

## Article

# Religious Doubts and the Problem with Religious Pressures for Christian Students

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**Abstract:** Educational literature has underscored the importance of higher education attending to students' religious development. For Christian students, environment plays a role. Recent Christian religious development literature focusing on environmental predictors of growth found that higher religious pressures, assumed to be a controller according to Self-Determination Theory, predicted religious growth for students. The current study examines this finding by considering the influence of religious pressures along with normative experiences of religious doubt on spiritual/religious development variables of relatedness and self-mastery. A web-based survey procured responses from a large sample of students from both Christian and public/secular institutions. Controlling for sex and institution, multiple linear regression modeling was used to develop a model hypothesizing that when religious doubts are high, greater pressure would result in lower levels of religious development. The model was supported for spiritual/religious self-mastery but not for relatedness. Students' quotes were presented to illustrate the findings that emerged from the data analysis. Results clarify the deleterious role of religious pressures for Christians at certain developmental and situational milestones who are also simultaneously experiencing religious doubt and/or questioning their beliefs about God. Given past findings about the uncomfortable and unsatisfying, albeit necessary, role of engaging in some religious doubt and exploration, religious pressures can sabotage effective adaptation. The results underscore the importance of higher education administrators allowing space and support for religious questioning and doubt. Moreover, administrators in Christian universities should help facilitate the honest expression of their students' doubts and questions and the minimization of environmental religious pressures.

**Keywords:** religiosity; religious doubts; religious pressures; higher education; Christian

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## 1. Introduction

Recent educational and religiosity research has begun investigating opportunities for improving environmental and social factors in religious development for Christian students [1]. The results of these studies have confirmed that support for autonomy, measured in higher education environments, unwaveringly leads to Christian religious development, an unsurprising finding given that environmental support for autonomy has positively predicted development in a myriad of studies measuring learning, parenting, and religiosity [2–8]. Surprisingly, this same bed of educational and religiosity research also found that perceptions of religious pressures in the broader environment, which would seem to act as a controller, positively predicts religious development for many Christian students as well [1,9,10]. The finding that a presumed controller predicts higher scores on religious development variables appears to contradict the empirically validated tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which have repeatedly found controllers to undermine development [2–4,6,11]. The purpose of the current study is thus to examine, under greater scrutiny, the influence of religious pressure for Christian students and clarify how and

under what circumstances perceiving such pressure, and possibly control, benefits their religious development.

## 2. Self-Determination Theory and the Concept of “Controllers”

External reinforcers typically do not facilitate long-term development. According to SDT, controllers in the social/environmental context undermine development by placing contingencies on a person before the personal values associated with related behaviors have been internalized [4,6,11]. When a person has not internalized the values, they tend to experience such contingencies as controlling and resist them, placing the person in a defensive position. Even if the person has internalized the values to some degree, behavioral contingencies communicate conditions of worth to the person and tend to undermine relationship development and further internalization. This results in deficiencies in the fulfillment of basic psychological needs for relatedness, a sense of competence, and autonomy, according to SDT. External controllers thus compromise a person’s ability to develop strategies for meeting their psychological needs, and this, in turn, thwarts the process of internalizing environmental values. SDT research provides many studies supporting this notion [2–4,6,11].

### *Religious Pressures as Possible Controllers*

Religious pressures result from the interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences individuals experience during times of religious questioning and exploring religious alternatives [12]. Past research measured religious pressures to positively correlate with Christian orthodoxy, church attendance, frequency of prayer, and the degree of emphasis placed on family religion [12]. The Religious Pressures Scale asks about the degree to which a person perceives that they would experience a loss of a particular aspect of an important relationship in their environments or with themselves, if they were to consider dropping their religion. As a measure of perceived consequences, religious pressures by definition measure contingencies and, according to SDT, constitute controllers that would undermine internalization. Contrary to what SDT predicts, recent research with Christian students linked greater religious pressures with higher scores on faith maturity, certain religious schemas, and two variables specifically constructed based on SDT concepts: spiritual/religious relatedness and self-mastery [1,9,10,13]. It is possible that Christian students in these studies had already internalized the religious values and behaviors to which they were being pressured to adhere, though some open-ended responses suggested otherwise [9,10]. Furthermore, religious pressures reduced the effectiveness of support for autonomy to predict vertical faith maturity [9] and negatively predicted one religious schema, xenosophia [10]. Even still, religious pressures overall did not serve as controllers as clearly and unequivocally as theory would suggest. We believe this may have to do with Christian students’ varying experiences of religious doubt. Though doubt is embedded in each person’s system of beliefs [14], some Christian environments actually discourage it [15].

