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Abstract

Despite persistent claims that higher education liberalizes students, the specific ideological impact of graduate theological education remains empirically underexplored. This study addresses that gap by using three-wave longitudinal data from the Seminary to Early Ministry Study to track how students' religious, social, and political beliefs evolve at a Mainline Protestant divinity school. We find that, on average, students shift modestly in a liberal direction. The most significant liberalization occurs in targeted areas central to the curriculum and current denominational debates: biblical interpretation, core theology, and sexual ethics. In contrast, opinions on politics and divine immanence change unevenly, while attitudes toward gender roles in parenting become more restrained, challenging narratives of uniform liberalization. These patterns support a two-part model of ideological development where a gentle, identity-level "liberal cascade" creates a weak tendency to liberalize, while intensive, high-contact engagement with specific topics drives the most notable belief updates.

Despite an expansive literature on both the ideologies of clergy and the liberal influence of higher education, the impact of graduate theological education on students' religious, social, and political worldviews remains underexamined.[1] The public has long understood higher education as having a liberalizing influence, with popular discourse often portraying colleges as hotbeds of progressive ideology that indoctrinate students and erode their religious convictions (Bloom 2008; Buckley 1986). Conservative commentators on theological education frequently leap from these perceived patterns to sweeping claims that seminaries lead to the wholesale liberalization of beliefs or even apostasy (Mathis and Parnell 2014; Rajkumar 2022). This study addresses empirical gaps in our understanding of how seminary influences students' ideology by leveraging a three-wave panel of Mainline Protestant divinity students to investigate whether, and in what areas, theological training might shift students' views toward greater liberalism. In doing so, we situate the effects of seminaries on ideology within the wider debate on liberalization in higher education, offering a more nuanced account of how seminaries, and perhaps universities in general, influence the beliefs and ideologies of their students.

Background

The ideological landscape in the United States is increasingly defined by a liberal-conservative divide, which serves as a primary organizing principle for political and social attitudes (DellaPosta 2020; Mason 2018). Although this study allows liberal and conservative positions to emerge from the data, liberal positions generally prioritize individual rights, fairness, and social change, whereas conservative positions emphasize tradition, authority, and group loyalty. This ideological spectrum offers a useful, albeit simplified, lens for examining how students' views evolve during their time in higher education (Jost et al. 2018; Haidt and Graham 2007). At

[1] Different terms are used to define institutions that offer training to people considering religious vocations. Throughout this paper, we use the terms "seminary", "divinity school", and "theological education" interchangeably.

the same time, research shows that belief systems are not monolithic. Ideologies are typically organized into multiple, partially independent domains—such as theology, morality, and politics—even when people do not consciously articulate them as separate (Jost et al. 2009).

Political psychologists have long argued that ideological orientations are rooted not only in social environments but also in relatively stable psychological dispositions. Research shows that personality traits predict whether individuals gravitate toward liberal or conservative worldviews (Gerber et al. 2011). Complementing this line of work, Feldman and Johnston (2014) show that distinct psychological dispositions and value orientations—such as egalitarianism, authoritarianism, and need for closure—predict different ideological domains, revealing that economic and social ideology have different underlying motivational bases. These dispositional and motivational foundations shape how individuals interpret new information and institutional experiences, including religious or educational contexts. Together, this research suggests that ideological change in seminary is unlikely to reflect wholesale replacement of prior worldviews. Instead, dispositional orientations interact with curricular, relational, and denominational cues in ways that selectively reinforce or reshape particular domains of belief.

In line with this literature, we conceptualize ideological change as potentially uneven across domains. Because our study allows ideological structure to emerge directly from the data, we use the term liberalization to describe directional movement toward the empirically established liberal poles of the observed attitudinal dimensions. To avoid conceptual ambiguity, we analytically distinguish among several domains of liberalization, while recognizing that these distinctions are heuristic rather than prescriptive. For example, theological liberalization refers to increased openness to historical-critical biblical interpretation and reduced adherence to exclusivist doctrinal claims; moral liberalization reflects more progressive views on sexuality,

gender, and family life; and political liberalization reflects movement toward positions more commonly associated with the political left in the contemporary U.S. context. Although these domains are empirically distinct, they are often correlated through broader processes of ideological structuring (Jost et al. 2009). This framework provides the conceptual foundation for our examination of how different dimensions of belief shift during theological education.

Recent longitudinal research reinforces the expectation that ideological change in Christian higher education is both cumulative and uneven across domains. Brown et al. (2024) study undergraduates at a Protestant university and find modest leftward movement in political attitudes alongside slight declines in traditional religious commitment, while doctrinal orientations remain comparatively stable. Their results highlight two themes central to our analysis. First, ideological change within Christian educational settings tends to be incremental rather than sweeping. Second, different domains of belief do not necessarily shift in tandem. These findings provide an important comparative case and suggest that seminary-based ideological change may reflect broader processes shaping Christian education more generally.

The growing salience of the left-right spectrum is connected to the ideas of Max Weber, who, in the early 20th Century, popularized the idea that Western society was becoming increasingly disenchanted and rationalized (Weber 1946; Greisman 1976). By this, he meant that a process was underway where practical, calculated, and scientific explanations of the world would replace religious, magical, or mystical ones. While legitimate arguments can be had about the extent to which Weber's thesis holds, there is little doubt that in the United States, there has been a general shift away from traditional forms of religious authority and an increase in individualistic, tolerant, and less dogmatic forms of belief among religious people (Chaves 2017).

At the same time, Converse (1964) argued that outside elite groups, people are often "innocent of ideology" and skilled at separating their beliefs and accepting conflicting views (Vaisey 2009; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008).[2] Put another way, the connection between beliefs may be considerably weaker at the individual level than at the group level (Martin 2002). This is why, when studying belief change, it is essential to measure change across multiple dimensions rather than relying solely on single questions to gauge changes in belief. In addition, sociologists have documented how systems of beliefs are anchored in external cognitive authorities found in groups (Rawlings 2020). The more attached people become to a particular group, the more likely they are to shift their beliefs to align with those of their group. This process has been observed in the context of a divinity school. Rawlings, Johnston, and Eagle (2025) demonstrate that the extent to which individuals change their beliefs in divinity school is directly related to how deeply they become embedded in the core social network of the group. The more embedded students become, the more likely they are to adopt the positions of their most socially connected friends.

Another possible pathway for religious liberalization in college is that it may force students to consider inconsistencies in their beliefs. For example, students may struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs with secular or scientific perspectives, leading to doubts about a more traditional religious worldview (Berger 1967; Evans 2011). The emphasis in higher education on critical thinking and understanding the world through science might foster skepticism. The empirical support for this position is mixed. Given that there are strong selection pressures into higher education (Campbell and Horowitz 2016; Mayrl and Uecker 2011),

[2] Some research has shown that the left-right distinction in not unipolar, but needs to be at least bi-polar, with separate axes for social ideology and economic ideology (Feldman and Johnston 2014). Inglehart (2020) argues that as societies become more economically secure, post-industrial issues become ideologically structured. This study excludes items on economics. We leave the question of whether economic views also liberalize for future research.

particularly for four-year degrees and graduate programs, it remains an open question of whether students who participate in higher education arrive primed to become more liberal or if their participation in higher education exerts an independent effect. Research that relies on nationally representative panel data to compare the ideological trajectories of individuals who do and do not attend college has yielded conflicting conclusions. Some have found that higher education does not have a liberalizing effect on most religious beliefs (Mayrl and Uecker 2011; Lee 2002). Mayrl and Uecker (2011) theorize that rather than exposing students to a broader range of viewpoints, students self-select into social networks with similar moral worldviews in college (Vaisey and Lizardo 2010), which causes their religious beliefs to remain unchanged. Others have come to different conclusions, finding that higher education leads to the decline of certain religious beliefs (Schwadel 2016; 2011; Hill 2011) and increases both moral progressivism and the certainty that morally progressive positions are objectively correct (Brońić and Miles 2021).

The idea that higher education liberalizes students is firmly entrenched in public opinion. Among conservative commentators, it has been popular to assert that colleges indoctrinate students and undermine students' religious beliefs with progressive politics and morals (Bloom 2008; Buckley 1986). Public opinion reflects this sentiment. There is a deep partisan divide on whether higher education has a positive or negative impact on the U.S. The proportion of Republican-leaning adults who view higher education as having a negative effect on society has increased from 35% in 2012 to 59% in 2019 (among Democratic-leaning adults, it has remained steady at approximately 18%) (Parker 2019). Similar critiques have been leveled at theological education, particularly toward Mainline Protestant seminaries, which some conservative commentators argue promote relativism and weaken orthodox Christian commitment (Reno 2009). Although these critiques are largely ideological, qualitative research indicates that some

clergy themselves trace their loss of confidence in biblical authority to their college or seminary training, typically through exposure to historical-critical methods (Dennett and LaScola 2010).

Although such critiques are often generalized to seminaries as a whole, they tend to focus disproportionately on Mainline Protestant institutions, which are perceived as more open to historical-critical methods, theological diversity, and socially progressive ethical frameworks. Evangelical seminaries typically maintain stronger confessional boundaries, often through faculty covenants, statements of inerrancy, and curricular emphases that reinforce doctrinal orthodoxy (Carroll et al. 1997). Comparative research underscores the consequential nature of these institutional differences. Yancey, Shaler, and Walz (2019) show that conservative Protestant colleges tend to reinforce doctrinal and political orthodoxy while promoting distinct forms of political tolerance. Their work illustrates how institutional environments shape ideological trajectories differently across Christian traditions, highlighting the analytical importance of studying a moderate Mainline seminary such as MDS. However, systematic empirical comparisons of curricula or ideological change across seminary traditions are limited, and little is known about whether ideological shifts occur within more conservative institutions.

Seminary provides a distinctive context for studying ideological change, primarily due to its central emphasis on the intensive study of the Bible, theology, and ethics. Unlike other educational programs, seminaries explicitly aim to form students into religious leaders, focusing not only on academic knowledge but also on personal faith, spiritual practices, and engagement with religious history (Williamson and Sandage 2009; Aleshire 2018; Hall et al. 2016; Aleshire 2021). This emphasis on religious and moral formation in seminary education makes it likely to exert a significant impact on students' ideologies, perhaps more so than other educational programs.

Theoretical Expectations

Our theoretical approach posits that an individual's beliefs are not merely a collection of independent stances; they are organized into complex belief systems (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017; DellaPosta 2020; Brandt and Sleegers 2021). Sociologists increasingly model these systems as networks, where individual beliefs are treated as nodes in an interconnected ideological web. Within this network structure, certain beliefs are more central than others. Core beliefs may act as central organizing nodes that connect and influence other, more peripheral beliefs. This network perspective on ideology suggests two distinct pathways through which belief change can occur in an intensive educational environment like a seminary.

Identity-Driven Cascade: Changes can start from the network's core. When a central belief, such as one's ideological identity, changes, it can trigger a cascade throughout the belief system. The core identity shift acts like a current, pulling other beliefs along with it to maintain ideological consistency. This process may result in a broad, though possibly subtle, liberalization across many unrelated issues.

Issue-specific updates can occur through targeted changes. People often compartmentalize their views, and the links between beliefs tend to be weaker at the individual level than in group analyses. Consequently, students might focus on particular topics or arguments that challenge individual beliefs or small groups of related beliefs. Intensive exposure to new information, such as historical-critical biblical studies, can quickly and sharply shift one's views in that area. This process typically results in a noticeable liberalization of issues directly related to the seminary curriculum, with little impact on other types of beliefs.

This study employs these two potential mechanisms as a theoretical framework to analyze how students' beliefs change in divinity schools. By exploring which beliefs change and

how these changes relate, we can determine whether the observed liberalization is better explained by a broad, identity-driven cascade, a series of targeted, issue-specific updates, or a blend of both. This method enables a more detailed understanding of how higher education influences student ideologies, going beyond mere accusations of indoctrination to examine the specific processes involved.

