Profiles of Religiosity in Adolescence

Lisa D. Pearce
Melinda Lundquist Denton

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Abstract and Keywords

Five profiles of religiosity that describe the landscape of adolescent religiosity in America are presented in this chapter: the Abiders, Adapters, Assenters, Avoiders, and Atheists. The five profiles come from a latent class analysis conducted with the NSYR survey data, and the stories and quotes from five youth who participated in the NSYR semi-structured interviews are used to illustrate each profile in depth. Discussion of these five profiles of religiosity reveals that while there are some youth with religious profiles or mosaics that are characterized by very high religiosity in every dimension measured (Abiders), or very low religiosity in every dimension measured (Atheists), the other adolescents have pieced together religious mosaics that rely on certain dimensions of religion and not others. This chapter provides an enriched understanding of the forms of religiosity as lived by American adolescents.

Keywords: religiosity, dimensions of religion, youth, adolescents, latent class analysis, semi-structured interviews

Religiosity is a personal characteristic that is difficult to measure in generalities. Indeed a single measure of religiosity, such as how often someone attends religious services, can prove misleading in characterizing religiosity. For example, if you hear that a person attends church every week, you might assume he is very religious on a variety of dimensions. Yet his church attendance may be driven by nonreligious motivations, such as a desire to maintain social networks or to fulfill expectations from family members. In these cases attendance may not be accompanied by other types of personal religiosity, such as frequent personal prayer, strong beliefs, or a reliance on religious principles in everyday life. Furthermore the scales or indices of religiosity that many researchers use, averaging or summing levels of practice with levels of
importance or levels of belief, can obscure important configurations of the multiple dimensions of religiosity in people’s lives. Is a person who has strong religious beliefs and personal religious salience but never attends religious services really that similar to someone with strong beliefs who attends religious services every week but does not feel close to God or consider religious ideas very relevant to other aspects of life? Focusing on beliefs alone or an average of all three aspects of religiosity results in an assumption that these two people are very similar. However, a focus on religious practice or salience suggests they are very different religiously.

Consider Diego and Jared, two young men from Catholic families. Diego rarely attends any sort of religious worship service, but he tells us religion is “very central” in his life. Jared attends Mass once or twice a month, but says he is “not, like, deep into the faith.” Diego is more religious in a private manner and less involved in public practice, and Jared is more involved in a public sense but less concerned about having his beliefs and religious identity be front and center when it comes to the rest of his life. Using a multi-item, low-to-high index to measure religiosity as a variable that describes Diego and Jared would result in two very similar scores (if calculated using a sum or average of the various dimensions of their religiosity). Yet their religious identities are qualitatively different, with clear implications for how they live their lives and for their systems of meaning. For a complete characterization of the role of religion in adolescents’ lives we need to carefully profile those who do not necessarily have consistently high, medium, or low levels of religiosity on every dimension.

Our approach is to identify and describe the most common profiles of religiosity among adolescents in the United States using a person-centered approach as opposed to a variable-centered approach. The variable-centered approach suggests that we can categorize people as falling along a continuum of degrees of some variable such as religiosity. A person-centered approach, in contrast, begins with the idea that there are various types of people, or discrete and mutually exclusive profiles in the population, best captured with a typology. Taking a person-centered approach provides a fresh perspective on the contours of religious life among youth. We use this approach to examine common patterns in how youth combine the various dimensions of religiosity in order to identify a set of religious profiles that accurately captures adolescent religious lives.

To accomplish this goal we use a statistical method called latent class analysis (LCA), a statistical technique that takes all possible combinations of responses to a set of survey questions and identifies which response patterns are most common in the population. We use eight measures of religiosity from the NSYR survey data: two measures of religious content (belief in God and attitudes toward religious exclusivism), three measures of religious conduct (the frequency of individual prayer, religious service attendance, and helping others outside of organized volunteer work), and three measures of centrality (importance of religion, closeness to God, and frequency of thinking about the meaning of life). All of the survey questions were asked in both waves of the survey, in 2002 and 2005. These eight measures are used to jointly characterize the classes (or religious profiles) that exist in the lives of adolescents in the United States.

Primarily we rely on survey measures of religiosity often applied in Western contexts: belief in God, exclusivism, prayer, attendance, importance of religion, and closeness to God.
However, we also incorporate two less standard and less obviously religious measures. The first is the question about how often youth think about the meaning of life. This measure is included to tap spirituality, or the drive to connect to that which is sacred, in a way that does not directly reference organized religion. The second is a question about how often the respondent helps those who are needy, outside of organized volunteer work. This measure is an attempt to leverage a measure of religious or spiritual conduct that has no direct reference to organized religion. Clearly not everyone thinking about the meaning of life or helping others is doing so with religious or spiritual intentions, but we do consider these traits to be markers that might help delineate types of religiosity or spirituality that are a bit more individual and less connected with Christian language and ritual. Although by themselves they are imperfect measures of religiosity or spirituality, we expect that combined with the other measures they will help to delineate the types of religious and spiritual youth living in the United States.

The results from LCA provide a parsimonious categorization of the youth population into the five latent classes or profiles of religiosity introduced in the introduction: the Abiders, the Adapters, the Assenters, the Avoiders, and the Atheists. The selection of the five As based on the statistical analysis was also consistent with the general types of religiosity that emerged from our analysis of the semistructured interviews. The categorization of five profiles of religiosity is stable, meaning that the same five classes provide the best fit to our survey data at both time points (2002 and 2005). The same five profiles appear among men and women, across racial and ethnic groups, and across religious affiliation. In other words, the five As describe the religious lives of virtually all American adolescents. Except for the Atheists (a small group of between 3 and 5 percent of the population), the other four groups are spread relatively evenly throughout the population at both time points, ranging from between 17 and 31 percent of the population (see figure 2.1). For a detailed description of the latent class methods we use, please see Latent Class Analysis, appendix B.

