



# Are American Youth Alienated from Organized Religion?

*A Research Report of  
the National Study  
of Youth and Religion*

*Number 6*

*by Christian Smith,  
Robert Faris and  
Melinda Lundquist Denton*

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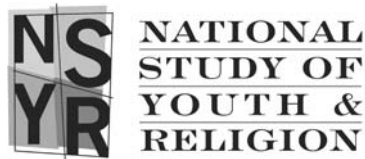
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**NATIONAL  
STUDY OF  
YOUTH &  
RELIGION**

**Number 6**



The National Study of Youth and Religion, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and under the direction of Dr. Christian Smith, professor in the Department of Sociology, is based at the Odum Institute for Research in Social Science at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This four-year research project began in August 2001 and will con-

continue until August 2006. The purpose of the project is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of U.S. adolescents; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent to which youth participate in and benefit from the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives, in order to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion.

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## Executive Summary

One of the most widespread and persistent stereotypes about U.S. teenagers is that they are alienated from “established” or “organized” religion and that this alienation is increasing. Much popular writing about adolescents assumes this view; however, empirical data suggest that this stereotype has little basis in fact. The majority of 12th graders in the United States — about two-thirds — do not appear to be alienated from or hostile toward organized or established religion. Only about 15 percent appear to be alienated from religion, a number comparable to the percentage of U.S. adults who are alienated from religion. Another 15 percent of U.S. teens appear to be simply disengaged, neither warm nor cold, toward organized religion. Correcting misinformed stereotypes about youth alienation toward religion might help to inform community and religious institutions how they might better serve young people.



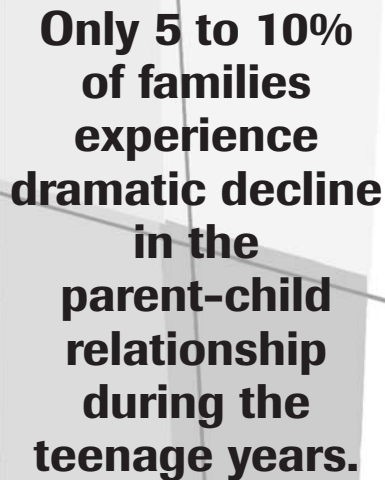
**Data suggest  
that most  
U.S. 12th  
graders are  
not alienated  
from  
organized  
religion.**

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## Introduction

One of the most pervasive and persistent conventional beliefs about U.S. teens is that adolescence inevitably puts them through a difficult period of physical, emotional and relational stress. Adolescence is commonly assumed to be a time of psychological and social turmoil precipitated by hormonal changes, sexual awakening, identity strains and tensions associated with changing relationships as teens seek increasing autonomy from institutions of former dependence, particularly family and religion. This stereotype was first noticeably promoted in the early 20th century by the influential adolescent psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1904) and has been reinforced since by the works of Peter Blos (1984), Erik Erikson (1968) and others. Anna Freud (1958: 275) epitomized this adolescent “storm and stress” stereotype when she wrote that, “To be normal during the adolescent period is by itself abnormal.”

The problem with this “storm and stress” stereotype of teenagers, however, is that much of the academic scholarship upon which it has been grounded is based on observations of the adolescent clinical patients of these psychologist authors. A number of popular books on youth continue this same sampling bias by featuring subjects who are hardly representative of the average or typical youth (e.g., Pipher 1994; Pollack 1998; Kindlon and Thompson 2000).



**Only 5 to 10%  
of families  
experience  
dramatic decline  
in the  
parent-child  
relationship  
during the  
teenage years.**

In recent decades, however, many more solid studies of non-clinical adolescent populations have cast doubt on the “storm and stress” stereotype, emphasizing instead the diversity of adolescents’ experiences, the lack of inevitability in any youth outcome and the relative low levels of intense turmoil in teenagers’ lives (e.g., Powers, Hauser and Kilner 1989; Offer 1969; Rutter et al. 1976). In fact, only about 10 to 20 percent of adolescents manifest severe emotional disturbance, approximately the same percentage as in the adult population (Hauser and Bowlds 1990). Further, Steinberg (1990: 260) writes that only between 5 and 10 percent of families experience dramatic decline in the quality of parent-child relationships during the teenage years. As a result, a consensus has emerged among scholars that most U.S. youth and their families do not experience adolescence as an unavoidably distressing period of intense psycho-social turmoil.



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Adolescence does involve major changes for youth and their families, but most negotiate these changes fairly successfully. Sustained teenage rebellion against, conflict with and alienation from parents and traditional social institutions are not inevitable, nor are they the adolescent norm.

## **What do we know about youth alienation from organized religion?**

It is curious, then, that a version of the adolescent “storm and stress” stereotype appears to continue to influence many popular and quasi-scholarly interpretations of U.S. adolescent religiosity. The youth-religion book market, for example, is inundated with works claiming in one way or another that contemporary youth — GenXers, “Busters,” “Millennials,” the “Mosaic” generation, “Generation 2K,” “postmodern kids” and so on — are suspicious of, rebellious against or otherwise alienated from “institutional” or “organized” religion in the United States. U.S. youth, it is claimed, are searching for an “authentic” faith that they find lacking in the (presumably inauthentic) adult church that for youth simply “isn’t cutting it” (Rabey 2001). Youth today are said to be pervasively skeptical, disoriented and irreverent, interested in spirituality but not inclined to be religious (Barna 1995; Beaudoin 2000; Zoba 1999). This standard account of contemporary youth religion has roots going back at least to concerns in the 1960s and ’70s about how the “generation gap” was undermining the religion of youth (Nelson 1969; Kimball 1970; but see Keeley 1976; Wieting 1975; Johnson et al. 1974). Today, it has become the master frame of published books on youth religion (see, for example, Barna 1995, 2001; Rabey 2001; Mahedy and Bernardi 1994; Lewis, Dodd and Tippens 1995; McAllister 1999; Cox 1998; Zoba 1999; also see Sweeney 2001). Even a number of more scholarly books appear to be influenced by this interpretive frame (e.g., Davis 2001; Hersch 1998).

