Conclusion

Lisa D. Pearce
Melinda Lundquist Denton

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Abstract and Keywords

The final chapter reviews the main arguments presented in the book and offers some concluding thoughts for those who are interested in the religious lives of youth. It begins with a review of the range of religious profiles found among adolescents in the United States, highlighting the importance of understanding the Adapters and Atheists, two groups whose unique religious mosaics have been previously overlooked or misunderstood. The chapter then examines the importance of considering the narratives of youth when studying their religious lives. Youth perceptions of their own religiosity do not always correspond to the picture that emerges from standard survey measures. Finally, social scaffolding in the lives of adolescents is reviewed, highlighting the important role of family, peers and religious institutions in the process of religious refinement among youth.

Keywords: religious profiles, narrative, family, peers, religious institutions, adolescent religiosity, youth religion

Youth are heated by Nature as drunken men by wine.

Aristotle

Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers.

Socrates
I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancieny, stealing, fighting.

Shakespeare

As the roaring of the waves precedes the tempest, so the murmur of rising passions announces the tumultuous change.... A change of temper, frequent outbreaks of anger, a perpetual stirring of the mind, make the child almost ungovernable.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

These quotes from prominent thinkers going back centuries demonstrate the long history of society’s generalizing the period of adolescence as turbulent and full of risk. G. Stanley Hall, widely recognized as the first scientist of adolescence, adopted the term “storm and stress” as a descriptor of adolescence, a time, he said, when youth are likely to question and contradict their parents, be particularly moody, and have a propensity for reckless and deviant behavior. Many parents of teenagers are probably enthusiastically nodding their heads right now, but some are not. Some are saying, “That’s not my daughter” or “That’s not my son.” People tend to stereotype adolescents in general as unstable and frustrating, but often categorize the ones they know and love as unique in positive ways.

Adolescents view themselves as unique as well. We asked the adolescents who participated in the NSYR in-person interviews how they think adults in society view teenagers, whether that view is accurate, and whether they themselves are viewed by adults in the same way as teenagers in general. The replies were surprisingly similar.

Interviewer: How do you think adults in this society view teenagers in general?

Participant: Um, I think one word sums it up. Pretty much hellions. [laughs] I don’t know how else to say it, um, even people in the church describe youth groups like that, but there are some adults who see kids as opportunity and potential, and some adults see them as just nothing, like they can’t hold the future.

Interviewer: The adults that see them as hellions, do you think that’s accurate?

Participant: I, I think so, yes.

Interviewer: How do adults in your life view you, in particular? Do they think of you as a hellion or ...?

Participant: No. I would think not. [laughs] Um, everyone I meet, I tell them about my faith, and I smile the whole time, um, I have two jobs right now and this one, I work at a theme park and they ask me to do the trash run, and if you knew the trash run at the theme park, it’s not very good, but I smiled and sang the whole time and um, one of the
vice presidents of the park was like, “You’re the only person I’ve seen happy to do the trash run.” I hope they don’t see me like that—a hellion.

Almost all of the in-person interview participants reported that adults see most adolescents as rebellious troublemakers. They believe this assessment is somewhat accurate, but they think there are plenty of youth who are responsible, mature, and prosocial, themselves included. It was rare for anyone to admit to being an unruly teenager.

These sentiments parallel where social scientists stand today on the character of adolescents and adults’ perceptions of them. Instead of viewing adolescence as universally and inevitably full of storm and stress, scholars such as Jeffrey Arnett posit that adolescence is not a challenge for all adolescents, but that it is the time in which struggles (p.173) with authority, emotional volatility, negative moods, and risky behaviors are most likely to occur. Society and its scholars conclude that adolescence is a time ripe for conflict with parents and other adults, impulsive moods, and unsafe behavior, but there is great variance in the extent to which individual youth themselves experience these issues. We can extend this general narrative to a discussion of adolescent religiosity as well. Although most adults and even youth might assume that adolescents avoid or shun religion or engage with it to a lesser degree than those at different points in the life course, we reveal a different reality in this book. It is time we set aside the overly vague and misleading notion that adolescence is a time of dramatically declining religiosity. Instead we must focus on appreciating the complexities of how adolescents experience and live religion across time and better recognize the role of parents, social networks, and religious institutions in supporting and challenging religious refinement in adolescence. Below we highlight key points from the book and discuss their implications for scholars who study youth, adults (such as parents, teachers, and youth practitioners) who care about youth, religious institutions, and youth themselves.

