

*RELIGION AND U.S. SECONDARY  
SCHOOL STUDENTS  
Current Patterns, Recent Trends, and  
Sociodemographic Correlates*

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*This study used large nationally representative samples of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students to examine current patterns, recent trends, and sociodemographic correlates of religiosity among American adolescents. The results indicate that approximately 60% of American young people feel that religion is an important part of their life, 50% regularly attend religious services, and the vast majority report an affiliation with a specific religion. Trend data suggest that key indicators of religiosity have been relatively stable for nearly a decade among 8th and 10th graders and for more than a quarter century among high school seniors. Bivariate and multivariate analyses of the relationships between selected sociodemographic factors and the religion measures indicate that younger students, girls, Black and Latino youth, more affluent youth, rural youth, and Southern youth are generally more religious than their older, male, White, less affluent, urban, and non-Southern counterparts.*

**Keywords:** religion; adolescents; trends

**Despite social scientists' predictions** of a decline in the importance of religion and its role in U.S. society (i.e., secularization), interest in issues related to spirituality and religion has grown significantly in recent years (see Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 1996). Evi-

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dence for this growth includes an increase in the number of books, articles, policy conferences, and other venues through which religion and its role in contemporary U.S. society are being discussed. In addition to the growing interest in religion in various popular venues, there has also been a growing interest in religion as a topic for scholarly examination (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). According to Sherkat and Ellison (1999), "Scholarly examinations of religious beliefs, participation and affiliation have focused on three elements: (a) the distribution of beliefs and commitments, (b) trends in beliefs and attachments, and (c) predictors of religiosity" (p. 365).

Although research on U.S. adults' religious beliefs, participation, and affiliations has increased in recent years, considerably less attention has been given to the social distribution, trends, and predictors of religion among U.S. adolescents. In fact, a review of 60 child and adolescent development textbooks published during the past 30 years found that only 2 of the texts had chapters that included the topic of religion in a chapter title, 5 had what might be considered an extensive discussion of religion, 9 mentioned religion only briefly, and 44 had no mention of religion at all (Thomas & Carver, 1990). Consistent with the findings of this earlier review, a more recent examination of research published in child and adolescent journals also found a general neglect of the topic (Donelson, 1999). For example, for the 5-year period from 1993 through 1997 the journal *Adolescence* had only six articles related to religious issues, *Genetic Psychology* had only three, the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* had one, and the *Journal of Early Adolescence* had none (Donelson, 1999).

Even in adolescent journals where religion has been a relatively frequent topic of research (e.g., the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* had 11 religion-related articles between 1993 and 1997; Donelson, 1999), the focus largely has been on the relationship between religion and adolescent problem behavior (e.g., substance use, precocious sexual involvement, eating disorders) rather than on adolescent religiosity itself as a topic of substantive importance (see Bahr & Hawks,

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1995; Donahue & Benson, 1995; Thornton & Camburn, 1989; Wallace & Forman, 1998; Wallace & Williams, 1997 for reviews).

Given the growing scholarly and societal interest in religion's role in Americans' life and the paucity of research conducted on adolescents, the social distribution, trends, and demographic correlates of U.S. young people's religious life is an important topic for empirical investigation. The purpose of this study is to begin to explore this topic and to provide baseline data for future investigations of religion among U.S. youth. In this article, we selectively review past research on U.S. youths' religiosity and investigate empirically (a) the distribution of important measures of adolescents' religious belief, participation, and affiliation; (b) trends in these measures over time; and (c) the extent to which key sociodemographic variables relate to these measures.

## BACKGROUND

It is widely accepted that religious involvement is a multidimensional concept incorporating, at minimum, dimensions of organizational, nonorganizational, and subjective religiosity (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995). From a developmental perspective, Philip Rice distinguished five dimensions of religion for adolescents: "1) ritualistic—active participation in rituals, 2) experiential—personal questions and beliefs about a Supreme Being, 3) ideological—acceptance or rejection of church doctrine, 4) cognitive—religious knowledge, and 5) conceptual—the extent to which religious beliefs, attitudes, and participation influence behavior in other areas of life" (as cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 263). Examining developmental changes in youths' relationship with God or a Supreme Being provides an alternative to Rice's dimensional approach to understanding religious issues during adolescence (Muuss, 1996). A review of research on religion and adolescents, however, shows that by far, the ritualistic, experiential, and conceptual dimensions of religion have been the focus of most of this work. Identified correlates of multiple dimensions of religiosity are more extensive in the adult research literature than in the adolescent literature. Thus, the review that follows incorporates significant findings from both literatures to better identify potential correlates of multiple dimensions of religiosity for American youth.

**PATTERNS AND TRENDS IN U.S. YOUTHS' RELIGIOSITY**

Although religion is not a central topic of adolescent research, the extant theoretical and empirical research suggests that religion is a key influence in the lives of young people (Hyde, 1990; Wallace & Williams, 1997). In fact, in one published national poll, young people indicated that religion was the second-strongest influence in their lives, second only to their parents (and exceeding their peers, teachers, and the media) (Lerman, 1998). Consonant with this finding, past research indicates that beliefs, practices, and affiliations favorable toward religion are widespread among U.S. youth. For example, data collected in the late 1980s indicate that 95% of U.S. teens aged 13 to 17 years believe in God (or a universal spirit), 80% say that religion is at least fairly important to them, 91% believe in heaven, and 76% believe in hell (Bezilla, 1993; Gallup & Bezilla, 1992; Smith, 1992). With regard to their religious practices, 55% of teens (aged 13 to 17 years) reported that they attend church weekly, 42% reported that they frequently pray alone, nearly one half (48%) reported that they have attended church or synagogue within the past 7 days, and 54% report that they read the Bible monthly or more often (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Gallup, 1999; Gallup & Bezilla, 1992).

