



9-1-2004

Youth and Religion: The Gameboy Generation Goes to "Church"

Ram A. Cnaan

University of Pennsylvania, cnaan@sp2.upenn.edu

Richard J. Gelles

University of Pennsylvania, gelles@sp2.upenn.edu

Jill W. Sinha

University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cnaan, R. A., Gelles, R. J., & Sinha, J. W. (2004). Youth and Religion: The Gameboy Generation Goes to "Church". Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/3

Postprint version. Published in *Social Indicators Research*, Volume 68, number 2, 2004, pages 175-200.
Publisher URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/B:SOCI.0000025592.60815.37>

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/3
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Youth and Religion: The Gameboy Generation Goes to "Church"

Abstract

Using the secularization theory and the Marxist notion of religion as masking class conscience one would expect the importance of religion and religious involvement today to wane and be limited to lower class members. To challenge this expectation, using a representative national telephone survey of 2004 youth (ages 11–18) and their parents, we attempt to answer the following two questions: How religious are teenagers, and what may explain variation in religious perception and involvement among teens. Findings suggest that religion remains perceived as very important by most teenagers and parents report that about two-thirds of teenagers attended a place of worship at least monthly and that two out of five attended a social group sponsored by a religious organization. These findings do not support the secularization theory. As expected, parental attendance of religious worship, teen's age, and teen's ethnicity and gender were significantly associated with three variables of religious behavior and attendance. In contrast to the Marxist notion of religion, measures of socio-economic status indicate that, in the contemporary United States, religious participation, but not beliefs, is largely the domain of the middle-upper classes.

Disciplines

Sociology

Comments

Postprint version. Published in *Social Indicators Research*, Volume 68, number 2, 2004, pages 175-200.
Publisher URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/B:SOCI.0000025592.60815.37>

YOUTH AND RELIGION: THE GAMEBOY GENERATION GOES TO “CHURCH”
RAM A. CNAAN, RICHARD J. GELLES and JILL W. SINHA

(Accepted 27 June 2003)

ABSTRACT

Using the secularization theory and the Marxist notion of religion as masking class conscience one would expect the importance of religion and religious involvement today to wane and be limited to lower class members. To challenge this expectation, using a representative national telephone survey of 2004 youth (ages 11–18) and their parents, we attempt to answer the following two questions: How religious are teenagers, and what may explain variation in religious perception and involvement among teens. Findings suggest that religion remains perceived as very important by most teenagers and parents report that about two-thirds of teenagers attended a place of worship at least monthly and that two out of five attended a social group sponsored by a religious organization. These findings do not support the secularization theory. As expected, parental attendance of religious worship, teen’s age, and teen’s ethnicity and gender were significantly associated with three variables of religious behavior and attendance. In contrast to the Marxist notion of religion, measures of socio-economic status indicate that, in the contemporary United States, religious participation, but not beliefs, is largely the domain of the middle-upper classes.

INTRODUCTION

The secularization theory suggests that in modern societies, and especially in America, the importance of religion will continue to weaken and society will become more secular with the advance of knowledge (Berger, 1967). The secularization theory posits that in the face of scientific rationality and knowledge, religion’s influence on all aspects of life – from personal habits to social institutions – will encounter a dramatic decline (Swatos and Christiano, 1999).

In other words, with modernism, technology, science, advanced communication, activist government, and better life conditions, religion will become obsolete. Its past function of dominating the masses, consoling them in their miserable situation in life, and hope for better after life will also become “passé”.

This secularization theory is related to, though not integrated into, the famous Marxist notion that religion is “the opiate of the masses”. Marx postulated that people use religion to mask the pain of exploitation, and the institutional church is a means by which the bourgeoisie prevent class conscience from evolving. Based on this approach, religion is embraced by lower class members as a means to endure their lot in life and maintain hope for a better after life.

If these arguments hold true, then measures of religiosity among U.S. teens ought to be on the decline when compared with previous generations, and religion should be more profound among teens of minority groups and low socio-economic backgrounds. Studying these propositions can shed light on today’s youth, the applicability of these two

theoretical propositions, and provide us with indication as to the role of religion in America in the twenty first century.

What do we know about today's youth? Since the 1960s, the public and the media's vision of American youth have been decidedly negative. At best, we see many teenagers as a generation of consumers, detached from the community, self-interested and isolated in front of a computer or Gameboy, who engage in acts of defiance through their dress, tattooing, and body piercing. At worst, both the public and media envision teenagers as a cauldron of violence and drug use, which spills over into mass killings in schools and random violence on the street and in homes. Whichever view one takes, today's teens are portrayed as different from previous cohorts and somewhat incomprehensible.

This negative image of youth is relatively new. More than 50 years ago, a 1949 Gallup Poll asked a national sample of adults whether they would agree or disagree that young people today (1949) are "more levelheaded and have more common sense" than young people 25 years ago. Forty-two percent of those polled agreed while 28 percent disagreed (Carlson, 2000). When the same question was asked of a national sample of adults in 2000, a mere 19 percent of the public agreed that young people are more levelheaded than young people of the past and two-thirds disagreed.

Perhaps as a result of changing public perceptions of youth, and perhaps because the media's focus on violence, drugs, suicide, and other youth risk behaviors, social research and social policy analysis tends to focus mostly on youth risk behavior, the generative causes of risk behavior, and the factors that predict youth risk behavior. Some recent attention is devoted to protective factors (Hawkins and Catalano, 1995), but only in the context of examining problematic youth behavior.

Common sense suggests that if risk behaviors, violence, drug use, and consumerism have increased among youth, there would be a corresponding reduction in religiosity, religious affiliation, and religious participation. Godless youth, we might suppose, are those who are responsible for the apparent epidemic of risk behavior. The problem with the conventional wisdom that the current cohort of youth is running away from organized religion is that surveys of youth and adults show the opposite.