The problem, however, is that many of these works are journalistic, impressionistic or semi-autobiographical. And those few that contain systematically collected empirical data rely on questionable research designs. Works by George Barna (1995, 2001), for instance, are based on in-house telephone and mail surveys with unspecified or ambiguous response rates and Ns that typically are only slightly larger than 600. Yet tens — if not hundreds — of

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thousands of parents, youth ministers, church pastors, denominational leaders, journalists, teachers and others in the reading public consume these books. This, in turn, helps to form a socially constructed reality that might or might not actually match scholars' best understanding of the empirical truth. This might have consequences in forming (and perhaps reproducing through self-fulfilling prophecy) parental expectations, youth self-images and the resource allocations of religious organizations.

### **Does Sociology have anything helpful to contribute in this situation?**

The difficulty here is that, in general, sociologists of religion do not know enough about the religious lives of U.S. adolescents. The vast majority of research in the sociology of religion in the United States focuses on adults, ages 18 and older. And few scholars of U.S. adolescents in other fields pay close attention to youth's religious lives. As a result, social scientific knowledge of the religious affiliations, practices, beliefs, experiences and attitudes of U.S. youth in general is inadequate.

To be sure, vast literature exists that addresses religion in the lives of U.S. youth. Such literature, however, is riddled with serious problems:

- ◆ Much of the existing literature on U.S. youth and religion is not systematically empirical but consists largely of theoretical works on moral formation and faith development, proposals for ministry models, unsystematic case studies, etc.
- ◆ Most existing empirical research on youth is out-of-date. While some subjects of study change relatively slowly, U.S. youth pass through time in culturally shaped generations that can change significantly from decade to decade. We know a fair amount about Baby Boomers in their youth, but members of that generation are now passing through middle age and toward retirement and have teenage and adult children of their own. Furthermore, members of the much-discussed "Generation X" are typically defined as those born between the years 1965 and 1980, a generation that has passed into adulthood; GenXers are now about 24 to 39 years old — many with children of their own. We cannot claim to understand youth today by referencing existing research conducted on GenX teens (the age median of whom were getting their driver's licenses before the fall of the Berlin Wall) or older.

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- ◆ Many works in the literature involve analyses that contain a religion variable but do not make religion a focus of analysis or explanation. Many studies control for religion by adding a religion variable in analytical models but are not particularly concerned with understanding that religious effect; they are interested instead in some other independent variable and use religion only as a non-explicated control variable to bolster the main argument.
  
  - ◆ The vast majority of published empirical studies on U.S. youth and religion employ samples of subjects and respondents that are methodologically problematic. While some studies are based on strong research designs, many rely on samples that are quite small, that are not randomly selected and/or that represent a narrow segment of a population. As a result, it is difficult to assess who findings represent, and it is difficult to piece together the findings collectively into a coherent picture of U.S. youth. For example, our review of empirical studies published in 1999 and 2000 related to religious beliefs, practices and commitment finds research based on the following samples: participants in a Protestant youth conference, 300 Iowa children, 3 Muslim teenagers, 1,500 teenagers from Seventh-Day Adventist churches, 86 youth attending alternative music concerts, 276 parochial high school juniors, 125 11th graders from West Virginia, 77 college students, 273 Jewish teenagers from the Philadelphia area, an unspecified number of participants in Buddhist and Catholic retreats and 2,358 black youth from poor areas of three cities. Only two other of the studies during these years were based on large, nationally representative samples of youth.

This is a problem for many reasons. U.S. adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 represent about 14 percent of all people in the United States (those ages 10-24 represent 21 percent), an age-minority population deserving scholarly attention as much as any other group. Indeed, U.S. adolescents might deserve extra scholarly attention by sociologists of religion. Adolescence represents a crucial developmental transition from childhood to adulthood and so can disclose a tremendous amount of knowledge about religious socialization and change in the life course.

Adolescents are a population that many religious organizations — both congregations and para-church ministries — particularly target to exert influence in their lives. Adolescence and

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young adulthood is also the life stage when religious conversion is most likely to take place. It furthermore provides a unique opportunity to study religious influences on family relationships and dynamics, peer interactions, risk behaviors and many other outcome variables. Finally, adolescence provides an ideal baseline stage for longitudinal research on religious influences in people's lives.

Gaining a solid understanding of the religion of U.S. adolescents could also enable sociologists of religion to make useful contributions to a variety of nonacademic audiences for whom their findings might have relevance. A series of high-profile events — including multiple school shootings and local epidemic outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases among youth — have heightened broad public concern about alleged problems in youth culture. There appears to be a growing awareness of and interest in religious, spiritual and moral influences in the lives of youth not only among religious leaders but also educators, social service providers, public-policy makers, philanthropists and journalists.

Unfortunately, sociologists have little solidly dependable, nationally representative, empirical knowledge about adolescent religiosity to contribute to these public discussions. Some good qualitative studies of U.S. youth religion do make helpful contributions (for example, Lytch 2000; Myers 1991), yet these are not designed to make nationally representative claims about the religiosity of U.S. youth. Of the best works on adolescent religiosity, most focus specifically on inter-generational religious transmission (Wuthnow 1976; Sherkat 1998; Nelson 1981; Hoge, Petrillo and Smith 1982; Meyers 1996; Ozorak 1989; Parker and Gaier 1980; Cornwall 1988; Erickson 1992; Keysar, Kosmin and Scheckner 2000). But, in general, much of the existing social science literature on youth and religion is simply out-of-date. For instance, one important older synthesis of the literature is Hyde's (1990) 529-page *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence*, which digested roughly 1,760 pieces of literature. But only 16 of the 119 references in his chapter on "Religion and Morality in Adolescence," were published after 1985 — meaning almost everything known from Hyde about adolescent religion and morality (when accounting for the data publication lag time) is based on studies of people who were teenagers before Ronald Reagan had become president (also see Bensen, Donahue and Erickson 1989).

