

TRAJECTORIES OF RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION FROM ADOLESCENCE TO YOUNG  
ADULTHOOD

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# TRAJECTORIES OF RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION FROM ADOLESCENCE TO YOUNG ADULTHOOD

## ABSTRACT

This study takes a life course approach to examine trajectories of religious participation from early adolescence through young adulthood and how family and religious characteristics influence whether and when youth experience religious changes. By employing a group-based method of trajectory analysis, this study uncovers three trajectories of religious stability (non-attendance, occasional attendance, and frequent attendance) and three trajectories of religious change (early, late, and gradual declining attendance). Results also suggest that residing with two biological parents and residing in a religious family increase the likelihood that youth attend religious services throughout adolescence. In addition, results indicate that religious disaffiliation is associated with a decline in religious participation for all youth, but marriage, cohabitation, and religious conversion are associated with a change in religious participation only among youth following a trajectory of high or moderate religious involvement. Overall, this study identifies distinct patterns of religious participation among adolescents, provides some insight into how these pathways are continually shaped by family and religious characteristics, and suggests that the influence of life events on religious participation is dependent on the trajectory of religious involvement that youth experience.

There has been a renewed interest in the religious lives of youth, and recent studies suggest that religion is a significant part of life for many adolescents and young adults (Smith and Denton 2005; Regnerus 2007). For example, most youth believe in God, and approximately half of all adolescents attend religious services regularly and believe that religion is a fairly important part of their lives (Smith and Denton 2005).

Although these studies have advanced our knowledge about overall rates of religious involvement among youth, less is known about how individual patterns of religiosity may change over time (Smith et al. 2003). It is generally believed that religious participation declines during adolescence and young adulthood and then increases later in adulthood as individuals marry and have children (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Benson and King 2005; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). However, given the religious diversity among adolescents, many youth likely follow a trajectory of religious participation that differs from this general trend (Smith and Denton 2005).

Two recent studies provide support for this argument. Regnerus and Uecker (2006) focus on dramatic religious changes over a one-year period in adolescence, finding that 5% of youth experience a large increase in religious participation, 6% of youth experience a large decrease in religious participation, and religious change is more likely to occur late in adolescence (i.e., age 18). An additional study focuses only on religious decline, finding that 69% of youth attend religious services less frequently in young adulthood than in adolescence (Uecker et al. 2007). These studies provide some insight into the frequency of religious changes among youth, but less is known about the ways in which these changes occur. Do youth experience a life-changing event that leads to a dramatic religious change, or does this change occur more gradually? When is religious change most likely to occur, and what causes these religious changes during adolescence?

Because religion is an important part of life for many youth, understanding whether youth follow a trajectory of religious stability or when and why youth experience religious change may provide insight into adolescent development. Moreover, because religious participation is linked to

various outcomes such as academic success, well-being, and civic engagement (Regnerus 2003; Benson and King 2005), increasing our knowledge of adolescent religiosity may help us to better understand why some youth may lead happier, healthier lives than others. The life course perspective provides a useful guideline for such an examination, as this perspective focuses on developmental processes (i.e., trajectories) and changes (i.e., transitions) that may alter patterns of development (Elder 1998). Thus, the life course perspective can serve as a framework for understanding patterns of religious participation, which may be marked by either stability or change. Moreover, a life course framework provides insight into how social contexts early in adolescence and life transitions throughout adolescence and young adulthood may shape trajectories of religious involvement.

Using the life course framework, the purpose of this study is to examine trajectories of religious participation and how family and religion may influence these trajectories. Three basic questions guide this study. First, what patterns of religious participation do individuals follow from early adolescence through young adulthood? Second, do family and religious characteristics early in adolescence predict these trajectories? Third, how do family and religious changes throughout adolescence alter these pathways? Children often inherit religious beliefs and practices from their parents, and this value transmission is most likely to occur when parents are very supportive (Myers 1996). In addition, religious conversions, family transitions during adolescence, and entry into adult relationships such as marriage may alter trajectories of religious participation.

This study employs a group-based method of trajectory modeling to examine patterns of religious participation. Group-based trajectory models assume that there are groups of individuals that experience distinct patterns of behavior over time, and use repeated measurements of an outcome (i.e., religious participation at each age) to estimate these trajectories. Through the use of these models, this study illustrates the distinct patterns of religious participation that youth experience, highlights the changes in religious involvement that occur throughout adolescence and young

adulthood, and examines how family and religious characteristics may continually influence the trajectory path that youth follow.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Patterns of Religious Participation**

Scholars have proposed a number of hypotheses to explain developmental changes in religious participation. Some scholars have argued that religious participation is relatively stable over time due to socialization (either religious or non-religious) early in life (Bahr 1970; King, Elder, and Whitbeck 1997; Sherkat 1998). Others believe that rates of religious involvement change throughout the life course, and that these fluctuations are linked to life events and transitions that individuals experience (Bahr 1970; Stolzenberg et al. 1995; King, Elder, and Whitbeck 1997; Uecker et al. 2007). From a life course perspective, both of these hypotheses may be correct. Factors early in life may set people on certain trajectories of religious participation, but transitions throughout the life course may alter these trajectories, leading to increases or decreases in religious participation over time (Wilson and Sherkat 1994; King, Elder, and Whitbeck 1997; Elder 1998).

