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Sources of Adolescent Faith:
Examining the Origins of Religious Confidence

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Abstract

Although proponents of the religious economies paradigm have regularly asserted the importance of the problem of religious confidence, they have put little effort into examining it theoretically and empirically. This article rectifies this shortcoming by explaining how and why specific aspects of past religious experience should nurture religious confidence. Binary logistic regression analysis was conducted by using the 2003 and 2005 waves of the National Study of Youth and Religion to identify the determinants of teenagers' confidence in the existence of God, the existence of angels, and the existence of an afterlife. Although results indicate that past involvement in family discussions about religious or spiritual matters significantly increases the likelihood that teenagers will develop strong belief in all three of the doctrines examined, praying with family, parental encouragement to participate in a youth group, and church attendance of parents were not found to be consistent predictors. Respondents who reported having witnessed a miracle, receiving an answer to prayer, and having powerful spiritual experiences also displayed greater religious confidence. Future research on religion and religious socialization could benefit from a greater focus on, and more effective measures of, religious confidence.

Central to the religious economies approach to studying religion is the assumption that the religious marketplace revolves around individuals who are seeking after otherworldly goods that religious groups offer (Stark and Finke 2000; Warner 1993). Proponents of this approach argue that what sets religion apart from the secular realm is that religious explanations rely on supernatural assumptions (Stark 2004). Because religious doctrines are extensively dependent on the existence of forces or entities outside the measurable, empirical realm, the success of religion depends largely on its ability to convince people that those forces are real. Clearly, doctrines about the supernatural can have no impact unless individual members believe in them. Therefore for a religious group to claim that it has access to supernatural resources is not enough to compel its members to accept costly obligations or sacrifice for the group. To be offered salvation is not the same as believing that you will actually obtain it.

Because claims about the supernatural cannot be verified empirically, religious adherents must accept them on faith. This analysis has led Stark (2004: 177) to suggest that “the universal problem of religion is one of confidence.” *Religious confidence* refers to the degree of certainty with which individuals believe in religious doctrines and principles, especially those related to the supernatural realm. For the purposes of this analysis, confidence and doubt are directly related to each other. The more confidence one has in the truthfulness of any particular religious doctrine, the less one doubts it. The more doubt one experiences in the teaching, the lower is one’s confidence.

Although the rational choice paradigm relies significantly on the idea of religious confidence, there have been only surface attempts by its proponents to tackle theoretically where strong faith comes from (Stark and Finke 2000) and almost no attempts to test those claims directly using religious confidence as a dependent variable. This is an important oversight that I will begin to address in this article.

Even well-established arguments tying religious upbringing to future religiosity tend to focus on outward religious behavior and fail to theoretically identify and examine the causal mechanisms that account for variation in religious faith (Cornwall 1989; Dudley 1999; Erickson 1992; Finke 2003; Iannaccone 1990; Sherkat 2001; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Smith and Denton 2005; Stark and Finke 2000). Too often, researchers of religious socialization assume that doing is believing and that the two are the products of the same social processes. Not only does this neglect the importance of understanding belief on its own terms, it also discourages us from exploring the interaction between belief and behavior. Most studies that have attempted to focus on belief separately as a dependent variable lack solid theoretical underpinnings and empirically have tended to focus on the presence or absence of belief rather than on

belief intensity (Cameron 1999; Hayes and Pittelkow 1993; Kelley and De Graaf 1997).

Ultimately, the problem of belief and the uncertainty inherent in religion have been somewhat of a thorn in the side of researchers of religion (Hechter 1997; Iannaccone 1995; Montgomery 1992, 1996). Few people have trouble comprehending the motivation for seeking out money or friendship, but explaining why people do things for deities, for spiritual enlightenment, or for salvation is extraordinarily challenging because it requires an understanding of individuals who believe in objects and entities that are not empirically detectable. Persecuted prophets, religious warriors, suicide bombers, spiritual hermits, avid tithers, and other devout religious participants might all have a difficult time explaining their actions in terms of what Weber calls means-end instrumentality (1978 [1914]). Still, even the casual observer knows that some individuals are more confident in their religious claims than others and that some religious groups are better than others at fostering confidence in the worldview they offer. Where does confidence in religious explanations come from, and what causes variation in the religious confidence of individuals?

There is much room to improve the literature on religion when it comes to theoretically explaining and empirically examining varying levels of religious confidence. In this article, I address these weaknesses by establishing and explaining specific propositions that predict how certain elements of religious experience and socialization affect religious confidence. Then, using longitudinal data collected from American teenagers, I conduct a test to empirically examine the influence each factor has on producing religious confidence in the existence of God, angels, and the afterlife. Finally, I consider some of the implications of these findings for contemporary theories of religion and how ideas presented here can supplement and improve research on religion.

A THEORY OF THE ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS CONFIDENCE

Stark and Finke offer an invaluable insight into the social mechanisms that produce variable confidence in religious explanations. They argue that an “individual’s confidence in religious explanations will increase to the extent that other people express confidence in them” (Stark and Finke 2000: 107). In this study, to *express confidence* is to act verbally or behaviorally in a way that is consistent with a belief in or commitment to a particular idea or explanation. Keep in mind that by this definition, an individual may express confidence in an idea through his or her actions without ever actually being confident.

The suggestion that expressions of confidence can affect the beliefs and behaviors of others is not new. Coleman (1990) explained that when individuals have no basis for determining the validity of their perceptions, they will transfer

control to another person. He cites Sherif's famous experiment in which subjects were placed in a dark room and asked to determine whether or not a point of light was moving and, if so, the direction in which it was going. When they were unable to determine the motion of the light, subjects tended to agree with the assertions of the confederates.

