

## Chapter 6

# THE FORM AND CONTENT OF ADULT RELIGION



Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say, over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. . . . none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.

Religion reveals itself in struggling to reveal the meaning of the world.

Every serious life has that experience where the profundities within ask for an answering profundity. No longer do the shallows suffice. Life within faces some profound abyss of experience, and the deep asks for an answering deep. So when deep calls unto deep and the deep replies, we face the essential experience of religion.

People will do anything for religion, argue for it, fight for it, die for it, anything but live for it.

No creed is final. Such a creed as mine must grow and change as knowledge grows and changes.<sup>1</sup>

### RELIGION IN ADULT LIFE

For 120 years, North American psychologists have constructed theories and conducted research in the psychology of religion (Booth, 1981). Following the pattern established by mainstream psychology, the psychology of religion did not explicitly focus on religion in adulthood at first; this was taken for granted when religious experience, beliefs, and behavior were studied. An emphasis on religion in childhood was established by G. Stanley Hall, who has often been viewed as a founder of our field. Hall extended his work to deal with adolescence, and wrote extensively on religion in the teenage years (Hall, 1904). His writings paralleled those of James Mark Baldwin, who has been called the father of North American child psychology. Adult psychology *per se* was generally overlooked, however, and was regarded as “new” as recently as 1970. It did develop rapidly in the last quarter of the 20th century, though (Botwinick, 1978). Unlike the situation in child psychology, there seem to be no giants in our psychological past who emphasized research and theory in *adult* development.

1. These quotations come, respectively, from the following sources: Jung (1933, p. 229); S. H. Miller, quoted in Simpson (1964, p. 204); H. E. Fosdick, quoted in Simpson (1964, p. 212); Caleb Colton, quoted in Edwards (1955, p. 535); and Sir Arthur Keith, quoted in Edwards (1955, p. 539).

Religion as a force in adult living was first recognized in relation to faith during one's closing years. Cumming and Henry (1961) looked on religious interest and activity as part of the process of disengagement from life prior to death. However, surprisingly little has been written on what is usually termed early and middle adulthood—roughly, the years between 18 and 50.

Our task in this chapter is to detail the nature and content of religion in adult life. We need to examine adult religious activity and beliefs in relation to such factors as gender and age. Here we set the stage for comprehending the meaning, influence, and function of one's faith in other areas of life.

## THE COLLECTIVE EXPRESSION OF RELIGION

Many faiths in the United States and Canada are unrelated to the Judeo-Christian tradition. These include Native American, Near Eastern/Middle Eastern, and Asian religions. Many local cults and sects also exist. The representation of some major world religions (e.g., Islam) in North America is growing rapidly, in large part because of immigration. But little psychological research has been conducted to date on these other religious groups, as noted in Chapter 1. We therefore emphasize in these pages the Judeo-Christian heritage and its expression in contemporary North American (especially U.S.) culture. In addition, it is not unreasonable to theorize that similar psychological principles underlie all faiths. This has, of course, been our message in Chapters 1 through 3, where we have set forth our theory suggesting the universal primacy of needs for meaning, control, and relationships with others (sociality). Greeley (1972b) earlier emphasized the roles of meaning and social belonging in the formation and maintenance of religion. These themes are clearly helpful, but, given their largely theoretical and assumptive status, they have not stimulated much specific research (Mills, 1959).

The Judeo-Christian heritage is worldwide in scope, and national surveys show that U.S. residents in particular are among the most religious people on earth. Table 6.1 shows this for "belief in God" and "religious experience," two core elements in the Western religious tradition. These data further reveal that among the nations studied, the United States joins Ireland and Poland as strongest in its belief in God. The latter two countries have a long history of established Roman Catholicism. Interestingly, over 40 years of Communist negativism does not seem to have adversely affected the Polish people's belief in God. Over 70 years of Soviet rule in Russia may have had some effect, but its data are not very different from those observed for France, the Netherlands, and Sweden—lands with no history of formal opposition to religion. Greeley (2002) provides some additional insight into these findings.

Though the questions used by domestic pollsters versus those of Greeley's investigators may be a factor, the incidence of subjectively reported religious experience is much higher in the United States than for all the other nations studied, including Ireland and Poland. Is it possible that Irish and Polish Roman Catholicism is not congenial to the expression and/or reporting of religious experience? The fact that belief in God is much higher and more variable across the countries compared in Table 6.1 suggests a need to search for influences that keep the experience rates so much lower in Europe, and also so much more similar in nations as diverse as Britain, Denmark, Russia, Ireland, and the Scandinavian countries. Again, we are confronted with the fact that researchers have studied the United States in particular (and North America in general) to such a degree that they may lose sight of the

**TABLE 6.1. Percentages of the Population in Various Countries that "Believe in God" and Have Had Religious Experience**

Country	Belief in God (%)	Religious experience (%)
United States	95	4
Czech Republic	6	11
Denmark	57	15
France	52	24
Great Britain	69	16
Hungary	65	17
Ireland	95	13
Italy	86	31
Netherlands	57	22
Northern Ireland	92	26
Norway	59	16
Poland	94	16
Russia	52	13
Spain	82	19
Sweden	54	12

*Note.* The U.S. "belief in God" data are from Gallup and Lindsay (1999) (in the Hirsley [1993] data, this percentage was 94%). The U.S. "religious experience" data come from the General Social Survey (GSS) data for 1972–1998 (GSS, 1999). "Belief in God" data for other countries are from Hirsley (1993). "Religious experience" data for other countries are from Greeley (2002).

necessity of comprehending faith in the rest of the world. Greeley's efforts to look beyond U.S. borders are important for broadening our perspectives.

### RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND BEHAVIOR IN THE UNITED STATES

U.S. residents take their religion very seriously. Sociologists indicate that "upwards of 93% of Americans have a religious preference" (Hadaway & Roof, 1988, p. 30). With regard to religious affiliation, Table 6.2 indicates its current status in the United States. Even though these findings only cover two decades, no notable changes in commitment over the last half-century have been demonstrated. Religion is deeply ingrained in the U.S. milieu and mind, and is therefore quite stable.

Nominal affiliation is buttressed by Moore's (2000) findings that 69% of U.S. adults said in 1980 that they were church or synagogue members, and that in 1999 the number was 70%. In 1999, 44% of adults also reported that they attended services within the preceding week—a rise of 5% from 1950 (Moore, 2000). The stability of church attendance among U.S. residents is further evidenced by a review of Gallup Polls in the 20th century, which indicates that church attendance in 1939 and 1999 was identical, at 41% (Newport, Moore, & Saad, 2000).

