

# Non-Christian and Immigrant Christian Communities and the Programs Available to their Youth in Middle Tennessee

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## Abstract

Youth and religion is an ambiguously researched field—Although some research does exist, there is sparse data available about certain demographics of teenagers. Especially in America, most of the research is centered on Christianity and religions such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism coalesce under the label "Other Religions." This gap has unfortunately led to a sort of misunderstanding about youth who follow one of these so-called "Other Religions" that can lead to discrimination or persecution that comes from simple ignorance. This proposed study seeks to answer two questions: 1) What programs do non-Christian and immigrant Christian communities in the Middle Tennessee area offer for the spiritual development of their youth and 2) How do these programs impact the daily life of youth? The outcome should lift the shroud and allow for a more complete understanding of how youth from diverse religious traditions develop spiritually and how that in turn affects other aspects of their development. This proposed study aims to contribute to the further education of the average American on these religions. Although this study is based in a relatively small geographic area, the findings will be generalized and possibly applied to other areas across the United States.

## Introduction

One study, Giuseppe Giordan's (2009) "Youth and Religion in the Aosta Valley," explicitly includes additional religions beyond the regional majority (in Giordan's case, Catholic Christianity). However, this study did not take place in the United States but rather in Italy. While it provides some helpful comparative data, it is not directly applicable to our understanding of religion in the United States. Additionally, Giordan's questions are directed towards a Catholic audience and include questions such as "How often do you attend mass?" This seemingly harmless question risks alienating non-Catholic participants. That being said, it at least includes other religions in the study, something that cannot be said for every study of youth and religion.

The National Study of Youth and Religion includes non-Christian religions; however, the most recent publication of these findings was in 2008 (Denton, Pearce, and Smith). Needless to say, American society has changed within the last decade, making this study slightly obsolete. This two-step study conducted in 2002 and 2005 did offer an outstanding methodology including questions that allowed for an accurate understanding of how adolescents understand their religious identities. Although my methodology won't include the multistep process that Denton, Pearce, and Smith took, I plan to incorporate many of their questions into my own surveys and their style of questioning will be quite valuable to understanding the status of non-Christian religious adolescents in the Middle Tennessee area.

For example, Patricia Snell Herzog's (2012) article "Accidental Inequality: How Religious Youth Socialization Reproduces Social Inequality" focuses exclusively on church youth groups within American Christianity. Through her research, Snell Herzog seeks to find an understanding of the impact of socioeconomic status on youth groups and how youth ministers interact with the youth members of such groups. Snell Herzog (2012) finds that youth ministers sometimes have trouble getting teens to see their participation and membership within the church as meaningful. She also states, "Results indicate that youth ministers evidence a great deal of ambiguity in understanding how to structure and implement religious youth groups" (Snell, 2012). Based on Snell Herzog's research, this project seeks to determine how these results from Christian youth groups relate to non-Christian or immigrant Christian youth events.



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There are other sources that seek to dive into understanding how religion impacts both Christian and non-Christian youth. Pamela King, Casey Clardy, and Jenel Ramos (2013) through their study "Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth" seek to understand how religion affects different adolescents across six different countries. Additionally, "Mapping American Adolescent Subjective Religiosity and Attitudes of Alienation Toward Religion: A Research Report" written by Christian Smith, Robert Faris, Melinda Denton, and Mark Regnerus (2003) conducted a descriptive inquiry to help define the baseline of American adolescent religiosity. Likewise, Leslie Francis, Yashoda Santosh, Mandy Robbins, and Savita Vij (2008) offer the "Santosh-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Hinduism" which allows for a better understanding of how Hindu teens view their own religion. Lastly, the article, "The Effects of Denomination on Religious Socialization for Jewish Youth" written by Anthony James, Ashlie Lester, and Greg Brooks (2012), offers similar findings to the "Santosh-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Hinduism" in regard to Judaism among Jewish teenagers.

## Methods

This proposed study originally involved two forms of data collection: recorded interviews and an online survey.

Potential participants for the interviews comprised of religious leaders associated with local religious centers (temples, synagogues, mosques, churches). They were contacted via email or telephone, whichever method was available via the religious institution's publicly posted contact information. If the leaders were available to meet, an in-person interview was conducted. Each religious leader was asked the same set of questions, regardless of religion. Audio recordings were administered and transcribed in order to allow for accurate analysis of qualitative answers after the interview was completed. In addition to open-ended questions, there were some quantitative questions in order to more easily compare differences between religions.

Following the interview, the religious leaders were to be asked to complete an online survey in order to have further quantitative data that is comparable. The same online survey that religious leaders complete was also going to be distributed among college faith communities to be answered on a voluntary basis. This qualitative and quantitative data, combined with outside readings, was intended to offer a better understanding of how religion impacts non-Christian or immigrant Christian teenagers. However, there were no connections made between the primary investigator and college religious organizations despite several efforts through both student leader and staff leader contact and therefore this portion of the research was unable to be conducted.

