

# Mapping American Adolescent Subjective Religiosity and Attitudes of Alienation Toward Religion: A Research Report

Christian Smith\*

Robert Faris

Melinda Lundquist Denton

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Mark Regnerus

*University of Texas at Austin*

This article is posted on [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org) courtesy of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Inc. © 2003. All rights reserved. All further use of this material, other than for personal research, is subject to the permission of the publisher.

Sociologists know surprisingly little about the religious attitudes and practices of adolescents in the United States. This article begins to redress that lack of knowledge by examining descriptive findings on adolescent religiosity and attitudes toward religion from two recent, reputable national surveys of American youth. We present descriptive statistics on three fundamental aspects of subjective youth religiosity (importance of religion, frequency of prayer, born again status) and four measures of youth attitudes of alienation toward religion (agreement with parents, approval of churches, desired influence of churches, financial donations to churches). We also examine the influences of gender, race, age, and region on most of these religious outcomes. This descriptive inquiry should help to increase understanding of and to help lay down a baseline of essential descriptive information about American adolescent religiosity. Further research is needed to investigate the social influence of different kinds of religiosity on various outcomes in the lives of American youth.

We know relatively little about the religious lives of American adolescents. The vast majority of studies in the sociology of religion in the United States focuses on American adults, ages 18 and older. And few scholars of American adolescents in other fields pay close attention to youth's religious lives. As a result, our social scientific knowledge of the religious affiliations, practices, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes of American youth is lacking.

To be sure, there exist vast literatures that address religion in the lives of American youth. However, much of this literature is riddled with serious problems. First, much of the existing literature on American youth and religion is not systematically empirical, but consists largely of theoretical works on moral for-

\* Direct correspondence to: Christian Smith, Department of Sociology, CB 3210, Hamilton Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599. Email: [cssmith@email.unc.edu](mailto:cssmith@email.unc.edu). Thanks to Lilly Endowment, Inc. for a grant funding this research, for more information about which, see [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org).

mation and faith development, proposals for ministry models, unsystematic case studies, etc. Second, most existing empirical research on youth is out of date. While some subjects of study change relatively slowly, American youth pass through time in culturally-shaped generations which can change significantly from decade to decade. We do know from the literature a fair amount about Baby Boomers in their youth, but this is a generation now passing through middle age and toward retirement, with 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 22-37 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 licences before the fall of the Berlin Wall) or older. Third, many works in the literature involve analyses that do contain a religion variable, but do not make religion a focus of analysis or explanation. Many studies exist which control for religion by adding a religion variable in an analytical model, but are not particularly concerned to understand 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. Fourth, the vast majority of published empirical studies on American 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 very narrow segment of a population. As a result, it is difficult to assess about whom findings can be generalized as representing; and it is difficult to piece together the findings collectively into a coherent picture of American youth. For example, our review of empirical studies published in 1999 and 2000 related to religious beliefs, practices, and commitment are 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 high school parochial school juniors; 125 eleventh 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 poverty 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. American adolescents between the ages of 10-19 represent about 14 percent of all Americans (adolescents ages 10-24 represent 21 percent), an age-minority population deserving scholarly attention as much as any other group. Indeed, American adolescents may 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 in order to exert influence in their lives. Adolescence and young adulthood is also the life stage when religious conversion is most likely to take place. Adolescence 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 American adolescents can also enable sociologists of religion to make useful contributions to a variety of non-academic audiences for whom our 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 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 among not only religious leaders, but also educators, social service providers, public policy makers, philanthropists, and journalists. Unfortunately, although impressionistic and journalistic works on youth religion abound (for example, Lewis, Dodd, and Tippens 1995; McAllister 1999; Mahedy and Bernardi 1994; Zoba 1999; Beaudoin 2000; Rabey 2001) and a few suggestive opinion-poll-based studies on American youth religion exist (Gallup n.d.; Barna 1995, 1999, 2001), sociologists of religion currently have relatively little solidly dependable, nationally representative, empirical knowledge about adolescent religiosity to contribute to these public discussions. Some good qualitative studies of American youth religion do make helpful contributions to our knowledge (for example, Lytch 2000; Flory and Miller 2000; Davis 2001; Myers 1991), yet these are not designed to make nationally representative claims about the religiosity of American 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," for example, were published after 1985 — meaning almost everything that we know 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).

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 that we investigated in our research, for example, fully 12 contain a mere three religion questions or less; only three high-quality, nationally-representative surveys of adolescents include 6 or more questions about religion ([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 is what we intend 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. We also need to conduct our own surveys of adolescent religion.

Meanwhile, however, we can move in the right direction in redressing our lack of knowledge about youth religion by analyzing and compiling available survey data, as inadequate in some respects as they may be, to provide a big-picture view of adolescent religiosity. It is possible to scour reputable existing survey data on youth to learn about some religious aspects of their lives. Even simple descriptive work can serve to heighten broader understanding of and to help lay down a baseline of essential information about American adolescent religion. That is the goal of this article. Here we analyze existing data from two of the best, recent national surveys of American youth to present descriptive statistics on three fundamental aspects of youth subjective religiosity (importance of religion, frequency of prayer, born again status) and four measures of youth attitudes about religion (agreement with parents, approval of churches, desired influence of churches, financial donations to churches). We also examine the influences of age, race, gender, and region on most of these religious outcomes, as the survey data allow.

We believe that since our collective substantive knowledge of American youth religion is so relatively thin, and since available datasets do contain a great deal of interesting and important descriptive information on the religiosity of American adolescents, a purely descriptive article mapping the contours and correlates of youth religiosity using frequencies and crosstabs is more than warranted. In a separate analysis, we have examined three variables concerning youth religious participation (affiliation, attendance, and participation in religious youth groups) (Smith, Denton, Faris, Regnerus 2002). Having mapped the religious terrain descriptively in this article, we intend in subsequent work to conduct multivariate analyses to predict factors explaining variance in youth religiosity and religious participation. But first, in this article, we concentrate on one of the crucial tasks of sociological work: describing the configurations of (religious) social life.

