

2021

## Subjective Well-being and Religious Ego Identity Development in Conservative Christian University Students

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### Recommended Citation

Watson, A.L., Goodwin, E.B., & Michael, C.W. (2021). Subjective well-being and religious ego identity development in conservative christian university students. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*, 11(1), 64-86. <https://doi.org/10.31380/sotlched.11.1.64>

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# SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND RELIGIOUS EGO IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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*Journal of the Scholarship  
of Teaching and Learning for Christians in  
Higher Education* 11.1 (2021) 64–86  
[http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl\\_ched/](http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/)

**Key Words** *Christian spirituality, subjective well-being, religious ego identity development, psychosocial development*

## **Abstract**

Spiritual maturity greatly impacts psychosocial development (Bravo, Pearson, & Stevens, 2016; Dreyer & Dreyer, 2012; Power & McKinney, 2014). Much of the identity formation process occurs during adolescence and early adulthood (Good & Willoughby, 2014; Hardy et al., 2011). The current study sampled students from a private Christian university to examine the relationship between religious ego identity status and subjective well-being. Positive relationships were found between religious ego identity and subjective well-being. Discussion includes the unique developmental needs of emerging adults to help Christian universities better facilitate their students' growth and education.

## Introduction

Spirituality is an important aspect of life for many people and can be an influential factor in mental health, affecting development and life satisfaction in different stages (Dreyer & Dreyer, 2012; Good & Willoughby, 2014; Power & McKinney, 2014). Hill and Hood (1999) have described spirituality as a sort of open-mindedness to the existence of a deity or other celestial possibilities. They delineate between spirituality and religiosity, which has been generally associated with more strictly codified religious beliefs that are cultivated and practiced within a social group (Hill & Hood, 1999). Watson (2011) explored issues complicating spirituality research that revolve around the myriad of ways spirituality can be defined. For example, spirituality is often thought to be a general openness to the Divine, while religiosity is considered to be a pursuit of spirituality within a communal context and informed by a doctrine of beliefs. Furthermore, spirituality has been operationalized in terms of behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social indicators (Hill & Hood, 1999). Secular researchers may have different ideas regarding desirable outcomes for their spiritual participants than these participants have for themselves, leading to potential misunderstandings that can alienate the two perspectives from one another (Watson, 2011).

### Statement of the Problem

At the turn of the century, Slater, Hall, and Edwards (2001) called for the development of more precise measures of spirituality, and several researchers have worked to refine measurement in ways that better account for participants' personal values and beliefs (Simpson, et al., 2008; Watson, 2011; Watson & Watson, 2013). In a 2011 report, the Pew Research Center (2011) estimated that approximately one-third of the 2010 global population (2.18 billion people) were Christian. According to Berger's 2009 study, there were approximately 560 million evangelical Christians in the world who subscribed to a biblical framework of spiritual understanding. This socio-cultural prevalence of Christianity makes it a central topic for discussion in many different

contexts. The United States has a long history intertwined with the Christian religion, and Christianity continues to be a dominant force in the lives of many U.S. citizens (Newport, 2017).

The college years are a time of transition during which individuals form and refine identity constructs (Bravo et al., 2016; Luyckx et al., 2013). For most students in the United States, going to a university is a rite of passage associated with self-discovery. The educational process is recognized as one that challenges learners not only to learn new ways of thinking and being but also to reflect on and question the familiar assumptions upon which they have built their lives thus far. This process of deconstructing one's belief system to make way for the reconstruction of knowledge that is better informed by historical and current perspectives is generally understood to be a necessary if difficult indicator of genuine education. A university is a place of education, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

Many universities, both secular and religious, are also committed to spiritual development, and private Christian universities are often especially invested in spirituality (Astin & Astin, 2010). At these universities, the administration focuses upon the spiritual dimension as a part of its commitment to mission, and faculty members are socialized to integrate the spiritual dimension into teaching, research, and service (Astin et al., 2011; Giselbrecht, 2015; Paredes-Collins, 2013; Utterback, 2013). In addition, students are recruited with the promise of this spiritual emphasis and subsequently educated with this goal in mind. As such, religious integration in this critical period of development in adolescence and emerging adulthood has great implications in the psychosocial functions and resolutions of these students. Many Christian educators identify with the calling of the prophet Jeremiah, to whom God spoke, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:9b-10, NIV). The trust that students and their loved ones place in private Christian universities is based upon the belief that this process of both rooting out inferior ideas and cultivating better ones will be carried out in ways that are respectful of who they are and where they come from, as well as where they are going (John 8:14).