## 3. Religious Doubt and Religious Exploration

Religious exploration begins with doubting current religious beliefs. Religious doubt is defined as “a hesitant reaction, a temporary and divided state of mind created by conflicting beliefs or inconsistency between belief and experience” ([15], p. 271). Religious development literature reveals that having doubts about the existence and nature of God is not unusual, particularly during difficult times [16–18]. In Fowler’s Stages of Faith model, the individual-reflective stage accompanies the critical examination of one’s own faith system, during which individuals become increasingly aware of the positioning of their beliefs in the larger landscape of faith systems [19]. This stage often accompanies disillusionment with one’s own beliefs and may even involve movement into a non-religious time. Though persons in the individual-reflective stage are often seen as “backsliders”, they have actually progressed in their development according to Fowler [19]. After yielding to the uncertainty

of this stage, individuals become fully freed to move into the mystical-communal stage, during which they begin to acknowledge the limits of logic and embrace the mystery and paradox experienced in life. Religious doubts during difficult times can thus trigger the reassessment of beliefs and possible transformation into a new, more developed, way of seeing religiously [18,20].

### 3.1. Religious Exploration as Normative

Both theory and empirical data have confirmed the importance of exploration for older adolescents and young adults during the formation of their personal religious identities. Questioning external religious aspects of environment and family reflects developmentally appropriate behavior for adolescents and emerging adults [21–23]. Marcia Erikson's theoretical stages of psychosocial development have been used to expand the understanding of identity development for adolescents and emerging adults [24]. According to Marcia's framework for general identity development, young adults move through a process beginning with introjecting familial and environmental values, to increasing levels of appraisal of those values coupled with the exploration of various options, to finally making a full commitment to the achievement of one's own identity. Subsequent research applied Marcia's framework [24] to religious development, identifying four stages of religious ego identity development: "(a) diffusion (low exploration, high commitment, (b) foreclosure (low exploration, low commitment), (c) moratorium (high exploration, low commitment), and (d) achievement (high exploration, high commitment)" [15,25] (p. 67). Before achieving full religious identity development, individuals must progress through a time of uncertainty, called moratorium, during which they question the truth of the beliefs and values embedded in their existing systems. Findings indicated that moving authentically through moratorium creates favorable conditions for a person to commit fully to a religious identity [15,25].

### 3.2. Religious Exploration and the Continuum of Internalization

The processes described by Marcia and subsequent applications of religious ego identity achievement [15,25] appear to align with SDT's concept of internalization [6]. In the early stages of religious ego identity development, identity fusion and foreclosure, individuals are primarily extrinsically oriented. In order for a person to engage in the religious questioning and doubt characteristic of moratorium, they must have internalized those beliefs to a certain degree, perhaps reaching introjection or identification on the SDT internalization continuum [6]. During moratorium, autonomy is then crystallized while the person employs their own agency to explore options outside of their original religious system and commits lowly if at all. After moratorium, individuals are able to integrate [6] their personal exploration into a religious orientation that coheres with their authentic experiences. At this point, individuals' faith becomes more personal and is characterized by high levels of commitment and intrinsic orientation, known as religious identity achievement [15,25]. While the development of autonomy is contingent upon having the support of healthy relationships with others in a person's environment (see SDT [6]), the maintenance of autonomy requires a fully formed relationship with oneself (see stages of religious ego identity development [15,25]). Understanding the stages of religious ego identity development thus helps us understand how religious doubt might facilitate the internalization process.

Other Christian religious development literature underscores this notion as well. For instance, Gibson [26] used Kohlberg's theory of moral reasoning as a launching point to describe Christian maturity in terms of moving from a self-centered to an "other"-centered and finally to a self-chosen, principle-centered source of authority, a process to which Gibson referred directly as internalization. Fowler's [19] description of the individual-reflective stage reflects a process by which a person grapples with his/her own beliefs and revises them to more closely align with their personal experiences; again, this reflects a negotiation process by which the individual develops a sense of competence and autonomy,

both of which lead to internalization. Streib et al. [27] offer another way to consider Fowler's [19] stages: religious development may not be linear or irreversible and may thus be better described as styles. Individuals may move flexibly among religious styles, called schemas, throughout their lives or inhabit more than one simultaneously [28]. Still, schemas are defined by whether individuals draw from external sources of authority and/or intrinsic value systems in guiding their understandings of truth [10,27].

