

## RESEARCH NOTE:

# RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION AND PARENTAL MORAL EXPECTATIONS AND SUPERVISION OF AMERICAN YOUTH

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REVIEWS OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH, 2003, VOLUME 44:4, PAGES 414-424

*A large body of empirical studies shows that religion often serves as a factor promoting positive, healthy behaviors and outcomes in the lives of American adolescents. This research note reports findings of one test of a "moral order" explanation of these religious effects. I use the national Survey of Parents and Youth (1998-99) data (N=1,073) to examine the relationship between parental religious participation and measures of parental moral expectations and supervision of youth ages 10 to 18. The findings support the hypothesis that parental religious participation increases parental moral expectations and supervision of their adolescent children.*

Several decades of social scientific studies have shown that in the lives of American adolescents religion is often a factor influencing their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. Various measures of religiosity are associated with a variety of healthy, desirable outcomes across a diversity of areas of concern, including juvenile drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, and delinquency (Wallace and Williams 1997; Evans et al. 1995; Pawlak and Defronzo 1993; Cochran 1993; Cochran and Akers 1989); suicide (Donahue 1995); depression and hopelessness (Wright et al. 1993); adolescent health-enhancing behaviors (Jessor, Turbin, and Costa 1998; Wallace and Forman 1998); life satisfaction, involvement with families, and skills in solving health-related problems (Varon and Riley 1999); effective coping with problems (Shortz and Worthington 1994; Balk 1991); risky sexual behaviors (Thornton and Camburn 1989; Lammers et al. 2000; Murry 1994); pro-family attitudes and values (Brody, Stoneman, and Flor 1996); academic achievement (Muller and Ellison 2001; Regnerus 2000; Scharf 1998); political and civic involvement (Smith 1999; Serow and Dreyden 1990); and commitment to and involvement in community service (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1999). Within the relevant bodies of literature, individual publications normally suggest causal mechanisms explaining their particular findings. Altogether, these many studies are very helpful, but as a whole they present the contemporary researcher with a disjointed and fragmented account for religious influences in the lives of American teenagers. What is needed instead is a more coherent, systematic account of how and why religion exerts significant positive effects on American youth.

## THE CENTRALITY OF PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS AND SUPERVISION

As a step in this direction, I have suggested elsewhere (Smith 2003b) that religion may exert positive, constructive influences in the lives of American youth through a number of

distinct but connected and potentially mutually-reinforcing factors. Two of those factors that are especially relevant for this analysis are moral order and network closure. In my discussion of moral order (Smith 2003b), I drew upon the works of Taylor (1985, 1989), Etzioni (1988), MacIntyre (1984), and Wuthnow (1987) to suggest the importance of substantive cultural traditions grounded upon and promoting particular normative ideas of what is good and bad, right and wrong, higher and lower, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, and so on, which orient human consciousness and motivate human action. Importantly, these distinctions of judgement and valuation within moral order are understood as not established by people's own desires, decisions, or preferences, but instead are believed to exist apart from and above them, providing standards by which human desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged. Within this framework of thought, we can observe that American religions promote specific cultural moral orders of self-control and personal virtue grounded in the authority of long historical traditions and narratives, into which new and young members are inducted, particularly through the effort of parents, such that youth may use them to guide their life choices and moral commitments. That is, as American adolescents go about forming practices and making choices that compose and shape their lives, religion can provide them with substantive normative bearings, standards, and imperatives to guide those practices and choices. Normally these substantive normative orders operate to foster virtues and values often expressed in positive, constructive, prosocial ways. Thus, the observable significant influences which the literature shows that religion does exert on youth in various outcomes may in part be explained by the cultural moral orders that religion provides, particularly as mediated through parental influences which orient consciousness and motivate action.

