

Giving Up Something Good for Something Better

Sacred Sacrifices Made by Religious Youth

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The concept of sacrifice was formerly a key variable in theorizing about religion and society. Secularization theory and conceptual models equating sacrifice with cost have reduced its usage and apparent relevance, although it continues to be of interest in anthropology and religious studies. Research on sacrifice has been neglected in the social sciences, especially in studies of religiosity and families. Seventy-seven religious adolescents in 55 religious Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Mormon families in New England and northern California were interviewed about whether they felt they had been asked to make sacrifices for their faith as they were growing up. This article discusses how contemporary religious youth view the sacrifices they make for religious reasons. Adolescents reported sacrifices in five domains: societal expectations, popular culture, comforts and pleasures, time and activities, and peer relations. Youth gave the following reasons for being willing to make sacrifices: connecting to a higher meaning or purpose, connecting to God, connecting to the faith tradition or community, fulfilling expectations, feeling affective benefits, and avoiding problems.

Keywords: *religiosity; spirituality; adolescence; youth; families; sacrifice*

One of the universal aspects of religion, both historical and contemporary, is that it asks something of adherents that takes them outside or beyond themselves. Historically, believers have sacrificed their time, desires, possessions, and even their own and others' lives in accord with the

perceived wishes of divine powers. The great psychologist of religion William James (1985/1902) suggested that “the impulse to sacrifice is the main religious phenomenon. It is a prominent, a universal phenomenon certainly, and lies deeper than any special creed” (p. 303).

While sacrifice is a historic cornerstone for religious expression, the role it plays in contemporary society may be questionable. Almost a quarter century ago, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) concluded that marital commitments and family obligations in America were threatened by a pervasive “therapeutic individualism” that devalued the concept of self-sacrifice. Americans believed in love, they said, but they also believed in the self, and an emphasis on “rewarding” relationships expressing individuality and freedom seemed to take precedence over relationships based in commitment and obligation. The concept of self-sacrifice, at least in positive contexts, was fading from usage. Among couples they interviewed,

Even the most secure, happily married of our respondents had difficulty when they sought a language in which to articulate their reasons for commitments that went beyond the self. These confusions were particularly clear when they discussed problems of sacrifice and obligation . . . [T]hey were troubled by the ideal of self-denial the term “sacrifice” implied. (Bellah et al., 1985, pp. 109-110)

Speaking of children from such couples, a European demographer commented that a generation of such children, themselves beneficiaries of parental sacrifice, might not have learned how to sacrifice (Van de Kaa, 1987). Other writers lamented the passing from politically correct language of many of the concepts associated with personal sacrifice and obligation (L’Engle, 1980; Schumacher, 1973). Now, a generation on, it is appropriate to ask about how the devaluation of self-sacrifice has affected the definitions and experience of sacrifice in contemporary families, especially among young people. The purpose of the present study is to explore sacrifice as a form of religious expression among adolescents and to illuminate the types of sacrifices they make and the meaning they attach to those sacrifices.

In the following pages, we consider the responses of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Mormon youth to questions about the sacrifices they make as

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a result of their religious beliefs. First, we discuss definitions of sacrifice and the place of sacrifice in contemporary religiosity, family life, and popular culture. Next, we provide a review of recent research on the religiosity of American adolescents and explain our reasoning for further inquiry into religious sacrifice among them. A description of data collection and analytical techniques is followed by findings on the meanings and consequences of religious sacrifice in the lives of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Mormon youth from these religious families.

Literature Review

Defining Sacrifice and Its Trajectory

A sacrifice is “a specific act or a series of specific acts in a religious world of meaning” (Sykes, 1980, p. 62). A sacrifice “transfers an object into the sphere of the sacred” (Pongratz-Leisten, 2007, pp. 5-6). Hubert and Mauss (1898/1964) observed that the term *sacrifice* “immediately suggests the idea of consecration,” for “in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain; it is consecrated” (p. 9). This consecration “extends beyond the things consecrated . . . [and] touches the moral person who bears the expenses of the ceremony,” or who sacrifices, who thereby acquires a religious character he or she did not have before (Hubert & Mauss, 1898/1964, p. 9). The sacrifice changes the sacrificer in a religious direction. It affects one’s identity.

Keenan (2005) cited E. B. Tylor’s proposal that

sacrifice was originally a gift to the gods to secure their favor or minimize their hostility, then as homage (with no expectation of a return on one’s sacrificial investment), and finally as renunciation (in which the sacrificer more fully offered him or herself). (p. 14)

Keenan (2005) takes the definition even further, stressing the uneconomical nature of sacrifice:

It involves selflessness, giving without reserve. Sacrifice has to be beyond calculation and hope of a reward, so as not to be construed as self-serving (and, there, not a genuine sacrifice). Sacrifice must necessarily be a sacrifice *for nothing*, a sacrifice for no reason, no goal. It must necessarily be a nonsensical uneconomical sacrifice . . . performed without calculation. (p.1)

Economist Kenneth Boulding distinguished the voluntary grant, a one-way, altruistic transfer of resources without expectation of return from the

two-way transfer of resources in systems of exchange. Voluntary grants (or sacrifices) flow from altruism and caring, and they create love and solidarity. Systems of exchange require little sacrifice, and therefore exchange “has no such power to create community, identity, and commitment” (Boulding, 1973, p. 28).

Like religion, sacrifice has become secularized in the modern era. Hughes (2007) characterized the 18th century as “the century in which it first became possible to talk of making financial sacrifices” (p. 3), and the 19th century as the time when it became possible to “uncouple it from religion,” to take sacrifice “out of the sphere of religion altogether.” Previously, “sacrifice had been associated with social and religious systems.” Now it became a “means of exploring and articulating the subjective” (Hughes, 2007, pp. 146, 151).

Another version of this development is Mauss’s (1925/1967) depiction of a historical trend whereby goods formerly offered wastefully to the gods are now offered to charity. Thus, sacrifice and charitable giving may be seen as opposite sides of the same coin. With secularization, sacrifice declines and charitable giving increases. The distinction between sacrifices reflecting religious beliefs and those involving calculation has continued, although with the secularization of both religion and sacrifice the term is now applied more diversely.

One aspect of the secularizing trend has been an individualization or privatization of sacrifice. Some expressions of sacrifice that formerly integrated into community festival cycles, for example, have become increasingly individualized. Theorists of social development often see sacrifice as a source of social identity and solidarity in early societies, but they see the social component of sacrifice declining in importance over time. To the degree that this marginalization and individualization has occurred, Beattie’s (1980) advice that “what is probably the most interesting problem of all . . . [is] that of understanding sacrifice from the point of view of the participants” seems relevant. “What do they see as its purpose, and what are the categories, the ways of thinking about reality, which is implicit—sometimes indeed quite explicit—in their view of the matter?” (pp. 36-37).

Sacrifice, Popular Culture, and Parent-Child Relationships

Contemporary American popular culture can be characterized as hedonistic, secular, individualistic, and focused on immediate gratification, having both a cultural and linguistic aversion to the idea of self-sacrifice (Bahr

& Bahr, 2009, 2001). Many aspects of this popular culture are directed at youth and children in an effort to influence their ideas and purchases, and much of the programming and advertising directed at adolescents seems designed to encourage unabashed indulgence in a variety of material and sensual activities and purchases. This focuses the attention of youth on comforts, pleasures, and entertainment available in unending supply.

