

## Chapter 8

# Religion and Development in Childhood and Adolescence

The study of childhood religion and spirituality has had little place in either Christian theology or child psychology (Boyatzis, 2003; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003). This is surprising, as psychologists since the time of G. Stanley Hall have recognized that childhood and adolescence are important periods in religious development, and the nurturance of children has been an important concern of Christian work, particularly during the Reformation and in the 20th century (Bunge, 2001, pp. 3–11). This lack of attention to children and adolescents is unwarranted, for if one defines spirituality as a craving for transcendence and meaning, then certainly children have a strong spiritual nature. They seek these things and experience awe and wonder as much or more than adults (Ratcliff & May, 2004). Nevertheless, some good empirical research exists on the topic, which we will examine in this chapter.

Another problem is that existing research on religion and spirituality among children and adolescents has been narrowly conceived as is also the case of much psychological research about children (Nye, 2004). Childhood and adolescence are seen mostly as precursors to adulthood, and as a result research often focuses on the implications of childhood and adolescence for adult spirituality, rather than seeing childhood as a period of life with its own importance. This is a key issue, for children are not just little adults; their spiritual and religious life has unique characteristics and considerations, such as the role of family (Pendleton, Benore, Jonas, Norwood, & Herrmann, 2004). Even early work in psychology recognized that the child does have religious needs and that these are not the same as the adult's (Wells, 1918). Childhood and adolescence are rich, complex periods of life, and researchers need to consider multiple domains in understanding religious development during this period. The cognitive, social, emotional, and moral aspects of childhood are all of importance and are directly or indirectly related to religious life (King & Boyatzis, 2004).

If spirituality and religion are thought of as concerned with a relation to ultimate meaning and transcendence that involves the whole person, childhood spirituality can be thought of as spontaneous experiences of a relational consciousness. This relational awareness can manifest itself in a number of ways, including feelings of presence and sometimes dependency, a reaction of wonder and awe at the world around us, and a sense of ultimate goodness and meaning. For the

most part, children do not separate such experiences from religion (Hart, 2006; Ratcliff & May, 2004; Hay & Nye, 2006; Scott, 2003; Tamminen, 1991, p. 34; Scarlett & Perriello, 1991; Shelton & Mabe, 2006; Loomba, 1942). These types of experiences can be found throughout childhood and adolescence. For instance, in a large study of Lutherans, Tamminen (1994b) found that religious experiences involving a sense of presence were common in childhood, often triggered by emergencies or personal troubles, loneliness, and fear. Adolescents also commonly reported them, although they were often given a secular interpretation. Adolescents who reported experiences of presence were more likely to report them in devotional and church situations, especially prayer, and in relation to death or loss rather than more common personal troubles. Those reporting nearness experiences had more positive attitudes toward school and were more altruistic. They were also more emotional, conscientious, and concerned about the opinions of others and were closer to their parents.

Three topics related to childhood religious development have been of particular importance to researchers: (1) the importance of socialization in the development of religious consciousness, (2) the role of early attachment relationships to later religiosity, and (3) the formation of concepts of God and their influence on adult life. We will consider each of these in some detail.

## 8.1 Religion and Religious Socialization in Childhood

Most psychologists and religious practitioners would agree that the family is central to the development of religiousness and spirituality (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006). Although religious attitudes and practices have a moderate relationship with genetic makeup (see Section 6.1.2), religious affiliation as well as many aspects of attitudes and practices are primarily transmitted through socialization in family and community (D'Onofrio, Eaves, Murrelle, Maes, & Spilka, 1999; Mehta, 1997). This early socialization by parents, church, and school appears to be more important than other life course factors in determining adult religion (Sherkat, 1998). While church and peer factors are important in religious transmission, the strongest effect is that of parental religiosity on the child (Regnerus, 2003). The specific effect depends upon a number of relational and environmental factors in the home, including the following:

1. Warm, caring behavior from both mothers and fathers is predictive of strong adolescent religiousness, and mothers' caring is predictive of attendance (Dudley & Wisbey, 2000). The relational quality of family closeness, a good marital relationship, and traditional family structure also seem helpful (Ozorak, 1989). Doubt or non-belief in adolescents is related to lower parental affection and religious practice (Potvin, 1977). Some studies have found relationships between parental beliefs and the development of intrinsic religious motivation in their children (e.g., Kaldestad, 1996).