Family and religious socialization are commonly cited as the most important influences on religious participation (Myers 1996; Smith and Denton 2005). Youth are more likely to be involved in religion early in life when they attend services with their parents, experience declines in religious involvement during adolescence as they become detached from their families and more involved with peers, and then increase their religious activity as they form their own families (Wilson and Sherkat 1994; Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Ploch and Hastings 1998; Uecker et al. 2007). However, trajectories of religious participation are dependent on the level of religious socialization that youth receive early in life. Ozorak (1989) suggests that religious polarization may occur during adolescence; youth who are only slightly or moderately religious in childhood may experience a decline in religious participation, but religious participation may increase during adolescence for very religious youth. Recent studies provide support for this hypothesis, showing that approximately the same percentage of youth

increase and decrease their religious activity during adolescence (Kerestes, Youniss, and Metz 2004; Regnerus and Burdette 2006; Regnerus and Uecker 2006).

Taken together, previous research suggests that individuals follow different trajectories of religious participation from adolescence into adulthood depending on the family and religious context in which they are raised. Therefore, I hypothesize that youth follow one of five trajectories of religious participation marked by either stability or change: *(a) a trajectory of declining religious participation throughout adolescence as Ozorak's (1989) polarization hypothesis suggests, (b) a trajectory of declining religious participation in adolescence but increasing as youth transition into marriage and parenthood as the family life cycle argument suggests (Stolzenberg et al. 1995), (c) a trajectory of increasing religious participation in adolescence as Ozorak's (1989) polarization hypothesis suggests, (d) a trajectory of stable high religious participation, or (e) a trajectory of stable low religious participation throughout adolescence and young adulthood.*

### **Religious Participation within Different Religious Contexts**

Illustrating trajectories of religious participation is vital to understanding the religious lives of youth, but it is also important to examine factors that influence these pathways. Because children often inherit their parents' religious beliefs (Myers 1996; Regnerus, Smith, and Smith 2004; Smith and Denton 2005), the trajectory of religious participation that youth follow is likely dependent on parental religiosity. Numerous studies suggest that religious exposure early in life has a long-lasting impact on youth; youth raised in highly religious families are more likely to remain religiously active throughout adolescence, whereas youth raised in non-religious families are more likely to avoid religious participation (Myers 1996; Ozorak 1989; Smith and Denton 2005). However, less is known about why youth may experience fluctuations in religious participation. Thus, it is useful to consider how the religious contexts in which youth are raised may influence whether and when youth experience religious changes during adolescence.

Although youth may change their religious behavior when they get older, residing with parents who pass on religious teachings and attending religious services with parents may lead youth to be more involved in religious activities during adolescence. Furthermore, residing in a religious family may lead youth to receive a more consistent message about religion by being enmeshed within a larger religious community (Smith and Denton 2005). Thus, *I expect that residing in a religious family early in life will increase the likelihood that youth follow a trajectory of high religious participation until late adolescence.*

Youth may not always receive a consistent religious message, however. The transmission of religious beliefs from parents to children is most effective when these beliefs are shared among the entire family. When there are religious differences within families (either between parents or between parents and children), parents may be less able to provide religious stability, resulting in weaker religious socialization for youth (Williams and Lawler 2001). Therefore, *I expect that being raised in a religiously heterogamous family will increase the likelihood that youth decrease their religious involvement early in adolescence.*

Rates of religious participation may also vary by the religious tradition in which youth are raised. Youth who belong to conservative religious denominations may attend services more consistently than youth who belong to mainline denominations because they are more likely to belong to religious youth groups and have friends within their religious community, resulting in stronger religious socialization (Smith et al. 2002; Loveland 2003; Smith and Denton 2005). Moreover, members of conservative denominations are more likely to see religious participation as a central part of their spiritual lives in which they interact with one another and increase their faith (Smith 1998). In contrast, members of mainline denominations are more likely to see church attendance as a weekly routine than a lively spiritual activity (Smith 1998). Not surprisingly, many youth who belong to mainline denominations experience declines in religious participation; approximately 75% of Catholic and mainline Protestant youth report attending religious services less

frequently in young adulthood (Uecker et al. 2007). Thus, *I expect that youth who belong to a mainline denomination will be more likely to experience a decline in religious participation during adolescence than youth who belong to a conservative denomination.*

### **Family Characteristics and Religious Participation**

Although family religious context is important, other family characteristics may also influence whether and when youth experience changes in religious participation. Because the institutions of family and religion are closely related, many religious institutions believe that certain family structures and practices may be better suited for raising children than others (Wilcox, Chaves, and Franz 2004). As a result, the level of religious socialization that youth receive may be influenced by the family structure and family processes that youth are exposed to early in adolescence.