In his discussion on the character of faith, Niebuhr (1989) claims that it is often the case that people come to have convictions about truth based on the trust they place in others. He argues that our reliance on science is a prime example of this. Although "science represents to most men a great body of beliefs about objects of which they have no direct knowledge . . . they hold these beliefs with great assurance because they trust the scientists" (Niebuhr 1989: 41). Most people know almost nothing about how carbon dating works or how DNA analysis can identify whose hair is whose, but many people accept the conclusions they are told out of simple faith in the expressions of the people who supposedly do know.

Although social scientists acknowledge that human beings believe because of the assurances of others, there is only limited research examining when and why expressions of confidence will produce confidence in others. Accordingly, Niebuhr (1989: 34) suggests that "this much neglected social character of knowing and believing requires further explorations." Likewise, Coleman (1990: 219–220) calls for "further research into contagious beliefs" and argues that this is "necessary before an explanation of such behavior systems can be integrated in a general theory of action." So how is confidence in religious explanations expressed, and when will those expressions have an impact?

I propose that individuals can express confidence in religious explanations in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most straightforward and familiar expressions are verbal: People tell others what they believe in the form of testimonials. Public prayer can also be considered a verbal expression of confidence in that by praying, individuals are acting in a way that is consistent with the belief that there is someone or something to pray to. Ultimately, the forms that religious expressions of confidence can take range from simple declarations of belief in God to the ultimate sacrifice of one's own life to a cause.

Obviously, not all religious expressions of confidence are equally important in shaping the perceptions of others. In fact, it can be very difficult to know whether or not an individual who is acting in a way that is consistent with a particular religious belief is truly confident or is just going through the motions or submitting to social expectations. It is essential to specify when expressions of confidence should be most likely to produce confidence in others. Consequently, I submit the following proposition:

Proposition 1: To the extent to which individuals observe religious expressions of confidence that are reliable and trustworthy, their confidence in religious explanations will increase.

But what makes expressions of confidence more reliable and trustworthy? I propose that they will typically be considered more reliable and trustworthy to the extent to which they have the following characteristics:

- They are costly.
- They are unattended by coercive or social pressure.
- They come from dependable sources.
- They come from individuals who are held in high regard.
- They are consistent, enduring, and repeated frequently.

In the absence of any opportunistic reasons to fake confidence, we should have little reason to doubt that such expressions are sincere. Still, each of the above conditions gives us some insight into which types of religious teachings and practices should be most likely to produce confidence. Indeed, in this case, actions speak louder than words. Dying for the faith costs more than saying, “I believe!” and one can be certain that the martyr has nothing to gain personally by death that would be of any social or worldly value.

Although public expressions of confidence may be subject to large amounts of social pressure, private ones are less so. As a result, private religious devotion can be considered a more trustworthy expression of confidence than public devotion can. Accordingly, the confidence of an individual who spends hours in private religious meditation is less questionable than is the confidence of an individual who practices such meditation only in public. Similarly, an adult’s praying to God at home can be considered a more convincing expression of confidence than the same adult’s praying aloud during a religious service.

In a different vein, no one denies that human beings listen to and trust some people more than others. People who provide information to us that consistently checks out will be trusted, while the fallibility of those who have consistently lied to us or whose information rarely seems to be accurate will also be apparent. Additionally, we will be prone to trust the people with whom we have formed close emotional ties or whom we hold in high regard. Although most of us would easily dismiss a total stranger’s claim to have seen an angel, we might think twice before rejecting the same claim by a dependable family member, longtime friend, or well-respected member of the community (Iannaccone 1995).

Finally, there is a big difference between an individual who prays only in times of crisis and one who prays several times a day, every day of the year, even when life is going well. Almost everyone will agree that consistent, enduring faith is more believable than is faith that emerges only intermittently or in a crisis. In

essence, one of the primary ways for religious adherents to make religious choices under conditions of uncertainty is to look for social cues that indicate that the commitments made by others are credible (North and Weingast 1989; Root 1989). Of course, the factors that have been presented here are not enough to make someone sure that religious explanations are true. It is quite possible that the people who are being observed are lying or insincere, and ultimately, people have no way of knowing the truth about the motivations of others. However, each of the five factors mentioned should send a signal of credibility and thus work to promote confidence in the observer.

If seeing other people express confidence produces confidence, then it follows that one of the most effective ways for religious groups and families to build faith is by encouraging public expressions of confidence. By fostering such public interactions, groups provide opportunities for members to observe each other's expressions of confidence. Groups that effectively promote public expressions of confidence that are reliable and trustworthy will be most likely to maximize confidence.

In addition to the effect of observing compelling expressions of confidence by others, confidence in religious explanations can also be enhanced through emotion. Each day, individuals experience an assortment of emotions. These might occur while participating in a wide variety of different behaviors, such as praying, listening to music, meditating, talking to a friend, or reading a book. While some individuals do not believe that their emotions have anything to do with the divine, others view some feelings as being related to or caused by otherworldly forces. If individuals view their emotions in supernatural terms, these experiences should enhance their confidence in the reality of an otherworldly realm and the validity of religious explanations.

Proposition 2: To the extent to which individuals have emotional experiences that they consider to be related to the supernatural, their confidence in religious explanations will increase.

Ultimately, the only aspect of emotion that is necessarily related to the social world is how we come to interpret emotions. In fact, where emotions lead us depends largely on social factors. In essence, Durkheim (2001 [1912]) was right to suggest that the meanings that are attached to emotions rely on social context. Religious groups and families shape the results of emotional experiences by providing explanations about what the experiences mean and how they should affect behavior. Groups that do not provide a religious framework within which to interpret emotional experiences will be less likely to have members who identify these experiences as being connected to the divine or approach them in a way that is consistent with group ideas. In contrast, groups that promote doctrines that

provide interpretations of emotional experience that connect them to religious explanations and the existence of supernatural resources will have members who are more confident.

