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Journal of Adolescent Research 2008; 23; 611
DOI: 10.1177/0743558408322141

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Journal of Adolescent Research
Volume 23 Number 5
September 2008 611-641
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Talking About Religion

How Highly Religious Youth and Parents Discuss Their Faith

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This study builds on previous research regarding parent-child religious conversations to explore the transactional processes of these conversations. It employs qualitative analyses of interviews with highly religious parents and adolescents representing the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) from New England and Northern California. Variations in conversational processes are summarized in a conceptual model. Findings suggest that when parent-adolescent religious conversations are youth centered, the emotional experience is more positive for parents and adolescents than when they are parent centered. Parents from both traditional and progressive faith communities reported that they understood the value of transactional conversation processes over a more hierarchical, preachy, or parent-centered approach.

Keywords: *adolescent; religiosity; religious conversations; qualitative research; Christian; Jewish; Muslim*

When religious parents and their adolescent children talk about religious matters, or about other issues with religious implications, the potential exists for strong positive or negative emotion in both parent and child, for the parent-child relationship to be strengthened or weakened, and for the child's interest in future religious discussions with the parent to be enhanced or diminished. Indeed, given how strongly many parents (and

Authors' Note: The authors thank Laura Padilla Walker, Carol Ward, Jeremy Yorgason, Lisa Bolin Hawkins, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on a previous draft. The authors express appreciation for research funding received from the following entities at Brigham Young University: the Family Studies Center, the Religious Studies Center, the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, and the Eliza R. Snow University Fellowship awarded to David C. Dollahite. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to David C. Dollahite, PhD, Professor of Family Life, 2054 Joseph F. Smith Building, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602-6723; e-mail: david_dollahite@byu.edu.

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youth) feel about their spiritual and religious experiences, commitments, practices, and communities, given the developmental changes that occur during adolescence, and given the emotionally charged nature of parent-child discussion involving value-oriented attitudes and behaviors, the potential for a conversational perfect storm is present in conversations with religious implications. This article addresses conversational processes among religious youth and parents belonging to a number of faith communities.

Adolescents are embedded in an increasingly complex circle of influence including peers, school, and media. In addition, the increasing emphasis on individualism in Western culture has resulted in an increase in adolescent independence and responsibility in society and a progressively interdependent parent-adolescent relationship. Although adolescence involves increasing autonomy, the influence of family relationships remains significant (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Research confirms that parents are one of the greatest socialization influences on adolescent religiosity and that a major method of influence is parent-child conversation (King, Furrow, & Roth, 2002; Smith & Denton, 2005).

Research indicates that, for religious youth, core issues of personal identity are strongly influenced by religious belief and involvement (Good & Willoughby, 2007). Research on adolescent religiosity, especially in highly religious families, is particularly relevant because adolescence is a stage in life when America's culture of individualism encourages young people to form their own views and identity (Gallup & Bezilla, 1992; Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003). This emphasis on greater autonomy in adolescence is based on cultural values of individualism and is neither natural nor universal; however, it is a pervasive and powerful influence on parents and youth.

The more traditional, orthodox, and conservative branches of the Abrahamic (or monotheistic) faiths, which include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have a tradition of more hierarchical parent-child relationships that foster parental (especially paternal) authority over their children. Based on Iyengar and Lepper's (1999) finding that culture exerts a great influence on the degree to which children value independence (vs. interdependence), it may be that American youth in more traditional faith communities do not expect or seek as much autonomy in parent-child relationships. However, in contemporary America, these families are increasingly influenced by the prevailing values of adolescent autonomy and individualism; thus even devout parents in the more traditional forms of the Abrahamic faiths are likely becoming less hierarchical.

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Scholarship on the influence of parent-child conversations has moved beyond a focus on transmission (a unidirectional influence from parent to child) to the study of how children also influence their parents (Kuczynski, 2003; Pinquart & Silberseisen, 2004). Yet we know relatively little about how this process relates to religious conversations—particularly those among more traditional, orthodox, or conservative faiths in America.

Most research linking family and religion relies on quantitative methods with large samples. Positive correlations between parent-adolescent religious conversations and adolescent religiosity are now substantially supported, but like other areas of the religion-family link, we know less about the processes involved (Dollahite & Marks, 2005). Furthermore, most studies in the psychology of religion have focused on individual religiosity (Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005); of those that have looked at parent-adolescent religious dynamics, few have used qualitative data to gain more in-depth understanding (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006). Therefore, for the current study, a qualitative analysis of in-depth family interviews was used in order to learn more about the "intricate details" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11) of parent-adolescent religious conversations that are more difficult to assess through other research methods.

Review of Literature

Parental and Adolescent Religiosity

Research from the 1970s to the mid-1990s found religion to be an important aspect of life for the majority (60%) of American adolescents (Smith et al., 2003; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). Smith and Denton (2005) conducted the most recent and extensive national study of adolescent religiosity and found similar results. They found that 51% of adolescents claimed that religion was *extremely* or *very* important in shaping their daily lives and 55% said they had made a personal commitment to live their life for God. Furthermore, a large minority of the youth reported that they prayed once a day or more (38%), attended church at least once a week (40%), and were currently involved in a religious youth group (38%).

Parent-adolescent relationships. A large body of findings has established benefits associated with religiosity in various areas of family life (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), including more warmth and satisfaction in parent-child relationships (see Dollahite, Marks,

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& Goodman, 2004). While comparing adolescents of varying religious activity, Smith and Denton (2005) found that highly religious youth had the best quality of parent-child relationships in every area studied, including levels of honesty, acceptance, and understanding, getting along, and feeling loved and close to their parents. Highly religious adolescents and adolescents with religious parents are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors and fewer high-risk behaviors (Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus, 2003). It follows that an increase in positive behaviors and a decrease in high-risk behaviors is likely to result in more positive parent-adolescent relationships.

Adolescent religiosity is influenced greatly by parents (e.g., Sherkat, 2003) and is typically consistent with parental religiosity (King et al., 2002), especially when the parents have common religious beliefs (Myers, 1996; Sherkat, 1991). Research is mixed as to which parent has the greatest influence on child religiosity, but some have found that the influence of both parents is greater than either parent alone (Francis & Brown, 1991; Kierun & Munro, 1987). Recently, some have suggested the need for research to move forward by exploring how religiosity and family relationships influence each other (Boyatzis et al., 2006). This suggests that a study to investigate how parents and adolescents influence each other through religious conversations is needed.

