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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a time when formal abstract thought becomes possible, enabling the individual to work through the highest stages of morality. Adolescents' understanding of religion and their commitment to it seem to differ sharply from those of children. It has been proposed that adolescents are likely to change, expand, or abandon their religious beliefs because of parental or peer pressure, cognitive development, or existential anxiety. Early, middle, and late adolescents (N=390) completed a questionnaire assessing family demographics and religious background, beliefs, practices, and experience; existential questioning; and closeness to family and peers. The results indicated that parents' religiousness was positively related to all aspects of adolescent religiousness, but there was little evidence of peer influence on religiousness. Existential questioning was positively associated with beliefs and private religious practices, but not with public religious practices or religious experience. Social aspects of religion appeared to be associated with increased commitment, particularly for subjects with close family ties. There were no significant sex differences in any aspect of religious commitment or change. These findings suggest that adolescents who are close to their parents are likely to adhere to the parents' belief system, even in the face of personal doubts. (Author/NB)

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The Development of Religious Beliefs and Commitment in Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

It has been proposed that adolescents are likely to change, expand or abandon their religious beliefs because of parental or peer pressure, cognitive development or existential anxiety. Three hundred and ninety early, middle and late adolescents filled out a questionnaire assessing family demographics, religious background, beliefs, practices, and experience, existential questioning, and closeness to family and peers. Parents' religiousness was positively related to all aspects of adolescent religiousness, but there was little evidence of peer influence on religiousness. Existential questioning was positively associated with beliefs and private religious practices, but not with public religious practices or religious experience. Social aspects of religion appear to be associated with increased commitment, particularly for subjects with close family ties.

Adolescence is the time when formal abstract thought becomes possible (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), enabling the individual to work through the highest stages of morality (Kohlberg, 1976). Adolescents' understanding of religion and their commitment to it seems to differ sharply from that of children (Fleck, Ballard, and Reilly, 1975; Elkind, 1978). Although it seems that adolescents are uniquely vulnerable to conversion experiences (Starbuck, 1895), it is not clear to what extent this tendency results from a reevaluation of previous knowledge (Kagan, 1971), a sense of isolation (Broughton, 1981), existential anxiety (McCartney and Weiss, 1985), a search for identity (Erikson, 1968), rebellion against parental values (Dudley, 1978), or other types of social pressures (Wallace, 1975). Furthermore, most adolescents have no conversion experience but gradually become more or less religious (Allport, 1950); some do not appear to change their beliefs or practices at all.

I should be clear about what is meant here by "religion". Typically, research in this area has used a simple self-rating scale, frequency of church attendance, or a composite scale of belief orthodoxy (this last has the disadvantage of being faith-specific, since faiths may have rather different doctrines). Initially, it seemed wisest to adopt a broad and flexible definition of religion, one that would encompass belief systems like Confucianism, which has no deity, and pantheism, which sees the divine in all things. However, it quickly became apparent that the subjects of this study held rather traditional Western views of religion: either they identified themselves with a specific organized religion, or they expressed belief in God (though not necessarily the traditional God concept), or they equated religion with worship service attendance. For the purposes of this study, therefore, religion was assessed in terms of religious affiliation, practices associated with such affiliations, or belief in some sort of God,

or some combination of the three. Commitment was defined in terms of level of belief or practice or both. Change was defined as an actual change of affiliation, or as change in level of commitment, or both.

It is generally agreed that people seek rewards and avoid costs. What kind of costs and benefits might be relevant to the adolescent in the process of examining, or choosing not to examine, her or his religious commitment? Stark and Bainbridge (1980) suggest that religion is uniquely equipped to offer certain kinds of rewards, such as spiritual salvation or being in a state of grace, which are not subject to empirical verification. Religion may also be seen as offering avoidance of certain kinds of costs, such as avoidance of death by means of eternal life in another world. Religions also provide explanations or information about how things came to be as they are, and to what purpose. Information itself is a reward, perhaps especially for adolescents, who are trying out their new cognitive capacities. Frankl (1959) and others have claimed that a sense of purpose is a basic human need. Such a need might be particularly relevant to adolescents, who have not yet established themselves and thus see fewer examples of their ability to have impact on others.

There are also social rewards associated with religion. Religious affiliation allows a sharing of social identity, which has powerful effects on self esteem. It also provides a medium for the exchange of social support. Of course, religious groups are not alone in offering social connection, but they have two advantages. First, support of fellow members is part of the ethical code of the group, making rejection less likely. Second, some religions—Christianity in particular—offer the possibility of emotional intimacy with the divine. As Allport (1950) says,

> It is doubtful whether even the happiest of earthly lovers ever feel that they love or are loved enough. A margin of yearning remains (10).

