

## What Drives Apostates and Converters? The Social and Familial Antecedents of Religious Change Among Adolescents

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While research on the psychology of religion and spirituality has examined religious conversion, little research has examined social and familial variables that might play a role in conversion in adolescence. Longitudinal work examining concurrent conversion experiences—as opposed to retrospective reports—is particularly rare. In an examination of 209 parent–adolescent dyads, findings suggested that those who became religious at Time 2 had higher social competence at Time 1 than did apostates, whereas adolescents who were religious at both times had higher social competence, parent communication, and parent trust than apostates. Additionally, those who converted to their parent’s religion at Time 2 were higher than apostates in Time 1 social competence and parent communication. Results point to the importance of considering social and familial factors in religious conversion.

*Keywords:* adolescence, apostasy, conversion

Religious conversion has been referred to as “a major discontinuity in behavior, a wrenching of the personality” indicating that “the convert has apparently experienced a drastic shift in the orientation of his valuation of reality” (Glock & Stark, 1965, p. 7). Although many claim a sudden conversion, it has been acknowledged that these transformations occur over longer periods of time (Rambo, 1993) and are influenced by forces only tangentially related to a religion per se (e.g., family and friend relations). Furthermore, it is likely that adolescents in particular might have a difficult time distinguishing nuanced differences between denominations, a phenomenon known as bounded rationality (see Ferrero, 2008) and might be strongly influenced by these forces as opposed to theological reasoning.

The “contemporary conversion paradigm” (Granqvist, 2003) suggests that this gradual shift occurs without particular change of the self. Indeed, there are minimal changes to big-five personality traits following conversion; rather, some individuals might be predisposed to conversion (see Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999, for a review). It is then logical that some of the more dramatic accounts of religious conversion could be post hoc reconstructions of an individual’s history (Berger, 1963), especially if the conversion occurred not because of theological opposition but instead because of those tangentially related forces.

Studies investigating conversion are predominantly cross-sectional, retrospective (Paloutzian et al., 1999), and typically examine college students and adults for practical reasons, as data are most readily available among those who have already gone through a conversion experience in their life. It is not surprising then to find that research on religious development in adolescence, especially analyzing longitudinal data, is particularly sparse. Despite this gap, there have been several high-quality investigations into the religious life of adolescents. Petts (2009) examined longitudinal religiousness in adolescents, finding six distinct trajectories of religious participation. Of particular note for the current investigation was the finding that family factors, such as residing with two biological parents, both positively and negatively influenced trajectories. Pearce and Denton (2011) utilized a nationally representative longitudinal sample of adolescents and discovered that there was not a substantial change in profiles of religiousness at a 2-year follow-up; however, general levels of religiousness did lessen over time. In addition, the profiles were significantly different in terms of both family and peer variables. Denton (2012) expanded on this work and found that parent–child relationship difficulties were related to changes in religiousness among adolescents—specifically, the two highest religiousness groups decreased in religious salience, whereas one of the groups lower in religiousness became more religious.

Social scientific research concerning the “Nones,” a group that includes those who claim no religious affiliation (including agnostics and atheists), also called “irreligious” and “religious independents,” has increased greatly in recent years (Baker & Smith, 2009; Edgell, Gerteis & Hartmann, 2006; Hayes, 2000; Sherkat, 2008; Smith, 2011; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; Zuckerman, 2009). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of research examining apostasy—the conversion *from* a religious tradition to no religion—in particular. Indeed, some definitions of conversion neglect apostates and focus only on those converting to a religion, (i.e., Rambo,

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1993), while we continue to know little about how individuals lose religion altogether (Smith, 2011).

To our knowledge there are no estimates of percentages of the population undergoing a conversion experience at any given time, nor do we believe that estimates would be particularly accurate, as those in the midst of a conversion experience might not fully understand that they are undergoing the change at that time. Because researchers of conversion must not only deal with temporal sequencing issues when examining conversion in adults, but must also combat the issues of post hoc reconstructions of events from some time ago, it is even more critical for longitudinal data to be utilized with data collection occurring during the time of the conversion. The current investigation seeks to fill in these gaps by longitudinally investigating how social and familial variables might influence religious conversion in an understudied group: adolescents converting both *to* and *from* a religious group.

