



Religious Trajectories from the Teenage Years into the Emerging Adult Years

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What factors in adolescence influence religious commitments and practices during emerging adulthood? What differences in the lives of teenagers are associated with stronger and weaker religious faith and practice among 18- to 23-year olds? Because the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) collected data on the same sample of youth over time, we are able to answer those questions.

One of our central aims in this article is to identify factors related to the teenage years that correlate statistically with religious differences during the emerging adult years and that we have good theoretical reasons to believe act as causal influences of those differences. Another central goal is to theorize the causal social mechanisms that explain the association between the identified teenage factors and the emerging adult religion outcomes. We also examine combinations of factors that represent different paths to the same highly religious emerging adult outcome, as well as the main divergent paths that persons take through their religious and spiritual lives from the teenage to the emerging adult years. One of the main stories from the analysis of the research is that the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years reflects a great deal of religious continuity and stability, but also a significant amount of religious change, most of which works in the direction of religious decline. Many emerging adults continue religiously much as they were as teenagers. Many others become either some or a lot less religious. And a small group becomes more religious.

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Identifying Influential Factors

The initial task was to determine a good measure of higher and lower religious commitment and practice during emerging adulthood. After exploring a variety of alternative approaches, one excellent measure was chosen that combined information about respondents' frequency of religious service attendance, professed importance of faith in everyday life, and frequency of personal prayer.

The four different levels of religiousness that our categorization produces for both teenage and emerging adult respondents are shown in the table below. The first row shows that the Lowest, Moderate, and Highest categories share similar number of emerging adults, at roughly 22 percent, while the Minimal religious category contains the largest percentage of emerging adults at 32 percent. The second row shows the same distribution for the respondents when they were surveyed as teenagers. When compared to emerging adults, we see that the number of respondents in the Highest religious group declined from 34 to 22 percent—a loss of 22 percentage points. The Moderate group lost 7 percentage points. Meanwhile the Minimal religious group grew 7 percent over the five years, and the Lowest religious group doubled in size, gaining 11 percentage points.

	Level of Religiousness			
	Lowest	Minimal	Moderate	Highest
Emerging Adults today	22%	32%	23%	22%
When they were teenagers	11%	25%	30%	34%
% of teenagers staying in the same group	73%	44%	29%	46%
% of teenagers moving to a <u>more</u> religious group	27%	22%	17%	N/A
% of teenagers moving to a <u>less</u> religious group	N/A	34%	55%	54%

The chart shows that the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years involves in general an impressive amount of stability (see Row #3)—46% of the Highest group as teens stayed in that group as emerging adults, but also, when it comes to change, a significant decline in religious

commitments and practice (see Row #5) – 55% of the Moderate group and 54% of the Highest group as teenagers moved to a less religious group as emerging adults. The teenage group that underwent the greatest amount of extreme change was the Highest religion category—one in four high religion teenagers moved to either the Minimal or Lowest religion categories by emerging adulthood. Moderately religious teenagers are the most likely to shift to a different level, with well more than half becoming less religious and one in five becoming more religious.

The second task was to identify factors from the teenage years (ages 13 to 17) that correlate with differences in religion during the emerging adult years.

Among the variables in the first NSYR survey of teenagers, having had highly religious parents, a high importance of faith, frequent personal prayer, a larger number of personal religious experiences, frequent scripture reading, and frequent religious service attendance during the teenage years are the *most strongly* associated with more religious service attendance, greater importance of faith, and more frequent prayer during emerging adulthood.

By contrast, having doubts about religious beliefs, other teenagers looking down on one for one's religion, attending a religious high school, having engaged in oral sex, feeling close to parents, and doing more mission trips are the *most weakly* correlated factors with the three outcomes in emerging adulthood (religious service attendance, importance of faith, and frequent prayer).

When statistical techniques are used to isolate the independent effects of each variable under consideration, five factors measured during the teenage years are *consistently very important* in associating with emerging adult religion:

Consistently Very Important

1. frequent personal prayer during the teenage years
2. strong parental religion—more religiously committed parents (greater religious attendance and professed importance of faith) during the teenage years
3. high importance of religious faith in daily life during the teenage years
4. few religious doubts—expressed few or no doubts about religious beliefs during the teenage years

5. religious experiences—making a commitment as a teenager to God and/or experiencing a miracle, prayers answered, and/or a “powerful religious experience”

Other factors beyond these five also matter, in that they also exert independent influences, but not strongly and consistently as these five factors. The additional independent factors were categorized in the following manner:

Consistently Somewhat Important

- believed in divine miracles
- frequent scripture reading
- many supportive religious adults
- sexual chastity
- made fun of for religious faith

Conditionally Somewhat Important

- believed sex belongs in marriage
- religious service attendance
- more religious friends
- satisfaction with congregation
- Sunday school attendance
- liked youth group
- teen closeness to parents
- number of religious activities

Not Independently Important

- mission trips
- religious high school
- wanted similar church at age 25

In order to sustain high levels of religious commitment and practice during the emerging adult years, several distinct factors seem especially important: first, strong *relational modeling and support* for religious commitment; second, genuine *internalization* of religious significance (importance of faith, religious experiences, no doubts); and third, the *personal practice* of religious faith (prayer). It appears that also important are certain theological *belief commitments* (in miracles), more intensity of *personal practice* of religious faith (scripture reading), another form of *relational modeling and support* (more supportive adults in the congregation), and *paying certain costs* for one’s religious beliefs (abstaining from sex, being made fun of for faith).

