

## Article

# An Exploration of Family Factors Related to Emerging Adults' Religious Self-Identification

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**Abstract:** Emerging or young adulthood is a time of identity exploration across a number of domains. Those domains include work, relationships, and beliefs and values. Specifically, emerging adults are tasked with differentiating religious beliefs and values from those of their parents. Much evidence suggests that emerging adults adopt the religious or non-religious ideals they were raised with. Family structure, parental divorce, parental marital quality and parental conflict have all been identified as factors related to degree of religiousness in emerging adulthood. It is less clear how those and other family factors may relate to types of religious identity. Using a subsample of wave 3 of the National Survey of Youth and Religion, researchers identified six types of religiousness in emerging adulthood. To our knowledge, family factors related to this typology have not been thoroughly investigated. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to further explore and describe the family factors related to the six types of religiousness in emerging adulthood using a purposive sample of 49 college students from a large public university in the United States. Qualitative analyses describe themes related to five of the six types. Future directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** emerging adulthood; religiousness; religious identity; religious types; young adulthood; family; contexts; typology; practices; beliefs

## 1. Introduction

Emerging or young adulthood is a time of identity exploration across a number of domains (age 18–29; [Arnett 2000, 2004](#)). These domains are theorized to fall roughly into three categories: work, relationships and beliefs and values ([Arnett 2000](#)). Specifically, emerging adults are tasked with developing and differentiating religious beliefs and values that are personal to and independent from those of their parents ([Erikson 1963](#)). Emerging adults may settle on religious identities and values that largely mirror or are very different from that of their parents. Evidence suggests mirroring—or the intergenerational transmission of similar religious beliefs and values—as more normative than not. Indeed, [Bengtson \(2013\)](#) longitudinally demonstrated that emerging adults largely adopt the religious or non-religious beliefs and values of their parents. Arnett and Jensen, however, ([Arnett and Jensen 2002](#)) found virtually no relationship between parent and emerging adult offspring religious approaches. A number of family-related contexts and processes have been identified as potentially important to religiousness in emerging adulthood ([Min et al. 2012](#); [Myers 1996](#)). For example, parental religious homogamy and marital quality is predictive of religious transmission ([Myers 1996](#)). Family structure, parental divorce, and parental conflict have all been identified as factors related to degree of religiousness in emerging adulthood ([Denton 2012](#); [Denton and Culver 2015](#); [Ellison et al. 2011](#)). It is less clear, however, how those and other family factors may relate to varying types of religious identities for emerging adults. Given that emerging adulthood is a developmental period qualitatively different from adolescence and adulthood, religious identities and types that spring from emerging adults themselves seems most appropriate ([Arnett 2000](#)). Quantitative

and qualitative approaches have identified between four and six types of religious identities in emerging adults (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Denton 2012; Petts 2012; Smith and Snell 2009). Smith and Snell (2009) identified six types of religiousness or religious identities in emerging adulthood: Committed Traditionalists, Selective Adherents, Spiritually Open, Religiously Indifferent, Religiously Disconnected, and Irreligious. This typology was developed using a qualitative approach with a relatively large participant pool ( $n = 230$ ) that is quasi-nationally representative (Smith and Snell 2009). Despite this unique and useful approach, only a brief summary of family related factors was initially provided. To our knowledge, family factors related to Smith and Snell's typology have not been thoroughly investigated. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to further explore and describe the family factors related to the six types of religiousness in emerging adulthood using a purposive sample of 49 college students from a large public university in the southern United States.

### *1.1. Emerging Adulthood and Identity Exploration*

Early and contemporary theorists alike delineated the time period between adolescence and adulthood—now early or emerging adulthood—as a time of marked identity exploration (Arnett 2000; Erikson 1963). One area important to this exploration is religious beliefs and world views (Arnett 2000; Erikson 1963). Successful resolution of the crisis of identity avoids role confusion and facilitates the resolution of future crises. In part, successful resolution of this crisis of identity is thought to include developing or adopting a set of values and beliefs that is personal, individual and separate from those held by parents (Erikson 1963). Applied to religious beliefs and values, the process of exploration and eventual resolution could conclude with adults that espouse religious identities that largely mirror those of their parents. It could also mean adults adopt identities that are very different from those which they were raised.

### *1.2. Intergenerational Transmission of Religious Values*

Despite the theoretical need for differentiated religious beliefs and values, emerging adults largely report religious beliefs, values and identities that are similar to their parents. This intergenerational pattern is strongest when both parents frequently attend religious services together, adhere to the same religious denomination, and express that religion is high in importance (Smith and Snell 2009; Spilman et al. 2013). Furthermore, Denton (2012) found emerging adults with the highest level of religiosity across all measures had parents who were highly religious and engaged in religious practices. Interestingly, this intergenerational transmission of religious values is not limited to the highly religious. Longitudinal evidence also demonstrates parents that consistently demonstrate that religion is not valued tend towards emerging adult offspring who also strongly oppose a religious world view (Bengtson 2013; Denton 2012). For example, in a longitudinal analysis, 68% of young adults adopted the same religious tradition as their parents while 63% of non-affiliated parents had young adults who followed suit. The strong connection between parent and offspring religious and non-religious values is markedly consistent. Yet approximately one third of emerging adults settle on beliefs and values that are different. Furthermore, Arnett and Jensen, found the religious beliefs and values of emerging adults in their sample to be virtually unrelated to those of their parents (Arnett and Jensen 2002).

### *1.3. Family Contexts and Processes that Impact Religious Transmission*

A number of family related contexts and processes impact the strength of the intergenerational transmission of religious values to emerging adults. Agreement between parents on religion is related to increased effectiveness in religious socialization. Longitudinal work suggests religious congruence—including denomination and practices—between parents as important to religious socialization (Bengtson 2013). For example, parental religious homogamy and marital quality is predictive of religious transmission (Myers 1996). Family structure also plays a part. Religious service attendance and importance of religion were found to be lower for youth raised in single-parent,

cohabiting, or step-family contexts when compared with those from married two-parent families, in part due to challenges regarding religious socialization (Petts 2015). It may be that youth raised in a family structures congruent with the religious values they were socialized face fewer barriers in adopting and holding on to those beliefs and values (Petts 2009).