Bidirectional Models on Internalization

Child internalization of parental values has been studied by researchers from various fields using two major theoretical models (Flor & Knapp, 2001; Lawrence & Valsiner, 1993). The more traditional model of internalization is unidirectional, which views the process of influence from parent to child, with the child as a passive recipient of parental values (Bao, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999). The second and more recent model is bidirectional because it views both the parent and child as active agents who continually influence each other (Grolnik & Ryan, 1989; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). Recent research supports this second model, and a variety of theoretical constructs have been used to explain the complexity of bidirectional transactional processes (Kuczynski, 2003). Research has also focused on the bidirectional nature of the parent-child relationship when dealing with religiosity. For example, in her large qualitative study, Garland (2002) found that both parents and children play a role in shaping the other's faith behavior, thus supporting a link between the bidirectional model and faith behavior.

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Family Religious Conversations

In their national study, Smith and Denton (2005) asked adolescents how often they and their families talk together about God, scriptures, prayer, or other religious or spiritual issues. About one third (34%) said a few times a week or more, 28% reported a few times a month or weekly, while 38% said a few times a year or never.

Transactional religious conversations. Influenced by the concept of bidirectionality, recent attention has been given to the transactional nature of parent-child conversations. Research has explored whether parent-child conversations are transactional or unidirectional and the implications of each. In a study on religious conversations, Flor and Knapp (2001) found that the more frequently parents and younger adolescents had transactional (bidirectional) discussions on issues of faith, the more likely the adolescents were to place importance on religion and to exhibit religious behavior. Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) conducted a study using survey and diary methods among Christians to determine whether religious conversations between parents and their young children involved more unidirectional or transactional components. They found transactional conversations to be more typical than unidirectional and to be characterized by the child asking questions, voicing his or her opinion, and initiating and ending the discussion. They urged future research on religious socialization to move beyond seeing children as passive recipients and view them with a more active role.

Limitations and Gaps in the Literature

Previous research on parent-child religious conversations has been informative but typically has the following limitations: small sample size, low ethnic and religious diversity, data from only one region of the country, analysis of conversations only between parents and children or young adolescents, and the use of only quantitative and diary methods of analysis. In addition, the majority of data stem from maternal reports. Myers (1996) argued that "the study of religious inheritance requires that both generations be interviewed" (p. 858) and Collins and Laursen (2004) stated that "observing only one dyad in a family with more than two members provides only part of the picture of an adolescent's family relationships" (p. 347). In support of this, Daly (2007) stated, "The value of multiple member perspectives may be paramount in many types of family research. For example, when the focus of investigation is parent-child relationships,

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data minimally would be gathered from mothers, fathers, and children" (p. 79). This study attempted to address these gaps and limitations in the literature.

Research Questions

In this study, we used a sample of parents and their adolescent children from various faith communities and relied on qualitative data from family interviews in which parents and adolescents discuss religious topics together. We analyzed religious conversations (meaning conversations about or influenced by religion) using grounded theory and therefore did not rely on hypotheses. Because current research still lacks a complete exploration of the transactional processes of parent-adolescent religious conversations, we were guided by the following questions: (a) What is the context of parent-adolescent conversations on religious issues? (b) What are the processes involved in parent-adolescent conversations involving religion? (c) What qualities of conversational processes are most beneficial for the religious exploration and development of youth?

Method

Participants

Consistent with Boss's suggestion (1980) that much can be learned by using a sample that is prototypical of the variable of interest, we used a purposive sample (Berg, 2001) of highly religious families for this study. To minimize the possibility that results were due to geographical factors, families in two locations (New England and Northern California) were interviewed.

The sample consisted of 57 married couples (32 from New England, 25 from Northern California) and their 77 adolescent children (45 from New England, 32 from Northern California; 39 girls, 38 boys). Of the 57 couples interviewed, 84% were White and 16% were ethnic minorities (2 African American, 4 White/Hispanic, 2 East Indian, and 1 Malaysian/White). On average, parents were in their mid-40s, had been married for 21 years, and had three children (range 1 to 11). Of the 57 families interviewed, 21 had two or more adolescent children participating in the interview. The 77 adolescents ranged in age from 10 to 20 years with a mean age of 15.5 (16 for girls, 15 for boys) and had ethnic diversity similar to the parents.

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Distribution of faith affiliation among the 57 families included (a) 6 Catholic, (b) 3 Orthodox Christian (2 Greek Orthodox, and 1 Orthodox Church in America), (c) 12 Jewish (2 Hasidic, 4 Modern Orthodox, 4 Conservative, and 2 Reform), (d) 4 Muslim, (e) 12 Mainline Protestant (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, and Methodist), (f) 12 New Christian Traditions (Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, Latter-day Saint, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Friends), and (g) 8 Evangelical Protestant (Baptist, Charismatic Episcopal, Orthodox Presbyterian, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Pentecostal).

These families were quite religious; on average they reported they attended religious activities more than once a week and donated an average of 7% of their income to their faith. However, there was significant variation within and between denominational groups in the degree to which participants described themselves as highly religious or devout. What is considered highly religious for some faiths (e.g., Mainline Protestant) differs greatly from what is considered highly religious for others (e.g., Hasidic Jews, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses).

Interview Procedures

We drew data from transcriptions of family interviews completed in New England in 2002 and Northern California in 2004. The interviewer (first author) met 38 congregational leaders from various faith communities in the given areas to solicit names of highly involved families in their congregations. The interviewer then contacted the families through a written letter explaining the aims and procedures of the study and requesting the approval and participation of parents and their adolescent children. He met one to three families from each congregation, usually in the families' homes. Participants were offered a monetary compensation as a token of appreciation (New England, $20 per parent and $10 per adolescent; Northern California, $75 per family). Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

Family interviews were conducted according to suggestions offered by Lofland and Lofland (1995). The interviewer (first author) began by giving a brief explanation of the study and an overview of the topics to be covered. He first met the parents to discuss how their religiosity influenced their marital relationship (not central to this study); next, adolescents joined in (for about 1 hour) to discuss connections between faith and family life, including parent-adolescent relationships. When the adolescents joined in the discussion, the interviewer made it clear that the majority of the questions were directed to any and all of the participants. The interviews were

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semistructured, allowing the interviewer to guide the conversations, while still remaining attentive to the participants' unique ways of expressing their experiences and views.

