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Adolescent Religion and Parenthood Outcomes in Young Adulthood

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Kelli K. Smith

May 2014

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Keywords: adolescence, religion, family formation, early parenthood

## ABSTRACT

### Adolescent Religion and Parenthood Outcomes in Young Adulthood

by

Kelli K. Smith

A multitude of research exists examining the relationship between religion and early marriage, yet little research has focused on the relationship between religion and early childbearing. Even less has examined the influence of adolescent religion on early parenthood. Using data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, I examined the relationship between religion in adolescence and parenthood outcomes in early adulthood. I focus on how religiosity in adolescence shapes whether an individual is more or less likely to be sexually active, become pregnant, and/or have and keep a child. Results suggest that those who are religious in adolescence are less likely to have children early because of the postponement of sexual debut.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Literature Review

Since the 1980s, research in the sociology of adolescence has paid close attention to the importance of the transition to adulthood (Dornbusch 1989). Researchers have been particularly interested in the significance of religion in the lives of adolescents, ranging from how religion affects outcomes from drug use (Barr and Hoffman 2008) to family relationships (Armet 2009). This research was an exploration of how religion in adolescence affects the childbearing aspect of family formation during young adulthood.

#### Adolescent Religiosity

Smith (2003) theorized on the many positive effects that religion can have on adolescents through the internalization of moral directives, learning skills that translate into community and social life, and increasing social capital through social and organizational ties. Adolescence is a crucial time for religious development (Desmond, Morgan, and Kikuchi 2010) because, at this life stage, religious practice affects internal religiosity, and internal religiosity reflects back on practice (Potvin and Lee 1982). During this time period, young people may question their own beliefs and the role of religion in society (Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer 2002). This doubt can influence how important religion remains for them later in life (Armet 2009).

Religion also has an impact on the relationships and family life of adolescents. Adolescents from families that belonged to high tension religions, religions with strict beliefs that contrast with secular society, and were closer to their parents had higher levels of religious

salience (Armet 2009). Being “born again” improves adolescents’ relationships with their fathers over time, and higher religious salience is associated with improved family relations (Regnerus and Burdette 2006). Conversely, family characteristics can shape the religiosity of adolescents. Less family cohesion can increase religious doubt (Hunsberger et al. 2002). Family is important in developing religious maturity in various ways (Martin, White, and Perlman 2003). Parents, congregations, and religious peers all significantly influence the religious maturity of an adolescent, but peers act as mediators of the parental influence (Martin et al. 2003). Furthermore, adolescents who live with their married biological parents are 36% more likely to attend church service than those living with step families (Day et al. 2009). The religious conservatism of parents can influence the future outcomes of their children. For example, adolescent children of fundamentalist parents who also hold fundamentalist views are less likely to pursue college preparatory courses in high school, this being especially true for female children (Sherkat and Darnell 1999).

Religion in adolescence shapes the understanding of the moral order for teens. What they see as appropriate ways to conduct their lives is shaped by religious experiences. Religious organizations have social influence in the lives of adolescents, promoting cultural standards of appropriate behavior and life choices, especially concerning sexuality and the family (Regnerus 2007).

### Religion and Marriage

Only recently have researchers begun to explore how religion during adolescence and young adulthood influences family formation once adolescents reach adulthood. The empirical research that does look at this relationship focuses primarily on how adolescent religion affects

the decision to marry young and on marriage in general (Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Fitzgerald and Glass 2012). How teens see their prospective relationships affects their decisions on how and when to marry and start families (Haplern-MeeKin 2012).

Recent research shows that the religious affiliation of young adults is important in determining when they marry, with conservative Protestant women marrying earlier than those with no affiliation (Uecker and Stokes 2008). Adults who are more religious are also more committed to the idea of marriage as an institution and see marriage as a moral obligation (Allgood et al. 2009). In a study of Australian adults, both men and women who held religion as important in their lives got married earlier than those who found it less important (Hewitt and Baxter 2011). Still, other research has shown that neither frequency of attendance nor religious salience in adolescence has a significant effect on whether or not a young adult marries early (Uecker and Stokes 2008).