Two Consistent Profiles
The easiest youth to categorize religiously are those who provide us with consistent answers across the eight measures of religiosity. We tend to assume that the responses of most youth will be congruent or consistent across the eight religion questions. Congruence is unique, however, to two profiles of religiosity that represent only about a quarter of American youth: the Abiders and the Atheists. Though seemingly at opposite ends of what most consider a religiosity continuum, these two groups share a level of consistency in their religiosity unmatched by the rest of the youth in our study. Not surprisingly Abiders’ survey answers reflect consistently high levels of each dimension of religiosity; Atheists are also consistent in their reported disconnect from religion on all dimensions.

The Abiders
The first profile of religiosity we describe is one whose members are highly religious on almost every component we consider. Abiders are those youth who report consistent involvement in...
religious practices, belief in a personal God, and a high level of religious importance in their own lives. Ashley’s story provides a good example of a youth who is characterized as an Abider.

Ashley

At the time of our first interview with her Ashley was 15 years old and about to enter eleventh grade. She was living in the Northwest with her mother, father, and a twin sister. She is a white girl with curly brown hair, a few freckles, and braces. Ashley was a straight-A student who described herself as shy yet not bothered by having different, “more conservative” political views than her friends. Her parents knew all her friends (and their parents) well, and they carefully monitored her activities. When bringing Ashley to the first interview, her mother made a point of introducing herself and inquiring about the purpose of the interview and how the findings from the project would be disseminated. Once her mother left and the interview started, Ashley talked about getting along with her parents well and having the same personality as her mother. She has a different personality than her “type A” father, but the two of them share a love for science fiction. She reported feeling comfortable talking about most things with her parents, except when she held back the occasional fact, such as having watched an R-rated movie at a friend’s house a few nights earlier, which was against her parents’ rules.

When asked how she was raised religiously, Ashley said, “I was raised as a Christian, since I was little.” While she was growing up her family moved twice. Though they moved within the same state, the moves were far enough to need to switch churches each time. In each place they lived they were involved in church: a Baptist church, then an Evangelical Covenant church, then another Baptist church. In the interviews we did as a part of this study, it was common for families to exhibit a drop-off in religious service attendance following a residential move that required finding a new place of worship in order to stay involved. That Ashley’s parents twice sought new congregations is evidence of their strong commitment to regular religious involvement. Ashley told us that she and her parents’ religious beliefs are “super similar, like identical.” When commenting on what religion does for her family relationships she said, “I think that since we ... we do things, like at church together, that’s like another area that we’re, we can be unified and that helps, just to keep us more connected. [Believing the same things] gives us a lot more in common, and it gives us like the same goals in life. And the same like backgrounds and basis for the way we act.”

In that first interview Ashley described herself as a religious and spiritual person whose outlook on life is influenced by what she believes. She talked about believing in a powerful and just but loving God who judges right and wrong but is merciful and personally involved in her life. When asked to summarize her personal religious beliefs, Ashley responded much more specifically than most of our study participants: “Um, well I believe in like God the father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, three in one, like Jesus rose from the dead and that, like his act, um, it’s like personal salvation for those who believe in him. That enables us to be able to go be in heaven and like be in unity, like kinda, like know God.” Her beliefs reflect classic Evangelical views, including the idea that Christianity is the one true religion and that people should accept all of the teachings of their religion, not pick and choose.

At the time of this first interview Ashley was very involved in her family’s large Baptist church. They attended every Sunday morning, both a main service and Sunday school. She attended the
youth group class on Sundays, where a sermon for young people was given. She also was involved in youth choir on Sunday afternoons. She went to a youth group meeting at the church almost every Tuesday night; describing these meetings she said, “I get strengthened in my religious beliefs and I also get kind of a community of people who are there to support me.” She had attended summer camps and youth retreats and had recently gone on a mission trip to Central America with her youth group. She appreciated the exposure to another culture, but more important, she believed that the trip had strengthened her faith in God. Ashley talked about praying throughout the day every day and knowing that God answers prayers. She believed God responded to her prayers about everything from feeling less anxious and passing a quiz to not missing a flight home from Central America when they were delayed getting to the airport. She described catching her flight as a miracle from God. Ashley said the size of her church made it difficult to get to know very many people, especially church leaders such as the minister and head youth minister. She felt close, however, to her Bible study leader and a youth ministry helper who led the mission trip. She described the youth leaders as good role models for how to live “a Godly life.”

Religion seemed highly salient to Ashley. She discussed extensively how religion influenced her actions and feelings and said that her faith was integrated into her life. Religion, she said, served as the basis for how she lived. She described feeling very close to God, except for occasional times when she was not focused on him and what he wanted for her. She talked about being both religious and spiritual, explaining that it is her spirit that connects and communicates with God. Ashley seemed very thoughtful about life, religion, and her purpose. She wanted to help people in general and give them joy, but she thought there is also a religious purpose in life, “to help people come closer to God and like to bring them in spiritually, like to support people spiritually.”

Even though all seemed to be going well in Ashley’s life at the time of this first interview, she had recently been diagnosed with clinical depression. It was especially bad when it was dark, during the winter, (p.37) and when she was at school. She talked about dealing with short bouts of depression about once a day or so, during which she would experience a particularly negative outlook on the world around her. She had just started therapy and medication to manage the depression. When we revisited Ashley about two years later she was still dealing with her depression through medication and therapy and had since learned that some of her relatives also suffered from depression; in fact an aunt had committed suicide just after our first interview with her. Ashley’s parents were very supportive of her treatment and very invested in helping her manage her illness.

Much had changed for Ashley over the two years between interviews. She’d bleached her bangs blonde (but left the rest of her hair brown), had three piercings in both ears, and wore a lot of black. She grew out of being a “band geek” into an “artist type” who spent a lot of time writing for the high school literary magazine. She had slipped and earned a couple of Bs in her senior year, but that was fine with her. Ashley was headed to a regional state university a couple of months after the interview, the only college to which she applied. She passed two AP exams to give her a head start. Ashley now had a boyfriend of eighteen months whom she adored and said she could see a future with him. She met him at church. Over the two years she had experimented with marijuana, cigarettes, and alcohol but was not particularly interested in any
of them. She was physically intimate with her boyfriend (“everything up to sex”), but they were planning to wait until they were married to have sexual intercourse.