There has been considerable examination of religiosity in American society. Roof (1999) has conducted detailed examinations of religious participation and religiosity among baby boomers (those who today are in their late 40s to mid 50s). Roof reports that baby boomers join places of worship that allow them to find personal meaning in religion. While they belong to congregations and attend worship services, baby boomers seek religious involvement that addresses their inner lives and not for the public rewards of religious involvement. Though the reasons may differ, this generation is as religious as generations before them.

The next demarcated generation is the so-called Generation X – those born in the 1960s and early 1970s. Cox (1998) has studied religiosity among Generation X and concludes:

. . . Their religious proclivities have remained a mystery almost as inscrutable as that of the Holy Trinity. Here is a generation that stays away from most churches in droves but loves songs about God and Jesus, a generation that would score very low on any standard piety scale but at times seems almost obsessed with saints, visions, and icons in all shapes and sizes. . . . And remember, it was this puzzling and allegedly secular generation that turned out a million of its representatives to welcome Pope John Paul II to that most secular city, Paris, France, in the waning weeks of summer 1997 (p. ix).

Barna (1994) as well as Howe and Strauss (1993) argue that Generation Xers are less religious than previous generations and that this cohort lacks serious religious or philosophical interests. On the other hand, Beaudoin (1998) contends that Generation Xers embrace new expressions of cultural and emotional religion and reject traditional established religions.

Sherkat (1998) showed that among baby boomers, traditional socialization factors such as parents, religious denominations, and schools influence religious commitment and participation in later life. Sherkat found substantial continuity in religious orientations and commitments among adult baby-boomers, which contrasts with the notion that newer generations are shying away from organized religion. He also found that religious beliefs and behaviors in adolescence have a strong impact on religious commitment in later life. That is, those who attended worship services with their parents and believed in God as teens have a strong likelihood of doing so as adults. Taking this one step further, if today's youth are religiously active, then it is reasonable to assume that as adults they will come back to the familiar territory of religion.

Contrary to those who predict rapid changes in religiosity between generations, real changes in religious behavior are slow and require many years to be noticeable. For example, in the U.S.A., Kanagy, Firebaugh, and Nelson (1994) found that religious participation in the South and the non-South are starting to mimic each other; that is, more religious participation elsewhere and less in the South between 1972 and 1991. These authors calculated that it might take some forty years of continual change for this trend to reach statistical significance. In short, changes in religious participation take many years to be evident and stable. As such, we can assume that today's youth – the millennium generation – contrary to popular portrayals, may be as religious as youth in the past.

Thus, while risking oversimplification, two rival hypotheses exist. The first, the “new age religion hypothesis” emerging from the “secularization theory” holds that adolescents today shy away from traditional organized religion and seek spiritual experiences elsewhere. If this is the case, today's teens will report lower rates of religious interest and participation compared to previous generations. The alternative hypothesis is that today's teens do pretty much as previous generations did – attend traditional places of worship and believe in God. Accordingly, today's teens would report rates of religious interest and participation similar to or higher than those reported by previous generations.

A related interest is what are the characteristics that describe teens who report being more religious. Furthermore, we are also interested in whether religiosity among teens is

related to socioeconomic levels and supposed hardships in life or more evenly evident among children from families of various socio-economic backgrounds.

RELIGION AND YOUTH BEHAVIOR

The importance of understanding the level of teens' religiosity is twofold. First, as we noted above, understanding today's teens religiosity will tell us about adult religiosity in America in the next thirty to sixty years. Second, as shown below, the literature suggests that more religious teens also take less risks as adolescents and are more active in pro-social activities.

Based on a study of 99,462 adolescents (6th–12th graders), Furrow and Wagener (2000), suggested that religious adolescents report consistently higher numbers of developmental assets associated with increased restraint and decreased risk behavior. Furrow and Wagener join a long list of scholars who have found an association between religious perception and religious participation and reduced engagement in risk behaviors ranging from drug and alcohol abuse (Gorsuch, 1995; Kharari and Harmon, 1984; McBride et al., 1996) to juvenile delinquency (Benda, 1995; Cochran, 1989; Stark et al., 1982).

What we do not know is how many teens are spiritually motivated and practicing any religion. While religion is hailed by some as a solution to societal social problems, it is of relevance to know what proportion of today's youth are religious and if religion is relevant for all teens or only to a sub-set of teens. Smith and Faris (2002) found that among U.S. 12th graders "regular religious service attendance, high subjective importance of faith and years spent in religious youth groups are clearly associated with high self-esteem and positive self-attitudes even when statistical procedures control for the influences of numerous demographic and socio-economic factors" (p. 9). This finding suggests that increased religiosity among teens and future adults can be a social asset. Thus, reliable data about teens' indicators of religiosity and an understanding of its distribution among sub-groups of teens have important implications for the near future.

The available literature on religious participation and beliefs among teens comes from three major sources: what we know about religion from surveys of adults; studies of teen religious behavior in other countries – especially Canada; and a handful of studies of religion and American teenagers. In the next paragraphs we will review these sources.

Surveys of Adult Religious Behavior

The scope of religious participation and its possible impact in a person's life is a topic of interest for scholars of religion and society. We have broad information about adult religious beliefs and behavior. For example, the latest Gallup Index of Leading Religious Indicators, based on a series of surveys conducted in 2000, reveals that Americans are more religious today than ten years ago, but less than in the 1950s. Over 90 percent of those interviewed believe in God and state a clear religious preference. More than two-thirds (68.2%) belong to an organized place of worship and over half (58.7%) report that their religion is important in their lives. Finally, nearly two thirds (64.9%) report that religion offers answers to life problems (Gallup, 2001). Other studies show that

Americans, on average, tend to believe in God and be members of congregations more frequently than Canadians and Europeans (Monsma and Soper, 1997; Lipset, 1990; Smidt, Green, Guth and Kellstedt, 2003). Can we extend these findings regarding adults and assume that today's teens are as religious as the generation before them?