### Conversion

Although there are many theories of religious conversion (Rambo, 1993), here we focus on four theories relating to an area of particular import to adolescents—parent and peer relationships.

#### Modernization Theory

Berger (1979) outlined the influences of modernization on personal religiousness and religious tradition. He posited that modernization, largely in the form of improved technology, has given modern man one crucial ability beyond all others: the ability to choose. Specifically, people once prescribed to certain occupations, lifestyles, and religions, but technology has taken us “from fate to choice” (Berger, 1979, p. 11). This shift has required us to embrace choice in all aspects of life, ranging from the style of cuisine at a meal, to the selection of a spouse, to the use of contraception to prevent reproduction. This has also turned our religious orientation from one in which we maintain one, likely familial, religion throughout our lives to one where we choose our religion from among many. Further, if one disagrees with the tenets of a particular religion, finds it oppressive, or has differences with followers, he or she might choose to leave that house of worship for another and continue this process ad infinitum.

Globalization theory (Rambo, 1993) refines modernization theory by specifying the processes through which choices are made. It theorizes that the increase in ease of communication, be it through travel, technology, or media, has made the conversion process increasingly possible. Those who desire new religious experiences now have many more outlets (e.g., Internet, TV, social networks) by which to be exposed to new religious groups. Smaller groups who even a short time ago might only have been known by those in close geographic proximity are now able to recruit from a much larger pool and can be sought out more easily by potential converts. In addition to the exposure of individuals to new religious groups, ease of communication could also lead to an increase in communication between individuals even within closer geographical regions. Because of the increase in idea sharing and the necessity of choice, communication could lead to more religious conversion.

Adolescents spend an astounding amount of time with devices such as televisions, computers, and phones (see Pea et al., 2012,

for a review). It is common for adolescents to include some personal religious information (Bobkowski & Pearce, 2011) and even discuss religion (Alvstad, 2010) on social networking websites. Taken with findings suggesting that individuals are surprisingly accurate in their self-representations online (Back et al., 2010), it would not be surprising that social networks can have profound impact on adolescent religiousness. Literature concerning the economics of religion echoes this notion (Iannaccone, 1992). One of the largest costs of leaving a religion is the social and familial fallout that can accompany disaffiliation. If prospective apostates have a ready-made support system surrounding them, be it through close friends or the Internet, the costs of disaffiliation could be lessened, making it easier for them to disaffiliate. In this way, globalization and increased communication better enable adolescents to leave a religion with fewer net consequences.

Although globalization theory typically posits that those with larger social networks are likely to convert from one religion to another or from no religion to a religion more frequently, it is equally possible that individuals with a religion could become *less* religious as a result of being exposed to new ideas. This could be especially accurate in what some see as an increasingly secular society (Demerath, 2001) in which followers might be trending more toward a personal religion (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Therefore, globalization theory predicts that those with more social relationships would be more likely to convert than those with fewer social relationships, both to and from a religion.

#### Deprivation Theory

According to deprivation theory, sects arise when those who lack resources or attributes become motivated to overcome their absence, often by turning to religion. Although originally proposed to relate to sect emergence, this could also be relevant to religious and conversion experiences. Glock and Stark (1965) propose five types of deprivation—economic, social, organismic, ethical, and psychic. For example, those with lower economic resources (i.e., lower income) have been seen to be more religious than the wealthy in some situations. Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) found that nations with harsher life conditions were more likely to be religious than countries with better life conditions. Similarly, Schwadel (2008) found that whereas poorer adolescents were less publicly religious (i.e., lower attendance in religious services) than wealthier adolescents, they placed particular emphasis on personal aspects of religiousness, such as the belief in judgment day.

Of particular interest to the current investigation is social deprivation. Theoretically, those who have fewer sought-after traits, such as intelligence and kindness, are less likely to be socially accepted. Because of this, these individuals might turn to religion because religion provides a place of unconditional acceptance, regardless of their lack of positive traits. Although economic resources can contribute to this lack of social acceptance, other coveted attributes are influential, as well. Therefore, according to deprivation theory, those who have fewer friendships should be more likely to turn to religion than those with a greater number.