Another behavioral sign of religious commitment is Bible reading. In 2000, 59% of those surveyed stated that they read the Bible, at least occasionally; 16% claimed to read the Bible daily, and 14% said that they participated in Bible study groups (Gallup & Simons, 2000).

**TABLE 6.2. Religious Affiliation in the United States for 1980 and 1999 (Percentages of the Population)**

Affiliation	1980 (%)	1999 (%)
Protestant	61	55
Roman Catholic	28	28
Jewish	2	2
Other	2	6
None	7	8

*Note.* Data from U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000, p. 62).

Prayer is also a very significant expression of religious devotion. National data suggest that 88% of U.S. adults pray, but that only one-third pray once a week or more (General Social Survey [GSS], 1999; Poloma & Gallup, 1991).

The foregoing statistics are impressive testimony to the religious behavior of adults in the United States. This information is, however, premised upon the verbal statements of those surveyed, and thus may not always be accurate. Most Americans view religious activity in a very positive light; the notion that good people are religious people is widely held. When U.S. residents are questioned, some exaggeration of personal religious commitment is to be expected because of its socially desirable character. Responding in this manner is quite common, as a massive literature on social-desirability-based responding amply illustrates (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Epley & Dunning, 2000). Still, the issue is not so simple, as inclinations toward this type of responding are probably confounded with the values of a committed, intrinsic faith (Watson, Morris, Foster, & Hood, 1986). Both motivations are likely to be expressed: People want to look good both to themselves and others, and they often try to live in accordance with the tenets of their faith. This, of course, means that surveys are likely to produce higher rates of religious activity and belief expression than hard observational data might indicate.

Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves (1993) carried out a major study to compare survey data on church attendance with actual counts of those attending services. Their results strongly "suggest that Protestant and Catholic church attendance is roughly half" (p. 748) that reported in surveys. Citing earlier work, these researchers feel that "inflation errors are more serious for membership statistics than for attendance counts" (p. 743). Though we are usually forced to rely on questionnaire and survey data that may be subject to social desirability influences, such data are frequently all we have. We must therefore understand the direction of potential bias, and account for it wherever possible.

The discrepancy between membership and attendance statistics tells us that being affiliated with a religious institution should not be confused with the idea of being religious. For many people, joining a church is the "right" thing to do, and is not necessarily different from being a member of some fraternal organization or local service club (Demerath & Hammond, 1969). Many who are not affiliated with a specific institution could easily be seen as more religious than the average church member. A common self-identification is to say that one is "spiritual." Though this term is fraught with unclear meanings, it is (as noted in Chapters 1 and 2) amenable to a wide variety of interpretations, not the least of which is a search to locate oneself in the scheme of things—to find ultimate answers (Emmons, 1999; Roof, 1993).

The foregoing discussion shows that there does not appear to have been any significant decline in religion in the United States for a century or more, ever since formal data on religious devotion and commitment have been gathered.

### RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN THE UNITED STATES

Similar backing for the central role of religion in the life of U.S. adults comes from polls on religious beliefs. The simple question, "How important would you say religion is in your life?" has been asked by the Gallup Poll organization since 1952. At that time, 95% of respondents claimed that their faith was fairly or very important to them. Since 1980, this percentage has shown minor erratic fluctuations between 86% and 89%. Though it has declined slightly in the past 50 years, in March 2000 the response to this query was 88%—suggesting the relative constancy of the feelings of U.S. adults regarding their religion for at least the last 20 years (Moore, 2000).

When asked about the applicability of religion to "today's problems," those polled are less sure that faith is relevant to impersonal matters beyond their own lives. During the late 1990s, the percentage believing that religion has such practical value showed no real change, remaining largely between 66% and 68% (Moore, 2000). Even greater indecision is evidenced when the issue concerns the growth or loss of religion's "influence in American life": The vacillating character of responses to this query is revealed in numbers varying from 27% to 48% in the 1990s. This item may be particularly sensitive to national problems that exist at the time the survey is administered. The overall pattern suggests that the 36–38% range is most representative. In March 2000, 37% of those sampled believed that religion is increasing its national influence (Moore, 2000). We are also probably witnessing the normal variation one can expect from different national samples. A broader picture of the pervasiveness of religion may be gained from the Christian beliefs examined in Table 6.3. Clearly, a considerable number of U.S. adults testify to the truth of these aspects of Christianity.

Again, however, it must be remembered that survey research is fraught with pitfalls. Just as we have mentioned earlier that data may be biased by social-desirability-based response sets, there are many instances when we have to curb our desire to take large-sample survey findings at face value. The GSS, the Gallup Polls, and the National Opinion Research Center provide information on thousands of people over long periods of time. These names are

TABLE 6.3. The Percentages of U.S. Adults Subscribing to Various Christian Beliefs

Beliefs	%
Miracles	48.3
Heaven	64.1
Hell	52.2
The Devil	64.9
Life after death	56.1
Bible is the word of God	33.5
Bible is inspired word	49.8

Note. Data from GSS (1999).

household words for social scientists, and it is not unusual to read sample sizes in the thousands. We cannot fail to be impressed, but results are invariably presented in percentages. For example, some data presented above indicated that the personal importance of religion to U.S. adults dropped from 95% in 1952 to 88% in 2000. Before the flag of battle or surrender is raised, we must recognize that the U.S. population increased by 79% during this period. Whereas about 150 million claimed religion was fairly or very important to them in 1952, the comparable number in 2000 was approximately 248 million. Descriptive terms such as "fairly" or "very" offer some guidance, but their meanings may have shifted. The average religionist today could be more committed and involved than in past years. This is implied by Gallup Polls finding that 33% of those surveyed described themselves as "born again" or "evangelical" in 1986; in 1994, 39% felt similarly (*The Gallup Poll Monthly*, 1994). Translating these figures into population equivalents suggests that there were about 23 million more people who felt this way in 1994. There are obviously great strengths to employing percentages, but there are times when we need to think of the actual numbers behind these percentages.

## GENDER AND RELIGION

Appreciating the many overt and subtle influences that affect adult religion necessitates a blurring of the frequently vague boundaries between sociology and psychology. Demographic factors, such as age, sex, and socioeconomic status, need to be addressed in relation to religious belief and behavior. These factors also must be translated from their collective character into individual psychological expression.

### The Data on Gender and Religion

The data are clear: **Women** consistently demonstrate a greater affinity for religion than men. The national findings presented in Table 6.4 demonstrate both stronger beliefs and higher levels of religious activity on the part of females.