## DATA AND METHODS

Our findings are based on analyses of the following two datasets:

1. *Monitoring the Future*, 1996. 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 at the Survey Research Center in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, is a nationally representative survey of American high school students, administered to 12<sup>th</sup> graders since 1975, and to 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders since 1991. Sub-samples of students in each grade are administered different versions of the questionnaire, while 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. Monitoring the Future uses a multistage area probability sample design, with three selection stages: 1) geographic areas, as the primary sampling unit (PSU); 2) schools within the PSU; and 3) 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 for 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 is surveyed. The response rate for schools has ranged from 66 to 88 percent for every survey year, and the student response rate in 1996 was 83 percent. Total Ns for MTF surveys vary by year and grade. However, the N for 1996 12<sup>th</sup> graders is 14,823; for 1996 10<sup>th</sup> graders is 7,895; and for 1996 8<sup>th</sup> graders is 9,167 — class samples were weighted in proportion to their national representation. By design, MTF data does not include school drop-outs and home-schooled youth. The MTF survey includes one religion question on its core questionnaire that we analyze here, the importance of religious faith (we are using 1996 MTF data here rather than 1999 data, because MTF surveys after 1996 did not ask subjects in California any of these survey's core religion questions, as they were prohibited by state law). Demographic information includes age, gender, race (to maintain confidentiality, race is only specifically coded in MTF data for whites and African-Americans; all other races are labeled simply "other"), and geographic region.

2. *Survey of Adolescent Health*, 1995. The National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally-representative school-based study of adolescents focusing on the social context of healthy behavior. Eighty eligible high schools — both public and private — were drawn from a national sampling frame of high schools, drawn up by Quality Education Data. To be eligible for selection, a high school needed to have an 11<sup>th</sup> grade and total enrollment greater than 30. The sampling design ensured representativeness according to geographic region, urbanicity, school type, and school size. Once the high schools were selected, one "feeder" middle school or junior high school

was selected with probability proportionate to the student body it sent to the selected high school in the past year. Because some high schools contain grades 7 through 12, the number of feeder schools is smaller than the number of high schools. There are a total of 132 schools in the survey. The recruitment rate of the originally sampled high schools was over 70 percent. The Add Health survey was administered in school, from the Fall of 1994 to the Spring of 1995, to all students grades 7 to 12 present on the survey date, and was completed by over 90,000 students. Note that, by design, Add Health data do not include school drop-outs and home-schooled youth. It is also important to note, however, that respondents who answered "no religion" to the survey's religious affiliation question were not administered subsequent religion questions; to be conservative, we have coded these cases as the lowest category on other religion questions, meaning that we no doubt underestimate the religiosity of American youth on this survey (i.e., a "no religion" respondent may very well pray, but was nonetheless coded in these data as never praying). Finally, the Add Health survey only asked the "born again" question analyzed below of its Protestant subjects; we are therefore unfortunately unable to estimate the percent of Catholic or other youth who are born again.

For purposes of this study, we have focused on American youth in the standard teenage years, those between the ages of 13 and 18. The four attitudes-toward-religion variables are limited to high school 12<sup>th</sup> graders. All data are weighted to be nationally representative. In order to provide the basic findings needed at this stage of a research program on American youth and religion, we have primarily employed descriptive frequencies and cross-tabs for analysis. We will first present the descriptive findings on our three main dependent religiosity variables. Then we will turn to examine the correlates of gender, race, age, and region on these variables.

## IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION

One of the most basic and widely used survey measures of individual subjective religiosity is respondents' stated importance of faith. Among American teenagers, we see a fairly even distribution among categories of importance of faith. According to MTF data, 31 percent of 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade (combined) adolescents say their faith is "very important," 30 percent say "pretty important," and 39 percent say faith is just "a little" or "not important." Thus, the majority of teenagers report having faith that plays an important role in their lives, although for only a substantial minority (31 percent) is it a very important role; also, for four out of ten teenagers, religious faith appears to be an unimportant factor in their lives.

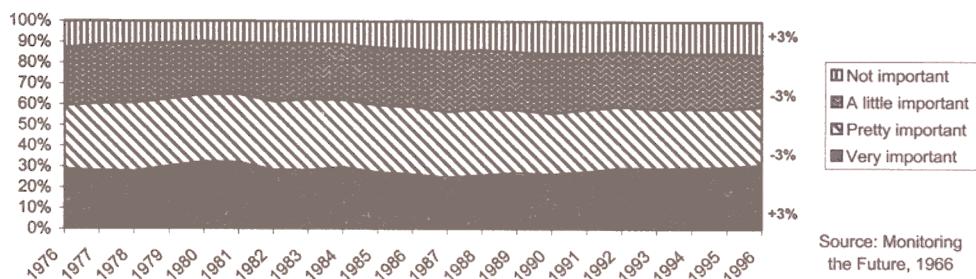
A 1987 Gallup telephone poll of 503 teenagers (response rate unknown) reported higher distributions for "importance of religious beliefs" — 39 percent very important, 41 percent fairly important, 15 percent not too important, and 5 percent not at all important (Gallup n.d.:52). Figure 1, however, suggests that

this difference is not likely due to an actual change in faith importance for teenagers over the nine year period (1987-1996), but rather methodological differences between the surveys. We are inclined to trust the MTF data more than the Gallup data. Also, a 1990 Gallup poll of 500 teenagers (response rate unknown) reports that 43 percent of teens reported that "having a deep religious faith" was very important to them (Gallup n.d.:42). By comparison, a 1999 Barna Research Group poll of 614 teenagers (response rate unknown) shows that 26 percent of teens are "absolutely committed" to their faith, 57 percent are "moderately committed," 14 percent are "not too committed," and 3 percent are "not at all committed" to their faith; the same poll showed that 56 percent agreed strongly with the statement "your religious faith is very important in your life," while 25 percent agreed somewhat, 12 percent disagreed somewhat, and 6 percent disagreed strongly (Barna 1999:46). Another way some surveys of adults have tried to measure importance of faith is by asking about religious influences on behaviors. Although neither the MTF nor Add Health surveys asked this kind of question, a 1999 Barna Research Group poll of 614 teenagers (response rate unknown) reports that 69 percent of teens could "think of specific times recently when your religious beliefs actually changed the way you normally would have behaved;" in the same poll, 46 percent of teens agreed strongly with the statement, "your religious beliefs actually change the way you behave," followed by 27 percent somewhat agreed, 16 percent somewhat disagreed, and 11 percent strongly disagreed (Barna 1999:51-52).

Monitoring the Future has asked American 12<sup>th</sup> graders the importance-of-faith question over a twenty year time frame, from 1976 to 1996, enabling us to track possible trends over two decades. Figure 1 projects these results, showing that the relative distributions of the importance of faith amongst 12<sup>th</sup> graders has changed very little, if any, over time. The only possible trend over these 20 years is perhaps a slight polarization of importance, with "a little" and "pretty" each losing 3 percent to "not important" and "very important." In any case, the findings of Figure 1 are not consistent with the fact that both adolescent religious affiliation and religious service attendance — measures of organizational religious participation — have declined somewhat during that same period (Smith et al. 2002). Thus, subjective religiosity seems to operate by a logic different than organizational participation, perhaps confirming anecdotal observations about the growing importance of subjective religion among youth (Beaudoin 2000; Rabey 2001).