Many scholars make the methodological assumption that family members should be interviewed individually to avoid other-influenced responses. The data for this study, however, were collected with the parents and adolescents together in order to observe family processes and to allow family members to interact and add to, revise, or challenge what others said (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This unique method of family interviews was particularly helpful for the current study on conversations, because it provided data of actual parent-adolescent conversations about their religious conversations. In support of this methodological decision, Smith and Denton's (2005) research on highly religious parent-adolescent relationships found their communication to be open and honest. In addition, they found that highly religious teens were more likely than their less religious counterparts to report (a) having the right amount of freedom to develop and openly express their own views on important topics and (b) being fairly or very comfortable talking with adults other than their parents.

Measures and Questions

Interview questions. The interviewer asked a number of questions to parents and adolescents regarding their faith and family relationships. We collected data for this study from both sets of interviews (New England and Northern California). We drew data from specific content-relevant questions and then systematically searched entire transcripts for additional information on parent-adolescent religious conversations.

Of the 26 questions typically asked of parents and youth that covered a range of topics on how religion influenced parent-child relationships, the following were most helpful in addressing the research questions: How do your parents share their faith with you? When you talk together as parents and children about religion, and how does the conversation go? How have your parent-child conversations about religion influenced parents and children? What do you consider to be the most important things for you to be or do as a mother or father of faith? As parents, how do you share your faith with your children?

Survey questions. To provide some quantitative data on how religious conversations compared to other religious activities, some data will be reported from a 20-item survey that assessed how often families reported

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participating in religious activities (e.g., saying grace at meals, reading sacred texts, watching or listening to religious media) and how meaningful those activities were to them. The survey is called Faith Activities in the Home (F.A.I.T.H.) and is available on request from the first author.

Reducing Interviewer Bias

Consistent with qualitative research methods, the interviewer attended to issues of "reflexivity" (Daly, 2007), wherein qualitative scholars are expected to be aware of their own biases and attempts to factor them into the research process. He paid specific attention to maintaining the greatest level of impartiality possible during the interview process. Aware of his predisposition to see the benefits of religiosity, he asked questions about the challenges and possible dangers of their religiosity.

Analyses

We used a grounded theory approach to explore the transactional nature of parent-adolescent religious conversations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Accordingly, we constructed conceptual constructs and models based on data and not our preconceived notions. However, in order to contextualize this study with theoretical sensitivity from the literature (Gilgun, 2005), we used research questions informed by current research on parent-child conversations.

Coding

The second author read and coded relevant interview sections as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), in which the initial step, Open Coding, consisted of a careful line-by-line analysis and labeling. Next, she employed Axial Coding to reassemble data into related categories, according to properties and dimensions of the categories. An important part of the analysis was coding for process in an attempt to understand the dynamic and transactional nature of parent-adolescent religious conversations. She then used Selective Coding to integrate and refine the categories into a conceptual model that accurately depicted the major emergent themes from the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Finally, in order to give greater validity to the findings, the authors searched for negative instances (Gilgun, 2005) that undermine the proposed conceptual model, to determine whether initial findings remained consistent under scrutiny.

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Reducing Analytic and Interpretive Bias

Before and during the analysis, the authors took the following measures to assure its rigor and validity: (a) constant comparisons to check for accuracy of code definitions and to explore possible reasons for variations across cases, (b) triangulation of the data from multiple family members and a faith-scale survey, (c) weekly debriefings between the authors to clarify interpretations and discuss emerging themes, and (d) detailed note-taking of the second author's personal reaction to the findings to assure adequate reflexivity. In addition, the interviews were recorded and transcribed, which recordings were available during analysis if further clarification on meaning was needed.

Results

There was variation between and within families and faith traditions in how participants viewed their parent-adolescent religious conversation. In order to build grounded theory, we report the most common responses. The findings rely on responses from parents and adolescents, even when they are reporting about each other. For example, conclusions about which types of religious conversations are more effective for adolescents were based on reports from parents and adolescents.

Results from the survey found that collectively, families rated religious conversations as the *most meaningful* (range = 0-3, $M = 2.5$) and the *second most frequent* (range = 0-7, $M = 5.1$) religious activity (after grace at meals), even when compared with such activities as church attendance and prayer with the children. Interview responses to a question regarding how the parents shared their faith with their children revealed religious conversation to be mentioned the most often (77% of parent responses, 76% of adolescent responses), even when compared to responses including parental example, family worship, church attendance, and faith traditions. Adolescents in particular noted faith transmission through conversation more than any other method.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model (Figure 1) summarizes the most meaningful findings on parent-adolescent conversations. In this article we primarily address the conversation processes of parent-adolescent religious conversations that are listed in the large circle in the center of the model. However, we also explored other elements of these conversations, which are also displayed in the conceptual model.

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Figure 1
Bidirectional Influences of Parent-Adolescent Religious Conversations