While the religious differ from the non- or less religious in their marriage patterns, there are also many differences between religious groups (Xu et al. 2005). Young adults from a conservative Protestant background get married earlier than those from other religious traditions (Fitzgerald and Glass 2012). Similarly, those from conservative Protestant religious backgrounds are more likely to both marry and cohabitate early than Catholics (Eggebeen and Dew 2009). Among young men, those from Mormon and conservative Protestant traditions are more likely to marry early (Uecker and Stokes 2008).

### Early Parenthood

Existing research on who becomes a young parent concentrates on at-risk populations and the negative precursors that often lead to teen pregnancy and parenthood (Woodward, Fergusson,

and Horwood 2006). This research shows that individual and social factors from childhood and adolescence play a major role in the likelihood of a person becoming a parent in teenage years and as a young adult.

The type of family experiences an individual has in childhood and adolescence such as discipline style and stability of family structure affect the likelihood of being a young parent (Woodward, Fergusson, and Horwood 2006). Individual factors like low academic achievement and early physical development also increase the likelihood of the precocious transition into parenthood (Woodward et al. 2006). Race and gender also have a significant effect on becoming a young parent with females more likely than males and African Americans more likely than whites to become parents by the time they reach age 24. Overall socioeconomic status contributes to early parenthood as well with those whose parents have lower income and education more likely to become young parents (Gest, Mahoney, and Cairns 1999). While this research looks at negative risk factors, it pays little attention to social factors, like religion, that we often assume have a positive influence on youth.

### Religion and Childbearing

Though much of the research on adolescent religion and family formation focuses on marriage, there are many findings among adult populations that tie religion to fertility and childbearing norms. Many of the demographic patterns across the world, such as the declining fertility in Western Europe and the high fertility in the Muslim world have been tied to religion (McQuillan 2004; Norris and Inglehart 2012). The gender and family norms that are often rooted in religion have an important effect on the family formation choices of young adults. In a study of women 18-24, researchers found that those who considered religion to be very important

wanted to have about one more child on average than those who did not consider religion to be important (Hayford and Morgan 2008). Religious tradition's influence on marriage can also be a mediator of birth timing. Those from a Catholic religious tradition wait longer to get married when compared with non-Catholics, but once married they have children sooner than those of other religious traditions (Teachman and Schollaert 1991).

The research that does examine the effects of adolescent or childhood religion on childbearing outcomes illustrates the importance of these early religious experiences (Pearce 2002; Pearce and Thornton 2007). The religion of children's parents during childhood affects their beliefs about childbearing when they are adults. For example, young adults whose mothers were Catholic during their childhood are more likely to want big families than those whose mothers were Protestant (Pearce 2002). Researchers have also found that young adults from conservative Protestant backgrounds start families earlier than young adults from other religious traditions (Fitzgerald and Glass 2012). In a study of female college students, women who held the gender ideology that men and women are complementary opposites, which is often promoted by evangelical denominations, were more likely to imagine a mothering path for their future, rather than more education and a career (Colaner and Giles 2007). Religious youth recognize that following traditional family values is expected of them even as adolescents (Dollahite 2009).

Closely related to the affect that adolescent religion has on childbearing and parenthood is its relationship with sexual activity and contraception use. Researchers agree that higher levels of religiosity are associated with a later sexual debut for adolescents, particularly among females (Meier 2003; Resnick et al 1997; Rostosky et al. 2004; Struder and Thornton 1987). When examined as a bidirectional relationship, religion delays timing of first sexual intercourse, but becoming sexually active has no subsequent effect on religiosity (Hardy and Rafaelli 2003).

Religiosity also has a significant effect on the knowledge and use of contraception among adolescents. Adolescents who were religiously affiliated were more likely to have misconceptions about condom use (Crosby and Yarber 2001) and parents who attended church more talked less with their children about birth control (Regnerus 2005). Among college students, those who see religion as more important in daily life are less likely to feel that condoms will effectively prevent pregnancy (Lefkowitz, Gillen, and Shearer 2004).

