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# On Fire For God: Exploring Adolescent Religious Development

Ella F. Moxley

High school students are navigating new social relationships and milestones; in this process, they may be forced to reevaluate their own religious identity. This research study asked the question, “How do adolescents ages 16-18 view their own religious development in a time when they have gained greater autonomy from their parents, and what factors do they see as most important in forming their own religious identity?” Through a series of half-hour phenomenological interviews with six carefully selected students, this study seeks a better understanding of those factors influencing the religious identity of adolescents. Interview questions were aimed at finding shifts in the participants’ religious identity in adolescence. The study is a critical investigation as it allows for a better understanding of what kind of events, people, or institutions are most influential in a young person’s life. Data analysis revealed four distinct themes: community, personal relationships, education, and morality. I examine those themes and show how they reveal that late adolescence is a time of complex identity development. My principal conclusion is that adolescents are active agents in their development of religious identity. They use the messages they receive from outside sources to inform their own choices about their religious identity and the role that religion plays in their lives.

*Keywords:* Religious development, adolescents, socialization, autonomy

## Introduction

Religious activities are an integral part of many American teenagers’ lives, yet for many young people, their religious identity exceeds the ascribed beliefs in which they were raised. Throughout adolescence, exploration, fueled in large part by doubt, can help young people better define their religious identities (Baltazar & Coffin, 2011, p. 188). Smith (2011) holds that identity for any group is made up of their membership, position, and status within a social group (p. 217). Nelson (2010) describes religious identity as composed of three significant elements: belief, action, and membership (p. 337). As young people age, their personal beliefs, as well as memberships to certain groups, may shift in response to outside factors.

Another aspect of religious identity relevant to understanding how religion factors into a teen’s view of oneself is religious salience, which James, Lester, and Brooks (2014) describe as how one sees the impor-

tance of religion within their overall identity (p. 879). Religious identity can or perhaps should be viewed as involving multiple factors, in which the family is a compelling factor. Regnerus, Smith, and Smith (2004) recognize how religion is inherently practiced in the company of others (p. 27), which is why Zhai, Ellison, Stokes, and Glenn (2008) make the claim that family can provide a socializing pull for the development of a religious identity (p. 380). This means that in order to understand a young person’s religious identity, it is critical to also understand how they are influenced by their parents.

This paper aims for a better understanding of how complex social interactions, as well as important moments in adolescents’ lives, can shape their religious identities. The principal research question for this study asks “How do adolescents ages 16-18 view their own religious identity development in a time when they have gained greater autonomy from their parents, and what factors do they see as most important

in forming their own religious identities?” This question illuminates the lives of young adults and facilitates an understanding of those factors holding importance for a young person’s growth into an adult.

## Literature Review

### High School Student’s Religious Experience

Throughout the last few decades, researchers focusing on religious identity have illuminated the religious lives of adults by focusing on college-aged young adults (18-22 year olds). This has left a considerable gap in understanding younger age groups, which led Bebiroglu, van der Noll, and Roskama (2017) to focus on the “need to move beyond examining adult conversations to study children and understand their perspectives” (p. 290). The body of literature that does focus on a younger age group is clear that the experiences of high school students are critical to the field due to the fact that young adults are biologically primed to begin thinking more deeply about abstract religious concepts (Barry, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010, p. 312).

Understanding how American teenagers develop their religious identity is especially relevant in the digital age. According to Bobkowski and Pearce (2011), social media forces students to consider how they present their own identities in the face of decreasing privacy and increasingly complex social norms within a matrix of rich social interactions (p. 744). Gaining insight into the religious identity development process from the perspective of high school aged young adults is a vital yet understudied domain of inquiry. As Petts (2009) clearly acknowledges, a better understanding of religious change and stability can help adults understand adolescent development as a whole (p. 552).

### Early Adolescent Religious Development

In a qualitative study of Muslim students, Peek (2005) concludes that for many young people, their Muslim identity went unquestioned throughout their early childhood since it was just a routine feature of their daily lives (p. 224). This is consistent with observations from Hoffman (2012) who notes that

young people’s orientation towards religion is often more rigid and concrete during early stages of the life course in which parental stipulation is likely a potent factor (p. 1027). These observations reveal that early stages of religious identity are often one dimensional due to the fact that young children have not yet critically examined the religious identity ascribed to them by their parents.