#### Religion as Compensator

Another theory relevant to adolescent conversion is the compensator theory of religion (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). The theory

postulates that humans as a species desire rewards and avoid punishments, and in the absence of a desired reward, humans will accept the promise of a reward in the future (a compensator). This theory can explain why those at the end of life might be more likely to adopt religious beliefs (with their lives ending and no reward in sight, a turn to religion can offer a reward), as well as why the poor might turn to religion throughout their lives (with less of a chance to receive material rewards in this world they rely on later rewards promised through religion). Further, those for whom rewards are consistently present and those who are further from death (typically younger) might be particularly likely to become nonreligious, indicating that adolescence might be a common time to become or stay nonreligious.

The compensator theory also states that there are two types of compensation—primary and secondary. Primary compensation consists of a reward for the direct benefit of the believer, such as the promise of salvation and eternal paradise. For example, those who are religious might be able to stop themselves from engaging in sexual behaviors because they believe that it will help their eternal salvation. In contrast, secondary compensation is a reward for a person obligated to another. This person feels connected to another person but understands that he or she cannot keep the other person from potentially tragic or life-threatening circumstances. Because of this, he or she attempts to dissolve this dissonance in other ways. For example, a parent understands that no matter what she does to protect her child, harm could still befall the child. This inability to protect her child, but feeling of obligation to do so, might lead the parent toward religion to find another way to fulfill her obligation. In doing so, the parent assures the salvation of the eternal soul of their child, even if she cannot assure the child's safety in this world.

Stark and Bainbridge (1987) argued that secondary compensation is a large part of religiousness and religious organizations and that atheism might be more common among those with fewer, less intimate personal relationships. Indeed, data support this claim by illustrating that those who have fewer intimate relationships (e.g., those single or cohabiting, having no children, those who would not like to go to a family reunion or family trip) and with lower quality relations with friends (e.g., those less likely to want cook a festive meal, less likely to say friends “will be there for me,” more likely to move residence) were more likely to be atheists.

### Parent–Child Relationship

Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of relationships with primary caregivers. Indeed, it has long been proposed that God can compensate for the lack of an ideal father figure (Allison, 1969). Much work in this area has been completed by Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992) and Granqvist (Granqvist, 2003, 2012; Granqvist & Dickie, 2006; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004) and has been strongly influenced by the work of Bowlby (1969). Literature has typically demonstrated that secure attachment is associated with positive conceptions of God, whereas insecure attachment is associated with unstable religiousness (Granqvist, 2012). Several of these studies also have implications for conversion research.

Granqvist (2012) summarized two hypotheses that explain how parent–child attachment may influence religious development: the correspondence hypothesis and the compensation hypothesis. The

correspondence hypothesis posits that children base their model for constructing images of God on their relationships with parents or other primary caregivers. Therefore, those who are securely attached to parents would be more likely to stay religious. Alternatively, the compensation hypothesis states that those insecurely attached would substitute God as a surrogate parent in an attempt to compensate for the lack of a secure attachment.

An additional prediction comes from social learning theory, which highlights the influence parents have on their children's thoughts, attitude, and behavior. Successful socialization is typically thought to occur when the child adopts the parents' worldview. Richter and Francis (1998) contend that aspects of the parent–adolescent relationship (specifically parental distance, conflict, antipathy, and inconsistent messages) all influence the likelihood of successful socialization (pp. 80–82). This socialization is not necessarily seen through adoption of theological orientation; rather, children who are less close to their parents are less likely to obey their parents to make their parents happy, and those whose relationships have more conflict might be more likely to use leaving their parents' religion as a form of rebellion. Alternatively, those who have a healthier parent–adolescent relationship are more likely to adopt their parent's views.

### The Current Investigation

In addition to a lack of understanding surrounding adolescent religious conversion, there is a particular lack of research examining the “Nones.” Hayes (2000) noted several limitations with current research on the “Nones”; namely, (a) no comparison of independents to religious affiliates, (b) studies rely mainly on bivariate comparisons based on demographic characteristics, and (c) samples are typically composed of American college students. The current investigation aimed to fill the gaps in the extant literature by longitudinally examining adolescents in four religious conversion groups (religiously affiliated, nonreligious, those who become religiously affiliated, and apostates) and their social and family relationship quality. Although certainly ripe for research, it is not the aim of this study to investigate those who become more religious within an affiliation, move from one denomination to another, or move from one faith tradition to another (i.e., intensification, institutional transition, or tradition transition; Rambo, 1993). The aim of this study is to gain a better understanding of how adolescents affiliate and disaffiliate with religion.