The effect of adolescent religion on family formation has been established. The timing of transitions into adulthood such as marriage and parenthood matter more than that single event of getting married or having a child in and of itself (Amato et al. 2008), and the lived experiences of religious activity and involvement have an impact on people's understanding of what makes a "good" family (Edgell 2006). Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood points to the importance of passing certain markers such as career, marriage, and having children as indications of passing through adolescence and into young adulthood. Religion may play a part in early entry into adulthood by way of these transitions. Research shows that religiously conservative groups are more likely than others to see complying with norms like viewing marriage as a marker of adulthood (McNamara and Barry 2005) and levels of religiosity are inversely related to the ideal age of marriage (Carroll et al. 2007).

Here I focus on the timing of childbearing, which is much less researched than marriage. The existing data on adolescent religion and family formation pulls primarily from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, leaving a gap for research to be done with other nationally representative data sets from an adolescent population. Research on the social consequences of early parenthood is abundant and has shown possible negative consequences for both the parents and children (Jaffee et al. 2001). Focusing on religion in adolescence will allow

us to begin examining how a factor that often has a positive influence of the social outcomes of young people may also contribute to patterns of young parenthood.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODS

#### Data

Data for this research comes from Waves 1, 2, and 3 of the National Study of Youth and Religion, the purpose of that study being “to enhance the understanding of the religious lives of American youth into young adulthood” (National Study of Youth and Religion). Wave I, completed in 2003, consists of a randomly selected, nationally representative telephone survey of American teenagers between 13 and 17 and their parents, with a total of 3,370 cases. The survey was administered to both English and Spanish speaking households and included an oversample of Jewish households. To ensure randomization within households, interviewers conducted the interview with the teen who had most recently had a birthday. The average length of time it took to complete the Wave I survey was 40 minutes for the adolescent respondent and 30 minutes for the parent. Wave II, completed in 2005, attempted to re-interview all adolescent participants from Wave 1, with a retention rate of 78%. Wave 3 was completed in 2007-08, with 77% of the original participants completing the survey. The main source of attrition between waves was from respondents who could not be located (Denton, Pearce, and Smith 2008).

#### Measures

##### Independent Variable: Adolescent Religion

Religion measurement includes four dimensions of adolescent religion: religious service attendance, frequency of private prayer, religious salience, and religious tradition. The variable is

measured at Wave 1, when respondents ranged in age from 13-17. Religious service attendance, which has been shown to have a significant effect on the behavior of adolescents (Amato et al. 2008), is measured by a question that asks respondents how frequently they attend their primary place of worship. Possible responses include a few times a year, many times a year, once a month, 2-3 times a month, once a week, and more than once a week. Prayer is measured by asking how often the respondent prays alone, providing a measure of private religious practice. Possible response choices for prayer include never, less than once a month, 1-2 times a month, about once a week, a few times a week, about once a day, and many times a day. Religious salience is measured by a question that asks respondents how important religion is in their daily lives. Responses ranged from extremely important to not important at all on a five-point Likert scale. I standardized frequency of attendance, frequency of prayer, and salience and then combined them to create a religiosity index<sup>1</sup>. Higher values on the index indicate a higher level of respondent religiosity.

Finally, religious tradition is measured using the RELTRAD variable developed by Steensland et al. (2000). RELTRAD is a composition variable, categorizing respondents based on their responses to denominational variables and other demographic characteristics. These measures then categorize respondents as Mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, no religion, or “other”. Analysis also controls for marital status, gender, and adolescent socioeconomic status, which is measured by parent education level and household income at Wave 1. Parental education is measured by degree attained, which I condensed into five categories ranging from less than a high school diploma to a graduate or professional degree. Income was asked as a categorical variable with respondents placing

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<sup>1</sup> These three variables were examined for scale interreliability prior to scale creation. The Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  value was .698, indicating a good fit and absence of overly high levels of correlation.

themselves within a given range. From these ranges, I created four comparison categories, which are annual incomes of less than \$30,000, \$30-60,000, \$60-90,000, and greater than \$90,000.