The benefits of belonging to a religious group are thus both social or

emotional and explanatory or intellectual. Conversely--and this is more typically applicable to adolescents--there are many disadvantages to attempting to leave one's religious community. It is not simply that one loses the intellectual advantage of the group's explanations for otherwise inexplicable phenomena. One may also be threatened by the group with supernatural punishment (such as spiritual damnation). More cogently, one is apt to lose considerable emotional support, and perhaps social privileges as well. Simply put, religious observance can become a bargaining chip between parents and their teenaged offspring. Likewise, adolescents are notoriously unkind to peers who depart from the norms of the group.

The present study explores the relationship between existential questing (the search for answers about human existence), social connectedness to family and peers, and religious beliefs, commitment, and change. It was hypothesized that social influences on commitment and change would be the most powerful, and that parents' influence would be greater than peers' for the two younger age groups, though not necessarily for the college age group. It was anticipated that existential questing would be associated with a decrease in commitment to the parents' religion and a higher level of religious doubt, while social connectedness would be associated with maintaining or increasing religious commitment. It was expected that both existential questing and religious change would be most likely around the end of high school, when reshuffling of social bonds generally occurs. It was also anticipated that religions with a strong social component, such as Judaism, would exert more holding power than belief-oriented faiths, such as Protestant Christianity.

Method

Three hundred and ninety adolescent males and females from three suburban school systems participated in the study: 106 ninth graders, 150

eleventh or twelfth graders, and 134 alumni of the school systems who had graduated three years before. Fifty-four percent of the subjects were Catholic, 14% were Protestant, 4% were Jewish, 15% were self-identified atheists or agnostics; the remaining 13% belonged to other faiths or did not identify their faith. Subjects filled out a questionnaire which assessed family socioeconomic status, their own occupational and educational aspirations, religious background, religious practices (own and family's), religious beliefs, religious experiences, existential questioning, and relationships with family and peers.

Results

A factor analysis of religious practice, experience, and belief variables confirmed that these three categories are distinct, and further distinguished between attendance at worship services, other social religious activities (such as belonging to a youth group or teaching Sunday school), and personal religious activities (such as praying or reading Scriptures). Table 1 shows the scales comprising each of these factors and gives the reliability coefficient for each scale. Most were acceptably high; the major exception is the change scale, suggesting that level of practice, strength of belief, and attachment to one's original faith often vary independently.

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insert Table 1 about here

As shown in Table 2, eleventh and twelfth graders showed the lowest levels of practice (except for worship service attendance) and belief, and in fact rated themselves nonsignificantly lower on religiousness than the other age groups. However, they not only reported the highest incidence of negative religious experience, but also had the highest incidence of positive religious experience, though the latter difference was not

statistically significant. The average age of conversion to a new faith or to no faith was about 15 years, as found previously (Starbuck, 1895), but most of these "conversions" were in the direction of less commitment, at least to organized religion.

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insert Table 2 about here

There were no significant sex differences in any aspect of religious commitment or change, as Table 3 shows. However, girls reported closer personal relationships, particularly with peers and with siblings. This difference seemed to be due to a greater amount of reciprocal self-disclosure in girls' relationships, a difference reported elsewhere (Hays, 1985).

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insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 compares subjects who had changed their religious affiliation with those who had not changed.

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insert Table 4 about here

Change from original affiliation was positively associated with existential questioning and negative religious experiences, and negatively associated with overall family closeness, though not with closeness to individual family members. The families of switchers tended to be less religious than those of nonswitchers.

Table 5 presents the original affiliations of those subjects who later switched and the affiliations to which they changed.

insert Table 5 about here

As predicted, Protestants were more likely to change their affiliation than Catholics or Jews. Atheists and agnostics were the most likely to switch.

Table 6 shows the correlations between religiousness and change and some possible influences, including existential questing and social connectedness.

insert Table 6 about here

Overall, family religiousness was the best predictory of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences, and of self-rated religiousness, for all age groups. The modest effect of family SES on worship service attendance is probably the result of the confound of religion and SES: Jews and liberal Protestants tend to be of higher SES than Catholics and evangelical Christians (Roof, 1979) and also to attend services less frequently (Lenski, 1963), tendencies also found in this sample. English and math grades were associated with social religious practices, perhaps because young people who do well in school are more likely to be chosen to teach or to lead a group. SAT scores were virtually unrelated to religiousness. There was a small but highly significant correlation between existential questing and personal religious activities. In fact, those who report a high level of existential questing are likely to be more orthodox in their beliefs than those who report a low level of questing (t=2.62, $p<.01$) and to rate themselves as being more religious (t=2.78, $p<.01$). Thus, existential concern need not be associated with religious doubt and may even strengthen religious convictions.