As adolescents move further into biological and social development they not only gain new cognitive abilities, they also go through what Kox, Meeus, and Hart (1991) would call “turning points,” where changes in life correlate with shifts in how adolescents think about their religious identity (p. 234). These changes are immensely important because Armet (2009) finds that such changes can culminate in the development of a young person’s identity, which is “one of the most important tasks of adolescence” (p. 279). As children begin to mature, the way they relate to their own religious identity may shift. To become an active agent in defining one’s own identity is a critical transition into more autonomous functioning and higher level thinking.

### Older Adolescence:

Watson, Howard, Hood, and Morris’s (1988) research reveals that religious orientation often becomes more exploratory in the adolescent years which they attribute to youth experimenting with the freedom they have to develop their own identities (p. 276). Different researchers have concluded that this kind of exploration can result in a number of different outcomes. For Twenge (2017), data, collected in a national survey, suggests that as adolescents gain more autonomy, and start to question the status quo, they are more likely to leave their religion (p. 122).

However, Pearce and Denton (2011) contradict this through a series of qualitative interviews from which they conclude that increased autonomy results in youth “[having] matured to the point that their faith is their own and that makes it deeper and stronger” (p. 3). Although these theories seem contradictory to each other, they both rely on the assumption that as youth age, they may be inclined to take control of their identities.

Other researchers have found conclusions similar to those of Rew, Wong, Torres, and Howell (2007),

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who break down religious identity to find that although young people's religiosity (religious practice) may decline in adolescence, their subjective beliefs (spiritual beliefs) are constant (p. 57). This implicates the potential for religious shifts that occur at multiple layers of a student's religious identity. It is important to recognize religiosity as a key element of religious identity, but it is not the full story. This is why religious researchers Lopez, Huynh, and Fuligni (2011) indicate that there is potentially no correlation between participation and affiliation (p. 1298). In fact, the decline in participation may be a product of young people's social environments, not changes in identity, according to Desmond, Morgan, and Kikuchi (2010) who note that peer pressure may not always influence the subjective beliefs of adolescents (p. 266). Therefore, the religious lives and identities of adolescents may produce a variety of changes, best understood through a lens that takes into account the multiple ways adolescents view and act on their religious identities. Due to the complex nature of religious identity, a qualitative methodology is used in order to better understand the process from the perspective of participants.

## Methods

### Qualitative Methodology

As a result of the complex nature of religious development, which goes beyond simple group membership, and the fact that research fails to include adolescents, a methodology that gave a direct voice to young adults' experiences proved essential to addressing the research question. In a similar study, one that examined the religious development of college students, the authors point out that "qualitative studies are thus needed for fuller descriptions" (Rew et al. 2007, p. 57). Qualitative research can be effective as it gives greater meaning to quantitative trends recorded in literature, and it helps illuminate the inner workings of a larger phenomenon.

A phenomenological interview process was determined to be the best method to understand how high school students see their religious development in relation to their life experiences. The interview process was best suited for the research as it allowed the

researcher to deeply understand the experiences of each individual participant.

I designed an interview schedule that was semi-structured, with ten open-ended questions based on the literature review. In a qualitative study done by Ravishankar and Bernstein (2014), the researchers asked people about the impact of religion in lives through "interviews [that] were based on a guide, but themes were freely explored as they arose" (p. 1900). In a similar fashion, I created the interview schedule so it was flexible in order to fully follow up with students' responses.

### Recruitment of Participants

Six students from a high school located in a college town (located within a Bible Belt state) between the ages of 16-18 were interviewed for approximately 20-30 minutes. Although I originally intended to perform an hour-long interview, the length had to be revised since the content of the interview was usually sufficiently covered in under 30 minutes. The number of students was chosen based on a number that would provide a saturation of data in the time constraints. Participants were selected through announcements in various school groups (i.e. Speech and Debate, Christians on Campus, Band). My use of announcements to recruit participants was not productive, so I began using a snowball method, where I asked participants to nominate other potential participants who were within their social networks. Participants completed consent forms indicating that they were informed about the potential risks and benefits of their involvement as informants. In order to protect confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym: John (Baptist), Sadie (Catholic), Melody (Baha'i), Sahana (Hindu), Ceedee (Buddhist), and Nathan (Deist).