Over the two years between interviews religion remained very important to Ashley, despite some significant life changes. Her boyfriend and parents still attended the large Baptist church, but Ashley had an encounter at that church with a peer who despised her and made life difficult for her. As a result she began attending a different church with a friend, a Nazarene church that she described as being very similar to her Baptist church. Her parents understood and supported her decision. She attended the Nazarene church weekly and participated in youth group there until graduating from high school and getting ready to depart for college. She still believed in a personal and involved God, felt close to him, and prayed regularly. She thought she may have gotten a little less religious because she was involved in fewer activities at church, but she went to some kind of religious service or meeting at least once a week. She said that between work, school, and other activities it became difficult to go to as many church functions as she had in the past.

(p.38) Asked to sum up what the major changes were in her life over the past couple of years she said, “I became more who I wanted to be and less what I thought others wanted me to be.” Ashley’s reflections on her life conveyed the sense that she had been working to establish her own identity, all the while facing her depression issues and keeping religion central in her life.

Although there have definitely been challenges and changes in Ashley’s life, she is fairly typical of the group of youth in our study who are consistently high on most dimensions of religiosity and spirituality across the period of the study. Their lives are not entirely predictable or stereotypical, but religion continues to be a salient and central feature of their lives. The Abiders are the group most likely to attend religious services weekly or more. They are also most likely to pray on their own regularly; none of the Abiders reported that they never pray. On the whole the Abiders are incorporating both public and private religious practice into their life almost every week, if not every day. Members of this religious profile also score relatively high on our alternate indicator of religious practice: the frequency of helping others outside of organized volunteer activities. Abiders score the second highest in reporting this type of helping behavior, following just behind the profile of religiosity we describe as the Adapters. Altogether, high levels of religious conduct, in both public and private, define Abiders.

The Abiders’ highly engaged religious conduct is combined with equally high levels of religious centrality. These adolescents are most likely to report that religion is either extremely or very important in their daily life. In addition they more often say that they are extremely or very close to God, compared to the other religious profiles, and very few Abiders report feeling distant from God. Abiders think about the meaning of life more than the average adolescent; as a group they are the second most likely to report thinking about it very often. The Abiders feel close to God and value religion and its guidance in their lives.

The content of the religious beliefs reported by Abiders sets them apart from other religious profiles. All Abiders report belief in God and are the most likely to express this belief in terms of a personal God involved in their everyday lives. Although it may surprise some, adolescents in the United States are on average not very likely to report exclusivist views of religion, such as believing that only one religion is true or that one should accept all the teachings of a religion.
However, Abiders have the highest likelihood of having an exclusivist view of religion and are more likely than the other profiles to believe that only one religion is true and that people should accept all teachings of the religion they follow.

The reason we label this group “Abiders” is because they seem to be living a rather conventional, institutional form of religiosity with standard expressions of organized religions that are mainstream in the United States. Ashley epitomizes the characteristics of an Abider, and as a member of this group she is among the minority of adolescents who talk about how religion shapes their actions.

Interviewer: Do you think that [your religious practices] influence how you think or believe or live?

Ashley: I think so because, like, I can’t really believe in God and his truths without it having that effect, like on how I act and how I live. I think it helps me to love people because it gives me … It’s like the world’s a fallen world type of thing, and so since I’m a part of that, it’s like wow, you know, since God loves us, then I should probably love others.

The Atheists

An important characteristic of the Atheist profile, as with Abiders, is the relative congruence of their religious identity. Membership in the Atheists profile is perfectly predicted by not believing in God. Only a small proportion of people in the United States are willing to declare that they definitely do not believe in God. In our study about 3 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds in 2002 fit this category, matching closely what Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann find for adults in the United States. Although a small group, the Atheists are interestingly different from youth who are simply passively disengaged from religion, and thus it is important to characterize this group separately.

Samantha

At the time of our first interview Samantha was 15 years old and living in her grandmother’s house in the Northwest with her two parents, a younger sister, and her grandmother. Since her mother and father married they have lived there to help care for her grandmother, who was widowed long ago and has always had health issues. Her mother runs a day care center in the home and her father works as a handyman. Samantha, a white girl who is short and overweight with light brown hair, green eyes, and some trouble with acne, revealed her introversion and uniqueness at the very start of the interview.

Interviewer: What kind of people are you friends with?

Samantha: Mm, I don’t really have a lot of friends.

Interviewer: Why would you say that is?

Samantha: Just because I’m not really the average teenager.

When the interviewer asked what she meant by not being an average teenager, Samantha responded that she dropped out of school when she was in the seventh grade because it was not
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a challenge to her and her teachers gave up trying. She attended high school online from home for a while, but lost interest in that as well. By age 15, however, she started taking college courses at a nearby commuter college. By the time of the second interview, when she was 17, she had completed two years of college courses and expected to have an associate’s degree, probably in criminal justice, by age 18.

Samantha reported great relationships with both of her parents and is especially close to her father, who enjoys discussing books with her and stories they have heard on National Public Radio. Although her grandmother attends church every Sunday, neither parent has attended since Samantha was born, and religion is not a subject they discuss. Asked how she felt about religion during the first interview, Samantha said, “Well, I, I always sort of thought that religion was just something that people used to just cope with the way things are. And my mechanism of coping with the way things are is … I just have sort of an innate sense. I mean, it’s just not something that I really feel that I need. I use logic and the rationale that I just can’t do anything about what has happened.”