Finally, most religious cultures attach positive and negative consequences to certain actions. To the extent to which religious adherents experience these consequences, they should have more faith in religious explanations. When devotees perceive that their prayers have been answered, that meditation has brought them closer to enlightenment, that paying tithes has brought great blessings, or that dancing for rain has brought rain, their faith has been verified. In essence, they see the cause-and-effect relationship between their religiosity and agreeable consequences: They see the fruit of their religious actions. The positive results that are derived from living according to religious dictates will be taken as personal proof of the worth and truthfulness of religious teachings. The negative outcomes that religious adherents associate with not living according to the faith will produce the same result.

In a sense, the choice to belong to a particular group and live by its doctrines is akin to conducting an experiment. Adherents shape their lives in ways that are consistent with the teachings of the group and then consider the impact of their choices. If living the faith produces the desired results, the individual has personal evidence that the religion works. If members of a religion fail to perceive its effectiveness, their confidence in its explanations about the world should wane. These experiences of personal proof are perhaps the most likely to result in total uncertainty reduction, or what the faithful might consider to be absolute knowledge that the doctrines are true.

Proposition 3: To the extent to which individuals personally experience the efficacy of religious explanations, their confidence in religious explanations will increase.

Group members who are encouraged to express confidence will often relate how living according to religious principles has helped them. They will convey their witness of personal miracles and the influence of the divine in their daily lives. Consequently, another potential benefit of encouraging group members to express confidence to one another is that they will raise awareness about the different ways in which living the religion has real consequences. As members realize the possibility of various manifestations of the efficacy of religious explanations, they will be more likely to see such manifestations in their own lives. This will come to be considered evidence of the existence of supernatural resources and the ability of a religious group to utilize these resources.

CONFIDENCE BUILDING IN THE HOME

When it comes to explaining what causes individuals to have confidence in religious teachings, it seems only natural to focus on family upbringing. Indeed, the discussion above can help us to understand the conditions under which parents will be more likely to pass religious convictions to their children. If it is true that costly, uncoerced, consistent, enduring, and oft-repeated expressions of confidence from dependable and highly regarded sources are crucial to religious confidence building, then we might expect some of the most lasting expressions of religious confidence to be those that parents transmit to their children.

In the home setting, parents have little or no outside pressure motivating them to express confidence in their religious beliefs. Most outsiders will never really know what occurs within the walls of other people's homes. As a result, parents' willingness to pay the costs of observing religious teachings in the home and to instill those teachings in their children might make these the most trustworthy of all expressions of confidence. In addition, the affective bonds between parents and children often lead children to trust their parents' guidance. In essence, it may be that the most effective religious socialization will occur as parents demonstrate the importance and validity of religious doctrines and teachings by the ways in which they conduct themselves within their homes and how they interact with their children.

Accordingly, children's conviction of religious explanations should increase as their parents express confidence in these explanations. They do this by living according to the dictates of their religion and by reading scriptures, praying, and attending church with their children. If the above theory is accurate, parents who place a low priority on expressing confidence in religious explanations will have children who are less confident. In addition, parents can have a tremendous impact on their children's perception of emotional experiences. As was previously suggested, children who learn to attach their emotional experiences to the supernatural should be more likely to have confidence in their religious beliefs. Likewise, children who realize the efficacy of their religion will have greater faith. I will consider each of these variables in the analysis that follows.

DATA AND METHODS

To establish how past experiences and interactions affect religious confidence, I utilize longitudinal data from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) in this analysis.¹ The first wave of the NSYR was collected between July 2002

¹ The National Study of Youth and Religion, www.youthandreligion.org, whose data were used by permission here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., under the direction of

and April 2003. It consists of a nationally representative telephone survey of 3,370 English- and Spanish-speaking American teenagers (ages 13–18 years) and parents. Random digit dialing procedures were used to obtain participants for the study. Households in which at least one teenager lived in the home for at least six months of the year were eligible to participate. To maintain the representativeness of the sample, when multiple teenagers were present, the one with the most recent birthday was interviewed.

Surveys were conducted by trained interviewers in a private setting, and each parent and teen was given \$20 to complete the survey, for a total of up to \$40 per household. The investigators reported an overall response rate of 57 percent, and while a higher rate would be preferred, comparisons with the 2002 U.S. Census data, the 1999 Survey of Adults and Youth data, the 1999 National Household Education Survey, the 1996 Monitoring the Future survey data, and the 1994 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicate that the NSYR provides an unbiased nationally representative sample of U.S. teenagers ages 13–18 years. (For further details, see Smith and Denton 2003.)

In 2005, the NSYR attempted to contact all the original teenage respondents for a follow-up interview; 2,604 of them were successfully reinterviewed. Parents were not reinterviewed in the second wave. These data provide an ideal opportunity to evaluate how past religious experiences reported during Wave I of the survey influence respondents' future religious confidence as reported at Wave II.

The religious confidence of teenagers is being examined for specific reasons. It is safe to say that the majority of teenagers probably did not “choose,” in one sense of the word, to be in their religious culture. Therefore anything that builds confidence in the doctrines that are being promoted by parents or their religious group should be a real effect, not the by-product of previously existing confidence that compelled the individual to be religious in the first place. Many of these teenagers were essentially in the process of being raised in specific religious traditions at the time they were studied. Any faith they developed in religious explanations can be more confidently traced to the process of their religious upbringing, the religious interactions in which they have engaged, and the religious events they have experienced.

