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Anchors of Religious Commitment in Adolescence

Emily G. Layton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### Anchors of Religious Commitment in Adolescence

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This study explores adolescent religious commitment using qualitative data from a religiously diverse (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) sample of 80 adolescents from California and New England. It identifies a new construct, “anchors of religious commitment,” to describe what adolescents are committing to as a part of their religious identity. Seven anchors of religious commitment are discussed: (a) religious traditions, rituals, and laws; (b) God; (c) faith traditions or denominations; (d) faith community members; (e) parents; (f) scriptures or sacred texts; and (g) religious leaders. Various forms of expression are identified within each anchor of religious commitment, with issues of relationships and authority being most common among the different anchors. The findings broaden the conceptual understanding of commitment as a relational construct and not just a behavioral or attitudinal construct. Implications for the future research on adolescent religious commitment are discussed, as well as practical implications for parents and religious leaders.

Keywords: adolescence, religion, commitment

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## **Introduction**

Research consistently shows that, compared to less- or non-religious youth, highly religious youth evidence more positive social outcomes and greater avoidance of risk behaviors (Smith & Denton, 2005; Wagener, Furrow, King, Leffert, & Benson, 2003), as well as greater mental and physical health (see Koenig, 2008 for a meta-analytic review of these findings). Though the connection between adolescent religiousness and positive outcomes is consistent, scholars are not clear as to how adolescents make, experience, and maintain their commitments to religion and thus become more likely to experience these positive outcomes. Though religious commitment has been studied and shown to be important in the domains of adolescent religiousness, moral development, and identity formation, there seems to be little agreement on how to conceptualize or measure religious commitment in adolescence.

This study is an effort to expand our view of how religious commitments are experienced by adolescents. More specifically, this study examined the following research questions using a grounded theory qualitative methodology: (a) Are there different ways that adolescents experience their religious and spiritual commitments? (b) What is it about religion that adolescents commit to? and (c) How do adolescents express their religious commitments?

Issues surrounding adolescent religious commitment are informed by and salient to three other domains of study in adolescence—religiousness, moral development, and identity formation. A brief review of literature in these areas helps provide a foundation for this study.

### **Religiousness in Adolescence**

Issues of religious commitment are central to the study of religiousness in adolescence. The National Study of Youth and Religion provides the largest, most methodologically and

theoretically sound findings related to the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents. In the book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Smith and Denton (2005) came to the conclusion that in the first wave of data, highly religious teens were doing better in life than less religious teens. Smith and Denton stated:

[We] observe sizable and significant differences in a variety of important life outcomes between more and less religious teenagers in the United States . . . we also believe that the empirical evidence suggests that religious faith and practices themselves exert significant, positive, direct, and indirect influences on the lives of teenagers, helping to foster healthier, more engaged adolescents who live more constructive and positive lives (p. 263).

That statement builds on decades of empirical research on the influence of religion on individuals showing that religious involvement is good and being more highly religious is generally better (see also Koenig, 2008).

The third wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion continues to support this conclusion as well. Smith and Snell (2009) reported that while there is a slight general decline in overall religiousness among the sample of emerging adults, “the significant association between high-end religious commitment and practice and higher scores on multiple measures of positive life outcomes continues to be evident among 18- to 23-year-olds” (p. 276). Even when they controlled for age, sex, race, region of residence, parental education, parental marital status, individual income, and parental assistance with expenses, there were still significant differences across levels of religiousness. From longitudinal analyses they also found that young adult religiousness outcomes, “flow quite predictably from formative religious influences that shape

persons' lives in earlier years" (p. 256). They identified these influences as commitments, practices, family, and faith community members.

Other researchers also claim that individuals who are highly religious differ in measureable ways from those that are only moderately religious. Loser, Klein, Hill, and Dollahite (2008) showed that highly religious families experience the religious and spiritual dimension of their life very differently than those who are less religious. The individuals in these families reported that their religion was central to their life and the processes and structures within the family. The centrality of religion reflects a different type of commitment and influences the routines, rituals, relationships, and choices that create the identity of the family. The same may be the case with the development of an individual identity. How scholars measure the centrality of and commitment to religion will influence the conceptual and theoretical development of these ideas.

### **Religious Commitment and Moral Development**

Issues of religious commitment are relevant in the domain of moral development. Colby and Damon (1995) studied adolescents who were nominated as being moral exemplars. Though the qualifications for nomination were not associated with religious attributes, they found that religion served as a unifying construct in the lives of most of these individuals. Religious commitment was a central component of how adolescent moral exemplars viewed the world and integrated their goals and concerns. Similarly, Walker explained that in the study of adult and adolescent moral exemplars, religious and spiritual commitments were generally foundational to moral character and action (Walker, 2003).



## **Religious Commitment and Identity**

Religious commitment in adolescence is also relevant in the field of identity formation research. Religious identity is one domain in the broad field of identity research. Historically the three domains of identity explored using Marcia's (1966) model were occupational commitment, political commitment, and religious commitment. Though religious commitment and religious identity is well-recognized as an important part of identity, it has been understudied in the domain of identity development in adolescence.

Erikson (1968), who originated the construct of identity development, acknowledged the important role religion plays in identity development. He identified religion as the oldest and most enduring institution that aids in the successful resolution of the adolescent psychosocial crisis of identity formation, a critical task of adolescence. In Erikson's theory, the resolution of this identity crisis results in the character trait "fidelity." This attribute is akin to the ability to make and keep commitments. Thus, the study of identity and the study of commitments are intertwined.

The identity statuses model developed by Marcia (1966) identified two main components of identity: commitment and exploration. The commitment dimension was originally defined in terms of low or high commitment. More recent work by Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) showed that "asserting a commitment" and "identifying with a commitment" are distinct components of the commitment factor. Though this work has begun to "unpack commitment," there is still more about dimensions of commitment that scholars do not yet understand.

Research shows some connections with religion and identity. Adolescents who are actively involved in a faith community make more religiously motivated sacrifices than their less-religiously involved or non-religious peers (Smith & Denton, 2005), and that these

religiously motivated sacrifices contribute to the creation of a religious or spiritual identity (Dollahite, Layton, Bahr, Walker, & Thatcher, 2009). Research also shows that conversations about religion, particularly those that are transactional (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003) and youth-centered as opposed to parent-centered (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008) are an important part of how adolescents explore issues of commitment and identity.

### **Religious Commitment**

Religious commitment is salient to all three of the interconnected domains of adolescent religiousness, adolescent moral development, and adolescent identity formation. In a review of literature on religious commitment, mental health, and prosocial behavior, Gartner (1996) summarized the ways that religious commitment has been conceptualized in the literature. It is generally measured as: (a) a member or non-member status (e.g. member of a faith community), (b) degree of participation in religious activities (e.g. frequency of church attendance), (c) attitude about or salience of religious experience in life (e.g. religion influences other areas of life), (d) belief in traditional religious creeds (e.g. orthodoxy), and (e) typologies of contrasting religious types (e.g. intrinsic vs. extrinsic). While Gartner found that among these different conceptualizations of commitment, behavioral measures of commitment were more consistently associated with measures of mental health (than were subjective or attitude-based measures of religious commitment), that finding does not mean that behavioral measures alone are sufficient.