## **Purpose of This Study**

More research is needed to explore the relationships between religious ego identity status and subjective well-being. This study focuses upon emerging adults enrolled in a conservative private Christian university to learn more about their developmental trajectories. We hypothesize that the higher religious ego identity status of moratorium would be correlated with lower levels of subjective well-being because of the ambiguity associated with this identity status.

## **Literature Review**

### **Identity Development**

A review of the literature on the topic of subjective well-being and religious ego identity development reveals a number of studies have been carried out in recent years. As identity development unfolds throughout an individual's emergence into adulthood, its resolution has consequences for one's behavior, well-being, and self-awareness (Hardy et al., 2011; Luyckx et al., 2013). Identity formation is critical in psychosocial functionality. The discovery of self is particularly relevant for college students, as much of the identity formation process takes place in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Bravo et al., 2016; Good & Willoughby, 2014; Hardy et al., 2011; Power & McKinney, 2014). Research suggests that most students work through Erikson's psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion while in college, developing an increasing sense of integrity or being true to self. During this period, students typically explore their identities, discovering their personal beliefs and the roles that they play as individuals in the world around them. Erikson's (1950) notions contributed to the foundational constructs of identity development, and Marcia (1966) later transformed Erikson's theory into an empirically viable model (Hardy et al., 2011).

Marcia's (1966) framework contains four categories of identity status: (1) diffusion (low exploration, low commitment), (2) foreclosure (low exploration, high commitment), (3) moratorium (high exploration, low commitment), and (4) achievement (high exploration,

high commitment). According to Marcia's operationalization of this developmental period, young adults develop their sense of identity by exploring their values, beliefs, and goals and developing an increasing commitment to those genuinely congruent with their self-understanding (Hardy et al., 2011; Luyckx et al., 2013). This process necessarily requires movement from less exploration and commitment to more thoughtful appraisal, which is not always a pleasant task. To achieve a true sense of identity, most people must endure a period of moratorium in which they are not certain of what they believe, what they want, or who they are. Generally, people prefer more security and less ambiguity to maintain a sense of subjective well-being. Consequently, the movement from unconscious concessions about identity and associated beliefs to more thorough expressions of realization is often accompanied by uncomfortable vulnerability. In fact, moratorium with its uncertainty has been correlated with lower levels of subjective well-being, and foreclosure with its commitment has been correlated with higher levels of subjective well-being (Lillevoll et al., 2013a). Among the ego identity statuses for developing young adults, achievement is typically considered to be the most developed status because it requires engaging in life possibilities, exploring options, and committing to certain principles or beliefs, while diffusion is considered to be the least developed status because it encompasses no interest in engaging in discovery or making meaningful commitments (Luyckx et al., 2013).

Negotiating the process of identity formation is critical in the psychosocial health and adjustment of individuals, and difficulties in this development can contribute to maladjustment and distress (Good & Willoughby, 2014; Hardy et al., 2011; Luyckx et al., 2013). Moreover, identity development has long been purported to occur across many dimensions of life, causing the processes of exploration and commitment to be potentially uneven as individuals may be differently motivated to avoid, foreclose, or continue the exploration process necessary to achieve a clear sense of personal identity regarding religion, politics, profession, etc. (Goossens, 2001). Thus, religious ego identity development requires the exploration of religious beliefs with the intent of making a commitment to values most consistent with one's sense

of self; this specific domain of exploration and commitment, however, often occurs contemporaneously with the development of ego identity in other domains as well.