Many religious institutions place a higher value on traditional two-parent families than other family types (Wilcox et al. 2004), and religious individuals are more likely to remain married than non-religious individuals (Call and Heaton 1997). Consequently, married parents may be more likely to provide religious socialization for their children than unmarried parents. Married parents may also be able to provide religious stability for their children by presenting youth with consistent religious teachings that are reinforced by other family members (Myers 1996; Regnerus and Uecker 2006). In contrast, youth raised in single-parent families may not receive the same level of religious socialization; single parents may be less likely to attend religious services themselves, and youth may have access to fewer family members that reinforce religious teachings (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Zhai et al. 2007). Although most youth experience a decline in religious participation (Uecker et al. 2007), stronger religious socialization in two-parent families may lead youth to delay this decline until late in adolescence when parental influence is weaker, whereas being raised by a single parent may result in religious decline early in adolescence (Regnerus and Uecker 2006). Thus, *I expect that youth raised by two parents will be more likely to experience a decline in religious participation late in*

*adolescence, whereas youth raised by single parents will be more likely to decrease their religious involvement early in adolescence.*

Religious institutions also stress the importance of close parent-child relationships. Religious organizations provide opportunities for families to interact with one another (Abbott et al. 1990), and emphasize that warm, expressive parenting may increase value transmission between parents and children (Ozorak 1989; Wilson and Sherkat 1994; Myers 1996; Regnerus et al. 2004). Engaging in positive parenting practices within a religious framework may bring parents and children closer together and provide greater meaning to these relationships, increasing the likelihood that youth remain religious during adolescence (Pearce and Axinn 1998; Mahoney et al. 2003). In contrast, family conflict may weaken value transmission, reducing the likelihood that youth remain religious throughout adolescence (Hoge, Patrillo, and Smith 1982). Therefore, *I expect that greater parent-child interaction and parental affection will increase the likelihood that youth maintain a high level of religious participation until late adolescence, whereas parent-child conflict will increase the likelihood that youth decrease their religious participation early in adolescence.*

### **Family and Religious Changes**

Family and religious characteristics early in life may influence the pattern of religious participation that youth experience, but these pathways are not immutable. As life course theory suggests, life events and transitions continually shape the trajectory paths that individuals follow (Elder 1998). Therefore, it is important to consider how family and religious changes may alter the trajectories of religious participation that youth experience.

As youth progress through adolescence, they may become exposed to various religious traditions through friends or other adults. This religious exposure may lead youth to find a religious tradition that better suits their own beliefs and attitudes, leading them to switch their religious affiliation. Experiencing a religious conversion may lead youth to become highly involved in their new religious organization since they chose a religion that best fits their needs (Loveland 2003).

Indeed, research suggests that individuals who convert are often more religious than those who remain in one religion (Hadaway 1980; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1995). Therefore, *I expect that switching religious affiliations will lead to more frequent religious participation among youth.*

Changes in youth's family structure may also alter trajectories of religious participation. Youth experiencing a parental divorce may attend religious services less frequently, as families often reduce their religious involvement following a divorce to avoid the stigma attached to divorce in some religious communities (Wilcox et al. 2004; Zhai et al. 2007). Furthermore, divorce may result in weaker religious socialization by limiting the religious influence of nonresident parents and extended family members on youth (Zhai et al. 2007). In contrast, parental remarriage may lead to increased religious participation for youth. Many religious organizations emphasize the importance of a married two-parent family, and transitioning from a single-parent family to a two-parent family may lead to greater acceptance in a religious community, stronger religious socialization, and more frequent religious attendance (Wilcox et al. 2004). Therefore, *I expect that parental divorce will be associated with a decrease in religious involvement whereas parental remarriage will lead to an increase in religious involvement among youth.*

As the family life cycle argument suggests, youth may also change their religious behavior as they enter into the adult roles of marriage and parenthood (Stolzenberg et al. 1995); entering into an adult relationship that is valued by religious organizations may increase one's religious participation, whereas entering into an adult relationship that is frowned upon may result in lower religious involvement. Many newly married individuals become more involved in religion as a way to interact with other couples and connect to a community, and new parents often attend religious services to provide their children with religious teachings (Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Petts 2007). In contrast, remaining single in adulthood or entering into a cohabiting relationship may lead to a decline in religious participation. Single adults may be highly mobile and less tied down to a religious community (Loveland 2003). Also, cohabitation is discouraged by many religions. Thus, individuals

who enter these relationships may be less likely to attend religious services (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992).

Although marriage and cohabitation may have a similar effect on the level of religious participation for all youth, the impact of family changes on religious participation may also depend on the trajectory that youth follow. That is, marriage may be more common among youth who are highly religious, whereas youth following a trajectory of low religious participation may be more likely to cohabit or remain single (Thornton et al. 1992). Thus, highly religious youth may be more likely to form adult relationships that lead to increased religious participation, whereas low or moderately religious youth may be more likely to enter into adult relationships that lead to lower religious involvement. However, even though the trajectory that youth experience may influence the adult relationships that youth enter into, *I expect that marriage and parenthood will result in increased religious participation, whereas entering into a cohabiting relationship or moving out on one's own (and remaining single) will result in decreased religious participation.*

## **DATA AND METHODS**

### **Sample**

Data from the Child and Young Adult Sample of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) is used for this study. Original respondents of the NLSY79 were between the ages of 14 and 21 in 1979, and included oversamples of Black and Hispanic respondents. Beginning in 1986, a separate survey was administered to all NLSY79 female respondents with children, focusing on mother's assessments of various child characteristics. Beginning in 1988, information has been collected biennially from each child aged 10 and older of the NLSY79 mothers for the child component of the survey. In addition, a young adult survey has been administered biennially to children ages 15 and older since 1994. Both children and young adults were administered separate questionnaires on a number of factors including various family and religious characteristics.

