

Anyone who endeavors to study the contours of Christianity is quickly overcome with the reality that no student will ever be able to fully grasp all the differences that exist in Christian churches worldwide. Voluminous amounts of research have described a religion that is characterized by a dizzying amount of theological, cultural, and racial diversity. However, in spite of this unimaginable diversity the vast majority of churches are organizationally similar. Save a handful of smaller denominations<sup>1</sup>, Christian churches are led by a recognized pastor or priest who ordinarily receives compensation for his/her role and is presumed to be afforded respect and deference by the congregation. The pastor's job is often seen to be as the teacher, encourager, and organizer of the laity and, in turn, the laity's job is to work alongside the pastor to bring about the vision set forth by the church leader. This conception of a hierarchical structure is one that has grown largely through religious tradition as the office of pastor is not explicitly stated in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Despite lacking a strong biblical foundation, scholars of the early church describe a rapid development of the role of pastor, possibly by the second century (Williams 2006).

This persistence of the pastoral office poses an interesting question for those who study religious life: How has this organizational structure affected how congregants and clergy see their roles in other aspects of social life? Scholars of American politics are quick to note that many of the hallmarks of political life such as the nominating convention (Howe 1991), and door to door conversion efforts (Jensen 1969), have been borrowed from religious traditions. It may be the case that a standard organizational structure has become so synonymous with the function of Christianity that it has merely receded into the background of inquiry. While social science has not paid significant attention to the question of authority there have been some notable exceptions. For

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<sup>1</sup> The one traditional Christian denomination that actively resists leadership are the Quakers (Sheeran 1983), while the Church of Latter Day Saints does have a local church leader, often called a bishop, however this person is unpaid (<http://www.mormon.org/faq/no-paid-clergy>).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that in the Pauline Epistles the author describes the role of elder (1 Timothy 3) or deacon (Acts 6).

example, Verba et al. find that Protestants are more likely to engage in activities of the church than Catholics and attribute this, in part, to the fact that Protestants are congregationally based as opposed to the Catholic hierarchy (1995: 245). In addition, other research has described the concept of “authority mindedness,” which is described as “an ideological commitment that values authoritativeness and obedience as a matter of principle” (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1989, 95). However, this authority mindedness is more related to dogmatism, as the authors go on to point to the ultimate authority in a religious community as the Bible. While these studies have made important contributions to the inquiry, it seems possible that a lack of focus in this area may be missing a critical component of how individuals construct their understanding of authority and trust. If individuals look to an institution that they value in order to determine how the larger society should be ordered then the organizational structure of religious communities could have profound effects on how individuals see their positions as members of a democratic society.

While there have been a few examples of researchers using the concept of religious authority to address specific types of policy issues (Hamil-Luker and Smith 1998), and some work exploring the impact that technology is having on religious authority (Campbell 2007; Turner 2007), there has been little substantive exploration of how Christians view the concept of religious leadership (but see Djupe and Gilbert 2008; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Barker and Carman 2012). The specific purpose of this research, then will be an exploration and measurement of the concept of religious authority and, in turn, how that religious authority shapes individuals’ views of other important topics of interest to social scientists. What follows is a study in contrast between the approach that the Christian Right has taken toward religious authority, as compared to the emergent church’s understanding of the structure of religious community. Springing forth from this dramatic tension, I introduce a way to operationalize religious authority and test its construct validity under a number of conditions. The findings described below paint a picture of religious authority exhibiting

characteristics that are similar to measures of religious conservatism, however after statistically analysis it appears that while religious conservatism contains an element of religious authority, religious authority is an independent theoretical concept as well. I find that clergy who exhibit high levels of religious authority and/or religious conservatism evince lower levels of support for raising children to be free thinkers. On the other hand, those who are amenable to religious authority show lower levels of support for deliberative values and democratic norms, irrespective of religious conservatism.

### **Polarity of Religious Authority – The Christian Right and The Emerging Church**

Over the last several decades the American religious landscape has seen a number of significant developments that directly consider the problem of religious authority. A recent headline generating a great deal of discussion is the rapid increase in the number of religious “nones” that have appeared on national surveys in the United States (Street et al. 2015). While commentators point to a number of causes for this exodus typically their reasoning is traced to theological matters, specifically conflict between science and Christianity, or the issue of gay marriage (Kinnaman and Lyons 2012; Held and Evans 2015), some social scientists point to the increase in secularization being a result of the loss of faith in religious authority (Chaves 1994). Chaves writes, “I propose that we abandon religion as an analytical category when studying secularization … (and instead) focus on religious authority” (750). While millions of Americans began to question how much trust they should place in religious institutions, two religious movements have fought to define and redefine religious authority for coming generations. The first attempt, the Christian Right, put an immense amount of emphasis on strong church leadership and helped to give rise to the mega church and the celebrity pastor. In response, a counter movement (the emergent church) developed that pushed for the diminishment of religious authority and instead focused on discussion and dialogue amongst all

members. It is through these two extreme understandings of religious authority that the importance of the concept come into focus.

The most prominent, and perhaps most successful, religious movement in the United States in the last thirty years has been the Christian Right (Balmer 2007; Armstrong 2010). While some accounts of the genesis of the Christian Right paint a portrait of a series of events that organically united disparate groups of conservative Christians under a single banner (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2006: 208-221), other observers describe a series of calculated events orchestrated by nationally known evangelical preachers with the goal of having an impact on the national political stage (Schaeffer 2008; Balmer 2015). This understanding of the Christian Right is one that emphasizes the use of televangelism by charismatic men like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson and their ability to mobilize a large numbers of believers to engage in political action (Hadden and Shupe 1988; Diamond 1999). These pastors, along with many others, preached an understanding of the Christian faith that was based on the utmost supremacy of the Bible, as well as the authority of pastors to be able to interpret the scriptures in the correct way (Sherkat and Ellison 1997; Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008). While the Christian Right enjoyed a sustained period of success in both the religious and electoral arenas, the movement has served to alienate a significant number of marginally attached Christians (Hout and Fischer 2002; Patrikios 2008)

In response to the Christian Right, a number of young religious leaders who have grown disillusioned with the rigidity and single mindedness of evangelical Christianity have come together to create a Christian religious movement that challenges many of the trappings, both theological and organizational, in mainstream Christianity. This phenomenon, popularly known as the emergent church movement (ECM), strikes at the core of many of the main tenants of Protestantism, including the objective truth of the Bible and the traditional structure of religious communities. In its place, the ECM has forged a vision of the church which emphasizes dialogue and discussion,

while at the same time creating an organizational structure that is most accurately described as “flat” (Jones 2011). While the ECM is a relatively young movement, its radical departure from orthodox approaches to Christian faith and practice has inspired researchers to try to understand how such a unique religious movement organizes and recruits individuals to its cause (Biolo 2011; Biolo 2012; Packard 2012; Marti and Ganiel 2014; Burge and Djupe 2014, 2015).