In addition to research on the distributions of adolescents' religious beliefs, practices, and affiliations, a small body of research has focused on the extent to which U.S. youths' religiosity has changed over time. According to Donahue and Benson (1995), the best data for examining trends in adolescent religiosity are from the Monitoring the Future study (MTF) (Johnston, Bachman, & O'Malley, 2001) of high school seniors. Past examinations of Monitoring the Future data reveal declines in high school seniors' weekly church attendance from 41% in 1976 to 31% in 1991 (Smith, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Interestingly, research that includes a wider age range of young people suggests that there may have actually been a modest increase in teenage church attendance in recent years—from 47% in 1977 to 55% in 1997 (Gallup, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

Prior work on young people's religiosity, as measured by religious importance and religious nonaffiliation, reveals a trend, albeit small, toward increasing secularization (Smith, 1992; Wallace & Williams, 1997). For example, between 1976 and 1990 the percentage of high

school seniors reporting no religious affiliation increased from 11% in 1976 to 15% in 1990 (Wallace & Williams, 1997). Similarly, the proportion of high school seniors who reported that religion was very important to them in 1976 (29%) experienced a slight decline by 1990 (26%) (Smith, 1992). The extent to which key indicators used to gauge adolescent religiosity (e.g., attendance, importance, affiliation) have continued to decline, stabilized, or reversed since the early 1990s is largely unknown.

#### **INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY CORRELATES OF U.S. YOUTHS' RELIGIOSITY**

According to Sherkat and Ellison (1999), religious beliefs and behaviors are a function of a number of individual, family, and community sociodemographic factors. Important individual sociodemographic correlates of religiosity include age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Among adolescents, research on the relationship between these sociodemographic variables and religiosity suggests that younger adolescents are more religious than older adolescents, that girls are more religious than boys, and that young people of color are, on average, more religious than their White counterparts (Donahue & Benson, 1995).

Key family correlates of adolescents' religious beliefs and behaviors include demographic factors (e.g., parents' education and marital status), the religious denomination to which the family belongs, and family variables more closely linked to adolescents' religiosity, such as their parents' religious attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Hood et al., 1996). Over the past several decades, the U.S. family has experienced tremendous change—change that might have important implications for religion among U.S. young people. Some of the most important changes that have occurred in the U.S. family are increases in single-parent families, increases in women's employment outside of the home, and increases in parents' educational attainment (Bianchi, 2000; Hoffman, 1989; South & Tolnay, 1992; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

Although researchers have hypothesized that family factors have a significant influence on adolescents' religiosity (Hood et al., 1996), relatively little research has examined explicitly the relationship between family sociodemographic variables and adolescents' religious

beliefs, behaviors, and affiliations. For example, as more parents raise their children alone, and as more women are involved in the labor force, their ability to be involved in religion may have decreased, resulting in lower levels of religious involvement among young people. Alternatively, in the absence of a spouse, single parents may increase their involvement with religious institutions as a source of spiritual and social support. To date, these and other related hypotheses remain largely untested. Accordingly, the relationship between family factors and adolescent religiosity is an area ripe for empirical investigation.

In addition to individual and family factors, community-level factors have also been found to be important correlates of religion (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Two important contextual or community variables that past research has examined among adults (and that might also be important for adolescents) include urbanicity (e.g., rural vs. urban and suburban) and region of the country (see Greeley, 1989; King, Elder, & Whitbeck, 1997; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). Research examining urban-rural differences in religiosity shows that residents of rural areas are more religious than are residents of large urban areas (King et al., 1997; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). With regard to region, persons who reside in the Southern United States have been found to be more religious than those who live outside of the South (Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1989; Greeley, 1989; Nelsen & Potvin, 1981; Taylor & Chatters, 1991).

#### **THIS STUDY**

The research questions that motivate this study include the following: (a) How religious are U.S. young people (as measured by the importance that they ascribe to religion, their attendance at religious services, and their affiliation with a religious denomination)? (b) To what extent, if any, has their level of religious commitment and involvement changed in recent years? and (c) Are the individual, family, and community factors that past research has identified as important predictors of adults' religiosity also important correlates of religiosity among young people?

Although previous investigations provide some insight into these questions, research in this area generally has a number of important substantive and methodological limitations. These limitations include

the following: (a) much of the research focuses on young adults (i.e., college students) rather than on early, middle, or late adolescents; (b) it is based on data that is a decade or more old; (c) its findings are based on samples that are often small, limited to a single location, and that are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically homogeneous (e.g., White middle class); (d) it often fails to conceptualize and examine religion as a multidimensional construct; (e) it does not identify the extent to which trends in religion (observable in the adult population) also exist among young people.

In an effort to begin to address a number of these limitations, this study used large nationally representative samples of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students to investigate empirically (a) current patterns in U.S. adolescents' religiosity; (b) recent trends in their religiosity; and (c) the relationship between their religiosity and a number of individual, family, and community-level geographic variables that past research has identified as important.

#### DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study are drawn from the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future study (Johnston et al., 2001). The design and methods are summarized briefly; a detailed description is available elsewhere (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1996). The study used a multistage sampling design to obtain nationally representative samples of secondary students (i.e., 8th, 10th, and 12th graders) from the 48 contiguous states. Data have been collected annually from high school seniors since 1975. Beginning in 1991, data have been collected annually from 8th and 10th graders. The sampling procedure involves three stages (Kish, 1965): First, particular geographic regions are selected; next, schools are selected—approximately 420 schools participate each year; finally, students are selected from within each school. To increase the number of cases for analysis, data are combined from 1998-1999, resulting in more than 80,000 students (approximately 30,000 8th graders, 26,000 10th graders, and 26,000 12th graders).