Teenagers are at a point in their lives that occurs before substantial dropping out of religious groups or denominational switching. Examining teenagers avoids many of the problems that frustrate efforts to tease out effects of religious socialization among adults. Another advantage of the NSYR is that it provides access to parents' responses about how they have interacted with their teenage children. In other words, we can find out what parents say they do and measure the impact their actions and interactions have on their children.

As always, the limitations of the scientific method are clear, and it is within these constraints that a sociological theory of religious confidence must be tested. Consequently, the present theory focuses on faith-building mechanisms that either can be measured directly or can be reported by people who have experienced them. Fortunately, self-reports of belief, religious interactions, contact with the divine, and experiences that prove the value of religion to believers can be quantified, and variations can be found. Of course, individuals must be taken at their word; therefore there must always be a level of skepticism when we examine empirical results based on survey data.

Dependent Variables

The NSYR asks a number of questions that can be used to measure religious confidence. Unfortunately, researchers accounted for only a few possible responses. The better measures of religious confidence that exist are in datasets that are not longitudinal or that exclude the other variables that would be needed to test this theory. Considering these factors, the NSYR seems to be the best available data to test the theory.

Because of the low range of variation of each of these measures, it is impossible to treat them as interval-ratio measures. Indeed, they are barely ordinal measures. Consequently, I have opted to convert the confidence measures found in the NSYR into binary measures that indicate the presence of the strongest measured level of religious confidence or the absence of it. Although this is not ideal, using binary dependent variables will permit an adequate test of my theory using binomial logistic regression analysis to predict who has the most confidence in certain specified religious doctrines. Furthermore, it will allow a comparison of the impact of each independent variable on nurturing faith in each separate belief that is examined. Of course, I hope that future measures of religious confidence and belief will be more effective and will account for more variation.

I focus on three beliefs as measures of religious confidence. Each measure is taken from Wave II of the NSYR. The first is belief in God. Each teenager was asked, "Do you believe in God, or not, or are you unsure?" Respondents who answered "yes" are considered to have the highest level of confidence and were coded as "1" in the dummy variable. Those who answered "no" or "unsure/don't know" were coded as "0." Responses to the questions "Do you believe that there is life after death, definitely, maybe, or not at all?" and "Do you believe in the existence of angels, definitely, maybe, or not at all?" are used as the second and third measures of religious confidence. Respondents who answered that they "definitely" believe were coded as "1," while those who responded "maybe," "not at all," or "don't know" were coded as "0."

Belief in God, belief in an afterlife, and belief in angels are important reflections of confidence in the existence of supernatural resources that are very common in the dominant religions in the United States. Fortunately for the present study, very few respondents (fewer than 0.5 percent) reported being in a religion (Buddhist, Hindu, Native American, Pagan/Wiccan) that may not incorporate one or two of these basic biblical beliefs. Although it makes sense to eventually examine the origins of confidence in other specific religious doctrines that are unique to particular religious cultures such as these, because of the constraints of available data the current analysis focuses on these three more general and commonplace Judeo-Christian doctrines about the supernatural.

Explanatory Variables

The theory outlined above directs us to three specific factors that should affect religious confidence. The first is observing the reliable and trustworthy expressions of confidence of others; the second is having emotional experiences that are considered to be related to the divine; and the third is personally experiencing the efficacy of religious explanations. There are several NSYR variables that indicate whether or not teens have observed past expressions of confidence in their homes. Teenagers who pray with their families regularly are consistently exposed to their family members' expressions of confidence. Consequently, I examine whether or not teenagers at Wave I reported praying regularly with their families at mealtimes ("Does your family regularly pray to give thanks before or after mealtimes, or not?") and whether or not they reported having prayed with their parents outside of church and mealtimes ("In the last year, have you prayed out loud or silently together with one or both of your parents, other than at mealtimes or at religious services?"). Both of these measures are binary; a value of "1" indicates that they prayed, and "0" indicates that they did not.

Parents who promote participation in religious activities are also expressing confidence in religion. The more often they encourage, the more trustworthy and reliable are their expressions of confidence. In Wave I, parents were asked, "How much, if at all, have you encouraged [your teen] to participate in a religious youth group?" Answer options included "a lot," "some," "a little," and "none." With such limited variation, I did not consider it appropriate to treat this variable as an interval-ratio variable; therefore I have included a dummy variable, where "1" indicates the presence of "a lot" of past encouragement by parents, the reference group being less frequent encouragement or none at all (coded as "0").

Families can also express confidence in a reliable way as they talk about religion at home. Wave I of the NSYR asked teens, "How often, if ever, does your family talk about God, the scriptures, prayer, or other religious or spiritual things?" Respondents could answer "every day" (coded as "6"), "a few times a

week” (coded as “5”), “about once a week” (coded as “4”), “a few times a month” (coded as “3”), “a few times a year” (coded as “2”), and “never” (coded as “1”). I have opted to treat this variable as an interval-ratio variable for purposes of this analysis to maximize the amount of variation that is accounted for. That said, it will not be open for any direct interpretation, though we will be able to see whether the frequency of past discussions of religious things affects the odds of belief later on.

The final expression of confidence that was measured is parents’ church attendance during the first wave of the NSYR. Parents who attend church more regularly are signaling to their children that religion is important and deserves their time. The more frequently the parents attend, the more reliable and trustworthy is their expression of confidence. Parents were asked “about how often” they attended church. They could answer “never” (coded as “0”), “few times a year” (coded as “1”), “many times a year” (coded as “2”), “once a month” (coded as “3”), “2–3 times a month,” (coded as “4”), “once a week” (coded as “5”), or “more than once a week” (coded as “6”). Again, to utilize all the information we have, this variable will be treated as an interval-ratio variable in the analysis, though it will not be as clearly interpretable.