2. Parental religiosity can affect parenting style, which in turn can affect child and adolescent religiosity. Research has focused on two parenting styles: **authoritative parenting** that involves a combination of warm parental support with firm, demanding expectations, and **authoritarian parenting**, which combines high levels of demand with a cold, rigid emotional tone. In a study involving a national sample of over 400 families, Gunnoe, Hetherington, and Reiss (1999) found that maternal and paternal religiousness was predictive of the presence of authoritative parenting, which in turn predicted transmission of parental values like religiousness (Wilcox, 1998). Increased maternal religiousness predicted less use of authoritarian parenting. They also found a strong relationship between adolescent social responsibility, authoritative parenting, and parental religiousness. Thus parental religiousness appears to have multiple direct and indirect effects on religion in their children and teenagers.
3. Other parental characteristics such as agreement on beliefs between mother and father also appear to promote transmission, while large dissimilarities in religious belief or participation can have negative effects on well-being (Dudley & Wisbey, 2000; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Petts & Knoester, 2007). Mental health issues also have an effect; for example, maternal depression decreases intergenerational transmission and its beneficial qualities. Religious transmission in nondepressed mothers seems to be related to lower risk of depression in their children, while transmission in depressed mothers is associated with higher risk (Gur, Miller, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Weissman, 2005).
4. Family involvement in religious activities and conversations at home promote religious transmission by teaching religious beliefs and helping to make them plausible. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about family religious activities and how they relate to other aspects of family life. Erikson's work on ritualization suggests some possible lines of investigation (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997, p. 97; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; see Section 5.3.2).

There is also a beneficial effect of religious involvement on family relationships. Using longitudinal data collected in the 1980s, Pearce and Axinn (1998) found that mothers with greater religious service attendance and higher or increasing religious salience had more positive relations with their children. Positive mother-child relations were further enhanced in families that had multiple members with high religious salience. Greater mother-child congruence in religiousness also predicted positive mother-child relationships 5 years later. They argue from their data and other research that religion appears to have an integrating effect in families, increasing cohesion between family members. Religion does this by (1) promoting the desirability of positive relationships among family members, (2) offering activities like worship that promote interactions and (3) creating a shared set of social ties with people that have similar values. In some cases, these relationships may become sanctified and take on a spiritual character and significance that leads to better functioning (Mahoney et al., 2003). This effect has also been found in adolescents. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth

from the late 1990s, Smith and Kim (2003) found that teens involved in multiple religious activities, when compared with uninvolved youth, had stronger parental relationships and participated in more family activities. Teens with parents who frequently attended church services or engaged in prayer also had better relationships with their parents. In particular, teens of frequent attendees had parents who knew more about their lives and fathers who were supportive and served as role models.

The beneficial effects of religion on family relationships also extend to the marital relationship. Religiousness is a protective factor against divorce and problems like domestic violence. A number of studies (e.g., Smith & Kim, 2003) have also found that frequent religious involvement is associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction and more positive relationships on a wide variety of measures. This appears to be especially true in certain circumstances (Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005):

- When the two individuals, particularly the husband, are in good mental health
- When both individuals have strong and similar religious commitments
- When religiousness includes frequent religious participation

However, problems like marital infidelity may be more distressing in religious couples because of conflict with religious beliefs.

It is often assumed that children receive religious transmission from their parents, but research suggests that it is co-created by parent and child in reciprocal dialogue. In a study of communication in Christian families, Boyatzis (2004; Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003) found that children initiate conversations about religious topics (e.g., God, prayer) as frequently as adults. Mothers were more involved than fathers. There was a wide variation among families as to the directness of the conversation, with some parents trying to convey their beliefs while others simply provided guiding questions and a structure to support the search for understanding. While conversations on religious topics were frequent, correction by parents was relatively rare. It is also the case that transmission is dependent upon the child's *perception* of parental beliefs, rather than their actual views (Okagaki & Bevis, 1999).

Some of the effect of parents appears to be due to **channeling**, where the parents direct youth into groups and activities that reinforce home teaching. However, studies have shown that much of the effect of parents on their children is direct and unmediated by channeling. The influence of parents also appears to continue through adolescence, although effects of ethnicity, congregational climate, and peer church attendance are also significant during this time of life (Gunnore & Moore, 2002). Research is varied on gender effects, but in general while both parents contribute, the mother seems to be more important (Martin, While, & Perlman, 2003; cf. Sherkat, 1998). Interestingly, adolescents from economically stressed families reported valuing religion more but attending less. More research is needed, and qualitative approaches such as narrative should be used more often in order to better understand the meaning that religion has for individuals in the context of family life (Boyatzis et al., 2006).