Students complete self-administered, machine-readable questionnaires during a normal class period. Overall questionnaire response

rates average about 90% for 8th graders, 86% for 10th graders, and 84% for 12th graders. Absence on the day of data collection is the primary reason that students are missed; it is estimated that less than 1% of students refused to complete the questionnaire. Sample weights are assigned to each student to take into account school sample sizes, as well as any variations in selection probabilities that occur at earlier stages of the sampling procedures. Because of the large sample size, sampling errors are very small; any relationship that we treat as substantively important far exceeds conventional standards for statistical significance.

Analyses of trends are based on data from 1976 through 1999 for 12th graders and 1991 through 1999 for 8th and 10th graders. Because fewer years of data are available for 8th and 10th graders, conclusions that can be made regarding long-term trends in their religiosity are more limited.

## MEASURES

### Dependent Variables

Religion, as treated here, is a multidimensional construct consisting of attitudinal (i.e., importance), behavioral (i.e., church attendance), and organizational (i.e., affiliation) components. The specific wording of the religion measures and their associated response categories are as follows. Religious importance is measured with the following item: "How important is religion in your life?" Possible responses range from 1 to 4 where 1 = *not important* and 4 = *very important*. Religious attendance is measured as follows: "How often do you attend religious services?" Possible responses range from 1 to 4, where 1 = *never* and 4 = *about once a week or more*. Denominational affiliation is measured by the following question: "What is your religious preference?" The response categories include Baptist, Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Other Protestant, Unitarian, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Latter Day Saints, Muslim/Moslem, Buddhist, Other Religion, None. Given past research that suggests an increasing number of Americans have no affiliation with traditional religious organizations (Glenn, 1987; Smith,



1991, 1992; Taylor, 1988), we dichotomized the affiliation measure, making the None category the primary focus of the bivariate, multivariate, and trend analyses presented next.

### **Independent Variables**

In addition to students' age (i.e., grade level), the sociodemographic measures included individual level measures (i.e., students' gender, race/ethnicity), family measures (i.e., family structure, parental education, and mother's labor force participation), and community geographic measures (i.e., urbanicity and region of residence).

*Individual characteristics.* Gender is coded 1 = male, 0 = female. Race/ethnicity is measured by the following item: "How do you describe yourself?" The response categories for this measure are 1 = American Indian, 2 = Black or African American, 3 = Latino, 4 = Asian, 5 = White.<sup>2</sup>

*Family characteristics.* The family characteristic variables include measures of family structure, parental education (as a proxy for socioeconomic status), and maternal employment status. The family structure measure asks "Which of the following people live in the same house with you?" and is coded 1 = neither parent, 2 = one parent, and 0 = both parents. In the multivariate analysis two parents is the excluded category. Parental education is an average of father's and mother's educational attainment using the following scale: 1 = completed grade school or less, 2 = some high school, 3 = completed high school, 4 = some college, 5 = completed college, 6 = graduate or professional school after college. Mother's labor force participation is measured by the following item for 8th and 10th graders: "Does your mother have a paid job?" Response categories were: 1 = no, 2 = yes, part-time, and 3 = yes, full-time. High school seniors were asked the following question: "Did your mother have a paid job (half-time or more) during the time you were growing up?" Response categories were: 1 = no, 2 = yes, some of the time, 3 = yes, most of the time, and 4 = yes, all or nearly all the time. In an effort to make the 12th-grade measure of mother's employment status more comparable to the 8th- and 10th-grade measure, we recoded the 12th graders in the following

way: The responses “most of the time” and “all or nearly all of the time” were coded “full-time,” and those that answered “some of the time” were coded “part-time.”

*Community geographic characteristics.* Urbanicity is determined by the U.S. Census Bureau’s classification of the area in which the school is located, where 1 = large metropolitan statistical area (i.e., urban), 2 = other metropolitan statistical area (i.e., suburban), 0 = nonmetropolitan statistical area (i.e., rural). Region is determined by the geographical region of the country in which the school is located (i.e., Northeast, North Central, South, West).

#### ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The analyses presented next proceed in five stages: First, we describe the samples (Table 1); second, we present univariate distributions of the religion measures (Table 2); third, we examine trends in the religion measures over time (Figure 1); fourth, we examine the bivariate relationship between the religion measures and individual, family, and geography variables (Table 3); finally, we present multivariate analyses designed to ascertain the extent to which the bivariate relationships hold when all of the individual, family, and geography measures are simultaneously controlled (Table 4).

### RESULTS

Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade samples. Young women and young men are equally represented in each of the samples (i.e., about 50%). White students constitute the majority of each sample (from 64% to 73%) followed by African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American youth, respectively. There is considerable variability in students’ parents’ education; however, a majority of students’ parents have completed at least high school, and a substantial proportion have some college experience or more. In terms of family structure, approximately 5% of students do not live with either of their parents, 20% live with one parent, and more than two thirds live in two-parent families. Re-

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Grade Level, 1998-1999 Data Combined**

