

Theorizing Religious Effects Among American Adolescents

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A large body of empirical studies shows that religion often serves as a factor promoting positive, healthy outcomes in the lives of American adolescents. Yet existing theoretical explanations for these religious effects remain largely disjointed and fragmented. This article attempts to formulate a more systematic, integrated, and coherent account of religion's constructive influence in the lives of American youth, suggesting nine key factors (moral directives, spiritual experiences, role models, community and leadership skills, coping skills, cultural capital, social capital, network closure, and extra-community links) that cluster around three key dimensions of influence (moral order, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties).

Several decades of social scientific studies have shown that religion is often a factor in the lives of American adolescents, influencing their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. Across a number of areas of concern, various measures of religiosity are typically associated with a variety of healthy, desirable outcomes. This article is an attempt to theorize systematically why religion might have such an influence in the lives of American adolescents. Within the relevant bodies of literature, individual publications normally suggest causal mechanisms explaining their particular findings. Altogether, these many studies are very helpful, but as a whole they present the contemporary researcher with a disjointed and fragmented account for religious influences in the lives of American teenagers. In the following pages, I attempt to synthesize some of what we know from these and other informative studies into a more coherent, systematic account of how and why religion exerts significant positive effects on American youth.

RELIGIOUS EFFECTS

A systematic review of the literature on religion and youth reveals notable patterns of religious influences among American adolescents. Although the present article is not intended as a literature review (see Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch forthcoming), some of these effects are worth mentioning as background to the theoretical discussion below.

A large majority of studies, for example, that have included religion measures (especially church attendance and importance of religious faith) have found them to be inversely related to juvenile drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, and to delinquency (for example, Wallace and Williams 1997; Evans et al. 1995; Pawlak and Defronzo 1993; Cochran 1993; Cochran and Akers 1989; NCASA 2001). Multiple studies also confirm that religiosity is inversely related to thoughts of suicide, attempted suicide, and actual suicide among American teenagers (for instance, Donahue 1995). Religiosity also appears to act as a protective influence against suicide among youth most at risk for it. Furthermore, religion is associated with lower levels of depression and hopelessness, which suggests it has an additional indirect effect on risk of suicide (Wright, Frost, and Wisecarver 1993).

Studies also often show religion as a factor fostering physical health. One renowned scholar of adolescence and his associates have found church attendance to be a key factor in promoting

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adolescent health-enhancing behaviors, such as diet, exercise, sleep, dental hygiene, and seatbelt use (Jessor, Turbin, and Costa 1998). Another important adolescence scholar has shown that religious youth are less likely to engage in health-compromising behaviors and are more likely to take care of themselves, even after controlling for other relevant factors (Wallace and Forman 1998). Moreover, several reliable studies show that youth and their families who regularly attend church display greater overall satisfaction with their lives, more involvement with their families, and better skills in solving health-related problems than those whose parents attend church less often (Varon and Riley 1999). A number of studies show that religion is demonstrably associated with more effective “coping” with problems by youth, among teens both physically ill and well (Shortz and Worthington 1994; Balk 1991). Studies furthermore show inverse associations between religiosity and youth having had sex, the number of sexual partners, recency of sexual intercourse, and teenage pregnancy (Thornton and Camburn 1989; Lammers et al. 2000; Murry 1994; Whitehead, Wilcox, and Rostosky 2001).

In the area of family relations, not only has parental religiosity been linked with higher levels of parental involvement in and overall health of family interactions, there is also fairly consistent evidence that higher levels of church attendance and religiosity are typically associated with more pro-family attitudes and religious family values, while declining religious commitment is found to be correlated with attitudes skeptical of family life (Brody, Stoneman, and Flor 1996). A few studies suggest that youth religiosity is linked to greater satisfaction with family life across a variety of family contexts, including nuclear families, step-families, and single-parent families. When it comes to education, generally, church attendance and positive perceptions of religion are related to positive school attitudes and behaviors. Robust, though mild, positive influences of church attendance are consistently visible on academic achievement, from childhood through late adolescence and into college (Muller and Ellison 2001; Regnerus 2000). Church attendance also appears to act as a protective influence against dropping out of school for at-risk youth (Scharf 1998).

Evidence about religion and youth political and civic involvement is fairly thin. However, existing evidence does suggest that religious participation may be associated with greater political and civic involvement, especially during young adulthood (Smith 1999; Serow and Dreyden 1990). Adolescents are generally less politically engaged than young adults. However, in most studies on the topic, religion appears to be linked with commitment to and involvement in community service (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1999).

