

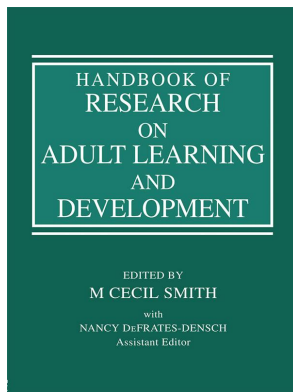
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### **Religious and Spiritual Development in Adulthood**

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RESEARCH  
ON  
ADULT LEARNING  
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## Religious and Spiritual Development in Adulthood

Paul Wink

A surge of interest in religion over the past 20 years has resulted in a number of recent reviews of the relationship between religious involvement and aging. A survey of these publications reveals how little is known, however, about the development of religiousness and spirituality in adulthood. In her review chapter for the *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences*, Idler (2006) devotes only two pages to age-related changes in religion and summarizes the existing body of research with the highly general and equivocal statement that “religion remains stable or increases until late life” (p. 283). Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch (2003) begin their brief entry on religion and elderly individuals by stating that although “it is widely assumed ... that people in late adulthood are more religious than their younger peers ... the data are often equivocal” (p. 165). A similar conclusion is reached by Levenson, Aldwin, and D’Mello (2005) in their review of findings on religious development from adolescence to middle adulthood.

The paucity of knowledge about religious development in adulthood is not surprising because a methodologically sound inquiry into how religion unfolds over the adult life course would require the continuous study of several different age cohorts over more than half a century. Such a study would need to sample different religious denominations and regions of the United States, assess multiple facets of religious beliefs and practices (e.g., attendance, prayer, use of electronic media), and pay attention to turning points and varied trajectories of change. Clearly, the existing body of research falls short of these requirements. At the same time, a proper evaluation of the available findings is made difficult by the absence of a theoretical framework that should sensitize researchers to reasons why their findings lack consistency, and serve as a guide for designing focused short-term studies aimed at understanding how specific life events or transitions affect religious beliefs, practices, and habits.

According to Idler (2006), the field of religion and aging has been slow in adopting the life course paradigm as the theoretical framework for organizing research because of the perception that the patterns of change in religiousness are not as closely tied to specific life transitions as, for example, work or marriage trajectories. Yet, recently the life course theory has been successfully applied to identifying different trajectories of change, and isolating social forces that influence change in religiosity (see, for example, Dillon & Wink, 2007; Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002). In this chapter, the existing body of data on religious development in adulthood will be reviewed using life course theory. After introducing the basic principles of this framework, I will discuss: (a) how rates of religious involvement (primarily church attendance) change over the course of early, middle, and late adulthood, (b) how the meaning of religious beliefs and practices evolves from early to late adulthood, (c) the stability of religiousness at an individual, rather than group level, and (d) differences in religious and spiritual seeking development across the life course.

## Life Course Theory

Life course theory stresses the importance of understanding the socio-cultural environment for interpreting individual behavior (Elder, 1995). In other words, although humans are active agents, their behavior is inevitably shaped by larger socio-historical forces that provide a context for action. It is not surprising that the development of life course theory coincides with the rapid social changes that have characterized the second half of the 20th century. From a life course perspective, the study of age related changes needs to be multidisciplinary as development is both multidimensional (involving biological, psychological, and sociological processes) and multispherical (involving interrelated changes in various life domains, for example, family, work, and religiousness; Settersten, 2003). Moreover, life long personal development is also multidirectional (involving losses and gains) and is characterized by both continuity and change. Individual lives consist of multiple and interrelated trajectories or patterns of change (e.g., work, marriage, and leisure) that are punctuated by events of abrupt change (e.g., divorce), more gradual transitions (e.g., graduation from college, retirement), and turning points or significant shifts in direction (e.g., religious conversion or apostasy). Events, transitions, and turning points need to be understood in the context of the trajectories in which they are embedded and conversely trajectories can only be understood by paying attention to the role of transitions in promoting stability and change (Elder, 1985; Settersten, 2003). Along with an emphasis on the role of historical context and social structures in interpreting change, life course theory stresses the importance of gender, race, and social class as important context variables for interpreting the trajectories of change.

The power of life course theory for understanding the relationship between religion and age is demonstrated by Ingersoll-Dayton et al. (2002) who applied this framework to retrospective interview data obtained from a group of older adults. Ingersoll-Dayton and her colleagues uncovered the presence of different trajectories of change in religiousness (e.g., an increasing, stable, and curvilinear pattern) whose shapes reflected the dimension of religiousness being considered (e.g., organizational participation, content of religious beliefs, and commitment). For example, whereas religious commitment demonstrated a stable pattern over the life course, organizational participation (church attendance) tended to decrease with age, especially in late adulthood. In addition, the shape of the religious trajectories was influenced by embedded transitions that either promoted (e.g., child rearing) or inhibited (e.g., adverse life events leading to disillusionment) religious involvement. In this chapter, a special consideration will be given to the interrelation between religious dimensions and trajectories and the role of transitions in the process of change. In addition, drawing on Kohli's (1986) tripartite division of the life course, I will discuss separately how religiousness changes in early adulthood, a time of education, training, and entry into the adult world, middle adulthood, a time of social and economic dominance, and late adulthood or the post-retirement period.

### **Changes in Religious Involvement and Attendance**

The most commonly asked question about age related changes in religion is: Do individuals become more religious with age? This question reflects an interest in mean or average level of change in religiousness among the elderly as a group. The answer to this seemingly simple question is complicated by the fact that it requires long-term longitudinal data gathered painstakingly over many decades. Not surprisingly, there exist less than a handful of longitudinal studies that have comparable data on religion for the

same group of individuals studied at multiple points in time. In the absence of such data, researchers have either used more focused short-term longitudinal data to explore how religion changes over discrete segments of the life course (e.g., shift from adolescence to early adulthood or from young-old to old-old age) or, alternatively, have resorted to large national cross-sectional data sets that include samples of individuals, albeit not the same, spanning in age the entire life course. While cross-sectional data sets, such as the General Social Survey or the Gallup poll, have the advantage of being representative of the U.S. population as a whole and of being relatively easy to obtain (the data can be collected in a short time), the major drawback of cross-section research is that it inevitably leads to uncertainty whether the findings can be attributed to change in the individual (maturation effect) or whether they are an artifact of cohort and/or period effects. In other words, if today's 60-year-old individuals are more religious than 20-year-olds, this effect could be due to either the fact that persons become more religious with age or, alternatively, that the older cohort has always been more religious reflecting perhaps a secularization effect. Although longitudinal data are not immune to cohort and period effects, their presence challenges the generalizability of findings but does not undermine the attribution of change to the individual. In discussing how levels of religious involvement change over the life course, I will first consider early and late adulthood, the two segments of the life course that have been researched most extensively, and will then consider middle adulthood, the mostly uncharted segment of the religious landscape.

*Early Adulthood.* According to the eminent Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah and colleagues:

The self-reliant American is required not only to leave home but to 'leave church' as well... Traditionally, Protestant piety demanded that a young person experiences a unique conversion experience of his or her own, even while specifying more or less clearly the content of that experience. More recently we have come to expect even greater autonomy. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, pp. 62–63)

In view of Bellah and his colleagues' perceptive insight into American culture, it is not surprising that the high school and college years are a period of the life course with highest rate of apostasy (i.e., the abandonment of one's religion) (Beith-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Spilka et al., 2003). The tendency of young men and women to leave the church is only strengthened by the "liberalized social attitudes, greater cosmopolitanism, religious skepticism, and sense of moral and religious relativity" experienced in high school and college (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993). Nonetheless, the majority of young Americans resume religious involvement once they marry and become parents; two events that traditionally have been seen as hallmarks of adulthood. As pointed out by Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite (1995), "in the U.S. participation in religious organizations is deeply intertwined with values and attitudes that encourage marriage and parenthood" (p. 84).

