Examining Religious and Spiritual Commitment Across Late-Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Thomas Ray Clanton
*Clemson University*, tclanto@g.clemson.edu

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EXAMINING RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT ACROSS LATE–ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

by
Thomas Clanton
May 2021

Accepted by:
Dr. Harrison Pinckney, Co-Committee Chair
Dr. Barry Garst Co-Committee Chair
Dr. Edmond Bowers
Dr. Andre Whitehead
ABSTRACT

Religion and spirituality are two distinct concepts that have been linked to positive outcomes (King & Boyatzis, 2015) and identity development (King & Furrow, 2004) in youth. Participation in religious and spiritual contexts has been associated with youth thriving (King et al., 2011) and transcendence (Schnitker et al., 2019). Participation in faith-based youth groups and interactions with spiritual models are primary ways that youth engage with religion and spirituality. As youth establish an identity with and fidelity to a religious or spiritual ideology, they express their commitment through spiritual activities such as prayer, scripture reading, and attend religious services (Chaves, 2017). The relationship that adolescents have with religion and spirituality is also influenced by the increasingly pluralistic and polarized American religious landscape (Chaves, 2017). An adolescent's relationship with religion and spirituality is influenced by the relational developmental systems in which they are situated (Overton, 2015). As youth move from late adolescents to young adulthood, they experience transitions that disrupt their relational systems (Breland-Noble et al., 2015). A common transition during this time is the transition from high school to college. The current studied examined how adolescents expressed religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood.

The study used an embedded mixed methods design where 387 survey responses from the 2014-2018 General Social Survey (GSS) acted as the primary data source. Qualitative thematic life stories were collected from 3 individuals and acted as a secondary source of data used to support the quantitative results. Results identified seven items that combined to form a single factor latent model that predicted religious and
spiritual commitment. This factor was then used to examine the three latent class profiles of adolescents in the GSS from age 18-22. Additional analysis indicated that females, youth of color, and Protestants were more likely to be associated with the high religious/spiritual commitment latent profile compared to the medium and low commitment profiles. The thematic life stories helped provide insight into the quantitative results and revealed additional insight into idiosyncratic behaviors of adolescent religious and spiritual commitment. The qualitative data also provided insight into the impact of the transition to college on religious and spiritual commitment. The qualitative data indicated that loss of religious community, dependence on private spiritual practice, and the reevaluation of their religious and spiritual identity were common themes among the three life story participants.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Kayla, who has loved and supported me through all the highs and all the lows graduate student life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support from my hard-working committee. Thank you to Dr. Harrison Pinckney and Dr. Barry Garst for acting as co-chairs and providing clarity and leadership throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. Ed Bowers and Dr. Andrew Whitehead for providing valuable feedback and support. Thank you to everyone who has helped to make this project a success.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Adolescents experience life within complex relational developmental systems that influence their development (Overton, 2015). Youth interact with ideological, social, and moral contexts that impact how they establish their identity (King, 2003). Religion and spirituality are two common factors that often contribute to identity development in youth (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Adolescents often develop their religious and spiritual identities by participating in faith-based youth groups (Snell, 2009) and interacting with spiritual models (Oman, 2013). Through consistent interactions with these groups, adolescents develop connection and fidelity to their religious and spiritual contexts (Schniker et al., 2019). As youth begin to form religious and spiritual identities, they express commitment to religion by attending religious services, reading scripture, or expressing their belief about God (Chaves, 2017). They represent their commitment to spirituality by engaging in prayer and reflecting on the spiritual aspects of their lives (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). As youth grow and develop, they are exposed to new ideas and contexts that impact their religious and spiritual commitment. As youth grow from late adolescence to young adulthood, they often experience disruptions of their relational context. One common disruption is the transition from high school to college. This transition exposes youth to new personal responsibilities and new social environments (Dvorakova et al., 2017). When youth are exposed to new contexts and new ideas, they begin to reevaluate their identity (Fowler, 1981). The presence of uncertain environments during this life stage influences how youth relate to religion and spirituality. The current
study explores the different levels of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes that adolescents in this life stage display and how demographic and personal factors influence those behaviors and attitudes.

**Religion and Spirituality**

This study discusses religion and spirituality primarily as concepts that act as avenues for identity and youth development. Researchers often discuss religion and spirituality as two distinct concepts. Researchers commonly conceptualize religion as an organized socio-cultural-historical system (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Therefore, the study of religiosity is often concerned with a person's relationship with a specific religious institution. On the other hand, spirituality is often conceptualized as more individual and as a person's quest for meaning, satisfaction, and wisdom (King & Boyatzis, 2015). The study of spirituality is often concerned with the self and its relationship with transcendent contexts and ideas. Given the distinct nature of these concepts in the literature, the current study examined if the data obtained from the 2014-2018 General Social Survey (GSS) produced individual and distinct factors for religion and spirituality.

There has been renewed interest recently in how religion and spirituality impact positive youth outcomes (Hardy & King, 2019; King & Boyatzis, 2015). Many positive outcomes, such as civic engagement and social capital, have been tied to religion and spirituality (Beyerlein et al., 2011; King & Furrow, 2004). Two primary positive youth development outcomes discussed often in connection with religion and spirituality are transcendence and thriving.
Transcendence occurs when adolescents shift their cognitive and emotional orientation away from themselves and toward meaning or purpose that is larger than themselves (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Transcendence can occur when a young person has a transactional experience with a person or idea that inspires and transforms them. Faith-based youth groups help promote a transcendent community narrative that focuses on God, spiritual growth, and service to others (Schnitker et al., 2019). Youth development researchers seek to measure how religion and spirituality can help youth think beyond themselves.

The development of transcendent identities can often lead to a person making prosocial contributions to themselves and society (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This mutually beneficial interaction between a person and their context is referred to as thriving (King et al., 2011). When religious and spiritual environments are structured appropriately, they positively influence thriving in youth (Dowling et al., 2004).

**Identity Development**

These well-structured religious and spiritual environments create avenues for adolescents to explore their identity. The period of adolescence is a time of physical and social change. As youth begin to navigate those changes, they better understand their relational environments and their identity (Riedinger, 2015). As adolescents seek identity formation, they identify, evaluate, and select core personal values and meanings (Hamman & Hendricks 2005). King (2003) proposed that religion provides three contexts that help youth explore their identity formation. Religion provides ideological contexts, social contexts, and spiritual contexts that can benefit adolescent identity development.
Religious contexts provide adolescents with opportunities to engage with abstract concepts about belief (Tirri & Quinn, 2010), interact with people who hold similar beliefs (King & Furrow, 2004), and integrate teachings from religion into a moral code (Hardy et al., 2011). Religious contexts can foster positive social interactions that provide connection and fidelity to a religious group. Through providing opportunities for thriving and transcendence, religious communities help youth find meaning and purpose in life (King & Rosier, 2009). When youth begin to establish a religious or spiritual identity, they express their commitment to the group or ideology. Religious commitment is often shown through expressing belief in God (Martin et al., 2003) or attending religious services (Hardie et al., 2016). Spiritual commitment is often expressed through prayer (Underwood, 2011) or reflecting on spiritual aspects of their lives (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Adolescents commonly navigate their religious and spiritual identities by participating in faith-based youth groups and interacting with spiritual models.

**Faith-Based Youth Programs, Spiritual Models, and Leisure**

The structure of faith-based youth programs can take a variety of forms. Faith-based youth programs can occur within a formal church setting, through a parachurch organization, at a summer camp, or at within any other programmatic structure that encourages discussion of faith and the development of religious and spiritual identity. These programs offer various activities such as bible study, mission trips, recreation time, sports leagues, summer camps (Pinckney et al., 2020) that encourage youth to discuss and grow in their faith. Faith-Based Youth Programs often utilize leisure concepts to encourage religious and spiritual identity development. Leisure has often been connected
to spiritual and religious practices, such as mediation and prayer (Gary, 2006). These practices encourage a person to contemplate their place in the world. The Ancient Greek leisure ideal espoused by Aristotle stated that contemplation was the most critical aspect of life and gave a person the capacity to think about things higher than ourselves (Morgan, 2006). This ideal was adapted within a religious and Christian context through the monastic movement of the medieval era. Helping an individual find authentic contemplative peace was the core ideal of monastic leisure (Gary, 2006). Contemplation of the biblical text is the centerpiece of monastic leisure. This contemplation is inwardly directed and helps a person find enlightenment and empowerment.

Many modern faith-based youth programs utilize these practices to help encourage identity development and thriving in their program participants (White, 2018). To further promote identity development and thriving, faith-based organizations often intentionally encourage youth to engage with non-parental adults about life and faith issues (Oman, 2013). Engagement with spiritual models provides adolescents with the opportunity to thrive by having positive bidirectional interactions with another person who shares their same beliefs. These interactions often result in opportunities for communicative humility and hermeneutic listening (Holba, 2014). Communicative humility is an approach to making meaning out of everyday experiences. Communicative humility involves taking the time to fully understand all sides of an issue so a person can enter into a conversation. This understanding allows a person to discuss important everyday issues without allowing their conversations to break down due to ignorance or preconceived notions (Holba, 2014). Effective communicators also engage in
hermeneutical listening. This form of listening takes a person's background and experiences into account while seeking to understand a person's perspective free of preconceived ideas or expectations (Holba, 2014). Faith-based youth groups encourage these leisure interactions with spiritual models in order to allow youth to explore their identity. By engaging in purposeful conversation, adolescents can ask questions and receive answers about their place in the world and their ability to serve a cause than themselves.

**Religion in America**

How adolescents relate to religion and spirituality is also influenced by the broader historical and sociocultural contexts of religion and spirituality in America. When compared to many other countries, America is highly religious (Chavez, 2017). Americans exhibit high levels of daily prayer and belief in God. More than a quarter (about 35%) of Americans report attending religious services at least once a week (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Since the 1950's, non-Protestant religions have become more prominent and more accepted in the American landscape (Baker & Smith, 2015). In contrast, more people live in America who consider themselves "non-religious" than in any other country in the world except China (Chaves, 2017). In an increasingly pluralistic society, religious diversity is a fact in everyday American life.

However, religion in America has also become increasingly more polarized since the end of World War II. With the sexual liberation of the 1960s countered by the rise of the religious right in the 1970s and 80s, religion in America has become polarized along political lines (Wuthnow, 1988). During this time, theological and political conservatism
began to converge, and the term "religion" began to be associated with the Republican party (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). This association resulted in a growing number of young Americans disavowing religion altogether. Combined with the decreased attendance in liberal mainline Protestant churches, the religiously active population has become more concentrated in the most politically and socially conservative groups. In contrast, the secular population has become more concentrated in politically and socially liberal groups (Chaves, 2017).

This pluralism and polarization in American religion have changed how congregations and denominations in America organize and operate. Congregational size has been slowly decreasing while the populations of congregations have been slowly aging over time. During this time, many Americans are eschewing small community churches to group together in larger churches. (Chaves, 2017). With the rise of megachurches and other non-denominational congregations, the importance of national congregations has waned. While still important to American religious identity, the rise of special interest religious groups and the propensity for individuals to experiment with religious "switching" has forced denominations to restructure their mission and focus. Congregations are increasingly embracing innovative strategies, such as informality and technology, to engage a culture that is increasingly less religious and more polarized than ever (Chavez, 2017; Evans, 2006). Situated within this historical context, the ever evolving American religious landscape influences the way adolescents relate to religion and spirituality and exhibit religious and spiritual commitment.

Theoretical Framework
This study seeks to explore how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. The direct interactions an adolescent has with religion and spirituality and the broader sociocultural, religious context influence how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality. This study utilized Relational Developmental Systems Theory (RDST) and the PYD theoretical framework (Lerner et al., 2015; Overton, 2015) to examine the influence of different contexts, settings, and backgrounds on how adolescents express their religious and spiritual commitment. RDST is a metatheory (or theory about theories), which emphasizes that bidirectional relational interactions between a person and their environment regulate the course of development (Overton, 2015). These reciprocal bidirectional interactions regulate the pace, direction, and outcomes of a person's development (Lerner et al., 2015). When these regulations are mutually beneficial to the person and their environment, the regulations can be considered adaptive (Brandstädter, 2006). Temporal dimensions are also part of the ecology of human development.

Therefore, there is always change and the potential for systematic change and plasticity (Lerner et al., 2015). Within RDST, a person is considered an "inherently active, self-creating, self-organizing, and self-regulating, relatively plastic, nonlinear complex adaptive system" (Overton, 2015, p.12). The plasticity of human development is a core feature of RDST. Plasticity means that humans, as adaptive systems themselves, have the capacity to change, for better or worse, to impact the trajectory of their own development. Humans exist in a relational developmental system that is complex. Biological, behavioral, social, cultural, and historical processes are all embedded within
the ever-changing time and space a person occupies. This complexity provides the opportunity for the adaptation of human characteristics and environmental context to promote positive change and provide a person with agency in their own development. Given the importance of environmental contexts and backgrounds on development, the current study examined how demographic factors such as race, sex, age, education level, and religious affiliation predict how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes.

RDST is a broad metatheory that provides a foundation for the study of all stages of development. PYD is an approach to development derived from RDST. PYD utilizes strength-based programming planning and delivery to connect adolescents to positive relational developmental systems. PYD regards youth as producers of their own development (Lerner, 1982) and not problems to be solved but "resources to be developed" (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Historically, youth development philosophies and programs stemmed from an underlying idea that youth had many problems and that adolescents were generally going through a period of "storm and stress" (Savage, 2007). Therefore, the approach towards youth development came from a deficit-based approach (Caldwell & Witt, 2018). Through this lens, helping youth avoid negative behavior, such as using drugs, joining a gang, or dropping out of school, were the primary purposes of youth programs (Caldwell & Witt, 2018). However, over time the understanding of human development has changed. With the emergence of RDST, researchers began to observe how youth could take control of their own development (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2009). With this observation, the study of youth development began to shift to an
assets based approach. PYD seeks to maximize adolescent potential by understanding the benefits of supports, opportunities, and programs (SOPs) available to youth in their local contexts. Religious and spiritual contexts offer a variety of SOPs that encourage positive development. For example, faith-based youth programs offer youth access to spiritual role models (Schwartz et al., 2006), leadership opportunities (King et al., 2014), and chances to engage in discussions that encourage transcendent thinking (Schnitker et al., 2019).

**Current Study**

Religious and spiritual contexts play a vital part in the lives of many youth. Although religious participation has seen a steady decline since the 1970s (Chaves, 2017), at least 64% of youth still participate in religion to some extent (Pew Research, 2020). Though historically neglected, the research interest in youth development in religious and spiritual contexts has increased in recent years (Hardy et al., 2019). The current study seeks to contribute to that research by exploring how adolescents express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood.

Many adolescents experience religion and spirituality through faith-based youth groups. These groups seek to help youth learn more about their faith, behave morally, and encourage interaction with adults of the same faith, particularly the faith-based youth leader (Snell, 2009). Most religious institutions provide this sort of programming for middle and high school aged youth. However, as youth grow from late adolescence to early adulthood, their familiar religious and spiritual contexts are often disrupted by times of transition (Barry et al., 2010). A common transition during this life stage is the
transition from high school to college. The transition to college is characterized by a shift in personal responsibility, a change in institutional support, and a change in social environments (Dvorakova et al., 2017). During this transition, adolescents must establish connections with new relational contexts. For some people, this transition can be a stressful process (Hudd et al., 2000). Struggling to make new social connections can negatively influence the mental health and overall wellbeing of adolescents (Bukhari & Afzal, 2017). Religion and spirituality can provide avenues for community, connection, and support for youth during this time (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Adolescents express their commitment to religion and spirituality in various ways, such as engaging in prayer, scripture reading, or attending religious services (Chaves, 2017). Understanding how adolescents display their religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood can help practitioners and researchers provide improved developmental support to adolescents adjusting to transition during this life stage, especially in adjusting to the transition from high school to college. The current study utilized survey items from the 2014, 2016, and 2018 GSS to explore general ways that adolescents express their religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. Qualitative data obtained from thematic life stories are also embedded into this study to provide support and further insight into how individual youth perceive their own religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience.

**Research Questions:**

Q1: Do variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment behaviors in 18-22-year-old adolescents?
Q2: What level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors at attitudes do 18-22-year-old adolescents display?

Q3: Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes?

Q4: How do individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience?

Overview of Dissertation

This study explores how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature that provides background on how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality and how that relationship influences their identity development. Chapter 2 also expands on the RDST framework and provide further detail on how relational systems such as faith based youth groups and the American religious landscape influence the relationship between adolescents and religion and spirituality. Chapter 3 presents the methods and research design used to address the research questions. Chapter 4 of the study provides the result of the quantitative and qualitative analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis, latent profile analysis, and logistic regression were conducted using data from the 2014-2108 General Social Survey to analyze broad religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes exhibited by 18-22-year-old adolescents. The study then uses thematic life stories to provide additional insight into adolescent’s religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. These stories provide insight into how individuals perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment and how the
transition to college has impacted that commitment. The final chapter, Chapter 5, provides a discussion of the findings, implications for practitioners, limitations of the study, and ideas for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth exist in a complex relational system that is impacted by their direct experiences and the historical and sociocultural realities of the world they live in. These influences impact how youth relate to religion and spirituality and how they express their commitment to those concepts. This literature review provides additional background on RDST and PYD as a framework for this study. The review of this literature discusses how life transitions influence an adolescent’s relationship with their developmental systems. The review then examines the positive influence that religion and spirituality have on adolescents and their development. The influence of religion and spirituality on the development of life skills, thriving, transcendence, and identity are examined. This chapter then examines how religion and spirituality influence youth from different demographic backgrounds such as race, gender, and education level. The literature on identity development is then examined to provide further clarity on how religion and spirituality influence the identity of adolescents. The influence of faith-based youth groups and spiritual models shows examples of contexts that influence adolescent identification with religion and spirituality. This section also provides examples of how adolescents display their commitment to religion and spirituality. How adolescents experience religion and spirituality in their lives is then framed within the American religious landscape. The final section of the literature review presents detail on the polarized and pluralized religious context in which adolescents interact. This section provides detail on how an adolescent's relationship with religion and spirituality is
influenced not just by their personal experience but also by their broader relational contexts. This literature provides background and detail to how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality and the concepts that influence how they express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in their lives. A visualization of the literature can be found in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Concept Map

**Relational Developmental Systems Theory**

Adolescents influence and are influenced by their relational context. RDST provides a theoretical framework to understand how an adolescent’s interaction with their environment influences their development. RSDT views adolescence as a natural period of growth. Researchers utilize RDST to observe “the day-to-day developmental opportunities and supports that allow young people to become competent and compassionate individuals connected to their community” (Zeldin, 2000, p.3).

