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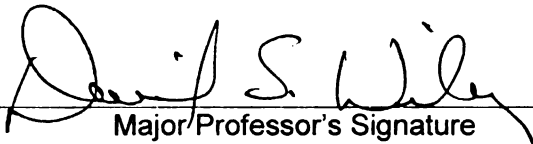
A GLIMPSE OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM: SOCIAL
ATTITUDES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT AN
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

presented by

Jeremy S. Norwood

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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A GLIMPSE OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM: SOCIAL ATTITUDES OF
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

By

Jeremy S. Norwood

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

A GLIMPSE OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM: SOCIAL ATTITUDES OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

By

Jeremy S. Norwood

This study utilizes a sample of an easily accessible group, Christian college students, to assess whether they believe the same social issues which were prioritized by the Moral Majority and currently the most recent Bush regime remain paramount today. This paper explores whether or not these young, evangelical Christians have similar values, are sensitive to similar social issues, and continue to align themselves with political viewpoints analogous as the Moral Majority generation which preceded them. As a result, this study will seek to answer the following questions. What social issues or problems are most important to evangelical Christian university students? What do these students perceive are the causes of these social problems? What are the events or experiences that have shaped what these students perceive as being the most important social issues in contemporary society? Do they take part in programs which help raise awareness about or alleviate these social problems?

In order to dig deeper into this debate surrounding the polarization of religious adherents into the evangelical or the progressive camps, this paper reports on an exploratory study of a small population of evangelical university students. In this study, I hope to contribute to the literature by showing that, among evangelical Christian students, there seems to be a trend to prioritize non-traditional social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and racism, as opposed to traditional social issues.

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A Glimpse of the New Conservatism: Social Attitudes of Undergraduate Students at an Evangelical Christian College

Introduction

The line between faith and politics has become increasingly blurred over the past several decades. The formation of the Moral Majority in 1979 and its allegiance to conservative values was first utilized politically by Ronald Reagan during his Presidential campaign. Since Reagan's time in office, however, other politicians have also utilized religious values in order to mobilize political and, ultimately, economic support. This political use of Christianity to mobilize the American population has had far-reaching consequences not only in the United States but in many countries around the world. Examples of this in the most recent Bush regime include quoting the Bible in speeches, labeling the conflict between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East as a "holy war," and being bankrolled by conservative Christian causes which mobilize on social issues such as abortion and gay and lesbian rights. As a result, many Americans perceive that much of Christianity has changed significantly over the past two, almost three, decades. These political mobilizations have caused many Americans who identify with conservative religious groups to believe that the Republican Party is, therefore, favored by God or even "doing God's work."

Some Christians, on the other hand, are left frustrated by how "politicized" major portions of public Christianity have become. In addition, many have always felt disturbed by that portion of the population that identifies its Christian faith with the political actors proclaiming that a particular belief system enhances their political and economic ends. Many evangelicals believe their Christian faith has become manipulated and misrepresented for political gain. They recognize that some U.S.

leaders have begun to co-opt certain aspects of their respective belief system(s) for their own ends.

This study utilizes a sample of an easily accessible group, Christian college students, to assess whether they believe the same social issues which were prioritized by the Moral Majority and currently the most recent Bush regime remain paramount today. This paper explores whether or not these young, evangelical Christians have similar values, are sensitive to similar social issues, and continue to align themselves with political viewpoints analogous as the Moral Majority generation which preceded them. As a result, this study will seek to answer the following questions. What social issues or problems are most important to evangelical Christian university students? What do these students perceive are the causes of these social problems? What are the events or experiences that have shaped what these students perceive as being the most important social issues in contemporary society? Do they take part in programs which help raise awareness about or alleviate these social problems?

Literature Review

James Davison Hunter's book "Culture Wars" (1991) was a fundamental study on the reshaping of the realignment of American political attitudes along religious lines. His perspective reflected the proliferation of religious viewpoints once characterized as only three categories: Protestant, Catholic, and Jew (Herberg, 1955). Hunter, seeking to take his predecessor Wuthnow's (1989) study into even greater depth, believed in the bifurcation of these three religious groups into two opposing viewpoints. On one side of the divide are the orthodox, those who are committed to "an external, definable, and transcendent authority" (Hunter 1991). Evangelical Christians are the dominant group in

this camp, though traditional Catholics, Orthodox, and conservative Jews, as well as political allies like the Christian Coalition and the National Right to Life Committee also were included (McConkey, 2001). On the other side of the battlefield are the progressives, who share the tendency "to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" (Hunter 1991). These would include most of the "mainline" churches that comprise the National and World Council of Churches (McConkey, 2001). In following these divergent perspectives, Hunter believes that political decisions in the areas of society such as the law, family, education, mass media, and the economy can be compromised, but moral decisions cannot (1991). Thus, the orthodox and the progressives can work together for political purposes political while disagreeing on issues of morality.

There are many studies which support Hunter's hypothesis. Green and Guth (1996) discovered that political activists who are traditionally religious are moving toward the political right whereas less traditionally religious activists are moving toward the political left. Layman (1999) found that the gap between Democrats and Republicans has deepened, particularly on "rights" issues such as abortion, women, and homosexuals. Some associate this political polarization with religious polarization. These differences are also seen between orthodox and progressives based on issues related to "family values" (Hammond, Shibley, and Solow 1994), including gender roles (Gay, Ellison, and Powers 1996), child-rearing techniques (Bartkowski and Ellison 1995), abortion (Cook et. al 1992), homosexuality (Leege and Kellstedt 1993), and premarital sex (Petersen and Donnerwerth 1997).

Others, however, have suggested that Hunter's assessment of the religious divide assumes that family-related issues can be severed from social issues. Davis and Robinson (1996), for example, found that the religious divide in the United States is limited to

"the family-related issues like those above: prayer for children in public schools, sex education, abortion, birth control, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, pornography, and the gendered division of labor."