Understanding the Range of Religious Profiles
What does it mean to be religious? Many scholars have argued and this book further reiterates that religiosity is multidimensional. There are many different aspects to religion, and people choose to emphasize certain aspects more than others. Three of the main components of religiosity are what we label the three Cs: the content of religious beliefs, religious conduct (or practices), and the centrality of religion in one’s life. In other words, three common dimensions on which to evaluate or describe a person’s religiosity are the types of beliefs he holds, the public and private religious actions in which he participates, and the salience that the beliefs and practices have for the rest of his life.

Social scientists have done a thorough job of delineating the many dimensions of religiosity. Ethnographers have deftly conveyed the complexities of everyday religion as lived by people. Research using survey data to show patterns of religiosity in the population has been more limited in addressing the complexities of multidimensional religiosity for a couple of reasons. First, although dozens of high-quality survey measures exist to gauge the various dimensions of religiosity, it (p.174) is difficult to know how to put all the measures together to summarize a person’s religiosity in a holistic way. We have argued throughout this book that a unidimensional conceptualization of religion does not adequately capture the complexity of religion as it is lived out in people’s lives. Many individuals think about religion in linear terms: either someone is very religious, not very religious, or somewhere in between. This linear thinking oversimplifies
reality. Religiosity, unlike height or weight, cannot always be summarized on a scale running from low to high values. Our focus has been on adolescents, but our approach to measuring religion is one that can inform scholarship about religion across a variety of populations. A person-centered approach, such as that provided by the latent class analysis we use, allows us to account for the many dimensions of religion and how people piece these dimensions together in unique ways.

To say that religion is multidimensional and complex is not to say that there are no identifiable patterns at work in the religious lives of youth. On the contrary, the five religious profiles reflect relatively discrete and discernable patterns in the religious mosaics of youth. **Abiders** are those who are very religious on virtually every measure of religiosity we use. They are especially institutionally engaged. **Atheists**, like the Abiders, have religious mosaics that represent a consistent balance across the dimensions of religion. In this case, however, the tiles reflect consistent distance from religion. Atheists do not believe in God and do not identify with the various dimensions of religion. The religious mosaics of **Adapters** are notable for their emphasis on religious centrality, private religious conduct, and adaptive enactments of religiosity, such as helping others and thinking about the meaning of life. Their mosaics are more variable in the extent to which tiles of public religious practice are included in the design. The religious mosaics of **Assenters** are also variable along the dimension of religious conduct, both private and public. The common pattern among Assenters is that while their mosaics tend to reflect belief in a personal and involved God, they do not include tiles of intense religious centrality. Assenters are unlikely to say that religious faith is very important to them. **Avoiders** are those youth who maintain a very tenuous connection to religion in their lives, most often in the form of a belief in God. They avoid atheism as well as any notable religious engagement. Identifying these five religious profiles highlights the range of religious expression that exists in the adolescent population. In addition the profiles allow us to better understand the nuances of religiosity by moving away from a linear conception to a person-centered understanding of the unique ways people combine the various elements of their religious lives.

What do we learn from these five profiles of religiosity in the population? The multiple dimensions of religiosity are not always congruent in individuals’ lives. Any one individual may have within her religious mosaic tiles of religious devotion and tiles of relative disengagement. To be sure, this is not the case for all; there are plenty of youth who do demonstrate congruence across religious content, conduct, and centrality. But it is important to recognize and allow for the possibility that these dimensions may not always operate in concert. To better study and understand religiosity and its consequences for adolescents we need to appreciate its various forms.

