



A LITERATURE REVIEW
ON THE SPIRITUAL LIVES OF

Children of Divorce



PREPARED BY

DAVID LAPP

Institute for American Values Research Associate

DAVID LAPP is an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values and co-investigator, with Amber Lapp, of the Love and Marriage in Middle America project, about which they are currently writing a book.

Design by Alma Phipps & Associates.

© 2013 Institute for American Values. No reproduction of the materials contained herein is permitted without written permission of the Institute for American Values.

Institute for American Values

1841 Broadway, Suite 211

New York, New York 10023

Tel: 212.246.3942

Fax: 212.541.6665

Website: www.americanvalues.org

E-mail: info@americanvalues.org

Anne-Marie Ambert and Jean-Francois Saucier, "Adolescents' Overt Religiosity and Parents' Marital Status," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 27, no. 1-2 (1986): 87-95.

In this study of a representative sample of 275 French-speaking adolescents in Montreal, adolescents from divorced and separated families were found to attend church less frequently than adolescents from widowed or intact families. (Also noteworthy is that the population was drawn entirely from a Catholic population.) However, the differences were only statistically significant for boys. In addition, there was no difference in church attendance between boys and girls from intact families, very little between those from widowed families, but significant difference for those from separated and divorced families.

What accounts for the lower church attendance among offspring of separated and divorced families? Studies suggest that parents who divorce are more likely to be non-religious, thus the children may simply be following in their parents' footsteps. But what accounts for the gender difference? Studies have indicated that girls receive greater nurturance from custodial mothers than boys do.

The authors issue two cautions: first, that "the data reported herein do not imply that parental divorce per se caused a lowering of church attendance," (91) and second, that the small number of adolescents from separated and divorced families suggests that one should be wary of making generalizations. Still, they suggest that the findings have merit in light of "the random and representative nature of the sample, the magnitude of the differences among boys, and the fact that these results in adolescents replicate results obtained from adult samples from other countries" (93).

Finally, because "[o]vert religious behavior is one of the many important aspects of individuals' personal and social life . . . it is unfortunate that researchers have not explored its potential ramifications in terms of family cohesiveness as well as marital dissolution" (93).

Melinda Lundquist Denton, Lisa D. Pearce, and Christian Smith, *Religion and Spirituality On the Path Through Adolescence*, Research Report Number 8, National Study of Youth and Religion, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2008).

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) is a longitudinal study of the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents. This report examines findings from the first two waves of telephone surveys. It finds that of those adolescents who reported becoming less religious, 30% attributed it to “a life change or some specific event” (27). Respondents cited divorce as one of those traumatic life changes that resulted in a decline of religious faith. However, 21% of those who became more religious also attributed it to a life-course change. It thus appears that just as some adolescents say that parents’ divorce drove them away from religion, others say it drove them towards religion. The authors acknowledge that “it is beyond the scope of this report to examine the factors why the same event, such as parental divorce or death in the family, might drive some adolescents to be more religious and others to drift away from religion” (30).

Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefeyt, “Family Education and Adolescents’ Approaches to Religion,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 18, no. 2 (2005): 205–234.

The authors surveyed 1,224 children (average age was 16.91) from schools in Flanders and Brussels, 80% of whom were from Catholic schools. They expected that, in accordance with Scott Myers’s 1996 study, they would find that children of divorced parents would be less religious. However, they actually found that family structure “has no direct influence” on a child’s faith. Also, children of divorced parents report higher levels of religious autonomy from their parents than children of married parents. In particular, children report significantly less support, strictness, and supervision from their fathers. Mothers only showed less supervision, but otherwise continued to remain active in the child’s life. The authors interpret their research as an indication that a divorce is not a “stumbling block” for young people coming to faith, especially considering that a mother continues to actively support the child.

Bernadette Hayes and Yvonne Pittelkow, “Religious Belief, Transmission, and the Family: An Australian Study,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 55, no. 3 (1993): 755–766.

