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COUC 750: Qualitative Research

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***Why am I interested in God attachment in college students?***

I have been interested in college students' God attachment because I have heart for helping people reconnect with God. Part of my personal experience is that I strongly considered leaving my faith after my parents divorced. I remember vividly how much my faith was tested during that time. In recent years, there had been a 'movement' of many young Christians going through a faith crisis that would eventually lead to them deconstructing their faith. Because I understood that stage and situation well, and because I did not leave my faith during that time, I felt it would be good for me to use my experience to help other young Christians remain connected to God as they go through their faith crisis or deconstruction.

As a counselor for college students, I often encounter this dilemma. I had always been intrigued by what factors lead students to deconstructs their faith. Was it how their parents treated them? What were the outcomes for students who had strict parents? How about those who had dismissive or avoidant parents? Or, what about students who grew up with neglectful parents? Did each of these types of parents create different issues for their children in their relationship with God as they got older? What about the church they grew up in? What kind of influence did that have on them? Did it matter if they grew up Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Mormon, or without any religion at all? All of these were questions I had because I recalled how growing up Baptist for me influenced my view of God.

My relationship with my parents was mostly positive during my toddler and early to late childhood years. However, everything changed when my parents separated when I was 11 years old. They eventually got back together, but it was only for another several years until they finally divorced when I graduated from high school. I share this because I remember being able to depend on my parents when I was a child but remember not being able to do so when I was a teenager. So, I often wondered, how did my parents' divorce affect my relationship with God? I realized that one of the reasons why I was so independent of God was because I had to become independent of my parents who I learned not to trust anymore. I had to learn how to depend on myself and be the "strong one" for my younger siblings. This played out in my relationship with God in that I did not feel I could fully trust Him, even though, theologically, I knew I could. However, I also felt the need to be strong so I did not seek Him out unless I felt that I desperately needed Him for the stressors I would experience in life. So, though I now understood one factor that affected my relationship with God, I wanted to see what other factors played a role. I began to explore how my theological understanding of God and church upbringing affected my relationship with God, and I gained some new insights.

In the research, our cognitive and theological view of God is referred to as the “God-concept” (Davis, Mauch and Moriarty, 2013). This was important for me to understand because I was given a very strong foundational understanding of who God is. My pastor focused heavily on teaching doctrine and about the nature and character of God. I assume that this is a common layer for most Baptist churches. We were not a fundamental or independent Baptist church either, so I never saw it or experienced it as extreme. However, we were not the best at learning how to extend love and grace to others who may not agree with our theological positions, so it became more of a stand on truth and oppose all who disagree with our foundational beliefs. As I grew older, I started to understand how different perspectives can add to our God-concepts, if we were willing and humble enough to learn. My approach now as an adult is to use the Bible and allow the leading of the Holy Spirit to help me discern what does and does not align with God’s Word. I am no longer solely trusting in authority figures in the church telling me who God is—though they can be helpful in my understanding—but rather I am continually in the Word to “test the spirits” (I John 4:1), challenge and reject false teachings (I Tim. 6:3-5) and examine everything carefully (I Thess. 5:21). There is a transition from this cognitive and theological understanding that leads to how I feel about and experienced God in my relationship with Him.

Research describes our emotional experience of God is known as the “God-image” (Davis, 2010), and this is where I encountered an even greater struggle. I knew what God’s Word said about Him and I felt confident in how I understood God to be, but that did not always line up with how I experienced God. I knew God was loving, but I did not always feel loved by God. I knew He was forgiving, but I did not feel deserving of his forgiveness. I knew He was gracious but it was rare when I would experience grace from others in the church. This was my emotional experience of God, but it was not due to God’s character. It was a consequence of the community I had around me where the emphasis was placed on truth (which I agree with) and not as much on love and grace (which is what I needed or was lacking). I imagine that this is the place where many of the students I meet are. They “know” things about God but do not “feel” close to Him. Or, they “feel” close to God, but do not know much about Him. In my own experience, I wanted to have both which is what led me to pursue wanting to understand how did I find the balance I currently have and what factors played a role in that understanding.

What then are the factors that led my students to believe not “feeling” close to God now that they have entered college? Was it their relationship with their parents, their religious upbringing, or another factor that I have not considered?