In a longitudinal study of retention among Seventh-day Adventist youth, Dudley (1993) defined three components of commitment: a cognitive or belief component, an activity or involvement component, and an experiential component. These components combined to predict which youth remained enthusiastic members of their local congregation over time. This approach

provides an experiential dimension of commitment that captures how the individual experiences the relationships and experiences related to the commitment. However, this approach has not carried forward in the literature.

More recently, Smith and Snell (2009) used five components in their conceptualization of religious commitment in the National Study of Youth and Religion. Those five components included: (a) church attendance, (b) personal prayer, (c) scripture reading, (d) importance of faith in everyday life, and (e) closeness to God. They cite these five components as “specific characteristics” that describe “common cultural understandings of specific religious types of people” (p. 259). While these components of religious commitment may reflect a “cultural understanding” of religious commitment, a research-based understanding of religious commitment in adolescence is still being developed in the literature.

Worthington et al. (2003) created a two-factor, 10-item scale to measure religious commitments for research and clinical use. The two factors were “interpersonal commitment,” which captures the individual’s commitment to values and beliefs, time spent in studying the religion, salience of faith, and the influence of faith on other areas of life, and “intrapersonal commitment,” which captures the individual’s affective, behavioral, and relational commitments within the religious group or organization. The work of Worthington et al. provides a measurement tool and empirical support that religious commitment has both an individual-level component and a relational-level component. While this measurement tool has been validated for both adolescent and adult populations and seems promising for the future study of religious commitment, it is possible that unique measures are needed to assess differences between adolescent and adult religious commitment. More research is needed to further clarify how adolescents are experiencing their religious commitments.

In this study I explore: (a) how adolescents talk about their religious commitments, (b) the different dimensions and expressions of these commitments, and (c) the impact of their family and faith community on how they experience their religious commitments.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The sample for this qualitative study includes 80 adolescents (41 females, 39 males) from northern California and New England. These two sample sites were used in an effort to represent a more broad population and to reduce the impact of geographic influences on the phenomena of interest. Creswell (2007) suggested that, for grounded theory work, a sample of at least 20-30 individuals should be used “in order to develop a well-saturated theory” (p. 127). This sample exceeds that standard. Steinberg (2005) identifies the stages of adolescence as: early adolescence (10-13), middle adolescence (14-17), and late adolescence (18-21). Since I seek to explore spiritual identity across the all stages of adolescence, I used interviews with youth ages 10-21. The mean age for the adolescents in the sample was 15.1 years old.

The participants were selected using a criterion-based purposive sampling strategy. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) explain, “purposive sampling is appropriate when the population parameters are not known and/or when you want to learn about select cases or variation across a set of cases” (p. 91). Since the phenomenon of interest is the religious and spiritual identity of adolescents, and since it is hypothesized that exposure to spiritual and religious contexts promotes spiritual identity development, the cases that will be most helpful in illuminating this phenomenon are adolescents who are involved in those religious and spiritual contexts. Thus, the criterion used to select the sample was that adolescents need to be actively

involved in a faith community. This increases the likelihood that “all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 128).

To recruit the participants, Dr. David Dollahite contacted religious leaders of different *Christian* (Baptist, Catholic, Christian Science, Episcopalian, Congregationalist, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Latter-day Saint, Lutheran, Methodist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist); *Muslim* (Shiite and Sunni); and *Jewish* (Ultra Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform) faith communities in New England and northern California and asked them to recommend families in their faith community who had adolescents and who they felt were representative of the activity level, beliefs, and practices of the faith tradition. These families were contacted and asked to participate in the study.

The distribution of religious affiliation for the 80 adolescents in this sample was: 6 Baptist, 10 Catholic, 1 Christian and Missionary Alliance, 3 Christian Scientist, 2 Congregationalist, 3 Episcopal, 2 Jehovah’s Witness, 16 Jewish, 11 Latter-day Saint, 3 Lutheran, 2 Methodist, 7 Muslim, 5 Orthodox Christian, 1 Pentecostal, 3 Presbyterian, and 5 Seventh-day Adventist.

Of the families that agreed to participate, 49 families had youth between ages 10 and 21 and were included in the sample for this study. The adolescents were interviewed in a family group setting including the parents and any adolescents in the family between ages 10 and 21 that were available and consented to be interviewed. The range of number of interviewed adolescent interviewed siblings was 1-5 and the mean number of siblings per family group was 1.6. The ethnic distribution for the parents, which reflects the ethnic distribution for the adolescents, was 82% Caucasian and 18% ethnic minorities (4 African American, 4 Latino/a, 2 Puerto Rican, 4

East Indian, 1 Asian, 1 Native American). On average the parents were in their mid-forties and had been married 21 years.

## **Interviews**

The adolescents were interviewed in the home and with other members of the family in an effort to gather the richest data possible about the adolescents' lives. This setting allowed the interviewer to "triangulate or obtain various types of data on the same problem, such as combining interview with observation" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 27). Both the adolescents and the parents were given the opportunity to respond to the questions, which provides multi-respondent perspectives. In addition, the interactions between the adolescents and the parents were observed.

This interview style is not without drawbacks. It is possible that adolescents were not as candid in responding to the questions because of the presence of parents or siblings. It is also possible that the responses were biased because of what adolescents felt parents expected them to say. However, the interviewer felt the benefits of this interview style outweighed the potential drawbacks.

The interviewer used "intensive interviewing" to gather the qualitative data. According to Lofland et al. (2006), this methodology involves "the use of an interview guide consisting of a list of open ended questions that direct conversation without forcing the interviewee to select preestablished responses" (p. 17). The interview guide for the adolescent interviews consisted of twenty-six open ended questions that were used to guide the conversation (e.g. Does your religion guide your life? How?, How has your religion influenced your efforts to define who you are?, What challenges arise from being a religious family in the surrounding culture?). Often

follow-up questions were used to clarify the parents' or adolescents' responses to the original questions. Most interviews lasted about an hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed following the interviews. This project was completed under the approval of the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board.

## **Analysis**

Lofland et al. (2006) assert that a grounded theory approach should be “pursued in a persistent and methodical fashion” (p. 196) in which the researchers, as the central agents of the analytic process, immerse themselves in the data. The analysis for this study was conducted using NVivo 8 software and was completed in four stages (see Table 1).

**Stage 1: Broad Coding.** In the first stage of analysis I used a process I refer to as “broad coding.” to extract from the original interviews all references that addressed issues of commitment. Religious commitments are defined differently by scholars, and in this first broad stage of coding we wanted to be as inclusive as we could in identifying issues of commitment. For this purpose, commitment was broadly conceptualized based on interpersonal and intrapersonal factors, behaviors, beliefs, affective expressions, experiences, priorities, and choices in how they spent their time. Every interview was coded by the author and one other undergraduate research assistant to ensure that no potentially relevant information was omitted from the collection of commitment references.

