

## **Religious Commitment, Religious Fundamentalism, and Attitudes Towards Reading Ellen White among Asian University Students**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explain attitudes towards reading Ellen White using religious commitment, religious fundamentalism, gender, class level, and academic major as independent variables. A cross-sectional design that surveyed 225 students at a Seventh-day Adventist university was employed. The analysis included descriptive statistics and multiple regression. Results indicated that religious commitment and religious fundamentalism had strong relationships with attitudes towards reading Ellen White. In addition, gender, and study major were also significant explanatory variables. The model explained 43% of the variance of attitudes towards reading Ellen White. This implies that among young adults, religious commitment and fundamentalism are factors to consider when addressing attitudes towards reading the writings of Ellen White.

**Keywords:** *Ellen White, religious fundamentalism, religious commitment*

### **Introduction**

Among young people, there has been a general decline in involvement in religious activities such as attendance at religious meetings and/or personal devotional exercises (Hardie, Pearce, & Denton, 2016). Americans in particular have been found to pray less, are less likely to believe in God, or to believe the Bible literally (Twenge, Sherman, Exline, & Grubbs, 2016). Furthermore, Millennials have identified themselves as being much more secular than people of previous generations (Twenge et al., 2016).

At the same time as the general decline in religious commitment, there has been a sharper polarization or separation in views in terms of attitudes toward religion (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2014). In other words, the gap between those who are secular and those who are religious has widened. This gap is most evident between believers and non-believers. In addition, this phenomenon is also evident in many churches between progressive and fundamentalist Christians.

Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it has been found that people who consistently read the writings of Ellen White are also more likely to have a personal devotional life and participate in religious activities (Dudley & Cummings, 1982). However, whether a person's attitude towards reading Ellen White was associated with their religious commitment and an orientation towards fundamentalism was not explored. Given the spiritual challenges facing tertiary students and the polarization in faith commitments that is happening currently in many aspects of denominational life, it is pertinent that a study be conducted that assesses tertiary students' attitudes towards reading Ellen White. It should also seek to establish whether such attitudes are associated with the students' self-perceptions of their religious commitment and orientation towards religious fundamentalism.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to examine the relationship that religious commitment and religious fundamentalism had with the attitudes that university students display towards reading Ellen White. For religious educators and youth leaders, understanding this can help them in determining where to focus their ministerial resources. In addition, assessing the association between fundamentalism, commitment, and attitudes towards reading Ellen White can provide evidence of the differences between various population groups commonly found among university students within the denomination.

### **Review of Literature**

#### ***Religious Fundamentalism***

There are several views on religious fundamentalism. It is commonly viewed as having a strong adherence to a set of principles or a discipline. Therefore, religious fundamentalism is strict observance of a

specific religion or faith tradition. Another view of religious fundamentalism sees it as a form of religious aggressiveness nurtured by perceptions of lost religious identity, as well as a desire to provide alternatives to secular practices (Herriot, 2014). Fundamentalists are often resistant to social change, with their religion serving as the philosophical foundation for their obstinacy (Mirola & Monahan, 2016). Among Christians, a fundamentalist is an individual who believes in biblical inerrancy and a literal interpretation of the Bible. Technically, any person who believes in absolute truth that requires protection and believes that they have a special relationship with divinity can be called a religious fundamentalist (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992).

According to Allport and Ross (1967), religious orientation consists of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. In contrast, Liht Conway, Savage, White, and O'Neil, (2011) found three components were characteristic of religious fundamentalism. One significant factor was external versus internal authority, which is similar to Allport and Ross's (1967) view on extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Other factors found by Liht and colleagues (2011) include fixed versus malleable religion, and rejection or affirmation of the world.

Religious fundamentalism appears to be viewed primarily in a negative fashion by those who are non-religious, as well as by those who have a more moderate position towards religion (Herriot, 2014). In education, home schooling has been found to encourage traits of resistance to modern culture, suspicion of institutional authority, and a strong emphasis of family before civic duties (Kunzman, 2010). When looking at parental income and education, there was almost no correlation with religious fundamentalism (Ellis, 2017). Even the role of biblical authority can affect education, as students from congregations that believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible had a decreased likelihood of completing college (Stroope, Franzen, & Uecker, 2015). Several studies indicated that religious fundamentalism was negatively associated with artistic interest and creativity (Warlick, Ingram, Multon, & Vuyk, 2017).