Different from previous work that identifies ideal types of more congruent forms of religiosity in the population, identification of the five **A**s highlights two groups in particular that have been difficult to summarize and study: Adapters and Atheists. In the past the Adapters and Assenters and the Avoiders and Atheists have tended to be lumped together, yet we find important distinctions between them. The Adapters see religion as more salient to everyday life than do Assenters, even if they do not attend religious services more often. The cultural and family backgrounds of these two groups are also very different. Adapters are more likely to be African American or Latino, so cultural characteristics of their religious institutions are at play.
Adapters also tend to have parents with lower education and less income. They are more likely to have experienced family disruption such as divorce or residential moves. Compared to Assenters, Adapters face more barriers to becoming actively involved in public religious practice.

Adapters are an important group to consider in the larger scope of adolescent religion. When we examined alternative expressions of religion in the form of helping behaviors and time spent thinking about the meaning of life we found that these measures were a significant part of the overall profile of religiosity among the Adapters. This suggests that perhaps we need to expand our understandings of religious expression, not only among adolescents but among the adult population as well. It is possible that there are other behaviors or attitudes that are rooted in or related to religious expression that go unmeasured and unobserved when the focus is on conventional religious expressions such as religious service attendance, prayer, and particularistic religious beliefs. Increasing interest in social justice and increasing suspicion of institutional religious organizations might (p.176) be encouraging people to find new ways to act out their religious inclinations.7

The recognition that there are alternative ways of expressing religiosity should urge scholars of religion to continue to explore the religious meanings behind attitudes and behaviors previously not included in our rubrics of religion in an attempt to more accurately assess the role religion plays in people’s lives. For those who work with and are concerned with the lives of youth, we suggest they take seriously adaptive forms of religiosity. Youth who are not engaged in institutional religious practice are not necessarily uninterested in religion. Recognizing religious interest and commitment expressed in adaptive ways will allow a more complete understanding of the religious lives of youth while at the same time making more effective the outreach efforts and programs directed at youth.

It does seem that being an Abider is more protective than being an Adapter when it comes to outcomes such as substance use, sexual activity, and depression. This could be because the more regular institutional involvement of Abiders results in benefits tied to competencies and coping developed within religious institutions.8 It is likely also the result of certain social characteristics that make it easier to become and stay Abiders (see paragraph below). Thus although we argue that it is important to acknowledge the diverse ways in which religion is lived, we are not claiming that all types of religiosity are equally associated with adolescent well-being.

In addition to expanding our conceptualization of religiosity, the Adapters in our study raise another important issue for consideration by scholars as well as religious communities. We found that although Adapters report high levels of religious salience, they are no more likely than Assenters to engage in public religious practice. There are certainly multiple explanations for this; one that is worth highlighting is the social position of Adapters. As a group Adapters appear to face a greater number of life challenges: their parents have lower than average income, education, and residential stability; although they report being close to their parents, they are the least likely of the five As to be living with both biological parents. These life challenges and disruptions may discourage or limit engagement in public religious practice. The adaptive forms of religiosity we see among Adapters are likely a response, at least in part, to the
social contexts and family backgrounds that shape their lives. The implications of this finding will vary for different readers of this book. Scholars will see the importance of considering individual lives in social context and the need to account for (p.177) socioeconomic factors that can have such powerful influence in so many areas of people’s lives. Religious communities may be compelled to think more seriously about the potential barriers to religious engagement that are experienced by marginalized populations in our society. For some this may lead to a reevaluation of the extent to which religious communities are accessible to and welcoming of people whose lives may not conform well to current program content and schedules. For others this finding might encourage a deeper commitment to addressing inequalities that exist in our society and working to reduce those structural barriers that make it difficult for some adolescents to engage in religious communities.

We are not suggesting that structural barriers are the only issues involved in the less consistent religious involvement of Adapters. We are also not suggesting that the goal is necessarily to make Adapters look like Abiders. But for those Adapters who would like to be involved in or benefit from involvement with a religious community, it is certainly an issue that needs to be considered. The main point is that we should not assume that all religious disengagement is the result of personal choice or agency. There is often a complexity of factors at work.