It is somewhat difficult to know how to characterize these effects overall. A number of fields in sociology and psychology use the fairly nebulous term “pro-social” to portray the pattern of influences here (see Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler, and Chapman 1983). But the normative judgment in the “pro” is problematic, insofar as what are considered good and bad for youth are to some degree dependent on larger moral frameworks defining what constitutes the good, the right, and the true in human life more generally. For example, the fact that religion tends to curb adolescent sexual activity may or may not be seen as a “pro-social” effect, depending on one’s larger view of sexuality—some may view religion as a morally constructive force, others as an ally to public health, and yet others as a coercively repressive force inhibiting the expression of legitimate pleasures. Social science typically skirts these concerns by employing therapeutic and public health languages, and sometimes by simply ignoring the underlying issues. But the issues are worth considering and discussing as research proceeds.

In any case, returning to our larger point, while divergent normative and moral frameworks may characterize scholarly findings differently, it is still safe to say that the vast majority of adult Americans—particularly parents, teachers, and others who work with youth—believe it is a good thing for teenagers not to do drugs, not to smoke, not to drink alcohol (at least excessively), not to engage in delinquent and illegal behaviors, not to commit suicide; to avoid depression and hopelessness; to learn coping skills for dealing with difficult emotions and situations; to feel satisfied with life; and to take care of their physical health. The majority of adult Americans also think, for various reasons, that adolescents having sex at early ages and with many partners is a

serious problem; that it is good for young people to get more education, not to drop out of school; and that it is good for youth to be politically and civically committed and engaged.

THEORIZING RELIGIOUS EFFECTS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

In the following pages, I suggest that religion may exert positive, constructive influences in the lives of American youth through nine distinct but connected and potentially mutually reinforcing factors. These nine distinct factors cluster as groups of three beneath three larger conceptual dimensions of social influence. These three larger dimensions are (1) moral order, (2) learned competencies, and (3) social and organizational ties. The nine specific factors that exert the religious influences are: (1) moral directives, (2) spiritual experiences, (3) role models, (4) community and leadership skills, (5) coping skills, (6) cultural capital, (7) social capital, (8) network closure, and (9) extra-community links. Viewed in outline form, the proposed explanation would be rendered thus:

- I. Moral Order
 - 1. Moral directives
 - 2. Spiritual experiences
 - 3. Role models
- II. Learned Competencies
 - 4. Community and leadership skills
 - 5. Coping skills
 - 6. Cultural capital
- III. Social and Organizational Ties
 - 7. Social capital
 - 8. Network closure
 - 9. Extra-community skills

Before elaborating on these factors of social influence, however, a prefatory observation is in order. Sociology has a long history of reductionistic thinking and analysis. With regard to religion, this reductionism has often expressed itself in claims that what on the surface appears to be religious phenomena are in fact revealed by serious analyses to *really* only be about other things quite unrelated to religion. Thus, what appears to be divine or spiritual or transcendent or pious or sacred are *really only* about social class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationalism, solidarity, social control, and so on. I number myself among those, however, who believe that both this general tendency toward such reductionism and many (though not all) of the specific cases of analytical reductionism are intellectually parochial and simplistic. We will do far better to understand the realities we study as multidimensional and multileveled and involving emergent properties and supervenient processes.

Such a nonreductionistic mentality has at least two intellectual consequences, one epistemological and one substantive. First, epistemologically, this approach recognizes the analytical limits of sociology. Thus, this article's attempt at a somewhat integrated sociological explanation of religious effects among adolescents self-consciously focuses on a range of human, social factors that may be involved. It makes no disconfirming or affirming claims about possible divine (or biological) influences involved, nor does it deny that these human, social effects are ones through which divine (or biological) influences might in theory potentially operate. Sociology simply cannot make claims about these matters.

Second, a nonreductionistic sociological approach to religion is interested in understanding how the distinctively religious dimensions of the phenomenon "religion" exert significant social influences. That is, this approach assumes that there is something particularly *religious* in religion, which is not reducible to nonreligious explanations, and that these religious elements can exert

“causal” influence in forming cultural practices and motivating action. For example, something particular about belief in a divine being or some distinctive element in the content of a particular religious moral tradition may produce some specific social outcome. By contrast, reductionistic approaches tend to look for significant influences in factors that happen to be found in religious contexts but that themselves are not particularly religious in any sense. Thus, for instance, religious influences may be reduced to the generic resources or social networks or organizational capacities or memberships that just so happen to be found in religious groups in particular cases. But there is nothing significantly religious about any of it. The factors that *really* matter only just so happen in certain instances to be located in religious contexts. Taken to its extreme, this approach would completely dissolve the sociology of religion as a distinctive field and divide up its component parts into the other fields of culture, organizations, race and ethnicity, collective behavior and social movements, and so forth. Against this approach, I suggest that religion exerts pro-social influences in the lives of youth not by happenstance or generic social process, but precisely as an outcome of American religions’ particular theological, moral, and spiritual commitments. The distinctively religious dimensions of American religion, in other words, are necessary conditions for the following explanatory factors to emerge as social influences in the lives of youth.