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The problem is, to some degree, a simple lack of interest and attention among sociologists. But the problem also stems from failing to put useful religion questions on many good surveys of youth, which typically understand and measure religion in narrow and deficient terms. Of 18 of the best national surveys of youth investigated for this report, for example, 12 contain a mere three religion questions or less; only three high-quality, nationally representative surveys of adolescents include six or more questions about religion. (See [www.youthandreligion.org/resources/surveys.html](http://www.youthandreligion.org/resources/surveys.html).) Moreover, it appears that few studies have analyzed these few religion questions systematically — which this report intends to begin to do here. Sociologists of religion who get involved in this research need to advise other scholars in family and adolescence on the importance of measuring religion well. Sociologists of religion also need to conduct their own surveys of adolescent religion.

Meanwhile, however, redressing the lack of knowledge about youth religion by analyzing available survey data to provide more accurate, big-picture views of adolescent religiosity is movement in the right direction. It is possible to scour reputable existing survey data on youth to learn about various religious aspects of their lives, including the extent of youth alienation from organized religion. Doing so can heighten understanding of and help lay down a baseline of essential information about U.S. adolescent religion. That is the goal of this report. Here, existing data from one of the best national surveys of U.S. youth is analyzed to test the pervasive youth-alienation-from-religion thesis.

## **Data and Methods**

Findings are based on analyses of Monitoring the Future survey data. The Monitoring the Future (MTF) Study is funded by research grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, a part of the National Institutes of Health. MTF, conducted in 1996 at the Survey Research Center in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, is a nationally representative survey of U.S. high school students administered to 12th graders since 1975 and eighth and 10th graders since 1991. Sub-samples of students in each grade receive different versions of the questionnaire. Each cover the core areas of demographic information and drug use, as well as questions on a range of other topics, including social life in school, academic achievement, parental involvement, political preferences and religion.

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Monitoring the Future uses a multistage area probability sample design, with three selection stages: geographic areas as the primary sampling unit (PSU), schools within the PSU and students within each sampled school. MTF includes 80 PSUs, eight of which were selected with certainty; the remaining PSUs were selected with probability proportionate to the size of the senior class, as were schools within each PSU. Typically, one school was selected from each PSU, although multiple schools were drawn from some major metropolitan areas. For each school, 400 students were randomly selected; for schools with less than 400 students in a given grade, the entire class was surveyed. The response rate for schools has ranged from 66 to 88 percent. The student response rate in 1996 was 83 percent.

This report focuses on dependent variables that MTF only asked of 12th graders. Data from 1996 rather than 1999 are used because MTF surveys after 1996 did not ask subjects in California any of the survey's core religion questions as state law prohibited them. For some charts below, 1996 data are compared with surveys conducted as far back as 1976. Total Ns for MTF surveys vary by year and grade. Note that, by design, MTF data, unfortunately, do not include school dropouts and home-schooled youth. While 12th graders clearly do not represent all U.S. youth, if there is a significant amount of youth alienation from religion in the U.S., one would certainly expect to see it among 12th graders, who among teenagers normally enjoy the greatest degree of autonomy of expression and independence from the social controls of family and religious congregations. If little alienation is found among 12th graders, one would expect to find even less among youth in lower grades.

This analysis uses four variables from MTF to test different dimensions of possible youth alienation from U.S. religion. These are:

1. Degree of perceived similarity between youth's and parents' ideas about religion,
2. Youth's approval or disapproval of the job churches and religious organizations are doing for the country,
3. Youth's desired levels of influence of churches and religious organizations and
4. Whether youth have already given or intend to give money to churches or religious organizations.

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The exact survey questions measuring these variables are:

1. “How closely do your ideas agree with your parents’ about religion?”
2. “How good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by churches and religious organizations?”
3. “Some people think that there ought to be changes in the amount of influence and power that certain organizations have in our society. Do you think the following organizations should have more influence, less influence or about the same amount of influence as they have now: churches and religious organizations?”
4. “If you have at least an average income in the future, how likely is it that you will contribute money to the following organizations (if you have already contributed, mark the last circle only). Are you likely to contribute to church or religious organizations?”

While none of these questions directly ask about alienation from religion (such a direct approach might or might not even work well) each taps a distinct dimension likely to indicate alienation or lack of alienation from religion. Because one question associates religion with the established authority of parents and the other three questions explicitly specify “churches or religious organizations,” it is reasonable to believe these four questions together tap not simply a general sense of religion or spirituality but also attitudes toward the organized, institutional, “established” version of religion from which youth are often said to be alienated. Together, these four variables provide an opportunity to test the alienation hypothesis with methodologically reliable data.

Demographic variables used in this analysis include age, gender, race (to maintain respondent confidentiality, race was only specifically coded in MTF data for whites and blacks; all other races are labeled simply “other”), geographic region, highest education of parents in the household and religious tradition or denomination. All data are weighted to be nationally representative. This analysis employs descriptive frequencies, cross-tabs and ordered logit regression analyses.

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## Results

Simple frequency distributions (reported as “overall” at the top of Tables 1-4) show that the proportion of U.S. 12th graders who express alienation from or hostility to religion is small. For example, 67 percent of the MTF sample of U.S. 12th graders report that their religious beliefs are very similar or mostly similar to those of their parents. Only 11 percent say their beliefs are mostly different, and 10 percent say very different. Twelve percent do not know. The vast majority of 12th graders thus express little evidence of rejecting or distancing themselves from the religious faith of their parents.

Similarly, only 4 percent of the sample of 12th graders believe churches are doing a very poor job for the country, while only 6 percent say churches are doing a poor job. Twenty-three percent say religion is doing a fair job. About one-half (49 percent) report that religion is doing a good or very good job for the country. Seventeen percent have no opinion. Again, by this measure, the majority of older youth do not appear to be disillusioned with or estranged from institutional religion in the U.S. (See Tables 1 and 2 on pages 15 and 16.)

How much influence would 12th graders like to see religion exert in U.S. society? Twenty-eight percent say religion should exert the same amount of influence as it currently does (see Table 3 on page 17). Forty-one percent would like to see religion exerting more or much more influence in society. Combined, these total 69 percent. Only 19 percent of youth would like to see religion exert less influence on society. Twelve percent have no opinion.