Studies of Teens in Canada

Bibby (2000) studied 3,600 teens aged 15 to 19 throughout Canada. He found that 22 percent of the sample attended worship services (listed as organized religion) weekly or more. Three-fourths identified themselves as members of a religion (e.g., Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or others). Girls were only slightly more likely to attend than boys (23% versus 21%). However, girls reported significantly higher levels of belief. More than three-fourths of girls (77%) believed God existed, compared to about two-thirds of boys (69%). Regardless of the geographical and linguistic proximity between the U.S.A. and Canada these findings cannot be extrapolated to the U.S.A. as the adult population in the U.S.A. is far more religious than adults in Canada (Cnaan and Handy, 2000; Smidt et al., 2003; Uslander, 2002).

Surveys of Youth in the United States

Youniss, McLellan and Yates (1999) studied high school seniors in the United States in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. They found little change in teens' perceived importance of religion. Contrary to public and media belief, religion was more important to high school seniors in the 1990s than in the two previous decades, although the percentages from all three waves of teens who felt religion was important were around 40%.

The George H. Gallup International Institute has conducted a series of studies of youth and religion since that late 1950s. Each survey examined a sample of 500 teenagers aged 13 to 17. Between the years 1959 and 1961, nearly all the teens surveyed (97%) reported that they believed in God. The most recent surveys, conducted in 1988 and 1993, show only a modest decline in this percentage – down to 95 percent. Teens were also asked whether they attended religious services in the previous seven days. Nearly half the teens (49%) reported they had attended services. Attending services was not related to sex, age, or size of the community.

However, higher rates of religious attendance were reported more by Black teenagers and teens who also reported being academically above average. More than one-third of youth surveyed (36%) reported that they participated in a church (or other religious)-based youth group. Youth group participation indicates a stronger religious commitment than worship attendance. Here, however, more Whites than Blacks reported participation, while the academically above average still participated more than those reporting lower academic performance.

A third survey by The Barna Research Group (2000) reports similar findings. Among youth surveyed, the study found that “when asked to describe themselves, terms that reflect a religious bent are common, but no more so than is found among adults. For instance, less than two-thirds say that they are ‘religious’ (64%). Only three out of every five call themselves ‘spiritual’ (60%) and the same proportion say they are ‘committed

Christians' (60%). These figures are equivalent to those among adults". This study further found that teens continue to be more broadly involved in church-based activities than are adults. In a typical week, nearly six out of ten attend worship services; one out of three attend Sunday school; one out of three attend a youth group; and three out of ten participate in a small group other than a Sunday school class or youth group meeting. In total, more than seven out of ten teens are engaged in some church-related effort in a typical week.

Finally, Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley conducted a series of national surveys of high school seniors covering the years 1976 to 1995. They reported a decline in weekly worship attendance from 41 percent in 1976 to 32 percent in 1992, which remained constant through 1995. During the same time period, the proportion of youth reporting that religion plays a very important role in their lives stayed relatively constant between 26 to 31 percent. Johnston and his colleagues included younger teens beginning in 1991. Younger teens, compared to older teens, reported similar rates of how important a role religion plays in their lives, but reported higher rates of weekly religious attendance. For example, 42 percent of eighth graders reported weekly religious attendance compared to 37 percent of tenth graders and 32 percent of high school seniors (12th grade). The same percentage (three in ten) of all teens reported that religion played an important role in their lives. Weekly religious attendance was higher for girls and Black youth.

Clearly, based on the data at hand, American teenagers are more religiously oriented than the public or the media assume. However, across the studies, there are some inconsistencies with regard to religious behavior and beliefs. In this article, we examine two aspects of youth and religion – (1) To what extent does religion play an important role in the lives of teenagers? We study religion through a three dimensional measure of religion: perception of importance, worship attendance, and membership in religious groups; (2) What background variables are associated with youth religious beliefs and behaviors? Results from this nationally representative study provide strong indications about for whom and to what extent is religion relevant. The study informs us about the prevalence of religious values among U.S. teens in the Twenty-first century and suggests whether the secularization theory and the Marxist view of religion are relevant for modern day America.

METHODS

Sample

The University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Youth Policy national survey of youth surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2004 youth ages 11 to 18 residing at home. The survey was conducted by telephone. The survey research firm, Schulman, Ronca and Bucavalas used a random digit dial procedure to draw the sample. Households that were contacted were screened for an eligible youth in the home. The primary screening question was whether there was a youth residing in the home, aged 11 to 18. If there was no eligible youth residing in the home, the interview was terminated. If there was an eligible youth, the parent or guardian was asked a series of questions including what the relationship of the person answering the phone was to the child, and demographic questions including religious affiliation. When more than one eligible child resided in the home, the interviewer selected the child who had the most recent birthday.

The adult portion of the interview included informed consent questions that asked permission to interview the youth. The youth portion of the interview began with an informed consent question. The completion rate of the survey, calculated as the percentage of eligible subjects (as determined from the screening question) who completed the interview was 80.57 percent.

Data Collection

The telephone interviews were conducted during two time periods. The initial data collection period was May and June 2000. The second data collection period was October and November 2000. Approximately half the sample (1,253) was surveyed in the initial period and the remaining portion of the sample was interviewed during the second data collection period. On average, interviews lasted 20 to 25 minutes.

Measures

To assess the role of religion in the life of teenagers, we examined three key variables: (1) perception of religion as important in one's daily life. This was measured by asking: "How important is religion in your life today?" The responses were a 5-item Likert scale ranging from "Extremely important" to "Not important at all". (2) Religious participation was measured by asking each parent or caretaker, "To the best of your knowledge, in the past month, how many times has your child attended organized religious worship services?" (3) Participation in religious programs was measured by asking each parent or caretaker, "Does your child participate in any organized program offered by a religious congregation or a religious organization?"

