

# **Instrumental Religion, Social Connectivity, and a Certainty of Perspective: The Effect of Religious Beliefs on the Ease of Students' Transitions to College Life**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Does religion ease students' transitions to college life? I hypothesized that students who hold some form of religious belief system would tend to have a less stressful transition to university life, due to the fact that religious belief often allows one to have a broader perspective on the often stressful events of life, including those that occur during one's college years. This perspective causes the stressful events to seem less extreme and more manageable. In order to empirically test this observation, I interviewed 14 undergraduates. Based on a pre-interview screening form which asked the students about their religious or spiritual beliefs, I classified them into three categories: those who described themselves as having religious beliefs, those who did not, and those who claimed that they had spiritual beliefs outside of an organized religion. Classifying the students in this way was not an easy task, since the range of the students' beliefs that I encountered actually fell along a continuum, and sometimes one person may have fit into two categories. However, I believe the classification was successful, and served as an effective way to distinguish students during the analysis portion of the study. My interview questions revolved around the religious and spiritual beliefs they held, where these beliefs came from, what sorts of stressful events they had experienced in college, and how they felt the beliefs impacted their experience of these events. The interviews were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed. I concluded that out of the students who I interviewed, all of those with religious beliefs experienced a smooth transition to college life, while only some of those without religious beliefs had a similar experience. I propose that religious beliefs guaranteed religious

students a “certainty of perspective” – a stable internal state on which they could rely while experiencing the external changes of a transition to college – which some of those without religious beliefs lacked. Further, I concluded that the key to a successful transition to college among the students I interviewed was the discovery of meaningful social connections. I propose that a certainty of perspective allows for the discovery of these connections more easily, explaining why students with this certainty had smoother transitions. Finally, I concluded that most subjects held an instrumental view of religion in which all religions are equally valid, and should be used based on their efficacy in providing guidance and hope, with truth value being an irrelevant factor.

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Stress is a recognized part of human existence. Generally, stress is a disturbance in the homeostasis of an organism, and a stressor is something that causes that disturbance. Everyone faces stress on a daily basis, and so it could be said that there is a baseline level of stress for every person. A stressful time of life, then, might be described as a part of one’s life that has a disproportionately high level of stress. Many of the most stressful times of life are those that involve a change: the bigger the change, the greater the stress. There are, of course, minor changes that lead to stress: a new hairstyle, and the accompanying stress when wondering if others will like it; beginning a new exercise plan, and wondering if it will be successful. And then there are larger changes that lead to stress: a new job, and the stress that goes with orienting one’s self to the particulars of a new occupation; moving to a new town, and the stress of meeting new people and becoming familiar with a new locale. College students face their own particular set of stressors: new semesters of classes, final exams, term papers, grades, and so

forth. And many college students face a very large change when they first arrive at their institutions of higher education. Many of these students are living away from home for the first time, having a roommate for the first time, and facing more difficult classes than they had in high school.

Also, many students, upon arriving at their colleges or universities, are presented with a number of different ideas and opinions, some to which they may never before have been exposed. Many of these ideas deal with religion and spirituality, which tend to be hot topics as students are exposed to new beliefs and begin to realize that they are free to make their own religious and spiritual choices, away from the potential influence of their families. This study focuses on the changes that students experience when they first arrive at a college or university, and what might affect the ease of their transitions to college life. Specifically, it examines the effect that religious or spiritual beliefs might have on that transition. The hypothesis of this study was that religious beliefs would ease students' transitions to college life, and that students without religious beliefs would face more stress during the transition.

## **METHODS**

***Recruitment of subjects.*** I recruited the 14 interview subjects from the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) undergraduate population. I posted an electronic recruitment advertisement, in an email format, to an electronic bulletin board available to all members of the CMU community. In addition, I forwarded the same recruitment email to the Resident Assistants of 3 residence halls: Mudge House, West Wing, and Resink Hall. Mudge House is a CMU residence hall that houses 312 students, and West Wing and Resnik House are two CMU residence halls that each house 298 students, for a total of 596 students. Of the 311 students in Mudge,

approximately 29% (90) are first-year students. Of the 596 students in West Wing and Resnik House, approximately 9% (54) are first-year students. I instructed the Resident Assistants of these three halls to forward the message to the residents living on their floors. The targeted students in the residence halls comprised a total of 908 students, 144 of which were first-years. However, the potential recruitment base extended to any person who regularly read the campus-wide electronic bulletin board. See Appendix A for a copy of the advertisement. Note that I used \$10 as an incentive in the advertisement, and that the advertisement says that it is for a study regarding “adjustment to college life”. Religious beliefs were not mentioned at this point to avoid a potential sample bias.

I received 32 responses to the advertisements through email. In response, I sent out a Screening Form through email, which consisted of demographic questions, including class level, and the following informative questions, presented in two blocks: “Did you spend your first year of college at Carnegie Mellon?” and “Are you a member of a religion? If so, which one, and do you actively practice that religion? If you are not a member of a religion, do you have any sort of spiritual beliefs?” I used these questions as screening questions in order to select the interview sample.

30 students returned the Screening Form through email. I classified respondents according to their class levels, and their responses to the informative questions. Of the 30 students, twelve were first-year students. I then divided responses to the religious belief question into three classes: Religious, Not Religious, and Semi-Religious. I classified respondents as Religious if they identified themselves with a particular religion and stated that they practiced that religion. I

classified them as Not Religious if they stated that they were not a member of a religion and did not mention any sort of spiritual beliefs. Finally, I classified them as Semi-Religious if they did not fit into the other two categories. People that fell into this category either identified themselves with a religion but stated that they did not practice or that they did not believe in a particular religion but did hold some sort of spiritual belief, such as a belief in G/god or spirits. For a listing of the respondents' answers to the religious belief question and their classification, see Appendix B. I classified seven respondents as Religious (six of whom were first-year students), twelve respondents as Semi-Religious (three of whom were first-year students), and eleven respondents as Not Religious (three of whom were first-year students).

Out of these 30 respondents, I chose 14 to interview. I attempted to balance this number across the three religious belief categories and class level (first-year versus upper-class). Also, I tried to include a variety of religions and types of spiritual beliefs in the interview sample. After careful consideration, I selected eight first-year students and six upper-class students. Out of the eight first-year students, six were Religious and two were Not Religious, according to my categories. (After the interview, however, one was reclassified from Religious to Not Religious.) Of the six upper-class students, four were Semi-Religious, and two were Not Religious. Note that the presence or absence of religious and/or spiritual beliefs were not well-balanced within the two class levels, due in large part to the characteristics of the respondents (there was one Religious upper-class student out of seven, and three Semi-Religious first-years out of twelve). Also, I sacrificed religious balance within class level to an extent in favor of a variety of specific responses to the religious belief question. Note that, ignoring class level, subjects consisted of six Religious (one Protestant, two Roman Catholic, two Jewish, and one Zoroastrian), four Semi-

Religious, and four Not Religious, which demonstrates a balance. The chosen subjects are printed in bold in Appendix B. Once I chose the subjects, I invited them to choose an interview time, and told them to meet me at that time.

**Interview.** When subjects met me, I greeted them and took them to the location where we would conduct the interview. I conducted the first five interviews (GB, LM, LL, SS, MH) in my residence hall room, and I conducted the remaining nine interviews either in a small office (BE, EK, EW, YWY, AH) or a conference room (JH, CH, JT), with one exception (ND). I interviewed ND in CMU's Hunt Library. Before the interview, I presented subjects with a consent form, briefly describing the study and asking for permission to use both written and audio excerpts from their interviews in research presentations. I asked subjects to read it over and sign it, at which point I gave them ten dollars for their participation. I set up a tape recorder (SONY brand using 90-minute FUJI Normal Bias DR-I and TDK D90 IECI/TYPEI tapes), and the interview began.