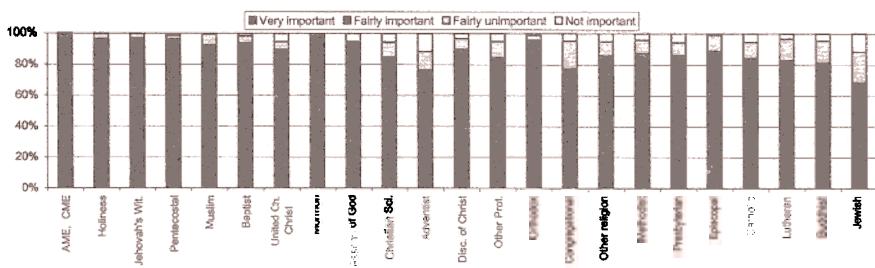
Importance of faith also varies by religious affiliation, as shown in Figure 2. There is no entirely clear pattern here, but youth in more theologically conservative, Pentecostal, and sectarian traditions evidence higher levels of importance of faith (one exception being the more liberal United Church of Christ, which, however, has an N below 50 in this dataset). And Jewish, Catholic, and mainline Protestant youth tend to profess lower levels of importance of faith.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Importance of Religion Over Time, 12th Graders**



Source: Monitoring the Future, 1996

**FIGURE 2**  
**Importance of Religion, by Affiliation, 1995**



Note: the Adventist, Congregational, Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Christian Scientist, and United Church of Christ affiliations each had fewer than 50 observations.

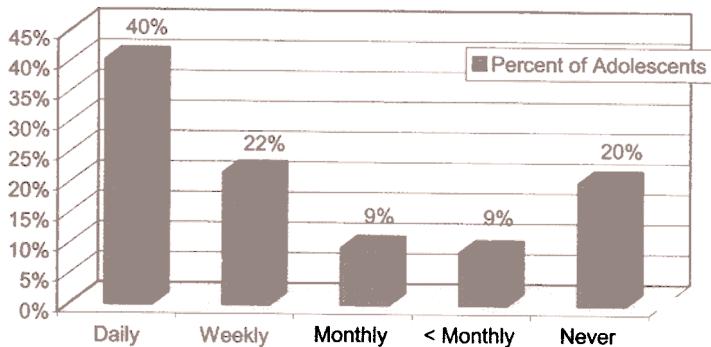
Source: Adolescent Health Survey, 1995

## FREQUENCY OF PRAYER

The majority of American adolescents pray, although as a group they exhibit a fair amount of variance in their frequency of prayer. According to Add Health data graphed in Figure 3, fully forty percent of teenagers pray daily, while 22 percent pray weekly. Nine percent each pray only monthly or less than monthly, and 20 percent never pray. These figures very likely underestimate the amount of actual teenage prayer, however, since 13 of the 20 percent who apparently "never" pray were respondents who answered "none" to the prior religious affiliation question and so were simply not given the frequency of prayer question, and thus automatically assigned to the "no prayer" answer category. We know, however, that survey respondents with supposedly no religion report that they do pray (Sherkat 1999). But with Add Health data, unfortunately, we simply cannot measure the prayer of these respondents, so we conservatively estimate their frequency of prayer by assigning them as "never." For comparable data, based on more methodologically problematic surveys: The Gallup International

Institute reports (based on a 1991 telephone survey, N = 513, unknown response rate) that 42 percent of American teenagers pray "frequently," 32 percent "occasionally," 17 percent "hardly ever," and 8 percent "never" (Gallup n.d.:14). A 1999 telephone poll (N = 614, response rate unknown) conducted by the Barna Research Group reported that 89 percent of teenagers had prayed to God in the previous seven days (Barna 1999: 58).

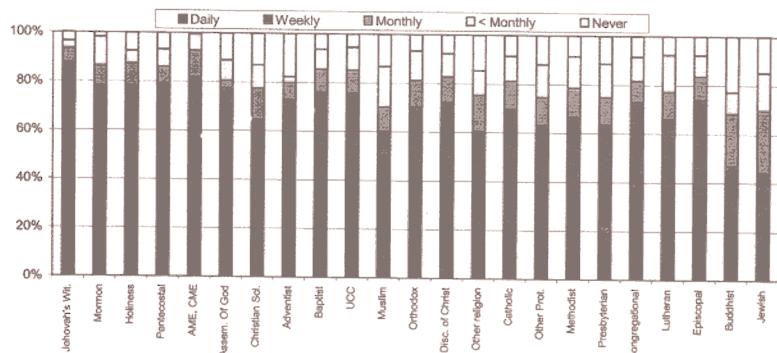
**FIGURE 3**  
Frequency of Prayer, Adolescents, 1995



Source: Adolescent Health Survey, 1995

Frequency of prayer also clearly varies by religious affiliation, as shown in Figure 4. The results generally parallel those on importance of faith in Figure 2. Teenagers in more theologically conservative, Pentecostal, and sectarian traditions pray more frequently. And Jewish, mainline Protestant, and Catholic youth tend to pray somewhat less frequently.

**FIGURE 4**  
Frequency of Prayer, by Affiliation, 1995



Note: The Adventist, Congregational, Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Christian Scientists, and United Church of Christ affiliations each had less than 50 observations.

Source: Adolescent Health Survey, 1995

It is worth noting that importance of faith and frequency of prayer are very highly correlated. For example, the data shows that fully 91 percent of American youth with some religious affiliation who say that their faith is not important in their lives also never pray. By contrast, 68 percent of American youth with some religious affiliation who say that their faith is very important in their lives pray daily (89 percent pray daily or weekly).

## BORN AGAIN STATUS

According to Add Health data, just over one-quarter of American Protestant adolescents (26 percent) say that they have been "born again" (again, unfortunately, the born again question was not asked in this survey of Catholics). The vast majority of Protestant teenagers (74 percent) say they have not been born again. This estimate is lower than those reported by other surveys. A 1999 Barna Research Group telephone poll ( $N = 614$ , response rate unknown) reported that 33 percent of all teenagers claimed to be born again (up from 28 percent reported in a 1990 Barna poll) (Barna 1999:47). By comparison, the Gallup International Institute reports (based on a 1988 telephone survey,  $N = 500$ , unknown response rate) that 35 percent of all American teenagers claim to be born again (Gallup n.d.:48). We are inclined to trust the Add Health data more than the Gallup or Barna findings, and so believe it is safe to think that perhaps about one-quarter of American Protestant adolescents (which is about 15 percent of all American adolescents, not including born again Catholics) consider themselves to be born again. We cannot estimate here the percent of born again Catholic youth.