With this preliminary note in mind, the following pages proceed to elaborate the nine distinct but connected and potentially mutually reinforcing factors that I suggest account for religion’s recurrent positive, constructive influence in the lives of American adolescents—who inhabit a culture emphasizing individualism, pluralism, and choice. What follows is a collection of theoretical hypotheses. Much more empirical work beyond this article is needed to test these hypotheses in order to confirm, invalidate, specify, or modify them. Aside from assessing their usefulness in explaining religious effects among adolescents, future theoretical and empirical work might consider to what extent these hypotheses also apply to American adults, and to youth and adults outside the United States. In any case, one purpose of this article is to help generate more empirical work on youth and religion, and to help tie such empirical analyses to a larger, coherent theoretical framework of explanation.

MORAL ORDER

I conceptualize the first three factors influencing youth as dimensions of the cultural moral orders into which religions induct their adherents. By moral order, I mean to draw upon the works of Taylor (1985, 1989), Etzioni (1988), MacIntyre (1984), and Wuthnow (1987) to suggest the idea of substantive cultural traditions grounded upon and promoting particular normative ideas of what is good and bad, right and wrong, higher and lower, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, and so on, which orient human consciousness and motivate human action. Importantly, these distinctions of judgment and valuation within moral order are understood as not established by people’s own desires, decisions, or preferences, but instead are believed to exist apart from and above them, providing standards by which human desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged. It is under this larger category of moral order that the first three of the nine factors should be understood, as follows.

1. Moral directives: *American religions promote specific cultural moral directives of self-control and personal virtue grounded in the authority of long historical traditions and narratives, into which members are inducted, such that youth may internalize these moral orders and use them to guide their life choices and moral commitments.*

This is to say that, as American adolescents go about forming practices and making choices that compose and shape their lives, religion can provide them with substantive normative bearings, standards, and imperatives to guide those practices and choices. Normally, these substantive normative directives and orders operate to foster forms of self-control toward the learning of virtues and values often expressed in positive, constructive, pro-social ways (see Wuthnow 1995).

For example, different religious traditions teach their young adherents moral commitments, such as tithing from one's income for the church, synagogue, and the common good; seeking reconciliation instead of vengeance; treating one's body as the temple of the Holy Spirit; honoring one's parents and elders; avoiding self-indulgent gluttony and sexual promiscuity; respecting the dignity of others because they are made in the image of God; faithfully fasting during Ramadan; acting in honesty and fairness even at a cost to oneself; practicing Zakat, the giving of alms to the poor as Allah commands; the Four Noble Truths; the Eightfold Path; and the Five Precepts; and so on. Most religious organizations bring to these moral commitments the authority of long historical tradition and compelling narratives. To what extent and under what conditions American adolescents actually internalize and act upon such imperatives of religious moral orders is an open, empirical question. The theoretical point here is simply that the observable significant influences that religion does exert on youth in various outcomes, as seen in the research literature, may in part be explained by the cultural moral orders that religion provides, which orient consciousness and motivate action (Hunter 2000). In this I take a clearly *normative* approach to human culture, and not merely an instrumental one, even though that is currently unfashionable among culture scholars (see Swidler 1986).

Of course, religions are not the only source of such moral directives and orders. Indeed, this normative theory of culture suggests that all cultures are constituted by and expressive of moral order (Wuthnow 1987). American youth (as do all modern people) therefore find themselves living within and between multiple moral orders among which they have to negotiate, balance, compromise, and choose. Religion represents one of many potential normative orders claiming youth's allegiance and adherence. While other nonreligious moral orders (which may have deep historical roots in religious moral orders yet subsequently have been secularized) may promote virtues and values similar to those of a religious moral order, clearly not all do.