The genesis of the emergent church movement has been traced back to the early 1990’s when a group of youth pastors began to coalesce around the belief that the teenagers they were ministering to were fundamentally different than any previous generation (Kimball 2003). What leaders of this new movement discovered was a rapidly expanding contingent of young evangelicals who were growing disenchanted with the theology of their churches, but did not want to walk away from Christianity entirely (Biolo 2012). For these disaffected individuals, the ECM provided a theology that was less focused on objective truth and more willing to embrace the doubts of its members (DeYoung and Kluck 2008). Keying on these feelings, many emergent authors began to tailor their writing and sermons to appeal to an audience of evangelical “refugees” who were searching for a place where they felt welcomed (Biolo 2011).

One of the centerpieces of this new movement was grounded in an understanding that no one person had the explicit authority to understand the bible completely. Instead, the ECM believed that each individual is deeply constrained by their own personal experience, their own theological tradition and their own intellectual capacity. One prominent member of the ECM writes, “To think that I can just read the Bible without reading any of my own culture or background or issues into it and come out with a ‘pure’ or ‘exact’ meaning is not only untrue, but it leads to a very destructive reading of the Bible that robs it of its life and energy” (Bell 2009: 54). While leaders of the movement have gone out of their way to not label this perspective as moral relativism (McLaren

and Campolo 2006: 38), outside observers have noted that the lack of objective truth is a significant component of emergent theology (Carson 2005; DeYoung and Kluck 2008).

This understanding of the authority of the Bible stands in stark opposition to the approach that many leaders of the Christian Right have taken toward the concept of biblical interpretation. The leading thinkers in the Christian Right movement taught a singular reading of the scriptures that emphasized that the absolute truth of all passages, no matter their subject area. In essence, social scientists have argued that the Christian Right succeeded in creating a schema through which adherents understood all parts of the world (Ammerman 1987; Boone 1989; Sherkat and Ellison 1997). This approach to religious authority has had a profound impact on the worldview of many evangelicals. For example, in an interview with researchers, an evangelical woman from Georgia stated, "And God has said, 'This is the way I want you to live and here's how the government should run.' It's all in the Bible." (Smith 2002: 33). This focus on the authoritative nature of the Bible provides believers a framework they find helpful to engage and interpret the events of the world.

This point of departure is instructive in that it highlights the significant departure the emergent church has made from the traditional authority structure, which has often been the hallmark of evangelical churches that form the backbone of Christianity. In contrast, the ECM does not shy away from questioning all aspects of Christian life, which includes embracing a skeptical view of clergy. The ECM instead sees value in the viewpoints of all members of the community. Because of this intense skepticism, emergent leaders often have an awkward relationship with their role in the community. Worthen writes, "Many emergent pastors seem to find the very notion of clergy slightly embarrassing" (2013, 256). An example of how an emergent community approaches the weekly sermon is illuminating.

Solomon's Porch, one of the largest emergent churches in the United States, goes about the task of sermon construction by having a small group of members join together in dialogue during the week. The collective result of the conversation is then delivered by the pastor of the church, Doug Pagitt, on Sunday morning. The church believes that both committed members and newcomers are benefitted by this process because they see that their opinions and viewpoints are not only valid, but also essential to the health and vitality of the community (Jones 2009). Pagitt himself often describes this approach toward sermon preparation and delivery as the antithesis of traditional Protestant preaching, which he describes in a derogatory term, "speeching" (Jones 2009, 58–59.) Instead, Pagitt is a proponent of "progressional dialogue", a process whereby the speaker speaks in relationship to the audience and changes the content of the message based on this relationship (Jones 2011: 107). Other observers have described this process as provocative and has the end goal of "pushing listeners to reflection" (Marti and Ganiel 2014, 115–116).

However the conversation does not end after the sermon is delivered in many emergent gatherings. Solomon's Porch, along with other ECM communities, allows significant time for discussion during the worship service and many members are quick to ask clarifying questions or inject their own personal viewpoint about that weeks' scripture (Wollschleger 2011). This ongoing dialogue has a profound effect on how the members of the congregation view the role of authority. Tony Jones writes, "The weakening of the role of the clergy in the movement undermines the pastor's traditional hermeneutical authority in the congregation, opening the interpretation of scripture to all community members" (Jones 2011, 106).

When this process is compared to how many evangelical pastors approach the task of sermon writing and delivery an important distinction emerges. Nancy Ammerman, a noted scholar of the Southern Baptist Convention, describes the evangelical approach in this way, "The preaching situation thus provides the model for authority. A biblically legitimated expert provides

unquestioned and respected leadership for those less able to care for themselves” (1987: 128). Ammerman’s description of pastors as “experts”, teaching individuals how to understand the Bible, is completely at odds with the emergent concept that all believers have something valuable to bring to a conversation about interpretation. This presentation style turns congregants into passive receivers of biblical truth, instead of active participants in discovering truth. This distinction is what some of the earliest writers in the ECM point to as reasons for the decline in church attendance (Kimball 2003, 103–107).