To construct the sample for this study, I first pool data from 1988-2004 according to youth's age. In order to focus on youth who have transitioned into young adulthood (ages 20-25), I then restrict the sample to youth who were at least 20 years old by 2004, resulting in a sample size of 2,929. I then further restrict the sample to only include youth who were also interviewed in each of two other developmental stages: early adolescence (ages 10-14) and middle/late adolescence (ages 15-19). After these restrictions, the final sample includes 2,472 youth who have transitioned from early adolescence into young adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

Because of these restrictions, the sample used in this study is not necessarily representative of all youth. Youth had to be born by 1984 to be included in the sample (to be at least 20 years old by 2004), causing the sample to be biased towards youth with younger mothers. All youth in this study have mothers who were no older than age 26 at the time of their birth, and the average age at birth is 20 years. Not surprisingly then, there is a disproportionate number of youth who are disadvantaged on a number of characteristics. Compared to youth who had not yet transitioned into late adolescence or young adulthood, youth in this sample are more likely to be Black, more likely to be raised by single parents, and have a lower average level of religious participation in early adolescence. Despite these differences, including youth who were interviewed in three separate developmental stages is useful in examining the transition from adolescence into adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

### **Dependent Variable**

Religious participation is a self-reported scale measuring how frequently youth attend religious services. Youth specified one of the following values in each wave: 1 = *not at all*; 2 = *several times a year or less*; 3 = *about once a month*; 4 = *two to three times a month*; 5 = *about once a week*; 6 = *more than once a week*. All responses from adolescence through young adulthood are used as the dependent variable to estimate trajectories of religious participation over time.

### **Time-Invariant Variables<sup>3</sup>**

Religious Characteristics. A number of variables are used to assess early religious influences. Religious family environment indicates families in which religious socialization may be strongest, characterized as families in which (a) the youth attends religious services with his or her parents, and (b) the mother feels that it is very important to provide religious training for her child. A measure of mother-child religious heterogamy is also included, and this variable indicates that the mother and the youth report different religious affiliations.<sup>4</sup> Finally, religious affiliation is indicated by one of 7 categories: evangelical Protestant (reference category),<sup>5</sup> mainline Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, other Christian, other religious affiliation, and no religious affiliation (Steensland et al. 2000). Mormon is included as a separate category because recent studies suggest that these youth have the highest rates of religious participation (Smith and Denton 2005).

Family Structure. Youth indicated who they reside with at the time of their initial interview, and three categories are used to indicate family structure: (a) two-parent biological family (reference category), (b) stepfamily, and (c) single-parent family.<sup>6</sup>

Family Processes. Three variables measure family processes in early adolescence: parental engagement, parental affection, and parent-child conflict. Parental engagement is taken from youth's reports on how frequently he/she participated with parents in a number of activities during the previous month, and the sum of the responses is used as the indicator ( $\alpha = .80$ ).<sup>7</sup> Parental affection is taken from mothers' reports on how often they praised and showed affection to the child in the past week; the mean of these measures is used as the indicator ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Parent-child conflict is taken from youth's reports on how frequently (1 = *hardly ever* to 3 = *often*) they argue with parents about rules, watching television, homework, and dating ( $\alpha = .60$ ). The mean value is used as the indicator.

Control Variables. Race, gender, and mother's age are included as controls.<sup>8</sup> Race and gender are important to consider because females report higher religiosity than males, and minority youth may be more religiously active than white adolescents (Smith et al. 2002, Smith and Denton 2005). Race is coded as White (reference group), Black, and Latino, and gender is a dummy variable

(female = 1). Finally, because age is positively correlated with religious participation (Stolzenberg et al. 1995), mother's age at the birth of the child (measured in years) is included in all models.

### **Time-Varying Variables<sup>9</sup>**

Religious Characteristics. Three variables measure religious switching. Youth are coded as (a) switching religious affiliations if they convert from one religious affiliation to another. (b) converting to a religious affiliation if they transition from no religious affiliation to having a religious affiliation, and (c) religious disaffiliation if they transition from having a religious affiliation to not identifying with a religious denomination. Each of these indicators is coded 1 for the year in which the youth reports a different religious affiliation than was reported in the previous interview.

Family Characteristics. Six time-varying factors are included to examine the influence of family changes. Two variables are used to indicate family transitions while the youth resides with his or her parents: "gains a resident parent" indicates youth who transition from a single-parent family to a two-parent biological family or a stepfamily, and "loses a resident parent" indicates youth who transition from a two-parent biological family or stepfamily to a single-parent family.<sup>10</sup> Three additional variables capture family changes once youth move out of their parents home: (a) living on own, (b) married, and (c) cohabiting. Each of these variables is coded 1 for each year that the individual resides in this situation, and the comparison group is youth who still reside with their parents. Finally, a dummy variable is included to indicate whether the individual has had a child.

