RURAL AMERICA AND RELIGIOUS CAPITAL: AN EXPLORATION OF THE 
REALATIONSHIP BETWEEN RURALITY AND RELIGION IN THE US 

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INTRODUCTION

This project is a synthesis of my personal and academic interests in both religion and journalism, and it focuses geographically on Appalachian Ohio. As modern society continually develops and evolves, the religious landscape in America is also changing. My professional project examines these dynamics through the lens of members of four rural communities in Southeast Ohio where religion is an integral part of their everyday life. I sought to better understand the roles of organized religion in these communities, specifically how it can impact the lives of people, religious and non-religious, living in these areas.

To do this, I attended services at congregations in McConnelsville, Pomeroy, McArthur and Logan – four communities in the Southeast Ohio area that are considered predominantly rural by the US Census Bureau. After attending these services, I conducted in depth interviews with members of these congregations that explored both rural living and the influence of religion on these people’s lives. By attending services prior to my interviews, and then conducting these interviews within the communities I studied, I was able to gain a better perspective and develop a framework of understanding to position their responses both about the areas they live and the places of worship they attend.

I wanted to explore the intersection of religion in modern American culture specifically as it relates to rural communities to generate insights about both religion and rural communities in America. Although stereotypes about both rural Americans and devout religious Americans are invariably present in public opinion, given the much-noted divisiveness of the public dialogue about social and economic issues leading up to
the 2016 presidential election, this topic seems pertinent. As such, many of these stereotypes and binary generalizations can negatively contribute to a growing divide in America between religious and nonreligious groups.

By understanding these community members and how their religious beliefs affect and inform their lives, I hope to contribute to a more effective dialogue between religious and nonreligious Americans. My goal is to portray these communities, their places of worship and the people in the congregations in a fair, honest and informed way that will ultimately allow outsiders to this demographic an authentic glimpse in. As former lawyer, movie critic and mayor of New York City Ed Koch noted in response to the racially motivated Howard Beach assaults, “Stereotypes lose their power when the world is found to be more complex than the stereotype would suggest. When we learn that individuals do not fit the group stereotype, then it begins to fall apart” (Koch, 2010).

The following literature review will cover a range of topics pertinent to understanding my project, starting on a national and moving to a local level. The sections are as follows: Defining Rural Communities in America, Rural Communities in Southeastern Ohio, The Religious Landscape in Modern America, The Public Opinion on Religion, Ohio’s Religious Landscape, Religion and Personal Well-Being and The Future of Religion in America. These sections are also followed by sections about the ethical implications of my project and personal reflection of how the project was created and what the process was like.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As someone who currently lives in an urban community and identifies as nonreligious, it was important for me to understand both rural America and religious
America. To supplement my interviews and experiences within these communities, I conducted research on American Christianity and rural communities in the US. This literature review examines both topics and how they intersect, and informed what was covered in my final journalistic pieces.

**Defining Rural Communities in America**

For the purposes of this project, I used a working definition of “rural” based on the US Census Bureau definition, which classifies rural areas as areas not urban – there are two types of urban classifications: urban areas of 50,000 or more people and urban clusters of at least 2,500 and less than 50,000. By this measure, rural areas are all areas that fall outside of this classification; in 2010, this was only 19.3 percent of the US population (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016, p. 1).

*Rural Classifications Outside America*

While the above classification is the most appropriate for a project that explores rurality in America because it reflects the official opinion of the US Census Bureau, it is important to consider other classifications when trying to conceptually understand what rural means. The example that I will use to demonstrate what another classification looks like is the urban and rural typology used by the European Commission, which divides these areas into three sections versus the two established by the US Census Bureau (Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2016). These three sections are predominantly rural, intermediate and predominantly urban (Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2016). This system of classification was adopted in response to classifications from the two part system that did not truthfully identify the characteristics of certain areas – population density was a key factor in the previously used system, which would result in certain areas with small
overall populations to be classified as urban because of a high density and areas with large overall populations to be classified as rural because of a low density (Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2016). This newly implemented system makes classifications based on both a density threshold and a size threshold, which the European Union hopes will solve the classification’s previous constraints¹ (Eurostat: Statistics Explained, 2016). It is possible to argue that this classification is more thorough because it includes more groups and because it addresses problems that the US Census Bureau classification also suffers from, like creating false urban areas. A relevant example for this would be Athens, Ohio – according to the US Census Bureau, this area is defined as an urban cluster, likely largely in part to the population influx of university students and faculty in the Athens area. Despite this classification, Athens is in virtually all other ways very much rural.

This section is in no way intended to discredit the US Census Bureau’s method of classification that is utilized throughout this project – its purpose is to create a more informed context to understand both what rural means and how different classifications may work in different ways in the interest of transparency regarding some of the inevitable flaws that may or may not be present in the system I used.

In addition to population, one must consider both social and economic factors. In general, rural areas have a less diverse ethnic breakdown than urban areas – 87 percent of the population in rural classified areas is white and non-Hispanic (Housing Assistance Council, 2008, p.16). The median income also tends to be lower in rural areas than in

¹ I purposefully give a very basic definition and overview of how this system works because it is being presented here only to serve as a reference for the other classifications that exist. In the case of this system, defining these different areas is dependent on the use of grid cells of neighboring geographic locations. To be classified as urban, a population density threshold of 300 people per kilometer is then applied to 1-
urban areas, usually due to a lack of higher paying, more advanced jobs (Housing Assistance Council, 2008).

Despite indicators that rural Americans may face certain socioeconomic disadvantages, the public’s general perception of rural life in American society is a positive one; many Americans associate ideas of strong morality and traditional values with rural living in a positive way (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). This comes as a contrast to the other general perception of rural life as “backwards and childlike” (FrameWorks Institute, 2003, p. 9). These differing opinions about the rural way of life illustrate the dichotomy within public opinion – people think of beauty, serenity, close families and a wholesome lifestyle when they think of rural America, but they also think of poverty, stunted growth, a lack of diversity and close-minded, traditional ideology (FrameWorks Institute, 2003). The existence of these contrasting opinions highlights why this project is socially relevant today.

The definition of rural I use is also largely informed by the identity that members of these communities create for themselves. Generally, members of these communities believe that rural is characterized as a different way of life than suburban or urban living – these characteristics can most easily be classified as “different values, different environment and different atmosphere” (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002, p. 1).

Different Values

Members of these rural communities perceive their general upbringing as being different from that offered to members of contemporary urban life, especially when it comes to the concept of traditional American values (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Much of this value system is exemplified in the creation of social circles within these
rural communities. Community members identify that they have close relationships with neighbors because the population is so low – it necessitates they forge ties with virtually everyone nearby simply because of proximity and population scarcity, which they believe would not be the case in an urban setting. Additionally, the choices for social outings in rural communities are often limited to one movie theater or restaurant, for example, in contrast to the plethora of social choices in an urban setting. Because of this, these community members believe that their children are raised to be active within their social circles and accustomed to traditional values simply because certain elements of modernity are absent from their everyday lives. Relatedly, members of rural communities see their social connections as more meaningful and strong than those forged in an urban setting (FrameWorks Institute, 2003). Seventy five percent of rural community members that participated in a survey by the W.K. Kellogg foundation said that “commitment to community” characterizes rural areas more than cities (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002, p. 5). These community ties become such an integral part of everyday life because they keep rural Americans from feeling isolated by their surroundings. Social circles formed in this way also allow rural communities to function smoothly with less manpower; a woman in Albuquerque described this by saying, “I think the people in rural areas might feel that they need to know their neighbors and they need to get along with them because they will have a need for each other” (FrameWorks Institute, 2003, p. 6).