Many individuals claim to have personally experienced proof that their religious inclinations are beneficial. To measure whether teenagers have experienced the efficacy of religious explanations, I examine whether or not they reported having experienced a “definite answer to prayer” and having witnessed “a miracle from God” at Wave I of the NSYR. In both these cases, “yes” is coded as “1” and “no” as “0.” Although emotions are hard to measure, we do have self-reports of emotional experiences. Having emotional experiences that are interpreted as being related to the supernatural is the final causal factor that is proposed to affect religious confidence. The best indicator of this found in Wave I was the question “Have you ever had an experience of spiritual worship that was very moving and powerful or not?” Those who answered “yes” are considered to have had a past spiritual experience (coded as “1”), and those who answered “no” are considered not to have had had one (coded as “0”).

Control Variables

To better assess the independent effects of my explanatory variables on the dependent variables, I control for the gender, age, geographic location, race, and religious affiliation of teenagers in Wave II along with parents’ marital status and income as reported in Wave I (parents were not reinterviewed, so these measures do not exist in the Wave II data). I have included a dummy variable for gender because it is commonly known that there are gender differences when it comes to religious belief and participation (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Ferraro and

Kelly-Moore 2000; Miller and Stark 2002; Stark 1996). Although the ages of respondents sampled only range from 16 to 20 years during Wave II, it is possible that the belief of older respondents would be influenced quite differently from that of the younger ones. Consequently, age is included as a control variable. I control for family structure by using a Wave I variable indicating whether parents were married (coded as “1”) or not (coded as “0”), and I control for parents’ income at Wave I by using an eleven-point scale in \$10,000 increments up to \$100,000 or more. Dummy variables for region (with “West” as the reference category) and race (with “white” as the reference group) are also included. Finally, to account for the religious context of respondents, dummy variables for evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Latter-day Saint, and other religions are included (“no religion” is the reference category). Because of variation in what religious groups emphasize and their approaches to teaching principles, we would expect religious confidence to vary from group to group. By including these dummy variables, we can uncover the effects of observing expressions of confidence, experiencing religious efficacy, and emotion while holding religious affiliation constant. Descriptive statistics for all the variables can be found in Table 1.

Hypotheses

Considering the measures outlined above, I tested the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Teenagers who in the past prayed with their families at mealtime and with parents outside of meals and religious services will be significantly more likely to have high confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife.

Hypothesis 2: Teenagers who in the past received “a lot” of encouragement from their parents to participate in a religious youth group will be significantly more likely to have high confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife.

Hypothesis 3: Teenagers who in the past spoke more often about religious or spiritual things with their families will be significantly more likely to have high confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife.

Hypothesis 4: Teenagers who in the past witnessed their parents attending church more often will be significantly more likely to have high confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife.

Table 1: Descriptions of Variables in the Model

	%	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
Believe in God	77.5			
Definitely believe in angels	55.9			
Definitely believe in afterlife	47.2			
<i>Demographic Control Variables</i>				
Female	50.5			
Age		17.7	1.4	16–20
Parents are married	67.4			
Parent income (in \$10,000 increments up to \$100,000+)		5.9	2.9	1–11
Live in Northeast	15.9			
Live in Midwest	23.6			
Live in South	40.9			
Black	17.3			
Hispanic	11.5			
Other race	5.2			
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>				
Evangelical Protestant	32.2			
Mainline Protestant	8.4			
Catholic	19.5			
Jewish	3.7			
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	2.0			
Other religion	17.3			
<i>Past Household Expressions of Confidence</i>				
Prayed regularly with family at meals	52.6			
Prayed with parents outside church/mealtime	41.1			
Parents encouraged youth group participation “a lot”	41.0			
Frequency family talked about religious or spiritual things ^a		3.3	1.7	1–6
Frequency parent attended church ^b		3.3	2.2	0–6
<i>Past Experiences of Religious Efficacy</i>				
Experienced a “definite” answer to prayer	51.2			
Witnessed a miracle from God	47.2			
<i>Past Emotional Experience</i>				
Had a moving and powerful spiritual experience	51.9			

^a The mean of an ordinal variable coded as follows: 1 = “never,” 2 = “a few times a year,” 3 = “a few times a month,” 4 = “about once a week,” 5 = “a few times a week,” and 6 = “every day.”

^b The mean of an ordinal variable coded as follows: 0 = “never,” 1 = “a few times a year,” 2 = “many times a year,” 3 = “once a month,” 4 = “2–3 times a month,” 5 = “once a week,” and 6 = “more than once a week.”

Hypothesis 5: Teenagers who in the past have seen miracles and had their prayers answered will be significantly more likely to have high confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife.

Hypothesis 6: Teenagers who in the past had a powerful experience of spiritual worship will be significantly more likely to have high confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife.

RESULTS

Table 2 reports the results of binomial logistic regression analyses in which the strongest (or less than strongest) level of belief in God, angels, and an afterlife are the dependent variables. The odds ratios of the confidence outcomes for each explanatory measure, and the controls are noted along with the Nagelkerke R^2 statistic as a rough estimate of the total explained variation (Nagelkerke 1991).