#### 4. The Potential Utility of Religious Doubt

Religious doubt, in the form of questioning and possibly struggle, is not only part of an internalization process that is normal for development but also may be necessary for religious development to continue, particularly for Christians. In the case of a grief-related loss, a survivor may question one's beliefs in a healing God or in the fairness of God's creation. For older adolescents and emerging adults moving toward religious identity achievement, experiencing both periods of moratorium and, ultimately, identity achievement predicts a period of doubting their previously held religious beliefs, while identity foreclosure and identity diffusion, both considered to be earlier stages of religious identity development, negatively predict doubt [15]. Authentically grappling with the unknown and allowing oneself to experience doubt appears necessary for full religious development; when one avoids such grappling, religious development is thwarted.

##### *Homeostatic Forces Preventing Religious Doubt*

If doubt is a necessary part of religious development, why are some Christians hesitant to yield to their genuine religious questions [18]? It appears that religious doubt may be perceived to be related to a drop in well-being through its association with spiritual struggle [29]. Spiritual struggle, however, is not synonymous with religious doubt. Spiritual struggle involves "negative concerns, or conflicts focused on spiritual practice, belief, or experience" ([29], p. 208) that can be both affective and cognitive and may last indefinitely, but religious doubt involves a "state of mind" that is temporary [15]. And though spiritual struggle widely predicts poor outcomes, it also predicts some positive outcomes [16,18,30–34]. Both concepts involve the ambiguity of uncertainty, which can paradoxically trigger an openness to growth. In terms of grief loss, Tedeschi and Calhoun [35] concluded that the death of a close loved one provides an opportunity for survivors to re-examine their beliefs, and for many, this leads to a more deeply meaningful religious and spiritual life.

In some cases, religious doubt actually correlates with lower well-being. During the developmental stage of moratorium, for example, when religious doubt and exploring religious alternatives remains high while commitment to a certain religious perspective lowers, well-being drops [25]. Research has also confirmed that if a person avoids moratorium and remains at lower levels of exploration, they experience lower levels of well-being, including more depression, loneliness, and dissatisfaction with life [25,36]. Conversely, when individuals made commitments to religious beliefs they had not actually explored, their development stalled [15]. In short, though necessary to development, being in a state of religious questioning, exploring and doubting can be uncomfortable.

In addition to subjective well-being, prior research has found environmental factors to significantly influence religious development [1,9,10]. Some religious environments reinforce the notion that doubt about God is an enemy of faith, dangerous, and potentially destructive [15]. When individuals question their faith in a stage Fowler describes as a higher level of development, they are sometimes seen by peers as "backsliders" [19]. Though Christians report struggling spiritually during difficult times, such as grieving a death [16–18], they often report being hesitant to discuss their questions and doubts openly in their environments [37]. Those who do not have support within their social contexts to help facilitate their questions and doubts around the grief loss are thought to be less likely to experience growth [35]. Moreover, when the uncomfortable state of having religious doubt is not reinforced through environmental support, Christians may not be able to tolerate the experience alone and retreat from the process altogether [1]. According to

research, retreating from doubt may unwittingly result in Christians' failure to progress in their own religious development [15,25].

### **5. The Possible Relationship of Religious Doubt with Religious Pressures**

For some, a lack of environmental support during times of religious doubt is experienced more directly in the form of religious pressures, the actual presentation of interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of questioning religiously and exploring alternatives [12]. As Christian students progress through a moratorium period and engage in the developmentally normative process of doubting and exploring religiously, the simultaneous experience of pressure toward a certain religious endpoint could result in serious cognitive setbacks or complications. Moreover, as Christian students experience added religious doubt from difficult situations such as grief losses, the simultaneous experience of religious pressure could push grieving survivors toward an expected outcome that is not reached authentically, leading to negative emotions such as anger and disillusionment. Some past research recommended against religious environments emphasizing external contingencies for the purpose of preserving individuals' religious internalization processes [38,39]. Even still, some religious environments currently function with high levels of religious pressure [40]. Whether in a specifically Christian environment or not, the simultaneous experience of religious doubt and pressures could undermine religious development for Christian students.

### **6. Aim of Study**

Given recent research producing conflicting results about the influence of religious pressures, in several cases predicting positive outcomes, we aim to examine how religious pressure interacts with religious doubt to predict religious development. Based on the literature, we hypothesize that when Christian students in different environments experience religious doubt, also feeling pressured religiously will lead to worse outcomes in terms of their religious development.