Samantha did not believe in God, and her lack of belief did not change at all by the time of the second interview. In fact at the second interview her life was pretty similar to when we first met her, although there were two significant changes in her life: she had moved into her own apartment in town and found a new best friend who thinks just like her and works with her part time at a public library. When Samantha was asked if she considers herself either agnostic or atheist, she said, “probably atheist”: “It just is what it is…. [Religion] just isn’t on my radar.”

Samantha closely resembles the other youth in our study who are not religious at all. She grew up in a family and network of friends where religion simply was not a part of daily life. The youth who are (p.41) outright atheist and completely unengaged with any religious tradition (only 3 percent of the youth in our nationally representative survey sample) usually have had almost no exposure to religion from their families. Invitations to church from neighbors and friends found them uninterested. Another striking feature of this very small group of Atheists in our study is that they overwhelmingly stand out from other youth their age in confidence and intellectual ability, and they seem relatively immune from or at least irresponsible to peer pressure. Identifying the causal process here is difficult. Do these youth self-identify as “different” in general and as a result find embracing an atheist identity easier? Or do they feel different from others because of their lack of religious socialization or disbelief, and then craft a larger identity of not fitting in with those around them?

In either case, even though Samantha is not a typical teenager, she is happy, has a great sense of humor, is able to think critically, and is nearly self-sufficient at age 17. She has taken a unique path through adolescence but seems to be doing well.

Unsurprisingly Atheists like Samantha are extremely unlikely to pray every day or attend religious services regularly (weekly or more). However, there is still a small probability that Atheists attend religious services at least sporadically (see appendix table B.3). One explanation for this attendance at religious services may be that a majority of these youth still live at home and some may be required to attend religious services with their parents. Having been raised in a nonreligious home Samantha has never attended religious services, nor does she engage in any religious practices such as prayer. Atheists are also very unlikely to hold exclusivist views
about religion. They do not believe there is one true religion, and they do not think that people need to believe in every aspect of the religion they follow.

On the question of how important religion is to daily life the Atheists have a very high probability of being in either the somewhat important or not at all important category. The Atheists have the highest likelihood of all the religious profiles of never thinking about the meaning of life. Questions of existence or ultimate reality seem relatively uninteresting or unimportant to these youth. As for Samantha, she is confident in her position on religion and does not express any doubt or hesitation about her atheistic views. She is not hostile toward people who are religious, but rather takes a “whatever works for them” attitude. For herself, she has chosen to depend on “logic” rather than any religious ideas.

(p.42) Making Sense of Inconsistency
Increasingly scholars who study the meaning and practice of religion in everyday life recognize that most people do not fit neatly within the boundaries of classification.4 Pinpointing and describing those who do have consistent packages of religious identity, either very religious in all dimensions or completely irreligious, is relatively easy. More challenging is identifying those whose religious lives are not characterized by uniformity and recognizing key differences among them. We now turn our attention to this challenge as we describe the remaining three religious profiles revealed by our analysis. The nuances within styles of religiosity have key implications for understanding the religious lives of youth and understanding how religiosity in adolescence affects the emerging adult life course.

The Assenters
The Assenters represent the image that might come to mind for many people when thinking about religiously middle-of-the-road youth. They are likely to say they believe in God and engage in some level of religious practice; however, religion does not appear to be very central to their lives. They are not particularly strong on measures of personal salience, spirituality, or service to others.

Jared
Our first interview with Jared, an African American boy, took place when he was 16. He lived with both parents in a very poor neighborhood of a large city on the East Coast and is the youngest of four children. Jared was popular and made many friends through sports. He said he chose to hang out with them because they are “good people.” He actively avoided fights and interactions with kids his age involved in gang activity and selling drugs. He was hoping to get a master’s degree in computer engineering and was focused on his schoolwork, but he had also started to get distracted by partying, drinking, and getting in the occasional fight.

Jared’s mother attended Mass weekly at a Catholic church, but his father never went. Though his father usually worked long hours, Jared doubted that he would attend services if he were not working. Jared used to go regularly with his mother when he was a child but said that he currently only goes to Mass about once a month. Religion was not discussed in the home. Jared considered himself Catholic and believed (p.43) in God, but said, “That is about as deep as it goes…. I’m not a hundred percent but I do attend church on occasion.” Jared’s view of God was of “an almighty black person controlling our lives.” He looked to God for hope, he said.
Two years later Jared was doing well. He said that in between interviews he had really scared himself by passing out drunk and waking up in the emergency room next to a bag of his own stomach contents. After this incident he had “calmed down” and now was doing really well in school, getting along with his parents, and had a girlfriend he adored. Jared was very close to his girlfriend’s parents and said they were like second parents to him. They were easier to talk to than his own mother and father. His girlfriend and her parents pushed him to attend religious services regularly (with them or his mother), and they encouraged him to read the Bible daily. He felt good about his increased church attendance and said it made his mother happy. Here is what he said about his own religiosity at the second interview:

Um, I would say that, as a Christian, I’m not like, deep into the faith. Like I believe and I agree with the Bible to an extent you know but, I’m not the type to go Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I go to Bible study every once in a while and I don’t, I personally, I haven’t even read the whole Bible like, I know people my age that, even my girl, she could quote scriptures, not me.

Jared believed his faith had strengthened somewhat over the past couple of years. Well, before, I didn’t believe, because I used to pray all the time but it felt like my prayers was never answered, and it’s been within these last two years that I’ve realized that God is good because I’m healthy, like I’ve outgrown my asthma and I have no enemies. Um, my girl is like everything that I ever wanted in life and like she’s what makes me happy. You know, she came in my life at the right time, when I was finished with all the nonsense I was doing and I was getting focused on school. I think it’s cool, I definitely believe that God is a good guy, he [is] always on time.

Even though he believed more strongly in God and felt God answered his prayers and provided for him, he believed he could be still more religious. Although he said he could probably do more to actually live like God would want him to he added, “I don’t think much about what I’m doing, I just do it.” His biggest struggle was over having sex with his girlfriend: “It’s like, once you start it’s hard to stop, and especially when you’re in a relationship, and it’s like, neither one of you all are virgins. So, it makes it even harder. It’s like, and you know you’re both attracted to each other, so that’s the really, really difficult part. And, yeah, I haven’t been doing too good with that.”