Overall, it is important to observe that collectively, the variables that are included explain a significant amount of the variation in teenagers' belief in all three of the confidence measures. This indicates the soundness of the model as a whole. Indeed, while no direct interpretation can be made, the Nagelkerke R^2 values indicate that the model might account for over 40 percent of the variation in who is sure that God exists. Overall, only three of the explanatory variables are significant predictors of definite belief in God at the 0.05 level. More frequent discussion with family about the scriptures, prayer, or other religious or spiritual things significantly increases the odds that a teen will have strong faith in the existence of God. Additionally, when all other variables are controlled, teens who reported having received a definite answer to prayer at Wave I are almost 1.7 times more likely to believe in God strongly at Wave II than were teens who did not have prayers answered, while teens who have witnessed a miracle in the past are 1.4 times more likely to have solid faith in God's existence compared to teens who have never witnessed a miracle.

A similar outcome is found as we examine predictors of high confidence in the existence of angels. Both measures of past religious efficacy are significant, positive predictors of confidence at the 0.001 level, and more frequent past discussions about religion in the home are again shown to have confidence-building effects. While respondents who have had a powerful spiritual experience are no more likely to believe strongly that God exists, they are almost 1.5 times more likely than those who had no such experience to definitely believe in angels. Again, however, past family prayer, parents' church attendance, and encouragement to participate in a youth group were found to be insignificant factors.

Table 2: Relative Odds of Having High Religious Confidence

	Believe in God	Definitely Believe in Angels	Definitely Believe in Afterlife
<i>Demographic Control Variables</i>			
Female	1.56***	1.58***	1.01
Age	1.09*	1.08*	1.15***
Parents are married	1.12	1.22	1.23
Parent income	0.95*	0.96*	1.02
Live in Northeast	0.78	0.91	0.89
Live in Midwest	1.00	0.90	0.91
Live in South	1.21	1.08	1.10
Black	1.85*	0.70*	0.57***
Hispanic	1.52	1.03	0.79
Other race	0.88	0.89	0.76
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>			
Evangelical Protestant	10.31***	4.17***	3.47***
Mainline Protestant	6.30***	2.21***	2.71***
Catholic	6.46***	2.40***	2.14***
Jewish	2.04*	0.44*	0.57
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	4.50**	2.07	4.81***
Other religion	6.34***	2.98***	2.79***
<i>Past Household Expressions of Confidence</i>			
Prayed regularly with family at meals	1.15	0.97	1.12
Prayed with parents outside church/mealtime	1.20	1.07	0.96
Parents encouraged youth group participation “a lot”	1.08	1.22	0.90
Frequency family talked about religious or spiritual things	1.22***	1.21***	1.20***
Frequency parent attended church	1.01	1.02	1.06*
<i>Past Experiences of Religious Efficacy</i>			
Experienced a “definite” answer to prayer	1.65***	1.61***	1.42***
Witnessed a miracle from God	1.40*	1.85***	1.44***
<i>Past Emotional Experience</i>			
Had a moving and powerful spiritual experience	1.27	1.42**	1.85***
Nagelkerke R^2	0.403	0.328	0.287
<i>N</i>	2314	2310	2306

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Of the three dependent variable measures, it seems that the model is least effective at predicting strong belief in the existence of life after death (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.287$). Even so, five of the eight explanatory variables were found to have a significant effect on confidence in the afterlife doctrine. Consistent with the other two models, past mealtime prayer and prayer outside church and mealtimes did not have a measurable impact on whether or not strong faith in the afterlife was present. However, parents' past church attendance, which did not affect belief in God or angels, does seem to positively affect teenagers' belief in an afterlife. Parents' encouragement of participation in religious youth groups also failed to have a significant impact on building confidence in this belief. On the other hand, individuals who have been consistently exposed to family religious discussions in the past are more likely to definitely believe in an afterlife. Once again, the measures of personal contact with the divine are important determinants of religious confidence. Having received a definite answer to prayer increases the relative odds of definitely believing in the afterlife by almost 150 percent, while teens who have witnessed a miracle are 1.4 times more likely to have strong confidence in the doctrine. Emotion also plays a key factor in that teens who have experienced a moving spiritual feeling in the past are almost two times more likely to believe in the definite existence of an afterlife than are those who have never realized such a feeling.

Consistent with prior research suggesting that females tend to demonstrate higher levels of religiosity than males do (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Ferraro and Kelly-Moore 2000; Miller and Stark 2002; Stark 1996), being a teenage girl did increase the relative odds that an individual is a believer in God and angels. However, gender had no effect on teenagers' confidence in the existence of life after death. When we examine the other control variables, all three measures of confidence are significantly affected by age, the older teenagers being slightly more believing. Marital status of parents did not affect any of the measures of religious confidence, while higher income is associated with less confidence in the existence of God and angels. When I controlled for the other variables in the model, religious confidence did not vary by region, and an examination of race reveals that blacks are more likely than whites to believe in God but are less likely to believe in angels and an afterlife. Hispanics and members of other minorities did not differ from whites in their religious confidence.

As was expected, religious affiliation has a major impact on who has confidence in the existence of God, angels, and an afterlife. Not surprisingly, compared to the nonaffiliated teens, religious adherents in almost all categories are significantly more likely to believe in the three doctrines. The notable exception to this observation is that Jews are significantly less likely than the nonaffiliated to believe in angels and do not differ statistically from the nonaffiliated at all in their confidence in the existence of an afterlife. This and the

wide variation between the groups indicate the importance of religious context in shaping religious confidence, which will be briefly discussed later. The analysis also indicates that Latter-day Saints are statistically no more or less likely to believe in angels than are the nonreligious, but this is likely the result of only a small number of Latter-day Saints being included in the sample.

Evidence is found to support all but two of the six hypotheses presented. The data provide no support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Past parental encouragement to participate in a youth group and prayer with family seem to have no relationship with teenagers' confidence in the three religious doctrines that I examined. In contrast, the support for Hypothesis 3 is considerable: Teens who have regularly talked with their families about religious and spiritual things in the past are significantly more likely to have high levels of confidence in all three of the doctrines under consideration.