Adolescence is a time of momentous change in all areas of life. From physical changes to psychological changes, adolescence is an ideal time to study the plasticity of human
development. The potential for systematic behavior change exists because of the mutually influential relationships between a youth and their biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche (Lerner et al., 2005). Adolescents have the cognitive, behavioral, and social relational skills to contribute actively and often effectively to their own developmental changes (Lerner et al., 2011). “Adaptive” development occurs when the actions of the youth have a mutually beneficial effect on themselves and their ecology (Brandtstädter, 2006). Seen through this lens, adolescents are active agents in their own development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

These bidirectional contextual interactions are the basis for RDST. RDST assumes that people can change at any point in their lifespan (Baltes, 1987). The relationships between multiple levels of human interactions and functioning provide a person with the ability to change (Overton, 2015). RDST is the primary metatheory utilized by PYD researchers.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model contains many of the concepts of RDST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2001). This model proposed that individuals interact with five environmental systems as a set of nested structures. Through these interactions, the biopsychological characteristics of human beings change continuously, both as individuals and as groups (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The five nested environments in this model, from most immediate to most broad, are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is where a developing person experiences face to face contact with people or places in the most
immediate context, such as parents or school. The mesosystem is the system of relationships among microsystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, a mesosystem relationship could be the relationship between a parent and a child’s school. The exosystem involves settings and context in which the developing person is not present but is still impacted by what happens within that context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A school board making decisions about the school microsystem would be an example of an exosystem. The macrosystem involves the larger cultural context in which a person exists. This system comprises broad social norms, customs, attitudes, and ideologies. The chronosystem is the temporal element of this model. This system is the overarching system that recognizes how history and past events influence each system of development. A core factor of Bronfenbrenner’s model is that all systems change over time. Bronfenbrenner proposes that these five systems interact with each other in a bidirectional manner and that development emerges from the interactions among the systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner proposes that proximal processes are the primary engines of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These processes are face-to-face interactions such as play, teaching, and conversation. For these processes to be successful, they must continue to evolve in scope and complexity over time. These processes can occur over various environments, contexts, and time periods (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Personal characteristics impact a person’s ability to engage in proximal processes successfully. People who exhibit natural dispositions such as curiosity, responsiveness, and readiness are more open to initiating and sustaining
proximal processes than people with more closed off dispositions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). As proximal processes advance in scope and complexity, a person’s natural bioecological resources of ability, experience, knowledge, and skill impact their ability to effectively engage (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A person’s capacity to invite or discourage reactions from the social environment can affect a person’s access to different levels of proximal processes. For example, an outgoing person may be exposed to a wider variety of social and environmental experiences than a person who is more likely to keep to themselves.

The temporal context of the chronosystem also influences the effectiveness of proximal processes. The influence of history and past events influence daily face-to-face interactions. For example, a white middle-class school’s historical context is drastically different from the historical context of a low-income African American school. The historical impact of slavery, the civil rights movement, and public discrimination have affected these communities differently over time. It is essential to understand the history of what has come before in order to provide positive developmental contexts in the present. To help support positive development, it is necessary to have a holistic understanding of the systems in which a person operates. A child’s developmental opportunities are impacted by what has happened in the past and what is expected to happen in the future (Kelly et al., 2020). The historical context of all human and environmental interaction runs through all levels of development.

The other form of time that impacts development, known as ontogeny, is more personal. This principle is concerned with timing in personal life. The principle states that
the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person’s life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). When transitions are smooth and supported in a person’s life, proximal processes are more likely to result in positive development. However, when transitions are abrupt or disrupt valuable developmental processes, personal development is negatively affected (Lerner et al., 2012). For example, the current study is interested in understanding how adolescents express their religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood. A common transition during this life stage is the transition from high school to college. During this transition, adolescents leave behind their familiar relational context and establish new connections in new places. A shift in personal responsibility, a drop in institutional support, and an abrupt change in social environments characterize the transition to college (Dvorakova et al., 2017). For many youth, this transition can be stressful (Hudd et al., 2000). A lack of social support during this time can result in mental health problems and negatively impact a student’s quality of life (Lee et al., 2014). However, adolescents who can establish social support and integrate into their new relational systems report higher levels of self-esteem and wellbeing (Alsubaie et al., 2019).

In conjunction with RDST metatheory, Bronfenbrenner’s model displays that human development is not straightforward; human development is rich and complex. A person’s actions and position within their ecosystem all interact in a bidirectional manner to influence development on various levels throughout the lifespan. Given these complex interactions, PYD seeks to utilize the principles of RDST to understand how youth interact with their multi-level contexts.
Positive Youth Development

Given the potential for systematic change and the plasticity of human development discussed in RDST, PYD views youth as assets to be developed rather than problems to be solved (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) PYD services and programs utilize this philosophy in the development and implementation of their programs. While the field of PYD has yet to adequately define a youth development program (Walker, Gambone, & Walker, 2011), researchers have outlined features that help promote PYD practices within a program. Eccles and Gootman (2002) list eight features of a positive youth development setting: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities for belonging, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skills building, and the integration of family, school, and community efforts. For Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003), the defining aspects of a youth development program include program goals that promote positive development while preventing problem behavior. PYD programs should promote an atmosphere that supports positive relationships with adults and peers while still empowering individuals. After a review of the research, Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom (2010) revealed that the factors most used to study PYD programs were relationships, environment, engagement, social norms, skills-building opportunities, and routine/structure. Positive youth development views the natural process of development through a set of strengths-based principles to provide supports and opportunities to youth through programs, services, and positive peer and adult interactions. The current study examines how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality as they enter young adulthood. Participating in positive youth

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development contexts can support adolescents as they examine their relationship with religion and spirituality.

**Youth and Religion/Spirituality**

Religion and spirituality are concepts that influence positive youth development and are associated with the development of a variety of positive factors (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Religion can serve as a protective factor to prevent problem behavior and as a social environment to promote asset development (King, 2008). Youth who report high religious participation levels participate less in delinquent behavior and drug use (King et al., 2004). Youth who report a positive relationship with religion and spirituality also express a higher level of prosocial behavior, identity exploration, and virtue development (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Schnitker et al., 2019). Concepts used to measure positive youth development, such as the 40 developmental assets and the Five Cs of youth development, identify religion and spirituality as critical assets for promoting PYD (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Lerner et al., 2006).

Religious and spiritual contexts provide youth with opportunities to build life skills, such as coping (Breland-Noble et al., 2015), decision-making (Regnerus, 2003), and social empathy (Giordano et al., 2014). Youth who express commitment to religion and spirituality report utilizing their beliefs to help them cope with adverse life experiences (Van Dyke, 2009; Carpenter et al., 2012). Faith-based settings are associated with higher levels of hope in adolescents and lower anxiety levels (DiPierro et al., 2018). Faith-based settings can improve adolescent decision-making skills and provide them skills for resisting social pressure (Kulis et al., 2012). For example, Native American
youth who participated in spiritual practices such as singing, dancing, talk circles, and prayer reported higher resistance to peer pressure regarding drug usage (Kulis & Tsethlikai, 2006). Youth also develop the ability to feel empathy for others through participation in religion and spirituality (Giordano et al., 2014). Adolescents receive examples of empathetic role models such as the good Samaritan through religious teaching (Baston et al., 1985). Faith-based contexts also allow youth to practice empathy through participation in prosocial behavior that expands the participant’s worldview (Furrow et al., 2004). Youth who find spirituality important to their daily lives and use spirituality to find meaning and purpose in facing adversity also report higher levels of empathetic concern for others (Stewart & Lawrence, 2020).

Faith-based settings often aim to encourage life skill development by providing transcendent contexts for youth. These contexts attempt to connect a person with something beyond the self in ways that provide deeper insight into personal identity and the needs of the community (Roehlkepartain & Patel, 2006). Religious settings create transcendent contexts by establishing a consistent community narrative that focuses on God, spiritual growth, and service to others (Schnitker et al., 2019). Transcendent communities help youth establish clarity and commitment to beliefs, values, and purpose (King & Boyatzis, 2015). This fidelity motivates behavior and inspires youth to live in a way that benefits others. These communities help youth thrive by providing opportunities for mutually beneficial interactions between youth and their context (Schniker et al., 2019). A properly functioning religious community provides youth with a chance to
develop leadership skills (King et al., 2014), empathy for others (King & Furrow, 2004), and prosocial concerns (Furrow et al., 2004).

As life skills develop, religious communities provide youth with opportunities to put them into practice. Service and leadership are essential experiences for religious youth (Youniss et al., 1999). For example, a study of spiritual exemplars from around the world found that engaging in acts of service and leadership was central to their experience of being religious (King et al., 2014). These exemplars reported opportunities to contribute to their local congregation and the community at large. They reported leading worship, teaching Sunday school classes, and mentoring younger youth in their home churches. They also reported opportunities to participate in religious mission trips. These trips are common among many faith-based youth groups. Youth from all levels of commitments and backgrounds participate in these trips. Participating in short term mission trips is associated with increased civic engagement in those who participate (Beyerlein et al., 2011). These trips take youth out of their daily context and have them provide service to those in need. During these trips, youth often have to use social and leadership skills to interact with people of diverse backgrounds. These interactions produce bidirectional effects that can improve the cultural responsiveness of trip participants (Simpkins et al., 2017; Probasco, 2013). These service and leadership opportunities carry over to the nonreligious life of youth as well. Youth who participate in religious communities report higher levels of civic engagement and volunteering than their nonreligious peers (Beyerlein et al., 2011). Faith-based communities provide youth with sustained adult relationships (Rhodes & Chan, 2008), provide opportunities for
thriving and skill development (King et al., 2011), and give youth opportunities to lead and serve (Furrow et al., 2004). When organized this way, religious and spiritual contexts provide fertile settings for positive development.

Religion and spirituality are associated with the development of several individual outcomes. For example, youth thriving is often linked to religion and spirituality. Thriving is when a person makes a prosocial contribution to themselves and society (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In the context of religion and spirituality, thriving is concerned with ethical development and the identification with a transcendent narrative that impacts personal identity and community involvement (Schnitker et al., 2019). There is evidence that religion and spirituality help youth think beyond themselves and take actions that contribute to the larger community (Dowling et al., 2004). Increased spirituality compels youth to maximize their opportunities to contribute to their social world and internalize personal, transcendent values (Lerner et al., 2002). Religion and spirituality also help promote youth thriving by helping youth develop prosocial behavior (King & Furrow, 2004). Youth who participate in religious communities have been found to have higher levels of altruism (King & Furrow, 2004), compliant behavior (Hardy & Carlo, 2005), and caring towards family members (Hart & Fegley, 1995).

Thriving is also concerned with the development of the individual through the formation of identity and purpose. Research suggests that youth are more likely to reach identity achievement when they display intrinsic religious motivation (Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Intrinsic motivation occurs when youth internalize the transcendent ideals of their religious community. Interactions with non-parental adult mentors and
interactions with peers and parents who share the same faith help support this identity development. Youth report that their identity is more associated with religion when they have friends of the same religious faith (Schwartz, 2006). Youth with more religious parents also reported being more religious themselves (Wilcox, 2002; Laird et al., 2011). As youth begin to utilize their social capital and internalize their religious beliefs, they also begin to form meaning and purpose in their lives. Youth reporting strong religious identities were more likely to have a framework of personal meaning that added direction to their lives than did their less religious peers (Furrow et al., 2004). Youth with a strong religious identity also displayed more hope for the future and character development (Mariano & Damon, 2008).

In addition to personal development and community contribution, Schnitker et al. (2019) proposed a third element that must be present for youth to thrive truly. They proposed that thriving must encompass an ethical and moral dimension. The researchers suggest that when youth engage in constructing a coherent prosocial moral ideology, it guides their personal development and relation to community, thus promoting thriving. When youth experience transcendent contexts in religious communities, they are more likely to establish a moral ideology (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Religious communities offer clear beliefs, spiritual practices, and emotional resources that encourage moral and virtue development (King, 2008). Faith-based communities and programs that provide these resources consistently provide settings that produce positive individual thriving outcomes in youth.

**Religion, Spirituality, and Youth of Color**
The varying demographic backgrounds and contexts of adolescents influence how they relate to religion and spirituality (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Youth of color, especially African American and Latino youth, tend to be especially involved with religion and spirituality (Barrett, 2010; Lopez et al., 2011). Black Protestants report religion playing a more prominent role in their lives than their white Protestant counterparts (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Youth who identify as Black Protestants and Catholic Latinos participate in churches that are highly interconnected to their communities.

Communalism is particularly important in African-American communities (Mattis et al., 2004; Gooden & McMahon, 2016). Communalism is the belief in the interdependence of people that places a value on social relationships (Boykin et al., 1997). The church often plays a prominent role in the communalism of African American communities. Greater positive behavior is associated with close communalism within the African-American church (Jagers et al., 2007), moral reasoning (Woods & Jagers, 2003), and the acceptance of Afrocentric values (Gooden & McMahon, 2016). The integration of church and community helps expose youth to non-parental mentors and spiritual models. This increased exposure provides support for religious socialization. This socialization helps youth internalize attitudes and beliefs from their religious communities (Brown & Gary, 1991). Increased religious socialization in the lives of youth of color has been associated with improved prosocial behavior and development (Barret, 2010). The social support that youth of color receive from their religious contexts helps youth develop a hopeful purpose, an openness to discovery, and opportunities to thrive (Gooden & McMahon, 2016).
Religion and spirituality also provide youth of color with avenues for coping and improved well-being. Hispanic teens who have positive social relationships within their neighborhoods and religious contexts report higher levels of mental health (Hull et al., 2008). Religiously active Latino youth also report increased resilience against stressors related to immigration and assimilation (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). Spiritual practices, such as prayer, belief in a higher power, and giving back to the community, acted as spiritual coping mechanisms (Dill, 2017). Utilizing spiritual coping provided African-American youth with “counterstories” that provided opportunities to refute the dominant notions and discourse about urban youth of color (Dill, 2017). The development of these “counterstories” provides transcendent narratives that help youth explore and establish their religious and spiritual identity (Schnitker et al., 2019).

**Religion, Spirituality, and Gender**

Gender provides an additional demographic variable to consider when exploring how adolescents exhibit religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. In general, male and female adolescents utilize their religion and spirituality in different ways. According to the Pew Research Center (2016), females are more likely to participate in religious activities than men. Females are also more likely to express their religious commitment through prayer (Pew research center, 2016), attend religious services (Petts, 2014), and integrate spiritual behavior into their personal relationships (Furrow et al., 2004) than their male counterparts. While the research often suggests that religion and spirituality are often stronger among females compared to males, some research shows that adolescent males relate to religion and spirituality in unique ways.
compared to females. Adolescent males are more likely to integrate religion and prosocial concern into their personal meaning-making systems (Furrow et al., 2004). They are more likely to report positive self-esteem the more spiritual they consider themselves (Hayman et al., 2007). Males often report greater health benefits from religious participation (Ellison & Henderson, 2011) and lower levels of substance abuse while receiving religious support (Milot & Ludden, 2009).

**Religion, Spirituality, and Age**

Adolescents relate to religion and spirituality in different ways as they age and experience different life stages. Older youth often report higher levels of spiritual integrations (Lerner et al., 2006). King and Furrow (2004) suggested that identity formation within a spiritual context becomes more complex as you age. As youth age, they are exposed to more complex and abstract ideas and experience more autonomy in deciding what to believe (Wagener et al., 2003). As youth transition from late adolescence to young adulthood, they often reflect and reevaluate their relationship to religion and spirituality (Fowler, 1981). Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory suggests that during the transition to late adulthood, a person sees relationships to others and commitment to their vocation as central to their identity. This change in perspective motivates people to reevaluate their religious and spiritual commitment and implement changes based on their new experiences and relational contexts.

**Identity Development**

An adolescents’ demographic background and their relationship with religion and spirituality, influence their identity development and formation. During adolescence,
youth experience noticeable changes in body, mind, and relationships. During this time of change, youth seek to establish purpose, belonging, and identity (King et al., 2011). Marcia (1966) proposed four phases that youth experience during identity formation based on identity exploration and commitment: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. A lack of exploration and commitment characterizes identity diffusion. Identity foreclosure occurs when individuals make identity commitments without exploring identity options. An individual experiencing identity moratorium has not made an identity commitment but is in a constant state of identity exploration. When individuals reach identity achievement, they have gone through the appropriate exploration and have made a deliberate commitment to a particular identity.

While seeking identity formation, youth ask questions to discover who they are and where they belong (Erikson, 1968). Religion and spirituality can help answer these questions. King (2003) identified three ways that religion can serve as a context for identity formation: as an ideological context, as a social context, and as a spiritual context. As an ideological context, religions provide systems of belief that can help youth find meaning, navigate adversity, and form a moral code (Hardy et al., 2011). Ideology provides “social glue” that allows youth to transcend themselves and connect with a larger group (Youniss & Yates, 1997). As a social context, religion helps youth interact with others who share similar ideologies. These interactions help youth reflect on the value of this ideology. This reflection encourages integrating the belief and value systems of religion into their own identity (Hardy et al., 2011; Good & Willoughby, 2007).
Religious contexts provide unique opportunities for the establishment of social capital (King & Furrow, 2004). Through the establishment of intergenerational relationships and intentional mentoring, religious contexts provide dense social networks that help ingrain identity formation. As a spiritual context, religious communities help youth focus on ideas that are greater than themselves. They help youth find meaning and purpose in life while providing a core community in which to base their identity. Religious groups and congregations provide a unique context that offers ideological cohesiveness, an intergenerational social network, and a system that sustains beliefs and meaning. When these contexts are combined, religious contexts become fertile grounds for positive youth development (King, 2003). When adolescent identity becomes more ingrained, they begin to form a sense of fidelity to their religious communities or belief systems. This fidelity is an established loyalty that begins to engage youth in the world beyond themselves (King & Rosier, 2009). This fidelity helps youth establish a transcendent identity that promotes the thriving of the individual and their community. However, some religious groups inspire fidelity to self-serving systems that do not promote prosocial ideals. For example, groups who use religion to promote violence through ideology do not promote positive outcomes in youth (King, 2008). Religious contexts that instill positive fidelity and identity development promote positive worldviews that encourage well-being and thriving in youth (King & Rosier, 2015).

As youth begin to establish their religious and spiritual identity, they begin to display their commitment through their thoughts and behavior. Highly religiously committed people tend to assess the world through religious dimensions based on
personal religious beliefs. A highly religious person shows commitment by the degree to which that person adheres to and uses their religious values, attitudes, and behaviors in daily life (Birmingham et al., 2018). Religiously committed people regularly attend religious services (Maselko & Kubzansky, 2006), feel a strong attachment to their religious institution (Bixter, 2015), read scripture (Cranney, 2013), and reflect on their belief in God (Martin et al., 2003). Those who are committed to spirituality use spirituality as a way to cope, a source of comfort, a way to feel God’s presence, or as a way to receive inspiration from God (Worthington, 2003). Those who are spiritually committed often express their commitment through prayer (Good & Willoughby, 2007) and their personal spirituality (Tovar-Murray, 2011).