We employed a set of explanatory variables to assess which subgroups of teens is more or less inclined to religious participation and beliefs. We asked about ethnicity, gender, age, family marital status, religious affiliation, household income, education level of the interviewed adult, and parental attendance at a place of worship. Teens were asked to identify their ethnic/racial group. We focused our analysis on three key groups: White/Caucasian; African American, and Hispanic or Latino. We asked the parent/guardian and the teen about the teen's gender and age (we included only those 11 to 18 years of age). We asked the parent about his or her marital status. There were six options: married; living as married; widowed; divorced; separated; and never been married. Additionally, we asked the parent/guardian to identify the religion or denomination the household is affiliated with. We asked the parent/guardian about the household income and used ten categories each of \$10000 whereas the last category was \$100,000 or more. Furthermore, we asked for the highest educational level of the parent/guardian, using the following categories: none, or grade 1–8; high school incomplete (Grades 9–11); high school graduate (Grade 12 or GED certificate); business, technical, or vocational school after high school; some college, no 4-year degree; college graduate (B.S., B.A., or other 4-year degree); and post-graduate training or professional schooling after college (e.g., toward a master's degree or Ph.D.; law or medical school). Finally, we asked the parent/guardian how many times in the last month he or she attended religious worship.

Sample Characteristics

Two thousand and four sets of a parent and teen interviews were conducted. The largest cohort of teens was 16-year-olds (15.2%) and the smallest cohort was 18-year-olds (10.6%). The sample is almost equally divided between girls (50.3%) and boys (49.7%). The majority of the teens interviewed were in grades 5 to 12. A small number of teens were attending college (3.2%) or were not in school (3.9%). With regards to race and ethnicity, the largest group of teens identified themselves as White (71.6%), followed by African-American (13.6%), Hispanic (10.3%), and Asian or Pacific Islander (2.5%), American Indian (1.3%), while less than 1 percent (.7%) identified himself or herself as something other than the above listed groups (18 teens did not answer this question). Ten percent (10.7%) of the parents reported household income in excess of \$100000 per year, while 11.3 percent of the reported incomes below \$20000. In terms of place of residence, the majority of the families reside in suburban communities (47.4%) followed by urban (26.9%) and rural (25.7%).

When asked about their religious affiliation, most parents responded that they are Protestant Christians (48.2%) followed by Roman Catholics (26.7%). One-eighth (12%) reported that religiously they are “nothing in particular”. Jews and Mormons each contributed 1.5 percent of the sample and Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses each contributed 0.4 percent. Three percent were members of other religions. Not included in this analysis are 23 individuals who did not know what to indicate as their religion and 26 who refused to answer.

Findings

The findings are presented in three sections: perceived importance of religion, worship attendance, and participation in organized religious social activities. Each section starts with a report on the frequency of religious involvement, is followed by bi-variate analysis, and concludes with a multivariate analysis explaining variance.

Perception of the Importance of Religion

When asked “How important is religion in your life today?” the majority of youth reported that it is important (83.7%). Of this percentage, about one-fifth rated religion as extremely important in their lives (18.7%), while about one-third rated religion as either very important or fairly important (31.8% and 33.2%, respectively). Only a very small group (3.8%) reported religion as not important at all, and the rest (12.6%) reported religion as not very important. These numbers indicate a strong sense of religious feelings and indicate that to teenagers, religion is no less important than to older members of our society. Just examining the top two categories (extremely and very important; 50.5%) shows that teens in our survey report higher rates of religious importance than was found by Johnston, Bachman, and O’Malley in their 1991 and 1995 surveys; who reported that 30% of teens stated that religion is very important in their lives.

Our survey found that religion was more important for girls than boys ($X^2 = 13.4$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.01$) – a trend similar to that found for adults (Davis, 1987–88; de Vaus and McAllister, 1987; Ulbrich and Wallace, 1984). One-fifth of the girls (21.5%) reported that religion is extremely important in their lives as compared with 15.8 percent of the boys. Similarly, 17.8 percent of boys reported that religion is not important in their lives

as compared with 14.8 percent of girls. Although these differences are statistically significant, the substantive differences are not very large. In fact, in all the categories, except for the category of those who reported religion to be important in their lives, gender difference disappears. In other words, the gender difference is stronger in the categories of those feeling strongly that religion is either very important or not at all important in their lives.

Whether the teen is raised in a single parent or two-parent family was not significantly associated with perception of religion as important in life. Household income and place of residence were also not significantly associated with importance of religion in the teenager's life.

Age, however, has a more robust impact on teen's perception of the importance of religion ($X^2 = 51.7$, $df = 28$, $p < 0.01$). With one exception (15 year-olds) the older the age of the teen, the lower the reported importance of religion in their lives. Of the 11-year-old respondents, 89 percent reported religion as important. In contrast, 79.1 percent of the 18-year-old respondents reported religion to be important. The outlier group was the 15-year-old respondents, of whom 86.7 percent reported religion as important. We have no plausible explanation for this outlier from the general inverse pattern of age and the importance of religion.

Ethnicity was strongly and significantly associated with the perception of the importance of religion in one's life ($X^2 = 67.1$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$). Due to small numbers for some ethnic groups, our analysis is based only on the three larger groups of Black, Hispanic, and White. A larger percentage of Black respondents (31.8%) reported religion as "extremely important" than the 15.3 percent of Hispanics and 17 percent of Whites who did so. Similarly, 18.3 percent of White teenagers reported religion to be "not very important" or "not all important" compared to 12.3 percent of Hispanic teenagers and only 9.6 percent of Black teenagers.