What Difference Do These Factors Make?

A teenager who among his or her peers scored in the top one-quarter of a scale measuring these four factors—(1) *parental religion*, (2) *prayer*, (3) *importance of faith*, and (4) *scripture reading*—stands an 85% chance of landing in the Highest category of religion as an emerging adult; but one who scores in the Lowest one-quarter on that scale stands only a miniscule chance (0.4 percent) of landing at the high end of religion when he or she is 18-23 years old. In short, the combination of a teenager’s parent religion, importance of faith, prayer, and scripture reading makes an enormous substantive difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood.

A teenager who scores in the top quarter of a scale measuring three more factors—(5) *having supportive nonparent adults in one’s religious congregation*, (6) *having religious experiences*, and (7) *not doubting religious faith*—stands 75 times the chance of landing in the Highest category of religion compared to one who scores in the bottom quarter. These three variables taken alone thus also make a big difference in the probability that a teenager will end up being highly religious as he or she grows into emerging adulthood.

In brief, with these seven factors alone, we have identified some powerful teenage factors associated with and, we think, causing differences in emerging adult religious commitment and practice.

Religious Continuities and Differences

Another way to examine religious continuities and differences between the teenage and emerging adult years is to calculate predicted probabilities of teenagers being at one of the four levels of religion, from Lowest to Highest commitment and practice, to ending up as emerging adults in one of four religious groups, also ranked from Highest to Lowest religious commitment and practice. As a baseline, teenagers are divided into four religious groups—the **devoted**, **regular**, the **sporadic**, and the **disengaged**. What are the percentage likelihoods that members of each of these religious groups will end up in one of the four levels of religious during

the emerging adult years—*Lowest, Minimal, Moderate, and Highest*? The **religiously devoted** teenagers have a more than 50 percent chance of ending up in the Highest religious group and only a 2 percent chance of ending up in the Lowest religious group as emerging adults. They have a 32 percent chance of ending up in the Moderate religious group and a 15 percent chance of being in the Minimal religion groups as emerging adults. In short, one can predict the probabilities of a highly religious teenager ending up in different groups by religious commitment as emerging adults. When one does, one finds that they are very likely to end up in one of the two most highly religious groups five years later. Highly religious teenagers are not very likely to become very unreligious five years later.

Looking at the same analysis for teenagers who, by contrast, were **religiously disengaged** as teenagers, they have a 54 percent likelihood of ending up in the Lowest religion level as emerging adults; and a 38 percent chance of being in the Minimal religious group. They have only 6 and 2 percent chances, respectively, of become Moderately and Highly Religious as emerging adults. The group of the *least religious* teenagers (age 13-17) is also extremely likely to remain in the Least religious group of emerging adults (age 18-23). Again, strong tendencies toward continuity in religious commitment and practice are apparent. The two middle groups—the **regulars** and **sporadics**—show a similar pattern. The **regulars** are most likely to end up in the Moderate religious group as emerging adults, and second most likely to end up in the Minimal religious group. The **sporadic** teenagers are most likely to end up among the Minimal group as emerging adults, and second most likely to be among the Lowest group five years later. For both groups, any change that does happen moves in the direction of less religion.

In short, teenage religion strongly predicts emerging adult religion. At least across this five-year time span, the forces of religious continuity are stronger than the forces of change. Most youth tend as emerging adults to remain generally the kind of religious people they were as teenagers. In the midst of this continuity, we do observe a stronger “downwardly”-shifting tendency among many youth when it comes to religion. But what we clearly do not observe are random outcomes in which the religious orientations of teenagers are “thrown into

the air” during the transition to emerging adulthood and then land in quite unpredictable places.

Pathways to Becoming Highly Religious Emerging Adults

What combination of factors actually can and do lead to particular religious outcomes in the lives of emerging adults. Are their particular *configurations* of multiple variables that produce high religious commitment and practice among emerging adults? Are different emerging adult religious experiences and conditions the result of identifiable combinations of other factors operating earlier in their lives?

The following diagrams show the basic results of statistical analysis of conjunctions of teenage-era factors that most likely lead to the Highest level of emerging adult religion five years later. The outcome measure here is, again, based on high levels of religious service attendance, high professed importance of faith, and frequent personal prayer. The Highest level of religion represent 21 percent of the emerging adult population. Analysis reveals six different patterns of combinations of four factors that reflect six different paths that teenagers who are most likely to become highly religious emerging adults might take. These six configurations are simply the combinations of factors that do so at a rate higher than 50 percent—that is, more often than not.