### Interview Content

During the interview, the researcher asked students questions that illuminated their shifts in religious identity over the course of their lives. One such question is "How do you feel your current religious identity differs or is constant with the way you thought about religion 10 years ago?" The questions that were incorporated into the schedule were also loosely based on important themes in adolescent

religious development that were identified through the literature review. For example, a paper by Vaidyanathan (2011), analyzed how socialization functions with religion, noting that religion and ethnicity are deeply intertwined (p. 384). Therefore participants were asked, “Do you think that your racial or ethnic identity influences your religious identity?” All questions can be found in Appendix A. These questions captured a narrative of adolescents’ religious history that focused on how their religious development shifted or remained constant throughout their adolescence. The responses also gave insight into what factors promoted adolescents’ changes in or continuity of their identities.

## Data Analysis Procedure

All responses were recorded and then later transcribed. After transcription, I analyzed the data by first sensitizing myself to the interview transcripts. Then through multiple readings of the transcripts, I became familiar with the raw data and I oriented to prevalent themes that repeated themselves within and across multiple transcripts. I was attentive to shifts in adolescents’ religious lives. A shift was defined as a factor, person, or event that prompted a change in religious identity or otherwise influenced the change.

Important themes were coded and organized like Halama and Halamová (2005) organized their data in a qualitative study of Christian conversions. Themes were placed into categories and subcategories (p. 71). I used such a procedure to help organize the data so I could compare categories across all six participants, and I located four shared categories and eight common subcategories. The common themes across participants were then analyzed using analytical questions developed from this researcher’s original questions.

## Results

I identified four major themes and eight sub-themes after comparing codes across all six participants. Overall themes moved from external factors that affect young people to more personal factors. Major themes were community, personal relationships, education, and morality.

## Community

### Religious Community

All participants talked about the way their religious community had a tremendous effect on their religious development because it created a sense of belonging. For both Sadie and John, their religious community was something they could turn to when they faced bullying in their schools. John was an especially salient example of someone who found deep friendships in his religious community after facing social exclusion from his school peers. Sahana also saw the way that the community she found in religion was helpful as it gave her a break from the external turmoil she faced in her middle school. She reflects that “Sunday was not just like me going to Sunday school it was like our family’s kind of ritual... it was like really solid and all the holidays were extremely fun.” For her and many other students, a religious community was a source of stability within their lives in the midst of external stress.

### Summer Camp

For three participants, summer camp was also one of the greatest forms of community that affected their connection to their religious identity. For John, whose family was not very religious, “It was really moving to be there surrounded by so many people that are really religious.” For Nathan, summer camp served to move him further away from the Christian faith in which he was raised when he realized that, “this isn’t spiritual energy this is more of just human energy... even if you were going to a Nirvana concert you would get the same feeling.” Most participants noted that the “energy” these camps offered was critical to either reaffirming their religious identity or forcing them to reevaluate their participation in their religious institution.

## Personal Relationships

### Role Models.

All students spoke of specific personal relationships that were especially monumental in shifting

how they viewed their religious identities. Many students had role models who affected their identity the most. Some students spoke of peers like Sadie, whose Mormon friend helped reaffirm her Catholic views as a young high school student because, in the words of Sadie, “she gave me a different point of view from someone that’s my age and going through the same thing as me.” Melody also had an older friend that was able to provide her with religious guidance that Melody trusted because of their proximity in age. This kind of empathy was something most students looked for in a religious role model. When unable to connect to his religiously ambivalent parents, John turned to his youth pastor. John reflected on the “surrogate family” he found with his pastor saying that “I feel like it just plugged a missing hole because you want your family to do the things you do.” Role models have great power to shift an adolescent either further into a religious identity or away from it especially if they are able to provide a young person with support and empathy that they might be missing from other figures in their lives.