**Defining ‘traditional values’**

Outlining a definition for the ‘traditional values’ that are stereotypically associated with life in rural America is important both for understanding the previous section and further developing a contextual framework to understand the public
perception of rural life in the US. A 2003 study by the FrameWorks Institute explored perceptions and misperceptions about rural America through qualitative research, and largely found that these values were connected to social relationships, especially within families. Respondents said that they believed that these values included the importance of keeping family members close, both geographically and socially, and a willingness to participate in the community that is not seen in other areas. This is likely a result of the isolated geographic location of most rural American communities – it becomes more important for members of rural communities to develop these close ties and “stick together” than it would for their urban counterparts in order to avoid feelings of isolation (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002, p. 6). Relatedly, the concepts of hard work and self-sufficiency are two of the most important values built into this framework. Not only do these relate to the idea of the rural “communal individual” (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002, p. 5) by providing an explanation for why members of these small communities may be more willing to help neighbors or family members than their urban peers, but they also help to illustrate the general public’s view of the economic situations in rural areas. Fifty three percent of respondents in a 2003 W.K. Kellogg foundation study (p. 5) about perceptions of rural America reported that they believe rural residents are more hardworking than Americans living in cities or suburbs; it follows that this is likely a result of the fact that these rural Americans have to work harder for the same amount of wealth that may be seemingly more easily accessible to city dwellers because of the differences in economic focus, like agrarian economies or service based economies versus financial economies. In addition to these values of closeness, both to family and community, and a strong work ethic, the last traditional value that is generally associated
with rural America is a tie to religious faith. Sociological debate on the topic of modernization’s influence on cultural changes, such as these values described, remains an active conversation. A study of these differing theories – one perspective that says that modernization will bring about large scale cultural changes in the communities it affects versus the conflicting thoughts of other sociologists who believe that these cultural properties are more enduring and will not be affected by modernization in such a pervasive way – was published in the American Sociological Review in 2000. The study outlines a difference in values for the purpose of their surveys, and it is likely unsurprising that the counterpart to “traditional” values is “secular-rational” values, and more than half of the traditional values presented are related to religion (p. 24). For example, the introduction to the survey reads, “Traditional values emphasize the following: God is very important in the respondent’s life” (Ingleheart & Baker, 2000, p. 24). While it would be difficult to assert with absolute certainty what the definition of traditional values are in general, for the purpose of this project and general exploration into the landscape of rural America, these three prove to be the most prominent and relevant.

Different Environment

While agriculture is no longer the economic driver of rural areas – farming makes up less than 12 percent of employment in these areas – a large part of the positive identity rural communities create comes from their scenic country settings (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002). This difference in environment is related to both physical location and the sense of peace that many community members feel comes with being part of a small town. While some view a lack of crowded businesses and traffic as a disadvantage,
members of these communities appreciate the slower pace, and choose to live in rural settings because of it (FrameWorks Institute, 2003). This also contributes to this sense of a community with a better-developed value system – because there are not as many businesses, strangers or traffic in rural communities, the general perception of community members is that there is less crime and danger to worry about than in a busier urban setting.

**Different Atmosphere**

Given the vast difference in environment and values ascribes to rural communities, these localities have a completely different way of life than urban areas. Rural respondents see the relatively uncomplicated construction of their communities as an escape from a modern society that is increasingly focused on material goods. Members of these rural communities, then, view their setting as a more positive environment to raise children. Despite the fact that raising a family in a rural community may mean a higher likelihood of living in poverty, “What they lose in wealth, these respondents feel they gain in the slower pace of life, the spiritual satisfaction, and the simplicity of rural life” (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002, p. 4). These rural community members see the construction of their identity as a choice for the complete departure from the sometimes-exaggerated picture of a modern urban, fast paced, career driven lifestyle (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002).

**Rural Communities in Southeastern Ohio**

These definitions of rural and the construction of rural identity are valuable for understanding what rural means as a general term, and also helped inform my decision for where to focus my research. However, my professional project is more focused on
these specific examples of rural communities than a general understanding of the concept.

My location at the time of this project was Athens, Ohio, a small town in Southeastern Ohio known for Ohio University. Because of the nature of the transplanted and dynamic student body population in Athens County because of the university, it was not used in my project. Instead, I looked at the eight counties that directly border Athens County and chose the four least populated: Morgan County, Meigs County, Vinton County and Hocking County. In order to find congregations to work with in each county, I calculated the places of worship in each county seat, which can be seen in the table below².

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION</th>
<th>Morgan County (McConnelsville)</th>
<th>Meigs County (Pomeroy)</th>
<th>Vinton County (McArthur)</th>
<th>Hocking County (Logan)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian (no other denomination specifically stated)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of the Nazarene</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-Day Adventist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² I created this table to the best of my ability as the culmination of many hours of research into these locations and the areas of worship within them. As such, they are not from any previously compiled list nor do they reflect any of the location’s or places of worship’s official opinions and may be subject to a certain margin of human error on my part.
I chose to study Christian places of worship specifically because I felt they best represented the population I was studying, and because each county had a place of worship I knew I could both attend and secure an interviewee. I also wanted to be careful not to focus on specific religious sects, like Pentecostal churches, for example, that could possibly engage some of the negative stereotypes already perpetuated about rural religious worship.

The US Census Bureau categorizes counties as ‘mostly urban’ if they are less than 50 percent rural, ‘mostly rural’ if they are 50 to 99.9 percent rural and ‘completely rural’ if they are 100 percent rural. The following chart displays the populations of the counties I studied and the specific locations of congregations I visited, as well as the percent rural for each of the counties. These numbers reflect the most recent population estimates from the US Census Bureau.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>COUNTY POPULATION</th>
<th>CHURCH LOCATION</th>
<th>POPULATION OF CHURCH LOCATION</th>
<th>PERCENT RURAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>14,777</td>
<td>McConnelsville</td>
<td>1,789</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meigs</td>
<td>23,257</td>
<td>Pomeroy</td>
<td>1,821</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinton</td>
<td>13,048</td>
<td>McArthur</td>
<td>1,664</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hocking</td>
<td>28,491</td>
<td>Logan</td>
<td>7,185</td>
<td>70.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These areas are predominantly rural, and therefore serve as an effective sample to understand the rural lifestyle in America. Each of these localities has current ties to its original economic and historic roots, which lend context to its current population and social situation. All of the areas studied in this project have poverty rates that are higher
than the national average, but they have not always been this way. Historically, they were the center of many extractive industries, in particular coal, salt and iron ore, as well as timber. It is important to note that each of these areas has historically developed with churches at the center of the community – each of these had more churches than newspapers, banks and sometimes, businesses. Throughout sometimes-long periods of economic strife, there has never been a shortage of places of worship. This obviously demonstrates the historic importance of religion in these rural areas, and helps to explain how these traditions have become so integrated into the everyday life of members of these communities.

- McConnelsville: Unlike many rural counties in Southeastern Ohio, Morgan County’s McConnelsville never had an economy dependent on mining. Instead, the workforce was historically divided between businesses that provided services to farmers in the surrounding area, reflective of a more traditionally rural agrarian economy. By 1886, almost 70 years after the area was first settled, residents could attend one of eight churches, compared to two newspapers and one bank (Ohio History Connection, n.d.). McConnelsville’s estimated population in 2014 was 1,797 residents, compared to its most populous point in 1960 with 2,257 residents (population.us, 2016).

- Pomeroy: Contrary to McConnelsville, Meigs County’s Pomeroy initially developed with an economy that was heavily reliant on the mining industry. Its location also made it an important harbor and loading station for barges, as some of the first coal barges to sail the Ohio River were loaded there. As salt and coal mining both began to deteriorate in the twentieth century, so did Pomeroy’s
economy. It is now one of Ohio’s most impoverished counties. Historically, churches have also been a central feature of Pomeroy – in 1846, there were four churches in comparison to the ten stores in the community. By the 1880s, there were two of everything – factories, newspapers and banks – in contrast to seventeen churches (Ohio History Connection, n.d.). Pomeroy’s 2014 population of 1,827 residents is a far cry from the 6,480 residents that lived in the area in 1860, likely largely a result of Pomeroy’s status as a true coal mining town at the time when the industry was booming (population.us, 2016).