There is considerable debate as to whether political views of the orthodox and the progressives have diverged to a greater extent on social problems such as economic inequality. Some argue that the Evangelicals, part of the orthodox category, are actually more politically liberal with regard to these issues. Some scholars have found that religious polarization among the general public is declining, resulting in evangelicals and progressives becoming increasingly moderate (Hoffman and Miller 1998; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). Petersen and Donnenworth (1997) believe that both religious conservatives and progressives are becoming more politically liberal.

While Hunter's ideas generally support the thesis that citizens are becoming more polarized based on their political and religious ideologies, scholars have also criticized his model for being too simplistic. Williams (1997) and several of his contributors (Platt and Williams 1997) acknowledge a moral continuum similar to Hunter's orthodox-progressive divide, but they also insist that an economic continuum intersects the moral one, creating four potential ideological spheres into which one may fall. Jelen and Wilcox (1997) similarly suggest that several categories beyond "orthodox" and "progressive" are essential in order to understand public opinion on church-state relations.

In challenging Hunter's thesis that the political attitudes of evangelical Christians are becoming more polarized, McConkey (2001) asserts that the current state of evangelical political despair is happening because its orthodox nature is caving in to the pressures of modernity. Consistent with Peter Berger's earliest theories of secularization, Hunter contends (1991) that evangelical Christians, and by extension other religious traditionalists, are accommodating their theological, moral, and political beliefs to the social realities of modernity. While evangelicals still remain much more conservative politically than their progressive counterparts, McConkey and Hunter's theories suggest that the gap no longer is as wide as in the past. Nevertheless, they suggest that a substantial number of evangelicals, particularly those who could be called the "young evangelicals" or the "coming generation" of evangelicals, are molding a "new breed" of evangelical culture (Hunter 1991; Wuthnow 1989).

In order to dig deeper into this debate surrounding the polarization of religious adherents into the evangelical or the progressive camps, this paper reports on an exploratory study of a small population of evangelical university students. In this study, I hope to contribute to the literature by showing that, among evangelical Christian students, there seems to be a trend to prioritize non-traditional social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and racism, as opposed to traditional social issues. In addition, I will seek to ascertain why students prioritize certain social issues as opposed to others, which social institutions students feel are responsible for alleviating these social issues, and how they feel about the more traditional moral issues.

Methodology

In order to mount an exploratory study of the values of students on contemporary social issues, I have interviewed a group of 44 college students at Spring Arbor University in Spring Arbor, Michigan, an avowedly Christian, Free Methodist-affiliated college “where Jesus Christ is lifted up and at the center of everything” (http://www.arbor.edu/edu_channelmain.aspx?id=39840). These 44 students were enrolled in two of my COR100 courses, Discovery in the Liberal Arts, for consecutive academic years (Fall 2008 and 2009), as well as one of my SOC101 Introduction to Sociology courses (Fall 2009). The students in the COR100 courses were assigned randomly by the admissions department in order to facilitate diversity of ability and interest. The purpose of the COR100 course is to develop critical thinking, writing, and public speaking skills in the students while also helping to foster their Christian faith. The students in my SOC101 course took the course either to fulfill a general education requirement or as part of their major program of study. The sample of COR100 students is highly representative of the Spring Arbor student population. The sample of SOC101 students is somewhat representative of the Spring Arbor student population because it is a general education requirement as well as a requirement for the sociology and social work majors.

The student body at Spring Arbor University is primarily white, female, politically conservative, children of the working-class who have primarily come from rural areas of the Midwestern states such as Michigan and Ohio. They are required to attend chapel twice a week and many study the Bible on a regular basis. The largest academic programs include teacher education, business, and ministry. The television in

the Fireside Lounge, which is part of the Dining Commons in the Student Center, normally shows FOX News or CNN. Shortly before the last presidential election, the few Democratic students on campus felt increasingly ostracized while a local chapter of the campus Republicans formed. A history of religion professor even published an article in the school newspaper encouraging students to vote for McCain, warning them that God would bring His wrath to earth if Obama were to win.

My research was conducted over the course of two semesters. The 16 students who were interviewed (COR100 class) participated in the first phase of my data collection in Fall of 2008. Five of the students were males, and 11 were females. Their ages do not vary greatly, with one student age 17 and the rest 18 or 19. The students are primarily from varying different Protestant backgrounds (Baptist, Free Methodist, United Methodist, and non-denominational Churches) but also include some Catholics and Orthodox. While the majority of students are from a working or middle-class background, the student responses also included some from upper- and lower-class backgrounds. All of the interviews were conducted either in my office or in a nearby conference room. The students were informed that their responses would be judged as neither right nor wrong, would not be used for class purposes, and were being solicited for a research project I was conducting as part of my graduate program at Michigan State University. Although the students are all enrolled in one of my courses, they were told the interview would not impact their grade in class but that their participation was very helpful to me. The interviews required approximately 30 minutes each. Students were asked whether or not they had consulted with prior interviewees, to which all responded that they had not. The interviews were conducted informally in order to

foster discussion and understanding. The students always sat in a seat which was near the entrance so that they did not feel confined or forced to answer any of the questions.

In order to facilitate data collection, students were asked seven questions during the interview process: (1) In your opinion, what were the three most important social issues?; (2) In your opinion, what are the reasons why these problems exist?; (3) [Definition of social institution] In your opinion, which social institutions are responsible for helping with these social problems?; (4) [Definition of macro- and micro- social problems] In your opinion, is this social issue more of a macro- or micro- social problem?; (5) Based on your previous responses, I understand that x, y, and z are serious social issues. How do you involve yourself in helping with these issues? What actions do you take to help alleviate these things?; (6) How does your faith inform you on social issues x, y, and z?; and (7) [Depending on the answers to question #1] I noticed that you did not mention either abortion or gay rights as one of your primary social problems. Would it be possible for you to let me know why you did not mention one of these? In some cases, students were asked to clarify or expand their answers for the sake of collecting accurate research data.