Religious fundamentalists are also often viewed negatively in terms of their views towards homosexuals. Religious fundamentalism is correlated with homophobia (Nagoshi, Cloud, Lindley, Nagoshi, & Lothamer, 2018). Craig, Austin, Rahsidi, and Adams (2017) found that LGBT members faced gender conformity, fear, and isolation as they studied at religious higher education institutions. The positive relationship found between religious fundamentalism and homophobia was stronger in the male than in the female population (Fisher et al., 2017). Therefore, it can be concluded that a less flexible view shown by individuals—in terms of religious practices and beliefs—may contribute to hostility towards the behaviors of those who do not conform to their fundamental beliefs.

Religious fundamentalism has been found to be associated with benevolent sexism, which views men and women as unequal (Haggard, Kaelen, Saroglou, Klein, & Rowatt, 2018). In a sample of people who scored high on religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism, only 40% achieved formal thinking as defined by Piaget. In addition, the same study found that there was a negative association between formal thinking and religious fundamentalism among women (Bridges & Harnish, 2015). What this means is that as a woman's religious fundamentalism grew stronger, she showed a decrease in formal thinking characteristics. As such, gender—along with cognitive development—can be constructs that are related with religious fundamentalism.

Although individuals who do not identify themselves as fundamentalists normally view religious fundamentalism negatively, there are some benefits. For example, religious fundamentalism has been found to encourage psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Carlucci, Tommasi, Balsamo, Furnham, & Saggino, 2015). Religious fundamentalists, with their adherence to absolute truth, have also been found to have a dampening influence on the alcohol consumption of others, indicating that—even if alcohol was seen as socially acceptable—religious fundamentalism helped people to still avoid its use (Scharer, 2017). Lastly, involvement with religious activities, which is sometimes seen as fundamentalist in nature, has been found to be associated with a strong academic ethic, which is crucial for student success (Soto, Tajalli, Pino, & Smith, 2018).

### ***Religious Commitment***

Religious commitment is the interaction between what people think of religion and how they practice it (Davidson & Knudsen, 1977). Among Christians, church attendance, study of scripture, and

enthusiasm for church work have been used as indicators of religious commitment (Ferrari & Guerrero, 2017). Religious commitment has been found to be positively associated with giving meaning to peoples' lives, as well as enhancing life satisfaction (Abeyta & Routledge, 2018; Dar & Iqbal, 2017).

In terms of views towards gender and homosexuality, there is no difference in religious commitment when comparisons are made by gender, but a difference emerges when comparisons are made by income (Schnabel, 2016). The exception for this was among the Jewish population, which often holds strong views on gender roles (Schnabel, Hackett, & McClendon, 2018). People who scored higher on religious commitment also tended to score higher on scales that measured homophobia (Harbaugh & Lindsey, 2015). Among gays, those who showed higher levels of religious commitment returned a negative association with psychological well-being (Meanley, Pingel, & Bauermeister, 2016). The role of homosexuality is of significance because within the Christian church, there is a sharp debate over the role and acceptance of individuals who belong to the LGBT community.

Several studies have found a positive association between health and religious commitment. For example, engaging in volunteer work with one's church has been found to lower one's pulse rate (Krause, Ironson, & Hill, 2017). Landors and Simons (2014) found that people with higher religious commitment were less likely to participate in risky sexual behaviors. Lastly, students with higher religious commitment had different views in terms of the acceptability of suicide when compared to non-religious students (Foo, Alwi, Ismail, Ibrahim, & Osman, 2014).

### ***Reading Attitude***

Reading attitude is the perception a person has about reading. Reading attitude can be separated into three dimensions—general reading for pleasure, academic reading for knowledge, and vocational reading for the application of a skill (Moore & Lemons, 1982). In addition, Isakson, Isakson, Plummer, and Chapman (2016) identified three different components of reading attitude, which are behaviors, expectations for success, and the value students place on academic reading. In terms of the characteristics of readers, Vansteelandt, Mol, Caelen, Landuyt, and Mommaerts (2017) identified three types of readers – namely, personally-oriented readers who read alone, socially-oriented who interact while reading, and low-affect readers who were reluctant to read.