We used a binary logistic regression to examine the combined impact of social and demographic variables on the youth perception of the importance of religion to their lives. In order to do so, we collapsed the dependent variable into a dichotomous variable: (1) religion is not important (first two categories) and (2) religion is important or even very important (last three categories). The independent variables were:

- How many times in the last month the parent or caretaker reported attending religious worship
- Sex (dummy variable, female)
- Ethnicity (dummy variables (2): White; Hispanic)
- Residence (dummy variable, rural)
- Marital status
- Child's age
- Household income
- Parent or caretaker's highest level of education

The final model (Table I) classified 83.6 percent of the cases correctly and the goodness of fit using the Hosmer and Lemeshow test was statistically significant ($X^2 = 17.2$, $df = 8$; $p < 0.05$). Using backward selection and six iterations, the final model reveals that youth perception of the importance of religion is best

Table 1: Summary of variables explaining Perception of importance of religion.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Parent attend worship services	.760	.073	108.864	1	.000	2.138
Gender	-.322	.137	5.527	1	.019	.725
Black	.547	.256	4.568	1	.033	1.728
Married	.325	.144	5.057	1	.025	1.384
Child age	-.089	.032	7.799	1	.005	.915
Parent highest level of education	-.101	.043	5.406	1	.020	.904
Constant	2.524	.530	22.690	1	.000	12.481

explained by increased parental attendance of religious worship, younger child age, being female, lower parent or caretaker education, married parents, and being Black. In short, youth who report that religion is important to them have married parents with lower level of education who attend religious services, are younger, and are Black females.

Worship Attendance

Attitudes are not always isomorphic with behavior; thus, believing that religion is important does not automatically translate into religious participation. We asked parents and caretakers to report on youth attendance at religious worship. One-third of teenagers (33.2%) reportedly did not attend religious worship in the month prior to the interview. The remaining two-thirds of teens' attendance varied from one day to 31 days. The majority of children who attended more than 15 days in the last month were defined as Protestant, "just a Christian", Catholic, or Jewish. No Muslim child attended worship services more than 15 days (the sample included only six Muslim teens).

Differing measures of attendance meant we could not compare our results directly to those obtained by other researchers. While our study measured the number of times a teen attended religious worship in the previous month, the Gallup survey asked about the previous seven days, and Johnston and his colleagues asked about weekly religious attendance. Nonetheless, our findings that 37.1 percent of the teens we surveyed attended worship services four times a month and 45.6 percent attended three or more times in the past month, suggest that our results are relatively consistent with previous surveys. Gallup found that 49 percent of teens attended in the past seven days while Johnston and his colleagues reported that 37 percent of youth are weekly attenders. Clearly, the number of those who attended last week includes the weekly attenders and a few less frequent attenders. Hence, our findings support both studies and point out the importance of the method of asking about religious attendance.

We examined the association between attitudes (how important religion is to youth) to behavior (worship attendance) by classifying attendance into five categories: not at all;

once; 2–5 times; 6 to 10 times; and 11 to 31 times in the past month. As expected, the association was statistically significant ($X^2 = 517.3$; $df = 16$; $p < 0.001$).

In addition to knowing whether teens attend religious services, we also wanted to know whether they attended alone or with their parents. However, we did not ask this question of either the parent respondent or the teen. We could assess the association between the parents' and the teens' reports of religious attendance by using simple linear correlation of the two responses. We found a strong and significant correlation ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$) between parent and youth participation in worship services. In fact, 1055 of the 2004 sets of parents and teenagers reported identical occurrences of attendance. This suggests teens attend services with their parents or that, if they attend alone, youth worship attendance is influenced primarily by parental behavior or encouragement. Hoge and Petrillo (1978) found that high school students' attendance of religious services and participation in religious social groups is moderated through their relationships with their parents. However, the George H. Gallup International Institute (2000) reported that when teens were asked why they attended religious services, 68% reported they do so because they themselves wanted to go and only nine percent reported doing so because their parents forced them to attend. The latter finding implies that modeling after parents rather than coercion is a main influence on youth behavior.

We also tested the associations between gender, family structure, household income, highest parental level of education, ethnicity, place of residence, age, and youth attendance in religious worship. Gender, parents' marital status, household income, and place of residence were not significantly associated with worship attendance. Age was significantly associated with worship attendance ($X^2 = 59.9$, $df = 28$, $p < 0.001$). As expected, older youth attend fewer religious services than younger ones. Forty-four percent of the 18-year-old respondents did not attend a religious worship even once in the last month, while only 22.8 percent of the 11-year-old respondents did not attend once in the previous month. This finding supports the premise that younger teenagers tend to attend religious worship accompanied by their parents. In other words, younger and generally more compliant children attend services more frequently than older and more independent teenagers.

Ethnicity was also significantly associated with worship attendance ($X^2 = 48.8$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.001$). A larger percentage of Black respondents (10.9%) reported attending religious services more frequently (6 times or more in the last month) than Hispanic (8.5%) and White (6.9%) respondents. Similarly, 35.6 percent of White teenagers reported not attending any worship service in the past month compared with 27.9 percent of Hispanic and 15.7 percent of Black teenagers.

Parental level of education was significantly associated with youth attendance ($X^2 = 47.0$, $df = 24$, $p < 0.01$). The less education a parent had, the less their youth attended religious services. Nearly two-thirds (64.4 percent) of youth whose parents had college education or academic degrees attended worship in the prior month compared to 54 percent of youth whose parents had less than a high school education.

We performed a binary logistic regression to assess the net explanatory power of the studied variables. Here the dependent variable was whether or not the parent reported the youth's attendance at a religious worship last month. We used the same explanatory variables as in the previous section. The final model explained 81.3 percent of the cases correctly and the goodness of fit using the Hosmer and Lemeshow test was significant ($X^2 = 16.9$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 2: Summary of variables explaining attendance in religious worship.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Parent attend worship services	1.495	.072	430.863	1	.000	4.460
Gender	-.245	.130	3.544	1	.060	.782
Black	.395	.217	3.313	1	.069	1.485
Child age	-.181	.031	35.076	1	.000	.834
Constant	1.960	.450	18.929	1	.000	7.098

As can be seen in Table II, using backward selection and eight steps, the final model revealed that attendance of worship services is best explained by increased parental attendance, younger age of the youth, being female, and being Black. In other words, youth are more likely to be actively religious if (1) their parents have higher attendance, (2) they are young, (3) they are Black, and/or (4) they are females. Unlike “perceived importance of religion”, parental education did not enter the final equation for attendance, but the bi-variate analysis showed that more highly educated parents are associated with higher attendance of youth at worship. Given that the more educated parents reported higher rates of worship attendance, the impact of parents' education in the model was overshadowed by parents' attendance.

