

Religiosity and spirituality (RS) are frontiers of research that have not been explored consistently throughout the history of psychology yet are of high public interest (Miller & Delaney, 2004). Religion and spirituality are of public interest in part because many people desire to live with greater inner peace and a fuller sense of meaning, direction, and satisfaction in their lives (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Among adults, spiritual commitment generally increases as age increases: those who are younger in age are less likely to be as spiritually committed as those who are older. This may be, according to Gallup Poll (2002), because younger individuals are less inclined to think about their own mortality and are more concerned with "making their way" in the world. They may also be more focused on material success and not question life's "ultimate meaning" as much as older adults (Gallup Poll, 2002). Although the 2011 Gallup Poll reports that belief in God drops below 90% among younger Americans, religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of American adolescents (Smith et al., 2003). According to data from the Monitoring the Future project, researchers have found that although church attendance among adolescents has declined from 40% in the late 1970s to 31% in the early 1990s, overall it has been relatively stable (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002; Smith, Fairs, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003).

Researchers have often reported the prevalence of religiosity in adolescents but less research has focused on *why* adolescents choose or choose not to incorporate a professed religious faith into their lifestyle. Even less is said about *how* adolescents become more active or noncommittal towards the religious faith they were reared in. However, one large-scale study investigated the factors contributing to dramatic spiritual change. Regnerus, Smith, and Smith (2004) investigated two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data to better understand the context in which spiritual change occurs. An analysis of dramatic increases and decreases in religiosity revealed that demographics, social context, personality, and family dynamics all played a role in adolescents' behavior (Regnerus et al., 2004). The religiosity of schoolmates and parents consistently predicted religious development and served as protection against religious decline. Similarly, Hardy, White, Ruchty, and Zhang (2011) found that family religiousness positively predicted individual religiousness and spirituality: emerging adults (17 - 31 years) who more frequently engaged in various religious activities with their families when they were younger maintained those activities in practice when they were older. This sheds light on what types of social factors contribute to adolescents' religious choice, but questions remain regarding what specific factors contribute to spiritual development.

To investigate the development of spirituality in adolescents, this study characterized spiritual development into three dimensions: transformation, identity, and maturity. These categories are suggested as a continuum of spiritual

growth but are not mutually exclusive. Adolescents who have had a spiritual transformation often describe their experience as a life-changing religious event that leads to a sustained spiritual commitment. Once they make a concrete decision to commit to a specific religious faith, they begin to shape their worldview through a religious lens that develops their spiritual identity. This stimulates a personal connection and relationship with God. Then, as they incorporate their worldview into their lifestyle, identity manifests itself in behavior through loving compassion towards others. This demonstrates spiritual maturity. The three “categories” of spirituality and their definitions are summarized below:

- **Spiritual Transformation:** The presence of an experience which resulted in a significant increase or decrease in religious faith: “...a fundamental change in the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred in the life of the individual” (Pargament, 2006).
- **Spiritual Identity:** The belief one has a personal relationship with God: “An individual's belief that she or he is an eternal being...connected to God” (Poll & Smith, 2003).
- **Spiritual Maturity:** The conviction one has to love others and feel compassion for the world: “Wisdom and compassionate action in the world” (Vaughan, 2003).

### **Aims and Hypotheses**

The current study investigates how spiritual transformation, identity, and maturity may be impacted by personal devotion as well as social factors. Contributing factors were grouped into two areas: 1) personal devotional activities: the engagement in prayer, worship, and the study of religious literature; and 2) religious social support, from family, friends, church community, and desire for or and/engagement in mentorship roles. The frequency of personal devotional activities and/or strength of social support may influence whether an adolescent chooses to remain and grow in the faith they were reared in or pursue an alternate path. Overall, this study aimed to:

- Understand what key factors foster a spiritual transformation (ST) experience
- Learn what key factors enable adolescents to develop a sustainable, spiritual identity
- Identify what key factors contribute to higher levels of spiritual maturity

An illustration summarizing the described hypotheses’ constructs and their relationships to one another is displayed in Figure 1. Specifically, it was hypothesized that:

- Those who report higher associations with religious support are more likely to report a spiritual transformation (ST) experience.

- Those who have a high level of support through family, friends, church, and mentorship communities will demonstrate a stronger spiritual identity and maturity than those who have support through only one or none of these communities.
- Adolescents who are more engaged in prayer, worship, and the study of religious texts will report a stronger spiritual identity and maturity.