Path 1

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



High teen importance of religious faith



Teen has many personal religious experiences



Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

The **first path** reveals that one of the six most likely ways that teenagers grow up to be highly religious emerging adults is by experiencing the combination of these four factors: teenagers who had highly religious parents, for whom religious faith was exceptionally important in their lives, who had had many religious experiences, *and* who prayed

and read scripture frequently. **Fully 68 percent of youth whose lives embodied the combination of those four factors ended up as highly religious emerging adults five years later.**

Path 2

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



High teen importance of religious faith



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

The **second path** shows a very similar configuration of factors leading to high emerging adult religion, except that in this combination, teenagers having many religious experiences is replaced with their having no doubts about their religious beliefs.

Path 3

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



High teen importance of religious faith



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen has many personal religious experiences

The **third path** looks very much like the second path, except that frequent prayer and scripture reading is replaced with having no doubts about one's religious beliefs.

The first three paths, then, all require teenagers to have had highly religious parents and to have said that their religious faith was exception important in their lives. Then, combinations of two other among three possible factors—having many religious experiences, praying and reading scripture frequently, and having no doubts about religious beliefs—are also necessary to more than likely land the teenagers in the high emerging adult religion category.

Path 4

High parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen has many personal religious experiences

A **fourth path** begins to add complexity. In Path 4, for teenagers to join the religious Highest 21 percent of emerging adults requires them to have had highly religious parents, many nonparental adults in their religious congregations to whom they could turn for help and support, no doubts about their religious beliefs, *and* many personal religious experiences. Compared to the common conditions in the previous three paths, supportive nonparental adults in religious congregations can “substitute” in Path 4 for very high importance of religious faith. Still, a combination of a minimum of four total factors remains necessary for teens to avoid most likely ending up outside of the most highly religious group of emerging adults.

Youth in Paths 2, 3, and 4 joined the most highly religious group of emerging adults after five years at rates of 70, 68, and 67 percent, respectively.

Path 5

Low parental religious service attendance & importance of faith



Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support



Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs



Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

A **fifth path** introduces a further wrinkle in the analysis. Here we have teenagers more likely than not becoming among the most highly religious emerging adults *without* having parents who were highly religious, unlike those in all four of the previous paths. What is necessary for that to happen under that condition, however, is for these teenagers to have the presence of many nonparental adults in their religious congregations to whom they could turn for help and support *and* to possess no doubts

about their religious beliefs *and* to be engaging in frequent prayer and scripture reading. In other words, teenagers whose parents are not highly religious may nevertheless be able to become highly religious emerging adults, but in order to overcome that parental “deficit,” they must have supportive religious nonparental adults in their lives, harbor no doubts about their faith, and pray and read scripture a lot.

Path 6

- High teen importance of religious faith
- +
- Teen has many personal religious experiences
- +
- Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs
- +
- Teen frequently prays and reads scripture

The **sixth path** reveals a configuration of factors more likely than not to lead to high-end emerging adult religion that does not include either parental or nonparental social ties to religion. In this case, teenagers may become among the most highly religious emerging adults “on their own.” But they need to “superreligious”—believing that faith is exceptionally important in the lives, having many personal religious experiences, having no doubts about their faith, *and* frequently praying and reading scripture. (Furthermore, an ancillary analysis revealed that such teenagers had parents who were in fact quite highly religious, at a level just below the threshold required to count as the most highly religious parents in the statistical analysis—meaning that they did not actually have entirely no or few relational ties to religious faith.)

Sixty-four percent of Path 5 and 77 percent of Path 6 youth ended up in the most highly religious emerging adult group after five years.

These findings reveal some important insights:

1. No single factor can produce high levels of emerging adult religiousness. Instead, multiple combinations of factors working together are necessary to more likely than not produce that outcome. When teenagers’ lives reflect only one strong factor, their chances to becoming highly religious emerging adults are lower than average.
2. Every most-likely path to highly religious emerging adulthood must combine

combinations of *distinctly different kinds* of causal factors, almost always including groupings of relational, personal-subjective, and devotional-practice factors. In almost all cases, necessary among these variables are strong, personal relationships with adults who bond teenagers to faith communities (either parents or supportive nonparents), strong expression of subjective teen personal faith commitment and experience (high importance of faith, few doubts, many religious experiences), *and* high frequencies of religious practice (prayer, scripture reading). In five of the six configurations, teenagers’ having no religious doubts is a necessary condition for strong emerging adult religious religion. In four of the six configurations, four different factors—high parent religiousness, high importance of faith, having many religious experiences, and frequently prayer and reading scripture—are all necessary conditions. In these mixtures of influences, adult relational ties to faith, both parental and nonparental, are clearly very important. The only combination of factors in which high parental religiousness or supportive nonparental adult ties are not necessary (Path 6) involves a fourfold combination of other religious factors indicating a kind of “superspiritual” religious teenager. ***In sum, the paths from teenage years that more often than not lead to highly religious emerging adulthood almost inevitably involve strong relational ties to religion and a faith that is personally embraced very strongly and typically, regular personal devotional religious practices.*** Not single influences but rather combinations of different kinds of factors are what shape lives toward achieving this outcome.