### Parents

The most repetitive relationship seen in all six interviews was the relationship between children and parents. Students repeatedly talked about their parents in the context of freedom, choice, and autonomy. Sadie says that “I didn’t really have strict enforcement of certain things that other Catholic families might. I feel like I wasn’t forced to believe any specific thing.” She sees this freedom as contributing to her growing interest as an adolescent in the Catholic faith.

On the other hand, Nathan had the opposite experience. He describes conversations with his parents saying, “When I talk to my dad about religion he gets furious. It’s an open-minded thing. When you talk to open-minded people you tend to keep an open mind.” Nathan desired to have parents who would listen and support his own independent exploration of his religious identity. He felt like his parents’ unwillingness to hear his own ideas contributed to his shift away from the Catholic faith. Parents can be powerful figures in adolescents’ lives and their response to young people’s growing desire for independence can be critical in shaping youth’s identity development especially in the context of religion.

## Education

### Learning

For all students, learning in all contexts was critical to their religious development. For Ceedee, schools were a critical component of this. During her earliest years of elementary school, she spent her weekdays at a Christian private school and her weekends taking classes at a Buddhist temple. Despite the confusion about her religious identity this created in her youth, she says that her experience with both means that “I can see the differences and why this is better for me.”

Learning about different religions was important for Melody and Sahana who credit the US History class and its teacher as helping them understand how they wanted to interpret their religious doctrines. Sadie says that learning about other religions through interactions with different people was helpful to her commitment to Catholicism owing to the fact that “When I have exposure to everything I have a reason to keep being who I am.” All students took steps to critically interpret the religious messages around them to make an informed decision about their religious identities, which seemed to shift over their lifetime.

### Teaching

Teaching others helped participants reaffirm their own identities. Most taught younger students at their religious institution. Ceedee and John both participated in youth groups where they took on leadership roles. Others, like Melody, felt that they had a duty to inform the others around them about their religious identities, especially if they were from a religious minority. Melody used social media to create awareness of her Baha’i Faith. Nathan sought to create religious awareness among peers. He used Instagram to create a podcast in order to create an open dialogue about religion with his friends. Social media for both Melody and Nathan, was a key platform used to inform users of different religious identities about their own beliefs. They felt that these differences made it all the more important that they educate others about their beliefs.

## Morality

### Moral Code

Especially important for participants was the adoption and application of a moral code embedded and taught by the religions with which they identified. John saw others who acted with what he viewed as Christian morals, and this made him more interested in connecting to his Baptist identity. Soon he became concerned about also demonstrating these morals. On the other hand, Sahana left her religious identity due to its moral code. In middle school, she felt she could not reconcile her sexual identity with her religious identity as a Hindu. When she entered high school, she associated with a new friendship group which is why she said, "I realized that I could be a good religious person and not be the exact definition of what some super old scriptures say you should be" and this helped her reconnect with her Hindu identity. This reinterpretation of one's religious doctrine was very common for the participants. When one aspect of their religion did not work well with another aspect of their identity, they reinterpreted their religion and critically evaluated its doctrine. This was done in a way different or even contrary to their parents' interpretation in order to personalize their religion and imbue a religious doctrine with their own personal perspective.

### Politics

Politics was also very relevant to most of these adolescents. And, politics influenced their stance on religion. For Sadie, she often felt attacked for her identity as a liberal Catholic. She felt like many people saw the two identities as mutually exclusive. Sadie says "with anything you're defending you should think about why you're defending it." The more she was forced to justify her religious identity to others the more she was able to reinterpret Catholicism to make it fit for her. Melody was also very concerned about politics. After asking questions about her religious doctrine, and realizing it matched many of her progressive stances on social issues, she says, "I was just really proud of my faith in that moment. Like they aren't going to allow something like that and that just made me really happy." Participants

demonstrate that their religious identity did not exist in a vacuum. As they develop religious, moral, and political identities concurrently, they modify all identities in order to fit together with each aspect of their personalities.