### **Methodology**

The primary method of analysis for this study is group-based trajectory modeling (Nagin 1999; Jones, Nagin, and Roeder 2001; Nagin 2005). This method is an application of finite mixture modeling that uses maximum likelihood techniques to estimate each group's trajectory, the proportion of the sample assigned to each trajectory group, and the probability of membership in each group for all individuals in the data (Nagin 2005). This methodology is useful for this study because it is able to uncover patterns based on observed data without forcing the researcher to make

arbitrary group cutoffs (e.g., high vs. low religious participation). Although these trajectory groups are only approximations, they are helpful in illustrating the patterns of religious participation that individuals may follow throughout their lives.

Because the measure of religious participation is a scale ranging from 1 to 6, a censored normal model is used to estimate the trajectories. The basic model estimating each trajectory specifies the link between age and religious participation as a polynomial function:

$$y_{it}^j = \beta_0^j + \beta_1^j AGE_{it} + \beta_2^j AGE_{it}^2 + \beta_3^j AGE_{it}^3 + \varepsilon_{it}.$$

In this model,  $y$  is the predicted rate of religious participation for person  $i$  in trajectory group  $j$  at time  $t$ ,  $\beta_0$ ,  $\beta_1$ ,  $\beta_2$ , and  $\beta_3$  are parameters that determine the shape of each trajectory, and  $\varepsilon$  is an error term for each group. Because a distinct set of parameters are used to estimate each trajectory, the shapes of the trajectories can vary by group (Nagin 2005).

### **Analytic Strategy**

The first part of the analysis utilizes a SAS procedure (PROC TRAJ) to estimate trajectories of religious participation (Jones et al. 2001). Because all children of the female NLSY79 respondents are included in the data, there is a potential clustering problem.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, PROC TRAJ is not able to account for clustering (Jones et al. 2001). Therefore, I compared trajectory models using the full sample with models using a restricted independent sample that included one randomly chosen child from each family ( $N = 1,630$ ). Trajectory estimates from each model were similar. Further analyses suggest that standard errors are similar in models that control for clustering and models that do not control for clustering.<sup>12</sup> Based on these diagnostics, clustering does not appear to substantially alter the findings in this study. Thus, the full sample of 2,472 is used in all analyses presented here.<sup>13</sup>

The second stage of analysis examines whether family and religious characteristics early in life predict trajectories of religious participation. Multinomial logistic regression models are used for these analyses in order to account for clustering in the data. Finally, I include time-varying factors

into the trajectory models to explore whether family and religious changes are associated with increases or decreases in religious participation. Because results are similar when family and religious factors are included in separate models, only the full models are presented here.

## **RESULTS**

A number of steps need to be taken in order to choose the correct model for group-based trajectory analysis (Nagin 2005). The researcher needs to specify the number of groups, the order of each trajectory (linear, quadratic, etc.) and type of distribution (i.e., censored normal) prior to estimating the trajectory models. BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion) statistics are used as the primary formal test to determine the optimal number of groups, and both BIC statistics and model parameters are helpful in specifying the correct form of each trajectory. Because there are times when BIC will marginally improve as more groups are added to the model, researcher judgment and other diagnostic tests are also used in determining the best-fitting model that conveys all of the substantive features of the data while remaining parsimonious (Nagin 2005).

Using BIC statistics and model parameters as a guide, a six-group model emerged as the best-fitting model; three of the groups follow quadratic trajectories, one group follows a cubic trajectory, one group follows a linear trajectory, and one group attends religious services at a constant rate.<sup>14</sup>

----- Insert Figure 1 About Here -----

### **Trajectories of Religious Participation**

Trajectories from the six-group model are displayed in Figure 1. Frequent attenders (3% of youth) have the highest rate of religious participation, attending religious services at least once a week (on average) throughout adolescence. Late declining attenders (24% of youth) have the second highest rate of religious participation during adolescence. Youth in this trajectory group attend religious services at least a few times a month (on average) until age 17 before experiencing a decline in religious involvement that continues into young adulthood. A similar percentage of youth are classified as gradual declining attenders (26% of youth). Youth in this group have a relatively high

rate of religious participation at age 10, and then experience a steady decline in religious involvement throughout adolescence until approximately age 22 when religious participation starts to increase. Although this trajectory appears similar to the family life cycle pattern of religious involvement, there is only a slight increase in religious participation in young adulthood, making it difficult to determine whether this trend will continue later in life. The next group of youth attends religious services slightly less frequently throughout adolescence than gradual declining attenders. However, instead of frequently attending religious services early in adolescence and rarely attending late in adolescence, occasional attenders (23% of youth) have a steady rate of religious participation throughout adolescence, attending religious services between a few times a year and once a month. A fifth group of youth is classified as early declining attenders (16% of youth). These youth attend religious services at a moderate rate at age 10, but experience a rapid decline in religious participation. By age 14, early decliners are attending religious services only a couple of times a year, and most have stopped attending by age 20. Finally, youth classified as non-attenders (7% of youth) never or rarely attend religious services throughout adolescence and young adulthood.

Overall, results in Figure 1 support previous research showing that rates of religious participation are relatively low in young adulthood; most youth attend religious services approximately once a month or less at age 25. However, the trajectories illustrated in Figure 1 support life course theory in showing that even though rates of religious participation may be somewhat similar in young adulthood, youth experience a number of distinct pathways of religious participation throughout adolescence. Thus, it is important to examine factors that may help to explain why youth follow a particular trajectory of religious involvement.