As a follow-up to the first round of face-to-face interviews, I also prepared a questionnaire which I gave to the student interviewees and asked them if they would provide more background about their initial responses. I encouraged them to write two or three substantive paragraphs in order to help me with my research study. Because this was near the end of the semester, only six of the 16 surveys were returned and only four of the six were substantive in nature. The other two were not substantive but

superficial one-sentence answers. Those which were answered comprehensively, however, provided additional content and context to the interviews.

The final round of my data collection took place in the fall semester 2009. During this semester I collected data in my COR100 and SOC101 classes. This phase of research sought to understand more about which events or experiences students relied on to determine which social issues were the most important in their lives. It also was designed to collect additional data to answer my initial research questions. In this phase of my data collection, I collected 28 completed surveys from both the Fall 2009 COR100 and SOC101 courses in order to augment my original findings. As with the previous round of surveys collected approximately one year earlier, I encouraged the students to write at least two substantive paragraphs of data, explaining why they believed or answered the question(s) a certain way. Students were told that the survey did not impact their grade but was a source of data for me to use as an assignment in my graduate sociology program. The surveys were anonymous and students did not put their names or any other identifying marks on the surveys. The questions asked on the surveys were: (1) In your opinion, what are the three most important social issues in our world today?; (2) In your opinion, why are these issues (what are the causes) happening today?; (3) Is there one (or more) event(s) or experience(s) in your life which have caused you to care more deeply about these particular social issues?; (4) From your perspective, who is responsible for correcting these social issues?; (5) Are you involved in helping to remedy these social problems? In other words, how are you involved in doing your part?; (6) How does your Christian faith impact your position on these issues?

The interview and survey processes were formulated in order to give the students a means to voice their personal beliefs and concerns regarding social issues. The purpose of surveying students was to discover their perspectives of how Christianity is defined within a social lens. In other words, university students may be much more likely to have a grasp of what their faith is because, while they may be gaining approval through parents, family members, and members of their university, *per se*, they are less likely to be cognizant of the political implications of their particular belief systems. This reasoning is contrasted with politicians, who clearly have something to gain by manipulating a particular religious doctrine to gain votes or rapport with potential voters and other constituent interests. While this may be true in the majority of cases, it is easy to overlook the social circumstances surrounding the students and how they must present themselves. Are students pressured to conform to a predominately religious environment? Are they biased to answer these questions in ways which will benefit them? They surely have motives and reasons why they answer questions the way they do. In reality, however, these students stand to gain less from misconstruing their Christian faith than do politicians, who have everything to gain (or lose). As a result, the data collected nonetheless represents a more accurate picture of what they understand Christianity to be.

Another potential source of bias results from my role in the research design and as an interviewer. Like the students, I attest to being a Christian and also am a professor at Spring Arbor University. In many ways, this study was completed in order to help me better understand which social issues students perceive as being most important. While this study could yield inaccurate results due to my bias, my

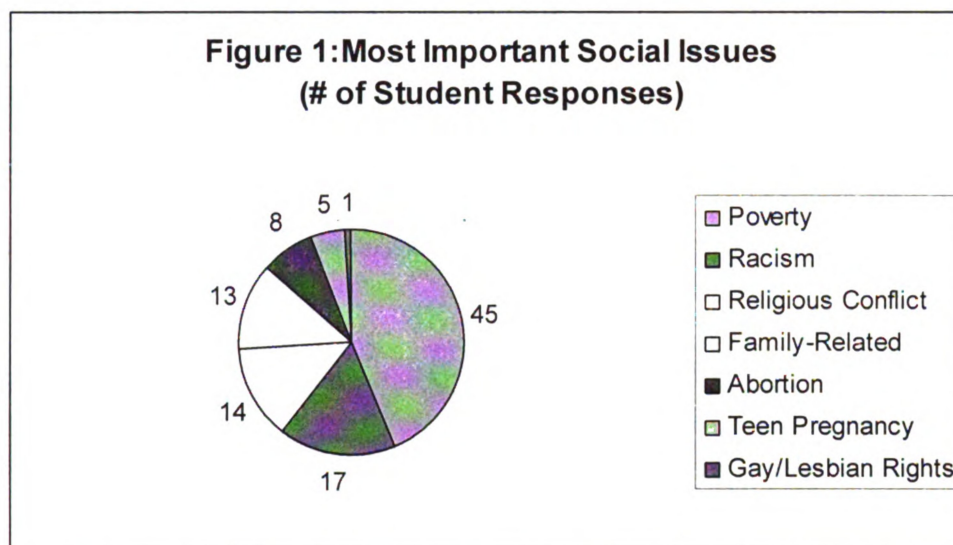
motivations for conducting this study are critical and analytical in nature. I am curious to understand better students' belief systems regardless of whether or not they conform to the "traditional" Christian culture portrayed by the media, politicians, some more conservative groups, the university, and whether or not there is a requisite nexus between their faith and action. On the other hand, however, I realize that these students are going through a process of learning what their faith means on an individual and a collective level. Thus, I will be diligent in exposing and addressing any bias concerning my particular beliefs that may be evident in the research. Any inaccuracies or biases would therefore reflect badly not only on me as a professional sociologist, but also on what I profess to believe. As a result, my goal is to be as unbiased as possible, ultimately realizing that complete objectivity is not possible but that the social scientist is committed to working hard to obtain an analytical perspective that minimizes personal values, taste, and orientations in such a study.