Other key factors that I have hypothesized help to shape adolescent outcomes in healthy, constructive directions are social network ties and network closure (Smith 2003a). I have suggested that American religious congregations can provide relatively dense networks of relational ties within which youth are embedded, involving people who pay attention to the lives of youth, and who can provide oversight of and information about youth to their parents and other people well positioned to discourage negative and encourage positive life practices among youth. The oftentimes unique cross-generational social ties that religious congregations facilitate can structure relational networks that facilitate more informed and effective oversight and control of youth by adults who care about them, particularly parents. Coleman has theorized the importance of network ties and closure, suggesting that higher densities of social relationships between youth, parents, and other interested adults, and among parents whose children are friends, are associated with improved youth outcomes (1988; Coleman and Hoffer 1987). Others have also suggested that high levels of social network closure benefit youth by enabling parents more effectively to monitor and supervise their activities, communicate with other parents about their expectations and behavior, and feel supported in their own parenting (see Fletcher et al. 2001). As one of the few major American social institutions that emphasizes ongoing social interaction not rigidly stratified by age, American religious congregations provide ideal settings for dense network ties and increasing closure in networks involving youth. In religious congregations, adolescents are able to form relationships with youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, parents of friends, and other adult acquaintances, who can relationally tie back to the adolescents' parents. For their part, parents of adolescents in religious congregations—compared to, say, schools or sports teams—are, due to the nature of the social set-

ting, better able to build relationships over time with their children's friends and the parents or kin of their children's friends. Moreover, these relationships are very likely to exist among people who share similar cultural moral orders, facilitating higher levels of agreement and cooperation in collective oversight and social control. All of this we should expect to create conditions of increased support for and supervision of youth, encouraging positive and discouraging negative behaviors among youth.

Parents thus play crucial roles in the operation of the theorized moral order and network ties influences. We expect parents to be the key mediators between their religion's moral orders and their adolescent's appropriation of them. Parents are the primary socializers of youth into the moral expectations of their religious traditions. Parents are also normally the key network tie to and through which information flows from other church members about their youth. With few exceptions, American religions both maintain meaningful moral expectations of their adherents and place the primary responsibility on parents for training young members to know and live out these moral expectations. If the moral order and network ties/closure hypotheses are correct, therefore, we might expect to see the parents of adolescents who are more involved in religious congregations to express higher moral expectations of and to exercise higher levels of supervision over their adolescent children's lives. The purpose of this investigation is to assess empirically this theoretical expectation. The specific hypothesis that this research note tests is this: *parents of American youth who more regularly participate in the life of religious congregations will manifest higher expectations of their children's moral behaviors and greater amounts of supervision of their children's lives than parents who are less religiously involved.*

Future empirical work remains to examine the possible influence of religiously-grounded parental moral expectations and supervision on actual specific youth outcomes, as a test of the larger theoretical framework above. As a preliminary step in that direction, however, this research note first seeks simply to answer the antecedent question posed by the above hypothesis: whether, net of other factors, greater parental religious participation in fact increases parental moral expectations and supervision of their adolescents. Findings will help build up a body of empirical evidence for a larger research program examining religious influences in adolescent lives.

## DATA AND VARIABLES

I test this hypothesis using data from the Survey of Parents and Youth (SPY), conducted in 1998-1999. SPY was designed by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing in conjunction with the National Evaluation Team for the Urban Health Initiative at the Center for Health and Public Service at New York University Robert F. Wagner Graduate School, and was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. SPY was designed to monitor trends in youths' access to parental and community resources. The survey includes interviews with parents and youth. The youth survey generated information on parent-child relationships, involvement in supervised activities, and outcomes such as health status, educational expectations, and school achievement. The study was administered as a random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone survey to a nationally representative sample of youth ages 10-18; and to over-samples of youth in six selected cities (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Richmond, and Chicago). Parents were screened and then interviewed, after which point the interviewers asked permission to interview the youth. SPY did not provide incentives for participation; it achieved an adult response rate of 89 per-

cent and a parent consent rate for youth interviews of 74 percent. SPY was conducted in English, Spanish, or Chinese, and lasted an average of 30 minutes for youth, and 20 minutes for parents. Since we are interested here in nationally representative statistics, and not the urban over-samples, we eliminated the latter and only analyzed the national sample of youth, providing for analysis a weighted N of 1,073.