### **Method**

Adolescents, ages 12 to 19 years old, attending Protestant church youth groups were sampled. Five separate youth groups of varying Protestant denominations were used in this study. Each youth group had between 15 to 35 teens. Youth groups were chosen to represent a variety of Protestant denominations as well as districts with varying socioeconomic status and ethnicities. After providing voluntary, written consent, a self-report, anonymous questionnaire of instruments to measure adolescents' social networks and personal devotional activities as well as spiritual transformation, identity, and maturity was compiled. The questionnaire was 25 pages long and took a maximum of one hour to complete. Spiritual transformation, identity, and maturity were defined using the following validated measures: Spiritual Transformation Inventory (Hall, 2004); Daily Spiritual Experiences (Underwood, 1999); Meaning (Pargament, 1999); Faith Maturity Scale (Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1993); Given Love (Fetzer Institute, 1999); Empathy & Perspective Taking (Davis, 1994); Altruistic behaviors (Rushton & Chrisjohn, 1981). To measure the seven constructs developed for this study (prayer, worship, religious literature study, parental religious support, friendship circle, church community, mentorship), items were lifted from the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiosity/Spirituality. Tests of correlations and binary logistic regression were used to test the study hypotheses.

### **Results**

#### **Participants**

Eighty five adolescents, ages 12 to 19 years old, attending Protestant church youth groups were sampled. Number of responses per measure ranged from 78 to 82 participants. The average age of participants was 15 to 16 years of age with about 20% in middle school (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade), 66% in high school, 6% not in school, and 8% transitioning from high school to college. The mean year in school was 10<sup>th</sup> grade. For ethnicity, 70% identified themselves as White, 12% as Hispanic, 7% as White-Hispanic, 2% as African-American, 2% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% as Native American/Indian, and 5% as other or unreported.

**Associations of total religious support with spiritual transformation (ST).** In our sample, 65 participants reported that they had a spiritual transformation

experience while only 16 said they have never had this type of experience. The majority of these experience were reported as being only positive ( $n = 47$ , or 72%) with the remainder ( $n = 18$ , or 28%) being reported as both negative and positive. Binary logistic regression was used to test the effect of total religious support on the presence of a spiritual transformation experience. Total religious support was predictive of whether an individual had experienced a spiritual transformation experience,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.337, p = .021$ . On average, those who had a positive spiritual transformation experience had a significantly higher level of religious social support ( $M = 4.622, SD = .472$ ) compared to those who had not had one ( $M = 4.277, SD = .601$ ),  $t(79) = 2.478, p = .015$ .

**Associations of religious social support with spiritual identity and maturity.**

Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, the relationship religious social support had with spiritual identity as well as with spiritual maturity was tested. Higher levels of mentorship, church community, religious friendship support, family religious activity and beliefs, and total religious social support were all significantly associated with higher levels of spiritual identity. Higher levels of mentorship, church community, and total religious support were significantly associated with higher levels of spiritual maturity. A full list of correlations is presented in Table 1.

**Associations of personal devotional activities with spiritual identity and maturity.**

Using Pearson's correlation coefficient, the relationship between personal devotional activities and spiritual identity as well as with spiritual maturity was tested. Higher levels of religious literature study, prayer, and total engagement in personal devotional activities were all significantly associated with higher levels of spiritual identity. Similarly, higher levels of prayer were significantly associated with higher levels of spiritual maturity. As expected, higher levels of desire and time spent in worship was positively associated with spiritual identity and maturity as well as with prayer and religious literature. Devotional activities were also positively associated with one another. Those who engaged more in worship were also significantly more engaged in studying religious literature,  $r_{Bible} = .481, p < .01, r_{prayer} = .358, p = < .01$ . A full list of correlations is presented in Table 2.

## Discussion

This study uniquely articulated three stages of spiritual development: transformation, identity, and maturity, and investigated the influence of religious social support and personal devotional activities on development. Evidence was found to support the role of demographics, religious social support, and personal devotional activities on spiritual transformation experience(s), identity, and maturity. Specifically, the presence of a spiritual transformation was related to stronger levels of religious social support. Spiritual identity related to stronger

levels of religious social support through mentorship, church, friends, and parents as well as of personal devotional activities such as religious literature study, worship, and prayer. Higher levels of spiritual maturity were related to higher levels of religious social support through mentorship and church community as well as personal devotional activities such as worship and prayer.

### **Religious Social Support Relates to Spiritual Transformation, Identity, and Maturity**

Religious social support is a key factor in spiritual development. Religious social support helps teens to maintain and grow in their personal relationship with God as well as demonstrate an outer Christian love towards the world. Higher levels of mentorship, church community, friendship support, and parental religious activity aggregated together was related to higher levels of spiritual identity. Higher levels of mentorship, church community, and total religious support were associated with higher levels of spiritual maturity. Mentorship is able to provide guidance for both growing in one's spiritual identity as well as maturity. By receiving mentorship, adolescents are able to have spiritual beliefs and behaviors modeled for them. By providing mentorship, they are able to benefit in helping others and are motivated to be a model of beliefs and behaviors. This two-way effort of receiving and providing mentorship contributed to a stronger spiritual identity and maturity more than those who were only receiving mentorship. Church community was also significantly associated with higher levels of spiritual identity and maturity. This is an opportunity to hear sermons and receive guidance from religious leaders, spend time with others who share similar values and beliefs, receive mentorship from adults, youth leaders and/or older teens, and develop a social network and friendships.