The popular culture also encourages parents to provide their children with enjoyable experiences and a range of material goods. Many parents try to give their children the luxuries and opportunities that the parents lacked as children and beyond that, to allow their children to “keep up,” materially and experientially, with their peers. Parents are expected to make sacrifices for their children, but in today’s culture, parents are often not encouraged to ask their children to make meaningful sacrifices. Generally, parental requests for children to give up valued time, activities, possessions, and status for religious reasons runs contrary to what the popular culture expects of parents. Personal sacrifice, especially by children, is countercultural activity.

The concept of sacrifice appears in research among Chinese adolescents as the least preferred among five possible strategies for the resolution of parent-child conflicts (the others are reframing, compromise, ego-centered, and escape). Self-sacrifice “requires children to give in to parental demands whenever conflict with parents arises,” and contemporary Chinese adolescents are no longer sufficiently committed to filial piety to see it as a preferred solution to family conflict (Yeh & Bedford, 2004, p. 135).

The secularization of sacrifice is apparent in its treatment by psychologists and psychiatrists as an aspect of mental health, typically representing pathology of some sort. Bakan (1968) sees sacrifice in biblical tradition as a representation of the “infanticidal impulse” and observes that “a confounding of self and other is present from the beginning in sacrifice” (p. 124). These views of sacrifice are in sharp contrast to beliefs of many religious individuals and families.

Family, Religion, and Sacrifice

The term *sacrifice* commonly appears as a synonym for the cost, often the high cost, of things. Thus, an immigrant mother refers to the struggles associated with migration to the United States as follows: “For the dream of being here, one sacrifices and suffers” (Paris, 2008, p. 145). Kochuyt (2004) identified two functions of self-sacrifice within poor families: it upholds parental honor (conforms to the traditional morality of parents and children) and builds solidarity with one’s children. A sacrifice of material

goods by one family member, often a parent, in service of another provides “material proof that love and affection really exist” (p. 149). Family “devotion and self-sacrifice appear to be irrational as long as one does not understand them as an asceticism which surpasses the present state of things. They are orientated towards a hereafter which makes all the efforts worth striving for” (Kochuyt, 2004, p. 154).

All the major world faiths emphasize the importance of family, and all prescribe sacrifices in service of family and kindred. However, the major Abrahamic faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism (here we follow Stark [1984, 1994] in considering Mormonism a “new world faith” distinct from traditional Christianity), all elevate sacrifice by reference to the scriptural accounts of the willingness of “Father Abraham” to obey the divine command to sacrifice his son. This relationship between father and son was of prime importance to Abraham, and the divine injunction to sacrifice his son is understood as a test of Abraham’s willingness to relinquish something of such great value to him as a witness of his devotion to God. The implications of this archetype continue to influence current notions of sacrifice among Abrahamic faith traditions today.

Judaism

The ancient Jewish practice of animal sacrifice ended with the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70. However, the story of the *Akedah* (Abraham’s binding of Isaac) is read on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), and when the *Shofar* (ram’s horn) is blown, it reminds the hearers that a ram was sacrificed in Isaac’s place. Indeed, throughout history, the *Akedah* was the inspiration for Jewish parents to be willing to sacrifice their lives (and even those of their children) rather than submit to forced conversion to another faith. The 1st-century heroic suicidal action of Jews at the Roman fortress Masada is a well-known instance of Jews choosing faith over life.

Christianity

Many Christians interpret the Abraham-Isaac story as a foreshadowing of Christ’s sacrifice, believing that God sacrificed his “Only Begotten Son” and that this sacrifice was eternally necessary to bring salvation to God’s other children. They believe that Christ had the power to prevent his own suffering and crucifixion, but he chose to be obedient in submitting his will to the will of the Father. Christians are likewise called on to take upon them “the cross” and make various sacrifices as they submit to the Father’s will.

In an oft quoted biblical verse, St. Paul called on Christians to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1).

Islam

According to the Qur’an, Allah commanded Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his firstborn son Ismail (Ishmael). This story is central to Islamic thought and ritual, as Muslims consider themselves to be descendants of Ibrahim through Ismail. A Muslim is one who submits to God, as symbolized through the Hajj ritual that focuses on the story of Ibrahim.

Mormonism

Latter-day Saint (LDS) theology and practice on sacrifice has linkages to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim beliefs. Like the others, LDS look to Abraham as the father of the faithful and teach their children that God has asked them to sacrifice personal time, money, energy, comforts, and “things of the world.” LDS teaching frequently mentions the sacrifices made by Mormon pioneers, and in their temples LDS make covenants to sacrifice time and means for religious purposes. Smith and Denton (2005) found that LDS teens were more likely than youth from most faiths to make sacrifices for religious reasons (see also Dollahite, 2007).

Common and Distinct Religious Expectations

In a daily, if much less momentous, reflection of the archetypal willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son or Jesus to sacrifice his life, religious involvement for Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Mormons typically includes giving up one’s time, energy, resources, convenience, and other valued things. Some delineation of common and distinct expectations is included below.

Common expectations. All faiths investigated in this article expect adherents to (a) regularly attend religious services, (b) engage in some type of regular prayer, (c) become familiar with the sacred texts and/or sacred history of the faith, (d) serve others in some way, and (e) contribute financially in some way.

Distinct expectations. In addition to these common expectations, many faiths have distinct expectations or requirements of adherents. These include (a) refraining from alcohol and other addictive substances (Muslims, LDS, Seventh-day Adventists), (b) refraining from typical activities on a holy day (Jews, Seventh-day Adventists, LDS), (c) wearing modest or

distinctive religious clothing (Orthodox Jews, Muslims, LDS), (d) restrictions on dating including chaperoned dating (Orthodox Jews, Muslims) or not dating until a certain age (LDS), (e) not engaging in sexual activity before marriage (Orthodox Jews, Conservative Christians, LDS, Muslims), (f) fasting of some type (Jews at Yom Kippur, Catholics and Orthodox Christians at Lent, Muslims at Ramadan, LDS on first Sunday of each month), (g) extensive religious education beyond that in worship services (Jews, Catholics, LDS), (h) not participating in activities generally expected of others (Jehovah's Witnesses not saying pledge of allegiance or celebrating Christmas or birthdays), (i) sharing their faith with others (Evangelical Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, LDS), and (j) dietary laws requiring adherents to eat only foods that are kosher (Jews), halal (Muslims), or that prohibit/discourage meat (Seventh-day Adventist) or coffee and tea (LDS).

These varied activities or prohibitions characterizing religious adherence may or may not be seen as a sacrifice by any given adherent at any given time. And the extent to which children and youth are expected to engage in religious observance varies across faiths and families and by age and (in some cases) gender.

This study seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent are contemporary American youth influenced by the ideals of sacrifice in their religious history, and the legacy of generations of parents and children making large and small sacrifices for each other and for their religious ideals? How are contemporary religious youth sacrificing for their faith? And what are their feelings about the nature and consequences of their sacrifices?

Religiosity in Adolescence

Smith, Faris, Denton, and Regnerus (2003) argued that the study of religiosity among youth is both important and interesting because (a) youth aged 10 to 19 represent 14% of the U.S. population; (b) adolescence is a time of great change, including religious change; (c) many religious institutions target individuals in this life stage for special influence; and (d) adolescence uniquely affords the chance to study important issues such as family, peer relations, and risk behaviors as they relate to religiosity.

