

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

AN INVESTIGATION OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY
AND RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM IN
A COLLEGIATE POPULATION

by

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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates stability and change in the religious beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism of high school students. Three related issues were explored: changes in the level and organization of orthodox Christian beliefs; changes in the level and organization of right-wing authoritarianism; and the causal relationships that might exist between these changes.

Right-wing authoritarianism was operationally defined as scores on Altemeyer's (1979) Right-Wing Authoritarianism (R.W.A.) Scale. Orthodox Christian beliefs were assessed by a Christian Orthodoxy (C.O.) Scale developed specifically for this study. The scale construction and cross-validation procedures as well as evidence for the reliability and validity of the scale are described.

The research questions were explored using cross-sectional and longitudinal data obtained from male and female Grade 10, 11, and 12 students attending either rural or urban collegiates. The cross-sectional sample included 747 students (154 rural and 593 urban). One hundred and seventeen of the rural and 325 of the urban students were involved in the longitudinal sample. Analysis indicated that the longitudinal sample was a representative sub-set of the cross-sectional sample.

Statistical analyses to assess change in the level of orthodox Christian beliefs over the high school years indicated, contrary to our prediction, that students' C.O. Scales scores were not decreasing over

grade levels. Post-hoc analysis of C.O. absolute change scores indicated that at the individual level change was occurring in both directions, however, overall these increases and decreases cancelled out and no net change over time or grade levels was observed. Both the C.O. Scale raw score and absolute change score analyses indicated that the students' gender was an important determinant of C.O. Scale variability. Females had significantly higher C.O. Scale scores and their scores were significantly more stable over time than males.

Analyses which probed changes in the organization of orthodox Christian beliefs revealed that the internal consistency of the C.O. Scale was increasing slightly among the Grade 10 and 11 students. The overall picture from the several analyses which investigated this question, however, was that orthodox Christian beliefs are highly organized and essentially stable among this population as hypothesized.

Investigation of changes in the level of right-wing authoritarianism over the high school years indicated that contrary to our prediction the R.W.A. Scale scores of these students were not decreasing over grade levels. Post-hoc analyses of R.W.A. Scale absolute change scores indicated individual students' level of right-wing authoritarianism was changing. These changes were occurring in both directions and cancelled out overall. Analyses of R.W.A. raw scores indicated the students' residential location was an important determinant of R.W.A. Scale score level. Rural students had significantly higher R.W.A. Scale scores than urban students. The R.W.A. Scale change score analysis indicated that the students' gender was an important factor in the amount of absolute change. Females displayed greater stability in their R.W.A. Scale scores than males.

Analyses which explored the organization of right-wing authoritarianism over the high school years revealed that the organization of this ideology was quite low in the population. Further only partial support for the hypothesized increase as a function of students' educational level was found. The internal consistency of the R.W.A. Scale increased over time for the Grade 10 and 11 students, however, no increase was found in the Grade 12 sample.

Exploration of possible causal sequences between changes in C.O. and R.W.A. Scale scores, using the Cross-Lagged Correlation Technique indicated that neither variable had "causal priority" over the other.

The findings that orthodox Christian beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism did not decrease over the high school years are discussed and explanations offered. It is thought that the stability of these variables at this time may be due to ideological ferment being cyclic in nature. It is suggested that the middle to late seventies have been a "quiet time" for ideological ferment.

Several explanations for the sex difference in C.O. Scale scores are elaborated. Data gathered in this study enabled these explanations to be probed. Data presented provides no support for a differential emphasis explanation of sex differences in orthodoxy. Some support is found for a sex-role identification explanation of these difference. However, an explanation which postulates that observed sex differences are due to males being more rebellious against, while females are more conforming to, parental attitudes and values appears to mesh best with the available data.

The location difference in R.W.A. Scale scores was explored through an item analysis of the R.W.A. Scale. This analysis indicated that the

R.W.A. Scale location difference is due to rural students being more conventional and "old fashioned" than urban students.