Data and Methods

This paper uses data from the Seminary to Early Ministry (SEM) Study (Eagle et al. 2023). The SEM Study is a mixed-methods longitudinal study that follows four cohorts of students who matriculated into one United Methodist divinity school between 2019 and 2022, which we will term Mainline Divinity School (MDS). This paper uses three waves of survey data. These rounds of data collection span respondents' experiences in divinity school, taking place at matriculation, during the fall of their second year (mid-program), and at graduation. The response rate across all rounds was 75%, with 570 participants completing at least one survey.

Institutional Context

MDS is a United Methodist divinity school that occupies a theologically moderate position within the landscape of Mainline Protestant seminaries. Its curriculum integrates historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation while maintaining an emphasis on traditional ministerial formation. Compared to more theologically liberal mainline institutions, MDS tends to enroll a more ideologically diverse student body—6% of the sample identified as Black Protestant, 14% as Conservative Protestant, 52% as Mainline Protestant (62% of whom identified as United Methodist), 25% as nondenominational, and 5% with another religious group at matriculation (Steensland et al. 2000; Gaghan and Eagle 2024)—and its faculty and curriculum reflect a centrist orientation within the UMC. At the same time, it differs sharply

from evangelical seminaries, which typically require doctrinal covenants and operate within more conservative theological frameworks.

Although MDS represents only one institution, its position within American Protestantism makes it an analytically valuable case. Mainline Protestantism has experienced long-term membership decline, but scholars consistently show that liberal Protestant ideas, organizational models, and leadership networks have exerted broad influence on American religion and public life far beyond the boundaries of mainline denominations (Chaves 2017; Wuthnow 1997). Mainline seminaries remain central to this influence: they train clergy who serve not only congregations but also chaplaincy programs, nonprofits, denominational agencies, and other public institutions that shape the moral and religious landscape of the United States. As a theologically moderate school that draws students with diverse ideological backgrounds, MDS serves as a bridge institution within the Protestant field, positioned between more conservative evangelical institutions and more progressive Mainline seminaries. This centrist profile makes MDS a particularly useful site for observing how seminary contexts shape ideological formation, and for identifying mechanisms that may operate, in varying degrees, across other moderate mainline schools.

Measuring the Left-Right Spectrum

Although there is an extensive body of research suggesting that people tend to organize their beliefs along a left-right spectrum, we do not want to assume that this is true of our study population. At each wave, the surveys asked participants to report a range of beliefs and attitudes they hold on various religious, social, and political issues. In total, participants responded to 51 items on beliefs and attitudes at all three waves. We can determine whether students primarily organize their views along a latent liberal-conservative spectrum by conducting an exploratory

factor analysis (EFA). This enables us to understand whether a single liberal-conservative factor accounts for a considerable amount of the variation in student beliefs, and if so, where each belief falls on this continuum for the student body. In interpreting movement along this continuum, we rely on the empirical structure of the factor loadings rather than imposing *a priori* classifications. Items loading on the same direction of the primary latent factor were treated as belonging to the same ideological pole, and movement toward that pole was interpreted as liberalization or conservatization, respectively. This data-driven approach follows prior research showing that ideological directionality emerges from patterned response structures (Jost et al. 2009; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017).

Measuring Belief Change

First, to characterize belief change at the population level, we plotted the values for each of the belief items at all three time points. To do this, we converted each of our belief items into binary variables and calculated the percentage of respondents who supported or opposed each view. Next, we employed a series of latent growth curve models to estimate the average intra-individual change observed among respondents during their time in the program (Duncan and Duncan 2009; Little 2024), constructed using a structural equation modeling approach. Given that we only have three time points, we specified a linear change model to characterize the average change in belief scores from baseline to graduation. To accommodate missing values, we used full information maximum likelihood to estimate the parameters. The dependent variable for each of these models was an individual belief or attitude. We standardized all the scores by converting them into z-scores and aligning them so that positive change scores indicated liberalization. By standardizing all our survey items, our primary outcome of interest (i.e., the slope) in these models measures how many standard deviations and in what direction

each of these beliefs shifts from matriculation to graduation. The first set of models does not include any covariates. We visualize these models by plotting the estimate of the linear slope parameter, with the corresponding 95% Confidence Interval (CI).

We also added time-invariant demographic covariates to the model to examine how these impact baseline scores and the rate of change. The demographic variables were all binary: whether the student is Black, married, a man, at least 30 years old, and a United Methodist. Because several of these characteristics are subject to change (e.g., marital status), we used each respondent's demographic information at the time of matriculation. Separate models were run with each demographic covariate added singly. The models enable us to examine how the intercept (i.e., the baseline mean level) and slope of the growth curve (i.e., the rate of change) are affected by the demographic covariate of interest. We visualize these models by plotting the differences in slope and intercept for the demographic controls of interest.

Measuring the Logic of Belief Changes

To understand how students' ideological systems evolve during seminary, we need to supplement our analysis of how individual beliefs change by considering how beliefs evolve in tandem. This enables us to evaluate whether these shifts result from students discretely adopting new views (where the change of one attitude does not predict the change of others) or a broader liberal or conservative worldview (causing beliefs to shift leftward or rightward in lockstep).

We did this by first calculating how each belief for every individual changes between survey rounds during seminary and then conducting an EFA on this dataset. While the cross-sectional EFA described earlier reveals whether students organize their beliefs along a traditional liberal-conservative axis, this factor analysis examines whether belief changes follow a similar left-right logic. If our longitudinal EFA shows that the variance in belief changes can primarily

be explained using the liberal-conservative spectrum, then we can likely attribute some of the belief changes we observe to students adopting a more liberal (or conservative) worldview, such that a shift in one belief predicts the change of another view, even if they are not logically connected.

Results

Figure 1 displays factor loadings from the first three principal components of our factor analysis. The results suggest that students' beliefs across a wide range of variables are primarily organized along a single left-right continuum. The first principal component of our EFA on all survey responses explained 31% of the variance in the data and corresponded with a liberal-conservative scale (see Appendix A). The eigenvalues dropped considerably from the first principal component to the second (from 16 to 4.6), at which point the logic behind the factor loadings became less apparent. We can, therefore, conclude that a liberal-conservative ideological spectrum is not only salient for our study population but also the central organizing principle of their beliefs. For this reason, we only used the first principal component to describe and organize the results. For the remainder of our analyses, we excluded two variables with absolute factor loadings of less than .3. Although this cut-off is more lenient than what is applied for most analyses (Howard 2016), the purpose of these factor loadings was to identify whether a belief has a liberal or conservative valence instead of constructing a latent variable that measures a facet of ideology.

[Figure 1 about here]

We *a priori* grouped our ideological measures into seven major categories, which we outline as follows. The full question wording and their category membership are found in Appendix A:

Bible – These include beliefs on the authority of the Bible and the historicity of specific biblical events. Our EFA classified views as more liberal if they regarded the Bible as less authoritative or were less likely to believe that certain biblical events were historical.

Divine Immanence – This category includes views on God's direct involvement in personal and worldly affairs. Beliefs that God is less involved in the world are considered more liberal.

Parenting Roles by Gender – This includes views on how parental roles should vary across genders. More conservative views prioritize men working over women, and that young children should have a stay-at-home parent.

Politics – This category includes students' levels of agreement with the Republican and Democratic parties. More liberal views are those that are more aligned with the Democratic Party and less aligned with the Republican Party.

Relativism – This includes views on whether morality is absolute or relative across individuals and cultures. More liberal views are those where morality is more individualistic.

Sexual Ethics – This category includes LGBTQ+ issues and the morality of certain sexual relationships. More liberal views are accepting of LGBTQ+ relationships and identities.

Theology – This is a general category measuring a range of theological beliefs. More liberal views are more universalist, less in line with traditional Christian beliefs, or are supportive of evolution. Although the latter is not an explicitly theological belief, it is connected to beliefs about the origins of life and, therefore, indirectly theological in nature.

We chose to keep the Bible and divine immanence categories separate from the general theology category because these items are often subject to special scrutiny by conservative detractors of seminary education. This also allows for a more nuanced view of how theological views change during seminary.

In Figure 2, we converted all our belief variables into binary measures and recoded them to have the same ideological valence (see corresponding table in Appendix B). In these raw estimates, inter- and intra-individual change are confounded; however, they provide insight into where MDS students tend to fall on the ideological spectrum and how they change cross-sectionally over time. Overall, we can characterize students' beliefs in each domain as follows:

Bible – Most students viewed the Bible as authoritative (61%)[3] with some human errors (only 16% believe it does not have human errors). Students overwhelmingly viewed certain events as historical (e.g., 91% endorsed the belief that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead), whereas they were mixed on others (e.g., 54% endorsed the belief that Noah actually built an ark).

Divine Immanence – Students strongly affirmed that God is directly involved and concerned with the world and the lives of individuals. For example, 99% endorsed the belief that God is concerned with their personal well-being, and 90% the belief that God is directly involved in the affairs of the world. There was less certainty whether God is angered by sin, with 60% believing that God is angered by their personal sins.

Parenting Roles – Students overwhelmingly reported egalitarian views on parenting roles, with only 6% believing that mothers of young children should not work full-time.

[3] For simplicity, the percentages in this section reflect students' beliefs at matriculation.

Politics – Although students tended to identify more often with the Democratic Party than the Republican Party (22% agreeing with the Democratic Party more than half of the time, compared to 7% for the Republican Party), they were not strongly aligned with either party.

Relativism – Students tended to disagree with moral relativism, with 75% believing that morality is based on God's law more than individuals' discretion.

Sexual Ethics – A minority of students opposed same-sex marriage (27%) and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy (27%). They were mixed on the permissibility of sex outside of marriage (43% are non-affirming) and the relationship between gender and sex at birth, with 49% believing that gender is only determined by sex at birth.

Theology – Students strongly affirmed the existence of God (57% believe without any doubt) and the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead (97%). They expressed more mixed opinions on whether all people are ultimately "saved" (39%) and the relationship between Christianity and other religions, with 59% endorsing the belief that their religion is the best for all people.

[Figure 2 about here]

In Figure 3, we present estimates of the slopes on the linear latent growth curves, which characterize the average within-person change in beliefs from matriculation to graduation on a standard deviation scale. All belief items are scaled so that positive slopes indicate that a belief moved in the liberal direction and negative slopes in the conservative direction.

[Figure 3 about here]

The results displayed in Figure 3 suggest that the direction of belief change varies considerably by category. Nearly every belief in the Bible, sexuality, and theology domains

became more liberal as students progressed through their graduate programs. Although not all of these changes were significant, some were substantial. For example, students' beliefs in the historical Moses and Noah declined by 0.38 and 0.36 standard deviations, respectively, during their graduate training. Conversely, students' views on the morality of sex outside of a committed relationship rose by 0.3 standard deviations during this timeframe.

Students' views on politics, divine immanence, and moral relativism did not shift uniformly in one direction. However, there were some notable trends within these categories. Levels of agreement with the Republican Party dropped by 0.21 standard deviations but were not offset by an increase in agreement with the Democratic Party, which also declined (albeit slightly) during this timeframe. Students viewed God as less involved in their personal lives but remained about as likely to agree that God is involved in the world's affairs. Finally, the shifts in students' views on moral relativism were mixed. Overall, students tended to grow more absolutist, except for a strongly decreasing level of agreement with the idea that right and wrong should be based on God's laws.

The clear outliers were changes to beliefs regarding gender roles in parenting. Students' views on every belief in this category grew significantly more conservative during divinity school. These results should be interpreted with caution. A vast majority of students entered their program with egalitarian views on parenting (e.g., 84% affirmed that "it is all right for mothers to work full-time when their youngest child is under age 5"). This rightward shift tempered, but did not reverse, egalitarian views on parenting roles.