Spiritual maturity was defined in this study as manifesting one's spiritual identity and connectedness to God by having compassion on the outer world. Higher levels of maturity were positively associated with active engagement in mentorship, church community, worship, and prayer. It was also related to higher reports of positive attitudes towards self and others. Spiritual maturity may help adolescents to be more pro-social as they build a stronger religious support community, and show a deeper concern and connectedness to others. Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993) studied over 36,000 7<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> graders to identify protective factors against adolescent social pathologies such as emotional disturbances and acting out behaviors. Multivariate models consistently showed that youth who had a sense of spirituality, cared for others, and were connected, especially to school and family, were more protected against social pathologies. Measures of caring and connectedness surpassed demographic variables such as two-parent versus single-parent family structure as protective factors against high risk behaviors. This supports the current study's finding that although parental support is related to spiritual maturity, youth who engage in a collective religious

social network with supportive parents, friends, mentors, and church community may have a stronger support system to nurture their spiritual maturity. In addition, youth who are not fostered in a caring, positively social environment, may be better served by connecting to a religious community where they witness and experience significant, caring relationships with adults.

Spiritual transformation (ST) is an integral part of the spiritual development process. It is a powerful feeling of awareness and connectedness to the Divine. Positive spiritual transformation experiences are life-changing religious events which may initiate or help maintain a sustaining spiritual commitment. Having religious support from multiple communities such as through parents, friends, mentors, and church provides an atmosphere where teens are more likely to experience a spiritual transformation. Support from a variety of sources may help teens to think more about their spirituality and religious faith, consider what it means on a personal level, and be in an environment where this type of event is accepted. Our findings supported this. Those who had a positive spiritual transformation experience had a higher level of religious social support compared to those who had not had such an experience. As expected, adolescents who had parents who were more religiously active were on average more likely to have experienced a positive spiritual transformation. Although this finding was not significant, this could suggest that youth with actively religious parents are more inclined to be at church and in an environment where they are encouraged to have their own personal ST experience. Those who had higher levels of total religious social support were more likely to experience a spiritual transformation experience. This suggests that the more support an adolescent has from different social networks, the more engaged they may be in a religious environment and therefore more susceptible to a ST.

### **Higher Personal Devotional Activities Related to Stronger Spiritual Identity and Maturity**

It was found that religious social support helps adolescents in their spiritual growth. However, only engaging in a religious community can make adolescents focus more on the social aspects rather than on their spiritual development. Prayer, worship, and study of sacred texts are more private behaviors that enable teens to reflect on what they believe and feel a spiritual connectedness so they can communicate with God on a personal level. As the study's findings suggest, taking time to spend alone in devotional activities related to higher reports of spiritual identity and maturity. This may help teens to base their spirituality on their personal experiences of connection and communication with the Divine.

### **Study Limitations**

Limitations that should be noted are the small sample size and issues with data collection. Future research would benefit from having a larger sample size to

confirm the salience of our findings. The method of data collection could also be improved. The questionnaire could be shortened or complemented with a type of reward (e.g. free food, candy) to keep adolescents' more engaged in responding. The measures regarding worship, mentorship, friendship circle, and prayer reported lower levels of internal reliability and could be improved for future studies to better represent their respective constructs. The question on preference of mentorship was an important part of the findings, but it was the most skipped item. Eighty two participants responded to the four of the five mentorship items but 19 skipped the question on mentorship preference (be mentored, mentor, or both). This may have been accidental as this was last item in the mentorship scale and was at the bottom of the page. To determine if this was accidental or deliberate, the scale can be reformatted and a "neither" category added for participants to mark if they are not interested in mentorship activities. Mentorship was found to be an essential part of spiritual development and should be further explored.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The current study focused on adolescents, 12 to 19 years of age. As described earlier, the college years are considered to be the "vulnerable stage" when many young adults choose to leave the religious faith they were reared in. Religiosity and/or spirituality may be seen by young adults as a burden of structure that they are free to shed once they transition out of their parent/guardian's household. Regardless, current research on adolescents and college students has shown that involvement in RS has positive effects. Desrosiers and Miller (2008) state that a direct, personal relationship with God serves as one of the most robust protective factors against different forms of psychopathology, such as depression and alcohol use, during the adolescent development period. Cotton and colleagues measured belief in God/Higher Power and the importance of religion in 134 high school adolescents and found that those with higher levels of RS had fewer depressive symptoms and fewer risk-taking behaviors (Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, & Rosenthal, 2005; Holder et al., 2000). Similar results have also been found for cigarette and alcohol use (Gryczynski & Ward, 2011; Haber, Grant, Jacob, Koenig, & Heath, 2011). In general, teenagers who choose to foster a strong level of spiritual identity and maturity prior to college may be more resilient against a variety of health risk factors such as substance use, high risk sexual activity, depression, stress, and anxiety. The benefits of religiosity and spirituality are many, and therefore, inspired the current study which focused on how religious community and personal activities could further enhance adolescents' spiritual development.