Hypothesis 4 is only partially supported. While frequency of parents' church attendance is a significant predictor of confidence in the afterlife, it does not seem to enhance the power of the model to predict belief in God or angels. Some of the most persuasive evidence is found for Hypothesis 5. Having had prayers answered and having witnessed miracles seem to help increase religious confidence in all three doctrines. Finally, Hypothesis 6 is only partially supported. Exposure to powerful or moving spiritual experiences in the past significantly increases confidence in angels and an afterlife but not in the existence of God.

DISCUSSION

The evidence presented here only partially supports the argument that if families can effectively promote reliable and trustworthy expressions of confidence in the home, they will be positively affecting their children's religious confidence. In fact, only having more frequent family discussions about spiritual and religious things seems to significantly affect the religious confidence of teens in all three doctrines explored. Observing their parents attending church enhances teen confidence only in an afterlife. Contrary to what the theory predicts, past prayer with family and encouragement from parents to participate in a youth group do not seem to shape teenagers' faith in God, angels, or an afterlife.

The fact that not all of the expressions of confidence that were measured affect teenagers' belief indicates that there is still much to learn about why some aspects of upbringing influence children more than others do. It may be that parents' past church attendance affected faith in only one of the doctrines because it is a less convincing expression of confidence. After all, there are many reasons to go to church that have nothing to do with belief. The fact that attending church is a public act means that it is more susceptible to social pressure and therefore

might be considered a less reliable and trustworthy expression of confidence by those who observe it.

Why praying with family does not seem to affect religious confidence seems more difficult to explain. It may be that there is something about the degree to which a behavior becomes part of a routine that affects how convincing it is as an expression of confidence. Perhaps mealtime prayer becomes so habitual that it can begin to lose its real meaning. This possibility might be supported by the observation that regular parent-child discussions about spiritual things do instill religious confidence. Such conversations are likely unplanned and are probably not built into any particular behavioral routine. Perhaps expressions of confidence that are consistent and enduring produce confidence only to the extent to which they are spontaneous rather than habitual. Unfortunately, the present analysis provides us with no way to be sure. Consequently, future research should further explore this possibility.

Parents' encouragement of youth group participation also did not seem to affect teenagers' confidence. This may be because participation in a youth group is not necessarily tied to any particular religious belief but rather indicates in a general sense that religious participation is important. Researchers might clarify this by considering how certain types of expressions of confidence relate to particular beliefs and not others.

The present analysis also reveals that the private religious experiences that teenagers have had are closely associated with their faith. The evidence suggests that receiving a definite answer to prayers, personally witnessing a miracle, and having profound spiritual experiences are all associated with greater confidence that specific religious explanations are true. Much of this implies that factors that are endogenous to families could have some power to determine which youths will believe more strongly and which will doubt.

It seems reasonable to conclude that an important step toward achieving high levels of religious confidence is for parents to provide children with a cultural framework within which the existence of supernatural resources is possible. At first glance, teens' experiencing the efficacy of their religion and having their own moving spiritual experiences might seem to have little to do with the family they are in. But if we look deeper, the social nature of even these most personal experiences becomes clear. A child who is never taught to pray cannot receive an answer, and a child who is never told that certain emotions are a sign of God's presence will be much less likely to interpret a feeling as a spiritual experience. The very fact that a significant proportion of surveyed teenagers are sure that they have had their prayers answered or had a powerful spiritual experience is a testament to the cultural environment that taught them to view the world in a way that makes such contact with the supernatural a reality.

Even witnessing miracles requires a mind that can consider the possibility that some events cannot be explained without deference to the supernatural. To an atheist, a miracle is simply an event that can eventually be explained, given more information. The atheist's mind is closed to the possibility of a supernatural cause. To a believer, a miracle is a reflection of the power of the supernatural that cannot necessarily ever be scientifically explained. The believing mind has been opened to suppose that all things are possible whether they can be explained rationally or not. The possibilities that each person becomes conditioned to consider are largely socially and culturally determined.

Of course, entertaining the possibility that religious ideas might be valid is only part of what is necessary to nurture religious confidence. Children must also see that the existence of supernatural resources is a motive of behavior. The evidence provides some support for the possibility that children who see faith in action will be more likely to believe in such things themselves. A self-proclaimed religious parent who does not talk about religion might be perceived as thinking that it is not worth discussing. Parents who take time to attend church are showing their children that religion is important.

As parents teach their children about religion, spirituality, and God and as parents show their children by example how to behave as believers, they in essence can play an important role in shaping how their children come to perceive the world. Accordingly, religious groups that emphasize in their theology the household as the locus of spirituality and communion with God should be better at instilling confidence than groups that are highly individualistic.

Of course, it is true that other contradictory (even secularizing) influences can emerge and might have the potential to change any person's mind about what he or she believes (Berger 1967; Bruce 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Swatos and Olson 2000). Consequently, how effective parents and religious institutions are at instilling confidence and how consistent and enduring their expressions of confidence are might be crucial to determining the staying power of the confidence that they nurture in their children. Although I suspect that the most confident youths will have a tendency to become the most confident adults, the truth about the persistence of religious confidence into adulthood is something that needs to be further examined elsewhere.

It should not be thought that these principles apply only to the young. Religious interactions that people have throughout adulthood are part of a process of religious socialization that essentially never ends. Consequently, as adults change their environments or make new friends, the type and content of religious interactions in which they engage and the expressions of confidence they witness can change, which may affect their perception of truth and reality. Confidence building is a lifelong process.