It is helpful to examine the topic of adolescent religiosity in a sociohistorical context. Since the 1960s, public and media views of American youth have been largely negative (Cnaan, Gelles, & Sinha, 2004). Without accurate data to explore adolescent religiosity in the United States, we are left to these public and media interpretations of religiosity among American adolescents and theoretical abstractions of scholars and historians. Secularization theory predicts that the continuing "disenchantment" of youth with

traditional religion will weaken religious commitment and practice and that “in the face of scientific rationality and knowledge, religion’s influence on all aspects of life—from personal habits to social institutions—will encounter a dramatic decline” (Cnaan et al., 2004, p. 175). Though this perception pervades public and media views, these claims are not descriptive of the majority of youth.

Several large-scale national surveys, such as the College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey of more than 112,000 college freshmen in 2004 (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2006), a survey in 2000 by the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Youth Policy (Cnaan et al., 2004), and most notably the ongoing National Study of Youth and Religion (Smith & Denton, 2005), have produced hard data on the religious beliefs and behavior of young people both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. The consensus finding of these and related studies is that American youth are surprisingly religious, that religion continues to matter to them (though activity decreases somewhat in later adolescence and emerging adulthood), and that their religiosity tends to be associated with positive civic, social, and mental and physical health outcomes (Gibson, 2008; Rew & Wong, 2006; Sinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007; Smith & Denton, 2005).

Recent findings illustrate this point. Among 2,530 adolescent respondents aged 16 to 21 who participated in Wave 2 of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR) in 2005, 78% said they believed in God and 63% said they believed in a personal God; 75% said religious faith was somewhat, very, or extremely important; 56% pray once a week or more; and 50% attend religious services once a month or more. Though the frequency of public and private religious behaviors decreased when compared to Wave 1, it is interesting to report that when asked “Over the past three years, have you become more religious, less religious, or stayed the same?” 27% reported that they felt they had become more religious, 57% had stayed the same, and 16% had become less religious (Denton, Pearce, & Smith, 2008). Similarly, among the 112,232 entering college freshmen, most in their late teens, surveyed in 2004 in the CSBV survey, 81% said they attend religious services at least occasionally, 79% said they believed in God, 69% said they pray, and 40% said they were trying to follow religious teaching in their everyday lives (Astin et al., 2006, p. 5).

Though these statistics show a majority of American adolescents report religion is important in their lives, additional findings reveal a lack of in-depth engagement and an inability to articulate reasons for personal religious beliefs. Reeves (1996) reviewed polling data showing that surprisingly high numbers of adult Americans, often in the range of 80% to 90%, believed in God, prayed, believed in heaven, and considered themselves

religious. Reeves matched these data with survey responses about people's views on issues of social and personal morality and reported behavior, concluding that, in the words of Robert Wuthnow, "we therefore go about our lives pretty much the same as those who have no faith at all." (Reeves, p. 21) Reeves depicted American religion as superficial and shallow:

Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient, and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as love of God The faith has been overwhelmed by the culture, producing what is rightly called cultural Christianity. (p. 21)

A decade later, Smith and Denton's (2005) research on the continued vitality of religion among adolescents would note a similar tendency to superficiality and compatibility with modern cultural norms. Their version of cultural Christianity is "the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers," a religion they call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." Among the advantages of this "de facto creed" are the "therapeutic benefits" it offers its adherents. [pp. 163-164]

This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, and at peace. It is about subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people (Smith & Denton, 2005, pp. 163-164).

This "de facto creed" of teenage religiosity is not about personal sacrifice. Given the apparent dominance of therapeutic individualism with its emphasis on individualism and self-gratification, whether sacrifice still appears as an expression of faith among American youth is an open question. Although the NSYR identified a large portion of American teens who are religiously oriented, it also revealed that a sizable number of those adolescents were "incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious practices, and its meaning or place in their lives." Their inability to describe reasons for or meanings to their faith, Smith and Denton suggest, reflects both low priority given such knowledge and a commitment to low-key, nondemanding religion that they labeled "benign whateverism" or "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism"—a religion that is mainly "mental background" and "low visibility" (Smith & Denton, pp. 131, 137, 162-66).

In response to these findings, Dean (2005) concluded that one of the major differences between religiously devout adolescents and those who favor “the god of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (p. 8) is not necessarily the theology of the varying religions, but what their faith communities (including religious leaders and parents) offer the youth as religion, and more specifically, what they require of them. Dean argued that young people need “a theology robust enough to counter the American theological default position of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” They need “a substantive God—a God who is worthy of the sacrifice of time and energy religion requires” and “a community of consequence—namely a community that loves sacrificially, and that calls young people to love and sacrifice as well” (Dean, 2005, pp. 5, 12).

However, most adolescents do not participate in these practices of sacrifice. According to NSYR survey data, while a large number of American youth assert the importance of religion in their lives, only 24% of youth had “fasted or denied self something as spiritual discipline” at all in the past year, with rates by religious affiliation at 4% for nonreligious youth, 20% for Black Protestants, 22% for Conservative Protestants, 25% for Mainstream Protestants, 29% for Roman Catholics, 49% for Jews, and 68% for LDS. Although fasting or denying the self something is only one form of sacrifice, it is clear from these findings that though religious youth are much more likely to sacrifice in this way than their nonreligious peers, only a minority of religious adolescents regularly deny themselves something as part of their religious observance.

The single item question used in the NSYR survey leaves many questions unanswered about what other types of sacrifices youth are making in connection with their religious beliefs. Our purpose here is to explore the nature and meaning of the religious sacrifices that are being offered by a sample of religious youth, who despite the general sense that religion exists to help people feel “happy, good, better, and fulfilled” (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 168) are sacrificing in service of religious belief. Among the questions we shall consider are (a) what do they give up for their religion, and (b) what meaning do they assign to their sacrifices?

Method

Participants

Consistent with Boss’s (1980) suggestion that much can be learned from a sample prototypical of the variable of interest, we used a purposive sample (Berg, 2001) of religiously involved families. To reduce the possibility

that results were due to geographic factors, families in two locations (New England and northern California) were interviewed. Families were recruited by asking religious leaders (pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, etc.) to recommend families in their congregations that were “involved in the faith community” and “good representatives” of the ideals of the faith community. There was no effort to recruit families with youth that were particularly likely to sacrifice for their faith. When asked about their level of activity in the faith community relative to others, most families indicated they were probably among the more actively involved but nearly all were adamant that this did not mean they were better than others (more devout or religious).

The sample consisted of 55 married couples (32 from New England; 23 from northern California) and their 77 adolescent children (45 from New England; 32 from northern California; 39 girls, 38 boys). Of the 55 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-forties, had been married 21 years, and had three children (age range 1-11). Of the 55 families interviewed, 21 had two or more adolescent children participate in the interview. The 77 youth ranged in age from 10 to 20 years with a mean age of 15.5 (16 for girls, 15 for boys) and ethnic diversity similar to the parents.