**Stage 2: Initial Coding.** For the second stage of analysis, the references coded in stage one as relating to commitment (more than 560 participant quote references) were coded using “initial coding.” This process involved coding all of the references line by line to identify prominent themes. (Lofland, et al, 2006). I wrote extensive annotations (i.e., memos), as

recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008), to facilitate the analysis process and to explore developing themes. As a result of this second stage of analysis, I identified 16 different categories that describe different dimensions of how adolescents experience, talk about, develop, and contextualize their religious commitments (e.g. congruence of commitment, internal vs. external commitments, origin of commitments, and individual vs. family commitments).

Though a thorough understanding of commitment is only possible when all of the dimensions are explored in depth and then brought together, that is beyond the scope of a single study. Thus, I will explore only one of the dimensions here and leave the others for future studies. Based on the number of references, I determined that “anchors of religious commitment” (155 participant quote references) was the most salient dimension of commitment at this stage. The next two closest dimensions were “congruence of commitment” with 150 participant quote references and “internal vs. external commitments” with 88 references (See Table 2).

**Stage 3: Focused Coding.** For stage three of the analysis, I used “focused coding” (Lofland, et al, 2006) to explore all the references coded as “anchors of religious commitment” in stage two. This involved breaking down the references about what the adolescents were committing to into conceptually distinct categories. Categories were grounded in the data and developed through the coding process. At the end of this stage, categories that were seen as similar were collapsed together into one. As a result of this stage of analysis, I identified seven different commitment anchors, which will be described with the results (See Table 3).

**Stage 4: Focused Coding.** For the fourth stage of the analysis I took each of the seven anchors of religious commitment identified in stage three and used “focused coding” again to identify the different types of expression of the commitments. The number of references for each type ranged from 1 to 23. Since the aim of this study was describe the construct thoroughly,



categories with a small number of references were still included when they were seen as conceptually distinct from other type categories. These types of expression of the anchors of commitment will be described with the results.

Through all stages of the analysis, steps were taken to ensure rigor and validity. Multiple coders were used during the first stage of analysis. Multiple coders were used in the first stage of analysis to increase internal validity and to ensure that the phenomenon in question—commitment—was accurately identified in the original sources and no potentially useful information was overlooked. In an effort to minimize interpretive bias, as the interview segments were coded during stage two, three, and four, NVivo 8 provided a coding context (the comments directly before and after the coded reference) so that the references were not interpreted out of context. When necessary I returned to the original interview for a broad context to better understand the adolescents' responses.

In addition, as part of the analysis I met frequently with the interviewer to discuss the progress of the analysis and to ask him questions as needed regarding the specific beliefs and practices of the different faith traditions. This knowledge of and respect for the different faith traditions was important in informing the analysis (Blea, 1995). To address issues of reflexivity and my inclination to view religion as a positive influence on families and adolescents, I was intentional about coding both positive and negative instances of the themes and dimensions being explored. These negative instances are included with the results.

## **Results**

“Anchors of religious commitment” is the term I use to describe what the adolescents were committing to, or in other words, where they focused their commitment. Commitment is

often viewed as an individual-based construct. The results of this study suggest here that it can also be viewed as a relational construct. Commitments connect or tie the individual to something else. Just as a tent is anchored to the ground and stabilized by a connection with multiple stakes, the religious commitments of these youth seemed to be anchored by their connection with different people, ideas, and experiences. The construct “anchors of religious commitment” presents the connections forged to these other entities through the commitments adolescents make.

As described previously, the result of first stage of analysis was the collection of participant quote references related to commitment. The result of the second stage of analysis was the collection of participant quote references related to anchors of religious commitment. The purpose of the third stage of analysis was to identify what it was the adolescents were committing to. I determined that there were seven different sources that served as an anchor of religious commitment (listed with the number of sources referenced and the number of total references): religious traditions, rituals, or laws (42, 90); God (24, 66); faith tradition or denomination (20, 37); faith community members (12, 18); parents or family (10, 29); scripture or word of God (10, 16); and religious leaders (5, 10).

I will report here on these different anchors of religious commitment. Both positive and negative examples of commitment and expressed lack of commitment in these areas will be given to present both sides of how these anchors of commitment compose the broader picture of adolescent religious commitment. In addition, I will report on specific forms or expressions of each anchor of commitment that resulted from the fourth stage of analysis (see Table 3). The illustrative quotes used here are representative of the sample. Though space does not allow for direct quotation from all of the adolescents, the quotes here give voice to half of the

individuals in the sample—39 adolescents (18 males, 21 females)—and represent the variety of faith traditions included in the sample. In addition, quotes from some parents are also included when they help illustrate the findings. While the sample of focus is the adolescents, these family interviews provided multi-informant data about these adolescent-based issues and I determined that using the information was beneficial for the analysis. In an effort to clarify the ideas being expressed, some quotes were edited, without ellipses, to remove verbal pauses (e.g. “um,” “like,” “you know”).

### **Commitment to Religious Traditions, Rituals, and Laws**

The most common anchor of religious commitment for the youth in this sample was religious traditions, rituals, and laws. These are the external, observable behavioral indicators that are often associated with religious commitment.

**Commitment to religious traditions.** The first form of this type of religious commitment was expressed through religious traditions. The most common type of tradition was religious celebrations, though marriage traditions and traditions of self-discipline, such as fasting and observing lent, were also mentioned. Though commitment to these traditions is related to commitment to the faith tradition, this type of commitment is conceptually distinct because youth spoke of specific behavioral aspects of the faith tradition that were event-oriented and they seemed to speak about them as somewhat distinct from the faith tradition as a whole.

This distinction was evident in how some youth spoke of traditional celebrations. For example, one 10-year-old Jewish female enthusiastically explained all of the ritual celebrations that were so meaningful to how she experiences her faith:

Well I like Rosh Hashanah because it's just, it's cool to be, well it's fun to be able to miss school and everybody says well where were you? And you say, “No, I was celebrating

New Year.” And they say, “No, the New Year is in January,” or something like that. And Yom Kippur is fun because I get to see how far I can fast, and every year it gets longer. . . . And Sukkah is fun because it’s festive and it’s on my birthday . . . And I like Hanukkah, just because it’s our version of Christmas, even though there, we don’t need the gifts or anything. But it’s just, it’s fun to be able to light your own menorah, and to invite friends over to come do it with you . . . and Purim is fun because you get to dress up, and Pesach is fun because the whole family’s there and all that sort of stuff.

Her description of these events shows that it is not necessarily the religious meaning behind the celebrations that she is committed to having in her life but the tradition of the celebrations. In particular, she is focusing on the fun experiences and the relational aspects of the traditions. Many other youth spoke of this relational aspect of traditions and how it changes over time. Some spoke of an increase in the sense of connection, and others, such as this 18-year-old Seventh-day Adventist male, described a waning of that sense of connection.

Like the Feast of Tabernacles, I mean we did that a few years ago, or a couple years ago, but it just wasn’t the same as it used to be, ‘cause you don’t have everyone else doing it, and it’s just not the same closeness. Even within your family it’s like, it’s sort of an anti-climax. It used to be fun. And it used to be so much a big part of life. We used to all look forward to it, now it’s like . . . “Why, why do we have to do this?” You know, why you’re doing it, it’s just not as powerful as it used to be.

He identifies that the closeness he used to feel as a result of the tradition was not there now and his commitment to that tradition was negatively impacted. Though his commitment to religion was strong in other areas, he was not as committed to the traditions of his faith as he once was.