**TABLE 6.4. A Comparison of Male and Female Religious Affiliation, Activities, and Beliefs**

Question	Men (%)	Women (%)
Religion "very important"	53	67
Member, church or synagogue	63	73
Attend church, last 7 days	63	57
Believe in miracles	71	86
Cope with crisis by prayer	74	86
Cope with crisis by reading Bible	56	72
Taught religion as child	78	81
Want their children to get religious training	86	90
Describe selves as "born again"	37	41
Thought a lot about developing faith in last 2 years	41	58
Interested a lot in relations with God	48	66
Feel need for spiritual growth	79	84
Religion relevant to today's problems	60	69

Note. Data from Gallup and Lindsay (1999). Percentages indicate "yes" responses.

This has fascinating possibilities, not the least of which have the potential of involving biology. Whitney (1976), citing data from many mammalian species, shows greater social cohesiveness and cooperation among females than among males. The observation that religion and ingroup social cohesion go together has been well explicated by Durkheim and others (see McGuire, 1992). Arguments in favor of women's religion and spirituality stress cooperation and cohesion (Conn, 1986). Echoes of biology may thus be heard in the strong propensities of women for religion and social unity.

### Explaining the Data

A number of theories have been proposed to explain the foregoing data. Anthropologists and sociologists suggest that male dominance means that females are socialized to be dependent and submissive. This is commonly translated into lower status for women, and has repercussions in terms of the division of labor. In many societies women are defined as homemakers and child rearers. Not being in the work force, they are regarded as having more time for religion, and this is cited as a reason for their greater church attendance and stronger religious beliefs and commitments. Women's greater religious participation is thus treated as a natural aspect of the overall female role within the social order (Miller & Hoffman, 1995).

Psychologically, Miller and Hoffman (1995) provide an opportunity to interpret the female social role in terms of risk taking. Being in a weaker position than men, women should therefore be lower in risk-taking behavior (more "risk-averse"), and should tend to adopt culturally safe positions such as religion. In other words, women are expected to confront life stresses and ambiguities conservatively. The case can then be made that males are socialized to be independent and hence to become risk takers. This may explain gender differences in many aspects of life in which females take risks less often than do boys and men. As expected, the research does show that risk aversion is positively associated both with religiosity and with being female (Miller & Hoffman, 1995).

The lower status and power of women (McGuire, 1992; Pargament, 1997) has been analogized by Hinde (1999) to the "religion of the oppressed"—namely, the need of the powerless to turn to their faith when all other avenues fail. Hinde further appeals to a biological foundation that affiliates femininity with a greater propensity for social connections and relationships with others, as suggested above.

This greater attachment to religion on the part of women has some interesting implications. One is that religion is likely to possess more utility for women than for men, and the evidence suggests that this is true (Pargament, 1997). That is, the more religious people are, the more helpful religion is seen to be in coping with life's problems. In general, as will further be shown in Chapter 15, the use of religion as a psychosocial resource is positively associated with good outcomes. Religion may perform such functions to a greater extent for women than for men.

In most instances, women are the "religious culture carriers." A fascinating demonstration of this role across the centuries is illustrated by the work of Janet Jacobs (1996) on the function of women in the survival of "crypto-Jewish culture." Crypto-Jewish culture is a result of the 15th- and 16th century persecution of Jews during the Spanish Inquisition. Facing death or conversion to Catholicism, many Spanish Jews either left Spain or "converted." This frequently meant that their Judaism "went underground," but persisted in one form or another until the present day as a crypto- or concealed Judaism with largely hidden traditional Jewish practices. Crypto-Jews live primarily in the southwestern United States and

Mexico, though some are also found in the eastern states among Hispanic émigrés from the Caribbean.

Interviewing a sample of crypto-Jews in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, Jacobs (1996) attributed the survival of crypto-Jewish culture to the women in these families. This framework of beliefs and behavior was historically and still is kept secret from outsiders, often beneath a veneer of Catholicism. Support for crypto-Judaism is associated with the maintenance of classical Jewish rituals, primarily by the women in the home. Among these, Jacobs observed the lighting of Sabbath candles; the enforcement of kosher dietary laws; and the celebration of Jewish holiday ceremonies for Passover, Purim, and Chanukah. Since these families were and still are often overtly Catholic, the Jewish festival of Purim might be practiced as the festival of St. Esther, and Chanukah masked as the festival of Las Posadas (a celebratory representation of the journey of Joseph and Mary). Often central to this Catholic–Jewish syncretic activity is the preparation of food, which in these families is strictly a female duty. The importance of secrecy plus the maintenance of classic Jewish rituals and practices endows the women in these crypto-Jewish families with both power and responsibility. The mothers must protect the family’s religious integrity in each generation, and pass on to their daughters the heritage they have received from their forebears. In all likelihood, similar religious practices and perspectives are conveyed through the women in Christian families, especially among those who have changed churches. These possibilities do not say that the men in such religious settings play no role in preserving religious tradition, but rather that the women are the dominant force in teaching their faith to the children.

### Women’s Changing Roles in Relation to Religion

Though for hundreds of years a few exceptional women publicly expressed unhappiness with their position as underlings in virtually all aspects of life, effective large-scale change only began in the 20th century. The classical roles of women in relation to religion began to change radically in the 1960s. Subservience was often replaced by self-direction. Instead of following the paths set by males, many women decided on finding new ways of developing their own directions. Initially, this took two forms. Women spoke of their religious and spiritual struggles and aspirations (Meadow & Rayburn, 1985; Ware, 1985). Next came an attempt to realize these hopes and dreams by critiquing traditional religious institutional structures and their theological justifications (Christ & Plaskow, 1979; Plaskow & Romero, 1974; Ruether, 1974). Concurrently, resources were created to permit women to take long overdue leadership positions in churches and synagogues (Conn, 1986; Ruether & McLaughlin, 1979). Chaves (1997) argues that pressures for gender equality were a major force in spurring the ordination of women—a trend that has increased rapidly in several Protestant groups and in Reform Judaism over the past 30 years.

### Religion and the Women’s Movement

It is hard to believe that real concern about women’s roles in regard to religion only developed with the women’s movement of the last 40 years. There is no comparable line of questioning about the religion of men, as it was traditionally taken for granted that men should naturally dominate both women and religion. Historically, members of the clergy were males, and scripture has been used to validate the controlling role of men in both the family and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Even when women did serve the church, such as Catholic nuns,



real power still resided in the hands of a masculine hierarchy. So, although individual women may have begun questioning their position in relation to religion well before the 1960s, this development was not widely articulated before that time.

### *Feminism and Religion: The Struggle*

Cultural change is often slow and troubled. This is evidenced in recent work on the conflicted attitudes of women in conservative Christian and Jewish groups. While arguing for equality in self-expression and opportunity outside of their conservative faiths, they appear to be ambivalent regarding the liberalization of their roles in church and home. There is also a tendency to oppose feminism explicitly, while implicitly accepting its ideas when these are framed in appropriate orthodox/conservative terminology (Manning, 1999).

