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Religion and Crime Studies: Assessing What Has Been Learned

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Abstract: This paper provides a review of the literature that assesses the relationship between religion and crime. Research on the relationship between religion and crime indicates that certain aspects of religion reduces participation in criminal activity. A review of the literature indicates religion reduces participation in criminal activity in two broad ways. First, religion seems to operate at a micro level. Studies have pointed to how religious beliefs are associated with self-control. Second, researches have examined the social control aspects of religion. In particular, how factors such as level of participation and social support from such participation reduces criminal activity. Likewise, findings suggest that although there has been a sizable number of studies and diverse interests of researchers examining the religion/crime nexus, the research has not identified which aspects of religion have the strongest influence on crime reduction. In addition, the specific ways in which these factors are associated with crime reduction have not been comprehensively identified. Similarly, more than 40 years of empirical scholarship suggests that religion suppresses criminal behavior. Nevertheless, these findings remain controversial as the literature neither accentuates the mechanisms of religion responsible for suppressing criminal behavior, nor does the literature reject the spuriousness of the religion-crime association relative to mediating effects of self-control and social control. Finally, our review suggests that methodological constraints infringe on the capacity for sociological and criminological to accurately ascertain the validity of the religion-crime nexus, often generating mixed or inconclusive findings on the religion-crime association. Our paper concludes with recommendations for future empirical scholarship that examines the religion-crime nexus.

Keywords: religion; crime; methodology; spurious; inverse

1. Introduction

"The devil made me do it!" could have been the mantra of many offenders during the era of demonological theories of crime. It was during this era, the late 17th and early 18th centuries, in which the offender was "viewed as a sinner who was possessed by demons or damned by other worldly forces" (Hagan 2017, p. 106). Since then, religion has played an important role in the way Western society has responded to offenders. From the 4th Century AD through the middle ages, no major distinction was made between civil and criminal offenses (Sumter 1999). Accordingly, sanctions for misconduct were derived from Roman Catholic teaching, arranged to accord with the Biblical command of an eye for an eye (Sumter 1999). Hence, religion pervaded all aspects of life during colonial America, a time where early settlers believed that God pre-determined some people to become criminals (Newman 1985). It is not surprising when reformers of later eras invented the penitentiary, probation, and parole, they structured their inventions as vehicles where offenders could go to atone for their sinful ways and embrace a spiritually right life (Clear and Sumter 2002; Sumter 1999; Sumter and Clear 2002). Hence, throughout the following centuries, including the

20th century and well into 21st century, many sociologists have nurtured the belief that attachment to and participation in religious events tend to suppress criminal behavior (Adamczyk et al. 2017; Brauer et al. 2013; Clear and Sumter 2002; Corcoran et al. 2017; Desmond et al. 2011; Ellison and George 1994; Hirschi and Stark 1969; Hoskin et al. 2017; Johnson et al. 2001, 2000; Lee 2006; Petts 2009; Regnerus 2003; Roberts et al. 2011; Schroeder et al. 2017; Sturgis and Baller 2012; Ulmer and Harris 2013; Sumter 1999). Eventually, the suppression of criminal behavior by religion became a focal point of empirical scholarship.

Specifically, the landmark study by Travis Hirschi and Rodney Stark, "Hellfire and Delinquency," pioneered empirical scholarship into the relationship between religion and crime (1969). Grounded in the Durkheimian discourse, which conceives of religion as essential to "ensuring and maintaining conformity to social norms," Hirschi and Stark (1969) found no difference between frequent church attendees and those who did not attend church frequently and their propensities for engaging in criminal behavior (p. 202). Furthermore, Hirschi and Stark (1969) found no difference between propensities to engage in criminal behavior relative to students who believed in the Devil and life after death and those who did not believe in an afterlife or supernatural world. Nevertheless, in his reconceptualization of "Hellfire and Delinquency," Stark (1996) argued that sustaining religion through interaction and fostering a collective consensus on the importance and value of religion fosters conformity to societal norms and reinforces religion as a structural safeguard against crime. Subsequent empirical scholarship, expanding over 40 years, have examined the relationship between religion and crime, often generating inconclusive and contradictory findings.

In general, available empirical evidence suggests an inverse relationship between religion and crime. According to over 40 years of empirical research summarizing the relationship between religion and crime, findings indicate that religion decreases propensities for criminal behavior (Adamczyk et al. 2017; Baier and Wright 2001; Johnson et al. 2000). Still, though this relationship seems viable, other research has shown that religion has little effect on criminal offending, instead suggesting that the religion-crime relationship is spurious (Hirschi and Stark 1969; Cochran et al. 1994; Kerley et al. 2011; Brauer et al. 2013). Though popularized as being inverse, the relationship between religion and crime within criminological and sociological scholarship remains conversational, given divergent conceptions of religion and how religion is often conceptualized (Sumter 1999). This inconsistency in framing religion undermines the ability of criminological and sociological research to empirically assess the religion-crime relationship. As Sumter (1999) has documented, the measure one uses to determine a person's level of religiousness is an important factor in determining the relationship between religion and criminal behavior. Therefore, "multiple dimensional measures of religiousness are generally considered preferable to unidimensional measures because they tap a variety of aspects of religiousness beyond mere participation" (Clear et al. 1992, p. 10). As noted by Clear and Sumter (2002), a multitude of social science disciplines have been limited in their ability to successfully define and operationally measure the core meaning of religion. This methodological constraint presents a unique challenge for empirical scholarship examining the religion-crime relationship, as researchers are inclined to utilize proxy measures that approximate or barely tap into the underlining core meaning of religion as a social construct. Nevertheless, two leading conceptions of religion exist which draw on the works of Durkheim and Marx. In particular, Durkheim conceives of religion as a set of sacred beliefs and rituals that foster a moral community or collective of willing members that adhere to the fundamental beliefs and practices, being themselves integrated in the wider social fabric and regulated toward pro-social behaviors. For Marx, religion represents an ideology used to legitimate existing social arrangements that are oppressive to the masses and function to perpetuate inequality and stratification. Though different conceptions, both Durkheim and Marx converge in their relegation of religion as a mechanism of social control. Hence, religion is a set of beliefs and rituals that are socialized and reinforced to a collective of individuals and groups and serve to control decisions and behaviors. To further expand the religion-crime relationship, self-control and social control have been advanced as potential moderators.