There are several competing hypotheses for the effect of social relations on conversion. Globalization theory (Rambo, 1993) predicts that an increase in social competence would relate to increases in conversion (both to and from a religion). In opposition, deprivation theory (Glock & Stark, 1965) predicts that those lower in social competence and higher in social problems would have greater incidences of conversion to religion. Finally, the compensator theory (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) predicts that higher social competence would lead to higher religiousness and therefore more conversion to religion, in contrast to globalization theory's prediction of conversion both to and from religion.

There are also several competing hypotheses specifically with regard to parent–adolescent relationship quality. Deprivation theory (Glock & Stark, 1965) predicts that religiousness would be higher among those with lower quality parent–adolescent relationship. The correspondence hypothesis, based on attachment theory

(Granqvist, 2012), predicts that those who have better parent–adolescent relationship quality would be more likely to have higher levels of religiousness. Finally, the compensation hypothesis predicts that those with a lower-quality parent–adolescent relationship would be more likely to convert to a religion, whereas social learning theory (Richter & Francis, 1998) predicts that those with better quality relations with parents would be more likely to adopt their parents' religious orientation.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 209 adolescents (113 male, 96 female) and their primary caregivers (from hereon, parents; 172 mothers, 32 fathers, 5 grandmothers). Adolescents' ages ranged from 10 to 17 years ( $M = 12.71$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) at Time 1 and from 11 to 18 years ( $M = 15.10$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) at Time 2, and parents' ages ranged from 25–69 ( $M = 43.29$ ,  $SD = 6.47$ ) at Time 1 and 28–71.80 ( $M = 45.96$ ,  $SD = 6.38$ ) at Time 2. Adolescents were 88% white, 10% black, 1% Hispanic, and 1% other, and parents were 89% white, 9.1% black, 1% Hispanic, and 1.4% other. Adolescents who entered atheist, agnostic, or selected "None" were placed in the "None" group. If they chose a religion, or entered any type of recognizable religious organization (as wide reaching as Asatru), they were placed in the religious group.

At Time 1, adolescents were 173 Christians (150 Protestant, 23 Catholic), 1 Jew, 32 "Nones," and 3 "Others." The three "Others" were categorized in the religious group, as one was Mormon, one was Asatru, and one "believed in God." At Time 2, adolescents were 165 Christians (142 Protestant, 23 Catholic), 1 Jew, 41 "Nones," and 2 "Others." One "Other" was the same Mormon, whereas the other was placed in the None category, as they stated that they were "A nature person." Those who were religious at both times were classified as "Religious" ( $n = 154$ ), those who were in the None group at both times were classified as "Nonreligious" ( $n = 19$ ), those who were in the None group at Time 1 and then in the religious group at Time 2 were classified as a "Converter" ( $n = 13$ ), and those who were religious at Time 1 but were in the None group at Time 2 were categorized as an "Apostate" ( $n = 23$ ).

In a second set of analyses, we looked at parent–adolescent similarity in religiousness. At both Time 1 and Time 2, 178 parents and children were similarly religious or nonreligious (e.g., parent and child were both religious), whereas 31 were different (e.g., parent was religious, child was nonreligious). Across both time points, 159 parent–adolescent dyads were similarly religious or nonreligious, in 19 dyads the adolescent changed from the parents' orientation to the other (i.e., parent was religious at both times, whereas the child changed from religious to nonreligious), in 19 dyads children changed from a different orientation to their parents' (e.g., parent was religious at both times, and child changed from nonreligious to religious), and in 12 dyads the parent–adolescent orientations were different at both time points.

### Procedure

Participants were part of a larger longitudinal data collection investigating risk and protective factors in adolescent develop-

ment, as described previously (Kim-Spoon, Longo, & McCullough, 2012). Participants were drawn from Southwestern Virginia through diverse advertisement methods, including flyers, recruitment letters, and e-mail distributions. Adolescents and their parents participated and were interviewed separately by a research assistant at the university's offices. Participants were invited back for a follow-up study, and completed the study an average of 2.4 years later. Those who had already attended their first year of college were considered aged out and were not asked to complete the study a second time. Attrition analyses indicated that participants who did not participate in Time 2 were more likely to be ethnic minority ( $p = .01$ ) and had lower family income ( $p < .001$ ) at Time 1 than those participants who did return. All participants received monetary compensation for participating. In the current study, only participants who completed data collection at both time points were examined. All study procedures were approved by the university's internal review board.