### **7. Materials and Methods**

To test the hypothesis, researchers employed a cross-sectional survey design at two locations, a Christian university in the southern central region and a state university in the western region of the United States. The study procured data from several variables related to religious/spiritual development and grief loss, and here, we utilize only those relevant to the current study. Though not used in the analysis, some quotes from students' answers to open-ended questions about their beliefs about God and the role of environment in their spirituality were presented to illustrate study results. The dataset used in this study is available as open data (CC0) on Figshare [41].

### **8. Procedures and Recruitment**

After both institution's IRBs approved the study, assuring compliance with the Belmont Report and the Declaration of Helsinki, the data collection process began. At both universities, students between the ages of 18 and 24 were recruited through email, provided a link to the survey, and offered the option of compensation for their time. At the Christian university, students were provided a USD 10 gift certificate, and at the state university, students were given the opportunity to enter a drawing for several USD 100 gift certificates. Participation was anonymous, and if students provided contact information to receive compensation, their personal information was not connected to their survey responses.

### **9. Participants**

Participants totaled 998, with 98 students from the state school and 900 students from the Christian university. Several participants who had missing values for some or all items were removed, leaving a dataset of 827 participants (92 from the public university). The mean age was 20.2 years, with most being female ( $n = 529$ ; 64%). Participants

were fairly evenly distributed across undergraduate years, reported as follows: first-year undergraduates ( $n = 211$ ; 25.5%), sophomores ( $n = 198$ ; 24.0%), juniors ( $n = 201$ ; 24.3%), and seniors ( $n = 217$ ; 26.2%). Racial/ethnic identities were self-selected as follows: Mexican American ( $n = 33$ ; 4.0%), African American ( $n = 123$ ; 14.9%), White, not of Hispanic Origin ( $n = 522$ ; 63.1%), Other ( $n = 65$ ; 7.9%), Other Hispanic Origin ( $n = 34$ ; 4.1%), American Indian ( $n = 25$ ; 3.0%), and Asian American ( $n = 25$ ; 3.0%). The vast majority ( $n = 818$ ; 98.9%) identified as Christian, with “non-denominational” ( $n = 456$ ; 55%), Charismatic/Evangelical ( $n = 120$ ; 14.5%), Pentecostal/Assembly of God ( $n = 117$ ; 14.1%), Not affiliated with a particular denomination ( $n = 33$ ; 4.0%), and Baptist ( $n = 32$ ; 3.9%) being the most frequently identified denominations.

## 10. Instruments

### 10.1. Religious Doubts Questionnaire

Altemeyer (1988) constructed the Religious Doubts (RD) Questionnaire for use in a research study to measure religion in undergraduate students and their parents. The scale consists of four questions with Likert-type answers ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Example questions include “I have often questioned the truth of my religious worldviews” and “I have often wondered whether my religious beliefs and practices are correct”. The alpha coefficient exceeded the acceptable level of 0.7 ( $\alpha = 0.877$ ). RD has been measured to correlate with Christian Orthodoxy ( $r = -0.64$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), endorsing being a good person as being more important than belief ( $r = 0.37$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), and negatively with intrinsic orientation ( $r = -0.37$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). The alpha coefficient for RD was 0.88.

### 10.2. Religious Pressures Questionnaire

Also constructed by Altemeyer (1988) for use in a religion study, the Religious Pressures (RP) Questionnaire scale consists of 10 questions with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = not at all; 5 = a great deal). Respondents are instructed to indicate the degree to which they believe the given consequence would occur if they were to consider other religions or no religion. Example items include “Disappointment, disapproval of parents” and “I would feel lost, adrift; I’d have lost my ‘anchor’ in life”. Internal reliability exceeded acceptable levels ( $\alpha = 0.857$ ). RP has been measured to correlate with Christian Orthodoxy ( $r = 0.69$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), intrinsic orientation ( $r = 0.69$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), and negatively with endorsing being a good person as being more important than belief ( $r = -0.55$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$ ). The alpha coefficient for RP was 0.87.

### 10.3. Spiritual/Religious Relatedness and Self-Mastery Scale

Hathcoat and Fuqua (2014) designed the Spiritual/Religious Relatedness and Self-Mastery scales (S/R-R; S/R-SM), based on SDT, to measure the degree of basic psychological need fulfillment, as it pertains to religious development. The S/R-R measures relatedness and the S/R-SM competence and autonomy need fulfillment. The entire scale includes 15 questions, 8 of which measure S/R-R and 7 of which measure S/R-SM. Respondents are requested to indicate their agreement on a Likert-type scale, ranging from one to five (1 = not at all; 5 = a great deal). Example items for the S/R-R scale include “My religious/spiritual views give me a sense of being connected to the divine” and “Significant others value my religious/spiritual worldview”. Example items for the S/R-SM scale include “I have consciously selected my views toward religion/spirituality” and “I feel competent in deciding what religious/spiritual views to follow”. Internal reliability was strong for both subscales (for S/R-R,  $\alpha = 0.924$ ; for S/R-SM,  $\alpha = 0.857$ ). Scores on the S/R-R scale correlated with truth of text in teaching ( $r = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and religious commitment inventory ( $r = 0.75$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and S/R-SM scores correlated with rational dialog ( $r = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and religious commitment ( $r = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The alpha coefficient for S/R-R was 0.89, and the alpha coefficient for S/R-SM was 0.86.