Available research examining the relationship between self-control, religion, and crime converge in their findings that low levels of self-control significantly increased criminal/deviant behavior (Welch et al. 2006; Laird et al. 2011). For instance, Laird et al. (2011) found that the more meaningful their religious beliefs and the more youth attended church services, the less likely youth were to have low self-control, thus the lower their propensity for anti-social behavior. However, additional literature highlights the independent nature between key social variables and self-control in predicting criminal/deviant behavior (Kerley et al. 2011; Antonaccio and Tittle 2008). In examining the relationship between an individuals' morality, self-control, and propensity for criminal behavior, Antonaccio and Tittle (2008) found that while morality and self-control exerted significant reductionist effects on criminal/deviant propensities, morality exerted the greatest effects in lowering propensities for engaging in criminal/deviant behavior. Such findings indicate that self-control alone is not responsible in explaining criminal offending and additional variables should be considered in explaining the religion-crime relationship.

For social control, available research indicates that higher levels of religiosity contributes to higher levels of social control which reduces the likelihood for criminal offending (Desmond et al. 2008; Johnson et al. 2001). For example, Desmond et al. (2008) found that the stronger youths' commitment to their religious beliefs, partly through their degree of involvement in religious activities and/or practices that socialized the moral transgressions of criminal behavior, the greater their disproval of delinquency and the lower their interaction with delinquency-affirming peer groups and the lower their involvement in delinquency.

Despite these findings, available research remains limited in accurately accounting for the role of self-control, social control, and religion in influencing criminal/deviant propensities. Similar to the methodological drawback of conceptualizing and operationalizing religion, the lack of a universal definition and measurement of self-control and social control within the context of religion further hinders criminological and sociological scholarship in understanding the religion-crime relationship and addressing the meaning and significance of self-control and social control to the empirical enterprise.

The current paper aims to unravel the meaning of religion and discuss the process in which religion functions as a safeguard for individuals against the allure of criminal/deviant behavior. Based on the extant research, the authors seek to provide a comprehensive compilation of the most salient self-control and social control aspects of religion that mitigate participation in criminal activity. In doing so, a survey of the literature addressing the role of social control and self-control, as potential mediators to the religion-crime nexus, is discussed. Furthermore, methodological constraints within available criminological and sociological scholarship on the religion-crime relationship is addressed. Finally, this paper concludes with recommendations to guide future studies that seek to explore the religion-crime nexus.

2. Theoretical Underpinning of Religion and Crime

The work of Emile Durkheim is considered one of the oldest and most comprehensive examinations of religion in sociology. Despite subsequent examinations of religion in sociology, Durkheim's examination provides a more holistic view of religion as a positive controlling force in society. According to Durkheim, members of society willingly adhered to core sets of beliefs that either integrated them into the fabric of society or regulated individual behaviors and decisions, promoting pro-social behavior. Karl Marx is also historically noted for his examination of religion which, in contrast to Durkheim, primarily focused on the extent to which religion operated as an ideology that had the ability to legitimate societal arrangements that perpetuated inequality in society. Although Marx's focus was on the role religion played in perpetuating inequality, core pieces of his work suggest that the acceptance of such religious beliefs was a fundamental aspect of such control. In theorizing religion and crime, an examination of Durkheim's theory of religion and a discussion of Karl Marx's perspective on religion is warranted.

According to Durkheim, religion consists of core sets of beliefs and rituals that are tied to items that designated as sacred. These practices unite members into a moral community or what Durkheim refers to as a Church. The following section examines the central elements of religion and how each of these is related to exercising control over the individual.

2.1. The Sacred and Profane

Religion is created by members of society but becomes a phenomenon that is transcendent and external to the members of society. According to Durkheim, an essential feature of religion is the designation of material objects in society as either sacred (religious) or profane (non-religious) (Regnerus 2003; Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017; Sumter 1999). The designation of pieces of the material world as sacred serves to reinforce religious sentiments/beliefs in society (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017, p. 97). As members of religious communities are consistently conscious of the distinction between the sacred and profane, so are they conscious of the beliefs that are represented in the sacred. This conscious awareness of the distinction between the sacred and profane ensures that members of religious communities avoid behaviors and decisions that desecrate the sacred. The following sections will discuss how religion exerts social control over members of society.

2.2. Rituals and Beliefs

Beliefs represent the non-tangible/non material element of religion. This aspect of religion is reinforced through rituals that typically incorporate sacred objects. Rituals serve to reinforce connections to a set of beliefs (Sumter 1999). In addition, rituals represent a set of collective behaviors and practices that reinforce the connection to a community of believers. Rituals are designed to promote a shared sense of belonging to something larger than the individual and elicit an emotional experience. This emotional experience typically reinforces beliefs embedded within the religion itself.