Participation in Religious Activities

We asked parents if their children had attended an organized activity offered by a religious congregation or organization in the past month. This type of activity could include a church youth group meeting, a bible class, a revival, a mentoring program, and some other activity or program. Our findings demonstrate surprisingly strong religious involvement by teens. Two-fifths of the sample (41.2%) answered positively regarding youth participation in a religiously-organized activity. Although the reported rate of participation is lower than worship attendance, it still is a high level of involvement and indicates the strong role that religion plays in the life of many teenagers. There is a significant association between youth perceptions of the importance of religion and youth participation in organized religious programs ($X^2 = 244.1$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, there was a significant association between attendance of worship services and participation in other organized religious activities ($X^2 = 483.4$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.001$).

We again used bi-variate analysis to test whether gender, family structure, ethnicity, household income, parental education, place of residence, or age are associated with participation in organized religious social activity. Once again, gender was not significantly related to the dependent variable. Teenagers living with married parents

attend religious activities (44.5%) more than any other group. This is followed by teens with parents who were previously married, including divorced, separated, or widowed (36.5%) parents. Interestingly, the lowest level of participation in organized religious activities was among teens with “two parents living as married” (26.3%) and “one parent-never been married” (30.6%). It is possible that for parents in these two types of families, the lifestyle choices – cohabitation and out-of-wedlock birth stand in contradiction with most organized religious teaching. Attending religious activities might be construed as exposing the youth to teaching that would view the parent(s) in a negative light and therefore view the youth as illegitimate. Alternatively, it is plausible that cohabitators and parents of children born outside of marriage may have chosen this family structure because religion is not important in their lives.

Thus, it would make sense that their children are not encouraged to be involved in a religiously-sponsored social activity. Worship services may require less involvement with the faith community or be seen as less intrusive concerning family marital status than the religiously-sponsored social activities that are meant to perpetuate and deepen the religious teaching among the next generation. Family income was significantly associated with participation in a religiously based social activity ($X^2 = 36.5$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.001$). The higher the family income the more likely the teen is to participate in religious activities or organizations. Less than one-third (29 percent) of youth in families with an annual income under \$20000 participated in organized religious activities, compared to 40% for youth in homes earning between \$20000 and \$75000. The rate of participation was greater than 50 percent (50.7%) for youth from

Table 3: Summary of variables explaining participation in organized religion.

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Parent attend worship services	.787	.051	237.690	1	.000	2.196
Gender	-.254	.108	5.498	1	.019	.776
Black	.544	.204	7.100	1	.008	1.723
White	.414	.160	6.678	1	.010	1.513
Child age	-.092	.025	13.895	1	.000	.912
Parent highest level of education	.080	.040	4.066	1	.044	1.084
Household income	.100	.033	9.453	1	.002	1.105
Constant	-1.193	.410	8.474	1	.004	.303

families with an income of \$75000. Parental level of education was also strongly associated with increased participation in religiously based social activity ($X^2 = 50.7$, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$). The higher the level of parental education, the greater the rate of youth religious participation.

Age showed a significant but weak association ($X^2 = 21.1$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.01$) with participation in religious activities. Seventeen and 18 year-old youth had the lowest rates of participation – 36.4 percent for 17 year-olds and 30.7 percent for 18 year-olds. Ethnicity was also significantly associated with participation in organized religious activities ($X^2 = 13.2$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$). A larger percentage of Black respondents

(49.6%) reported participation as compared with White (41.9%) and Hispanic (32.5%) respondents. Finally, place of residence was not associated with participation in religious activities.

In order to assess the explanatory power of all variables combined on participation in religious social activities, we again performed a binary logistic regression. The analysis correctly classified 71 percent of the cases and the goodness of fit using the Hosmer and Lemeshow test was significant ($X^2 = 17.4$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.05$). Table III reports the final model after five iterations. Parental attendance in religious worship, a likely indication of parental involvement and concern with religion, had the strongest explanatory power. Age was the second explanatory variable. As expected, older teens participate in religious social activities less often than younger ones. Household income in 1999 was third in contributing to the model. Increase in income explained the increased likelihood of youth child attendance in a social religious activity. For Blacks and Whites, ethnicity was a significant variable in the model. These two groups tended to participate in religious activities more than Hispanic youth. Gender also contributed to the model. Female teens engage in religious activities more than male teens. Finally, parent's education was also significantly related – the more education the parent had, the more likely the youth was to join in social religious activities. The other variables in this model, family structure and place of residence, did not significantly contribute to the model.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers some surprising glimpses of today's youth and their involvement in religion. Clearly, as with the two generations before them, religion is perceived and practiced as important in the lives of the "Millennium Generation". The overwhelming majority of the youth we interviewed assessed religion as important in their lives and a large number of them attend places of worship and participate in religious groups and/or activities. Our findings regarding importance of religion in the lives of youth are consistent with and support the findings from other available surveys of teens, including the George H. Gallup International Institute (2000) and the study of high school students conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (Johnston et al., 1976–1995).

For many teens attending worship service may be a less personal choice than one mandated by a parent(s). Parent attendance in worship services was the strongest explanatory variable in all our models. Regardless of motivation for attendance, for many youth, religious involvement includes worship in a congregation and belonging to a religiously based social group. This provides us with a strong indication that unlike their European counterparts' future cohorts of Americans will exhibit a high level of continued religious beliefs and activities. Furthermore, like adult Americans (Stark, 1999), the attitudes and practices of today's teens indicate a rejection of the secularization theory, at least as far as assuming that modernity will lead us to a "religion-less" society.