## 8.2 Attachment and Religion in Children and Adults

Attachment theory comes out of the work of John Bowlby (e.g., Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby observed that over time infants develop attachments to caretakers that respond to calls for help. This kind of relational **attachment** is an internal, emotional bond to a trusted person, who can serve as a secure base for exploration and a safe haven when threatened (Labouvie-Vief, 1996, p. 105). An attachment bond can form the basis of **attachment behavior** as when the trusted person is sought out for protection in times of anxiety or other need (Oksanen, 1994, pp. 34, 57; Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005, pp. 169–187).

Baumeister (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) has argued that attachment is an example of a basic human need to form strong, stable interpersonal relationships marked by concern for the welfare of the other person and that a few stable consistent relationships of this type are more important and helpful than many superficial ones. These relationships may be difficult to replace when lost because they have special unique benefits. Presumably, people should be reluctant to break these bonds and will do a lot to maintain them and will be negatively affected by loss or threat of loss of these relationships. This need to belong may be related to religious behavior, such as in the desire to seek supportive relationships in a religious community.

Attachment appears to work through a couple of fundamental processes. First, attachment assists in the formation of positive, stable internal representations of others and our relationships. In object relations theory (ORT), these representations are referred to as **objects**, while in attachment theory they are called cognitive-affective schemas or **internal working models** (Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2005, p. 126). They develop out of early caregiver interactions and act as guides for subsequent relationships with others. Unlike psychodynamic ORT, attachment theory tends to assume that these models are fairly accurate representations of reality and not highly affected by fantasy (Levy & Blatt, 1999). However, attachment theory and ORT agree that internalized objects and working models are not strictly intellectual representations but have emotional and experiential components. Attachment can thus be an alternative framework for looking at object relations phenomena that has parallels but also points of divergence (Ainsworth, 1969; Kirkpatrick, 1997).

### 8.2.1 Attachment Styles

Bowlby's work on attachment was expanded on by Mary Ainsworth (1969, 1978). She thought that the Freudian drive theory and its conceptualization of development as moving from dependence to independence were inaccurate in a couple of ways. First, some dependency relationships coexist well with increasing independence. Second, mature adulthood is marked by the continuation of attachment relationships that are enduring, loving connections to others. Ainsworth extended Bowlby's work by identifying several fairly stable styles or patterns of attachment. The most common pattern is **secure attachment**, when children feel that they can depend

upon their caretaker and thus are able to tolerate their departure as well as seek them out when they return. In the **insecure**, anxious or ambivalent pattern, the child is more isolated and hostile, shows distress on departure of the caretaker, and does not soothe on their return. In this situation, the caretaker does not appear to the child as offering either a secure base or safe haven. Insecurely attached children may be either excessively preoccupied or prefer distance (Schottenbauer, Fallot, & Tyrrell, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1992).

More complex taxonomies of attachment have also been developed and have advantages over simpler schemes (Leak, Gardner, & Parsons, 1998). Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) have divided attachment according to characteristics of internal working models of self and other, whether we see ourselves as the sort of person that others are likely to help and whether we view others as likely to respond to our needs. These working models result in four attachment patterns:

- **Secure:** positive views of self and other; nondefensive
- **Preoccupied:** positive view of other, but negative view of self; anxious and/or ambivalent
- **Dismissing:** positive view of self, but negative view of other and intimacy
- **Fearful:** negative views of self and other; socially avoidant

Some scholars believe that secure attachment requires success at two developmental tasks: (1) learning to form stable mutually satisfying relationships; and (2) establishing a healthy, realistic and positive identity. Healthy identities have two characteristics. First, they are **differentiated**, rich with many different interests, values, and coping mechanisms. Second, they are **integrated** so that the many aspects of the individual are able to work together in harmony. From an attachment perspective, patterns like the fearful and dismissive ones represent developmental levels related to different degrees of integration and differentiation (Levy & Blatt, 1999).

Although people do not uniquely fit one style all the time (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), a large body of research shows that people have persistent attachment patterns and that these have significant effects on a wide variety of behaviors. Attachment patterns affect many different things, such as our goals for interaction, our models of the self, and our emotional connections to others. Secure attachment helps promote compassion and altruism by reducing personal distress and fostering a strong sense of self that can remain balanced while facing the demands of needs from other people. Secure attachment also affects parenting, as individuals with this pattern are more likely to have secure attachment bonds with their children (van IJzendoorn, 1995). In contrast, insecurely attached people are not comfortable with closeness and have negative models of others, and anxiously attached individuals may become emotionally overwhelmed by the distress of others, lacking a clear line between them and the self (Gillath, Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2005). Attachment may also facilitate social support because it builds positive perceptions and comfort with intimacy, and it may help to protect against stress by fostering a sense of security and social competency (Kenney, 2000).