3. Certain factors can “substitute” for other similar ones. For example, we have shown that the religious lives of parents are normally very important in shaping the religious outcomes of their growing children. But our analysis has also shown that in some circumstances, supportive nonparental adults with whom teenagers have real relationships in religious organizational contexts can provide the necessary social bonding to and support in religious faith and

practice to “replace” the normally crucial role of highly religious parents when that is absent (Path 5). For that situation to work, however, teenagers also need to hold no doubts about their faith *and* frequently practice personal religious devotions (prayer, scripture reading). If any of those are missing, and if the teenagers are not “superspiritual” youth (Path 6), then highly religious parents simply must be in the picture for teenagers to be more than 50 percent likely to end up highly religious as emerging adults. Likewise, teenagers with some doubts about their religious faith can become among the most highly religious emerging adults (Path 1). But to do so, in addition to having highly religious parents, they need to counter those doubts by having many personal religious experiences and frequently praying and reading scripture.

Altogether, the six pathways account for the specific combinations of factors by which 34 percent of all highly religious emerging adults become highly religious. And of all of the teenagers who traveled one or another of these six pathways, 68 percent ended up five years later belonging to the relatively small highly religious emerging adult group. That means, on the one hand, that we have here identified the complex combinations of factors that are most likely to produce the Highest level of religion among emerging adults. On the other hand, it also means that there are many other ways to become a highly religious emerging adult. Every other combination of factors examined in the study—and there are many—tends more likely to produce emerging adults who are not highly religious emerging adults. That is in part due to the fact that most emerging adults are not highly religious—by our measure in this analysis, 79 percent are not. Still, *some* youth whose lives reflect the many other possible combinations of these variables, improbably, due in fact end up highly religious emerging adults. It is not likely, but when added altogether, the small number of improbably pathways ends up accounting for the majority of highly religious adults. However, despite that fact, when we step back and examine the actual probabilities of U.S. teenagers ending up as highly religious during the ages 18-23, there are only six combinations of these the most important factors that are more likely than not to produce that

outcome: the six pathways. Every other combination of factors makes it more likely that a teen will not become a highly religious emerging adult, even if some teenagers in those other combinations improbably do.

Pathways from High Teenage Religiousness to Low

According to our analysis, for youth who as teenagers were among the most highly religious to slip down as emerging adults into the lowest two categories of religion takes a combination of factors that together reflect lower parental religiousness, lower personal importance of religion, and combinations of doubts about faith, less frequent personal devotion, and fewer religious experiences. In the chart below, we see three distinct possible paths that more often than not lead the more highly religious teenagers into not very religious emerging adult lives. In all three of the configurations of factors (paths), we see as necessary conditions having parents who are not among the most religious *and* expressing lower levels of the importance of one’s faith. In all three configurations, we also see combinations of two of either greater doubts about faith, less frequent personal prayer and scripture reading, and fewer personal religious experiences.

Path 1

Lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith



Lower teen importance of religious faith



Teen **less** frequently prays and reads scripture



Teen has at least **some** doubts about religious beliefs



Teen has **fewer** adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support

In **Path 1**, it takes a combination of these factors plus having fewer supportive nonparental adults in one’s religious congregation to lead to lower levels of emerging adult religion.

Path 2

- Lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith
- +
- Lower teen importance of religious faith
- +
- Teen has had **fewer** personal religious experiences
- +
- Teen has at least **some** doubts about religious beliefs
- +
- Teen frequently prays and reads scripture
- +
- Teen has many adults in religious congregation to turn to for help and support

Path 2 shows that the combination of somewhat lower parental religiosity and personal importance of faith, few personal relationships experiences, and some doubts about religious faith is enough to neutralize and overwhelm the fact that these highly religious teenagers also prayed and read scripture and had many supportive nonparental adults in their religious congregations.

Path 3

- Lower parental religious service attendance and importance of faith
- +
- Lower teen importance of religious faith
- +
- Teen has **fewer** personal religious experiences
- +
- Teen **less** frequently prays and reads scripture
- +
- Teen has no doubts about religious beliefs

Similarly **Path 3** reveals that the combination of somewhat lower parental religiosity and personal importance of faith, fewer personal religious experiences, and less frequent prayer and scripture reading are sufficient to counteract and overpower the fact that these highly religious teenagers also said they had no doubts about their religious faith.