In a study of Protestant and Catholic boys and girls aged 16 who were reassessed in their late 30s, O'Connor, Hoge, and Alexander (2002) found that the mean age of becoming religiously inactive was in the early 20s, and the mean age of becoming active again was in the late 20s. Over half of the sample indicated that they become religiously inactive with the main reasons being lack of time, lack of interest, and religious doubt. The main reasons for resuming religious involvement were marriage and children, spiritual needs,

and influence of spouse. O'Connor et al.'s (2002) findings are supported by a number of other studies indicating that becoming married and a parent decreases the likelihood of apostasy (e.g., Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990) and increases the chances of "returning to the fold" (e.g., Wilson & Sherkat, 1994). Analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 that traced religious involvement until age 32, Stolzenberg et al. (1995) found that marriage and parenthood increased the likelihood of belonging to a church or synagogue, with the maximum effect of children on church membership occurring when children were on the average 10 years of age. In other words, young married couples with children are more likely to be religiously involved than their peers who are childless and unmarried. According to Wilson and Sherkat (1994), marriage and parenthood have a stronger positive influence on men's religious involvement presumably because men tend to be less religious than women and therefore need an external stimulus to reestablish their church involvement.

Are there factors other than marriage and parenthood that predict religious involvement in early adulthood? In support of social learning theory, Wilson and Sherkat (1994) found that maintaining religious involvement in the transition from adolescence to early adulthood was particularly characteristic of individuals who as children had a close relationship with their parents and those who developed strong religious habits in childhood. In contrast, O'Connor et al. (2002) were surprised by how tenuous was the relation between youth predictors and adult church involvement. They found religious involvement in late 30s was best predicted by current circumstances (e.g., both respondent and partner going to church together) than adolescent religiousness (e.g., strength of belief or frequency of prayer) with the exception of involvement in church youth programs.

In sum, as argued by Wilson and Sherkat (1994), life course transitions play a defining role in understanding the developmental trajectory of religious involvement in early adulthood. But how relevant are findings based on the study of the Baby Boom generation to explaining religious beliefs and practices of the current generations of young adults? In their survey of changes in religious behavior among youth from 1976 to 1996, Smith, Denton, Faris, and Regnerus (2002) found a 10% decline in religious affiliation and an 8% decline in church attendance among Protestants and a corresponding 5% increase in individuals who self-identified as not religious. While significant, the drop in religious participation was relatively small in magnitude meaning that religious involvement among white Protestant American youth continues to exceed that found among their peers in most Western European countries. Nonetheless, Smith et al.'s (2002) findings suggest that the American religious landscape is changing with strongest religious involvement present among African American, Hispanic, and Asian youth and residents of the southern states. Only time will tell whether the United States, like Europe, will become eventually divided into largely secular regions (the Northeast and West) and more traditionally religious areas (the South and parts of the Midwest).

Another feature of early adulthood at the beginning of the 21st century is the tendency among college graduates to delay marriage and parenthood until the late 20s and early 30s. Gone are the days of a lock-step progression from college to a stable career trajectory and family life (see Moen, Kelly, & Magennis, chapter 13, this volume). Instead, the entry into adulthood is marked today by a prolonged interval of several years of exploration. During this period many individuals in their 20s define themselves as being neither an adolescent nor an adult (Arnett, 2004; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). If, as documented by the older studies, marriage and parenthood play a key role in facilitating religious re-engagement among younger adults, the current trend in delaying commitment to long-term romantic relationships along with the tendency for a growing number

of children to be brought up in a single parent family means a need to reconsider the nature of religious trajectories of early adulthood. Clearly, in view of the wide age range in which contemporary Americans marry and become parents, chronological age may have lost its utility as a marker of changes in religious involvement. Whether transition to becoming a marital partner and parent exercise the same effect on “returning to the fold” among current emerging adults remains an open question.

*Late Adulthood.* Ever since the times of William James (1902/1961), old age has been associated with heightened religious involvement. The popularity of this belief is based on the view that entering the post-retirement period increases the concern among older adults about mortality (see McFadden, 1999, 2005), and that, at least among Christians, religion assuages not only the existential dread of mortality but also offers the hope of being forever reunited with loved ones (Lemming, 1979–1980). Although persuasive, this view disregards the increasing number of Americans who, upon retirement at the normative age of 65, continue to have relatively healthy and productive 15 to 20 years in front of them (James & Wink, 2007). Being in one’s early 80s has lost the aura of survivorship that it had during the time of William James (1902/1961) or even when Erik Erikson (1951) developed his stage theory of development in which he assigned the task of “integrity versus despair” to older adulthood. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Third Agers (individuals between the ages of 65 and 79) report high levels of life satisfaction, physical health, and vital involvement in everyday activities (e.g., Grafova, McGonagle, & Stafford, 2007; Wink, 2007). Contrary to popular belief, fear of death decreases with age; older adults are significantly less anxious about the prospect of dying than are young adults (Neimeyer & Van Brunt, 1995). The main concern for older adults is not the prospect of death but the fear of dying in a painful and undignified manner (Cicirelli, 1999). The majority of older adults accepts their past and the inevitability of death seamlessly without, as postulated by Erikson (1951) and Butler (1963), the need to review their life and develop a new sense of identity that reconciles the past with the present and leads to the acceptance of their life without undue regret. Using data from the Institute of Human Development (IHD) longitudinal study, Wink and Schiff (2002) found that only approximately a third of older individuals engaged in the process of life review, and these individuals tended to be introspective throughout their adult lives. Further, both Wink and Schiff (2002) and Coleman (1986) found no evidence that older adults who did not review their lives suffered any adverse psychological consequences as a result.

The emerging portrait of the Third Age as a time of high life satisfaction and vital engagement in everyday life does not preclude the possibility that religious involvement increases in the post-retirement period. However, it challenges the idea that such an increase is an inevitable outcome of the existential crises or dilemmas associated with aging. Rather, the view presented here suggests that, if present, the increase in religious involvement among older adults may be equally likely to be due to a greater amount of free time or the need for companionship as the concern over impending mortality or uncertainty about the afterlife.

Given the ubiquity of the assumption that older adults become more religious (e.g., McFadden, 2005), why is there so little empirical data to support this hypothesis? The primary reason is that most short-term longitudinal studies of religiousness and aging appear to have focused on the wrong age period. Instead of tracing changes in religiousness from middle to late adulthood, researchers have focused solely on shifts in religious beliefs and practices among the young-old (age 65–75) and old-old (age 75+) only to find, paradoxically, that religious involvement tended to decrease with age. In an 8-year follow



up of Mexican American and Anglos age 60 and over, Markides, Levin, and Ray (1987), for example, found “little evidence that older people increasingly turn to religion as they age and approach death (p. 664).” In fact, it is now well established that attendance at religious services declines with age as a function of increased incidence of illness and disability (e.g., Blazer & Palmore, 1976; Kelley-Moore & Ferraro, 2001; Markides et al., 1987; Mindel & Vaughan, 1978; Idler, Kasl, & Hays, 2001), even though, as reported by Idler et al. (2001), overall church attendance among the elderly remains fairly high—including those with less than six months to live.