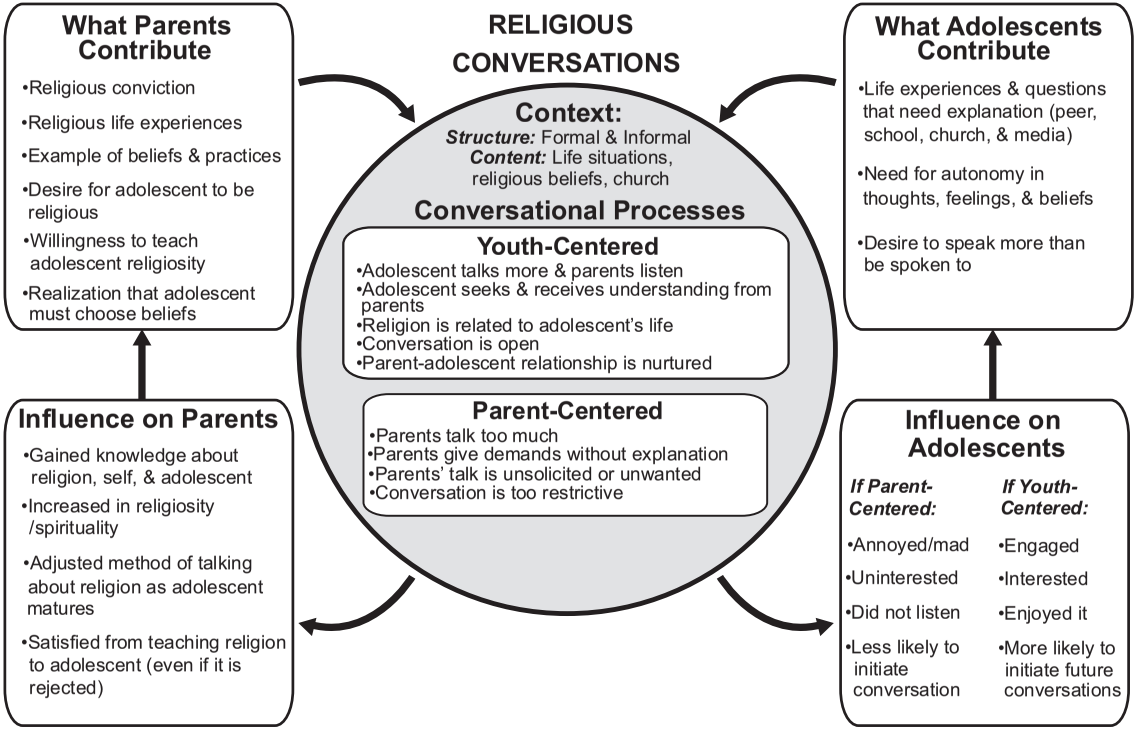

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Table 1
Content, Structure, Location, and Frequency of Religious Conversations

Domain	Description
Content	Life situations (personal or familial trials, relationship problems, child's future, daily activities)
	Church and religious teachings (theology, doctrine, spiritual practices)
Structure	Formal (part of a structured religious activity
	Informal (various places and times; often prompted by an event, a question, or a situation)
Location	At home (often in kitchen at dinner time)
	In the car (on the way to religious services/activities and other times)
Frequency	Infrequently (10%)
	Frequently (some daily; 20%)
	Did not mention frequency (70%)

These include the context (content, structure, and location) of the conversations, the contributions of parents and adolescents to the conversations, and the ways they are influenced by the conversations. Processes in parent-adolescent religious conversations were embedded in a context of transactional influence as parents and adolescents contributed to, and then obtained unique attributes from, religious conversations together.

The arrows in the conceptual model show a circular pattern indicating that parents and adolescents continually influenced each other through religious conversations. This indicates that while parental religiosity influences adolescent faith development, adolescent religiosity also influences parental faith development. Findings on conversation context are provided below as a background to the main findings.

Context of Parent-Adolescent Religious Conversations

Findings regarding the context of religious conversations are taken from responses to a variety of questions that elicited references to parent-adolescent religious conversations. The data provide information about the content, structure, location, and frequency of parent-adolescent religious conversations (see Table 1 for a summary of these findings).

Content. Families reported having had conversations about a variety of religious topics (see Table 2). The topics reported most often were in the

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Table 2
Content of Parent-Adolescent Religious Conversations

Content area	Description
Life situations	Situations the adolescents, parents, or others are in (difficult situations, relationship problems, etc.)
	Beliefs, standards or values about things they encounter or in the media
	Past and future events (of parents and adolescents, ancestor experiences)
Religious beliefs	God/Allah
	Religious texts
	Jesus/forgiveness/prayer
	Difficult theological issues (e.g., role of priest, the creation)
Religion/church	What they learned or did in church
	Other religions and tolerance for those of other faiths
	Family religious background and history
	Religion class or prep for Bat/Bar Mitzvah

Note: Content areas and descriptions are listed in descending order by frequency of times mentioned.

area termed *life situations*; however, conversations about church and religious teachings were also prevalent. Many recalled specific situations they discussed, such as personal or family trials, relationship problems, the child's future, and the media. Others, like Shawn, a 43-year-old Baptist father of four, stated that their conversations dealt with daily life activities: "We kind of debrief the day together. Things will always come up that bring issues that relate to our faith. How are you responding to the situations you're in? How are you looking at the world around you?"

Structure. Family religious conversations varied in structure but were coded into two main categories: formal and informal. Informal religious conversations were the most frequently reported, especially by adolescents. They occurred at various places and times throughout the day and were often prompted by an event, a question, or a situation. Meredith, a 17-year-old Baptist, said, "Circumstances that come up day-to-day, like if something happens, we talk about it." One Latter-day Saint couple, Heather and Lyndon, spoke of where and how they have informal discussions with their children:

> Heather: Driving in the car, while you're doing dishes, not "we are now sitting down and having this discussion." Part of life, folding clothes.

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Lyndon: The question comes up, you answer it. You take the time right then to stop or to continue what you're doing and answer.
Heather: But to have formal as well as informal discussions.

Families reported that formal religious conversations were often part of a structured religious activity, such as family devotions, gospel lessons, scripture study, or religious holidays. Ed, a 43-year-old Seventh-Day Adventist father of seven told how scripture study leads to family religious conversation: "We share with each other what scripture means to us. Scriptures can be a stimulus for conversation and thought." A 42-year-old Presbyterian mother of three, Tasha said, "When we have our devotions, I have questions and I try to get them [the children] to think."

Location and Frequency

Families indicated that religious conversations primarily took place at home and sometimes in the car. Many described having had casual religious conversations in the kitchen area during dinnertime, while preparing meals, or while doing the dishes.

Many participants indicated how much they thought they talked about religion. Five families reported that they did not talk about religion much and 10 families said that they discussed religion quite frequently, some even daily. A few parents and adolescents reported that the children spoke more often with the mother than with the father. One family suggested that it was because the mother spent more time with the children. A 14-year-old Latter-day Saint youth, Hailey, said that she talked to her mother more than her father about life situations, such as problems with friends, as well as about scripture questions, and her reasoning was, " 'Cause I'm more comfortable talking to my mom." It is noteworthy that Hailey mentioned that she sometimes got annoyed that her father always related faith and scriptures to her life.

Conversational Processes in Parent-Adolescent Religious Conversations

Not all that was said about parent-adolescent religious conversations was positive. In fact, both parents and adolescents were candid about their frustrations as well as their satisfaction with their religious discussions. Through analysis of the patterns of positive and negative experiences, two main conversational processes were identified and labeled: *parent centered*

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and *youth centered*. Out of the 52 families whose interviews directly contributed to this study, 46 (88%) referred to conversations that were parent centered and/or youth centered. Youth-centered (transactional) conversations were mentioned by all 46 families, while 14 of those families (30%) also reported parent-centered conversations. Of the 339 total passages coded for parent-centered and/or youth-centered conversations, only 42 (12%) referred to parent-centered conversations.

Findings suggest that parent-adolescent conversations were more emotionally positive for youth and parents when they were youth centered and less emotionally positive when parent centered. Parents and adolescents reported that when religious conversation was focused on the adolescent child's needs and interests, the adolescents were engaged, interested, and enjoyed discussing religion. In contrast, when the conversations were tailored more to the parents' desires and needs, the adolescents were more likely to be disengaged and uninterested. The following sections provide data illustrating the processes in parent-centered and youth-centered conversations.