This radical deliberation and intentional departure from the institutionalized nature of most Protestant denominations means that the ECM struggles with having a common and consistent theology. One emergent author writes, “When one asks an emergent Christian where ultimate authority lies, he or she will sometimes choose to say either ‘in Scripture’ or ‘in the Community.’ More often though, he or she will run the two together and respond, ‘in Scripture and the community’ (Tickle 2012, 151). While this is a welcome environment for many who are fleeing what they perceive as the stifling rigidity of evangelicalism (Hempton 2008; Bielo 2012), evangelicals find this level of relativism dangerous. Rev. Falwell stated on many occasions that the Bible needed no commentary, ““The entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the inerrant Word of God, and totally accurate in all respects.” (Ice 2009: 1)

As becomes apparent, the emergent movement is a significant departure from the traditional structure of a majority of Protestant denominations and certainly the Catholic Church. Many mainline churches have centralized leadership structures that control many aspects of individual congregations, including budgetary issues as well as who will be the minister in charge of each congregation (Roof and McKinney 1987; Calfano 2009). Even many evangelical denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, have moved toward preferring ministers who have seminary training and position themselves over the local congregation (Ammerman 1990; Finke and

Dougherty 2002). Previous social science research has been able to conceptualize and operationalize a number of approaches to the concept of religiosity, namely under the behavior, belief, and belonging classification (Leege 1996; Layman 1997; 2001). These studies have made tremendous strides in trying to understand the complex topic of religion, however the field has been scattered when trying to pin down the issue of religious authority with many studies either focusing on the outcomes of religious authority such as activity or opinion, while not attempting to measure religious authority ignored the authoritarian structure that exists in every religious community (see Wald, Owen, and Hill 1989; Mockabee 2007). Instead, what I propose is a measurement of how truth and power flow between clergy leaders and member of the congregation.

## **Data**

When considering matters of religious authority, those who are in positions of leadership have likely considered their proper role in a congregation in a more meaningful way than those who make up the laity, and as such, this research will use a sample collected from Christian clergy in the United States. A significant body of previous research has concluded that clergy are opinion leaders in their communities how they perceive authoritarian values will undoubtedly have some influence on the congregations that they serve (Stark 1971; Quinley 1974; Olson 2000). While, admittedly clergy do not perfectly represent the congregations that they serve, they are a useful sample because they emulate and implement religious style in their local community. In fact, church leaders likely provide church goers their only example of clergy-laity relations.

The data were compiled through a survey conducted via the internet using the Qualtrics platform. Participants were invited by email to complete the survey, in total 411 clergy provided a response to at least one of the questions. The survey was drawn from the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and clergy from the Greek Orthodox Church. It is important to note that this

sample is not random and does not contain all of the religious traditions that exist in American Christianity, however it does provide a significant sample size as well as a number of appropriate questions that will help to understand the concepts of religious authority as well as conventional measures of authority mindedness.

### **Religious Authority Measurement**

The survey that was distributed to clergy contained a battery of questions that were an attempt to operationalize the concept of religious authority. Respondents were given a list of ten statements regarding their orientation toward organization, beliefs, and how the church should approach the topic of outreach to the community. Response options ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” and included a “neither agree nor disagree” option. These statements can be most accurately as “values” because each was phrased in terms of how the world should be, not how it currently exists. Using factor analysis (available in Appendix Table 1) these ten items were reduced to five variables that include the following statements: (*Organization*) The more clergy can step out of the way of the congregation the better; It is important for the congregation to construct their own salvation; (*Belief*) The Gospel is what the congregation makes of it; I believe there are many valid interpretations of the Bible; and (*Outreach*) The church must adapt to a postmodern culture in order to spread the Gospel. In total there were 387 respondents who completed this religious authority values battery (RAV), and the five items hang together reasonably well as an index ( $\alpha=.66$ ). The scale ranges from 1-5 (higher values indicating a higher opinion of authority), with values distributed across nearly the entire range, however the lowest RAV score in the sample was 1.4 (*mean = 3.36, s.d. = .72*).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In order to properly situate this measure of RAV, it is helpful to understand how the measurement exists in relation to well understood religious identifiers. The survey afforded them the

opportunity to indicate how they identified themselves religiously. The question was posed, “Admittedly, few people like labels, but would you use any of the following to describe your religious faith?” Respondents were given a number of labeling options, many of which are indicated in Figure 1, which displays how each religious label scored on the RAV. It would follow that those who chose the label “emerging church” would score lower on the scale, but it is interesting to note that the ECM mean is not statistically different than the mean for those choosing the “liberal” label (2.78 vs. 2.79). In terms of the traditional labels, liberals scored low on the RAV, while conservatives scored at the higher end of the range. These findings do begin to paint a picture of religious authority exhibiting many of the same characteristics as religious conservatism. In addition, the similarity in RAV between emergents and liberals gives credence to the popular perception that the ECM has been a refuge for liberal Christians (McKnight 2007; McLaren 2008; Jones 2012; but see Burge and Djupe 2014). It is interesting to note as well that those who see themselves as “orthodox” indicated a level of religious authority (3.42) that is not statistically different than the overall median for RAV (3.36), a finding that supports the notion that orthodoxy is neither biased toward or against religious authority<sup>3</sup>.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Next, I compared RAV scores to an index of religious conservatism, constructed along the lines of a vast amount of previous research (Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Kellstedt et al. 1994; Guth et al. 1997). These items included biblical literalism, the virgin birth, a belief in Satan, and a complementary view of gender roles (for full question wording see the Appendix). These items were summed to generate a scale of conservative religious belief ( $\alpha=.92$ ). While the overall understanding in the previous literature is that religious conservatives also have higher levels of religious authority

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<sup>3</sup> As a check of measurement validity, both RAV and religious conservatism were correlated with each of the ten possible response items, the results of this analysis can be found in Appendix Table 2. None of the response items correlated more closely with religious conservatism than religious authority.

this is not a foregone conclusion. For example, Barker and Carman note that it seems possible that evangelicals would be skeptical of strong leadership because conservative Christianity describes human beings as “utterly depraved” and prone to abusing power. In addition, the evangelical approach to salvation is one that is highly personal and not dependent upon a pastor to be an intercessor, as in the Catholic Church. (2012: 63-65).