Several empirical articles have studied the role that religion and spirituality have in identity formation. The National Survey of Youth and Religion found that participation in religion and spirituality was positively associated with an overall sense of meaning and hope for the future (Denton et al., 2008). Youth with strong religious identities were more likely to establish a meaningful framework that added direction and purpose in their life (Furrow et al., 2010). Participation in religious communities also helps youth establish their personal philosophies and grow their moral character (Markstrom, 1999; Mariano & Damon, 2008). Youth who are intrinsically motivated to participate in religion are more likely to attain identity achievement (Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996).

While religious and spiritual context can help youth commit to personal identities, these contexts do not always allow youth to fully explore their ideological and identity options. For example, Hardy et al. (2011) found that greater levels of religious
involvement positively correlated with identity foreclosure. The study suggested that youth who spend a large part of their lives attending one religious community do not have the opportunity to explore multiple religious identities. Religious involvement includes religious service attendance and engagement in spiritual practice (Hardy et al., 2011). When a person is highly involved in a religious community from an early age, they are more likely to commit to their religious identity before being exposed to alternate paths. The extent to which religious communities encourage early religious commitment has a moderating effect on how youth establish their identity and helps explain ‘where’ identity development occurs in youth. Another study on religious identity discovered that youth in identity moratorium experienced high levels of religious doubt (Puffer et al., 2008). Adolescents experience the greatest levels of exploration during identity moratorium. Puffer et al. (2008) suggest that the religious doubt that youth experience during this time may contribute to a “holding pattern” in identity. The presence of spiritual doubt helps explain ‘why’ and ‘how’ religion and spirituality impact identity development in youth. While adolescents navigate their religious and spiritual identities, they are influenced by the religious and spiritual context that they associate with.

**Faith-Based Youth Programs**

Faith-based youth groups are common religious and spiritual contexts that influence how adolescents navigate their religious and spiritual identities. Faith-based youth programs aim to provide a consistent structure that nurtures positive interactions with peers and non-parental adults. Faith-based youth programs report their programs’
intended outcomes are for youth to have fun, connect with adults, develop faith, and establish moral behavior (Snell, 2009). These programs offer various activities such as bible study, mission trips, recreation time, sports leagues, summer camps, and more (Pinckney et al., 2020). Despite the wide range of activities offered by these programs, few empirical studies have examined how participation results in long term faith development or youth development in general (Snell, 2009; Pinckney et al., 2020).

This small sample of studies has measured various positive outcomes related to faith-based youth group participation. Long term religious youth group participation has been associated with positive life outcomes such as decreased drug usage and alcohol consumption (Smith & Faris, 2002). Participation in faith-based youth groups also contributes to the development of teamwork, social skills, initiative, and the development of social capital with adults (Larson et al., 2006). Larson et al. (2006) also found that 75% of youth from their study who participated in faith-based youth programs reported discussing morals and values compared to 24% of those involved in other youth organizations. Faith-based youth leaders encourage their groups to share a transcendent narrative that challenges youth to think about issues bigger than themselves (Schnitker et al., 2019). These narratives encourage youth to engage with peers and mentors on issues where they might disagree. These conversations allow for youth to practice commutative humility and hermeneutic listening (Holba, 2014). These practices create spaces for discussions where youth learn to see all sides of an issue and listen to a conversation partner without preconceived notions.
Religion provides a shared belief system that acts as a bonding agent for youth to connect with peers and adults with similar views (Larson et al., 2006). Youth who attend youth group regularly report higher levels of network closures (Smith, 2003). Network closure indicates a dense social network that does not allow individuals to go unnoticed (Burt, 2001). In faith-based youth groups, adolescents can form relationships with youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, peers, parents of peers, and non-parental adults (Smith, 2003). This deep social connectedness provided youth with support as they grow throughout their childhood and adolescents. Network closure also prevents an individual from getting overlooked. If a youth is struggling or needs help, closed social networks should provide enough attention to address the issue and care for the youth. The deep social support provided by faith-based youth groups also encourages academic expectations and achievement (Regnerus, 2003). The social support offered by churches and their youth groups integrate youth into broader society and generate an environment of educational success.

The common bond provided by faith-based youth groups can provide youth with a strong sense of identity. Faith-based youth groups help adolescents develop psychosocial maturity and express a greater sense of hope and purpose (Markstrom, 1999). The service activities provided by faith-based youth groups act as reflective material for youth in the process of identity development (Youniss et al., 1999). Through providing opportunities to reflect on their identity, faith-based youth groups all youth to gain self-knowledge and develop a stronger sense of self (Dworkin et al., 2003). However, faith-based youth groups often become insular (Herzog, 2012). This insulation sometimes results in faith-
based youth groups deploying unintentional exclusionary practices. In-group participants often see the youth of lower socioeconomic status or minority race as members of an out-group (Herzog, 2012). For example, in an effort to engage in evangelical outreach, some white Protestant youth groups may accidentally make those who receive the outreach feel like outsiders. Regular members of these youth groups have reported seeing outsiders as “outreach kids” and discuss how they are distracting or disruptive (Herzog, 2012).

Despite this, faith-based youth groups are considered contexts that promote positive youth development, and their positive impact is often overlooked (Pinckney et al., 2020).

**Spiritual Models**

The social interactions in faith-based youth groups and other religious and spiritual contexts primarily consist of interactions between adolescents and spiritual role models. Spiritual models can be parents, peers, or other adults who embody religious and spiritual norms and serve as role models for youth (Erikson, 1968). These models represent the beliefs, norms, and expectations of a particular religious group. Exposure to spiritual models helps to socialize adolescent’s religious and spiritual identities (Oman, 2013). Spiritual models allow youth to connect to a larger whole, enabling them to identify with the greater religious community. Many religious institutions seek to provide intentional non-parental spiritual mentors for youth. These mentors provide scaffolding to help support an adolescent’s spiritual and religious exploration. Effective spiritual mentors are warm and supportive while providing youth the freedom to make their own decisions (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Spiritual mentors who are too controlling can push their mentees away. Mentors acting this way can cause youth to rebel by abandoning religion
Spiritual models help reinforce religious and spiritual beliefs and help guide youth toward faith development. By providing social support and social capital, spiritual models can potentially direct youth toward the growth of positive youth development outcomes (Smith, 2003).

Parents are often the primary spiritual models for their children. It is common for adolescents to express their parents’ religious and spiritual views (Mahoney et al., 2003), and shared religious belief has been associated with positive parent-child relationships (Regnerus et al., 2003). For example, it has been shown that the more religious the mother, the more likely the child was to report a quality relationship with her (Laird et al., 2011). Private religious practice was more important to this close relationship than church attendance. For fathers, a high level of church attendance correlated with high involvement in their children’s extracurricular activities (Wilcox, 2002). Children with religious fathers also reported high academic success levels (Regnerus et al., 2003). For children, if they saw their parents as accepting of their lifestyles, they were more likely to internalize their parent’s religious beliefs (Regnerus et al., 2003). Interaction with spiritual mentors in faith-based settings are proximal processes that are embedded in the larger sociocultural American religious landscape.

**Religion in America**

The impact of religion and spirituality, spiritual mentors, and faith-based youth groups on youth development must be understood in the complex landscape of American religiosity. Historically America has been considered a white Protestant nation primarily. However, the landscape of American religion has become more diverse in recent years.
Protestantism in America has experienced a slow but consistent decline over time. While 62 percent of Americans identified as Protestant in the 1970s, slightly less than half of Americans identified as Protestants in 2014. This change indicated the first time in American history that Protestants did not consist of a religious majority. This decline has caused some to proclaim the end of “White Christian America” (Jones, 2016). The modernist/fundamentalist and conservative/liberal debates in the early part of the 20th century created polarization within white Protestantism. This infighting weakened the Protestant establishment’s ability to hold its place of dominance in American culture. During the 1950s and 60s liberal mainline Protestants held heavy cultural influence. Many of these Protestants wielded influence through official denominational bodies and through individual congregation members who carried their Protestant values into the political and business sphere. However, growing secularity and a failure to unite ecumenical denominational movements caused the mainline to lose its influence slowly (Jones, 2016). In fact, since 1972, mainline Protestantism has steadily declined and has contributed significantly to the decline of American Protestantism as a whole.

In comparison, conservative or evangelical Protestant affiliation rose slightly from 1972 to the early 1990s and has held consistent since then (Chaves, 2017). During the 1970s, conservative Protestant leaders claimed that evangelicals were the “Moral Majority” and reacted against the liberal ecumenicalism of the mainline. Taking more conservative views on the Bible and cultural change, evangelical leaders looked to restore and protect a distinctly Protestant Christian America (Jones, 2016). This movement dominated the Protestant political and cultural consciousness of the later 20th century.
This movement’s success was due less to the defeat of liberal religious ideas and more to the successful retention of those raised in the evangelical tradition. While there was a slight increase in people switching from mainline to evangelical churches in the 1970s (12 percent) and 80s (16 percent), more people became religiously unaffiliated than they became evangelical during the same period.

Black Protestants have a long and storied history in American religion. Black Protestants share many of the same beliefs as white evangelicals, but the history of slavery and systematic racism has caused African Americans to establish their own churches. These churches are distinct from the churches attended by white evangelicals. African Americans report that their lives are more infused with religion than evangelical Protestants and report saying grace more often at the dinner table (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). They also hold similar conservative beliefs about the Bible and salvation that white evangelicals hold. The major difference between the groups is that black protest churches are more interconnected with their community, and they vote overwhelmingly with the Democratic party instead of the Republican party. Black Protestants uniquely combine individualistic piety with communal identity, inspiring political activism (Putnam & Campbell, 2010).

Over the last 20 years, people reporting no affiliation have become the third largest (17 percent) religious identity in the United States. This affiliation is more than mainline Protestants (13 percent) and black Protestants (8 percent) (Chaves, 2017). However, reporting no religious affiliation is not the same as not believing in God or not participating in religious services. Many people in this category consider themselves
“spiritual but not religious”. In other words, many people believe in the benefit of prayer and other private spiritual practices without feeling the need to associate with a public religion or congregation.

Religious “Nones” express themselves in diverse ways. Atheists and Agnostics are people who express theistic dis- and nonbelief. Atheists do not believe in theistic claims at all, and Agnostics believe that theistic claims are unverifiable (Baker & Smith, 2015). The number of Atheists in America is relatively low (3 percent). Agnostics make up 8 percent of the American population. The most common type of religiously unaffiliated person claims no religious affiliation but maintains some sort of theistic belief. These nonaffiliated believers (11 percent) are the most likely to privatize religious belief and practice, and 63 percent of nonaffiliated believers identify as “spiritual but not religious”. Baker and Smith (2015) identify another category of secularity, the culturally religious. This group makes up 6 percent of the population. While the culturally religious claim affiliation with a religion and theistic belief, they do not engage in religious practice with any frequency. People in this group still find cultural and emotional meaning in religious symbols but do not actively participate in religious communities or report frequent religious practice. The rise of the religiously unaffiliated is due primarily to the development of religious polarization over the last 50 years.

This polarization has shifted the landscape of American religion in noticeable ways. Society at large underwent a significant social change after the conclusion of World War II. Higher education became more readily available, the government expanded its role, and technology was rapidly improving. During the 1950s, Americans
were still largely religious, with 75 percent of Americans telling Gallup that religion was “very important” to their daily lives (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Moderate mainline denominations still thrived, and most of the religious conflict was between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. However, with the onset of the new adolescent baby boomer generation and the rise of “counterculture”, the American political, social, sexual, and religious landscape began to liberalize. During this time, sexual norms shifted rapidly. Between 1969 to 1974, the number of Americans who believed that premarital sex was “not wrong” doubled from 24 to 48 percent (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Dramatic attitudinal changes such as these began to decrease confidence in institutional authority. To coincide with this increased institutional skepticism, people were becoming better educated with better access to college and higher education. These highly educated boomers pushed religious institutions to become more socially active and more accepting of changing cultural ideals.

However, a cultural divide began to appear between those with and without higher education. Education was becoming not just a tool for personal improvement but a tool for economic advancement as well. With this sharp change in cultural attitude and increased educational attainment, people who claimed that “the influence of American religion is growing” fell to just 18 percent in 1968 (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). This change in cultural attitude was a dramatic contrast to the 69 percent that expressed that sentiment just 11 years earlier in 1957. Attaining college education influenced how Americans expressed their religious and spiritual commitment. Given this historical
background, education is used as a demographic predictor of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in the quantitative analysis.

Despite this change, religious importance and influence began to stabilize and even rise in the 1970s and 1980s. In response to the moral developments of the 1960s, college aged students and college educated adults began to shift toward religious and political conservatism. This period saw the rise of evangelical churches and non-denominational mega churches. Due to the decline in mainline attendance, conservative evangelical Protestants began to regain cultural relevance. With this improved social capital, the “Moral Majority” and religious right began to exhibit prominence. Conservative leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robinson used radio and television technology improvements to express their socially conservative views to a large audience. Conducting “I Love America” and “Prayer for Life” rallies, the Moral Majority made a public example of evangelical Christians’ connection with conservative politics (Wuthnow, 1988).

In direct contrast to the “counterculture”, Evangelical Christians of the time vehemently opposed liberal sexuality, homosexuality, and abortion. This strong political stance had a significant effect on the upcoming generation in the 1990s and 2000s. GenXers and millennials began to push back on the strong influence that religious conservatives were having in the political sphere (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Many of these young people began to see religion as judgmental, homophobic, and hypocritical. This push back began the significant rise of the religiously unaffiliated or the religious “Nones” (Baker & Smith, 2015). As we have seen, being religiously unaffiliated does not
necessarily mean a person rejects theism or spirituality. However, many people began to think that if being religious meant being Republican, then religion was not for them (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The push back to the religious right continued to polarize the religious landscape in America. Over time, the moderate position eroded and gave way to more partisan views on both sides of the spectrum. While this divide does not constitute a true culture war (Chaves, 2017), the divide between the religious and nonreligious people is a major factor in American culture at large. Understanding the polarized and pluralized religious landscape in America provides background to how adolescents interact with religion and spirituality on a day to day basis.

Summary

Youth exist in a complex world influenced by their daily face-to-face interactions and the historical and sociocultural realities of the world in which they live. Religious and spiritual contexts can create a space where youth are supported and given opportunities to excel. Religion and spirituality support the development of life skills (DiPierro et al., 2018), prosocial behavior (King et al., 2004), and identity development (Schwartz, 2006). Faith-based settings provide an ideological, social, and spiritual context where youth can explore who they are and what they believe (King, 2003). Youth find support from faith-based settings through spiritual models (Oman, 2013), opportunities to contribute (Beyerlein et al., 2011), and the development of a transcendent narrative (Schnitker et al., 2019). This transcendent narrative allows youth to think about causes beyond themselves. Participating in transcendent contexts leads to
positive interactions between a youth and their ecological environment (King et al., 2011). In other words, faith-based settings provide opportunities for youth to thrive.

When adolescents experience disruption to their religious and spiritual contexts during times of transition, they begin to reevaluate their religious and spiritual identities. Adolescents evaluate their religious and spiritual identities based on their demographic backgrounds and their experiences with faith-based settings. For example, females tend to be more likely to pray and take part in spiritual activities (Pew Research Center, 2016), Black Protestants report religion playing a more prominent role in their lives than their white Protestant counterparts (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), and older youth often report higher levels of spirituality (Diemer & Li, 2011).

Faith-based settings are often facilitated through faith-based youth groups. These programs offer a wide variety of activities that allow youth to interact with peers and adults who share a common belief system. Faith-based youth groups help youth develop social capital (Larson et al., 2006). Youth who attend youth group on a regular basis report higher levels of network closures (Smith, 2003). These social networks can help youth from getting lost and receive support when they are struggling. Faith-based youth groups and other faith-based settings can provide positive relational developmental systems that foster positive youth development. However, the American religious landscape is becoming increasingly more polarized (Chaves, 2017). Declining confidence in institutional religiosity and pushback to the religious right has caused many Americans to become religiously unaffiliated (Baker & Smith, 2015). These religious “Nones” now constitute the third largest religious identity in America (Chaves, 2017). The rapidly
changing religious landscape in America provides additional context on how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality in their own lives. Given this background, how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality influences how they express religious and spiritual commitment. Adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment by engaging in prayer and scripture reading, reflecting on their spirituality, religiosity, and belief in God, and attending religious services. The current study seeks to gain additional insight into how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This study explored how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. This study utilized an embedded mixed methods design to observe general and specific trends in how adolescents relate to religion and spirituality across young adulthood. Data were collected concurrently and then merged for comparison during the analysis and discussion (Harrison et al., 2020). Figure 3.1 provides a visualization of the study design.

General quantitative results were analyzed using secondary data analysis of the 2014, 2016, and 2018 GSS. This data set acted as the primary data set. Idiographic thematic life story interviews were then embedded into the study and used in a secondary role to help provide additional insight into adolescents’ religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes (Creswell et al., 2006). This qualitative data were used to provide insight into the unique ways that individuals express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes throughout young adulthood, especially
during their transition from high school to college. Because the quantitative and qualitative results come from different samples, the thematic life stories and the results from the GSS answered different research questions. However, both the qualitative and quantitative analyses provided insight into how adolescents express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. Figure 3.2 provides a visualization of how each research question was analyzed.

**Methodological Approach**

![Methodological Approach Diagram](Image)

Specifically, the quantitative analysis used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), latent profile analysis (LPA), and multinomial logistic regressions to measure the different ways religious and spiritual commitment were expressed in the 2014-2018 GSS. The qualitative data used thematic life stories to examine how individuals perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment. The qualitative data are also used to provide additional insight and to support the quantitative results. These parallel analyses were
then compared and contrasted to examine how the results helped provide insight into the religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes displayed by adolescents across young adulthood. Table 3.1 provides an a priori example of how the qualitative and quantitative research questions and analyses were intended to be compared and contrasted. Following the analysis, a post hoc table (Table 4.10) is provided to explain the data comparison results.

