

# Factors that Affect Religious Congruence among College Students

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Previous studies have found that student's religious beliefs and religious behaviors often do not align. Individuals will indicate through their beliefs that they are more religious than their behaviors suggest. By examining the beliefs and behaviors of college students this study aims to identify the most significant factors that affect religious belief-behavior congruence. When examining social influences, religious opinions, prioritization of activities, and other factors, a broad range of influences or predictors are observed. The author examines data collected via a voluntary survey of college students at seven universities in the spring of 2018. Most predictors are found to be insignificant, but Catholic education prior to college and sex are found to be nominal predictors, and opinions on the stances of the church and percent of extracurricular time spent with campus religious organizations present themselves as significant continuous predictors of congruence.

## Methods

**Data Collection:** In this analysis, the data used is collected from a survey sent out in the spring of 2018 to students who identified as Catholic at eight universities across the country (Brown University, Duke University, Iowa State University, University of Missouri-Columbia, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of Southern California, Syracuse University, University of Wisconsin-Madison). This survey is the fourth iteration of a survey sent to observe beliefs and behaviors of Catholic college students. The survey contains questions ranging from on-campus activities, religious behaviors, political leanings, mental health, and much more. The survey was distributed voluntarily to students through their university catholic centers. A total of 901 students are represented in the results.

**Filtering Data:** Given that the goal of this analysis is to examine which factors affect belief behavior congruence among Catholic college students, only data from students who identify as Roman Catholic is included. Students who indicated anything besides Roman Catholic when asked "What is your current religious preference?" were removed. This left a group of 736 students represented.

**Defining measures of congruence:** To observe what factors affect religious belief-behavior congruence, various measures, or definitions, of congruence, are established. To accurately capture different types of religious belief-behavior congruence, measures of general and specific congruence are defined. Seen below, in Tables 1 and 2, are the definitions of congruence which are used.

<b>General Measures of Congruence</b>	
General religious beliefs (beliefs on the importance/impact of God and the church)	vs General religious behavior (participation in the church and campus ministry activities)
Opinions on the influence of God in daily life and decisions	vs General religious behavior
General religious beliefs	vs Intrinsic Expression of Faith: Observing how religious beliefs are reflected in inward focused religious behaviors
General religious beliefs	vs Extrinsic expression of Faith: Observing how religious beliefs are reflected in outward focused religious behaviors

Table 1: General Measures of Congruence

<b>Specific Measures of Congruence</b>
Community beliefs vs Community behavior: How important is it to be part of a congregation vs how many of a student's friends are involved in the congregation.
Charity and Service Beliefs vs Charity and Service Behavior: How people indicate the importance of charity and service vs how they participate in charity and service
Importance of knowledge about faith vs Actual knowledge about faith: How people's knowledge of their faith compares to how important they consider knowledge about their faith.

Table 2: Specific Measures of Congruence

**Examining measures of congruence:** After creating each measure of congruence each is observed and analyzed to understand its center, distribution, and continuity. Understanding the congruence measures is essential to understanding the differences that each predictive variable makes.

**Examining variables that affect congruence:** After creating accurate measures of congruence, several variables are tested to observe how they affect congruence. The predictive variables that are tested can be seen in Tables 3 and 4 below. Table 3 displays the nominal grouping variables and Table 4 displays the continuous numerical variables.

Variable	Idea Examined by Variable
University attending	Does the general academic, religious, social environment an individual is in affect religious congruence?
Catholic education prior to college	Does attending Catholic elementary/middle school, high school, or both affect religious congruence years later when in college?
Sex	Does religious congruence differ among males and females?
Race	Does religious congruence differ among students of different races?
Social leanings	Does religious congruence differ among students with different social leanings (on a scale from very liberal to very conservative)?

Table 3: Nominal Grouping Variables

Variable	Idea Examined by Variable
Religious social influences	Does how religious one's closest friends and family are (measured by how frequently one's parents and 5 closest friends attend mass) affect one's religious congruence?
Priority of religious activities	Based on how students rank religious activities vs their other extracurricular activities, how will their religious congruence change?
Percent of time spent on religious activities	Based on the percent of one's total extracurricular activity time is spent on religious activities, how will one's religious congruence change?
Importance and opinions on the bible	Does the importance of the Bible in one's life (comprised of belief in how real the old testament is, if it is looked to for guidance in daily life, and how it shapes one's sense of right and wrong) affect religious congruence?
Agreement with stances of the church	Does agreement with important stances of the church (the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ, serving the needs of the poor and vulnerable, euthanasia, premarital sex, the Holy Trinity, sexual intercourse between two people of the same sex, the death penalty, the infallibility of papal teachings, care for the earth and environment, and abortion) affect religious congruence?

Table 4: Numerical Continuous Variables

**Testing the effect of predictive variables on congruence:** Each of the ten predictive variables are tested for each of the seven measures of congruence using several analytical techniques. If the results are found to be significant a graphical analysis is preformed to examine the results.

## Results

Two grouping variables were found to be significant predictors of religious belief-behavior congruence. Catholic education prior to college and gender were found to be significant predictors across each measure of congruence. Students who attended Catholic education prior to college showed equal or better levels of congruence across each measure of congruence. The effect of attending Catholic elementary through high school and just high school had a significant effect while attending only Catholic elementary or middle school did not have a significant effect. Across each measure of congruence males showed equal or better religious belief behavior congruence than females.