The high and stable organization of orthodox Christian beliefs is discussed and attributed to the widespread, early, and thorough teaching of these beliefs in our society. The increases in the organization of right-wing authoritarianism, while being partially due to improved verbal skills, are thought to reflect increased psychological organization of these social attitudes as a result of increased education.

The picture presented by the present research is that, at least with regard to the variables considered, the high school years are a "quiet time" for social attitude change.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The present research project sought to investigate empirically stability and change in the religious beliefs and right-wing authoritarianism of middle and late adolescents. Specifically, three issues were examined: (1) change over time in (Christian) religious beliefs; (2) change over time in right-wing authoritarianism; and (3) the relationship between changes in these two attitudinal constructs.

Religious Belief Change

With regard to the first issue, previous research has shown that religion is an important issue to young people. A post-war study conducted by Allport, Gillespie and Young (1948) found that approximately seven out of 10 Harvard and Radcliffe students felt they needed religion in their lives. These researchers further determined that the most important influence producing this need for religion was the students' parents. A more recent longitudinal study of students at a number of American universities (Webster, Freedman and Heist, 1962) found that at entrance to college, 88% of the male and 91% of the female National Merit Scholarship Winners felt a need to believe in a religion.

Notwithstanding the importance of religion to young people, several studies have shown it also to be a source of anxiety, conflict, and doubt. Meissner (1961) administered a free-response questionnaire to 1,278 boys attending nine Catholic schools to determine the major sources of anxiety in adolescent boys. He found that over the high school years,

religion became an increasingly prominent issue, until it was listed as the primary source of doubt among juniors and seniors. Havens (1963) estimated that at any given time about 12% of college students have a critical concern, or even an acute crisis due to religious conflicts.

Such conflicts and doubts may, of course, cause young people to change their religious beliefs and behavior. Allport et al. (1948) concluded from their investigation that about two-thirds of all children who eventually go to college react against parental teachings. In addition, while approximately 25% of their sample stated that they had no need for any sort of religious orientation, only 40% of those students who did feel such a need found the system in which they were reared satisfactory to their needs.

Several studies have sought to determine the period in the adolescent's life when such changes are most likely to occur. Some have identified the high school years as the "critical period" for adjustments in religious values.

Kublen and Arnold (1944) in a cross-sectional study administered questionnaires to adolescents in the sixth, ninth, and twelfth grades. They found that many specific beliefs acquired during early childhood were no longer held in the late teens and that older subjects displayed a greater tolerance with respect to the religious beliefs and practices of others. Allport et al. (1948) found from the self-reports of Harvard and Radcliffe students that both conversion and reaction to religion tend to occur at about 16 years of age. Moreton (1944) reported that

religious conflict and change in a sample of British adolescents was most common between the ages of 15 and 19.

Other studies, however, have indicated that changes in religious values occur during the college years. Feldman (1969), in an extensive review of more than 40 years of research on this question, concluded that these studies

...generally show mean changes indicating that seniors, compared with freshmen, are somewhat less orthodox, fundamentalistic, or conventional in religious orientation, somewhat more skeptical about the existence and influence of a Supreme Being, somewhat more likely to conceive of God in impersonal terms, and somewhat less favorable toward the church as an institution. Although the trend across studies does exist, the mean changes are not always large, and in about a third of the cases showing decreasing favorability toward religion, differences are not statistically significant (considering only those studies that have given results of statistical tests of significance) (p. 44).

The majority of these studies, however, were conducted during the 30's, 40's, and 50's and it may be that 'kids' are growing up faster now and thus changes occur earlier. Research conducted recently at the University of Manitoba and elsewhere (Hunsberger, 1973, 1978) provided little, if any, support for the proposition that religious beliefs change during the course of higher education.

Hunsberger administered a 44-item questionnaire on religious attitudes and practices to 311 freshmen and 146 "seniors" attending the University of Manitoba and three church-related colleges. The students were from Mennonite, Roman Catholic, or United Church backgrounds.