### Dependent Variable: Parenthood Outcome

The parenthood outcome is measured through a composite variable using data from all three waves of the study. At each wave respondents were asked if they were sexually active. If they responded affirmatively to this question, they were then asked if they had ever gotten pregnant (female respondents) or if they had ever impregnated someone (male respondents). For waves 2 and 3, respondents were asked if they had gotten pregnant or impregnated someone since the previous wave. If they responded affirmatively to these questions, they were then asked about the outcome of the pregnancy. Possible response choices were that the respondent was still pregnant, that they had a live birth and kept the child, that they had a live birth and gave the baby up for adoption, the pregnancy ended in an abortion, the pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, or the pregnancy ended in stillbirth.

Responses from all waves were combined so that the final outcome variable consisted of four categories: no sexual activity, sexual activity without any pregnancy, pregnancy without keeping the child, and pregnancy with keeping the child. Because of question structure, it was possible for a given respondent to be categorized differently depending on waves leading to responses that were not mutually exclusive. For example, a respondent may have had an abortion at wave 2 but had a child and kept the child at wave 3. This only happened in two cases. My key outcome of interest is having a child and keeping the child, so for these cases I placed respondents in that category. Because I am examining parenthood trajectory, separating the different ways that respondents do not become parents is an essential comparison for those who do become parents. This will allow us to better understand who becomes a young parent. The category of “still pregnant” was coded as

missing because we cannot determine what the final outcome of the pregnancy was. Pregnancy that ended in miscarriage or stillbirth was coded as missing because of the small number of responses. Pregnancies ending in miscarriage are qualitatively different from those ending in abortion or adoption. In miscarriage, not having the child is not a choice of the respondent, while adoption and abortion are conscious choices made by potential parents<sup>2</sup>.

### Hypotheses

H<sub>1</sub>: Respondents who have higher levels of religiosity in adolescence will be less likely to be sexually active.

H<sub>2</sub>: Respondents who have higher levels of religiosity in adolescence will be more likely to be parents by young adulthood (Wave 3).

H<sub>3</sub>: Respondents who identify as conservative Protestant or Mormon in adolescence will be more likely to be parents by young adulthood than those who have no religion in adolescence.

### Analysis Plan

Hypotheses were evaluated through the use of multinomial logistic regression. In the regression models, the dependent variable category of “not sexually active” served as the reference group. This category of respondents has made the least progress toward becoming a parent, so they serve as a good baseline for comparison.

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<sup>2</sup> The number of cases in the categories of miscarriage (n=65) and still birth (n=3) were very small compared to those cases in which there was a live birth. This low N and the inability to determine what the outcome of the pregnancy would have been justify the elimination of these categories from the analysis.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

#### Descriptive Statistics

As you can see from Table 1, respondents tend to be more religious than not, with the majority attending religious service at least once a month (57.7%) and praying more than once a week (52.1%). Almost half (49.7%) consider religion to be very or extremely important in their daily lives. Respondents were most likely to identify with a conservative Protestant religious tradition (31%), closely followed by Catholics (24%). The standardized religiosity index has a minimum of -5.22 and a maximum of 4.03 with the mean at .0026 and a standard deviation of 2.44.

**Table 1. Independent Variable  
Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Prayer Frequency</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Never	487	14.5
Less than once a month	257	7.6
1-2 time a month	449	13.4
About once a week	418	12.4
A few times a week	499	14.9
About once a day	723	21.5
Many times a day	527	15.7
Total N	3,360	

<b>Service Attendance</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Never	619	18.4
Few times a year	527	15.7
Many times a year	276	8.2
Once a month	233	6.9
2-3 times a month	420	12.5
Once a week	763	22.7
More than once a week	527	15.6
Total N	3,365	

**Table 1 (continued)**

<b>Religious Tradition</b>	N	%
Conservative Protestant	1,045	31
Mainline Protestant	347	10.3
Black Protestant	400	11.9
Catholic	819	24.3
Jewish	114	3.4
Mormon	72	2.1
Other	88	2.6
No religion	410	12.2
Total N	3,295	

<b>Religious Salience</b>	N	%
Not important at all	237	7
Not very important	378	11.2
Somewhat important	1,078	32.1
Very important	1,025	30.5
Extremely important	645	19.2
Total N	3,363	

Table 2 indicates that by wave three, the majority of respondents (64.1%) were sexually active but had not yet either become pregnant or impregnated someone. Only about 5% of respondents had made the transition into early parenthood by giving birth and keeping their child. Another quarter of respondents were not yet sexually active at wave 3 of the study.