To begin to understand how these two concepts are related, I constructed both a histogram as well as a scatterplot, which are presented in Figure 2. While there are some similarities between the two measures, there is some significant difference between the distributions of the two scales. While the largest concentration of the sample falls between 3 and 4 on religious authority, most clergy show considerable religious conservatism. While just 15% of the sample scored a 4 or higher on RAV, over 44% of clergy scored a 4 or above on religious conservatism. There is little doubt that there is a positive relationship between religious authority and conservative theology, however there is a great deal of heterogeneity in the sample on these measures.

To further illustrate the relationship between religious conservatism and RAV a scatterplot was constructed that also includes a regression fitted line with 95% confidence intervals, this can be found in the second panel of Figure 2. The relationship between the two variables is positive, with those expressing higher levels of religious conservatism also indicating higher levels of trust in religious authority. It is noteworthy that the densest cluster of respondents in the survey can be found among those who score a minimum of four out of five on religious conservatism. This uniformity, however, begins to break down when one moves from the right side of the scatterplot to the left (or religious liberal) side of the figure. The analysis indicates that there is a higher level of uniformity among those who are theologically conservative, which provides support for the belief that religious conservatism and religious authority are rooted in the same underlying schema. This relationship however is not so consistent for other parts of the theological spectrum, however – as

there is a significant degree of pluralism in religious authority models among religious moderates and liberals. Finally a Pearson's correlation was estimated that indicates a positive relationship ( $r = .63$ ), however the correlation is not strong enough to trigger any worries about collinearity.

### **Religious Authority and Religious Conservatism - Child Rearing Practices**

In order to understand how religious conservative and religious authority converge and diverge, it is now worthwhile to turn to other relevant measures of societal values. Authoritarianism is a concept that has long been explored in the field of psychology with research going back to the 1930's identifying an authoritarian disposition and its link to political orientations (Lasswell 1930; Smith 1958). Perhaps the most succinct definition of this concept is "the balance between group authority and uniformity and individual autonomy and diversity" (Stenner 2005, 14). The role that authoritarianism plays is one of the crucial tensions that society wrestles with, with one author calling it, "(a) basic human dilemma...common to all mankind" (Duckitt 1989, 72).

The measurement of this concept has a long and varied history in the psychology literature, with a number of different operational strategies being employed. The earliest appearance of authoritarian measurement was included as part of the F-Scale, which attempted to assess the building blocks of an individual's personality (Adorno 1950). One of the questions touched on parental values for children reading, "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn." Subsequent research built upon the theme of child rearing values (Kohn 1977), believing that, "How to 'bring up' children...is a matter of profound consequences" (Martin 1964: 86). Subsequently, the use of child rearing measures to operationalize the concept of authoritarianism has been widely employed in the most significant work in the field (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). Previous work has indicated that while conservatism is typically strongly related to increased levels of authoritarian child rearing, the relationship is complex (Stenner 2005). For example, some work has concluded that conservative

Protestants are more willing to use corporal punishment as a way to discipline their children (Ellison and Sherkat 1993; Ellison et al. 1996), other research has indicated that evangelical fathers spend more quality time with their children, and also express more physical affection (Wilcox 1998; 2002). It seems worthwhile to explore the possibility that emphasizing religious authority in a religious context may lead religious individuals to desire their children to respect their elders and seek to conform to the larger culture.

Following in the footsteps of previous scholarship, the survey asked subjects a number of questions in relation to what values they desired for their own children. Respondents were read the following statement, “Although there are a number of qualities that people feel children should have, every person thinks that some are more important than others. Below are pairs of desirable qualities. Please tell me which one you think is more important for children to have.” The three response pairs were: independence or respect for elders, curiosity or good manners, being considerate or well-behaved. The three response items were combined to create a scale that ranged from 0 to 1 ( $\alpha=.61$ ), with higher values indicating a more authoritarian approach to child rearing ( $mean = .37$ ,  $s.d.= .33$ ).

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In order to understand how traditional measures of religious conservatism interact with religious authority, a linear regression was estimated using child rearing values as the dependent variable. In addition, a number of control variables were included that assessed a respondent’s years of ministry experience, education level, gender, as well as their political ideology (full question wording is available in the Appendix)<sup>4</sup>. The regression analysis model estimates from three models are displayed graphically in Figure 3 in a series of three model estimates, -- the first includes just

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<sup>4</sup> All variables, including IVs, DVs, and control variables were scaled from 0 to 1 in the following analyses in order to ease comparison of magnitude between coefficients.

conservative theology, the second has the religious authority values measure, and the final model includes both independent variables as a way to see how the two measurements relate to one another. The figure contains both independent variables as well as control variables along with lines indicating 95% confidence intervals. In addition, a vertical line is included that indicates a zero value, easing readers ability to determine which variables have an effect that is statistically significant. In their individual models both religious authority and religious conservatism reach statistical significance and are signed positively indicating a desire to raise children in a more authoritarian manner. The third model, which included both RAV and religious conservatism maintain statistical significance as well as being positively signed in the direction of seeking to raise children to be more obedient. These results are noteworthy because when the two independent variables are combined their resulting coefficients do not change in a statistically significant way. These results provide support for two possible conclusions: (1) religious authority and religious conservatism are tapping into the same underlying concept, or (2) that RAV and religious conservatism are related to authoritarian child rearing in different ways. While these results provide some illumination to how these two variables relate, further analysis helps to paint a more accurate picture.<sup>5</sup>

### **Religious Authority and Religious Conservatism - Deliberative Values**

One of the most significant trends in the field of religion and politics is a growing amount of literature that is devoted to understanding how religious environments provide opportunities for individuals to engage in dialogue about important theological and political issues on the national stage (Shields 2007), at the denominational level (Wood and Bloch 1995), as well as in the local congregation (Djupe and Neiheisel 2007; Djupe and Olson 2013). It would seem that having a strong view of religious authority could have dramatically shape how open an individual is to

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<sup>5</sup> The full regression table has been included in the Appendix, Table A3.

deliberation in their local church. Additional research has concluded that clergy have a tremendous ability to help frame the types of discussions that occur in the church context, by highlighting arguments for and against a position (Djupe and Calfano 2012). It would appear possible, and maybe even likely, that this could lead to a willingness of laity to consent to congregational authority. Also, it seems likely that conservative theology would work in tandem with religious authority to further stifle deliberative environments. If a pastor is seen as the “expert” on religious matters, as mentioned above, then deliberation will be a fruitless endeavor as the goal of any discussion environment would not be about sharing differing opinions, but instead about affirming the view of the church leadership.