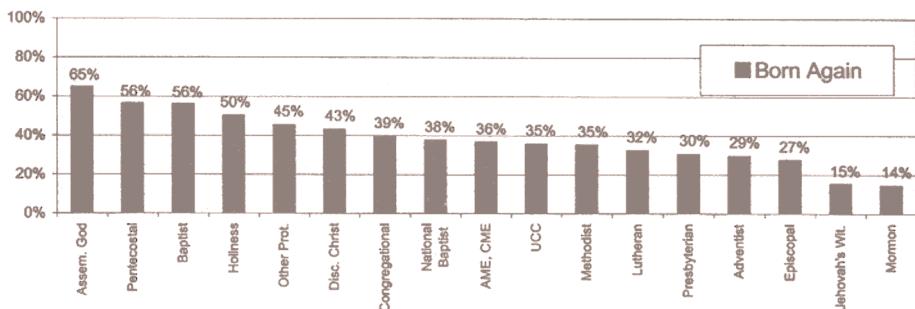
Born again status, as a particular theological and spiritual concept, also varies among Protestant youth by religious tradition, as we might expect. According to Figure 5 (as with importance of faith and frequency of prayer), Protestant youth in more theologically conservative, holiness, and Pentecostal denominations were more likely to be born again; youth in mainline Protestant denominations were less likely. Jehovah's Witness and Mormon youth, who are in traditions where "born again" is a less salient concept, were the least likely to claim being born again.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

Adult American women (and those from many other cultures) tend to score higher on most measures of religiosity than adult men. This difference holds somewhat for American adolescent girls compared to boys as well. Figure 6a shows gender differences in importance of faith for our surveyed 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders combined. Six percent more American adolescent girls than boys say their faith is very important; on the other hand, 7 percent more boys than girls say their faith is not important. Figure 6b also reveals a gender difference in adolescent frequency of prayer. Fully 10 percent more girls than boys pray daily.

By contrast, 6 percent more teenage boys than girls never pray. Gender differences in born again status are also somewhat evident; according to Add Health data, 28 percent of Protestant girls are born again, compared to 24 percent of boys. Thus, using these three measures of subjective religiosity, American adolescent girls appear to tend to be somewhat more religious than adolescent boys.

**FIGURE 5**  
Born Again Christians by Affiliation, Adolescents, 1995



Note: The Congregational, United Church of Christ, and National Baptist affiliations each had fewer than 50 observations.

Source: Adolescent Health Survey, 1995

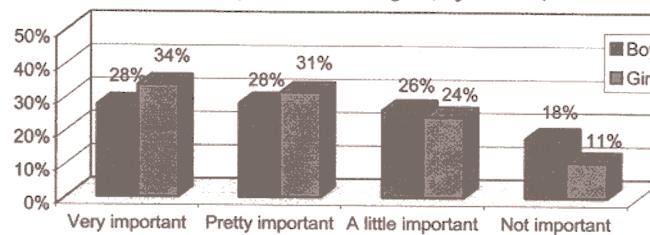
## AGE DIFFERENCES

Each additional year lived through adolescence in American culture brings with it significant physical, psychological, and social changes that we might expect to influence the subjective religiosity of youth. Subjective religiosity of adolescents, however, appears to be not much affected by age. Using MTF data (using grade as a proxy for age), for example, we find in Figure 7a that reported importance of faith changes little over the four years between 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. In Figure 7b, we see that frequency of teenage prayer does decline somewhat between age 13 and 18, although the decline is not pronounced. Eight percent fewer 18 year olds pray daily than 13 year olds; and 6 percent more 18 year olds never pray than 13 year olds. But the larger pattern suggests more stability than change.

Finally, the percentage of "born again" Protestant teenagers declines only somewhat from age 13 to 18. Twenty nine and 28 percent of 13 and 14 year olds, respectively, are born again. That number drops only a few percentage points to 26, 23, 24, and 24 percent, for 15, 16, 17, and 18 year olds, respectively (barring an unlikely cohort effect here, it appears that a few adolescents have the capacity to become "un-born again," having once earlier been born again). Despite the perceptible slight change, the overall pattern is one of stability.

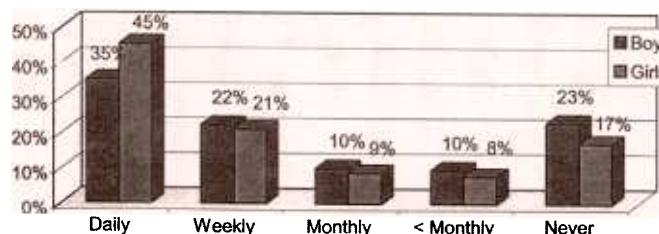
**FIGURE 6**  
Gender and Religiosity

**6a: Importance of Religion, by Gender, 1996**



Source:  
Monitoring the  
Future, 1996

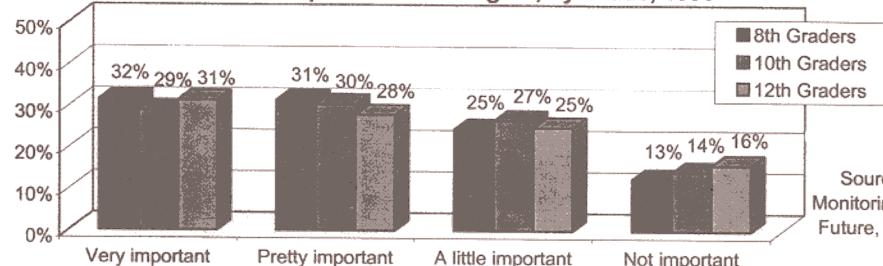
**6b: Frequency of Prayer, by Gender, 1995**



