

Religion's Role in the Development of Youth

Geoffrey L. Ream

Cornell University

Researchers and policymakers generally underestimate the *prevalence* of religion among America's youth, the *impact* of religion on their lives, and their *agency* over their own religious and spiritual development. A more accurate and youth-focused understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of youth and adolescents should inform policies and practices regarding religion and youth. Best practices are guided by a *youth development* perspective, which capitalizes on youths' own strengths and assets and trusts them to make informed decisions regarding their own lives in order to ensure positive outcomes and preparedness for adulthood.

Prevalence of Youth Religiousness

Gallup poll data have tracked the proportion of American teenagers who attend religious services regularly as hovering just under half, and this has remained steady since 1977. Young women are somewhat more faithful in their attendance than young men (46% vs. 40%). With regard to denominational affiliation, 52% of American youth (and 51% of American adults) are Protestant, 26% (24%) Catholic, 2% (2%) are Jewish, 3% (2%) are Mormon, 8% (9%) are some other denomination, and 9% (9%) are unaffiliated with religion. When asked to compare themselves to their parents, 65% are "very" or "somewhat" confident that they will be more religious than their parents (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999).

Nearly all (95%) teens believe in God or a universal spirit and 86% believe that Jesus Christ is God or the Son of God, but only 67% believe in life after death, and 52% have confidence in organized religion. Less than half, however, give religion a central role in their lives: 42% pray alone frequently and 39% consider their own religious beliefs to be very important. Given these prevalence statistics, it is important to regard individual spirituality and participation in religious institutions not as a sidebar issue, but as an important consideration in assessing youths' developmental assets and liabilities (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999).

Religion, Risk, and Resiliency

Numerous studies have demonstrated that religion acts as a source of *resiliency*, a buffer against negative environmental influences (such as poverty and racial discrimination) leading to negative consequences (such as depression and delinquency). Religion acts as a source of resiliency by adding legitimacy to regulations against maladaptive behaviors and providing an adaptive alternative. Major religious belief systems contain prohibitions against substance use, promiscuity, violence, and stealing (Donahue, 1995). Youth who

internalize these values are less likely to engage in risk behaviors even when circumstances motivate them to do so. Religion has a particularly strong effect on individual-level behavior in communities with a high proportion of residents attending religious services regularly, presumably because religion adds legitimacy to community-level as well as individual-level prohibitions against risk behavior. Young people adopt religious belief systems because of the personal benefits that religion and spirituality offer to them. In religious involvement, youth seek a sense of belonging and positive relationships with peers and adults in a religious community, and also a connection with God and higher powers which provides a sense of meaning and purpose.

Specific populations of youth take advantage of specific resiliency functions of religion. Religion empowers both individuals and communities. Urban Latino, African-American, Jewish, and Muslim communities draw cohesion from a shared common bond of religion. This empowers them not only to provide a positive environment for youth, but to work for social justice. Religion connects immigrant families with their culture and language of origin as they cope with assimilation pressures. Religious organizations also serve an important role in delivering social services to inner city neighborhoods where, in many cases, government-based facilities are ineffective or missing and religious organizations are the only institutions left with buildings and personnel capable of providing social services (Ramsay, 1998; Trulear, 2000).

Although spirituality serves as a special source of resiliency for many special populations of youth, it can be a risk factor for gay, lesbian, and other sexual-minority youth. Many major religious groups teach that same-sex attraction and gender atypicality are psychopathological and that to adopt a sexual-minority identity is to participate in a sinful lifestyle. Although religious people do not necessarily harbor anti-gay attitudes, religion-based intolerance obstructs the access of sexual-minority youth to the full benefits of religious involvement. This obstruction occurs on the individual level, as more conservative religious groups close their doors to "practicing homosexuals" or insist that sexual-minority youth have to change via therapy. It also occurs on the social and political level, as conservative religious groups pressure schools to leave scientifically neutral or gay-positive information about sexual orientation out of sexuality education curricula and not to address victimization based on perceived sexual orientation as a specific problem (Ream, 2003).

Religious and Spiritual Development

Young people's individual religious choices are a product of their upbringing and of the available religious options. The most important factor, however, is youths' own spiritual preferences and agency. Youths' style of attachment to parents determines how likely they are to follow in their parents' religious footsteps. Securely attached youth are likely to adopt the faith (or lack of faith) of their parents. Insecurely attached youth are likely to

distance themselves from their parents either by ceasing religious attendance or by joining a different religious organization and seeking attachment and family there (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Youth also change their pattern of religious involvement because of peer invitation or to avoid cliques, but peers do not have a strong influence on youths' deeply held spiritual beliefs. When motivated to change religious affiliation, youth generally switch to as similar of organizations as they can find that have the desired characteristics that were missing in the ones they left.

This characterization of youths' religious involvement as mainly a matter of their own choice and agency is at considerable variance with that of traditional social and psychological theory. Traditional perspectives assume that young people's religiousness is mainly a function of the strength of socialization pressures around them and youths' own pliability to them. Empirical evidence has proven this false. Rather than being dull and compliant to the wishes of adults, young people seriously seeking spiritual growth and commitment tend to avoid religious contexts that are adult-oriented and paternalistic. When asked what was figural in their spiritual development, youth are more likely to mention a youth-oriented event such as a church camp or a trip to Israel rather than a ritual such as Confirmation or Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Many who have been through these rituals perceive them be adult-oriented and unassociated with any real change in status. Religious organizations that successfully foster youth involvement offer youth-oriented contexts of spiritual development, but also provide youth with a role in the larger religious community that is consistent with their almost-adult status (Ream & Witt, 2003).