### **Conclusion**

As demonstrated by the implications and findings of this study, religiosity and spirituality are important constructs that benefit adolescents. In order to

properly serve adolescents, spiritual development must be properly fostered through middle and high school, before adolescents make the transition to college. This study investigated what factors contribute to three phases of spiritual development: transformation, identity, and maturity. It was found that the frequency of personal devotional activities and the strength of religious social support influenced how adolescents grow in their religious faith. This furthers our understanding of what fosters spiritual transformation (ST) experiences, enables adolescents to develop deeper levels of spiritual identity and maturity, and overall maintain a religious, spiritual commitment.

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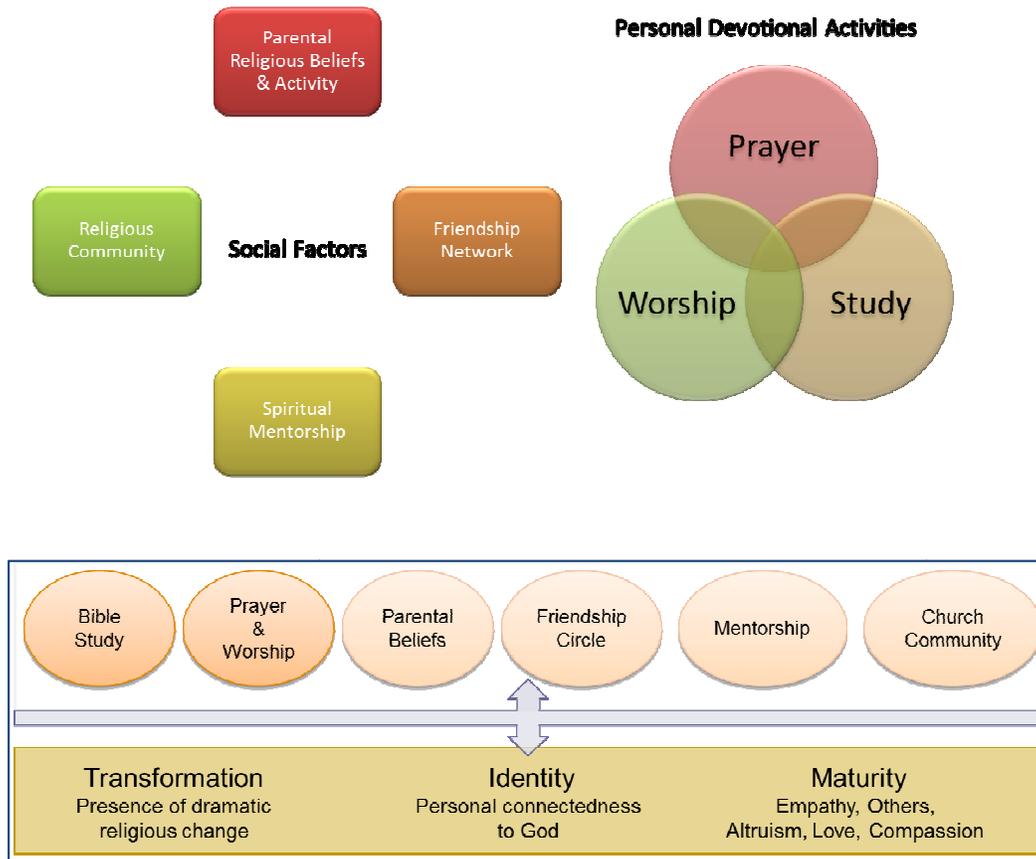


Figure 1. Summary of religious social support, personal devotional activities, spirituality constructs and hypothesized relationships.

Table 1. *Correlations of religious social support variables with levels of spiritual identity and maturity.*

	Mentorship	Church Community	Friendship	Parent Religious Activity	Total Religious Social Support
Spiritual Identity	.488**	.501**	.380**	.243*	.595**
Spiritual Maturity	.441**	.251*	.161	.084	.364**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).  
 Note: Sample size ranged from 79 – 82 participants for all correlations

Table 2. *Correlations of personal devotional activity variables with spiritual identity and maturity.*

	Bible	Prayer	Worship	Total Personal Devotional Activities
Spiritual Identity	.550**	.617**	.667**	.752**
Spiritual Maturity	.212	.248*	.405**	.356**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note: Sample size ranged from 80 – 81 participants for all correlations

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