Marital quality, as indicated by a happy marriage and low levels of parental conflict, also plays a role in family religious socialization. For example, young adults with parents that were happily married and in relationships characterized as low-conflict reported few doubts and a positive outlook of God and their parents' religion (Ellison et al. 2011). Furthermore, young adults from homes where parents are unhappily married but conflict is low report greater levels of religious engagement compared to young adults from married, unhappy, high conflict homes (Ellison et al. 2011).

Parental divorce can also impact parental religious socialization outcomes for offspring. Parental divorce is specifically associated with identifying as spiritual but not religious for young adults (Zhai et al. 2007, 2008) and with being more skeptical of institutional religion and their parents own commitment to religion (Ellison et al. 2011). Family disruption, including divorce or parental break-up, was related to a decrease in both religious practice and the importance of religion for emerging adults who were highly religious as adolescents. However, adolescents who display average levels of religiousness appear turn towards religion after a family disruption (Denton 2012). Overall, parental conflict in conjunction with parental divorce, has been shown to be associated with low levels of religious engagement (Ellison et al. 2011). However, Denton and Culver (2015) demonstrate that the family disruption reduction in religiousness pattern may be accurate for whites, but it is less so for African American youth. It is unclear how divorce or disruption may impact other non-Whites.

Race and ethnicity may play a prominent role in religious transmission. In fact, religiousness has been identified as particularly salient within the lives of African Americans (Taylor and Chatters 2010). Furthermore, African American mothers and fathers differentially impact the religious beliefs and practices of daughters and sons (Halgunseth et al. 2016) and African American adolescents participate in religious services and other religious groups to a greater extent compared to other ethnic groups (Smith et al. 2002). Parent-child relationships within African American families have been characterized as largely positive, which may promote religious socialization intergenerationally (Gutierrez et al. 2014). Ecklund and Park (2007) suggest that Asian Americans and non-Christian religions are understudied groups and research also shows Asian American immigrant parents may rely on religion to strengthen parent-child relationships, increasing family unity and strengthening pro-social values across generations (Son et al. 2018). Asian American emerging adults in turn report that parents and other family members as influential to their own religious identities (Park and Ecklund 2007). For Hispanics religion and culture often deeply intertwine (Gallo et al. 2009) and religious identity may be particularly important to understanding this group (Westoff and Marshall 2010).

Finally, feeling close to one's parents is associated with a greater socialization influence for that offspring towards parental religion (Min et al. 2012). Communication and conversations between parents and youth is another potentially important source of religious socialization (Boyatzis et al. 2006; Dollahite and Thatcher 2008; Smith and Snell 2009).

Thus, family religious congruency, family structure, marital quality, divorce, race, ethnicity, feelings of closeness and having ongoing conversations around religion may all impact religious transmission. But what of religious identity?

#### *1.4. Religious Identity Types in Emerging Adulthood*

While most research on emerging adults and religiousness focuses on a specific measure that is usually some combination of religious service attendance and importance of religion, these minimal measures only tell part of the story. Religiousness is multidimensional and as such is likely to exhibit nuances that will be difficult to capture with only a few items. Indeed, there may be qualitative differences in religiousness specific to emerging adulthood that are masked by limited measurement.

Three typologies of religiousness or religious identity are of note. First, [Denton \(2012\)](#) utilizes a person-centered, latent-class approach combining eight items tapping various aspects of religiousness. The items address some expected areas such as importance of religion, prayer and religious service attendance. The items also address some unexpected areas, such as belief in and closeness to God, helping others, thinking on the meaning of life and exclusive attitudes towards religion. From these items five latent classes of religiousness from adolescence to early emerging adulthood are identified (for a detailed description see [Denton 2012](#)). Abiders are highest on all eight measures and are highly likely to have highly religious parents, come from a two parent family and have lived with them in the same house growing up. Atheists are lowest on all eight measures and have other family characteristics that are not unlike the rest of the population. Assenters are average. They believe in God and practice some forms of religious engagement. The typical Assenter identifies with a specific denomination or congregation, but is not overly active there. They come from stable families yet have parents who are average in their own religious practices and beliefs. Avoiders have social networks, friends and family, who are not religious. They exhibit fairly stable residential and family backgrounds. Adapters are largely average on a number of the eight items, with some notable distinctions. Adapters combine low levels of institutional involvement with high levels of personal religiosity. Adapters are more likely to be African American or Hispanic, have low family residential stability and to not live with both parents. A nationally representative sample with a multidimensional person-centered measure approach is a strength. While using eight items to tap into the multidimensionality of religiousness is a vast improvement over the historically popular yet conceptually limited frequency of religious service attendance and/or importance of religion items alone, it is entirely possible that a purely quantitative survey approach may have missed essential components due to items being selected a priori. A qualitative approach would not brook that limitation.