**Table 2. Dependent Variable Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Parenthood Status at Wave 3</b>	N	%
Not sexually active	576	25.6
Sexually active with no pregnancies	1,440	64.1
Pregnancy ending in abortion or adoption	112	5
Live birth, kept child	118	5.3
Total N	2,246	

Respondents were evenly distributed with regard to sex with slightly more males than females (50.4% and 49.6% respectively). Parental income and mother’s highest education serve as a proxy for socioeconomic status. The majority of respondent parents had an annual income of \$60,000 or less (63%) and most mothers had some college or more (65.1%). The majority of respondents had still never been married by wave 3. This is in line with national trends as average age of first marriage is higher than the average age of respondents in wave 3.

**Table 3. Control Variable Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	1,670	49.6
Male	1,700	50.4
Total N	3,370	

<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Ever Married	171	6.8
Never Married	2,357	93.2
Total N	2,528	

<b>Parental Income (annual)</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Less than 30K	746	23.6
30K-60K	1,246	39.4
Over 60K-90K	632	20
Great than 90K	540	17.1
Total N	3,164	

<b>Mother's highest education</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Less than HS	267	8.8
HS/GED	788	26
Some College	1,019	33.7
College Degree	549	18.1
Grad/Prof Degree	403	13.3
Total N	3,026	

## Regression Results

For the multinomial regression as a whole, the results of which can be found in Table 4, I use those who are not sexually active as my reference category. Within the model, conservative Protestants serve as the reference group for religious tradition. For control variables, the reference category for mother's education is less than high school, the reference category for income is less than \$30,000 a year, and the reference category for marital status is those who have never been married.

**Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression of Impact of Adolescent Religion on Parenthood Status in Young Adulthood**

	Sexually active, no pregnancies	Pregnancy ending in abortion or adoption	Live birth, kept child
Religiosity Scale	-.154*** (.029)	-0.227*** (.061)	-0.305*** (.064)
Black Protestant	0.262 (.214)	1.261** (.375)	1.278** (.396)
Catholic	0.253 (.153)	0.355 (.340)	0.087 (.364)
Jewish	0.087 (.301)	-0.153 (.823)	- -
Mainline Protestant	0.233 (.184)	0.238 (.441)	-0.052 (.514)
Mormon	-.912** (.328)	-0.732 (.804)	-1.127 (.843)
Other Religion	-0.09 (.368)	0.303 (.815)	0.269 (.781)
No Religion	-0.173 (.240)	-0.45 (.510)	-0.526 (.504)
Ever married	2.935*** (.735)	3.587*** (.824)	4.834*** (.777)
Female	0.008	0.548*	0.87**

<b>Table 4 (continued)</b>	Sexually active, no pregnancies	Pregnancy ending in abortion or adoption	Live birth, kept child
	(.112)	(.247)	(.272)
<i>Mothers Education</i>			
High school/GED	0.148 (.293)	-0.465 (.482)	-0.214 (.483)
Some College	-0.001 (.290)	-0.453 (.480)	-0.691 (.504)
College Degree	-0.429 (.305)	-0.994 (.537)	-1.25* (.591)
Graduate/Professional Degree	-0.439 (.315)	-2.356** (.761)	-0.923 (.623)
<i>Parental Income (annual)</i>			
\$30-\$60K	-0.048 (.175)	0.007 (.328)	-0.209 (.325)
\$60-\$90K	-0.012 (.195)	-0.319 (.409)	-0.355 (.404)
Over \$90K	0.344 (.210)	-0.255 (.476)	-1.56 (.686)
Constant	.884	-1.46	-1.68
N=2196			
Nagelkerke $r^2=.159$			

Reference Category for the equation is "Not sexually active"