A decline in attendance at religious services is not tantamount to a decrease in the importance of religion in the lives of the elderly. It may be the case, after all, that restricted by poor physical health from church attendance, physically incapacitated older Americans turn to other sources such as prayer and electronic media to satisfy their spiritual needs. In support of this hypothesis, Mindel and Vaughan (1978) found that reduction in formal religious participation was compensated by increased involvement in non-organized religion (prayer). However, most other researchers have failed to support the finding that a drop in church attendance is compensated by increase in non-organized or informal religious activities. Rather, the preponderance of evidence suggests that frequency of prayer, ratings of subjective religiosity, and the use of electronic media with religious content remains constant among the elderly whose church attendance declined because of physical disabilities (Benjamins, Musick, Gold, & George, 2003; Kelly-Moore & Ferraro, 2001). This is an important finding in so far as it shows the need of assessing religious involvement in multiple domains. Nonetheless, it fails to support the thesis that signs of impending mortality result in increased religious fervor.

In view of the failure of short-term longitudinal studies to show increased religious involvement as individuals move from their 60s to their 80s, support for the claim that religiousness increases in old age is primarily based on findings from large scale, national, cross-sectional samples spanning the entire adult life course (for an exception, see Wink & Dillon, 2007, discussed below). These studies indicate an overall positive relation between religiousness and age (e.g., Argue, Johnson, & White, 1999; Hout & Greeley, 1987; Ploch & Hastings, 1994; Sasaki & Suzuki, 1987). Although the relationship between age and religion appears to increase linearly for most of adulthood, Argue et al. (1999) report a particularly steep rate of increase in self-reported influence of religion on daily life in early adulthood (ages 18 to 30), and Ploch & Hastings (1994) confirm the tendency of church attendance to decline in the 80s. In addition, several studies indicate slight variation in the pattern of change occurring in middle adulthood, but these findings have largely been ignored in the absence of a theory regarding the meaning of religion in the lives of middle aged individuals. The discussion of these findings will be, therefore, postponed until the next section.

Writing in the early 1990s, Ainlay, Singleton, and Swigert (1992) commented that “30 years of research on the role of religion among older people has produced contradictory findings that have stalled theoretical development” (p. 178). In hindsight, this conclusion seems overly pessimistic. Nonetheless, it reflects the fact that 15 years later we still know relatively little about religion and aging. The preponderance of evidence suggests that although religious involvement increases among the elderly, the magnitude of the change is modest and it does not support the contention that large numbers of older Americans turn to religion in order to deal with issues of mortality. Among the old-old, a decrease in religious participation does not lead to a concomitant decline in other forms of religious involvement, but there is no evidence that such activities increases exponentially as individuals get closer to death. Overall, the findings on religion in old age fit well

with the emerging portrait of the Third Age as a time where life satisfaction and engagement in everyday life remain high (Wink & James, 2007) and concomitantly a time when older adults accommodate to life in the post-retirement period by continuing to rely on existing adaptive strategies rather than developing new ones (see Atchley, 1999).

*Middle Adulthood.* It is not surprising that less is known about religion in the middle years of life than other segment of the life course. This reflects the fact that until quite recently, middle adulthood has been neglected in general by researchers interested in adult development (see Lachman, 2001) who preferred to focus on early and late adulthood with their better defined points of transitions (e.g., graduating from college, marriage, parenting, retirement, and death and dying). In comparison, the long stretch of middle adulthood lasting from age 30 to the early 60s lacks similar landmarks, perhaps with the exception of the empty nest and menopause for women.

The accumulated body of evidence indicates that middle adulthood is a period of high positive affect for most Americans (Mroczek, 2004; Wink, 2007). The decade of the 40s and 50s is a time of social and personal dominance with middle aged individuals tending to assume positions of responsibility at work and as volunteers (Helson & Wink, 1992; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1968). Although the empty nest was initially depicted as a threat to the well-being of parents, mothers in particular, recent research suggests that children leaving home is a welcome relief for both parents and offspring and, if anything, it enhances rather than detracts from marital satisfaction (Carstensen, Graff, Levinson, & Gottman, 1996). Similarly, although it brings with it unpleasant physical symptoms, menopause does not threaten the sense of self-esteem or “femininity” of most women (Rossi, 2004). Finally, the notorious midlife crisis—far from being omnipresent—is experienced by only approximately 10% of Baby Boomers (Wethington, Kessler, & Pixley, 2004). While the decade of the 50s (dubbed by Karp [1988] as the decade of reminders) is characterized by increased signs of physical limits and aging, the onset of these symptoms is typically gradual and serves to smooth the transition between late middle adulthood and the Third Age (McCullough & Polak, 2007).

Given the dominant societal status of middle aged individuals (Neugarten, 1968), it is not surprising to find them occupying leadership positions in religious congregations and organizations (Argyle, 2000). However, the time pressures associated with maintaining a busy work career, fulfilling volunteer obligations, and the need to take care of elderly parents, coupled with freedom related to the absence of children living at home, and the lack of need to confront issues of impending mortality suggests that midlife is a low point (nadir) for religious involvement (Dillon & Wink, 2007). This hypothesis is supported by a number of older studies indicating a U-curve trajectory of religious involvement over the life course with middle adulthood being characterized by lower participation than either early or late adulthood (see Argyle & Beth-Hallahmi, 1977, for a review). More recently, a midlife (age 50) dip in religious attendance has been reported by Ploch and Hastings (1994) in their national cross-sectional study of religion over the life course. A similar decline in mid 40s to early 50s was found by Miller and Nakamura (1996) and Sasaki and Suzuki (1987) in their analyses of church attendance based on the General Social Survey and Institute of Social Research cross-sectional data sets, respectively. However, lacking a theoretical framework for interpreting these findings, none of the authors discuss the meaning or significance of their results. Whereas the midlife dip in religiousness can be attributed to a shift in social roles at work and in the family, in the case of the current generation of older adults, it also coincides with the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Hout and Greeley (1987),

a temporary drop in church attendance in the 1970s was particularly characteristic of American Catholics (the largest religious denomination in the U.S.) in response to the Church's reaffirmation of papal authority and the ban on contraception (see also Dillon & Wink, 2007).

Although a number of studies suggest a midlife drop in religiousness, these findings are contradicted by research indicating that religious involvement either peaks in middle adulthood or alternatively remains stable after early adulthood. In a 12-year, four wave, panel study of married individuals under the age of 50, Argue et al. (1999), for example, found that religiosity (assessed in terms of self-reported importance of religious beliefs for daily life) increased steadily throughout adulthood, after rapidly accelerating from age 18 to the late 20s. Despite uncovering a slight dip in church attendance around the age of 50, Ploch and Hastings (1994) found an overall tendency for religiousness to steadily increase until age 70 when it begins to gradually decline. A similar pattern of steady age related increases in religiousness was reported by Rossi (2001) in her analysis of cross-sectional data from the MIDUS study.

*Findings from Long-Term Longitudinal Studies.* In discussing how mean levels of religiousness change over the adult course, I have omitted thus far the three long-term longitudinal studies that have data on the same individuals assessed over a prolonged period of time. In a 42-year-old follow-up study of male graduates of Amherst college (attending college in the early 1940s), Shand (1990) found considerable stability in rates of religious belief from the early 20s to late adulthood (late 60s). Unfortunately, Shand reports data for only two time points and therefore his study is insensitive to changes in religiousness that may have occurred in the long intervening period.