### Measures

**Religiousness.** The religiousness questionnaire asked participants to indicate their religion from the following options: Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Other, and None. Those who chose "Other" were asked to specify. If the "Other" responses could easily be categorized (e.g., "Baptist"), their answers were recoded to indicate the appropriate classification. If not, they remained "Others."

**Youth Self Report (YSR).** The YSR (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) is completed by the adolescent, and consists of 118 items concerning their problematic thoughts and behaviors during the previous six months. The current investigation used two subscales of the YSR: social competence and social problems. Social competence is a three-item subscale concerning group activities and social relationships. Participants are asked to report the number and degree of participation in activities, number of friends and amount of contact with them, and quality of family and peer relationships. Social problems consist of 11 items children endorse on a 0 = *not true* to 2 = *very true or often true* scale, with items such as *I feel lonely* and *I am not liked by other kids*. Achenbach and Rescorla (2001) reported the alphas for the social competence and social problems scales as .68 and .82, respectively.

**Inventory of Parent Attachment.** Quality of communication, trust, and alienation in the parent–adolescent relationship was measured using the children's report of the Inventory of Parent Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Raja, McGee, & Stanton, 1992). The scale consists of 12 items, with items such as *I tell my parents about my problems and troubles* (communication), *I wish I had different parents* (trust), and *I don't get much attention at home* (alienation). Items are on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 = *Almost Never or Never True* and 5 = *Almost Always or Always True*. Alienation scores are reverse-scored, making higher scores for each subscale indicate better parent–adolescent relationship quality. Each of the three subscales contains four items. In the current sample, the alphas for communication, trust, and alienation were .68, .78, and .67, respectively.

### Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables can be found in Table 1. Results of ANOVAs can be found in Tables

Table 1  
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Demographic, Social, and Familial Variables

Variable	Income	Sex	Age	Race	Social prob.	Social comp.	P. comm.	P. alien	P. trust	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Income	—									—	—
Sex (% female)	-.02	—								46%	—
Age	.06	-.10	—							12.71	1.53
Race (% white)	-.25*	.06	-.11	—						88%	—
Social prob.	-.26*	-.07	.02	.04	—					3.71	2.96
Social comp.	.21*	-.01	.05	-.08	-.33*	—				9.56	2.07
P. comm.	.10	.01	-.26*	.00	.03	.21*	—			4.04	.73
P. alien.	.08	-.03	-.04	.00	.00	.27*	.53*	—		4.05	.73
P. trust	.06	.01	-.24*	-.08	-.03	.15*	.67*	.55*	—	4.58	.57

Note. Social prob. = Child Behavior Checklist (CBC) Social Problems subscale; Social comp = CBC Social Competence subscale; P. comm. = Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) Parent Attachment subscale; P. alien = IPPA Parent Alienation subscale; P. trust = IPPA Parent Trust subscale. \*  $p < .05$ .

2 and 3. In the current investigation, potential antecedents of religious membership at two times were explored in four groups of adolescents: those who claimed a religion at both times ("Religious"), those who did not claim a religion at either time ("Non-religious"), those who had no religion at Time 1 but did at Time 2 ("Converters"), and those who had a religion at Time 1 but left by Time 2 ("Apostates"). Additionally, four dyads grouped by parent-adolescent similarity in religious orientation (both either religious or nonreligious; child changed from parents orientation to the other; child changed from the other orientation to the parents; parent and child different in orientation at both times) were examined as an outcome to examine differential effects of religiousness and similarity in religiousness. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were utilized to examine all group differences.

First, differences in social and family characteristics at Time 1 were compared across adolescent religious group membership (see Table 2). Significant effects were found for both parent communication,  $F(3, 208) = 8.74, p < .01$ , and social competence,  $F(3, 208) = 3.61, p = .01$ . Tukey's HSD tests were conducted for all pairwise comparisons and revealed that those in the religious group were significantly higher than the apostates in social competence, parent communication, and parent trust, and were higher than the nonreligious in parent communication. Additionally, the converters were higher than the apostates in social competence.