Family closeness was associated with higher levels of religious belief and practice, but not with positive religious experience. Interview data supported this pattern of association. Closeness to peers was not related to any aspect of religiousness. Thus, it seems that both the family's beliefs and practices and the adolescent's cognitive growth play a part in determining religious commitment during adolescence, and that adolescents who are close to their parents are likely to adhere to the parents' belief system, even in the face of personal doubts.

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Table 1

Scale Items and Reliability Coefficients (Cronbach's alpha)

Change	
Changed affiliation	
Changed frequency of worship service attendance	
Self-rated change in religiousness	
Difference between own and parents' faith	alpha = .49
Existential questing	
Think about how to find happiness	
Think about the purpose of life	
Think about how you came to be the way you are	
Think about whether there is a God	
Think about how the world came into being	
Think about why there is suffering in the world	
Think about what happens after you die	
Think about whether you will do anything important	alpha = .72
Orthodoxy of belief	
Belief in God	
Belief that God influences one's life	
Belief that God influences history	
Belief that God answers prayers	
Beliefs similar to rest of congregation	alpha = .80
Worship service attendance	
Satisfied with present congregation	
Frequency of attendance	
Attendance on holidays	
Observations of religious rules on Sabbath	alpha = .79

Table 1, continued

Religious activities: Personal	
Read Scriptures outside of worship service	
Read other religious literature	
Pray alone	
Pray with others	alpha = .71
Religious activities: Social	
Lead religious activities	
Belong to a religious youth group	
Teach or tutor religious material	
Donate time to religious community functions	alpha = .63
Religious activities: All	alpha = .77
Religious experiences: Positive	
Felt in the presence of God	
Had a religious vision	
Felt that God spoke to me	
Was converted to a new faith	
Converted someone to my faith	
Felt helped by prayers on my behalf	
Someone led me to a deeper religious understanding	
Felt that I would be saved	alpha = .90
Religious experiences: Negative	
Felt my church acted wrongly	
Had serious doubts about my faith	(r=.45)
Religious experiences: All	alpha = .90
Family's religious activities	
Parents' worship service attendance	
Family says grace at mealtimes	
Family's worship service attendance on holidays	alpha = .67

Table 1, continued

Connectedness: Peer	
Frequency going out with best friend	
Frequency going out with a group of friends	
Frequency going out with date/spouse	
Shares problems with friend	
Friend(s) share problems with you	alpha - .56
Connectedness: Father	
Father praises your achievements	
Father listens to you	
Father takes other side in arguments (r)	
Ask father for advice	
Spend free time with father	alpha = .75
Connectedness: Mother	
Mother praises your achievements	
Mother listens to you	
Mother takes other side in arguments (r)	
Ask mother for advice	
Spend free time with mother	alpha = .76

Table 1, continued

Connectedness: Sibling	
Fight with sibling (r)	
Sibling is proud of your achievements	
You are proud of sibling's achievements	
Sibling listens to you	
You listen to sibling	
Sibling shares problems with you	
You share problems with sibling	
You spend free time with sibling	
Sibling sticks up for you	
You stick up for sibling	alpha = .89
Connectedness: General family	
Will have a similar family to yours	
Family is together on holidays	
Family eats dinner together	
Spend free time with family	
Family travels together	
Family "kids around" together	
Family has traditions	alpha = .76

Note: Items marked (r) were scored in reverse.

Table 2

T-tests for Grade Differences

in Religiousness, Existential Questing and Connectedness

Scale/Item	9th	11/12th	15th
Change: Affiliation (item)	0.11*	0.23	0.32***
Self-rated (item)	0.30**	-0.25	0.02
Scale	2.34**	3.26	3.73***
Existential questing	23.04	24.02	24.92
Orthodoxy of beliefs	6.99	6.24**	7.91
Worship service attendance	9.65*	8.28	7.64**
Religious activities:			
Personal	1.81	1.64**	2.38
Social	1.58	1.34	1.40
All	3.39	2.96	3.76
Religious experience:			
Positive	1.26	1.72	1.31
Negative	0.38**	0.69**	0.38
All	1.64	2.41*	1.69
Self-rated religiousness (item)	2.68	2.39	2.80
Connectedness:			
Peer	11.23***	12.96	12.95***
Father	7.85	7.55	8.14
Mother	8.84	8.92*	9.72*
Sibling	13.69**	16.52***	19.18***
General family	15.67	14.80***	16.73

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences between groups as follows: left column, 9th vs. 11/12th; center, 11/12th vs. 15th; right, 9th vs. 15th.