The second religious profile that stands out in our analysis is that of the Atheists. The obvious distinction between Atheists and Avoiders is thatAvoiders have some professed belief in God and Atheists do not. Beyond this difference, however, Atheists tend also to have thought more seriously about life and the meaning of it. They can clearly articulate their beliefs and tend to be very intellectual. On the other hand, Avoiders do not think much about religion. Although these groups are distinct in many ways, most analyses of how religiosity relates to other life outcomes use survey measures of religiosity that combine these two groups. The experiences of Atheists, a very small part of the overall population, are then overshadowed by the experiences of Avoiders. Yet, our analysis in chapter 3 reveals differences in the well-being of these two groups. For example, Atheists are less likely to be depressed and have much higher educational aspirations than Avoiders. By separating out Atheists and studying them more carefully scholars will be better able to assess when religion and religious involvement offer unique contributions to the lives of youth who are engaged in them, and when religion operates similarly to other order-imposing systems of meaning and belonging such as atheism.

The distinctions between Avoiders and Atheists and their relative proportions in society are important for religious institutions and youth (p.178) ministers to understand as well. In our data Atheists make up only from 3 to 5 percent of the adolescent population at the two survey points. Therefore, rather than being overly alarmist about the relatively small risk that youth will abandon all belief or become anti-religious, religious institutions may want to focus more on the much larger proportion of youth who claim a belief in God even though religious conduct or centrality in their life is virtually nonexistent. These are the youth who seem to also struggle in other realms of life like subjective well-being, risky behaviors, and educational aspirations.

In general knowing the types of religiosity that are lived by adolescents and the other life characteristics and outcomes that go along with living a certain type of religiosity clarifies the range of adolescent experience. Then, instead of relying on larger group stereotypes—such as
that all adolescents are “hellions,” “tyrannize their teachers,” or are uninterested in thinking through their beliefs—those who study or work with youth can take a more tailored approach.

Acknowledging Adolescent Perceptions of Change

One of the strengths of the National Study of Youth and Religion is its incorporation of both survey data and in-person interview data. By drawing on both sources of data we can more fully assess the religious lives of the youth we study. There is much to be learned from the statistical analysis of survey data; our survey has generated a picture of overall religious stability among youth with some instances of religious change. Throughout this book, however, we have also allowed the voices of the youth themselves to inform our analysis and interpretation of the data. We believe that the in-person interviews are essential for uncovering some of the nuances and contradictions that can’t be resolved with survey data alone. By listening to youth talk about their faith we gain more insight into their own perceptions of religious stability and change in their lives. In particular it is through the voices of youth that we come to a better understanding of one of the puzzling paradoxes of our survey data: that in spite of average declines across a number of individual measures of religion, the majority of youth report religious stability or even increased religiosity in the years between the two time points of our study.

Paralleling the general sense of cognitive development that youth experience in adolescence, our interviews reveal that adolescence is a time when many youth begin to feel more ownership over their religiosity. What used to be beliefs and practices that they accepted from parents and other adults are recast as more personal. Numerous participants said they now “understand” things better or make their own decisions about their faith. Youth appear to value this personalization process, feeling more connected to a faith that they can claim as their own. However, this increased ownership of their faith rarely translates into higher levels of practice or religious engagement. In fact, as we discussed in chapter 5, ownership of one’s faith appears to be distinct from issues of religious belief or practice and may even accompany a decrease in practice. Regardless of the content of their religious beliefs or the practices in which they engage, a significant number of youth appear to have a more autonomous approach to religion as they move through adolescence.