My analysis used nine survey questions for different dependent variable measures of parental moral expectations and supervision. Five survey questions serve as measures of parental moral expectations of their children. The SPY survey asked its youth respondents, "How upset would your parent/mother/father be if they/she/he found out that you were (a) drinking alcohol?; (b) skipping school?; (c) getting into fights?; (d) having sex?; (e) using drugs?" Answer categories were (1) very upset, (2) somewhat upset, (3) not very upset. In addition, I employ two measures of general parental supervision which are based on these questions: (1) "Now, tell me how much you agree with the following statements about your day yesterday. . . . My parents knew where I was at all times" and (2) "My parents knew how to get in touch with me at all times." The answer categories for both were (1) strongly agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) somewhat disagree, and (4) strongly disagree. In addition, the SPY survey included questions that allow for a more substantively specific view of parental supervision of youth, focusing on the regulation of television watching. The analysis below employs two questions on the supervision of television: (1) "How often do/es your parent/mother/father . . . tell you not to watch TV?" and (2) "I'm going to mention some things parents often make rules about. Please tell me whether your parent/mother/father make/s the rules about [this], or whether you decide for yourself. . . . What kinds of TV shows and movies you can watch?" For many parents of adolescents, regulating the television watching of their children is not merely a matter of proper time management—of not wasting time. Widespread parental concerns about violence, sex, profanity, and shallow materialism on television also make its regulation for many a key element of the proper moral socialization of children. I thus include these specific questions here, to complement the more general questions about parental supervision.

My main explanatory independent variable relies on the SPY survey's religious service attendance question. The attendance question was asked only of parents, as follows: "How often do you attend church of synagogue? Once a week, 2-3 times a month, once a month, a few times a year, or never?" Since this analysis focuses on the morally regulating role of parents in adolescents' lives, whatever the religious commitments of their youth, the proper analytical strategy here is to estimate the effects of parental religious participation on parental expectations and supervision, without bringing in measures of youth religiosity. If we find those effects to be significant here, future analyses can then assess to what extent parental expectations and supervision—perhaps in interaction with youth religiosity variables—influence the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of youth.

The main analytical strategy below is to compare in bivariate and multivariate analyses the levels of parental religious participation as measured by church attendance and differences in measures of parental moral expectations and supervision of their 10 to 18 year old children. Because we have reason to believe that parental expectations and supervision may be correlated with factors other than religious participation, the analysis below controls for a number of demographic variables, including child's age, child's gender, child's race, parent's age, parent's education, family income, number of children under 18 years of age living in household, parent's marital status, region of country (South, West, Midwest, Northeast),

and community context (Urban, Suburban, Rural). These control variables enable the isolation of possible religious influences net of other possibly correlated variables.

The analysis begins with a bivariate crosstabs, examining in Tables 1 and 2 the distribution of variance in our expectations and supervision dependent variables across levels of parent church attendance. Because the answer categories of all of the dependent variables are neither categorical nor continuous, but rather ordinal, I employ ordinal regression to conduct the multivariate analysis. This ordinal regression technique allows me to model the dependence of an ordinal response on a set of predictor covariates. Tables 3 and 4 report the estimates of the ordinal regression and results of significance tests.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reveals a consistent pattern in the relationship between parental religious service attendance and the five dependent variable measures of parental moral expectations. The more parents attend religious services, the more upset their adolescent children perceives their parents would be if they found out they were having sex, using drugs, drinking alcohol, getting into fights, and skipping school. Thirteen percent more parents attending services weekly compared to never, for instance, would be very upset if they found out their child was having sex; nine percent more if they found out their child was getting into fights. The observed differences are not enormous, but they are noticeable, consistent, and, we will see, statistically significant in a multivariate context.

Table 2 reveals a similar consistent pattern in the relationship between parental religious service attendance and the four dependent variable measures of parental supervision of their adolescent children. The more parents attend religious services, the more supervision they exercise over their adolescent children, according to the latter, particularly when it comes to television viewing. Again, the observed differences are not enormous, but they are noticeable, consistent, and, again we will see, statistically significant in a multivariate context. Therefore, this bivariate analysis supports the hypothesized relationship between parental religious involvement and moral expectations and supervision of their adolescent children.

How does the religious service attendance variable fare in a multivariate analysis? Table 3 shows the ordinal regression estimates for the relevant explanatory and control variables. Controlling for a variety of key youth and parent variables, we find in Table 3 that, for all five models, parental religious service attendance is a significant predictor of higher expectations of children's moral behavior. Net of controls, the more parents attended religious services, the more upset their adolescent children perceives their parents would be if they found out they were having sex, using drugs, drinking alcohol, getting into fights, and skipping school. In most models, parental attendance was the second most important predictor of their moral expectations of their adolescent children, behind age of child.