Altogether, 60 percent of teens who experienced one of these three combinations of factors ended up as emerging adults in the lower religion categories. And 56 percent of all of those high religion teenagers who did end up as emerging adults in a low religion category got there by following one of these three paths. All of these six variables, in other words, appear in various combinations to be important influences on the outcome. Thus, even for youth who are as teenagers quite highly religious, the lack of the strongest

parent and nonparental ties to religious faith combined with holding a religious faith that is not extremely important to one's life and/or praying and reading scripture less frequently and/or having fewer personal religious experiences and/or harboring some doubts about religious faith puts those highly religious teenagers at "risk" of becoming low religion emerging adults five years later. When present, in other words, the same factors that combine to make "life recipes" for sustaining high religious faith and practice into the emerging adult years are also those that, when absent, combine to make recipes for declining religion over the same years.

Again, stated at a more abstract theoretical level, what clearly matters in the teenager's situation, for shaping the religious outcomes under consideration, is relational ties with religious adults—with both parents and others in one's religious congregation—importance of one's faith, and other combinations of one's religious practices, experiences, and assurance. These factors operating in opposite directions either reinforce or let disintegrate even relatively high religious commitments and practices held during the teenage years as youth move into emerging adulthood.

Theorizing about Causal Social Mechanisms

We have identified a number of measured variables that seem to correlate significantly with differences in observed levels of emerging adult religion. Therefore, the *causal* question, now is if these factors not only correlate with but actually cause those outcomes, then exactly why and how do they do so? What social mechanisms are at work to causally produce those different results?

We have theorized what we think are the actual causal dynamics involved in what appear to be the seven most important teenage-year factors associated with strong emerging adult religion. The following descriptions summarizes the main mechanisms behind the important variables leading to higher religiosity in emerging adulthood. In each case, it is not simply a score on a survey measure itself that produces the outcome. Rather, "below the surface" of the observations, complex sets of social causal mechanisms—usually not directly observable—are operating, according to the real

nature of the things in question, to generate the observed result.

1. Strong Parent Religion

We will begin with the influence of strong parental religion during the teenage years. Why and how does that function through specific social causal mechanisms to produce stronger emerging adult religion. The possibilities are multiple.

Religious Socialization

One obvious possibility is simple **religious socialization**—that teenagers with seriously religious parents are more likely than those without such parents to have been trained in their lives to think, feel, believe, and act as serious religious believers, and that that training “sticks” with them even when they leave home and enter emerging adulthood. Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents’ religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously. At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization. We think of this socialization as the “positive” side of the dynamic. But we also believe it is only part of the story.

Avoidance of Relationship Breakdown

A second social causal mechanism that we think connects strong parental religion to strong emerging adult religion is the more “negative” one of **the avoidance of relationship breakdown**. Most parents and children enjoy relationships—however imperfect—that they value and want to sustain. Parents and children in highly religious families, in

fact, enjoy even closer and happier relationships than those of the national average. When it comes to parents, children, and religion, when religious faith and practice are particularly important to parents, it is usually the case that they want it to also be important in the lives of their children. When the children accept, embrace, and practice that religious faith, therefore, the relationship tends to be affirmed and sustained. When their children neglect or reject that religious faith, the relationship tends to be threatened. Children of seriously religious parents who are generally invested in avoiding relational breakdown therefore have an incentive not to disregard the religious faith and practice that they (usually accurately) believe their parents want them to continue. Unless some other overriding factor comes into play, therefore, the consequence of not believing and of living as a nonreligious person is too costly to accept. So we think that in part in this way, too, religious commitment and practice is reproduced from one generation to the next.

We believe that strong parental religion is linked to higher emerging adult religion through at least two social causal mechanisms, one positive and one negative, of religious socialization and the avoidance of relational breakdown.

2. Adults in a Religious Congregation

A second factor associated with stronger emerging adult religion is the teenager *having more adults in a religious congregation to whom he or she can turn for support, advice, and help*. One social causal mechanism that we think helps create this statistical association is a **heightened enjoyment of religious congregational participation**. The more relationships in their religious congregations that teenagers enjoy with nonparental adults whose social statuses are superior to their own, the more likely they will be to experience involvement in their congregations as enjoyable and rewarding. They stand a great chance of actually looking forward to going to, rather than simply getting through, religious services. They are more likely to be drawn into more of the religious activities of the congregation. They are also more likely to shift their involvements in the religious congregations closer to the center instead of out on the periphery of their social lives overall. All of this has the effect of establishing for teenagers an active life in a religious

congregation as a valued priority to maintain even into emerging adulthood.

Besides this mechanism, we think two others are involved that are similar to those operating with the strong parental religion factor. The first is **religious socialization**. The more nonparental adults teenagers have in their religious congregations to whom they are personally tied, the more teachers and role models they have, coming from different social positions, to train them in the right believing and living of their faith. The second mechanism is **avoidance of relational breakdown**. Thus, emerging adults having histories of positive social ties to supportive nonparental adults in their teenage religious congregations will for these reasons increase the chances that they will remain religious committed and practicing five years later.