In terms of baseline beliefs and the rates of change among subgroups of students, overall, we observe that the trends in students' views across the central domains where there was the most liberalization (i.e., the Bible, sexuality, and theology) are similar (results are plotted in

Appendix C). Across each of these three domains, the views of Black students stand out, with their beliefs at matriculation being considerably more conservative than those of their peers. Throughout their time at MDS, their beliefs tended to liberalize at a slightly faster pace than those of their peers, resulting in them remaining slightly more conservative in these domains at graduation. Men and students over 30 follow a similar, though more muted, trend. They entered divinity school with slightly more conservative views in these areas than their peers. These views tended to evolve more rapidly than those of their peers, causing them to nearly catch up to their peers' views by graduation. By contrast, United Methodist students entered with more liberal views on sexuality than their peers and nearly equivalent views on the Bible and theology. Their views on the Bible and sexuality liberalized at a slightly faster rate than their peers, causing their views in these domains (along with sexuality) to be more liberal than the rest of the student body at graduation. Finally, married students matriculated with slightly more conservative views than their peers but liberalized at a faster rate. At graduation, they aligned with their peers' views on theology and sexuality, holding comparatively liberal perspectives.

The trends in views on divine immanence are less pronounced than those in the domains above, except for Black students. This subgroup, again, entered divinity school with more conservative views in this domain than their peers, but this time tended to grow liberal at a faster rate. By graduation, their views on divine immanence were slightly more conservative than those of their peers. Men and United Methodists were the outliers in their views on traditional gender roles in parenting. Men entered somewhat more conservative than their peers, and their views on parenting roles grew conservative at an even faster rate. United Methodists initially held considerably more liberal views on gender roles and then shifted to the right at a faster rate, causing their opinions in this area to align with those of their peers by the time of graduation.

Given the low number of items on politics, it is difficult to identify trends across groups. Black students entered the seminary more politically liberal than their peers, and men were more conservative. However, no particular group consistently shifted to the right or the left at a faster rate than their peers. Men were the only group to consistently differ from their peers in moral relativism. They entered MDS slightly more conservative and grew even more conservative than their peers by graduation.

Finally, we can consider the mechanism that led to the liberalization of certain beliefs and not others. Namely, are students generally adopting a more liberal worldview and shifting their views accordingly, or are they considering each view in isolation or proximity to related beliefs and updating their views discretely? Although our cross-sectional EFA shows that a left-right spectrum is the central organizing principle of students' beliefs, we cannot assume that this unidimensional logic is salient for how their beliefs evolve in seminary. Figure 4 helps us determine this by displaying the factor loadings of our EFA on change scores. In the first principal component, the same left-right pattern emerges: nearly every belief that moves liberal (or conservative) does so in tandem with the others. Beyond the first principal component, belief changes are more compartmentalized, with shifts in certain domains less consistently predicting changes in other areas.

[Figure 4 about here]

Overall, this indicates that students develop a more liberal worldview during seminary, leading them to shift their opinions leftward to maintain ideological consistency. Nevertheless, it's important to be careful not to exaggerate the influence of this leftward shift on their overall worldviews. Although the shared logic students primarily employ to shift their beliefs follows an expansive left-right logic, the first principal component of our factor analysis explains only 10%

the variance in students' changing views, suggesting that students are also considering their beliefs separately and updating them accordingly. This is why liberalization is not uniform across all beliefs, despite evidence that the worldviews of students are shifting to the left.

Discussion

Conservatives in the United States have long argued that universities promote moral relativism and indoctrinate students with liberal dogma (Bloom 2008; Buckley 1986). Similar critiques have also been directed at seminaries. In this study, we analyzed longitudinal responses from 570 seminary students at a single institution to observe how their answers to 49 questions, covering a range of beliefs and attitudes, changed over the course of their program. An exploratory factor analysis revealed that the largest common factor aligned with a left-right spectrum, supporting the notion that the conservative-liberal divide is a central axis along which these beliefs are positioned. Students' views on the Bible, theology, and sexual ethics liberalized most rapidly during their time at MDS. Changes in their opinions on politics, divine immanence, and moral relativism were mixed, while their perspectives on gender roles in parenting became more conservative.

Evidence for an Identity-Level Cascade

Overall, we can conclude that liberalization is occurring in this context, with some exceptions. However, to understand the seminary's influence on belief formation, we need to consider *how* students' views are becoming more liberal. In general, we observe evidence for students shifting their beliefs to the left to align with liberalizing worldviews, *as well as* more idiosyncratic changes in individual beliefs or small clusters of beliefs.

There is clear evidence that students are adopting a more liberal worldview, which subsequently pulls their specific views to the left. The first principal components of the factor

analyses show that some of the observed belief changes are ideological. Students adopt a broader liberal identity, creating a cascade effect in which they update all their views to align with this new worldview. For this reason, our factor analyses show that a shift to the left on one belief predicts liberalization on others, even when the topics are not directly related (e.g., skepticism about a historical Noah and agreement with the Democratic Party). Yet the impact of this broad ideological shift is modest – it explains only 10% of the total variance. While it may be an exaggeration to say students are ideologically naïve, the limited explanatory power demonstrates that a move towards greater ideological consistency is not the only mechanism accounting for changes in beliefs.

The Power of Domain-Specific Updating

Students are also updating individual beliefs or smaller clusters of beliefs independently. Crucially, this does not imply that the seminary program's influence on these belief shifts is neutral. When we look at the beliefs that liberalized the most – those concerning the Bible, sexuality, and theology – these map directly onto the core content of the curriculum. The Bible and theology are central components of every accredited curriculum ("2020 Standards of Accreditation" 2020), and MDS is no exception. In qualitative interviews, a majority of students identified sexuality as the most pressing theological issue they were wrestling with (BLINDED). Moreover, as a United Methodist institution, the denomination's contentious debate over same-sex marriage and the ordination of queer clergy (Williams and Dias 2019) and its eventual split (Graham 2023) made these questions unusually salient during data collection. Because these issues were at the center of denominational realignment, they became the domains in which students most frequently encountered explicit institutional signals through coursework, chapel services, public statements from church leaders, and ongoing conversations among peers and

faculty. Sociological research on ideological structuring suggests that beliefs shift most readily in domains that occupy a prominent place within an individual's immediate social environment (Kiley and Vaisey 2020), and the UMC's internal conflict effectively elevated sexuality and biblical interpretation as focal points for meaning-making. By contrast, the belief categories that either trended conservative or showed no clear leftward movement were more tangential to coursework and the day-to-day experiences of divinity students. These areas, such as views on parental gender roles, were neither central to the curriculum nor actively contested within the denomination, resulting in far fewer institutional or interpersonal prompts for reconsideration.

These patterns support a two-part model: a modest identity-level current nudges students leftward across the board, while intensive curricular, interpersonal, and denominational contact accelerates change in specific doctrinal areas. As a result, institutional and denominational dynamics create uneven pressure points for belief revision. Students change most in domains where MDS and the wider UMC provided clear normative cues, and far less in domains where institutional messaging was diffuse or absent. Because the topics most central to students' experiences shift the furthest left, the process of evaluating one's beliefs in divinity school not only permits but also facilitates liberalization.

The Rightward Shift in Parental and Gender Role Attitudes

In a notable exception to the general trend of liberalization, students' views on gender roles in parenting grew significantly more conservative during their time in divinity school. This rightward shift was a clear outlier among the various belief categories studied. Specifically, students became more likely to agree with statements suggesting that preschool children might suffer if their mother works or that a man should be the primary earner, while a woman should take care of the home and family. This trend was consistent across all questions related to

parenting roles, making it a distinct and uniform pattern of change within the data. However, it is crucial to contextualize this conservative shift. The vast majority of students entered the seminary program with strongly egalitarian views. For example, 84% initially affirmed that it is acceptable for mothers to work full-time when their children are young. The observed rightward movement tempered these initial views rather than reversing them into a predominantly traditionalist stance.

While the study does not definitively establish the cause, several mechanisms could explain the surprising conservative shift in students' views on parenting roles. This ideological movement may be less about a theological rejection of egalitarianism and more about the practical realities of life planning. As students, many of whom are in their late 20s and 30s, engage in intensive vocational discernment, they may begin to consider the concrete challenges of balancing a demanding career in ministry with family life. Anticipating these structural constraints may prompt students to adopt a practical conservatism in the domestic sphere, endorsing more traditional parenting arrangements as a practical response to anticipated work-family trade-offs (Sherkat 2000). Moreover, because gender-role attitudes receive relatively little attention in divinity school curricula or denominational debates, students may rely more heavily on background socialization or culturally available schemas when considering these questions (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; Lizardo 2017).While views on gender and family roles have become more egalitarian in recent decades, there remains a cultural expectation that women fulfill these roles (Charlesworth and Banaji 2022). Together, these mechanisms suggest that the conservative movement in gender-role attitudes may reflect the pragmatic realities of entering a demanding profession, the persistence of gender traditionalism in society, and the relative absence of institutional cues encouraging students to reevaluate these beliefs.

Changes in Political Alignment

The shifts in students' political views deserve further exploration. While students' agreement with the Republican Party dropped, this was not counterbalanced by a corresponding increase in affinity for the Democratic Party. Agreement with the Democratic Party also declined slightly over the same period. This resulting pattern suggests that the seminary experience may instead have fostered a general move away from established partisan identities. These findings are also consistent with students becoming frustrated with the Democratic Party and moving further to the left in their political views.

Differences Among Subgroups

Among the observed demographic differences in patterns of change, several notable patterns emerge. Certain groups of students enter MDS with views that are consistently more liberal or conservative than those of their peers. The extent to which these students' views change in seminary varies considerably. Black students are by far the most conservative subgroup of students at the time of matriculation. Their beliefs tend to liberalize slightly faster than those of their peers, causing them to be only somewhat more conservative than average by graduation. Men follow a trajectory similar to that of Black students, although they are somewhat less conservative at baseline and don't liberalize quite as fast. Finally, UMC students matriculate into their programs with consistently more liberal views than their peers. In some cases, their views liberalize at a slower rate than others, causing their beliefs at graduation to nearly match those of their peers. The reason for these differences may be myriad. It is well known that peer relationships influence changes in student beliefs. In other analyses (BLINDED), we have discovered a high degree of ideological segregation in friendship networks, particularly among more conservative students, which may catalyze more conservative belief change among some

groups of men. Additionally, the fact that United Methodist students' views mirrored those of their peers at graduation more than at matriculation suggests that the dominant institutional ideology may be exerting a socializing effect on non-UMC students, causing them to liberalize at a faster rate than their UMC peers. Taken together, we see evidence for multiple pathways by which beliefs change in seminary, countering simplistic notions that higher education exerts a uniform liberalizing influence on all students.

Limitations

One major limitation of our analysis is that we cannot definitively conclude that participation in the MDS program caused students to become more liberal. Although we know that students' beliefs in certain domains shifted leftward in seminary, it remains unknown how these students' views would have changed in the counterfactual scenario in which they chose not to attend divinity school. For example, students may tend to enter seminary at a time in their lives when certain beliefs are primed to change, such that they would grow similarly liberal or conservative whether they matriculated into divinity school or not. Still, MDS is an environment designed to form students' religious beliefs. The fact that the views most central to students' experiences at MDS shifted sharply to the left across all subgroups – including groups such as older students who are less prone to belief change (Kiley and Vaisey 2020) – makes it plausible that divinity school is catalyzing this ideological shift.

Another limitation is that, because our data comes from a single Mainline Protestant theological school, the findings should not be generalized uncritically to all forms of graduate theological education. As a theologically moderate mainline seminary, MDS represents a middle position on the broader landscape of theological education. It is less doctrinally restrictive than evangelical seminaries but more traditional in ethos and curriculum than the most liberal

Mainline schools. These differences may condition both the direction and magnitude of ideological change. At the same time, the mechanisms we identify may extend to other institutional settings even if the specific outcomes differ. Future research comparing ideological trajectories across multiple seminary traditions is needed to clarify the scope conditions of the processes we observe.