A 17-year-old Jewish male explained that his religious commitment has also changed and he only attends for traditionally important days.

After bar mitzvah, I’ve only really gone, I’ve gone to temple not really that much. . . . [I] stopped going to the classes. And I’ve only really been going on the high holy days and some bar mitzvahs. I mean if it’s like a bar mitzvah I’m invited to, then I go to their service. But after that, it’s definitely dropped off after my bar mitzvah.

This reference shows a commitment to the traditions associated with special days but not a commitment to the more regular rituals of his faith, particularly regular church attendance. This

was echoed by a 15-year-old Congregationalist male who described his attendance as “I still go on the big days, you know—Easter, Christmas.”

**Commitment to religious rituals.** Commitment to rituals was the second form of this anchor. One Catholic mother of a 13-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son described these rituals as, “the little things that we do, that have that spiritual meaning to us.” In contrast to traditions, which are conceptualized here as the larger events that occur on special occasions, rituals are the daily and weekly routines that are commonly associated with religious observance. Those include, but are not limited to, church attendance, scripture reading, prayer, and family meals and gatherings. Many of these rituals have an individual and a familial expression.

**Family ritual.** One expression of this commitment was a commitment to family rituals. A 15-year-old Christian and Missionary Alliance female described a family ritual of attending church:

It’s a break in the week. It’s something that’s consistent, that we do every week together. We get in the car and go to church and come home. And it’s nice to sort of step back from the busyness of everything and just have something that we all do together.

A 14-year-old Catholic male also demonstrated a commitment to family-based rituals.

Well, I, we try to do something with faith, or religion, a lot of times. And we say prayers every night and before meals and stuff. And they really try to teach us. And we go to church every Sunday. And I guess they just really want to . . . bring religion into our lives and to make us better.

It is interesting to note that he began the sentence with the personal pronoun “I” but quickly changed to the collective pronoun “we” to describe the religious traditions in his life. He speaks here of the “they” that is the motivating factor behind the commitment to the rituals. Some youth expressed this passive commitment to family traditions, and other youth were more active in facilitating family traditions, even when parents were not consistent.

**Personal ritual.** Another expression of commitment to religious ritual was through personal ritual. One 15-year-old Catholic male expressed that religious rituals are central to how he sees his personal religious identity.

Compared to other kids my age, I think I'm pretty religious, 'cause I go to church every Sunday. I pray every day. I altar serve. I go to CCD [religious instruction]. And religion is a big part of my life.

A 19-year-old Muslim female described her commitment to personal prayer during school time.

We pray 5 times a day. And usually two of those prayers are, well in the winter time, two of them are during school hours. And so what I would do is like during lunch time or whenever I didn't have a class, I had already like talked to the principal or whoever was the head of the school, and they gave me a room where I could go pray. And so I would just go do that.

This is an example of commitment to regular personal religious ritual, even when it took great effort.

Both personal and familial rituals seemed to be an important part of religious commitment for these youth, though these rituals take great effort to maintain. Some individuals and families expressed that the commitment to rituals was not always consistent amidst competing commitments, as did this 18-year-old Baptist male, "It's been a little different now with, I mean there's four of us kids, so it's sort of hard to get us all together at the same time."

**Commitment to religious laws.** The third form of this anchor was to the specific laws of the faith tradition. The most common manifestations of this were modesty in dress, wearing religious clothing, dietary regulations, abstaining from broader societal holidays, and abstaining from traditional medicine. When asked about her feelings regarding her commitment to cover herself with the hijab, an 18-year-old Muslim female expressed, "I look at it basically as just obeying the laws of my faith, just like any other faith." This awareness of and commitment to the laws of his religion was described by a 20-year-old Jewish male:

Judaism is a very legal religion, and if you are dedicated to following [the laws] then it's, then there practically isn't any aspect of your life that isn't going to be affected. You can't separate the other things that you do from the religious things that you do. There really isn't any separation.

This commitment to the laws, and the external behaviors associated with those laws, was a salient part of the religious commitment of some youth in this sample. Some other youth acknowledged the laws of the religious tradition even though they did not observe them. When asked if his religious beliefs influenced his lifestyle, including food and media, a 17-year-old Jewish male simply stated, "Not really. We don't keep kosher."

**Summary.** In these three areas—religious traditions, rituals, and laws—the youth in this sample demonstrated that their religious commitment is largely defined by their commitment (or lack of commitment) to these observable behaviors. This anchor was evident in youth of all faith traditions and was equally represented by males and females.

### **Commitment to God**

The second most common anchor of religious commitment discussed by youth in this sample was God and/or other forms of deity. For ease in theoretical description, the general term "God" is used here, since that was the term most commonly used by this sample. In this religiously diverse sample, youth used other terms and also spoke of other forms of deity that are included in this anchor, including, "Jesus Christ," "Jehovah," "our Creator," "Allah," and "all the Saints and Angels." The fourth level of analysis showed five different ways that youth experienced their commitment to God. These different forms of commitment to God are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and the same youth may find expression of his or her commitment to God in more than one way. However, this description offers more depth to the variety in commitment types.

**Source of authority.** First, some adolescents commit to God as a source of authority, as did a 19-year-old Jehovah's Witness female, "We appreciate the fact that He's our Creator and who better to give us guidelines for how to live our lives." A 14-year-old Christian Scientist female also illustrated this idea of God as an authority:

We tend to think about it like there's only one mind and that's the right mind. Not that there's two minds and one's right and one's wrong. There's only one mind and that one mind belongs to God.

**Relationship with God.** Other adolescents spoke of a personal relationship with God, as did a 15-year-old Catholic male, "Being religious is kind of like you have another friend. It's God and Jesus; you just feel like you're able to lean back on someone, if the going's tough." An 18-year-old Baptist female also expressed:

I'm so happy that I have some place where I can go and God loves us unconditionally. And no matter what I do He's always there, and He always loves me. And just thinking that you know the creator of the universe; thinking that God actually loves me is just amazing.

**Affective dimensions.** A third way adolescents described their commitments to God focused on affective dimensions to the commitment—such as those centered on devotion, trust, honor, respect, and gratitude. When asked why she was willing to sacrifice for her faith, an 11-year-old Orthodox Christian female responded, "I would say because it's like something to show your devotion to God." Similarly, a 21-year-old Baptist male explained his commitment to marry a Christian woman by saying, "Well, I think, again for reasons of trust, first of all, I think it would be the most pleasing to God. It's what He would want."

**Seeking counsel.** A fourth description of a commitment to God was evident as the youth talked about seeking counsel from God about decisions in their lives, as a 15-year-old Christian and Missionary Alliance female described, "Well, now that I'm thinking about getting a career



and everything, He's my counselor, and so I would like to do something that would be in His will." As another example, a 17-year-old Muslim female said:

When I had to choose which school to go to . . . I knew my parents were very worried, and I was very worried what [the] environment's going to be for me. And I knew that there was a greater population of Muslim students at one particular high school. And I just made personal like, ask God, "Please, if it's better for me to be there in that environment with them, send me there." And you know, at times I thank God that I did go there.