Using a nationally representative sample of adults and their parents, the study examines the influence that sociodemographic background, childhood home environment, and parental religiosity has on the religious beliefs of Australian men and women. Among their findings: the level of parental closeness and parental understanding, measured by the questions “How close were your mother and father to each other when you were 14 years old?” and “How well did your mother and father understand each other?” respectively, was not a statistically significant predictor of either male or female religious belief. Sociodemographic background also was not a significant predictor of adult religious beliefs. Children whose parents frequently discussed their religious beliefs with them are more likely to retain their religious beliefs. In particular, the dominant influence is the mother. Although the authors don’t control for divorce, they conclude that their findings indicate that the religious influence of parents is “not mediated through differences in the general family environments of children” (765). They do acknowledge that the family home environment may influence religious transmission, although they suggest that by itself it is not important for predicting the adult beliefs of Australian men and women.

Hart M. Nelsen, “Gender Differences in the Effects of Parental Discord on Preadolescent Religiousness,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 351–360.

Based on cross-sectional data of 2,724 Minnesota youths from intact families, Nelsen finds that parental discord does affect the religiousness of youth, and particularly males. (It should be noted that the study specifically excluded youths from non-intact families from the study because it wished to examine parental discord—which, of course, begs the question: Are not youth from non-intact families particularly vulnerable to parental discord at some point in their lives?) Based on the psychologist Herbert Kelman’s thesis about the three processes of social influence, Nelsen hypothesizes that children, and especially males, in grades 4–6 who say their parents often or sometimes argue or fight, will be less religious in grades 7–8. Why is this? Kelman’s thesis suggests that in the first process of social influence, children seek to comply with their parents. However, in the second process, identification, a child who is not attracted to

his parents will be less likely to adopt their religious beliefs. Studies show that boys strive for independence more than girls. Thus, Nelsen hypothesizes, boys in grades 7–8 who report that their parents sometimes or often fight are more likely to detach themselves from their parents' religiousness. He finds that although parental discord is not a main effect of the religiosity of youth, there is significant interaction among gender, grade, and parental discord in predicting the religiosity of youths. Youths who perceive their parents as sometimes or often fighting manifest a decline in religiousness as their grade level rises. This is especially true among males. That is, boys in grades 7–8 who perceived their parents as sometimes or often fighting showed a decline of religiousness compared with boys in grades 4–6. While there is a general decline in religiousness by grades for girls, the effect is not as substantial. Based on his analysis, Nelsen concludes that parental discord affects the religious development of youth, and that junior high boys whose parents are in dissension are especially likely to desert their parents' religion.

Jennifer Elizabeth Nooney, “Keeping the Faith: Religious Transmission and Apostasy in Generation X,” Dissertation, North Carolina State University (2006).

Nooney observes that scholarly work shows that disruptive marriages may undermine the parents' ability to transmit their religious beliefs to their children. Thus, she seeks to know whether (1) religious transmission will be most effective when the level of marital fighting is low and (2) religious transmission will be most effective when a youth comes from an intact household. For the first hypothesis, she finds that “marital fighting had no significant effect on affiliation transmission but had a significant negative effect on distance. Parents and adolescents were more similarly religious when levels of fighting were higher, a counterintuitive finding that was not anticipated . . .” (78). For the second hypothesis, she finds that children from intact households were less likely to apostatize, “although the effects of adolescent household structure are subsumed by other variables in the full models” (123). Particularly, “Only 15 percent of adolescents from intact households chose different religious affiliations from their parents, while nearly 30 percent of adolescents from disrupted households did so. The correlation between parent and adolescent religiosity in intact households (.56) was stronger than that in disrupted households (.46)” (78).

Other findings of interest: 8% of children from disrupted households reported no religious affiliation, whereas 5% of children from intact households reported no religious affiliation. Children from disrupted households tended to report a conservative Protestant affiliation—41% compared to 29% for children from intact households. While some scholars suggest that conservative Protestant groups are on the decline, these denominations appear to be doing a good job of attracting adolescents from disrupted households in particular and adolescents in general.