Cults

The potential exists for youth spiritual and religious development to take a non-traditional trajectory toward a new religious movement. The potential for youth to become involved in cults is a legitimate cause for concern. However, the word "cult" as it is used conventionally encompasses both *dangerous cults*, which use deceptive recruiting practices and mind control and threaten proselytes with harm should they leave, and *new religious movements* (NRM's), which have beliefs that are at variance with mainstream religions but are otherwise benign. Dangerous cults, such as Heaven's Gate or the Branch Davidians, are rare, and are much more likely to target young professionals than they are to recruit youth and adolescents, which have little to offer such a group in terms of money and power.

Some even invoke public fear of cults in order to express concern about the *cult following* of cultural phenomena such as Marilyn Manson, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, and Harry Potter. Confusing the issue further is Evangelical Christianity's Counter-Cult Movement, whose main targets are ostensibly Christian groups with doctrines that vary

significantly from those of mainstream Christianity. To the Counter-Cult Movement, The Creativity Movement (formerly World Church of the Creator) and the Children of God (a.k.a. "The Family") are classified as cults, but so are the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Finally, although the existence of an underground Satanic plot to proselytize youth has never been proven, one survey estimates that 90% of Americans believe that such a thing exists (Robinson, 2001). Although the task of protecting youth against cults is complicated because of religious politics, "cult" is not entirely in the eye of the beholder, and some groups put their members at serious risk. Electronic and print resources published by and for ex-members of high-control groups are useful tools for ascertaining whether or not a young person really could be in danger.

Recommendation: A Youth Development Approach

According to a Youth Development perspective on religion and spirituality, the appropriate role of concerned adults is to serve as a resource and facilitate a process over which youth themselves have ultimate control (Ream & Witt, 2003). If parents compel religious attendance strongly enough to damage the youth-parent relationship, it will likely have the opposite effect to the one intended. The strength and stability of youths' relationships to religious parents, other involved adults, and peers motivates them to invest in those relationships via religious participation. This helps them to begin or strengthen an existing personal relationship to God and higher powers to which they are introduced by religious attendance. Should they develop such a relationship, it usually becomes their main motivation for religious participation. This relationship is important if the goal is to ensure that they will remain involved in religion and continue to receive its benefits across major life transitions, such as going to college, when pre-existing personal ties can no longer hold them to a religious affiliation on their own.

In addition to respecting and encouraging a young person's own spiritual agency, concerned adults must also guard youths' religious and spiritual boundaries outside of the family. Christian "parents' rights" activists pressure schools to withhold important sexuality and reproductive health information from youth, and schools are fully justified in upholding youths' own right to accurate information. Parents' rights groups also lobby against schools' efforts to specifically address problems of victimization and harassment based on perceived sexual orientation. Schools are justified in resisting these efforts as well, upholding their responsibility to keep all youth safe and healthy. Stamping out any visible expression of religion within the school walls, however, would not be in keeping with Youth Development ideology. Student-led religious study and discussion groups, as long as they do not become sources of aggressive proselytizing or religion-based intolerance, are consistent with a youth development approach.

Too often, religion in the lives of youth is ignored as of marginal importance, or becomes a means by which adults carry out their agendas for youth. Rather than specifying a role

for youth in adult politics and institutions that is not necessarily in the youths' best interests, a youth development perspective on religious and spiritual development calls for concerned adults to respect young people's own agenda. Ultimately, the religious institutions that grow will be those that relevant to, attentive to the needs of, and a worthy investment for youth.

References

Donahue, M. J. (1995). Religion and the well-being of adolescents. *Journal of Social Issues, 51*(2), 145-160.

Gallup, G. J., & Lindsay, D. M. (1999). *Surveying the religious landscape: Trends in U.S. beliefs*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing.

Kirkpatrick, L. A., & Shaver, P. R. (1990). Attachment theory and religion: Childhood attachments, religious beliefs, and conversion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 29*(3), 315-334.

Ramsay, M. (1998). Redeeming the city: Exploring the relationship between church and metropolis. *Urban Affairs Review, 33*(5), 595-626.

Ream, G. L. (2003). Religion and sexual orientation in America. In J. R. Miller, R. M. Lerner, L. B. Schiamberg & P. M. Anderson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of human ecology* (Vol. 2: I-Z, pp. 608-613). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio.

Ream, G. L., & Witt, P. A. (2003). Organizations serving all ages. In S. F. Hamilton & M. A. Hamilton (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Development* (pp. 49-74). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Robinson, B. A. (2001). *Has ritual abuse happened outside of day care centers?* Retrieved October 13, 2003, from http://www.religioustolerance.org/ra_real.htm

Trulear, H. D. (2000). *Faith-based initiatives and high-risk youth: First report to the field*. Philadelphia, PA: Public-Private Ventures.