In order to assess this relationship, clergy were asked a series of five statements (wording can be found in the appendix) that were prefaced with the following question: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about any adult forums that would be held in your church to address social or political issues?” These five response items, used in previous research (Barabas 2004; Neiheisel, Djupe, and Sokhey 2009) were summed into a deliberative practices variable that creates a statistically valid scale ( $\alpha=.73$ ). This scale then became the dependent variable in a regression analysis using the model from the previous analysis (*mean = .80, s.d. = .10*).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The regression model estimates from three models are displayed graphically in Figure 4-- the first includes just conservative theology, the second has the religious authority values measure, and the final model includes both independent variables as a way to understand the relationship between the two variables.<sup>6</sup> The figure contains both independent variables as well as control variables along with lines indicating 95% confidence intervals. As in the previous figure, a vertical line is included that indicates a zero value statistically significant effects do not overlap with the zero line. In both

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<sup>6</sup> The full regression table has been included in the Appendix, Table A4.

the first and second model conservative theology and RAV are statistically significant and drive down deliberative values, although the magnitude is much larger for RAV. For instance, an individual who went from the lowest value on the RAV scale to the highest would be nearly 50% less supportive of deliberative values. Under the same conditions, an individual moving from the most religiously liberal to the most religiously conservative would only become 15% less supportive of deliberative values. In the final model with both variables included, conservative theology fails to reach statistical significance, while RAV maintains significance at the  $p < .05$  level. The size of the coefficient indicates that an individual moving from the lowest level of religious authority to the highest level would move nearly halfway across the scale of deliberative values. The control variables included in the models worked as expected, with none being statistically significant. Additionally, a model was estimated that interacted RAV with religious conservatism, however the interaction did not reach statistical significance, as well. Clearly, this finding indicates that religious authority is a stronger predictor of deliberative values and should be considered in subsequent research in the field of political deliberation.

### **Religious Authority and Religious Conservatism – Democratic Norms**

Finally, I turn now to the concept of democratic norms, which underpin how individuals feel about the fundamental aspects of democracy, including openness to opposition and free speech. Previous literature has indicated that churches are especially capable at helping congregants construct a worldview, not just in a religious context but in all aspects of society (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988), often through small group activities (Wuthnow 1996), or through informal interactions that take place among church members (Djupe and Gilbert 2008). These exposures subtly push church goers to consider their role, as well as the place of the church, in a democratic society. One study states, “churches can be considered microcultures in that they showcase the promise and perils of democracy.” (Djupe and Calfano 2012: 95). If churches are indeed microcultures, then the way

that authority is structured is tremendously important to how individuals perceive the functioning of democracy in the larger environment.

As a way to test this relationship, a scale was constructed using four questions that have been used in previous research that assessed how supportive clergy were of democratic norms (Arceneaux 2008; Djupe and Calfano 2012) (full question wording can be found in the Appendix). Each subject was given four response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These four items were combined into a scale that hangs together well ( $\alpha=.79$ ) and range from 0 (low support) to .69 ( $mean=.43$ ,  $s.d.=.17$ ). As in the previous models, this scale of democratic norms then became the dependent variable in a linear regression, the results of which are graphically displayed in Figure 5.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Using the methodological approach that was employed previously, a regression was estimated using just religious conservative with, requisite controls, followed by a model containing just religious authority, and a finally a full model containing both independent variables. In both the first and second models religious conservatism and RAV predict lower levels of democratic norms, however the magnitude of the effect for RAV is twice that of religious conservatism. The finding that religious conservatism drives down democratic norms supports previously descriptions of the theological conservatives and their overall reluctance to listen to alternative points of view (Sherkat and Ellison 1997), but this finding becomes more nuanced when considering the full model which can be found in the third panel of Figure 5. When both religious conservatism and religious authority are included in a single model, religious conservatism does not achieve statistical significance, while RAV both maintains significance at the  $p<.05$  level and the coefficient does not decrease in impact. In fact, the overall magnitude of religious authority is substantial with an individual moving from the lowest level of RAV to the highest becoming 25% less supportive of democratic norms. This finding, taken together with the previous discussion of deliberative values

provides strong evidence that while religious authority is in some ways conceptually similar to traditional measures of religious conservatism, that there is an additional component to be explored<sup>7</sup>.

## Discussion

While many scholars of the emergent church have wondered about the long ranging impact of the movement on Christianity (Marti and Ganiel 2014), one contribution that may be felt long into the future is the way that the ECM has reconsidered the problem of religious authority. While many churches have denominational or congregational structures that clearly explicate the lines of authority, the trust that individual congregants have in those leadership positions is an area that necessitates a more in depth look by social scientists. The results of this analysis bring to bear the possibility that there is an additional dimension to religiosity that is worthy of further study.

In regards to child rearing strategies, religious authority and religious conservatism work in a similar fashion, with both increasing the individual's desire to see their children been raised in a way that emphasizes conforming to societal norms. In this case, the results indicate that both RAV and religious conservatism are creating the same measurable effect, however because both maintain statistical significance in the combined model they appear to be anchored in the same theoretical mooring. However when one looks at both the case of deliberative values and democratic norms, a more nuanced picture surfaces. In both these cases those who believe in having strong religious authority show a decreased support for allowing divergent opinions in the religious, as well as the political, atmosphere. Previous work in the field has indicated that one of the purposes of deliberation is to share information and attempt to change the positions of other participants (Barabas 2004; Neiheisel, Djupe, and Sokhey 2009; Djupe and Olson 2013). If one is in a position of authority, the lines of communication and persuasion exist in a one way relationship, with true deliberation significantly undermining the authoritative position.