Both the Terman (McCullough, Enders, Brion, & Jain, 2005) and the Institute of Human Development (IHD; Dillon & Wink, 2007) longitudinal studies consist of California-born, predominantly white, well-educated, Protestant and Catholic men and women who were intensively followed-up throughout the life course. The main differences are that (a) the Terman participants were born somewhat earlier (1910s) than the IHD participants (1920s), (b) whereas the Terman study consists solely of intellectually gifted (IQ within top 1% of the population) individuals who attended public schools in Southern California, the IHD study comprises of a community-based sample of individuals born in San Francisco's East Bay Area, and (c) the Terman data on religious involvement are based on recoding of self-report ratings, whereas the IHD ratings are based on qualitative accounts of religious beliefs and practices obtained from in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Because the Terman and IHD data were collected from the same individuals at multiple time points, they lend themselves to the use of modern statistical techniques that allow the extraction of multiple trajectories of change. The advantage of growth curve analysis is that it allows the rephrasing of the question: "How does religiousness change over the life course?" to "What are the different patterns of change adhered to by individuals as they progress from adolescence/early adulthood to old age?" As a result, the Terman and IHD data make it possible to test longitudinally Ingersoll-Dayton et al.'s (2002), retrospectively based, life course hypothesis that individuals' religious involvement is contingent on the nature of experienced transitions, life events, and other background factors.

The majority of the Terman and IHD participants remained quite stable in their religious involvement following either a high and slightly increasing, or a low and slightly declining, trajectory of change (McCullough et al., 2005; Dillon & Wink, 2007). In

other words, participants in both studies who were religious as young adults tended to maintain (and even increase somewhat) their religious involvement throughout the life course. Conversely, those individuals who were not religious as young adults continued to remain so in middle and late adulthood and, if anything, their commitment declined further with time.

The two stable trajectories were differentiated in both the Terman and the IHD studies by gender, background religiousness, and personality; the high religiousness group included more women, and individuals who as adolescents were religious and whose personality was characterized by warmth and agreeableness. In a separate study of the long-term relation between personality and religiousness, Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, and Tracy (2007) found that, among the IHD participants, religiousness in late adulthood was predicted by adolescent dependability and conscientiousness and, in the case of women, warmth and agreeableness as well. This effect was independent of any overlap between religiousness and personality. In the Terman study, a similar association between personality and religiousness was obtained in a model predicting religious involvement in early adulthood from adolescent characteristics (McCullough, Tsang, & Brion, 2003).

In addition to the two stable groups, a minority of participants in the Terman and IHD studies followed a parabolic trajectory of change. In the case of the Terman study, an inverse U-curve trajectory reflected the presence of a group of individuals whose initially low level of adult religious involvement increased in their 30s and 40s, followed by a decline from age early 50s onward. Among the IHD participants, a mirror opposite (U-curve) trajectory described individuals whose initial high levels of religious involvement when they were in their early 30s, declined in middle adulthood only to increase in old age (late 60s/mid 70s).

What accounts for these contradictory findings? According to McCullough et al. (2005), a substantial number of the Terman participants who were initially not religious chose to attend church once they became parents—only to revert back to original levels of involvement when the children left home. In support of this hypothesis, members in the parabolic or inverted-U trajectory were distinguished from the low/declining group by a significantly greater number of children. In contrast, the IHD participants who, as a group, were more religious than their Terman counterparts presumably did not feel pressured to become more religious as a result of parenthood. Rather, a portion of the study members chose to reduce their religious involvement in middle adulthood, a time period coinciding with the empty nest, and, the competing demands of life at age 40s and 50s. Despite their different pattern of change, the IHD participants who followed a U-curve trajectory, just like their Terman counterparts, returned in old age to the same levels of religiousness as in early adulthood, which in their case resulted in increased religiousness from age 50s onward. In addition, in the IHD study the midlife decline in religious involvement which coincided with the 1970s was particularly characteristic of Catholics (Dillon & Wink, 2007), thus confirming Hout and Greeley's (1987) finding of a temporary decrease in church involvement among American Catholics following the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

In sum, both the Terman and the IHD longitudinal studies confirm Shand's (1990) finding that aggregate levels of religious involvement tend to remain substantially unchanged between early to late adulthood, although this does not preclude an intervening ebb and flow in religious participation during the middle years. Further, the two studies highlight the importance of mapping different trajectories of change rather than focusing solely on normative patterns of change that describe the sample as a whole. Finally, the Terman and IHD studies demonstrate the importance of taking a long view

of changes in religiousness over the life course. The interpretation of the IHD finding that religiousness increases from late middle to late adulthood, for example, changes considerably once we also know that, despite this increase, the average rate of religious involvement in late adulthood did not differ significantly from that in early adulthood. Taken as a whole, the life long pattern of religious involvement documented by Dillon and Wink (2007) for the IHD participants supports the contention that older aged individuals “return to the fold” by reestablishing levels of religiousness that characterized them as young adults rather than exhibiting heightened religiousness in response to the aging process per se. Similarly erroneous conclusions regarding the drop in religious involvement in the second half of adulthood could be drawn from the Terman study (McCullough et al., 2005) should its findings be interpreted without taking into account the entire adult life course.

### ***Change in Meaning of Religiousness***

The fact that rates of religious involvement change or remain stable over the life course has no bearing on whether the actual meaning of religious beliefs and practices alters with age. In other words, even if the level of religious involvement in late adulthood did not differ from that in early adulthood, it is easy to imagine an age-related shift in its meaning from, for example, a more social to a more personal emphasis. Conversely, even a steep increase in church attendance from age early to late 20s, may not result in a change in the personal significance of religious practices.

The hypothesis that the meaning of religious involvement changes (deepens) with age comes from a variety of sources. According to post-Piagetian or post-formal theorists, the development of cognitive abilities and structures continues well into adulthood resulting at midlife in a new appreciation and understanding of the paradoxical and contingent nature of knowledge (e.g., Sinnott, 1994). The post-Piagetian view of adult development has served as a basis for Kohlberg’s (1981) stage theory of moral development and James Fowler’s (1981) stage theory of faith development. According to Fowler, as people age, their faith becomes less concretistic and more contemplative, and personal yet universalizing in scope. For example, a transition from Stage 3 (synthetic—conventional faith) to Stage 4 (individuating—reflective faith) coincides with a moving away from embracing faith as defined by others and religious institutions and a greater reliance on the self as an arbiter of religious beliefs and practices. At Stage 4, whose emergence typically coincides with the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, “stories, symbols, myths and paradoxes from one’s own or other traditions may insist on breaking in upon the neatness of the previous faith” (p. 183). The newly found confidence in self-generated knowledge is, however, undermined in Stage 5 (conjunctive faith) by an emergence, typically in middle adulthood, of a sense of irony reflecting the recognition that all understanding is relative, partial, and distorting of the underlying transcendent reality.

The final stage of universalizing faith (Stage 6) is rarely attained as it involves a total dissipation of self-interests in the service of transforming the “present reality in the direction of a transcendent actuality” (Fowler, 1981, p. 200); a mode of being that can perhaps be discerned in the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King. Using cross-sectional data, Fowler found support for his developmental theory with evidence of Stage 4 faith development beginning to emerge only among individuals in their 20s, and Stage 5 narratives coinciding with middle adulthood and increasing in the decade of the 50s.