Finally, how do youth attitudes toward religion play out when it comes to their wallets and purses? Are youth friendly enough toward religious institutions to consider giving money to them? Interestingly, more than one-quarter of sampled 12th graders (27 percent) report that they actually already have given money to church. Nearly one in four (39 percent) say they believe (either definitely or probably) they will give money to churches or religious organizations in the future. Only 10 percent of 12th graders say they probably will not give money, and 9 percent say they definitely will not give money to church. Sixteen percent say they do not know. Of course, none of this measures what youth will actually do when they grow up. But it does measure another aspect of adolescent friendliness toward organized institutionalized religion in the United States. (See Table 4 on page 18.)



**Table 1: Agree with Parents' Ideas about Religion  
12th Graders, 1996 (Percents)**

	<b>Very similar</b>	<b>Mostly similar</b>	<b>Mostly different</b>	<b>Very different</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>Overall</b>	39.6	27.3	10.9	9.8	12.4
Baptist	52.4	22.2	11.4	5.0	9.1
Other Protestant	37.3	33.6	10.8	6.7	11.6
Catholic / Orthodox	41.5	32.9	12.2	5.7	7.7
Jewish	19.0	54.5	15.2	4.4	6.9
Mormon	69.3	16.9	0.7	13.1	0.0
Other religion	44.2	16.7	8.7	20.4	10.0
None	20.5	22.0	11.2	19.0	27.3
Boys	39.0	25.3	10.8	11.2	13.7
Girls	41.6	29.2	10.8	7.7	10.7
White	36.7	29.5	12.4	9.8	11.5
Black	55.6	16.0	5.2	4.8	18.4
Other	40.4	26.4	8.6	12.5	12.1
Northeast	28.7	35.1	10.2	10.2	15.7
North Central	37.7	24.9	11.2	11.2	15.0
South	44.1	26.0	11.9	8.5	9.4
West	44.8	25.3	8.8	9.9	11.2
Rural	47.4	22.8	11.2	7.0	11.5
Small town	36.4	30.0	10.8	10.2	12.5
Suburb	38.6	30.2	10.2	9.0	12.0
City	39.9	27.7	10.6	9.8	12.0
Father does not live in home	40.2	28.9	9.9	9.5	11.5
Father lives in home	37.6	22.9	14.0	10.3	15.2
No parent with HS degree	44.1	16.0	13.6	10.0	16.3
At least one parent with HS degree	36.4	26.7	11.0	9.3	16.5
At least one parent with some college	43.4	26.0	8.1	11.1	11.4
At least one parent with college degree	44.3	26.4	10.6	8.3	10.6
At least one parent who attended grad school	33.4	34.8	13.6	10.0	8.2

N = 2,037; Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996

**Table 2: Opinions on the Job Churches and Religious Organizations Do for the Country, 12th Graders, 1996 (Percents)**

	<b>Very good</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Fair</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Very poor</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>Overall</b>	16.8	32.5	23.1	6.0	4.3	17.3
Baptist	25.2	37.7	22.3	2.5	1.8	10.7
Other Protestant	19.7	36.3	21.5	5.6	2.6	14.3
Catholic / Orthodox	12.9	41.7	27.1	4.1	1.2	13.0
Jewish	8.0	22.9	18.0	7.3	5.2	38.6
Mormon	55.2	25.9	17.3	0.7	0.0	0.9
Other religion	17.9	25.5	22.1	9.9	10.7	14.0
None	4.9	17.3	22.9	11.6	10.2	33.3
Boys	14.8	30.4	23.5	7.6	6.1	17.7
Girls	18.6	34.6	23.3	4.3	2.6	16.6
White	16.3	32.7	22.6	6.0	4.8	17.7
Black	25.8	29.5	24.9	5.1	2.2	12.6
Other	13.5	33.8	24.0	6.5	3.8	18.4
Northeast	13.2	34.3	25.1	6.0	5.4	16.1
North Central	14.5	31.7	26.5	5.2	3.6	18.5
South	19.0	33.8	19.3	6.6	4.9	16.4
West	20.3	28.9	23.5	5.9	3.1	18.4
Rural	16.8	35.0	23.6	4.4	5.6	14.7
Small town	17.7	35.5	22.3	4.9	3.6	16.1
Suburb	15.5	35.3	20.5	7.9	4.0	16.9
City	17.1	29.7	25.7	6.2	4.3	17.0
Father does not live in home	17.7	27.6	25.0	8.8	3.8	17.1
Father lives in home	16.6	34.1	22.7	5.1	4.5	17.0
No parent with HS degree	16.1	29.7	26.8	5.6	2.8	18.9
At least one parent with HS degree	18.6	30.3	23.7	5.1	4.6	17.8
At least one parent with some college	15.8	33.8	24.2	6.7	4.6	15.0
At least one parent with college degree	19.5	35.0	20.7	5.3	3.4	16.2
At least one parent who attended grad school	12.4	31.6	24.8	7.4	5.6	18.3

N = 1,996; Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996

**Table 3: Desired Amount of Influence of Churches and Religious Organizations in Society, 12th Graders, 1996 (Percents)**