• McArthur: As the county seat of Vinton County, McArthur is the largest community in Vinton, despite its still small population. The community was founded in 1815, and the original economy was dependent on both coal and iron in the surrounding area – like much of Southeastern Ohio – and the railroad that ran centrally through the community. In 1888, McArthur had four churches, which meant that there were more religious institutions in the towns than banks or newspapers (Ohio History Connection, n.d.). McArthur’s population was estimated at 1,687 in 2014, only a few hundred residents less than the village’s population at its peak in 1980 with 1,912 residents (population.us, 2016). The population has been declining each decade since 1980 (population.us, 2016).

• Logan: Of the four, Hocking County’s Logan is the largest, and also never had an economy reliant on the coal mining that once made the area so wealthy. Instead, Logan’s economy was historically dependent on the railroad that ran through the town, as well as other manufacturing jobs. Today, the economy heavily relies on Logan’s status as a tourist destination in the Hocking Hills. In 1880, six churches
outnumbered the three newspapers and two banks in the community (Ohio History Connection, n.d.). The difference in historic and modern population in Hocking County is the least significant of the four, which is unsurprising considering it is the largest of the four in general, and was the least reliant on the industry whose failure was largely responsible for the large-scale population loss in all these areas. Logan’s population in 2014 was 7,154 residents – this is Logan’s most populous year so far, and the trend will seemingly continue, as Logan has been growing steadily since 1970 (population.us, 2016).

Understanding the historical context for the development of each of these communities is important when trying to analyze their modern social structure because these origins give insight into the values of the community and the economic structure, which does much to contribute to a place’s social situation. The comparison in current population for each county and maximum point and year serve to provide even more context to the fact that these areas have generally lost residents in large numbers. Once again, it is valuable to note the number of churches has consistently outnumbered banks, businesses, newspapers and grocery stores in each of these communities, as it indicated the physical structure’s prominence within the civic landscape and cultural sense of place.

**The Religious Landscape in Modern America**

Understanding these particular rural communities and more broadly, the daily reality of life in rural America in 2017 is certainly at the core of this project. However, it is equally important to consider what religion looks like in modern America today.
Perhaps the most notable characteristic of the country’s shifting religious landscape is the decline of the Christian population – between 2007 and 2014 the Christian branch of the population decreased from 78.4 percent to 70.6 percent, largely due to a decline of Protestant and Catholic groups (Pew Research Center, May 2015). To understand this percentage in context, there were 227 million adults in the US in 2007, and roughly 178 million of them identified as Christian. Between 2007 and 2014, the population grew to nearly 245 million, while the Christian share of the population declined to around 173 million (Pew Research Center, May 2015).

Relatedly, the number of Americans who do not associate with a religious group or identify as atheist or agnostic is experiencing “rapid growth,” in the same seven years the number has increased from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent (Pew Research Center, Nov. 2015). In an annual Gallup poll of religious preference, ‘none’ is the only number that has increased consistently since 2011 (Gallup, 2016).

In addition to growth in the unaffiliated group, other non-Christian faiths are growing, although at a slower rate. This includes the Muslim population, which grew 0.5 percent between 2007 and 2014, a 0.3 percent increase for the Hindu population and a 0.3 percent increase in the ‘other faiths’ group, which includes “Unitarians, New Age religions, Native American religions, and a number of non-Christian faiths” (Pew Research Center, May 2015). Understanding this growth is important to understanding the religious landscape – while Americans are generally becoming less religious under a specific definition that focuses on Christian faith in the US, these other faiths do continue to grow, and remaining members of the Christian faith continue to be as devout as they have been historically (Pew Research Center, Nov. 2015). While the number of
respondents that said religion is ‘not very important’ to their own life increased by 3 percent from 2015 to 2016, the number who said it was ‘very important’ also increased from 52 to 53 percent (Gallup, 2016).

Also of note is American Christians becoming a more racial and ethnically diverse group, mirroring changes to the US population as a whole (Pew Research Center, May 2015)\(^3\). Growth in the denomination as follows: 29 to 34 percent for Christian, 26 to 31 percent for Protestant, 19 to 24 percent for Evangelical Protestant tradition, 9 to 14 percent for mainline Protestant tradition, 35 to 41 percent for Catholic, 13 to 19 percent for Orthodox Christian, 14 to 15 percent for Mormon, 52 to 64 percent for Jehovah’s Witness and 23 to 353 percent for Other Christian. In the context of this study, non-white included “African Americans, Asian Americans, those of other races, those of mixed race, and Hispanics” (Pew Research Center, May 2015).

A final noteworthy finding is age and the generational differences in religious belief. Groups within non-Christian faith – Pew categorizes Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu faiths in this category – and unaffiliated – this includes Atheist, Agnostic and those who answered that they are affiliated with ‘Nothing in Particular’ - are further segmented into those who find religion to be important and not important. Both have increased from 2007 and 2014, and are “relatively young and getting younger” (Pew Research Center, May 2015). The median age group for all of these non-Christian and unaffiliated faiths is in the 30s except for Jewish. In contrast, the lowest median age groups for any of the Christian faiths – the ten groups mentioned in the previous paragraph – is 40 (Pew Research Center, May 2015). This difference shows that the

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\(^3\) Of the ten Christian religious groups represented in Pew’s study, the only group without an increase in non-white members was ‘Historically black Protestant tradition,’ which remained at 98 percent non-white.
groups that are growing are thriving from the support of the younger generations as Millennials begin to move into adulthood. Pew’s study defines five different generational groups: Greatest generation, born before 1928, Silent generation, born between 1928 and 1945, Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, and Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996. Of the Millennial group, 56 percent identified as Christian in 2014, compared to 70 percent of Generation X, 78 percent of Baby Boomers, 85 percent of the Silent generation and 86 percent of the Greatest generation (Pew Research Center, May 2015). Interestingly, the study found that while these older generations do remain predominantly Christian, they are also increasingly becoming less religious. Each of the percentages of these older generations that do identify as Christian is lower than the 2007 numbers, and the percentages of these older groups identifying as unaffiliated is higher in all categories in 2014 than it was in 2007 (Pew Research Center, May 2015).

The Public Opinion on Religion

The previous information helps establish a snapshot of recent religious trends in America, but this information demands the context of the national public opinion on religion.

Despite the fact that Christian affiliation is on decline in America, the general public opinion about various religious groups is an increasingly positive one (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017). This gain could be related to the Millennial transition to adulthood, whereby younger adults rated all of the groups generally higher than older respondents did. Still, when Americans were asked to apply a thermometric temperature
scale to attributed warmth of Jews, Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Evangelical Christians, Buddhist, Hindus, Mormons, Atheists and Muslims, each group was rated warmer in January 2017 than in June 2014, with one exception – Evangelical Christians remained at a ‘middle’ rating of 61 degrees (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017).

\[4\] Warmth in this case is a reflection of how positive or negative respondents’ feelings about each group are – the warmer they are rated, the more positively respondents feel about them as a specific section of society. The colder they are, the more negative respondents feel. In the case of this study, respondents responded on what Pew called a “feelings thermometer,” which is shown above.
The ratings system divided opinion into three groups based on level of warmth: ‘warmest’ is those rated at 67 degrees or above, ‘middle’ is the range between 34 and 66 degrees and the ‘coldest’ group is anything below 33 degrees. No religious groups fell into the coldest rating either year. Muslims, Atheists and Hindus saw the biggest spike in temperature, rising from 40 to 48 degrees, 41 to 50 and 50 to 58 respectively. The changes in the rest of the groups are as follows: Mormons rose from 48 to 54, Buddhists from 53 to 60, Catholics 62 to 66 and Jews from 63 to 67. A new group was introduced into the survey in 2017: Mainline Protestants, who appeared on the thermometer at a warm 65 degrees (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017).