## Discussion

The central question asked by this study was how do adolescents ages 16-18 view their own religious development in a time when they have gained greater autonomy from their parents, as well as addressed those factors they might see as most important in forming their own religious identities. The coding of various adolescents' descriptions of their religious developmental process reveals young people are very much active agents in determining their own identities. The participants were aware of their parents' influence on their choice, yet they are also conscious of how a variety of other factors shape their choice. This matches Pearce and Denton's (2011) findings that parents can function as "social scaffolding" to influence their children's religious beliefs and practices but do not have the power to completely dictate a young person's religious identity. (p. 9). For most of these students, their religious identity is one that they create for themselves, an identity that may be consistent with or inconsistent with their parents' commitments. The participants reinterpret their religious identities through their experiences with role models or their own reflections on morality and the other identities they hold. A combination of these institutions, people, and their other experiences have led them to integrate their religious doctrine in a way that is unique from their parents or other religious role models.

The data indicate that the participants likely begin to apply their religious knowledge to their everyday life, much like Brown's (1964) description of an intrinsic religious person: "He has made his Church's beliefs his own (although he does not necessarily hold them all strongly), and he carries them into his everyday dealings with others" (p. 94). This kind of description is parallel to the way John emphasized "acting with Christian values" or the way Sahana chose to volunteer in her community in order to satisfy Hinduism's doctrine of Karma. All students emphasized

the relationship between their religious identities and the doctrines they embody and the morality of their actions in a wider world. Ultimately, the process can make them more autonomous in the formation of their religious identities. The data suggest that the participants were functioning as intrinsic religious thinkers.

### **How has autonomy affected religious development?**

For adolescents, a religious summer camp was one of the most obvious examples of the way that the autonomy materialized in their life to give them an experience that helped solidify their religious identity. Desmond et al. (2010) clearly note “parents and peers provide models for adolescents to observe and imitate and positive and negative reinforcement (rewards and punishments) for religious behaviours” (p. 248). This is true for many students until an event, such as summer camp, helps them partially break away from the influence of their parents and peers; those who had previously either closely regulated their religious behaviour or had not participated in religious socialization. The freedom of summer camp allowed them greater agency in interpreting or reinterpreting their religious doctrine in a way that made sense to them, not just to their parents.

Autonomy also surfaces as a critical component of the development of religious identity as youth become leaders and educators. Many students talked about taking on leadership roles within their youth group which matches Ji and Tameifuna’s (2011) research which states that students who are given the chance to have leadership roles will have a higher level of commitment to their religious institution as they will feel more cognitively engaged (p. 309). This is most certainly true of students participating in the study. Ceedee, who taught younger girls at her youth group, felt more engaged with her religion in a leadership role. Whether teaching younger students at their religious institution, their friends of different religions, or other peers, they felt more connected and more confident of their religious identity. Sharing this aspect of themselves with others seemed to solidify the commitment they had made to their religious paths.

### **What factors have the greatest influence on religious identity?**

For most students, understanding their ascribed religious identity on a deeper level was influential to them claiming an identity for themselves. Trusted people, like parents, mentors, and teachers who were willing to logically explain the more abstract aspects of religion became important sources of influence in these young people’s religious development. Even media, such as a textbook or book explaining a religious doctrine, was helpful to these youths as they sought to understand what their religious identity was in the context of the wider world. This trend is supported by Armet’s (2009) observation that “exploration is an important dynamic in the process of forming an intrinsic commitment to an ideology” (p. 281). Once students learned about their religious identity, they felt more empowered to apply it to their everyday life.

This was especially true for students that practiced a minority religion. For many of these students, peer support was lacking as they began to explore their religious identity. This is unsurprising as Bowman and Smith (2010) clearly state that “students from these minority groups are often faced with a lack of support and/ or understanding of their religion” (p. 598). Even so, for some students, teaching those around them about their identity or at times defending their religious choices became easier once they were fully educated about the religious identity they were practicing. Therefore mentorship and education serve as important sources of influence in these young people’s lives.