Parent-Centered Approaches to Religious Conversation

Both parents and adolescents spoke of situations in which religious conversations were not as pleasant or effective for the adolescents or parents. Typically these situations involved an overemphasis on the parents' desires and a lack of attention to the adolescent's interests. They consisted mostly of unidirectional talk from the parent to the adolescent and thus were categorized as parent-centered approaches to religious conversation. Four main characteristics of parent-centered conversation were as follows: (a) Parents talk too much, (b) parents' talk is unsolicited or unwanted, (c) parents give demands without explanation, and (d) conversation is too restrictive for the adolescents.

Parents talk too much. Some parents acknowledged that they had the tendency to talk to their children about religion more than the children preferred. Heidi, a 35-year-old Latter-day Saint mother of four, reported, "We talk to them an awful lot more than they want us to." A 40-year-old Lutheran mother of three, Elizabeth, spoke for herself and the children when she said, "Every once in a while, we have to remind Matt [the father] that he's preaching to the choir."

Adolescents reported some frustration with religious conversation when their parents talked too much. Chad, a 12-year-old Episcopalian,

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explained how his parents sometimes made him talk with them longer than he would like:

> Sometimes I ask a question and then I think that they go too far because they start talking too much. . . . And then I say that I don't want to discuss it anymore and I try to walk away and then they have me come back in and I'm, like, really mad.

In Chad's account of this situation, he initiated the conversation with a question, and his parents were willing to answer his question. At first, this could be seen as a youth-centered conversation. However, when his parents insisted on talking about it more than Chad wanted to, it ended up as a negative experience for him.

Parents' religious talk is unsolicited or unwanted. Some parents and adolescents indicated that at times, the parents spoke to the children about religion when it was unsolicited or unwanted by the child. Hailey, a 14-year-old Latter-day Saint was irritated that her father always spoke of religious principles: "He always, for every situation, even something as a math problem, he can relate a scriptural principle. . . . And it can get really annoying."

Some parents also expressed their desire to expose their children to their faith. Joann, a 49-year-old African American Methodist mother of one told how her 16-year-old daughter, Jasmine, reacted when Joann insisted on exposing her to a scripture: "Jasmine just rolls her [eyes] . . . And if she just says, 'Mom, I don't want to hear it;' it's like, 'okay fine' [but] meanwhile, I've said it."

Rachel, a Hasidic Jewish mother, explained that even when they initially gave their children a chance to talk but then took over the conversation, the children did not always listen:

> We have relaxed conversation at the table, and then, we, either my husband or myself, after ten minutes we tell the kids to hold onto their chair, just try to listen. And they don't always listen as well as we'd like them to listen and they sometimes are like "blah, blah, blah."

Parents give demands without explanation. Many parents expressed the need for their children to choose their own faith; however, some reports indicated times when parents told their child how to behave without providing adequate explanation about the expectation. Charlotte, a 56-year-old Presbyterian, recounted a conversation in which she made her 14-year-old son, Shane, go to church:

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Charlotte: But you've [Shane] made a comment a lot about, "How come we have to go to church? None of my other friends do. Why are we the only ones?" Which we're not.
Interviewer: And how do you respond to that when Shane asks that question? What do you say?
Charlotte: What do I say? Because that's what we do. We're going to church and you'll be better off for it. So get out of bed and get in the car.

This reported conversation was parent centered because the mother, Charlotte, did not really answer Shane's questions about going to church, but rather, insisted that he go. His questions may have indicated a negative outlook toward going to church, but they were left unanswered.

Although this theme was categorized as negative, it should be noted that not all instances of parents telling their children what to do were met with resistance. Maryam, a 17-year-old Asian American/Indian Muslim, explained:

> In Islam there's rights and duties upon the parents to the child and the child to the parents. And my right and duties [are that] I have to respect my parents. . . . I have to be kind, I have to obey them, no matter what, except in the case that they would ask me to do something against Islam. . . . I understand what they say, there's a wisdom behind it, and I understand what that is. And I know that it's better for me. If I don't understand it now, I just let it go, because I'm sure I'll understand it tomorrow or ten years from now.

A number of youth from more traditional faiths (Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, Muslims, Orthodox Jews) expressed that they felt a duty to obey their parents. However, despite strong variation in the approach to religious belief and practice among families in this study, it was our impression that there were no systematic differences between more traditional (orthodox or conservative) families and more progressive (liberal) families in terms of religious conversation processes.

Conversation is too restrictive. Some families reported that when religious conversation was too restrictive for the adolescent children, it was a negative experience. Rachel, a 38-year-old Hasidic Jewish mother of seven learned that, "If [they] have to sit rigidly—the children of all ages, and . . . you have this long lecture, it can actually be a very negative influence. Too, the kids will feel restricted." Alecia, a 20-year-old Latter-day Saint, said, "When it comes to family home evening . . . it feels forced sometimes just because we all have to sit here and talk about it." Shannon, a 17-year-old Seventh-Day Adventist, responded to her father's suspicion that she did not

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enjoy the religious holidays as much anymore, by suggesting that he "let [the children] talk too." Shannon's response showed that it was not the religious holidays she disliked but rather the fact that she had to listen to her father speak so long without a chance to say something as well. Other participants also indicated the need for adolescents to feel free to speak and not to feel coerced.

Not surprisingly, there was some variation in terms of parental hopes for the religious identity their children would adopt. Some of the more progressive parents said it was important to them that their adolescents choose their own religion, whether or not it was the same as their own. Most parents stated that they hoped their children would continue or come to share the parents' beliefs. It was mainly the more orthodox parents who indicated that they would be deeply disappointed if their children chose another faith.

In summary, less than one third of the families reported having had unidirectional religious conversations in which parents initiated, controlled, and dominated the conversation. These were termed *parent centered* due to the overemphasis on the parental desires and less attention on adolescent needs. In response to these conversations, adolescents were less interested in listening to and discussing religious issues. All of these families also reported having youth-centered conversations and many explained that because they had learned that parent-centered conversations were less effective, they had tried to make their conversations more youth centered.