## 11. Analytical Strategy

Several linear models for both S/R-R and S/R-SM were developed in R v4.2.0 [42] using only participants with complete data ( $N = 827$ ) and mean-centered independent variables. Models were only considered if all independent variables were statistically significant at the  $p = 0.05$  level. Model preference was evaluated using ANOVA, differences in measures of central tendency were evaluated with a Wilcoxon rank sum test, and recursive partitioning was accomplished in R using the rpart library [43].

## 12. Results

First, descriptive statistics and intercorrelations were calculated for all study variables. All correlations were statistically significant at the  $p < 0.001$  level. See Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables ( $N = 827$ ).

Variable	1	2	3	4
Spiritual/Religious Relatedness	33.97 (5.712)			
Spiritual/Religious Self-Mastery	0.534 ***	30.44 (4.776)		
Religious Doubts	−0.279 ***	−0.267 ***	9.90 (4.280)	
Religious Pressures	0.347 ***	0.164 ***	−0.232 ***	37.52 (9.327)

Note. Means and standard deviations, in parentheses, are shown on the diagonal. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Linear models for Spiritual/Religious Relatedness (S/R-R), controlling for demographic variables of sex and institution, were then created using complete subset regression. None of the controlling variables were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) in any of the models, and thus the only linear model considered was the pure model consisting of both religious doubt (RD;  $p < 10^{-10}$ ) and religious pressures (RP;  $p < 10^{-15}$ ), which had an overall  $p$ -value less than  $10^{-15}$ ,  $F$ -statistic = 81.2, and adjusted  $R^2 = 0.16$ . See Model 1.

$$S/R-R = 34.0 - 0.29 RD + 0.18 RP \quad (1)$$

No models that included an interaction term (RD  $\times$  RP) were statistically significant. That is, the interaction of religious pressures with religious doubt was not significant for relatedness.

Similarly, linear models for Spiritual/Religious Self-Mastery (S/R-SM) were created, both with and without the interaction term, and three models were found where all independent variables were statistically significant. See Models 2 ( $p < 10^{-15}$ ,  $F = 37.4$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.08$ ), 3 ( $p < 10^{-15}$ ,  $F = 26.3$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.08$ ), and 4 ( $p < 10^{-15}$ ,  $F = 30.2$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.10$ ). The terms in the model with both sex (male = 1, female = 0) and the interaction term (RD  $\times$  RP) were all statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  except sex ( $p = 0.06$ ) and thus may be worth consideration ( $p < 10^{-15}$ ,  $F = 23.6$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.10$ ). See Model 5.