The research reported here contributes to the literature on religious confidence and religious upbringing in at least three important ways (Cornwall 1989; Dudley 1999; Erickson 1992; Finke 2003; Iannaccone 1990; Sherkat 2001; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Smith and Denton 2005; Stark and Finke 2000). First, it further develops the religious economies paradigm by elaborating theoretically on the mechanisms that might produce confidence in religious explanations. The importance of religious confidence and its origins have been addressed previously at a basic level (Stark 2001; Stark and Finke 2000) but never as completely as in the present study. The insights that are presented here can be used to strengthen the paradigm.

The second contribution of this study is that it establishes religious confidence as an important concept to measure separately in considering religious socialization. Outside of examining compliance with group norms, no effective way of measuring the extent to which religious culture is internalized has been established. This presents researchers with little chance to disentangle the effects of internalization from those of external sanctions, habits, and preferences. I would argue that confidence in specific beliefs might be identified as an indicator of the extent of internalization. Outward compliance with religious practices can be easily coerced and monitored by parents, but winning over the minds of teenagers is a more intimate and challenging matter. Consequently, how confident teenagers are in religious doctrines seems a better measure of how strongly they have internalized religious culture. In the future, researchers should utilize high-quality longitudinal data and effective measures of religious confidence to empirically determine the independent effects of internalized socialization on religious behavior.

A third contribution of this study is that it directly focuses on why some aspects of household piety that are known to influence religious behavior can also have an impact on the intensity of religious belief. Although this connection has been strongly suspected, it has rarely been verified empirically and is almost never explained. It may be that identical causal models can be used to predict religious belief and behavior, but researchers should not assume that is the case. These insights suggest that future research might be greatly benefited by theoretically and empirically distinguishing between beliefs and behaviors. This will allow us to come to a better understanding not only of the origins of strong versus weak belief, but also of how beliefs influence behaviors and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented here suggests that variation in religious confidence levels of American teenagers might be partially accounted for by examining the experiences they have in their homes and their personal contact with the divine. One

reason religion is so interesting to study is because it historically has found much success in producing certainty about unseen objects. In fact, religion is unique in the modern world in its open attempts to rely on faith over empirical information. Although it is easy to want people to be sure about unempirical realities, actually achieving widespread confidence in them is difficult. In this article, I have dealt theoretically and empirically with the issue of religious confidence more directly than has been done in the past (Cameron 1999; Durkheim 2001 [1912]; Hayes and Pittelkow 1993; Kelley and De Graaf 1997; Smith and Denton 2005; Stark and Finke 2000).

A weakness of the current study is that I have considered only common religious doctrines. Although all three doctrines that I examined are widely accepted in the United States and understanding the origins of confidence in them is certainly important, future studies should examine the origin and impact of religious confidence in specific religious contexts (Abel 2008). How do religious groups promote confident congregations, and how does that confidence affect member contribution? Does confidence in certain types of religious doctrines shape member involvement differently?

Considering confidence at the religious group level is important because effective religion is largely a function of uncertainty reduction (Hechter 1997; Iannaccone 1995; Montgomery 1992, 1996). To the extent that religious groups can strengthen members' belief, they reduce members' uncertainty about outcomes. If members come to have no doubts that certain principles and doctrines are true, then the risk associated with living according to those principles is eliminated. For example, to the church member who knows that salvation awaits those who donate 5 percent of their income to the church, donating is not risky. In their mind, salvation is a sure thing, and it costs them only 5 percent. On the other hand, to the doubtful affiliate, there is always a chance that giving up the money will yield no return. As long as a person has doubts, the likelihood that he or she will give should be diminished.

The analysis above gives us a glimpse into some of these possibilities. Why are evangelical Protestants over ten times more likely to be sure that God exists than are nonbelievers while Mormons are only four times more likely? Why does being Jewish make an individual two times more likely than a nonreligious person to believe in God but half as likely to believe in angels? Clearly, the sort of group to which a person belongs makes a difference. Different denominations promote different doctrines, and each denomination has unique ways of encouraging confidence in the teachings they espouse. Understanding how these mechanisms work should shed some light on the variations in faith that exist between religious groups. I believe that the differences in levels of religious confidence that exist between specific religious perspectives and denominations can be more effectively examined within the theoretical framework that I have provided.

Unfortunately, while the NSYR is the most suitable dataset in many unique ways to use in addressing my hypotheses, the measures of confidence that were used in the NSYR were not ideal. In fact, a brief review of existing datasets that examine religious belief reveals that only a few of them effectively measure variation in religious confidence. Many provide three levels of variation or less. The theoretical framework introduced here calls for measures of religious confidence that allow researchers to distinguish the most believing respondents from the least believing. Seven-point or even ten-point scales that provide respondents with options to indicate that they have “no doubts” or “know” that a religious teaching is true would be ideal. Until such measures are more common, firmly establishing whether or not religious confidence is an important variable will be difficult. Despite this known weakness, the findings of the present study still provide an important beginning to a more focused analysis of religious confidence.

Much work remains to be done before we will have a complete understanding of confidence and its impacts. Of course, I have applied these ideas primarily to religion. Religion is a good place to start because it is the part of culture that is most clearly focused on otherworldly beliefs about ultimate truth, meaning, and morals. In a sense, it seems to be the institution that is most belief-focused. However, researchers should not limit their analysis of belief to the religious realm. Any institution or group that makes claims that must be taken on faith or without empirical evidence—and most of them do—will likely contain the elements that are found in confidence-producing religion. What form they take, how effective they are, and the extent to which they result in social outcomes will vary. However, I suspect that as long as people believe in something, religious confidence will provide a rich and satisfying source of study.

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