**Sense of responsibility.** A fifth way adolescents spoke of their commitment to God was as a sense of responsibility or duty toward God, as with a 16-year old Baptist female:

And just like, the fact, the idea that you are what you are a living sacrifice. It's not living for itself, it's living for being a sacrifice. And it's whole purpose is to sacrifice itself for some other means, and like, in this case to glorify God and hopefully like attract some sort of attention of others that are lost.

**Summary.** These five ways reflect the variety of ways that adolescents described their commitment to God. The youth who spoke of a commitment to God did not always describe a strong or positive commitment. One 15-year-old Lutheran female expressed this about her commitment to God:

It's something that I think about daily. But, I don't know how much it influences what I do. . . . I talk about it a little bit with my friends, but I want what, you know, God says we should do to influence me more, but it doesn't influence me or teach me to do the right things like I think I should.

Though she recognizes her commitment to God is not as salient as she thinks it should be, her comment illustrates that she still sees the connection to that source as a reflection of her commitment. This anchor of commitment—commitment to God—was more common among the Christian youth in this sample and was more common for females than males.

### **Commitment to Faith Tradition or Denomination**

Commitment to their particular faith tradition or denomination was the third most common anchor of commitment among the youth in this sample.

**Self-labeling.** The most common way youth expressed this commitment was through self-labeling as an adherent of the tradition, as demonstrated by a 12-year-old Jewish female while explaining why she is willing to sacrifice for her faith:

Well, it's worth it because being Jewish is very special and we're different and I kind of like that a little bit. And I'm willing to make sacrifices so I can be Jewish, more Jewish than I can be if I don't do it, I guess.

A 15-year-old Episcopalian male who did *not* feel a strong commitment to his faith tradition also showed how this self-labeling is a form of commitment through his desire to *not* label himself according to his faith tradition.

I don't necessarily say that I'm Christian. I mean I've gone to church every Sunday, with a few exceptions maybe. . . . I've brought some of my friends along because they just moved here, or I've just encouraged them to come. Not just because I wanted them to be Christian or anything, just because it was a place where there was a lot of really nice people that they could really get to know well.

A variation of this form of commitment was also used by a 21-year-old Protestant male who described that being "Christian" was an important attribute for the kind of woman he wanted to marry.

I think for me, yeah, in terms of marriage, the person I marry, I hope, especially would be Christian, but that it wouldn't just be that they hold the label Christian or that they come from a Christian family, but that they actually practice their faith in a real meaningful way.

This comment suggests his own determination to carry on his religious commitments in his married life. He uses "other-labeling," a variation of the self-labeling form, by using the description "Christian" to describe the commitment he hopes for in a future mate.

**Source of authority.** The second most common way youth spoke of the commitment to their faith tradition or denomination was as a source of authority to guide or inform their choices. This is illustrated by a 20-year-old Orthodox Jewish male, “And in the sense of, you know, I go about my life and yet Judaism is always right there at this side of my mind, but it’s not necessarily the guiding force so much as the, you know, informing force.” A 15-year-old Muslim male also illustrated this when he expressed:

Islam is doing my religion because, Islam is not just something you’re doing at certain times of the week or whatever. It’s real, like you do it all day, when you sleep . . . it’s part of what you do. Part of the way you eat, the way you treat other people.

**Values and belief systems.** A third way youth experienced this anchor was as a commitment to the values and beliefs of the faith tradition or denomination. One way youth spoke of their commitment to the values associated with their faith traditions was as adopting or accepting a structure of beliefs or moral guidelines by which they lived and governed their choices. For example, a 20-year-old Jewish male described himself as, “taking on an ethical and moral framework provided by Judaism.” This “framework” of values and morals was important to youth as well as to their parents. The father of a 15-year-old Lutheran female explained:

The values that we like are in the church system. We’re not really happy with the values that we see in American culture, a lot of consumerism. We’re really not happy with all of that, that we see there. This kind of greed, this . . . where everybody’s out for themselves. That’s just not, the kind of value system that we really want. And they’ll get that, unfortunately, but, so we bring them to church, to get this whole other value system.

**Personified entity.** A fourth form of commitment to the faith tradition or denomination involved seeing the faith tradition as a personified entity. For example, a 20-year-old Latter-day Saint female said, “I think a big thing is our church doesn’t believe in [viewing] pornography and to me that is such a blessing.” This personification of the faith tradition is also illustrated by

how a 16-year-old Catholic male spoke of how his religion influences what media they let in and keep out of their home:

Let's say we're watching something on TV and some of it's against what the Catholic Church teaches, they usually just explain it and sometimes you already know it, sometimes you don't, but they'll just explain how it's different and what the right way we believe. And like listening to music . . . I don't really listen to stuff that's against my religion.

**Center of Family.** The fifth form of commitment to a faith tradition was as a center point for the family or the individual to come back to or something to fall back on or rely on when times are challenging. When speaking of how important her religion is in her family life, a 15-year-old Latter-day Saint female expressed:

It's the most important thing that influences our family because without it, I don't think we would be a full and complete family, because through the hard times where we're all kind of going our separate ways, but then I know that each of us think about the religion and we're all like, yeah we're supposed to make up and that's what we're supposed to do. And that's what we do and we feel better about it.

**Generational Component.** A sixth way youth spoke of their commitment was as a generational commitment to the faith tradition. A 20-year-old Orthodox Jewish male explained his father's commitment to the faith tradition and how that has influenced him,

He tells me that he very strongly felt you know, particularly again because I think he's someone who feels very much sensitive to the Holocaust and having lived right at that time just after it that he felt sort of the weight of all of the sacrifice that had been made for 3,000 years so that a father could pass to their son to their son to their son the knowledge that we're Jewish and this is what it means.

**Summary.** These six forms of expression capture how the adolescents in this sample spoke of their faith tradition as an anchor of their religious commitment. This anchor was more common among Jewish, Muslim, and Latter-day Saint youth and was more common among males than females in this sample.

### **Commitment to Faith Community Members**

The fourth most common anchor of commitment for this sample was the members of the congregation they were affiliated with.

**Sense of community.** Enjoying a sense of community and the feeling of family was the most common form of how youth experienced their commitment to the congregation. This was expressed by a 17-year-old Orthodox Jewish female, whose commitment to having a strong community of believers influenced her decision of where she wanted to attend college:

I visited the Chabad [Jewish Student Center] on campus, you know, I went to a barbecue there, I met the rabbi, I really liked the family you know and that has really dictated why I'm going there. Just the religious community that surrounds it.

The sense of belonging within the faith community was also illustrated by a 16-year-old

Presbyterian male:

Religion has sort of taken on a new role in my life from being something just to turn to in a time of need to something that I really care about and I participate in just for the joy of connecting to the people I'm worshipping with.

Later in his interview that same individual was speaking of his interest and skill in music and the role his faith community has played in that:

It is that religious, that really strong feeling of family in the church that allowed me to have confidence in the arts. So I'd say it definitely began with religion and it began with the support that I felt from the people in the community.

**Personal support.** This captures the second form of commitment to a faith community—feeling the personal support or strength from members of the community. Some youth expressed that feeling of support in their personal life like this young man, and others expressed a feeling of support or strength in matters of faith, as did this 20-year-old Lutheran female, “There’s a lot of strength that I draw from being able to share communion with other believers and the reminder and the forgiveness that comes through that is definitely, I guess strengthening.”