Source:  
Adolescent  
Health Survey,  
1995

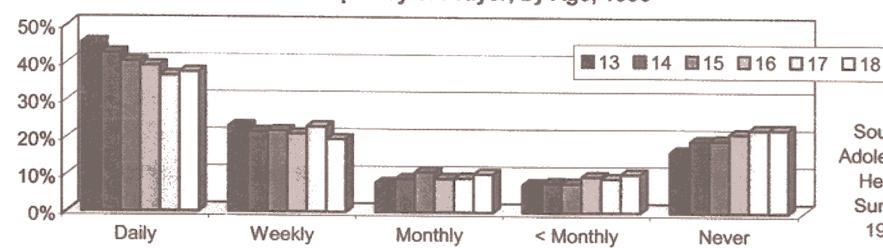
**FIGURE 7**  
Age and Religiosity

**7a: Importance of Religion, by Grade, 1996**



Source:  
Monitoring the  
Future, 1996

**7b: Frequency of Prayer, by Age, 1995**



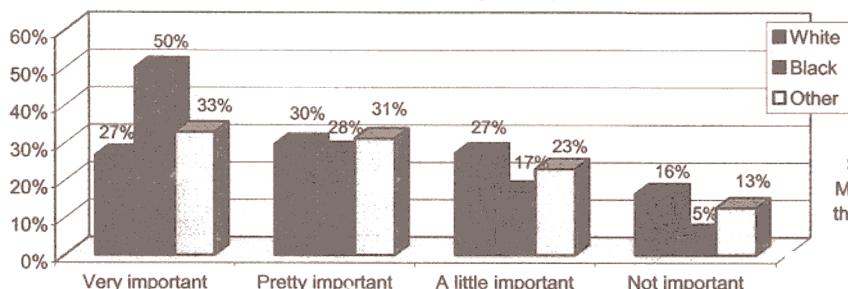
Source:  
Adolescent  
Health  
Survey,  
1995

## RACE DIFFERENCES

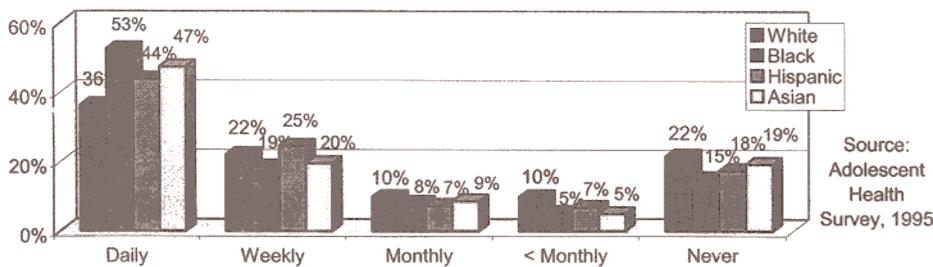
The race of American adolescents influences their levels of subjective religiosity. We observe racial differences in importance of religious faith among American youth in the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (combined). Figure 8a shows that faith is most important to black adolescents (50 percent report "very important"), followed by youth of other race (33 percent), and whites last (27 percent very important). Sixteen percent of white teenagers report that faith is not important to them, compared to only 5 percent of black and 13 percent of "other race" youth. This race effect is also consistent with findings on frequency of prayer. Figure 8b shows that young blacks are 17 percent more likely than whites, for example, to pray daily. Hispanic and Asian youth fall between those extremes. Furthermore, whites, at 22 percent, are the most likely racial group never to pray (compared to, say, blacks at 15 percent). The differences are not enormous, but they are patterned and notable.

**FIGURE 8**  
Race and Religiosity

8a: Importance of Religion, by Race, 1996



8b: Frequency of Prayer, by Race, 1995



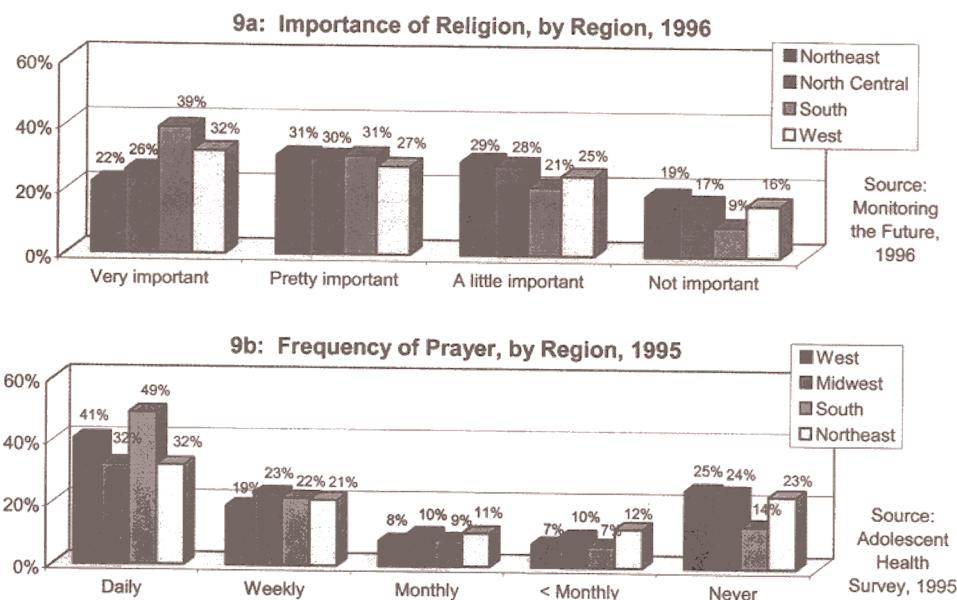
Finally, the data show that percent of Protestant youth born again varies by race as well: 36 percent of black Protestant youth report being born again,

compared to 26 percent of white Protestant youth, 13 percent of Hispanic Protestant youth, and 15 percent of Asian Protestant youth.

## REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Research on American adults has shown regional effects on religiosity (Smith et al. 1998). We find similar effects on the religious participation of American youth. Figure 9a, for instance, shows that adolescents from the South are much more likely to report higher levels of importance of faith, followed by youth in the West and North Central regions. Teenagers from the Northeast report the lowest overall levels of importance of faith. Similarly, Figure 9b shows that Southern youth are the most likely (at 49 percent) to pray daily and the least likely (at 14 percent) never to pray. Teens from Northeast and Midwest states pray daily at a rate 17 percentage points less than Southern youth. Compared to Southern youth, about 10 percent more youth from all of the other regions never pray. Northeastern youth pray the least frequently; 46 percent pray monthly or less. Even so, we should keep in mind that at least a third of youth do pray daily, no matter what their region of residence; and many more American youth pray daily than never pray.

**FIGURE 9**  
Region and Religiosity



A somewhat similar pattern holds true for the born again variable. Those Protestant youth living in the South are most likely to be born again (at 38 percent), followed by North Central youth (23 percent), and youth from the Northeast (17 percent). Protestant teenagers living in the West are the least likely, at only 8 percent (less than one-quarter the rate of Southerners), to report having been born again (these numbers for geographic distribution are roughly paralleled by a 1989 Gallup poll of 539 college students [Gallup n.d.:49]).