Next, differences in social and family characteristics at Time 1 were compared across parent-adolescent religious group membership (see Table 3). Groups were based on similarity to their parent's religion at Time 2. Those who were the same religion as their parent at both time points were put in the "same" group, those

who were different at both time points were in the "different" group, those who switched to their parent's religious group were labeled "adopters," whereas those who left their parent's religious group were labeled "deserters." Effects were found for social competence in social competence,  $F(3, 208) = 2.80, p = .04$ , and parent communication,  $F(3, 208) = 3.68, p = .01$ . Tukey's HSD indicated that adolescents who adopted their parent's religion between Time 1 and Time 2 were higher in social competence and parent communication at Time 1 than those who switched from their parent's religion. Additionally, adolescents who had the same religion as their parent at both times were higher in parent communication than those who turned away from their parent's religion.

## Discussion

The primary goal of the current study was to examine religious conversion in adolescents through the lens of several theories, including globalization theory (Rambo, 1993), religion as compensator (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987), deprivation theory (Glock & Stark, 1965), attachment theory (Granqvist, 2012), and compensation hypothesis (Richter & Francis, 1998). The findings indicated that those who were religious at both times were higher than Apostates in social competence and parent communication at Time 1, and that Converters were also higher than the Apostates in parent communication at Time 1. Thus, results for social relations largely supported the compensator theory of religion, which predicts that larger numbers of social relationships will correspond to higher religiousness through the effects of secondary compensa-

Table 2  
Mean Differences in Social and Familial Antecedents Among Religious Change Groups

Antecedent	Religious	Apostate	Converter	Nonreligious
Social problems	3.63	3.61	4.77	3.74
Social competence	9.69 <sup>a</sup>	8.28 <sup>ab</sup>	10.15 <sup>b</sup>	9.68
Communication	4.18 <sup>ab</sup>	3.62 <sup>a</sup>	3.81	3.55 <sup>b</sup>
Trust	4.64 <sup>a</sup>	4.30 <sup>a</sup>	4.50	4.45
Alienation	4.14	3.82	3.81	4.05

Note. Means in the same row with the same superscript are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

Table 3  
Group Mean Differences in Social and Familial Antecedents Among Religious Change Groups

Antecedent	Same	Deserted	Adopted	Different
Social problems	3.66	3.74	3.15	4.03
Social competence	9.63	8.37 <sup>a</sup>	10.18 <sup>a</sup>	9.54
Communication	4.11 <sup>a</sup>	3.74 <sup>ab</sup>	4.04 <sup>b</sup>	3.54
Trust	4.62	4.22	4.74	4.31
Alienation	4.10	3.78	4.20	3.60

Note. Means in the same row with the same superscript are significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

tion. Interestingly, social problems were not found to differ among groups, further supporting the compensator theory, which is primarily focused on the number of social relationships without regard for social problems.

Effects were seen for parent–adolescent relationship variables, as well, supporting both the correspondence hypothesis and social learning theories. Converting adolescents were not different in parent–adolescent relationship variables than those who were religious at both time points. This finding might be reflective of an effective, albeit late, success in parental socialization of religious beliefs. Parent–adolescent dyads that were higher in communication might have maintained a constructive way of interacting, even though the adolescent was not religious at Time 1. In addition, those who were religious at both times were significantly higher in parent communication and parent trust, supporting the correspondence hypothesis, which predicts that those with better parent–child relationships would be more religious, regardless of their parent’s religion.

Furthermore, our findings indicated that those who changed their religious orientation to match their parents at Time 2 were higher in Time 1 social competence and parent communication than those who switched their religion away from that of their parents. Those who had the same religion as their parents at both times were significantly higher in parent communication than those who switched away from their parents’ religion. Moreover, those who had the same religion as their parents at both times and those who changed to their parents’ religion at Time 2 had higher levels of parent–child communication at Time 1, supporting social learning theory.

Conversion during adolescence might be of particular import from an identity development perspective. For those leaving religion, this could be particularly true. [Smith \(2011\)](#) has argued that an atheist identity is a rejection identity. While a religious identity includes behaviors that are typically socially desirable due to the large proportion of the population that is religious, a nonreligious (specifically atheists) identity is personal and rejection-based in which prescribed social and cultural roles are negated and rejected. If this rejection of societal norms is common in apostates, then religion has potentially gone from an obligation to a specific tradition to a search for yet another lifestyle preference as suggested by [Streib \(1999\)](#). Perhaps some of this rejection can affect relationships, as the rejection of norms could be seen as less desirable to those who follow norms more closely. Alternatively, perhaps those who are less inclined to be religious and have fewer relationships feel less of a need to comply with social norms, and this lack of relationships helps create an environment in which rejection of norms is more common.