The results of Table 4 shows similar results. Controlling for a variety of key youth and parent variables, we find in Table 4 that, for all four models, parental religious service attendance is a significant predictor of higher parental supervision of their adolescent children. Net of controls, the more parents attended religious services, the more they tended to know where their children are, to know how to get in touch with them, to be involved in making rules about TV and movie watching, and to tell their children not to watch TV. Again, in most models, parental attendance was the second most important predictor of their moral expectations of their adolescent children, behind age of child.

**Table 1:**  
**Parental Moral Expectations of Adolescent by Church Attendance (percents)**

	<u>Parental Church Attendance</u>				
	Weekly	2-3 x/ Month	Once/ Month	Few x/ Year	Never
How upset parents would be if found out adolescent was ...					
Having sex:					
Very	86	84	81	74	73
Somewhat	11	13	14	20	18
Not	3	3	4	6	9
Using drugs:					
Very	97	97	95	95	91
Somewhat	3	2	5	5	8
Not	-	1	-	1	1
Drinking alcohol:					
Very	87	85	84	84	81
Somewhat	12	12	14	13	15
Not	1	3	2	3	4
Getting into fights:					
Very	61	63	67	56	52
Somewhat	37	35	30	35	42
Not	2	3	3	10	6
Skipping school:					
Very	88	87	88	86	81
Somewhat	11	12	10	12	16
Not	1	1	2	2	3
Total Percents (Ns):	100	100	100	100	100
(Total N)	(465)	(187)	(92)	(203)	(124)

Source: Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998. N=1,070. Note: not all column percents add to 100 because of rounding.

**Table 2:**  
**Parental Supervision of Adolescent by Church Attendance (percents)**

	<u>Parental Church Attendance</u>				
	Weekly	2-3 x/ Month	Once/ Month	Few x/ Year	Never
Parents knew where child was at all times previous day:					
Strongly agree	80	82	86	75	76
Somewhat agree	14	10	17	15	11
Somewhat disagree	4	6	5	5	7
Strongly disagree	3	2	1	5	6
Parents knew how to get in touch with child at all times previous day:					
Strongly agree	74	73	67	69	67
Somewhat agree	17	18	22	18	17
Somewhat disagree	5	7	4	8	7
Strongly disagree	4	2	7	5	9
How often parent tells child not to watch TV:					
Often	14	14	10	15	13
Sometimes	29	24	27	21	18
Rarely	24	22	32	22	23
Never	33	40	32	42	47
Who makes rule about what kinds of TV shows and movies child can watch:					
Parent	45	35	30	29	31
Both	13	7	8	10	14
Child	43	57	62	61	54
Total Percents (Ns):	100	100	100	100	100
(Total N)	(465)	(187)	(92)	(203)	(124)

Source: Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998. N=1,070. Note: not all column percents add to 100 because of rounding.

**Table 3**  
**Ordinal Regression on Parents Getting Upset over Adolescent Behaviors**  
**(estimates)**

	1. Having sex	2. Using drugs	3. Drinking alcohol	4. Getting into fights	5. Skipping school
Parent religious service attendance	.289***	.301**	.125*	.008*	.107+
Youth age	-.645***	-.431***	-.536***	-.118***	-.404***
Youth female	.368+	.361	.302	-.001	.228
Youth race: <sup>1</sup>					
Black	-.482+	-.408	.526	-.255	.518
Hispanic	-.001	-.001	-.009	-.003	.007
Other	-.326	.358	.445	-.403+	.008
Parent Age	.001	.002	-.001	.000	-.000
Parent Education	-.001	.005	-.005	.000	.003
Family Income	.007	.002	.003	.008	.001
# Children <18	.001	.156	.119	.002	-.006
Parent Married	.678**	.177	.003	.003	.160
Region: <sup>2</sup>					
South	-.002	-.005	-.008	.008	-.138
West	.006	-.398	-.003	.003	-.572+
Midwest	-.001	-.684	-.252	.109	-.463
Community Context: <sup>3</sup>					
Urban	.170	-1.097+	.000	.122	-.009
Suburban	.131	-.969+	-.351	.173	.001
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.225	.048	.158	.033	.094
$\chi^2$	266.311***	52.094***	183.274***	35.031**	103.693***

Source: Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998. N=1,070.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Reference category=white. <sup>2</sup>Reference category=Northeast. <sup>3</sup>Reference category=rural.