## **Identity Status and Subjective Well-Being**

According to previous literature, Marcia's (1966) four identity statuses of psychosocial development are each associated with unique traits. For instance, individuals in diffusion have often reported high levels of health-compromising states such as depression, generalized anxiety, and social anxiety. On the other hand, achievement has been associated with high scores in areas of general well-being such as life satisfaction, internal locus of control, meaning in life, and eudaimonic well-being (personal development and potential in life) (Schwartz et al., 2011). This literature suggests that the adherence to a certain set of beliefs coupled with the search for meaning in life generally leads to greater overall subjective well-being. However, individuals actively working to achieve a clear sense of identity have also been shown to exhibit greater levels of general anxiety and depression in comparison with those who foreclose exploration and commit to their identity sooner. Thus, the uncertainty associated with high exploration and a search for meaning may often have a negative effect on subjective well-being, at least in the short term (Schwartz et al., 2011).

Research has shown the foreclosure identity status is correlated with lower levels of generalized anxiety than all three of the other identity statuses, indicating the understandable temptation to cut short exploration to avoid uncertainty, even at the cost of congruence. In comparing Marcia's identity statuses, Lillevoll, Kroger, and Martinussen (2013a) also found that individuals in the achievement identity status possess lower levels of anxiety compared to individuals in moratorium. The lower anxiety levels associated with less mature identity development seem due to less uncertainty and doubt that logically accompany exploration. Foreclosed individuals are more likely to make choices that shield them from internal and external conflicts, which leads to greater adherence to social norms, absence of difficult decision making, and avoidance of challenging situations

associated with the exploratory stages of identity development (Lillevoll et al., 2013a). While Schwartz et al. (2011) found individuals in moratorium have “fairly high levels of emerging self-knowledge” (p. 16), such as eudaimonic well-being and meaning in life, those individuals also scored fairly high on measures of identity confusion, depression, and anxiety. The increase in anxiety that often accompanies moratorium’s questioning and insecurity (and subsequent gains in identity development), then, appears to be a necessary if painful artifact of the journey toward identity achievement for many. For example, the identity statuses of foreclosure and achievement, which are both distinguished by high levels of commitment—as opposed to ambiguity—have been correlated with lower levels of health-compromising behaviors, such as impaired driving, unsafe sexual behavior, and illicit drug use, demonstrating the immediate benefits stronger commitments bring (Schwartz et al., 2011).

## **Christianity and Religious Ego Identity Development**

A large body of research suggests that religiosity is an influential factor in mental health and contributes to healthy determination of purpose (Dreyer & Dreyer, 2012; Power & McKinney, 2014; Puchalski et al., 2014). For many people, religion is an important part of life that enhances psychological health and functioning. Religiosity has been shown to contribute to better psychosocial adjustment, higher levels of subjective well-being, and higher levels of interpersonal satisfaction (Bravo et al., 2016; Dreyer & Dreyer, 2012; Good & Willoughby, 2014; Power & McKinney, 2014; Puchalski et al., 2014). For many other people, however, religion contributes to dysfunction. For example, religion has been related to lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Shariff & Akinin, 2014), higher levels of distress (Salsman & Carlson, 2005), more health risk-taking and delayed medical treatment (Horton, 2015; Mambet Doue & Roussiau, 2015), and collegiate sexual addiction (Giordano et al., 2017). Given that religion is a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses such diversity of belief and practice, it can be difficult to determine which aspects of religion are conducive to good psychological health and functioning and which are not.