	<i>8th Grade</i>		<i>10th Grade</i>		<i>12th Grade</i>	
	<i>Weighted N</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>Weighted N</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>Weighted N</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
Gender						
Female	15,863	51.2	13,815	52.2	13,509	51.0
Male	15,127	48.8	12,635	47.8	12,996	49.0
Race						
White	20,099	63.7	18,555	69.3	19,778	72.8
Black	5,241	16.6	3,712	13.9	3,577	13.2
Latino	4,252	13.5	3,324	12.4	2,590	9.5
Asian American	1,294	4.1	836	3.1	973	3.6
Native American	650	2.1	330	1.2	262	1.0
Parental education						
1.0 to 2.0 (Low)	2,489	8.6	2,256	8.8	2,026	7.7
2.5 to 3.0	7,120	24.6	6,576	25.7	6,676	25.3
3.5 to 4.0	7,326	25.3	7,102	27.8	7,783	29.5
4.5 to 5.0	7,633	26.3	6,400	25.0	6,279	23.8
5.5 to 6.0 (High)	4,411	15.2	3,242	12.7	3,580	13.6
Family structure						
No parent	1,297	4.1	1,091	4.1	1,611	6.0
One parent	6,818	21.8	5,459	20.5	6,360	23.6
Two parent	23,205	74.0	20,10	575.4	18,979	70.4

Mother's labor force participation <sup>a</sup>						
No	5,252	17.0	4,685	17.7	4,277	16.0
Part-time	6,163	19.9	4,434	16.8	5,692	21.3
Full-time	19,512	63.1	17,292	65.5	16,809	62.8
Urbanicity						
Large MSA	7,918	25.1	6,619	24.7	6,798	25.0
Other MSA	8,558	27.1	7,442	27.8	7,465	27.5
Non-MSA	15,061	47.8	12,697	47.5	12,917	47.5
Region						
Northeast	5,464	17.3	5,573	20.8	4,890	18.0
North Central	7,863	24.9	6,439	24.1	7,104	26.1
South	11,936	37.8	9,417	35.2	10,221	37.6
West	6,273	19.9	5,327	19.9	4,966	18.3

NOTE: MSA = metropolitan statistical area.

a. Although this question was asked of all grade levels, the response categories differed for 12th graders versus 8th and 10th graders. For 8th and 10th graders, the question was: "Does your mother have a paid job?" Response categories were 1 = No, 2 = Yes, part-time, and 3 = Yes, full-time. For 12th graders, the question was: "Did your mother have a paid job (half-time or more) during the time you were growing up?" Response categories were 1 = No, 2 = Yes, some of the time, 3 = Yes, most of the time, and 4 = Yes, all or nearly all the time. Although these measures are not exactly comparable, we recoded the 12th-grade response categories so that those that answered "most of the time" and "all or nearly all of the time" were coded "full-time" and those that answered "some of the time" were coded "part-time."

garding mother's labor force participation, approximately 20% of students' mothers do not work outside of the home, another 17% to 24% of students' mothers work part-time, and approximately two thirds of students' mothers work full-time outside of the home.

Geographically, one fourth of the young people live in large urban areas (metropolitan statistical areas or MSAs), approximately one half live in medium-sized MSAs, and another one fourth reside in smaller rural communities not designated as MSAs. A little more than one third of the students live in the south, slightly less than 20% live in the northeast and western sections of the United States, and slightly more than one fourth live in the north central region.

#### **PATTERNS OF RELIGIOSITY**

Table 2 displays the univariate distributions of the religion measures by grade level. These data provide some insight into the question "How religious are American young people?" With regard to age, the data indicate that religiosity is, on average, higher among younger adolescents than among their older counterparts. Looking across the three grade levels, the data suggest that the majority of U.S. adolescents are at least somewhat religious and that approximately one third of them might be considered very religious. For example, more than 60% of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students report that religion is at least "pretty important" to them, and 31% to 34% say that it is "very important." Similarly, 50% or more of the students indicate that they attend religious services at least "once or twice a month," and between 44% and 33% indicate that they attend weekly. In addition, the vast majority (i.e., 84% to 87%) of young people claim some denominational affiliation with only a small percentage (i.e., between 13% and 16%) of them indicating that they are not affiliated with any religious organization.

#### **TRENDS IN RELIGIOSITY**

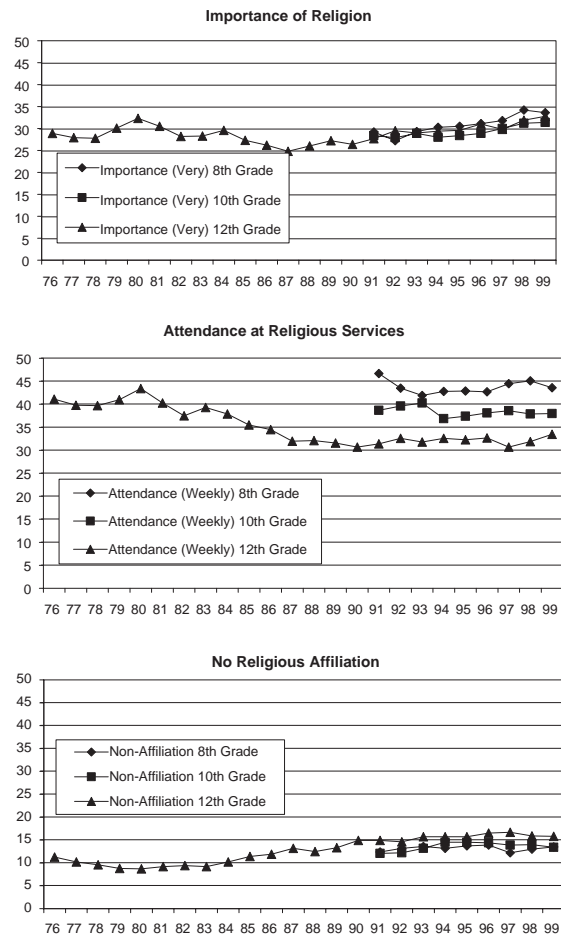
Figure 1 presents recent trends (1976-1999 for seniors and 1991-1999 for 8th and 10th graders) in the importance, attendance, and affiliation measures. The top panel of the figure shows the importance