	<b>Much more</b>	<b>More</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Less</b>	<b>Much less</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>Overall</b>	18.2	22.6	28.4	9.8	9.4	11.6
Baptist	37.4	30.9	18.4	4.4	2.0	7.0
Other Protestant	18.6	27.3	32.7	5.5	5.8	10.2
Catholic / Orthodox	9.8	25.2	37.7	10.4	5.1	11.8
Jewish	2.7	4.2	30.5	22.3	28.7	11.7
Mormon	37.0	22.6	24.4	4.1	1.1	10.8
Other religion	23.6	14.6	21.6	11.4	16.5	12.3
None	3.5	9.9	24.3	19.1	25.2	18.1
Boys	16.3	23.1	27.8	10.3	11.6	10.91
Girls	20.6	22.4	29.7	8.2	7.0	12.05
White	15.7	23.3	29.0	10.4	11.0	10.7
Black	38.5	25.6	13.7	6.8	2.9	12.5
Other	14.4	18.6	35.2	9.7	8.1	14.1
Northeast	8.5	19.6	32.7	11.0	12.6	15.6
North Central	16.6	23.7	27.4	12.3	8.0	12.0
South	25.8	25.9	25.2	6.3	8.3	8.5
West	16.4	17.7	31.5	11.8	9.8	12.8
Rural	23.6	26.0	24.9	5.8	7.4	12.3
Small town	17.1	24.8	28.5	9.5	9.1	11.1
Suburb	14.2	22.4	29.8	11.7	11.9	10.1
City	18.4	20.9	29.8	11.5	9.3	10.1
Father does not live in home	22.2	19.9	28.3	6.9	9.4	13.2
Father lives in home	17.0	23.4	28.5	10.5	9.5	11.1
No parent with HS degree	24.4	23.8	24.6	3.6	2.8	20.9
At least one parent with HS degree	20.3	21.7	30.2	8.0	6.5	13.3
At least one parent with some college	19.9	25.5	25.0	8.3	10.0	11.3
At least one parent with college degree	18.1	24.3	27.2	11.4	8.3	10.8
At least one parent who attended grad school	13.9	19.0	33.2	11.7	15.4	6.8

N = 2,125; Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996

**Table 4: Plans to Contribute to Church or Religious Organizations  
12th Graders, 1996 (Percents)**

	Already have	Definitely will	Probably will	Probably not	Definitely not	Don't know
<b>Overall</b>	27.1	16.8	22.1	9.7	8.8	15.5
Baptist	36.4	25.9	21.7	3.9	2.5	9.6
Other Protestant	31.1	18.5	24.1	7.0	3.2	16.3
Catholic / Orthodox	24.4	17.1	31.5	5.7	4.4	16.8
Jewish	14.0	22.8	29.1	15.2	5.6	13.4
Mormon	66.5	22.2	7.3	2.1	1.1	0.9
Other religion	32.1	15.1	18.8	11.4	8.3	14.3
None	7.2	1.6	10.4	26.7	33.5	20.5
Boys	25.3	15.2	21.3	9.6	11.4	17.2
Girls	28.6	18.0	23.3	10.1	6.3	13.6
White	27.5	14.2	22.2	10.8	9.6	15.7
Black	33.5	29.7	20.3	4.8	2.3	9.3
Other	21.8	17.8	22.9	8.8	10.2	18.5
Northeast	23.7	12.3	24.2	10.3	10.8	18.8
North Central	27.2	14.0	24.5	10.2	8.9	15.2
South	28.3	21.2	21.7	6.5	7.4	14.9
West	28.5	17.4	16.9	15.0	9.1	13.0
Rural	25.5	17.9	20.9	9.0	10.6	16.2
Small town	27.9	17.8	23.2	9.9	6.5	14.7
Suburb	32.3	12.1	21.1	9.5	12.9	12.0
City	25.5	18.5	21.1	10.7	7.1	17.2
Father does not live in home	23.3	17.5	20.4	10.2	8.5	20.1
Father lives in home	28.3	16.7	22.8	9.6	8.8	13.9
No parent with HS degree	14.9	23.7	23.4	12.3	6.5	19.1
At least one parent with HS degree	27.6	16.5	24.5	9.1	7.2	15.1
At least one parent with some college	27.3	17.9	20.0	9.4	7.4	18.0
At least one parent with college degree	28.7	15.7	24.3	8.6	9.1	13.7
At least one parent who attended grad school	29.7	15.8	17.9	11.4	12.1	13.1

N = 2,010; Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996

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In summary, simple frequency distributions suggest that the large majority of U.S. 12th graders in 1996 — insofar as the four dependent variables validly measure evaluative attitudes toward the established religion of parents and churches — do not appear to be particularly alienated from or hostile toward organized religion in the United States. Depending on the measure, only about 10 percent of U.S. 12th graders in 1996 revealed some strong sign of disaffection from the religion of their parents or religious congregations. Considering that the 13 percent of U.S. adolescents who report no religious affiliation can be expected to have little positive regard for religion, the extent of religious alienation appears quite limited.