### **Predictors of Religious Participation Trajectories**

Table 1 includes mean values within each trajectory group for each of the time-invariant variables. Consistent with previous research, results suggest that frequent attenders are more likely than youth in other trajectory groups to be raised in a religious family, a two-parent family, and have

affectionate parents. In contrast, non-attenders are less likely to be raised in a religious family and more likely to reside in a religiously heterogamous family than youth in other trajectory groups. Because much is already known about why youth may consistently attend (or not attend) religious services during adolescence, I turn to multivariate analyses to more fully examine whether family and religious characteristics influence whether and when youth experience a change in religious participation (compared to attending services occasionally throughout adolescence).

----- Insert Table 1 About Here -----

Results from multinomial logistic models are presented in Table 2. As expected, residing in a family that provides a clear, consistent religious message increases the likelihood that youth remain religiously active in adolescence. Youth raised in a religious family are more likely to follow a trajectory of late declining ( $b = 1.33, p < .001$ ) or gradual declining attendance ( $b = .78, p < .001$ ) than occasional attendance.<sup>15</sup> In addition, a lack of religious consistency within the family may lead youth to desist from religious involvement early in adolescence; youth who are raised in a religiously heterogamous household are 47% more likely to experience an early decline in religious participation than attend religious services occasionally throughout adolescence ( $b = .39, p < .05$ ). Finally, as expected, mainline Protestant youth are over 70% more likely to experience any decline in religious participation than evangelical Protestants, supporting research on the decline in religious involvement within mainline denominations (Uecker et al. 2007).<sup>16</sup>

----- Insert Table 2 About Here -----

Somewhat surprisingly, family context early in adolescence does not appear to directly influence whether youth experience a decline in religious participation. The exception is that youth raised in single-parent families are 35% less likely to follow a trajectory of late declining attendance ( $b = -.43, p < .01$ ) than occasional attendance. This result provides some support for my hypothesis that residing in a two-parent family increases the likelihood that youth remain religiously active during adolescence. Overall though, results in Table 2 suggest that the religious context in which

youth are raised has a stronger influence on whether and when youth experience a change in religious participation than youth's family background.

### **Factors that Explain Variation Within Trajectory Groups**

The remaining analyses examine whether family and religious changes are associated with changes in religious participation. Table 3 provides mean values by trajectory group for each of the time-varying factors. Consistent with life course theory, results suggest that youth in each trajectory group have different life experiences in adolescence and young adulthood. Whether these life experiences lead to increases or decreases in religious participation is examined in Table 4.

----- Insert Table 3 About Here -----

Table 4 provides results from trajectory models that explore whether time-varying factors change the level of religious participation of youth within each trajectory group. The results shown are limited to occasional attenders and the trajectories of declining religious participation to better understand how family and religious changes may influence these patterns of fluctuating religious participation. Although previous studies have found that religious conversion is associated with increased religious participation, results in Table 4 suggest that this relationship only holds true for youth following a trajectory of stable religious involvement; converting from no religious affiliation to a religious denomination ( $b = .50, p < .05$ ), and switching religious affiliations ( $b = .57, p < .001$ ) are only associated with increased religious participation among occasional attenders. To assess the magnitude of these religious changes on rates of religious participation, predicted values of the average rate of religious participation at age 25 are presented in Table 5. As illustrated in the first column of Table 5, occasional attenders who choose their own religion attend religious services at least 14% more frequently in young adulthood than occasional attenders who remain in one religion, attending religious services at least once a month. In contrast, switching religious affiliations does not seem to significantly alter rates of religious participation among youth who are following a trajectory of declining religious involvement.

----- Insert Table 4 About Here -----

----- Insert Table 5 About Here -----

Results in Table 4 also suggest that one time-varying factor has a consistent influence on religious participation regardless of which trajectory an individual follows; youth who disaffiliate from organized religion attend religious services less frequently than youth who maintain a religious affiliation. Predicted values in Table 5 suggest that this decrease is greatest among late declining attenders; late declining attenders who experience religious disaffiliation attend religious services 46% less frequently than late decliners who remain in one religious denomination (several times a year or less compared to once a month). Religious disaffiliation is also associated with a sizeable decrease in attendance among youth following a trajectory of moderate religious involvement (occasional and gradual declining attenders). Not surprisingly, religious disaffiliation has the smallest impact on religious participation among early decliners. Because religious participation is low for this trajectory group, youth who disaffiliate from organized religion only attend religious services slightly less frequently than youth who remain in one religion. Overall, religious disaffiliation appears to be an important factor that contributes to declining rates of religious participation in adolescence. However, consistent with life course theory, the magnitude of this influence seems to depend on the trajectory of religious participation than youth are following. Although religious disaffiliation may lead some youth to stop attending religious services completely, other youth may still occasionally attend religious services even after disaffiliating from organized religion.