### 8.2.2 Attachment and Religion

There are obvious reasons to believe that attachment and religious behavior might be related. As Kirkpatrick (1992) notes, theistic religions often refer to God as a kind of available and responsive attachment figure, who can serve as a haven to turn to in prayer, or a secure base that can be experienced as friendly and trustworthy. Religious people turn to God through prayer or other means in situations where this type of figure would be helpful, such as in times of crisis. This attachment relationship with God becomes more central as children become more independent of their parents (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006). Image of God studies also fit well in the attachment framework. Nearness to God and a loving, protective parental factor have been consistently found to be aspects of our God image, and these seem to be descriptions of secure attachment (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990), while avoidant attachment is related to an image of God as not loving but controlling (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

Some aspects of adult religiousness can be predicted from childhood attachment patterns. Sudden conversion experiences seem to be more common among those with insecure attachments, while securely attached individuals have more gradual conversions (Granqvist, 2003). Positive beliefs about God and one's relationship to the Divine, as well as whether we have a sense of having a personal relationship with God, are enhanced in individuals with strong childhood attachment patterns. Those with secure attachments also tend to feel more secure in their relationship to God and less threatened by the possibility of religious change. Not surprisingly, adult intrinsic religious motivation is positively related to secure attachment and negatively related to avoidant attachment in childhood. However, the relationships between childhood attachment and adult religiousness are complex and go beyond any simple mental models hypothesis. Furthermore, attachment is not good at predicting other aspects of religiousness such as participation. More work on the topic is needed in order to gain a clearer picture of these relationships (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002).

How does attachment have these effects on our religious and spiritual life? Lee Kirkpatrick has identified two main hypotheses that have been pursued by investigators. In the **correspondence hypothesis**, it is believed that our relationship with God matches the pattern of attachment we developed as children; thus people with secure attachment might be expected to have better relationships with God. In this view, an *experience* of love is a necessary foundation of our *ability* to love (von Balthasar, 1986, p. 105). The alternative view is the **compensation hypothesis**, which predicts that people without early secure attachment are more likely to turn to religion, because they are looking for a substitute (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 2005).

Evidence from research is supportive of both hypotheses. The *correspondence hypothesis* is supported by research suggesting that those with secure attachments and more comfort with closeness will participate in more communal and individual religious activities. They also have greater religious commitment, higher levels of theological exploration, more positive images of God, and lower rates of

loss of faith. Individuals who come from emotionally cold or authoritarian homes have attachment patterns similar to the dismissing or fearful styles and report more avoidance or anxiety in their relationship to God (Schottenbauer et al., 2004; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992; Beck, 2006; McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy, 2005; cf. Oliver & Paull, 1995). Evidence for the *compensation hypothesis* is found in longitudinal studies which show that insecure, avoidant, and anxious individuals are twice as likely to report new relationships with God compared with secure attached people, and that religious experience or conversion is more than twice as common among the anxiously attached than those with avoidant or secure patterns. Some research has also found high rates of sudden religious conversion precipitated by transitional times, emotional turmoil, or personal crises like marital problems among those with avoidant or insecure attachments. In these situations, God seems to act as a substitute attachment figure, while gradual religious change is more related to socialization factors (Kirkpatrick, 1997; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Oksanen, 1994, pp. 153–157; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). Kirkpatrick has suggested that correspondence and compensation behavior are both present but found in different kinds of situations. He believes correspondence behavior is related to the formation and continuity of internal working models and has more of a long-term longitudinal effect, while compensation is related to substitute attachment figures and seeking a fit between attachment models and current relationships. These latter effects are more evident in cross-sectional studies (Kirkpatrick, 1992, 1997, 1998).

### 8.2.3 Critique

Religion has many possible connections with attachment-related issues, so this literature has rich potential utility in the psychology of religion, particularly as a way of operationalizing some important psychoanalytic insights. However, effect sizes in attachment studies tend to be small, and even advocates of the model recognize that life cannot be reduced to attachment (Kirkpatrick, 1992). The way the theory has been conceptualized to date also has certain limitations. It compares child attachment with adult behavior but does not say much about how attachment affects religious life during childhood. Attachment styles are described as static, while in fact representations change and become more complex over time (Levy & Blatt, 1999), and positive adult attachment experiences can potentially alter one's attachment style. The theory also ignores the possibility that attachment and separation have a dialectical relationship, that these develop in interaction with each other and are both needed for the development of a stable, differentiated identity and strong relatedness to others. Concepts from other psychodynamic theories like that of Erikson might help broaden the attachment model to take into account some of the very complex features of the process (Blatt & Blass, 1990).