Studying the feminist identity of Jewish women, Dufour (2000) encountered a situation similar to that in Manning's study. Dufour perceives this process of coping with conservative religion versus change as one of "sifting." Judaism is examined, and doctrinal selection takes place in order to resolve the conflict between spiritual and religious identities. Beliefs and actions that do not satisfy feminist spiritual needs are "sifted" out. We need to know more about what is observed and what is removed from consideration, however. When is feminism challenged and/or threatened, and, conversely, when does one's religious identity become tenuous?

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AGE

### The Phenomenon of Adulthood

The psychological correlates and effects of age have been primarily examined with regard to childhood, adolescence, and old age. Research surveys on religion and aging seem exclusively devoted to work with elderly individuals (Fecher, 1982; Koenig, 1995). When one becomes a "senior citizen" or "elderly person" is unclear, ranging from about 50 to 65 years. Atchley (1977), however, points out the inadequacy of chronological age as a criterion for one's later years. Great individual variation exists in how people respond to the advances of time. There are very many physically and mentally active people in their 80s; others still in their 50s manifest the debilitating effects of what we regard as old age. Even though we generally treat adulthood and aging as reasonably well-circumscribed times in the life cycle, we must recognize the overwhelming significance of individuality and avoid engaging in age stereotyping.

At first glance, becoming an adult is simply defined chronologically. Sometime about the age of 18, there is a vague sociocultural transition to adulthood. A new image of maturity is invoked, with accompanying political and social responsibilities (for which adolescents are assumed to be unprepared). Still, for many young people, 4 years or more are taken up with continuing education before they enter the job market. Usually, without further ado, these young adults are expected to take on the burdens of adult life. Though these pose many new concerns, most can be subsumed under a few major problem areas. We explore these in Chapter 7.

Unfortunately, there are no agreed-upon divisions of the years constituting adult life. Even though Erik Erikson (1963) referred to "early," "middle," and "late" adulthood, he was not consistent with respect to their boundaries. In less than rigorous formality, early adulthood ranges from 17 or 20 years to about 45, with middle adulthood continuing to about 65 years

of age (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). As conceptually appealing as this framework is, very little has been done to provide it with empirical verification. Some fine efforts have also been made to coordinate Erikson's thinking with religion, but the need for research to supplement these ideas continues (Browning, 1973; Wright, 1982).

We can gain a broad perspective on religion in adulthood by looking at the phenomenon known as the "baby boomer" generation. "Baby boomers" are Americans born immediately following World War II, during the years from 1946 to 1964—a time of high birth rates. An estimated 76 million children were born in the United States during this period. Currently, most boomers are middle-aged; some are now on the threshold of old age. With respect to faith, the noted sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof (1993) has called them "a generation of seekers."

### Religion and the Baby Boomer Generation

Many baby boomers have attempted to pursue spirituality outside of the religious mainstream, but their main direction has been much more mundane, which suggests that the future of organized religion in our nation is probably safe for some time to come.

In his major study of the baby boomers' religion, Roof employed a sample of 1,599 people in four states spanning the nation. He distinguished three groups: "loyalists," "returnees," and "dropouts." Loyalists, as the word implies, stayed with traditional religion; the returnees often deviated considerably in their personalized experiments with faith before coming back to the mainstream. The dropouts included those who either moved away from or were never affiliated with mainstream religious institutions. Table 6.5 offers some insight into the journey of those who were reared as Catholics, and as "mainline" and "conservative" Protestants.

The table suggests that orthodox Protestants and Catholics, the more conservative groups, were more successful in keeping their members as active religionists than mainline Protestants were. In addition, about twice as many of the mainline Protestants as of the other groups shifted to other faiths. These effects may be an expression of the power of conservative religious bodies. More mainline Protestants also became nonreligious than members of the other groups. Still, Roof (1993) found that before their possible return, over 60% of all the young adults with religious backgrounds had dropped out of their faith. When they did come back, 13% moved toward fundamentalism, and 21% were denoted as conservative (technically "evangelical moderates").

We see some possible contradictions when we look at attitudes toward churchgoing and actual weekly attendance among Roof's subjects. With respect to the latter, as we move from liberal to conservative groups, the attendance percentages for men ranged from 31% to 51%; for women, the comparable figures ranged from 30% to 80%. When subjects were asked, however, whether a person "can be a good Christian and not attend church," the parallel agreement percentages varied from 66% (conservative) to 94% (not conservative). Churchgoing has thus become an issue of personal determination and choice, which Roof (1993) has described as the "new voluntarism" (p. 110).

There is no doubt that exposure to the 1960s "revolution against the establishment" had a rather pervasive effect. For those minimally affected by this period, 56% dropped out. Where such influence was high, 84% left the institutional fold. Still, in terms of belief in a deity, the baby boomers essentially matched the overall population, with 94–95% of the total group affirming this stance. An interesting subtle shift may be inferred from the finding that,

TABLE 6.5. Religious Paths Taken by Baby Boomers Reared as Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Conservative Protestants

Religious path taken	%
<u>Reared as Catholics</u>	
Loyalists (identify selves as Catholics)	33
Currently active as Catholics	50
Shifted to other faiths <sup>a</sup>	12
Currently religiously active	58
Initial dropouts	67
Returnees	25
Final dropouts	42
Inactive Catholic	31
<u>Reared as mainline Protestants</u>	
Loyalists (identify selves as mainline Protestants)	31
Currently active mainline Protestants	39
Shifted to other faiths <sup>a</sup>	24
Currently religiously active	56
Initial dropouts	69
Returnees	24
Final dropouts	45
Inactive mainline Protestants	26
<u>Reared as conservative Protestants</u>	
Loyalists (identify selves as conservative Protestants)	39
Currently active conservative Protestants	55
Shifted to other faiths <sup>a</sup>	13
Currently religiously active	64
Initial dropouts	61
Returnees	25
Final dropouts	36
Inactive conservative Protestants	25

*Note.* Adapted from Roof (1993, pp. 176–179). Copyright 1993 by HarperCollins Publishers. Adapted by permission.  
<sup>a</sup>For Catholics, this includes shifts to conservative and mainline Protestant groups, with a variety of undefined faiths. For mainline Protestants, this includes shifts to conservative Protestant groups; for conservative Protestants, this includes shifts to mainline bodies.

as Roof (1993) has put it, “these intense seekers prefer to think of themselves as ‘spiritual’ rather than as ‘religious’” (p. 79).

Perkins (1991) studied a subset of the baby boomers, called “yuppies” (“young, upwardly mobile, urban professionals”). On the average, religious commitment and yuppie values were negatively related, but many yuppies still identified themselves with religion. In addition, a religious stance was positively associated with a sense of happiness. Greater insight into the religious perspectives and needs of the yuppies would have nicely supplemented Roof’s research.