Durkheim (1951) states that religious beliefs reinforce norms and behaviors in society, thus promoting solidarity in society. This solidarity acts a form of social control as members of the group not only adhere to beliefs that guide appropriate and acceptable behavior because they are integrated into the group, but they also adhere to these norms and behaviors because they may fear being stigmatized for diverging from the norms and behaviors promoted by the group.

2.3. Morality

According to Durkheim, morality refers to the level of consensus in society concerning appropriate behavior. Morality in society is typically reinforced by sanctions against those who fail to adhere to behavioral expectations. Although morality is a societal phenomenon, Durkheim consistently saw a connection between the individual and society. Subsequently, individual behaviors are a reflection of the extent to which the individual is integrated in society.

Morality was considered a social fact that can guide an individual in his or her life (Desmond et al. 2011; Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017; Sumter 1999) in Durkheim's view. Without this morality, "the individual would be enslaved by ever-expanding and insatiable passions" (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017, p. 83). Therefore, the moral consciousness of a society would lead individuals to act in a manner that kept them tied to society rather than isolated from society.

To further explore why and how religion guides individuals, examining Durkheim's study on suicide warrants attention. In his study, Durkheim examined the ways in which level of integration in society was associated with the act of suicide. Religious affiliation was one factor Durkheim examined in predicting rates of suicide. In comparing two specific religions, one that was more exclusive and one that was more open, Durkheim found members of society who adhered to the more exclusive religion, the religion that has less outside interference, exhibited a lower suicide rate (Durkheim 1951). In comparison of these two religions, Durkheim (1951) also revealed that in both religions, the prohibition on suicide was "of divine origin" (p. 157) and that "God Himself is their authority" (p. 157). Therefore, it is easily understood that the divine word of God would create the

beliefs and thoughts of religious individuals, and, because God forbade suicide or any other action against His word as being immoral, the believer would abstain from taking part in that action. In other words, if God said it is wrong, it is wrong, and a believer will not take part in committing an immoral act. However, as Durkheim outlined in his work, it was not only the beliefs themselves but the extent to which believers felt a sense of integration in the religious community and bought into these beliefs. Thus, the extent to which believers were bound to this set of beliefs (level of integration) influenced rates of suicide. Although Durkheim studied suicide, we argue that this concept, the extent to which people are bound to a certain set of guiding beliefs, can be applied to any type of deviant behavior and practice, even if the activity is the social construction of crime.

Aside from Durkheim, the work of Karl Marx also examined the influence of religion on society and behavior. While Marx's views on religion are often viewed as very different from Durkheim's views, there are some similarities. For instance, Marx viewed religion as being a tool of oppression (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017), a form of false consciousness, premised on a set of beliefs that members of society are indoctrinated with and adhere to in daily living. Thus, just as Durkheim emphasized the extent to which these beliefs were internalized and adhered to, Marx made a very similar argument. Specifically, religious beliefs exercise control over the individual only to the extent that these beliefs are internalized and utilized by members of society in daily living.

Based on the work of Durkheim and Marx, we argue that above all else, religion will keep followers of a religious doctrine from participating in actions that are viewed as deviant or immoral, simply because they have internalized beliefs which deem certain actions to be immoral. These individuals are more likely to exercise control over their behaviors that stems from their religious beliefs, thoughts, rituals and actions. In doing so, they find in those elements of their religion a peace and a higher power, no matter the name of their God—Jesus, Allah, or Adonai, over their behaviors that stems from—that higher power (social control) that guides them in a moral direction, often without question, and away from what our society terms criminal activity.

As outlined above, religion is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that exerts a significant amount of control over members of society. In examining the relationship between religion and criminal behavior, it is important to note that the role of religion in reducing criminal activity can be dichotomized into two broad frameworks. The first framework discussed below examines how religion operates as a form of self-control. The second framework examines religion as a form of social control.

3. Survey of the Literature on Religion and Self-Control and Social Control

This survey of the literature explores the relationship between religion, self-control, social control, and criminal behavior. This review reveals an inverse relationship between religion and criminal behavior and unmasks the potential spuriousness present in the religion-crime nexus.

3.1. Religion and Self-Control

In examining self-control, researchers have typically examined the ways in which attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and values, which are internalized, have the ability to influence the behavior of the individual. Subsequently, in examining criminal activity, members of society who have incorporated a set of attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and values that condemn criminal activity will be less likely to engage in such activity. Religion represents one example of a system that incorporates these elements.

Advanced by Gottfredson and Hirschi, self-control theory states that individuals possessing high levels of self-control, conceptualized as "the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances [. . .]" (Akers and Sellers 2013, p. 122), are less likely to engage in criminal/deviant behavior. Comparatively, individuals possessing low levels of self-control are more likely to engage in criminal/deviant behavior when criminogenic opportunity structures are available, under certain circumstances (Akers and Sellers 2013). Accordingly, once self-control is developed during childhood through parenting practices and socialization, the degree to which individuals

possess the restraint to avoid criminal acts typically remains in place. Once developed, self-control remains the same throughout the life course and is resistant to change (Akers and Sellers 2013).