Jared had his beliefs and he attended religious services and prayed often. He felt close to God, but unlike Ashley did not describe religion as central or driving all of his actions.

Jared’s religious life is typical of the Assenters. When it comes to religious content they are likely to believe in a personal God, although they rarely have exclusivist views on religion (i.e., that only one religion is true or that all teachings of religion must be accepted). Assenters are most likely to fall in the middle of the spectrum on personal prayer and religious service attendance. They have not abandoned either practice, but neither are they regularly engaged like Abiders. The centrality of religion is relatively low for this group. When it comes to religious salience they are much more likely to say religion is somewhat or not important than they are to say it is very or extremely important. Although a sizable proportion report being somewhat close to God, Assenters are very unlikely to report feeling very or extremely close to God. They may
participate in public and private displays of religion, but religion is not integrated into their lives as it is for Abiders and that seems fine with them.

Recall that when Jared was asked about the importance of religion in his life he said, “Um, I would say that, as a Christian, I’m not like, deep into the faith.” Asked whether or not religion is the basis for how he lives his life, he said, “Um, no, but I could, I do, sometimes I think about it, when I’m making the important decision that I think might have a negative effect, but if it’s nothing major, I don’t even, I don’t think about it at all, I just do it.”

For many Assenters like Jared, God and religion are recognized and acknowledged, but not in a central or essential way, which is why we call them Assenters. They typically assent to the religious beliefs with which they were raised, but religion seems tangential to the rest of life, and that is generally fine with them. When considering alternative measures of religious expression Assenters are the least likely of the five religious profiles to report that they help other people or that they often think about the meaning of life. They are open to the idea of religion and see its value, yet they also seem content to maintain a loose connection to religion. As Jared put it, “I do pray. Before I didn’t, so I guess you could say I have become more [religious], but it’s not to an extreme; it’s not an extreme difference.” Talking again about the role of religion in his life, he said, “I mean, it’s there but I wouldn’t say, I wouldn’t say I fine-tune my life to make sure that I live by the Bible.”

The Adapters

The Adapters would probably score moderately on any overall scale of religiosity. In fact on an aggregate scale they might look very similar to the Assenters, with average or middle-of-the-road religiosity. However, latent class analysis allows us to explicate specific dimensions of religiosity and highlight some important distinctions between the Assenters and the Adapters. Earlier we introduced Diego and the problems that might arise when comparing him with Jared on scales of religiosity. Diego’s story provides a good example of why it is important to consider the varying dimensions of religiosity found among the Adapters.

Diego

At the time of our first interview with him, Diego was 18. He is Latino and lived on the West Coast with his mother and father, who had been married for thirty-six years. A much older brother (by seventeen years) lived nearby. Diego felt very close to his mother and described his relationship with his father as “okay.” The family had recently experienced a rough patch in their lives due to the alcoholism of Diego’s father. His father had quit drinking before the interview, however, and Diego reported that his family life had been much better since. Diego described his parents as sporadically religious in his childhood years. He went to a Catholic school for kindergarten and first grade, and during that time his parents attended Mass. After he left Catholic school his parents stopped attending Mass. When Diego was 16 he began attending youth group and Mass with his cousin and decided to go through first communion and confirmation just a year before our first interview. Eventually Diego’s parents began attending Mass again with him. Diego described a significant increase in his religious feelings in the year before the interview.

When asked if he saw himself as religious or spiritual, he said, “Religious, yeah.” He believed in a personal God, “a sort of father figure who is always there for [him].” He prayed every night.
and tried to attend Mass weekly, though other commitments, such as schoolwork, often got in the way. He stopped going to youth group because “life was too crazy with trying to graduate and all.” After his cousin stopped attending youth group or Mass regularly he felt less inclined to go.

(p.46) In talking about how important religion was in his life, he said it was “very central.” He said that religion definitely influenced what he did and provided him with a “moral system,” even if he did not regularly attend Mass. When he prays he feels “very close to God, like he is right there listening.” He believed prayer to be so important that he prayed every night, even when he was so tired that he would like to just go to sleep. He never missed a night.

The recent resurgence of religiosity and spirituality in Diego’s life made him happy. Even though he had been unable to keep up the public practice component of his religiosity, there was no sense that his beliefs or the importance of religion in his life had dropped off as his attendance had. Instead Diego adapted the various dimensions of religiosity to create a religious practice that worked for him. Two years later his description of his level of commitment to religion was much the same. When asked how he saw himself religiously or spiritually, he said:

Um, well I know I’m Catholic. But I think I’m, you know, I think like a lot of Catholics, I don’t adopt everything they say. I take it for what it is. I don’t try to follow it to the core. And I think God understands me like that. And spiritually-wise, I pray every day. Sometimes I go to church, sometimes I don’t…. I think, I would like to go to church more, but I don’t know if it’s like necessarily like the first thing on my list. I’m okay with like the place I am right now. I pray every day. I got, you know, I have everything I want, you know. I try to, you know, to be good, as whatever good is, but I try to be it. And uh, I think I’m satisfied with it. I think I’m okay with it.

He still believed in God, prayed regularly, and found that religion had a big impact in his life. He said things always “pop into” his head about what is right or wrong, and that would not happen without his being so close to God. He believed God kept him safe and supported him. Diego didn’t talk to any of his friends, or even his parents, about his beliefs, frequent prayers, or answers to prayer. He kept it to himself; it was his own personal faith. Although he had occasional doubts, especially when he thought God was not answering his prayers, he remained pretty consistently connected to God on his own.