**Intergenerational Relationships.** The third form of how youth experienced their faith community is in the intergenerational relationships, as described by a 15-year-old Episcopalian male:

When I talk to my friends, if I say I have to go to church or something, they immediately think it's a bunch of old people and they think I'm just being dragged along. But there's a lot of people; and it's a fun place to go because there's so many people. . . . When I was really young, there weren't as many people and I'd sit with my parents throughout the service. And I'd go out and all these old people would shake my hand, and I didn't know any of them. And it wasn't as fun for me. But I look forward to going to church to see those people. And I'll sit through as much of the service as I can.

**Serving the Congregation.** A fourth form of commitment to the faith community was demonstrated by youth who emphasized serving in their congregation. When asked why she liked being an altar server, this 14-year-old Catholic female responded simply, "I just like serving the church. It makes me feel good that I'm serving the community." Other examples of serving the faith community that youth in this sample spoke about were helping with fundraising activities and teaching classes at church for younger children.

**Fun.** A fifth expression of why youth were committed to their faith community is simply because they think it is fun to be with those people, as evidenced in this comment made by an 12-year-old Jewish female,

I think it's really fun to have Shabbat with like a lot of other families that are Jewish. And just meeting with them and stuff and you know speaking about like stuff. I'd also have to say things where there's like a big quantity of people for me is most fun because I like it when everybody sings songs and stuff like that at Passover.

The fun was also important for a 14-year-old Jewish male who described the reason for his renewed commitment to religion:

The first time when my parents took me to [synagogue], my mom came downstairs and was dancing around the bimah [Torah podium]. . . . I was having a fun time. And so after kiddushin and everything else, after dinner I said to my mom, can we come back here again? And so that's when I started getting more and more religious.

**Summary.** The adolescents in this sample experienced members of their faith community as an anchor of religious commitment in these five ways. Some adolescents and families in this sample did not feel committed to a particular faith community, and, as illustrated by this 12-year-old Jewish female and her mother, this was generally because they did not feel a sense of connection there.

Daughter: Since we move a lot, it's sometimes hard to get too connected to them. We were in Kansas for four years and we got very connected and it was hard to leave them, but here it's not as easy because . . .

Mother: Well we don't go, that's part of it.

Daughter: We don't go that much anymore. We usually went for my mom's *Shiray Shabbat* services and they don't really seem to care for it as much.

Though causality cannot be assigned in either direction, the lack of commitment to participating in the faith community and the lack of connection to the members of the faith community were both part of the larger religious experience of this family. Though they expressed strong commitments in other ways, this was clearly not an anchor of their commitment.

This anchor of religious commitment—commitment to members of the faith community—was evident in youth from all faith traditions and was equally represented in males and females in this sample.

### **Commitment to Parents**

Parents were the fifth most common anchor of commitment for the adolescents in this sample. This included references to mothers, fathers, and parents together.

**Source of authority.** The most common form of this anchor was viewing parents as a religious authority in their life. This form was manifest in two ways—seeing the parent(s) as a

religious authority, and seeing the parent(s) as an authority in matters related to religion. For example, a 20-year-old Lutheran female stated, “Dad’s the spiritual head of the family.” She identified him as the authority but is also vesting that authority with religious significance. In contrast, a 15-year-old Episcopalian male stated:

My mom wants me to go to church, and my dad. . . . And sometimes I’ll want to hang out with a friend on Saturday night, but I have to go to church the next morning. And that’s not an issue, I’m going to church the next morning.

He identifies his parents as authority figures in his religious commitments, but he does not see that role as the authority as being endowed with religious significance.

**Affective dimension.** A second form of this anchor deals with how youth perceived the affective dimension associated with the parental relationship and authority. Youth may have acknowledged or committed to the parental authority but had varying forms of affect connected to that commitment, as was also explained in the commitment to God. This affect could be negative, neutral, or positive. The two references given above are neutral. The youth did not explain how they felt about that parental authority but rather just asserted that commitment to their authority. No negative expressions of affect regarding parental authority were present in the data for this sample. Trusting, respecting, and honoring parents were the primary forms of the positive expression of affect.

A 14-year-old Latter-day Saint male demonstrated this when asked why he doesn’t drink proscribed beverages when he is with his friends. He stated, “Because they’ve [parents] taught me not to do that and I respect them.” This shows the presence of that positive affect dimension for a parent authority where the authority is not necessarily seen as a religious authority. In contrast, a 21-year-old Protestant male also expressed, “You know, so my honoring towards God as my Father is the same as honoring my mom and my dad. So it’s kind of reflective.” This



second example demonstrates an affective expression of a commitment to the parent as an authority with religious significance.

**Duty to parents.** A third form of parents as an anchor focused on the responsibility or duty to the parents. This same form was evident in the commitment to God as the anchor of commitment. This is demonstrated by a 17-year-old Muslim female:

I want to be able to fulfill my duty in Islam upon my parents, because I wouldn't want to be like the cause of them not being able to fulfill their duty, like if I was to disobey, and I wouldn't want them to be questioned about why, you know, why wasn't I, you know, obeying the rules of God.

**Summary.** Being committed to parents as an anchor of religious commitment was evident in equal numbers of males and females in this sample. It was evident in youth from diverse faith traditions, though the responsibility or duty to parents was particularly evident in Muslim youth.

### **Commitment to Scripture or Sacred Texts**

The sixth most common anchor of religious commitment was scripture or sacred texts, often referred to as “the word of God.” Sacred texts that were referred to by this religiously diverse sample included the Bible (Christian), Book of Mormon (Latter-day Saint), Torah and Talmud (Jewish), Qur’an and Hadith (Muslim), and Science and Health (Christian Scientist). This commitment is conceptually distinct from the ritual of reading the scripture or sacred texts as an individual or family. The ritual captured the behavior while the commitment discussed here captured the belief about and commitment to *what* was being read. The youth in this sample demonstrated two forms of this commitment.

**Source of authority or truth.** The first was seeing sacred text as “a standard,” “the guiding principles,” or “the foundation” of what they believe and how they chose to act. This is illustrated by an 18-year-old Baptist female:

I just remember sitting in English class last year and we were discussing a lot of things and I just remember sitting there thinking how confused I'd be on this earth if I didn't have the Bible and God's standard and morality to live by. Because things can be reasoned different ways and just become so relative and then you don't know what truth is, and what right is, and what wrong is. And just sitting in that class and watching people try to like reason these things out, and thinking they don't know. They might think this one day, and then someone will present a good argument tomorrow and they'll swing over to the other side. And I was even so confused about [it]. I was thinking I want to go home and look at the Bible.

Sacred texts were also seen as a source of truth to turn to in a time of need or doubt. A 15-year-old Lutheran female explained the role the Bible played for her and her family in these difficult times:

I mean anytime we have a problem, siblings or just a problem, outside of the world, we come home and we [say], “I can't take it anymore. This is too hard” and always be ending up with, “Well what does the Bible say about it?”