Distribution of faith affiliation among the 55 families included (a) 5 Catholic, (b) 3 Orthodox Christian (2 Greek Orthodox, 1 Orthodox Church in America), (c) 12 Jewish (2 Hasidic, 4 Modern Orthodox, 4 Conservative, 2 Reform), (d) 4 Muslim, (e) 12 Mainline Protestant (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Methodist), (f) 11 New Christian Traditions (Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witness, LDS, Seventh-day Adventist), and (g) 8 Evangelical Protestant (Baptist, Charismatic Episcopal, Orthodox Presbyterian, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal).

Among the components of religiosity are spiritual beliefs, faith community involvement, and religious practices (Dollahite & Marks, 2009). These families were, for the most part, moderately to highly religious as reflected by their activity in these three areas. They averaged attendance at religious activities more than once a week, spent an average family total of 18 hours per week in religious activity, and donated an average of 7% of their income to their faith. It is important to note that there was significant variation within denominational groups in the degree to which participants described themselves as “highly religious” or “devout.” Also, what is considered highly religious for some faiths (e.g., Mainline Protestant) differs considerably from what is considered highly religious in others (e.g., Orthodox Judaism, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses). Therefore,

no specific distinction is made in what designates these families and adolescents as moderately or highly religious. When the term *highly religious* is used here, we refer to the sample as a whole in comparison to the general population.

Selection and Interview Procedures

We drew data from transcriptions of family interviews completed in New England in 2002 and northern California in 2004. After obtaining institutional review board approval, the first author met with 38 congregational leaders from various faith communities in the two areas to solicit names of families who were highly involved in their congregations. He then contacted the families by phone and e-mail, explained the aims and procedures of the study, and requested the approval and participation of parents and their adolescent children. He met with 1 to 3 families from each congregation. Interviews were conducted with the parents and youth together, mostly in homes (but occasionally in religious buildings). They were tape-recorded, typically lasting about 2 hours. Questions addressed the ways that family members felt their religion influenced their marriage and family life, their parenting, and their sense of identity. Participants were given token monetary compensation (New England: US\$20 per parent and US\$10 per adolescent; northern California: US\$75 per family).

Family interviews were conducted as recommended by Lofland and Lofland (1995). The interviewer began by giving a brief explanation of the study and an overview of topics to be covered. He then met with the parents to discuss how their religiosity influenced their marital relationship (not central to this report); next, adolescents joined in (for about an 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 most questions were directed to any and all of the participants. The interviews were semistructured, allowing the interviewer to guide the conversations while still remaining attentive to participants' personal ways of expressing their experiences and views.

Some researchers make the methodological assumption that family members should be interviewed individually to avoid other-influenced responses. An alternate approach followed in the present study is to interview 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 have said (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Babbie (2004) stated that interviewing people together "frequently brings out aspects of the topic that

would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals” (p. 303). Seymour, Dix, and Eardley (1995) stated that joint interviews reveal varied kinds of knowledge held by each person and produce more complete data as interviewees fill in each other’s gaps and memory lapses.

This method of family interviewing was helpful in this study because it provided opportunities for family members to remind each other of sacrifices made by youth. Also, 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 quite comfortable talking with adults other than their parents (Smith & Denton, 2005).

Parents and youth were typically asked 26 questions about different aspects of how religion influenced their personal lives, the family, and the parent-child relationships. The question prompting discussion of children’s experience of religious sacrifice was as follows: “Are there ways that the child(ren) in your family is/are asked to sacrifice for their faith?” Analyses for the New England sample (45 youth) involved a modified version of the original grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), using open and axial coding (Patton, 2002) in an attempt to determine the major types of sacrifices adolescents reported making. Based on results from the analysis of responses in the first sample (New England), a follow-up question was added for the interviews in the second sample (northern California): “Why do you feel you are willing to make these kinds of sacrifices for your faith?”

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 attempt to factor them into the research process. He paid specific attention to maintaining impartiality during the interview process. Aware of his predisposition to see the benefits of religiosity, he asked questions about the challenges and possible negative outcomes of respondents’ religiosity.

Analysis

Data for the present report derive 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 relevant information from parent-adolescent religious conversations. We applied a modified grounded theory approach to assess the

content of parent-adolescent religious conversations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), deriving conceptual constructs and models from the data and not our preconceptions.

Phase I of the analysis was conducted by the first and fourth authors. We began by transcribing the New England interviews (45 youth) verbatim and then employed qualitative methods to classify and code statements into categories that captured the major themes of types of sacrifices expressed by respondents. Relevant statements were then removed from their interview context to facilitate sorting by category. Similar types of sacrifice were grouped, and from these sets overarching sacrificial themes emerged. Sacrifice themes that were not sufficiently exclusive in definition were collapsed into like categories until only six themes remained. Statements found under each theme were then checked against the interviews of origin to ensure agreement between theme categorization and the respondent's meaning in context.

Seven coders rated each reported sacrifice as either a sacrifice related specifically to that participant's religion (unique sacrifice) or a sacrifice similar to those made by respondents belonging to other faith communities (common sacrifice). Accounts of sacrifices considered similar across faiths were copied verbatim into a single document, divided by their specific sacrifice themes. These were then reviewed to eliminate biases in interpretation. This was done by careful comparison of the verbatim responses with each other and by combining responses that were obviously two or more coder's interpretations of the same sacrifice. Any response that appeared to be an interpretation of the data instead of simply a grouping of the data was removed. Accounts of sacrifice listed by each coder as unique to a specific religion were copied and compiled into a single document. Each account of sacrifice was then assessed for interrater agreement.

Coders were also presented with descriptions of each theme, along with three to six comments from respondents pertaining to a specific theme, and were asked to rank each comment by how well they thought it illustrated the particular theme category. Then their rankings were compared to those given by the original coder. Adjustments were made in the rankings according to the degree of interrater agreement and reliability.

Phase II of the analysis, conducted by the second and fifth authors, included systematically comparing findings for the northern California sample (32 youth) with those from the first sample. Findings were generally consistent across samples, although two themes were collapsed into one theme to more accurately reflect the responses of the sample as a whole. This combined analysis resulted in five themes for types of sacrifices made by religious youth.

Analysis of the interviews to determine the reasons for sacrifice was completed by the first and second authors. The second author coded the transcripts for reasons or explanations for why the youth made the choices or participated in the activities they did. These reasons were grouped into categories, and both authors discussed the similarities and differences among the resulting themes. Two of the original themes were collapsed into one theme based on conceptual similarity. The second author identified quotes from the data that were representative of the themes.

In the presentation of findings, we have tried to ensure that religious composition of the sample is accurately reflected in the number of illustrative quotes, while ensuring that the religious minorities in the sample are adequately represented. Although there was some editing (e.g., removing “like” and other verbal pauses), we have tried to portray accurately in the respondent’s language the nature of the themes presented.

Findings

Types of Sacrifice

In response to the question “Are there ways that the child(ren) in your family is/are asked to sacrifice for their faith?” parents and children reported many forms of sacrifice. Responses were classified using qualitative approaches designed simply to categorize the major themes. The themes are not intended to be orthogonal categorizations of the responses. Many of the sacrifices made fit into more than one theme because of different components of the sacrifice. Based on the analyses, the following themes emerged: (a) societal expectations, (b) popular culture, (c) comforts and pleasures, (d) time and activities, and (e) peer relations.

Each of these five themes will be explained in detail. For each theme, we will (a) briefly describe the theme, (b) list some of the common sacrifices across the various Abrahamic faiths, (c) list some of the unique sacrifices mentioned by the youth of various faiths, and (d) present representative statements from adolescents who illustrate each theme. There were no discernable differences in the ways youth in New England and northern California discussed religious sacrifices.