During the interview, only the subject and I were present, with ND's library interview again serving as an exception. (This interview was conducted in a group study area of the library. However, we were at our own table, at a far enough distance from others where ND felt comfortable speaking openly about the issues I raised in the interview.) To ensure that all the subjects felt comfortable, I conducted the interview informally. For the most part, I did not take notes during the interview or use a question sheet. However, I did use a standard set of memorized questions during the interviews, and they can be found in Appendix C. Generally, I asked the subject about his or her religious or spiritual beliefs and practices, and how they had

evolved throughout his or her life. Then, I asked the subject to describe his or her first month or two at CMU, and asked if s/he had found anything stressful during those first months. I then asked the subject how s/he handled stress in general. After the interviews, which lasted approximately 45 minutes, I debriefed the subjects and asked if they had any questions. At this point, further discussion sometimes occurred. After discussion, I thanked the subjects, and then they left.

***Transcription.*** To transcribe the interviews, I used headphones attached to a tape deck with an adjustable headphone volume control, and Dolby B and C noise-reduction. I used the noise reduction on occasion to reduce the level of background hiss when it did not sacrifice the quality of the subject's vocal responses. As I listened to the audio recording, I transcribed the interview into a Microsoft Word file on a Gateway Solo 9100 laptop computer. I performed this transcription in a paraphrase manner, meaning that I was not concerned with exact wordings, but rather with the "gist" of the statements. This was done for the sake of time. However, I marked counter recordings and/or time stamps read from the tape in the transcription so that, during analysis, I could return to the tape and quickly find exact quotes if needed. During this phase, I threw out two interviews (MH and EL) because the subjects' responses were muffled due to difficulties with the recording equipment. For the rest of the paper, these two interviews will be disregarded, although it is possible that ideas garnered from those interviews might unknowingly affect my interpretation of the interview results.

## RESULTS

*Subject Descriptions.* These brief characterizations of the subjects and summaries of their interviews will be broken down by their religious classification. I will then look at the interviews as a whole in order to determine some more general results that held across the sample. The characterizations will take the following form: first, I will mention their religious or spiritual stance. Next, I will discuss their attitude towards religion in general. Finally, I will discuss what their first year at CMU was like, and how their religious or spiritual stance played a role in that first year.

### *The Religious.*

*GB.* GB is a first-year student at CMU. She was raised Baptist until four years before she arrived at Carnegie Mellon, at which point she began gradually to shift her attendance to a non-denominational Christian church. At home, GB attends church weekly; at CMU, she had attended three times in the almost three months she had been here. She told me that this was acceptable, because it is not necessary to go to church to feel close to God. It is simply a particularly convenient way to do so. Despite her lack of regular attendance at church, she does have her own ways of practicing her religion. She regularly prays and often listens to worship music. The religion is a strong influence for her: she claims that the religion is “always influencing [her] mindset....” Her parents have encouraged her to attend a church while at college. The specific denomination of church did not matter, as long as it was a church. Interestingly, this was a theme of my interview with GB: the denominations of Christianity are not important divisions. She called them “silly” and said that people “go to the denomination that meets [their] needs.” She noted that people can’t just “pick and choose out of the Bible”, and



seemed to think that people needed to be tied to some sort of church; but she did note that the most important belief was that “Jesus Christ died for your sins”. As long as that belief was there, the details were incidental.

GB was very liberal in her Christian beliefs, as evidenced by her belief that a detail such as whether or not women should be allowed to preach was not a crucial element of determining a good Christian. Rather, she notes: “The most basic thing is that Jesus was crucified, rose again, died for our sins, and was the Son of God.” The topic of the validity of other religions did not come up in my interview with GB, but I gained the sense that she was accepting of other religions, although she would have believed them to be false, since they did not involve the “basic thing” just mentioned.

I would characterize GB, then, as a very devout Christian who, although she does not attend church regularly, has regular forms of practice and allows religion to influence her constantly. It is a prime factor in her life, and so I anticipated that it would have played a huge role in her transition to college. GB’s transition was unique among my interviewees in that she was moving to college from a home-schooled high school education. She was particularly excited about starting college, and she noted that “the first month was great – living in a dorm [with] all these people.” She felt little homesickness, though she admitted that it helped that her parents called her almost every day. Interestingly, she noted that one of the highlights was encountering “people who believe all different things”. She said it had been good for her in that it had reaffirmed her own beliefs while allowing her to maintain an open mind. This exposure to difference was important to her – I felt that she had learned from the beliefs of others while confirming her own beliefs.

When asked if the first month at CMU had been stressful in any way, she remarked that it had not been very stressful, but that she had faced some stress in attempting to explain herself to her friends: “There were things that were accepted and standard at home, but here people have had radically different moral codes. Thinking I’m backwards. And it’s stressful, but it makes you rethink, and then you have to support your beliefs, and you do, and you’re stronger. It’s stressful but it makes you think.” GB was able to put a positive spin on the stress.

Aside from the stress just mentioned, GB found nothing else stressful about her transition to college. The academic transition was not a problem for her, since she had taken community college classes during her home-schooling, and had prepared herself on skills like note-taking. When asked, she attributed the ease of her transition to her beliefs. She noted that her beliefs had kept her from being involved in “bad things” that “disturb [people]” in college – that they had kept her from being “carried away”. She said it also helped to know that she “had someone [she] could go to pray to about things”, and that she knew God would not give her more than she could handle. As she aptly put it, when asked what role her beliefs played in her transition: “I would say that they served as an anchor. I knew what I believed. There are so many things to try, that I needed an anchor. I would hope that my conscience would kick in, even if I didn’t have these beliefs, but the beliefs have served as an anchor and they have encouraged me. And although there’s pain now in following my beliefs, it’s worth it. They’re such a part of me, though, that they’re there when I think about anything. It influences my outlook.” She felt it was an essential part of easing her transition to college.

*ND.* ND is a first-year student at CMU. She has been a Zoroastrian since birth. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion which originated in 600 B.C.E. in an area which is now part of India and Iran.

Members of the religion have moved to the United States, but their numbers are still very small. Every month, the members of a particular Zoroastrian church gather at a central location for services. Although most Zoroastrians in the area attend these services, some do not, because they feel “awkward since there are so few [of us].”

Other Zoroastrian practices that ND mentioned, aside from the services, were a prayer that happens three times daily, and the wearing of a special garment that is “built like a tank top” with “a square in the middle.” The prayer is supposed to occur first thing in the morning, after a shower, and then directly before going to sleep. ND points out, however, that many Zoroastrians only perform the prayer once a day, at night, since there is no time in the mornings. The garment symbolizes purity, and is always worn as a reminder of this.

Moving from practices to beliefs, the main tenet of the religion is summed up in the following phrase: “Good thoughts, good words, good deeds.” There is a major emphasis on being “good.” Good thoughts allow one to speak good words, which allow one to perform good deeds. Also, Zoroastrianism is monotheistic, with God usually referred to as “He”. God created the world, and the people in it, and He allows people to choose between two paths: the path of righteousness, called “Asha”, and the wrong path. The religion also has a prophet named Zarathustra, who is the only person ever to have seen God. Zarathustra is responsible for the spread of the Zoroastrian religion. Aside from these basic beliefs, however, and the prayer and garment practices already mentioned, ND told me that her religion is very liberal. There are not many rules to follow, or beliefs that have to be held – as long as a Zoroastrian believes in God, Zarathustra as the prophet of that God, and following Asha through good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, that person can be a good Zoroastrian.