Such ratings reflect many of the characteristics previously described in the section detailing the changing religious landscape in America. They are also the mean ratings of all respondents in the survey, so while they do reflect general public opinion, some of the more complex elements that could help explain why certain ratings can only be reflected in a more specific breakdown of how each group was rated. For example, Jews had the highest mean thermometer rating at 67 degrees – this is largely because less than ten percent of respondents rated them in the coldest temperature group. Fifty percent of Americans rated them in the warmest group and 40 percent rated them in the middle. These middle ratings came from Americans in the 18 to 29 and 30 to 49 age groups, while the 50 to 64 and 65 plus age group both rated Jews in the warmest category (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017). This general division is somewhat true for many of the groups’ ratings. In the case of some of the highest-ranking groups, it is important to note that groups rank the group they belong to the highest, and these larger groups make up a larger subset of the American population. Catholics are rated at 66 degrees, but they also
make up about 20 percent of the US adult population, meaning that they account for a larger part of the respondents of the survey (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017). The ratings also varied somewhat significantly based on the age group of respondents. If the 18 to 29 year old age group had been the only one surveyed, it is likely all groups would have been ranked relatively neutral - the range between the lowest and highest temperature is only eight degrees. The differences in ratings become increasingly widespread as the age ranges increase; for the 65 plus group, the bottom two are ranked at 44 degrees while the highest is 75, a 31-degree difference (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017).

Political ideology is certainly another complex factor that helps to shape the public opinion on religion, and although both Democrats and Republicans are both expressing generally higher views toward a large range of groups, certain differences may be significant in the context of party lines. For example, Republicans rate Atheists and Muslims significantly lower than Democrats, and significantly lower than any of the other groups. Democratic ratings look similar to the ratings of the 18 to 29 year old age group, and do not vary as much as Republican ratings (Pew Research Center, Feb. 2017). Even so, these general warmer feelings and increasingly positive perception of virtually all religious groups was expressed across all of different factors; higher ratings came from all of the groups, both political parties, both genders and all age ranges.

This uptrend in the American public’s perception of religion might seem surprising in the context of religion’s affiliation downtrend. It follows that people are not leaving religion behind because of a negative opinion of these religious groups. Instead, religious disillusion is often related to either a basic change in beliefs or a disapproval of
the treatment of certain groups by organized religion (Jones, Cox, Cooper, & Lienesch, 2016, p. 6). Sixty percent of Americans who left behind their childhood religion said they did so out of a lack of belief religion (Jones, Cox, Cooper, & Lienesch, 2016, p. 6). Thirty two percent cited a lack of a religion-focused family in childhood, and 29 percent say they left because of their church’s negative treatment of the increasingly visible and socially accepted LGBT community (Jones, Cox, Cooper, & Lienesch, 2016, p. 6). More than half these respondents left their religion behind before they even turned 18 (Jones, Cox, Cooper, & Lienesch, 2016, p. 6).

As previously mentioned and illustrated above, a lack of religious affiliation does not equal a negative perception of religious groups. There are infinite reasons why the emerging generations in modern society have trended downward in religion’s prominence, but negative perceptions do not account for much of the change. Indeed, the group that is making the biggest strides and becoming a catalyst for many of the biggest changes in this religious landscape is the same group that rated every other group generally positively.

**Ohio’s Religious Landscape**

This overview of contemporary religion in the US gives a contextual framework for the findings in my project, but given my specific focus on the areas in rural Ohio, locating Ohio’s individual religious landscape within our nation’s geographic regions is necessary.

Generally, the South remains the most religious region in the US (Pew Research Center, 2017). Even so, the South did see a rise in the religiously unaffiliated population
between 2017 and 2014, as did the North, Northeast and West\(^5\) (Pew Research Center, 2017). Ohio falls in this Midwest region, where 73 percent of adults identified as
unaffiliated population in the Midwest region is the second lowest, three points higher
than the South’s 19 percent (Pew Research Center, 2017).

These numbers reflect Ohio’s landscape as well, which can be explained in part
by the 22.08 percent share of Ohio’s population that is classified as rural – for reference,
this is 2,546,810 of the 11,536,504 people living in Ohio in 2014 (Pew Research Center,
2017). According to Gallup’s Index of Leading Religious Indicators, when asked to rate
their levels of religiosity, respondents who lived in rural areas gave much higher numbers
than those living in urban or suburban areas – a 686 out of 1,000 (Lyons, 2003). Fifty six
percent of adults in Ohio say that religion is very important to the structure of their
everyday lives (Pew Research Center, 2017). Fifty seven percent of adults in Ohio also
reported that they practice daily prayer, while 77 percent say that they do believe in
Heaven (Pew Research Center, 2017). This information is reflected throughout the
project portion of my thesis.

It also helps position Ohio contextually into the public opinion and national
religious landscape previously discussed and further situates each of the counties I
studied.

**Religion and Personal Well-Being**

Much of the information covered thus far has looked at religion through a lens of
demographic and socioeconomic situations. To understand why certain sections of the

\(^5\) These four regions are chosen because they are the four outlined in the Pew study where this information originates.
population or geographic regions may be more inclined to practice religion, it is necessary to explore how religious affiliation affects everyday life for members of these communities.

A Pew Research Center study found that highly religious Americans – those who practice daily prayer and attend worship service weekly -- are generally happier than those who are less religious or unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, April 2016). When describing their situations, 40 percent of these highly religious Americans said they are “very happy,” compared to only 29 percent of the less religious groups (Pew Research Center, April 2016).

Additionally, Americans that are more religious are also more likely to be involved with their communities, close to their extended families and participating in some kind of volunteer work (Pew Research Center, April 2016). This difference does not carry over into all aspects of the lives of these highly religious people – for example, they are not less likely than someone who is less religious or unaffiliated to tell a white lie or lose their temper, and they are not more likely to be socially conscious or attentive to personal health and fitness (Pew Research Center, April 2016). Still, it is clear that those more religious Americans do have different behavior because of their beliefs. One of the questions in the Pew survey asked respondents to identify what kinds of beliefs are most important to their religious identity, and concepts like ‘being grateful for what you have’ and ‘being honest at all times’ topped the list (Pew Research Center, April 2016). “The survey shows a clear link between what people see as essential to their faith and their self-reported day-to-day behavior,” reports Pew (2016). “Simply put, those who believe that behaving in a particular way or performing certain actions are key
elements of their faith are much more likely to say they actually perform those actions on a regular basis.”

This can explain why being highly religious influences some elements – relationship with family and community, for example – and not others, like personal fitness. Members of this highly religious group choose to carry out these positive actions because they believe that it is important to the practice of their faith.

**The Future of Religion in America**

The current religious landscape in the US mirrors the country’s shifting demographics and political climate, which makes it difficult to predict long-term trends. However, one of the biggest changes globally will likely be continual spread of Islam during the next four decades (Pew Research Center, May 2015). Although Christianity is projected to remain the world’s largest religion, during this time trends show that the Muslim population is likely to increase substantially by the middle of the 21st century (Pew Research Center, May 2015). This is due in part to the fact that Muslims as a population group are both young and have characteristically high fertility rates. While the population as a whole is expected to increase roughly 35 percent between now and 2050, the Muslim population is expected to increase by a much higher 73 percent (Pew Research Center, May 2015). This is in comparison with Christian growth projections of 35 percent (Pew Research Center, May 2015).

This undoubtedly affects the future share of the religiously unaffiliated in America. It follows that this number is expected to increase as a total, while the percentage of the population that identifies as unaffiliated is expected to shrink (Pew Research Center, May 2015). Notably, the Muslim population is the only group expected
to experience any real change in the next few decades, as well as the only group with projected growth as a percentage of the US population (Pew Research Center, May 2015).

ETHICS

It would be virtually impossible to embark on a journalistic venture related to religion and not have multiple layers of ethical consequences to consider. The following section will outline some of the ethical considerations inherently present in religion reporting in America, and how I made specific, careful steps to avoid succumbing to these pitfalls. It will also highlight my own struggle with certain conflicts of interest throughout my project, and why ethics are especially important to a project whose main goal is to combat stereotypes and equip a certain part of the population with an identity that may differ from the one the general American public has already given them.