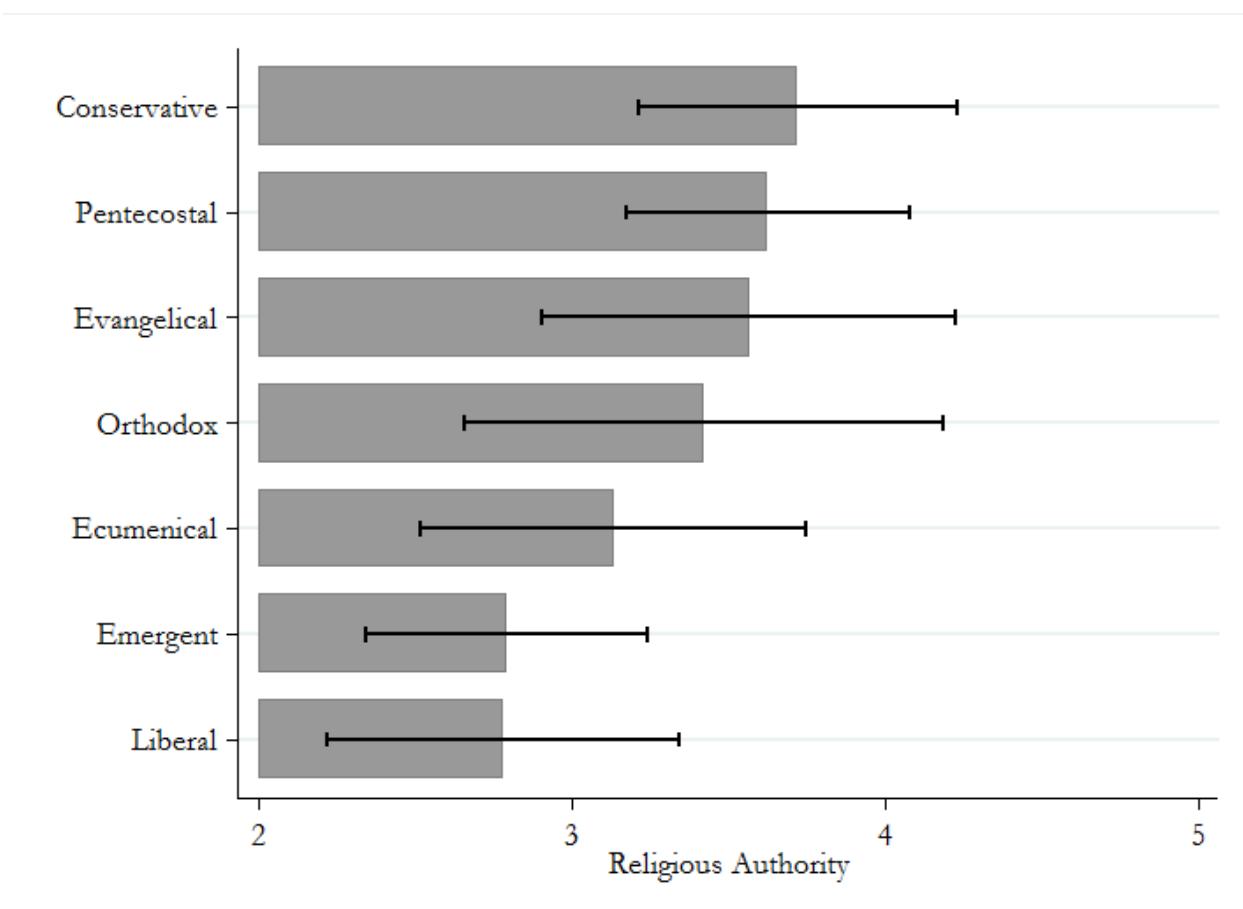
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<sup>7</sup> The full regression table has been included in the Appendix, Table A5

The work presented here merely begins the project of what can be understood about the impact of religious authority. While it is clear that there are vast differences in religious authority among clergy that were included in this sample, it would be of great value to replicate a religious authority measurement using church goers in a number of congregation and compare how the laity view of the problem of authority, with how clergy see their own role as leaders of a congregation. In addition, there is always the possibility the religious authority is a phenomenon that varies not just because of demographic or religious causes but is also highly sensitive to the specific leadership in individual congregations. It seems possible, and maybe even likely, that congregations that are led by ineffective leaders may alter parishioners' trust in leadership in a more general way, and could lead to the erosion of trust in governmental institutions. This calls for congregational level data to be collected in both quantitative and qualitative ways.

In addition, there needs to be further refinement of the religious authority battery. This questions offered in the current survey are based on several dimensions of the emergent church movement, but I make no claim that they are all encompassing of the concept. For example, the prominence that doubt plays is one of the hallmarks of emergent theology, but it was not included in this research. If a church leader consistently preaches sermons that indicate a persistent personal doubt about some matter of theology that could have an erosive effect on how authoritative that pastor is seen by the congregation. Obviously, this concept is ripe for further investigation. It is my hope that the work here begins the process of disambiguation between religious authority and religious conservatism. This measure of religious authority should be transferred into other subfields in religion and politics. For example, the work in the field of religion and tolerance has largely focused on literalism as the primary measure of religiosity (Wilcox and Jelen 1990; Eisenstein 2006; Burge 2013). Future research in to the connection between RAV and tolerance may illuminate and more nuanced understanding of the linkage between religious belief and religious authority.