She concludes that “[t]he results of this study point to household structure as a very important determinant of religious transmission to children” (141). Intact families are able to do a much better job of transmitting their religious beliefs than are disrupted families. Thus, she fears that “if single parenting becomes even more prominent in U.S. society, it is likely that the religious imprinting of the next generation will be jeopardized” (82–83).

For these reasons, she proposes an alternative perspective from which to look at religious transmission and apostasy in Generation X: “one that privileges household structure and, at the aggregate level, the changing relationship between the institutions of religion and family” (142).

Leora Lawton and Regina Bures, “Parental Divorce and the ‘Switching’ of Religious Identity,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 1 (2001): 99–111.

Using data from the 1987 National Survey of Family and Households, the authors find that children of divorce are more likely to switch to another religious identity or to become non-religious. This is especially true for Catholic and conservative Protestant children of divorce. That this phenomenon is not simply a search for a “surrogate family” is evident by the fact that apostasy was the strongest reaction of children of divorce. Conservative Protestants, for instance, were 1.478 times more likely to switch to a moderate Protestant denomination and 2.629 times as likely to reject religion altogether. These effects are true, although less severe, even when the parental divorce occurred in an individual’s adulthood. While moderate Protestants showed no significant difference, Catholics who experience parental divorce in adulthood are more likely to either switch to a conservative Protestant identity or to become non-religious, and

white conservative Protestants in the same situation are more likely to reject any religion entirely. The authors conclude by noting that a person's switching of religious identity is not necessarily "good" or "bad," but it does suggest that there may be a weakening of family and community ties that facilitates such a switch. Thus, family structure is important for a child's religious socialization and the construction of long-lasting community ties.

Annette Mahoney and Elizabeth J. Krumei, "Questions Left Unaddressed by Religious Familism: Is Spirituality Relevant to Non-Traditional Families?" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Spirituality*, ed. Lisa J. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 165-181.

From the chapter abstract, the authors report that "given the growing pluralism in family structure, this chapter highlights the role of religion and spirituality in the formation and maintenance of diverse types of families. We outline commonalities and differences that exist among major world religions about forming and maintaining family relationships. Consistent with the predominant conceptual model *religious familism*, most research on faith and family life focuses on traditional families (i.e., married heterosexual couples with biological children). We summarize findings on these families that largely assess spirituality via markers of religious participation (e.g., religious affiliation, attendance, salience). We then review in more detail research on spirituality within nontraditional families, focusing on families comprised of cohabitating couples, same-sex couples, and single parenthood because these nontraditional families have received the most, albeit limited, empirical attention. Given evidence of the interdependence of religious and traditional family forms, research is needed to determine the relevance of spirituality for nontraditional families" (165).

Avidan Milevsky and Melissa Leh, "Religiosity in Emerging Adulthood: Familial Variables and Adjustment," *Journal of Adult Development* 15, no. 1 (2008): 47-53.

The authors study the family variables associated with the external and internal religious lives of emerging adults. Based on a sample of 305 young adults between ages 19–33, they found that emerging adults from families of divorce reported lower levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity than those from intact families. (Intrinsic religiosity is assessed by asking "How important is

religion to you?” and extrinsic religiosity is assessed by asking “How often do you take part in religious activities, such as attending services, religious classes, bible study groups, or church activities?”) Further, a young adult’s perceived parental marital satisfaction predicted extrinsic religiosity.

Scott M. Myers, “An Interactive Model of Religiosity Inheritance: The Importance of Family Context,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (1996): 858–866.

Based on data from a longitudinal study of parents and their offspring, Myers concludes that a person’s family context is important for religiosity inheritance. The study interviewed families in 1980 and their offspring 19 years or older in 1992. The study reveals that parental religiosity, quality of the family relationship, and traditional family structure are important variables that affect offspring’s later religiosity. Regarding the quality of the family relationship, he finds that “Religiosity inheritance is enhanced if offspring are raised by both biological parents who have high marital happiness” (864). Offspring raised in stepfamilies, he finds, have lower religiosity than offspring raised in families with high marital happiness. Previous research (White 1994) has shown that the degree of social support and contact is significantly less in stepfamilies than in families where both biological parents are present. This study confirms that finding, suggesting that “these weak relationships between stepchildren and stepparents reduce the intergenerational transmission of religiosity” (865).