An important element of the religion is that it can be passed down only when two Zoroastrians marry and have children. ND told me that this leads to a great pressure for Zoroastrians to marry within the religion. She said that the idea of having to marry in the religion “...is such a drag, because our parents are always telling us – they want me to be happy, but they’ll be slightly disappointed if I don’t marry a Zoroastrian.” A problem with this position on marriage, according to ND, is that it would encourage Zoroastrians to marry other non-practicing members of the religion over “good” non-members. She feels that her generation is beginning to challenge this issue, however; but they face difficulty because the old generation is “stubborn and rigid.” Aside from this difficulty, ND did seem to appreciate her religion, and she attempts to adhere to its basic practices (e.g., the wearing of the special garment and daily prayer) and beliefs (e.g., good thoughts, good words, good deeds). She also had a tolerance of other religions – they seemed to be acceptable to her, and she did not necessarily feel that they were false.

After discussing her religious background, we moved to a discussion of her first month at CMU. ND told me that the first two weeks were somewhat lonely, but that the loneliness dissipated after she grew to know people that lived on her residence hall floor. ND felt that these social connections were important to make, because she noted that people are not just at college to study. Rather, they are also at college to “meet new people from all over the world and talk about stuff.” Once this began to happen for her, she began to feel settled at college. The academic stress was not unbearable after the first couple of weeks because ND grew aware of the academic support system at CMU, and felt that it would be able to help her through any difficulties she might face. However, there was a measure of academic stress during her first few months.

ND did face some disappointment upon arriving at CMU and finding no other first-year students who were Zoroastrians. She had also been hoping to connect with other Zoroastrians who would be willing to take her to the monthly church service in the area, but this proved to be a problem. ND's religion did not help her socially, but it did help her handle elements of her academic stress. She prayed for strength to succeed academically. She also drew on an idea that she felt came from outside of her religion, however, in noting that "everything has a purpose." If she was having a bad day, or was experiencing some stress, there was a reason for it. As an example, she said, "...if I truly studied hard and failed, then there was a reason, and all I could do is study harder next time and ask God to help me." This does sound tied up with her religion, but ND believed that the general concept of understanding that things happen for a reason came more from her daily experience than from any sort of specific religious belief. Zoroastrianism, then, did seem to play a role in ND's transition to college, primarily through prayer and the possible influence on her "everything for a reason" outlook on life. However, the religion did seem to cause ND an element of social stress in that she is always wondering who she is going to marry – finding a lack of Zoroastrians at CMU may have added to her stress.

*JH.* JH is a first-year student at CMU, and a Conservative Jew. He has grown up with the religion, and was part of a youth group during high school, in which he served in a number of leadership positions. In order to be a leader in this group, he had to sign a paper confirming that he would follow the rules of Conservative Judaism to the letter, which he did: he kept kosher, did no work on the Sabbath, and attended weekly services at least three times a month. Eventually, for a year during high school, he served as part of a board that oversaw all the youth groups in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and West Virginia. Despite this high level of involvement

during high school, however, he has become less active in the religion at CMU. He told me that he attended Saturday morning Shabbat services “at the beginning of school”, but then the weather “got cold”, and he stopped attending. The weather was a factor for JH because the service was held roughly 25-30 minutes from his residence hall, and he was forced to walk there and back because he had no car. For major Jewish holidays, he returns home, and when he does, he still attends the weekly service, and participates in his family’s Friday night dinner marking the beginning of the Sabbath, along with any other services centered around the holiday.

However, at CMU, his involvement is now limited to an administrative work-study job he holds at the local Hillel chapter. He has stopped keeping the Sabbath and observing the kosher dietary rules because of how difficult it is to do so while at school – he has too much work to take an entire day off, and there are no kosher food stores nearby. He acknowledges this by saying that he has “let that part of [his] life slip away.” However, he says he doesn’t feel any less religious, because he did not follow the rules growing up. When asked about the influence of religion on his life, JH said the following: “It was the basis upon which [my morals] were built, and looking back I say that things came from my life experience, and part of that religion.” Religion has shaped JH, but it no longer has an active, conscious influence in his daily life.

JH describes his first month at CMU as “a new experience” and a “great time.”

Highlights for JH were meeting a number of “really smart people” and “having conversations...that [he] never would have had in high school...” He feels that he made friends very quickly, especially on his residence hall floor: “The floor was a unit like *that* (snaps fingers) with all the freshmen.” He notes that there was never a time that he felt “lonely or sad”, and that he had a good time “from the very first day”. I asked him why he thought his transition was so easy, and he said the following: “...we all clicked right away, and there were always people to

go places with. You always had someone to go with you.” When I probed more specifically about the role of religion in his transition to college, he told me that he felt it had not played a major role. There were some friends that he attended services with at the beginning of the year, and he was still friends with them; but for the most part, his religious life remained separate from his social life, and played no part (according to JH) in his transition.

*EK.* EK is a Roman Catholic first-year student at CMU. She has been Roman Catholic since birth, and regularly attended weekly services at home. At CMU, she attempts to attend services on a weekly basis, but told me that lately it was becoming “harder because of [her] schedule”. Outside of weekly services, she prays when she feels the need, and this has continued at CMU. She noted that religion played a “more central” role for her at home, where it was “much more concentrated for [her] family.” With regards to its role at college, EK said: “...here it’s not a common thing for me and my friends to talk about. It doesn’t come up as much, because there are so many different religions.” She acknowledged that it plays less of a role in her life at college, and that she felt she could not yet tell if this decreased role had led her to “experience change.” Despite the decreased role of religion for EK in general, she claimed that she still prayed twice a week on average, when “there’s something serious going on, when anybody is having a bad time...or if [she’s] just lost.” She said she enjoys prayer because it reminds her that she’s not “self-centered”, and that she thinks of others.

I asked EK about her transition to CMU, she mentioned the presence of stress, but this stress was mainly focused on academic issues. She told me that the stressful aspect of her transition was moving from a “high school that was very easy to [CMU] which is very hard.” However, other than that, her stress was minimal. She told me the following: “I had a great

period of change with everything. It was fun. A lot of it was a lot of fun, and exciting to me, because I was learning new things and meeting new people...My transition was good because I made so many friends and I liked where I was and still do.” She felt that having friends (and a family within 30 minutes of college) definitely helped to ease her transition.

I asked her how she gets through the academic stress she faces at college, and she told me that what kept it from getting bad was “a close network of friends in the same sort of classes and going through the same thing.” She acknowledged minor social stressors, but said that she dealt with those simply by taking a step back and realizing that her life was going well, and that some minor problems shouldn’t ruin that. This perspective – realizing what she has compared to others, and noting that her problems are not so bad – is a primary way that she handles minor problems. I asked EK how her religion fit into this perspective, and she told me the following: “A lot of what I have comes from my religion and my faith in God – that’s where I give my thanks.” I asked her if the transition to college would have been more difficult without religion, and she said, “Yeah, definitely. But another person who isn’t religious might have another idea to give their thanks to.” This led me to ask about other ideas, and she told me that she felt that other religions besides Roman Catholicism were not necessarily right or wrong – people can believe what they want. When I asked how people should decide what religion to follow, she said the following: “Most people are brought up with one, but I think there are different points in their lives when people realize that they are in the proper religion or they realize that they’re not getting anything from it and they should educate themselves in the other ones and see what they think. Often staying with your family religion is a good idea but if you’re not getting anything from it then you should convert.” For EK, religion should be decided on the basis of what a person gets out of it. She has remained a Roman Catholic because she feels that it has given her



“a good foundation”, and gives her someone to thank when she realizes how good her life is when compared to others – these elements also made it a help during her transition to college.