For example, the moral order of mass consumer market capitalism and the advertising industry it deploys with great influence on American youth does little to promote self-control, moderation, the common good, sacrifice, honor for others, and other traditional religious virtues among youth. Rather, contemporary American capitalism and advertising tend to promote among youth a moral order whose "virtues" include self-gratification, self-assertion, competition, insecurity, conformity, perpetual experimentation, contempt for traditional authorities, the commodification of all value, and incessant material acquisition. Thus, when various religious speakers say that they struggle against "the culture," they mean that they are up against other moral orders antithetical to their religion's moral order that are vying for loyalty and conformity. The methodological question here, then, is how to assess or measure people's relative commitments to different moral orders, including a religious moral order. And the empirical question is: To what degree does embracing (or being embraced by) a particular religious moral order foster consciousness and actions consistent with the moral order that result in observable differences in significant social outcomes?

2. Spiritual experiences: *American religions provide the organizational contexts and cultural substance fostering in youth spiritual experiences that may help to solidify their moral commitments and constructive life practices.*

The point here is that moral directives are not simply imposed from the outside by traditions and organizations. Individuals do not simply conform their consciousness and actions to moral orders like chameleons changing color to match their environment. Rather, humans internalize moral directives and orders in their subjective mental worlds of identity, belief, loyalties, convictions, perceptions, interests, emotions, and desires. And these subjective commitments prove often to have a fair amount of stability and continuity (if not consistency and coherence) for individuals over time. They also help to frame the issues and inform the motivations that shape outcomes in the lives of youth. Religious youth are facilitated in this process by personal spiritual experiences that often legitimate and reinforce their religious moral order. Whether it is a conversion experience, an answer to prayer, a sensation of deep spiritual peace, a perceived word

of divine guidance, the witnessing of a miracle, or something else, the religious moral orders of youth (and adults) are substantiated and reinforced in ways that bolster the influence of the moral orders on outcomes in their lives—many of which are positive and constructive.

From a sociological perspective, religious experiences tend not to float down from the sky as autonomous or self-generating encounters. Rather, sociologists are attuned to ways that spiritual experiences often arise from the immediate or distant context of religious traditions and organizations. Youth normally have conversion experiences in churches that emphasize conversion, just as youth who belong to religious cultures that emphasize prayers for healing typically witness miraculous faith healing. This does not make the experiences any less real or authentic or perhaps divinely inspired; it simply acknowledges that human persons are socially constituted beings. Consequently, religious organizations and traditions possess the contexts and resources to help facilitate such spiritual experiences, which, in turn, often solidify the moral orders that shape various outcomes in youth's lives.

3. Role models: *American religions can provide youth with adult and peer-group role models, providing examples of life practices shaped by religious moral orders that constructively influence the lives of youth, and offering positive relationships that youth may be invested in preserving through their own normatively approved living.*

Also solidifying the moral orders that shape various outcomes in youth's lives are the embodied normative models provided to youth by adult and peer role models. Religion supplies not only moral order and spiritual experiences that authenticate and fortify moral order. Religion also supplies fellow congregants, companion disciples, wise elders, exemplary representations of life shaped by the religious moral order. (In many cases, religion also provides or points out the opposite: explicit cases of examples of people who have violated the moral order, fallen from grace, exemplified vice and foolishness, and so on.) These help make moral order tangible. They provide a teleological direction for growth and development. They show what a good (and perhaps bad) human life looks like, furnishing an instructive example of right (and wrong) living (Wuthnow 1995). Moreover, when youth develop relationships with such positive role models, their cost of violating the moral order goes up because doing so would likely damage the relationship. The youth come to be personally invested in sustaining the relationships, which normally will involve affirming and enacting the religious moral order. And, again, this can often have positive, constructive consequences in various outcomes in the lives of youth.

For example, a young person in a religious context may come to know and admire and prize his or her relationship with a youth leader, or devout aunt, or young adult friend who has taken a particular interest in him or her. This relationship communicates to youth that people who they hold in positive regard are committed to the religion's moral order and have learned with some success how to live it out in their actual lives. This provides them with a micro plausibility structure (Berger 1967) for that moral order and a model for possible emulation. Furthermore, the valued relationship with the youth group leader (or aunt or young adult friend) as role model tends to provide an incentive for the youth to continue to enact the religious moral order himself or herself in order to sustain the conditions for maintaining the valued relationship. All of this, I suggest, tends to reinforce the attitudinal and behavioral conditions that give rise to the often observed association between religiosity and positive youth outcomes.

LEARNED COMPETENCIES

Religion shapes the lives of American adolescents in ways beyond the formative influence of moral order. A second major way that religion can influence the lives of youth is by increasing their competence in skills and knowledge that contribute to enhancing their well-being and improving

their life chances. Here I explicate three distinct learned competencies that religion may afford American youth.