Religion Reporting in the US

The Society of Professional Journalists [SPJ] have a code of ethics that largely serves as a baseline example to every journalist in America for how to “improve and protect” the integrity of their journalistic work (SPJ, 2014). This code of ethics is long and somewhat complex, but the four major sections that comprise it are telling of its general content: Seek Truth and Report It, Minimize Harm, Act Independently, and Be Accountable and Transparent (SPJ, 2014). While this code of ethics is general and not specific to reporting on religion, it establishes a baseline for the most important ethical factors that journalists generally must pay attention to in order to produce high quality content that does not also have negative ethical implications. Therefore, introducing these
general concepts help to establish a baseline for which more specific rules about the religion beat are built upon.

It is likely of interest to note that many of the sources outlining how to cover religion in the American news media are introduced or have large sections that provide explanations on why religion reporting is important; the most relevant to this project comes from the *Oxford Handbook on Religion and the American News Media* (2012).

“…Religious movements can never be studied apart from the cultural and political milieu in which they arise…religion is a reliable cultural barometer. …That is exactly why reporting about religion matters: it not only reveals social arrangements and cultural trends but also illuminates, as would reporting on any other subject, contemporary media practices and their underpinning assumptions” *(Oxford Handbook on Religion and the American News Media, 2012, p. 3).*

The beginnings of journalism in America were largely characterized by religion journalism, except it was not considered a beat topic then – it just naturally seeped into the way Americans shared information (Buddenbaum, 1998). Newspapers considered it their duty to report on anything “God would let happen” (Buddenbaum, 1998, p. 91). This difference can largely be attributed to the different religious climate of the time; rather than living in an increasingly secular version of the US like modern day Americans, Americans at this time were still part of a society where religion was willfully and actively intertwined with many facets of the public sphere – politics, education and, unsurprisingly, the media.

As post-Revolutionary War America began to industrialize and therefore modernize, so did the American media, including the coverage of religion in the US
press. Rather than being an inherent part of all information, religion started to make the shift to a topic specifically covered as news, similar to the way it is today (Buddenbaum, 1998). In modern America, most major outlets have dedicated religion sections that cover everything from human-interest pieces to politics to medicine and explore the relationship between religion and all of these topics. It follows, then, that because of the current religious, political and journalistic landscape, there are now a plethora of sources available for journalists trying to understand how to navigate the sometimes-complicated ethical situation of reporting about something as personal as religion.

The Basic Ethics of Religion Reporting

The Religion Newswriters Foundation has unsurprisingly written a number of documents that outline the ethics of reporting on religion that vary from a general guidebook to specific rules for different religious faiths. This section is meant to provide a very basic outline for understanding some of the more specific ethical questions that may be important to religion reporting more so than other beats, but in no way attempts to fully explain the vast range of considerations and/or implications involved with religion reporting in America.

Generally, one of the largest ethical concerns about religion reporting is covering religion across a wide range of topics and not just in relationship to negative events that may be occurring (SPJ, 2001). This has presented itself as a somewhat recurring problem in the American media largely because many of these negative events – for example, religiously motivated terror attacks – are undoubtedly newsworthy, coupled with the fact that some religion reporters struggle to find this newsworthiness in more casual topics relating to religion. To avoid skewing content, in this way or any other, Judith
Buddenbaum’s *Reporting News on Religion* introductory guide for journalists urges religion reporters to seek news values that might still highlight conflict, but in all areas: arts and entertainment, lifestyles, the environment, sports, medicine and more (Buddenbaum, 1998). She also urges journalists writing about these topics to focus on compromise and partnership as much as conflicts (Buddenbaum, 1998). In addition to stories like these, Buddenbaum suggests finding news in changes in certain religious traditions or exploring stories that detail how religion functions in certain communities, especially if these local perspectives can also relate to some national or international events happening at the same time (Buddenbaum, 1998). In this same vein, the Religion Newswriters Association handbook urges religion reporters to explore areas that may be outside more traditional organized religion (Connolly, 2006).

While this is the case for virtually every topic journalists cover, it is important to note that one of the most fundamentally important and commonly recurring across pieces of ethical advice given about religion reporting is research and understanding. In the case of religion, this research can have different identities – exploration through the Internet, books and other resources that informs an informational understanding, and visits to religious sites, especially places of worship for the religion being covered, to understand more about how these places function (Connolly, 2006). Attending services and visiting places of worship as an objective audience can have ethical implications of its own, but generally attending is more beneficial than not (Connolly, 2006). Another important part of this research stage is learning terminology and ensuring its correct use, especially if the person reporting does not identify as religious. While many of these terms can be
complicated and occasionally difficult to work with, their correct use is vital to ensuring that the information and subjects covered are portrayed accurately (ReligionLink, 2017).

A summative concept of the previous information, perhaps the most important ethical concept of religion reporting is how stories are framed. It is important that these journalistic pieces reflect empathy for members of covered religious faiths (Buddenbaum, 1998) and that the expectations for stories created in the first few paragraphs of the inverted pyramid style of journalistic work reflect a positive effort to overcome the previously discussed ethical trials (Buddenbaum, 1998). Similar to the SPJ ethics code, Buddenbaum proposes a list of suggestions to improve the ethics of religion reporting at the end of her book. It is beneficial to include a summary of these concepts, which are as follows: “prepare, keep the audiences in mind, think broadly, honor the First Amendment, practice religion journalism, put religion in the religion news, show, don’t tell, watch the language, check carefully and fight for resources” (Buddenbaum, 1998, p. 191-195).

**Personal Beliefs and Religion Reporting**

Politics and religion intersect in many ways, but the characteristic the two share more than anything else is that everyone inevitably has some kind of opinion about both. As a journalist reporting on religion, this poses a problem: how can one possibly remain objective in writing when they do, to some degree, carry a personal opinion? This topic has been highly debated and analyzed since religious journalism’s inception.

The relationship between spirituality and impartiality is a philosophical and conceptual question that cannot be answered completely through research into journalistic ethics or existing ethical codes. Despite this, there are multiple resources
available for journalists to better understand effective practices that keep personal beliefs and work separate; much of this advice comes from other journalists that have extensive knowledge with the situation, like former *New York Times* religion reporter Ari Goldman. Goldman is now a professor at the Columbia School of Journalism and director of the Scripps Howard Program in Religion, Journalism and the Spiritual Life (Rolfson, 2008). In addition to his experience reporting on religion and teaching the ethics of religion journalism to students, Goldman is himself an Orthodox Jew.

Being personally religious as a religion reporter is not out of the ordinary, and limiting a reporter’s personal religious activity is an area that has its own ethical implications – NPR’s ethics handbook reads that, “[Journalists] have the same right to practice religion – or not – as other Americans. But we do not let our religious or personal beliefs distort our coverage of events or other faiths” (NPR, 2012). Goldman believes that having personal faith can help religion reporters to understand the perspective of their interviewees and chooses to share his personal faith with most sources (Rolfson, 2008). This practice is something that is largely left to personal choice on the part of religion reporters. Julia Lieblich, a reporter for the Religion Newswriters Association, for example, says that she took the advice of a colleague who, when asked by sources, says that she does not talk about her personal religion at work but explains that she is sensitive to whatever system of beliefs she is reporting on (Rolfson, 2008).