A number of studies have explored the relationship between self-control, religion, and criminal offending (Welch et al. 2006; McCullough and Willoughby 2009; Kerley et al. 2011; Laird et al. 2011; Reisig et al. 2012). In addition, the role of morality as a predictor of criminal offending has been examined (Antonaccio and Tittle 2008). Collectively, available literature reinforces Gottfredson and Hirschi's contention that self-control influences criminal propensity amongst individuals (Welch et al. 2006; Antonaccio and Tittle 2008; Kerley et al. 2011; Reisig et al. 2012). For instance, in their study, Welch et al. (2006) examined if the relationship between personal Christian religiosity (i.e., literalism or religious interpretation, salience or meaningfulness of beliefs, frequency of prayer, and attendance at religious services) and future misconduct (i.e., likelihood that respondents would engage in illegal gambling, petty theft, DUI, assault, and tax evasion in the foreseeable future) was spurious or associated with the variable self-control. More broadly, the focal point of their study centered on Gottfredson and Hirschi's assertion that the associations between "social variables and force, fraud or analogous imprudent acts" emerge in part by the "antecedent effect of self-control" (Welch et al. 2006, p. 1606). In this sense, the relationship between social variables such as religion and criminal offending is spurious in nature given the influence of self-control in aiding individuals to adhere to underlining expectations of one's moral community and conform and safeguard social bonds (Welch et al. 2006). Further, through self-control, individuals internalize and operationalize fundamental principles of their religion that further dictate and guide individual behavior towards conformity (Welch et al. 2006).

Results from Welch et al. (2006) revealed that, in opposition to Gottfredson and Hirschi, the association between religiosity, a social variable, and future misconduct was not "spuriously attributable to prior levels of self-control" (Welch et al. 2006, p. 1615). Instead, both religiosity and self-control were found to "operate independently of one another", net of socioeconomic indicators (i.e., gender, race, age, educational level, family intactness during childhood, and types of place of childhood residence) (Welch et al. 2006, p. 1615). This suggest that high levels of religiosity and self-control decrease the likelihood of future misconduct (Welch et al. 2006).

In another study, Kerley et al. (2011) examined the degree to which the religion-crime relationship was mediated by levels of self-control. Using data collected from a stratified convenience sample of 208 male parolees, findings from Kerley et al. (2011) coalesced with Gottfredson and Hirschi's contention that the relationship between religion and criminal offending is spurious, noting that levels of self-control serve as a compounding factor. Specifically, Kerley et al. (2011) found that self-control significantly predicted behavioral measures of religiosity (i.e., praying privately, watching religious television broadcasts, and attending religious classes or groups), as well, when regressed on prison deviance alongside behavioral measures of religiosity, criminal history, and inmate demographics, significantly and negatively explained inmates' involvement in prison deviance. These findings suggest that the relationship between religiosity and prison deviance is partially moderated by levels of self-control. Furthermore, findings indicate that levels of self-control and attendance at religious classes or groups operate independently of each other to predict prison deviance, buttressing Welch et al. (2006) findings.

Nevertheless, despite the deterrent effects of self-control relative to criminal offending, available literature deviates from Gottfredson and Hirschi's argument supporting self-control as the primary predictor of criminal offending (Antonaccio and Tittle 2008). In their study, Antonaccio and Tittle (2008) sought to isolate the effects of morality (i.e., dynamic moral beliefs and actions that are specific and contextual) and self-control relative to criminal propensity in order to gauge their relative predictive strength. For their study, religion, conceptualized as childhood religiosity (i.e., the degree to which respondents were religious as a child), served as a control variable. Based on findings from Antonaccio and Tittle (2008), although self-control has a statistically significant negative effect on criminal propensity, net of the control variables, morality possesses an even stronger association with criminal

propensity, net of the control variables, that is also statistically significant. In another study, Reisig and colleagues (Reisig et al. 2012) examined the degree to which the religion-crime association was spurious "after individual variations of self-control are controlled for in different multivariate contexts" (p. 1177). Conceptualized along three important domains of religiosity, religion was conceived as the frequency to which individuals engage in prayer and attend religious services (religious activity), the degree to which one's religious beliefs are integrated in their daily lives (religious devotion), and individual endorsement of life after death (religious belief) (Reisig et al. 2012). Reisig et al. (2012) found that, net of the control variables, all religious domains significantly reduced the likelihood that individuals would engage in ascetic offending (i.e., individual gratification prohibited by most religious traditions and criminal law, yet are not completely shunned by society at large), independent of self-control. In the case of secular offending (i.e., law-breaking behaviors with strong norms against conduct expressed by religious and nonreligious individuals), all religious domains were insignificant, net of all control variables, with self-control emerging as the key significant predictor (Reisig et al. 2012). Here, depending upon the nature of the offense, religion has a potential inhibiting effect that is independent of self-control.

The extant literature indicates that while self-control is a strong predictor of whether or not individuals will engage in criminal activity, religion also seems to play a significant independent role as well. The integration of beliefs, values, attitudes and ideologies associated with a particular faith can curtail involvement in criminal activity if these traits are an integral part of the individual's psyche. Furthermore, extant literature suggests that additional variables, such as morality, have a greater potential for predicting the inverse religion-crime relationship than self-control; self-control is not the only variable capable of predicting the religion-crime nexus.