4. *Community and leadership skills: American religions provide organizational contexts where youth can observe, learn, and practice valuable community life skills and leadership skills, which are transposable for constructive uses beyond religious activities.*

Most American religions take concrete form as congregational voluntary associations. As such, they provide their members—including adolescent members—with multiple and continuous opportunities to observe, learn, and practice the skills of community life and leadership. Religious congregations are ever in need of members to serve on committees, to organize programs, to provide leadership, to coordinate initiatives, and so on. Functional religious congregations also require ongoing member involvement in fundamental organizational processes. In and through this, religious youth may find themselves organizing a car wash, facilitating a Bible study, arranging a trip to Israel, sitting in as a youth delegate on a church committee, serving as altar boy or girl, helping to coordinate a social justice march, assisting in a tutoring program, planning a retreat, sitting in on a congregational meeting, reading scripture in a service, and much more. In so doing, religious youth are exposed to and have the chance to acquire and practice a series of useful capacities and skills. These may include group decision making, raising and budgeting funds, leading discussions, mobilization consensus, public speaking, enacting rituals, building coalitions, conducting meetings and services, and resolving disagreements.

Learning such skills clearly enhances the religious capital of youth (Iannacone 1990). But—following the Tocquevillian tradition (Tocqueville 1969)—we can see that these skills may also be transposed and deployed for use in nonreligious settings. The community and leadership capacities that American youth learn in religious congregations may serve youth equally well throughout their lives in study groups, student government, sports, neighborhood organizing, political activism, professional activities, business ventures, civic involvement, and beyond. Thus religious communities may inculcate in youth abilities that can increase their confidence and functional capacities, which may enhance their well-being and life chances.

5. *Coping skills: American religions promote a variety of beliefs and practices that can help believers cope with the stress of difficult situations social-psychologically, to process difficult emotions, and to resolve interpersonal conflicts, and so enhance the well-being and life capacities of youth.*

Life presents most people with various degrees of ongoing problems, obstacles, troubles, crises, and tragedies. Different people possess differing capacities to confront and deal with these difficulties. In general, people who are better able to address, cope with, negotiate, and resolve life's problems are also more healthy and functional.

Most American religions comprise and foster many beliefs and practices that can strengthen young people's ability effectively to cope with life's problems (Pargament et al. 1998; Ellison 1991; Koenig, George, and Siegler 1988). Religions often offer youth a variety of cognitive and behavioral resources to address and process life's mental, emotional, and interpersonal stresses and troubles. These may include practices of prayer, meditation, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, Sabbath keeping, small-group sharing, funeral rites, cleaning rituals, and more (see, for example, Worthington, Berry, and Parrott 2001; Taylor et al. 2000). They may also include the beliefs that a loving and omnipotent divinity is in control of one's life, that all things work together for the good of those who love God, that God understands and shares in one's suffering, that ultimately good will be rewarded and evil punished, that a divine Providence is guiding one's steps, that suffering builds character, that God gives the strength to confront and overcome injustice, and much more.

Clearly, nonreligious youth are able to draw on coping mechanisms that are not obviously religious, such as “live and let live,” “one day at a time,” “they’ll get theirs,” “breathe,” and “try to put things into perspective” (although many of these maxims in fact do ultimately have religious roots). But religion at least can greatly expand the range of possible beliefs and practices that adolescents may draw upon to deal with their life problems (Swidler 1986). Beyond that, it is possible that for some people, the sacred, divine, transcendent, cosmic, and historically traditional nature of many religious coping-enhancing beliefs and practices provides them with greater significance, depth, and power than perhaps their secular counterparts (Wuthnow 1987; Hunter 2000). For many, “nothing can separate you from the love of God” is somehow more profound and compelling than “it’ll all work out in the end.” Likewise, participating with countless generations of believers in prayer and affirmation by reciting a millennia-year-old liturgy is somehow more meaningful and comforting than reading the various quips in the most recent edition of *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*. Thus, religion may provide American adolescents with extra or more effective coping mechanisms for negotiating and resolving their mental, emotional, and interpersonal stresses and problems.