The social and familial effects on group membership could also be seen as conflicting with the increase in “active” conversions in which conversion is “characterized by an active subject, making meaning” ([Streib & Keller, 2004](#)). Although we do not have data that state that our participants did not go through a thoughtful meaning-making process, our data minimally suggest that social and familial factors might make fertile the grounds for religious change. These results are supported by the findings of [Petts \(2009\)](#) and [Denton \(2012\)](#), both of whom found family variables to influence strength of child religiousness. Alternatively, it could be that those who are less inclined to be social are also less inclined to be religious. [Durkheim \(1912/2001\)](#), among others, thought of

religion as inherently social. If one is less inclined to be social, they could shy away from religious events and away from categorizing themselves as members of a certain religion, which is how we classified them.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current investigation addressed several gaps in the literature, there are some areas that future studies could expand upon. First, our sample was limited to a relatively small, largely white sample from Southwestern Virginia that was also mainly Christian. Generalizability of the findings could be enhanced by investigations examining a larger sample of adolescents of greater diversity, allowing for a greater number of individuals in each group. Additionally, increases in sample sizes would provide adequate power to conduct more advanced statistical analyses. Second, future studies should be careful in the construction of questions regarding religious affiliation. Because we used the standard “None” as an answer, we do not know whether our participants were committed Atheists, undecided agnostics, or anywhere in between. It is likely that by using “None” as an option we lost the ability to examine meaningful differences. Similarly, researchers should be careful to place those who claim to be “spiritual but not religious” in a group separate from “Nones.” Third, whereas we investigated parent–adolescent relationship quality, much of the current literature has examined attachment styles specifically (e.g., [Granqvist, 2003](#); [Granqvist & Hagekull, 2003](#)). Future investigation involving attachment style as well as parent–adolescent relationship quality could be fruitful.

Fourth, although the groups created were theoretically sound and were meaningful, researchers have pointed out that affiliation can have diverse meanings to followers in different denominations. For example, [Richter and Francis \(1998\)](#) point to differences in definitions of membership between several groups, including Episcopalians, Methodists, Catholics, and more conservative churches, but also highlight the difficulty of accounting for culture. For some, being a member of an affiliation is not strictly religious, but also an engrained part of culture. This means that even if they do not attend services, these individuals would still classify themselves as a member. In our study, these “lapsed,” “resting,” or “unchurched” members would still be classified as religious even though they were not active members. Further, denominations differ in their degree in which they are “culture affirming,” creating thinner boundaries between culture and religion ([Richter & Francis, 1998](#)). Perhaps part of the apparent beneficial effect of being religious is through having an engrained culture and support system. Fifth, although at this point in their religiousness these individuals have chosen either to be or not to be a part of a religion, it is uncertain whether this is the last conversion to be made. Some adolescents might be classified as “accumulative heretics” ([Streib, 1999](#)) who will be a member of several religious organizations throughout their lives. There are a variety of sociocognitive components of both conversion to religion and apostasy ([Adam, 2009](#)), including fear, hope, social support, and social conflict, among others. Future research could look at those who make one conversion compared with those who make several. Further, our sample consisted of relatively young adolescents. Examination of potential differences in these phenomena between adolescents at different ages is encouraged. Finally, although the current work supports

examining social and familial antecedents to religious conversion, other variables have also been seen to be important in the process, including childhood trauma.

## Conclusions

This study investigated the transition both to and from religiousness in adolescents. The compensator theory of religion (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987), correspondence hypothesis (Granqvist, 2012), and social learning theory (Richter & Francis, 1998) emphasize the importance of parent and peer relationships in the development of faith—or lack thereof. Results indicated that those who became religious were higher in social competence than those who left a religion. Additionally, those who switched away from their parent's religion were lower in parent communication than those who switched to their parent's religion. Our analyses point to the critical nature of social and familial factors in the development and change of religious affiliation. Although many studies have explored the contemplative aspects of religious affiliation and apostasy, the current results highlight the critical roles of social and familial factors in these processes.

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