The decision to share or not share my own religious affiliation with my interview subjects is one that can greatly be informed by the use of the Potter Box method, a model of reasoning for “creative ethical analysis” developed by Ralph D. Potter of Harvard Divinity School (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel, & Woods, 2016, p. 3). This
method utilizes four different “dimensions of moral analysis” to try to understand why ethical confusion can occur, and create a plan for action that will avoid any ethical dilemma (Christians, et al., 2016, p. 3). The dimensions of moral analysis in the Potter Box are intended to be explored in the order they are presented visually in the box: definition, values, principle and loyalties (Christians, et al., 2016, p. 3). Following this method, I might define the situation as: questions about personal opinions that could potentially harm the objectivity of my work. If I move next to values, it is helpful to return to the SPJ ethical code because it serves as a basic guideline for journalism’s ethical values. The four most important values highlighted in the SPJ code are: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent (SPJ, 2014). If these serve as my values for this ethical consideration, it follows that my principles would be honesty, truth telling and transparency. As a journalist, my loyalty is virtually always to my readers rather than to my interviewees. Through this Potter Box method of ethical consideration, I find that respectfully declining to share my religious faith with those that I am interviewing is a valid choice. It falls in line with all of the values I presented – in order to seek the truth I need to remain unbiased and therefore untethered to a specific system of beliefs in the eyes of my interviewees, in order to minimize harm in the relationships between myself and my subjects in the interest of completing my work it is important for me to remain completely objective as to not upset or trigger any of my interviewees, in order to act independently as a journalist it is important that I remain neutral by not sharing personal feelings, and to remain accountable and transparent it is important that when making this choice not to share my beliefs, I am prepared to explain why I made that choice to my interviewees. Although I
am choosing not to share certain information with interviewees, it also stands that this choice to not share falls in line with my values of honesty, truth telling and transparency in the context of where my loyalties lie – to my readers. Not sharing allows the dialogue to remain unaffected by similarities and/or differences in beliefs. Ultimately, because no journalist can identify with sets of religious beliefs that will satisfy every source, there is no one answer to these questions of personal affiliation that can be universally applicable to every situation, so journalists are left to their own ethical judgment, which is often aided by the rules of individual media outlets (Buddenbaum, 1998).

As the NPR ethics handbook says, “…When it comes to protecting our impartiality, the limitations are often more nuanced than clear” (NPR, 2012). The general professional consensus is that practicing religion while also reporting for the religion beat of a publication is not a breach of ethics on its own, but that journalists should have their identities as journalists at the forefront of this work, rather than their religious identities. “It’s hard, but I think it’s possible,” Goldman explained of his own experiences with working to cast his religious identity aside. “I think you can say, ‘I’m a Jew, but I’m not here as a Jew’” (Rolfson, 2008).

The dangers in not doing so are briefly illustrated in the memoir of former Los Angeles Times religion reporter William Lobdell. Lobdell himself is a Christian, and explains in his memoir that when he was hired he felt that it was an answer to his prayers that he would be able to work as “His vessel” (Dolbee, 2009). This is already an obvious

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6 This professional consensus reflects the views of various sources that were explored and ultimately not utilized in the final product of this thesis project. It can be supported in the opinions reflected by professional expert Ari Goldman and source of credibility the Columbia School of Journalism, which are expressed in Roflson’s 2008 article, “Reporting on Religion: When Faith and Neutrality Collide.”
contrast to Goldman’s thoughts, despite the fact that the two are coming from the same perspective – reporters that also practice a religion.

The ways that these different schools of thought ultimately affected each of their careers is telling; Lobdell wrote the memoir as an explanation of how his time working in this position made him lose his faith and compelled him to quit his work on the religion beat (Dolbee, 2009). This decision, though, and his later openness to discuss the journey came after his career became littered with questionable ethical decisions, like an initial lack of willingness to report on the Catholic church’s sexual abuse scandal because of his own allegiance to the Catholic church, or even on the other end of the spectrum when he started to lose his faith and then began to write from the perspective of wanting to heal a “body of Christ” he referred to as “sick” (Dolbee, 2009).

Lobdell’s story is important to include in a conversation about impartiality because it clearly illustrates how a lack of separation between personal faith and professional work has unfortunate results, both personally and professionally. As Sandi Dolbee, former religion and ethics editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune and president of the Religion Newswriters Association wrote, “The reporter isn’t the only casualty when this happens. The collateral damage includes readers — and their trust” (Dolbee, 2009). While Goldman’s faith helps him be more empathetic to his interviewees, Lobdell’s caused him to warp his journalistic voice to fit his own agenda.

Dolbee herself is another example that is important to consider – she writes about Lobdell’s actions with surprise and disapproval and briefly discusses being surprised by members of the Religion Newswriters Association for wearing crosses on their necks at meetings or working in leadership roles at places of worship while they also report on
religion (Dolbee, 2009). She has also won the award for Religion Newswriter of the Year multiple times; I think that the reason why some of these questions of religion and impartiality are so hard to navigate is because people might feel uncomfortable criticizing the way others choose to express their religious beliefs, even in a workplace, like a journalistic publication. But Dolbee is able to both look at these behaviors of her colleagues critically and still be highly successful in her career as a religion reporter – a practice that should be utilized by every editor and reporter when working with the religion beat.

Sources

The methodology of finding sources that will work well is integral to any journalistic piece, but as is true with many aspects of journalism can be more difficult when the subject is religion. This section will outline how I found my sources and what I informed them of before speaking to them, and lay out some conflicts that I encountered in the process of doing my work.

For the purposes of this project, I conducted hours of research into the different places of worship and breakdown of religious affiliation in each of the areas before I reached out to sources. These churches had to be within the areas I was studying, and had to be Christian affiliated in some way – I wanted to focus on nondenominational churches, but ended up having to examine multiple churches that were different sects of Christianity (Methodist, Church of the Nazarene, etc.) due to a lack of available resources within the geographic constraints, which were more important. After I narrowed down a list of churches that fit these criteria, I reached out to members of the leadership team – pastors, communications directors, etc. – with an explanation of my project, asking if
they could suggest members of their congregation they thought would be willing to work with me. I then reached out to the members suggested to me on a personal level, once again explaining who I was, the purpose of the project and what I would need from them as interviewees.

In her chapter on finding sources, Buddenbaum writes, “In religion reporting, gathering information from multiple sources and multiple perspectives and then triangulating the evidence much as social scientists do is the key to writing stories about complex subjects” (Buddenbaum, 1998, p. 157). When I reached out to find sources, I specifically looked for groups at each congregation of one or more so I would be able to gather as many different viewpoints as possible for consideration. Buddenbaum also mentions ensuring that there are multiple perspectives reflected in religion journalism; in order to do this, I found a counterexample of a large group that attended an urban church (Buddenbaum, 1998).

The most important point that I wanted to make clear to each person that I spoke to, whether that be the leadership person I reached out to at the church or my actual interviewees, was that my interest in these congregations and the people in them was for academic use, not a personal exploration of religion. I did not in any way want any of the parties I worked with to think that I was looking for a church to attend in my own daily life or speaking to them about religion because I wanted advice to inform my personal faith or lack thereof. Before each interview, I also took another small amount of time to make sure that each person understood what the project was for and how the interviews that I recorded would be used to make sure that all parties felt comfortable before starting.
In reflection, I think that this was generally accepted and easily understood by my sources. When I did my first interview, one of the first things one of the interviewees said to me was a comment about how thorough my original email to them was, and how easily I explained my project and why their participation as sources was important to me. In contrast, after one of my visits an interviewee expressed to me how much he hoped I would attend their church in the future and how he had a feeling that I would be back for service on my own personal time. Although he was the only person that vocalized that to me, I found multiple interviewees becoming interested in my own personal wellbeing, which for Christians means that they became interested in my personal relationship with God and trying to bring me to the church that has brought them so much happiness.

This posed a personal problem for me because it made me feel guilty about exploring their religion and place of worship with no intentions to join myself. While this did not affect the scholarly essay portion of my project at all, I do think it had a minor effect on the way I wanted to portray my interviewees in the professional project portion of my thesis – I felt responsible for making sure that I wasn’t writing in a way that would portray them negatively unless they had actually done something negative. As Jacqui Banaszynski notes in her essay “Conflicting Loyalties and Personal Choices,” this human reaction to the people I was portraying in my work is normal for journalists, and while there is much value in retaining a certain level of detachment, she notes that it is also vitally important for journalists to bring their own “emotional intelligence” to the pieces they are covering (Banaszynski, 2010, p. 239). Banaszynski also notes that acknowledging one’s personal connection to a story and/or its subjects is not unethical in
itself – in fact, it is much more unethical to ignore the “humanity” of these emotions as a journalist (Banaszynski, 2010, p. 239).