Table 3.1
A Priori Research Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Quantitative Results</th>
<th>Qualitative Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1: Do variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in 18-22-year-old adolescents?</td>
<td>Confirmatory factor analysis is used to examine the validity of the 2-factor seven item latent model based on items from the 2014-2018 GSS.</td>
<td>The thematic life stories were used to reveal to what extent the thematic life story participants discussed religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes that were similar to the items from the latent factors and GSS items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2: What level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes do 18-22-year-old adolescents display?</td>
<td>The Latent Profile Analysis were used to determine different profiles of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes based on the results of the 2014-2018 GSS.</td>
<td>Thematic life stories provided examples of how individuals display characteristics associated with these latent profiles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3: Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual</td>
<td>Multinomial logistic regression determined how race, sex, college education, age, and religion predict adolescent religious and spiritual</td>
<td>Thematic Life Story participants provided insight into how the demographic backgrounds of participants influenced their religious and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
commitment behaviors and attitudes?  | commitment behaviors and attitudes.  | spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes.
--- | --- | ---
Q4: How do individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience?  | The quantitative data provided insight into what broad and general items, categories, and demographic backgrounds contribute to religious and spiritual commitment.  | Thematic life stories provided additional insight into how individuals display unique religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. The qualitative data provided support and additional insight in the purpose of the study to examine how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood.

Despite coming from different samples, the analyses in this study provide rich insight into the broad general ways in which religious and spiritual commitment is expressed by adolescents across young adulthood and how that behavior is expressed on an individual idiosyncratic level.

**Secondary Data Analysis**

The GSS is a project of the independent research organization the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, with principal funding from the National Science Foundation (General Social Survey, Media). The GSS has been collecting data on the trends in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes of Americans since 1972. The GSS collects a wide range of demographic data that measures race,
ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, family structure, and more. The GSS contains questions that cover various topics, including morality, religion, and social mobility. The GSS provides researchers with the opportunity to examine broad general trends and more specific trends based on subgroups (General Social Survey, About). This study uses items from the GSS to examine variables that produce latent constructs that predict religious and spiritual commitment in 18-22-year-old adolescents, utilizes those same items to examine what level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes 18-22-year-old adolescents display, and extracts demographic variable items from the GSS to predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes.

The sample for the GSS is a multi-stage area probability sample to the block level. Quota sampling is then used at the block level to ensure that the appropriate demographic information is collected (General Social Survey, Appendix A). The GSS is administered through face-to-face interviews or through computer-assisted personal interviews when an in-person interview is challenging to arrange. The survey is collected every two years and receives updated questions based on changes in culture and landscape. The current study utilized 12 questions from this survey to analyze demographic information and 2 potential factors: religious commitment and spiritual commitment. Table 3.2 displays the descriptive statistics for categorical variables.

Table 3.2
Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GSS year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>111 (29.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>143 (37.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Size Power Analysis

This study is interested in examining religious and spiritual commitment in adolescents from the 18-22-year-old age range. In order to obtain the necessary statistical power for this study, the 2014, 2016, and 2018 GSS surveys were combined. Obtaining sufficient statistical power is necessary to avoid Type II error. Type II error is a statistical error that occurs when an effect is erroneously detected. Obtaining sufficient statistical power provides confidence that a statistical model is measuring what it is claiming to measure. A sample size power analysis for a latent model with seven independent predictors was conducted using G*Power to determine sufficient sample size using an
alpha of .05, a power of .95, and an effect size of .07. Based on these criteria, the power analysis indicated a sample of 320 respondents would be sufficient to achieve the desired effect size in a latent analysis of the items intending to measure religious and spiritual commitment.

In order to obtain the necessary sample size, the 2014, 2016, and 2018 GSS surveys were combined and resulted in a sample size of 387 survey participants between the age of 18-22 years old. The 2014 survey contained 938 variables and recorded responses from 3,842 participants. Of the 3,842 survey respondents, 111 were between the age of 18-22. The 2016 survey contained 948 variables and recorded responses from 2,867 participants. Of the 2,867 survey respondents, 143 were between the age of 18-22. The 2018 survey contained 1,061 variables and recorded responses from 2,348 participants. Of the 2,348 survey respondents, 129 respondents were between the age of 18-22. Due to the secondary nature of the data collection, the researcher was unable to determine if participants overlapped across waves of the study. Despite this limitation, utilization of the GSS an adequate examination of the general ways that adolescents in this age range expressed religious and spiritual commitment.

**Religious Commitment**

The current study seeks to determine if variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment in 18-22-year-old adolescents. Based on theoretical and conceptual validity, five items from the GSS were used to assess religious commitment. These questions ask respondents to consider questions about their religious commitment (e.g., *How often do you attend*...
religious services). Answers were collected on a variety of scales ranging from a 9 point Likert scale (i.e., How often do you attend religious services?) where 1 represented “never” and 9 represented “Several times a week” to a 4 point Likert scale where 1 represented “Not religious at all” and 4 represented “Very religious” (i.e., To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?). A full selection of items related to religious commitment can be found in Appendix A.

These items appeared in all three surveys and were selected due to their theoretical strength. For example, the question measuring a person’s religious commitment (i.e., would you call yourself a strong [religious preference] or a not very strong [religious preference] and to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?) have been used to predict: attitudes towards abortion (Wilcox, 1990), attitudes toward capital punishment (Thinley & Ziegler, 2020), and happiness and political orientation (Bixter, 2015). The Wilcox (1990) study utilized the religious preference item to examine how religious commitment, gender, and race impacted attitudes towards abortion. The study measuring attitudes towards capital punishment used the religious person item to measure the concept of religion. The study examining happiness and political orientation utilized the religious person item as one of seven factors measuring religion as a latent variable.

**Spiritual Commitment**

Two items from the GSS will be used to assess the potential second latent factor, spiritual commitment. These questions ask respondents to consider questions about their spiritual commitment (e.g., About how often do you pray?). Answers were collected on a
variety of scales ranging from a 6 point Likert scale (i.e., *About how often do you pray?*) where 1 represented “never” and 6 represented “several time a day” to a 4 point Likert scale where 1 represented “Not spiritual” and 4 represented “very spiritual” (i.e., *To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?).

These items appeared in all three surveys and were selected due to their theoretical strength. For example, the question asking participants to report their daily prayer activity (i.e., how often do you pray?) has been used to study spirituality in relation to scientific dedication (Granger & Price, 2007), job satisfaction (Bednarczuk, 2019), and economic resilience (Cuomo et al., 2020). The study using scientific dedication utilizes the prayer item to confirm the spiritual commitment of undergraduate students (Granger & Price, 2007). The study measuring job satisfaction used this item as a single indicator to examine private religiosity, which is often used interchangeably with spirituality (Bednarczuk, 2019). The study on economic resilience uses the item to examine a person’s private religious practice. All uses of the item appear in validated studies and are used to examine a person’s personal relationship with religion, the self, or a greater purpose (King & Boyatzis, 2015). The item concerning how spiritual a person considers themselves has also been used to measure spirituality in the context of treating PTSD (Currier et al., 2014), measuring well-being (Tovar-Murray, 2011), and examining social connectedness (Hastings, 2016).

**Data Preparation**

Prior to analysis, the data were explored for multivariate outliers and non-normality using SPSS and R studio. First, the data were examined for univariate and
multivariate outliers. Utilizing a combination of the Mahalanobis Distance function and the Chi-Square distribution with a p < .001 revealed 4 respondents were outliers within the data set and were removed from additional analysis. Next, the data were transferred from SPSS to R Studio for analysis of the measurement model and hypotheses testing. The Psych package in R was used to examine multivariate kurtosis by utilizing Mardia’s coefficient; the results indicated the data were non-normal (Mardia’s = 14.35). As such, a robust estimation technique (i.e., Satorra-Bentler chi-square; S/Bχ²) was applied to all preceding analyses as this approach is less applicable in situations with non-normal data (Bentler, 2006). Responses to the questionnaire were then examined for systematic causes of missingness [e.g., Missing Completely At Random (MCAR), Missing Not At Random (MNAR)] utilizing the BaylorEdPsych package in R to conduct Little’s Test of MCAR (Byrne, 2006; Little, 1988). Nine missing patterns were present in the data resulting in .97% of missing data within the data set. The systematic cause of missingness analysis produced a significant (p = 0.014) result indicating the missing data were (MCAR) [χ² (41) = 63.241, p = .014]. As such, a full information maximum likelihood (FIML) technique was utilized to simulate missing values to test the measurement and structural models.

Data Analysis

After data screening, the quantitative analysis consisted of three distinct phases in order to answer research questions 1-3. The first phase addressed research question 1 “Do variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment in 18-22-year-old adolescents?” by utilizing CFA to
measure the selected items’ properties from the GSS. The second phase addressed research question 2 “What level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes do 18-22-year-old adolescents display?” with an LPA to identify individual response patterns based on latent religious and spiritual commitment patterns determined in the CFA. LPA utilizes a person-centered approach to determine the probability of group membership for each survey respondent. The process of utilizing latent variables allows this technique to better estimate the size and composition of profiles compared to single indicator estimates (Collins & Lanza, 2009; Taggart et al., 2019). The third phase addressed research question 3 “Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes?” by utilized multinomial logistic regressions and odds ratios to measure the influence of demographic variables on latent profile affiliation.

**Qualitative Analysis**

This study’s quantitative analysis was concerned with the nomothetic or general trends of religious and spiritual commitment in adolescents across young adulthood. The current study employed an idiographic approach to provide further insight into the religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes displayed by youth of this age. This approach was used to gain an understanding of particular views on religious and spiritual commitment from individuals. Recently, Schachter and Hur (2019) proposed that more researchers should take this approach to understand better the idiosyncrasies of personal religious and spiritual commitment. They stated the importance of studying unique individual beliefs and relating them to youth and general human outcomes. Their
framework called for the study of personal goals and motivations, personal religious constructs, identity exploration, affective valence, and autobiographical reasoning. These approaches go beyond the simplistic semi-structured interview and allow for a depth of understanding of personal meaning making, religious and spiritual identity, and the importance of religion and spirituality in an individual’s life. In order to take this idiographic approach, the researchers used thematic life story interviews (McAdams & Logan, 2006; Schachter & Hur, 2019). The researchers in the present study utilized the same approach to answer research question 4 “How do individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience?”. The results of the thematic life stories provided insight into how individuals express religious and spiritual commitment, especially during times of transition. The analysis of these stories was compared and contrasted with the results of the quantitative analysis in the discussion.

During a thematic life story interview, interviewees are asked to narrate their general life story covering all topics while also relating anything in the story to the central theme. The central theme for this particular study was the expression of religious and spiritual commitment throughout the life of the interview participant. The interviewee was also instructed to pay special attention to how the transition to young adulthood impacted their religious and spiritual commitment. Before the interview began, each participant was instructed to view religious commitment as the commitment to a sociocultural, religious institution (King & Boyatzis, 2015) and spiritual commitment as the commitment to the pursuit of meaning, personal growth, or purposes outside of
themselves (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Interviewees were given an hour and a half to complete the interview and are encouraged to provide ample detail and tell as many stories as they can. The interviewee was asked to reflect on the impact of religion and spirituality on their lives and primarily focus on how they expressed religious and spiritual commitment during high school and early college. The interviewer limited their interaction during this story. The interviewer provided encouragement and displays of interest, ask nondirective clarifying questions, and ask the interviewee to expand on abstract ideas and thoughts with concrete examples (Schachter & Hur, 2019). An example of interview prompts for a thematic life story interview can be found in Appendix B.

Thematic life story interviews are analyzed through systematic, interpretative, phenomenological analysis. The researcher uses five indicators to help identify the personal meaning of religion and spirituality in an interviewee’s life: goals, personal constructs, identity, affect, and autobiographical reasoning (Schachter & Hur, 2019). Goals can be seen as personal strivings that help address clashes between a person’s needs and external circumstances, also called thema (McAdams, 1985). Personal constructs are how people make sense of experiences. These constructs are how people pair opposites within a narrative in defining life challenges (Schachter & Hur, 2019). The analysis of identity exploration and commitment in thematic life stories examines how much a person accepts identities that are most prevalent in their lives. The analysis of thematic life stories sees identity as the tool that a person uses to integrate their personality by reinterpretation past events and interactions in their lives in a manner that
links the present self to the past and future (McAdams & Pals, 2006). In relation to identity development, this study observes the vigor or affective valance that an interviewee displays when discussing different identity development moments. Successfully integrating identity into everyday life can be invigorating (Schachter, 2018), and struggles to integrate identity can be distressful (Cote, 2018). Because of the strong emotions connected to indemnity exploration and commitment, the vigor and affective valence in which interviewees discuss these topics are noted during thematic life story analysis. Finally, Interviewers look for autobiographical reasoning by the participant during thematic life stories. These are moments that occur when interviewees reflect on past decisions and look to connect them to their present and future circumstances (Blgavo & Singer, 2004). As interview participants engage in autobiographical reasoning, they look to make sense of major life events and how those events and how their personal decisions fit within their current life and their life narrative overall (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011).

Researchers in this study also analyzed the mention of faith-based youth groups and spiritual models. These two constructs have been known to influence positive religious and spiritual development (King, 2008; King & Boyatzis, 2015). This study is interested in understanding how individuals perceive the influence of spiritual models and faith based youth groups in their lives. The analysis was conducted to determine how or if these factors were present in the interviewee’s life. The analysis also examined how these influences have changed as they transitioned into young adulthood. Analysis of the interviews took place in two distinct rounds. The first round focuses on the analysis of the
participant’s general life narrative. This analysis looks at goals, personal constructs, and identity exploration outside of religious and spiritual contexts. The second round focuses specifically on specific conversations relating to religious and spiritual commitment throughout their lives and during the transition into young adulthood. The analysis is not focused on the coding of the indicators or mentions of religious or spiritual commitment but is focused on a holistic understanding of the concepts. The purpose of these interviews is to provide a well-rounded view of the interviewees’ personal life. As a result, the results of the analysis are displayed in narrative form. Providing results in narrative form allows for a better understanding of the idiosyncrasies of individual religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes through the examination of the topic in the interviewees’ own words. To provide further insight, major themes that occur in all stories are also analyzed and examined.

The current study obtained interviews from 2 females and 1 male. Participants all participated in the same Presbyterian church and Presbyterian faith-based youth group. Participants were recruited through prior connections made by the researcher. The participants were chosen from the same faith group to identify within group differences in the perception of religious and spiritual commitment. Participants were offered a $20 visa gift card as an incentive for participating in the interview. Each participant participated in one ninety-minute interview. Interviews were conducted from December 2020 to January 2021. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic limited the ability to obtain a larger sample size and limited the impact of the thematic life stories. The lack of religious diversity in the sample also limited the generalizability of the results. The
examination of three youth from the same religious background limited the examination of diverse religious backgrounds. All three participants also expressed a similar level of religious and spiritual commitment. This limited the ability to compare and contrast the qualitative results to the religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes displayed by the general population. However, despite these limitations, the thematic life stories provided valuable insight into answering research question 4 about how individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience. The analysis of thematic life stories also provided the opportunity to mix results to provide a comparison with the quantitative analysis (Creswell, 2003).
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Do variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment behaviors in 18-22-year-old adolescents?

The GSS has been collecting data on the trends in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes of Americans since 1972. 7 items present in the 2014, 2106, and 2018 surveys have been utilized in a variety of research studies (e.g., Maselko & Kubzansky, 2006; Chaves, 2017; Bixter, 2015) to examine religion and spirituality in the lives of Americans. Based on this prior research, evidence suggests that these items should exhibit latent qualities of religious commitment and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. The latent relationship of these items was examined utilizing confirmatory factor analysis. To enhance parsimony, two items from the GSS were revere coded. The item measuring prayer (i.e., how often do you pray) was recoded from 1= Several times a day to 6= Never to 1= Never and 6= Several Times a day. The item measuring how spiritual a person considered themselves (i.e., To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person) was recoded from 1= Very spiritual to 4= Not spiritual to 1= Not spiritual and 4= Very spiritual. The measurement properties of the preliminary two-factor 7-item scale were examined by utilizing the lavaan package in R to calculate a confirmatory factor analysis and supporting statistics. Acceptable model fit was examined through inspection of comparative fit indices (CFI), which indicate better model fit as they approach 1.0, with levels above 0.90 generally indicating acceptable
model fit (Brown, 2015). The CFA model fit was also assessed through the root mean square root of approximation (RMSEA), where levels approaching zero indicate better model fit, with levels below 0.08 generally suggesting an acceptable model fit and levels above .10 indicating poor fit (Kline, 2015, p.290). The preliminary CFA indicated unacceptable model fit: \[ S/B \chi^2 (13) = 51.792, p < .001, CFI = 0.963, RMSEA = 0.088 \] (90%, CI 0.065 to 0.113) for the two-factor 7-item model. As illustrated in Table 4.1, the scale failed to exhibit discriminant validity. The between factor correlation of the two latent variables was higher than 0.700 \( r = 0.929 \), indicating that the items did not display characteristics of two distinct factors. Given these results, a secondary one-factor 7-item scale was examined utilizing CFA and FIMIL data imputation. The secondary scale indicated moderate model fit \[ S/B \chi^2 (14) = 54.670, p < .001, CFI = 0.961, RMSEA = 0.087 \] (90%, CI 0.065 to 0.111). The model exceeded the RMSEA that indicated “close fit” but did not exceed the level of unacceptable fit (Kline, 2015, p.290). The model was also evaluated to examine convergent validity. As illustrated in Table 4.2, the scale exhibited evidence of convergent validity with as the structural factor Cronbach alpha was greater than 0.500 \( \alpha = .881 \), all structural factor loadings above 0.500 \( \lambda = 0.527 \text{ to } 0.877 \), and the structural factor AVE level was above 0.500 \( \text{AVE} = 0.554 \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Factor Correlations for Initial 2-Factor Model</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>F1. Religious Commitment</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F2. Spiritual Commitment</strong></td>
<td>.929**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *indicates \( p \leq .05 \); **indicates \( p \leq .001 \)
Table 4.2
Descriptive and Confirmatory Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor/Item</th>
<th>M(SD)</th>
<th>(\Lambda)</th>
<th>(\alpha)</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious/Spiritual Commitment (F1)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you attend religious services?</td>
<td>3.696 (2.600)</td>
<td>.747</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= Never, 9= Several times a week)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you call yourself a strong [religious preference] or not a very strong [religious preference]?</td>
<td>2.479 (1.190)</td>
<td>.725</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= No Religion, 4= Strong)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?</td>
<td>2.144 (.946)</td>
<td>.877</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= No Religion, 4= Strong)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?</td>
<td>4.308 (1.676)</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= I don’t believe in God, 6= I believe in God and have no doubts)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of these statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about the Bible?</td>
<td>1.965 (.696)</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1= The Bible is an ancient book of fables, 3= The Bible is the literal word of God)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About how often do you pray?</td>
<td>3.303 (1.862)</td>
<td>.760</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1=Never, 6= Several times a day)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?</td>
<td>2.396 (.978)</td>
<td>.527</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 2: What level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes do 18-22-year-old adolescents display?

Based on their experience with (Oman 2013; Snell, 2009) and exposure to (Jagers et al., 2007; King et al., 2011) religious and spiritual contexts, adolescents display different levels of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. The level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes displayed by 18-22-year-old adolescents were examined using latent profile analysis. Table 4.3 provides a summary of the statistics used to determine the appropriate number of religious and spiritual commitment latent profiles.