Even though Roof’s study appeared to include Jews, no data on Jews were offered, little discussion was provided, and only a few individuals were mentioned. It is therefore difficult to form an opinion regarding “religious seeking” on the part of Roof’s Jewish respondents.

Using poll data, Waxman (1994) studied a sample of 801 Jewish baby boomers. Unfortunately, very few questions were employed, and it is very difficult to compare Waxman's findings with those of Roof (1993). On the surface, a quite different situation seemed to exist with this group than with those studied by Roof. If we assume some tenuous correspondence between Roof's category of "loyalists" (Protestants and Catholics identifying with their traditional faith) and Waxman's "personal importance" distinction, Jewish identification among Waxman's subjects appeared greater than traditional Catholic or Protestant identification among Roof's Christians. From 31% to 39% of Roof's groups were classified as loyalists, whereas Waxman found that 85% of his sample regarded being Jewish as important to some degree. (Keep in mind that this comparison may be challenged.)

Sometimes one hears the term "cultural Jew," which may be valid here. Christianity is tightly tied to religion, whereas Judaism often refers to both a faith and a culture, especially in the United States. One rarely if ever hears of "Christian Americans," but "Jewish Americans" is a common referent (Goldstein & Goldscheider, 1968). Also, though being Jewish was considered important, essentially half of Waxman's baby boomers (49.8%) were not married to Jews; by contrast, almost 80% of an older comparison sample of 46- to 64-year-olds had Jewish spouses. This favors the "cultural Jew" argument, rather than one based on conformity to Jewish religious principles.

Neither the work of Perkins (1991) nor that of Waxman (1994) approaches the depth of Roof's (1993) effort, and we can easily ask for more. Interview data are excellent for the development of hypotheses that can be quantitatively assessed. We can view the struggles of individuals, but as poignant as they are, they point to subgroups that need further exploration. Studies of background motivational and experiential factors are largely lacking. Among Jews, distinctions among Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox affiliations need to be examined. Whether Jewish or Christian groups are studied, there are seekers, rejecters, and those who are simply apathetic about religion. There is much more to be learned about the life histories of such individuals.

## THE ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION OF INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION

Adulthood is a time when people make decisions about how religion may affect their lives. Not the least among these is how people will relate as individuals to their faith. Will it be through the traditional avenues of church involvement in the style of their parents? Will there be a seeking of new paths and expressions, a turn to some alternative version of orthodoxy, a loosening of ties, a shift to a different faith, or a complete rejection of religion? These are questions that all individuals ask themselves at one time or another, but they become especially significant when raised in adulthood. What choices will be made and why? These concerns are dealt with, in part, in other chapters; however, let us look at a few of their manifestations in adulthood.

### Becoming Involved with Religious Institutions

There are many reasons for people to affiliate themselves with religious institutions. These range from an automatic, habitual continuation of family tradition to deep personal struggles with understanding one's place in life and society. (See also Chapter 11 on conversion, since conversion is mainly an issue of adult life.)

A fine example of research in this area was carried out by Roberts and Davidson (1984). Recognizing the importance of psychosocial factors in church involvement, these researchers noted two major approaches to the problem: (1) the importance of religious meaning to the individual, and (2) religion as a social phenomenon (i.e., the significance of belonging to a church and relating to its members). Research Box 6.1 details this work.

This study shows that many factors may affect the choice to become involved with a church (or other religious institution). Meaning systems and social relationships are both very important and are probably not independent of each other. For example, both may relate to socioeconomic status, education achieved, the nature of the church under consideration, and a host of other sociocultural factors (Roberts & Davidson, 1984). Surprisingly, actual religious beliefs were shown to be least important in this complex array of motivations. In all likelihood, we are witnessing the effects of little variation in beliefs. Those involved in specific churches probably believe quite similarly, showing high agreement in their belief systems. Because this work is basically correlational, low variability works against obtaining the kinds of data (correlation coefficients) that might reveal the significance of reli-

#### **Research Box 6.1. The Nature and Sources of Religious Involvement (Roberts & Davidson, 1984)**

Seeking to answer the very basic question of why people become involved in their church, Roberts and Davidson studied 577 members of two Methodist and two Baptist churches in relation to four sets of possible predictors of involvement. These were (1) one's personal meaning system, (2) social ties to church members, (3) sociodemographic factors, and (4) religious beliefs. Specifically, these variables were assessed as follows:

*Meaning:* How one makes sense out of the world—theism, science, nonreligious materialism, social humanism.

*Social relations:* Connections to other church members, a sense of belonging to the church community.

*Demographic factors:* Age, gender, socioeconomic status (education, occupation, income), denominational affiliation.

*Religious beliefs:* Beliefs in existence of God, divinity of Jesus, miracles, virgin birth, life after death.

Using the statistical method of path analysis, Roberts and Davidson observed a complex set of associations among the measures. Meaning and social relations were positively correlated, which suggested that others confirmed and supported one's personal meaning system. These two factors directly contributed most to church involvement. Religious beliefs were weakly and indirectly influential. (One possible major reason for this is presented in the text.) Sociodemographic variables were also indirectly effective, largely through their influence on one's meaning system. Older members and women tended to be most involved, but the important factor was whether a respondent was a member of the liberal (Methodist) or conservative (Baptist) denomination being studied. Overall, meaning and social ties were the big determiners of church involvement. More research of this nature would help us understand further the connections among the predictor variables—in particular, the role of religious and social beliefs.

religious beliefs. This limitation in analysis masks the qualitative and quantitative importance of beliefs. Clearly, liberal churches have members whose views differ from the views of those in conservative churches; however, within each there is probably considerable similarity, and hence little variation.

Utilizing a slightly different theoretical cast, Cornwall (1987) asked two basic questions: "How do adults come to their religious perspectives?" and "What maintains these outlooks?" Her research answer to the first query was religious socialization by family and friends. Once this framework is established, a connection to a "personal community" of like-minded believers supports and strengthens the religious system.

O'Hara (1980) suggests some differences between Protestants and Catholics in why church participation persists from childhood to adult life. For Protestants, the dominant influence is "accommodation," or how one deals with the social pressures exerted by significant others. Second comes meaning or cognition—namely, the degree to which the faith that is embraced resolves basic questions about life, death, God, and the supernatural. Third is socialization—being part of a religious group that has established norms for religious belief and behavior. The order of these factors for Catholics is cognition, accommodation, and lastly socialization. This variation between Catholics and Protestants is probably a function of the historically conditioned practices and beliefs that distinguish these two broad patterns of faith.