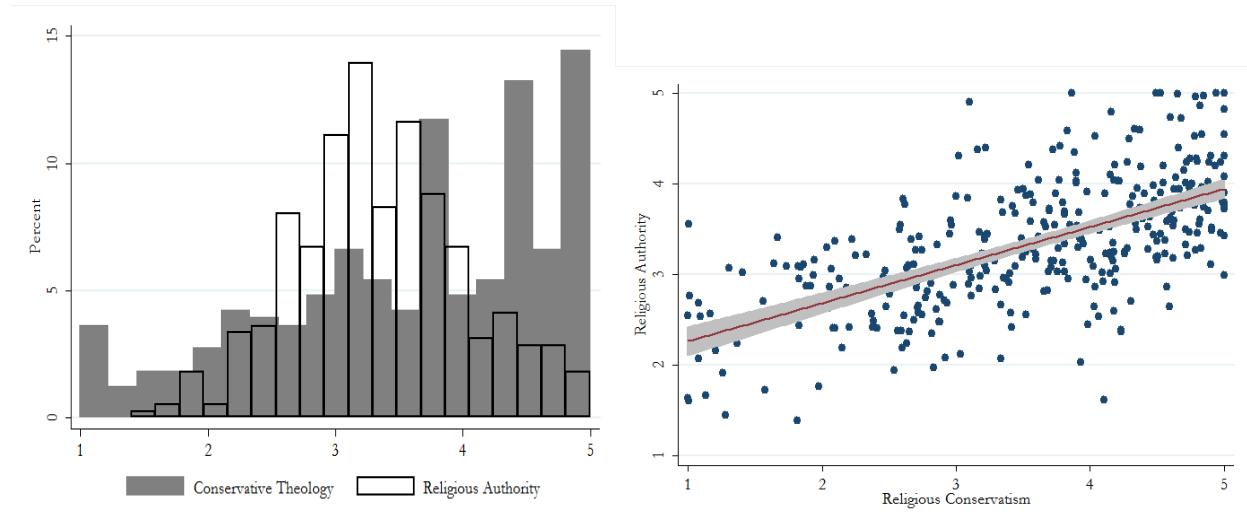
Figure 1 – Religious Authority Values by Religious Identity



Source: 2014 Clergy Study. Bars indicate emergent values score; the capped lines indicate +/- 1 standard deviation from the average.

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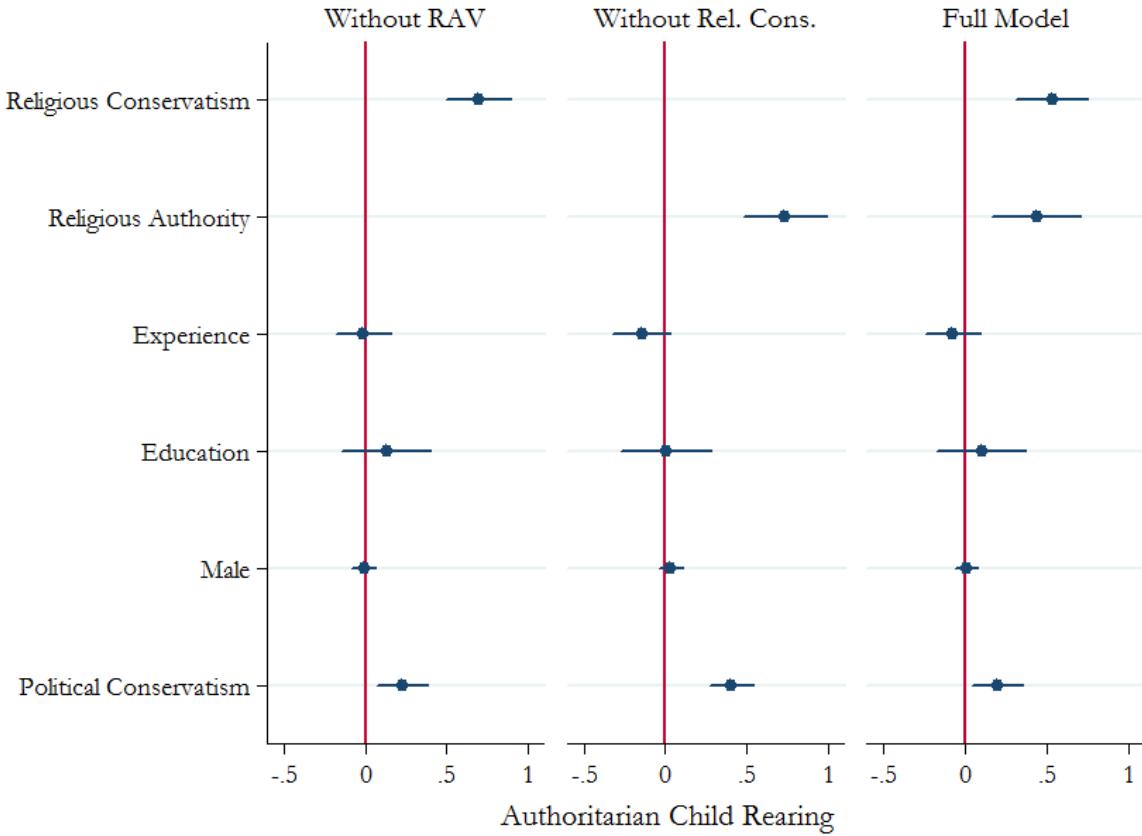
Figure 2 – The Distributions and Relationship of Religious Conservatism and Religious Authority