Despite these set backs in more quantitative methods of analysis, five qualitative interviews were conducted with youth religious leaders from the following religions: Coptic Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and Reformed Judaism. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and covered questions such as: "Do you think it is easy or difficult for teenagers who follow your religion to identify as a follower?", "Do you know of any teens that faced persecution for their religion in this area? If so, how did that persecution affect their spirituality or other areas of their life?", "Are there other sources available for your teens to develop spiritually outside of your house or worship?", "Can you describe a time when a teen had to make a decision that their religion played a role in?", and "Please describe how events at your house of worship impacted how important or unimportant a teen's faith is in their daily life." These questions alongside others helped outline how minority religion youth balance the importance of their religion with the pressure of outside factors such as peers, media, and conflicting morals.

## Results

The major answers from the interview questions are listed below.

	Coptic Orthodox Christianity	Hinduism	Islam	Orthodox Judaism	Reformed Judaism
<b>About how many of those teenagers are actively involved in your house of worship?</b>	10-15 (100% participation of 15 total teens)	30-40 (10% participation of 300-400 total teens)	20 weekly & 100 throughout the year (20% participation/100% participation of 100 total teens)	Unsure of accurate number, but approximate 15% monthly and 40% monthly the rest yearly	38 (50% participation of 75 total teens)
<b>Do you think it is easy or difficult for teenagers who follow your religion to identify as a follower?</b>	Difficult because minority within a majority so often forgotten	Difficult because others do not understand the religion and it is difficult to explain	Difficult because everything is Christian whether conscious or subconscious in this community	Difficult	A challenge but one that the students are keenly aware of and can take pride in or fall into peer pressure
<b>Do you know of any teens that faced persecution for their religion in this area? If so, how did that persecution affect their spirituality or other areas of their life?</b>	Persecution here and in Egypt [where Coptic Orthodox was founded] is different and students face persecution here but also resonate with the persecution of Egyptian followers	No	Yes, but generally it strengthens them with proper support from the group and the family of the teen	Yes, but spiritual identity can grow with proper support since students are put on the defensive for being of a minority religion	Yes, which can lead to some teenagers falling away from the faith. This discomfort surrounding religious ignorance of others starts very early in life too.
<b>Are there other sources available for your teens to develop spiritually outside of your house or worship?</b>	Resources online	There are religious camps but also opportunities to learn about the cultural aspect as well	The mosque is for spiritual education and the youth group is for the application of faith	Jewish summer camps (1 or 2 months), youth retreats, and a semester in Israel are options but none in the southeast	Jewish summer camps, regional events (4x/year), and informal learning that can only happen in cultural areas
<b>Can you describe a time when a teen had to make a decision that their religion played a role in?</b>	Coptic Orthodox Christians fast and diet as vegans which is an entire lifestyle change for some	College is the proving grounds of faith with peer pressure and maintaining values being at odds. Hindu groups help support	Faith is involved in every decision regardless of its importance, and the students realize that	Worship days that interfere with school cause friction, but there is no pressure from leaders, so the choice is left to teens	Worship days can interfere with school, but priority is placed on seeing everyone in the image of God and interreligious learning with Islamic teens
<b>Please describe how events at your house of worship impacted how important or unimportant a teen's faith is in their daily life.</b>	Information about faith is important to build knowledge, but learning application helps in ways that didactic knowledge cannot. Application is the focus which is important to teens	Continuity of gatherings provides stability and a space to develop religious identity which is important in the ever-changing world of young adulthood	Faith is about 5-10% of our religion—the rest is acts of humanity, relationships, and kindness. The foundation of faith sprouts into application in whatever way the teens see fit	The biggest thing that impacts how teens view their faith is looking at how mentors experience faith and go through struggles—they're tuned in and want to learn to develop their own faith	Teens are valued as adults in congregation meetings which gives them a voice and allows for their ideas to be heard. Their faith develops through action with support

## Conclusions

Ultimately, this project aspires to counter misunderstandings about youth from diverse religious backgrounds and reduce the discrimination and persecution they face in a predominantly Christian society. It was discovered that minority religious youth do feel a sort of exclusion when discussing daily life with peers both in school and in extracurriculars. Being in the "Bible-Belt" leaves little room for religions other than Christianity to be mentioned on a daily basis; however, there is noteworthy solidarity within these religions as well as a desire to be involved with and share in the larger community of Middle Tennessee. Additionally, despite any difficulty in commonality of religion with the majority of people, youth of these religions feel they gain not only religious development but also socioemotional development as well which benefits them as young adults as well as in starting families. This research, while not conducted as originally intended, still provides a thorough and significant amount of information to support that minority religious youth create a camaraderie within their own religion and reaches outside of their religion in order to educate others and for meaningful relationships.

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