The processes of becoming and remaining involved in religion are clearly complex. Sociocultural influences operate on a large scale. Psychologically, we contend that religious behavior, belief, and experience are gratifying to the individual. Basically, religion makes people feel good: It helps resolve conflicts, answers fundamental questions, enhances their sense of control in life, and brings like-minded individuals together. One meta-analysis of 28 studies concluded that among adults, subjective well-being and religion are positively correlated (Witter, Stock, Okun, & Haring, 1985). Apparently religious activity is more important than belief, but both contribute to the sense of self-satisfaction generated by religious participation. These positive feelings probably result from social integration, which, according to Durkheim (1915), makes life more meaningful. Note that in Chapter 3, the evolutionary/genetic theory of religion presented there relies on meaning and social integration as two of the three basic religious motivations. The third, control, could well be a natural development from these two foundations. It should also contribute to them.

Peter Benson (1988a, 1988b), a scholar known for studying the big problems in the psychology of religion, has undertaken extensive research on what he terms "mature faith." This concept has much in common with Allport's Intrinsic religious orientation—namely, a deep religious commitment that includes social sensitivity and "life-affirming values" (Benson, 1988a, p. 16). The latter constitute Saint Thomas Aquinas's classical duties to oneself, others, and God (Spilka, 1970). In mature faith, then, a healthy lifestyle is combined with an appreciation of human welfare, equality, personal responsibility, and what sounds like the role of faith in everyday life.

Utilizing thousands of respondents, Benson found religious maturity to be an outgrowth of literally being steeped in one's faith through family, early religious education, and affiliations throughout life with like-minded others. Maternal and spousal influence (which may be translated into support and reinforcement) also appeared to be central in maintaining strong attachments to religious principles and church doctrines (Benson, 1988b).

We can see that becoming deeply involved with religious institutions has many facets, among which are the need for personal meaning, identification with a like-minded community, and (probably most important of all) a family background and familial ties that stress

the pertinence of religious faith to the way life is lived. Undoubtedly, there is room for utilitarian attachments to religion, as Allport's concept of Extrinsic religious orientation conveys.

### Apostasy: Leaving the Faith

At the opposite end of the spectrum from involvement is apostasy, disaffiliation, or leaving the faith (which has been discussed in regard to young people in Chapter 5). This has two main facets: A person may join a different church, or may simply reject religion *in toto*, embracing either agnosticism or atheism. When we look at why individuals leave their church, the situation gets even more complicated. One study identified three kinds of "unchurched" Protestants (Perry, Davis, Doyle, & Dyble, 1980). Those regarded as "estranged" and "indifferent" held similar traditional beliefs, but differed in commitment: The latter just became inactive, whereas for the former, religion was no longer salient in their lives. This was also true for "nominal" Protestants, for whom traditional beliefs were irrelevant.

After interviewing respondents in six counties across the United States, Hale (1977) offered a scheme that demonstrates how complex the realm of unchurched individuals actually is. Table 6.6 details this framework. A system such as Hale's begs for rigorous, objective study, for there is a high likelihood that some of these categories overlap and/or may represent personality and social dispositions for which religion is a convenient scapegoat or expression.

Some of these factors are also present in a classificatory scheme for Catholic dropouts that has been proposed by Hoge (1988). There is some overlap with Hale's (1977) framework, but some new (more personal and familial) factors are described in Table 6.7. Hoge also noted that dropout type in his study was a function of age. Those under 23 were mostly in the "family tension" group; adolescent rebellion entered this picture. In contrast, "weary" and "lifestyle" dropouts were commonly found among those older than 23. Problems with faith may well represent personal and social needs that one struggles with in early and middle adulthood.

Simple institutional disaffiliation may occur for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the prevailing influence of secularization in modern society (Nelson, 1988). Some of these are implied in the labels researchers have applied to the various types of "dropouts" and "unchurched" individuals. Many such people remain personally religious, but churches, temples, and synagogues no longer seem relevant to their life in the modern world. Causes for this strain between persons and religious institutions also lie in the considerable level of physical, social, and economic mobility that prevails in much of early and middle adulthood. People are often "too busy" to consider questions of ultimate meaning or to feel the need to relate to a specific religious community. With respect to a wide variety of attitudes and beliefs, those who are religiously disengaged tend to be more liberal than churchgoers on many social, moral, and political issues (Nelson, 1988).

#### • The Possible Role of Education

These observations raise questions about the possible role of education in disaffiliation from institutional religion. This relationship is by no means clear. Though a negative correlation between education and holding orthodox beliefs was found in the 1950s, by the 1980s this association had essentially disappeared (Wuthnow, 1993). Roof (1993) has commented that his baby boomers were exposed to more secular and scientific explanations for various phe-

TABLE 6.6. A Taxonomy of Unchurched Individuals

Unchurched type	Description
Anti-institutionalists	See themselves as truly religious, "better Christians" (Hale, 1977, p. 40).
The boxed-in	Church was too restrictive.
The constrained	Feel limited by doctrinal rules.
The thwarted	Feel suppressed from growing by church insistence on conformity and dependence.
The independents	Independent, nonconformists.
The burned-out	Feel exhausted, drained, emptied.
The used	Feel exploited, worked over.
Light travelers	Feel no need to continue a deep commitment, just "take it easy."
The cop-outs	Never really committed, involved.
The apathetic	Can "take it or leave it."
The drifters	Establish no real attachments.
Happy hedonists	Either utilitarian or leisure-oriented; seek gratification.
The locked-out	Feel rejected or victimized.
The rejected	Feel church has not accepted them.
The neglected	Feel church ignores them.
The discriminated	Feel church is biased against them.
The nomads	Religious vagrants, expect to move on and up; casually attached.
The pilgrims	Seekers and searchers who believe.
The publicans	Self-righteous; feel "better than others." Can't find their "true faith" in church.
The scandalized	See power seekers, factions, and divisiveness in church.
True believers	Hold alternative or antichurch positions.
Agnostics/atheists	Don't know if God exists, or fully reject the idea.
Deists/rationalists	Rely on reason, not revelation.
Humanists/secularists	Committed to human ideals outside of the church.
The uncertain	No reason for nonaffiliation.

sq man  
dit real

Note. Data from Hale (1977).

nomena than earlier generations were. Though these perspectives were found among post-graduates, they do not appear to have adversely affected their belief in God. Roof has noted that "both uncertainty and belief in a higher power are more common among the better educated" (1993, p. 73). Greeley's (2002) multinational study also finds that current university graduates are likely to be theists. Atheistic propensities among these highly educated people have been declining for many years.



TABLE 6.7. Hoge's Classification of Catholic Dropouts

Dropout type	Description
Family tension	Rebellion vs. parents causes rejection of church and family.
Weary	Low religious motivation; church "boring and uninteresting."
Lifestyle	Lifestyle clashes with church's moral position and teachings.
Spiritual needs	These needs not met by church.
Antichange	Oppose church liberalization.
Out-converts after intermarriage	Marriage to a non-Catholic and shift to spouse's faith.