### Table 4.3 LPA Fit Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor/Item</th>
<th>Entropy</th>
<th>Prob_min</th>
<th>Prob_max</th>
<th>AIC</th>
<th>BIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Classes</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>6288.95</td>
<td>6407.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Classes</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>6199.45</td>
<td>6349.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Classes</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>6138.79</td>
<td>6320.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The person-centered approach utilized by LPA allows for multivariate data to be interpreted in ways that are not available to variable-centered approaches. The process of class enumeration requires a variety of considerations. In conjunction with fit statistics, theoretical consideration and interpretability are equally important for class organization (Cudeck & Henly 2003; Nagin & Tremblay, 2005). Given this reality, LPA does not
provide a “true” number of latent classes (Taggart et al., 2019). Entropy is a fit statistic that determines latent class separation, and entropy scores above .8 are seen as providing adequate class separation (Meng-Cheng et al., 2017). Entropy values for the variables in this study were similar across 3, 4, and 5 class solutions (.88 to .89), indicating an acceptable separation between classes and certainty about class membership. Further inspection of the solutions showed that the three-class solution provided a clearer delineation of class membership and acceptable fit statistics (BIC = 6407.39, AIC = 6288.95). Table 4.4 shows the group means and standard deviations for items in this profile.

Table 4.4
Descriptive Statistics for LPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious/Spiritual Commitment (F1)</th>
<th>High Religious/Spiritual Commitment (n= 112, 29.2%)</th>
<th>Medium Religious/Spiritual Commitment (n= 158, 41.3%)</th>
<th>Low Religious/Spiritual Commitment (n=113, 29.5%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often do you attend religious services? (1= Never, 9= Several times a week)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you attend religious services?</td>
<td>6.82 (1.70)</td>
<td>2.96 (1.70)</td>
<td>1.65 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you call yourself a strong [religious preference] or a not very strong [religious preference]? (1= No Religion, 4= Strong)</td>
<td>3.51 (.80)</td>
<td>2.56 (.95)</td>
<td>1.37 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person? (1= Not religious at all, 4= Very Religious)</td>
<td>3.18 (.54)</td>
<td>2.16 (.60)</td>
<td>1.11 (.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God? (1 = I don’t believe in God, 6 = I believe in God and have no doubts)</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>(.71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? (1 = The Bible is an ancient book of fables, 3 = The Bible is the literal word of God)</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>(.54)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About how often do you pray? (1 = Never, 6 = Several times a day)</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>(.85)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person? (1 = Not Spiritual, 4 = Very Spiritual)</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>(.79)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The high religious/spiritual commitment class represented 29.2% (n=112) of the sample. The mean age of participants in this profile was 20.19 years old. This group was characterized by high scores on all items within the religious/spiritual commitment latent factor. This group deviated relatively little on their religious and spiritual commitment responses. Participants in this group expressed attending religious services almost every week or every other week (mean = 6.82, sd =1.70), considered themselves moderately to very religious (mean= 3.51, sd = .80), and strong to somewhat strong in their religious preference (mean= 3.18, sd= .54). Those in this group indicated a confident belief in God (mean= 5.59, sd= .71) and the literal interpretation of the Bible (mean= 2.45, sd=.54).
The members of this group also considered themselves moderately to very spiritual (mean = 3.11, sd = .79) and indicated that they prayed several times a day (mean = 5.03, sd = .85). The *medium religious/spiritual commitment* profile represented the largest percentage of respondents, 41.3% (n = 158). This class was characterized by moderate scores on the religious/spiritual commitment items and by scores with relatively large standard deviations in their attendance habits, their belief about God, and how often they prayed. The mean age of participants in this profile was 20.43 years old. Participants in this group expressed low religious service attendance, attending church several times to once a year (mean = 2.96, sd = 1.70). However, members of this profile considered themselves at least slightly to moderately religious (mean = 2.16, sd = .60) and somewhat strong in their religious preference (mean = 2.56, sd = .95). Those in this group indicated a relatively confident belief in God, indicating having doubts but feeling like they believe in God (mean = 4.85, sd = 1.19). This group indicated at least some belief that the Bible is the inspired word of God, even if it is not to be taken literally (mean = 2.06, sd = .55). The members of this group also considered themselves slightly spiritual (mean = 2.28, sd = .85) and indicated that they prayed once or several times a week (mean = 3.54, sd = 1.54).

The *low religious/spiritual commitment* profile represented 29.5% (n = 113) of the sample. The mean age of participants in this profile was 20.59. This class was characterized by low religious/spiritual commitment scores with relatively little deviation from the mean. Participants in this group expressed almost never attending religious services (mean = 1.65, sd = 1.21), considered themselves mostly not religious (mean = 1.11, sd = .31), and not very strong in their religious preference (mean = 1.37, sd = .79).
Those in this group indicated that they mostly didn’t know where there was a god and didn’t believe there was any way to find out (mean = 2.27, sd = .93) and that they mostly believed the Bible to be an ancient book of fables and legends (mean = 1.34, sd = .55). The members of his group also considered themselves not very to somewhat spiritual (mean = 1.85, sd = .89) and indicated that they prayed less than once a week or never (mean = 1.27, sd = .75).

Research Question 3: Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes?

Adolescents experience religion and spirituality from a variety of backgrounds and developmental contexts (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Chaves, 2017). These diverse experiences impact how they display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. The current study used race, sex, college education, religion, and age as independent variables in multinomial logistic regressions to examine how these factors predicted affiliation with the dependent variable, religious and spiritual commitment latent profiles membership. Following the LPA, each survey participant was assigned membership to one of three latent profiles. Profile membership acted as the dependent variable in this analysis. Since the dependent variable consisted of more than two outcomes (1 = High Religious/Spiritual Commitment, 2 = Medium Religious/Spiritual Commitment, 3 = Low Spiritual/Religious Commitment), multinomial logistic regression was used. Two multinomial logistic regressions were used to examine categorical predictors of profile membership. The first regression used the medium
religious/spiritual commitment profile as the reference group and the second regression used the high religious/spiritual commitment profile as the reference group. The two regressions sought to measure how race, sex, education level, age, and religion predicted latent class membership compared to the reference group. Each demographic variable was dummy coded and was categorized in the following way: 2 categories for race (1= white, 2 = nonwhite), 2 categories for sex (1= male, 2= female), two categories for age (1= 18-20 years old, 2= 21-22 years old), 2 categories for college education (1= at least one year of college education, 2= no college education), 4 categories for religion (1=Protestant, 2=Catholic, 3= None, 4= Other). Complete results of the logistic regressions, including regression coefficients ($B$), standard errors, odds ratios ($\text{EXP}(B)$), and significance levels ($p$), can be found in Tables 4.5 and 4.6.

Both the multinomial logistic regression model using the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile as the reference group and the multinomial regression using the high religious/spiritual commitment profile as the reference group resulted in acceptable model fit [$\chi^2 (104) = 125.340, p = .076$]. The model explained 51.4% (Nagelkerke $R^2$) of the variance in class membership. Results from the analysis indicated that males were 2.097 times more likely compared to females ($p=.025$) to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile. Those with at least 1 year of college education were 2.713 times more likely compared to those without a college education ($p=.005$) to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile. Whites were 2.183 times more likely compared to
nonwhites (p=.023) to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared
to the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile. Religious Nones were 49.827
times more likely compared to Protestant/Christians (p <.001) to belong to the low
religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the medium religious/spiritual
commitment profile. Religious Others were 7.134 times more likely compared to
Protestant/Christians (p =.003) to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment
profile compared to the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile.

18-20 year olds were 2.051 times more likely compared to 21-22 year olds
(p=.025) to belong to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the
medium religious/spiritual commitment profile. Protestant/Christians were 9.095 times
more likely compared to Religious Nones (p<.001) to belong to the high
religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the medium religious/spiritual
commitment profile.

Results from the multinomial logistic regression model using the high
religious/spiritual commitment profile as the reference group indicated that whites were
3.447 times more likely compared to nonwhites to belong to the low religious/spiritual
commitment profile compared to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile. Those
with at least 1 year of college education were 2.279 times more likely compared to those
with no college education to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile
compared to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile. Religious Nones were
94.410 times more likely compared to Protestant/Christians to belong to the low
religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high religious/spiritual
commitment profile. Religious Others were 15.783 times more likely compared to Protestant/Christians to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile.

Religious Nones were 9.095 times more likely compared to Protestant/Christians to belong to the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile. 21-22 year olds were 2.051 times more likely compared to 18-20 year olds to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile.

Table 4.5
Multinomial Logistic Regression (Medium Religious/Spiritual Commitment Reference Group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class%</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Religious/Spiritual Commitment (N=113)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.479</td>
<td>0.572</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20 years old</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td>0.336</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least 1 year of College Education</td>
<td>0.998</td>
<td>0.352</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>2.713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.741</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>-0.781</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>0.699</td>
<td>0.612</td>
<td>0.254</td>
<td>2.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious None</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>0.534</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>43.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Other</td>
<td>1.965</td>
<td>0.666</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>7.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Religious/Spiritual Commitment (N= 112)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.456</td>
<td>0.323</td>
<td>0.158</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4.6
Multinomial Logistic Regression (High Religious/Spiritual Commitment Reference Group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class %</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Religious/Spiritual Commitment (N=113)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.024</td>
<td>0.606</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20 years old</td>
<td>-0.749</td>
<td>0.393</td>
<td>0.056</td>
<td>0.473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least 1 year of College Education</td>
<td>0.824</td>
<td>0.402</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>2.279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.417</td>
<td>0.383</td>
<td>0.275</td>
<td>0.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>-1.237</td>
<td>0.401</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>0.961</td>
<td>0.619</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>2.613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious None</td>
<td>5.977</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>394.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Other</td>
<td>2.759</td>
<td>0.733</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>15.783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagalkerke R²</td>
<td>.514</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>245.662**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01

% Medium Religious/Spiritual Commitment is the reference group
Commitment
(N=158)

| Age Group                        | Variable        | Coefficient | Standard Error | t-value | p-value
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-20 years old</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.718</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least 1 year of College</td>
<td>At least 1 year of College Education</td>
<td>-0.174</td>
<td>0.267</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.323</td>
<td>0.262</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>1.382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonwhite</td>
<td>-0.457</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.289</td>
<td>0.366</td>
<td>1.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>Nagalkerke R2</td>
<td>.514</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>245.662**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05, **p<.01

% High Religious/Spiritual Commitment is the reference group

**Research Question 4: How do individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience?**

The plasticity of human development is a core feature of Relational Developmental Systems Theory (RDST). Within RDST, a person is considered an "inherently active, self-creating, self-organizing, and self-regulating, relatively plastic, nonlinear complex adaptive system" (Overton, 2015, p.12). The complex nature of adolescents allows them to respond to religion and spirituality in unique, idiosyncratic ways. Thematic life stories were used to analyze how individual youth perceive their religious and spiritual commitment and how they express the impact of their transition to college on that commitment to help further examine how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood.
In accordance with the model proposed by McAdams & Logan (2006) and Schachter & Hur (2019), each thematic life story was analyzed in a case-by-case holistic manner. Analyzing qualitative data in this manner provides meaning as it relates to the whole person rather than from meanings shared across participants (Schachter & Hur, 2019). Each interview participant told their own unique life story while paying specific attention to their religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes and the impact of the transition to college on their commitment. A targeted narrative with quotes from participants is provided to further explain how each participant displayed idiosyncratic religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across their lives. Each case study is presented under a pseudonym to protect the identity of the thematic life story participants. Throughout the targeted narrative, paraphrasing and explanation were used by the researcher to provide context and consciousness to the life stories. The thema/goals/motivations, personal constructs, identity exploration and commitment, vigor and affective valence, and autobiographical reasoning of each interview participant were also analyzed. This analysis produced unique results for each thematic life story participant. The analysis of these factors is presented in the targeted narrative and in their entirety in tables 4.7 (Bri), 4.8 (Jamie), and 4.9 (Jane).

**Case 1, Bri.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.7</th>
<th>Round 1 (General)</th>
<th>Round 2 (Specific for religion)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bri</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thema, goals, and motivations</td>
<td>Child care</td>
<td>Sees religious context as a safe place to connect and build relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish community and connection</td>
<td>The purpose of religion is to relax and restore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bri, 20 years old, is a sophomore at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. Bri was raised in Easley, South Carolina, where she was involved in the local Presbyterian Church for as long as she can remember. She mentioned that neither of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Constructs</th>
<th>Religion allows for community service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COVID socialization vs non COVID socialization</td>
<td>Safe space vs unsafe space in religious context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College vs high school social relationships</td>
<td>Church friends vs school friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal connection vs physical service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New religious community vs old religious community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity exploration and commitment</th>
<th>Child Care worker</th>
<th>Presbyterian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorority member</td>
<td>Reads Bible and Prays to explore her relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring new groups and communities</td>
<td>Hesitant to find a new religious community in college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Her faith helps her stay on track</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Still uses youth group from home as support a system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vigor and affective valence</th>
<th>Expresses how she feels like it is hard to get into the groove of things in college</th>
<th>Passionately discussed her home religious community and the members of her youth group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autobiographical Reasoning</th>
<th>Can acknowledge that she has grown since leaving high school.</th>
<th>Didn’t know anything different other than going to church.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She misses people to talk about faith with.</td>
<td>She recognized how COVID interrupted her search for religious community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She feels more mature and like she is planning for her future career</td>
<td>Wants to get back to being heavily involved in church eventually.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
her parents grew up Presbyterian but found the denomination a nice middle ground between their religious backgrounds, Baptist and Methodist. Throughout her story Bri discussed how she strongly identified as Presbyterian. Bri was baptized as a baby and received confirmation when she was in eighth grade. This process was especially meaningful to her and her younger sister. She described the importance of the experience in this way:

To our faith journey, I guess, you could say we both went through confirmation, and that was kind of more eye opening because we were old enough to, we're both in eighth grade at the time, and so we kind of got to understand it more and kind of confirm our faith. Since we were baptized as a child I connected to that, since I wasn't sure what I was doing when I was a baby, obviously, so it was nice to go through that in eighth grade and kind of of once I was more aware, I was able to confirm for myself, this is what I believe in this is what I understand.

In regards to her church, Bri found a sense of community and a safe space with her youth group. Experiencing safe space in a religious context motivated Bri to continue to participate in religion. She expressed passionately how members of her youth group were like her family. The friends she made a church extended to school and fully immersed her middle and high school years in the life of the church and the members belonging to the congregation. This resulted in Bri participating in church activities multiple times a week and attending mission trips and conference retreats with her youth group. She specifically mentioned the importance of these trips as a motivating factor in her religious participation. One trip that really stuck out to her was her trip to Washington DC between her sophomore and junior year of high school. One this trip she established a personal construct, learning that she preferred to serve others by making a personal connection rather than participating in physical service:
When I was in high school we went to Washington DC and so that one has kind of always stuck with me because normally on our mission trips we you know, are doing physical labor and building things you know kind of more physical things like that, but when we were in DC it was more of like an emotional thing I guess it was more conversational things like that. We got to work and learn and talk to people in poverty and that were struggling and things like that, and so that was one really stuck out to me because, it wasn't more of the physical it was definitely more of just like learning about things, so it was it was extremely eye opening because I got to see those things in person, rather than just building a house for someone.

In high school, Bri expressed that she exhibited a high level of religious service attendance and participation. However, as she transitioned to a college that was a few hours from her home town she found herself hesitant to seek out a new faith community. In college she began to explore her identity by participating in new groups and communities. She discussed making it a goal to jump into as many groups on campus as she could to find the connection she experienced in high school. She mentioned that finding a group where she could find deep connection was one of the most difficult parts of her transition to college:

In college it's so hard to find a group, like that (her high school youth group), and so, once you find it you stick on to it but I haven't quite gotten that so that's kind of the biggest difference for me just in my life in general is probably that I haven't gotten on to that specific thing.

While she was able to connect with some groups, such as her sorority, she visited a few churches but was not able to connect fully her first semester of Freshman year. Interestingly, she mentioned that her interest in child care lead her to work with one of the churches she visited, but that experience left her unable to actually connect with the Sunday services. She is learning to make sense of how her experience with her home compared to her experience with a new religious community:

I went to a couple different churches and actually ended up working at one for a
few weeks in the nursery which I loved because I always love doing things, with children, but I loved and hated that because that's during Sunday mornings and I wasn't able to actually go to church, I was working there so that lasted a little bit, but then I was really like I needed to get into something a little more.

However, Bri still mentioned how she has continued to do her personal devotions and spend time engaging with her own spirituality. She mentioned that she explored her personal faith by dedicating a few times a week to read her Bible and reflect on its meaning:

*At the very least just read my Bible that always makes me feel really connected. I know everyone kind of has their own ways that they feel most connected, but, for me, I really just like reading it and then sometimes take notes or just sit and kind of reflect to myself about certain things.*

While she sees her personal devotions as an important aspect of her life, she still misses the tangible aspect of being in church:

*Even not during church, I would still do my normal devotions and reflections and things like that, but I just needed to be in the sanctuary. It made me feel more home, even if it wasn't my home sanctuary.*

Bri conveys the religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes similar to those who are associated with the medium commitment latent profile from research question 2. While she still considers herself religious and spiritual, she is having a difficult time connecting with new religious communities. Unfortunately for Bri, as with all of the interview participants, the COVID-19 pandemic made her search for religious community even more difficult. As she began to take her search more seriously, most congregations and ministries stopped holding in person gatherings. Despite this, Bri was able to connect with an online Bible study affiliated with her sorority, she was able to integrate her identity as a sorority member with her desire to use her faith to establish
community and stay on track with her personal growth:

*You know Covid hit and so that's kind of when I was actively looking, I guess, and so I'm still looking not a lot is open here yet, but in my sorority we have a great group of girls who have started their own Bible study and so I'm fortunate to be a part of that so that has been a big thing for me it's almost like those are my home people but not like my home people.*

As she continues to advance in college and into adulthood, Bri reflected that she plans to grow in her faith and continue to seek religious community. She has noticed how faith and belief evolve over time. For her, she seeks to take her beliefs and apply them to her daily life. She credits her mother as a positive example of someone who lives out her faith:

*I guess, from my childhood, it's more of the basics of just do you believe, or what do you believe, specifically, but now it's kind of more detailed I guess it's more like apply it to the real world, not just hear about it. Like one of my biggest things is me and my mom Oh, you know, like forgiveness and kindness is the biggest thing that we discuss and things like that, and so I love to relate to versus about that, and so one thing that like going into adulthood, I see is not to just hear about it it's actually do it and live out life that way.*

As a final reflection on our conversation, Bri vigorously reiterated the difficulties of adjusting to college life:

*Like I said it's harder generally to kind of get into the groove of things in college, I guess, sometimes people say it takes four years to get used to college and then you're out of it.*

However, she also was able to reflect on the positives. She discussed how pursuing her faith is worth it and that her own personal spirituality has helped her stay on track through the difficulties of the pandemic. She took time to express her belief in God and the importance of spirituality. Throughout Bri’s story she expressed that, despite her
lack of religious service attendance in college, she finds her commitment to religion and spirituality important to her personal life:

But I definitely have noticed, yes it's harder but it's you know worth it, because I always and people tell me this You know, God has a plan for you, and so, when Covid hit that was a whole other thing, but like when it comes to the church my search to find the perfect church here in my college city, but that was a negative, yes, but it was also a plus because I've been able to kind of do those reflections and things like that kind of on my own so I've kind of gotten back on my path because my first year I didn't really go to church a lot and that really it like it didn't change me but it definitely affected me a little bit and so now since you know, during Covid I've been a lot better about self-reflecting and kind of getting my mind back on the right path. It's kind of set me straight a little bit so that's been a big plus.