Results from the time-varying analyses (Table 4) also provide some evidence that transitioning into adult relationships may be associated with changes in religious participation for youth following a trajectory of more frequent religious participation.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, occasional ( $b = .63, p < .01$ ) and late declining attenders ( $b = .42, p < .05$ ) who marry are more likely to be involved in religion than youth in these groups who do not marry, and cohabitation is associated with a decline in religious behavior for late declining attenders ( $b = -.97, p < .001$ ). The influence of marriage and

cohabitation on a trajectory of late declining attendance is further illustrated in Figure 2. Although these significant relationships provide some support for my hypotheses, the lack of findings for early and gradual declining attenders suggests that the influence of adult relationships may be dependent on the trajectory of religious participation that youth follow. That is, youth who are at least moderately religious may seek out a spouse who is also religious, resulting in increased religious participation. In addition, religious youth who cohabit may decrease their religious participation because they no longer feel accepted in their religious community. In contrast, because early and gradual declining attenders rarely (if ever) attend religious services in young adulthood, they may have limited interactions with religious congregations or other religious individuals. Thus, early and gradual declining attenders may remain relatively invisible to religious institutions and not receive any encouragement to attend (or discouragement to stop attending) religious services.

----- Insert Figure 2 About Here -----

## **DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to the literature on religion by taking a life course approach to examine patterns of religious behavior from adolescence into adulthood. In support of life course theory, this study suggests that youth may experience one of six distinct patterns of religious participation from early adolescence into young adulthood characterized by either stability or change. Although some youth are able to maintain a relatively stable level of religious participation, most youth experience a decline – early, late, or gradually throughout adolescence – in religious involvement and attend religious services relatively infrequently by young adulthood. This developmental approach to studying religious participation provides more detail about the rate of religious change among youth and the timing of these changes during adolescence, helping to better visualize the patterns of religious participation that youth may experience.

In addition to uncovering trajectories of religious participation, this study also increases our understanding of how family and religious characteristics may predict and shape patterns of religious

involvement. Although 66% of youth experience a decline in religious participation during adolescence, results from this study support life course theory in showing that family and religious characteristics throughout adolescence may influence the timing of religious change and the rate at which this change occurs. Youth who are raised in a family that provides a consistent religious message and youth who reside in a family structure that reflects the religious teachings they are exposed to may be more likely to delay any decline in religious involvement and attend religious services frequently throughout adolescence.

The choices that youth make about religion and the adult relationships that individuals form also influence patterns of religious involvement, but only for some youth. Leaving organized religion is the only factor that is associated with a change in religious participation among youth in each trajectory group. In contrast, finding a religion that best suits one's individual needs and getting married are associated with an increase in religious participation only for moderately religious youth, and cohabitation is associated with a decrease in religious participation only for moderately religious youth. There are a couple of possible explanations for these findings. Because individuals in this study were only followed until age 25, these results may only capture the impact of early adult relationships on religious participation. For example, early marriages may be less likely to result in increased religious involvement than marriages at more conventional ages (Stolzenberg et al. 1995).

Alternatively, the differences between trajectory groups highlight the importance of considering previous experiences when examining the influence of life events on trajectories of religious participation (Elder 1998). As life course theory suggests, the types of life events that youth experience and the influence of these events on religious participation may depend on the specific trajectory that youth follow. Youth who are at least moderately religious may be more likely to be exposed to different religious traditions, find a religion that best suits their needs, and attend religious services more frequently. Individuals who are following a trajectory of high or moderate religious participation may also seek a spouse that is religious, resulting in increased religious participation. In

contrast, supplementary analyses suggest that individuals following a trajectory of low religious participation (i.e., early declining attenders) are more likely to marry a spouse with no religious affiliation, and therefore may not increase their religious participation after marriage.

Although there are a number of strengths in this study, there are some limitations to note. One limitation is that because individuals are only followed until age 25, this study may not fully capture the impact of adult relationships on trajectories of religious participation. This may be especially the case for marriage and parenthood, since the impact of these transitions on religious participation may depend on the age at which they occur (Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Moreover, due to the age restrictions in the sample, there is a bias toward youth with young mothers in this study. Thus, it is likely that youth in this sample may have access to fewer social and financial resources than youth from a nationally representative sample. If parental resources increase the likelihood that youth remain religiously active during adolescence, then there may be a higher percentage of youth that follow a trajectory of frequent or late declining attendance than is found in this study. Indeed, there is some evidence that youth in this sample attend religious services less frequently than other youth in the NLSY79 Child and Young Adult cohort.

The indicators of religion available in the NLSY79 are also somewhat limited. Although it is important to analyze patterns of religious participation among youth, I am unable to examine whether these trajectories are consistent for other measures of religiosity. Religious participation is only one component of the religious lives of youth, and future research should take a developmental approach to studying other religious behaviors as well, especially because other aspects of religion (especially private forms of religion) play a vital role in American religion today. In addition, the measures of family religiosity are time-invariant. It may be that any changes in youth religiosity may be due to changes in parental religiosity. Unfortunately, this study is unable to capture these possibly important causes of religious change. Furthermore, the indicators of religious affiliation are also limited. Given

the diversity in American religion, broad categories such as “other Christian” may not fully capture how trajectories may differ between youth from diverse religious traditions.