To alleviate my own ethical questions related to my closeness to the piece, I discussed my feelings with a professor who is an expert in the area of journalism ethics – this practice of sharing with a respected colleague is a method Banaszynski notes is often enough to address ethical questions of this nature (Banaszynski, 2010). I also made sure to go back to my original emails and explanation to re-read them and ensure that I had done and accurate and thorough job of explaining my project and was satisfied with the results. It is important to note here that while Banaszynski is surely an advocate of honesty on the part of journalists about the inevitable human emotions and connections that come with covering any array of different topics, she draws a line where this humanity can get in the way – in her essay she gives the example of a journalist who asked for a burial at a refugee camp to be stopped because she could not remain composed (Banaszynski, 2010). In this case, expressing this opinion was done so to a fault; in expressing my emotional ties to this project, I did so in a professional manner to my advisor and director of studies, two colleagues that were then able to discuss those feelings with me and work out the ethical considerations in a way where my objectivity was not compromised (Banaszynski, 2010).

In addition to struggling with some of these feelings about my ties to my sources, I faced a conflict of interest related to a family member. In order to accurately illustrate the difference between religion in rural and urban areas, I wanted to have interviews with members of an urban congregation as well. The congregation I used for my project is called the Community United Methodist Church, located in Jackson Heights, Queens,
New York City. I was able to connect with members of this church because my grandma is a member of this congregation. She was also present for the interview and gave quotes that were later used in the project portion of my thesis. Edward Wasserman defines a conflict of interest at its most basic level as “a variety of situations where undeclared obligations or loyalties exist that might plausibly stand between journalists or journalistic organizations and the public they principally serve” (Wasserman, 2010, p. 250). In order to alleviate this, I was openly transparent in my professional project that she was a family member.

Generally, the ethical confusion that comes with using a family member as a source is enough to be an effective deterrent for journalists. In some cases, like is the policy of The New York Times, journalists are prohibited from interviewing family members (The New York Times, 2004, p. 33). The Worlds of Journalism pilot study released in 2011 identified different sources of influence that affect journalists; family members are in the “reference group” category (Worlds of Journalism, 2011). The results of the study found this to be one of the least influential spheres, meaning that despite some situations where familial ties creates a large problem, there are also situations where journalists are able to work with members of this reference group while being completely ethically sound (Worlds of Journalism, 2007). Wasserman also speaks to this idea of judging a conflict of interest in more broad terms; the danger of a conflict of interest is that the influence from the conflict in question would impair a journalist’s judgment (Wasserman, 2010). To assess this, Wasserman suggests using a method that explores both “reasonableness and likelihood” of whether or not the source will have a
significant influence, and if this influence will then be negative (Wasserman, 2010, p. 251).

In the context of my project, my grandmother and the group she was connected to served as a counterexample for the group I was actually focused on studying. Her role in the story in terms of influence is small – she serves as a representation for a larger group of people in America that have attended both rural and urban churches, and is featured in the project only to be able to give a voice to these experiences. Her role in the project is vitally important because she serves to be my connection to the group of women in New York City that serve as a general urban counterexample, and she is also the only source I spoke to that had the unique perspective of attending a highly rural church as well as a highly urban church. I looked to Wasserman’s suggestions on handling conflicts of interest to alleviate the weight of the interest on my overall project. He first suggests eliminating conflicts, which he notes is likely not an applicable route for endemic conflicts, or conflicts that “arise from the nexus of institutional, professional, and personal relationships in which the journalist works” (Wasserman, 2010, p. 255). He then suggests disclosure, noting that in some cases it is virtually impossible, and in some cases even disclosure can have its own ethical implications (Wasserman, 2010). In the case of my project, I did choose to disclose the conflict, which allowed my readers ahead of time to be aware that there may be a bias and where it may be present, which Wasserman says is a benefit of disclosing (Wasserman, 2010). While these two strategies are largely meant to try to completely eliminate conflicts of interest, Wasserman also refers to these conflicts as “inescapable feature[s]” of the journalistic terrain (Wasserman, 2010, p. 259). Because of this, Wasserman next suggests both in-house discourse and internal oversight
two methods that I personally utilized (Wasserman, 2010). In addition to discussing this conflict of interest with both my advisor and director of studies, which in this case serve as perfect examples of colleagues participating in in-house discourse about the topic, I had multiple layers of internal oversight in the form of both said advisor and director of studies reading my work multiple times with the knowledge of this existing conflict. Wasserman also notes that a good way to test if the conflict of interest in question is a problem is to analyze if the piece of journalism the public reads is reasonably affected by the journalist’s relationship with the conflict of interest; in my case, the role of my grandmother in the journalism the public will read is short and largely made up of direct quotes that could not be changed, therefore the journalism is not affected by our relationship on any kind of large scale (Wasserman, 2010).

Because of my transparency about her role in the project coupled with an assessment of her influence that combines Wasserman’s ideas with the Potter Box method and multiple conversations with colleagues about the implications, or lack thereof, of including her in this piece, I believe that while there is a conflict of interest inherently present in her role in the piece, it has been alleviated to the point where it is no longer a fault.

**CONCLUSION**

It proves difficult to give a singular conclusion for this project as it explored a number of different areas of interest: the religious landscape in America, the definition of rural, religion’s impact on a community and its sense of place. Generally, though, my conclusion is that although there have been recent decreases in the Christian population in the US, religion remains one of the most personally fulfilling elements of the human
experience for members of groups that do identify with a specific faith, and therein lies the explanation for religion’s endurance in a modern society so focused on secularism. The future of the religious landscape in America will be marked by more diversity in the future, but likely also more positivity as the Millennial generation continues to be historically the most accepting.

Religion is also likely to continue to thrive in rural communities that effectively build around places of worship socially. These communities have even more of a historic tie to religion as a focal point than most areas in the US, and these longstanding ties seemingly will not break any time soon. Additionally, religion thrives in the younger generation in these areas compared to the rest of the US; generally, Millennials are the highest unaffiliated population of any generation, but those raised in the Millennial generation in highly religious areas in rural America seem to be largely unaffected by this trend, likely because of these longstanding historic ties coupled with personal, familial importance put on practicing religion.

Another newly emerging theme is the importance of spirituality versus organized religion or organized religious practices, like weekly church attendance. This is a commonality between all generations and can be observed both in rural and urban areas.

In general, the future of the American religious landscape will be highly diverse, generally positively regarded and comprised of more members of older generations instead of Millennials and their younger counterparts.
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http://www.religionlink.com/reporting-on/reporting-on-christianity/.


The McArthur United Methodist Church appeared relatively sparse when I entered the doors for the first time. There are the conventional rows of pews, a few displays on the walls inside the entry doors with bulletins and news about the church, and a fifteen or so person choir standing on the stage in the front.

Though their singing is beautiful and harmonic, its aural delight is quickly overcome by the visual splendor of the stained glass windows, which dominate the facing walls of the church’s sanctuary. And in contrast to the comparatively brief lifespan of a choir, the windows’ enduring dignity has enclosed its members for more than a century.

Estimated to be worth $500,000, these windows are probably the most valuable items in McArthur, a town with a population of a little less than 2,000 people in Southeastern Ohio’s Vinton County. When the church was built in 1903, this cost equaled about $20,000, which even today remains a sizable sum for a county whose poverty rate is 23.2 percent, almost a full ten percent higher than the national rate of 13.5 percent.

Not many businesses thrive in this area, perhaps a result of the area’s low median income of $38,000. And this impacts even sustenance — McArthur has been without a full service grocery store for three years, so it’s significant news that this summer, a family-owned Ohio chain will open a McArthur location that will save residents a half hour round trip drive to buy fresh food.

Still, half a million dollars remains built into the walls of perhaps the most distinguished building in town. It serves as a representation of the value people in this area put on religion. And for other similar rural areas across America, this value is hardly window dressing — it’s about purpose, and even endurance.