Another source of support for the idea that the meaning of religiousness deepens with age comes from theories of personality development in adulthood. According to Carl Jung (1953), for example, the primary task of the first part of adulthood is to get to know the workings and intricacies of the external world, including establishing a career and a family. With middle adulthood these priorities change to a greater emphasis on getting to know oneself, a process that includes exploration of archetypes or the propensities and capacities of the mind, including the proclivity to produce an image of God, which, Jung argues, are shared by all humans. A midlife reorientation in personal interests is also embedded in Erikson's (1951) stage theory of psychosocial development. According to Erikson, the early adulthood tasks of identity development and establishing of intimacy give way in the second half of life to a generative concern for others and, subsequently, an emphasis on reconciliation of the past and present in a way that leaves no place for undue regrets. Although based on different intellectual traditions, there are clear parallels among Jung, Erikson, and Fowler—all of whom associate aging with a shift in perspective from the outer to the inner, an emphasis on authenticity, and a deepening of self understanding that ultimately results in an enhanced appreciation of one's limits and a greater sense of compassion for others. These purported age related changes in being-in-the-world are bound to affect religious beliefs and practices by shifting the emphasis from the public to the private role of religion, from reliance on external to internal authority, and by expanding the circle of reference to include a larger segment of humanity.

Empirical support for the view that religious beliefs change with age comes primarily from retrospective studies. Participants in Ingersoll-Dayton et al.'s (2002) study indicated, for example, that older age coincided with a greater tolerance of differing religious beliefs. A new emphasis on caring for others was reflected in a shift in the nature of prayer from request to gratitude and praying less for self and more for others. In a study of faith in late life, Eisenhandler (2003) found that, although most of the participants tended to maintain old habitual (reflexive) means of worship, a number of men and women "stretched their soul" by moving beyond the usual and accepted patterns of faith. These individuals displayed a greater concern for others, an awareness of transpersonal bonds with others, and an emphasis on inner life and reflection (interiority).

Perhaps the strongest empirical support for the view that older age brings with it a new focus and new priorities comes from the work of the Swedish social gerontologist Lars Tornstam, who based his theory of gerotranscendence on data from large scale retrospective and cross-sectional studies of Danish and Swedish adults. In particular, Tornstam (2005) found a positive relation between age and the development of the *Cosmic* dimension of functioning characterized by feelings of being connected with the entire universe and earlier generations, transcendence of time (living simultaneously in the past and present), and strong connection with earlier generations. Age was also associated with an increase in the *Coherence* dimension or the sense of meaning in life. In addition to these cross-sectional findings, retrospective life narratives of older adults indicated less self-preoccupation, a decrease of interest in superfluous social interactions and in material possessions, and a greater need for solitary meditation (positive solitude as opposed to forced disengagement). All of these changes suggest an evolution in late adulthood of religious beliefs and practices from an emphasis on self-interest to a greater stress on the ego-transcendence and the care for the common good. A similar shift has been reported in a number of retrospective studies focusing on highly functioning older adults (e.g., Meddin, 1998; Thomas & Eisenhandler, 1998) and can be also found in fairy tales from around the world that include older age protagonists (Chinen, 1992).

Contravening Tornstam's findings, however, over three-quarters of participants in the Ohio Longitudinal Study of Aging Americans (Atchley, 1999) reported that material things meant more (rather than less) to them; they were likely to take themselves more (not less) seriously, and to see less (not more) connection between themselves and past and future generations.

The presence of similarly worded open questions on religion in the IHD study allowed the testing of aspects of Tornstam's theory using longitudinal data collected in early and late adulthood. Dillon and Wink (2007) coded the study participants' religion narratives to see whether there was an age-related shift in emphasis away from the more social to the more faith-based functions of religiousness. In early adulthood, 55% of the participants referred to religion's social dimensions. In contrast, only 26% commented on religion's personal meaning to them in terms of faith or as a theological resource in trying, in the words of one participant, to apprehend "unanswered questions." This pattern was reversed, however, in late adulthood with only 17% referring to religion's social aspects, and 36% invoking its faith elements. For example, when interviewed in her late 60s, a Presbyterian woman stated, "I enjoy going to church to hear a sermon, but I don't want to be hit for joining committees to do this or that, and have to sit and introduce myself to the people next to me, and all this holding hands." The same woman, in adolescence and early adulthood emphasized the importance of her social involvement in church. Another Presbyterian woman emphasized in late adulthood the importance of faith as a guide to her life and saw it as providing purpose to her life. In early adulthood, this woman expressed "faith in the sense of prayer" but, at the same time, wondered whether church attracted her "as a matter of wanting to belong to a social group" (Dillon & Wink, 2007, pp. 115–116).

In sum, a large gamut of theories and empirical findings suggest that the meaning of religious beliefs and practices evolve with age and that, in particular, older adults place a greater emphasis on the private as opposed to public (social) aspects of religion and use faith to express a concern for others rather than pursue more narrowly circumscribed personal interests. These shifts in the meaning of religion may aid older adults in adapting to the aging process. Nonetheless, it is likely that the age-related changes in meaning of religion, just as changes in church attendance or religious involvement, are likely to follow a variety of different trajectories and as a result apply to some older adults but not others. As documented by Eisenhandler (2003), the majority of older adults are likely to continue using religion throughout their life in a *reflexive* or habitual fashion without evidence of any significant change in its meaning. This should not overshadow, however, the minority of older individuals who approach religious beliefs and practices in a *reflective* way that allows them to use religious resources to grow personally and to seek new answers to life's existential dilemmas. While these individuals may be particularly admired by psychologists who, as a rule, value personal growth and introspection (see Dillon & Wink, 2007), this should not result, however, in labeling as deficient those adults who cope with the vicissitudes of old age by relying on more habitual religious resources. In other words, contrary to Tornstam's (2005) assertion that "the very process of living encompasses a general tendency toward gerotranscendence...which in the West can be accompanied [and impeded] by guilt" (p. 45), it could be argued that many, if not the majority, of older adults cope with the vicissitudes of aging by relying on the same adaptive strategies they used throughout adulthood (see, for example, Coleman, 1986, Wink & Schiff, 2002). Just as it would be erroneous to label this latter group as repressed or lacking in self-realization, so it would be mistaken not to appreciate persons who use the process of aging to develop new modes of psychosocial functioning. Clearly, the

welfare of a society depends on the presence of both conservers and innovators at any stage of the life course.

### ***Change at an Individual Rather than Group Level***

So far in this chapter I have discussed the connection between age and religious involvement and its meaning at a group level by asking whether older adulthood brings with it a general shift in religious beliefs and practices for most adults or among specific groups of individuals based on antecedent personality and intervening life experiences. However, group level information tells us nothing about individual variation in religious beliefs and practices over the life course. In other words, knowing that older adults as a group become more religious says nothing about whether individual group members retained their rank vis-à-vis each other or not. After all, a sample that is highly stable as a group can show a lot of individual variability as long as increases in religiousness among some of the members are offset by declines in religiousness among other members. Conversely, an increase in religiousness at a group level can be achieved with little individual variability as long as all participants increase at the same rate.

In general, much more is known about group-level change in religiousness over the life course than about its individual (rank order) stability. In contrast to group-level stability, the coefficient of individual stability can be computed only by using data collected on the same individuals over time and this requires longitudinal rather than cross-sectional findings. This is the case because individual stability is calculated using the correlation coefficient which requires data from the same group of persons at two time periods. The need for longitudinal data means that if we want to know whether young adults retain their ranking in religiousness in old age we need to wait for at least 40 years before being able to answer this question.