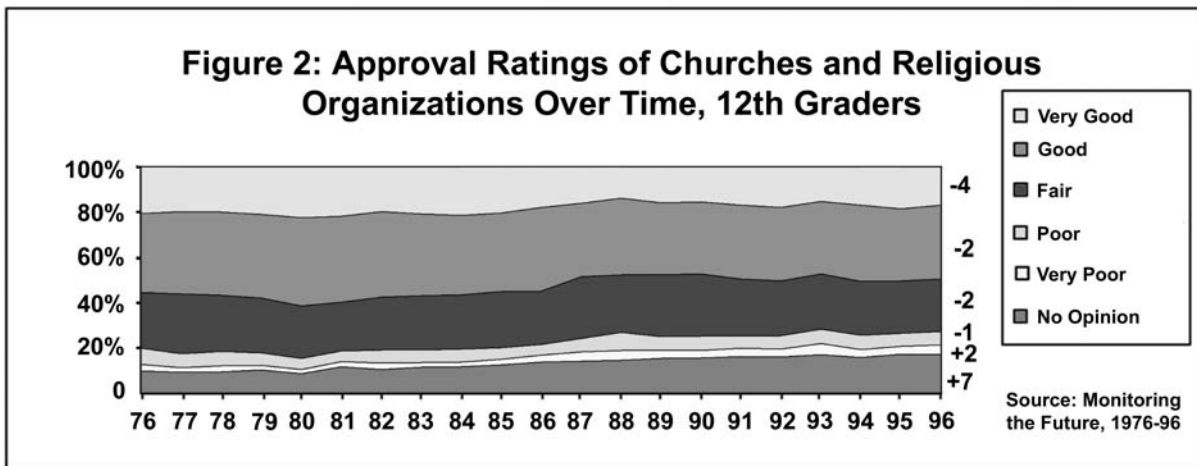
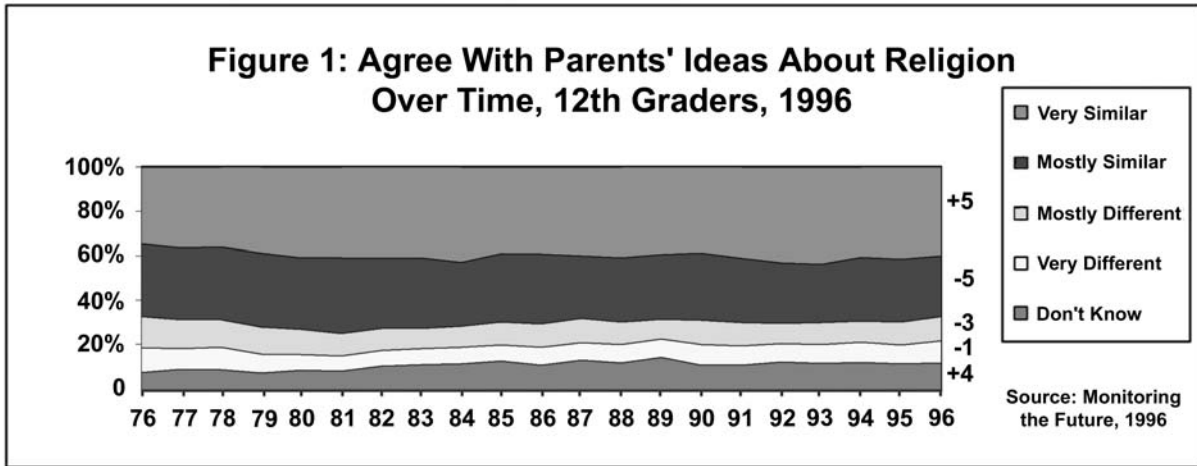
Tables 1-4 also enable examination of the possible influences of various demographic and religious affiliation factors on differences among youth in their alienation from established religion. Only a few overall patterns appear. Focusing on the demographic variables, girls seem to be consistently friendlier toward religion, as measured by the four variables, than do boys. Black youth appear to be more positive about religion than white and other-race youth. Regional differences are not large, but perceptibly higher levels of dissatisfaction with established religion are evident in the Northeast, compared especially with the South (see Smith, Sikkink and Bailey 1998).

The community type variables do not reveal large differences between rural and urban residence. Youth in households with fathers in residence do not appear vastly different on the four dependent variables than those without fathers, although the presence of fathers appears somewhat to increase agreement with parents about religion. Parental education also does not appear greatly to differentiate youth on the variables, except that adolescents of more highly educated parents appear to want religion to have less influence in society.

This analysis finds more differences, however, across the religious affiliations and denominations at the top of Tables 1 through 4. Overall, Mormon and Baptist youth — both more theologically and behaviorally conservative or strict than the other groups — appear to be the least alienated from organized religion. Non-religious and “other”-religion youth — and to some extent Jewish youth — appear to be comparatively the most alienated from institutional religion. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that these youth consider themselves not religious or belong to minority religions in America. Catholic and non-Baptist (other Protestant) youth tend to hold relatively middle positions on these issues.

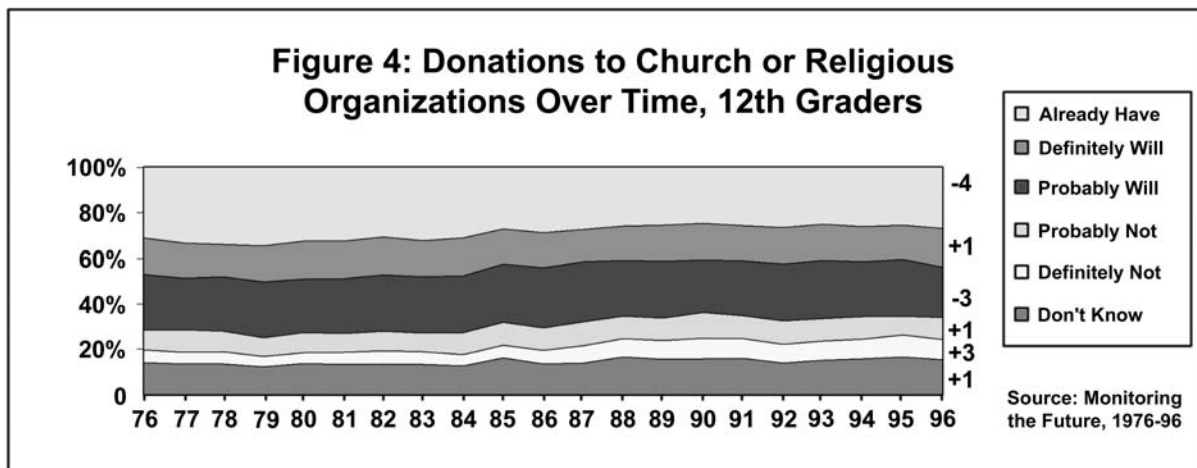
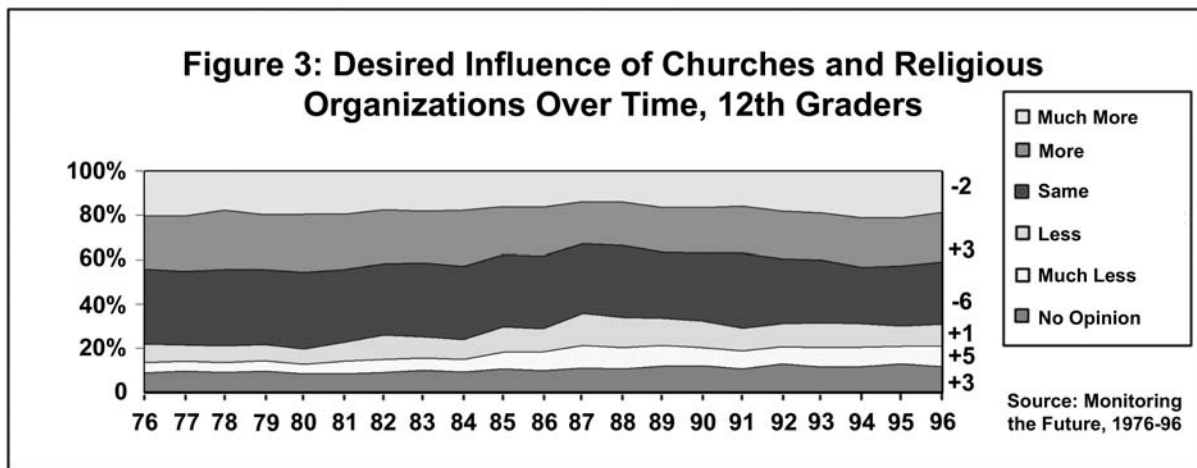
But what about trends over time? Regardless of their absolute levels of alienation, might there be a noticeable growth in youth disaffection from organized religion over the last decades that might presage significantly increased levels of alienation in the future? Evidence from 20 years of MTF surveys shows no such growth trend — in fact relatively little change at all.