$$S/R-SM = 30.4 - 0.27 RD + 0.05 RP \quad (2)$$

$$S/R-SM = 30.2 - 0.28 RD + 0.06 RP + 0.66 \text{ Sex} \quad (3)$$

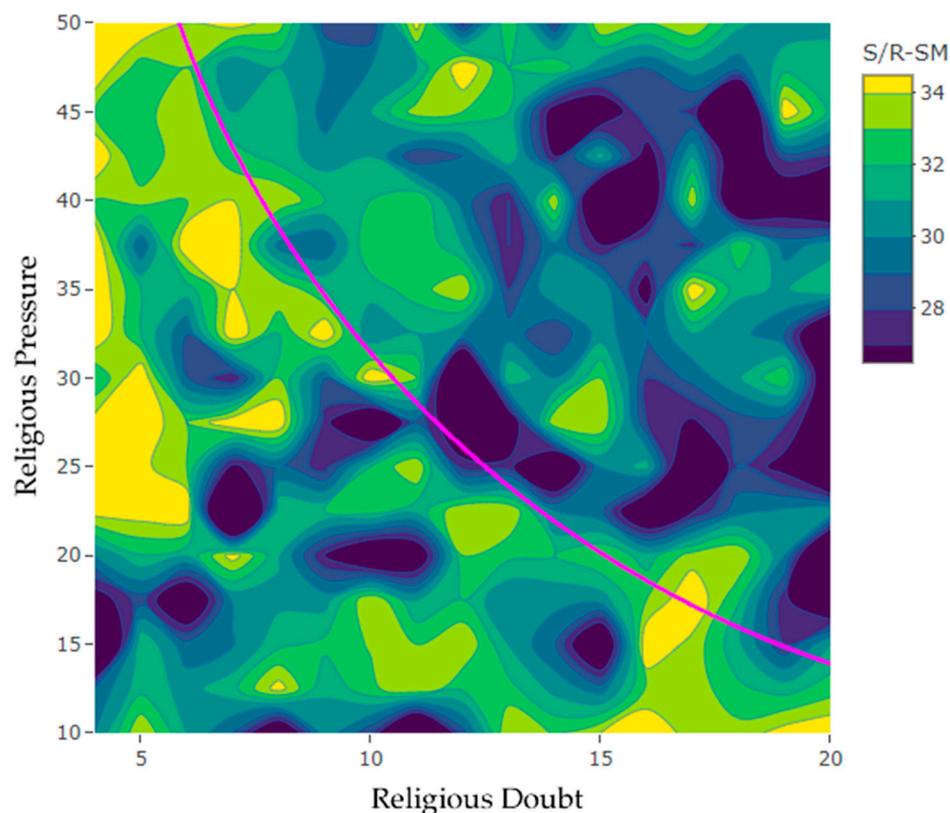
$$S/R-SM = 30.3 - 0.29 RD + 0.06 RP - 0.014 RD \times RP \quad (4)$$

$$S/R-SM = 30.1 - 0.29 RD + 0.06 RP - 0.013 RD \times RP + 0.62 \text{ Sex} \quad (5)$$

Models for S/R-SM were compared pairwise using ANOVA and Model 4 (bolded above) was significantly preferred, even when controlling for sex.

We used recursive partition techniques to identify the region where the interaction of religious doubt and religious pressures became most significant. This occurs when the interaction term RD  $\times$  RP is greater than 335; see Figure 1. Participants with an RD  $\times$  RP  $\geq 335$  ( $N = 436$ )

have a mean S/R-SM score of 29 (median 30), significantly ( $W = 109,686, p < 0.05$ ) lower than participants with  $RD \times RP < 335$  ( $N = 391$ ), whose mean S/R-SM score is 32 (median 33).



**Figure 1.** Contour map illustrating the influence of the interaction between religious doubt and religious pressures on self-mastery. Blue regions correspond to low S/R-SM scores. The delineating pink curve partitions the map; areas above this curve represent instances where the interaction term  $RD \times RP$  is equal to or exceeds 335, where the interaction of religious doubt and religious pressures becomes most significant. This demarcation illustrates the insights derived from the model.

### 13. Discussion

The results partially confirm the study's hypothesis, that the interaction of religious doubts and religious pressures will result in lower levels of religious development. The interaction of RD with RP was found to be significant for spiritual/religious self-mastery but not for relatedness. The interaction was consistent regardless of institution or sex, though being male and from the Christian institution predicted more self-mastery. When students were really doubting, even low levels of RP can result in less S/R-SM. When RP is very high, however, having even a small amount of RD can lower self-mastery. The contour map of the data illustrates this well, with darker colors indicating lower S/R-SM and lighter colors indicating high S/R-SM. Though beyond the scope of the current study, it is interesting that when both RD and RP were low, S/R-SM also tended to be lower. It is possible this is due to a general lack of emphasis these students' value systems place on religious matters.

Since both development and situational events can trigger religious doubt, and religious doubt occurs during moratorium, it is possible that situational events, such as death losses, can lead to a sort of moratorium at any point in the life span, though the literature has focused on emerging adults [15,25]. In both cases, it appears that what students most need is a supportive environment with mentors and peers that will help facilitate, rather than shun, their religious doubt and difficult feelings about God. In the following paragraphs, we attempt to explain this further by exploring theoretical explanations and providing illustrations through direct quotes from study participants.

Hathcoat and Fuqua [13] constructed the Self-Mastery subscale to measure the basic psychological needs of competence and autonomy, as they pertain to religious development. The significant interaction thus indicates that adding RP to the normative developmental process of doubting religiously effectively predicts a reduction in students' basic need fulfillment. SDT posits that forfeiture of competence and autonomy needs occurs by thwarting the internalization process, which subsequently hinders growth [6]. While answering open-ended questions about the role of environment in their spirituality, one student from the Christian university who reported high levels of both doubt and religious pressure illustrated this well by stating

I feel that at (the educational environment) there is a very high expectation for perfection and not a lot of room for error. It creates immense pressure that condemns me into believing certain things as opposed to exploring what I believe and why (22-year-old female).