As is evident in Diego’s story, the Adapters share some similarities with the Abiders, including a consistently reported belief in God. Unlike the Abiders, however, a minority of Adapters also reported belief in a less personal, uninvolved version of God. Another trait that distinguishes (p. 47) these two profiles is that Adapters are much less likely to have an exclusivist view of religion compared to Abiders, instead resembling Assenters on this question. Adapters are more pluralistic and generally accepting of whatever religion or version of religious beliefs people choose for themselves. In addition these nonexclusive beliefs are often applied to their own faith; they report being free to pick and choose for themselves which constellation of religious beliefs and practices best suits them. Recall how Diego described his Catholic faith: “I know I’m Catholic. But I think I’m, you know, I think like a lot of Catholics, I don’t adopt everything they say, I take it for what it is. I don’t try to follow it to the core. And I think God understands me like that.”
Later in the interview he talked about having read some parts of the Old Testament that were difficult to understand and accept: “But that’s one thing that threw me off. And it kind of made me go, you know. But all it did was it reiterated the fact that I should pick and choose what I believe, you know? That I don’t have to take the whole thing for what it is. That I can take parts and pieces, you know? And I know a lot of people say, well you have to take the whole thing. And I don’t think you should, you know?”

Diego’s nonexclusive views of religion extend beyond the particularities of his own Catholic faith to people of other religions as well.

*Interviewer:* Do you think other people who don’t have a religious faith should have one?

*Diego:* I, it’s up to them, to the person in charge, and I’m sort of indifferent. I don’t, if they don’t have one, then I don’t think they should have one.

*Interviewer:* And why is that?

*Diego:* ‘Cause it is a personal choice, you know some people need the support, I need the support, other people just don’t.

*Interviewer:* Do you think it is okay for someone of one religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one religion?

*Diego:* I think it’s, I think it’s up to that person whether they want to take, you know, I wouldn’t do that, but …

*Interviewer:* It’s up to them? Why is that?

*Diego:* Because this is a personal choice, and it’s, no one can make that choice except them.

When it comes to religious conduct the Adapters are an interesting group. They are much less likely than the Abiders to attend religious services once a week or more. In fact their answers to questions about religious service attendance are very similar to those for the Assenter religious profile. Though the Adapters are the most evenly spread across the three response categories (regularly, sporadically, and never), both Adapters and Assenters are most likely to fall in the middle category of attendance. Thus membership in the Adapter versus Assenter profiles is not necessarily distinguished by levels of attendance, making it difficult to predict who will be in the Adapter profile by looking at religious service attendance alone. Looking at prayer, we see a somewhat different picture. On this indicator the Adapters look a little more like the Abiders than the Assenters. Like Abiders, the highest probability is that Adapters will pray at least once a day, and they are unlikely to report that they never pray. However, they are much more likely than the Abiders to fall somewhere between daily and never praying.

With regards to our alternative measure of religious practice, the Adapters are the most likely of all five profiles to regularly help others in need outside of organized volunteer opportunities. So although the Adapters might not be as involved in religious institutions or pray quite as much as the Abiders, they do serve others more frequently. Whether or not this always takes on a
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religious or spiritual connotation can be debated. Surely helping others is not always consciously motivated by religiosity or viewed as religious practice per se, but increasingly scholars are calling for new analysis strategies that take into account the ways people practice their faith and spirituality that do not take institutional forms legitimized by organized religion and religious elites.5

The Adapters also exhibit relatively high levels of religious centrality, less than Abiders but more than Assenters. They have a high probability of reporting that religion is extremely or very important to them. Of all the indicators we use the Adapters are most similar to the Abiders when it comes to the closeness they feel to God. The majority of Adapters report feeling extremely or very close to God, in contrast to the Assenters, who were very unlikely to report this level of closeness to God.

The complex relationship between religious conduct and religious centrality found among Adapters is illustrated once again in Diego’s story. In spite of his recent decline in attendance at Mass and youth group, he still professes to be religious, saying that religion is part of his everyday life and has a significant impact on his life. His primary connection to religion is that he believes in God and prays regularly. (p.49)

Diego: I pray every night and I, whenever I need support, I, you know, I pray to God and ask for it.

Interviewer: So you believe in God?

Diego: Yeah.

Interviewer: And when you think about God, who or what is God to you?

Diego: I don’t know, I sort of think like, sort of like a father figure, like a person that, but like the perfect father figure, like the person that will love me no matter what the personal situation I’m in. The person that’s gonna stand by you no matter what, and that’s what I think, that’s what I see in him.

Interviewer: Do you tend to think of God as personal or impersonal?

Diego: Tend to think of him as personal.

Interviewer: Do you tend to think of God as active in human life or removed from human life?

Diego: I think he’s active.

Interviewer: Do you think of God as more loving and forgiving or demanding and judging or something else?

Diego: I think he’s more loving and forgiving.

In both interviews Diego frequently described how God supported him and helped him through life. He recounted several examples suggesting that the help he received was in response to his
prayers. In one such example he lost his wallet, prayed extensively, and gave up meat and sweets for Lent. Shortly thereafter he found the wallet. Finding his wallet, he said, was God’s response to his prayers and Lenten sacrifices.

Like other Adapters, Diego reported engaging in service to others. In his first interview he talked about volunteering at the local hospital. He started out volunteering through a class at school, but he continued after the class was over and ended up volunteering at the hospital for about a year and a half. He said that he stayed because he liked it and because it felt good to be helping people. Diego believed that helping others was important. Although he did not believe that people should be forced to do volunteer work, he did think it was something that people should do.

In addition to specific volunteer work Diego talked about trying to help others around him. He told a story about sticking up for someone whom he did not know well. His friends were spreading rumors about this person, and Diego called them out on it, asking them to stop spreading the rumors. Later in the interview he talked more about this impulse to help other people: (p.50)

I think, I think people do have a moral obligation to help others. I don’t know. I don’t want to impose anything, but like, I think that people do have maybe a sense of, or they should have a drive to maybe stick out their hand and help somebody up, you know. I don’t think that letting somebody fall and then just turning a blind eye to them is the right thing to do at all. You know, you can’t, you can’t let somebody go out the window and die there, you know, or to just let somebody stay on the course of self-destruction. You can’t do that. You have to stick out a hand.