### ***The Not Religious.***

*BE.* BE is a sophomore at CMU. He was raised Roman Catholic, but remembers that around the time that he received his First Communion – around the age of 11 – he “really wasn’t convinced of this stuff.” Although he did attend weekly Mass with his parents, and attended a Baptist Sunday School with friends on some occasions, religion was not pushed much in the home. BE said that he saw religion as being “educational” and consisting of “cool stories”, and that he never totally believed in God because as a little kid, he realized that “if you can’t see it, it’s not there.” For BE, the move away from Roman Catholicism was brought on by the gradual realization that little of what went on in the Bible was provable.

After moving away from Catholicism, BE was an atheist in high school. However, in his first year of college he took an introduction to philosophy course, and was exposed to the ideas of French philosopher Rene Descartes. Reading Descartes’ proof of God in his *Meditations*, BE says he realized that it was “kind of dumb for me to think that just because I can’t see it means that it doesn’t exist.” This realization helped lead him away from atheism towards an abstract, spiritual belief. It did not lead him towards religion, and he told me that he could never see himself as part of a Western, organized religion. I asked him why he felt this way, and he told me that religion was not a bad thing for people if they truly believed it, but that it was bad for him because he doesn’t. In fact, he told me that all religions are equally valid, and that he would like to explore Eastern religions more once he had more time. He is wary of religious followers,

however, because he feels that most are religious simply because “of the way they were brought up.”

I asked BE why exploring religions was not a priority for him, and he told me that it was because his personal philosophy was good enough. This philosophy certainly saw him through his transition to college, which he said “was a lot of fun”, primarily because of the increased freedom and his floor-mates. He clicked with the students on his floor immediately, and through them had a solid social structure at CMU almost from day one. He has since made more friends through his fraternity and his job, but he remains friends with his first-year floor-mates. BE did face some problems during his first semester due to academic issues and a roommate conflict, but the problems brought him little stress. He told me that “big things like grades, school, and life in general” didn’t bother him, and that although he occasionally is irritated by small issues, these issues usually pass. If he does feel the need to talk about a problem, he takes it to his girlfriend, who usually makes him feel better. Finally, I asked BE what he thought made his transition very smooth, and he told me that the way his floor got along made a huge difference. However, interestingly, he felt that even if his floor had not been as tight as they were, he would have found friends elsewhere. Still, though, BE noted that making friends was a major element in easing the transition to college life.

*EW.* EW is a first-year student at CMU. He reports that he is not religious, but does think of himself as spiritual to some degree. He summarized his spiritual beliefs by saying, “Do whatever feels right for yourself.” He told me that he wasn’t sure where this belief came from. For EW, a spiritual practice is laying in his room, listening to music with a black-light on, and relaxing. He

equates it with meditating. He told me that this is his only spiritual practice, but that he does it on a regular basis, whenever “things get too much” or when he feels like relaxing.

When I asked EW about his perspective on religion, he told me that it can be helpful to people in that it gives them something to believe in; but he believes “more in scientific theory”, and sees religion “as something used to control masses.” Whether or not to have religious beliefs was never an issue for EW: his parents were not religious, and it never came up in his life. Interestingly, though, he does not deny the existence of a higher power. Rather, he remains agnostic on the issue. He “can keep the window open but [he doesn’t] follow it.” However, he can not imagine any situation where he would begin to believe in a higher power, and has no interest in looking more deeply into various religions. He has developed his own set of principles, which focus on honesty and being friendly towards everyone, regardless of who they are. These principles came from his parents, he said. When EW has problems, he first attempts to work them out on his own, but will turn to other people for advice if it seems appropriate (especially if the problem involves another person). When he has to make a moral decision, he considers the outcomes of his possible decisions, and decides which would lead to the most benefit.

EW greatly enjoyed his first few months at CMU. Everyone on his floor got along, he enjoyed having afternoon classes and being able to sleep in, and he joined a fraternity in his first semester. He said, “It was a very smooth transition coming here.” The only stress he faced was academic, and this he dealt with primarily by staying organized and carefully planning his schedule. He also noted that he has “this idea that everything is going to work out.” Because of this idea, he never becomes too worried about academics. I asked EW if connecting to the people on his floor helped with his transition and he told me that it definitely did: “I need to interact

with people on an academic and social basis. I need to converse...If it was a hall with people who stayed in their rooms on their computers all the time I'd go crazy." Since nothing seemed to cause EW a great amount of stress, I asked him what would cause him stress, and he said "family". In this situation, he said he would "need to talk to [his] family a lot more." Social interaction was a crucial element in making EW's transition to college a successful one. When he had problems he could not deal with on his own, he would turn to other people; but, in fact, "problems" rarely occurred, because of his generally stress-free attitude towards life.

YWY. YWY is a first-year student at CMU. Her parents are Buddhist, and she did attend a Buddhist temple "once in a while", but she was never forced to go, and never forced to participate. Further, her parents told her that when she was old enough she would be allowed to choose a religion on her own. She has not yet made this choice. She told me the following: "I'm at a point in my life where I'm not really sure if I believe there's a God or what religion I believe in." She does, however, think of herself as a spiritual person, and she defines "spiritual" as her "emotional well-being". She explains: "For me it's like if I'm happy, if I feel a closeness to my family, that's spiritual." YWY does not believe in a higher power, but she mentioned that she rarely thinks about this issue. The center of her life, she told me, is her family and friends, and so she only considers religious and spiritual issues when they happen to arise, which isn't often. YWY does, however, believe in spirits, and she believes that this idea came from her family; but she's not sure if there is a cosmic order. Many religious and spiritual questions seem to be unresolved for YWY, primarily because she feels no pressing need to answer them.

We discussed her experiences attending Buddhist temples, and she told me that she feels a sense of calm whenever she enters one, which she thinks comes from the reverence that the

believers are feeling. None of this reverence comes from her, however, and when I asked her how she felt about religion in general, she told me the following: “I believe that for a lot of people it’s a sense of comfort definitely. You don’t know what’s going to happen to you when you die, and some people can’t go on without an answer....Religion is also a way to explain – to feel like part of a community. It’s a social thing....When bad things happen, they need something to explain why and give them hope.” When I asked her if religion was real, she said, “It is for them but not for me.” YWY clearly believed that the usefulness of religion varies from one individual to the next. She considers it to be false, but does not begrudge others for believing.

YWY was one of the few I talked to who had a truly difficult transition to college life. She told me that she was “so miserable the first month”, mainly because she was homesick. However, she also had a hard time getting to know people on her floor, and was frightened of the academic stress she would face. After a week at college, though, she began to connect to her roommate and the others on her floor, and she told me that the main focus of the first month was “trying to deal with being away from home.” At first she handled this by losing herself in her work, but she felt that she was not able to overcome the homesickness until she opened up to people on her floor. She began to realize that she was not the only person who felt homesick. She also had an excellent first-year advisor who was available to discuss her problems, and she grew particularly close to her roommate.