6. Cultural capital: *American religions provide youth with alternative opportunities (beyond family, school, and the media) to acquire elements of cultural capital that may directly enhance the well-being of youth and may be transposable to other social settings for constructive purposes in youth’s lives.*

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has suggested how important possession of cultural capital may be in enhancing one’s life chances (also see McNeal 1999; DiMaggio 1982). Cultural capital in this context consists of unevenly distributed and socially distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices that are embodied as implicit practical knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and objectified in particular cultural objects and credentials (see Holt 1998). American youth enjoy a variety of contexts in which they might acquire cultural capital, including family, school, voluntary associations, and the media. American religions, however, often provide their youth with increased and alternative opportunities to appropriate more and distinct kinds of cultural capital. For example, in American religion, children and adolescents can often grow in biblical literacy so that they better understand the Western historical context, the prophetic and wisdom traditions, scriptural moral teachings, and more. Furthermore, in religious congregations, youth can acquire substantial musical education through participation in choirs and choruses, exposure in services to rich traditions of sacred music, learning to sing four-part harmonies for hymns, and opportunities to play piano, guitar, or other musical instruments for worship. In addition, in the course of their religious education and practice, American youth are often exposed to and may learn much about world civilizations and empires (the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Roman Empire, etc.), Western history (the Middle Ages, the Reformation, etc.), major religious traditions (Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, etc.), major holiday traditions (Easter, Ramadan, Rosh Hashanah, etc.), major ethical traditions (ascetic, pietistic, sacramental, natural law, etc.), and important theological categories (holiness, moral law, incarnation, repentance, etc.) (Iannaccone 1990).

All of this enhances for youth the meaning and value of their religious participation. But, in addition—simply because familiarity with the Jewish and Christian (and Greek) traditions is a precondition for truly understanding Western history, civilization, and culture—acquiring through religion the knowledge and appreciation of matters such as those described above can also tremendously advantage youth who accumulate this cultural capital. The adolescent who has soaked up the various kinds of cultural capital available through involvement in his or her religion may have gained a relative edge over the one who has not, in a variety of ways (see, for example, Regnerus 2000). The young person will likely converse more comfortably with a broader array of social contacts, perform better in humanities and social science classes, be more impressive

in the lunch and dinner conversations of job interviews, and more. All this tends to work toward positive, constructive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes in youth's lives.

SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL TIES

The third major hypothesized dimension of religious influences on American adolescents concerns the social and organizational ties religion affords young people. In this we move beyond the cultural orders that shape moral judgment and action, and beyond the advantaging skills and capacities individuals can acquire. Here we are discussing structures of relations that affect the opportunities and constraints that young people face, which profoundly affect outcomes in their lives.

7. *Social capital: American religion is one of the few, major American social institutions that is not rigidly age stratified and emphasizes personal interactions over time, thus providing youth with personal access to other adult members in their religious communities, affording cross-generational network ties with the potential to provide extra-familial, trusting relationships of care and accountability, and linking youth to wider sources of helpful information, resources, and opportunities.*

It is difficult to underestimate the importance for youth of the transgenerational and age-variable character of most religious organizations in the United States. Most American adolescents live the vast majority of their extra-familial lives in age-stratified institutions and consume age-targeted products and services. Perhaps most importantly, American youth spend about 40 waking hours per week for between 12 and 17 years in mass-education schools that sort them into classes by single year age differences. Youth thus spend the greater part of their weekdays with and being socialized by their age-identical peers. In off-school hours, youth often spend many hours watching television programs that are also marketed for their specific age groups. Another major use of time by young people is in sports, hobbies, and play—also very often spent with other youth of similar age (see Carnegie 1992). Structurally, therefore, the schedules and institutions that organize youth's lives tend to isolate and limit their contacts, exposures, and ideas to those available from youth their own age. In such situations, trends in and pressures from peer groups become highly influential, and narrow.

American religious congregations, by contrast, represent one of the few remaining major social institutions in which adolescents participate extensively (Smith et al. 2002) that emphasizes continuity of interaction and yet is not rigidly stratified by age (Putnam 2000:65–79; Smidt 1999). In these religious organizations, American adolescents gather together in congregations with fellow believers of all ages and life-course stages. Although some religious programming may be age stratified, most central congregational functions (worship services, fellowship gatherings) mix participants of all ages. As a result, youth are exposed to many adult members of their religious communities. This creates the possibility for youth to form significant relational network ties that cross age boundaries. And those ties generate the potential for relationships with older congregants who may express care for youth. Adolescents' ties to older members of their religious congregations may also afford them access to otherwise less available sources of opportunities, resources, and information. The more (strong and weak) adult ties the youth have in their religious congregations, the more likely they are through them to land a good summer job, be recommended for acceptance into a competitive program, know someone who can and will help them fix their broken computer or car, and much more. All this helps foster and reinforce the kinds of positive, constructive life choices and behaviors noted earlier in this article.

8. *Network closure: American religious congregations can provide relatively dense networks of relational ties within which youth are embedded, involving people who pay attention to the lives of youth, and who can provide oversight of and information about youth to their parents*

and other people well positioned to discourage negative and encourage positive life practices among youth.