Societal Expectations

The major feature of this theme was religious behaviors that do not follow traditions or values held by the society and community.

Common sacrifices. The societal expectations sacrifices mentioned by respondents from several denominations included wearing religiously distinctive clothing, living as a unique religious minority, feeling endangered because of religion, marrying young with strong parental input, and choosing traditional family roles.

A 17-year-old Hasidic Jewish female said,

In this day and age for someone to be like yeah, I want to be a mom basically, you know everyone kind of looks at me funny. I mean last year I was a junior at public school and my English teacher . . . said how many of you girls want to have a career as opposed to be a mother and I didn't raise my hand. And she you know was sort of taken aback.

Unique sacrifices. Youth sacrifices mentioned by members of specific faith communities having to do with not following societal expectations included Jewish youth not celebrating Christmas or Easter and having a unique identity as being Jewish; Jehovah's Witness and Muslim youth not celebrating Halloween and Christmas; and Muslim youth wearing distinctive clothing (i.e., the hijab scarf for women) in a time of anti-Islamic feeling (this is particularly relevant since the interviews in New England were conducted only months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York).

A 17-year-old Muslim female said,

When I was younger, I wanted to go to my friend's Halloween party, go to like the Christmas things. But at that time for me it wasn't giving up anything, like for religious reasons, because they [my parents] asked me to. And I felt that, Oh, these are my friends, you know, I want to do that.

Popular Culture

Responses under this theme include religious sacrifices that adolescents make regarding popular culture, such as entertainment, dress and appearance, and substance use.

Common sacrifices. The ways that youth from several denominations reported sacrificing their participation in popular culture included being a critical media consumer, selectively choosing appropriate music and entertainment, not imitating teen idols, dressing modestly, not drinking or doing drugs, keeping language clean, avoiding "alternative lifestyle" conversations, and being honest.

A 16-year-old Presbyterian male said,

I think the biggest thing that I've had to give up is the temptation of when you're my age, of just going out and having a good time and not caring what other people think about you and just doing what your impulses tell you to do.

Unique sacrifices. Sacrifices unique to particular faith communities relevant to participation in the popular culture included Muslim youth not following popular clothing fads or trends, and LDS youth following church counsel to keep their bodies clean by not drinking, smoking, or being tattooed.

A 12-year-old LDS female said,

I'm not supposed to smoke; I'm not supposed to drink alcohol. I'm not supposed to do things that are going to hurt my body. I'm not supposed to get tattoos because my body is a temple and I'm supposed to keep it clean and pure because I mean you don't go to any temple and see graffiti of a skull or a pink butterfly or anything on it. You don't see writing on it. It's just white and it's pure and I want my body to be that way.

Comforts and Pleasures

This theme includes responses about religious sacrifices that adolescents make by giving up comforts and pleasures such as food, sleep, watching television, or voluntarily donating money or other resources. These are mostly sacrifices of consumption or resources.

Common sacrifices. Sacrifices of comforts and pleasures that young people across many denominations reported making include paying tithes and offerings, donating material goods to others, possessing fewer material goods, missing television programs or other media presentations, giving up sleep to participate in religious activities, consciously living one's life as a sacrifice, and making decisions to please God instead of self.

A 14-year-old Catholic female said,

Going to church every Sunday, my friends are, not a lot of them do that and so they're like, "How do you get up so early?" or like Saturday night they'll ask if I want to spend the night or something like that. I'll just have to say no because I have to go to church in the morning and they'll just be like, "Can't you just miss 1 week?" or something like that. And, nope.

Unique sacrifices. Among the ways that religious youth in particular faith communities said they sacrificed their comforts and pleasures were Jewish

youth eating out only at kosher establishments, Christian scientists not taking medicine for religious reasons, giving up particular foods (i.e., Catholics giving up chocolate or desserts for Lent), and LDS youth getting up very early each weekday during the school year to attend religious instruction (Seminary).

A 15-year-old Modern Orthodox Jewish male said,

Not being able to watch TV on holidays and Shabbat, just like if I wasn't Jewish, I would. Like the sports games that are on Friday nights, Celtics games I don't watch, if they're on Friday night. But because I'm Jewish, and I'm observant, I didn't, even though I wanted to.

Time and Activities

Responses under this theme include sacrifices that adolescents reported regarding time and activities that are either prescribed or proscribed by their religion.

Common sacrifices. The following sacrifices of time and activities were reported by youth across many denominations: praying, attending religious meetings, reading religious texts, serving others, sharing their beliefs, foregoing activities with friends (such as sleepovers) that conflicted with religious worship, and not participating in sports activities that conflicted with observance of a holy day.

A 13-year-old LDS male said,

I'm on a basketball team right now, and they have tournaments almost every weekend on Saturday and Sunday and so I go to the games on Saturday, then on Sunday, I don't go to them because I'm trying to keep the Sabbath day holy. I go to church with my family and stuff.

Unique sacrifices. Sacrifices specific to particular faiths in this category include Muslim youth praying five times a day (once before sunrise), Christian adolescents serving in church positions, Jewish families driving long distances so that the children can associate with other Jewish young people, and LDS youth setting aside time on Mondays for family night.

A 19-year-old Muslim female said,

Well, basically, we pray five 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.

Peer Relations

Responses under this theme refer to religious sacrifices that adolescents made in connection with social relations with their peers, including issues of friendship, socializing, dating, courting, isolation, and not being accepted by others.

Common sacrifices. Among the ways that religious youth of various faiths said they sacrificed peer relations were being the only one of their faith or one of a small minority at school, not always being socially accepted, having a limited social life because their friends chose to participate in activities that were against their religious beliefs, having dating rules and restrictions that make them different, and being expected to date and marry within their faith.

An 18-year-old Baptist female said,

Well, I guess like, mostly the whole way of living in this community. I feel like I've really just not had a very active social life because almost everything that most of my friends at school are doing is something that I don't feel would be glorifying God.

Unique sacrifices. Religious youth in particular faith communities identified several sacrifices related to their association with peers, including Muslim youth not dating, LDS youth not attending R-rated movies with their friends or not being invited to other "questionable" activities with friends, and Jewish youth not being able to eat at friends houses' because of the laws of Kashrut (dietary restrictions).

When asked what he was asked to sacrifice, a 13-year-old LDS male responded, "Watching PG-13 movies and rated R. Our parents asked us not to do that." When the interviewer asked how his friends respond when they want him to come with them, he answered, "Well they kind of make fun of me sometimes . . . But then I just say, 'Well I don't really care because there's better stuff to do like play basketball.'"

Reasons for Sacrifices

After explaining what kinds of sacrifices they made for their faith, adolescents and their parents were asked "Why are you willing to do those

things?” Several themes emerged from their responses. Reasons for making sacrifices included the following: (a) connecting to a higher meaning or purpose, (b) connecting to God, (c) connecting to the faith tradition or community, (d) fulfilling expectations, (e) feeling affective benefits, and (f) avoiding problems. Each of these six themes will be presented and illustrated with representative quotes from the data.