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Having higher scores on the religiosity scale and belonging to a Mormon religious tradition in adolescence are both significantly related to lower odds of being sexually active but never pregnant versus the reference category of not sexually active. Respondents who grew up Mormon have over two times lower odds of being sexually active and not pregnant in young adulthood than Conservative Protestants (exp(b)=.402). This is interesting because both the Mormon and conservative Protestant religious traditions strongly promote abstinence until marriage (cite). These data show that conservative protestants are more likely to be sexually active than Mormons by early adulthood even when controlling for marital status. For the

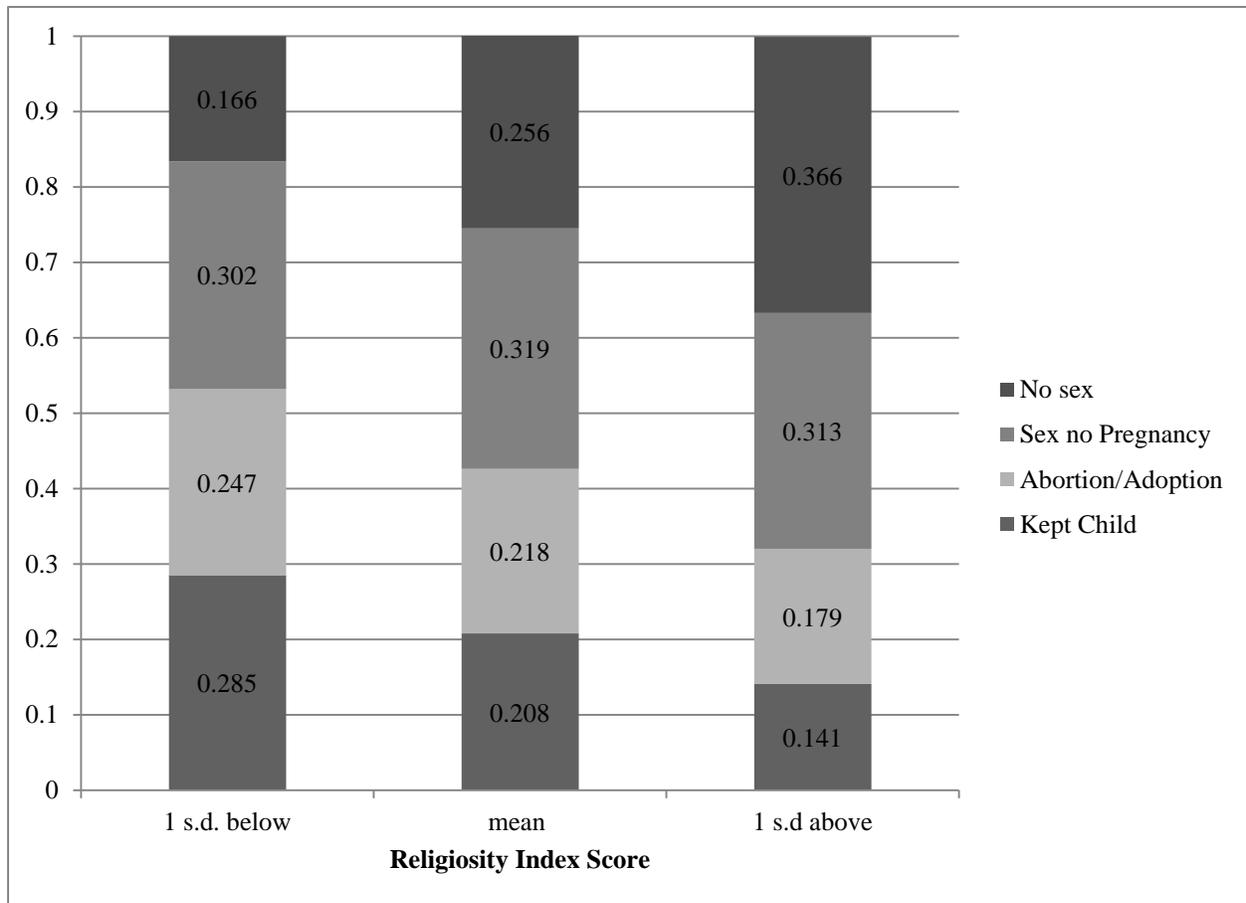
parenthood outcome of being sexually active but not pregnant, marital status is the strongest predictor and scores on the religiosity scale is the second strongest predictor. Overall religiosity affects the likelihood of being sexually active but not getting pregnant, with those who are more religious being less likely to end up in this category. This is in line with past research that indicates that young adults who are religious are less likely to engage in premarital sex.