The often unique cross-generational network ties that religious congregations facilitate not only potentially provide youth with important flows of information, resources, and opportunities, they also structure relational networks that facilitate more informed and effective oversight and control of youth by adults who care about them. Coleman (1988) has theorized the importance of network closure, suggesting that higher densities of social relationships between youth, parents, and other interested adults, and among parents whose children are friends, are associated with improved youth outcomes (Coleman and Hoffer 1987). Others have also suggested that high levels of social network closure benefit youth indirectly by enabling parents more effectively to monitor and supervise their activities, communicate with other parents about their expectations and behavior, and feel supported in their own parenting (see Fletcher et al. 2001; also see studies on closure and community integration (Darling et al. 1993), educational outcomes (Carbonaro 1998; Morgan and Sorensen 1999), and child adjustment (Fletcher et al. 2001), and studies examining religious social networks using samples of adults (for example, Krause et al. 2001; Cavendish, Welch, and Legee 1998)).

As one of the few major American social institutions that emphasizes ongoing social interaction not rigidly stratified by age, American religious congregations provide ideal settings for increasing closure in networks involving youth. In religious congregations, adolescents are able to form relationships with youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, rabbis, parents of friends, and other adult acquaintances, who can relationally tie back to the adolescents' parents. These ties can operate as extra-familial sources reinforcing parental influence and oversight. For their part, parents of adolescents in religious congregations—compared to schools or sports teams, for instance—are, because of the social setting, better able to build relationships over time with their children's friends and the parents or kin of their children's friends. Moreover, these relationships are very likely to exist among people who share similar cultural moral orders, facilitating higher levels of agreement and cooperation in collective oversight and social control. We should expect all of this to create conditions of increased support for and supervision of youth, encouraging positive and discouraging negative behaviors among youth.

9. *Extra-community links: American religions typically comprise links to national and transnational religious organizations, providing youth with connections to positive experiences and events well beyond their local communities, which can expand youth's horizons and aspirations, foster developmental maturity, and enhance competencies and knowledge.*

Participation in the organizations of American religion very often affords youth structural connections to beneficial programs and organizations at the regional, national, and international level. The vast majority of American religious organizations are not completely autonomous, but are linked to larger associations, denominations, conventions, and other regional and national organizations. This is as true for Southern Baptists and black Muslims as it is Reform Jews and Roman Catholics. These regional and national organizations and associations very often involve denominational and para-church programs, organizations, and other opportunities specifically designed to serve youth.

As a consequence, local religious involvement can plug adolescents into an almost endless array of summer camps, youth retreats, missions projects, teen conferences, service programs, Holy Land trips, music festivals, denominational conventions, the hajj to Mecca, and any number of other socioreligious activities. These programs and activities likely strengthen the religious faith and commitment of youth, but they probably do more than that. We may expect that by moving youth out of local contexts and presenting them with new experiences and challenges, these sorts of experiences also open up an adolescent's imaginable aspirations and horizons, encourage developmental maturity, and increase knowledge, confidence, and competencies. And

this should, in turn, tend to reduce unhealthy and antisocial attitudes, choices, and behaviors among these youth.

Once again, religion is not the only means by which adolescents might link to these kinds of larger programs and organizations. There certainly exist plenty of nonreligious summer camps, service projects, and travel opportunities. Yet organized religion adds to these a massive superstructure of youth-oriented programs and activities, which should significantly increase the chances that youth will participate in and benefit from them.

QUALIFICATIONS AND SUMMARY HYPOTHESIS

These, then, are the nine factors that I hypothesize as helping to account for the kind of significant positive effects of religion on American adolescents noted at the start of this article. To nuance the argument, however, it is necessary to offer three qualifications.

First, this theoretical account presumes that these nine influences do not typically operate independently, but often together and in combination as mutually reinforcing social processes. For instance, the social capital effects of religious communities could not be operative were it not for the religious moral order factor drawing cross-generational networks together over time in the first place. At the same time, those social capital effects help reinforce in youth the cultural moral orders religious communities promote. This reality of interdependence can present the researcher with interpretive difficulties in assessing the source or type of religious influence from a standard measure of religiosity; elsewhere, I have tried to show how this might be done (Smith forthcoming (a), (b)). Nevertheless, I suggest that while these factors are believed to be interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and even though interpretive difficulties abound, it is still best to conceptualize and present these factors as analytically distinct influences.