Mark D. Regnerus, Christian Smith, and Brad Smith, “Social Context in the Development of Adolescent Religiosity,” *Applied Developmental Science* 8, no. 1 (2004): 27–38.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the authors seek to understand how adolescents’ faith is developed by religious and social contexts. Adolescents’ religiousness is measured by gauging church attendance and self-reported importance of religion—the first is a more objective measure and the second is a more subjective measure. They control for two variables pertinent to our discussion: an adolescent’s family structure and self-reported level of family satisfaction. What do they find? For both church attendance and importance of religion, the importance that the parents attached to them corresponded significantly to the adolescent’s level of

religiousness, although it is more pronounced with church attendance than with importance of religion. (The importance that an adolescent's friends and schoolmates attached to religion contributed more significantly to a child's subjective religiousness than to church attendance.) Also, intact, two-parent biological families and an adolescent's self-reported level of family satisfaction "contributed in a nearly unmitigated way to greater attendance habits" (33) and, albeit not as strong, contributed to subjective religiosity. In other words, a child's family structure corresponds significantly to how religious he is: adolescents from biologically intact, two-parent homes were more religious than adolescents from other family structures.

Mark D. Regnerus and Jeremy E. Uecker, "Finding Faith, Losing Faith: The Prevalence and Context of Religious Transformation during Adolescence," *Review of Religious Research* 47, no. 3 (2006): 217-237.

The authors explore the context in which religious transformations occur. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, they include family structure as a control variable. They find that family structure is a more significant factor to adolescents' religious decline than to religious growth. Youth in single-parent families are more likely to report a decrease in church attendance and lower religious salience when compared to adolescents in biologically intact, two-parent families. Also, adolescents in alternate family forms (e.g., living with a grandparent or aunt/uncle, etc.) are more likely to show a decline in church attendance. At the same time, they are more likely to show an increase in private religiosity. The authors interpret these last two findings as evidence that an alternate family form "lends itself to religious instability and flux. Alternately, biologically intact, two-parent families are given to religious stability . . ." (231).

Also, they find that step-families tend to provide religious stability for adolescents. Whereas adolescents living in a single-parent family and in alternate family forms tend to exhibit a higher risk of religious decline, "parental remarriage appears to reduce the effect of family disruption" (233). Hence their conclusion that "Religious context does little . . . to mediate the religious instability that accompanies alternative family forms (step-families notwithstanding). In fact, family variables are consistently associated with religious transformation outcomes" (233).

In summary, family factors may predict an adolescent's decision to abandon religion, but it is more difficult to predict an increase in religiosity. Thus, "it may be helpful to think of positive religious transformations and conversions (involving sharp growth in religiosity) and religious apostasy (i.e., losing religion) as two separate entities, each with its own set of mechanisms and patterns. The presence of the one has little in common with the absence of the other" (232).

Christian Smith, "Theorizing Religious Effects Among American Adolescents," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 1 (2003): 17-30.

Examining nine factors, Smith offers a theoretical explanation for how and why religion exerts positive influences on American youth. Two of those factors are a youth's role models and network closure (this has to do with the relational networks that religious congregations facilitate—the level of density among youth, parents, and other interested adults). He hopes that more empirical work will follow his theoretical account.

At the end of the article, he suggests that a "disruptive event" like divorce may account for instances where youth are not religiously involved: "Some youth who are being constructively influenced by religious involvements may have them disrupted and negated by specific detrimental events (such as the divorce of parents, abuse by a religious authority, disorienting tragedy, or unreconciled falling-outs with people in religious community) that the positive religious influences are for various reasons unable to counter or overcome" (28).