Data Analysis

Question #1: Most Important Social Issue(s)

In the first question, each student was asked to name the three most important social issues in the world today. When coding the data, several key themes emerged including poverty/unemployment, racism/slavery, religious conflict, selfishness, sex-driven society, education, and family problems such as divorce and domestic violence. Of all of the responses, the 44 students surveyed named issues of poverty or unemployment a total of 45 times, or approximately one out of every three responses. Half of the student respondents (22 of the 44) indicated that poverty or unemployment was one of the defining social issues of their time. The second highest frequency was

racism or slavery, which was mentioned 17 times or about 13% of the time. Out of all of the other social issues indicated by the students, none was indicated by more than ten responses. The “hot button” issues on many conservative Christian college campuses, gay rights and abortion, were mentioned once and eight times, respectively (See Figure 1).



Since the category of poverty/unemployment was mentioned most, a total of 45 times, in fact more than twice as often as the second most important issue, the following data analysis and findings will focus on explaining and evaluating this response. In light of the stereotypical notions that evangelical Christians care most about gay rights and abortion, I will seek to understand the reasons why poverty/unemployment was the most important social issue identified by this group of college students.

While the students polled articulated that the most important social problem of their time was indeed poverty, the six students which provided survey data in the first phase of research differed on how they had learned of poverty. One student admitted that he learned of poverty from “paying attention to the news and learning about these

problems through high school.” He also “had to do many current event projects,” noting that many of his teachers were “active in attempting to find solutions to social problems” (GJ, 11/30). Two other students stated that they learned about poverty from “experience and the news,” and by “seeing them occur daily in the world and doing a little research” (KM, 11/17 and AS, 11/20). A female student mentioned how she learned from “magazines and papers” but she also “heard through observation and conversation” because “hearing other peoples’ opinions helps me formulate mine” (MS, 11/24). Thus, the majority of the students who returned the surveys claimed to learn about social issues such as poverty as a result of watching the news and discussing the issues with those around them. One of them talked about how he learned about poverty from lessons in school. Finally, one thread which was repeated throughout the experiences of the students was how they saw the issues happening throughout the world around them.

In the second phase of surveys, the majority of students in this group who identified poverty and unemployment as a major social issue did so due to their proximity to or experience of the issue. Several students had experienced poverty as a result of living near urban areas or traveling to different countries where they saw “absolute” poverty. One student noted that “I see poverty in Detroit because I live nearby,” another student wrote about “going to large towns and seeing poverty breaks my heart,” while a third described “seeing homelessness in Detroit frequently” (#1, #8, #11). A fourth student described a trip to Guatemala: “I came in contact with extreme poverty when I went to visit the city dump, living conditions were horrible and people rummaged through the scraps” (#17). Another substantial group of students noted

having friends and family living in poverty and/or being unemployed. One stated that “I have experienced poverty, it is not fun, and there is little effort done to resolve it,” while another confessed “my family is below the poverty line and I have experienced the consequences” (#2, #12). A third student stated that “I live surrounded by poor people and have empathy towards them” (#4). A fourth student commented “many of my friends’ families are having a difficult time (financially)” (#9). A fifth student described “speaking with individuals in poverty and without health care,” while a sixth shared about “working with the homeless before and understanding that most homeless are not incompetent” and stating that “there must be a way to get them out” (#10, #14). Others describe hearing “every day that someone is losing their job and then their family is in trouble” and “through the news, as well as talking with friends or family” (#9, #14). Finally, students also learn about poverty in classes they take. “The more I learn about poverty and racism in class, the more compelled, I feel, to act” (#6). Another student described how he/she “saw a documentary talking about consumerism where others starve” (#8).

These findings are very similar to Hunter (1991) and McConkey’s (2001) ideas that evangelicals’ attitudes are adapting to conditions of modernity. While these students do not claim to be changing their belief systems or social attitudes based on the emerging conceptions of modernity, the experiences students have in response to the increasing rates of unemployment and economic inequality helps them to better understand the problem itself. Experiencing poverty, or knowing someone who is experiencing poverty, may be a major factor in why these students believe poverty is the most important social issue today, confirming Hunter (1991) and McConkey’s

(2001) hypothesizes that there is a shift in social attitudes amongst evangelical Christians. Furthermore, many students learn about these issues from more “secular” sources such as schools and popular media instead of from the church, where they are more likely to hear about a smaller set of traditional issues. Thus, while there are many stereotypes that conservative Christian groups favor “hot button” political issues such as gay rights and abortion, the 44 college students surveyed indicated that instead the most important social issue in their eyes is poverty and unemployment. Does this data confirm a shift in evangelical attitudes? Does this data translate into action on behalf of evangelical Christian groups to become more involved in ending poverty and unemployment? In order to answer these questions, it is important to first identify the perceived causes of poverty and unemployment.

Question #2: Causes of Poverty

There are three primary reasons students articulated in describing why poverty exists. The reason which was mentioned the most was greed. Several students articulated how poverty was a direct result of greed on behalf of those who have money in abundance to the detriment of those who have very little. One student mentioned that “greed and inaction contribute to why poverty exists today” (AG, 9/29). Another mentioned how “some people get rich [at] the expense of others” (SF, 10/6). The same student implied that being wealthy was more culturally acceptable, “people think that they have to be greedy” (SF, 10/6). One student also mentioned that those who they viewed as greedy often justified their lifestyles. “People are justifying the reason why they are living” (BW, 10/20). The same student mentioned how “people think that over-consumption is o.k.” (BW, 10/20). Students were also able to tie greed to the

manipulation of those who are “ignorant:” “poverty is built on the greed of people who have, while the ignorance of people who have does not let others realize their full potential” (GJ, 10/20). Students were also able to put greed into context in saying that “the U.S. spends a disproportionate amount of its resources on ‘useless’ luxuries,” “people put themselves above others (based on wealth) and then subjugate others,” and “there is an inability of the majority of the population to recognize the effects of this substandard treatment” (#6, #8).