Case 2, Jamie

Table 4.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jamie</th>
<th>Round 1 (General)</th>
<th>Round 2 (Specific for religion)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thema, goals, and motivations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract thinker</td>
<td></td>
<td>Use experiences to expand his knowledge of God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality as an avenue to think about his purpose in the world</td>
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<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Constructs</td>
<td>Thinker vs feeler</td>
<td>Doesn’t feel God vs people who say they do</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>God will provide vs the absence of God</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Literal vs metaphorical interpretation of the Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity exploration and commitment</td>
<td>South African</td>
<td>Committed Presbyterian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Met a lot of new people in college</td>
<td>Influenced by older peers.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoys hearing other people’s views about God</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Out loud prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No church attendance during college so far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vigor and affective valence</td>
<td>Relaxed and excited about the</td>
<td>Thinks differently than others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Jamie, 19 years old, is a freshman at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, South Carolina. Jamie’s parents are both from South Africa originally. They eventually moved to Canada, where Jamie was born. Before he was old enough to remember, his family moved to Tennessee for two years before moving to Easley, South Carolina, where he spent the majority of his childhood and adolescence. He knows that his mother has been affiliated with the Presbyterian Church for her whole life. He was less sure of which religious tradition his father came from but recognized that he was a spiritual person as well. Jamie is the second oldest of his four siblings. All members of his family have attended Easley Presbyterian Church since arriving in Easley. Jamie expressed that his identity as South African and as a Presbyterian were essential aspects of his identity. As he grew up, Jamie credited his church with helping him to understand the fundamentals of the faith and becoming a good thinker:

"You know I grew up in the church for such a long time I got there before first grade and they teach you all the fundamentals in my opinion they, um, they taught me all the fundamentals of how to think. Personally, you know, like how I view God, you know, in my spirituality, but they I think Easley Presbyterian Church, maybe the Presbyterian Church in general, does a really good job of making you think."
Jamie sees himself as an abstract thinker and is motivated to think about things on an intellectual level. Jamie really enjoys that religion and spirituality give him the opportunity to engage with issues on a deep level. He mentions that he primarily thinks of God in spiritual or abstract terms. He sees the way that he personally constructs his religious experience as slightly different from those of his peers. When his friends would say that they felt God in a certain area or space, Jamie would not have a similar experience. Instead, Jamie found a connection with God by thinking on the nature and attributes of God:

Like if we went to camp Buck or if we went to Montreat, you know, people would say they feel God in most places and like I mean I would feel good, you know, and I would learn a lot about God, but I wouldn't really get the idea of feeling God. But I don't know the more I think about God and the more I think about how abstract He really is and how much we don't really understand what he is and you know how he's present in all things, you know, more I go out, the more I'm like okay I can, I can feel God here.

Though Jamie identifies as a Christian, he is always questioning his faith and asking himself questions that help him grow and understand more about the type of “God” he wants to believe in. He likes to take time on his own to think through theology, the literal and metaphorical parts of the Bible, and the fundamental teachings of Christianity that have helped shape his thinking. Through establishing these personal constructs and exploring the teachings of Christianity, he is able to better understand how he personally expresses religious and spiritual commitment:

I mean I identify myself as a Christian. I'm always like, questioning it questioning by asking myself questions about, you know, the nature of Jesus and you know how much the Bible is metaphorical versus literal and all this stuff and then I do independent research sometimes. You know, Christianity itself has helped lay a foundation of how I want to believe the kind of God I want to believe in. I'm, you
know, I'm still exploring whether or not I, um, how much of the Bible is metaphorical or how much is literal. But I think the whole book is a very good Christian teaching that I've grown up in has been really good as a foundation for thinking about my faith and then thinking about what it all means.

Through his church and youth group Jamie was able to find a sense of community and connection. During his time in high school, he was able to make friends with the older youth and the adults in the youth group. These friendships gave him opportunities to witness examples of how people in different stages of life lived out their faith. The models of religious and spiritual commitment expressed by his friends provided Jamie with the opportunity to explore his over personal religious and spiritual identity. Through the close friendships he established at Easley Presbyterian, he was able to have conversations about faith and belief. Even though he did not share the same experiences and passions of his peers, he was still able to find joy and fulfillment through youth group:

*I became really close with the people in my class. And then because I was really close to the people and we were in a church setting we would often talk about what we believe. It would give me more perspectives on different ways to think about God and Jesus and then once you transition to high school and once you start hanging out more with the older kids and you get into more actual lessons with Phil that make you actually think about what you're believing in it helped me make a foundation of what I wanted to believe in. Through experiences like Montreat You can see the amount of joy and the amount of passion that people have for Christianity and religion and Jesus and that's admirable but I would feel that no, I don't think necessarily to the same degree as a lot of other people did but I definitely felt some of that joy and happiness and fulfillment."

Jamie is motivated to participate in experiences. Jamie thinks one of the primary goals of religion is to provide people with experiences that expand their knowledge about God. Jamie mentioned that one particular experience was very meaningful to him. He described a trip to New Mexico that really helped him start to develop his idea of God. He
tells a story about how being able to walk in the desert and being in unfamiliar circumstances allowed him to feel closer to God. He mentions that this trip has motivated him to seek out similar experiences in an effort to understand himself and God more fully:

*I remember on the first day I'm hiking, you know, going from the little house out to the wilderness. It was awesome, because I've never been in a place like that the ground was hard and crackly and it was flat for a long time, and it was dry heat, but we hiked for like hours. Because I've never been in a place like that I didn't do any research. So I didn't really know how New Mexico was going to be, but I'm there and then reminding myself there's new things, you know, things that I would have never thought I would have experienced unless I was there. I could feel a connection with God while we were walking through the wilderness, just because it was such a new thing. But it was cool. So now you know my whole thing is going out looking for more new things to do, because I feel like we don't know anything about God but if I go to specific unknown circumstances or unknown things that I connect with God more if I'm in an unfamiliar environment.*

Jamie’s experiences in high school have prepared him to confidently and comfortably embrace his transition to college. He has enjoyed meeting new people and embracing a new experience. He mentioned that he has met a lot of people who are atheist, and he enjoys hearing from people’s experiences that are different from his own, “you meet a lot of new people, a lot of new atheist people too. Through that I stand by my faith, but hearing different people's views about God really influenced my own”.

He mentioned that COVID has not prevented him from meeting new people but it has impacted his ability to connect with a new faith community. He also discussed that managing course work and a social life keeps him busy. He mentions that he uses the weekends in college to catch up on sleep and recover for the coming week. Even though he doesn’t go to church, he still finds himself praying and reflecting on his relationship with God.

*Well, I haven't gone to church since the pandemic started... I mean, during college*
I didn't really go to church. I didn't go to church because I felt so crunched on time, all the time. Sundays and Saturdays were my days without school so I sleep in and recovered from the previous night. I didn't really go to any religious services, but I found myself praying. So I'm not really going to any institutionalized services, but I'm still putting time out of my day to think about God. Think about God's plan, God's plan with other people, the gospel all that stuff.

Similar to other interviewees, Jamie considers himself a religious and spiritual person, he is committed to his Presbyterian identity, and he prays and reads his Bible. However, he exhibits low religious service attendance while in college. Despite being highly involved in high school, the transition to young adulthood has provided different opportunities and ideas that have influenced his religious and spiritual commitment.

As Jamie reflects on his future, he discussed how he would like to reconnect with his home church in Easley. He says he missed the community and content of being connected with a religious group. He mentions that he would also like to seek out a Presbyterian church in his college town. He discussed how he liked the quiet and stillness of the Presbyterian tradition and how that helped him think and reflect on God. However, he mentioned that he would wait until the pandemic was over to start properly seeking a faith community. In the meantime, he still intends to exhibit his religious and spiritual commitment by praying and reflecting on God in his daily life.

Well, in the future I hope to start going more to EPC. I missed out on months of Sunday services and Sunday schools. I think those were beneficial for me. So I want to get back in the swing of that and I might start asking around at college about what good churches there are to go to. I would prefer to stay in the Presbyterian denominations because it's not contemporary it's traditional all the services are very quiet. There's no interruptions. You're just listening and I appreciate that. So once Covid is all done, I'll probably look for a Presbyterian church to go to. But for the near future I still plan on praying, talking to God, looking at things through a religious standpoint, you know.
### Case 3, Jane

#### Table 4.9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jane</th>
<th>Round 1 (General)</th>
<th>Round 2 (Specific for religion)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thema, goals, and motivations</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>The purpose of religion is to provide community, a common place to discuss interest/beliefs a safe space, and an opportunity to contribute to the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loves to serve</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Constructs</td>
<td>COVID socialization vs non COVID socialization</td>
<td>Having religious community vs not having religious community</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>God is comforting, loving, rational vs strict and rigid</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Presbyterian vs Baptist</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Safe space vs unsafe space in religious context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity exploration and commitment</td>
<td>Older sibling</td>
<td>Figure out God for herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tennis player</td>
<td>Taking personal responsibility for spirituality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bad high school experience</td>
<td>Integrating science with religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finding leadership experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vigor and affective valence</td>
<td>Passionate about gaining knowledge and serving her community</td>
<td>Really passionate about her religious leadership experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feels hopeful that her college experience is going to be better than her high school experience</td>
<td>Loss of safe space at Easley Pres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical Reasoning</td>
<td>A person whose mind is always running</td>
<td>Didn’t have any other concepts of religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confident in her ability to lead</td>
<td>Understands the importance of community and safe space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Afraid to be labeled</td>
<td>Despite my flaws God loves me.</td>
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Jane, 19 years old, is a freshman at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina. Jane was raised in Easley, South Carolina, where she was involved in Easley Presbyterian Church. Jane’s parents are both from cities in the upstate of South Carolina. Her parents were not serious churchgoers for most of their lives. They both were raised in Southern Baptist homes, and they had a hard time adapting to the environment in that denomination. Jane also has a brother that is six years younger than her. She considers being an older sister as a core part of her identity and has always felt a sense of responsibility over her brother. She thinks that that relationship has shaped her who she is as a person:

*I've got a younger brother, who is six years younger than me. Which I think was always an interesting part of my story because of our age gap. I was always a bit of a parent to him. And I think that necessarily forced me to grow up a little bit, I always felt like I had to be a role model to him. So I think in a lot of ways. I grew up faster because of him.*

Her family did not start attending church regularly until she was in the second grade. They found a home at Easley Presbyterian Church because it provided a more comforting and loving environment than her parents were exposed to when they were growing up. She discussed that before they started attending church regularly that she didn’t have a firm understanding of God or religion:

*Before that, again, we weren't really steady churchgoers but I kind of had this idea of God. I guess I said my prayers before bed every night. But I didn't really have any other concept of church or religion.*

As she grew up, she was very involved in the church and in youth group. She was also elected to represent her youth group on a council of youth from other Presbyterian churches in her area. Her youth group and the Presbyterian Youth Council
(PYC) acted as her core community during high school. She mentioned that PYC specifically nurtured her desire to serve others in her community. One of her goals in life is seek out leadership and service opportunities. PYC provided her with an opportunity to pursue her goal and she even became the moderator in her senior year of high school. She strongly identified with her role in PYC and enjoyed the opportunities she received through participating in the group:

_I was on PYC Presbyterian Youth Council; I was very active with that for two years. And I was actually the moderator my senior year in high school, which was a really interesting experience. And once I got old enough to be a part of PYC I wanted to make an impact within my community. That's something I've always kind of been interested in. But I've also, it's kind of hard to find your place in the community, trying to help people that's my personality. I love to help people. And I love to try and be involved in my community, but sometimes it's just hard to find a niche and once I was able to get into PYC, that was a way that I really enjoyed being a part of my community._

Jane identified the purpose of religion as an opportunity to provide community and motivate others to discuss common beliefs and serve their community. While PYC was a place where Jane could serve, the local church youth group was a place she could learn. She identified the group as a safe space to talk about religion and spirituality. It was important to Jane that she could discuss sensitive issues and feel that her voice was heard and understood. These discussions around shared beliefs helped her feel a sense of community between her, her friends, and her church:

_Youth group for me was a lot about the community of around the interest in a common belief. And I think it was really important for me to have that community. It was always a safe space, I think, to talk about religion and spirituality. I think religion and spirituality is such a tender subject sometimes depending on who you're with and what areas you're talking about. And so just having that safe space to talk about those things and learn about these things without judgment was really important to my faith, growing up._
The supportive community she found in the youth group contrasted with her high school experience overall. Jane discussed that she didn’t really have a great high school experience. She didn’t feel like she had the opportunity to contribute to her community or use her gifts. The safe space of her church’s youth group and the leadership opportunities provided by PYC helped her overcome that negative experience:

*I didn't have a super great high school experience. I didn't really enjoy people from my high school. And I think that's another place where youth group came in they were some of my best friends because I didn't really have a whole lot of friends at school. I'm very thankful for my high school experience, it was very important to me but see youth group as my safe space and I was never really involved in school. PYC was my way to be involved in something, you know, bigger. PYC was really the only thing I did and I can't think of a ton of other opportunities that I had been presented to be a part of.*

However, at the end of her senior year of high school, her youth group lost the safe space feeling. She says that something happened in her group that she wasn’t comfortable with, and that experience drove a wedge between her and her youth group. During this time, she was forced to create constructs of what a safe religious context was and what an unsafe religious context was. While she was having the negative experience in her community during the second semester of her senior year, COVID began shutting down in person meetings. So she discussed that the negative experience she had and the inability to wrestle through that situation in person really left her disconnected from religion as she made her transition from high school to college:

*Right at the end of my senior year, there were some things that happened at church that I just wasn't very comfortable with. So I kind of stopped going and fell away from it a good bit. And that was really hard. And I think a combination of that and everything being online over the summer. I didn't really have any connection to religion. And that was really hard because when all that fell through. At the end of my senior year, I lost a lot of sense of community that I had depended on for most of my life.*
However, Jane was able to make the distinction between the religious institution and personal spirituality. She acknowledged that she has lost touch with institutionalized religion but still practices her personal spirituality. She has recognized that she depended on her religious community to support her personal spirituality. She has had to work through how to connect with God on her own. As she began college in the midst of the pandemic, she has been forced to struggle with questions and doubts that she has about her faith on her own and seek out her religious and spiritual identity on her own:

*It was hard because I didn't realize how much I depended on all that community and such to uphold my faith and over the summer. I kind of lost a little bit of my spirituality, but I'm kind of learning to take that on myself more. And I think that's been the hardest thing for me is moving away to college. I haven't been around those people that I've known my entire life and have the people that have helped me in my faith. And again, everything that happened. I had a lot of questions and a lot of doubts about a lot of things I had been taught, growing up, and it was just really hard to try and reconcile what I need to be true. So that's something that I've really struggled with my first semester of college is just finding myself in my relationship with God.*

The challenges of the pandemic have made it more difficult to find other religious or spiritual communities. Jane has had to take time to explore what it means to be connected to a religious community compared to not belonging to a religious community. Jane has a hard time connecting with new people virtually but has enjoyed living on campus and making friends with her roommate and the other students in her dorm. She enjoys asking questions and interacting with new people. In these new interactions, she has seen a stigma that people from outside of the South connect to southern Christians. People she meets consider Christians as strict, rigid, and politically conservative. Jane doesn’t identify with any of those characteristics and has had to
navigate how she holds addresses these two competing constructs. Navigating this issue has been difficult, and she feels frustrated with the political and social stances of many Christians she meets. This sometimes makes her avoid talking about her faith, so she is not associated with those identities:

The political climate is intense right now and I hate talking politics, but it feels it rules my life now so I feel like there's a bit of a stigma against a Southern Christian. And I think that's kind of hard because like going off to college I'm surrounded by a lot of people who are not from here who don't necessarily believe the same things that I do. Growing up, I knew that the Presbyterian faith was always a little bit different... You know, you get labeled and it's scary because I know how I feel about a lot of things and I know that stereotype doesn't define me. But it's really scary to think that I could be labeled a certain way based on this one idea, and so I guess it kind of goes back into college and my faith is. I'm kind of scared to talk about it to people and such, because I don't want to be labeled a certain way.

Despite these experiences, Jane is able to reflect on how her past and present are helping her prepare for the future. Overtime, she is hopeful that her faith will grow stronger. She knows that God loves her, and she has been able to find peace in God throughout the difficulties of her circumstances. She acknowledges that through the chaos of life, God provides her comfort in little moments. These little moments remind her that no matter how much she doubts, God still loves her. As with the other two interview participants, Jane finds herself expressing a belief in God and considers herself a religious and spiritual person. However, she still expresses commitment behaviors and attitudes similar to those associated with the middle religious/spiritual commitment latent profile because of her disconnection from religious services. Jane expressed that the loss of her religious community was distressing and that the transition to college made this disconnect more difficult. However, as she moves forward in life, Jane hopes to pursue religious and spiritual commitment by asking questions, pursuing her personal
spirituality, and seeking out religious community:

But I think in the end, this moment is probably going to help me be a lot stronger in my faith. In the end because I’m having to figure out what everything means to me. And then, you know, eventually once things get back to normal and I’m able to try and find more of a community. Overall, my relationship with God will be stronger because I am working on figuring out what it is, to me, without the reliance of other people... One thing that I've held on to in these really tough times, these challenging times and these transitions. I think God has always kind of spoken to me. In little moments of peace, you know, so when everything seems crazy every now and then sometimes my brain just shuts down and I get this overwhelming sense of just comfort and peace. And I think in those moments, I think that's God kind of reaching out to me and just being with me. And I think right now in these really weird times in my faith it's in those moments that I'm really confident in the fact that even in my hardships, he's still here and he's still cares about me. And one day, it's just all going to be okay. So I think right now that's really what my faith is consistent of just those little moments that I get where I'm reminded that no matter how hard I doubt things it's going to be okay.