Recently published findings from the Terman (McCullough et al., 2005) and the IHD (Dillon & Wink, 2007) longitudinal studies indicate a surprisingly high level of individual level stability in religious involvement over the adult life course. In the Terman study the average correlation among measures of religiousness collected at six different time points between the ages of 27 and 77 was .69. In the IHD study the average correlation for religiousness assessed at four time periods spanning age 30s and 70s was .77. In other words, individuals who scored comparatively higher in religiousness in early adulthood tended to also score higher than their peers in late adulthood notwithstanding the ebb and flow of religious involvement for the samples as a whole. In the IHD study, a somewhat lower level of individual (rank order stability) was obtained between religiousness in adolescence and adulthood. The average correlation was .49 with the highest correlation being between religiousness in adolescence and early adulthood ( $r = .54$ ) and the lowest between adolescence and late adulthood ( $r = .42$ ). This means that a substantial number of individuals who were highly religious in adolescence became less religious in adulthood and, conversely, some nonreligious adolescents became religious later in life. In short, adolescent religiousness is a robust, but not an overwhelmingly strong, predictor of religiousness in adulthood.

The higher level of individual stability of religious involvement assessed in adulthood compared to that in adolescence confirms findings indicating that radical changes in religious beliefs and practices resulting in apostasy and conversion peak between adolescence and early adulthood (Beith-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). There are several explanations for this finding. Adolescent religiousness is more immediately constrained by



parents' expectations than is adulthood religiousness. Adolescents who attend church primarily because of parental expectations, boys in particular, are likely to cease doing so once they leave home and gain independence. Some adolescents and young adults may develop an interest in religion for the first time in college, in the military, or through other work and social contacts. For others, these same experiences may serve to dampen their religious involvement. As already indicated, marriage, in particular through spousal influence, is one of the most important predictors of religious affiliation and involvement (Hout & Fisher, 2002; Sherkat, 2003), and, as a result, it may contribute to religious re-engagement or disengagement.

In contrast to adolescence, the high level of rank order stability in adulthood means that relatively few people experience radical religious transformations in adulthood indicative of conversion or apostasy. The finding of high stability in religiousness across adulthood is important because it challenges the view that individuals tend to experience radical changes in religiousness in response to negative (e.g., Ferraro & Kelley-Moore, 2000) or positive (Albrecht & Cornwall, 1989) life experiences. Life events such as, for example, bereavement and poor health tend to affect, at any given point in time, some adults but not others. If these individuals were to respond to these adversities by becoming more or less religious, this should have lowered the correlation among measures of religiousness at different stages of adulthood. This, however, does not appear to be the case.

The Terman and IHD findings do not, of course, preclude the possibility that a small number of individuals respond to adversity by turning to religion or that others decline sharply in their religious involvement. The IHD data, for example, indicate that approximately 3% of the sample did experience a sudden conversion to religion in middle adulthood primarily in response to adversity and a further 3% were characterized by a marked decrease in religious involvement (Dillon & Wink, 2007). The high levels of individual stability across adulthood simply suggest that this was not a normative pattern that applied to the majority of adults.

A final implication of the high correlation between scores on religiousness throughout adulthood means there is a high probability that the social and psychological characteristics associated with religiousness at one point in adulthood can be predicted from religiousness at an earlier time. For example, in the IHD study, the concurrent positive association between religiousness and vital involvement in everyday activities, positive relations with others (Wink & Dillon, 2003), and generativity or altruism (Dillon, Wink, & Fay, 2003) in older adulthood could be predicted from religiousness in early adulthood, a time interval of close to 40 years. This, in turn, means that knowing one's religious involvement at age 30 serves as a good predictor of future patterns of psychosocial functioning.

### ***Life Course Changes in Spiritual Seeking***

The review of the literature on religious involvement over the life course has highlighted the importance of considering religion as a multifaceted construct whose various components may follow different trajectories of age-related change. As documented, whereas, for example, prayer and the uses of electronic media with religious content tend to remain unchanged in old age, this does not preclude a decline in church attendance associated with deterioration in physical health. In this section, findings from the IHD longitudinal study are used to consider how life course changes in religious involvement compare to spiritual seeking.

*Religiousness and Spiritual Seeking.* In the social science literature, spirituality has been defined in varying ways, with some researchers using it in the context of church-centered piety (e.g., Pargament, 1999) and others using it to refer to the largely non-church based spiritual seeking (e.g., Eastern meditation, New Age practices) that has grown in popularity in America since the 1960s (e.g., Fuller, 2001; Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). The ambiguity in how contemporary Americans construe their religious/spiritual identity is well captured by Hout and Fischer (2002) who found that over two-thirds of Americans who have a religious affiliation describe themselves as both religious and spiritual. By contrast, among those who had no religious preference, Hout and Fisher (2002) found that 15% thought of themselves as, at most, moderately religious, but 40% describe themselves as spiritual. Clearly, these two groups invoke spirituality to convey different things. Individuals who identify themselves as both religious and spiritual are predominantly church members—"religious dwellers" (Wuthnow 1998)—who use the term spirituality to underscore the sincerity of their beliefs and their personal striving to relate to God within the boundaries of organized or church-focused religion (see Hout & Fischer, 2002; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Those who identify as spiritual only do so in part to distance themselves from church and organized religion (Hout & Fischer, 2002). In sum, although prior to the 1960s it made little sense to decouple spirituality from religiousness, currently the term "spiritual" is used with equal validity to denote a dimension of traditional religiousness and to signify a growing number of Americans who choose to engage in non-traditional and non-church centered religious beliefs and practices.

Following Wuthnow's (1998) distinction between church-centered religious dwellers and spiritual seekers who actively negotiate among diverse spiritual resources, religiousness and spiritual seeking were operationalized in the IHD study as two separate though overlapping religious orientations (e.g., Dillon & Wink, 2007; Wink & Dillon 2003). Whereas individuals high in religiousness were characterized by a belief in God, an afterlife, prayer, and frequent church attendance, spiritual seekers typically emphasized sacred connectedness with God, a Higher Power, or nature and systematically engage in practices such as mediation, Shamanistic journeying, and centering prayer. The difference between religiousness and spiritual seeking is typified by the response to a question about the afterlife, to which an IHD participant who was high in religiousness stated, "Well, religiously, I go to heaven," compared to the statement offered by a spiritual seeker: "I do believe that I'm part of the universe, and that I get returned somehow—my spirit or my consciousness—to something that is, hopefully, more worthwhile, at a higher level." When asked about religious practices, a woman who was high in religiousness said, "I attend religious services usually every Sunday, but during the year we also have Bible study." In contrast, a woman high on spiritual seeker stated, "If one believes in the universal spirit, 'Our Father in Heaven' doesn't work too well. So I've been introduced to a centering prayer that is an old revival of a Catholic contemplative prayer—not too distant from Transcendental Meditation" (Dillon & Wink, 2007, pp. 219–220).

This distinction between religiousness or religious dwelling and spiritual seeking parallels the analytical distinction made by several scholars; most notably, that between authoritarian and humanist religion (Fromm, 1950), between religious loyalists and highly active seekers (Roof, 1993, 1999), and between religious mystics who embrace religious tradition and spiritual mystics for whom personal authority and experience override the "historical claims of tradition" (Hood, 2003, p. 261). In previous research, the construct validity of the rating of spiritual seeking was evidenced by its closer relation to involvement in non-organized (e.g., meditation and prayer) than organized religious activities (church attendance) (Wink & Dillon, 2003), its significant positive association

with personal growth (Dillon & Wink, 2007) and creativity (Wink, 2006), and the personality characteristic of openness to experience (Wink et al., 2007), and its only modest correlation with the IHD measure of religiousness (Wink & Dillon, 2003).