The homesickness seemed to be cured until YWY went home for Thanksgiving Break. When she returned to CMU, the homesickness returned as well. At this point, she said, “I realized I needed to deal with it on my own.” She said that, often, she attempts to handle problems on her own first, and then opens up to friends if she needs the extra help. If friends can

not help, she talks with her parents. She also noted that she would turn to her parents if she was unsure about a moral decision. She called her parents her “moral guide”.

I wound up the interview by asking YWY what she believed in. She said, “I believe in myself and my family. I would like to believe in other people; but I don’t believe strongly in religion or god.” YWY draws her spirituality primarily from people. People are where she finds her contentment; and people and herself are what ultimately allowed her to transition successfully to college life.

*JT.* JT is a first-year student at CMU. He was raised Roman Catholic, but his senior year of high school saw a change in his belief system. The change was spurred by discussions with an atheist friend and explorations of the “scientific realm”, specifically regarding the theory of evolution. Examining theories such as evolution and the Big Bang led JT to question “why or how there could be a higher power up there that is a cause of everything.” At this point, he says his “logic took over,” and it became “hard to fit together the Christian picture.” Despite his falling away from Catholicism during his senior year, his parents continued to force him to attend weekly Mass, although they were noticing that he “wasn’t into it as much.” JT wasn’t bothered by this, however, because he saw a benefit to attending Mass – namely, that it allows people to reflect on themselves. He noted that this reflection time helps him when he has had a stressful week, and that, even though he has stopped attending Mass at CMU, he still spends time before going to sleep reflecting on his life.

When I asked whether he felt his religious upbringing had any effect on his current life, he told me the following: “...directly it’s not an influence anymore, but the base it set up is still standing.” JT has no qualms with the base – in fact, he claims that many of his beliefs still align

with those of the Church, except for a belief in God. I went on to ask him about his feelings about religion in general, and he told me that although it is wrong to believe in a higher power, people often live better lives because of religion, and “there’s more to religions than the higher power.” In fact, he feels that a religious upbringing can be valuable, because “it helps you to develop a sense of how what you do affects other people and the importance of the state and the family and being thankful for what you have.” When I asked him if religion is a sort of tool for people to use to feel hopeful if they need it, he agreed.

Since JT no longer has this tool, I asked him how he handled stressful times. He told me that he deals with most problems on his own, and that he would only consider attending church (i.e., using religion) if his problem happened to occur on a Sunday. I then asked him if his transition to college was stressful, and he said it was because it was “the first time [he’d] had to work.” Aside from academics, however, he felt little stress. He noted that his transition may have been simplified by the fact that his family lives within 30 minutes of CMU, and that he went home over a few weekends, which “lessened the shock of being on [his] own”. Primarily, however, JT attributed his relatively smooth college transition to academic preparedness. Although CMU was definitely a more difficult environment for JT, he knew what was coming, and so was able to take the increased academic pressure in stride.

JT does note that he had slightly more difficulty making the social transition to college, mainly because he focused so much on academics during his first months. However, he told me that he did feel that he had achieved a comfortable social structure at CMU once he decided to focus slightly less on classes and slightly more on friends. I asked JT how he handled stressful situations when they arose, and he told me that he had “learned to open up to people” when he felt he could not handle the stress on his own. Finally, I asked JT if he could see religion helping

in stressful times, and he believed that it would help him, if he could set aside time every week to dedicate to attending Mass. Despite his lack of belief in God, JT would still find Mass to be a helpful experience – if he only had the time.

### *The Semi-Religious.*

*CH.* CH is a junior at CMU. He describes himself as having spiritual beliefs, but not religious beliefs. His distinction between the two types of beliefs is that religious beliefs involve an organized group, and spiritual beliefs are more individualized. He describes his spiritual beliefs as follows: “I have a belief in free will. Because of this, I come across logical contradictions when I try to argue the atheist standpoint. I don’t believe in organized religion either. I do believe there is some Creator, but His exact nature is unknown.” He discredits atheism because it can not account for free will, and he discredits organized religion because there are multiple religions and because he finds the stories on which religions are based “a little hard to believe.” He had no religious influence growing up, although he did attend church with his family on Christmas and Easter. However, he notes that they attended church on these holidays primarily because his “mom liked the candles and the bells”. He says, then, that his current religious beliefs came “from within”, and that these beliefs have evolved: in high school, he considered himself an atheist, but he currently believes in a Creator. He hesitates to call this Creator by the name of God, though, because he does not agree with people thinking of God as a sentient being. He thinks that God’s existence is something that we can never prove, so it is useless to try to think about it in any sort of terms.

Overall, CH held a very rational point of view. His decisions about religion and spirituality seemed primarily based on logic. Even his moral decision-making process is very



logical: for a particular decision, he weighs how much benefit it will bring to him and to other people, and then decides how much of a negative effect he is willing to cause to others for a positive effect for himself, or vice versa. He seemed to enjoy dealing with concrete issues – so he talks about human happiness and sadness as factors in making decisions rather than an abstract code of right and wrong.

When thinking back to his first few months at CMU, during which time he was still an atheist, he said he “had a good time.” He felt that his transition went very smoothly, and describes his entire first year as calm. When I asked how he handled bad days, he responded with answers that centered around removing himself from the bad situation. If there was a roommate problem, he would leave his room for a while. One situation he mentions as his most stressful time at CMU came during his sophomore year, and to handle it he simply left CMU for a weekend and visited a friend. In general, then, he handles these problems on his own; and only turns explicitly to friends when the situations are particularly stressful. His transition to college offered little stress, and he described his first few months at CMU as follows: “It’s fun to be at college. More free time, more cool people.”

*LM.* LM is a sophomore at CMU. She describes herself as a spiritual person, but not as a religious person. She thinks of religion as “being associated with a certain religious group or a certain set of structured beliefs whereas being spiritual...consists of an individual recognizing that there is more to life than physicality.” She was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, but left the group around 12 at the same time her mother left the group, when her parents divorced and her mom remarried, which is considered adultery under the beliefs of the Witnesses. She describes her current beliefs as a “big conglomeration of different pieces from different religious

structures.” She attributes this first to her Witness background, but also to a very diverse private school she attended which allowed her to interact with a number of people from different religious backgrounds.

The big conglomeration of beliefs is not so well-defined that LM would say she has a permanent set of beliefs in place. Rather, she feels that she is constantly trying to understand the patterns in the world in order to work them in to her philosophy and spirituality. However, LM said that she has difficulty with this task at college because she neglects “spending time by [herself].” She told me that she is “hooked on people”, and is constantly spending time communicating with people, whether in person or over email. She acknowledges that interaction with people can be beneficial to spiritual exploration in that it allows her to discuss ideas with others, but she maintains that she feels her spirituality much more powerfully when she is alone. This spirituality comes from “being in awe of everything” around her, and being amazed at the way the world operates.

However, when LM first arrived at CMU, her spirituality was forgotten. LM’s first semester of college was “hellish”. Despite having connected with friends of her roommate’s boyfriend, she still felt “alone and miserable.” She describes her first two and a half months of college as a “completely crazy burst of insanity”, and notes that it was getting into a “stable relationship” that “calmed [her] down.” Until entering that relationship, however, she felt very disconnected from her surroundings. She offers the following description: “I felt completely out of balance here, and I was doing things that I knew were bad, and I had no self-control, and I very much compensated for my disconnection by spending all my time with people and feeling close to people I didn’t know very well. And it was bad. The most unhealthy period of my life ever.” She tried to force connections with people, and this led her into situations that she

considers unhealthy because she was partying too much. She says that she had an imbalance at that point in her life, and that it took a relationship to bring her back into balance.