In short, today's youth exhibit the same religious trends as previous generations if not more. It is likely that Baby Boomer and Generation X parents (though there are fewer Generation X parents who have teenage children yet) encourage their teens to attend

worship services carried out by organized religions and to be part of religiously based social programs.

Our study, like Sherkat's (1998), finds more continuity than change in youth religious behavior and involvement. A large number of teenagers perceive religion as important in their lives and attend worship services regularly, most likely accompanied by or influenced by their parents. In our sample the correlation of attendance of parent(s) and teens was quite high and hence may foreshadow the expected sustenance of organized religion in America. It will be the task of the organized religious community to offer meaningful religious experiences to these youth if they are to grow up in congregations that are as relevant to their needs as the congregations of previous generations.

Today, many religious parent(s) are probably hopeful that their teens will acquire appropriate values and participate in safe social programming through religious programs rather than in front of a computer, or on the street, or left on their own. Our data cannot support this parental hope, but they show that these young citizens are familiar with organized religion and have experienced it. While there is a decline in perceived importance and participation in religious activities among the 17- and 18-year-old teens, there is no obvious reason to assume that this is a life long pattern. Larson and colleagues (1996) found that between the ages of 10 and 18, the amount of time spent interacting with parent(s) decreases from 35 percent to 14 percent of waking hours, with the greatest decline occurring at ages 17 and 18. However, this disengagement does not imply conflict with the family, but a normal process of developmental growth and response to opportunities and "pulls" for adolescent experiences outside the family (such as having a car, a job, or a boy/girl friend). This is an age of testing one's identity and experimenting with boundaries. Yet, many young adults have and probably will continue to come back to religion, either in the same or a different faith tradition than that of their parent(s). Young adults often "come back to religion" when they have children of their own. Many probably hope, like their parent(s) before, that involvement with a congregation and exposure to religious teaching and values will enhance their children's values and protect them from certain risks.

Two background variables that were expected to explain religious perception and behavior, namely ethnicity and gender, were found statistically significant for all three dependent variables. Black teens were significantly more religious than Hispanic or White teens and female teens were more religious than male teens.

The findings regarding Black teens could be interpreted as support for the Marxist notion that religion is used to mask the pain of exploitation and social abuse. However, the fact that Latino teens are as religious as White teens and are less active in religious youth groups may dampen this theoretical approach. It is difficult to apply our findings since Hispanic teens fall between Black and White teens in attendance at worship services, but reported less attendance in religiously based groups than White teens and Black teens. Alternate explanations for this may be related to differences in faith traditions rather than ethnicity.

The more surprising explanatory variables, refuting the theory of religion as a lower class phenomenon, were household income and parental level of education. These two classical measures of socioeconomic status were statistically significant in explaining perceived importance of religion as well as both forms of religious behavior, but in different ways. In the case of perception of the importance of religion, while the binary logistic regression analysis indicated that higher education is associated with decreased perceived importance of religion, the bi-variate analysis showed no significant association. Using a secondary analysis, we found that among Black girls whose parent(s) attend worship, as parent education increased, perceived importance of religion decreased. However, regarding attendance of worship services and other religiously-based social activities, the socio-economic variables were more profound and in the opposite direction. We found that the more educated and more affluent the parent(s) the higher the chance that the youth will engage in these forms of religious behavior. In this respect, our findings stand in contradiction to the Marx perception of religion as “the opiate of the masses”.

It can be inferred from our findings that in America, organized religion is used as a means for families to educate their children in social values and to encourage their involvement in pro social activities. It may be that religion is viewed by higher-income families as a form of “social capital” that can accumulate with economic capital. While parent’s religious behavior, age, gender, and ethnicity are all very important, the socio-economic status of parents is also important in understanding who actively participates in America’s organized religion. Our finding is supported, in part, by the Gallup’s finding that youth who attend religious services are more often achieving above-average grades academically.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1990) said the following: “I do not know if all Americans have faith in their religion – for who can know the secrets of the hearts? – but I am sure that they think it necessary for the maintenance of Republican institutions”. Indeed the nexus between perceived importance of religion and practice is not a simple one. Sacerdote and Glaeser (2001) based on the General Social Survey (1972–1998) showed an association in the United States between higher education and increased congregational attendance but not an increase in religious belief. More educated people tend to belong to congregations but less to proscriptive ones. The researchers attempted to explain this phenomenon of increased religious attendance through social connection and social capital, arguing that higher levels of education, in general, are correlated with all forms of social connection and associational affiliation. We add to this conjecture the possibility that middle and upper class members of the American society see religion as a positive force in their life and in their community, as a means to offer their children an opportunity for value acquisition, and a place to find like-minded trusted friends. As such, religion plays a role for people in America that contradicts the Marxist notion of religion, where religion serves as a tool for social cohesion and reduced anomie.

Our findings about perceived importance of religion and religious behavior of teens in America show that the picture of teens as hedonistic and carefree is not accurate. The Millennials demonstrate religious proclivities that are similar to generations before them

and it is safe to assume that with proper adjustment by the organized religious community many Millennials will find themselves adult members of congregations as well. There is, however, a lot we do not know. Among the questions left open are what is the impact of the teens' religiosity on their risk behavior, how teens explain their religious involvement, what accounts for the drop in religious perceptions and behavior after age 16, and how religion is associated with class structure in America.

REFERENCES

Barna, G.: 1994, *Baby Busters: The Disillusioned Generation* (Northfield, Chicago).

Barna Research Group: 2000, January 10, Teenagers embrace religion but are not excited about Christianity. Retrieved from the Internet February 16, 2003 from: <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=45&Reference=B>

Beaudoin, T.: 1998, *Virtual Faith* (Jossey Bass, San Francisco).