**TABLE 2**  
**Levels of Religiosity Among American Youth by Grade Level,**  
**1998-1999 Data Combined**

	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>
Religious importance			
Not important	11.6	13.9	14.0
A little important	23.0	24.4	24.5
Pretty important	31.5	30.4	29.2
Very important	33.9	31.3	32.3
<i>N</i>	27,900	23,227	24,402
Religious attendance			
Never	13.0	14.5	14.2
Rarely	26.3	30.4	35.2
Once or twice a month	16.3	17.2	17.9
About once a week	44.4	38.0	32.7
<i>N</i>	27,892	23,219	24,439
Religious affiliation			
Liberal	8.7	9.3	9.4
Moderate	7.5	8.9	8.7
Conservative	38.1	33.6	29.6
Catholic	18.7	21.5	22.9
Other Protestant	2.0	2.8	3.5
Other religion	8.5	7.9	7.5
Jewish	2.1	1.2	1.4
Muslim/Moslem	0.4	0.4	0.4
Buddhist	0.8	0.8	0.7
None	13.2	13.7	15.9
<i>N</i>	26,934	22,811	24,159

trends, the middle panel shows the attendance trends, and the bottom panel shows the affiliation trends.

Figure 1 indicates that the percentage of 12th graders who said that religion was a "very important" part of their life experienced a slight overall decline from the late 1970s to the late 1980s (from 32% at its peak, to 25%). From the end of the 1980s to the late 1990s, however, the percentage of 12th graders who said religion was a very important part of their life actually increased (from 25% to its high of 33%). Interestingly, the data indicate that there are not substantial age differences in the percentage of students who indicate that religion is a "very important" part of their life (see Figure 1, top panel). Consistent with the trends for 12th graders, trends on the importance measure for 8th and 10th graders have also fluctuated around 30% since 1991, with both groups being at or near their highest levels (34% and 31%, respectively) in 1999.



**FIGURE 1: Trends in Religiosity Among U.S. Youths**

The attendance data, shown in the middle panel of Figure 1, reveal that seniors' weekly attendance at religious services declined between 1976 and the late 1980s (from 41% to around 31%) but has remained relatively stable between 1987 and 1999 (between 31% and 34%). The figure also reveals that from 1991 to 1999 weekly attendance for 8th and 10th graders was higher than that of 12th graders (i.e., between 43% and 45% among 8th graders and between 37% and 40% for 10th graders).

With regard to denominational affiliation, there has been a slight overall increase in the percentage of 12th graders who claim no religious affiliation. For example, only 11% of 12th graders reported that they had no religious affiliation in 1976; by 1999 this figure had increased to 16%. The percentages of 8th and 10th graders who report no affiliation have remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 12% and 15% from 1991 to 1999.

#### **INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY CORRELATES OF RELIGIOSITY**

We turn our attention to the bivariate relationships between the religion measures and individual, family, and geographic location variables. To determine the statistical significance of these relationships, we estimated a series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square analyses. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3. The first set of analyses focuses on the individual-level correlates—age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

The data presented in the first row of the table suggest that religiosity generally decreases among young people as they approach adulthood. Specifically, means on the importance and attendance measures are highest among 8th graders, and the older students are more likely than 8th graders to report that they have no religious affiliation. Gender differences in religiosity found in past studies of adults are also evident here; across all three grade levels, relative to girls, boys ascribe less importance to religion, attend church less often, and are more likely to report that they have no religious affiliation. Significant racial/ethnic differences in religiosity are also prevalent, with Black youth reporting higher importance, more frequent attendance, and lower levels of nonaffiliation than White, Latino, Asian, and Native American youth.

The next set of analyses presented in Table 3 focuses on the family measures: parental education (socioeconomic status [SES]), family structure, and maternal employment. Although, there is no clear consistent pattern in the relationship between parental education and religious importance, attendance and affiliation are linked to this indicator of socioeconomic status. Specifically, across all three grade levels,



**TABLE 3**  
**Bivariate Relationships Between American Youth's Religiosity and Sociodemographic Characteristics**  
**by Grade Level, 1998-1999 Data Combined (means and proportions)**

	<i>Religious Importance (1-4)</i>			<i>Religious Attendance (1-4)</i>			<i>Religious Nonaffiliation (%)</i>		
	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>
Grand mean	2.88	2.79	2.80	2.92	2.79	2.69	13.2	13.7	15.9
Gender									
Female	2.95	2.87	2.90	2.99	2.84	2.74	11.0	11.9	13.5
Male	2.80	2.70	2.69	2.85	2.73	2.64	15.5	15.8	18.2
<i>T ratio/<math>\chi^2</math></i>	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Race									
White	2.78	2.67	2.69	2.93	2.75	2.65	13.3	14.6	17.1
Native American	2.92	2.63	2.57	2.65	2.54	2.45	23.2	23.2	23.5
Black	3.24	3.30	3.34	3.02	2.99	2.94	11.0	9.6	9.60
Latino	2.90	2.94	3.00	2.76	2.75	2.69	14.0	11.1	11.7
Asian American	2.91	2.87	2.67	2.96	2.81	2.56	13.9	16.8	21.2
<i>F ratio/<math>\chi^2</math></i>	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Parental education									
1.0 to 2.0 (Low)	2.88	2.77	2.86	2.57	2.52	2.45	19.3	16.3	16.9
2.5 to 3.0	2.78	2.73	2.76	2.75	2.63	2.55	15.8	15.9	17.4
3.5 to 4.0	2.81	2.83	2.81	2.95	2.83	2.69	12.1	12.4	15.4
4.5 to 5.0	2.90	2.83	2.85	3.11	2.94	2.85	9.5	11.4	14.4
5.5 to 6.0 (High)	2.96	2.76	2.74	3.15	2.94	2.85	10.2	13.5	14.9
<i>F ratio/<math>\chi^2</math></i>	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Family structure									
No parent	2.92	2.89	2.78	2.67	2.66	2.41	17.1	15.0	19.9
One parent	2.83	2.79	2.76	2.72	2.62	2.50	16.6	16.0	18.2
Two parent	2.89	2.78	2.81	3.00	2.84	2.78	12.0	13.0	14.8
<i>F ratio/<math>X^2</math></i>	**	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**