Overall religiosity is also a significant predictor of the likelihood of becoming pregnant and the outcome of that pregnancy being abortion or adoption. Respondents with higher scores on the religiosity scale have lower odds of being in this category than those with lower religiosity scores. Black Protestants are also significantly more likely to end up in this category than those with a conservative Protestant tradition in adolescence. In fact, those who belonged to a black Protestant religion tradition during adolescence have about three times the odds of ending a pregnancy in abortion or adoption when compared to those who grew up in a conservative Protestant tradition ( $\exp(b)=3.529$ ). However, this trend is most likely a result of racial rather than religious differences in parenthood outcomes. In this model, growing up in a black Protestant religious tradition serves as proxy for being black. Black teens begin intercourse at an earlier age and are more likely than white teens to be teen parents (Kohler, Manhart, and Lafferty 2008). Again, marital status is the strongest predictor for this parenthood outcomes, as can be seen in Table 5, with those who have ever been married being more likely to have had an abortion or adoption than those who have never been married. Parent's education is the second strongest predictor with those whose parents have a graduate or professional degree being less likely to have had an abortion or adoption.

**Table 5. Standardized Coefficients for Logistic Regression Predictors**

	Sexually active, no pregnancies	Pregnancy ending in abortion or adoption	Live birth, kept child
Religiosity Scale	-0.2075	-0.306	-0.411
Black Protestant	0.0471	0.227	0.2301
Catholic	0.06029	0.0845	0.027
Jewish	0.0087	-0.0154	-
Mainline Protestant	0.039	0.0402	-0.0088
Mormon	-0.0735	-0.059	-0.0908
Other Religion	-0.008	0.0269	0.0239
No Religion	-0.0314	-0.0819	-0.0957
Ever married	0.406	0.4967	0.6712
Female	0.0022	0.151	0.2398
<i>Mothers Education</i>			
High school/GED	0.0358	-0.1125	-0.0517
Some College	-0.0002	-0.118	-0.18007
College Degree	-0.0911	-0.211	-0.265
Graduate/Professional Degree	-0.0822	-0.441	-0.1729
<i>Parental Income (annual)</i>			
\$30-\$60K	-0.0129	0.0018	-0.056
\$60-\$90K	-0.0264	-0.0703	-0.0782
Over \$90K	0.0713	-0.052	-0.3236

Figure 1 shows the probabilities for each parenthood outcome at various levels of religiosity. For the final parenthood outcome, having a live birth and keeping a child, higher levels of religiosity are related to lower odds of this outcome. Again, we also see that those who grew up in a black Protestant tradition are about three times as likely as those who grew up in a conservative Protestant tradition to be parents in young adulthood ( $\exp(b)=3.589$ ). Additionally, those who were more religious overall during adolescence have a much lower probability of becoming early parents when compared to those who were less religious. Respondents who are at the mean level of adolescent religiosity have a 21% probability of becoming pregnant and keeping the child, compared with a 14% chance for those who were one standard deviation below the mean level of religiosity and a 28% chance for those who were one standard deviation above average religiosity. This mirrors the probability of a respondent having the parenthood outcome not being sexually active. Those at one standard deviation above mean adolescent religiosity are more than twice as likely to not be sexually active (37%) than those at one standard deviation below average religiosity (17%). Having ever been married is the strongest predictor for having and keeping a child in this model. Scores on the religiosity scale are the second strongest predictor.



**Figure 1. Parenthood Outcome Probabilities by Level of Religiosity**

Overall, measures of higher religiosity in adolescence were associated with lower odds of being sexually active with no pregnancies, ending a pregnancy in abortion or adoption, and being a young parent when compared to our reference category of not being sexually active. These results indicate that the model may be functioning as a predictor of sexual debut and activity rather than parenthood trajectory. Previous research has shown that those who are religiously affiliated in adolescence become sexually active later in life than their less religious counterparts (Rotosky et al. 2004). This model confirms that those who are religious in adolescence have lower odds of engaging in sexual activity and/or becoming pregnant. In addition, as parents' education rises the likelihood of being sexually active or getting pregnant falls.