3. Devotional Practice: Prayer and Reading Scripture

A third key factor associated with stronger emerging adult religion is intense teenage devotional practice in the form of *frequent personal prayer* and *reading of scripture*. Why and how do these religious practices or what about them cause stronger emerging adult religion?

Religious Belief and Desire Reinforcement

One possibility is simply **religious belief and desire reinforcement**, the idea that praying and reading scripture cognitively and emotionally fortify the moral belief that being a committed and active person of faith is the right thing to do in life. We suppose here that acts of regular personal prayer and scripture reading are generally self-affirming and reinforcing, insofar as they help reinforce the believer's relationship with God, strength of personal faith, and understanding of and benefit from the practices themselves.

Habituation

The self-propagating dynamic then combines with processes of **habituation**, in which routines and habitual practices become established and so are easier to continue than to break. As a result of their reinforced beliefs and desires concerning religious devotion, emerging adults who as teenagers engaged in frequent and regular personal prayer and reading

of scripture prove more likely than those who did not to continue on as more highly committed believers, more capable of resisting countervailing forces and mechanisms that would reduce their religious commitments and practices.

Religious Capital

Another relevant mechanism is the tendency toward **conserving accumulated "religious capital."** The idea of religious practices generally, sociologically speaking, is that, like practicing at most things more broadly (e.g., a musical instrument, sports, speaking a foreign language), they train the one practicing to move closer toward excellence in exercising or expressing the skills, activity, or way of life in question. By practicing religion—through, for instance, prayer and scripture reading—one enhances one's ability to be a good believer, through greater familiarity and engagement with and knowledge about the religious faith. And as with most other things, generally, the more one practices religion, the more rewarding it becomes. In other words, the more one practices religion, generally the more capacity one builds up to benefit in various ways from belonging to and living out the faith. Some social scientists call this increased capacity and enjoyment "religious capital." Most people seek to avoid squandering accumulated religious capital and, rather, attempt to conserve, protect, and capitalize on it. If so, then young persons who as teenagers have invested themselves in the practices of frequent prayer and scripture reading will have as a result accumulated a quantity of religious capital that promises ongoing "payoffs" in the form of better informed, observed, performed, and therefore more fulfilling life of faith. To drop or dramatically discount that life of faith would mean to fail to use that accumulated religious capital. *So emerging adults who, through committed religious practices during their teenage years, have accumulated such religious capital will be more likely than those with less of it to capitalize on it by continuing strongly in the faith in which that capital is able to realize payoff.* Put differently, people who have not seriously practiced their faith in prior years simply have less to lose, in the way of religious capital, if they drop out of the faith than do those who have seriously practiced it. And so those who as teenagers prayed and read scripture a lot are more likely to tend to stick with the serious practice of their faith when they are older.

Drive for Identity Continuity

Religious practices not only work to accumulate religious capital. They also help to define, establish, and confirm religious identities. Persons who pray regularly become as a result known both to themselves and to others as more faithful religious persons than those who do not. The same is true about frequent scripture reading. The assumption here is that people have a strong interest in conserving their senses of self, of sustaining the continuity of their identities over time and space. Most emerging adults generally continue being essentially the same persons they have been in the past. So emerging adults who as teenagers, in part through their religious practices, established personal and social identities for themselves as people of serious religious faith will be more likely than those who were only moderately religious to continue forms of life that will sustain that serious religious identity. Having become a serious religious person in part through these practices, and having the interest in sustaining a continuity of identity that most people have, such a person will, other things being roughly equal, tend later in life to remain that kind of serious religious person.

4. High Teenage Importance of Religious Faith

Emerging adults who as teenagers reported higher importance of faith in everyday life proved more likely to remain most highly religious as 18- to 23-year olds. What social mechanisms are at work producing this effect? We think some of those already discussed do so. One is **religious belief and desire reinforcement**. Part of being someone for whom religious faith is highly important in everyday life itself involves embracing sets of particular beliefs and desires—about what is real, good, right, true, and worthy—that themselves commend the continuing investment in that religious faith. Thus cognitive and emotional forces operate to sustain the high importance of faith into the emerging adult years.

Another related mechanism is the drive for **identity continuity**. When people understand themselves to be the kind of selves for whom faith is highly important, the basic human interest in sustaining a continuously coherent identity will—all else being equal—tend to motivate them to remain

highly religious into future years. Also, if one is at one time a serious religious believer for whom faith is extremely important in one's life and then subsequently drops that religious aspect of one's identity, one then has some explaining to do in order to maintain a credible sense of reliable self to others.

This connects to the third social causal mechanism likely linking high teenager importance of faith and stronger emerging adult religion: **avoidance of relationship breakdown**. We know that teenagers for whom religious faith is highly important in their daily lives are much more likely than teens for whom faith is not important to enjoy social relationships with others who are also highly religious—parents, siblings, relatives, friends, and other adults in the religious congregations. For them to drop their highly religious way of life in the transition to emerging adulthood would probably cause damage to what are likely highly valued relationships. So there is a relational incentive to sustain and a disincentive to lose serious religious faith and practice.