Second, Arnett and Jensen interviewed 140 emerging adults with an age range of 21–28 (2002). Six religious items from a survey were combined with two items that were presented during the interview schedule. The survey questions covered topics such as frequency and importance of religious service attendance, importance and certainty of religious beliefs, importance of religious faith to daily life and belief in God. The first interview question addressed religious family socialization, allowing participants to choose from high, moderate and low exposure to religion. Most indicated high exposure (64%), with only 13% moderate and 23% low. Low exposure was defined as parents rarely if ever taking children to church. In other ways parents conveyed that religion was simply unimportant. Moderate had family environments where parents were inconsistent in religious service attendance, religious socialization efforts, and communicated that religion was not important. High exposure was representative of parents who consistently took their children to religious services and gave high importance to religion. The second interview question invited participants to identify their religious or spiritual beliefs from one of four options: Agnostic/atheist (24%), Deist (29%), Liberal Christian (26%) or Conservative Christian (22%). The Agnostic/atheist response was defined as someone who is unsure about the possibility of knowing about God, one who is unsure about their own beliefs or one who rejects belief in religion all together. The Deist generally believes in God or endorses spirituality without an institutional sense. The Deist also may self-identify as Christian but only nominally, rejecting tradition specific teachings and including personalized beliefs from a variety of sources. The Liberal Christian also identifies with a specific denomination and largely accept much of the teachings of that tradition. However, some teachings are not adopted as truth and certain areas remain targets for open skepticism. Liberal Christians may think favorably on or reserve judgment against non-Christian faiths. Conservative Christians believe what is taught by their specific denominations or traditions. Some believe that Christianity is the only true faith. Approximately 77% of this sample may be thought of as Christian or having Christian leanings. The qualitative approach allows for conceptual complexity and for the participant to speak for themselves. One hundred and forty interviews is a significant sample size. However, the age range of the sample, combined with the sizeable proportion of participants that are married and have children, and fewer religious identification options compared

to Denton (2012) all may indicate that this sample of emerging adults may be qualitatively farther along the path to adulthood than early emerging adults. An approach that combines the sampling strength of Denton with the openness of Arnett and Jensen's qualitative approach and high number of participants would be ideal.

Third, Smith and Snell's unique contribution to the religious typologies that may exist in emerging adulthood is bolstered by an unparalleled sampling strategy coupled with a substantial number of interviews. In the first stage of the sampling approach, participants were recruited as teens (ages 13–17) via national random digit dialing for a telephone survey in what is now known as the National Survey of Youth and Religion (Smith and Denton 2005). After participating in the telephone interview, a subsample of 267 youth were chosen to be interviewed face-to-face in part due to the diversity of responses to the survey questions and in part to reflect the nationally representative nature of the original sample across race, religion and region of residence. As part of Wave 2, 120 of the original participants were reinterviewed face-to-face approximately two years later. In Wave 3, 151 participants were selected from the pool of those who had been interviewed in Wave 1 and 67 participants who had never experienced a face-to-face interview combined to total 230 now early emerging adults (18–24 years old) while preserving the nationally representative nature of the original sample and striking a near equal ratio of males to females (Smith and Snell 2009). As to the religious denominations of the sample, 48% were Protestant, 15% Catholic, 6% Jewish, 6% Mormon, 11% not religious and the remaining 10% a combination of Christian and non-Christian approaches. The relatively high number of interviews allows for in-depth comparisons across groups and detailed description of the groups themselves. Smith and Snell applied a qualitative approach to face-to-face interviews (Smith and Snell 2009) and identified six types of religiousness or religious identities in emerging adulthood: Committed Traditionalists, Selective Adherents, Spiritually Open, Religiously Indifferent, Religiously Disconnected, and Irreligious. Smith and Snell suggest each group may be described by a single summary statement that captures each grouping's position in relation to religion in their lives. For example, "I am really committed," describes a Committed Traditionalist, while a Selective Adherent would more likely respond "I do some of what I can". Spiritually Open respondents suggest that "[T]here's probably something more out there", and "It just doesn't matter much," is the mantra of the Religiously Indifferent. "I really don't know what you are talking about," summarizes the Religiously Disconnected, while the Irreligious approach is captured by the phrase "Religion just makes no sense". Smith and Snell estimate that most emerging adults are either Selective Adherents (SAs; 30%) or Religiously Indifferent (RI; 25%). The next largest groups are thought to be Committed Traditionalists and Spiritually Open (CT; SO; 15% each respectively). Irreligious and Religiously Disconnected emerging adults represent the smallest proportions in the population at ten and five percent, respectively (I; RD). With respect to family related contexts and processes, the description of CTs is conspicuously silent. The SAs have a "fairly solid religious upbringing," and may have been raised in a religious faith (Smith and Snell, p. 167). SO's may have no religious background, or be a former believer. RIs can come from any religious tradition or be nonreligious all together. RDs have families and other social relationships that are wholly non-religious and come from non-religious backgrounds. Most IRs were raised in non-religious families or are no longer following the religious tradition in which they were raised.

Each typology of religious identity makes advances in categorizing and summarizing the somewhat discontinuous process of identity exploration and development in emerging adulthood. Each comes from emerging adults. Yet Smith and Snell's typology speaks little, if at all, to the family related contexts and processes that contributed to each type. Thus, the current project will attempt to replicate the six religious identities described by Smith and Snell (2009) using a purposive sample of college students from a large southern university. As part of the replication, special attention will be paid to the family context and processes that may be related to each type.



## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample

The sample included 49 university students from a large southern university. The average age of participants is almost 21 ( $M = 20.82$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) with an age range of 19–24, indicating mostly upper classman. Most participants were female (41; 84%) and eight were male (16%). Most of the sample is white (40%), 22% Asian/Asian American, 14% African American, 12% Mexican/Mexican American, 8% Bi-racial, 2% Indian and 2% had missing data. Compared to national estimates of race and ethnicity for 18–24 year olds, the current sample underrepresents whites and Hispanics, closely represents African Americans, and over represents Asians and those who are Bi-racial ([National Center for Education Statistics n.d.](#)). The majority of the sample came from married two parent families (65%), with 16% from step-families, 12% from single-parent families and 2% each from cohabiting common law, divorced and not remarried and extended family backgrounds, respectively. Participants self-identified in the following denominations: Non-denominational (24%), Catholic/Roman Catholic (19%), Christian (16%), Baptist (12%), Agnostic (8%), Atheist (6%), Hindu (4%), Reformed Judaism (2%), Muslim (2%), Jehovah's Witness (2%), Higher Power (2%) and confused (2%). At the state level, adults in Texas report 77% Christian, including 1% Jehovah's Witnesses and other Christian, 1% Jewish and Muslim and less than 1% Hindu. Those that are religiously unaffiliated account for 18% of the adult population in Texas, with 2% Atheist and 3% Agnostic, respectively ([PEW Research Center n.d.](#)). Thus, at 73% the current sample slightly underrepresents adult Christians in the state of Texas while over representing non-Christians, atheists and agnostics.