3.2. Religion and Social Control

While religion may act as a form of self-control, it can also be argued that certain aspects of religion work as a form of social control as well. In examining religion as a form of social control, social scientists typically point to the ways in which being a member of a religious community may exert influence over decisions and behaviors people engage in. In this sense, control over behaviors has more to do with meeting the expectations of the group and maintaining a connection to the group. It is understood that failing to adhere to certain behaviors becomes a violation of the religious group's expectations. Thus, the reason individuals may shy away from behaviors that are considered deviant, is to avoid being ostracized by the group. In addition, it has also been argued that participation in religious activities serves as a form of social control as well. This is particularly true when these activities are engaged in a group setting. Group participation in religious activities can be a powerful influence over behavior.

One of the aspects of religion that Durkheim examined in his work is the notion of the collective conscience. For Durkheim, collective conscience is the "totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society" (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017, p. 83). Because Durkheim saw this collective conscience as a means to determine certain social facts, religion can be considered as a social fact that may or may not be a guiding factor in the lives of individuals. Therefore, religion, as a part of society's collective conscience, can exercise certain forms of social control over the society's members. Durkheim (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017) suggested that the social facts of integration, the "strength of the attachment that we have to society" and regulation, which refers to the "degree of external constraint on people" (p. 93) would determine the strength of social control over a society. Thus, integration and regulation could be applied to religion and the amount of social control that can be experienced.

Because individuals are so closely connected to religion, we would assume that religion can be a powerful influence in the lives of society's members. With the influence of religion, we could also assume that social control exerted by religiosity would prevent individuals from taking part in criminal activity.

In his study of suicide, Durkheim addressed the diverse types of religions, with those possessing more exclusivity having lower suicide rates (Durkheim 1951) due to the increased social control over the lives of individuals. As well, in Durkheim (1951) study of suicide, he found that religions that provided individuals with greater freedom, less social control, and "fewer common beliefs and practices" (p. 159) would have higher rates of suicide. These factors show the amount of social control some religions have over suicide, more specifically, but generalized criminal activity, more broadly. Recent studies have also examined the relationship between religion, social control, and criminal activity.

For example, Johnson et al. (2001) and Desmond et al. (2008) examined samplings of youth from the National Youth Survey (NYS) to determine if religiosity and moral beliefs had any influence on delinquency. Both studies (Johnson et al. 2001; Desmond et al. 2008) hypothesized that social bonds held the key to youth involvement, or the lack of, in delinquent behavior. Both studies (Johnson et al. 2001; Desmond et al. 2008) examined the theoretical elements of social bond theory (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) and the strength of these bonds as the guide for delinquent behavior. Findings from Desmond et al. (2008) revealed a strong connection between the socialization of youth and "strong moral beliefs" (p. 66). Specifically, Desmond et al. (2008) found that youth who were socialized to believe that criminal behavior, in any form, ranging from stealing to drug use, was "morally wrong" (p. 66) abstained from that type of behavior. According to Johnson et al. (2001), due to youth commitment to his/her religious beliefs, that "religiosity reduces delinquency partly because religious involvement increases his or disapproval for delinquent acts" (p. 38) as well as reduces the connection of youth to delinquent peer contacts.

Similar findings were presented by Knudten and Knudten (1971) in their review of previously conducted research on religion and crime. Knudten and Knudten found that the perceived "criminal deviance is a by-product of the unstated assumptions of our society" (Knudten and Knudten 1971, p. 131), and those assumptions were the integral part of the perceptions of crime in our modern society, stemming from the Puritan beliefs of the country's early history. As a result, Knudten and Knudten (1971) questioned the amount of social control fostered by religion and how those religious insights would affect public laws. Their research did find that, in many instances, fanatical religious groups would indeed abstain from any type of criminal activity, which would also prove the sustainability of social control religion holds over a society.

In another study, Curry (1996) used data collected from a 1993 study conducted by the Department of Sociology, University of Oklahoma, to measure if religion influenced a "perceived wrongfulness of crimes" (p. 453). According to Curry (1996), religion and punishment were closely connected, but his study investigated if there was an additional relationship between religion and the perceptions of crime in religious communities. The results of the Curry (1996) research did reveal "that conservative Protestants tend to view all criminal behavior as very wrong" (p. 462). Also, Curry (1996) found very little difference in these beliefs between minor crimes such as trespass to more serious crimes such as murder. Although research by Curry (1996) was atheoretical, the social control in a society, such as that of a conservative religious community, would have the most profound influence over that society. Hence, this conclusion is aligned with Durkheim's collective conscience of a group as well as Durkheim's notion of integration of beliefs within a group. Each of these factors influences whether individuals commit or do not commit crimes.

Later in 1999, Sherkat and Ellison examined the sociology of religion by reviewing academic journals that were considered prime in their fields during the time of the literature review. While conducting this examination, Sherkat and Ellison (1999) consistently found that socialization among religious families, along with "(b) gender, (c) social status, and (d) life course events and aging" would have a direct influence "through the socialization of beliefs and commitments" (p. 367). This review of the literature also provided a substantial support for the element of commitment in social bond theory to again steer individuals away from criminality. As well, similar to previous research by Knudten and Knudten (1971) and Curry (1996), social control exhibited by the more conservative religious groups created an atmosphere whereby criminality, in any form, would be considered wrong and

group members would be less likely to participate in crime in any fashion. At the conclusion of the Sherkat and Ellison (1999) review, the reviewers noted that more research was needed to determine if "religious value is collectively produced versus when it is a private good with intrinsic value" (p. 386), further supporting Durkheim and the power of collective conscience and religiosity (Durkheim 1951; Ritzer and Stepnisky 2017).