Another feature of the Adapters that distinguishes them from other groups is that they are the most likely of the religious profiles to say they think about the meaning of life very often. Thinking about the meaning of life is not a typical measure of religiosity, and we are not arguing that this is a purely religious measure. However, when coupled in a latent class analysis with other, more standard measures of religiosity, this question reveals a unique group of personally religious youth who practice and express religion in adaptive ways.

Taking all of the survey measures together, we see that Adapters are a group of youth for whom religion is important, though they may be living it out in ways that are not as conventional as the Abiders’. On the one hand, they tend to feel very close to God, pray somewhat regularly, help others, and think relatively often about the meaning of life. However, they may or may not regularly attend church and are not very likely to hold exclusivist views about religion.

For some of the Adapters their religiosity may reflect an aversion to involvement in particular religious communities. For example, one of our interview participants classified as an Adapter was raised by her Pentecostal grandmother and great-grandmother. However, she grew frustrated with the expectations of how she had to dress and present herself and stopped attending despite expressing deep salience of religion in her life. She said, “I was raised Pentecostal … and I would have to go to church. I still do once in a while. But, it was just like I felt … like I am religious, but I just don’t like that you have to wear skirts all the time and can’t
wear pants. And, it’s just like you gotta be plain, like you can’t wear no kind of jewelry, nothing, no earrings, just skirts and dresses.”

Another reason some youth are adaptive in the ways they live their religion is that they or their families may have faced barriers to becoming or staying religiously involved over time. One example of this type of situation comes from a Latina we interviewed whose (p.51) parents divorced when she was 1 year old. When she was 10 her mother was put in jail for drug possession. She moved in with her father and stepmother, but they divorced when she was 15. Her mother took her to church occasionally when she was young, and she attended another church with a neighbor for a while in her early teens, but regular attendance had never been a part of her life. Her interview responses suggested that her parents were uninterested in religious involvement. However, they also may have felt they did not belong in a religious institutional setting, or at least did not have the time and energy to engage in this way, given the family’s struggles and illegal activities. Trying to sort out the causal ordering of why this family and young woman never consistently engaged in a religious institution and institutional forms of religious practice is difficult, but it likely has a connection with various social and structural barriers. Still, this young woman prays every night, says, “God is on my side,” and believes that he is a father figure to her. There are many youth like this in our study, whose family situation is such that getting involved and staying involved in a religious institution is a challenge. For many Americans the ability to find a religious institution that meets their needs within a reasonable distance (walking distance for many with no personal transportation), to find the time to attend (working around inflexible work schedules with brief opportunities for sleep), and to feel accepted for who they are (alternative family forms, addictions, depression) is extremely difficult and sometimes impossible. When maintaining a profile of religiosity in which every component is at the highest level is too challenging, individuals adapt. The Adapters tend to keep their personal or affective religiosity higher despite lower levels of institutionally based practice. This unique and adaptive packaging of religious conduct, content, and centrality sets the Adapters apart from groups like the Assenters. Although both groups might appear average on a traditional scale of religiosity, a closer examination of their religious mosaics reveals important differences in their lived religious experiences.

The Avoiders

Avoiders tend to score very low on all measures of religiosity. They do express belief in God, however, and on rare occasions they pray or attend a religious service. We call this group the Avoiders because it seems as if they are avoiding being either religious or irreligious. They are not Atheists nor dismissive of religion in their discussion of it, but (p.52) they are uninterested in having religion be a part of their life. They acknowledge religion and believe in a set of basic tenets, but they do not engage with religion at all.

Brandon

Brandon was 16 when we first interviewed him. He is white and lived in the Northwest with his mother, to whom he was very close. His parents divorced when he was in the eighth grade. His dad still lived nearby, and they saw each other about three times a week. Brandon felt a little closer to his mother than his father, whom Brandon described as the strict parent. Brandon’s older sister was away at college. Brandon spent a lot of time hanging out with friends, watching The Simpsons, and listening to rap music.
Brandon said that his family was never religious; he wasn’t raised that way. In the past few years he had been invited to some Christian youth groups a few times by friends, and he learned something about God there. He used to not believe in God, but at these youth group meetings he learned that “God does exist,” and now he believed in a God who “just sort of stands back and watches out for you.” He attended the youth groups, which he recalls as Catholic and Unitarian, only a few times, but the ideas stayed with him. He said he was “not really that into it” when explaining why he chose not to go to the meetings anymore, adding that people can be religious and spiritual without having to be a part of a congregation or go to religious services. Brandon was quite happy with his situation; he had some degree of belief but did not engage in any religious practices or otherwise act on these beliefs. He kept busy with school, where he was satisfied with the Bs and Cs he received, and he played a lot of sports. Hanging out with his friends, especially at parties where they drink, was fun for him.

He started off the second interview by announcing that a lot had changed in two years: “I was probably doing a whole bunch of dumb stuff. Smoking and not caring about school, and now I’m working thirty hours a week and going to college.” He said he got his life “back on track.” He had his own apartment and his girlfriend “sort of” lived with him. She stayed there three or four nights a week.

Much had happened in those two years between interviews. His mother’s Parkinson’s disease, which he had not even mentioned in the first interview, had gotten so bad that she had to move into an assisted living home. Then Brandon developed a blood clot in his leg and ended up in the hospital for two months. He considered his life-threatening medical emergency a major turning point in how he thought about life and how he lived it, and said that it brought his family closer together. His parents now got along much better.

In spite of all of the changes in his life, his views on religion remained essentially the same between interviews. When asked about his own religiosity in the second interview he said, “I’m hardly religious. I believe in God and stuff, but I don’t really live my life like that.” He denied being agnostic or atheist, saying only “I’m not religious.” He believed in God and said, “Maybe I prayed a couple of times in the hospital.” He still had a couple of friends who attend religious services often and were what he called “really religious,” but that did not interest him. He had nothing against it; religion just wasn’t his thing.