Some students believed poverty resulted from the lack of jobs. Two female students who live in parts of their respective states where large numbers of jobs have been exported in the last two decades felt strongly about outsourcing jobs. One student, a female from a depressed area of rural Virginia, stated frankly that “people do not have money because they do not have jobs” (AS, 10/13). Another female, this time from the Detroit area, mentioned that “people are poor because they do not have the money to buy things. There are not a lot of jobs for them to have” (AM, 10/20). These data suggest that the lack of jobs leads to unemployment, which then leads to poverty. A third student, however, believes the issue of poverty is much more complicated, articulating how the demographics and opportunities available to people are causes of poverty. “The location where people live and the resources available to them determine whether they live in poverty” (KA, 10/20). Other students’ responses show their understanding of a lack of jobs as stemming from a poor economy. “The economy is not doing well” and “there are not enough jobs for people to work” (#3, #15). In addition, another student believes “the loss of jobs, the high cost of living, is related to

medical expenses” (#14). Based on the students’ responses, then, the second major cause of poverty is lack of employment opportunities and resources.

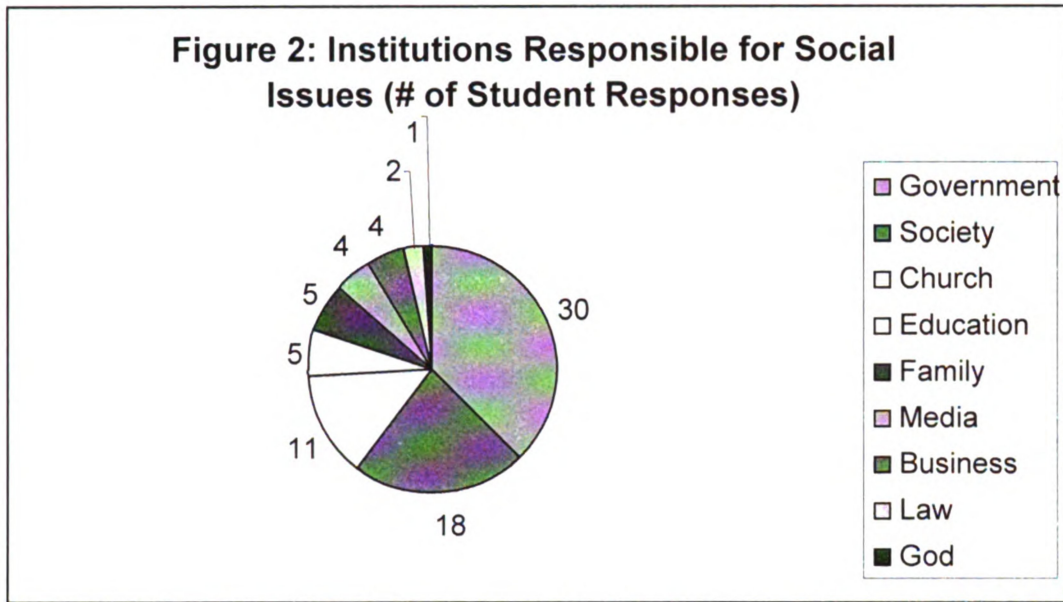
A third potential cause of poverty, as described by the students, is the lack of education globally and domestically. A female from a mid-sized city in Michigan believes that “the lack of education and information to people around the world” (MS, 9/9) leads to increased levels of poverty. In other words, if more people could get a quality education and were better informed, poverty would be less likely to exist. Another female, this time from a more rural Michigan town, believes the government is responsible for poverty: “the government spends too much and people are too greedy” (ED, 9/9). Thus, in addition to the greed of the few and the lack of employment opportunities and other resources, poverty is also caused by lack of education, resulting in ignorance.

Other students, especially in the second phase of surveys, also noted the “lack of hope” certain Americans have in being a cause for poverty and unemployment. Other students cited the lack of role models, causes similar to a “culture of poverty” argument, as well as spiritual causes for why poverty and unemployment exist. For the purposes of this study, the most frequent cause will be discussed in the context of these responses. There were several responses which noted that “lack of hope” was one of the primary causes for poverty and unemployment. There were two primary responses. One student commented that “no one has faith or hope they can get out of the criminal lifestyle,” implicitly assuming that those in poverty are more likely to become criminals (#1). Another student made a similar assumption “people are desperate and hopeless – and not everyone can live on government money,” thereby assuming that the majority

of the poor do not work, but instead live only off of public assistance (#9). As a result, the majority of students believe the primary causes for poverty and unemployment are greed, the lack of jobs, little education, and, finally, a lack of hope. In this data the students realize the structural causes of poverty and unemployment. While this data does illuminate which causes students attribute to this social issue, it does not solve which social institutions students would deem responsible for causing poverty, nor does it describe whether or not students involve themselves in efforts to alleviate poverty. It is to these questions which we now turn.

Question #3: Social Institutions Responsible for Poverty

In a similar fashion to their responses to the three most important social issues, students also were fairly unanimous in deciding which social institutions were most responsible for ending poverty. Among the different responses students gave as to which social institution(s) are responsible for ending poverty, 30 responses (taken from those students who mentioned poverty in Question #1) mentioned the government. Another 18 responses mentioned “society,” 11 the church, five each for the education system and the family, four each for media and big business, two for the legal system, and one student believes that God is responsible for poverty (See Figure 2).



So, many of the students who recognized poverty as an important social issue blamed it on those who were greedy, and many of the same students believe it is the government's job to do something about the greed of the few. While this finding will be analyzed in more depth later, this section will seek to describe why the students responded that the government, society, churches, and other social institutions are responsible for ending poverty.