Attachment has been an attractive concept for Christian writers engaged in integration work, but it has also met with criticism. Miner (2007) argues that attachment models can become overly reductionistic, ignoring important relational factors like

beliefs and experience, as well as neglecting the importance of religious community for relationships and our spiritual life. Especially important from an integration standpoint is that attachment models often lack any kind of developed theological understanding of the concept.

### 8.3 God Image and Representation

A prominent idea in both psychological and theological literature is that each person contains within them an image of God. In Christian thought, the idea of a God image stretches back to the Judaic scriptures that proclaim humans were created in the image of God. Eastern Christian thinkers commonly distinguish between this *image of God*, or what we are created to be, and the *likeness of God*, the extent to which we display or reflect that potential (e.g., Lossky, 1974, 1998). The image of God thus relates to some essential aspect of our nature as persons.

In psychological studies of religion, the concept of **God image** has a more limited meaning, referring to a representation or internal working model that we have of God, which is powerful but not easily explainable in functionalist terms (McDargh, 1983, p. 5). The idea of a psychological God image was first developed in psychodynamic thought and is related to ideas about object relations. Freud thought that our internal representations of God and supernatural beings like devils were related to male or father figures, as well as our own self-representations, ignoring the mother or the effects of interactions between the parents (Goodwin, 1998; Rizzuto, 1976). Erikson extended this idea and distinguished three kinds of God images—a loving and accepting image related to our material experience, a guiding conscience related to the father, and a preparental image “where God is pure nothing” (1958, pp. 263–264). Jung thought that God images were archetypal, and thus the specific personal characteristics of the image were less important than its universal quality. Current discussions about the God image are mostly based in object relations theory and Winnicott’s idea of transitional objects (see Section 5.4.3). Schaefer and Gorsuch (1991) argue that religious beliefs, as manifested in the God concept of the individual, are one of the three foundations of religiousness along with motivation and coping or problem-solving style (see Sections 1.4.6, 9.3.1 and 10.2).

#### 8.3.1 Early Psychoanalytic Work

The first major work on psychological aspects of the God image was done by Rizzuto (1974, 1979). Her work was largely rejected by the psychoanalytic establishment and has been criticized for its reliance on a case study approach using a clinical sample of people who were not well integrated (St. Clair, 1994, p. 28). However, it has been very influential among many clinicians and researchers (McDargh, 1997). She reached a number of conclusions, which have largely been supported by later work:

1. All people raised in Western culture have some sort of God image or internal working model of God, in addition to a *God concept* or intellectual definition, although they do not necessarily recognize its presence (Meier & Meier, 2004). This image is separate from other internalized images in the psyche such as the self-image, although it can impact other images and be affected by them. Like other images, it can be complex and can be a transformational object with integrating or fragmenting effects throughout the lifespan (McDargh, 1992).
2. Elements used to form God images are found in early object representations and interactions. Unlike Freud, she believed that these images include both maternal and paternal material. In her sample, those who were aware of a benevolent God tended to have God images primarily drawn from the relationship with the mother, while those who were questioning and had more fearful feelings about God as controlling or angry had their image drawn from their paternal relationship. She found that God images are also affected by God representations found in official religions, as well as by our own personal experiences (Rizzuto, 1991).
3. It is possible to develop a typology of God images and different attitudes toward the image. In her patients she found four groups of people: those (a) aware of God, (b) questioning God, (c) not interested and surprised that others are, and (d) aware of a demanding God that they would like to eliminate (Rizzuto, 1974). Similar groups of people were found in a study of adolescents by Banschick (1992), although he also identified a fifth type of image where God is seen as an impersonal force.