Gender is commonly associated with reading attitudes. Girls generally have better reading skills and a more positive attitude towards reading when compared to boys (Merisuo-Storm & Aerila, 2018). The role of the family and teachers is also important. The socialization effect of parents on their children has been associated with a child's attitude toward reading (Pfof, Schiefer, & Artelt, 2016). Applegate and colleagues (2014) found that some teachers lacked a love of reading, which leads to questions as to whether such teachers can inspire students to love reading.

Another factor affecting reading attitudes is whether the reader is a native speaker of the language or not. Students with a higher second language (L2) proficiency have been found to be more comfortable reading English (Odo, 2017). Extensive reading was found to be beneficial for high proficiency L2 students, but had a negative effect on the reading attitudes of low proficiency L2 students (Lee & Schallert, 2015). This may be because extensive reading is often accomplished alone, which is a situation where the student is not able to solicit help from peers or the teacher.

### ***Ellen White***

Ellen White was one of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. One of her primary roles within the Church was that of a writer. In this function, she wrote over 50,000 pages during her lifetime, and she is one of the most translated authors of all time (White, 2000). For many members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ellen White is viewed as a prophet, and her writings are read for instructional and spiritual growth purposes.

There has been criticism of the role of Ellen White's writings in the Church. Some claim that the interpretation of White's writings is subjective (Dwyer, 2009). Others have said that White's writings downplay the role of the moral law (Davies, 2011). Still, others have made claims that the views set forth by

Ellen White have limited theological development in the Church (Quartey, 2018). Currently, there are questions about social justice and the role of women, with support on both sides drawing on ideas presented originally by Ellen White (Baker, 2018). When controversial issues arise, the divide within the Church often is along progressive and fundamentalist lines (Corson, 2011).

The role of Ellen White in formation of doctrine has been one of confusion for many years. Results from a denominational-wide study found that many Adventists do not understand the source of doctrine for their Church. Yet despite this confusion, there was still agreement that the majority of members at the time of the survey agreed that God spoke through Ellen White during her ministry (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist, 1993).

In a study by Dudley and Cummings (1982), several strong differences were noted between those who read Ellen White's writings and those who did not. For example, 82% of people who read Ellen White also observed a daily devotional period, while only 47% of those who did not read Ellen White followed such a practice. About 85% of Ellen White readers reported that they experienced an intimate relationship with Jesus, versus 59% for those who did not read Ellen White. This study was conducted over 35 years ago. As such, it is possible these numbers have changed in the general population and also among young adults at university.

This review of literature has highlighted several ideas worthy of exploration. First, fundamentalists tend to be more rigid in their interpretation of society. Therefore, is it possible that, among university students who perceived themselves as fundamentalist, there is a more positive view of reading of Ellen White and/or a stronger outward commitment to religion? Second, religious commitment is generally linked with more outward displays of religion. The question is whether religious commitment within the Seventh-day Adventist church is linked with extensive reading of Ellen White.

In order to understand these issues better, the following research questions are explored in this study.

1. What are the participants' perception of their religious commitment, their degree of religious fundamentalism, and attitudes towards reading Ellen White?
2. Do factors such as religious fundamentalism, religious commitment, gender, and academic study major correlate with attitudes towards reading Ellen White?

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The sample of this study was taken from an Adventist university located in Thailand. A total of 225 respondents participated, who were required to participate in worship activities such as chapel attendance and morning/evening worship, as well as to enroll in courses that discuss Christian theology. Stratified sampling was employed, with gender as the criterion. The demographics of the study were as follows: 54% of the respondents were male and 46% were female. Sorted by class level, 20% were Seniors; Juniors were 31% of the sample, followed by Sophomores at 15%, and lastly Freshmen at 34%. Categorized by study major, 24% were Business majors, 16% Education, 40% English, 14% Religion, and 6% were science majors. At the time of this study, 55% of the student population was Seventh-day Adventist, 34% was Buddhist, and the remaining 11% was of some other faith tradition.

### **Research Design**

A cross-sectional survey was used. Data were collected by the researcher at the university. The survey was divided into two parts. Part one addressed demographic information, which included gender, class level, and study major. Part two contained the survey items that addressed religious fundamentalism, religious commitment, and attitudes towards reading Ellen White. All variables in part two were measured with a five-point Likert scale, with 1 = "Strongly Disagree", 2 = "Disagree", 3 = "Neutral", 4 = "Agree", and 5 = "Strongly Agree."