Contemporary scholarship examining the relationship between religion, social control, and criminal activity further illuminate the inhibitory role of religion on criminal/deviant propensities relative to social control variables. As an agent of social control, religion, as argued by Cochran et al. (1994), fosters conformity and reduces the likelihood for crime/deviance by "encouraging the internalization of moral values and acceptance of social norms" (p. 93). However, the degree to which religion alone decreases individual propensities for crime/deviance remains questionable. Hence, Cochran et al. (1994) assessed whether the religion-crime relationship was spurious by examining the effect of religious variables (i.e., religious participation, religious salience, and religious affiliation) on various indicators of delinquency (i.e., interpersonal delinquency, property-theft, property-damage, skipping classes, and use of drugs and alcohol), net of arousal (i.e., self-reported thrill-seeking, impulsivity, and physicality), and social control (i.e., internalized controls, parental controls, and institutional controls) variables. Findings from Cochran et al. (1994), though supportive of the inverse relationship between religion and delinquency, revealed that the religion-crime nexus was mediated by social control variables. Similarly, Brauer et al. (2013), in examining the validity of the inverse religion-crime relationship and assessing the effects of self-control, informal social control, morality, negative emotion, and social support on criminal probability, found that the inverse relationship between religion and crime was likely explained by theoretical mechanisms of self-control, informal social control, and morality.

Reinforcing Stark (1996) moral communities thesis, which posits that religion be sociologically studied at the macro-level as a group process and not that of individuals, Regnerus (2003) investigated the risk of delinquency amongst adolescents residing in religiously homogenous schools and counties that were characterized as being "above average social disorganization" (p. 529). In this study, religiosity was measured as adolescent's self-identified level of church attendance and their identity as "born again" Christians, while individual-level measures of social control included, school attachment, family satisfaction, and autonomy from parents (Regnerus 2003, p. 530). At the country-level, religiosity was measured in terms of church membership and adherence, as well indicators of social disorganization (i.e., family disruption, female headed-households, residential mobility, proportion children five years of age and older, proportion of Black population) and school-level factors (i.e., proportion of students from broken homes, proportion of students engaged in sexual intercourse, proportion of Black students, and level of intergenerational closure) were included (Regnerus 2003). Though not explicitly stated, findings from Regnerus (2003) suggest that the religion-crime relationship is spurious given that conservative Protestant homogeneity in schools and counties not only served to shield adolescents from engaging in delinquency, but further mediated the inverse relationship between religion conceived as self-identification as "born again" Christians and delinquency (i.e., theft).

Overall, available literature underscores the protective role of religion as an agent of social control, as well reveals the interactive nature between religious practices and informal agents of social control in reducing criminal/deviant propensities. Nevertheless, though these studies contribute to the growth in epistemologies within sociological and criminological empirical enterprises, these studies are not immune to having empirical drawbacks.

4. Empirical Drawbacks

Methodologically, available literature lacks a conceptualization of key predictor variables, particularly religion. Since the late 1800s, definitions of religion have been grounded in Western and Judeo-Christian conceptual frameworks that emphasize the effects of religion on various facets of social life over the underlying origins of religion. Furthermore, these conceptualizations reinforce

religion as a natural and materialistic construct, marginalizing the supernatural dimensions of religion and its derivatives (Berry 2005). As a result, the associated meanings and importance of religion as a construct have been constrained; in this respect, religion fails to accurately account for the multitude of religious ideologies and conceptual frameworks that exist within a globalized world. Within the social sciences, this limitation impedes on empirical scholarship into the role of religion on individual and group behaviors.

According to Clear and Sumter (2002), various social science disciplines have not successfully conceptualized religion relative to its core meaning. As a multidimensional construct, definitions of religion have been based on various dimensions, to include, belief (i.e., membership in a religious organization), affective (i.e., effect of religious systems on belief systems), and behavioral (i.e., frequency to which individuals are involved in religious practices or activities) (Fernander et al. 2005). The derivative of religion, religiosity, has also been defined in terms of organizational religiosity (i.e., attendance at religious services) or subjective religiosity (i.e., importance of religion and self-rated religiosity). Such ambiguous conceptualizations of religion yield a multitude of meanings that possess different indicators or measures that are not consistent and vary depending upon which dimension of religion is utilized. As argued by Clear and Sumter (2002), this lack of conceptualization translates into "no one [knowing] with complete assurance how 'religious' a person is" (p. 138).

The lack of conceptualization on religion equates to countless researchers employing proxy measures that approximate or barely account for the underlining core meaning of the construct of religion. In praxis, researchers are not building upon previous conceptual foundations; researchers are not modifying or advancing conceptual understandings of religion. This stagnation inhibits the development of more advanced measurements of religion and undermines the degree of methodological rigor in assessing the religion-crime nexus. As shown in available research, various operationalizations of religion and religiosity have been employed. For instance, Welch et al. (2006) measured religiosity as the degree of literary religious interpretation, meaningfulness of beliefs, and the frequency of prayer and attendance at religious services. Laird and colleagues (Laird et al. 2011) measured religiosity as the importance of religion and the frequency of attendance at religious services. Utilizing behavioral measures of religiosity, Kerley et al. (2011) operationalized religiosity as the frequency by which individuals "prayed privately, watched a religious broadcasts on television, and attended a religious class or group" in the time frame of a month or thirty days (p. 1258). Accounting for the multidimensionality of religion as a construct, Fernander and colleagues (Fernander et al. 2005) measured religiosity as behavioral (i.e., frequency by which individuals attended religious services), belief (i.e., whether respondents identified themselves as religious or non-religious), and affective (i.e., the degree to which religious beliefs shaped their behaviors). Such variation in measurement parallels variations in definitions of religion. As argued by Clear and Sumter (2002) religion encompasses "beliefs and behaviors that are often internal" and that exist independent of one's external religious practices (p. 138). This complexity complicates the development of a universal definition of religion that is agreeable across various disciplines.