As we outlined in chapter 5, this shift in perspective to ownership of one’s faith does not occur for all youth and results in a variety of outcomes when it does occur. It is debatable just how deep and consequential this shift is during adolescence; there are certainly youth who may personalize or take ownership of their faith in a way that is of little consequence in their lives. But for some, particularly Abiders and Adapters, for whom religion is already highly salient, the process of religious refinement appears to be significant and reflects an increase in religiosity that may not be captured by standard survey measures. Their reports of religious intensification offer yet another way to understand movement in the religious lives of youth, one we might not see if we limit our analyses to standard religion measures available through survey data. Though some youth are connected to religion by the thinnest of threads, others are highly engaged and desire to grow in their personal commitment to religion. Efforts to study, understand, and interact with the religious lives of youth must account for the full range of religious experience among adolescents. Much energy has been focused on religious decline among adolescents, yet many youth are maintaining their religious lives or even cultivating them further. They ought not to be overlooked either by the scholars who study them or the adults who care for them.
Those who are interested in the religious lives of youth—scholars, parents, religious leaders, and practitioners who work with youth—bring to the table their own understanding of what religiosity looks like and what constitutes religious change. Listening to youth talk about religious change and stability in their lives offers an opportunity to learn some important things from their responses. Whatever one thinks about the accuracy of their self-assessments, there is insight to be gained by listening to how they talk about religion and faith. We hear in their responses the complexity of religion. Some are able to articulate this far better than others, but youth in general seem quite aware of the multiple dimensions of religious experience and expression, though few would use this type of language to talk about it. More significant, as we listened to them discuss their religious lives we were reminded once again of the fallacy of congruence and the oversimplification that can result from assuming that people live out the different facets of religion in consistent ways. Youth are quite able to combine varying levels of content, conduct, and centrality in ways that may or may not make sense in a traditional framework of low to high religiosity. The variety of adolescent perceptions of religion reaffirms our commitment to a person-centered approach to studying religion, one that can account for this multidimensionality as well as the complexity and variation in how the dimensions are packaged together.

Beyond the study of religion these conversations with youth highlight for other interested parties the importance of taking seriously adolescent perceptions of religion. Religious communities, parents, and others who hope to engage youth in conversations about faith would do well to recognize these issues and leave room in the conversation for youth to come with their different mosaics and grapple with the complexity that these mosaics present. We heard youth say that a better understanding of their religion is one important aspect of taking ownership of their faith. Rather than serving as a threat to a preconceived notion of what constitutes religiosity and religious development, adolescent self-assessments and the incongruence they entail can serve as an opportunity to engage youth in conversations about their faith and help them better understand their religious traditions. Traditions will vary in their emphasis on the different dimensions of religion and their responses to the different mosaic patterns that emerge among their youth. By taking seriously the ways that youth view their own religious lives, adults may be better able to meet youth wherever they are in the process of religious refinement and guide, challenge, and support them through the process.

Scaffolding Adolescents to Thrive
We anticipate that many who read this book will be interested in the factors that relate to shifts over time across the various profiles or waxing and waning within profiles. Given that many before us have done comprehensive analyses of survey data to locate key characteristics of youth and experiences that seem tied to religious change, we focus on a unique but resounding theme that emerges from the NSYR interviews. As we reported in chapter 6, youth are most likely to make well-founded and sustainable refinements to their religious identities when they are well scaffolded in the process by parents, peers, and religious institutions.

Social scaffolding is the process whereby influential others serve as a support system while adolescents strengthen their internal sense of being. This involves knowing where youth are in the religious refinement process (e.g., are they currently perplexed by any particular belief...
issues, and if so, which ones?) so that scaffolding can be located right at the base of that particular process. This allows the youth some freedom in refining what she believes, as well as support to fall back on and models to observe. Being close enough so that youth know that the scaffolding is there, but far enough away to allow them some freedom in exploration and expression seems key to the process. This finding again highlights the importance of recognizing key forms of variance in youth.