Mother's labor force participation <sup>a</sup>									
No	2.87	2.80	2.87	2.86	2.76	2.79	15.2	14.9	14.7
Part-time	2.88	2.80	2.77	2.96	2.89	2.71	12.9	12.4	16.5
Full-time	2.88	2.79	2.79	2.93	2.77	2.66	12.8	13.8	16.0
F ratio/ $\chi^2$	*	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Urbanicity									
Large MSA	2.89	2.79	2.74	2.87	2.76	2.60	13.0	13.3	16.7
Other MSA	2.86	2.75	2.79	2.95	2.75	2.70	12.5	14.4	15.2
Non-MSA	2.88	2.86	2.88	2.91	2.88	2.77	14.5	13.0	16.2
F ratio/ $\chi^2$	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Region									
Northeast	2.64	2.50	2.49	2.79	2.55	2.46	13.4	13.1	17.8
North Central	2.75	2.71	2.68	2.90	2.80	2.65	16.3	15.5	18.1
South	3.11	3.03	3.06	3.07	2.95	2.87	10.1	9.6	11.3
West	2.74	2.74	2.66	2.65	2.64	2.53	18.0	20.9	24.1
F ratio/ $\chi^2$	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**	**

NOTE: MSA = metropolitan statistical area.

a. Although this question was asked of all grade levels, the response categories differed for 12th graders versus 8th and 10th graders. For 8th and 10th graders, the question was: "Does your mother have a paid job?" Response categories were 1 = No, 2 = Yes, part-time, and 3 = Yes, full-time. For 12th graders, the question was: "Did your mother have a paid job (half-time or more) during the time you were growing up?" Response categories were 1 = No, 2 = Yes, some of the time, 3 = Yes, most of the time, and 4 = Yes, all or nearly all the time. Although these measures are not exactly comparable, we recoded the 12th-grade response categories so that those that answered "most of the time" and "all or nearly all of the time" were coded "full-time" and those that answered "some of the time" were coded "part-time."

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed tests).

attendance is highest, and nonaffiliation is lowest among those students whose parents have the highest education.

Similar to the findings for parental education, the relationship between family structure and the importance measure are relatively small across all three grade levels. Also similar to the findings for parental education, attendance at religious services and nonaffiliation are related to family structure. Across the three grade levels, frequency of attendance at religious services is higher, and nonaffiliation is lower among students who live with both of their parents as compared to those who live in other family configurations.

Overall, the relationship between mother's employment and adolescent's religiosity varies only slightly across the religion measures and the three grade levels. For example, 8th- and 10th-grade students' mean levels of importance are virtually the same among those whose mothers do not work outside of the home and those whose mothers work part-time. For seniors, importance is slightly higher among those students whose mothers do not work outside of the home. Attendance and affiliation are highest among 8th and 10th graders whose mothers work part-time and among 12th graders whose mothers do not work at all.

The final set of analyses presented in Table 3 focus on the geographic location variables—urbanicity and region. These urbanicity data reveal relatively small differences across the various contexts. Where differences do exist, there is a trend toward students who live in smaller communities reporting slightly higher levels of religious importance and church attendance than students who live in large communities. The relationship between urbanicity and religious nonaffiliation varies by grade level; for 8th graders nonaffiliation is highest for those living in small communities (non-MSAs), for 10th graders it is highest for those living in medium-sized communities (other MSAs), and for 12th graders it is highest for those living in large MSAs. Taken in total, these findings suggest that the differences in religiosity across the various contexts are not substantial.

Consistent with findings from the adult literature, the data in Table 3 reveal that there are significant regional differences in religiosity. The data indicate that religious importance and attendance tend to be highest among 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade Southern youth, at intermediate levels among youth who live in the North Central region, and

lowest among youth from the Northeast and West. Similarly, the data on nonaffiliation indicate that Southern youth are least likely to be unaffiliated with a denomination, Western youth are most likely to be unaffiliated, and levels of nonaffiliation are at intermediate levels for youth in the Northeast and North Central regions of the country.

### **Multivariate Analyses**

To ascertain the extent to which the bivariate relationships just reported hold when the individual, family, and community-level geographic measures are controlled, we regressed the three religion measures on the individual, family, and geographic location variables. Because the affiliation variable is dichotomous (i.e., affiliated vs. not affiliated), logistic versus ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to analyze its relationship to the independent variables. The results of the OLS regression models for importance and attendance and the logistic regression models for affiliation are presented in Table 4.

The data reveal that relative to girls, boys say religion is less important, attend services less often, and are more likely to be unaffiliated with a religious organization. Similarly, the data indicate that Black and Latino students are, on average, more religious than White students. The findings for Asian American and Native American youth are somewhat mixed, depending on the specific religion measure and the grade level being examined.

Data on the family variables indicate that when all of the variables are controlled, young people whose parents have higher levels of education and who live with both of their parents are more religious than their peers who do not live with both parents and whose parents have lower levels of educational attainment.