### 2.2. Interviews

After receiving IRB approval, the qualitative data was acquired through semi-structured interviews with participants who were students at a large southern university. Participants were recruited through classroom visits using a stratified purposive sampling strategy with the intention of sampling those who have experienced change or struggle with respect to their religious identities since starting college ([Palinkas et al. 2015](#)). Potential participants were screened to insure they met the recruitment criteria. One-on-one interviews were conducted in a small conveniently located interview room on campus. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded. As part of the interview schedule, participants were asked a number of questions related to demographics and their family backgrounds. Key to this investigation, participants were read each of the summary statements indicated by Smith and Snell to capture and summarize each of the six religious types ([Smith and Snell 2009](#); See Table 1). Participants were then invited to verbally select the summary statement that most closely aligned with their own approach to religion. Most self-identified within a specific type, while 10% of the current sample chose a self-identification that combined two conceptually proximal religious identities. Upon completion of the interview participants received \$10. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Frequency Distributions of Six Religious Types Across Independent Samples.

| Religious Type                              | Summary Statement                          | Smith & Snell Estimated % <sup>1</sup> | Current Sample % |
|---|--|--|------------------|
| Committed Traditionalist                    | I am really committed. <sup>2</sup>        | 15                                     | 28               |
| Committed Traditionalist/Selective Adherent | —  | —                                      | 8 <sup>3</sup>   |
| Selective Adherent                          | I do some of what I can.                   | 30                                     | 36               |
| Spiritually Open                            | There's probably something more out there. | 15                                     | 14               |
| Spiritually Open/Religiously Indifferent    | —  | —                                      | 2                |

Table 1. Cont.

| Religious Type           | Summary Statement                       | Smith & Snell<br>Estimated % <sup>1</sup> | Current Sample % |
|--------------------------|---|---|------------------|
| Religiously Indifferent  | It just doesn't matter much.            | 25  | 8                |
| Religiously Disconnected | I don't know what you're talking about. | 5   | 0                |
| Irreligious              | Religion just makes no sense.           | 10  | 2                |

### 3. Data Analysis

Five content relevant questions in the interview schedule were identified for analysis. These questions tapped family contexts and processes as indicated by literature reviewed above. Participants were invited to describe the family structure they grew up in, conversations they had with their parents about religion growing up, conversations about religion right before coming to college, the degree of religious practices present in their homes and the degree of parental conflict in their homes. Demographics and interviews were initially reviewed to code each interview along the typology developed by (Smith and Snell 2009). Participants were placed in the religious identity type with which they self-identified (e.g., CT, SA, SO, RI, RD, I). Interviews that could not be coded due to missing data were removed, dropping the N from 52 to 49. Any relevant data associated with each question was gathered and collated from the 49 interviews into a single document. Data was then organized first by religious identity and then by content question, resulting in five pure groups with five content topic sub groups each, as responses to the conversations about religion growing up and conversations about religion before leaving for college question were combined. No participants self-identified as RD. For the smaller groups, (RI, I) content relevant data for all of the respondents were directly reported. For the larger groups (CT, SA and SO) data were then organized by question. All of the responses to one question were reviewed for patterns and themes. All names are pseudonyms (see Table 1 for a comparison of the frequency distribution of the six types across two independent samples).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Committed Traditionalist

Approximately 46% of CTs indicated the degree of religious practices in their homes growing up was high. Only one suggested a medium amount of religious practices characterized their home and one was unsure. Surprisingly, over one third of CTs (38%) indicated that there was no religious practice present in their home growing up (see Table 2 for additional details).

<sup>3</sup> Smith and Snell suggest that some participants will not fit cleanly into a specific type 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Summary statements capturing each group cited from (Smith and Snell 2009, pp. 166–68).

<sup>1</sup> Population level estimates are based on the categorization of 230 participants while adjusting for oversampling specific religious traditions (Smith and Snell 2009, p. 334).

**Table 2.** Summary of Family Context, Process and Demographic Variables across Five Religious Identity Types.

| Variables                       | Religious Identity Type   |  |  |   |  |
|---------------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|
|                                 | Committed Traditionalist  | Selective Adherent   | Spiritually Open   | Religiously Indifferent                 | Irreligious                                      |
| Religious practices in the home | 46% high<br>8% medium<br>38% no practices<br>8% uncategorized                     | 70% high<br>6% medium<br>24% occasional  | 29% high<br>14% medium<br>43% low  | Extreme/High when young<br>Occasional   | High until parental divorce at age 8 then forced |
| Parental Conflict               | 77% little to no conflict<br>8% historically high now low<br>8% medium<br>8% high | 50% little to no conflict<br>11% historically high now low<br>11% medium<br>6% high                            | 43% little to no conflict<br>14% historically high but now low<br>14% medium<br>14% high | Minimal<br>Passive aggressive<br>Medium | high   |
| Family Structure                | 57% nuclear<br>29% step family, 7% extended family or single mom                  | 67% nuclear<br>17% single parent<br>5% divorced<br>5% cohabiting common law<br>5% multiple step-families       | 86% Nuclear<br>14% Step family   | Nuclear                                 | Multiple step-families                           |
| Religious Affiliation           | Nondenominational, Christian or Baptist   | 44% Catholic<br>22% Nondenominational Christian<br>17% Baptist<br>6% Methodist 6% Hindu<br>6% Reformed Judaism | 29% Agnostic 14% Atheist 14% Protestant 14% Baptist 14% Hindu 14% higher power           | Atheist Agnostic Muslim                 | Agnostic   |
| Race/Ethnicity                  | 43% White<br>29% African American<br>14% Asian<br>7% Bi-racial<br>7% Latino       | 33% White<br>28% Latino/a<br>17% African American<br>11% Asian<br>6% Indian<br>6% Bi-racial                    | 43% Asian<br>43% White<br>14% Latino/a   | White<br>Asian Hispanic                 | Latina   |