## YOUTH ATTITUDES OF ALIENATION TOWARD RELIGION

One of the most widespread and persistent conventional beliefs about American teenagers is that they are very alienated from "established" or "organized" religion, and are becoming increasingly so. This stereotype clearly influences many popular and quasi-scholarly interpretations of American adolescent religiosity. The book market on youth religion, 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 very suspicious of, rebellious against, or otherwise alienated from institutional or organized religion in the United States. American 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, Brekke, Strommen, and Underwager 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 do contain systematically-collected empirical data rely on research designs that are questionable. Works by George Barna (1995, 2001), for instance, are based on in-house telephone and mail surveys with no reported response rates and Ns that typically are only slightly larger than 600. Yet these books are being consumed by tens if not hundreds of thousands of parents, youth ministers, church pastors, denominational leaders, journalists, teachers, and others in the reading public. This, in turn, is helping to form a socially constructed reality that may or may not actually comport with what we might know to be closer to the actual

empirical truth. And this may have consequences in forming (and perhaps reproducing through self-fulfilling prophesy) parental expectations, youth self-images, and the resource allocations of religious organizations.

But do empirical data support this alienation-from-religion view? We use the following four questions from MTF to test different dimensions of possible youth attitudinal alienation from American religion: (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?" and (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, each of them taps a distinct dimension of relating to religion very likely to indicate alienation or lack of alienation toward religion. Since one question associates religion with the established authority of parents, and the other three questions explicitly specify "churches or religious organizations," we believe these four questions together tap not simply a general sense of religion or spirituality, but attitudes toward the organized, institutional, "established" version of religion from which youth are often said to be alienated.

Frequency distributions alert us immediately that the proportion of American 12<sup>th</sup> graders who express alienation from or hostility to religion are small. For example, 66.9 percent of our MTF sample of American 12<sup>th</sup> graders report that their religious beliefs are similar (very similar plus mostly similar) to those of their parents. Only 10.9 percent say their beliefs are mostly different, and a mere 9.8 percent say very different; 12.4 percent did not know. The vast majority of our 12<sup>th</sup> graders thus express little evidence of rejecting or distancing themselves from the religious faith of their parents. Similarly, only 4.3 percent of our sample of 12<sup>th</sup> graders believe that churches are doing a "very poor" job for the country, only 6 percent say churches are doing a "poor" job; and 23.1 percent say that religion is doing a "fair" job. About one-half (49.3 percent) report that religion is doing a "good" or "very good" job for the country; 17.3 percent had no opinion. Again, by this measure, the majority of older American youth do not appear to be disillusioned with or estranged from institutional religion in the U.S.

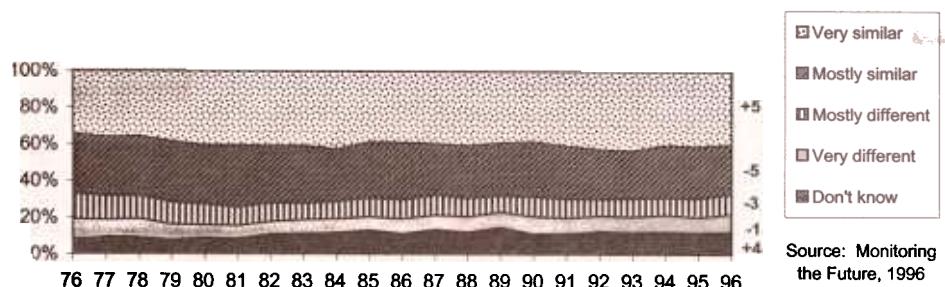
How much influence would 12<sup>th</sup> graders like to see religion exerting in American society? 28.4 percent say religion should exert the same amount of influence as it currently does. 40.8 percent would like to see religion exerting more or much more influence in society (both totaling to 69.2 percent). Only 19.2 percent of youth would like to see religion exert less influence on society.

11.6 percent have no opinion on this. Finally, how do youth attitudes toward religion play out when it comes to their wallets and pocketbooks? Are youth friendly enough toward religious institutions to consider giving money to them, or not? Interestingly, more than one-quarter of our sampled 12<sup>th</sup> graders (27.1 percent) report that they actually *already have* given money to church. Nearly one in four (38.9 percent) say that they believe (either definitely or probably) that they will give money to church or religious organizations in the future. Only 9.7 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders say they probably will not give money, and 8.8 percent claim that they definitely will not give money to church. 15.5 percent say they do not know. None of this measures what youth will actually do when they grow up. But it does measure yet another aspect of adolescent friendliness toward versus estrangement from organized, institutionalized religion in the U.S.

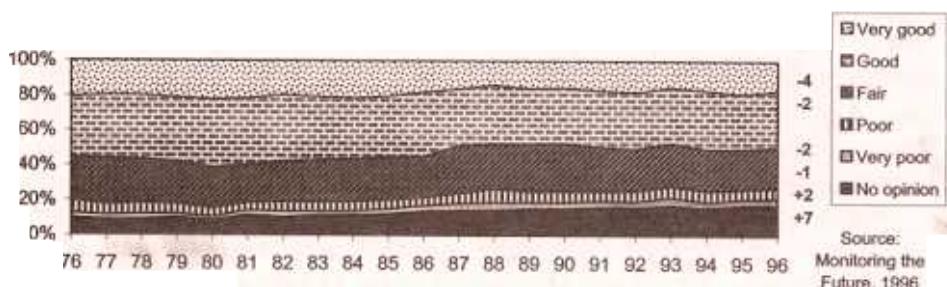
In summary, simple frequency distributions suggest that the large majority of American 12<sup>th</sup> graders in 1996 — insofar as our four dependent variables validly measure evaluative attitudes toward the established religion of parents and churches — do not appear to be particularly alienated from or hostile toward organized religion in America. Depending on the measure, only about 10 percent of American 12<sup>th</sup> graders in 1996 revealed some strong sign of disaffection from the religion of their parents or religious congregations. Considering the fact that 13 percent of American adolescents report no religious affiliation at all, among whom we might expect little positive regard toward religion, the apparent extent of religious alienation more broadly appears quite limited.

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, which 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 10 through 13 reveal that between 1976 and 1996, the percent of American 12<sup>th</sup> graders who answered any category for any of our 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. 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 twenty years, approximately 2 percent fewer 12<sup>th</sup> graders say they expect to give money to churches. On the other hand, differences in youth and parental beliefs about religion appear to have actually reduced in these twenty years. We therefore find no notable, consistent trend in these data reviewing the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century of any increase in alienation or antagonism toward organized religion among American youth.