### 8.3.2 *Gender of God Images*

In monotheistic religions, God representations have tended to be built around a male, parental figure. This raises the question of whether psychological God images also have gendered characteristics. The answer to the question appears complex, for gender qualities in these images are based on individual experience with our parents, social and cultural views of what mothers and fathers are like, and religious teachings about possible gender-specific characteristics of God (Vergote, 1981a). Cross-cultural studies have found that maternal and paternal images are typically described in terms of (1) availability and (2) authoritarian or legalistic qualities, with the former more primary in maternal descriptions and the latter in paternal ones. These same factors appear as important aspects of God image descriptions found in both Christian and non-Christian religious groups (Tamayo, 1981; Meier & Meier, 2004; Kunkel, Cook, Meshel, Daughtry, & Hauenstein, 1999; Desjardins & Tamayo, 1981). Using European samples, Vercruyssen and de Neuter (1981) found that the maternal image was more dominant but that other qualities including paternal ones were also included. In the US, studies suggest that this changes with age, with image descriptions more like the father in early childhood and more like both parents or the mother in middle childhood. The trend toward maternal or bi-gendered

image characteristics has also been found in other studies of older children and adolescents (e.g., Meier & Meier, 2004; Dickie et al., 1997; Ladd, McIntosh, & Spilka, 1998) suggesting that this period of life is an active time for redefining our God image. These differences can have important effects; for example one study found that boys tend to see God as closer in problem situations if the Divine is seen as male, while girls see a non-male or female God as closer (Eshleman, Dickie, Merasco, Shepard, & Johnson, 1999). Vergote (1997, p. 68) argues that in secular Western societies, adults can only remain believers, if they transform their childhood God representation using alternatives from available religious language and symbols.

Other factors also appear to affect the gender characteristics of the God image. Vergote (1981b) found that religious believers tend to have God images that emphasize availability, while doubters see law as a primary characteristic and thus are more likely to view God as a threat to their autonomy. Studies with European adolescents seem to confirm this picture, as teenagers with the lowest spiritual and religious attitudes have the highest scores for fear of God (Vergote, 1969, p. 193). Lambert and Kurpius (2004) found in a study with Catholic university students that feminine gender identity was related to having an image of God as female, regardless of whether the subject was male or female. They also found that feminine rather than masculine images of God were more related to nontraditional and less negative attitudes toward women. A number of writers, drawing on feminist psychoanalysts like Nancy Chodorow and theologians like Rebecca Chopp, have expanded on this. They argue that exclusively male patriarchal images can limit the image of God, while feminine, nurturing, and natural world images are a positive addition (Stone, 2004). Names connected to the God image can also have special significance because of their connection with gender (Fisher, 1988, pp. 53–73).

### ***8.3.3 Development of the God Image***

The trend in scholarly research has been to move away from the Piagetian view that children have limited and primitive understandings of God toward a view that children are imaginative and capable of surprising sophistication in their understanding. Barrett and Richert (2003) advance an alternative “preparedness” hypothesis that states (1) children are able to form concepts of intentional agents that are not limited to humans, (2) supernatural assumptions are the default position for children rather than an aberration applied to God, and (3) children as young as age 3 or 4 are perfectly capable of distinguishing between divine and human activity (cf. Harms, 1944).

In general, psychodynamic psychologists such as Meissner (1984, pp. 138–140, 150–157) see the God image or images as rooted in experiences and creative activity from as early as the first year of life. These images are thus pre-linguistic and highly affective in nature. Early events such as experiences of trust and immersion develop emotional tones and interpersonal resources that can impact later mystical or religious experiences and images of God, giving them a numinous

quality (McDargh, 1983; Balswick et al., 2005, pp. 128). In this view, the self begins and forms images in a dialectic between biologically undergirded motives and caregivers who are emotionally available. As early as age 3, these interactions build a prerepresentational affective core that supports self-regulation, empathy, and a moral self that has rules and emotional signals able to guide behavior. Children at this point can articulate stories with a moral component (Emde, Biringer, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991). After this early stage comes a differentiation of the self that involves a tension between autonomy and adoption of familial religious structures and values. The individual forms an image of God that has a numinous quality due to a fusing of cognitive and affective processes. Religion at these early stages often serves a defensive function of protecting against anxiety. As the child ages they become more aware of the shared and communal quality of beliefs as well as the distinction between fact and fancy, the problem of religious paradoxes, and the moral issues that come with the development of the superego and conscience. Gradually the child shifts from judgments based on authority to personal responsibility for sorting through these issues, hopefully with the help of institutional support. This can be seen in drawings that children make of God (see Figs. 8.1 and 8.2). When the individual reaches maturity, religion no longer needs to serve a defensive role, as the individual has hopefully found other ways to deal with anxiety. Instead, tensions are embraced, affirmed, and resolved, resulting in an inner harmony that combines meaningful object relations with a mystical, numinous quality of experience. Freud's accounts deal with early types of this religious experience, while adult religious experience is more typical of the later levels.