### **What has contributed to students’ shifts in religious identity?**

High school is a time of increased autonomy but also a time when social pressures are magnified. Youth are influenced by peers especially since peers can often give students experiences with new perspectives and religious identities that can be influential in solidifying their own. Petts (2009) explains that exposure to new religious beliefs can often prompt students to shift their own religious identities to make it better fit their own (p. 556). Even if exposure to peers did not prompt a conversion in religious identity, for many students their interactions with friends

of different religions helped them reinterpret their religious doctrine to make it better suit themselves. This is a phenomenon noted by Shalev, Baum, and Itzhaky (2016) whose study reveals that people can be influenced to make changes in their religious lives and identities through their interactions with people with whom they sustain close relationships (p. 135). Ultimately, as students progress through adolescence, they will begin to develop relationships with people outside of the social circles of their parents. This will prompt exposure to new ideas that can result in shifts in their religious identity. This clearly shows that it is imperative that young people are given safe social environments and positive mentors who help them explore the opportunities they have available to them. This allows adolescents to solidify their identity and develop into well adjusted young adults.

### **Limitations**

Although this study reveals critical knowledge about the way adolescents process the world around them to solidify their religious identities, it is not without flaw. Like any study that uses a qualitative methodology, the information in this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. Compensating for this is that qualitative inquiry can give a more nuanced explanation of a phenomenon. The phenomenological aspect of this study also gives more agency to the participant to tell their own story. The other major flaw in this study is location based. The school in which the study was performed, is located in a college town in the Bible Belt. This location is known to be more liberal relative to other cities in the state. The city itself is also known to have two high schools largely divided by class.

This study was performed at the more affluent and less diverse high school which could contribute to some of the trends seen in the study as most students never had to contend with economic instability. Many of the students interviewed who came from minority religious backgrounds go to school with predominantly Christian peers. This might affect their development of religious identities because of the possible alienation they felt in the school and community in which they were living.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this research shows that high school is a dynamic time for youth. Family changes, peers, a growing sense of autonomy, and leadership contribute to shifts in adolescents' religious identities. This directly contradicts Lopez et al.'s (2011) statement that the "stability of adolescents' social environment across high school results in few challenges to their existing religious identities, with little need to renegotiate the extent of one's identification" (p. 1305).

As students progress through high school they are likely to reevaluate how they relate to their ascribed religious identity or even shift to new ones. Recognizing that young adults are influenced by a myriad of factors around them is critical. Future studies can recognize the agency that younger adolescents have. Students are likely free thinkers who are processing the messages they are receiving around them to make coherent choices about their identities. Future research can look into the way a secular education can impact students' formation of their religious identities. The surprising impact of US History on the religious identities of several young people in this study shows that a secular education can introduce new ideas into a students' consciousness that changes their relationship to their identities. Ultimately, this research reveals that adolescents can display advanced forms of critical thinking about their religious identities that show they have much to add to the field and should not be disregarded as passive or minor actors who simply follow the beliefs their parents ascribe.

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## Appendix A

Is there a pseudonym you would like to choose for this research paper to protect your identity?

Warm Up Question: Can you briefly tell me a little bit about your family's religious identity and practices?

What religious identity did your parents instruct you in and how do you identify currently?

If different: Tell me about what prompted this change and when?

How do you feel your current religious identity differs or is constant with the way you thought about religion 10 years ago?

Do you remember the first time you ever thought about your religious identity?

Can you explain what it was like to think about your religious identity for the first time?

Has there ever been a time you doubted your religious identity?

Yes: What factors led to a turning point in your religious identity and contributed

to your doubt? How did you respond to this doubt?

b. No: What factors made you feel more secure in your religious identity?

Can you identify important individuals (peers, mentors, family, religious leaders) that you think have had the most influence on your religious belief?

How do you feel they have influenced your view of religion?

Do you feel as though you've influenced your peers religious development?

Do you express your religious identity online or have friends who express their identity online?

Do you change the way that you express your religiosity in front of their friends.

Do you think that your racial or ethnic identity influences your religious identity?

Do you feel as though the ways that you practice your religion have changed over the last few years?

In the coming years, do you expect your religious identity to shift?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your religious development today?