There was little evidence that first-year students agreed with parents' religious teachings more than third-year students. Overall, measures of religious practice showed third-year subjects to be less active than first-

year subjects; however, the tendency was weak. Furthermore, a religion-by-religion breakdown of this tendency showed virtually no such trend for individual religious groups. Similarly, very little evidence was found to suggest that differences in religious ideology exist between first- and third-year students.

Hunsberger inferred that a period of religious ferment had probably occurred in many of his subjects' lives, and that a frequent outcome of this period was a lessening in orthodoxy. But this usually happened before the students entered university...presumably during late adolescence. That, of course, is one of the issues tested in the present research.

The Ontogeny of Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Consideration of the second issue of this study requires some summarization of the extensive literature which exists on authoritarianism. The search for the "authoritarian personality" began approximately 30 years ago and over this period of time numerous conceptualizations of the construct (and scales to measure them) have been presented. The best known of these are probably Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford's theory of "the authoritarian personality" (1950), Rokeach's theory of "dogmatism" (1960) and Wilson and Patterson's theory of "conservatism" (1968). In addition, both Lee and Warr (1969) and Kohn (1972) have developed approaches to the issue, and recently Altemeyer (1979) has been active as well. We will briefly consider the first three approaches listed above because they are the best known, and because they have been related to religious behavior more often than the other published conceptual-

izations. But in the main, we shall examine the recent approach taken by Altemeyer because it appears to be conceptually clearer, and have greater validity, than any of the preceding efforts.

The Berkeley Theory of the "Authoritarian Personality"

The most famous and influential research program ever undertaken on authoritarianism is, of course, that developed by a multidisciplinary research team at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1940's. The original goal of this research team was to investigate social prejudice, and at one point it occurred to them that an indirect measure of prejudice which they were about to develop could also be used to tap a fascist or antidemocratic personality syndrome. Eventually, a nine-trait model of this syndrome was conceptualized (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 228); the nine traits were operationalized in the 30 unidirectionally worded items which formed the F Scale.

The Berkeley researchers theorized that authoritarianism (i.e., scores on the F Scale) should be positively associated with anti-semitic and ethnocentric attitudes. To a large extent their research program seemed to confirm this, and also pointed to the childhood origins of authoritarianism. However, this evidence for the F Scale's validity was seriously questioned soon after the publication of The Authoritarian Personality. The mean inter-item correlation on the test was approximately .13 indicating there was very little relationship among responses to the various items. Furthermore, various researchers argued (Christie and Jahoda, 1954) that response sets could have contributed appreciably to the apparent relationship between authoritarianism and prejudice, as the tests used to measure these constructs were both unidirectionally worded.

In addition, the "interview studies" which had produced the evidence that authoritarianism had childhood origins were found to be methodologically flawed from beginning to end.

Despite the fact that there was virtually no evidence to support the validity of the F Scale, an avalanche of research soon appeared which used F Scale scores as indices of right-wing authoritarianism. A careful review of this literature, however, (Altemeyer, 1979) indicates that there still is no convincing evidence that the F Scale measures the Berkeley investigators' construct of authoritarianism with any power and precision.¹ The assessment seems unavoidable: Some 30 years after the publication of The Authoritarian Personality, the F Scale has little to offer the behavioral sciences today.

Rokeach's Theory of Dogmatism

Whereas the Berkeley researchers had endeavored to construct a measure of right-wing authoritarianism, Milton Rokeach (1960) set out to develop a construct and a measure of "general authoritarianism" which he called Dogmatism. It was intended that this concept would have equal applicability on both ends (and in the center) of the political spectrum, as it focused on the structure of belief systems rather than their content.

The conceptualization of dogmatism which Rokeach developed is

¹At best the test seems able to predict (weakly)
1) Aggression against unconventional or low-status victims, and
2) right-wing political sentiments.