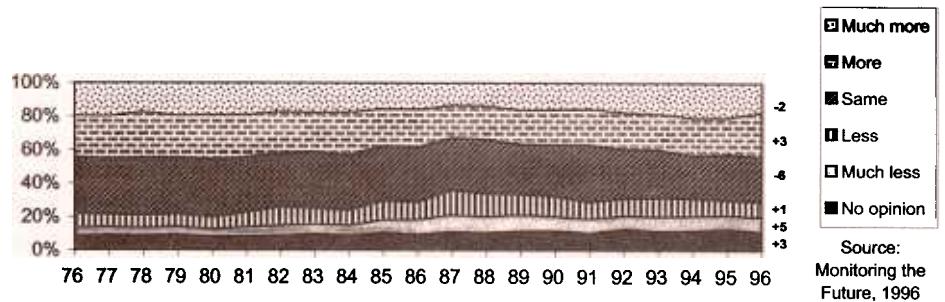
**FIGURE 10**  
Agree with Parents' Ideas of Religion, Over Time, 12th Graders, 1996



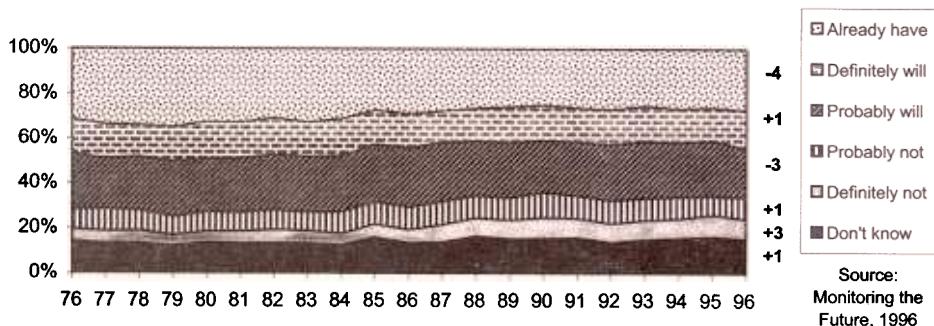
**FIGURE 11**  
Approval Ratings of Churches, 12th Graders, 1996



**FIGURE 12**  
Desired Influence for Churches Over Time, 12th Graders, 1996



**FIGURE 13**  
Donations to Church Over Time, 12th Graders, 1996



## DISCUSSION

There is much we can learn about the religiosity of American youth from existing descriptive survey data. It is always important to bear in mind, however, some limitations built into much extant data that should qualify our interpretation of the findings. For instance, Monitoring the Future data only represent American 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, and so are not technically nationally representative of all adolescents; nevertheless, we believe they provide a close approximation. Moreover, Survey of Adolescent Health respondents who answered "not religious" on the initial religious affiliation question were unfortunately skipped out of the frequency of prayer question. We know from other studies (Smith et al. 2002) that some "non-religious" youth are religiously active. This means that Add Health data underestimate the proportion of American youth who are praying. Moreover, the Add Health data only ask the born again questions of Protestant youth, limiting our ability to assess possible born again experiences among youth from other religious traditions. Furthermore, both the Survey of Adolescent Health and Monitoring the Future data are school-based, and so exclude school drop-outs and home schoolers. Nevertheless, these are among the best data available at the moment, so we must make our best use of them.

What, in review, have we found about American adolescent religiosity? We believe the following eight summary observations are most important to note:

1. Religious faith is important for the majority of American youth. Nearly one-third of youth each say that their faith is "very important" and "pretty important." Available data also suggest that the importance of religious faith to American adolescents has not declined (or increased) during the two decades from 1976 to 1996. While youth for whom faith is very important are spread across all religious traditions and denominations, they tend to cluster in more among theologically conservative, Pentecostal, and sectarian traditions.

2. On the other hand, religious faith is not really important for a large minority of American youth. Four out of ten American youth do not find their religious faith to be even somewhat important in their lives. Historical trend data, however, do not show this group of American youth to be growing remarkably over time (at least since the mid-1970s). The highest proportion of these youth for whom their religion is less important appear to be from Jewish, mainline Protestant, and Catholic backgrounds.

3. The vast majority of American youth pray regularly. Nearly two-thirds of American youth pray daily or weekly. These youth also tend to be the same for whom religious faith is important, meaning that those youth who have high religiosity tend to express this through multiple forms of subjective religiosity.

4. Only a minority of American adolescents think of themselves as being "born again." Our findings suggest that about one-quarter of Protestant youth report that they are born again; we unfortunately do not have data on born again Catholic youth, or youth from other non-Protestant religious traditions. Even the highest estimates by other surveys suggest that no more than one-third of all American teenagers say they are born again.

5. Adolescent girls exhibit somewhat higher levels of subjective religiosity than boys. Girls are more likely than boys to report that their faith is important to them, to pray more frequently, and (among Protestants) to be born again.

6. The subjective religiosity of American adolescents does not appear to decline much with age. Older teens do not appear to have declined in subjective religiosity as measured here, compared younger teens. Frequency of prayer may be one minor exception. Elsewhere (Smith et al. 2002), we have found that increased age among adolescents is associated with declining participation in organized religious activities. But decline in participation do not appear to affect adolescent subjective religiosity. This may reflect the apparently growing emphasis on subjective religiousness reported among youth (Rabey 2001; Beaudoin 2000).

7. The subjective religiosity of American adolescents is somewhat differentiated by race. Black youth exhibit the highest levels of importance of faith, pray the most, and (among Protestants) are most likely to be born again. On these three measures, American white, Hispanic, and Asian youth appear rather similar, with slight variations on importance of faith, born again status, and prayer.

8. The subjective religiosity of American adolescents varies somewhat by region of residence. Southern youth have the highest levels of subjective religiosity as measured by importance of faith, frequency of prayer, and born again status. That Southern culture is generally more friendly to religion than non-Southern cultures in the United States shows in teenage religiosity. Youth from the North Central and Western states exhibit lower levels of subjective religiosity, followed by the lowest levels in Northeastern teenagers. Northeast culture tends to be relatively more secular than many other regions of the country, and its dominant

religion is Catholicism, which is associated among youth with lower levels of importance of faith and frequency of prayer.

9. *The vast majority of older adolescents in America — about two thirds — are not alienated from or hostile toward organized religion in America.* 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, and another one-quarter believe they are doing a fair job. Seven in ten 12<sup>th</sup> graders would like to see religion exert the same, more, or much more influence in society. And two-thirds say that they either already contribute money to churches or religious organizations or that they plan to in the future. In sum, the vast majority of older American adolescents display positive regard, not negative hostility toward or disaffection from organized religion.