### **Religious Fundamentalism**

The religious fundamentalism scale was adopted from Liht and colleagues (2011). Sample items included “Women should be able to occupy any leadership position in my religious organization” and “It is important to distance oneself from movies, radio, and TV.” The Cronbach alpha for the 15-item scale was .75. All items on the scale were used in this study.

#### *Religious Commitment*

The religious commitment scale was adopted from Worthington and colleagues (2003). Sample items included “Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life” and “I enjoy working in the activities of my religious affiliation.” The Cronbach alpha for the 10-item scale was .91, and all items on the scale were used in this study.

#### *Attitudes towards Reading Ellen White*

The attitudes towards reading Ellen White scale was modified from Brooks (1996). The statements were modified in a way that they addressed perceptions of reading specifically Ellen White books rather than reading books in general. Sample items include “Reading Ellen White makes me feel good” and “I would rather read an Ellen White book than watch TV.” The Cronbach alpha for the 16-item scale was .91, and all items on the scale were used in this study.

#### **Data Analysis**

Analysis included the calculation of descriptive statistics. Multiple regression was used to explain the variance of attitudes towards reading Ellen White, with the original model having the predictor variables of religious fundamentalism, religious commitment, gender, class level, and study major.

#### **Results**

Descriptive statistics and correlations for each variable are given in Table 1, and Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for select individual sample statements for each variable from among the 41 total items.

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations with Confidence Intervals

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Religious Fundamentalism	3.26 [3.21-3.32]	0.42		
2. Religious Commitment	3.45 [3.35-3.54]	0.72	.59** [.51, .67]	
3. Reading Ellen White	2.97 [2.87-3.07]	0.76	.46** [.36, .55]	.58** [.49, .65]

*Note.* *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in square brackets indicate the 95% confidence interval for each correlation. \*\*indicates  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2.** Means and Standard Deviations for Selected Survey Items

Statement	Mean	<i>SD</i>	95%CI
<b>Religious Fundamentalism</b>			
Women should be able to occupy any leadership position in my religious organization.	2.62	0.96	2.49-2.75
Human reason, and not religious belief, is the best guiding light for human action.	3.21	1.12	3.06-3.36
<b>Religious Commitment</b>			

Statement	Mean	SD	95%CI
I enjoy spend time with others of my religious affiliation.	3.53	1.02	3.40-3.67
I spend time trying to grow in understanding my faith.	3.52	1.02	3.39-3.65
<b>Reading Ellen White</b>			
Reading EGW is boring.	3.48	1.08	3.34-3.62
Reading EGW books makes me feel good.	3.29	1.04	3.16-3.43

The relationships among the variables of this study are moderately strong, yet there is no indication of collinearity. The respondents were primarily neutral towards the statements of all three variables in this study. The only exception was the respondents' position towards women leadership, which indicated that they disagreed with the idea of allowing women to serve in all leadership positions within their religious organization.

Multiple regression analysis was employed to explain the variance of attitudes towards reading Ellen White based on the independent variables of religious fundamentalism, religious commitment, gender, major, and class level.  $R$ -squared ( $R^2$ ) is a statistical measure of the proportion of variance for a dependent variable that is explained by an independent variable in a regression model; scores range from 0 to 1. The beta weight ( $\beta$ ) measures the strength of the relationship of an independent variable while controlling for the influence of other dependent variables. The resulting regression model indicated that the five independent variables explained 43% of the variance ( $R^2 = .43$ ,  $F(10,208) = 15.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2_{adjusted} = .40$ ). It was found that religious fundamentalism significantly explained the variance of attitudes towards reading Ellen White ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as did religious commitment ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Gender ( $\beta = -.17$ ,  $p < .1$ ) and study major (English  $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ , Religion  $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, class level was not a significant explanatory variable of attitudes towards reading Ellen White. Table 3 details the regression results. The results in brackets are the 95% confidence intervals for the intercepts, independent variables, and  $r^2$ .