A 17-year-old Muslim female also describes her commitment to the Hadith (teachings of Muhammad) as a source for answers in her life:

In Islam, there are, there's always an answer for everything. If you just look in the Hadith, for any problem that you may have, there's an answer. And if you can't find it, you just need to ask Allah to make it easier for me to find this answer.

**Life models.** A second form of commitment to scripture was as a narrative of life experiences of others that can be a model or a deterrent for certain life paths. This form is articulated by a 16-year-old Jehovah's Witness female who explained how the stories of scripture helped her with a life path choice.

Next year they're planning on having a team. And they want me to be on the team. But my thing is, some of the people that are on the team, aren't the best examples. And they're doing things that I wouldn't approve of. And so, when we read the Bible, there's

guidelines in the Bible that kind of help me out, when I like read, that help me make a decision that I wouldn't want to be on the team, because I would have those influences like constantly there. Because, when you're on the team, you're always going to be around these people. And when you read the Bible and you see the instances found in the Bible, you've seen what that association has done to, and some examples that are found in the Bible. And so that kind of helped me to make a decision on that part.

**Summary.** These responses reflect the commitment of these youth to the scripture or sacred text. Commitment to scripture or sacred texts was referred to by youth of all faith traditions. Of those that spoke of their commitments in this way, more were female than male.

### **Commitment to Religious Leaders**

The last anchor of religious commitment evident in this study was commitment to religious leaders. The religious leaders referenced by the youth in this study were a spiritual father, prophet, rabbi, a Christian Science practitioner, youth group leaders, and a bishop. The two main forms of this commitment were to religious leaders as a source of authority and as a relational connection or support.

**Source of authority.** The first form—commitment to religious leaders as a source of authority—is demonstrated by a 13-year-old Latter-day Saint male:

The prophet, he's the guy who's in charge of our whole church for the whole world, he has asked us to not drink caffeine and alcohol, so we don't drink caffeine or alcohol. . . . It's not like every second I'm thinking, "Oh I have to do this because of my religion" but I try not to do some stuff that's not appropriate because the people in the church have asked us not to and so that kind of guides our life.

Similarly, a 12-year-old Christian Scientist male shared a time when he turned to a religious leader as an authority in his life.

Well I was deciding which scout troop to join and I couldn't decide. We called a Christian Science Practitioner to help and I can't remember the thoughts now, but he used good thoughts and then I decided on a troop.

Though this was not a particularly religious decision, the religious leader was looked to as an authority for guidance and direction.

**Relational component.** The second form of this anchor was a commitment to the relationship with a religious leader. This form generally occurred in connection with respecting the authority of the religious leader. This form of commitment was expressed by a 14-year-old Orthodox Christian female as she spoke of how she wants her life to be when she is an adult and the important role of her commitment to having a relationship with a religious leader as an authority in her life.

I can't think of anything that I would really do differently. I'd just follow the basic patterns set out by the church. And just consult with a spiritual father; have a spiritual father for the family and as long as you have that and base and connections with the church, really it would be just about what we're doing right now.

The mother of a 13-year-old LDS female explained her perception of a role of the religious leader and why some youth may feel that connection or commitment.

I appreciate the support of youth leaders in the church and the bishop and others. . . . I think it lessens our conflict because they can reinforce and support values without it always having to be us telling the kids things. I think it's a little easier to take from somebody else sometimes.

**Summary.** This anchor—commitment to religious leaders—was most common among Christian (particularly LDS) youth. It was slightly more common among males than females, and was also noticeably more common for younger youth than for older youth.

## Discussion

This study was an effort to broaden the conceptual understanding of adolescent religious commitment. It examined “anchors of religious commitment”—a previously unexplored dimension of adolescent religious commitment. King (2003) stated that scholars lack “the

terminology and conceptual understanding to explain the mechanisms” related to adolescent religiosity and how it influences the lives of youth. Referencing a term used by Garbarino (1995), King (2003) asserted that religious congregations are “spiritual anchors” that provide youth with a context “in which to grapple with the spiritual issues . . . critical for commitment to identity” (p. 201). The construct of anchors of religious commitment adds to this terminology and conceptual understanding of this domain. It compliments King’s work and expands the idea of “anchors” to include other contexts or relationships that have an anchoring effect on adolescents exploring spiritual issues related to their purpose and their place in the world.

### **Relational Commitment**

In a review of literature on religion and family from 1999 to 2009, Mahoney (in press) proposed the construct “relational spirituality” to describe the “multi-dimensional interface between the search for relationships with the search for the sacred” (p. 8). While Mahoney did not address issues of religious commitment, our understanding of the pathways that connect religion with individuals and families are highly relational. Additionally, Worthington et al. (2003), demonstrated that religious commitment has both an interpersonal factor and an intrapersonal factor.

The findings of the present study demonstrate that relational pathways are at work in the domain of adolescent religious commitment. The construct of “anchors of religious commitment” is a multi-dimensional relational construct that connects the individual with the religion. The “relational” component here is represented by relationships with living people as well as relationships with the ideas, teachings, and stories of people who are not living (as with a commitment to sacred texts and to a faith tradition). Commitment does indeed have one part

centered in the individual but it also has a second part that is anchored in the relationship with the anchor of religious commitment. In a study of religious identity in Muslim youth, Peek (2005) asserted, “Religious boundaries and meaning are constructed both from within and without, in response to internal conflicts and choices and external pressures and rewards that drive identity formation” (p. 236).

Religious commitment cannot be fully understood without understanding the different dimensions of the relationship between the individual and what she or he is committing to. The relationships between the adolescent and the seven anchors of religious commitment (religious traditions, rituals and laws; God; the faith tradition or denomination; members of the faith community; parents; religious leaders; and sacred texts) seemed to be unique dimensions to how the youth in this sample experienced and described their religious commitments.

### **Authority and the Internalization of Commitment**

The findings of this study make clear that perceptions of authority and the associated commitment are intertwined. In five of the seven anchors of commitment (God, faith tradition or denomination, parents, scripture or sacred texts, and parents), the youth spoke of seeing the anchor as a source of authority.

Movement toward increasing autonomy and the renegotiation of authority, particularly with parents, is often seen as an important aspect of adolescence (Steinberg & Silk 2002; Williams 2003). Research suggests there are three different dimensions of autonomy: emotional autonomy, behavioral autonomy; and value autonomy (Steinberg, 2005). In matters of religion, Denton (2006) explained that adolescents sometimes have only “partial autonomy” (p. 48), meaning that they participate in religious activities largely at the direction of parents or others

and not because of an internalized motivation. There is perhaps a difference between an internalized commitment and an externally-based commitment.

Some of the examples from these youth demonstrated a commitment to the expectations or standards of authority, and it is unclear how these expectations influenced the formation and maintenance of commitment and the perceptions of autonomy. Youth in this study sometimes spoke of doing things because of the expectations of parents or others. Youth in this study also spoke of being grateful for and accepting of the guidance, direction, and foundation of the authorities in their life. This dialectic suggests the three different types of autonomy may be influenced differently by sources of authority in the religious domain.