*Note.* Adapted from Hoge (1988). Copyright 1988 by Sage Publications. Adapted by permission.

In contradiction, Shermer (2000) cites large-sample data (over 2,000 respondents) showing a negative relationship between belief in God for either rational or emotional reasons and education. These results may be statistically significant, but they are rather weak. Other work on a sample of over 12,000 people revealed that the average educational attainment of church members fell 1 year below that of nonmembers (Caplow et al., 1983). Again, one should approach such small differences with caution.

### *Alternative Possibilities*

Albrecht and Bahr (1983) describe some subtleties in the inclinations of those who either leave Mormonism or abandon their original church to become Mormons. Most ex-Mormons drop out of religion altogether; that is, they simply become nonreligious. The next largest group of leavers become Catholics, suggesting that they remain conservative religionists. Most converts to Mormonism come from mainline Protestant bodies, and possess rather orthodox outlooks that the Mormon faith can effectively satisfy.

An interesting hypothesis is offered by Albrecht and Bahr in regard to either dropping out altogether or switching to a new faith. Switching may be seen as more deviant than dropping out. It means going public with a rejection of the previous identification (in this case, Mormonism) in favor of a new group that, by implication, the switcher considers "better." The person who just drops out can be viewed as a "lost soul" who has not found any real alternative. The first action can stimulate hostility; the second, pity by former coreligionists. The dropout may be considered potentially salvageable; the switcher is not. One wonders whether pity might turn to rage and total ostracism if a dropout publicly denies the existence of God. This could add even more insult to injury than switching.

Hadaway (1980), using Gallup Poll data from national samples, also notes that switchers are mostly conservative religious seekers. The motivation to change is frequently associated with a religious experience, particularly among evangelicals. Apparently a period of integration of the meaning of the experience takes place during the process of reaffiliation into a group that values such encounters.

Though we discuss intermarriage in greater detail in Chapter 7, we briefly consider it here as a basis for switching and dropping out. Again there are a number of possibilities. First, religion may be unimportant to two people from different religious backgrounds. If they marry, religion may never be a problem. In many instances, however, the initial unimpor-

tance of faith changes for one or both spouses when children enter the family. Individually or together, they may become seekers, like many of the baby boomers. Community and family social pressures relative to religion also frequently enter the picture. U.S. society, with its high level of religiosity, makes independence from a religious or spiritual framework increasingly difficult with the passing years.

The ~~most common intermarriage situation entails one spouse's switching to the faith~~ of the other. Using national data on approximately 8,000 individuals, Musick and Wilson (1995) show least switching for marital reasons among Jews, Baptists, Mormons, and Catholics. The highest switching rates for intermarriage occur among Disciples of Christ, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and members of the United Church of Christ. With regard to the details of switching for marital purposes, Musick and Wilson suggest that liberal religionists tend to affiliate with conservative religious bodies, while conservatives move toward the liberal end of the spectrum. Interestingly, Catholics shift to the no-religion category when marriage is an issue. The need for a more in-depth analysis of factors that relate to marital switching is abundantly evident.

## RELIGION AND ELDERLY INDIVIDUALS

It is widely assumed and often stated that people in late adulthood are more religious than their younger peers. This makes eminently good sense, but the data are often equivocal. Can we then say that people become more religious as they age? Despite Freud's and others' theories that the knowledge of death stimulates religious thinking and beliefs, and the fact that elderly people are approaching death, we cannot simply say that increasing age creates a need for faith. The alternative is simply that elderly persons were reared in a time when religion ~~was more widely accepted and taught~~ than it is today.

Some support for this latter position was found in a large-scale study of 11,000 people (Benson & Eklin, 1990). Those respondents aged 60–69 years had, when young, attended church-related or religious schools longer than younger respondents had. The same was true of coming from families in which devotions, Bible reading, and/or prayer were practiced in the home. When this work was undertaken in the late 1980s, these people in their 60s still demonstrated the highest frequencies for reading the Bible and other religious literature, plus engaging in prayer or meditation. Unhappily, the situation in this study was confused by the respondents aged over 70, who did not reveal a similar high level of background religion or current religious activity. Lack of data on this latter sample restricts our understanding of possible influences.

Survey data from different sources sometimes provide information that is difficult to reconcile. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000), church and synagogue membership increases with age. Sixty-four percent of those 30–49 years old report an institutional affiliation; this increases to 82% for those 65 and older. In contradiction, the GSS (1999) data show no clear pattern of membership with age (see Table 6.8). Still, the United Methodist Church reports that the average age of its members has been increasing for over 40 years (*Christian Century*, 1995). The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) further indicates that new members are younger than current members by 7 years (Marcum & Woolever, 1999). In some instances, church membership may be confounded with church attendance. There is reason to believe that the latter declines in old age, as illness and infirmity may make church-going increasingly difficult (Ainlay, Singleton, & Swigert, 1992; Atchley, 1977; Payne, 1988).

This inference may also be questioned, however, as Orbach (1961) found no patterning age with attendance at services. Other research supports a decline in institutional religious activity, but suggests a corresponding growth in private religious behavior (Brennan & Missinne, 1980).

Table 6.8 illustrates the problem of too readily assuming that the religious beliefs and behavior of elderly individuals can be distinguished from those of younger people. The data in this table run counter to both popular and supposedly informed beliefs about religion among elderly persons. That is, a fairly consistent decline in religious beliefs and activities is evident from the 30s through the 70s. Could it be that the oldest decade sampled here was the least religious because those questioned were the healthiest in their age group, and possibly utilized religion the least? Finney and Lee (1977) have tied increased religiosity to the anxieties of old age. Benson and Eklin (1990) used some items identical to those in the GSS schedule; their oldest respondents likewise showed lower levels of religious activity and weaker beliefs than their younger cohorts did.

By contrast, two classic patterns emerged from a recent Gallup Poll (Gallup & Simonson, 2000) when the data were analyzed by sex and age. First, among respondents who were frequent Bible readers, 43% were women and 29% men. Second, Bible reading increased with age in this overall sample, from 27% of those 18–29 years old to 50% of respondents 65 and older.