The relationship also allowed her to regain a foothold on her spirituality, which she had ignored since coming to CMU. The relationship prompted her to think about spiritual issues involving love and connections between people, and it also caused her to spend less time on unhealthy practices like partying. She eventually left the relationship (just two and a half weeks before our interview) because she felt that it was not allowing her enough time to herself, but she does attribute it to getting her back on a balanced spiritual path. For LM, spirituality is a key element of balance and contentment. During her first two months at CMU, she neglected her spirituality, and threw herself into social situations instead. However, after these first months, entering into a relationship helped her to lessen the unhealthy impact of some of her friendships, and led her to consider spirituality again, bringing her back on the road to balance.

SS. SS is a sophomore at CMU. His parents are Hindu, and although he attended temple services with his family, it was always clear that Hinduism would not be forced upon him, and that he was free to make his own religious decisions. At the time of our interview, he told me that he was just beginning to become spiritual because he was reading the Bhagavad Gita (a primary Hindu holy book). He thinks of spirituality and religion interchangeably, however, because for SS, religion consists of a belief in God and having right intentions. He told me that it was not necessary to attend temple services to be religious – religion is something a person can do on his own. He did note, however, that he would attend temple if there was one located near CMU (the closest temple is almost 30 minutes away by car).

SS felt a great deal of conflict between his spirituality and his business administration major, because the Gita tells him to focus on a “higher level”, whereas his major tells him to focus on internships, work, and money. Interestingly, he notes that being immersed in the CMU culture, which he sees as materialistic and dislikes, encouraged him to delve more deeply into the Gita to find an alternative way of living. When we talked, he was still in the process of working through the Gita and formulating his belief system, but it was clear that he placed an importance on a belief in God and good intentions.

When SS first arrived at CMU, he had not yet begun to explore the Gita, although he was feeling a religious influence because he was coping with a death in his family. The religious influence quickly faded away, though, and didn’t resurface until near the end of his first year. However, SS claims that the influence was still in the back of his mind, and that it actually hurt his transition to college, because it caused him to think about “death and life situations” rather than actively focusing on transitioning to college. Perhaps because of his lack of focus, he describes his transition to CMU as “pretty tough” because of academics and because he “wasn’t sure where [he] was supposed to fit in.” This conflict came because he found two distinctive groups of friends: one from his residence hall floor, and another from an Indian cultural organization. He noted that both groups were “good”, however, and so he learned to fit in with both of them. The academic stress was due primarily to one difficult (poorly taught, in the opinion of SS) class, but he handled this stress by talking to his parents. He also relied on friends during this time. From what SS said during the interview, I received the impression that the death in his family before his arrival at CMU led him to consider some spiritual issues that distracted him from making the transition to college. However, despite this transition, he still seems to have had a largely successful transition, because of his social connections and his familial support.

Eventually, during the beginning of his second year at CMU, the religious beliefs returned to the forefront of his mind once he became unhappy with the materialistic situation at CMU, and the beliefs are now playing a very positive role in his life.

*AH.* AH is a sophomore at CMU. She describes her beliefs as having a Christian focus – for example, she believes in God and the Virgin Mary, and has attended church services – but not belonging to any one denomination. However, she also acknowledges a Hindu/Buddhist influence – she believes in karma, feng shui, “the whole flow of energy”, and attends a Buddhist temple on the Chinese New Year. She believes that these two influences came largely from her family, half of which is Christian, and half of which is Buddhist. She points out, though, that most of the Buddhist influence is culturally-based, and not religiously-based, whereas the Christian influence is religiously-based. When it comes to religion in general, AH notes that she “can’t prove anything so she tolerates everything.” She sees faith as “good regardless of what kind” because it provides guidance, security, and hope. She claims to have this faith, and a belief in God, but has not attended religious services during her time at CMU.

This faith was in place when AH first arrived at CMU, and she describes her first few months as “a little tough” because she felt somewhat isolated. Part of this isolation stemmed from the fact that she lived in an off-campus apartment with few other first-year students around, and hence did not have many friends on her floor. However, she did make friends through classes and organizations. Academic stress was not a problem for AH: she told me that she never feels stress about classes, but rather only about “social things.” When AH had a bad day during those first months, she would often handle it by talking to some of her growing number of friends; but when she became “extremely depressed”, then she would turn to prayer. She made it

very clear, though, that she only prays about “truly personal really deep stuff.” A bad day would not elicit prayer.

AH, then, did find the transition to college somewhat difficult. When I asked her to name what allowed her to get through this transition, she told me that it was a “solid friendship” that she made during her first month at CMU. Religion did influence her in times of moral decisions, and she did use prayer in times of deep depression, but she felt that it was the friendship, more than anything, that allowed her to transition successfully to CMU.

## **DISCUSSION**

Recall that the hypothesis of this study was that students with religious beliefs would experience less stress during their transition to college life, and that students without religious beliefs would find the transition more stressful. After I had examined the results of the twelve interviews taken together, I realized that my hypothesis could be correct, although with such small sample sizes and such a large number of potential confounding variables, it is hard to tell definitively. I should note, first of all, that all subjects eventually successfully made the transition to college. By the time I interviewed them, they had all reached a point where they felt comfortable at Carnegie Mellon, and they were all happy with their decisions to attend CMU. When I discuss a “successful transition” below, then, I mean a transition that occurred smoothly – a transition that subjects did not describe as “rough” or “difficult”. By this standard, 100% of the four Religious subjects (GB, ND, EK, and JH) had relatively successful transitions. EK and ND did report minor amounts of academic stress, but overall, they characterized their first months at CMU positively. However, only three out of four subjects (75%) who were Not Religious also had successful transitions (JT, EW, and BE did; YWY did not), as did only two

out of four subjects (50%) who were Semi-Religious (CH and SS did; AH and LM did not). Note that the only category in which all the subjects reported positive transitions was the Religious category. Admittedly, a sample size of four subjects for each condition does not allow for any robust statistical comparison on the number of successful transitions across groups. However, if I found this pattern of results to hold true over a large number of subjects, then we would see a substantial effect.

Students that claim to hold religious beliefs, then, may have a better chance of experiencing a smooth transition to college than students who do not. Yet I was struck by the fact that although three out of the four Religious subjects explicitly told me that their beliefs had helped them through the transition (only JH did not), there was another factor that all subjects who had smooth transitions had in common: they found a social support structure very soon after arriving at Carnegie Mellon. I mention this not to downplay the potential effect of religious beliefs, but to bring attention to the fact that religious beliefs may simply be a catalyst of the larger social factor. Every subject reported that forming friendships was a key element in their transition to college, whether the transition was smooth or not. Subjects who had very smooth transitions attributed much of this to the fact that they clicked with people right away and/or that they had families nearby to CMU; and subjects who had rough transitions often reported that a turning point occurred when they began to make friends. YWY even mentioned that a major part of her successful transition was realizing that “although [she] was far away from home, [she] didn’t have to lose touch completely.” She realized that her familial social structure could still be an active support even from afar.