The findings for maternal employment vary somewhat depending on the religion measure in question and student's grade level. In general, however, the impact of maternal employment appears most important among 12th graders. More specifically, 12th graders whose mothers worked outside of the home (full- or part-time) report that religion is less important to them, attend religious services less frequently, and are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than those whose mothers did not work.

**TABLE 4**  
**Estimated Net Effect of Sociodemographic Factors on Religious Importance, Religious Attendance, and Religious Nonaffiliation by Grade Level, 1998-1999 Data Combined (standard errors in parentheses)**

	<i>Religious Importance</i>			<i>Religious Attendance</i>			<i>Religious Nonaffiliation</i>		
	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>10th Grade</i>	<i>12th Grade</i>
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>Logistic</i>	<i>Logistic</i>	<i>Logistic</i>
Gender									
Male	-.156**	-.180**	-.216**	-.163**	-.125**	-.141**	.440**	.337**	.385**
	(.012)	(.013)	(.013)	(.013)	(.014)	(.014)	(.040)	(.040)	(.037)
Female <sup>a</sup>									
Race									
Black	.440**	.613**	.630**	.159**	.311**	.391**	-.205**	-.532**	-.673**
	(.018)	(.021)	(.021)	(.020)	(.023)	(.022)	(.062)	(.072)	(.072)
Latino	.162**	.342**	.411**	.005	.207**	.271**	-.188**	-.767**	-.708**
	(.021)	(.027)	(.026)	(.024)	(.029)	(.027)	(.069)	(.090)	(.085)
Asian American	.182**	.213**	.072	.065	.103*	-.031	-.029	.179	.226*
	(.039)	(.047)	(.042)	(.043)	(.051)	(.043)	(.126)	(.132)	(.106)
Native American	.221**	-.021	-.125	-.091	-.150*	-.069	.291*	.280	.376*
	(.044)	(.064)	(.068)	(.048)	(.070)	(.071)	(.117)	(.162)	(.165)
White <sup>a</sup>									
Parental education	.007**	.006**	.004	.016**	.014**	.014**	-.026**	-.015**	-.012**
	(.000)	(.000)**	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Family structure									
No parent	-.069*	-.120**	-.201**	-.263**	-.219**	-.398**	.184	.315*8	.446**
	(.033)	(.036)	(.029)	(.037)	(.040)	(.030)	(.103)	(.106)	(.079)
One parent	-.162**	-.127**	-.186**	-.280**	-.255**	-.310**	.387**	.349**	.390**
	(.016)	(.017)	(.016)	(.017)	(.019)	(.017)	(.048)	(.050)	(.044)

Mother's labor force participation <sup>b</sup>									
No <sup>a</sup>									
Part-time	.015 (.021)	.054* (.023)	-.107** (.022)	.039 (.023)	.142** (.025)	-.080** (.023)	-.109 (.065)	-.251** (.070)	.163** (.062)
Full-time	-.032 (.017)	-.019 (.018)	-.145** (.019)	-.010 (.019)	-.010 (.020)	-.165** (.019)	-.094 (.053)	-.110* (.054)	.169** (.054)
Urbanicity									
Large MSA	-.065** (.017)	-.093** (.020)	-.225** (.018)	-.066** (.019)	-.121** (.021)	-.260** (.019)	-.059 (.055)	.071 (.060)	.191** (.052)
Other MSA	-.032* (.015)	-.122** (.016)	-.112** (.016)	.005 (.017)	-.145** (.018)	-.140** (.017)	-.056 (.048)	.154** (.050)	.048 (.046)
Non-MSA <sup>a</sup>									
Region									
Northeast	-.448** (.017)	-.443** (.018)	-.490** (.018)	-.327** (.019)	-.394** (.020)	-.385** (.019)	.487** (.059)	.474** (.055)	.504** (.053)
North Central	-.329** (.015)	-.228** (.017)	-.272** (.016)	-.192** (.017)	-.129** (.018)	-.189** (.017)	.627** (.052)	.335** (.053)	.480** (.047)
West	-.373** (.021)	-.245** (.026)	-.337** (.023)	-.450** (.023)	-.281** (.029)	-.350** (.024)	1.054** (.061)	.863** (.072)	.928** (.06)
South <sup>a</sup>									
Intercept	2.890	2.787	3.138	2.601	2.531	2.679	-1.543	-1.713	-2.040
N	25,104	21,935	23,177	25,099	21,928	23,206	23,583	21,395	22,283
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.078	.091	.102	.069	.063	.079			
Model $\chi^2$							775.58**	467.87**	691.93**

NOTE: MSA = metropolitan statistical area; OLS = ordinary least squares.

a. Omitted category

b. Although this question was asked of all grade levels, the response categories differed for 12th graders versus 8th and 10th graders. For 8th and 10th graders, the question was: "Does your mother have a paid job?" Response categories were 1 = No, 2 = Yes, part-time, and 3 = Yes, full-time. For 12th graders, the question was: "Did your mother have a paid job (half-time or more) during the time you were growing up?" Response categories were 1 = No, 2 = Yes, some of the time, 3 = Yes, most of the time, and 4 = Yes, all or nearly all the time. Although these measures are not exactly comparable, we recoded the 12th-grade response categories so that those that answered "most of the time" and "all or nearly all of the time" were coded "full-time" and those that answered "some of the time" were coded "part-time."

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed tests).

The multivariate findings for urbanicity and region are largely consistent with the findings from research on adults. Specifically, when other sociodemographic factors are controlled, youth living in smaller communities and in the South report higher levels of religious importance, more frequent attendance, and lower levels of nonaffiliation than do their urban and non-Southern counterparts.

### DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Spilka (1991) noted, "American youth are basically a religious group, but it is a group that evidences much variation" (p. 926). Consistent with this perspective, our analyses indicate relatively high levels of religiosity among U.S. youth, stability and change in patterns of religiosity over time, and significant heterogeneity in religiosity across gender, race/ethnicity, family structure, socioeconomic status, maternal employment, and geographic location. The data on patterns of religiosity reveal that approximately 60% of U.S. young people feel that religion is "pretty" or "very important," approximately 50% regularly (monthly or more) attend religious services, and the vast majority (more than 80%) report an affiliation with a specific religion.

The trend data examined here fail to confirm a simple secularization hypothesis—the notion that religion is on the decline among U.S. young people. In fact, depending on the measure and age group in question, one might conclude that religion among U.S. youth is increasing, decreasing, or staying the same. For example, on one hand, the data on the percentage of young people who indicate that religion is very important to them appears to be on the increase among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. On the other hand, at least among 12th graders, there was a clear decline in religious attendance from the middle 1970s until the late 1980s. Throughout the 1990s, however, attendance rates were relatively stable across the grade levels. Data on affiliation reveal that although most U.S. young people (85%) express a denominational preference, the percentage of them who do not has increased over time.

The slight increase in the percentage of young people who indicate that religion is a very important part of their life—coupled with the slight decline in the percentage of them who claim a religious affilia-

tion—suggest that a growing privatization of religion among U.S. youth paralleling the growth in privatization that some researchers have suggested exists among U.S. adults (Gallup, 1999; Putnam, 1995; Roberts, 1995; Roof, 1984). Nevertheless, given that the overall magnitude of the changes in religiosity have been relatively small, perhaps the most conservative and accurate interpretation of the data is that religiosity has been fairly stable for nearly a decade among 8th and 10th graders and for more than a quarter century among 12th graders.

The bivariate and multivariate findings on the sociodemographic correlates of religiosity are comparable to those observed among adults. For example, age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, urbanicity, and region were consistently linked to religiosity, with younger students, girls, Black and Latino youth, more affluent youth, rural youth, and Southern youth generally being more religious than their older, male, White, less affluent, urban, and non-Southern counterparts (Hood et al., 1996).

Despite the similarities of these findings with those in the adult literature, the meaning of these relationships may be different for youth, especially when considering social influences on religious choices. For example, the idea of freely participating in religious activities (which is often a fundamental assumption in adult studies) may be influenced by the youth's age in different ways. Parents may place normative constraints on younger adolescents' religious participation, whereas friendship norms may represent the more important social influence on older adolescents' participation patterns. Thus, fluctuations and stability in church participation among younger adolescents noted in this study may be a reflection of historical patterns of parental choices and characteristics rather than the youths' commitment to religion. On the other hand, older adolescents' religious choices may better reflect their own preferences after considering family and peer influences. This interpretation is consistent with Sherkat and Wilson's (1995) argument that religious preferences must be conceptualized socially. Future research should consider the meaning of various social influences on the patterns, trends, and social correlates of adolescent religious behaviors to better understand religion's influence on youth development.



Despite the strengths of this study (e.g., large heterogeneous, nationally representative samples, multiple ages, multiple measures of religiosity, recent data, and trend data), it has at least two important limitations. First, the data are drawn from samples of students, and thus the 12% to 15% of young people who have dropped out of school or who are frequently absent from school are underrepresented. Given that religion has been found to relate negatively to dropping out and other problem behaviors (see Wallace & Forman, 1998; Wallace & Williams, 1997), our estimates of the level of religiosity among U.S. youth may be slightly higher than the level of religiosity in the entire youth population.

A second possible limitation of the study results from the fact that our results are based on adolescents' self-reports of behavior that, for many youth, may be socially desirable. Researchers debate the extent to which Americans are likely to overreport their religiosity (and church attendance, in particular) (see Hadaway, Marler, & Chaves, 1993; Presser & Stinson, 1998). Past research suggests that where overreporting may occur, it occurs largely from the social desirability pressures that result in the context of face-to-face (vs. self-administered) interviews. Where religion questions have been asked in self-administered questionnaires, the extant data suggest that misreporting is minimized (Presser & Stinson, 1998). This study used self-administered questionnaires to elicit responses to the religion items reported here, and thus the degree of overreporting, if any, is probably minimal.

Given that this article has focused on broad patterns, trends, and correlates of adolescents' religiosity, future research should delve more deeply into these issues within subgroups of youth (e.g., African Americans, girls) and longitudinally to better understand change at different stages of the life course, at different periods in time, and across different age cohorts.

Although our research does not allow us to forecast the future of religion in America, the data suggest that religion continues to be an important part of the lives of young people and adults for years to come. Nevertheless, the data also suggest that the role of religious institutions may continue to decline in the lives of a small but growing segment of U.S. society. Ultimately, however, as with all projections, the real answer to the question regarding the future shape of religion in America is that only time will tell.

## NOTES

1. Presser and Stinson (1998) argued that “self-administered [questionnaires] minimize misreporting” of church attendance data (p. 143). Thus, the discrepancy in results observed may be related to the fact that the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey relies solely on self-administration, whereas the Gallup Youth Survey (GYS) does not. Consequently, GYS church attendance data may be biased upward. Another possible explanation for the discrepant results is the expanded age range covered by Gallup data (ages 13 to 17) compared to the reported MTF data that includes only high school seniors.

2. The authors recognize that each of the ethnic and racial groups are diverse and that treating them as homogeneous groups may mask important within and between racial/ethnic group differences. Ideally, more refined measures would be used; unfortunately, no such measures are available in the present data set.

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