Prior research has shown that family religious background and experiences in youth are significantly related to religious change during adolescence and young adulthood. The more parents attend religious services and value religion’s role in everyday life, the more likely their child will be and remain religiously involved and engaged. However, when there is religious conflict or disagreement between parent and child (especially when a parent is very religious on every dimension and the child is not), evidence suggests that parent-child relationships are strained and youth are more likely to participate in delinquent behavior. Thus parental religiosity can be perceived in a variety of ways. As the scaffolding perspective suggests, when parents are able to model a high level of religiosity in combination with warmth and support, children are more likely to feel able to make their own informed decisions about their personal religious mosaics, and this usually leads them to choose to maintain an engaged faith. As scholars continue to study factors that are associated with religious change in adolescence, consideration must be given to the social context, networks, or quality of relationships in which major life changes or key events (e.g., the death of a loved one, moving away from home, being exposed to new friends with different belief systems, becoming sexually active) are experienced. It is often these systems of social support that determine whether critical life experiences bolster or threaten the religious profiles youth have developed.

(p.182) On the practical side parents, adults who work with youth, and especially religious institutions should consider the forms of social scaffolding they provide. Is the appropriate level of social scaffolding in place? Do they have a thorough understanding of where the youth they care for and work with are in terms of religious and spiritual refinement as well as in other realms of life? Have they provided enough space for youth to feel that they are able to make autonomous decisions and develop a faith they can call their own? Some adults are more comfortable than others with providing youth this space. Our analysis of the NSYR data suggests it is vital that adults recognize the importance of youth feeling that they have some space to explore their own beliefs and sources of meaning with loving and honest adults and peers providing guidance and support.

Youth seem to thrive when they feel loved for who they are and trusted to explore their own beliefs, especially when they have role models from whom to draw advice and support. Youth especially struggle when no one seems genuinely interested in them as a unique individual, and when either little or no scaffolding is provided or scaffolding is overapplied. An example of overscaffolding is Michael’s mother, who melts into tears when he tries to vocalize doubts he is having over God’s existence. She is understandably frustrated that he is not accepting what she has taught him about God, but the result of her behavior is Michael’s feeling that he cannot trust her with his faith struggles in the future. If forced to admit it, Michael’s mother has probably had many of the same doubts herself. Being honest with him about this (as Diego’s mother was with him) and providing him the support to process his doubts is likely to be better for him and
their relationship. In addition the opportunity to verbalize his doubts and have his mother’s help in thinking through his questions could facilitate a better understanding of the faith he has begun to question. Instead his mother’s attempt to force him to accept what she wants him to believe has contributed to Michael’s turning away from a religion that produces doubts he can’t reconcile.

Youth themselves can make use of these findings as well. When it comes to their own faith journeys, they can look to the adults and institutions around them for the scaffolding they need. When they are not being fully understood or getting the appropriate level of support they may be able to talk with the adults around them to ask for modifications in the scaffolding. Youth can also learn to serve as scaffolding for each other. In fact in many ways adolescents understand each other better than adults can. They are experiencing many of the same life changes at the same moment in history and can offer encouragement to one another in the process of religious refinement.

Final Thoughts
This book is about getting beneath the surface, pushing past generalities and stereotypes, and trying to really understand the primary profiles of religiosity in adolescence, how they are refined over time, and other life characteristics that go along with these unfolding forms of faith and meaning. Youth are not all hellions, and they do not all walk away from religious beliefs and practices in adolescence. Neither are the majority of youth extremely religiously or spiritually engaged. Adolescents exhibit an interesting variety of religious mosaics, and many struggle to sort through how beliefs and practices form and are formed by their lives and understanding of the world. For scholars, parents, practitioners, or religious institutions to assume any less, or to oversimplify their approach to reaching the variety of youth refining their ideas about religion, is to shortchange themselves and the youth they care about. (p.183)

Notes:
(1) G. S. Hall, Adolescence.
(2) Arnett, “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered.”
(3) Cornwall et al., “Dimensions of Religiosity.”
(4) Ammerman, “Golden Rule Christianity”; Bender, Heaven’s Kitchen; D. D. Hall, Lived Religion; McGuire, Lived Religion.
(5) Chaves, “Rain Dances.”
(8) Smith, “Theorizing.”
(9) Kanazawa, “Why Liberals.”
(10) Smetana, Campione-Barr, and Metzger, “Adolescent Development.”
Conclusion