Major Themes

Over the course of the three interviews, some common themes became apparent. Overall, each interview participant expressed a desire for community and connection.

They all discussed the importance of the community that they established in their high school youth groups. They all discussed how that group created a space to discuss common ideas and beliefs as well as a place to establish friendships and connections. However, each interviewee discussed that their close connection with their religious communities was disrupted when they began attending college. Each participant discussed how they missed their religious communities and desired to find a similar avenue to establish connections in their college setting. Each life story participant also indicated that transitioning to college provided them with opportunities to reevaluate their religious and spiritual identities. Jamie discussed that he enjoyed speaking to people from other religious backgrounds in order to reassess his own beliefs. Jane took pride in
seeking out God on her own terms and establishing her beliefs for herself. Bri discussed how she takes time to read her Bible and pray in order to better understand her relationship with God. Each interview participant reevaluated their religious and spiritual identity without consistently attending religious services. Each participant indicated how difficult it was for them to find a new church or religious community in their new college context, despite their difficulty in attending religious services. Each participant expressed the importance of their own personal spirituality. Each participant described how they spent time personally reflecting on God, reading the Bible, or praying. While the transition to a new context impacted the interviewee’s ability to participate in religious services, the COVID-19 pandemic also impacted their ability to form connections and community. Each participant mentioned how COVID disconnected them from their friends and how they hope to be more engaged in religious and nonreligious community once the pandemic is over. In summary, each interview participant expressed high involvement in religious community before the transition to college and low involvement after attending college. The participants did not mention a decrease in their belief in God, the Bible, or prayer and still considered themselves moderately religious and spiritual. However, each youth expressed these beliefs and behaviors in unique ways that help provide additional insight into how individuals perceive their own religious and spiritual commitment.

**Results Summary**

In keeping with the embedded mixed methods design of the study, this section merges the quantitative and qualitative results to compare and contrast how to different
results from different samples helped provide insight into how adolescents express religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood. The quantitative results from the GSS acted as the primary source of data in this study, with the qualitative results from the thematic life stories providing secondary support and insight. Table 4.10 presents the post hoc analysis showing how the qualitative data did or did not support the quantitative results.

Table 4.10
Post Hoc Research Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Quantitative Results</th>
<th>Qualitative Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1: Do variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment behaviors in 18-22-year-old adolescents?</td>
<td>The confirmatory factor analysis determined that 7 items from the GSS combined produced a valid 1-factor latent construct predicting religious and spiritual commitment.</td>
<td>All Interviewees discussed utilizing commitment behaviors and attitudes that were similar to the items utilized in the latent construct measuring religious and spiritual commitment. Interview participants discussed the importance of prayer, belief in God, reading the Bible as important to their religious and spiritual commitment. They also mentioned how religious and spiritual they considered themselves. Each life story participant also discussed how attending religious services impacted their religious and spiritual commitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2: What level of religious and spiritual commitment</td>
<td>The Latent Profile Analysis determined 3 different profiles of religious and spiritual commitment.</td>
<td>The data collected from the interviews did not provide examples of all three religious and spiritual commitment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
behaviors and attitudes do 18-22-year-old adolescents display? Commitment based on the results of the 2014-2018 GSS. Spiritual commitment profiles. However, the results of the thematic life stories affirmed that different people express different levels of religious and spiritual commitment and display that commitment in different ways. The three thematic life story participants expressed religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes consistent with the Middle religious/spiritual commitment profile.

Q3: Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes? Multinomial logistic Regression determined that Race, Sex, College Education, Religion, and age significantly predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. For example, whites were more likely than nonwhites to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile in comparison to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile. Thematic Life Story participants did discuss how their demographic backgrounds have affected their religious and spiritual commitment. All three participants discussed the importance of their Presbyterian faith, how attending college, and their age have impacted their commitment. However, the interviewees did not discuss their gender or race when discussing their religious and spiritual commitment.

Q4: How do individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual The quantitative data provided insight into what broad items contributed to religious and spiritual The interviewees expressed the positive influence of religious community on their religious and spiritual
commitment across their young adulthood experience? This data also provided three general categories of how 18-22-year-old adolescents express religious and spiritual commitment and what demographic factors generally predicted membership to these commitment profiles.

Each participant expressed how their connection with religious community was weakened by the transition to college. Each youth discussed how prayer and Bible reading were important to their own spiritual development. Each youth also considered themselves religious and spiritual but did not regularly attend religious service.

The first research question, the results of the qualitative data indicated that the participants in the thematic life stories all expressed religious and spiritual commitment similarly compared to the 7 items used from the GSS. The qualitative data indicated that the participants expressed their religious and spiritual commitment through prayer, Bible reading, and prayer. Each participant discussed how religious and spiritual they considered themselves and how intense their religious commitment was. All thematic stories also expressed how religious service attendance contributed to their religious and spiritual commitment. While each participant discussed reading the Bible, only one participant mentioned the difference between the literal or metaphorical belief in the Bible (e.g., you know how much the Bible is metaphorical versus literal and all this stuff). The later response more accurately represents the item from the GSS discussion belief in the Bible (i.e., Which of these statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about the Bible?).
For research question 2, the qualitative data failed to provide conclusive data from all three latent profiles. The three interview participants were not categorized into the three latent profiles produced by the LPA during the analysis of research question 2. However, it was noted that all interview participants expressed behavior similar to those in the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile. Each participant expressed low religious service attendance but moderate to high levels of the other items (e.g., *I didn’t really go to any religious services, but I pray*). The life stories also displayed that individuals express their religious and spiritual commitment in unique and idiosyncratic ways. Even though the interview participants exhibited similar levels of religious and spiritual commitment, each participant expressed their commitment in different ways.

When comparing and contrasting the quantitative and qualitative results for research question 3 the qualitative results provided insight into how their religion, their age, and their participation in college influenced their religious and spiritual commitment. In contrast with the results of the multinomial logistic regression, interview participants did not discuss the influence of race or gender on their religious and spiritual commitment. The survey participants provided additional insight into answering research question 3 (i.e., Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes?) by discussing how their involvement in college negatively impacted their religious service attendance (e.g., All survey participants also indicated that they began to take more ownership of their religious and spiritual identity as they aged and that this influenced the way they expressed their personal commitment (e.g., “Overall, my
relationship with God will be stronger because I am working on figuring out what it is, to me, without the reliance of other people”

The final research question sought to examine how individual adolescents perceive their religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience. The primary quantitative data set produced results on broad and general religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes exhibited by adolescents across young adulthood. The results from the analysis of the fourth research question helped provide further insight into the overall purpose of the quantitative research questions, which was explored how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. The qualitative results helped clarify the impact of transition, especially the transition to college, on religious and spiritual commitment. The qualitative results also provided examples of the different idiosyncratic behaviors that individuals utilize to display religious and spiritual commitment. The qualitative data helped support the outcomes of this study by acting as a secondary data source embedded within the primary quantitative data.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This section describes the study's findings, implications for practice, limitations, and areas for future research. This section discusses each research question and its outcome in detail. The purpose of this study was to explore how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. To accomplish this, the present study primarily examined broad and general religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes exhibited by youth from ages 18-22 years old by analyzing the 2014, 2016, and 2018 GSS. The study also embedded qualitative data into this study with the use of thematic life stories in order to provide additional insight into how individuals display religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine that the items from the GSS produced one latent factor utilizing 7 items to predict religious and spiritual commitment. These items were then used in a latent profile analysis to determine three profiles of religious and spiritual commitment in adolescents from ages 18-22 years old. Race, sex, college education, religion, and age were then used as demographic factors in a multinominal logistic regression analysis to determine which factors predicted latent profile membership. Finally, thematic life stories were used to gain specific insights into how individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience. Thematic life story participants provided additional insight into the results of the quantitative analysis. In addition, these stories provided descriptions that illumined the impact of transition, especially the transition to college, on
adolescent religious and spiritual commitment. Utilizing this analysis, the results of this study explore how adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood.

**Research Question 1: Do variables from the 2014-2018 GSS produce a valid 2-factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in 18-22-year-old adolescents?**

The confirmatory factor analysis of the items selected from the 2014-2018 GSS produced a single factor latent model predicting religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in 18-22-year-old adolescents. The failure of the selected items to distinguish between the two distinct concepts of religion (the socio cultural institution) and spirituality (personal quest for meaning) exposed a limitation of the GSS data set. However, the items that were combined to measure the single latent factor measured religious and spiritual commitment in ways that were consistent with prior research.

Religious service attendance has been measured in the GSS since 1976. Service attendance has been used often as a metric to describe religious commitment (Maselko & Kubzansky, 2006; Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020; Chaves, 2017) and helps provide insight into how connected a survey respondent is to a religious institution. A common way to exhibits religious or spiritual commitment is for a person to contemplate how religious or spiritual they consider themselves. Reflecting on personal spirituality helps a person understand their purpose and motivates them to contribute to a transcendent ideal (Tovar-Muarry, 2011; Schnitker et al., 2019). People also express their commitment to spirituality by participating in prayer (Good & Willoughby, 2007), scripture reading...
(Cranney, 2013), or by reflecting on their belief in God (Martin et al., 2003). Based on this conceptual background, the items used in this study provide a consistent understanding of religious and spiritual commitment.

The qualitative results of this study provide additional support to validate that the items from the GSS provide an adequate measure of religion and spirituality. Each interview participant discussed how religious service attendance, or lack thereof, influenced their religious and spiritual commitment. For example, Jane mentioned how not being able to attend church impacted her, “I didn't really have any connection to religion. And that was really hard because when all that fell through. At the end of my senior year, I lost a lot of sense of community that I had depended on for most of my life.” Each participant also discussed how they expressed their religious and spiritual commitment through prayer, scripture reading, and reflection on their beliefs about God. Bri mentioned that she takes time out of her day to pray and reflect on scripture, “I do certain reflections. I have an app on my phone that says a verse of the day, so sometimes I just pick a random one and go from there”. Finally, even though none of the interviewees have connected with a consistent religious community in college, they still consider themselves religious and spiritual and have a strong connection to their religious preference. Jamie expresses this sentiment well, “I mean I identify myself as a Christian” and “I would prefer to stay a Presbyterian”. The additional background provided by the life story participants provides support and insight into why the items chosen from the GSS were used to measure religious and spiritual commitment in 18-22-year-old adolescents.
Research Question 2: What level of religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes do 18-22-year-old adolescents display?

Latent profile analysis discovered three latent profiles of religious and spiritual commitment exhibited by 18-22-year-old adolescents. The largest profile was the medium religious/spiritual commitment subgroup (n=158). This subgroup was characterized by relatively high mean scores on all items except for religious attendance. Members affiliated with this profile considered themselves moderately religious and somewhat strong in their religious preference. Members of this profile also reported participating in prayer at least once a week and considered themselves moderately spiritual. Those affiliated with this group also expressed religious and spiritual commitment through fairly confident belief in the existence of God and belief in the Bible as the word of God. However, those affiliated with this profile only attended religious services around a few times a year. Many youth affiliated with this group consider themselves religious and spiritual but are disconnected from a religious context that they are able to associate with on a regular basis. All three thematic life story participants exhibited behavior consistent with those expressing medium religious/spiritual commitment. Each participant discussed how they were connected with their faith-based youth group in high school, but when they transitioned to college, they were unable to find a similar connection with religious community. For example, Bri mentioned that she enjoyed going to church multiple times a week in high school, "being in that community every week and or multiple times a week, it was nice to have that". In college, it was more challenging for her to find a consistent place to attend, and she
missed that, "I kind of hopped around…went to a couple of different churches…I needed to be in the sanctuary, it made me feel more at home". Each interview participant also expressed how they relied on their personal spirituality to maintain their faith. Jamie discussed how he hasn’t gone to church in college yet, but he still prays and reflects on God, “I didn't really go to any religious services, but I found myself praying. So I'm not really going to any institutionalized services, but I'm still putting time out of my day to think about God”. The results from the qualitative data analysis helped provide additional insight into how individual youth exhibiting characteristics of the medium religious/spiritual commitment latent profile express their religious and spiritual commitment. However, the qualitative analysis was also limited by the fact that the interview participants did not express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes that could help inform the high or low religious/spiritual commitment profiles. Despite this, the LPA results provided insight into the consistent religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes of those affiliated with the high and low religious/spiritual commitment profile. In comparison to the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile, those who were affiliated with the other two profiles appeared to be experiencing a greater deal of commitment to their religious and spiritual identity. Those affiliated with the high religious/spiritual commitment profile exhibited consistently high religious and spiritual behavior. This consistent behavior indicates that youth affiliated with this profile have decided how to relate to the three ways that King (2003) suggests that religion serves as a context for identity formation, as an ideological context, as a social context, and as a spiritual context. Ideologically, youth associated with this profile
exhibit consistently confident beliefs about God and the Bible. Spiritually, they report praying often and considering themselves highly religious and spiritual. Finally, those in this profile express attending religious services regularly. Attending these services provides members of this profile with social support (King & Furrow, 2004) and opportunities to connect with potentially transcendent contexts (King et al., 2011). Those affiliated with the low religious/spiritual commitment profile exhibited the opposite level of religious and spiritual commitment on an equally consistent basis. Members of this profile exhibited consistently low belief in religious ideologies, consistently low amounts of prayer and religious service attendance, and did not consider themselves very spiritual or religious. This consistent behavior indicates that adolescents affiliated with this profile are looking for identity achievement outside of religious and spiritual context.

Unlike the members of the other two latent profiles, those affiliated with the medium religious/spiritual profile appeared to be experiencing a greater deal of uncertainty and exploration in their religious and spiritual identity. Examining the three ways that religion influences identity presented by King (2003), those affiliated with this group express moderate ideological belief and spiritual practice but do not have a consistent social context in which to receive support for their religious and spiritual identity. Without consistent religious social support, members of this profile have to navigate their religious and spiritual identities on their own. This autonomy to make their own decisions can provide young adults with a sense of ownership to their religious and spiritual identity. However, without consistent participation in religious contexts, young
adults affiliated with this profile are unable to relate to spiritual models (Oman, 2013) or discuss their religious or spiritual beliefs (Holba, 2014) on a consistent basis.

Those affiliated with the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile may exhibit low religious service attendance due to the disruption of their religious and spiritual context during times of transition. As youth grow from late adolescents to young adulthood, they begin to transition into new relational contexts. One of the most common transitions during this time is the transition from high school to college (Nobel et al., 2015). The transition to college is characterized by shifts in personal responsibility, a loss of institutional support, and an abrupt change in social environments (Dvorakova et al., 2017). In other words, youth leave behind their familiar relational developmental systems during the transition to college and are exposed to new, unfamiliar systems. During this time, adolescents move away from their familiar churches and faith-based youth groups and must establish new connections in a new environment. The interview participants expressed the difficulty of making these new connections. For example, Bri discussed how it was difficult to find a group like the one she had at home, “In college it's so hard to find a group, like that (her high school youth group), and so, once you find it you stick on to it but I haven't quite gotten that.” The insight gained from the thematic life stories and the latent profile analysis shows that some youth have a hard time establishing connections with new religious communities as they enter young adulthood. High school and college faith-based youth leaders should be aware of this and seek to provide support for youth as they transition from high school to college. Practitioners should provide youth with opportunities to maintain social support from spiritual models and avenues to
discuss their evolving religious and spiritual identities. This consistency can help youth have a positive transitional experience that will support healthy development and provide health avenues to express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes.

**Research Question 3: Do race, sex, college education, religion, and age predict how 18-22-year-old adolescents display religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes?**

The demographic backgrounds of adolescents also impact how they display religious and spiritual commitment (Gooden & McMahon, 2016; Dill, 2017). The current study utilized multinomial logistic regression to analyze how race, sex, college education, religion, and age predicted latent class profile affiliation. The qualitative analysis was limited in its ability to provide insight into the effect of demographic backgrounds on religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. However, the life stories did provide some insight into how religious affiliation influenced the interview participants’ religious and spiritual commitment.

The analysis of 18-22 year olds from the 2014-2018 GSS revealed that males were more likely than females to be affiliated with the low religious/spiritual commitment profile when compared to the medium commitment profile. This result is consistent with former studies that have examined lower religious internalization in males (King & Furrow, 2004) and higher participation in religious services for females (Petts, 2014). However, neither sex was significantly more likely to belong to the high religious/spiritual commitment profile when compared to the other two profiles. These results show that while males and females relate to religion and spirituality in different
ways, their experience is not always dramatically different. This result is also consistent with past research that has failed to find a moderating effect for gender in regards to religious and spiritual influence (e.g., Best & Bush, 2006; Tan & Vogel, 2008).

For race, the analysis revealed that whites were more likely than nonwhites to belong to the low religious/spiritual commitment latent profile in comparison to the medium and high commitment profiles. These results provide an additional data point in the research that shows that youth of color, especially African American and Latino youth, tend to be more involved with religion and spirituality than their white counterparts (Barrett, 2010; Lopez et al., 2011; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The church continues to be strongly integrated into Latino and African-American communities (Mattis et al., 2004; Gooden & McMahon, 2016). This integration provides youth of color access the religious socialization, which helps them internalize religious beliefs (Brown & Gary, 1991). This result also provides additional insight into the declining influence of white evangelical and mainline protestants within the American religious landscape. Through polarizing events (Wuthnow, 1988) and the growth of religious pluralism (Putnam & Campbell, 2010), whites have reported declining religious participation since the 1970s (Chaves, 2017).

The analysis revealed that 18-20 year olds were more likely than 21-22 year olds to be affiliated with the high religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the medium commitment profile. The analysis also revealed that 21-22 year olds were more likely than 18-20 year olds to be affiliated to the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high commitment profile. As youth age, they are exposed to more
abstract religious and spiritual ideas. Their religious and spiritual context become more complicated (King & Furrow, 2004). As youth navigate their increasingly more complex religious and spiritual landscape, they begin to take personal responsibility for what they believe (Wagener et al., 2013). As adolescents transition into young adulthood, relationships with peers and vocational success become more important aspects of a person’s identity (Fowler, 1981). This shift in perspective allows young adults to reevaluate their religious and spiritual commitment. The results of this study show that 21-22-year-old youth are more likely to express low religious/spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in comparison to their younger peers. However, additional research is needed to provide more insight into how and why young adults of that age range express low levels of religious and spiritual commitment.