5. Having No Doubts about Religious Beliefs

The causal mechanism at work here concerns elementary cognitive belief commitment. Commitment to the serious embrace and practice of faith normally requires accepting and trusting the rightness of those descriptive and normative religious beliefs. The more a believer questions or doubts them, the more susceptible over time he or she is to revising, discounting, or abandoning his or her associated religious faith and practice. By contrast, the faith of the believer who encounters fewer doubts about his or her religion is more likely to remain intact and maintained. Therefore, teenagers reporting that they have no doubts about their religious beliefs indicates possible negative and positive causal mechanisms at work. Negatively, it suggests that mental structures and life experiences are shielding them from cognitive and existential forces that could potentially undermine their religion. Positively, it indicates that their existing cognitive religious belief systems are formed in such a way as to be robust and resilient enough to withstand threats to faith. Such negative and positive mental operations achieving this kind of intellectual and existential security are important

cognitive mechanisms helping to sustain strong religious faith and practice over time.

6. Having Many Religious Experiences

The final key factor leading to higher emerging adult religion is teenagers *having many religious experiences*. Here this means having specifically committed their lives to God, having had definite answers to prayers, having experienced at least one miracle, *and* having one or more moving spiritual experiences. Many of the mechanisms already described would seem relevant to this factor. Such religious experiences should, in normal circumstances, reinforce religious cognitive belief commitments and desires. In a culture that puts such a high premium on the reliability and validity of individual subjective experience as American culture does, simply having personally had an answer to prayer, witnessed a divine miracle, or encountered an emotionally moving spiritual experience will tend to confirm and validate the larger religious faith associated with those experiences. They should help to make the religion more “real” and therefore personally reliable and important to believers. Such experiences are also often integral parts of religious socialization processes, as new or young members of religious communities come not simply to cognitively understand religious ideas but also to experience and personalize their faith for themselves. Furthermore, these religious experiences may in some cases heighten the enjoyment of participating in religious communities in which such experiences are normative. For many, they may enhance a sense of belonging and sharing in religious groups. Such religious experiences also tend to increase believers’ religious capital: their stocks of religious knowledge, familiarity, skills, and other learned resources that increase proficiency in understanding and practicing their faith. This in turn normally makes religious believers more invested in their faiths and so in continuing to sustain them. And all of this should work toward the formation of particular religious identities, which believers over time will tend to want to conserve, because of the drive for identity continuity. Any and all of these, we expect, will work causally toward producing stronger rather than weaker religious faith and practice into the future.

Summary of Theoretical Mechanisms Leading to Higher Religiosity in Emerging Adults

Theoretical Mechanism	Description	Significant Variables Supporting Operation
Socialization	Values, behaviors, and beliefs are transmitted from important others to youth through formal teaching and informal modeling	- Strong parental religion - Supportive religious adults
Avoidance of Relationship Breakdown	Youth act in ways toward shared agreement to maintain valued relationships	- Strong parental religion - Support religious adults - High importance of religious faith
Enjoyment of participation rewarding continuation	Intrinsically rewarding activities are more likely to be continued to be pursued and have its associated messages internalized	- Supportive religious adults - High importance of religious faith
Belief and desire reinforcement	Cognitively and emotionally solidifying and fortifying one’s beliefs about what is true, good, and right in life	- Frequently praying & reading scripture - High importance of religious faith - Many religious experiences
Habituation	Meaningful behaviors that become routine and practices are more likely to be continued in the future	- Frequently praying - Frequently reading scripture
Conserving accumulated religious capital	Investment in activities and communities accrues potential benefits, which discontinuing participation in would eliminate	- Frequently praying - Frequently reading scripture - Supportive religious adults
Drive for identity continuity	Desire to maintain one’s sense of who one is and presentation of that self to others	- Frequently praying & reading scripture - High importance of religious faith - Many religious experiences
Cognitive belief commitment	Embracing a belief system that explains lived reality and provides direction for one’s life	- Having no doubts about religious beliefs

The Timing of First Commitments to God

We have shown that youth committing to live their lives for God is one important religious experience that is among the most important factors in leading teenagers into the highest levels of emerging adult religion. How many American teenagers and emerging adults commit their lives to God and at what ages do they do it? Analyzing the data from all of the surveys (teens and emerging adults) reveals the following.