A third limitation in this study is that the parent-child relationship variables are either taken from the mother’s perspective or focus solely on the mother-child relationship. Although the mother-child relationship is important (Pearce and Axinn 1998), fathers have become increasingly involved in children’s lives (Petts 2007). Moreover, fathers may have a greater influence on the religious behavior of male youth than mothers (Baker-Sperry 2001). Unfortunately, the NLSY79 does not allow for a full exploration of the influence of fathers on youth’s religious participation, but future research should examine the role that both fathers and mothers play in influencing youth religiosity.

A final limitation is the lack of information on peer influences. Although research consistently finds that family is the most important predictor of youth religiosity, peers may also influence youth’s religious participation (Regnerus et al. 2004). Supplementary analyses suggest that youth who report having friends that attend religious services early in adolescence are more likely to follow a trajectory of frequent attendance. However, the NLSY79 does not contain information on peer religion throughout adolescence when peer influences may become more important.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a number of contributions to our understanding of adolescent religiosity. The use of a recent national sample and an innovative methodology improves on previous studies by more clearly illustrating the patterns of religious participation that youth experience. In addition, this study utilizes longitudinal data to examine how family and religious characteristics early in life may lead youth to follow particular trajectories of religious participation, as well as how family and religious changes may alter these pathways over time. This approach provides a basis for better understanding the contextual factors that contribute to patterns of religious behavior among adolescents and young adults.

The findings from this study have some important implications for future research on religious involvement. Through the use of trajectory modeling, this study highlights the importance

of examining both gradual and dramatic changes in religious behavior and why youth may experience these patterns of behavior. Scholars should continue to explore how these trajectories may change at later ages, whether these trajectories are persistent across cohorts, and whether these trajectories are consistent across different social groups. By focusing on the rate and timing of religious change, future research may be able to gain a more complete understanding of the religious lives of individuals. Future studies should also consider how family context may condition the influence of religion on patterns of religious behavior; the influence of youth's religious background on religious participation later in life may depend on the family context in which youth were raised. Such knowledge will be useful to religious scholars and leaders who could use the information to reach out to people that may be more or less likely to turn away from religion.

Overall, this study fills an important gap in the literature by utilizing group-based trajectory models to better understand patterns of religious behavior from adolescence into adulthood and identify the distinct trajectories of religious change that youth may experience. In doing so, this study supports life course theory in showing that the religious lives of youth are quite diverse; adolescents from this sample follow one of six trajectories of religious participation characterized by various patterns of both stability and decline. Furthermore, results suggest that family and religious contexts throughout the life course may play an important role in the rate and timing of religious change that youth experience. Because religion is often a source of social support, youth who remain involved in religion during adolescence may be better equipped to deal with the transitions and stresses that occur throughout this stage in the life course. Therefore, longitudinal studies such as this one are essential in increasing our knowledge of how changes in religiosity may be linked to changes in identity formation and adolescent development as well as the implications these pathways have for adolescent well-being, adult relationships, and later life outcomes.

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## NOTES

1. 457 youth who were at least 20 years old at the time of their last interview were removed from the sample because they were not interviewed in each of the earlier stages of adolescence.
2. Three waves of data are also necessary for estimating group-based trajectories accurately (Nagin 2005), and youth in this study may have as many as nine waves of valid data ( $M = 6.13$ ).
3. Each time-invariant factor is taken from the first valid interview in early adolescence.
4. Religious heterogamy is indicated by differences between the categories of religious affiliation. Supplementary models examining different types of heterogamous relationships were consistent with those presented in this study.
5. Prior to 1998, the only evangelical Protestant option in the survey is Baptist. Later surveys included more extensive options for specifying one's religious affiliation.
6. Children had to reside with their mother at least part-time to be included in the NLSY79 sample. The single-parent category includes youth who also reside with their mother's cohabiting partner or other relatives. Supplementary analyses suggest that these families all function in similar ways.
7. Activities include going to a movie, out to dinner, on an outing, shopping, doing other things, working on homework, and playing a game.
8. Family SES was included as a control in supplementary models, and did not change the results presented here.
9. These variables are measured at each interview, and all valid responses are included in the trajectory model.
10. These measures are coded as 1 in the year in which the youth reported residing in a different family structure.
11. 34% of youth in this sample have the same mother as another respondent in the sample.
12. There is less than a 5% difference in the standard errors between multinomial logistic models that control for clustering and those that do not. Most of the standard errors are identical in each model.
13. Trajectory models account for missing data through maximum likelihood techniques. For the multinomial logistic models, very few cases have missing values. Regression-based imputation techniques are used to account for missing values, and supplementary analyses using listwise deletion produced similar results.
14. Other diagnostic tests suggest that this is a good-fitting model. For example, Nagin (2005) suggests that the average posterior probability (the average probability that each individual assigned to that group actually belong to the group based on their pattern of religious participation) for each group should be at least .70. The average posterior probabilities of the six groups in this study are .78, .74, .79, .75, .81 and .72.

15. Results are largely unchanged when mother's religious importance is used in place of the religious family environment measure.

16. Youth in the "no religious affiliation" and "other religion" categories are less likely to experience declines in religious participation late in adolescence because they have lower levels of religious participation than other youth.

17. I ran separate models to examine whether family characteristics had a significant effect prior to entering the religious change variables. Results from separate models are consistent with those presented here.