Jane Woodell was born in McArthur and has remained there for all her 68 years. She’s been a devoted McArthur United Methodist Church attendee for more than half of these years, and when we spoke she was washing dishes in the church’s basement after the Sunday morning service. “It’s just a good feeling to be in a small community, I think,” said Jane of living in such a rural area. “We always knew who our kids’ friends were. We knew their grandmothers and their great-grandmothers, so you know all about them. And if you don’t, you find out real easy.”

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“If you move to a smaller community and get involved with our church, you’re going to know people and get involved. I mean, we’ve done dinners for the football teams and the basketball teams and the drama club and the band. We do that a lot. We do funeral dinners all the time. And it’s not just
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For many, this close-knit community, both within and outside the church walls, is part of the attraction to move to a rural area, despite disadvantages that often include higher poverty rates and lack of access to resources. “You’ve got a tightness in a small community,” said the Proffitt matriarch, Martha, of raising their young son in one of these rural areas. “I thought that the other day when I was driving through town, it’s not just the church but just a small community,
raising our son versus a larger community. We may not have the opportunities to take him to hockey games or football games or the mall like we would somewhere else, but if he needs something or we need something.”

As investment in future generations of religious followers continually becomes more important to the health and survival of churches in America, the role of the children in these congregations becomes more important, too. The van ministry system the Dillhas set up at their church in McConnelsville functions to bring more youth numbers in, and similar systems that provide transportation to these churches for kids who couldn’t make it to service otherwise are common. Youth programs in these churches also tend to be heavily involved, building upon the church’s role as a key social venue in the community. “There are a lot of opportunities to step into activities or volunteer where you might not have done otherwise,” said Brody of church involvement in Logan. “I went to Ohio State University, and I remember thinking of myself being considered as a social security number, which was not a positive in my mind. Getting personal attention lets the kids have more accountability for their actions, and we pray that this accountability will motivate our intelligent kids to use this blessed intelligence for positive influences on those around them.”

This personal attention and accountability also means that the youth members of these churches feel responsible for the religious decisions they make. Many make the choice to attend services with friends or through the help of van ministry programs even if their parents or extended family aren’t members of the congregation. Children raised in these types of churches often also participate more than once a week, whether that means taking part in a Wednesday night bible study, attending vacation bible school or volunteering to help with social activities taking place in the church building. Similar to previous generations, their social circles become dependent on connections forged within the church, which may account for why rural areas are keeping the youth interested in church attendance for now.

But the younger set is also helping these religious organizations evolve. In most cases, these congregations pay close attention to their online presence and stay active with members on social media. Regardless, spirituality outside the church walls seems the common thread between all members, no matter their location. In the course of my interviews for this piece, almost every person mentioned religion being part of a living organism that all followers are participating in. When I asked Pomeroy’s Jay Proffitt what he thought would be different about practicing religion in a rural and urban area he said, “…There really shouldn’t be a difference because we’re all part of one body of Christ.”

On the other hand, Phyllis Blaney, one of the longtime Methodist Church attendees from New York City, said that she finds her church in nature. She argued that the actual church isn’t as important as your personal relationship
with God and how you want to explore that. “I go to a lot of different churches, and I’ve just made peace with the fact that you’re not going to find everything in one church,” said Blaney. “This church is great for fellowship. And other churches are great for teaching or other things.”

But perhaps the most basic explanation for rural religious participation lies in the most uncomplicated emotion – it gives them a sense of well-being. A 2016 Pew Research Center study showed that religious Americans are generally happier, more involved with their families and communities, and more likely to volunteer than their unaffiliated peers. While the study found that religion doesn’t positively influence every aspect of daily life, it certainly does seem to make followers happier, and Gallup has found that rural areas are significantly more religious than urban areas as a whole, which could explain why members of these small communities are so happy to live where they do.

“It’s just like the Bible says, you’re supposed to meditate on the good things,” said Alissa Dahlia of why she thinks her family thrives in rural McConnelsville more than they would in a city. “And if you are exposed to negative things you’re meditating on all of these negative things all the time… I know it still happens here, but if you’re seeing less of that negative stuff, its impacting your mind less. It doesn’t seem normal to you because you don’t see it like you would see it every day somewhere else.”
Below is an unformatted version of my professional project to reflect its true length as a writing piece. My advisor and I chose not to exceed the project’s current length in the interest of future publication possibilities; many publications have specific requirements about lengths that submissions may not exceed.

A Pause at the Intersection of Rural Culture and Religious Capital Today

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For many, this close-knit community, both within and outside the church walls, is part of the attraction to move to a rural area, despite disadvantages that often include higher poverty rates and lack of access to resources. “You’ve got a tightness in a small community,” said the Proffitt matriarch, Martha, of raising their young son in one of these rural areas. “I thought that the other day when I was driving through town, it’s not just the church but just a small community, raising our son versus a larger community. We may not have the opportunities to take him to hockey games or football games or the mall like we would somewhere else, but if he needs something or we need something.”

As investment in future generations of religious followers continually becomes more important to the health and survival of churches in America, the role of the children in these congregations becomes more important, too. The van ministry system the Dillhas
set up at their church in McConnelsville functions to bring more youth numbers in, and similar systems that provide transportation to these churches for kids who couldn’t make it to service otherwise are common. Youth programs in these churches also tend to be heavily involved, building upon the church’s role as a key social venue in the community. “There are a lot of opportunities to step into activities or volunteer where you might not have done otherwise,” said Brody of church involvement in Logan. “I went to Ohio State University, and I remember thinking of myself being considered as a social security number, which was not a positive in my mind. Getting personal attention lets the kids have more accountability for their actions, and we pray that this accountability will motivate our intelligent kids to use this blessed intelligence for positive influences on those around them.”

This personal attention and accountability also means that the youth members of these churches feel responsible for the religious decisions they make. Many make the choice to attend services with friends or through the help of van ministry programs even if their parents or extended family aren’t members of the congregation. Children raised in these types of churches often also participate more than once a week, whether that means taking part in a Wednesday night bible study, attending vacation bible school or volunteering to help with social activities taking place in the church building. Similar to previous generations, their social circles become dependent on connections forged within the church, which may account for why rural areas are keeping the youth interested in church attendance for now.

But the younger set is also helping these religious organizations evolve. In most cases, these congregations pay close attention to their online presence and stay active
with members on social media. Regardless, spirituality outside the church walls seems the common thread between all members, no matter their location. In the course of my interviews for this piece, almost every person mentioned religion being part of a living organism that all followers are participating in. When I asked Pomeroy’s Jay Proffitt what he thought would be different about practicing religion in a rural and urban area he said, “…There really shouldn’t be a difference because we’re all part of one body of Christ.”

On the other hand, Phyllis Blaney, one of the longtime Methodist Church attendees from New York City, said that she finds her church in nature. She argued that the actual church isn’t as important as your personal relationship with God and how you want to explore that. “I go to a lot of different churches, and I’ve just made peace with the fact that you’re not going to find everything in one church,” said Blaney. “This church is great for fellowship. And other churches are great for teaching or other things.”

But perhaps the most basic explanation for rural religious participation lies in the most uncomplicated emotion – it gives them a sense of well-being. A 2016 Pew Research Center study showed that religious Americans are generally happier, more involved with their families and communities, and more likely to volunteer than their unaffiliated peers. While the study found that religion doesn’t positively influence every aspect of daily life, it certainly does seem to make followers happier, and Gallup has found that rural areas are significantly more religious than urban areas as a whole, which could explain why members of these small communities are so happy to live where they do.

“It’s just like the Bible says, you’re supposed to meditate on the good things,” said Alissa Dahlia of why she thinks her family thrives in rural McConnelsville more
than they would in a city. “And if you are exposed to negative things you’re meditating on all of these negative things all the time… I know it still happens here, but if you’re seeing less of that negative stuff, its impacting your mind less. It doesn’t seem normal to you because you don’t see it like you would see it every day somewhere else.”