Thirty different students gave responses which indicated that the government must take the lead in alleviating poverty. Some of these responses range from the belief that poverty alleviation is solely the government's job, others reflected a joint effort between the government and other social institutions, and yet a small group of students also believe churches, the media, and businesses are primarily responsible. One female student mentioned that "[even though] poverty has been around since the beginning of time, it is the government's job to *deal* with it [*italics are mine*]" (ED, 9/9). In other words, poverty is a serious issue, but it is the responsibility of the government to solve it. Another female student stated that poverty is too often looked at as someone else's

problem. “Poverty is too often not viewed as America’s problem and not a government issue” while believing that “other institutions need to sacrifice too” (RJ, 9/15). Other students exhibited an understanding that the government has the power to “regulate business matters.” One female from a large city in southern Michigan stated this succinctly: “the government needs to have more control over business matters” (SF, 9/29). This idea was seconded by another female student, “business and government have a responsibility to help social class” (KM, 10/6). A previously quoted female student from rural Virginia believes that “the government has a responsibility to set standards for ‘money situations’ and should help with poverty, businesses also have a responsibility to provide jobs for people” (AS, 10/13). Another female student from the Detroit area was much more direct in her beliefs: “the government has money; it controls the resources to help” (AM, 10/20).

Students in the second phase of interviews had a similar response as to who was responsible for ending poverty. One student was rather poignant “it is also the government’s fault for not...doing something to help the impoverished” (#17). A second student recognizes that “those with the most social power have a responsibility to make changes (fighting poverty) because they are in a position to do so” (#10). A classmate concurs “I feel that countries with the most wealth and highest standards of living need to help correct these problems” (#8). Another student, however, sees his or her involvement in the decisions the government makes “citizens need to influence the government to help” (#14). Many of the other students also believed similarly, citing partisan political differences as the reason why the government will not act to decisively end poverty. “We are all responsible,” one student writes, “instead of placing blame on

others we need to come together to make change happen” (#12). Another student echoes “we are all citizens and the government...citizens have to put pressure on the government so we can see action” (#9). The majority students who completed these surveys, then, believed that the government has a responsibility to help those who are poor and unemployed. Some students even go so far as recognizing that they should be part of the solution, raising their voices to be heard by the government in hopes of making changes.

Other students believe that society, as well as the church, the educational system and the media also are responsible for poverty and unemployment. The fact that students mention not only the government, but also “society,” is appealing for students in explaining who is supposed to take ownership of poverty and unemployment. In other words, many students described how it is the responsibility of everyone to participate in helping address social issues. One male student from a suburb of Flint stated that the “church must work with the government” while mentioning that “churches also need to work together for their finances” and how “they should not spend the entire amount [of their budget] on selfish reasons” (MM, 10/20). Another male student seconded his suggestion, advocating how “the church needs to take an active role” but the “government must help but not be totally responsible (GJ, 10/20). Another mentioned how the government must work through the educational system “to help combat poverty” (KA, 10/20). Other students mentioned the role of the media and how it emphasizes outward appearance, inundating students with the ideology of materialism (BW, 10/20).

Based on these responses, the majority of students believe it is the responsibility

of the government to initiate programs to help end poverty. As such, these students have indicated an understanding that these problems are inherently systemic and not the fault of the victim or victims involved. While the majority of students seem to indicate how the government must bear the majority of responsibility for poverty alleviation, some students believe in a sort of collaboration between the government and churches, society, businesses, and other social institutions. Very few of the students, however, believe that social institutions like the media, church, and big business must take the lead in helping to control the harmful affects of poverty. In fact, if these students believe the government must play a central role in poverty alleviation, how would this belief impact their political allegiances? If they are interested in providing the government with the resources to fight poverty, it would seem their political perspective should be a bit more democratic in order to allocate more funding to the government to put an end to poverty.

The students, however, indicated the opposite. In the follow up survey of the first COR100 class, all but one of them (MS, 11/24) believe in smaller governments and support the position of the avowed Republican Party. In other words, while the most important social issue of their day is poverty and they hold the government to be the most responsible social institution in ending poverty, their political preference and behavior does not support empowering the government to end poverty. In fact, five of the six (KM, 11/17; AS, 11/20; SF, 11/28; GJ, 11/30; and BW, 12/1) indicated they were Republicans based on the conservative stance the Republicans took on Hunter's (1991) "moral" issues. The sixth student, however, believed the Democratic ticket to be more sympathetic to "social" issues, which impact traditional "moral" issues (MS,

11/24). This finding does confirm that at least some evangelicals have begun to compromise their attitudes on “social” issues while still holding the line on “moral” issues. More importantly, however, in this population, the idea that evangelical Christian students vote differently, based on social instead of moral issues, is unfounded. Even though evangelical university students may be more liberal on social issues than before, they still may be as conservative on moral issues as ever, and these issues seem to inform how they vote to a greater degree.

Thus, Hunter (1991) and McConkey’s (2001) thesis that there is a shift in the evangelical vote may hold true to a small degree, but I would need to collect more data in order to hypothesize whether there has been a major change in the trend of evangelical voting among these evangelical university students. While the students are clear in saying how they believe it is the role of the government as a social institution to fight poverty, they were unclear as to whether it was also their responsibility to join the fight. Should corporate responsibility be delegated to the government without individual accountability on behalf of its respective constituency? Does every person have a role to play in what these students have determined is the most important social issue of their time? The next section will describe the responses of the individual students when asked whether or not they participate on an individual level in fighting poverty.

Question #4: What Are Some of the Things You Do to Fight Against Poverty?

One of the main ideas within mainstream Christianity is the dichotomy between faith and action. This section relies on this dialogue within Christianity, asking students how they are involved in the self-identified “most important social issues.” While this

section does not explore the discrepancy between “moral” and “social” issues made by monumental figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it does touch on whether or not students take part in addressing such social issues. (The majority of the churches told Dr. King that racism was a “social” issue, a type of issue with which the church does not concern itself).