Conclusions

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of belief changes among students at a Mainline Protestant divinity school, offering a more nuanced perspective on the ongoing discourse about the liberalizing effects of higher education. By leveraging longitudinal data from the Seminary to Early Ministry Study, we move beyond anecdotal claims and provide empirical evidence of how theological education shapes the ideological contours of its students. Our findings reveal a complex process of belief formation, rather than a simple, uniform shift toward liberal viewpoints. We found that while a modest, overarching trend toward liberalism exists, the most significant changes are concentrated in areas central to the seminary curriculum and contemporary denominational debates, namely the Bible, theology, and sexual ethics. Conversely, views on topics more peripheral to the core educational experience, such as politics and divine immanence, showed mixed results, and attitudes toward gender roles in parenting shifted somewhat in the conservative direction.

These patterns point to a two-part mechanism of ideological change. First, a gentle, identity-level liberal cascade appears to produce a general leftward shift among the student body. This broad shift, however, explains only a small portion of the overall variance in belief change, suggesting that claims of wholesale liberal indoctrination are overstated. The second, more powerful mechanism is high-contact, issue-specific updating, where intensive engagement with

specific topics through coursework, interpersonal relationships, and denominational issues drives the most profound ideological shifts. Students are not passively absorbing a monolithic liberal ideology; rather, they are actively wrestling with the core tenets of their faith within a focused academic environment. The fact that the most dramatic liberalization occurs in areas central to the curriculum underscores the formative power of theological education.

Our analysis also highlights the diverse ideological journeys within the student body. Factors such as race, gender, and denominational affiliation significantly shape students' initial beliefs and their trajectory of change. For instance, Black students and men often entered with more conservative views but liberalized at a faster rate than their peers, while United Methodist students, who started more liberal on certain issues, sometimes liberalized more slowly, leading to a convergence of views by graduation. These findings counter any simplistic narrative of a uniform educational effect, pointing to the intricate ways in which social identities intersect with the formative process in the seminary.

While this study is limited to a single institution, its findings offer a valuable and detailed snapshot that likely resonates with the broader landscape of Mainline Protestant seminaries. The results challenge educators, church leaders, and the public to adopt a more sophisticated understanding of how belief systems evolve. Future research should build on this foundation, ideally incorporating data from a broader range of theological schools to test the generalizability of this two-part model. Longitudinal studies that follow graduates into their early careers would also be invaluable for understanding the long-term consequences of these ideological shifts on their ministry and leadership. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the ideological impact of attending MDS is not merely simple indoctrination but a dynamic process of engagement,

reflection, and transformation, shaped by both broad ideological currents and the specific social contexts in which students reside.

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Figures

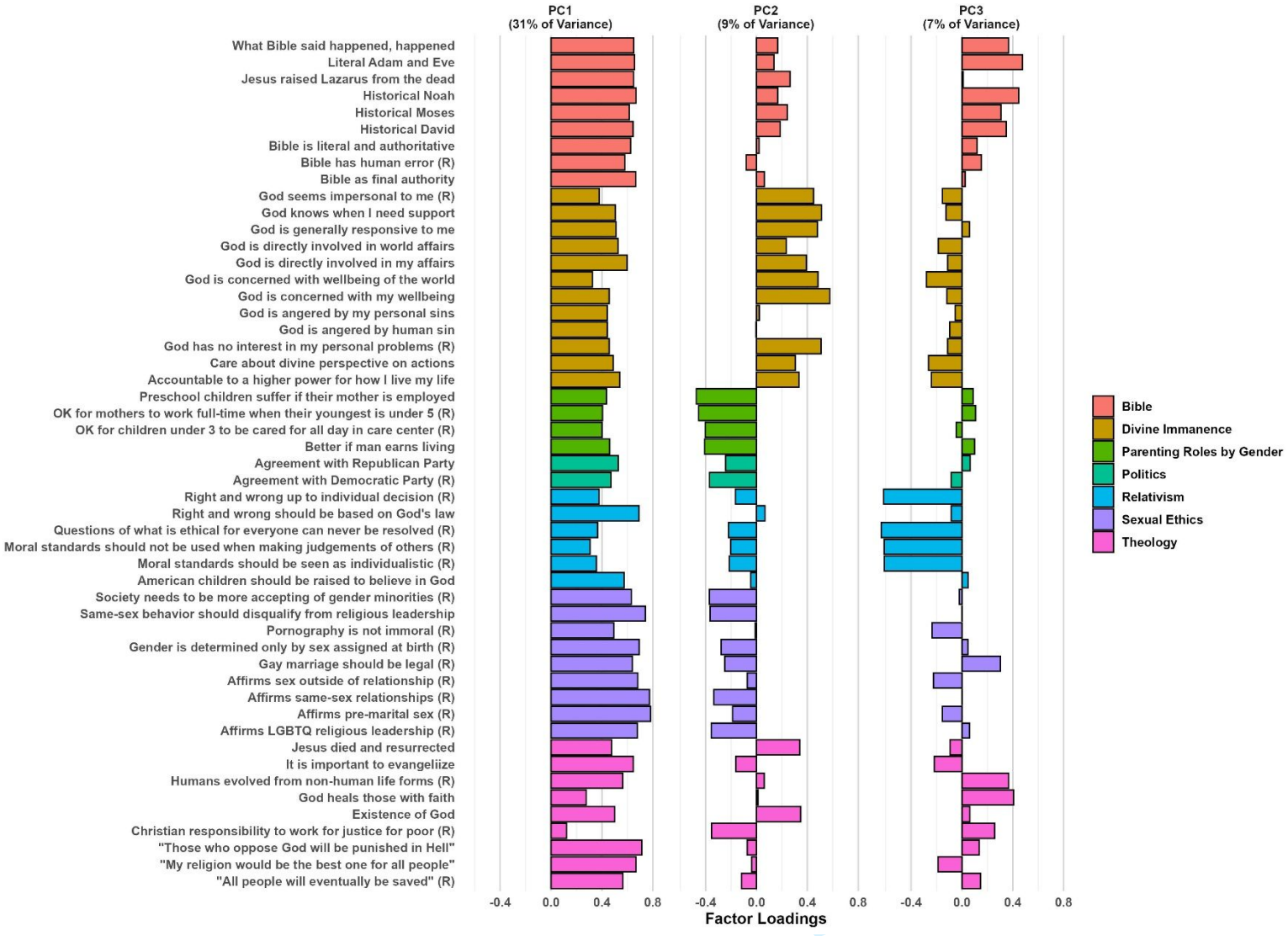


Figure 1: The results from the exploratory factor analysis. We gave all items the same ideological valence, as defined by the first principal component.

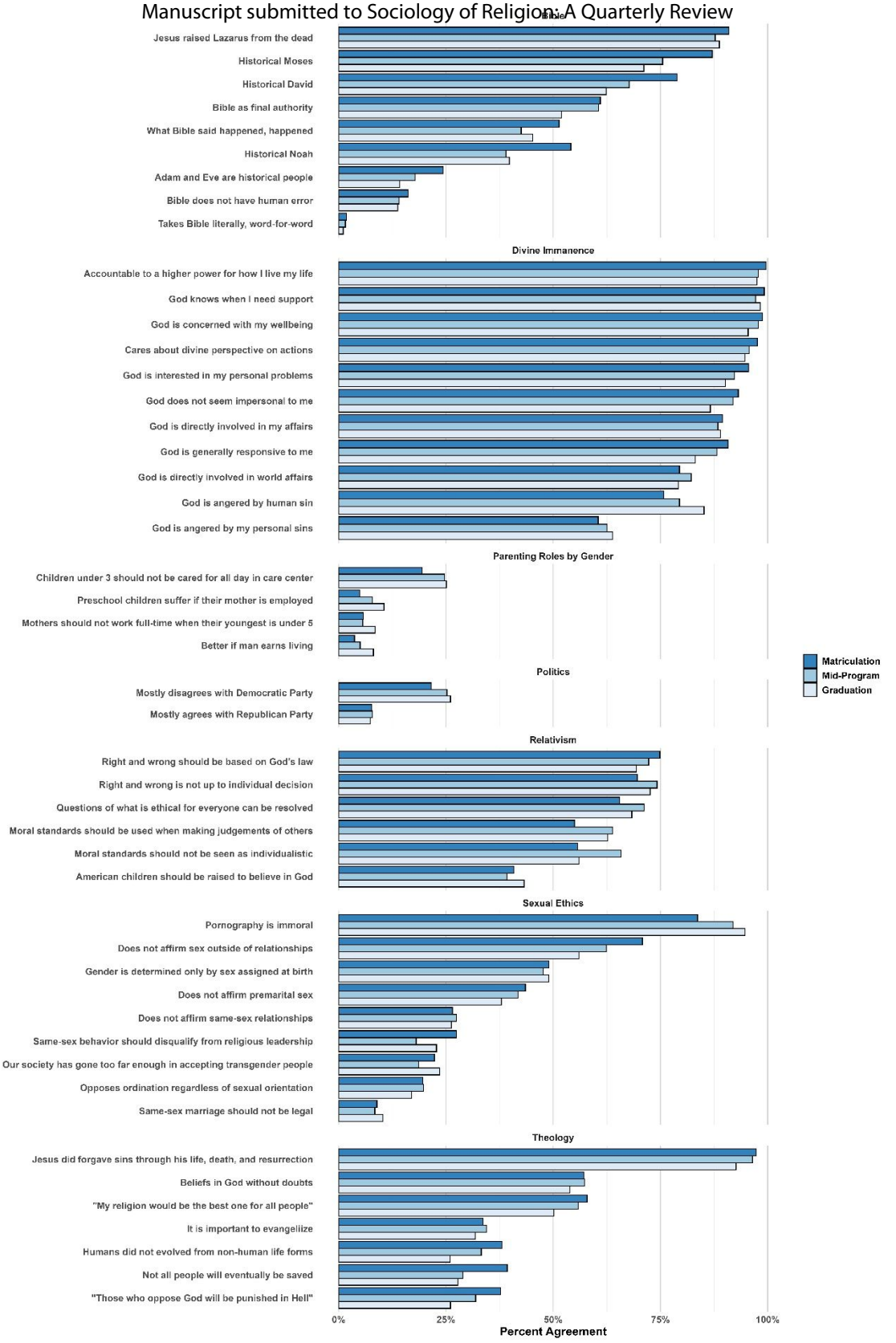


Figure 2: All items have the same ideological valence. Increasing percentages indicate the views are growing more conservative.