No overarching theme appeared that captured the essence of religious conversations growing up for CTs. A number of smaller themes did emerge from the data, however. One interesting theme is the idea of Unspoken Understanding. This pattern is that of CTs explaining that they had matured in their faiths to the point that their parents no longer have conversations with them regarding religion. CTs see themselves more as religious or spiritual equals than as parent and child. An illustrative example quote of this theme is as follows: “We had most of our conversations um about God and religion whenever I was like younger, um maybe. When was it? Middle school, maybe early high school. And then from there I like kind of developed my own sense of um like they didn’t really talk to me about it anymore but, unless it came up in conversation, but it wasn’t a concentrated really discussion if that makes sense. Whenever I was younger they were trying to like teach me about it. But as I grew older um, you know I kind of already had my sense of identity in term of my views and they’ve held pretty consistent so”. This theme is in contrast to second theme, Radio Silence. Both themes share a lack of communication. However, where Unspoken Understanding is relying on a foundation that was built between the parent and child earlier in the relationship, Radio Silence represents how some parents have little to no communication at all with their children regarding religion. These emerging adults have been cut off from a potentially helpful resource in their task of deciding who they are. Instead they must rely on outside sources. A quote from a CT with the Radio Silence theme will illustrate:

“Not really uh I remember again going to Mass on Sundays, but outside of Mass there was never any uh conversations about religion or God or anything”. Within CTs in this sample there seems to be a willingness to stand up for, own and defend one’s religious beliefs, even if that means going against the beliefs of parents, or theme three: Spiritual Certainty. An example quote will illustrate:

“And then when [my parents] came here and had me I was sprinkled as a baby . . . but then I don’t remember because I was a baby. And so that’s Catholic. Uhm but then when I grew older I received my salvation and became baptized as a Baptist. So then I remember uhm a few years down the line looking into [laugh] those different denominations I was like wait like does that mean you know uhm is there, was there something that I did wrong with the technicality, because . . . can you, are you supposed to be baptized before you get saved, after you get saved, you know like . . . sprinkling versus you know baptism as being a symbol and things, and so when we were moving churches like they were trying to move back to the Catholic Church and I didn’t want to. And so we had that conversation I guess about different denominations”.

Approximately 77% of CTs come from family backgrounds with little to no conflict. Some have never seen their parents fight, while others have seen clear positive examples of how people can disagree and work through those disagreements to a resolution. For example:

“Right yeah it definitely has affected me. My parents have always expressed love for one another and um publically and like to us as children, to me. You know they got in disputes and stuff, misunderstandings, and you know get frustrated at times with one another but always um, it was never hostile or I never saw my parents yell at each other. Um or hit each other or anything like that. Um and when they would get into disputes they would kind of make it a point to make sure that they would reconcile things um I’m not sure always in front of us but they definitely did in front of us I think to show us like hey this is how it’s done. You’re never going to be in a relationship with a person where you won’t uh it’s not always going to be perfect and this is how you, you know this is how you cope with it. This is how you figure things out. This is how you apologize and stuff like that. That has affected me in my current relationships, and the girls that I’ve dated and um, and just really every kind of relationship I have so it’s been good”.

#### 4.2. Selective Adherent

Five themes emerged from the data specific to the kinds of religious conversations that selective adherent emerging adults engaged in from childhood until the present with their parents. The first, most prevalent theme is called Keep the Faith. In these conversations, parents answered questions of faith to the best of their abilities and sought to encourage their offspring to live according to the religious values upon which they had been raised. Phrases like “stick to”, “keep”, or “stay in” are used with respect to the efforts parents hope their children will put forth regarding developing faith. An illustrative quote from this theme is as follows: “Conversations about religion growing up were minimal and more about the functions and rituals of the church”.

“I mean, when I was little I really liked Sunday school and then, so we would talk about like things like that and I enjoyed like all the Noah’s ark stories and stuff like that. They would kind of just like they always said like oh just like you have to keep the faith. Like pray and things will get better sort of a thing. We’d talk about that a lot even like up until now, it’s like ‘well just keep the faith, everything’s going to work out, like there’s a plan for you, kind of a thing.’”

A second, smaller theme—Just the Basics—takes a different approach to religious conversations. For this theme, discussions, if they occur, are largely to convey information about an upcoming religious event or ritual. Once the ritual is past the information and conversation is not revisited. An illustrative quote from this theme is as follows: “Conversations about religion growing up were minimal and more about the functions and rituals of the church”.

Unspoken Understanding is the name of a third theme. The emerging adult selective adherents who fall into the Unspoken Understanding category expressed that their parents did not need to have on-going conversations with them about faith. Instead, these emerging adults have observed the religious examples set by their parents and have actively adopted what was being taught.

“Trying to think uhm . . . To be honest I wasn’t really a child—well I didn’t ask a lot of questions about church, religion, none of that growing up. Uhm I just—I kind of just—I watched I was the . . . like . . . I’m the kind of person . . . I observe everything. So it was like I didn’t need to ask that many questions. I was always watching what was going on”.

The fourth theme to emerge from analyses is Source of Wisdom. Under this theme, offspring go to and see their parents as a viable source to answer questions related to religion and life in general. Through conversation parents are able to show how religion can answer some of life’s questions. A representative quote from this theme is as follows:

“[W]e had a lot of conversations about religion, like mostly like I would ask her about like other denominations and stuff or be like what does this mean with our religion? Um just like to clear things up or like I’d say um you know Jehovah’s Witness like what do they do? Like or like what is different than what we do and then she would just clarify that kind of stuff. But yeah I mean, like everything that I know about my religion is pretty much because of [my mother]”.