*Spiritual Seeking across the Life Course.* In the IHD study, the average scores on spiritual seeking remained stable from early (age 30s) to middle (age 40s) adulthood and then increased significantly in the later stages of adulthood, in particular from age 50s to age late 60s to mid-70s. The late life increase in spiritual seeking was true of men and women, those raised Protestant or Catholic, and of individuals from higher and lower social classes (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Nonetheless, because of a higher rate of spiritual growth, women scored significantly higher on spiritual seeking than men in late-middle (age 50s) and late adulthood (age late 60s, and mid-70s). The overall magnitude of the late life increase in spirituality was of sufficient magnitude to be clinically significant. This means that if we were to meet the IHD participants' socially in middle adulthood and then encounter them 20 years later in late adulthood, their increased spirituality would be clearly evident in casual interaction. In other words, compared to religiousness, the post-midlife increase in spiritual seeking was much more pronounced. In addition, the life course trajectory of spiritual seeking followed a linear path of steady increases from early to late adulthood compared to the curvilinear relation between age and religiousness indicative of a dip in religious involvement in middle adulthood.

What accounts for the increase in spiritual seeking in the second half of adulthood? As discussed in the section on changes in meaning of religiousness, a post-midlife emphasis on a sense of interconnectedness with a Higher Power or nature has been postulated by theorists ranging from Jung to Tornstam. Although this broadening in the meaning of the sacred can be incorporated into traditional religiousness, midlife, as argued by both Fowler and Jung, ushers an additional greater sense of personal autonomy and an appreciation of different religious traditions. It is these latter changes that offer a psychological explanation of the age-related increase in spiritual seeking. As conceptualized in the IHD research, spiritual seeking assumes the willingness to juxtapose and incorporate in one's life different religious traditions and perspectives; a task that entails a sense of personal autonomy, and an appreciation of relativism and contextualism of knowledge.

The post-midlife increase in spiritual seeking among the IHD participants also has a socio-cultural explanation. The study participants entered middle adulthood in the late 1960s, and consequently their negotiation of midlife identity during this time of cultural upheaval may have opened them to the new currents in America's vastly expanding spiritual marketplace (see Roof, 1999). The public accessibility of a new spiritual vocabulary and spiritual resources in the post 1960s era may have generated a new spiritual awareness among the study participants independent of any inner psychological process. In other words, the IHD findings may reflect a period instead of a maturational effect. The cultural explanation for the post-midlife increase in spiritual seeking is supported by the fact that the younger IHD cohort (those born in 1928–29) evidenced a steeper increase in spirituality than the older cohort (those born in 1920–21). Members of the younger cohort had a less firmly set sense of personal identity and they were more likely to have teenagers living at home during the 1960s and 1970s. Both these factors increased, in turn, their chance of being exposed and receptive to the cultural changes of this era (Dillon & Wink, 2007). The significance of cultural context in aiding the post-midlife growth in spiritual seeking does not negate the psychological (maturational) explanation but, rather, reaffirms the life course theory postulate that lives are inevitably lived in a socio-historical context.

*Individual Variation in Spiritual Seeking.* Spiritual seeking, unlike religiousness, showed considerable inter-individual variability with the average correlation of .47 among the ratings of spiritual seeking from early to late adulthood. This means that knowing, for example, whether someone ranked high or low in spiritual seeking in early adulthood did not tell much about the person's ranking in late adulthood ( $r = .30$ ). In fact, the IHD data indicated that spiritual seeking did not stabilize on an individual level until late-middle adulthood, when people were in their fifties ( $r = .64$  between rating of spiritual seeking between late-middle and late adulthood). The relatively low level of rank order stability of spiritual seeking compared to religiousness was due to the fact that relatively few of the IHD participants were rated as high on spiritual seeking in early adulthood.

A direct corollary of the low individual stability was the fact that psychosocial correlates of spiritual seeking in late adulthood, such as its positive relation with creativity, personal growth, interest in gaining new knowledge, and altruism could be predicted by spiritual seeking in late middle adulthood (age 50s), but not earlier (Dillon & Wink, 2007; Dillon et al., 2003; Wink & Dillon, 2003). This once again differentiates spiritual seeking from religiousness; the latter's associations with measures of psychosocial functioning in late adulthood could be predicted from religiousness in early adulthood. The only exception was authoritarianism—obedience to authority, adherence to tradition, and *disesteem* of minority groups—where its negative relation with spiritual seeking and positive relation with religiousness could both be predicted from early adulthood. This robust and life-long differential effect of religiousness and spiritual seeking on authoritarianism highlights the polarization existing between individuals who are high on religiousness and those who are high on spiritual seeking in the area of submission to authority and attitudes toward minority groups (gay, lesbians, and feminists in particular; Wink, Dillon, & Prettyman, 2007). In all other areas of functioning the effects of religiousness and spiritual seeking on psychosocial functioning were much less polarized.

Finally, the relatively low level individual stability of spiritual seeking raises the question as to who became a spiritual seeker as an older adult. The modal spiritual seeker in late adulthood was a woman who as a young adult was involved in traditional religious practices, who was psychologically minded or incisive, and who subsequently, in her late thirties and forties experienced stressful life events such as divorce, personal or family illness, and untimely death in the family (Wink & Dillon, 2002). The fact that spiritual growth was prompted by personal turmoil indicates a parallel between spiritual seeking and wisdom whose development has been also linked to the experience of stressful life events (see, for example, Wink & Helson, 1997; Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). In contrast, religiousness was unrelated to personal adversity. In addition, whereas, as discussed in a preceding section, religiousness in late adulthood was predicted by adolescent personality characteristics of conscientiousness and warmth or agreeableness, spiritual seeking was predicted by openness to experience (Wink et al., 2007).

In sum, the different patterns of group and individual change exhibited by spiritual seeking and religiousness confirm the importance of distinguishing not only between various dimensions of religion but also different religious orientations. Just as religiousness is a complex and multifaceted construct, so too is spirituality. Nonetheless, the multiple meanings of the terms should not deter researchers from investigating how spirituality or spiritualities unfold over the life course provided that the investigators offer a clear and precise definition of how the construct is operationalized in their research.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The study of how any psychosocial characteristic changes over time is of necessity a daunting enterprise because it involves the disentangling of maturational, cohort, and period effects. In the case of religion, this task is made more difficult by its multidimensionality and the fact that religion in the Western world is undergoing a dramatic shift not witnessed since the Reformation. Although the forces of secularization are not as strong in the United States as they are in Western Europe, nonetheless, it is hard to imagine that the current generation of young adults will inhabit the same religious landscape in old age as their parents. The best strategy for dealing with this complexity is to ground research on age and religion in specific theories of religiousness and adult development (see McFadden, 1999, 2005) and a methodological paradigm, such as life course theory, that acknowledges the importance of the socio-historical and cultural context for the understanding of human action. Although it is legitimate to ask the question, “How does religiousness change over time,” this should not prevent us from answering that it depends on the aspect of religiousness being measured, the cohort being followed, the stage of life cycle being investigated, the particular trajectory of change being adhered to, and the background socio-demographic characteristics of the sample.