Figures 1 through 4 reveal that between 1976 and 1996, the percent of U.S. 12th graders who answered any category for any of the four dependent variable questions generally changed by no more than a few percentage points in any direction. In some cases, indicators of alienation grew modestly, but in others they declined slightly. Differences in youth and parental beliefs about religion appear to have actually reduced in these 20 years.



Positive approval ratings of religion do appear to have lost out somewhat to having no opinion. The percentage of youth desiring the same amount of influence for churches declined, but both the categories of less influence and more influence (and no opinion) grew. Over 20 years, four percent fewer 12th graders say they expect to give money to churches. Therefore, there is no notable consistent trend found in these data reviewing the last quarter of the 20th century of any increase in alienation or antagonism toward organized religion among U.S. youth.

Finally, which factors predict more or less alienation among youth from institutional religion in a multivariate context? Table 5 reports results from ordered logistic regression analyses



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in which all of the religious and demographic variables were entered in the models. Comparing the models, race (white, compared to black) is the most consistent predictor of alienation from religion. The black pro-religion relationship observed in the bivariate cross-tabs is statistically significant for three of the four models, with the exception being approval of the job churches are doing for the country. Females are also significantly more likely than males to have pro-religion attitudes when it comes to desiring churches to have more influence in society and the likelihood of donating money to church, but are no more likely to agree with parents' ideas about religion or approve of the job churches are doing for the country. Youth from rural backgrounds, as well as those whose fathers live in the household, are more likely to agree with their parents' ideas of religion. Adolescents from the South and North Central states (compared to the Northeast) are more likely to want religion to have more influence in society and less likely to want to reduce religion's influence. Southern youth are also more likely to expect to donate money to church. Compared to youth with parents who hold only high school diplomas, youth with a parent lacking a high school degree desire religion to have more influence in society. Youth with at least one parent who has attended graduate school would like to see religion have less influence in society. Among the demographic variables, then, there were several statistically significant relationships, however, there were not any consistent predictors of alienation from religion.

For the religious affiliation and denomination variables, the omitted reference category is Catholic youth. Not surprisingly, compared to Catholic youth, non-religious youth are less likely to agree with their parents about religion, to want to increase religion's social influence and to give money to church. The estimates for Jewish and "other"-religion youth are also all in the negative direction, although the only significant case among them is Jewish youth wanting religion to have less social influence. Compared to Catholic youth, Baptist and other Protestant youth are significantly more likely to want to increase religion's social influence. Finally, Mormon youth are significantly more pro-religious than Catholic youth on the influences of and giving to churches dependent variables. (According to Table 1, Mormon youth are somewhat polarized on agreement with parents; they are most likely of all groups to hold very similar views to their parents but also above the average in holding very different views.)



**Table 5: Ordered Logistic Regressions of Support for Religion  
12th Graders, 1996**

Independent Variables <sup>†</sup>	Agree with parents' ideas about religion <sup>‡</sup>	Approval of job done by churches and religious organizations <sup>‡</sup>	Desired influence of churches and religious organizations <sup>‡</sup>	Likelihood of donating to church or religious organization <sup>‡</sup>
Female	0.15 (0.10)	0.27 (0.09)	0.27** (0.09)	0.18* (0.09)
Black	0.89*** (0.18)	0.22 (0.15)	1.24*** (0.15)	0.35* (0.14)
Other minority	0.05 (0.14)	0.17 (0.14)	0.22 (0.12)	0.09 (0.13)
Rural	0.49** (0.16)	0.14 (0.14)	0.26 (0.14)	-0.03 (0.14)
Small town	0.10 (0.13)	0.13 (0.12)	0.15 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.12)
Suburb	0.06 (0.14)	0.22 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.13)
North Central	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.07 (0.13)	0.32* (0.13)	0.06 (0.13)
South	0.13 (0.14)	0.12 (0.13)	0.57*** (0.12)	0.28* (0.13)
West	0.28 (0.16)	-0.01 (0.15)	0.21 (0.14)	0.01 (0.15)
No parent has HS degree	0.25 (0.23)	-0.09 (0.20)	0.45* (0.21)	-0.14 (0.20)
At least one parent attended college	0.14 (0.15)	0.03 (0.14)	-0.08 (0.13)	0.05 (0.13)
At least one parent is a college graduate	0.20 (0.14)	0.04 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.12)
At least one parent attended graduate school	-0.14 (0.15)	-0.19 (0.15)	-0.42** (0.13)	0.06 (0.14)
Father lives in home	0.34*** (0.12)	0.21 (0.11)	0.11 (0.11)	0.13 (0.11)
Baptist	0.15 (0.17)	0.24 (0.15)	0.86*** (0.15)	0.25 (0.15)
Other Protestant	0.01 (0.14)	0.14 (0.13)	0.40*** (0.12)	0.19 (0.13)
Jewish	-0.34 (0.36)	-0.44 (0.34)	-1.11*** (0.34)	-0.23 (0.31)
Mormon	0.44 (0.42)	1.37 (0.40)	1.07** (0.38)	1.35*** (0.39)
Other religion	-0.21 (0.19)	-0.59 (0.18)	-0.30 (0.17)	-0.21 (0.17)
None	-1.17*** (0.15)	-1.45 (0.15)	-1.62*** (0.14)	-2.73*** (0.16)
Constant 1	-1.67 (0.22)	-2.90 (0.21)	-2.03 (0.20)	-2.72 (0.21)
Constant 2	-0.76 (0.21)	-1.88 (0.20)	-0.96 (0.19)	-1.45 (0.19)
Constant 3	0.84 (0.21)	-0.09 (0.19)	0.82 (0.19)	0.14 (0.19)
Constant 4	-- --	1.86 (0.19)	2.28 (0.19)	1.05 (0.19)
N:	1542	1706	1831	1748
Log likelihood:	-1794.6	-2234.8	-2495.1	-2399.8
Chi Square:	153.3***	190.4	580.2***	509.1***

Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996 \* p <.05; \*\* p <.01; \*\*\* p<.001

<sup>†</sup> Reference categories are: Male, White, Urban, Northeast, At least one parent with high school degree, and Catholic.

<sup>‡</sup>Higher values indicate greater likelihood of giving, and more agreement, influence, and job approval; standard errors are in parenthesis.

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## Conclusions

There is much to learn from MTF data about possible levels of alienation from organized religion among U.S. youth. It is important to bear in mind, however, three limitations of these data that qualify interpretation of the findings. MTF asked variables only of 12th graders, and so data are not nationally representative of all adolescents. Still, they provide a solid representation of older U.S. adolescents. Second, MTF data are school-based and so exclude school dropouts and home-schoolers. Finally, the measures employed here only focus on active alienation from religion, not positive enthusiasm for religion; it could very well be that while the majority of teenagers are not alienated from religion, neither are they positively excited about and invested in religion.

What then, in review, has this analysis found about the possible alienation of older adolescents from U.S. religion, as measured by the four dependent variables? The following six summary observations are most important to note:

1. *The vast majority of older adolescents in the United States — about two-thirds — do not appear to be alienated from or hostile toward organized religion.* Two-thirds of them closely agree with the religious ideas of their parents. One-half believe churches and religious organizations are doing a good job for the country. Another one-quarter believe they are doing a fair job. Among 12th graders, seven in 10 would like to see religion exert the same, more or much more influence in society. Two-thirds say either that they already contribute money to churches or religious organizations or that they plan to in the future. In sum, the vast majority of older U.S. adolescents display positive regard, not negative hostility toward or disaffection from, organized religion.
2. *On the other hand, a significant minority of older U.S. adolescents — about 15 percent — appear to be alienated from organized religion.* Ten percent have religious ideas that are very different from those of their parents. Ten percent believe churches and religious organizations are doing a poor or very poor job for the country. Nineteen percent would like to see churches and religious organizations exert less or much less influence in society. And 19 percent do not now nor do they plan in the future to contribute money to churches or religious organizations. While data structure limitations prevent testing this thoroughly, it appears that it is mostly the same respondents who are giving the more alienated answers to all four questions — that is, alienation from religion as measured by the four variables tends to cluster among the same respondents.

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3. *Another significant minority of older adolescents in the United States — about 15 percent — appear to be simply disengaged in attitudes toward religion, being neither warm nor cold toward organized religion.* Twelve percent do not know how their religious ideas compare to their parents'. Seventeen percent have no opinion about whether churches are doing a good or bad job for the country. Twelve percent have no opinion about whether the social influence of churches and religious organizations should increase or decrease. And 16 percent do not know whether they expect to contribute money to churches or religious organizations. Again, while data structure limitations prevent adequately testing this, it appears that it tends to be mostly the same respondents who are giving the “don’t know” answers to the four questions — that is, indifference to or disengagement from religion as measured by “don’t knows” in the four variables tends to cluster among the same respondents. Regressions run predicting “don’t know” answers (results not shown) revealed only one consistently predicting factor: Youth who attend religious services weekly are significantly less likely to answer “don’t know” than youth who attend less regularly. While one cannot say these religiously disengaged youth are approving of religion, neither is it clear that they are alienated from it.
  4. *The minority of older adolescents in the United States who do appear to be hostile to or estranged from organized religion does not appear to have grown (or declined) in recent decades.* The percent of U.S. 12th graders who disagree with their parents about religion, who think churches are doing a bad job for society, who would like to see organized religion’s influence reduced and who do not plan to give to organized religion in the future did not increase in any major way between 1976 and 1996. Youth evaluative attitudes about organized religion appear to have been quite stable over time.
  5. *Black youth are less likely to be alienated from organized religion than white youth.* Black 12th graders are significantly more likely than white 12th graders to agree with their parents about religious beliefs, to desire more social influence for churches and to give money or expect to give money to church. This finding comports with others (Smith et al. 2002) showing higher levels of religious participation and subjective religiosity among black youth compared to white youth.

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6. *Adolescent girls are less likely to be alienated from organized religion than boys.* Girls are statistically more likely than boys to desire more social influence for churches and to give money or expect to give money to church. These differences mirror a similar pattern of religious variation among adult men and women in the United States and numerous other countries.

Current solid, social scientific knowledge about the religious lives of U.S. adolescents has been inadequate. As a result, master interpretive frames of youth religiosity that do not reflect the empirical reality can fill the cultural airwaves with persistent but largely false stereotypes. Given the increasing interest in many sectors of society in the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. youth, sociologists need to invest more resources into research on adolescent religion. This report is a modest step in that direction. By employing existing data from one high-quality national survey of U.S. youth, this report focuses analysis on four different measures of teenage alienation from organized religion, examining frequency distributions, trends over time and social predictors of youth alienation. These findings not only help to counter the “storm and stress” interpretation of youth and religion but also help raise awareness about the religious lives of U.S. youth and establish some core body of available knowledge about the extent of adolescent religiosity in the United States.

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