The fifth and final theme is Childhood Limited or Life Long, meaning that some conversations around religion began and ended in childhood, and parents or emerging adult children are no longer initiating nor receptive to religious conversations. An example of Childhood Limited religious conversation is as follows:

One SA emerging adult was struggling with the logical time order of God and dinosaurs. When asking her mom about the topic she replied ‘Oh, God created the dinosaurs you know.’ She learned not to ask questions for fear of offending her mom. She also began to fear admitting to herself she had questions.

On the other hand, some conversations that may have started in childhood maintain relevance into emerging adulthood and thus the channels of communication are kept open.

SAs indicated the degree of religious practices in their homes growing up varied from “100%” or “hardcore,” to less than occasional. Going to church and praying, whether before meals, bed-time or in general, were the most frequent religious practices mentioned by SAs (76% and 47%). For some church attendance meant weekly, including Shabbat. For others it was less frequent, with emphasis on attending during holidays, such as Christmas or Easter. Other special occasions include the Virgin of Guadalupe’s birthday, Rosh Hashanah, Yom-Kippur, Hanukkah and other special occasions. A small group of SAs perceived attending sporadically or only on special occasions as being less than fully invested. Another small group of SAs reported parental attitudes that were clearly anti-institutional. For example, one mother of an SA indicated “you don’t have to go to church to feel connected to God”. Another father of an SA stated that one does not need to go to church or read the Bible to know one’s faith and beliefs. Catholic and former Catholic SAs clearly articulated the educational process and pathway they walked. For example, one Catholic SA indicated she would attend church with her parents every Sunday, attend classes for Catholic Children’s Education every week during the school year and had completed the sacraments, baptism, first communion, reconciliation and confirmation. Interestingly, she would go on her own even if her parents would not make it to services. Less common practices included reading from or taking a class or Bible seminar, Vacation Bible School, and learning holy music. For SAs, it seems as though there is a wide range of commitment levels and exposure to things religious.

When it comes to parental conflict growing up, half of SAs report little to no conflict. Two report high historic conflict but concurrent levels are down to lower levels. Two report an average or normal amount of parental conflict and one reports high levels due to both parents working in a family business. On the whole, SAs seem to be members of families that are largely able to keep conflict out of the picture. Approximately 15% of SAs perceive the level of parental conflict in their home growing up to be of average or moderate levels. The remaining 8% have parents who are perceived to be high in conflict.

#### 4.3. Spiritually Open

Of the seven who selected spiritually open, all but one come from a nuclear family. This identity includes two agnostics, one atheist, a Protestant, a Baptist, a Hindu and one who follows a high power. Three of seven SO emerging adults characterized the level of religious practices in their homes growing up as low to fairly low. For example, one emerging adult from this family environment endorsed the following rating: “Probably about a one [on] a scale of ten”. A fourth SO emerging adult reported the degree of religious practices in her home as “fairly strong,” especially around holidays and special occasions, which typically took the form of religious service attendance. Two endorsed the idea that religious practices were very present growing up. A culturally Jewish emerging adult described how her mother simultaneously promoted Judaism while allowing space to explore and engage with other worldviews. Her mother made sure they went to temple, Sunday school, completing bot mitzvah, doing confirmation. “You are doing these things,” she would tell them. They celebrated the Jewish holidays, Shabbat every Friday but they were more family and culturally focused events rather than religious. Despite her mom’s strong push towards Judaism, she also gave her children space to choose what activities they would like to do even in the community with other faiths. It was ok and encouraged to be part of the non-Jewish culture. Both parents encouraged her to find what worked for her while creating a foundation in Judaism. The family even celebrated Christmas due to her fathers’ relatives being Christian. Thus, there appears to be a wide variety of religious engagement throughout the home for emerging adults with an SO identity.

For many emerging adults who self-identify as spiritually open, conversations about religion with parents growing up seemed to lack depth. Intentionally or otherwise, this lack of depth discouraged open and honest dialogue about religion and potentially divergent views being explored by emerging

adults in their youth. Some emerging adults did not feel comfortable discussing their doubts. A few emerging adults were able to speak openly about their beliefs with parents growing up, with diverging results. One female emerging adult has developed what she terms more “liberal” values than her mother. They disagree on topics such as the morality of homosexuality and waiting for marriage to have sex, which her mother promotes but did not practice herself. “[W]e clash a lot with it”. This clash includes being forced to attend midnight Mass against her will. Yet, she went anyway to please her mother. For this participant “[R]eligion is not super strong or specific religion isn’t—organized religion isn’t strong in my beliefs”. In contrast to the clash of the previous example, efforts by parents to reach out and have deep conversations sometimes are well received. As a teen Fran was feeling a bit rebellious and hid under her bed to avoid going to religious services one day. Her father was able to coax her out and engage in a meaningful conversation in the car on the way there. “‘You know Fran, like it’s okay to not believe in something’ and I must have been like in my early teens, like maybe like maybe even a little bit before that I want to say I was like 10 or 11. Um and that was just kind of like, it was kind of the seed, you know what I mean? He planted the seed of like, not that you don’t have to believe anything but that there’s a lot of things to believe in. and so you know you have to choose what’s right for you basically.”

In four of seven SO households, there was little to no observable parental conflict. As one participant put it “[T]hings were pretty calm at my house”. In the other homes parental conflict ranged from historically high to currently low thanks to separate sleeping quarters, above average due to the strain of working a small business together and divorced parents who do not get along.

In sum, SO’s come from nuclear families, a wide variety of denominations but possibly more atheists and agnostics than SAs and CTs. Conversations about religion growing up were largely limited and shallow and parental conflict is not the norm.