Given these observations, it appears that the expected pattern of high religiosity among elderly people is supported by the Gallup Poll data, but not by the findings of other researchers who also employed large samples. If we shift to studies of smaller samples, virtually everything is found. Hunsberger (1985) observed increased religiosity in old age. Others have shown essentially no change over many decades in adult life (Blazer & Palmore, 1976; Brennan & Missinne, 1980). Stark (1968) noted increases in belief in life after death with age, but no other evidence of growth in religious feelings. Blazer and Palmore (1976) revealed a decline in church activity, but no change in religious beliefs. Glamsler (1987) has suggested

TABLE 6.8. Relationships between Age and Religious Beliefs/Behaviors from the GSS, 1972–1998 (Percentages in Each Age Category)

Belief/behavior	20–29 (%)	30–39 (%)	40–49 (%)	50–59 (%)	60–69 (%)	70–79 (%)
Respondent religiosity <sup>a</sup>	15.5	21.4	22.7	14.7	14.0	11.8
Church activities <sup>b</sup>	15.7	23.4	20.6	9.5	15.9	14.9
Church/synagogue member <sup>b</sup>	19.8	21.8	17.8	10.3	15.6	14.7
Frequency of prayer <sup>c</sup>	16.2	23.6	20.7	15.0	10.3	11.9
No doubt God exists <sup>b</sup>	18.3	24.3	20.0	14.1	12.4	11.0
Belief in miracles <sup>b</sup>	19.4	26.3	20.2	13.8	10.9	9.5
Life after death <sup>b</sup>	19.4	27.3	21.0	12.8	10.4	9.1
Belief in heaven <sup>b</sup>	20.5	26.1	20.1	13.2	10.8	11.4
Belief in hell <sup>b</sup>	20.4	26.9	20.6	12.8	10.6	8.6
Belief in Devil <sup>b</sup>	21.1	26.5	20.0	11.5	11.1	9.9

Note. Data from GSS (1999).

<sup>a</sup>Includes “very high” plus “extremely high” categories.

<sup>b</sup>Response is “yes.”

<sup>c</sup>Several times a week or more.

that there may be a tendency for older people to move toward extremes in churchgoing—either to cease attending, or to increase attendance. This possibility needs corroboration. Moberg (1965b) concluded his fine review of this literature by noting that “religion as a set of extradomiciliary rituals apparently increases in old age, while the internal personal responses . . . decrease among religious people” (p. 87).

There is another lesson here about survey research that should be added to our earlier cautions; this also applies to research in general. That is, we need to know in detail how data are collected and from whom. Furthermore, different pollsters and researchers often employ different phrasings in conceptually overlapping questions. The comparability of results may thus become questionable. In addition, variance in age groupings and other demographic categories can be influential.

### RELIGIOUS PURPOSES

We have examined the form and content of adult faith, and have suggested motivations for individuals’ affiliating themselves with religious institutions, such as achieving meaning and becoming part of a supportive community. Collectively, Monaghan (1967) suggests **three basic expressive needs: authority seeking, comfort seeking, and social involvement**. Those in the first group want an authority upon whom they can be dependent, and to whom or which they can submit themselves for guidance. For these people, “the minister provides meaning for church members where none existed before” (p. 239). Is it possible that the baby boomers are primarily searching for authorities who offer ultimate meanings? There could, of course, be overlap with Monaghan’s second type, in that comfort seekers are also looking for answers, particularly regarding death and its aftermath. It is generally believed that such concerns increase as people age. In contrast, Monaghan’s socially involved individuals are really persons for whom the church becomes their life. Religion is primarily relational and interpersonal rather than ideological. This third group may be a rather small one.

Benson and Eklin (1990) speak of “horizontal,” “vertical,” and “integrated” faith. The first two forms, introduced earlier by Davidson (1972a, 1972b), refer to an orientation toward people or toward God and the supernatural, respectively. When both orientations are strong, one’s faith is said to be integrated. Benson and Eklin note that the overall tendency for adults is for a vertical perspective to be dominant. The survey data we have presented in this chapter strongly testify to this stance.

Throughout history, theologians have promulgated doctrines that church and faith should both comfort and challenge believers. The comforting function is abundantly evident when personal tragedy strikes. People turn to their God in times of stress and loss, and clergy translate these circumstances into practices that bring solace to petitioners. Socially, this comforting function maintains the cultural status quo. The social order is not challenged.

♦ Adherence to religious ideals has the potential of questioning and threatening both the individual and society. Becoming a better person may call attention to collective injustice, inequity, and suffering. Individual problems are often transformed into moral, social, economic, and political issues. Public authority and power are defied, and defiance commonly results in confrontation. When such challenge is legitimized by religion, the resulting conflict is especially bitter. Jensen (1989) has illustrated how belief in God and strong religious feelings can eventuate in improved medical care, aid to the needy, environmental action, stress reduction, nonviolent protest, actions to counter racism, and educational reform.

Generally, researchers who have employed fairly large samples to study the comfort-challenge issue in U.S. churches have overwhelmingly come out on the side of their comforting function (Davidson, 1972a, 1972b; Glock, Ringer, & Babbie, 1967). A number of scholars attribute this to religion's largely becoming "a private matter related to personal and family problems more than to social and community problems" (Davidson, 1972b, p. 65). (For more details on Davidson's work, see Chapter 7, Research Box 7.1.)

Even though the evidence is strong that U.S. religion is more concerned with personal comfort and satisfaction than with humanistic action, we will see in Chapter 13 on morality that there is a large potential for constructive and challenging social involvement.

## OVERVIEW

In this chapter we have examined the content of adult faith, primarily stressing the U.S. situation. Through some international comparisons, it is evident that ~~the~~ United States is one of the most religious nations in the West. The faith of adults is by no means a simple affair. It frequently involves personal and social struggles. First, there is a need to bring meaning into one's life, to gain some insight into ultimate questions and issues, and to understand basic truths. Concurrently, adulthood confronts people with the tasks of relating to others and becoming part of a compatible community. Institutional religion offers pathways to solve both the personal and the social problems with which thoughtful adulthood is concerned. As Roof's (1993) research well illustrates, seeking satisfying answers often involves disaffiliation from churches or synagogues and a search for new anchors. Sometimes this occasions rejection of religion; more often, shifts to a new and more conservative stance occur. Not infrequently, there is a return to the faith in which one was reared. All possibilities are found, leading us to an awareness that we need to know much more about the psychology of seekers.

Demographic factors such as gender, age, and education enter the picture, but again answers are elusive. Theories are offered to explain why women find religion more congenial than men; these directions range from biology to culture. Definitive tests of such possibilities are lacking, however. Large-scale surveys from different sources often disagree because of methodological problems that need to be resolved.

Stereotypes about the association of religion with old age abound, but the assumptions that prevail do not find much support. Simplistic thinking is challenged at every turn.

Research on the role of religion for the individual shows that it is primarily directed at personal comfort and utilitarian goals, rather than at resolving sociocultural problems and issues.

The real meaning of adult religion may be found in the roles and functions of faith in other realms of life than just the religious. We look at these in Chapter 7.













