In his seminal work studying Christian participants, Allport (1950) conceptualized religiousness in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic orientations. Intrinsic religiousness, with a focus on internal motives, is more reflective of psychological maturity and adjustment. Subsequent studies have observed that the extrinsic dimension seems to be better conceptualized by two factors: an extrinsic personal orientation focused upon intrapersonal benefits derived from religion and extrinsic social orientation focused upon relational benefits (Genia, 1993). Moreover, the intrinsic religious orientations correlate with psychological adjustment among Christian participants, in general, and conservative Christians, in particular (Ghorpade et al., 2010). Allport's original description of mature Christians, those who are cognitively open not only to contemplate their beliefs but also to welcome corrections and subsequently integrate feedback into existing belief systems, seem to share many similarities with those who have achieved religious identity. Extrinsic religiousness, with a focus on external motives, is less adaptive and would be thought to more closely resemble the less analyzed categories of identity development. On the other hand, subsequent research on the questioning nature of a mature faith has led to rampant debate about the nature of questioning for people of faith who feel securely attached to God versus those who prefer cognitive complexity itself over religious aims and value more agnostic perspective-taking (Batson et al., 1993; Miner, 2008). Questions persist about the nature of religiosity and identity, particularly in emerging adult populations whose primary psychosocial tasks are centered upon developing ego identity.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Volunteers were recruited from a private Christian university in the midwestern United States. Data were collected using two measures of Christian spiritual maturity from 590 participants as part of a confirmatory factor analysis; however, only 174 participants who also completed measures of subjective well-being were included in this study.

## ***Demographics***

- Out of the 174 students in this study, 128 were between the ages of 18-25, and the remaining participants either declined to disclose age ( $n = 4$ ) or were older (ages 26-35 = 18, ages 36-45 = 9, ages 46-55 = 9, ages 56 and older = 6).
- Of those in the study, 89 volunteers were female, 79 were male, and 6 declined to disclose sex.
- Out of the 174 participants in this study, 136 reported never having been married, 26 reported being currently married, 6 reported being divorced, 1 reported being widowed, and 5 declined to report marital status.
- Regarding their parents' marital status, 122 students reported their parents were married, and the remaining students reported their parents were not married (divorced = 23, widowed = 16, never married = 3), declined to disclose their parents' marital status ( $n = 6$ ), or selected an option that was outside the acceptable range, suggesting they misunderstood their choices (i.e., they selected a fifth option when only four choices were provided,  $n = 4$ ).
- Racial components showed that 97 participants self-identified as White, 40 as Black, 15 as Hispanic, 10 as Asian, 9 as other, and 3 declined to disclose ethnicity.
- Lastly, 59 subjects were first-year college students, and the remaining subjects either declined to disclose education level ( $n = 4$ ) or had been in college longer (2nd year = 37, 3rd year = 29, 4th year = 8, 5th year or higher = 37).

## ***Religious Affiliation***

- Out of the 174 participants in the study, 136 self-identified as Assembly of God/Non-denominational/Pentecostal, and the other participants either declined to disclose denomination ( $n = 3$ ) or affiliated with another denomination (Baptist = 10, Catholic = 0, Methodist = 9, or other = 16).
- Of the 174 student volunteers, 123 reported having been converted to Christianity or self-identifying as a member of the Christian religion for eight years or longer. Seventeen

reported not having been converted as long (4-7 years = 8, 1-3 years = 7, less than one year = 2), and others reported never having been converted (n = 27) or declined to report time since conversion (n = 7).

- Of those in the study, 94 students described themselves as intellectually conservative, 63 described themselves as moderate, 13 described themselves as liberal, 3 declined to disclose intellectual preference, and 1 participant selected an option that was outside the acceptable range, suggesting they misunderstood their choices (i.e., they selected a fifth option when only three choices were provided).

## **Procedures**

The second author administered the measures to participants who had been recruited using an IRB-approved script. Participants completed the packet of measures independently in their classrooms during a regularly scheduled class period and then returned them to the researcher for analysis. All identifiers were removed from the data, which were kept under lock and key to assure anonymity and confidentiality. This data collection process adhered to the same procedures described in earlier research (Watson, 2011; Watson & Watson, 2013).

## **Measures and Assessments**

### ***Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OMEIS)***

Religious ego identity development was measured using the religious subscale from the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OMEIS) (Adams et al., 1979). Adams (1998) reported Cronbach's alphas from 20 studies that ranged from .30 to .91, with a median alpha of .66. The scale was composed of 15 items designed to measure Marcia's four statuses (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement) of ego identity development. For example,

- Item 2 from the subscale that is intended to measure diffusion (low exploration, low commitment) is "When it comes to religion, I don't care about finding something that appeals to me."