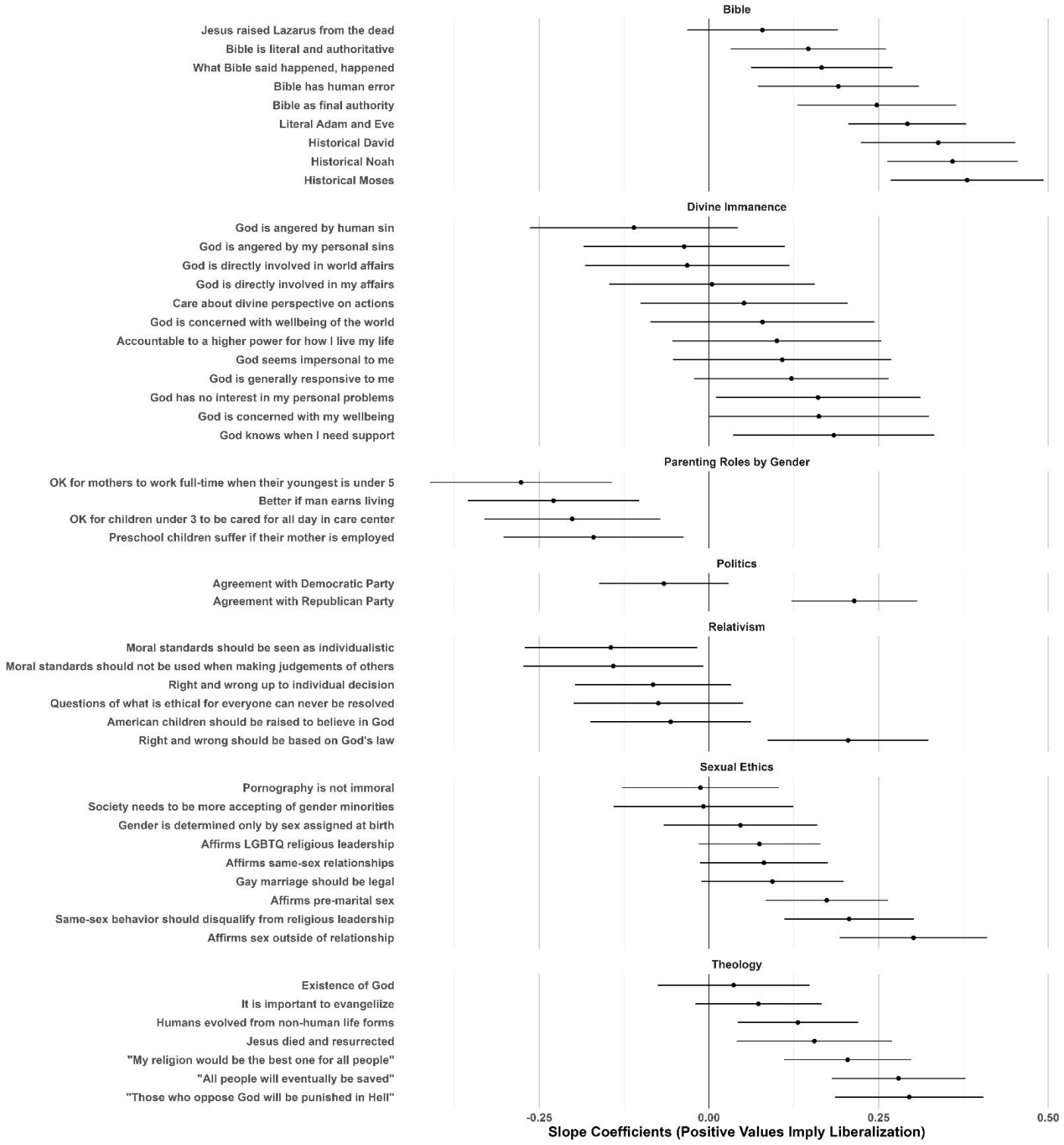


Figure 3: Slope coefficients for the latent growth models and their 95% confidence intervals. The slopes for each belief were given the same valence, such that positive slopes implied that beliefs grew more liberal.

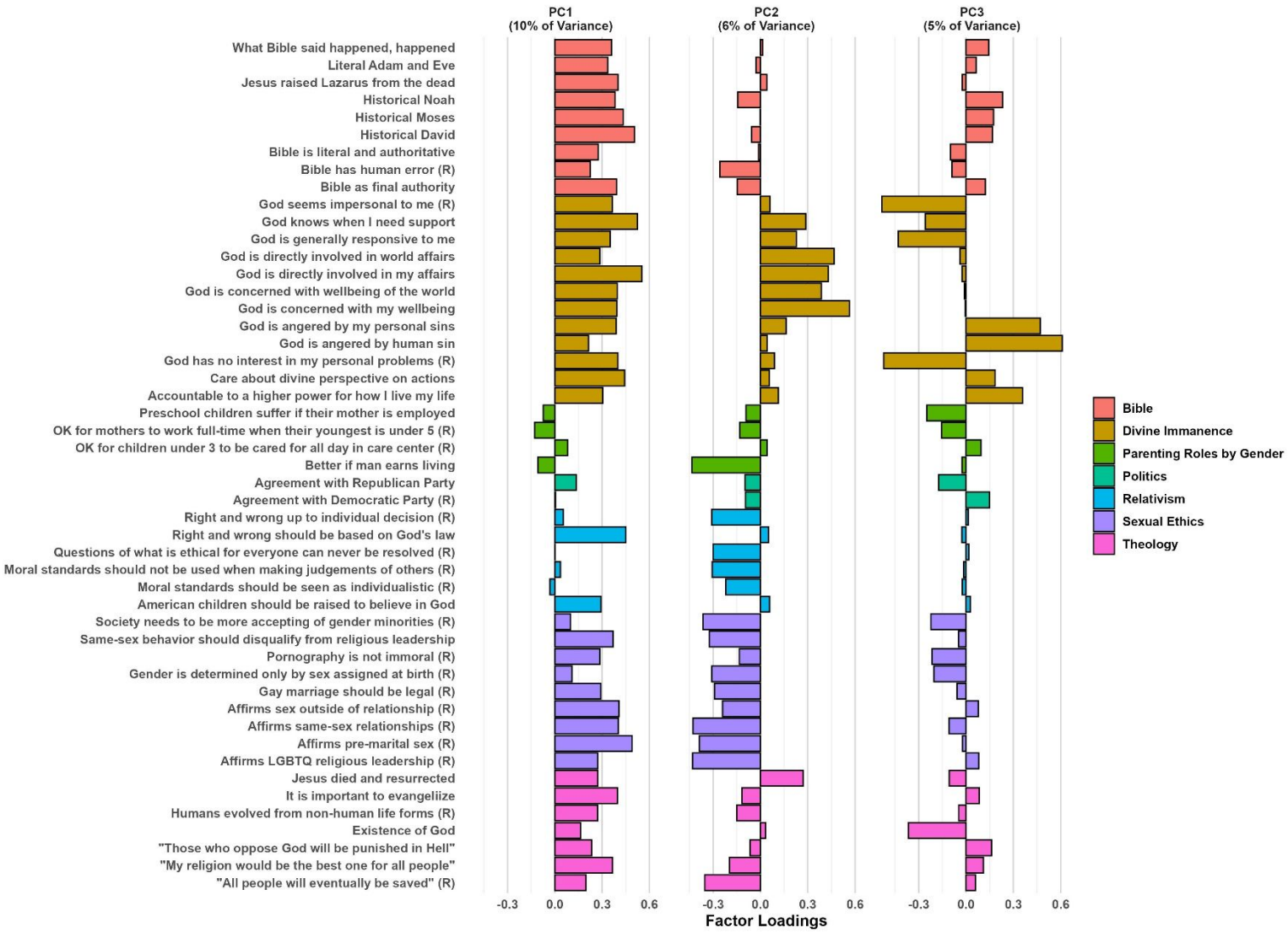


Figure 4: The results from the exploratory factor analysis of the belief changes. We gave all items the same ideological valence, as defined by the first principal component of our cross-sectional factor analysis.

Appendix A: Exploratory Factor Analysis

Category	Question	Minimum Response	Maximum Response	Loadings
Bible	Do you believe that Adam and Eve were literal historical people?	No, definitely not	Yes, definitely	0.65
Bible	Which of the following comes closest to your personal beliefs about the Bible?	The Bible contains a mix of legends, stories, and moral precepts with little relevance for today.	The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word-for-word.	0.62
Bible	The Bible contains some human errors.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.57
Bible	If the Bible says something happened, then I believe that it did.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.65
Bible	The Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.68
Bible	Noah built an ark and filled it with animals.	Definitely fictional	Definitely happened	0.67
Bible	Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.	Definitely fictional	Definitely happened	0.61
Bible	David killed a warrior called Goliath.	Definitely fictional	Definitely happened	0.65
Bible	Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.	Definitely fictional	Definitely happened	0.66
Divine Immanence	God is concerned with the well-being of the world.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.33
Divine Immanence	I feel that God is generally responsive to me.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.50
Divine Immanence	I am accountable to God, or a higher power, for how I live my life as a whole.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.54
Divine Immanence	I care about a divine/transcendent perspective on my actions.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.50
Divine Immanence	God is angered by my personal sins.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.47
Divine Immanence	God is directly involved in world affairs.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.54

Divine Immanence	God is concerned with my personal well-being.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.45
Divine Immanence	God is directly involved in my affairs.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.59
Divine Immanence	God is angered by human sin.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.44
Divine Immanence	God seems impersonal to me.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	-0.37
Divine Immanence	God seems to have little or no interest in my personal problems.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	-0.42
Divine Immanence	God knows when I need support.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.50
Parenting Roles by Gender	It is much better if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.48
Parenting Roles by Gender	Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.44
Parenting Roles by Gender	It is all right for children under 3 years old to be cared for all day in a day care center.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.40
Parenting Roles by Gender	It is all right for mothers to work full-time when their youngest child is under age 5.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.41
Politics	Thinking about political issues, how often, if at all, do you tend to agree with the positions of the Republican Party?	Never	Always	0.54
Politics	Thinking about political issues, how often, if at all, do you tend to agree with the positions of the Democratic Party?	Never	Always	-0.49
Relativism	What is right and wrong is up to each person to decide.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	-0.38
Relativism	Right and wrong should be based on God's law.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.70
Relativism	American children should be raised to believe in God.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	0.59
Relativism	Moral standards should be seen as individualistic: what one person considers to be moral may be judged as immoral by another person.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	-0.36

Relativism	Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved because what is moral or immoral is up to the individual to decide.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	-0.36
Relativism	Moral standards are simply personal rules that indicate how a person should behave, and should not be used when making judgments of others.	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	-0.31
Sexual Ethics	Which statement comes closer to your views, even if neither is exactly right?	Whether someone is a man or a woman is determined by the sex they were assigned at birth	Someone can be a man or a woman even if that is different from the sex they were assigned at birth	-0.69
Sexual Ethics	Which of the following statements comes closer to your feelings?	Our society has gone too far in accepting people who are transgender	Our society has not gone far enough in accepting people who are transgender	-0.64
Sexual Ethics	In general, is pornography morally acceptable or morally wrong?	Definitely morally wrong	Definitely morally acceptable	-0.49
Sexual Ethics	Consensual sex between a married homosexual couple is morally acceptable.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.78
Sexual Ethics	Consensual sex between a non-married couple in a committed relationship is morally acceptable.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.79
Sexual Ethics	Consensual sex outside of a committed relationship is morally acceptable.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.69
Sexual Ethics	All religious leadership positions should be open to people regardless of their sexual orientation.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.68
Sexual Ethics	Consensual same-sex sexual behavior should disqualify a person from holding a religious leadership position.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.76

Sexual Ethics	In your opinion, should same-sex marriage be legal?	No, definitely not	Yes, definitely	-0.65
Theology	Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?	I don't believe in God	I know God really exists, and I have no doubts about it	0.50
Theology	My religion would be the best one for all people no matter their background or current religion.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.68
Theology	It is important for me to try to persuade people in other religions to accept my religion instead of their own.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.66
Theology	Humans evolved from non-human life forms.	Definitely false	Definitely true	-0.56
Theology	Christians have a responsibility to work for justice for the poor.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.10
Theology	Those who oppose God will be punished in Hell.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.72
Theology	All people will eventually be saved.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	-0.57
Theology	Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of people's sins.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.49
Theology	God will grant good health and relief from sickness to believers who have enough faith.	Completely disagree	Completely agree	0.29

Appendix B: Beliefs by Survey Round

Survey Item	Category	Agreement at Matriculation	Agreement at Mid-Program	Agreement at Graduation
Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead	Bible	90.9%	87.8%	88.7%
Historical Moses	Bible	87.1%	75.5%	71.1%
Historical David	Bible	78.8%	67.7%	62.3%
Bible as final authority	Bible	61.0%	60.6%	51.9%
Historical Noah	Bible	54.1%	39.0%	39.8%
What Bible said happened, happened	Bible	51.4%	42.5%	45.2%
Adam and Eve are historical people	Bible	24.3%	17.8%	14.2%
Bible does not have human error	Bible	16.2%	14.1%	13.8%
Takes Bible literally, word-for-word	Bible	1.8%	1.6%	1.1%
Accountable to a higher power for how I live my life	Divine Immanence	99.6%	97.8%	97.5%
God knows when I need support	Divine Immanence	99.2%	97.2%	98.2%
God is concerned with my wellbeing	Divine Immanence	98.8%	97.8%	95.4%
Cares about divine perspective on actions	Divine Immanence	97.6%	95.6%	94.7%
God is interested in my personal problems	Divine Immanence	95.6%	92.2%	90.1%
God does not seem impersonal to me	Divine Immanence	93.1%	91.9%	86.6%
God is generally responsive to me	Divine Immanence	90.7%	88.2%	83.1%
God is directly involved in my affairs	Divine Immanence	89.5%	88.4%	89.0%
God is directly involved in world affairs	Divine Immanence	79.4%	82.2%	79.2%
God is angered by human sin	Divine Immanence	75.8%	79.4%	85.2%
God is angered by my personal sins	Divine Immanence	60.5%	62.5%	63.8%
Children under 3 should not be cared for all day in care center	Parenting Roles by Gender	19.4%	24.7%	25.1%

