

RELIGIOUS SOCIALIZATION
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Kenneth W. Inskip
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In the following few pages it is my intention to review some of the basic sociological literature on religious socialization. I present two alternative approaches to religious socialization. The first has to do with the authorities of home and church developing and exercising strong control over the entire life of the adolescent. The literature does indicate that this method is effective. The second approach is an alternative to the first. It suggests that religious socialization might best be facilitated by dealing more sympathetically and directly with the rebellion that accompanies adolescent development rather than trying to prevent it.

Theoretical Concerns

Religious socialization has to do with the process of learning about a religious world. Religious socialization, like socialization in general, occurs most often as a natural part of growing up. For example, we learn a religious language which enables us to perceive the actions of God in the world around us. We learn that a "church" is different than a "home," and different behaviors are appropriate to each. We learn that the Bible is a special book, to be approached in a special way, making powerful demands on our thoughts and deeds. We learn about Jesus and sin and redemption. We learn of judgment and grace. In other words, religious socialization is a process of education, and through this education we learn to see the world differently--as a world of religious significance.

While I have defined religious socialization as the process of learning about a religious world, most people interested in religious education are interested in much more than whether or not children and adolescents can pass a test on behaviors appropriate to church or the doctrinal details of Luther's Small Catechism. Instead, the more important question of religious socialization has to do with whether or not children and adolescents will make a religious view of the world their own. We are now in a unique time when religious belief and commitment is, in fact, a choice. Religion is no longer "natural" nor can it be "taken for granted". Peter Berger (1967:126ff.) has long argued that the modern world is defined by large numbers of groups competing with each other for control over the process of socialization. A religious world view is simply one among many and even if a religious world view is adopted the options have only slightly narrowed. One can choose to be a Lutheran, but just as easily an Episcopalian, or a Catholic or, with a bit more difficulty, a Buddhist.

Recently Hammond (1988), in trying to develop a system for better understanding the role of choice in contemporary religious life, has suggested that it may be possible to understand the way people interact with religious groups by distinguishing between two different widely held conceptions of the nature of identity. Hammond, following Mol (1978), notes that we often look at a person's identity as something which is the "core" of their personality that slowly changes if at all. This core personality is not "chosen." In other words, we are what we are largely because of

circumstances. We did not choose to be born male or female, white or black, in a rural town or a big city, but these circumstances are a part of us and they shape the very nature of who we are.

But a second way we often use the term "identity" seems to imply there is no "core". We become whatever we need to be as we define and redefine continually changing social situations. For example, a person may be one "self" in the presence of the boss and quite another in the presence of co-workers. In this case we choose whatever identity seems to most appropriate and we may be many different people over the course of any particular day.

Hammond goes on to relate the first conception of identity, as relatively permanent and unchangeable, to the family. We choose none of our relatives, but their effect on the way we see ourselves is very, very important. On the other hand, the workplace demands the second type of identity. In the workplace the emphasis is on changing the self and adapting to the different requirements of different situations. Within limits, the variations may be dramatic. The self can be almost anything.

Religious groups in American society--particularly the mainline religious groups--are finding themselves caught in between. They used to function very much like the family in the formation of identity, but now they are more like the workplace. In the not so distant past, a Finnish family and the Lutheran church worked together to leave their mark on a child for life. A person was Finnish and Lutheran in much the same way they were white. No part of the identity was chosen nor could any be forsaken. But the grandchildren of these Finnish Lutherans come into contact with their Lutheranism in a different way. In their case Lutheranism is a part of their identity (at least until shortly after confirmation), but it is a chosen part and one that can be put on or off. One could just as easily be a Presbyterian, or not religious at all. This fact provides the overarching context of all religious socialization in the late 1980s, and the changing role of the church in its relationship to the family should not be forgotten. No longer do the family and the church serve the same identity function in the lives of children and adolescents. This is not as true, however, among the most conservative religious groups. They continue to use the church as an extension of the family and as a result are able to shape their children in their own image.