Connecting to a Higher Meaning or Purpose

The most salient theme of why youth choose to make religiously related sacrifices was that it expressed, reinforced, or created a sense of meaning or purpose in their lives. Many youth expressed that because of their religious faith they valued different things than their peers or the surrounding culture. A common hallmark of this theme was that youth were looking past the desires of the present moment and reflecting on what mattered most to them “in the long run” or “in the end.” This theme was expressed well by a 20-year-old Lutheran female:

I’m often finding myself giving up the bad or even the good for the best, whether it’s dating and not going out with any guys or other people I work with [who] are spending their entire summer right now drinking and partying every night and they’re like, “Why don’t you come?” and it’s like, “Why would I want to go?” You know it’s giving up this so that I can have something better because tomorrow I don’t want to look like you or feel the way you’re feeling right now, and I don’t want to have to live the regrets that you all have to live with. . . . it’s giving up what the world thinks is good to get the best.

A 14-year-old Christian Scientist female who, because of her religious beliefs, does not believe in seeking professional medical care for injuries explained,

When I [get a] cut . . . I’m not going to think, “Wow, that sleepover was fun.” I’m going to think, “Okay, in Sunday school I learned. . . .” Like that. It’s better in the long run.

Like this youth, other youth felt their religious beliefs, practices, and relationships provided them something more than their peers or popular culture could provide.

Some youth reflected deeper understanding or stronger commitment to their belief system than others. An 18-year-old Baptist female is one example

of a youth who expressed a more amorphous sense of enduring meaning, “It’s mostly stuff that maybe would seem fun for now, but in the long run, I think that, you know, when God’s best is in mind for me that doesn’t include things that I have to sacrifice.” Others, like one 18-year-old Muslim female, explained the issue of ultimate concerns more concretely:

I don’t think that it’s a matter of sacrifice because like we said, life is for to get to paradise. And any smart person would want the best . . . anything in this earth can go away. Toys can get broken, people can die . . . but when you have something that is for an afterlife, it’s not something that can go away. It’s not something that can be taken away. It’s something that you strive for and it’s there for good, you know, it’s not something that’s disposable or something. So it’s not really an even trade off, you know.

Responses in this theme illustrate that many youth have thought about the consequences of their choices and are intentionally choosing those things that support their sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Connecting to God

Though they used different phrases to describe a transcendent connection to God, many youth articulated that they chose to participate in religious activities, sacrifice temporal resources, or avoid certain activities because they felt it was a way they remembered or felt connected to a higher power. For example, one 14-year-old LDS female explained, “Well, I remember how Jesus fasted in the desert and I just remember him during that time and I just do it to remember how he fasted that much and so do I.” Many youth felt their sacrifice was an expression of devotion or gratitude or praise to God. One 15-year-old Lutheran female stated, “In music, does it glorify God? If it doesn’t, well then why listen to it.” A 17-year-old LDS male also explained, “We like to thank the Lord a lot for giving us all we have, and we give him usually 10% of our earnings to him to go toward church funding and stuff like that.” These and similar expressions captured the theme that many youth make sacrifices as an expression of a felt connection to God.

Connecting to the Faith Tradition or Community

In addition to feeling a sense of transcendent connection through sacrifice, some youth expressed that sacrifice helped them to feel connected to their faith community or to their faith tradition and contributed to their sense of identity. A 12-year-old Jewish female explained,

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 20-year-old Jewish male also expressed, "This is very much intentional, going back thousands of years, that part of what kosher precludes is eating at your friends' houses if they don't keep kosher." These youth saw their choices to sacrifice as a part of their identity and saw that part of their identity as being deeply connected to their heritage, faith tradition, or faith community.

Fulfilling Expectations

Some youth expressed that they made sacrifices because others, particularly family members and others in the faith community, expected them to sacrifice. A 20-year-old Seventh-day Adventist female and her 18-year-old brother illustrate this theme. The sister said, "One thing about giving up doing things on Friday nights and on Saturdays is that the whole family is together, and you really have no other choice, so you make the best of it." The brother said, "And sometimes that means doing fun stuff, sometimes that just means fighting over why you can't do something. In the end it makes you stronger." While a few adolescents reflected some degree of feeling resigned to meet these expectations, others asserted that meeting the expectations was also a matter of trust. For example, a 14-year-old Catholic male stated,

I've been the one on my soccer teams that's missed a lot of games. I lost lots of games over church or CCD [religious education]. And right then, like I really hate it, like I don't want to go to church or CCD. But then, I think the people I've talked to, they actually say, it's going to be good for you. And I guess I kind of trust that.

Honoring parents was another motivation for fulfilling expectations to sacrifice, as evidenced by a 14-year-old LDS male. When the interviewer asked him why he was willing to sacrifice drinking proscribed beverages even when his parents weren't there to see him, he responded, "Because they've taught me not to do that and I respect them." This illustrates the theme that many youth sacrifice because of religiously influenced expectations paired with their commitment to or respect for their parents, family, or faith community members.

Feeling Affective Benefits

When asked why he was willing to sacrifice for his faith, a 16-year-old Presbyterian male answered,

I think that it's because when all is said and done and when the parties are over and the day after, it feels so right and I feel so thankful for my decisions. And I judge a lot of my decisions in the past by how I felt the day after I made the decision. And it just feels so right to make that sacrifice, and of course I've experimented with doing the wrong decisions and things like that, and it feels so good to be making better decisions. It's wonderful.

This quote captures the theme that many youth sacrifice because of an affective dimension of the experience. They said things like "it feels good," "I feel better when I do that," and "it just feels right" when asked why they choose to sacrifice. This type of "feeling good" seems to have a moral dimension, which stands in contrast to the self-indulgent type of "feel good" commonly ascribed to adolescent decision-making. An 18-year-old Catholic male further explains,

I think in the end it's rewarding. I don't mean like "heaven points" or something like that. I just mean you feel better about yourself. I mean it's helpful. I think it kind of puts you at ease, like peace of mind.

Avoiding Problems

Some youth expressed that they chose to sacrifice what the surrounding culture values because they see the results of those actions and do not want to have those consequences. A 17-year-old Muslim female conveyed,

And these things that Islam advises you to stay away from are things that are no good to you to begin with. Like drugs some people take are a momentary pleasure, and it harms your body. It can harm you, your family, and people surrounding you. They're no good for you.

Some problems referenced were personal or physical and some were relational. A 17-year-old LDS male explained that avoiding physical and relational problems was one motivation for abstaining from certain substances, "For example, with alcohol you don't get drunk and maybe get killed too or affect somebody else." An 18-year-old Conservative Jewish male further illustrated this point of avoiding problems in relationships:

Is it a sacrifice not to sleep around after you get married? Yeah, but it's definitely worth it, right? Look what you get in return, it gives you a solid marriage and a lasting [marriage] . . . so really, that's a good deal.

Discussion

Our data suggest that the spirit of religious sacrifice remains influential in the lives of these religious adolescents. The data illustrate that adolescents are making these sacrifices for their faith in visible, public ways—such as turning down an offer to go to a party or movie with their friends because it is not in keeping with their beliefs. At the same time, youth are also making these kinds of faith-related sacrifices in private ways—such as engaging in personal prayer or scripture study instead of watching television or playing video games.

The youth also demonstrated that they make these sacrifices in individual and collective settings. Sometimes, the choice to sacrifice was dependent solely on their own choice—as with choosing not to drink a proscribed beverage—and other times the choice to sacrifice was tied to participation in a group—as with family observance of a holy day or a Shabbat meal. In all of these ways, the youth in this sample demonstrated that sacrifice is an issue that cuts across many domains of adolescent life and reaches into the public and private as well as the personal and relational aspects of daily life.