Another student (21-year-old female) from the Christian university stated "I sometimes feel like religion is being forced down my throat. I don't have time to think things through".

Students' sense of relatedness was not affected by the RD and RP interaction, and this makes sense because perceiving RP as pressures requires that certain relationships already be experienced as salient in students' lives. Furthermore, yielding to the pressures to avoid religious doubt and exploration actually preserves these relationships. When students reported having lower levels of RD, the added RP did not matter as much to either relatedness or SM scores. One such senior-level student (20-year-old female) indicated "In my life, whether (I) lost a loved one, a pet, or a material or non-tangible thing, I have not ever let external circumstance negatively affect my belief and relationship with God". This finding could reflect students occupying the religious diffusion stage, according to Watson et al. [25]. A more concerning possibility is that the religious pressures felt by participants actually sabotaged their normal progression toward questioning/searching, characteristic of moratorium, and effectively undermined participants' capacity for managing the tension around religious doubt.

Normative processes of religious doubt are not limited to development. Grief and bereavement literature have repeatedly documented the tendency of religious people to question God and doubt their religious beliefs during times of inexplicable loss and grief [16–18]. Some of our own participants, when answering open-ended questions about how losses had affected their beliefs about God, alluded to their religious doubts. For instance, one student (21-year-old male) said "Over the past year, a number of events in my personal life have caused me to doubt God's divine interaction". Another student rather poignantly said

For being all-powerful, it seems like a shitty thing for God to have let her die meaninglessly when she was so devoted to helping others and taking care of her son who needed her desperately. There was no reason for God to let that happen . . . no purpose whatsoever (20-year-old male).

If the environmental context is not supportive of religious questioning, and pressures to avoid religious exploration remain high, then the stage is set for students to either (a) avoid questioning and retreat to unchallenged religious beliefs, (b) hide their true doubts from others, or (c) abandon their Christian faith altogether. One participant (24-year-old female) appeared to shy away from questioning in her statement "It hasn't really affected my belief about God . . . (I) just wanted to know why him. I am hurt and not happy about the situation, but God is good and he knows why everything happens the way (it does)". Another student (20-year-old male) who self-reported having little doubt appeared to actually have doubt in his statement "(Loss) made me think about why people die. I believe in healing, so I wonder why my friend was not healed. That does not mean that God is not good, but I wonder why that happened. It confuses me". Another participant from the Christian university stated

(Educational environment) is not a very safe place for asking questions about issues that we as Christians really need answers for and don't have. I am (not) comfortable asking questions in general out of fear of feeling stupid or ashamed.

Some students experiencing religious doubt appeared to be considering abandoning Christianity altogether, such as one (20-year-old female) who stated "I still . . . believe in (God), but I have seriously doubted His existence more often now".

On the other hand, when students reported being able to doubt without being pressured toward a particular end, their spiritual/religious self-mastery scores improved, indicating a greater fulfillment of competence and autonomy needs. Moreover, students' descriptions suggested a growing amount of peace during their pain. One such student said

I had already suffered a debilitating amount of doubt over the years, including during the time (friend) and I were roommates. Before his death, I had already gotten to the place where I considered myself an atheist/agnostic. Yet surprisingly, his death caused me to . . . be open to the existence of God, as (his) death was so shocking and untimely that a part of me wondered if there was more to his death than I could see (22-year-old male).

Another participant stated

Through this loss I have actually felt the greater power of God, because I got to see and reflect on how He was there in my grandmother's life and how He interacted with her life, before I was even around. I felt more closely connected to God, my grandmother and to the gravity of time (22-year-old female).

Consistent with our findings, the literature suggests that if given the opportunity to authentically examine one's own doubts and questions in a supportive environmental context, it is possible for the grieving person to grow spiritually [35].

It is important to note that even when RP was low, RD led to reductions in religious development as measured in lower relatedness and self-mastery scores. This is consistent with what the literature suggests during moratorium [15,24]. Questioning and doubting one's previously held beliefs leads to a time of uncertainty, characterized by ambiguity and even confusion, a time when well-being empirically drops [25]. Nevertheless, experiencing doubt seems to be a necessary precursor to further growth, underscoring the heightened need for warm and supportive environments with leaders and mentors that can handle the discomfort of holding difficult questions and facing not knowing. Leaders should be intentional about facilitating questioning and creating a safe space for Christians to share their concerns authentically and even explore religiously. By doing these things, Christian leaders will succeed in reducing religious pressures that can potentially fester in religious environments and sabotage individuals' perceptions of their own safety.