Due to their significant impact, both Catholic education prior to college and gender are used as controls when testing the significance of the continuous predictive variables. With these controls in place one's opinions on the stances of the Catholic church and the percent of one's extracurricular time spent in religious activities were found to be significant predictors of religious belief behavior congruence.

Student's opinions on the stances of the church are a significant predictor of religious belief-behavior congruence. In specific, the opinions examine are the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ, serving the needs of the poor and vulnerable, euthanasia, premarital sex, the holy trinity, sexual intercourse between two people of the same sex, the death penalty, the infallibility of papal teachings, care for the earth and environment, and abortion. As the scaled value of opinions on these stances, the more an individual indicates that they are open to disagreeing on the church's stances, the lower their respective measure of belief is. However; behavior remains relatively constant across different levels of opinion. At low levels of the predictive variable congruence is weak with beliefs being much stronger than behavior. However; at high levels of the predictive variable congruence improves due to decreasing values of belief. In a few measures of congruence, the respective belief representation even becomes less than the behavior representation.

The percent of a student's extracurricular time spent with campus religious groups, compared to time spent with a social, charitable/volunteer, athletic, academic, job, political, artistic and other groups, serves as a significant predictor of religious belief-behavior congruence. As individuals spend a greater percentage of their time with campus religious groups, their congruence improves. Individuals who spend a low proportion of their extracurricular time with campus religious groups display low congruence, with their religious beliefs being much higher than their religious behavior. As the percent of time spent with campus religious groups increases, congruence becomes stronger; beliefs increase slightly while behavior increases significantly.

While other predictors showed specific instances of significance among certain measures of congruence, none showed significant enough behavior to be considered reliable predictors of religious belief-behavior congruence. Future studies and more data would allow these variables to be investigated further and should be investigated further in future studies.

In specific the prioritization of religious activities, beliefs on the bible and its importance in one's life, and university currently attending should be investigated when more data is collected.

## **Discussion**

The main findings of this investigation are the following: In general college students indicate that they have stronger religious beliefs than their associated religious behaviors; gender, Catholic education prior to college, and percent of one's extracurricular time spent on a campus religious organization serve as significant predictors of religious belief-behavior congruence; and lastly, many of the predictors that were hypothesized to be significant did not yield significant results and in future studies should be investigated further.

Certain underlying explanations may exist to explain the significant relationship between the predictive variables and the measures of congruence observed. Catholic education prior to college is an important part of shaping students' religious identity and the more recent this effect the more impactful it is. Elementary and middle school show little effect while high school or all three have a significant effect. In more transformative and recent high school years this Catholic environment may play a large role in shaping religious beliefs and behaviors that carry over into a student's college beliefs and behaviors. For the control variable of gender, gender is frequently used as a control and is continuously shown to affect the beliefs and behaviors of individuals across many subjects including religion.

Explanations for the effects of a campus religious environment exist as well. This study shows that individuals who spend a greater proportion of their extracurricular time with campus religious groups display better religious belief-behavior congruence than students who do not. As a student spends more time with an organization, their beliefs may translate more accurately into their behaviors due to their environment supporting it, explaining the improved congruence. Examining students' opinions on the stances of the Catholic church as a predictor of congruence a strong relationship exists. As students are more open to disagreeing on the church's stances, congruence improves as the value of religious beliefs decrease and the value of religious behavior remain the same. As students are more open to disagreeing with the stances of the church, they are probably more open to not inflating their religious beliefs. In the population of students surveyed, it is seen that beliefs are significantly higher than behaviors, so it is possible that these beliefs are inflated overall and only a select group of students accurately represents their beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

By examining the religious beliefs and behaviors of college students we are better able to understand where they are similar, where they are different, and what variables affect their similarity (congruence). In this study, survey data obtained from more than 900 college students at eight different universities in the United States was studied to try and identify variables that affect religious belief-behavior congruence.

Different measures of congruence were used to generate a representative and broad picture of what religious congruence can look like. Certain measures were as broad as comparing conglomerate general religious beliefs with general religious behaviors while other are as specific as comparing a student's indication of how important it is for them to be part of a close congregation vs. how many of their closest friends are involved.

In general, we see that college students do not have very strong religious belief behavior congruence. Across every metric of congruence there is a significant non-zero value with students indicating that their beliefs are stronger than their behaviors indicate.

Examining non-continuous grouping variables, it is found that both gender and Catholic education prior to college have a significant impact on religious belief behavior congruence. Congruence is highest among individuals who attended Catholic high school or full Catholic education, while those that attended only Catholic elementary and middle school, or none showed lower levels of congruence. Across each measure of congruence males showed stronger or equal congruence than females.

Examining continuous variables, it is found that opinions on key stances of the Catholic church and percent of one's extracurricular time spent with campus religious groups are significant predictors of religious belief-behavior congruence. Individuals who are more open to disagreeing on some key stances of the Catholic church display better congruence than those who are not. In general, these students display lower levels of religious belief and equal levels of religious behavior compared to their peers. Individuals who spend a higher percentage of their time with campus religious group display better religious congruence than those who spend a lower percent of their time. In general, these students exhibit higher levels of religious behaviors and equal levels of religious beliefs compared with their peers.

These findings provide important insights into what aspects of college students lives affect their religious beliefs, behaviors, and the alignment between the two. Learning more about religious belief-behavior congruence may be an important step into examining the effects of that environment and influences of college life play into student's thoughts and actions.