#### *4.4. Religiously Indifferent*

Three participants elected the religiously indifferent identity. One is atheist, one agnostic and one is Muslim. Two are Asian and one Hispanic. All come from nuclear families. Henry, a Muslim, was born on the west coast of the United States but spent most of his childhood in Saudi Arabia. When asked about the presence of religious practices in his home growing up he responded “[I]t was extreme”. He would go on to describe Saudi Arabia as the most Muslim country in the world. He would attend Mosque once a week and pray five times a day and attend what he termed “religion school,” once a week. Conflict was minimal. When it came to religion, he just did what he was told. Conversations about religion focused on whether Henry would continue to practice his religion while away at college. He is, he tells them, but not as much. Henry says yes out of fear of disappointing his family, but he shares “truthfully it wasn’t like on my priority list or anything”. Laura, a self-identified agnostic, comes from a “really, really Catholic” home. Religious practices included praying before each meal, an emphasized prayer before bed, church on Sundays and Bible study throughout elementary, junior high and high school. She describes conflict in her home as more passive aggressive and making “horrible remarks” than anything. Laura connects her parent’s approach to conflict to the Catholic teaching of never getting a divorce. High levels of overt conflict could lead to divorce. So instead her parents resolved conflicts in a passive aggressive manner. She also pointed out the potential danger of being involved in the church and having “Tia Rosa,” the lady that is always there doing things, find out you are getting a divorce. When it came to conversations about religion, Laura would go to Bible study despite fears of being rejected by “another set of kids”. She didn’t want to go but instead she kept quiet and “kind of just went through the motions”. Her father encouraged Laura to find a church while she was away at college. She said she would, but has not. Than self-identifies as Atheist. His father is Christian and his mother is a traditional Buddhist after the Vietnamese tradition. It is unclear whether Than’s father was Christian before his side of the family immigrated, but during the process their family became close with a host family in a Southern state where the host father was a pastor. His Dad’s family went to church every Sunday in that Southern state. Than indicated

that even though he didn't see his father as the most devout Christian, they still went to church a lot every time he visited that side of the family. Growing up attending church was not mandatory for Than. The family did attend for big holidays like Easter. He would occasionally go to Mass just to see what his Catholic friends were doing. The building of a Buddhist temple in his hometown sparked a greater interest in that religion. Than watched his mother attend, donate money and join that faith community. There was a language barrier, as the worship services were in Vietnamese. Nonetheless, he would listen to the Buddhist monks as they led the prayer session from their knees. He reflects on how his attendance at temple has changed "I used to go a lot more when I was younger because it was cool and there was food and you were around like the other young kids and stuff. It was kind of like a family kind of thing". Now he attends temple on special occasions like Chinese New Year and to celebrate the Lunar year with the August moon festival. When prompted to discuss religious practices within his home, Than describes an altar with incense in a pot of dry rice surrounded by pictures of his Dad's parents and grandparents. The intent, he says, is to "pay homage to your ancestors". You do so through placing their favorite food and drink next to their pictures, praying and sharing your thoughts with them. When asked about parental conflict, he relays that his parents have always fought but that they do not share public displays of affection. Contrasting this with a stereotypical American couple who Than feels will kiss and hug, his parents' relationship never sat quite right in his mind. Two years prior to our interview Than's father explained that he is choosing to stay married to Than's mother so that Than and his brother can "prosper economically". Conversations about religion growing up went differently depending on who he was speaking with. As a 13-year old he would tell his mother he didn't believe in God. She did not engage him in conversation, leading Than to feel dismissed. His father made space for Than to express his disbelief in God but suggested that "it's always good to believe in something". He felt a desire to logically discuss religion with his parents but did not feel capable of fully bringing that discussion to fruition. Than shares in the interview that he grew up logically, scientific and taking an empirical view of things. Interestingly, Than does feel as though something he can't quite describe—something spiritual—is missing from his life. He is trying to eat right, exercise, do yoga and meditate to find it.

#### 4.5. Religiously Disconnected

No participants self-identified as religiously disconnected. This finding is likely due to two major reasons. First, if the Religiously Disconnected truly make up only 5% of the emerging adult population they will be difficult to find. Second, the sampling strategy targeted people who had at least some concept of God. By the nature of this sampling approach, potential RDs who may have otherwise joined the study were excluded.

#### 4.6. Irreligious

There was only one participant who self-identified as Irreligious, about 8% below what Smith and Snell predicted 2009. This participant, Fiona, identifies as Agnostic, which is in line with the Irreligious identity. She was raised Catholic by an atheist mother and a Catholic father who she describes, along with his side of the family, as "very Catholic". Up until age 8 there was a high degree of religious practices in the home. After her parents divorced those dropped off sharply. Her mother still dropped her off for Catechism class three times a week for twelve years. In response to the question about level of conflict between parents growing up Fiona states "(laugh). As worse as possibly could be [sic]. They are very happily divorced, so . . . they hate each other. They hated each other when I was little. Still hate each other". When the same question is applied to her mothers' on and off husbands she says "[M]y mom likes to get married for fun so she's like working on husband four right now. They all suck. My mom just has horrible taste in men. Like, none of them lasted long, [she] should never have gotten married". Conversations about religion in the home growing up were minimal beyond her mother pushing Fiona to go to church. Attending church was not particularly meaningful for Fiona, as all of

the meetings were in Spanish, and she only spoke English. Given Fiona's family background, it is not a surprise she is now Irreligious as an emerging adult.