Youth-Centered Approaches to Religious Conversation

The findings indicate that most parents were aware of their adolescent child's needs during religious conversations and tried to tailor the conversations accordingly. In contrast to the more hierarchical, unidirectional, parent-centered approaches to religious conversation, these were much more transactional in nature, encouraging or allowing the adolescent to play an active role in the discussions. Youth-centered conversations manifested the following characteristics: (a) Adolescent talks more and parents listen, (b) adolescent seeks and receives understanding from parents, (c) religion is related to adolescent's life, (d) conversation is open, and (e) parent-adolescent relationship is nurtured. Findings suggest that youth-centered conversations were the most engaging, enjoyable, and effective in helping adolescents understand their parents' religiosity and explore their own religious beliefs.

We labeled this type of approach to religious conversation *youth centered*, rather than transactional, as (a) they occurred because parents realized the

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needs of their adolescent children to participate much more in the conversation instead of being lectured or preached to by parents and (b) parents' motivation for engaging in this type of conversation was to respond to the interests and needs of their adolescent child and to build a better relationship with their child.

Adolescent talks more and parents listen. Some parents shared their discovery that with their adolescent children, they needed to listen more and talk less. Rachel, a Hasidic Jewish mother, said, "We find the older kids get, they have so much to say, and . . . after a whole day of school, they come home and they don't want to hear us talk, they want to talk." Kira, a Lutheran mother responded why she thought it best to use fewer words: "I've learned that less words are better because sometimes if you just plant the seed, their mind will work on it." She referred to the need for children to think and come to conclusions on their own, instead of being lectured to. Earlier on in her interview, Kira reported her tendency to want to speak up when she disagrees with her children. She had learned from her husband's example that it's better to listen more than talk:

> I tend to react when they say something and I have learned from Aaron [husband] to listen. I've got two ears, one mouth. . . . He can talk to them or listen to them and throw out one or two words and they feel very comfortable.

Brent, a Jehovah's Witness father, suggested that by letting his adolescent children express themselves, he could better understand them: "And also understanding what their thinking patterns are, and what they're going through. And allowing them to communicate that."

One Latter-day Saint family spoke of how they let their children speak more during formal religious activities. The mother, Charlene, explained that during family scripture study, they have each child read and then explain the meaning of the verse and then "if anybody has any thoughts, 'Oh that's like when this happened' or anything like that, then people say that." Her 13-year-old son, Bradley added, "Sometimes we [children] teach the family home evening lesson."

Adolescent seeks and receives understanding from parents. One of the most commonly mentioned youth-centered ways that parents and adolescents communicated was through questions solicited by either parents or adolescents. Parents asked the adolescents questions to get their feedback, to prompt them to think, and to test their level of understanding. The adolescents asked questions on topics of interest. For some adolescents, these

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questions were in response to peer, school, or media influences. Questions were commonly about religious beliefs, values, or how to treat others. A comment by Lyndon, a 35-year-old Latter-day Saint father of four, suggested not only the need to answer the child's questions, but to "take the time right then." Mandy, a 15-year-old Christian and Missionary Alliance youth, commented about her parents' readiness to answer her questions: "And they're always willing to talk to me about any questions I had. And they explained what they believed to me."

When trying to help their children understand religion, the parents did not always know the best answer to their child's questions. Sophie, a Presbyterian mother, said, "Sometimes I have an answer for him [adolescent child] and sometimes I go, 'you know, you've got a point.'" Kelsey, a 13-year-old Orthodox Christian, commented, "Sometimes my parents don't know the answer so then it's kind of a discussion because they don't have the answer to give me." Mindy, a 15-year-old Lutheran, also explained how difficult questions led to a conversation and even a joint family search for an answer:

> A lot of times it's me and Natalie [10 year-old sister] coming up with questions. And it's usually when we're all sitting in the living room together and a question will pop into our head. We'll ask, "Dad, what is this? What does that mean?" And we always have a Bible around and it's amazing because then we'll look it up in the Bible and we'll talk about it.

Another way that parents tried to help their children understand their religious views was by reasoning on the child's level. Yuusif, an East Indian Muslim father, said that one element of religious conversations is "explaining to them [his children] in a way they can understand. . . . and reason[ing] with them." A 43-year-old Presbyterian father of three, Thomas, explained a similar way of reasoning together by saying, "I take the approach of coming alongside rather than trying to parent down to them."

Religion is related to adolescent's life. Parents and adolescents recognized the importance of having religious conversations that link faith beliefs with the adolescent's life. Scott, a 14-year-old Catholic, spoke of his parents: "I just feel like they always try to bring religion into our lives and to make us better." Paul, a 46-year-old Christian Scientist father of two said, "I think the time where it comes most to its surface is applying what we know and believe at times of conflict." Yuusif, a Muslim father, said:

> We try and take every situation that they face, the children, and show them the faith perspective of each thing that happens, good or bad, and to remind

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> them when something good happens, that this is from God and how they should be thankful to Him. And when something happens by way of a trial, how to be patient and also to be assured that there's going to be good in that too, because it has come from God with a purpose that we have not understood at this moment.

Similarly, Julie, a 55-year-old Latter-day Saint mother of three, said they looked for opportunities to relate their faith teachings to their life:

> I think we're pretty open and verbal about what we believe and if we think that the moment is teachable and we use that to teach Beth [16-year-old daughter] about Heavenly Father, and the Holy Ghost, and what's happening in the world today.

Some families spoke of connecting religion to their child's life during formal religious discussions. Shawn, a Baptist father, said the following, when speaking of family devotions: "There's always the challenge of, 'okay let's really make this relevant,' or helping them see the usefulness." Ed, a Seventh-Day Adventist father illustrated how during family devotions, he used the scriptures to ask questions about issues in their own lives:

> This is what the scriptures say, what are we going to do now? How is that speaking to each of us individually? How is that going to change our life? Where does our life need to change? Where are we falling short? Where do we need to focus our attention? Where are we deficient in our own relationships?

Conversation is open. There were many families who spoke about how they valued openness in their religious conversations, which allowed everyone to speak their minds. Alecia, a 20-year-old Latter-day Saint, gave an adolescent perspective when she said she enjoyed casual conversation where she could talk:

> If it's a one-on-one conversation, it's usually pretty interesting. It's interactive. I enjoy talking about religion. . . . Most of the time when we're just talking as friends more than anything like on a casual basis, it's usually pretty cool. . . . I'll say something to [my mom] about religion and she'll be like, "Yeah, that's awesome. I have a story that goes with whatever you were talking about." And I'm like, "Oh that's really cool." And you know we can talk about it casually and not have to worry.

Kira, a Lutheran mother, thought openness is best but explained why this is difficult for her:

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> Just let them have their ideas and their thoughts and . . . I tend to flip out because I'm afraid, "Oh my gosh, they're going down the wrong path" and to realize that's all part of growing up, testing out their own faith, challenging us. . . . I'm still in the process of learning that.