Perceptions of Sacrifice

Discussing sacrifice with adolescents was an engaging task because of the differing perceptions about what sacrifice really is. As a 14-year-old Orthodox Christian female delineated, “I think it all depends on whether you’re talking about what I view as being a sacrifice or what other people would view as being a sacrifice.” This suggests a broad spectrum of how adolescents define sacrifice in their own lives.

On one end of the spectrum, illustrated by a 20-year-old Jewish male, some youth did feel that they were making sacrifices, “Yeah, it’s a sacrifice, it’s a worthwhile sacrifice, but it is one.” For faiths in the Abrahamic tradition, the act of sacrifice has historically involved an element of suffering. It is noteworthy that even though these youth saw their actions as sacrifices, the words *suffer* or *suffering* were never used by any of these young people.

On the other end of the spectrum, other young people explicitly stated they did not see their actions as a sacrifice but as something else. Some said, “I don’t think that it’s a matter of sacrifice . . . it’s not giving up anything, it’s *making a decision*,” or “I don’t look at it as a sacrifice, I look at it as *investing* for me,” or “A lot of people say keeping kosher, keeping Shabbat, is a sacrifice, but I think it’s *a gift*.”

Elsewhere in the spectrum are those who felt sacrifice was the right term, but they were not just *offering* a sacrifice, they were *being* a sacrifice,

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 its whole purpose is to sacrifice itself for some other means. (16-year-old Baptist female)

The description here echoes Tylor's description of sacrifice historically, that it was seen as both a temporal or tangible offering to God and a renunciation or an offering of the self to God (Keenan, 2005).

While all of these definitions describe sacrifice from a different angle, one 17-year-old Baptist male seemed to capture a metaconcept about sacrifice when he said, "It's giving something up that has value to you." Perceptions of sacrifice seem to be intertwined with what youth value most. A choice to sacrifice is a choice to give up something of value. We suggest that sacrifice both reflects commitments to religious values and fortifies commitments because it calls the adolescents to give up something else they value to maintain those commitments. In other words, their sacrifices seem as much to be avenues to faith as results that follow faith.

Reasons for Sacrifice

The "therapeutic individualism" that Robert Bellah et al. (1985) claimed threatened marital commitments and family obligations in America a quarter of a century ago appears to be reiterated in Smith and Denton's assertion that Moral Therapeutic Deism is the prevailing value structure for adolescents. Both suggest that the predominant adolescent values are individuality, acceptance, happiness, self-gratification, and limited obligations or expectations (Smith & Denton, 2005). The popular culture seems to continue to promote or at least support those values through entertainment and media that encourage independence and self-gratification. Our data suggest that this religious sample stands in contrast to that norm. These adolescents were willing to sacrifice things valued by the surrounding culture in many areas of their lives and were willing to do it because their prevailing value structure is different than those youth—even other religious youth—who subscribe, to some extent, to Moral Therapeutic Deism.

This difference in value structure is evident in the reasons adolescents gave for why they were willing to sacrifice. Of the six main themes, two (feeling affective benefits and avoiding problems) seem to be associated with the happiness-seeking aspect of Moral Therapeutic Deism. Standing

alone, these reasons would suggest that these youth are looking for ease and happiness, and the sacrifices they make are calculated to bring about that happiness. However, the other four themes (connecting to a higher meaning or purpose, connecting to God, connecting to the faith tradition, and fulfilling expectations of family or faith community), representing the large majority of the responses, indicate that youth are not just looking out for themselves. These four themes share the overarching idea that connectedness or relatedness is an integral part of adolescent sacrifice. Adolescents are sacrificing because they want to feel connected to God, the heritage of their faith tradition, their family, and their faith community, as well as wanting to feel a part of a meaning or purpose that is bigger than they are. Thus, youth are sacrificing the values of independence and self-gratification for that which brings greater connectedness.

We suggest that making sacrifices both generates and supports an ongoing sense of transcendent, social, and familial connectedness through a positively reinforcing bidirectional relationship. Youth may be sacrificing both because they feel connected and because they do not, but want to, and the sacrifice itself results in a sense of connectedness. Over time the process of repeated sacrifice increases the connectedness and the commitment to those values maintained through the sacrifice. Thus, the process may be somewhat developmental, associated with the process of identity development in how the youth see themselves and the centrality of their close relationships. This assertion supports research suggesting that the ability to sacrifice may be a developmental asset (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

As mentioned previously, theorists of social development have suggested that sacrifice was once a more salient source of social identity and solidarity. Though secularization trends have diminished many social and community expressions of sacrifice, this study reveals that public and private as well as personal and collective forms of sacrifice may continue to provide religious youth with the same benefits of social identity and solidarity evident in earlier, more traditional societies.

Identity and Sacrifice

Based on analysis of the first wave of NSYR data, Dean (2005) suggested that for young people to escape the pull of Moral Therapeutic Deism they need four “anchors for a religious identity,” namely, (a) a creed to believe, (b) a place to belong, (c) a call to live out, and (d) a hope to hold onto (p. 9). Our findings illustrate that religiously motivated sacrifices in the lives of religious adolescents facilitate youth experiencing all four of these anchors.

A Creed to Believe

Sacrifice is both based in and reinforces commitment to religious beliefs and practices, anchoring religious creeds across many domains of adolescents' lives. Pearce and Thornton (2007) found associations between religion and family ideologies that endured across the lifespan from adolescence into adulthood. They suggest that these ideologies—or compilations of attitudes, values, and beliefs—are “reinforced by cumulative participation in religious congregations where particular ideas . . . are encouraged and expected” (p. 1240). The sacrifices adolescents make connect them to the communities and faith traditions that provide these ideologies or belief systems that the adolescents can then carry with them into their adult lives. In addition to providing and reinforcing these belief systems, through calling youth to sacrifice for their faith, these beliefs are “sanctified” and set apart as something different or more meaningful than the creeds or beliefs espoused by the surrounding culture.

A Place to Belong

In this study, sacrifice was clearly associated with a strong sense of relatedness and connection in transcendent, social, and familial contexts, which anchor a place to belong. In this study, the family was a primary setting in which sacrifice was explored. The sanctification of family relationships leads to “positive effects not only for relationship functioning, but also for the personal well-being of individual family members” (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003, p. 228). Sacrificing with and for family members as part of an expression of religious devotion strengthens that place to belong. The youth in this study explained that sacrifice also provided a transcendent connection to a God. We suggest that this connection creates a transcendent place of belonging that cannot be provided by cultural or worldly relationships or networks. Thus, religion and the sacrifices made in devotion to one's religion offer a unique setting for adolescents to experience multiple dimensions of a place to belong.

A Call to Live Out

The adolescents in this study revealed that sacrifice was associated with a sense of meaning and purpose in life. That connection to a bigger picture in life calls the youth to look beyond their own interests and indulgence to something of greater meaning and worth. The connection to family, faith tradition, and the transcendent calls youth to care for more than self, creating

a sense of generativity that is not a part of the surrounding culture. That future-based, other-based perspective provides a call for adolescents to live out through continued sacrifice.