The second qualification of the theory suggested above is that obviously not all religious organizations provide their youth with the same quantity or quality of these constructive resources and influences. Some provide most of them in high quality. Others provide only few of them or offer them in weak form. And yet others may neutralize whatever is helpful that they do provide with other detrimental practices and influences (such as abusive leaders, adult hypocrisies, and dysfunctional organization). Thus, this article's theory does not represent a categorical claim about the effects of American religion on youth per se. It rather suggests a set of independent variables that we can work to measure well in order to assess the theory's value (see, for example, Smith forthcoming (a), (b)).

Third, as I have repeatedly acknowledged above, American religion is not the only place where many of these kinds of social influences might affect the lives of youth. Alternative parallel contexts may include community programs, purchased lessons and instruction, and other nonreligious voluntary associations. Nevertheless, religious organizations are uniquely pervasive organizations in American society that do strongly encourage youth participation. And religious organizations can provide cultural moral orders characterized by impressive scope, depth, and authority, often matching if not surpassing other kinds of American voluntary associations or purchasable services. Therefore, I suggest they deserve particular theoretical and empirical attention for their effects in the lives of youth.

With this discussion and these qualifications in mind, therefore, I suggest this concluding and summary hypothesis:

The more that these nine influences are present to youth in their religious organizations, and the more youth learn, embrace, and capitalize on these resources, the more religion will positively and constructively influence outcomes in American youth's lives.

NO EFFECTS AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Before concluding we would do well to give a bit of attention to the possibility that religion sometimes does not positively influence adolescent outcomes, and may even negatively influence

adolescent outcomes. None of the above suggests that religion always or invariably has positive, constructive effects in the lives of youth. First, the larger claim here and in the literature is probabilistic, not categorical. Second, religious traditions do vary, and certain religions and particular circumstances may produce negative effects in the lives of adolescents, which deserve to be investigated and theorized. In what follows, I do not elaborate a full-blown theory of lack of significant effects and of negative effects, but merely suggest some factors for future consideration. To begin, we might simply state and elaborate the converse hypothesis to that above, suggesting that when religious involvement does not have significant effects among American youth, it may be for the following reasons.

1. Inadequate supply: Some religious communities in which youth are involved provide few of the influences enumerated above, or only weak versions of them.
2. Failure to appropriate: Some youth present in religious communities that do offer constructive influences may, for whatever reasons, choose to remain largely detached, marginal, and uninvolved, and so fail to engage and benefit from positive religious influences.
3. Disruptive events: Some youth who are being constructively influenced by religious involvements may have them disrupted and negated by specific detrimental events (such as the divorce of parents, abuse by a religious authority, disorienting tragedy, or unreconciled falling-outs with people in religious community) that the positive religious influences are for various reasons unable to counter or overcome.
4. Competing influences: Some youth being constructively shaped by religious involvements may have those influences overwhelmed by counterinfluences from interactions in other social associations (neighborhood, work, school, the media, etc.) that promote competing moral orders and practices (risk behaviors, delinquency, family conflict, apathy, school drop out, etc.).

Some research has investigated destructive tendencies among mainstream clergy (for example, Shupe, Stacey, and Darnell 2000; America 2002). Other scholars have noted potentially destructive aspects and outcomes of youth participation in some new religious movements (Belitz and Schacht 1992). Religion may also hinder the educational attainment of some types of youth (for example, Darnell and Sherkat 1997; Ellison and Sherkat 1993). Thus, religion's potential for detrimental and antisocial effects in the lives of American youth is an issue deserving further consideration and development in future empirical and theoretical work.

CONCLUSION

Accumulated scholarship provides ample empirical evidence that religion is a factor in the lives of American adolescents that often influences their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. In a number of areas of concern, different measures of religiosity are correlated with a variety of healthy, socially desirable outcomes. Although various explanations for these religious effects have been offered in individual pieces of scholarship, we have lacked a more comprehensive and coherent theoretical account of religious influences in the lives of youth. In response, this article has attempted to theorize more systematically why religion might have such constructive effects in the lives of American adolescents. The hypotheses advanced above suggest a research program for data-collection design, measurement, analysis, and theory construction. Elsewhere, I have tried to begin empirically to work out specific aspects of this program (Smith forthcoming (a), (b)). Other research should consider the extent to which the hypotheses advanced here might be adapted to explain religious effects among American adults. Additionally, cross-national research is warranted to assess whether these hypotheses work primarily in an American religiocultural context, or whether they identify more general human processes and mechanisms that transcend such cultural and religious particularities. In general, future research will benefit by less often pursuing isolated research questions and instead

more frequently connecting with and perhaps integrating inquiries and findings into a larger, more coherent and systematic framework of explanation and understanding. This article is intended as a modest step in that direction.

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