Furthermore, higher education administrators from both Christian and non-Christian universities must be attuned to the needs of various students who may be more or less inclined to engage in doubt and exploration. Fowler [19] provides helpful insights into stages of Christian religious development, and ref. [27] expanded Fowler's theory to identify religious schemas, which can be inhabited in a non-linear, reversible way. According to Streib et al. [27], a person can inhabit more than one of the three identified schemas simultaneously, and one may move back and forth to different schemas throughout one's life. Schemas include (a) truth in text, a literal orientation regarding Biblical or sacred texts, (b) fairness, tolerance, and rationality, an openness to dialog about religious differences, and (c) xenosophia, seeking the commonalities among various religions. Consideration of religious schemas has been helpful in understanding the internalization of individuals' Christian values and beliefs [10] and may also be useful in facilitating an understanding about the degree of RD experienced and how one deals with perceived RP.

#### **14. Religious Pressures as Both Internal and External "Controllers" of Religious Doubt**

Given the conflicting findings from past research [1,9,10], it is worth returning to our discussion of SDT's concept of controllers and whether it fully captures the experience of

religious pressures. It is possible that some participants have internalized the Christian religious values so deeply that fears of contingencies associated with religious exploration are moot. In a past study of religion, at least some participants (in this case, the most “authoritarian”) who reported high religious pressures also derived moderate to strong intrinsic satisfaction from their religion [12]. In the current study, participants reported a fear of feeling lost and adrift as their greatest pressure ( $M = 4.31$ ), followed in descending order by fear of disappointment and disapproval of ministers ( $M = 4.02$ ), a tie between fear of disappointment of parents and fear of betraying the ultimate purpose of their lives (for both,  $M = 4.01$ ), fear of disappointment of close friends ( $M = 3.88$ ), and fear of being damned and condemned to everlasting fire in hell ( $M = 3.87$ ). So, religious pressures appeared to come from both internal and external factors. We suspect that even those factors that come from within can grow from the seeds of familial and religious environmental influencers and serve as controllers, as a person’s sense of autonomy is initially cultivated through meaningful interactions with significant others [6].

Given the responses in this and past studies [12], it appears that some experience their unquestioned religious values as intrinsic. Without examination, however, we posit that such values are vulnerable to fracture. Unassessed and unevaluated beliefs may not stand the test of time or hold up in the face of life’s turbulent and inexplicable events. Rather, they may lead to the developmental dead ends of religious diffusion and foreclosure [15]. The results highlight the importance of higher education environments supporting students, given that older adolescent and emerging adult students are developmentally near a process of religious ego identity development [15,24,25], and the educational literature underscores the importance of higher education institutions tending to students’ religious and spiritual needs [2,44–46].

### 15. Limitations and Implications for Research

This study’s findings imply that administrators and professors in higher education settings would serve their students well by creating supportive environments for students to explore religiously and question and discuss their religious doubts. This is particularly important for Christian students, based on the current study findings, but may also be important for students with other religious orientations. Continued investigations of religious doubt and pressures in educational environments, considering various ways of predicting students’ religious development, is needed. Moreover, explorations of religious doubt and religious pressures in various environments for individuals identifying as Christian would also advance research. The current cross-sectional survey design was limited to only two universities and to emerging adult-aged students. Future research should be longitudinal, in order to investigate trends in religious doubt and development over time. Research should measure different age groups across the life span and examine more closely the differences between developmentally and situationally based religious doubt. Future research should measure various religiosity factors, such as religious schemas, and predictors of doubt, pressure, and ultimately well-being. Generalizability would also be expanded with the employment of additional Christian samples and with the inclusion of other religious groups.

### 16. Conclusions

Given past conflicting findings, the current study set out to better delineate the relationship between the religious pressures and religious development of higher education students who are Christian. Religious doubts alone led to lower self-mastery, and when perceptions of religious pressures increase, religious doubts led to even lower levels of self-mastery. Higher education administration, particularly from Christian universities, would do well to consider the need for students to engage in religious doubts and questioning as a normative process in developmental and situational adaptations. By cultivating environments supportive of students who are having doubts, higher educators will help facilitate students’ religious development, and administration in Christian universities

will also simultaneously lower the religious pressures experienced by students. These findings advance the higher education and religious development literature and suggest the need for further investigation of the nuances around the religious doubt of students who are Christian.

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