- Item 13 from the subscale intended to measure foreclosure (low exploration, high commitment) is “I’ve never really questioned why I attend the same church I always have.”
- Item 11 from the subscale that is intended to measure moratorium (high exploration, low commitment) is “I keep changing my views on what religious views are right and wrong for me.”
- Finally, item 6 from the subscale that is intended to measure achievement (high exploration, high commitment) is “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about religion and know what I can believe.”

Respondents chose from a 5-point Likert-type scale with the response most like them from among the choices “disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “unsure,” “somewhat agree,” and “agree.” Summated scale scores were calculated for the global measure and for each subscale. Cronbach’s alpha for the global scale in this sample was .70. Cronbach’s alpha for the subscale measuring diffusion was .84, for foreclosure was .62, for moratorium was .78, and for achievement was .37, so it was not retained for further analysis.

### ***Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)***

Subjective well-being was operationally defined in terms of depression, loneliness, and life satisfaction. The variables were measured by the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck et al., 1961), the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996), and the Life Satisfaction scale (LSS) (Diener et al., 1985).

Internal consistency for the Beck Depression Inventory is generally high. For example, the internal consistency coefficient was reported to be .89 for a sample of 1,022 undergraduate psychology students with a mean age of 20 years (Dozois et al., 1998). The scale is composed of 21 items designed to measure participants’ self-reported feelings associated with depression. An example of a question from the BDI is “How often do you feel so sad you can hardly bear it?” Respondents chose from a 5-point Likert-type scale with the response most like them from among the choices “never,” “once in a while,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “always.” Summated scale scores were calculated, and Cronbach’s alpha for the BDI was .94 for this sample.

### ***The UCLA Loneliness Scale***

Russell has reported coefficient alphas for the UCLA Loneliness Scale from four studies, each with sample sizes greater than 300, ranging .89 to .94 (Russell, 1996). The scale is composed of 20 items designed to measure participants' self-reported feelings associated with loneliness. An example of a question from the UCLA Loneliness Scale is "How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?" Respondents chose from a 5-point Likert-type scale with the response most like them from among the choices "never," "once in a while," "sometimes," "often," and "always." Summated scale scores were calculated, and Cronbach's alpha for the UCLA Loneliness Scale was .75 for this sample.

### ***Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS)***

Bailey, Eng, Frisch, and Snyder (2007) reported coefficient alpha for the Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS) to be .85 from a study of 215 adults, and Yoon and Lee (2004) reported their study of 215 older adults yielded Cronbach's alpha of .83. The LSS is composed of five items designed to measure participants' satisfaction with their lives. An example of a scale item from the LSS is "In most ways my life is close to ideal." Respondents chose from a 5-point Likert-type scale with the response most like them from among the choices "disagree," "somewhat disagree," "unsure," "somewhat agree," and "agree." Summated scale scores were calculated, and Cronbach's alpha for the LSS was .85 for this sample.

## **Results**

### **Overview of Statistical Analyses**

Bivariate correlations and multiple regression analyses were conducted. The analyses first examined the whole relationships among all the variables and then explored the unique relationships between religious ego identity status and subjective well-being.

### **Identity Status and Subjective Well-Being**

First, we investigated correlations between identity statuses and subjective well-being, the results of which are available in Table 1.

These statistics include the means, standard deviations, and correlations with the other measures in the order they are presented: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, loneliness, depression, and life satisfaction.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Diffusion	6.74	4.06	—	.192*	.349**	.134	.157*	-.003
2. Foreclosure	8.92	4.10		—	.091	.079	.101	.005
3. Moratorium	6.49	3.53			—	.247**	.508**	-.216**
4. Loneliness	58.81	9.46				—	.439**	.008
5. Depression	42.84	15.24					—	-.365**
6. Life Satisfaction	17.60	5.54						—

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables*

\* $p < .05$ , one-tailed. \*\* $p < .01$ , one-tailed.