\*\*\*=p<.001 \*\*=p<.01 \*=p<.05 +=p<.10

The control variables reveal a few effects also worth noting. Not surprisingly, the age of the child respondent is the most important factor predicting parental moral expectations and supervision—the older adolescents grow, the less influence their parents seek to exert over them. For some but not all dependent variables, married parents (compared to the reference categories including divorced, separated, widowed, never married) exhibit higher levels of moral expectation and supervision over their children. The other significant control variables lack clear and consistent patterns in their effects.

**Table 4:**  
**Ordinal Regression on Parental Supervision of Adolescents (estimates)**

	1. Knew where child was	2. Knew how get in touch	3. Tells not watch TV	4. Parent makes TV rules
Parent religious service attendance	.008+	.009*	.103**	.214***
Youth age	-.185***	-.118***	-.282***	-.521***
Youth female	-.006	.103	.156	-.003
Youth race: <sup>1</sup>				
Black	-.002	.004	-.009	-.005
Hispanic	-.280	.004	.132	.002
Other	.758*	.005	.002	-.276
Parent Age	.000	-.008	.000	-.000
Parent Education	-.005+	-.004	.005	.001
Family Income	.001	-.003	.002	.001
# Children <18	-.002	-.002	.005	.006
Parent Married	.328+	.368*	.336*	.268
Region: <sup>2</sup>				
South	.466*	.314	-.151	.334+
West	.307	-.002	-.008	.151
Midwest	-.001	-.168	-.226	.008
Community Context: <sup>3</sup>				
Urban	.479*	.322	-.001	-.276
Suburban	.256	.460*	.001	-.255
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.055	.041	.142	.293
$\chi^2$	60.277***	44.998***	162.83***	370.93**

Source: Survey of Parents and Youth, 1998. N=1,070.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Reference category=white. <sup>2</sup>Reference category=Northeast. <sup>3</sup>Reference category=rural.

\*\*\*=p<.001 \*\*=p<.01 \*=p<.05 +=p<.10

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analytical purpose of this research note was to assess the hypothesis that parents of American youth who more regularly participate in the life of religious congregations will manifest higher expectations of their children's moral behaviors and greater amounts of supervision of their children's lives than parents who are less religiously involved. The results confirm the theorized hypothesis, suggesting that—net of control variables—increased religious service attendance of parents significantly increases their moral expectations and supervision of their adolescent children. The only other more consistent and strong variable tested was age of youth.

It is important to put these findings into broader context, and to understand their limits. First, while the religious attendance effects are consistently significant, they are not enor-

mous. While church and synagogue attendance clearly affects parents' expectations and supervision of their children, that is not the only factor that does so. Second, this analysis has not demonstrated that the greater parental expectations and supervision of religiously active parents observed here actually and definitely explain the positive religious influence on outcomes in youth's lives noted above. Establishing that connection will require a separate analysis bringing in other dependent outcome variables. Nevertheless, this research note's findings do help empirically to verify a relationship that fills in one missing piece of the much larger explanatory theory of religious effects among American adolescents, about which I have written elsewhere (Smith 2003b). Future empirical work can extend and build upon these findings with an eye toward confirming, invalidating, specifying, or revising the larger theoretical account of religious influences on youth. Altogether the findings of future work will help build up a body of empirical evidence strengthening a larger research program examining religious influences in adolescent lives.

To conclude, accumulated scholarship provides ample empirical evidence that religion is a factor in the lives of American adolescents that often influences their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. In a number of areas of concern, different measures of religiosity are correlated with a variety of healthy, socially desirable outcomes. Scholars now need to develop a more comprehensive and coherent theoretical account of religious influences in the lives of youth than currently exists. This research note represents a modest step in that direction. It has sought to test for the existence of an empirical relationship between the church and synagogue attendance of parents and their moral expectations and supervision of their adolescent children—finding that such a relationship does indeed exist. In so doing, this research note contributes an important missing piece of evidence that helps to build up a larger, more coherent theoretical account for why and how religion matters in shaping the lives of American youth.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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