As mentioned in the section about parents as an anchor of religious commitment, sometimes these sources of authority were seen as authorities in religious matters and sometimes they were seen as authorities endowed with religious significance that would have authority over many domains of life. Exploring the differences in how youth perceive the influence of these sources of authority, how that perception influences the three types of autonomy, and how that perception of authority changes over time was beyond the scope of this study but would be useful for future research. Perhaps adolescents perceive the anchors of religious commitment as sacred or “sanctified” (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003) and thus the acceptance of authority is perceived differently in the religious domain of life.

### **Developmental Commitment**

When discussing their commitments to the different anchors of religious commitment, the youth in this sample often spoke of changes in the relative importance of those commitments. Some commitments were more important than others at certain times in their development or the

development of the family system. While this concept was not explored in depth, it is important to note in the discussion of this new construct that these commitments change and develop as the adolescent develops.

The theoretical work of Sullivan (1953) on intimacy in adolescence used the term “targets of intimacy” to describe the persons with whom the adolescent is developing an intimate relationship. Steinberg (2005) noted that these “targets of intimacy” change over time. Where Sullivan theorized that the target changes from family members to same-sex peers and then to opposite-sex peers throughout the transitions from preadolescence to late adolescence, Steinberg has shown that “new targets of intimacy do not replace old ones. Rather, new targets are added to old ones” (p. 345).

With this foundation we can hypothesize that through the transitions and developmental processes of adolescence the relationship with the different anchors of religious commitment will change, with new commitments not necessarily replacing old ones but simply being added to the individual’s unique constellation of commitment anchors. These changes in relative importance may be associated with developmental processes of adolescence and they may also be associated with processes of familial change that occur during an adolescent’s life. This aspect could not be explored given the limited breadth of this study, but the changes and development of different anchors of religious commitment is important for future understanding of this construct.

### **Anchors of Religious Commitment and Moral Development**

Adolescent moral exemplars are often shown as being highly religiously committed (Colby & Damon, 1995; Walker, 2003). However, the pathways between moral development and religious commitment are not yet clearly defined. A construct such as anchors of religious



commitment may be helpful in illuminating some of the specific connection points in the lives of adolescents, which may help determine what part or parts of religious commitment or constellations of religious commitment may be associated with moral development. While these connections were not explored in this study, the ideas presented suggest the possibility. For example, a commitment to traditions, rituals, and laws may have a unique relationship with moral development that may not show up with broad measures frequently used to measure religious commitment (frequency of church attendance and religious salience). Future research could explore the seven anchors of religious commitment in the lives of moral exemplars.

### **Anchors of Religious Commitment and Identity**

Commitment and exploration continue to be the two primary constructs used in studying religious identity (Bertram-Troost, de Roos, & Miedema, 2009). The seven anchors of religious commitment identified here seemed to serve as unique components of these adolescents' religious identity inasmuch as identity is defined in terms of commitments made and maintained. As Luyck et al. (2006) "unpacked" commitment in the broad domain of identity development, the concept of anchors of religious commitment may help in further unpacking commitment in the specific domain of religious identity. Future research could examine how different constellations or combinations of the anchors of religious commitment in the lives of adolescents influence their religious identity.

### **Limitations**

The present study was cross-sectional in nature and only captured a snapshot of the lives of these youth. Because of this, the analysis could not address how these anchors of religious commitment developed or changed over time. Additionally, because the sample was not random,

the conclusions are not generalizable to the population at large and would apply only to more religiously involved youth in two-parent families.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggests that religious commitment in adolescence can be conceptualized as being anchored in: (a) religious traditions, rituals, and laws; (b) God; (c) faith traditions or denominations; (d) faith community members; (e) parents; (f) scriptures or sacred texts; and (g) religious leaders. This construct may be helpful in broadening our understanding of how youth are experiencing their religious commitments. This construct may also be helpful in exploring how differences in types of commitment influence the relative impact that religion has on adolescents and associated positive life outcomes.

Additionally, this study has implications for parents and religious leaders. The relationships that anchor religious commitment in the lives of religious youth should not be underestimated. When these relationships are seen in light of their contribution to the larger issue of religious commitment, they take on a greater meaning. Greater efforts can be made to perpetuate religious traditions and rituals, help youth learn the stories of their religious heritage, encourage youth to develop a personal relationship with God, provide opportunities for youth to engage with other members of the religious congregation, strengthen parent-child relationships and parental modeling of religious commitment, engage in discussions with youth about role models from the scriptures, and foster connections between youth and religious leaders. All of these practical suggestions are examples of activities can serve to strengthen the very things that anchor religious commitment in the lives of adolescents.

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## Appendix A

Table 1

### *Description of Four Stages of Analysis*

	Data Source	Type of Coding	Description	Result
<b>Stage 1</b>	All of the in-depth interviews	Broad Coding	Conceptual analysis informed by the literature but grounded in the data.	Many broad coding categories: <i>commitment</i> , exploration, spiritual experiences, autonomy, belongingness, etc.
<b>Stage 2</b>	All references coded as <i>commitment</i> in stage 1.	Initial coding (open)	Line by line coding to analyze different dimensions of commitment.	16 commitment categories— <i>anchors of religious commitment</i> , congruence of commitment, etc.
<b>Stage 3</b>	All references coded as <i>anchors of religious commitment</i> in stage 2.	Focused Coding	Coding to discriminate between different kinds of commitment anchors.	<i>Seven anchors of religious commitment</i> —tradition, God, denomination, faith community, parents, scripture, church leaders
<b>Stage 4</b>	All of the references coded for each of the <i>seven anchors of religious commitment</i> in stage 3. Seven analyses were done in this stage.	Focused Coding	Descriptive coding of each commitment anchor to describe the different types of expressions within each anchor.	<i>Types or expressions</i> —family or personal rituals, intergenerational relationships, source of authority, etc.

Table 2

*Dimensions of Commitment from Stage 2 of Analysis.*

Dimension of Commitment	Number of	
	Sources	References
Anchor of commitment	40	155
Congruence of commitment	44	150
Origins of commitment	25	59
Personal commitment (independent of family)	24	55
Fruits of commitment	22	53
Future trajectory of commitment	28	42
Commitment as a mediator with peers or others	24	41
Commitment is developmental	22	38
Across different domains of life	19	38
Actively sharing commitments with others	15	27
Self labeling	17	26
Wishes commitments were different	20	25
Active vs. passive commitment	11	21
Standing up for commitments in specific experiences	10	10

*Note:* This table lists the dimensions of commitment that resulted from stage two of the analysis. They are listed here with the number of sources (different interviews) and references (different quotes) coded in each category. Source and reference numbers cited in this study include both positive and negative instances of the theme, as well as both adolescent and parent references.



Table 3

*Summary of Anchors of Commitment and Types of Expression*

Anchor of Religious Commitment	Types of Expression
Religious Traditions, Rituals, and Laws	Commitment to religious traditions Commitment to religious rituals Family ritual Personal ritual Commitment to religious laws
God	Source of authority Relationships with God Affective dimension Seeking counsel Sense of responsibility
Faith Tradition or Denomination	Self-labeling Source of authority Values and belief systems Personified entity Center of family Generational component
Faith Community Members	Sense of community Personal support Intergenerational relationships Serving the congregation Fun
Parents	Source of authority Affective dimension Duty to parents
Scriptures or Sacred Texts	Source of authority or truth Life models
Religious Leaders	Source of authority Relational component