*p<.05
**p<.01
***p<.001

Table 3

T-tests for Sex Differences

in Religiousness, Existential Questing and Connectedness

Scale/Item	Male	Female
Change: Affiliation (item)	0.25	0.21
Self-rated (item)	-0.04	0.03
Scale	3.28	3.14
Existential questing	23.98	24.13
Orthodoxy of beliefs	6.89	7.11
Worship service attendance	8.18	8.67
Religious activities:		
Personal	1.75	2.10
Social	1.42	1.[illegible]4
All	3.24	3.54
Religious experience:		
Positive	1.63	1.31
Negative	0.58	0.43
All	2.21	1.74
Self-rated religiousness (item)	2.53	2.68
Connectedness:		
Peer	11.81	13.02***
Father	7.91	7.78
Mother	8.65	9.58**
Sibling	15.19	17.98***
General family	15.18	16.07*

*p<.05
**p<.01
***p<.001

Table 4

T-tests for Differences Between Subjects Who Changed and Subjects Who Did Not Change Affiliation in Religiousness, Existential Questing and Connectedness

Scale/Item	No Change	Change
Self-rated change in religiousness (item)	0.21	-0.72***
Existential questing	23.54	25.76***
Orthodoxy of beliefs	7.57	4.50***
Worship service attendance	9.49	5.04***
Religious activities:		
Personal	1.93	1.97
Social	1.36	1.68
All	3.31	3.70
Religious experience:		
Positive	1.53	1.23
Negative	0.44	0.68**
All	1.97	1.91
Self-rated religiousness (item)	2.77	2.08***
Family religious activities	6.32	4.07***
Connectedness:		
Peer	12.36	12.82
Father	7.91	7.58
Mother	9.24	8.86
Sibling	16.71	16.71
General family	16.10	14.07***

*p<.05
**p<.01
***p<.001

Table 5

Original Affiliation, Percent Changing and Present Affiliations

Original Affiliation	%Changing	Present Affiliations
Atheist (n=9)	56%	Agnostic (2)
		Jewish (1)
		Theist (1)
Agnostic (n=25)	44%	Atheist (2)
		Protestant (2)
		Catholic (3)
		Jewish (1)
		Born Again (1)
		Theist (1)
Protestant (n=74)	35%	Atheist (3)
		Agnostic (11)
		Catholic (1)
		Jewish (1)
		Born Again (4)
		Theist (4)
Catholic (n=237)	16%	Atheist (4)
		Agnostic (12)
		Protestant (2)
		Born Again (5)
		Theist (7)
Jewish (n=17)	12%	Agnostic (1)
		Theist (1)
Other (n=19)	21%	Agnostic (1)
		Catholic (1)
		Born Again (1)
		Theist (1)

Table 6

Correlations of Demographic Variables, Existential Questing, and Connectedness with Religiousness

	Change:			Activities:			Experience:		Relig.:
	Self-r	Scale	Belief	Service	Personal	Social	Positive	Negative	Self-r
Family SES	-.00	.06	-.14*	-.20***	-.13	.06	-.10	.01	-.17**
Family relig.	.01	-.39***	.33***	.71***	.29***	.36***	.26***	.15*	.49***
Grades: Engl.	-.09	-.11	.02	.11	.10	.24***	-.08	-.06	.09
Math	.02	-.04	-.07	.03	-.04	.23**	-.20**	-.13	-.01
SAT: Verbal	-.05	.07	-.22	-.10	.07	.07	-.12	.02	-.08
Math	-.24*	-.12	-.12	-.11	.13	-.02	.05	.00	-.07
Exist. Quest.	.08	.15*	.13*	-.02	.19***	.06	.07	.00	.12*
Connectedns.:									
Peer	.03	.07	-.06	-.05	.04	-.05	.03	.05	.02
Father	-.04	-.14*	.16**	.12*	.10	.12*	.07	-.07	.12*
Mother	-.01	-.06	.11	.13*	.16**	.08	.07	-.05	.13*
Sibling	.01	.00	.11	.06	.12*	.00	.00	-.11*	.17**
Family	-.01	-.25***	.26***	.23***	.15**	.11	.04	-.15**	.27***
Tot. fam.	-.05	-.16**	.20**	.20***	.18**	.10	.06	-.13*	.25***

*p<.05
**p<.01
***p<.001