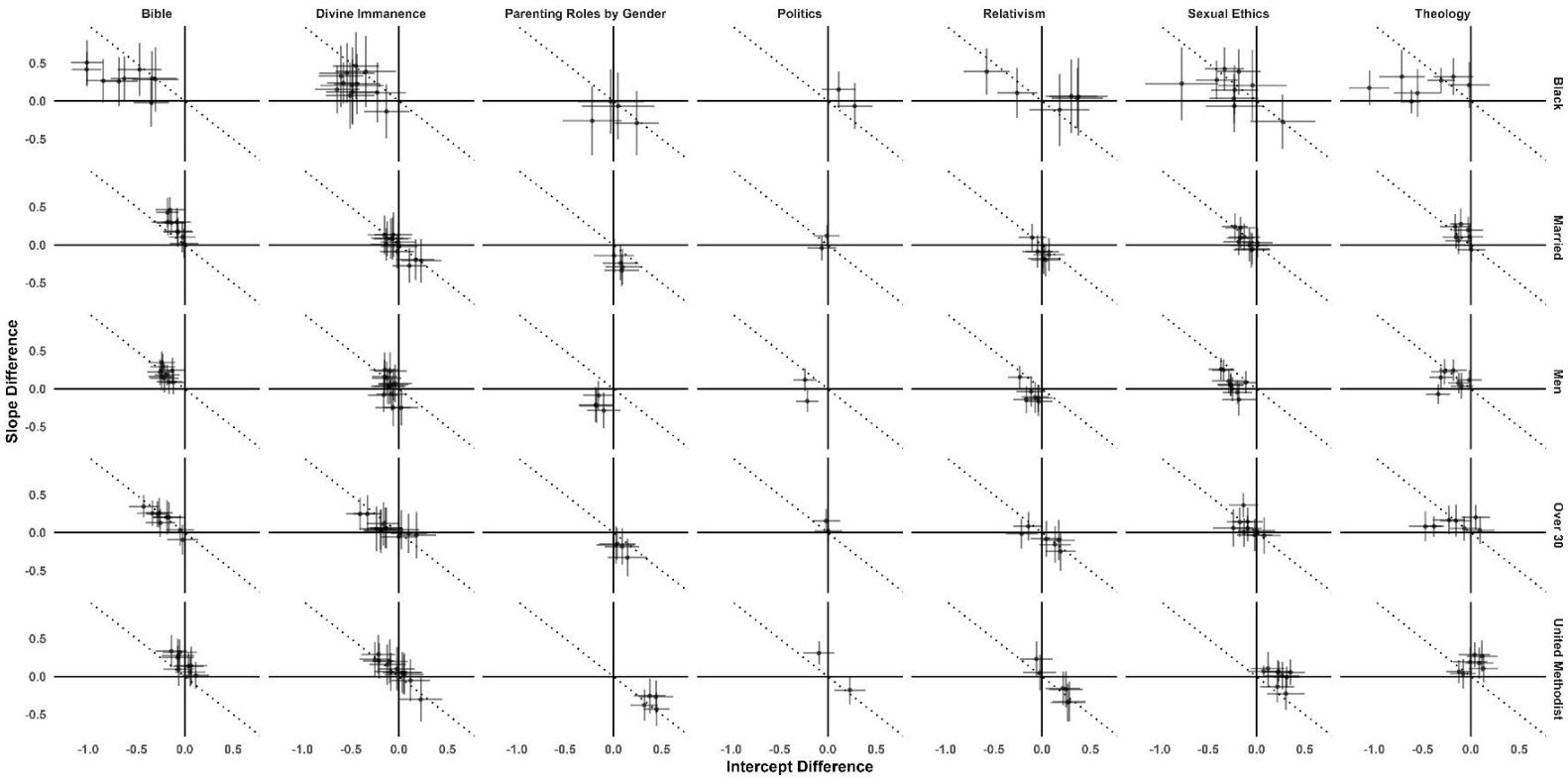
Mothers should not work full-time when their youngest is under 5	Parenting Roles by Gender	5.7%	5.6%	8.5%
Preschool children suffer if their mother is employed	Parenting Roles by Gender	4.9%	7.8%	10.6%
Better if man earns living	Parenting Roles by Gender	3.7%	5.0%	8.1%
Mostly disagrees with Democratic Party	Politics	21.6%	25.2%	26.1%
Mostly agrees with Republican Party	Politics	7.7%	7.9%	7.4%
Right and wrong should be based on God's law	Relativism	74.9%	72.3%	69.4%
Right and wrong is not up to individual decision	Relativism	69.6%	74.2%	72.6%
Questions of what is ethical for everyone can be resolved	Relativism	65.5%	71.2%	68.3%
Moral standards should not be seen as individualistic	Relativism	55.7%	65.8%	56.0%
Moral standards should be used when making judgements of others	Relativism	55.0%	63.8%	62.7%
American children should be raised to believe in God	Relativism	40.8%	39.2%	43.2%
Pornography is immoral	Sexual Ethics	83.7%	91.9%	94.7%
Does not affirm sex outside of relationships	Sexual Ethics	70.8%	62.4%	56.0%
Gender is determined only by sex assigned at birth	Sexual Ethics	49.0%	47.7%	48.9%
Does not affirm premarital sex	Sexual Ethics	43.5%	41.8%	37.9%
Same-sex behavior should disqualify from religious leadership	Sexual Ethics	27.5%	18.1%	22.8%
Does not affirm same-sex relationships	Sexual Ethics	26.5%	27.5%	26.2%
Our society has gone too far enough in accepting transgender people	Sexual Ethics	22.3%	18.6%	23.6%
Opposes ordination regardless of sexual orientation	Sexual Ethics	19.6%	19.7%	17.0%
Same-sex marriage should not be legal	Sexual Ethics	8.9%	8.4%	10.3%

Jesus did forgave sins through his life, death, and resurrection	Theology	97.3%	96.4%	92.6%
"My religion would be the best one for all people"	Theology	57.9%	55.8%	50.2%
Beliefs in God without doubts	Theology	57.2%	57.3%	53.9%
Not all people will eventually be saved	Theology	39.3%	29.0%	27.8%
Humans did not evolved from non-human life forms	Theology	38.0%	33.2%	25.9%
"Those who oppose God will be punished in Hell"	Theology	37.7%	31.9%	26.1%
It is important to evangeliize	Theology	33.7%	34.4%	31.8%

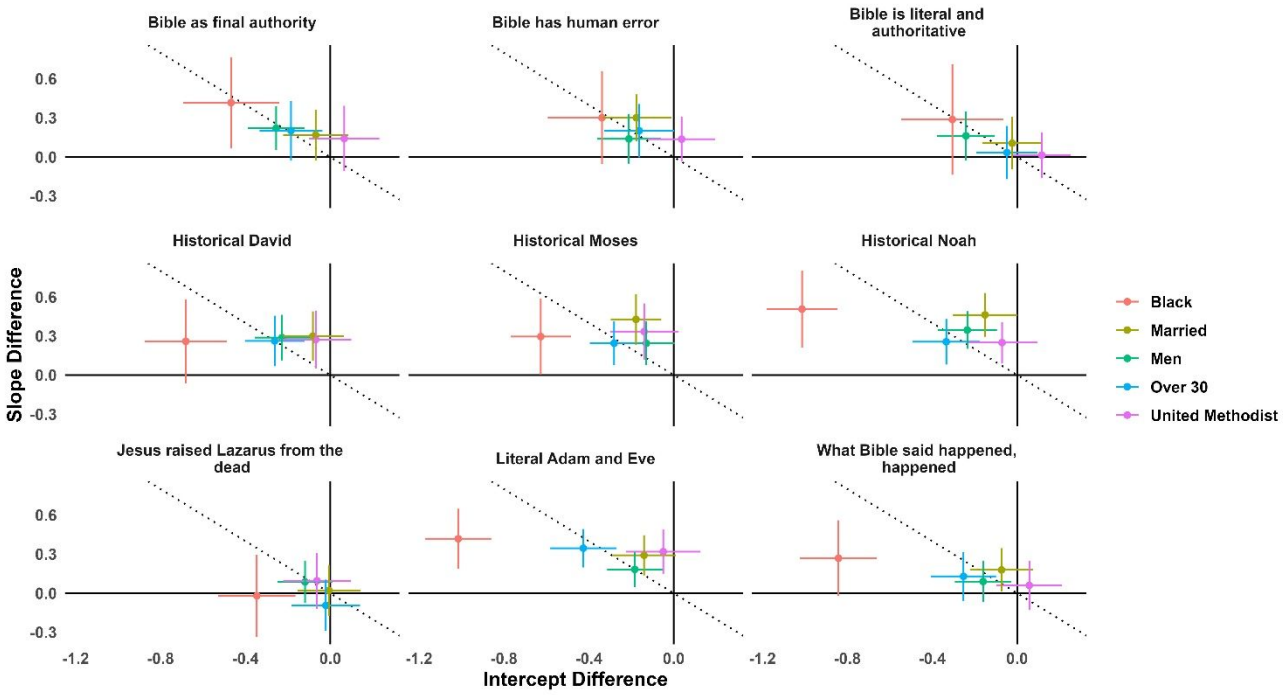
Appendix C: Subgroup Coefficient Differences by Belief

This series of plots shows the differences in slopes and intercepts of the latent linear growth curve between the groups represented by the control variables (e.g., Black students and men). The intercept differences indicate how the beliefs of each group differed from their peers at matriculation. Because all the variables are standardized, they represent the number of standard deviations more conservative than the average member of that group was at matriculation. The slope difference indicates how the rates of belief change from matriculation to graduation differ between the two groups. Positive values indicate that, relative to the change of their peers, the beliefs of a group shifted left by that many more standard deviations than their peers. The relationship between these pairs of coefficients is also informative. When the sum of a group's slope and intercept differences equals 0, it means this group's views on this belief were the same as their peers' at graduation. When the absolute value of the sum of the slope and intercept is greater than the absolute value of the intercept, the views of this group on a belief grew further away from their peers from matriculation to graduation.