Finally, throughout this review of the literature on religious socialization it should be clear that the religious choices made by children have less to do with the "truth" of one religious system or another than they do with the nature of the social interaction that promotes and prolongs or discourages and cuts off the process of religious socialization itself. In other words, religious socialization is a matter of understanding children and adolescence in the context of religious and social development. Religious socialization in this sense is no different than any other kind of socialization. For example, Law and Lodge (1984:159), in writing about the socialization of scientists, argue that the scientist is turned into a scientist by learning "the wisdom or prejudice" of the scientific world. Much of this education has to do with learning scientific facts, but the scientist learns to see the world as a scientist not because the scientific way of seeing the world is necessarily "true," but because the scientist has the greatest amount of contact with and trust in the teachers of science. The question then becomes why the prospective scientist "chooses" to pursue and develop contacts with the scientific community and not some other community. In the context of religious socialization, the question is the same. Why do some children choose to

pursue and develop their contacts with a particular religious group while others choose another or some none at all? The "truth" does not answer this question. Instead, groups that have best come to grips with their particular role in the development of children and adolescents in this society stand the best chance of competing successfully in the religious marketplace.

The Developmental Approach to Adolescent Religion

Because children grow and develop in their ability to comprehend, appreciate, and accept different religious concepts, the concepts themselves must be presented in ways that are consistent with the level of growth. Most often this development is presented in terms of stages. Erikson's stages may be the most widely known and used. According to Erikson (1963:247ff.), every individual moves through a series of psychosocial crises each of which must be resolved before the individual can advance to the next higher stage of development. The family plays a large and obvious role in creating conditions under which the crises arise or can be resolved. At the earliest stage--infancy--the crisis involves trust and mistrust. During early childhood the crisis has to do with autonomy and doubt or establishing some sort of independence without cutting the self off completely from others. During middle childhood the crisis involves initiative and guilt or taking responsibility for one's own behaviors in a positive way. In late childhood the crisis centers around being able to accomplish the tasks one is supposed to be able to accomplish and then in adolescence, there is the crisis of identity itself. In late adolescence the adolescent is faced with the most important task of becoming a person by breaking familial ties. By this age there is also considerable contact with those other than the parents, and these new contacts often facilitate the break.

Throughout these stages the parents are the main focus of conflict. As Elkind (1971) points out by the time children are into early adolescence they often reject the religious beliefs of their parents. Much of this rejection is necessary in the sense that without it would be impossible for the child to grow and mature. The question is what to do about potential and actual rejection. One alternative, often embraced by the most conservative religious groups, is to enlist the aid of the church as an extension of the family. Religious choice on the part of the adolescent is assumed, but the church is asked to work with the family to control the options of choice. Most often this is done by controlling the nature of contacts with the "outside" world (Inskeep, 1986). The attempt is made to duplicate the old Finnish Lutheran situation so that it becomes very difficult for the adolescent to become anything other than what is proscribed. As we will see, this technique of religious socialization has proven to be effective in adolescence.

A second option is to build rejection into the socialization process. This means, for example, that discussions of Christian faith in the context of the church may give considerable importance to the Biblical themes of rejection in a positive way and as part of the fear and joy of becoming a mature person. It may imply a critique of simple moral religion, or religion in general. It may mean exploring the social implications of faith. It certainly means taking chances, in that this second option inevitably legitimizes the adolescent rejection of the faith of their parents. But, outside of the alternative of control, facilitating rejection in some way may be, in the long run, worth the risk.

The Social Context of Religious Socialization

As Potvin and Lee (1982) point out, the developmental model of religious socialization is well documented, but it is very important to take into account the varied social contexts and personal experiences of religious socialization. Using a representative sample of adolescents aged 13 to 18 from six different denominations, Potvin and Lee (1982:136) developed a series of scales measuring religious practice, experience, and belief. (The sample was developed for the Boys Town Studies conducted at Catholic University and it included Roman Catholics, Southern Baptists, United Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and the Church of God--Anderson, IN). They (1982:142) found that up to ages 13 and 14 children with active parents from the more conservative denominations were also most active. They argue that religious activity at this age is very important for the long term, no matter how it is "encouraged," because it forms the basis for religious belief.

At about ages 15 and 16, parental and church control generally declines and religious experience is often reinterpreted. What is most important, however is that this process of reinterpretation involves a large number of variables. For example, the new set of religious attitudes and beliefs may not be vastly different from the original set if the process is controlled or guided by an important significant other who holds, in some form, the earlier religious perspectives. Also, alternative religious belief systems may not be readily available to the adolescence, or what is available may vary in form but not substance. Total rejection is seldom a viable option, but a simple decline in religious activity is not unlikely. Finally, reinterpretation often takes place in the context of a peer group and because of the variety of such groups there may be important differences in the substance of the reinterpreted system.