Nevertheless, definitions of religion are emerging within various fields of inquiry. From the vantage point of the discipline of psychology, McCullough and Willoughby (2009) advanced religion as a psychological construct focusing on "cognition, affect, and behavior arising from awareness of, or perceived interaction with supernatural entities" that play a critical role in human affairs (p. 71). Within the field of criminology, Sumter and Clear (2002) also underscored the multifaceted nature of religion in terms of definition, stating that "the word, religion cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name . . . ," suggesting the need to conceptualize religion from the stance that, regardless of the religious tradition, all religions share common elements of transcendentalism, ritual, morality, history, belief, personal identity, and community or society (n.p.). Potentially, addressing these common elements shared by all religious traditions would provide a framework for developing a universal definition of religion that is measurable based on these different facets. Nevertheless, as long as this lack of conceptualization and measurement ensues,

empirical findings addressing the religion-crime relationship will likely remain inconclusive and without much meaning.

Beyond conceptualizing religion and religiosity, examining the role of religion at various units of analysis illustrates another empirical drawback. As illustrated by available research, conceptualizations and operationalizations of religion and religiosity are primarily focused at the micro- or individual-level. Specifically, within sociological and criminological scholarship, less attention is given to assessing the religion-crime relationship at the macro-level, though empirical shifts are emerging and the study of religion and crime is extending beyond the individual level to the structural level (Ulmer and Harris 2013). In examining religion at the structural level, Ulmer and Harris (2013) conceive of religion in a similar manner as Stark (1996); religion is viewed as an institution characterized by a "regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive element" that, when combined with religious rituals and resources, exerts control and provides meaning to social life (p. 613). In this sense, a macro-level understanding of religion posits that the more salient religion is in an area or place, the lower rates of criminal or deviant behavior for that area or place. The lack of macro-level analyses examining the religious context (i.e., overall religious adherence or diversity of adherents) relative to rates of crime forestalls the development of sociological and criminological epistemologies addressing how religion impacts crime at the aggregate level, as well how measures of religious context interact with macro-level predictors of crime (i.e., concentrated disadvantage) to shape crime rates in an area or place. Hence, research addressing the religion-crime nexus at the macro-level is warranted to further expand sociological and criminological understandings on the role of religion relative to criminal/deviant behavior.

Similarly, the lack of conceptualization and operationalization of self-control and social control influences the production of knowledge drawn from empirical conclusions related to religion and crime. From the field of criminology, self-control is conceptualized as "the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts whatever the circumstances [. . .]" (Akers and Sellers 2013, p. 122). From psychology, McCullough and Willoughby (2009) defined self-control as situations where individuals engage in behaviors designed to override or counteract prepotent responses in favor of responses judged to possess more long-term utility. Other studies examining self-control (Welch et al. 2006; Laird et al. 2011; Kerley et al. 2011; Reisig et al. 2012), though not conceptualizing self-control, appeared to have adopted various measures (i.e., behavioral-based and cognitive-based) attempting to gauge self-control as purported by Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime. For instance, Kerley et al. (2011) operationalized self-control using cognitive-based measures of impulsivity, egoism, temperament, risk seeking propensity, engagement in simple tasks, and physical ability.

In referencing Cochran et al. (1994), Kerley et al. (2011) suggest that the conceptual overlap between social control and self-control theories generates similar issues in conceptualizing and operationalizing social control as with self-control. For example, Cochran et al. (1994) utilized indicators from both self-control and social control theories to develop a general control measure that captured internalized control, parental control, and institutional control. In this sense, though not explicitly defined, control illustrates an exerted force designed to restrain behaviors and decisions that undermine normative and proscribed values and beliefs. Thus, for these authors, integrating theoretical concepts from both control theories into a "continuum of controls" would prove beneficial to the field of criminology by expanding how control in its most general form is conceived and measured (Cochran et al. 1994, p. 115). Yet, despite being proxy measures, without a clear definition of self-control and social control, these measures further generate knowledge and conclusions that are inconclusive and/or mixed.

In addition, the cross-sectional nature of available literature addressing the self-control, social control, religion, and crime nexus forestalls the production of knowledge that illuminates the potential variation in the effects of self-control, social control, and religion relative to criminal/deviant behavior. For example, given the findings from Reisig et al. (2012) suggesting that the association between religiosity and criminal offending is spuriously attributable to self-control, to what extent does this