## 5. Discussion and Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the family factors related to the six types of religiousness in emerging adulthood initially identified by [Smith and Snell \(2009\)](#) using a purposive sample of 49 college students from a large public university in the United States. A comparison of frequencies across samples and taking into account the different sampling methods the current sample distribution across types appears at least somewhat similar to the distribution theorized by previously ([Smith and Snell 2009](#)). The largest discrepancy in distributions is found within the CT category; a difference of 13% in favor of the current sample. Given the sampling strategy, with a focus on variability, it is counterintuitive to have CTs make up such a large proportion of the sample. The inflated CT proportion may be an artifact of an order effect. The CT summary statement was read first of all the options. However, if an order effect was at work we would expect the CT religious identity to be the largest group. Instead, SAs, the second available option, are the largest group. Furthermore, respondents were read all of the summary statements before respondents shared the statement that most closely aligns with their approach the religion. It may also be that some participants felt social pressure to choose a socially desirable response. While it may be impossible to know to what degree this occurred, if at all, the interviewers actively sought to emphasize the value neutral position of the interview procedure throughout the interview, attempting to allay such concerns. The high levels of CTs in the sample may also be related to the significant degree of racial and ethnic diversity and oversampling of females in the current sample. Approximately 40% of Smith and Snell's sample can be characterized as non-White and 50% male, while the current sample is 84% female and 60% non-White ([Smith and Snell 2009](#), p. 319). As females and non-Whites tend towards greater levels of religiousness, these demographic differences by sample appear to be a plausible explanation of the CT discrepancy across samples ([Denton and Culver 2015](#); [PEW Research Center 2016](#)). High levels of CTs and SAs may also be related to region of the country, as residents of Southern and Midwestern states consistently report higher levels of religiousness compared to residents from other regions in the United States ([Lipka and Wormald 2016](#)). Interestingly, 38% of CTs in the current sample reported no religious practices in the home growing up. This is somewhat similar to the high personal religion and low institutional religion of Adapters described by Denton 2012. The differences across RI, RD and IR are likely a combination of sampling strategy, availability in the population and willingness to declare an identity that may not be viewed socially acceptable. Family factors such as parental conflict, religious practices in the home and religious conversations were described for each religious identity, and themes emerged for those identities with sufficient data. CTs are Spiritually Certain and may have either an Unspoken Understanding of faith or alternately are on the receiving end of Radio Silence. SAs have the next lowest levels of parental conflict. They can experience quite a varying degree of religious practices as well as a wide variety in types of practices. Themes that emerged among SA religious discussions with parents included efforts of parents to exhort their offspring to Keep the Faith, as well as parents being seen as keepers of valuable religious knowledge as Sources of Wisdom. Unspoken Understanding, or the recognition of spiritually mature SAs, was found here as well. Just Basics captured parents sharing little, if any information about religious rituals and beliefs with their offspring. The timing and duration of religious discussions was described in the Childhood Limited or Lifetime theme. SOs came from family backgrounds with the third lowest parental conflict levels. Most came from families where the degree of religious practices was low or when higher were encouraged to find their own truth. Furthermore, religious conversations with parents of SOs lacked depth on the parent's side. The RI emerging adults in this sample all come from religious backgrounds but are now less invested and active in religion than their parents would like them to be. The Irreligious emerging adult has a forced Catholic background with high levels of parental conflict, divorce and parental religious heterogamy. When comparing



religious practices in the home across religious identity types a few findings are of note. First, and in line with previous research, the religious identity types that entirely or partially endorse religion (i.e., CT and SA) reported the highest levels of religious practice (Myers 1996). Spiritually Open was largely characterized by low levels, while RI and I report high levels but only in childhood and often against their will. Parental conflict across the typology was also as expected and in line with previous research (Ellison et al. 2011), such that as endorsement of religion or spirituality increases, the level of parental conflict decreases across SO, SA and CT emerging adults and is high for Irreligious emerging adults. The patterns on family structure run largely counter to expectations, with SO and RI emerging adults growing up largely in nuclear families and only 57% of CT emerging adults being raised in a nuclear family. Nearly 30% of CTs report growing up in step families, which may account for the low levels of religious practices for that group as well. In line with Smith and Snell (2009), most CTs in this study were nondenominational or Christian, while SAs are largely Catholic. Also in line with previous research (2009), the SO category represented the largest concentration of Atheists, Agnostics and a variety of Christian and non-Christian religions whereas RI and I are largely Agnostic or Atheist. Catholics made up 44% of SAs. African Americans in this study were found in greatest proportions in the CT designation. This finding is in line with research suggesting that religion is highly important in the lives of African Americans (Taylor and Chatters 2010). SOs on the whole were almost exclusively Asian and White. It may be that culturally, Asian Americans may be predisposed towards the SO religious identity. SAs were mostly White and Latino, likely connected with the large Catholic presence identified earlier. The diversity of religious identities in conjunction with the racial and ethnic diversity is a strength. This study is not without limitations. First, the sample is largely of female emerging adults in college, recruited from a single university. A greater male presence may have rounded out the RI and I religious identities, providing substantial depth to the descriptions of each category. Second, these identities, including RD, may have been better represented with multi-site data collection across less religious regions of the country. Third, emerging adults not in college were not included in the sample. As non-attendance of college may impact religious and spiritual development, their exclusion likely biased the sample in favor of more religiously oriented identities. Though additionally limited due to the purposive sample, geographic restriction and small sample size, this study forwards descriptions of family related factors for five of the six types of religious identity specific to emerging adults.

## 6. Future Directions

Alternative sampling methods may yield frequency distributions by religious identity type that are more comparable to those set forth by (Smith and Snell 2009). Also, the current research design allowed for co-types (e.g., CT/SA), an area that is yet untouched. Another potentially fruitful future direction could be to explore how one's closeness to God fluctuates over time within and between each religious type. Another area of investigation may be delving into the CTs that reported no religious practices in the home growing up, as understanding this group may lead to a greater understanding of resiliency. The potential cultural connection between SO and Asian Americans may be particularly illuminating as well. Qualitative data analysis is of high utility, especially when attempting to address multidimensional constructs such as religiousness and identity. This study largely replicated the religious identity types in emerging adulthood initially identified by Smith and Snell (2009) and described the connection to and role of religious practices, religious discussions, parental conflict, race, ethnicity and family structure for five of the six types, expanding the understanding family contexts and processes for this innovative typology.

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