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Religion, community service, and identity in American youth

JAMES YOUNISS, JEFFREY A. MCLELLAN AND MIRANDA YATES

The role of religion in identity development has, for many years, been a relatively neglected topic in psychology. To demonstrate the importance of religion to the formation of identity, this paper presents evidence connecting community service and religiousness in American youth. Data are reviewed that show (1) youth are heavily involved in volunteer service; (2) many youth view religion as important and those who do so are more likely to do service than youth who do not believe that religion is important in their lives; (3) involvement in church-sponsored service makes it more likely that youth will adopt the religious rationale in which service is couched; and (4) youth who do church-sponsored service are neither service "nerds" nor single-issue tunnel-visioned adolescents. These data from nationally representative samples strengthen the case that the many contemporary youth who take religion seriously are vibrantly engaged in their schooling, in the betterment of communities, and the development of identities which presage healthy lives.

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Introduction

For many years, the discipline of psychology has neglected the role of religion in the development of identity. Psychology discarded religion earlier in this century when it took up the modern academic pursuit of value-free knowledge (e.g. Reuben, 1996). One can see the shift in the generational transition from G. Stanley Hall and William James to, for example, Thorndike and Watson (e.g. Siegel and White, 1982; Youniss, 1990). Hall, for instance, in his classic volume, *Adolescence* (1904), devoted an entire chapter to adolescent religious conversion which he believed was natural, normal, universal, and necessary (p. 301). In contrast, two decades later, Watson (1928), with tongue in cheek, was seeking the first mother who could bring up a child in a healthy manner using folk-ways, by which he meant to denigrate religious and cultural belief systems. Ever since, religion has been viewed as an anachronism that stands in the way of science and a rational approach to living.

However, for reasons that deserve study, religion has made a comeback in recent years. Indeed, the British sociologist John Thompson has argued that religion never went away. It was ignored by social scientists who predicted its demise with the progress of modernity. Its reappearance only emphasizes that the death of religion is one of the biggest non-events of our time (Thompson, 1995). For example, political observers know that modernity did not kill Islam. Academic professors realize that it did not remove the need for values. "Religion . . . provides individuals with a sense of belonging to a community, a sense of identity as an integral part of a broader collectivity of individuals who share similar beliefs and who have, to some extent, a common history and a collective fate" (p. 194).

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