Potvin and Lee (1982:133) argue for an "equilibrium" theory that somehow balances religious systems off against personal experiences. Parental or church "truth" may not seem as capable of accounting for the personal experiences of an adolescence as the "truth" of a particular friend or set of friends. To the extent that this is the case it is the religious system that most often gives way in an attempt to reestablish the equilibrium between experience and belief. By age 17 to 18 a new world view which may or may not be religious is often in place. Disturbances of the equilibrium may occur again and the individual may be forced to find a new balance, but at this point the changes are less dramatic.

A second study by Sloane and Potvin (1983) (using the same sample described above) set out to reexamine the decline in religious belief among older adolescents. They (1983:51) point out that most of the literature documents lower levels of religiosity for older adolescents, but they were able to show that this is not always the case by controlling for denomination. They found that older adolescents actually are more active than younger adolescents in the Southern Baptist and the Church of God. They suggest that the members of the Southern Baptist and Church of God are more effective in controlling the contacts with and influence of other religious and non-religious groups on their late adolescents. This option is not one most mainline religious groups have chosen to adopt but, in the interest of religious socialization, the process of adolescent rejection has to be faced. If contacts are not controlled then some other approach must be found.

Showing the power of controlling social contacts, Cornwall (1987) has addressed the issue of religious socialization in terms of what she calls the "social bases of religion."

The social bases of religion are the processes by which individuals develop and maintain a set of religious beliefs. Individuals acquire their world view through socialization processes and by continued interaction with significant others. Individuals are then able to maintain these belief systems by continued interaction with significant others. These significant others form a personal community which serves as a plausibility structure and helps maintain a particular world view (Cornwall 1987:45).

The study is based on a representative sample of members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. She measured the amount of religious socialization activity in terms of interaction with family, peers, and the institutional church. She also tried to delineate "personal communities" (ingroups) of friendship, along with the number of wider community ties (outgroups). Finally, Cornwall measured the level of individual religiosity. She found that high levels of ingroup interaction improved the consistency of religious belief and activity, while high level of outgroup interaction negatively affected religious belief and activity.

The Parochial School Studies

Several attempts have been made to understand religious socialization in terms of parochial education. The largest of these studies addressed Catholic parochial education and was conducted by Greeley and Rossi (1966) with the aid of the National Opinion Research Center. Greeley and Rossi were interested in whether or not children who attended Catholic schools were better Catholics. Using a national sampling frame they developed a series of indices on religious belief including a sacramental index, the church-as-teacher index, an ethical orthodoxy index, and an organizational membership index. They (1966:73) found that Catholic parochial education improved church attendance, increased loyalty to the ecclesiastical system, and dramatically increased religious knowledge. In general, Catholic education had a significant impact on many Catholic adolescents.

Greeley and Rossi also noted, however, that the level of religiousness of the family directly influenced the impact of the school. It was only among those families that were highly devout that the schools had much influence. They argued that religious schooling was only selectively effective. It could not, by itself, offset other social environments like non-supportive families. In fact, it was only when the family gave full support to the socialization activities of the school that religiously oriented schooling met with much success.

A second study on parochial schooling by Johnstone (1966) concentrated on Lutheran (Missouri Synod) high schools in Detroit and St. Louis. The study was limited by its lack of resources. The purpose of the study was to judge the effectiveness of Lutheran parochial schooling. Johnstone examined the amount of Lutheran education and measured its effect on the level of adolescent religious commitment. Contrary to the findings of Greeley and Rossi, Johnstone concluded that Lutheran schooling had a significant impact only on children from "marginal" Lutheran homes.

Several attempts at reconciling the two studies were made. Erickson (1967:429), for example, suggested that the long term effects of parochial education could only be supported by a larger social environment that reinforced religiousness, i.e., the devout home. He believed--following Greeley and Rossi--that the effect of Lutheran education among children from marginal homes would wear off because it lacked the reinforcement and support of a larger institutional network.

A final parochial school study of interest was conducted by Erickson (1962) on "fundamentalist" schools in urban and suburban areas of the Midwest and West. The students involved in the study were sixth, seventh, and eighth graders from fundamentalist churches, some of whom attended private Christian schools (Erickson, 1962:28). Erickson (1962:68) found that the level of religious belief and commitment did not vary consistently with the amount of Christian schooling, yet there was interaction between the religiousness scores, parental religiousness, and church involvement. Erickson (1962:88) argued that "religious attitudes are acquired when a significant religious figure is available for the child's identification."