Several of the students indicated that they are personally involved in working to address poverty in society. While the degree of involvement varies among the students, many of them have helped the poor. One female states “I have recently helped out at the local food shelter as a volunteer” (AG, 9/29). This student visited the shelter twice during the semester. A male student also helped at a homeless shelter: “I helped at a homeless shelter a couple of times this semester” (MM, 10/20). A different female even went so far as to claim to “help” out at the food shelter, using the present tense of the verb. “I help out at the homeless shelter” (BW, 10/20, 11/7). Other students are more direct about their experiences helping the poor. One male student who grew up in a poor rural town in southwestern Michigan “lived in a family which has struggled with poverty and living simply” but “has also taken part in service trips to help the poor in Sioux Falls, SD, and Alamosa, CO” (KA, 10/20). Another student, a female from the Detroit area, informed me that “[she] has donated food and blankets. [She] has also fed a homeless guy a couple of times” (AM, 10/20). Another male student “sometimes gives money at gas stations. You know, when they have those shamrocks on the walls (MM, 10/20).” Another male student from rural Ohio also described how “[he] tries to educate people. [He] has helped, along with his family, support children in South America and Africa through Compassion International (GJ, 10/20).”

Some students indicate that they fight poverty by their spending habits. One female associates her spending habits with fighting poverty, “I try to be frugal and simple when I spend” (ED, 9/9). Another female student describes how “[she] tries to reserve resources” (BW, 10/20). While this is not directly helping poverty *per se*, they believe that living more simply may help them be able to give more. Another female student “did a fundraiser in high school to help raise awareness and money for [human and sex] trafficking victims” (MS, 9/9). Some of the language which the students used gave the impression that they were not very involved. One female from a Detroit suburb mentioned that she “is trying to be aware of the world around [her]” and “is trying to do service trips to make a difference” (RJ, 9/15). Another female student is “trying to help [her] cousin financially” because she is “irresponsible financially, but [she] is trying to help her out” (SF, 9/29). Another student mentioned how her church was involved, but did not mention her involvement through her church. “At my church we have a food pantry which helps feed the homeless” (AG, 9/29). A final student stated quite frankly: “I am not involved in these issues. I could be involved more, but I am not” (AS, 10/13). While many of these acts of charity help individuals at a personal level, these students, primarily due to their status as students, have not yet become involved in seeking structural solutions to poverty such as advocating for a particular policy or other socio-economic change.

Many of these responses indicate that these students are involved in fighting poverty, an issue which they have identified as the most serious of their time. In the follow-up survey, however, all of the students (KM, 11/17; AS, 11/20; MS, 11/24; SF, 11/28; GJ, 11/30; and BW, 12/1) admitted that they did not take part in community

service regularly. Based on the subsequent survey data, seven of the 28 students surveyed had actively taken part in some sort of community service related to poverty and unemployment in the past year. These experiences ranged from helping at the local homeless shelter to working with Child Protective Services to provide gift and food baskets to those in need to working through in developing countries (#2, #4, #6, #10, #11, #14, #18). Other students mentioned how they were currently learning about such issues, a process which would help empower them to take a more active role in fighting poverty (#12, #16, #18). The potential explanations for this discrepancy will be described later, but at this point it is interesting to point out how the students expect the government and other social institutions to solve social problems, but do not expect to have to invest themselves in the process of fighting poverty.

These data appear to indicate that these students have taken little action with regard to poverty. But what does their Christian faith tell them about poverty? Is it an endeavor which they should become involved in? Is it a social problem which the government only should tackle? Is there a theological justification for why Christians do not seem to be involved in this particular social issue? The next section will help to evaluate whether or not the social attitudes of conservative Christian college students have diverged from the social attitudes of traditional conservative Christians.

Findings

Response

The first question in the study dealt with what was termed “the most important social issues of the day.” Each student was asked to name the three most important social problems in their own opinion. The result yielded 48 responses, many of which

went against the popular portrayal of what constitutes a conservative evangelical Christian response. Based on the responses by these Christian university students, however, it does not appear that these students value similar tenets as those Christians who voted in the 2004 election. In fact, one-third of the responses reflected that these university students viewed poverty and unemployment as the most important social issue of their time. The second-most popular response, with about one-eighth of the responses, was racism and slavery. One could argue, to the contrary to these responses, that they are primarily a product of a very charged political climate, where both sides, Democrat and Republican, were vying for power. Others could also argue how this generation of conservative evangelical students has different values or priorities than their predecessors. These students, in fact, were not old enough to have voted in the 2004 election. While these are all definite possibilities, the data must be analyzed in order to explain more about why these responses are starkly opposite to the traditional stereotypical responses conservative evangelical Christians give.

The explanation which is discussed most widely in the literature can be characterized as the dichotomy between “social” and “moral” issues (Hunter, 1991). In general, Hunter believes that evangelicals are becoming more progressive with regard to social issues, but are standing firm on moral issues. In spite of the apparent shrinking of the gap between political attitudes based on these two types of issues, Hunter asserted that evangelicals, while becoming more socially progressive, voted on moral issues where they continued to be extremely conservative. This would also account for the large number of responses to the “most important ‘social’ issue” as being poverty. Based on Hunter’s (1991) research, students most likely would differentiate social and

moral issues and would admit to voting primarily on moral issues, which many of them admitted (KM, 11/17; AS, 11/20; SF, 11/28; GJ, 11/30; and BW, 12/1). All in all, these data helps to confirm Hunter's (1991) original hypothesis.

Causes and Responsibility

Two of the variables which were used to explain the data were called causes and responsibility. Which causes were most important in explaining poverty? Which social institutions should bear the responsibility for fighting against and alleviating poverty whether domestically or globally? Based on the students' responses, they attributed blame to three main causes of poverty: individual greed, the lack of jobs, and the lack of educational opportunities domestically and globally. Likewise, the students attributed responsibility overwhelmingly more to the government than to society, then the church, and marginally to business, education, the media, and the family. In other words, students perceive the primary cause of poverty to be individual greed and hold that the government must take action. These data could lead to a policy which would redistribute income through taxation of individuals. This policy, which logically might be enacted based on their responses, was drastically opposed by the latest Bush regime in both its terms in the White House. In fact, the Moral Majority began advocating for lower taxes for the wealthy during the Reagan years (Baca-Zinn, Eitzen, & Eitzen-Smith, 2008). This evidence begs the question as to why conservative evangelical Christian students believe the government should do something to keep individuals from being greedy when they supposedly overwhelmingly support the goals of the Moral Majority. (Nearly 83% of self-identified Christians voted Republican in 2004, that number dropped to about 76% in the 2008 election.) Why would the overwhelming

number of Christian conservatives support the Moral Majority, which seems to support eliminating barriers to the greedy, clearly against their own interests? Is it because evangelicals are not informed about these issues? Is it because they attach their support to whichever ticket targets conservatism, religion, or Christianity? In order to analyze this seemingly contradictory position, it is imperative to conduct further research into how conservative evangelical Christians perceive the Republican Party and its policies. It is important to know whether or not these students understand what policies they are supporting.