Source: 2014 Clergy Study

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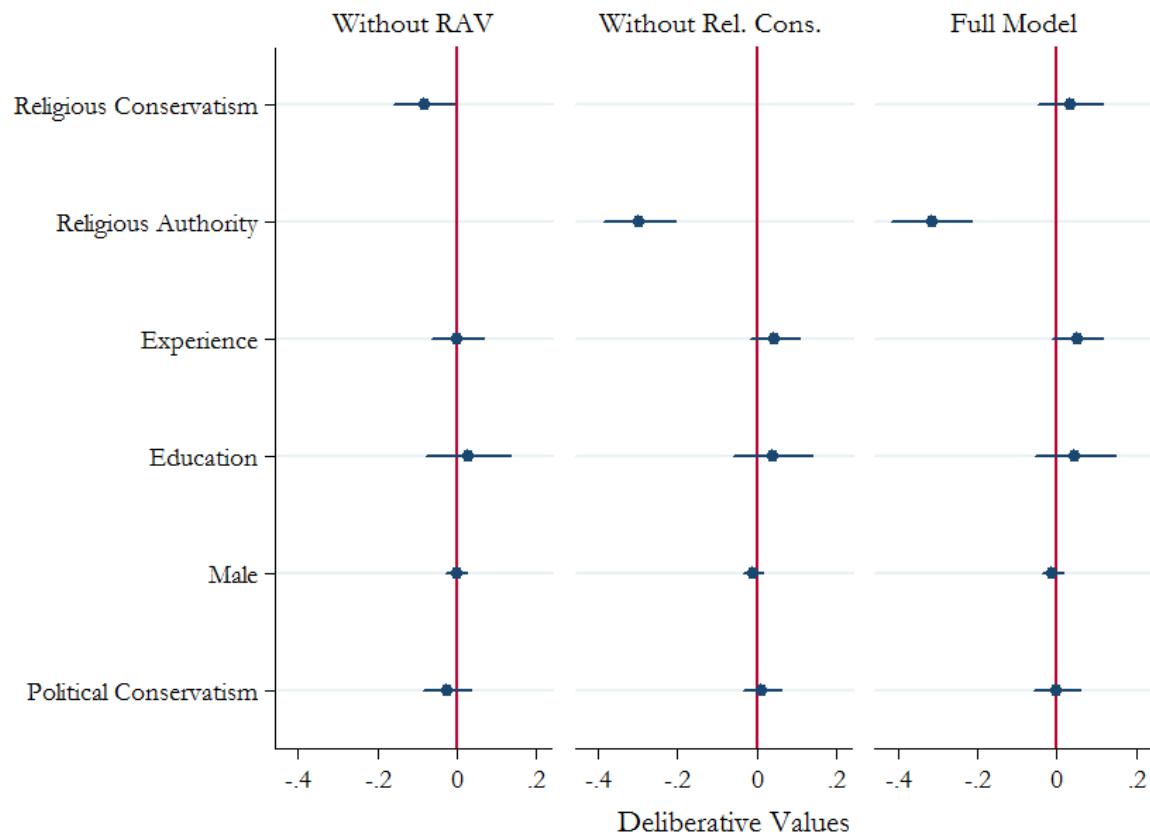
**Figure 3 – Linear Regression Estimates of Child Rearing Values**



Source: 2014 Clergy Survey

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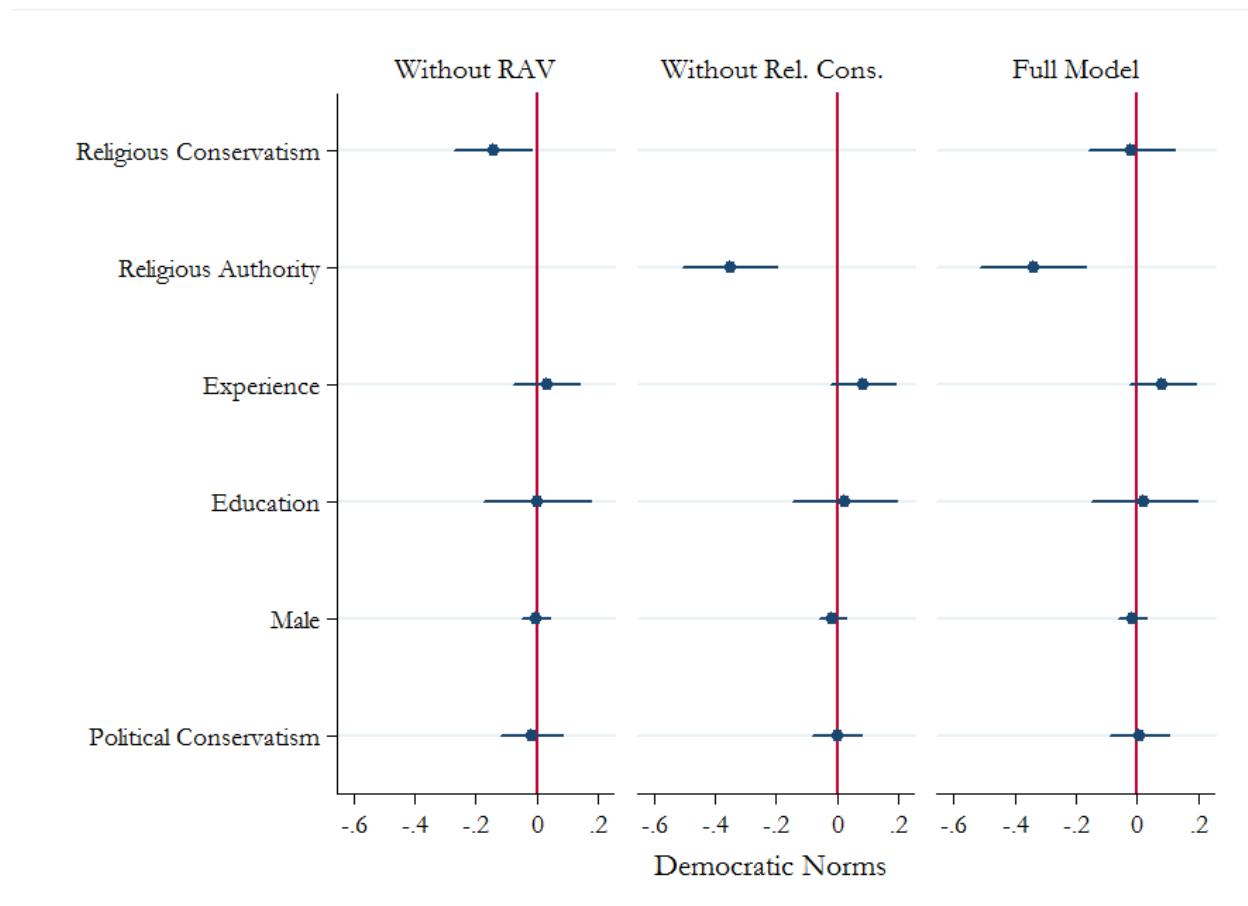
**Figure 4 – Linear Regression Estimates of Deliberative Values**



Source: 2014 Clergy Survey

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Figure 5 – Linear Regression Estimates of Democratic Norms



Source: 2014 Clergy Survey

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