Benda, B.B.: 1995, 'The effect of religion on adolescent delinquency revisited', *Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency* 32, pp. 446–466.

Bibby, R.: 2001, *Canada's Teens: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Stoddert, Toronto).

Berger, P.L.: 1967, *The Sacred Canopy* (Doubleday, Garden City, NY).

Carlson, D.K.: 2000, *Americans More Skeptical of Young People Today than They Were 50 Years Ago* (The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ, also available: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr001110b.asp>

Cnaan, R.A. et al.: 2002, *The Invisible Caring Hand: American Congregations and the Provision of Welfare* (New York University Press, New York).

Cnaan, R.A. and F. Handy: 2000, 'Comparing neighbors: Social service provision by religious congregations in Ontario and the U.S.A.', *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 30, pp. 521–543.

Cochran, J.K.: 1989, 'Another look at delinquency and religiosity', *Sociological Spectrum* 9, pp. 147–162.

Cox, H.: 1998, 'Forward', in T. Beaudoin (ed.), *Virtual Faith* (Jossey Bass, San Francisco), pp. ix–xi.

Davis, W.L.: 1987–88, 'Men and the church: What keeps them out and what brings them in', *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 3, pp. 46–61.

de Tocqueville, A.: 1990, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1 (Vintage Classics, New York).

de Vaus, D. and I. McAllister: 1987, 'Gender differences in religion: A test of the structural location theory', *American Sociological Review* 52, pp. 472–481.

Furrow, J.L. and L.M. Wagener: 2000, 'Lessons learned: The role of religion in the development of wisdom in adolescence', in W.S. Brown (ed.), *Understanding Wisdom: Sources, Science, & Society* (Templeton, Philadelphia, PA), pp. 361–391.

Gallup, G., Jr.: 2001, Americans more religious now than ten years ago, but less so than in 1950s and 1960s. Press release by the Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ. Also: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010329.asp>

Gorsuch, R.L.: 1995, 'Religious aspects of substance abuse and recovery', *Journal of Social Issues* 51, pp. 65–83.

Hawkins, A.M.W. and R.F. Catalano: 1995, 'Preventing substance abuse', in M. Torny and D. Farrington (eds.), *Building Safer Society: Strategic Approaches to Crime Prevention*, 19 (Chicago University, Chicago), pp. 343–427.

Hoge, D.R. and G.H. Petrillo: 1978, 'Determinants of church participation and attitudes among high school youth', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, pp. 359–379.

Howe, N. and B. Strauss: 1993, *Thirteenth Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (Vintage Books, New York).

Johnston, L.D., J.G. Bachman, P.M. O'Malley: 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, *Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors* (Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan).

Kanagy, C.L., G. Firebaugh and H.M. Nelson: 1994, 'The narrowing regional gap in church attendance in the United States', *Rural Sociology* 59, pp. 515–524.

Kharari, K. and T.N. Harmon: 1984, 'The relationships between the degree of professed religious beliefs and the use of drugs', *International Journal of Addiction* 17, pp. 847–857.

Larson, R.W., M.H. Richards, G. Moneta, G. Holmbeck and E. Duckett: 1996, 'Changes in adolescents' daily interactions with their families from ages 10 to 18: Disengagement and transformation', *Developmental Psychology* 32, pp. 744–754.

- Lipset, S.M.: 1990, *Continental Divide* (Routledge, New York).
- McBride, D.C., P.B. Mutch and D.D. Chitwood: 1996, 'Religious belief and the initiation and prevention of drug use among youth', in C.B. McCoy, L.R. Metsch et al. (eds.), *Intervening with Drug-involved Youth* (Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA), pp. 110–130.
- Monsma, S.V. and C.J. Soper: 1997, *The Challenge of Pluralism* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD).
- Roof, W.C.: 1999, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ).
- Sacerdote, B. and E.L. Glaeser: 2001, *Education and Religion*. National Bureau of Economic Research working paper No. 8080. Cambridge, MA. Retrieved from the Internet on December 20, 2002: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w8080>
- Sherkat, D.E.: 1998, 'Counterculture or continuity? Comparing influences on baby boomers' religious orientations and participation', *Social Forces* 76, pp. 1087–1115.
- Smidt, C.E., J.C. Green, J.L. Guth and L. Kellstedt: 2003, 'Religious involvement, social capital, and political engagement: A comparison of the United States and Canada', in C. Smidt (ed.), *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Texas A&M University Press Consortium, College Station, TX).
- Smith, C. and R. Faris: 2002, *Religion and the Life Attitudes and Self-images of American Adolescents* (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, National Study of Youth and Religion, Report No. 2).
- Stark, R.: 1999, *Secularization, R.I.P.* *Sociology of Religion* 60, pp. 249–273.
- Stark, R., C. Kent and D.P. Doyle: 1982, 'Religiosity and delinquency: The ecology of the lost relationships', *Journal on Crime and Delinquency* 7, pp. 83–96.
- Swatos, W.H. and K.J. Christiano: 1999, 'Secularization theory: The course of a concept', *Sociology of Religion* 60, pp. 209–228.
- The George H. Gallup International Institute: 2000, *The spiritual life of young Americans: Approaching the year 2000* (Author, Princeton, NJ).
- Ulbrich, H. and M. Wallace: 1984, 'Women's work force status and church attendance', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23, pp. 341–350.
- Uslander, E.M.: 2002, 'Religion and civic engagement in Canada and the United States', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, pp. 239–254.

Youniss, J., J.A. McLellan and M. Yates: 1999, 'Religion, community service, and identity in American youth', *Journal of Adolescence* 22, pp. 243–253.

*School of Social Work
University of Pennsylvania
3701 Locust Walk
Philadelphia, PA 19104
USA
E-mail: cnaan@sp2.upenn.edu*