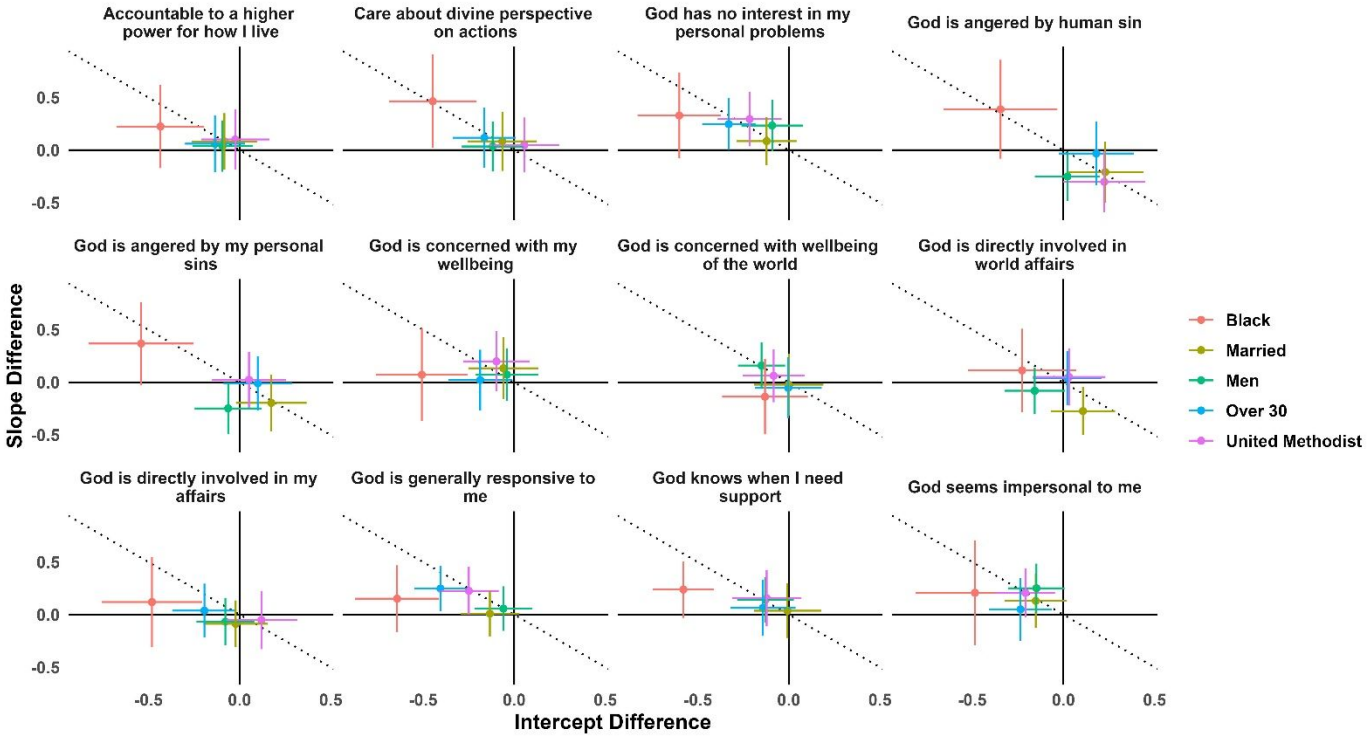
All Beliefs



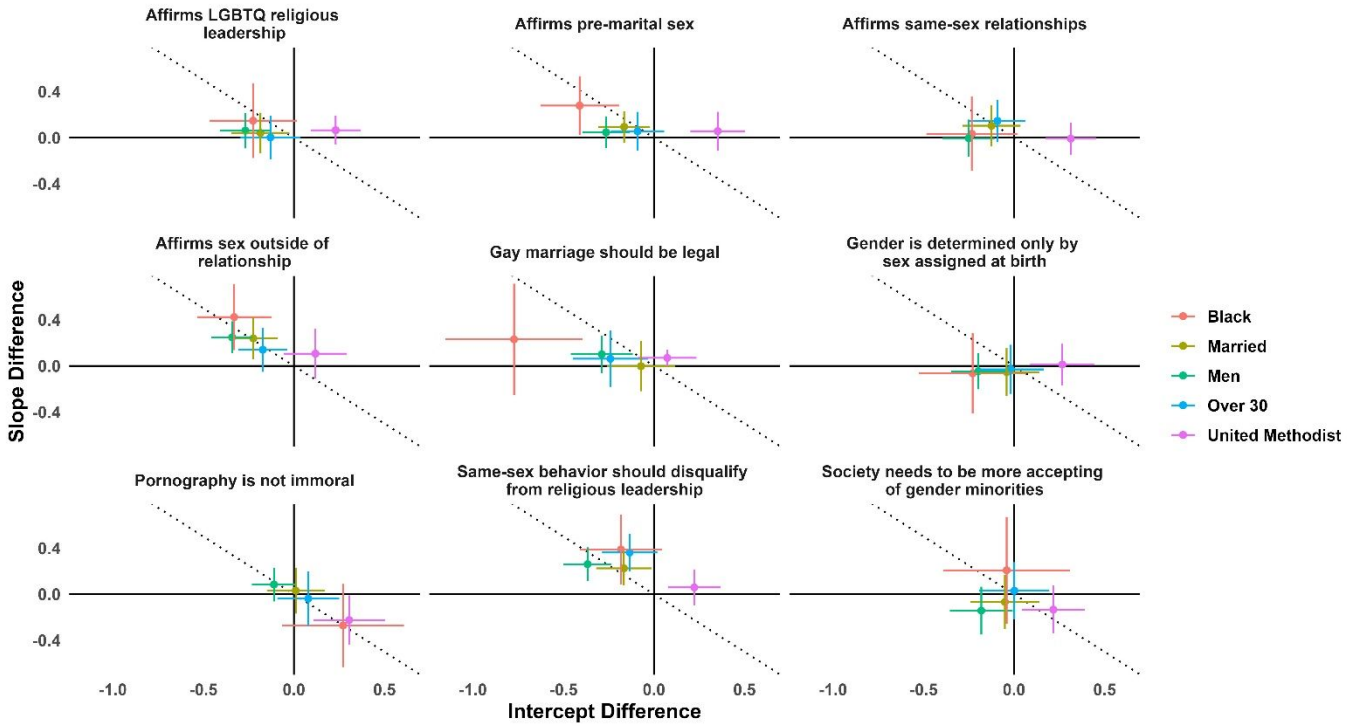
Bible



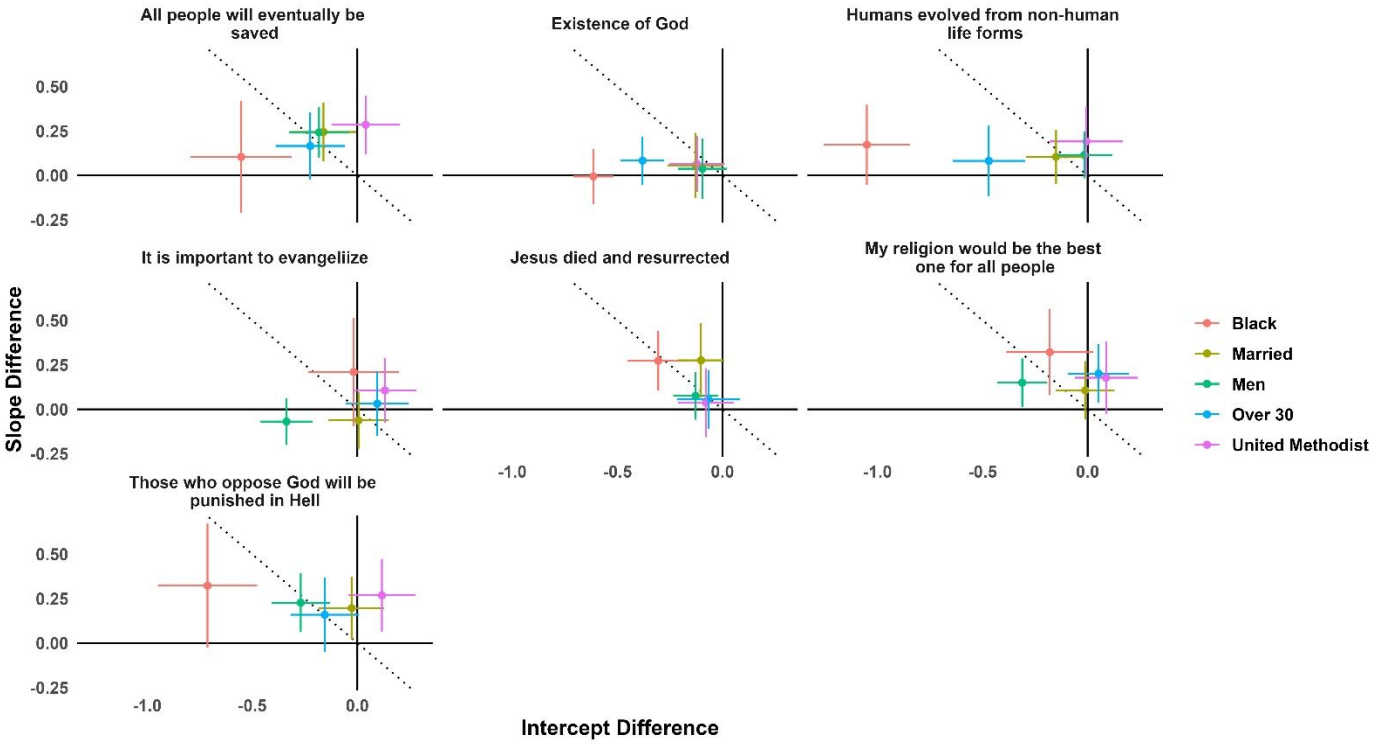
Divine Immanence



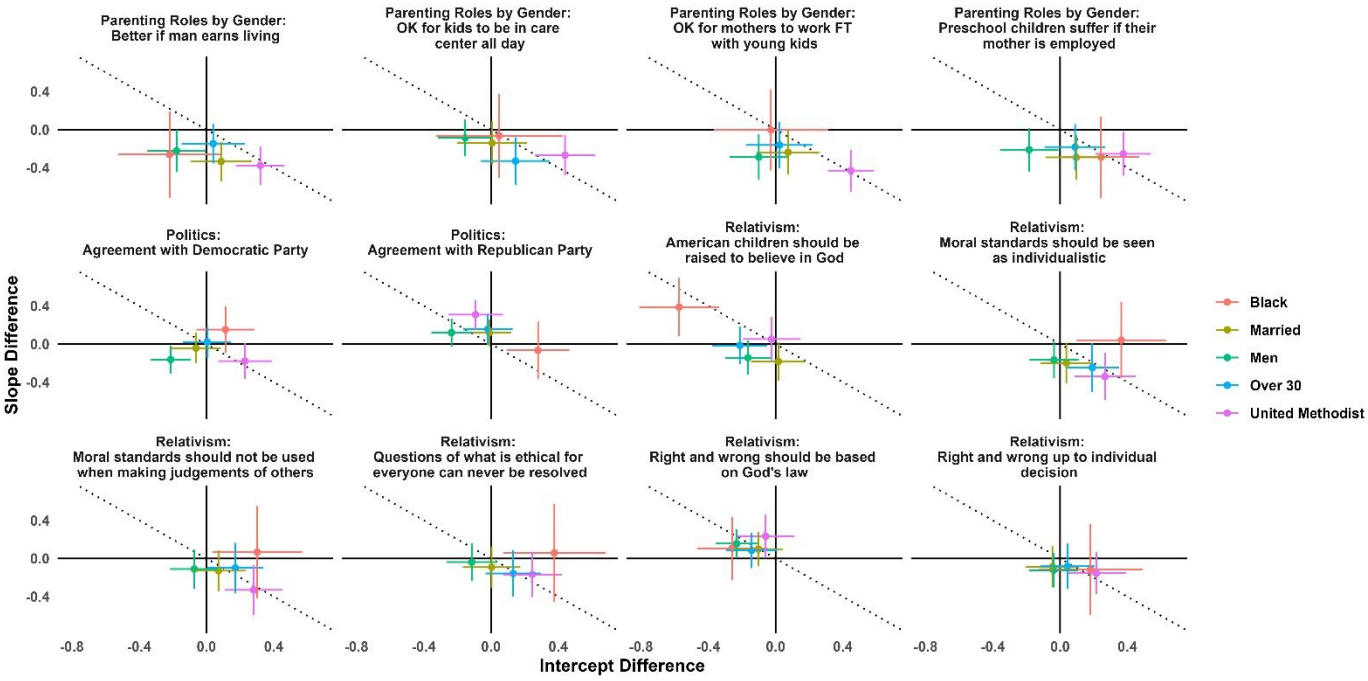
Sexual Ethics



Theology



Other Beliefs



The Anatomy of Liberalization in Graduate Theological Education
Manuscript ID SOCREL-2025-085

Due May 12, 2026

Thank you for excellent comments on this paper. We appreciate the time it took for you to review the work and provide detailed feedback. We have studied your comments closely and have revised the manuscript to address each of the concerns you raised.