spuriousness remain intact over time? Is it likely that, over time, religiosity becomes a stronger predictor of criminal offending and self-control evaporates? Or could religiosity exert a confounding effect on self-control, thereby influencing criminal/deviant behavior over time? Also, the noted spuriousness of religion and crime that is attributable to informal social controls, as suggested by Brauer et al. (2013). It is plausible that, over time, the quality of relationships (i.e., strength of relationships, number of relationship bonds, basis of relationships, and number of relationships) shifts in a manner that disrupts conventional values and norms for unconventional or criminogenic norms and values. For example, the loss of a parent or the eventual disconnect between an individual and their religious organization could weaken the strength of ones' relationships and reduce the number of prosocial relationships and interactions. This "freedom" from a moral center; this lack of integration and regulation could potentially manifest currents of anomie that increase propensities toward criminal or deviant behavior. Another case in point found that morality and self-control operate independent of each other, only interacting under certain situations and with certain criminal/deviant behaviors (Antonaccio and Tittle 2008). From a longitudinal vantage point, it could arguably be the case that, over time, morality and self-control interact in a way that is not situational, or the independence between the two constructs could possibly evaporate away and become spurious. To this degree, it is essential that longitudinal studies be employed in order to capture these variations and potential changes in causal ordering and sequence. In this respect, also, the lack of integrative theoretical frameworks that account for additional predictor variables, such as religion and morality, warrants attention. Focusing exclusively on one premier predictor variable for criminal offending, Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime ignores the possibility that other variables also possess predictive capabilities relative to criminal/deviant behavior. As illustrated by Antonaccio and Tittle (2008), morality was more strongly associated with future criminal behavior than self-control, lending credence to the need for more integration in theoretical frameworks. In doing so, these frameworks can address greater variability and generate a diverse array of empirical conclusions and findings. However, the need for greater conceptualization and operationalization of core constructs merits primary focus, for without these, empirical studies will fall victim to recycling previously used methods of measurement and definition that barely scratch the surface of religion. As a result, emerging findings will remain inconclusive and limited in their ability to accurately reflect and address the underlining meaning and significance associated with the empirical enterprise.

5. Summary

Speculation about the role of religion as an effective means of social control has a rich history with roots deeply imbedded in the functional perspective that assumes that the stability of society is maintained by teaching and reinforcing the same set of values, beliefs, and norms for everyone (Sumter 1999). This perspective is derived from Emile Durkheim, who viewed religion as a crucial and integrative mechanism for maintaining social order and fostering a set of common values and beliefs (Sumter 1999). Likewise, since the landmark study by Hirschi and Stark (1969), which questioned the effectiveness of religiosity as a social control mechanism, empirical investigations of the relationship between religiosity and crime emerged within the fields of sociology and criminology. In general, studies coalesced in revealing an inverse association between religiosity and crime; this suggests that religion helps to suppress criminal behavior (Brauer et al. 2013). Nonetheless, the religion-crime nexus remains an unsettled and controversial topic, for the evidence has not authenticated the specific mechanisms by which religiosity affects criminal behavior. As well, the research has neither rejected the possibility that the observed association between religion and crime is essentially coincidental or spurious, nor noted that the findings are inconclusive and mixed (Brauer et al. 2013; Kerley et al. 2011). Still, empirical scholarship into the religion-crime relationship persists.

Traditionally, studies that have examined this relationship apply two types of approaches. First, some studies examine how religion plays a role in the propensity to commit criminal acts. Such studies primarily examine relatively young populations whose members may have admitted to

criminal/delinquent acts but have not been incarcerated. For these studies, the main purpose is to assess the degree to which religion functions as a deterrent to the commission of crimes. A second set of studies examine the role of exposure to religious programs among those who are already incarcerated. While many of these studies do not examine previous religious beliefs, the goals of these studies focus on assessing the extent to which faith-based programs that are offered to inmates reduce reoffending.

With respect to studies examining adults, results are mixed with respect to reducing recidivism. Similar to studies examining youth, these studies also fail to account for the length of an inmates' experience with religious doctrine and practices. Is it the case that inmates who already have experiences with religion are more likely to benefit from prison ministry programs? In addition, similar to studies examining youth, studies focusing on adult inmates do not take into account the motivation behind inmates' participation in prison ministry programs. Hence, further examination on these issues is warranted given what evidenced based practices tell us about reducing recidivism.

Although most empirical evidence suggest an inverse relationship between religion and crime, challenges in the conceptualization and operationalization of religion, the methodological limitations of available data and studies to date, and the inconsistencies in the evidence, researchers cannot claim with certainty that religion suppresses criminal behavior. Yet, despite these empirical drawbacks, religion remains an agent of social control oriented toward reducing criminal/deviant propensities and fostering conformity and solidarity within society.

While the discussion presented here is not exhaustive with respect to studies that have examined the relationship between religion and crime, there are some themes that warrant further exploration. First, does the age at which one is exposed to religious doctrine make a difference in engaging in criminal activity? Some studies have examined the influence of religion on youth. While the results were mixed, there is some evidence that religion (measured in a number of different ways) does have some influence on reducing the propensity to engage in criminal and or delinquent behavior. However, the studies presented did not discuss how long the youth had been exposed to religious doctrine and activities. This raises a question about length of experience with a religious doctrine and practices. Does religion have a stronger influence on youth who have a longer experience with religion compared to those who may have a shorter experience? Second, the reason or motivation behind attending church was not addressed by these studies. One might expect to see different outcomes for youth who willingly attended because they like to do so verses youth who were forced to attend. Third, it will be important to examine the dimensions of religion to understand their relative significance. Does the amount of religious knowledge matter more than the amount of religious participation? Testing different measures of "religiosity" will help to develop a better theoretical understanding of the religion-crime nexus. Specifically, it makes a difference, for instance, if the amount of religious attendance and participation suppresses crime more than the degree of knowledge or belief (Clear and Sumter 2002).

In all, it is critical that subsequent empirical investigations of the religion-crime nexus address these empirical drawbacks in defining and measuring religiosity to include self-control and social control as well accentuate the mechanisms by which religion, as an agent of social control, suppresses criminal/deviant behavior.

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