*Importance of Theory of Religion.* The existing body of research on age and religion indicates the importance of selecting measures of religious beliefs and practices to match the characteristics of life stage under consideration. For example, as demonstrated by numerous studies, it makes little sense to rely on church attendance as an index of religious involvement among the very old; a population where frequency of prayer, strength of belief, and, increasingly, the use of electronic media are likely to provide a much more meaningful measure of religiousness. However, church attendance may be the measure of choice for assessing religious involvement in early adulthood given the prevailing view that many parents “return to the fold” in order to provide their children with religious education. The fact that one or another measure of religiousness may be better suited to research at a particular stage of the life course does not negate, however, the importance of investigating a variety of religious beliefs and practices at any age period.

Whereas the selection of developmentally appropriate measures of religious involvement illustrates the importance of low-level theory, Tornstam’s (2005) programmatic research on gerotranscendence demonstrates the power of higher-level theory for understanding the age—religion connection. By conceptualizing religious involvement within an innovative theory of aging, Tornstam is able to not only to shed light on how the meaning of religious beliefs and practices evolves in old age but also highlight the importance of emergent properties of older adulthood that distinguish this segment of the life course from its other stages. In this regard, Tornstam’s research not only enhances our understanding of religion in old age but it also helps to promote the view of older adults as valuable members of society with unique skills and insights.

Similarly, findings from the IHD study demonstrate the utility of differentiating religious dwelling from spiritual seeking, a distinction based on Wuthnow’s (1998) sociological analyses of the changing American religious landscape in the post 1960s era. Both religiousness and spiritual seeking were found to be associated with different trajectories of change and patterns of individual stability. Yet, each provides older adults with unique resources for positive aging and dealing with the inevitable losses associated with the aging process. Obviously, every research program has its limitations. In the case of Tornstam, these include the lack of longitudinal data and the tendency to generalize

findings to older adults as a whole. Whereas the IHD study contrasts spiritual seeking with religiousness, it does not capture the many meanings of spirituality. Nonetheless, these inevitable shortcomings should not overshadow the importance of theory-guided research in furthering the understanding of how religion evolves over the life course.

*Importance of Theory of Adult Development.* Perhaps no other stage of the life course illustrates better the importance of theory of adult development for understanding changes in religious involvement than late adulthood. How the evidence of the modest increase in religiousness in the second half of adulthood is interpreted depends squarely on one's theory of aging. Those who subscribe to the view that aging threatens the individual with despair unless he or she gains a new perspective on the past, present, and the future are likely to construe this finding as indicative of the power of religiousness to offer answers to life's existential dilemmas. In contrast, those who construe the post-retirement period as largely an extension of middle adulthood are much more likely to interpret any increase in religiousness in terms of greater availability of free time and/or a desire for more contact with others. For the purpose of the present argument, it does not matter which view of aging is correct, what is important is the inextricable intertwining of fact and theory.

Middle adulthood provides another illustration of the importance of theories of adult development for research on religious involvement. Most studies on age and religion appear to treat the long period of middle adulthood as barren wasteland that is best speedily traversed on the way from youth to old age. As a result, very little is known about religious involvement during this stage of life and the available findings from national cross-sectional studies of the life course are either ignored or treated as random fluctuations. Yet, as a result of the new found interest among social scientists, we know that the middle years of life are an important segment of the life course where individuals shed some of their youthful idealism, begin to confront signs of aging, experience new freedoms resulting from adult children leaving home, confront increased pressure to take care of elderly parents, and, in general, enjoy a dominant status in society reflective of years of experience and expertise at work and in managing volunteer activities. All of these changes are bound to have an impact on religious beliefs and practices that are waiting to be fully explored (see Dillon & Wink, 2007).

*Importance of Methodological Framework.* With few exceptions, research on religion and aging tends to ignore the influence of socio-historical context as exemplified by cross-sectional researchers who take great pains to argue away the possibility that their findings are influenced by cohort or period effects. Yet, socio-historical context matters for the ebb and flow of religious involvement over the life course both in terms of more circumscribed and temporary shifts in participation (e.g., decline in church attendance among Catholics in the 1970s) and larger historical trends (e.g., the recent emergence of individuals who define themselves as spiritual but not religious). We should not be afraid, therefore, to interpret findings as contingent and as subject to change depending on age cohort or denominational, regional, ethnic, and racial characteristics of the sample. A reminder of the role played by context in interpreting findings and for designing research is an important contribution of life course theory.

It is not accidental that the emergence of life course theory with its emphasis on multiple trajectories of change and the moderating effect of life's transitions coincided with the advent of new and more powerful statistical techniques that allow researchers to map different patterns of change on a given characteristic. These types of analyses would

not have been possible 10 to 15 years ago. Yet, as documented by the findings from the Terman and the IHD study, the use of growth curve analysis has the potential to revolutionize research on age and religiousness by allowing investigators to decompose a single normative curve into its component trajectories. Membership in each trajectory or group can then be predicted from a combination of personality and socio-demographic characteristics.

The drawback of growth curve analysis and path modeling is that it requires longitudinal data (see Holt, chapter 5, this volume). Nonetheless, as shown by Elder and his collaborators, such research does not need to take decades to complete as long as researchers anchor their study on judiciously chosen historical events such as the Great Depression (Elder, 1974) or life transitions such as divorce (Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006). In the case of religiousness, these transitions include, among others, marriage, becoming a parent, children leaving home, and retirement. In other words, the field of religion needs well designed short-term longitudinal studies that will allow the mapping of discrete segments of the life course and, in doing so, to ultimately gain a better perspective on religiousness over the entire life course. These studies need to be obviously grounded in theory of religion and adult development. To gain an understanding of whether, for example, religiousness increases in old age, we need to study the period before and after retirement, or focus on changes associated with moving to a retirement community, bereavement, and physical illness. Participants could be selected based on their degrees of background religious socialization, and their variability by denomination, gender, ethnicity, and personality characteristics. The effectiveness of research on how discrete life transitions, such as marriage and parenthood, affect religious involvement in early adulthood should serve as an example to investigators interested in the shifting role of religiousness at other stages of the life course. While such research can have religion as its primary focus, questions on religious involvement could be also included in studies with other primary aims.

## Conclusions

The course of human life is predictable because as the result of an interaction among genetic predispositions, social learning, and life's experiences we develop stable cognitive and personality structures and choose social environments that, in turn, reinforce the stability of our preferred modes of psychosocial functioning. It is not surprising, therefore, that religious beliefs and practices show considerable stability over the life course. Highly religious adolescents and young adults tend to continue being so throughout the life course and, conversely, individuals who enter adulthood with little religious involvement are unlikely to change their practices. Yet, this stability belies the ebb and flow in religious involvement associated with changing social roles, transitions, and movement from one stage of the life course to another. It also does not do justice to the circumscribed group of individuals who experience more radical shifts in religious involvement as a result of a variety positive and negative life experiences. Individual lives are also influenced by the larger socio-cultural and historical context. In this regard, the second half of the 20th century has witnessed a radical change in the prevailing social order and concomitant evolution of religious traditions and habits. Evangelical Christians are the fastest growing religious group in America, but the rates of individuals who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious or simply as not religious are also on the increase. How these changes will influence religious involvement over the life course only time will tell. After all, a true understanding of the human life course can only be

achieved in hindsight. Although new trends in religious beliefs and practices do not appear out of the blue, we need a long-term perspective on personal and social history to assess their true meaning and significance.

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