This memo summarizes the changes we made to the paper in response to your suggestions. Our responses are in **bold**. Thank you again for your help improving the work.

Reviewer 1:

Reviewer 1 noted that we make "an important contribution to the literature on religion and education" and that "the methodology seems well-designed," but also asked that we revise how we frame the study.

First, the reviewer asked us to be more specific in our characterization of conservative critiques of seminary. They clarified that these critiques are directed primarily at mainline seminaries—especially moderate to liberal ones—and not at evangelical schools, which are not understood to be "liberalizing." They recommended that we describe the curricular and theological differences between evangelical and mainline seminaries to make this framing explicit.

Thank you for this helpful suggestion. We have revised the Background section to more clearly distinguish between the targets of conservative critiques and the broader landscape of theological education. Specifically, we now note that while public commentary sometimes generalizes critiques to "seminaries" as a whole, conservative critiques disproportionately focus on Mainline Protestant institutions, which are often perceived as more open to historical-critical biblical interpretation, theological diversity, and socially progressive ethical frameworks. We contrast these perceptions with the stronger confessional boundaries typical of many evangelical seminaries. We also clarify that systematic empirical comparisons of ideological change across seminary traditions remain limited, preventing us from drawing broad conclusions beyond what our data allow.

These edits appear on page 7 of the revised manuscript.

Second, the reviewer asked us to moderate our generalizability claims, noting that the pattern we observe at MDS may not extend to more liberal mainline seminaries, where student bodies and curricula differ substantially. They suggested that our findings may apply primarily to moderate mainline institutions.

Third, Reviewer 1 asked us to situate MDS within the landscape of mainline schools and explicitly characterize it as an institution with a moderate theological ethos distinct from both more liberal mainline seminaries and from evangelical seminaries.

We appreciate these important points. In response, we have revised the Introduction (see page 7), added an Institutional Context section (see pages 9-10), and updated the Limitations section (see pages 25-26) to more clearly delineate the scope of our claims. We now explicitly characterize MDS as a moderate mainline divinity school and clarify that our findings should be interpreted primarily within this institutional niche.

We note that the United Methodist–affiliated context, the school's blend of academic theological study with broad denominational diversity, and its relatively moderate ethos likely shape the domains and degree of ideological change we observe. We now emphasize that more progressive mainline seminaries may exhibit different patterns of belief change. These revisions make clear that our findings are not intended as claims about all theological schools but rather as insights into ideological development within a particular segment of mainline Protestant education.

Reviewer 2:

Reviewer 2 commended our paper as "a methodologically sound piece of sociological research which addresses a meaningful topic." They also identified several areas for improvement.

First, the reviewer emphasized the need to more fully justify the sociological value of studying a single theological school. They suggested that we need to make a stronger case that trends we observed at MDS reflect those at other Mainline Protestant schools. They also noted that the mainline occupies a shrinking share of the American religious landscape and argued that our manuscript should provide a stronger theoretical justification for why MDS and Mainline Protestantism more generally remain meaningful contexts for understanding American Protestantism more broadly.

We thank the reviewer for this insightful suggestion. We have substantially revised the Institutional Context (see pages 9-10) section and the Limitations section (see pages 25-26) to articulate more clearly why a single-site study at MDS offers broader sociological value. First, we clarify that MDS occupies a moderate position within the spectrum of mainline theological schools. This institutional profile makes MDS a theoretically informative case for understanding ideological formation in moderate mainline settings, where a range of theological orientations interact.

Second, in response to the reviewer's call to justify the broader relevance of Mainline Protestantism, we now highlight that, even as membership declines, the Mainline Protestantism remains disproportionately influential in American public life, religious leadership pipelines, and theological education. Mainline clergy continue to occupy prominent positions in public-facing ministries, chaplaincy, nonprofit leadership, and denominational governance. Moreover, Mainline seminaries remain key sites where future clergy, scholars, and moral leaders work through questions of biblical interpretation, sexuality, and political engagement. We now emphasize that understanding ideological formation in this sector is therefore crucial for understanding how Protestant ideas and moral frameworks continue to shape civic and religious life. See page 10 for these updates.

Finally, we explicitly state on pages 9-10 that while single-site studies necessarily have limits, MDS is not an idiosyncratic case. Its curriculum, denominational affiliation, and student demographic profile align with those of many moderate mainline seminaries, making it a theoretically productive site for examining belief change.

Second, the reviewer encouraged us to strengthen the literature review by engaging additional scholarship, particularly research related to personality and ideology (e.g., Gerber et al. 2011), studies of ideological change in Christian higher education (e.g., Brown et al. 2024), and recent work by Yancey, Shaler, and Walz (2019). They indicated that incorporating these sources would help bolster our theoretical framing.

We appreciate this helpful recommendation and have revised the Background section to incorporate these bodies of work in three ways.

First, we expand our discussion of the foundations of ideological structure by incorporating Gerber et al. (2011) and related personality-ideology research. These additions clarify that ideological orientations are shaped not only by social and institutional influences but also by stable psychological dispositions. We now explain how such findings underscore the importance of analyzing ideological change across multiple domains rather than assuming uniform movement.

Second, we integrate Brown et al. (2024) into our comparative framing of ideological change within Christian higher education. We highlight that their study of undergraduates at a Protestant university documents uneven ideological shifts across domains. These are patterns that parallel the domain-specific changes we observe in seminary. We also note key contrasts, including differing directions and magnitudes of change, to clarify how our findings extend work on religious education into the graduate theological context.

Third, we incorporate Yancey, Shaler, and Walz (2019) to strengthen our discussion of institutional variation within Christian colleges and seminaries. We now emphasize that evangelical and conservative Protestant institutions often maintain more rigid theological and political boundaries, reinforcing our argument that ideological change is likely to vary across institutional types and that MDS is a theoretically distinct setting.

These additions appear in the revised manuscript on pages 2-8 and help situate our study more clearly within the broader scholarly landscape on ideological development, Christian higher education, and the structure of belief systems.

Third, the reviewer requested additional descriptive detail about the dataset. They suggested adding descriptive tables for all three survey waves so that readers can fully understand the distributions of beliefs over time. They also noted that we mention the diversity of students' religious backgrounds but do not explore it in depth and asked us to provide more information about students' denominational affiliations as a potentially meaningful explanatory factor.

Thank you for this helpful suggestion. We have made two substantive revisions in response.

First, we strengthened the descriptive detail by adding a table to Appendix B, which reports the proportion of students agreeing with each survey item at all three waves. This table enables readers to see the distribution and directional movement of beliefs over time in a clear and accessible format. The new appendix table provides a balanced level of descriptive detail without overwhelming the reader.

Second, we expanded our description of students' denominational backgrounds in the Institutional Context section (see pages 9-10). Drawing on RELTRAD classifications, we now report the denominational composition of the sample: 6% identified as Black Protestant, 14% as Conservative Protestant, 52% as Mainline Protestant (62% of whom identified as United Methodist), 25% as nondenominational, and 5% with another religious group. This addition specifies the religious diversity of the cohort and helps situate MDS within the broader landscape of theological education.

Reviewer 3:

Reviewer 3 offered a positive evaluation of the manuscript, describing it as "well-executed," "methodologically rigorous," and "theoretically promising," and noting that it is "essentially publishable, pending several modest revisions." They highlighted the strength of the three-wave longitudinal design and affirmed that our "two-pathway" model provides an elegant explanation for uneven liberalization. Their suggestions focus on sharpening conceptual clarity, strengthening theoretical context, and refining presentation.

First, the reviewer asked us to clarify the conceptual boundaries of the term "liberalization." They noted that the manuscript sometimes uses "liberalization" across theological, moral, and political domains. They recommended adding a concise definitional paragraph early in the theory section to differentiate among theological liberalization, moral liberalization, and political liberalization.

We appreciate the reviewer's attention to conceptual clarity. In response, we substantially revised the early portion of the Background section to include an explicit definition of theological, moral, and political liberalism. We also now explain that the study allows ideological structure to emerge empirically from the data, and we use "liberalization" to describe movement toward the empirically liberal poles of the observed attitudinal dimensions (see pages 10-11). The revised text specifies how theological, moral, and political liberalism differ analytically, yet often correlate through broader ideological structuring processes. We also root this clarification in the existing literature on multidimensional ideology and belief-network structure (e.g., Jost et al. 2009; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017). This addition appears on pages 2-4 and provides the clearer conceptual framing the reviewer requested.

Second, the reviewer encouraged us to more fully theorize the institutional context of MDS. Rather than simply noting the single-site limitation, they asked us to analyze how the denominational moment—particularly the UMC schism and broader Mainline identity debates—shaped the domains in which belief change occurred. They recommended adding one to two

paragraphs in the Discussion connecting these institutional dynamics to the observed patterns, especially around sexuality and biblical interpretation.

We appreciate this excellent suggestion and have expanded our theorization of the institutional and denominational context accordingly. In the Discussion section, we now explicitly connect domain-specific belief change to features of MDS's institutional environment during the study period.

Specifically, we have added new text explaining (1) how active denominational conflict over the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the UMC created an unusually salient context for evaluative work around sexuality, inclusion, and biblical interpretation; (2) how exposure to these debates in coursework, chapel life, field education, and informal peer conversation likely heightened students' attention to these domains relative to others; and (3) how this denominational moment helps explain why the strongest liberalization occurred in theological and sexual ethics items, while beliefs less tied to UMC identity debates (e.g., gendered parenting roles) did not follow the same pattern. This new theorization appears in the expanded section titled "The Power of Domain-Specific Updating" (pages 21-22).

Third, the reviewer recommended strengthening our engagement with comparative literature, especially recent work on ideological development in Christian higher education. They specifically highlighted Brown et al. (2024) as a useful parallel case documenting similar processes among undergraduates.

We appreciate this helpful suggestion. We now incorporate Brown et al. (2024) more explicitly into the literature review to situate our findings within the broader landscape of ideological formation in Christian educational settings. On page 4 of the revised Background section, we added a discussion of how Brown et al. (2024) find heterogenous ideological movement among students at a Protestant university, with distinct rightward shifts among more conservative subgroups and leftward or stable patterns among more progressive students.

We highlight that their findings underscore the importance of examining domain-specific ideological change rather than assuming uniform movement. We also note that their undergraduate context complements our graduate-level focus, jointly illustrating that Christian educational environments can both reinforce existing orientations and generate targeted belief change depending on students' incoming profiles and institutional cultures. This addition strengthens the manuscript by showing that our findings fit within an emerging pattern of research documenting nuanced ideological development across the Christian higher education spectrum.

Fourth, the reviewer asked for more clarity in the measurement logic behind our designation of items as "liberal" or "conservative." They suggested adding a brief note in the Methods section or Appendix clarifying whether ideological directionality was established empirically (e.g., through factor loadings) or theoretically (e.g., through prior research).

Thank you for this helpful recommendation. In response, we have clarified our Methods

section on pages 10-11 to explain how ideological directionality was determined. As the reviewer suggested, we now note that our primary approach was empirical. We used results from the exploratory factor analysis to identify the latent ideological continuum and infer the liberal or conservative pole of each item based on its loading direction. Our empirical coding aligned with our theoretical expectations from prior research on theological, moral, and political orientations.

Fifth, they encouraged us to deepen our interpretation of the conservative shift in gender-role attitudes, suggesting that we draw on sociological explanations such as gendered vocational expectations and work-family trade-offs within ministry to provide a more grounded theoretical interpretation.

We appreciate this recommendation and have expanded our interpretation accordingly. In the revised manuscript, we now offer a fuller theoretical explanation for why students' gender-role attitudes may have shifted in a more conservative direction even as their views in other domains liberalized. Specifically, we added discussion connecting this pattern to (1) the practical work-family constraints associated with pastoral vocations, which may prompt students to anticipate the challenges of balancing ministry work with childrearing, and (2) the relative absence of institutional or curricular cues encouraging reevaluation of views on gender roles, which may lead students to default to background socialization or culturally available schemas when considering these issues. These additions appear on pages 22-23.