If a social support structure is what allows students to make a smooth transition to college, then why did I observe a trend towards people who described themselves as Religious

having a smoother transition to college? I propose that religious beliefs can greatly assist in a smooth transition to college, both directly due to the social structure they often provide, and indirectly through the outlook on life they instill. The beliefs work directly because most religions have a community at their center. Western religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam often have a community worship service as a weekly occurrence; and Eastern religions, although more individualistic, often have temple services that occur on a regular basis. However, although EK and JH attended weekly services when they first arrived at CMU, GB and ND did not. A religious community does not exist only within the walls of a worship center, though – people of the same religion can feel a kinship anywhere in the world. GB mentioned attending a Bible study session with a group of campus Christians, and JH mentioned meeting other Jews during his orientation week at CMU. The idea here is that a common religion is an influential commonality that can help form and maintain a connection between incoming college students. Also, we must not forget the connections that common religious beliefs form between an incoming student and groups of people from home. A student coming from a particularly strong religious family or community might be able to draw support from that group, even if they are physically distanced from that group at school. However, interestingly, this direct influence did not actually seem very prevalent among the Religious subgroup. Although some mentioned meeting others of the same religion, none of them mentioned that a religious community eased their transition in any way – the only communities that helped them were secular. It seems, then, that although religious beliefs and social connectivity may have separately been factors in easing transitions, religious social communities were not.

I also mentioned an indirect influence that religion can have on the formation of a strong social structure, and it is this influence that I believe is the most important. I suggest that



religious beliefs give a person a bright outlook on life, and hence make that person pleasant to be around. This is not to say, of course, that a non-religious outlook can't be positive; but it is to say that almost all religious perspectives are fundamentally positive. And this optimism allows an incoming student to make friends more easily, whether those friends come from religious connections or not. This is a crucial idea, in my opinion, because it points to a very direct benefit of a religious upbringing.

However, there is a fine line here, and the social benefit of a religious upbringing varies depending on the way a person acts on their beliefs. However, despite the variance, the overall effect is positive. For example, on the Carnegie Mellon campus, there are a number of Christian groups that regularly hold Bible studies and other themed activities – they even hold a week-long celebration called “Jesus Week” during the week preceding Easter Sunday. The people who lead these events are often very devout, and their religious beliefs are very prominent in their actions. Interestingly, there are students at CMU who think these groups are very similar to cults, and often feel uncomfortable around their members because they are afraid that they will have Christianity pushed on them. This certainly sounds like an adverse social effect of religious beliefs for the members of these Christian groups; however, the overall effect is positive, because the members often grow very close with one another. They may be alienating some people outside of their group; but within their group, they are forming very intense friendships that lead to a strong social structure.

The other extreme of this spectrum includes people who are very religious, but who rarely actively bring up religion in their social interactions. These people might miss out on the social bonds that form within the campus religious groups, but they gain the benefit of seeming approachable to people outside of their religion. They seem approachable not only because

people are not afraid of being religiously accosted by them, but also because their underlying beliefs have given them a positive outlook on life, and hence make them likable. This is the effect I saw at work in the four Religious people that I interviewed. None of them were active crusaders for their religions. GB mentioned that she rarely brings up religion in conversations, and JH and EK mentioned that they rarely discussed it with people. However, all four of them had a religious upbringing, and had religious values instilled in them. They were all very at ease during the interview, and very socially comfortable. Further, GB mentioned that her beliefs let her know that “things will be okay”; JH noted that he doesn’t “let things bother [him] that easily”; EK mentioned that, during times of stress, she will often “sit back and realize that it’s not that big of a stress for [her] because [she] has so much other good stuff going for [her]”, an idea which she says stems from her religious beliefs. ND also mentioned that when she had a bad day, she would realize “that everything has a purpose.” All of these statements point to a perspective on life that easily writes off small stressors as issues that should not cause worry. Hence, despite the ups and downs that college life often brings, they are able to fall back on the idea that the ups and downs happen for a reason, and are not major issues in the big picture of life. This perspective, I would argue, is a key element to a healthy outlook on life. To live a positive life, one must be able to realize which issues are important and worth worrying about, and which are not. Due to their religious beliefs, GB, JH, EK, and ND were able to have this perspective.

I should point out that I did come across this perspective in the subjects that were Semi-Religious or Not Religious. However, in reflecting on my interviews with AH, LM, and YWY – the three subjects who had rough transitions to college life – I noted that none of them articulated the sort of beliefs that came up in my interviews with the Religious subjects. One possible

explanation for this is that a prerequisite for positive beliefs is an underlying certainty that small issues are often unimportant in the “long run.” To be certain of this, though, a person needs to be certain that there is a “long run”, and a person needs to be certain about which issues are unimportant and which are not. Religious beliefs offer certainties on both of these points; and these were beliefs that AH, LM, and YWY did not have. However, there were subjects who claimed to hold no religious beliefs who did articulate positive beliefs. What did these subjects have in common with the Religious subjects who articulated the same beliefs? A certainty of their world view. I will call this certainty a “certainty of perspective” – a rarely-questioned internal perspective on the world on which people can rely while experiencing external stressors.

My speculation is that this certainty of perspective leads to the positive beliefs which lead to pleasant personalities which lead to likeability which leads to solid friendships which leads to a strong social support structure, which leads to a smooth transition to college life. Without the certainty, the chain never begins, and a smooth transition is far less likely to occur. Of course, many of the connections in this chain will require further study in order to determine their accuracy. However, regardless of the process that connects certainty of perspective to a smooth transition to college life, it clearly affected the transition of my subjects. LM definitely lacked this certainty – her life is a constant state of searching for answers about the way the world works. Religion often provides these answers ready-made. AH held a combination of Christian and Buddhist beliefs, but none of these beliefs seemed to apply generally to her life. She invoked karma when relating a story of how she once returned someone’s wallet, and she mentioned prayer to God and the Virgin Mary during times of extreme depression, but I did not get the sense that she had merged her two sets of beliefs into a coherent overall world-view. Her perspective may have been certain, but it was incomplete. YWY mentioned that she believed

primarily in herself and her family, and she noted that religious and spiritual issues rarely arose in her life. She seemed to lack a “big picture” idea of things. Rather than having a world-view to fall back on during times of distress, she could fall back only on herself or her family.

My Not Religious and Semi-Religious subjects who had smooth transitions did articulate clear ways of looking at the world and making decisions that were more abstract or well-defined than the ideas of those who had rough transitions. JT said that even though he lacked a belief in God, he retained many of the beliefs from his time as a Roman Catholic. EW very clearly stated a view that “everything is going to work out.” What marked these subjects was a certainty of their perspective, whether it was based on a religious upbringing or not.

I propose, then, that a certainty of perspective leads to a chain of effect that allows a student to have a smooth transition to college life. This certainty does not have to come through religion, but subscribing to a set of religious beliefs ensures that one will have it. This certainty does not, of course, just help during a transition time to college; rather, it can help in any situation where a person experiences change. When change is occurring externally, a person needs to fall back on an internal state that is constant – a state that is certain. This internal certainty gives a person a stability that can allow him or her to handle easily the ups and downs of daily life. In most cases, the certainty also provides a system for handling stressors that are deemed more important.

Interestingly, many of my subjects across all three categories articulated the basic idea that religion is important for some people since it provides guidance and hope. I saw this as a very instrumental view of religion. Only one of my subjects, GB, seemed to acknowledge that religious belief should be held because it is true. All the others seemed to see religion as a tool that people can use if they feel that it is right for them. The veracity of a religion was not an

issue; and therefore all of the subjects who I asked, even the Religious subjects who were all members of an organized religion, noted that they held a tolerance for all religions. Some explicitly stated that people should choose their religions based on what was right for them. Truth was irrelevant.