Consistent with expectations, a lack of commitment was associated with lower subjective well-being as expressed with the positive relationships between diffusion and depression, between moratorium and loneliness, and between moratorium and depression. Further, the negative relationship with moratorium and life satisfaction lends additional evidence to the lack of commitment on well-being. In this sample, there were some measurement problems with the ego identity status subscales as seen in the multicollinearity between diffusion and foreclosure. This can likely be explained by the lack of exploration that characterizes both of these identity statuses, but foreclosure should also reflect a commitment lacking in the diffusion status.

## Religious Ego Identity Status and Subjective Well-Being

Next, we conducted multiple regression analyses to see if identity status predicted subjective well-being. Table 2 shows that scores on moratorium contributed a small amount of additional unique variance in scores of life satisfaction beyond any shared variance with scores on the other identity status measures.

Measures	Unstandardized beta	Standardized beta	t	p	Zero Order r	Semi-partial r
Diffusion	.110	.080	1.001	.318	-.003	.074
Foreclosure	.016	.012	.153	.879	.005	.011
Moratorium	-.384	-.245	-3.091	.002	-.216	-.229

Table 2. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Life Satisfaction from Ego Identity Status*

Similarly, Table 3 confirms that moratorium was the only predictor that contributed to the variance in scores on loneliness. In this case, however, the unique variance attributed to moratorium was slightly smaller than the shared variance.

Measures	Unstandardized beta	Standardized beta	t	p	Zero Order r	Semi-partial r
Diffusion	.106	.046	.569	.570	.134	.042
Foreclosure	.111	.012	.633	.528	.079	.047
Moratorium	.605	.226	2.870	.005	.247	-.212

Table 3. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Loneliness from Ego Identity Status*

Finally, Table 4 also reveals that moratorium was the only status that predicted variance in scores on depression. As with loneliness, there was slightly less unique variance attributed to moratorium than the variance shared with the other predictors.

Measures	Unstandardized beta	Standardized beta	t	p	Zero Order r	Semi-partial r
Diffusion	-.130	-.035	-.488	.626	.157	-.032
Foreclosure	.225	.060	.906	.366	.101	.059
Moratorium	2.222	.515	7.368	.000	.508	-.482

Table 4. *Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Depression from Ego Identity Status*

## Implications

Students are unique, and their developmental trajectories differ. Some students are diffused, not seeking to understand themselves in terms of their commitments, potentially leading to lower levels of subjective well-being such as depression. Some students are foreclosed, demonstrating a strong commitment to beliefs they have not actually explored, potentially retarding development. Some students are in moratorium, seeking to understand what they believe and why, so they can make meaningful commitments and grow in their sense of self and purpose. Regrettably, this necessary yet difficult process is often accompanied by lower levels of subjective well-being.

Our results confirm past findings that those who identify themselves with the religious ego identity statuses associated with lower commitment are also more likely to suffer from lower subjective well-being (Lillevoll et al., 2013a). In addition, participants are particularly vulnerable when they cannot yet make commitments in ways that are truly congruent with their sense of self as they are exploring personal beliefs and reflecting upon their values, (Schwartz et al., 2011). As expected, those in the highly committed foreclosure religious ego identity status demonstrated no relationship with subjective well-being, while those who identified with the lack of commitment that is characteristic of diffusion yielded a small positive relationship with depression.

The most troubling finding, however, confirmed that those who identified themselves in the moratorium status suffered from the poorest subjective well-being, indicating they felt lonely, dissatisfied with life, and quite depressed. In other words, ambiguity and uncertainty cause most people to feel insecure, which threatens the sense of subjective well-being; identity achievement is theorized to require reflection and at least some interior exploration of beliefs necessitating a degree of uncertainty that, for many people, is somewhat uncomfortable (Schwartz et al., 2011)



## Conclusions

The present study provides unique insight into the developmental trajectories of students in a private Christian university. The students in this sample with higher scores on moratorium demonstrated a negative relationship with life satisfaction and a positive relationship with loneliness and especially depression. The inherent conflict between the search for religious ego identity and subjective well-being must be known and understood if adolescents and emerging adults caught in the throes of this conflict are to be properly supported. Educational leaders at universities that exist to facilitate the education and development of each student must both be aware of the diversity within their student populations and be ready to respond. Thus, administrators at these universities should commit to meeting the needs of individual students in ways that support their growth, education, and healthy functioning, and faculty should be socialized with these goals in mind. Young adult Christian students need educational scaffolding to know that exploring their beliefs does not suggest a betrayal of God or renunciation of faith.