A Hope to Hold Onto

Sacrifice seems intricately tied to the hope for the future that adolescents can hold onto. Youth with no hope for a brighter, significant future have no reason to delay or forego personal gratification or give of self to benefit others. However, these religious youth who were willing to sacrifice in these ways reflect the anchor of a hope in the future and the hope that their sacrifices in the present are helping them become what they want to be and what they feel God, parents, and faith community leaders hope they will become. Their comments demonstrated that they are thinking about things “in the end” and “in the long run” instead of just living in the moment.

In these ways, sacrifice seems to facilitate the development of a salient religious identity strong enough to counteract the “de facto creed” of Moral Therapeutic Deism.

The data suggest a possible developmental process that creates or strengthens the religious identity and a possible connection to the role sacrifice plays in that process. Some youth referred to how their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior about themselves and their sacrifices changed over time. A 16-year-old Presbyterian male described this process in his life:

When I was you know 12, 13, 14 kind of range, that time of . . . self-discovery and trying to figure out who the heck I was and what it means to be a teenager. And of course I’m still in that process, but it was definitely much stronger. I had a much stronger sense of being unsure of myself at that age. I didn’t know what to turn to besides religion, and it really did help me a lot in just getting into some traditions and praying every morning and things like that. Just small things that really just kind of kept me on track for a certain amount of time.

The behaviors we have identified in the present study as evidence of sacrifice of time and activities seem to have been influential in the process of self-discovery this adolescent describes. This suggests that the sacrifices adolescents are making are connected to the formation of their individual identity. This assessment of sacrifice is consistent with previous work suggesting that sacrifice is “less a matter of conscious choice than of who one is,” that self-sacrifice “tends not to be the result of conscious, rational decision making. Its voluntary nature is more reflexive than cognitive, more a

matter of community, identity, intuition, and reaction, than realistic weighing of alternatives” (Bahr & Bahr, 2001, pp. 1250-1251, 1253).

Family and Sacrifice

Sacrifice also seems to be instrumental in the context of a family identity. The interviews used for the present study offer a unique perspective into religiously related sacrifices in family contexts because the interviews were conducted with family members together in the home. Though the analysis for the present study was primarily focused on adolescent responses, the background family context and conversations provided the researchers valuable information in understanding the topic. Often family members offered different perspectives on sacrifices made by the family and the meaning attached to those sacrifices. Sometimes parents offered interesting insights about sacrifices their children made. For example, a Jewish mother suggested that her son didn't recognize the sacrifices he made because "he's always lived this way." It is evident that understanding adolescents' choices to sacrifice for their faith is intricately tied to and better understood within the family context.

Analysis revealed that many types of sacrifices religious adolescents make are collective sacrifices—meaning that they are enacted with other members of the family. For example, foregoing other activities in observance of a holy day and upholding standards in the home to avoid certain kinds of media are sacrifices often made collectively by family members. Thus, families influence how youth enact behaviors of sacrifice, and conversely the willingness of adolescents to sacrifice in the family context supports the further development of the family religious identity.

Families also influence the reasons adolescents make sacrifices. Among the themes of why youth are willing to make sacrifices, we find the influence of many dimensions of family relationships—trust, respect, honor, connectedness, and expectations. Feminist scholar of religion Nancy Jay (1992) offered an insightful view of how religiously related sacrifice influences connectedness in families. She studied rituals of sacrifice across history and cultures and concluded that sacrifice is always "at home" in that it binds families together. Her conclusion is consistent with our findings on contemporary religious sacrifice. The sacrifices reported in our interviews seemed to create a sense of identity and unity within families. This may also be a bidirectional relationship. Armet (2009) found that among adolescents in the second wave of NSYR, "self-reported parental closeness is a significant predictor of adolescent religious saliency. The more adolescents perceive

parental solidarity, the more important religion becomes” (p. 9). Though this finding targets religious solidarity, it may be that closeness also has an influence on the sacrifices that youth are willing to continue making over time.

Religion and Sacrifice

The present analysis revealed that different families had different traditions or practices of sacrifice and showed considerable variance in how often those sacrifices occur. The sample was not large enough and the interview questions were not designed to make comparisons among faith traditions, but based on the NSYR survey data mentioned earlier regarding sacrifice, we know that marked differences exist among sacrifices made in different faith traditions. Some of this variance may be explained by some faith traditions requiring or expecting more sacrifice from adherents. According to Armet (2009), these are “high tension religions” or religions that “consistently display higher degrees of religious commitment . . . thus showing greater tendencies toward intrinsic religion” (p. 278). While high tension religions have shown greater success in retaining youth through late adolescence (83% retention for high tension religions and 53% for all other religions; Armet, 2009), no in-depth research has been done to explore the association between sacrifice and religious solidarity.

The analysis here on reasons for making religiously motivated sacrifices showed that many youth acknowledge they make sacrifices because it is expected of them by their families or faith traditions. It is possible that these expectations, more salient in high tension religions, lead to greater frequency of sacrifice, which may lead to (or be bidirectionally associated with) greater faith, commitment, and connectedness. In the popular culture that emphasizes individuality and independence, expectations may be viewed as restrictive and controlling. However, the expectations referred to here may serve more as guidance and direction on the path to developing a sense of identity and connectedness. This type of expectation within a faith community is what Dean (2005) referred to as a community that “loves sacrificially and calls young people to love and sacrifice as well” (p. 12).

Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, one of the universal aspects of religion, both historical and contemporary, is that it asks something of adherents that takes them outside or beyond themselves. Given the culture of comfort,

conformity, and consumption they live in, and given the power of peer pressure that contemporary religious youth experience, the efforts these youth make to sacrifice for their faith and look beyond the self seem notable. The religious youth in this study recognized that their religiously motivated sacrifices are often inconvenient, sometimes difficult, and frequently set them apart from friends and neighbors who take their faith less seriously or follow different ideals. However, the cost of sacrifice did not seem to deter these youth from continuing to make those sacrifices in many domains of their lives. The resulting connectedness and positive consequences they associated with their sacrifices were motivating factors to continue making sacrifices for their religions, despite the costs.

Limitations

One possible limitation of this study is the use of purposive sampling. While this approach facilitated the focus of our investigation on a specific group (i.e., religious youth), it also limits the generalization of findings to that specific group. Similarly, a second limitation involved sampling only in two areas of the country (California and New England), again limiting generalizability of findings to the sampled regions. A third limitation may be that, despite our impressions to the contrary, youth interviewed without parents present may answer questions more readily and honestly than do youth interviewed together with their parents.

Contributions

In his review of 60 years of religion and family research, Jenkins (1991) observed the almost complete absence of qualitative studies. In response to his observation, this study contributes to the methodological diversification of the field. In their assessment of religion and family research, Dollahite, Marks, and Goodman (2004) also identified the homogenous sampling of Christian families as a current limitation of the field. While the present study does include a substantial Christian component, Muslim and Jewish families were also included, thus providing a broader base for religious understanding and allowing comparisons across religions.

Future Directions

Religious families and youth may exhibit characteristics or behaviors that set them apart from their non- or less-religious peers. The willingness

and ability of the youth in our sample to sacrifice in service of religious ideals seems to set them apart from other youth. However, there are relatively few studies of adolescent sacrifice or delay of self-gratification (Wulfert, Block, Ana, Rodriguez, & Colzman, 2002), and firm conclusions about the frequency and nature of religious sacrifice among contemporary youth will require further research.

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