Generally, it can be concluded from these studies that adolescent religious behavior is influenced by an interaction between the level of religious commitment in the family and a larger supportive religious context. This means that outside adolescent contacts are controlled by the interaction of homes and congregations, and when this is the case levels of religious commitment and activity are the highest.

The Challenge for the Church

The description of conflict between the adolescents' conceptions of themselves and their parents' conceptions is the primary topic of the literature of religious socialization. In this battle, the church, for a variety of important reasons, often allies itself with the parents and so it too becomes the focus of adolescent discontent. Parents look to the church for support and under some circumstances--when the parents are highly committed and the adolescent's friendship and activity network involves the church--the adolescent is more likely to end up adopting the religious perspectives of the parents. In general, however, religious activity and belief declines with age and this is primarily because the outside contacts of older adolescents can no longer be controlled. If a religious group does not choose to exercise the option of trying to control contacts, then the question that must be asked is what else can be done about the conflict between children and their parents in late adolescence with regard to religion.

An interesting study by Hoge, et al. (1982) examined the "desired nature and style of religious education" of both parents and religious educators in the six denominations of the Boys Town studies. There were few differences between parents and educators, and in all the denominations the most valued goal of religious education was "moral maturity." Moral maturity was defined as the ability to make good decisions with regard to behavior involving drugs, alcohol, sex, etc. The question of why drugs, alcohol and sexual behavior are problems for adolescents in this society certainly cannot be addressed here, but at the same time, drugs and alcohol and sexual behavior could be describe as simple declarations of independence. They are declarations that, with good reason, frighten adults. As the authors (1982:243) put it:

One often hears that parents are worried about the problems of adolescence in our society--especially sex, drug use, and misbehavior--and look to churches to help their children through these dangerous years. The high priority of the moral maturity scale suggests that this concern is widely felt.

Many parents do, in fact, "look to churches to help their children through these dangerous years" but perhaps the churches should be slower to side with the parents at this point in the adolescent's life. In the most conservative churches the congregation sees itself as little more than an extension of the family and along with the family it works to create an environment that controls the adolescent. Unless the church takes on this role as its primary mission, and unless the church and family are successful in controlling the adolescent, the church has much to lose. The church becomes identified as something to be strictly avoided, and it is relatively easy and very possible for adolescents to avoid the church. Adolescents come to see the religious part of themselves as option; an identity that can be put on or taken off. Perhaps, instead of allying itself with the parents, the church should look to raise the level of discussion about the relationship of faith to life in terms other than those most directly related to moral behavior. Particularly in late adolescence issues of faith, social and personal conflict, even a critique of religion itself may be far more effective methods of dealing with this period of adolescent rejection of the religion of their parents than personal moral arguments. It is unlikely, however, that this option will be adopted by many. In the Hoge, et al., study, "moral maturity" ranked highest among the six denominations while "universalizing faith and social justice" ranked lowest. The authors (1982:243) comment:

The prospect of learning to relativize one's faith and of social criticism is not widely promoted by any of these denominations. Possibly some parishes and denominations are more open to philosophical criticism or post-conventional moral thinking than others but. . .none want to encourage it very much.

Finally, Potvin and Sloane (1985), in the last in the series of Boys Town studies, deal directly with the issue of "parental control". Using the Boys Town sample in the six denominations, they measured self assessments of parental control and compared these assessments to levels of religious practice, belief, and experience. Potvin and Sloane (1985:11) found that no adolescent group showed an increase in religious practice with increasing age, but those who showed the greatest decline scored high on religious experience while their parents scored high on control. Potvin and Sloane (1985:12) conclude by noting:

At early ages parental control and personal religious experience are compatible, and their combination produces high levels of religious practice. At later ages, however, they are incompatible and high religious experience is associated with higher practice only when parental control is low.

If the church is to maintain a relationship with older adolescents it must in some way carefully distance itself from parents who look to it for help in controlling their children. In the mainline religious groups a religious identity is something than can easily be put on or taken off. Adolescents have to be convinced by the church in new and innovative ways that they have a good reason to put it on.

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