10. *Yet a significant minority of older American adolescents — about fifteen percent — does appear to be alienated from organized religion.* Ten percent each have religious ideas that are very different from those of their parents, and believe churches and religious organizations are doing a poor job for the country. Nineteen percent would like to see churches and religious organizations exert less influence in society. And 19 percent do not now nor plan in the future to contribute money to church or religious organizations. It appears that it is mostly the same respondent who are giving the more alienated answers to all four of our questions, that alienation tends to cluster among the same respondents.

11. *Another significant minority of older adolescents in America — about fifteen percent — appear to be simply disengaged in attitudes toward religion, being neither warm nor cold toward organized religion.* Between 12 and 17 percent do not know how their religious ideas compare to their parents'; have no opinion about whether churches are doing a good or bad job for the country; have no opinion about whether the social influence of churches and religious organizations should increase or decrease; and do not know whether or not they expect to contribute money to churches or religious organizations. It appears that it is mostly the same respondents who are giving the "Don't Know" answers to our four questions, that is, indifference to or disengagement from religion tends to cluster among the same respondents.

12. *The minority of older adolescents in America who do appear to be hostile to or estranged from organized religion has not grown (or declined) in recent decades.* The percentage of American 12<sup>th</sup> 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 stable over time.

Future multivariate analyses beyond the scope of this article will help to sort out the relative importance of alternative factors in predicting variance in subjective religiosity and alienation from religion among American youth. Also

## 2 SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

including more useful religion questions on otherwise good adolescent surveys — which the forthcoming third wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health is actually doing — will be important for improving future research. We suggest that all adolescent surveys include questions on religious service attendance, importance of faith, religious youth group participation, views of God, and born-again status.

## CONCLUSION

Current social scientific knowledge about the religious lives of American adolescents is inadequate. Given the increasing interest in many sectors of society in the religious and spiritual lives of American youth, and an apparently growing interest in "spirituality" among American youth themselves, sociologists of religion need to invest more resources into research on adolescent religion and its social effects. This article is a modest step in that direction. We have employed existing data from two high-quality national surveys of American youth, however wanting on some points they may be. We have focused our analysis on adolescents' importance of religious faith, frequency of prayer, and born again status; have examined gender, race, age, and regional effects; and have investigated four measures of possible youth alienation from religion. We hope that our findings help to raise broader awareness about the religious lives of American youth, and perhaps help to establish some core body of available knowledge about the extent of adolescent religiosity in the United States. Future survey research of American youth needs to develop much better and more extensive measures of adolescent religious practices, experiences, beliefs, and interests; to combine quantitative survey methods with qualitative interviews and ethnographies; to use multivariate analysis to identify the most important variables predicting religiosity; and ideally to conduct a longitudinal design that will track the same respondents over time, in order to strengthen our ability to assess causal religious influences.

## REFERENCES

- Barna, G. 1995. *Generation next*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.  
———. 1999. *Third millennium teens*. Ventura, CA: The Barna Research Group.  
———. 2001. *Real teens*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.  
Beaudoin, T. 2000. *Virtual faith: The irreverent spiritual quest of generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.  
Bensen, P., M. Donahue, and J. Erickson. 1989. Adolescence and Religion: A review of the literature from 1970 to 1986. In *Research in the social scientific study of religion*. Vol. 1. edited by M. Lyunn and D. Moberg, 153-81. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.  
Burkett, E. 2001. *Another planet*. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers.

- Cornwall, M. 1988. The influence of three agents of socialization. In *The religion and family connection*, Vol. 16, edited by D.L. Thomas, 207-31. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press.
- Cox, K. 1998. *GenX and God: A genX perspective*. Kearney, NE: Teckna Books.
- Davis, P. 2001. *Beyond nice: The spiritual wisdom of adolescent girls*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Erickson, J. 1992. Adolescent religious development and commitment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31(2):131-152.
- Gallup. n.d. *The spiritual life of young Americans: Approaching the year 2000*. Princeton: The George H. Gallup International Institute.
- Hersch, P. 1998. *A tribe apart*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Hoge, D., G. Petrillo, and E. Smith. 1982. Transmission of religious and social values from parents to teenage children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 44(3):569-579.
- Hyde, K. 1990. *Religion in childhood and adolescence*. Birmingham: Religious Education Press.
- Johnson, A., M. Brekke, M. Strommen, and R. Underwager. 1974. Age differences and dimensions of religious behavior. *Journal of Social Issues* 30:43-67.
- Keeley, B. 1976. Generations in tension. *Review of Religious Research* 17:221-231.
- Keysar, A., B. Kosmin, and J. Scheckner. 2000. *The next generation: Jewish children and adolescents*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kimball, J. 1970. A generation apart: The gap and the church. *Dialogue* 5:35-39.
- Lewis, D., C. Dodd, and D. Tippens. 1995. *The gospel according to generation X*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press.
- Lytch, C. 2000. *Choosing faith across generations*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Emory University.
- Mahedy, W., and J. Bernardi. 1994. *A generation alone*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- McAllister, D. 1999. *Saving the millennial generation*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Meyers, S. 1996. An interactive model of religious inheritance. *American Sociological Review* 61:858-66.
- Myers, W. 1991. *Black and white styles of youth ministry*. New York: The Pilgrim Press.
- Nelson, C. E. 1969. Symposium on our divided society, A challenge to religious education: Can Protestantism make it with the "Now" generation? *Religious Education* 64:376-383.
- Nelson, H. 1981. Religious conformity in an age of disbelief. *American Sociological Review* 46:632-40.
- Ozorak, E. W. 1989. Social and cognitive influences on the development of religious beliefs and commitments in adolescence. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28(4):448-463.
- Parker, M., and E. Gaier. 1980. Religion, religious beliefs, and religious practices among Conservative Jewish adolescents. *Adolescence* XVI:361-374.
- Rabey, S. 2001. *In search of authentic faith: How emerging generations are transforming the church*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press.
- Sherkat, D. 1998. Counterculture or continuity? *Social Forces* 76(3):1087-1115.
- . 1999. Tracking the "other": Dynamics and composition of "other" religions in the General Social Survey. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38(4):551-560.
- Smith, C., M. L. Denton, R. Faris, and M. Regnerus. 2002. Mapping American adolescent religious participation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* December 41(4):597-612.
- Smith, C., D. Sikkink, and J. Bailey. 1998. Devotion in Dixie and beyond. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37(3):494-506.
- Sweeney, J. 2001. *God within: Our spiritual future as told by today's new adults*. Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing.
- Wieting, S. 1975. Examination of intergenerational patterns of religious belief and practice. *Sociological Analysis* 36:137-149.
- Wuthnow, R. 1976. Recent patterns of secularization. *American Sociological Review* 41:850-67.
- Zoba, W. 1999. *Generation 2K: What parents need to know about the millennials*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.