For some families, their open conversations were usually calm and respectful. Elizabeth, a Lutheran mother, and her 15-year-old daughter, Mindy, said:

> Elizabeth: There's lots of times where, "I see it," "No I see it this way." "But what about this?"
> Mindy: But it's usually calm.
> Elizabeth: It's calm, but everybody has a view. And some of us are more passionate about our views than others.

Aisha, a 46-year-old African-American Muslim mother of 11, said:

> We talk a lot. We have very in-depth conversations because you can see they're very verbal. They have their opinions. And we've always told them that you can always say what you need to say, but just say it with the right tone. You know, so they're allowed to express themselves, even if they disagree with us. We don't have a problem with that, it's just how you say it.

This Muslim family had guidelines on how comments were to be made, although content was open. Some families reported that the level of openness in their religious conversations allowed for arguments. Some Jewish families explained that openness and even arguing were a welcomed and positive part of their culture. Arella, a 42-year-old Conservative Jewish mother of two, said "Jews are very open. They always tell it like it is. They're just open, they're out there. No one holds back anything." Esther, a 12-year-old Conservative Jewish girl, explained, "Well it's kind of a stereotypical thing that we [Jewish families] argue a lot, but it's true."

Parent-child relationship is nurtured. Some parents spoke of religious conversation in connection with their desire to be close to their children by spending time with them, seeking to understand them, and encouraging them. Kari, a Christian and Missionary Alliance mother, articulated the importance of being available for conversation with her children when they needed her: "Be there to talk to them and help them through things and love them unconditionally through hard times that do come, and good times as well. Spend time together." Yuusif, a Muslim father, spoke of the need to be "constantly alert with them and close to them in understanding what they're

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going through." Amy, a 45-year-old Baptist mother of two, expressed her efforts to compliment her children and be a good friend to them:

> And I think also trying to encourage them and to just let them know how much I respect and admire them and appreciate them as people and who they are and how proud I am of them. . . . I still play with my kids; and I'm very affectionate and I hug them. And even though I'm their mother, I'm also their friend.

The participants suggested that religious conversation can help foster a healthy parent-adolescent relationship. Jack, an 18-year-old Baptist, told how his friends' parents neglected the parent-child relationship while still trying to transmit beliefs:

> I've seen some of my friends have acted, where parents are slamming Bible verses in their face, and really not loving them, not helping them grow. It's more like a forceful thing, at unnecessary times. When it really would have been helpful just for them to sit down and talk with their kid.

In sum, 88% (46/52) of families provided some description of youth-centered conversations; many had recognized the need to adjust their religious conversations to be more youth centered. They reported that youth-centered conversations fostered adolescent interest and engagement in the conversations. Both parents and youth reported that youth-centered conversations fostered adolescent interest and engagement in the conversations. Parents—including the more traditional ones—also seemed to enjoy and value more youth-centered conversations because it was apparent to them that their children were more likely to feel better about both their parents and their faith during and after these kinds of conversations.

Discussion

In this study, we analyzed the conversation processes manifest when highly religious parents and their adolescent children discussed religion. The purpose of this study was to explore (a) the context of parent-adolescent conversations on religious issues, (b) the processes involved in parent-adolescent conversations involving religion, and (c) the qualities of conversational processes that are most beneficial for the religious exploration and development of youth.

In the discussion and conceptual model, we make no attempt to claim cause and effect. However, because parents and adolescents themselves

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suggested certain patterns and outcomes of religious conversation, a careful analysis of their responses allowed for the construction of a conceptual model that suggests concepts and processes grounded in the data.

Conversational Processes

Core concept. Scholars such as LaRossa (2005) have suggested that qualitative research should result in a core concept that captures the main finding of the study. The core concept of this study is, "When parent-adolescent religious conversations are youth-centered, the emotional experience is more positive for parents and adolescents than when they are parent-centered." This is congruent with models that hypothesize that the quality of the parent-child interactions has more influence than the specific content that parents are trying to teach (e.g., Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). Interview data indicate that both parent-centered and youth-centered conversations influenced adolescents, but the latter were more related to positive adolescent reactions.

Traditional and progressive families. Parents from both traditional and progressive faith communities reported that they understood the value of transactional conversation processes over a more hierarchical or preachy or parent-centered approach. It may be that more traditional and devout parents and adolescents are as much influenced by the culture of adolescent individualism as more progressive families. Or it may be that the deeply held value of passing religious faith to the next generation leads more traditional parents to use whatever approach they think is most likely to encourage their children to choose these beliefs and practices for themselves.

Parent-Centered Conversations

Participants indicated that negative responses by adolescents were most often in conjunction with parent-centered conversations. These were characteristic of parents dominating the conversation in terms of what, when, and how much was said, thus allowing the adolescent very little influence on the conversation. Conversations were too rigid and controlled, thus stifling the adolescents' ability to add to or change the discussion. It seemed that parents were talking to their adolescents, rather than with them. A number of issues discussed in the literature relate to findings from this study on parent-centered conversations. This section addresses the transmission of values and adolescent autonomy.

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Transmission of values. Lee, Rice, and Gillespie (1997) analyzed different family worship patterns among Seventh-Day Adventists to distinguish which patterns were most likely to lead to child internalization of religious values. They found that when parents led the faith discussions and excluded child participation, the child had less active faith than those who did not worship at all. Findings from the current study support this and other studies: parental transmission of values through one-way conversations (preaching to, talking at) is not the best method for transmitting faith to children and may even be counterproductive (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Flor & Knapp, 2001).

Adolescent autonomy. Research on parent-adolescent relationships has found that when parents are restrictive in conversations, they inhibit expression and discovery of self. However, when parents encourage an adolescent to express his or her own opinions, even when contrary to parent's ideas, it can foster sense of identity, self-confidence, and autonomously chosen values (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Quintana & Lapsley, 1987). The current study contributes to this literature by providing in-depth detailed accounts from parents and adolescents illustrating and explaining how the lack of psychological and verbal autonomy can be stifling or frustrating in religious conversation. Findings also illustrate how parents recognize these changing needs in their adolescent children and attempt to adapt their own conversational styles to meet the adolescent's needs.

Youth-Centered Conversations

This section will discuss how the findings on youth-centered conversations relate to existing literature. It specifically addresses (a) transactional conversations, (b) open conversations, and (c) the parent-adolescent relationship.