Perhaps the most powerful source of support involves not only recognizing the soul work required of emerging adults seeking to achieve their own religious ego identity but also celebrating that process by normalizing it and encouraging students in their faith as they carry out this important psychosocial task. A unique challenge faced by many conservative Christian students is the sense that they should accept without question all they have been taught, without realizing that it is the testing of faith that leads to the authentic Christian maturity they seek (James 1:3; 1 Peter 1:7). Many students wrongly believe that questioning their beliefs and values is somehow evidence of a lack of faith and maturity, when in reality, it is by this very act of questioning that depth and maturity are produced. Indeed, scripture teaches followers not to spurn the prophetic utterances, but to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). According to a biblically-based theology, they can be confident that God is their loving Father who is present with them as they work out their salvation, using all things – even difficult things—for their ultimate good (Deuteronomy 31:6; Philippians 2:12; Romans 8:28). When they

encounter questions that they are not certain how to answer, they can rest assured that they are not required to derive every answer; indeed, they are not required to derive any answers without Divine assistance (Proverbs 3:5-6; John 16:13). Christians have been promised that they are each a masterpiece created by God, and that He who began a good work in their lives is faithful to complete it (Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 1:6); therefore, they can be content even in struggle, knowing that His power is perfected in weakness (Philippians 4:11-13, 2 Corinthians 12:9).

Perhaps the most important tenet of Christian doctrine is also the most potent tool in supporting conservative Christian university students in successfully achieving a congruent religious ego identity: God is love, and He has called His followers to pursue Christlike love above all else (1 John 4:7-8; 1 Corinthians 13). Thus, adolescents and emerging adults from conservative Christian constructs can be supported in their pursuit of an achieved religious ego identity when they are reminded that they have been invited by their God to bring Him every question, concern, and anxiety in prayer to exchange them for peace (Philippians 4:4-8). Mature Christian followers know quite well that the very desire to be mature in faith can result in an existential angst that threatens subjective well-being. These believers can encourage those in their care who are cultivating their own religious ego identity with the scripture that teaches the antidote for this self-doubt: reassurance that God not only sees the struggle but also that He is not threatened by their uncertainty and doubt. Instead, He reminds them that He loves them, His faithfulness is greater than their self-doubt, and He is present to reassure them of His good intentions toward them. He can be trusted to help them pursue authentic truth about who they are and the freedom that truth brings (1 John 3:18-23; John 8:31-32).

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Although this study contributes significantly to the knowledge of associations between spiritual maturity, identity, and subjective well-being, the data must be viewed within the context of its limitations. There are implicit challenges with self-reported data, yet prior research

has demonstrated relatively low threats to validity when anonymity and confidentiality are assured, as this study provided (Slater et al., 2001). Other concerns, however, are more serious. The OMEIS subscales correlated in unexpected directions. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha was so low that it could not be retained for analysis, and our sample demonstrated correlations among the three identity statuses that were investigated, suggesting a measurement problem that has possibly confounded our findings. Hence, future research should focus on improving the psychometric properties of the OMEIS, in general, and the achievement subscale in particular. Second, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the specific characteristics of the participants included in the study. For instance, the majority of the volunteers in our study self-identified as Assembly of God/non-denominational/Pentecostal, limiting generalizability not only to other faith traditions outside of Christianity, but to other Christian groups as well. Also, most participants were between the ages of 18-25, narrowing the implications of the study to the general population. Finally, the majority of the participants self-identified as White, restricting the range of variability in ethnicity. Therefore, in future research, it would be useful to examine the effects of denomination, age, and ethnicity on Christian spiritual maturity and their resulting effects on religious ego identity development and subjective well-being.

Note: The authors wish to thank Claire Ferguson for her contributions during the initial stages conceptualizing this research study.

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