The level of educational attainment also influences how an adolescent expresses religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood. Those with at least one year of college education were more likely than those with no college education to be associated with the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high and medium commitment profiles. These cross-sectional results are consistent with the broader sociological trend that has measured how college education has contributed to a religious and cultural divide between those with and without a college education (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Through obtaining a college education, adolescents often move away from their home context into new environments. This transition provides a shift in social environments and institutional support (Dvorakova et al., 2017). This transition allows youth to develop new skills, expand their social network, and gain new knowledge
(Alsubaie et al., 2019). However, this process can also be stressful and be difficult to adjust to (Hudd et al., 2000). As youth navigate a new collegiate environment, they must establish connections with new developmental contexts and reevaluate their identity (Azmitia et al., 2013). The transition to college specifically gives youth freedom to make their own decisions about how they wish to express their religious and spiritual commitment. The change in relational contexts and the transition to a new environment may be an additional factor that contributes to the change in religious and spiritual commitment in adolescents with at least one year of college education.

The final demographic examined by this study was religious affiliation. The analysis determined that religious Nones and religious Others were more likely than Protestant/Christians to be affiliated with the low religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the high and medium commitment profiles. Protestant/Christians were more likely than religious Nones to be affiliated with the high religious/spiritual commitment profile compared to the low and medium commitment profiles. While it is logical that religious Nones would be associated with the low commitment profile, the odds ratio between a religious None being associated with high religious commitment gives insight into the large divide between those with high religious/spiritual commitment. Religious Nones were 94.410 times more likely than Protestant/Christians to be associated with the low religious/spiritual commitment profile than with the high religious/spiritual commitment profile. This large gap provides further perspective into the polarized American religious landscape. The sample from the GSS in this study contained an equal amount of Protestant/Christians as religious Nones (n=131). These two large groups
express their identities in different ways that can cause varying views not just on religion but on politics and societal norms as well (Baker & Smith, 2015; Putnam & Campbell, 2010). These results help provide additional insight into how adolescents view religion and spirituality on a day-to-day basis.

The thematic life story participants also provided insight into how religious affiliation influenced religious and spiritual commitment. Each life story participant expressed the importance of their Presbyterian denominational background. For example, Jamie expressed how the Presbyterian church helped think through abstract ideas, “I think Easley Presbyterian Church, maybe the Presbyterian Church in general, does a really good job of making you think” While this did limit the generalizability of the qualitative data, examples such as these provide insight into how youth utilize their religious affiliation to inform their religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. One life story participant also discussed how he enjoyed processing his identity as a Christian against the views of his friends from an atheist background, “you meet a lot of new people, a lot of new atheist people too. Through that I stand by my faith, but hearing different people's views about God really influenced my own”. These examples from individuals help provide additional insight into how adolescents express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes in unique ways.

**Research Question 4: How do individual youth perceive their personal religious and spiritual commitment across their young adulthood experience?**

Analysis of the three thematic life stories revealed common themes among the interviewees. The interviews also provided insight into how individuals express their
religious and spiritual commitment across young adulthood. Despite a small sample size and coming from a different sample than the quantitative analysis, the results from the interviews helped support the understanding of the quantitative results. The interview participants discussed their religious and spiritual commitment in similar terms as the items chosen from the GSS. They all exhibited commitment behaviors and attitudes similar to the medium religious/spiritual commitment latent profile. They discussed the importance of their religious affiliation on how they exhibited religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes. However, the results were limited in some capacity. The life stories did not provide specific insight into the high or low religious/spiritual commitment profiles. They did not provide much detail on the influence of sex, age, education, or race on their religious and spiritual commitment. However, the embedded qualitative data still provided adequate support for the primary quantitative analysis and provided additional insight into how adolescents express religious and spiritual commitment across adulthood. The following discussion examined the themes of the thematic life stories to provide a broad overview of the data and provide examples of idiosyncratic religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes displayed by the interviewees.

The first major theme that appeared in all three interviews was the importance of community. Each interviewee discussed how vital their church youth group was to them when they were in high school. They all discussed how the group felt like a family and how they felt comfortable sharing their beliefs. For example, Jane discussed how important having a safe space to talk about her beliefs was to her, "just having that safe
space to talk about those things and learn about those things without judgment”. Having these conversations between non-parental adults and peers provides youth with opportunities to engage in abstract thought and discuss societal issues. An environment that encourages in-depth conversation helps youth broaden their thinking and provides a hermeneutical lens to understand better the needs of others (Holba, 2014). Having a community of people who share a similar belief system provides role models who help confirm religious and spiritual identities (King & Boyatzis, 2015). The faith-based youth group these youth participated in also shared the characteristics of a transcendent community (Schnitker et al., 2019). The group they were a part of provided opportunities for youth to shift their thoughts and emotions to a meaning or purpose that was larger than themselves (King & Boyatzis, 2015). The interview participants discussed a shared transcendent narrative where the group would share their feelings about God and have opportunities to serve their community (Schnitker et al., 2019). For example, Jamie discussed how the mission trips they attended allowed many members of the group to feel closer to God, "You know the feeling that I get after we worked hard for those days then after we got done with all our projects and went home, you know, the fulfillment of doing that and doing it, not for ourselves, but for them and also the glory of God." While their high school religious communities provided each interviewee with connection and opportunities to contribute, each person also described how they were missing a similar community in college. For example, Jane described how she had not had the opportunity to find a new community yet, "I haven't really been able to find any other community to be a part of. Which on one hand is really hard."
The change in connections and community led to all three interviewees seeking to re-establish their religious and spiritual identity in college. Each youth expressed their desire to find a new religious group to connect with in college. As a sophomore, Bri has had some more time to seek out a religious community. She mentioned that she looked at a few different churches but has not found one that she feels connected to yet. Jamie expressed that he was still adjusting to college life and hopes to seek out a religious community in the future. Jane discussed how she is taking time to practice spirituality independently and answer some questions before finding a new church home. All of these comments demonstrate youth who are still in the process of exploring their identity. With the increased autonomy offered by their new collegiate context, the interview participants have to make their own decisions on how to pursue their religious and spiritual identities most efficiently. Each interviewee discussed taking self-motivated steps to think through religious and spiritual issues. For example, Jamie has enjoyed talking with atheists and friends from other religious backgrounds, "Hearing different people's views about God really influenced my own". Seeking out these conversations is an example of being intrinsically motivated to seek out identity formation. Continued intrinsic motivation is more likely to lead to established identity achievement. One part of achieving a committed religious and spiritual identity is forming a firm personal construction of their place in the world and who God is to them. These personal constructs help youth establish a sense of personal meaning in their lives. These personal meaning systems guide the interpretation of new experiences and regulate how youth make and execute life goals (Singer et al., 2013). Intentionally seeking out identity better equips youth to
establish direction in their lives. In an effort to better understand who she is, Jane is utilizing her time in college to concentrate on her personal spiritual life, "I'm working on figuring out what it (spirituality) is to me, without reliance on other people". The transition to college has given each interview participant freedom to discover themselves and make their own choices about whom they want to be in life.

Through the uncertainty of transition, each interview participant expressed the importance of spirituality in helping them adjust to the new college environment. For example, Bri discussed how she participated in daily devotions and reflections to help maintain her faith while she was seeking a new church community, "Even not during church, I would still do my normal like devotions and reflections and things like that". Spirituality is a person's quest for meaning, satisfaction, and wisdom. (King & Boyatzis, 2015). The youth in this study utilized spirituality to help them think through these ideas and the transcendent ideas of their religion. Participating in prayer and reflection help youth internalize beliefs that are beyond themselves. Jamie expressed how praying out loud helps him feel closer to God, "If I pray, I'm usually praying softly out loud, just because I feel like a personal connection with Him and I can communicate better with Him". Engaging in spiritual reflection in this way helps youth develop their ethical and moral framework (Schnitker et al., 2019). Through engagement with transcendent ideals, youth can structure a coherent prosocial moral ideology that impacts how they interact with their community. For example, Jane utilizes her spirituality to help her navigate the polarized religious environment of her campus. She discusses how she believes differently than many people she knew growing up. She mentions that several people she
knows are very strict in their religion. Still, she believes that God is loving to everyone, "I know that God loves me. God loves everyone and there's nothing too big or too small to make him not love me." Jane is engaging in spirituality in this way helps her establish what beliefs are most important to her. Finding more confidence in what is right and wrong helps youth better understand how they can make positive contributions to their community. Better establishing a spiritual identity helps promote thriving and helps youth establish themselves within their new contexts.

Finally, the interruption of COVID-19 was a significant factor in each of the life stories. The pandemic has shut down many of the churches and campus ministries available to students on college campuses. The disruption has been especially chaotic for incoming Freshmen. Jane explains that it has been hard to find community on campus because of social distancing mandates. "The environment on campus is really weird. Every time you go into a building or shared space, even if you're around people, it just feels sterile. There's no natural flow". This unnatural feeling has prevented her from doing much socially or from finding a religious community. Even though many campus ministries provide an online option, Jane does not want to have to sit on her laptop all day, "the last thing I want to do at the end of the day is sit on my laptop". Bri has also described how the pandemic has prevented her from pursuing a new religious community, "when COVID hit, that's when I was actively looking". Even though Bri desired to find religious community, the pandemic disrupted her plans. The pandemic has limited the interview participant's ability to access the support systems they need to thrive. Jamie mentioned that he has not been able to go to church since the pandemic
started, and that has prevented him from getting into a routine in college, "I haven't gone to church since the pandemic started. I mean church during college, I don't really go to church." Each interview participant described how important community and connection was to them. The disruption of COVID-19 has prevented them from finding this support. They have been unable to share their thoughts and feelings with others of similar belief systems. It has prevented them from being able to make meaningful contributions to their community. The youth in this study have faced unique challenges to their religious and spiritual commitment. The examination of these stories provided support for the primary quantitative analysis and provided specific insight into how individuals express religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood.

**Implications**

American religiosity is diverse and complex. Political polarization, the rise of the religious "Nones", and the increased prevalence of non-Christian religions have created a dramatic shift in the American religious landscape over the last 50 years. This study examined how American youth display religious and spiritual commitment from ages 18-22. The quantitative analysis revealed that the religious and spiritual commitment profiles of American youth cover the full spectrum. Some adolescents are fully committed to their religion and spirituality, while others are not committed at all. However, the largest portion of youth in this study were associated with the medium religious/spiritual commitment profile. This group expressed a relatively high belief in God and scripture, considered themselves moderately spiritual and religious, and prayed on a regular basis. However, this group expressed low religious service participation. For youth in this age
range who are receiving a college education, the transition to college can often disrupt their connection with religious community (Barry et al., 2010). College and high school faith-based youth workers should partner together to help provide adolescents with a smooth transition to college. College leaders could connect with high-school students before they come to campus to provide them with a point of contact and familiarity. Maintaining a connection to religious community can provide adolescents with healthy avenues to continue to explore their personal religious and spiritual identities (King, 2003). The thematic life story participants expressed a desire to find a connection with a religious community as they entered college. For example, Bri mentioned that it was difficult to find a group like her high school youth group, “In college it's so hard to find a group, like that (her high school youth group)”. The interview participants also expressed a desire to receive support from religious contexts while in college. Jane expressed how hard it was for her to lose her religious community and how she missed the support that group provided for her, “I didn't really have any connection to religion. And that was really hard because when all that fell through. At the end of my senior year, I lost a lot of sense of community that I had depended on for most of my life”. Faith-based youth leaders should seek to not only connect youth with religious communities but to provide them support through access to spiritual mentors and models. These models can be adults or peers who are willing to talk and listen to students as they navigate the ever shifting landscape of young adulthood. The quantitative analysis from this study also provided insight into how youth from different backgrounds relate to religion and spirituality in different ways. Faith-based youth leaders should seek to understand the larger religious
landscape in America to better understand the social and historical influences that impact the development of religious and spiritual commitment of people from different backgrounds. Youth exist with complex relational developmental systems that are influenced by personal interactions and broader sociocultural contexts. Faith-based youth leaders should seek to understand these contexts and provide support for adolescents as they explore their identity and religious and spiritual commitment across the young adulthood experience.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that should be mentioned. The primary and overarching limitation to this study was the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic prevented the researcher from collecting quantitative data in person and impacted the researcher’s ability to find more participants for the thematic life stories. The use of the General Social Survey as secondary data were necessitated by the global pandemic and did limit this study's impact in some ways. The survey did not receive responses from anyone below the age of 18. This limitation prevented comparison of religious and spiritual commitment from early high school to late college. This comparison could have created a clearer picture of how the transition to college impacts commitment over time. Despite this limitation, this study was able to gain value cross sectional data on how adolescents expressed religious and spiritual commitment between the ages of 18-22 years old. Future studies could benefit from increasing the age range of participants and collecting data in a longitudinal manner. A longitudinal study of participants from ages 15 to 25 may help provide a clearer picture of how religious and spiritual commitments
change over time. The sample also provided relatively few participants of non-Christian religions (n = 26). This small sample size prevented the study from making any meaningful conclusion in how this group displayed religious and spiritual commitment. The variables in this study also do not provide a fair evaluation of these other faiths. The question about the Bible is especially irrelevant to members of non-Christian faiths. Future studies should seek to provide measures that better reflect the diversity of religious backgrounds in America. The use of the General Social Survey also limited the items available for measurement in this study. Over the three surveys chosen, only 7 items meet the theoretical and statistical criteria for inclusion. These limited items provide a relatively narrow view of commitment. Future studies should seek to develop their own survey instrument to collect more diverse data on religious and spiritual commitment. Future research should address these limitations to improve the theoretical impact and practical application of this study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Over the past 30 years, the study of religion and spirituality as factors that influence positive youth development has become increasingly popular (Hardy et al., 2019). However, additional research is needed to clarify the influence that religion and spirituality have on youth outcomes. The current study examined how adolescents express their religious and spiritual commitment behaviors and attitudes across young adulthood. This study used the 2014-2018 GSS to conduct secondary data analysis to examine religious and spiritual commitment in adolescents 18-22 years old. While this information is helpful, future studies should collect data from diverse populations using
more targeted validated measures. Using such measures can provide researchers with additional measurement items to provide a more precise understanding of religious and spiritual commitment. Future studies should consider collecting data on measures of positive and healthy development (Lerner et al., 2005) to examine the changing influence of religious and spiritual commitment on positive youth development. A measurement scale combining these factors could provide additional insight into the support that youth need to thrive as they transition to college.

Future studies should also consider collecting data from a more comprehensive age range of participants. Collecting data from participants ranging from 15-25 will provide a deeper understanding of changing religious and spiritual habits. During high school, youth rely much more on their parents and peers to influence their religious and spiritual beliefs (Fowler, 1981). As youth age and enter a new environment, they gain the freedom to make their own choices. The college environment encourages critical thinking and can often challenge youth to examine their own identities (Edgell, 2017). However, there are still various programs and supports that are targeted towards college aged youth to help them think through their religious and spiritual identities. When youth leave the college environment, their access to these supports and programs decreases even more. Collecting data from participants outside the traditional college age could help provide a complete picture of how religious and spiritual commitment changes in youth as they face transition and gain access to greater autonomy.

The format of the current study should be conducted with a more religiously diverse population. The sample of the current study is primarily concerned with
Protestants and the religious "Nones". Conducting studies that specifically target Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or other religious backgrounds will provide a more robust understanding of religious and spiritual commitment in American adolescents. The population of these other religious backgrounds has been steadily rising (Chaves, 2017). When studies fail to consider the increasing diversity of the American religious background fully, they risk excluding important religious groups and oppressing valuable belief systems. Without specific studies targeting these religious groups, faith-based youth leaders will not have the adequate resources and data to provide youth from these religions with the support they need. These studies should consider adding religion specific measurement items, such as asking Muslim youth about their beliefs about the Quran, to better measure genuine religious and spiritual commitment. Researchers should examine their implicit bias and seek ways to increase the representation of minority groups, even if they come from a different religious background.

To further address this issue, idiographic qualitative approaches, such as thematic life stories, should be used more often to understand the specific ways in which youth relate to religion and spirituality. Conducting qualitative research can help researchers obtain deeper and richer data than purely quantitative data (Creswell, 2009). Collecting this data will provide researchers and practitioners with deeper insight into what adolescents want from their religious and spiritual experiences. It will also give youth from minority religious groups opportunities to have their voice heard. The thematic life stories conducted in the current study provide unique insights into youth's struggles as they transition to college. Future studies can look to replicate and enhance this research.
Future studies should obtain a larger sample size of interview participants to create a more robust picture of how individuals relate to religion and spirituality throughout their lifetimes. The focus of future studies should be primarily on collecting information from diverse voices. Intentionally seeking out youth from diverse backgrounds can help researchers gain a more holistic view of the religious and spiritual lifestyles of American adolescents.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Items from the 2014-2018 GSS

Items from the 2014-2018 GSS: A full question bank with measurement scales can be found at the following link: http://thearda.com/qbshow.asp?id=1640

Descriptives:
- Respondent's age (AGE)
- Respondent's education? (EDUC)
- Respondent's sex (SEX)
- What race do you consider yourself? (RACE)
- What is your religious preference? (RELIG)

Religious Commitment:
- How often do you attend religious services? (ATTEND)
- Would you call yourself a strong [religious preference] or a not very strong [religious preference]? (RELITEN)
- To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person? Are you very religious, moderately religious, slightly religious or not religious at all? (RELPERSN)
- Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; the Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word; the Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man (BIBLE)
- Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God? (GOD)

Spiritual Commitment:
- About how often do you pray? (PRAY)
- To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person? Are you very spiritual, moderately spiritual, slightly spiritual or not spiritual at all? (SPRTPRSN)
Appendix B

Thematic Life Story Prompt

Conducting a Thematic Life Story Interview about \( x \)
(\( X \) can be religion, social relationships, work, play, art – depending on the research question. Adapt the prompt as needed).

Details to provide in preliminary contact (e.g., by phone call, e-mail):
“In the interview I would like to hear of your life-story in general, and particularly, about \( x \) in your life. I will tell you more when we meet. It should take around an hour and a half.”

Interview Prompt:
“As I explained I’d like to hear about \( x \) today - about \( x \) in your life.
So first maybe please tell me your life-story as you see it today. I’d like to hear about it in as detailed and colorful a manner as possible. I would want to hear of anything you think is important that will help me understand who you are, how you came to be who you are today, and maybe even where you think things are going from here on. Many people tell their story in a chronological order but that is up to you. The story can include all sorts of things, such as about your parents and where they came from, their characters and concerns, and what kind of home you grew up in - this is just an example, it can get you started. I really love stories, and would be happy to hear about your background, your growing up, your childhood and adolescence, your friends, relationships, what was important to you along the way, changes you underwent, if you did, whatever you think would help someone who doesn’t know you, to get to know you better.
As I mentioned, I especially would like to hear about \( x \) in your life along the story, anywhere something related to \( x \) comes up, stories about \( x \) and how \( x \) fits in your life, or changed along the way, that would be really helpful.
We have around an hour and a half for this, so please take your time. Just start and let it roll, and I will help you if you get stuck”.

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REFERENCES


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