- **31 percent of respondents reported never committing to God as a teenager or emerging adult.** And on the basis of what we know, one can expect that few of them probably ever will.
- **58.8 percent made their first commitment to live their lives for God before the age of 14.** Most of these probably committed to God during the childhood years.
- **5.3 percent appear to have made a first commitment to live their lives for God during the teenage years (14-17).**
- **4.9 percent reported committing their lives to God after the age of 18 (18-to 23-years old).**

The vast majority, then, of those youth—85 percent—who have by the age of 18-23 ever committed to live their lives for God appear to have made their first commitment before age 14. These findings complement and reinforce one of the larger stories of this research: that *the religious commitments and orientations of most people appear to be set early in life* and very likely follow a consistent trajectory from the early formation through the adolescent and into the emerging adult years. Some young people do make dramatic shifts into lower and higher religious commitments and practices later in life that would not be expected from their early life experiences and formation. But they are a minority. Most are set early in life to follow one religious trajectory or another—mostly, we showed earlier, formed by the religious lives of

their parents and by social connections to their congregations and embraced in personal religious beliefs and practices—which they tend to follow as they grow into emerging adulthood. When it comes to commitment to God, it is not that experiences and changes during the teenage and emerging adult years do not matter religiously for people—they do, especially for some. It is instead simply that *what matters for most even more is what happens religiously before the teenage years, which powerfully conditions most of everything that happens thereafter.*

A Summary of the Findings

Standing back and reviewing this article's findings about religious trajectories from the teenage to the emerging adult years, what has been revealed?

1. It is apparent that among a host of possibly significant factors operative during the teenage years, certain ones powerfully shape emerging adult outcomes, others are significant but not as consistent or potent, and yet others exert little to no influence on outcomes. Frequent teenage personal prayer, for instance, is more influential than having a lot of religious friends, and both are more important than going on missions or service trips. Likewise, having highly religious parents matters more than attending Sunday school, but both of those are more significant than attending a religious high school.
2. It is apparent that the most influential of these shaping forces are not only technically significant statistically but make differences of sizeable magnitudes in substantive outcomes. Among these are personal prayer, parental religious commitments, important of faith, religious doubts, and personal religious experiences. The variance observed in emerging adult religious outcomes related to these most crucial factors is very large. They really do seem to make important differences.
3. It is apparent that in the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years, the religious lives of youth in the process are not thrown up into the air to land in a random jumble. To the contrary, where youth end up religiously as emerging adults is highly governed

by the nature of their religious upbringings, commitments, and experiences in earlier years. Most lives during this transition into emerging adulthood, in other words, reflect a great amount of continuity with the past.

4. The important factors shaping adult outcomes noted above tend *not* to operate in isolation with sufficient independent effects on outcomes but rather conglomerate in various combinations to exert their strongest effects. General factors that seem consistently to be at work are strong relational ties to religious faith, embrace of and commitment to religious faith, and the frequent practice of religious devotion. Combinations of these factors are also most important in determining who among the most highly religious teenagers will remain highly religious as emerging adults and who will shift down to the less religious half of emerging adults.
5. Using growth mixture modeling, we showed that about half of today's emerging adults have sustained religiously stable lives over five years, at distinctly high, medium, and low levels; that most of the balance (almost half of emerging adults) has declined religiously, either moderately or sharply, during the same time; and that a small group (about 3 to 6 percent) has significantly increased in religious faith and practice since the teenage years.
6. Approximately 70 percent of youth who at some time or other before mid-emerging adulthood commit to live their lives for God, the vast majority appear to do so early in life, apparently before the age of 14. Some make first commitments to God during their teenage years and others as emerging adults, but these are the minority. Most make their first commitments to God as children or during the preteen or very early teen years. Many religious trajectories followed in the course of life's development seem to be formed early on in life.
7. Going to college no longer seems to corrode the religious faith and practice of students as it did in decades past. New evidence is accumulating, including these findings, that for various reasons, since the 1990s, higher education has not been undermining the religion of students as it did for prior generations.

8. Internal, subjective religion and external, public religion tend strongly to go together in coherent packages. The NSYR's findings indicate that the common idea that emerging adults remain subjectively highly committed to religious faith even though their outward religious practices significantly contract is false, a myth. When the public practice of religion declines among emerging adults, for the vast majority, their internal, subjective interest in faith does as well. Religion, it would seem, tends to be lived in fairly consistent bundles of expression and engagement.

To summarize most briefly, religious outcomes in emerging adulthood are not random happenstances about which all bets are off after age 18. Instead, they often flow quite predictably from formative religious influences that shape persons' lives in early years. The transition into emerging adulthood is clearly accompanied by a significant amount of religious decline among many. But even that decline is quite predictable, using information about the set of the most important factors that lead to decline. Furthermore, the lives of many teenagers who are transitioning into the emerging adult years reflect a lot more religious stability and continuity than is commonly realized. Everything simple does not change. The past continues to shape the future. This is important to know, because it means that religious commitments, practices, and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities, matter—they make a difference. Appreciating the stabilities and continuities that usually override unpredictable changes also reinforces the basic sociological insight that people's lives are profoundly formed by the social networks and institutions that socialize them, that the relational and social structures that compose and order life are not easily changed or inexplicably made irrelevant. Again, who people are is very much a product of where they are socially located, of what social and relational forces that have formed their lives. And who people are usually does not randomly and unaccountably change over time. ***What people have been in the past is generally the best indicators of why they are what they are in the present and what they will likely be in the future. That is a fact that needs to condition the understanding of emerging adult religion.***