Transactional conversations. Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) found that religious conversations between parents and younger children were typically transactional, characterized by the child taking an active role in asking questions and ending conversations. The current study supports these findings in that the great majority of the families (88%) manifested (or were striving to have) youth-centered transactional conversations because parents had learned that these were most effective for the adolescents. Our study also provides insight about how parent-adolescent conversations can be transactional. In addition to findings from Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) about children taking an active verbal role by asking questions, and initiating and terminating conversations, this study found that youth want to be even

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more involved verbally than when they were younger, and they have more of an influence on the purpose, content, and processes of conversations. Our study is also unique in that it provides insight into parental recognition and sensitivity to adolescent cognitive, verbal, and identity development, and illustrates how parents adjust accordingly.

Flor and Knapp (2001) found that more frequent transactional conversations predicted greater adolescent internalization of parental religious values. The current study helps clarify why youth-centered transactional conversations are more influential. Findings suggested that youth have an increasing need to talk and be heard, to understand the world around them, and to choose their own religious identity. Lee et al. (1997) found that for adolescents, "family worship which encourages exploring and sharing personal insights may increase the likelihood of internalizing and applying concepts to daily living" (p. 373).

Open conversations. Findings from the current study on the importance of open religious conversations, in which adolescents feel comfortable exploring their personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, are consistent with other research on adolescent development. Adolescence is a time of identity formation; but until late adolescence, values and beliefs are likely to be exploratory, with continued searching and questioning (Steinberg & Scott, 2003). When adolescents are not allowed to explore and form their own religious views, they may end up accepting someone else's religious identity as their own without true conviction or rejecting religion altogether (Marcia, 2002; Markstrom-Adams, 1992).

Parent-adolescent relationship. Interview data suggested that youth-centered religious conversations are a means to foster the parent-adolescent relationship and usually result in positive adolescent perceptions of religious conversations. Given that the parent-child relationship is the greatest influence in shaping many important decisions made by adolescents (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000), parent-adolescent religious conversations may be a mediator influencing important decisions made by adolescents—at least for religious youth. Future research should explore this possibility.

Findings from this study support the claim by Collins and Laursen (2004) that regardless of variance in family relationships due to cultural and ethnic differences, "family environments that emphasize mutuality, respect for the child's opinions, and training for maturity seem to be most effective" (p. 354). Findings suggest that adolescents are eager to involve their parents in this discovery process if they feel the conversation is open, safe, and helpful.

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Future research might compare these findings on parent-centered and youth-centered conversations to parent-adolescent conversation about various age-relevant topics, such as school, friends, extracurricular activities, future goals/career, and ethnic identity.

Limitations

Sample. This study used a purposive sample of religiously homogamous, two-parent, highly religious families; therefore, its findings are not necessarily generalizable to the general population. Further research will be needed to determine whether the theoretical ideas and empirical findings of the current study are present among families who (a) are only moderately or minimally religious, (b) have religious heterogeneity, (c) include nonreligious members, (d) only have one parent involved in the faith, or (e) have a single-parent home.

The sample's ethnic diversity was broader than that of most previous studies on religious parents and adolescents, yet it was still too narrow to achieve theoretical saturation concerning differences in parent-adolescent religious conversations due to ethnicity. Given that religion often holds great importance for ethnic minority families (Dollahite et al., 2004), future studies may seek a more ethnically diverse sample to explore differences in parent-adolescent conversations.

Methods. Interviewing parents and adolescent children together produces data rich with parent-child interactions; yet it is possible that in each other's presence, some parents and adolescents may have presented socially or relationally desirable answers, thus withholding negativity or disagreement. We observed a couple of cases of this but noticed far more times when parents and adolescents were open about disagreement and worked through the discussion until they all expressed their opinion, which resulted in a more complete answer. Therefore, it is possible that they were more honest together because they were aware that other family members were listening and would not allow them to misrepresent their family life.

Conclusions and Implications

Nearly three quarters of Christian parents report that their faith is "very important" or "extremely important" in shaping their major life decisions (Smith & Denton, 2005) and 90% of parents desire religious training for their children (Gallup & Castelli, 1989). For "a substantial minority" of Americans, religion is "the single most important influence" in their lives

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(Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p. 25). Thus, many parents and youth are likely interested in understanding how to improve conversation processes where religion is concerned.

Some important conclusions can be drawn from the current study. First, when it comes to parent-adolescent religious conversation in contemporary America, even highly religious parents who have traditional religious values of hierarchical family relationships recognize the need to adjust methods of conversation with their adolescent children in order to allow for autonomy in an individualistic culture. They recognized the adolescent's need to freely initiate, direct, and contribute to the discussion. When parents did not adjust their conversational approach to meet their adolescent's increasing need for individualism, they controlled and dominated the discussion, resulting in adolescent children who said they were less interested, less engaged, and less likely to participate in future religious conversations.

This study has implications for learning and the socialization and internalization of values among youth. This study demonstrated that (a) there are different kinds of religious conversations between youth and parents, (b) some types of conversations are dominated by adults but most are not, (c) those conversations that are more mutual are experienced more positively emotionally by the youth and their parents, and (d) transactional religious conversations foster the autonomous exploration of religious topics and the religious socialization of youth. This implies that when conversations between parents and youth around religious issues allow for both actors to participate, express viewpoints, and ask questions, both sets of actors enjoy the conversations more. More enjoyable conversations may foster exploration and religious values internalization in a way that less enjoyable conversations do not.

There is evidence that, among children, the value of choice, agency, and independence differs across cultures (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). This suggests that if a family is part of a racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious subculture that values and upholds parental authority over adolescent autonomy, interdependence over independence, or doctrinal certainty over theological exploration, then the youth may actually be uncomfortable with the degree of autonomy that typical American youth prefer. Accordingly, it may be that the youth and/or the parents in that family would enjoy and prefer a more parent-centered approach to religious conversation. However, based on the pervasive cultural value of adolescent autonomy in contemporary America, our research suggests that parents who desire to see their adolescent children more willingly, happily, and frequently engage with them on matters of faith would be well-advised to adopt a conversational style that focuses on the needs, interests, questions, and perceived time constraints that their kids bring to the conversational table.

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We believe these findings are relevant to more than just religious or spiritual people and issues. In fact, religious conversations did not always deal with theology or ritual but rather how religious beliefs, values, and practices informed other domains of daily life such as peers, dating, family, media, school, politics, and current issues. Future research may consider implications from this study on parent-adolescent conversations of various topics.

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