When looking at the overall predictability, this model explains about 16% of the variance in my outcome variable of parenthood status. However, a previously run model including only this religiosity scale and religious traditions explained about 6% of the variance (Nagelkerke's  $r^2=6.1$ ). Therefore, sociodemographic factors such as gender, marital status, and parental SES explain more of the variance in parenthood outcomes in young adulthood than do religious factors.

Because these data show a clear and consistent relationship between religion and parenthood outcomes in young adulthood, I also explored some of the mechanisms through which religion may be limiting the sexual activity of young adults. Some previous research points to the religion as a mediator of risk behaviors during adolescence. I added frequency of alcohol and marijuana use during adolescence into the model to explore whether religiosity decreases the likelihood of sexual activity by decreasing the level of risk behavior overall. By adding these two variables into the model the significance dropped in the relationship between the religiosity index and the outcomes of a pregnancy ending in abortion or adoption (from  $p \leq .000$  to  $p = .086$ ) or having a child and keeping it (from  $p \leq .000$  to  $p = .045$ ). Simply put, religion reduces the likelihood of a young adult having a pregnancy by reducing likelihood of overall risk behavior. This finding indicates that it's not simply the relationship between religiosity and sex that is so important, but religiosity's overall relationship with risky behavior among young people.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

This study shows that rather than being a predictor of parenthood in young adulthood, religiosity in adolescence predicts the absence of sexual activity in young adulthood, an obviously necessary step toward parenthood. My findings align with a wealth of research that indicates those who are religious in adolescence postpone sexual activity (Manlove et al. 2008; Rotosky et al. 2004). My findings show that, across the board, those who grew up religious are less likely to be sexually active not only in their teens, but in early adulthood as well. However, my findings do differ from those in the few studies that do exist on adolescent religion and family formation.

Other research had indicated that those who were raised in the conservative Protestant tradition begin their families earlier than those raised in other religious traditions. My study reveals no difference in parenthood status among religious traditions. One possible reason for this discrepancy could be the relativity of the idea of “early” parenthood. At Wave 3 of the NSYR, respondents were 18-23, which is below the national average for age at first birth, which is 25.6 (CDC 2011). Therefore, the parenthood of conservative Protestants may be relatively early compared to other religious traditions, but still later than the NSYR data could reveal. Respondents may have still been in the “emerging adulthood” stage and therefore had not yet been married and had children, which still serve as markers of true adulthood.

The small n size for the outcome of interest also hindered more in-depth exploration. Examining the more nuanced affects that religion may have on parenthood outcomes through

more specific behaviors was not feasible because the comparison categories were already quite small. The overall scale for religiosity provided the best mechanism for examining this relationship. Future studies should continue data from adolescence through and past early adulthood to get a more complete picture. I imagine that a more nuanced relationship between religion and family formation might exist through its religion's close relationship with gender roles and expectations. Conservative religious traditions put a strong emphasis on the purity of young people, especially women, before marriage. Yet, at the same time there is a strong emphasis on family duty and the nurturing and caregiving roles of women that actualized in marriage and motherhood. Perhaps, once marriage does happen for those who are more religious parenthood comes swiftly afterward, with less time between marriage and parenthood.

Though my hypothesis that those who were religious in adolescence would be more likely to be early parents was not supported, I did find that religiously active youth were more likely to be abstinent. Though not as I predicted, this study still illuminates that religion does have an effect on parenthood outcomes in that it postpones sexual activity and childbearing, at least in the late teens and early 20s. While my results may not have illuminated a pattern of early parenthood among those who were more religious, it does fit into the greater context of the narratives of family and sexuality that are prominent in religious communities. The emphasis on waiting until marriage to become sexually active fulfills the stress that many religions put on the purpose of sex being procreation. This emphasis on purity and saving oneself for marriage can be seen in that those who grew up religious are much less likely to be sexually active than their less religious counterparts.

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