Shafraanske (1992) has argued that the God image contains material not only about our parents, but it is a personal statement of our relationship with the source of otherness and all of existence, as well as the transformational power this has or could have in our lives. The God object is thus a *transformational* object as well as a *transitional* one. Its presence suggests to us that change is possible, and the views of God and change contained within the object help determine what kinds of changes we think are possible and desirable. Unlike other transitional objects, God is not abandoned after childhood and can play a continuing functional role in the

**Fig. 8.1** *God in the Light.*  
Drawing by T.X., girl, age 7.  
Young children often have a God image that combines a sense of numinous awe with childhood playfulness

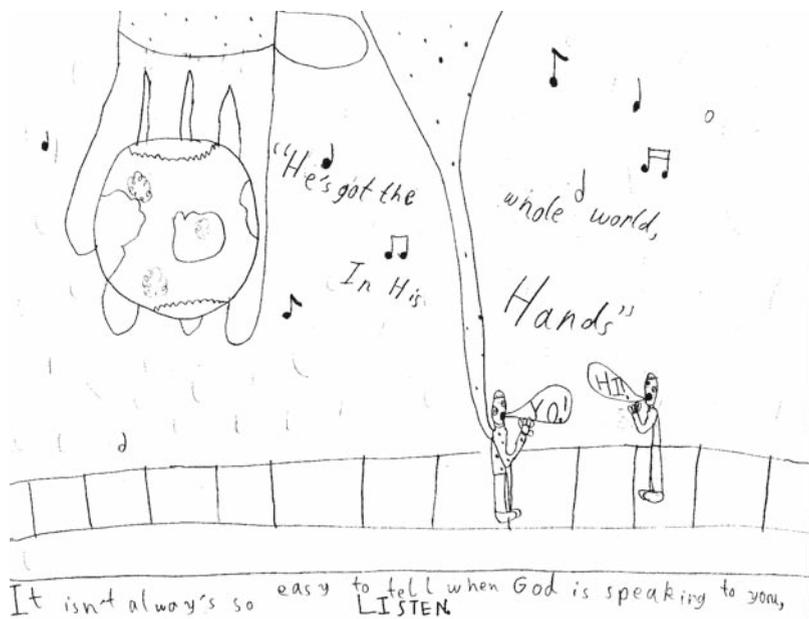
Q: Where is God?

A: In the light.

Q: Where are you?

A: I'm off to the side having a snack





**Fig. 8.2** *Meeting God*. Drawing by C.A., boy, age 11. As children move into adolescence, God images become more sophisticated and relational. Boys in particular tend to focus on the moral and guiding qualities of the relationship

developing adult (Banschick, 1992). The God image has the potential to grow and change throughout adulthood. From a theological perspective, this is not surprising, for any image falls short of the reality of the Divine and thus has the potential for change (Lonsdale, 2000, p. 60).

Empirical research suggests that religious socialization from both parents and church are influential in offering resources for constructing a God image (Meier & Meier, 2004; Nazar & Kouzekanani, 2003; Spilka, Armatas, & Nussbaum, 1964). As with attachment, data support both a correspondence and a compensation relationship between these influences and the God image. Correspondence is supported by evidence that when parents are perceived as nurturing (especially the father) and powerful (especially the mother), God is seen that way as well (Dickie et al., 1997). Also, God images that form in negative environments are often negative, or if they are positive they will be set aside and God will not be perceived as close (Roberts, 1989; Bellous, de Roos, & Summey, 2004; McDargh, 1983, pp. 128–132). On the other hand, a compensation view is suggested by the finding that both boys and girls see God as closer in problem situations, if the parents are less involved or the children are older (Eshleman et al., 1999).

Not surprisingly, traumatic events that affect one's views of relationships can affect one's relationship with God and our religious behavior. For instance, sexual assault victims often report **spiritual injury**, including a broad sense of alienation and malevolence in the world, personal feelings of impurity, difficulty trusting or

believing in God, feelings of anger at God, perceptions of God as wrathful and distant or disapproving, and problems with lack of meaning and hopelessness. Studies suggest that sexual assault victims have lower levels of religious attendance but increased frequency of prayer, along with higher levels of depression and lower levels of mental health. The use of religion as a source of strength weakens the relationship between trauma and depression, although it does not protect against all kinds of mental health problems (Chang, Skinner, Zhou, & Kazis, 2003; Hall, 1995; Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, 1998; Pritt, 1998; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993).