Jiexia Elisa Zhai, Christopher G. Ellison, Charles E. Stokes, and Norval D. Glenn, "Spiritual, But Not Religious: The Impact of Parental Divorce on the Religious and Spiritual Identities of Young Adults in the United States," *Review of Religious Research* 49, no. 4 (2008): 379-394.

Using data from Elizabeth Marquardt's nationwide (US) sample of 1,500 young adults, half of whom were children of divorce and half of whom were raised in intact, two-parent homes, the authors examine whether parental divorce is a key contributor to the growing phenomenon of self-described "spiritual but not religious" young adults. They find that young adults with divorced parents are more likely to have identified themselves as "spiritual but not religious" or

as “neither religious nor spiritual” than young adults from intact families. Even after controlling for childhood religious variables (acknowledging that irreligious parents may be less prone to imparting religious training to their children and that they may be more prone to divorce) and sociodemographic variables, young adults from divorced families are still less likely to identify themselves as religious compared with young adults from intact families.

Jiexia Elisa Zhai, Christopher G. Ellison, Norval D. Glenn, and Elizabeth Marquardt, “Parental Divorce and Religious Involvement among Young Adults,” *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (125–144): 2007.

Using data from Elizabeth Marquardt’s nationwide (US) sample of 1,500 young adults, the authors find that young adults who experienced parental divorce are more likely to report lower levels of religious attendance than young adults from intact families. At the same time, there are no effects of parental divorce on young adults’ prayer activity or feelings of closeness to God. These effects are true even when controlling for potentially confounding factors like childhood religious variables and current adult relationship status.

They find no support for the hypothesis that the link between parental divorce and the religiousness of offspring would be reduced or eliminated by controlling for young adults’ respect for their parents’ morality and doubts about their parents’ spirituality. That is, they find no evidence that we can explain the low church attendance of offspring of parental divorce by a reduction in respect for their parents’ morality and an increase in doubts about their parents’ spirituality.

What accounts for this lower organizational participation in religion? The spiritual modeling and spiritual capital perspectives posited by psychologist Pamela King and her colleagues provide clues. Whereas the spiritual modeling perspective emphasizes the importance of “spiritual exemplar(s)” in the life of young people, the spiritual capital approach highlights the importance of “direct spiritual interactions”—e.g., talking about religious issues, praying together, spiritual encouragement—in a young person’s religious development. In testing the relevance that these theories might have for offspring of divorce, the authors find that the estimated net effect of parental divorce was reduced by 30% when the father was identified as playing an important role in religious socialization. Thus, they find a “clear explanation for the link between parental divorce and

low adult religious attendance: Divorced fathers are much less engaged in religious socialization of their offspring than fathers in intact families” (139).

The authors suggest several possible explanatory reasons for why parental divorce influences the church attendance of young adult offspring. First, custody arrangements typically favor mothers over fathers. Second, divorced parents may be inclined to withdraw from religious congregations because they feel judged and ostracized by the congregation. Finally, the inadequacy of ministries to non-nuclear families may facilitate lower church attendance.

What accounts for the lower church participation but no significant change in private religiosity (i.e., prayer and feelings of closeness to God)? They speculate two answers: first, evidence suggests that personal devotion and spiritual experiences are less dependent on one’s family of origin and more dependent on exogenous factors like personality, media and culture, and biosocial predispositions; second, the disruption and turmoil that follows divorce may drive one to greater spirituality.

About the Institute for American Values

The Institute for American Values, founded in 1987, is a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and public education on issues of family well-being and civil society. By providing forums for scholarly inquiry and debate, the Institute seeks to bring fresh knowledge to bear on the challenges facing families and civil society. Through its publications and other educational activities, the Institute seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship and policy making, bringing new information to the attention of policy makers in the government, opinion makers in the media, and decision makers in the private sector.



Institute for American Values

1841 Broadway, Suite 211

New York, New York 10023

Tel: 212.246.3942

Fax: 212.541.6665

Website: www.americanvalues.org

E-mail: info@americanvalues.org