**Table 3.** Regression Coefficient Results

Feature	Estimate ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	$t$	$p$ -value
(Intercept)	-0.01 [-0.68, 0.66]	0.34	-0.03	.97
Religious Fundamentalism	0.38 [0.16, 0.61]	0.12	3.37	< .01
Religious Commitment	0.46 [0.31, 0.60]	0.07	6.50	< .01
Gender: Male	-0.17 [-0.34, 0.00]	0.09	-1.95	< .05
Major: Education	0.09 [-0.16, 0.35]	0.13	0.71	.47
Major: English	0.24 [0.03, 0.45]	0.11	2.30	< .05
Major: Religion	0.33 [0.05, 0.61]	0.14	2.33	< .05
Major: Science	0.13 [-0.22, 0.50]	0.19	0.74	.46
Class Level: Sophomore	0.14 [-0.11, 0.31]	0.13	-0.23	.26
Class Level: Junior	-0.02 [-0.23, 0.18]	0.11	0.73	.82
Class Level: Senior	0.08 [-0.14, 0.31]	0.12	1.13	.46

## Discussion and Conclusions

There were several important findings in this study. First, religious fundamentalism and religious commitment are strong explanatory variables of attitudes towards reading Ellen White among university age students when controlling for gender, study major and class level. When an individual is more committed to their religion, there is an association with a more positive view of reading the writings of Ellen White. This positive association between religious commitment and attitudes towards reading Ellen White is held regardless of whether the person held a progressive or fundamentalist view of their religion. What people are committed to may have different philosophical foundations, but the dedication can be similar. This supports the idea that a positive attitude towards reading Ellen White can be found in many sectors of Adventism, yet differences arise regarding the interpretation of her writings (Dwyer, 2009). In general, the more committed a person is, the more positive is their view of reading the writings of Ellen White.

However, a contrasting second finding was that people who had a more fundamentalist view of their religion also had a stronger positive view of reading Ellen White's writings. This means that when students indicated greater agreement with conservative values and an unchanging view about the role of religion, this was linked with a stronger appreciation for reading Ellen White. Given the patriarchal context of the study in that Asian societies often exhibit strong male leadership roles, it is reasonable to expect that conservative views support and lead to appreciation of the unchanging nature of Ellen White's writings (Corson, 2011). Therefore, commitment makes a difference but – even then – those who indicate a more conservative viewpoint showed a stronger association with positive attitudes towards reading Ellen White.

A third major finding was that differences by gender were observed. Women had a more positive view of reading Ellen White than men. Other studies have shown that females generally have a more positive attitude towards reading when compared to males (Merisuo-Storm & Aerila, 2018). Therefore, the results in this study may be an indication of enjoyment of reading in general, rather than anything specific to reading Ellen White.

Finally, differences were observed based on the academic major. Religion majors were found to have a positive association with attitudes towards reading Ellen White. However, there is a tremendous amount of social pressure connected with pastoral work (Drumm et al., 2017). Therefore, the students may have chosen to give the socially acceptable answer rather than what they really thought, given the profession for which they were training.

## Recommendations

The findings of this study lead to the following recommendations. Developing ways to strengthen commitment can help students to be more diligent in reading about their faith as found in the writings of Ellen White. This means that schools should consider adopting strategies to strengthen commitment, through Church attendance, study of scripture, and service (Ferrari & Guerrero, 2017).

A second recommendation is that there should be greater exposure among young adults to the writings of Ellen White within Adventist tertiary education. Encouraging reading alone and together are additional strategies (Vansteelandt et al., 2017). Through reading these writings, students can develop an understanding and appreciation for what she wrote regardless of their religious position as progressives or conservatives. General exposure is at least one way in which students can better understand the position the Church takes towards various issues.

For further studies, it would be beneficial to explore the differences in gender in terms of not only readings attitudes towards Ellen White, but also other concepts such as fundamentalism and commitment. Conducting a similar study that does not focus only on university students – but the general church population – would serve as a way to assess the larger church population's perception of the variables investigated in this study. In addition, understanding factors that contribute to fundamentalism would provide insights into what may be precursors to this viewpoint.

## Limitations

This was a correlation study, and as such cannot imply causation. The variables involved are linked, but what causes this is still unexplained. In addition, this study looked at participants' perception of their behavior and not their actual behavior. This means that the study examined what people think, rather than what they do. This study did not assess how often individuals read the writings of Ellen White. Finally, the context of this study was Southeast Asia, and generalization should be limited to a similar setting.

## Conclusion

This study explained in parts how religious commitment and fundamentalism are linked with the attitudes of tertiary students towards reading Ellen White. The results indicated that religious commitment and fundamentalism explain a significant portion of the variance of attitudes towards reading Ellen White. Therefore, among young adults undertaking tertiary study, their commitment and level of fundamentalism may be appropriate predictors of their attitude towards reading Ellen White.

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