Brandon was also quite happy with how his life was going generally. He was attending community college with high hopes of being a police officer. He was proud of himself for turning his life around and his new self-sufficiency.

Like Brandon, Avoiders as a group report a belief in the existence of God. However, they are most likely to say that God is impersonal or uninvolved in daily life. They are very pluralistic and are extremely unlikely to report exclusivist views of religion. When it comes to religious conduct, there is about a 50–50 chance they will report never praying or praying moderately. Their reports of religious service attendance look similar to their reports of prayer: they are unlikely to attend once a week or more and most likely to never attend. With regard to religious centrality, they are very unlikely to say that religion is very or extremely important and similarly unlikely to report being very or extremely close to God. The Avoiders’ most common answer to the question about closeness to God is that God is either somewhat or extremely distant. Overall
this group seems nearly detached from religion, though they do still express a belief in God and at times some practice or connection to God.

Brandon’s story illustrates well the Avoider profile. In many ways his life looks similar to those youth who are categorized as Atheists: he does not engage in any religious practices or consider religion to be at all a part of his life. However, Avoiders like Brandon differ from Atheists in at least one significant way. Although Brandon describes himself as “not religious,” he does not seem ready to reject the idea of religion altogether. He believes that there is a God and does not have any particular opposition to religion. Religion just does not have a role in his own life. When asked why, he says he has just never been interested in religion. He summarizes his religious beliefs by saying, “I believe in God and I believe there are religions or there is religion, but I just don’t choose to go down that path.”

Summary
Taking eight survey items representing three core components of religiosity—content, conduct, and centrality—we have used latent class methods to map the patterns and dynamics in adolescent religiosity in the contemporary United States. Our results suggest there are five main profiles of religiosity for adolescents: Abiders, Adapters, Assenters, Avoiders, and Atheists. What is most interesting and new about our results is that they can be used to characterize different profiles within a larger group of youth who are normally considered to be moderately or nominally religious. We are able to separate the Adapters from the Assenters and the Avoiders from the Atheists and better understand how different these groups may be. For a summary of all five latent classes and the characteristics of each of them, see figure 2.2.

Descriptive analyses or studies of either predictors or consequences of religiosity usually conceptualize or operationalize religiosity as unidimensional, a construct that ranges from low to high in individuals. This requires using a single measure of religiosity or averaging across a set of measures. Either of these approaches eliminates interesting information about the ways youth package the various dimensions of religiosity within their religious identity. In the study of religiosity there have been increased calls for a better understanding of lived religion, or the ways individuals creatively enact the beliefs, practices, and salience of religiosity and spirituality in their own lives. Typically those arguing for a lived religion approach emphasize the usefulness of less structured or ethnographic methods to capture religiosity in its own forms and not impose a set of measurements that reflect institutional involvement and preference for Evangelical Christian forms of belief and practice. We concur with the value of such an approach and these research methods. We would add that there are new methods for the analysis of survey data that may also move us toward a better operationalization of lived religion. One such option is the method we have used: latent class analysis.

Latent class methods allow us to retain information about the interesting ways individuals combine the various dimensions of religiosity, some at higher levels than others. We return here
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to the image of adolescents crafting mosaics that represent their religious and spiritual (p.55) lives. Using the colored tiles of religious conduct, religious content, and religious centrality, adolescents balance the various colors and patterns of their mosaics. Although each individual mosaic is unique, when we step back we can begin to recognize patterns among these youth, shared strategies for creating the mosaics of their religious lives.

Several stakeholders can learn from the results we present in this chapter. For social scientists who study the influence of religiosity on other aspects of life, especially among adolescents, it may be important to consider these profiles of religiosity and how studying their causal influence may improve our understanding of the role of religion in (p.56) adolescence. Are there significant differences in the risk behaviors or well-being of the Adapters and the Assenters? Which group’s form of lived religion is more protective? It could be that the high religious salience of the Adapters helps them cope with life’s challenges better than the Assenters, but the Assenters’ higher likelihood of institutional engagement may link them to more adult supervision, higher expectations, and greater social capital than the Adapters. In addition this typological approach to religiosity may help us better understand how Atheists fare when it comes to well-being and risk behaviors. In an analytic model in which religiosity runs from low to high, the minority of Atheists are likely swamped by the experiences of the Avoiders, thus obscuring our understanding of how Atheists compare to the Abiders and others. Given that Atheist youth are willing to state unpopular beliefs, they may have a particularly strong sense of self that protects them against other struggles in adolescence. We explore some of these issues in chapter 3.

The implications of viewing religiosity in a typology framework as opposed to a low-to-high framework extend to religious institutions and leaders, parents, and those who work with youth in a variety of settings. Religiosity is complex and multidimensional, so programs for youth (and likely adults as well) should be designed to address this. Youth could be better understood by knowing the profiles of religiosity into which they tend to fit. Programs could be designed around the types of profiles we identified. Youth who do not attend services or youth group meetings regularly should not be assumed to have reduced commitment to their beliefs. Nor should anyone assume that lower religious involvement necessarily equates to lower affective religiosity or salience. Alternatively youth who are regularly involved in religious activities should not be assumed to have high levels of affective religiosity or feel particularly close to God.

We hope this chapter inspires readers to rethink their own definitions of religiosity and how they apply them. We have tried to offer a more nuanced understanding of what religiosity is and how its multiple components are packaged in the real world.

Notes:
(1) . For more information on latent class analysis, see Collins and Lanza, Latent Class.

(2) . The exact wording of the eight measures and their response options, our recoding of some response options, and distributions of each variable within our sample of adolescents who participated in both NSYR telephone surveys are displayed in table B.1 in appendix B.

(3) . Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann, “Atheists as ‘Other.’”
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