Some future research that would help clarify the issues raised in this study would involve examining the relationship between religious beliefs and transition to college among larger groups of people. Unfortunately, due to the small sample size of this study, it is impossible to make any causal connections, or even reliable correlations. However, this study does indicate the possibility of a connection between religion and transition to college, and examining this link among larger and more diverse groups of undergraduates would allow for the testing of the certainty of perspective, social connectivity, and instrumental religion theories that I have raised. Also, conclusions and theories could be strengthened (or, of course, refuted) by comparing groups of undergraduates across colleges. Carnegie Mellon could very likely attract a certain type of student, which may lead to a certain type of result on a study such as this. Different results might be found, for example, among students at a religious institution, or at a public university, as opposed to at secular, private Carnegie Mellon.

If the conclusions proposed in this paper were confirmed by larger-scale studies, then a next step would be to shed light on the process by which religious beliefs ease a transition to college. Is it because they invariably provide a certainty of perspective? Is it simply because they allow for social connections to be more easily made? Is there something different about people who choose to be religious that helps them through transitions? All these questions could be answered through further study. Additionally, future work could address whether religious beliefs ease transitions generally, or if the transitions with which they help are limited somehow.

Do religious beliefs help when people are moving their home? When changing occupation? When relationships are ending? Again, we could address these questions through further study. Admittedly, the sort of study I am proposing would require a vast number of interviewers (and transcribers), and the interviews would provide a vast amount of data for analysis. However, the information provided by these large-scale studies would help shed light on the effects of religious belief on life transitions, and whether religion should be encouraged as a way to handle stressful times.

## **CONCLUSION**

I conclude that the key to a successful transition to college life is the attainment of a strong social structure. This transition can be made smoother if the students have a certainty of perspective. Although this certainty can come from beliefs that are non-religious or semi-religious, religious beliefs are very likely to provide it. Hence, many people who hold religious beliefs should have a smooth transition to college, whereas a smooth transition will only be achieved by some of those who do not. This concept also applies to transitions in general, in that a certainty of perspective gives people an internal constancy that they can fall back on regardless of what changes occur in the external world. Further, although this certainty seemed to affect the smoothness of transitions, a successful transition occurred when people developed social support systems. Finally, many people accept that religion can be a helpful force, but only for some. They would claim that, if a religion is not providing guidance and hope for a person, then it should be abandoned, regardless of any sort of truth value. Hence all religions are equally valid, though certain religions will apply particularly well to certain people; and some people will find it best to have no religion at all. An instrumental view of religion prevailed among my subjects;

social connectivity marked a successful transition; and a certainty of perspective, from sources that were religious, spiritual, or entirely secular, made the difference in the ease of their transitions to college life.

## APPENDIX A – Copy of Recruitment Advertisement

Date: Varied  
From: Jeffrey R Thibert <[jrt@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:jrt@andrew.cmu.edu)>  
To: Varied  
Subject: \$10 for ONE HOUR INTERVIEW for THESIS

WANT \$10? WANT \$10? WANT \$10?

Participate in a  
ONE HOUR INTERVIEW  
for a  
SENIOR HONORS PROJECT  
discussing your  
ADJUSTMENT TO COLLEGE LIFE!

Contact Jeff Thibert at  
[jrt@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:jrt@andrew.cmu.edu)  
for more information!



## APPENDIX B – Subjects’ Answers to Religious Belief Question and their Classifications

Class*	Initials	Year	Religious?
K	NA	1	Yes, Catholic, but not very religious.
N	RB	3	No religion, no known spiritual beliefs.
<b>Y</b>	<b>GB</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Yes, I'm a Christian and I do actively practice my beliefs.</b>
K	WC	1	Not a member of any religion but I believe in a greater being that we, as human beings, are unable to fathom.
K	RC	1	I am catholic but i do not go to church and i do not know if i fully believe everything in the doctrine. i definitely believe in God.
<b>Y</b>	<b>ND</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>I'm a member of the Zoroastrian religion and I actively practice it</b>
K	RD	4	Roman Catholic. But I am really not that active.
N	BE	2	<b>No religion, I believe that there are things (god, whatever) that are incomprehensible to us</b>
N	MH	3	<b>not a member of a religion....my spiritual beliefs are pretty limited. I actually really haven't decided what I believe yet, but i do not believe in one God. spirits, yes.</b>
<b>Y</b>	<b>JH</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Conservative Judaism, yes</b>
<b>K</b>	<b>CH</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>I am not a member, practicing or otherwise, of any organized religion. I do hold my own set of spiritual beliefs.</b>
K	KH	2	I am Roman Catholic, but I rarely attend church, except on religious holidays.
<b>Y</b>	<b>EK</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Roman Catholic</b>
K	KK	2	I am a practicing Christian, but do not regularly attend church.
<b>Y</b>	<b>MK</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Catholic, semi-active</b>
N	JK	1	am not an active Christian
<b>Y</b>	<b>EL</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>i am Jewish, i am relatively active w/in that community, more at home than at school</b>
<b>K</b>	<b>LM</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Geez... what a question... Let's see... I consider myself a spiritual person, but I am not a member of any organized religion. I'd go into greater detail, but I think that answers the question. :)</b>
K	CP	2	I am a Christian, technically a Methodist, but I am not practicing at this point in time.
N	SP	4	I'm a Hindu that doesn't practice much at all. I used to go to Mandir (our temple) every weekend until I was about 7.
N	BS	4	I don't have a religion, but I do hold a philosophy, Objectivism. I actively study and promote philosophy because of its practical value and "spiritual" rewards (i.e., "sense of life").
<b>K</b>	<b>SS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Yes, I am a Hindu, however, I do not practice it as often. I usually just read the holy book.</b>
K	GS	2	I am a member of the Catholic Church but do not practice
N	MS	4	i suppose i am protestant, but i am inactive and not sure i'm religious.
N	BS	3	No religion, and no spiritual beliefs
<b>Y**</b>	<b>JT</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>I am a Roman Catholic, and regularly practice it.</b>
K	CW	3	Yes, Episcopalian, but not actively practicing.
N	EW	1	<b>Don't believe in religion, I believe in science. :)</b>
N	YWY	1	<b>No religion, no spiritual beliefs.</b>
K	AH	2	<b>Not a practicing member of any religion. Believe in God, various Buddhist principles.</b>

\*Class Y is Religious, Class S is Semi-Religious, and Class N is Not Religious

\*\*Although JT was initially classified as Religious, my interview with him led me to reclassify him as Not Religious.

## APPENDIX C – Interview Questions

### *About religion*

- Would you define yourself as a religious person? A spiritual person?
- What does being religious/spiritual mean to you?
- Describe your current religious/spiritual beliefs, if any.
- Tell me about the religious/spiritual beliefs and practices that you grew up with, if any.
- Describe your current religious/spiritual practices, if any.
  - How often do you practice? (*If applicable*)
  - With whom do you practice? (*If applicable*)
- How have your religious/spiritual beliefs evolved over time, if at all?

### *About stressor*

- Describe your first month at Carnegie Mellon. What was it like making the transition to a university setting?
- Was there anything about this transitional time that you found particularly stressful?
- What did you do to help you get through this transitional period? Was there anything that you found particularly helpful?
- What role did your religion/spirituality, or lack thereof, play in helping you through the transition?
- Do you feel that your religion/spirituality, or lack thereof, was helpful in getting you through this time or not?

### *Further questions*

- Can you think of any other stressful events you've experienced during your college years?
- How did you handle these events?
- Did you have any difficulty in dealing with these stressors?
- Did religion/spirituality, or a lack thereof, play any role in your coping? Was the role helpful or not?