The Dichotomy between Faith and Action

There are many dichotomies within organized religion, but perhaps the most poignant is the gap between what conservative evangelicals refer to as “faith” and “action” or “word” and “deed.” One of the common criticisms leveled against the Christian church is that people act one way in church to please fellow believers, but then act completely differently in the workplace, in the home, or when interacting with others. Biblical teaching in a number of evangelical churches, in fact, discusses how faith and works are equally important in order to attain salvation.

When discussing how the Bible addresses poverty, for example, the students gave many examples of how they, as Christians, should treat the poor. Many of these responses discussed how Jesus Christ intentionally spent time with “the least of these.” Others described in common language how they felt a need to look after those who were marginalized because it was the right thing to do. When analyzing the actions taken by the students in response to these teachings, however, there were significant inconsistencies between how students perceived their Christian duty to the poor and

how they acted out these duties. The most prevalent example students gave when asked what they did to help the poor was spending time at a local homeless shelter. While the students should be commended for reaching out in the community, they did not initiate the contact with the shelter. When analyzing the other responses, it is obvious that not many of the students are actively involved in serving the poor in this way. Moreover, they did not actively involve themselves in helping remedy the social issue which they overwhelmingly agreed was the most important of their time, poverty. Instead, they believed it was the fault of the “greedy” and that the government should have responsibility for finding a solution for it.

On Homosexuality and Abortion

While the public perception is that political pundits manipulate voter behavior through campaigning on particular moral issues such as homosexuality and abortion, many younger Christians do not see these “hot button” issues as the most important issues. As previously mentioned, out of 48 total responses in the first round of interviews, homosexuality and abortion were mentioned by only two respondents. In the second part of the study, less than 10 percent of respondents mentioned either homosexuality or abortion. Is this an indication of a proverbial “changing of the guard” with regard to conservative values? Or is it merely another paradigmatic shift from certain moral issues to others in a new generation? Lastly, is it possible for Christian students to have particular social beliefs, to value poverty as the greatest social issue of their day, but then to vote along different party lines? If this is so, why does it happen? How does one comprehend this seemingly contradictory behavior? In order to understand this, it may be important to understand the students’ responses to

homosexuality and abortion themselves.

Some students definitely reacted by expressing frustration with how these issues have been “beaten to death” in popular media associated with Christianity. Others believed that the issues were not relevant to their lives because they did not impact them personally. Others still claimed since these social issues revolved around personal choice, that they were not social issues *per se*. The students overwhelmingly, however, supported the notion that they did not agree with liberal views on these issues, but did not believe the government had the right to legislate against them. While these attitudes are consistent with their responses in the first question, it is possible that many of these students believe homosexuality and abortion are socially unacceptable but did not view them as social issues. Such a conclusion, though, would assume that some students would inquire as to whether these issues are indeed “social” in nature as opposed to being, a “moral” or “political” issue. In other words, did students refrain from addressing homosexuality and abortion as social issues because they did not view them relevant to their ethical stance? Did the students neglect to reinforce the popularly held stereotype of conservative Christian students because the idea of a “social issue” was vague and ambiguous? In order to evaluate and study this question further, it is important to understand a bit more about how students came to be exposed to the issues they mentioned: poverty and unemployment, racism and slavery, and others. Why did these issues become so important to them? How do these students work for their alleviation? Is it possible for students to value “social” issues less than “moral” issues? Does this difference account for the lack of consistency between their faith and the “fruit” it bears? In order to more fully grasp this study, it will be necessary to conduct

further research into these specific areas.

Conclusion

Christian evangelical students, while becoming more socially conscious, continue to vote based on their deeply-held moral values. In this initial exploratory study of students in a Midwestern church-affiliated college, they identify the most important social issues of their day as poverty and unemployment, probably because many of them have experienced those struggling with financial problems. In addition, many of them have learned about poverty through the mass media, education, and through experience, whether through a church service trip, several visits to a nearby homeless shelter, or growing up near an urban area. While they believe poverty is the most important social issue, many of them are not actively involved in helping, learning about, or serving the poor. On the other hand, many of these students enjoy taking the opportunity to help those who are poor if given an opportunity to do so. Furthermore, these students believe, despite their conservative leanings, that the government can and should take a more active role in alleviating poverty. When polled about their political preferences, on the other hand, the students quickly indicate they are conservatives and would vote for the Republican candidate if they could. Moreover, many of them quote Jesus Christ as the leader of the Christian faith as living closest to the poor, yet their lives do not reflect a commitment of service to others. Finally, when asked about why they did not mention the most important “moral” issues when asked about the most important “social” issues, they explained how these issues did not pertain to them, how they were outdated, and how these decisions are personal and not “social.” Based on this research, there is evidence that this small sample of evangelical Christian college

students embodies a sense of “New Conservatism.” This emerging brand of conservatives are more likely to be aware of social issues such as poverty and racism, hold that one of the prominent causes of poverty is greed, believe the government can and should take part in helping to eradicate poverty, while personally not being consistently involved in taking action against poverty. These data support the theory that this new brand of conservatism continues to diverge from its traditional narrative in shape and form.

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