### ***8.3.4 Dimensions of the God Image***

Empirical research suggests that theistic God images are multidimensional and include several relatively independent characteristics. Following early work (e.g., Spilka et al., 1964), Gorsuch has identified a number of possible types of God image qualities that fall into three factor groupings, providing a typology of God images. First are characteristics describing an active, benevolent, guiding, and stable God with omniscient and omnipresent characteristics similar to the traditional Christian conception. Second are descriptors of a severe God who is wrathful and condemning; these are uncorrelated with the higher-order Christian God factor. Third is a set of characteristics describing a distant or uncaring God who is deistic-like, impersonal, inaccessible, irrelevant, and passive. This categorization is similar to that developed by Vergote (1969, pp. 291–292) who divides descriptors into objective, moral, and affective attributes such as greatness (objective), kindness (moral), and strength (affective). Most of the participants in college student samples had God images similar to the Christian one, and the presence of this kind of image was related to higher levels of religious participation and spiritual importance, as well as complex relationships with well-being and coping style (Gorsuch, 1968; Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1991, 1992; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2004). Scores on the benevolent and active God factor most strongly related to an intrinsic religious orientation, which in turn was related to higher levels of attendance and a sense that God is in control. Religious attendance appears to help maintain feelings of God-control (Krause, 2007). Other research looking at more relational rather than conceptual aspects of the God image have connected intrinsic motivation with better scores on measures of awareness and relational quality (Hall & Edwards, 1996, 2002). God concept descriptors were largely unrelated to quest motivation, suggesting that seeking can take place in the context of any of these God concepts.

While various types of God descriptors can be separated from each other conceptually and statistically, in practice they overlap each other. Potvin (1977) found that among US adolescents the most common was a loving and punishing God (45%) followed by loving and non-punishing (19%). A combination of punishing and non-loving was rare (2%). The specific pattern of God image descriptors was related to type of parental control and education, supporting the idea that socialization and projection of parental images are related to development of the God image. The interaction in types of descriptors appears to vary in different religious groups, with evangelical

Protestants higher on vindictive, stern, and powerful descriptors than mainline Protestants or Catholics, and mainline church members seeing God as more distant and less kind than the perceptions of evangelicals (Noffke & McFadden, 2001).

### ***8.3.5 Impact of the God Image***

A number of relationships have been found between the God image of the individual and important psychological variables. For instance, our image of God is related to religious salience and participation, as well as the kinds of attributions we are willing to make with regard to God—whether things are due to God’s will, God’s response to us, or just plain luck (Maynard, Gorsuch, & Bjorck, 2001; Mallery, Mallery, & Gorsuch, 2000). Images of God that are benevolent may assist in helping deal with life traumas like sexual abuse (Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, & Vardy, 2007). Another major impact of the God image is on our object relations status. Todd Hall (Hall & Brokaw, 1995; Hall, Brokaw, Edwards, & Pike, 1998; Hill & Hall, 2002; Hall & Edwards, 1996; cf. Brokaw & Edwards, 1994) has argued that the search for the sacred, particularly in the Christian theistic context, is really a relational one, and the God image is not just a belief but has relational qualities and implications. In his view, spiritual maturity is relational in nature, a matter of mature dependence or interdependence, and these qualities can be related to relational aspects of the God image. This has been confirmed in studies with Christian church members, which have found strong correlations between spiritual well-being, religious involvement or spiritual maturity, positive object relations, perceived quality of relationship with God, and positive God image qualities like benevolence and eternity. Not surprisingly, these positive relational qualities are associated with greater effectiveness and stress tolerance in ministry situations (e.g., Barnett, Duvall, Edwards, & Hall, 2005; Lewis-Hall, Duvall, Edwards, & Pike, 1999). Other studies have found relationships between positive God images (e.g., benevolent) and good interpersonal relationships (Schottenbauer et al., 2004), higher self esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973) and lower levels of anxiety (Schaefer & Gorsuch, 1991), while harsh and punitive views of God are more common in families with psychological dysfunction (Wilson, Larson, & Meier, 1983). Psychological treatment that addresses spiritual and religious issues has been found to positively alter the God image toward more good, loving, and supportive qualities (Tisdale et al., 1997).

### ***8.3.6 Limitations***

A criticism of God image theory and research is that it is insufficiently relational because it concentrates on our *representation* of the Divine and not the *relationship* we have with God (LaMothe, 1999). These scholars see the religious imagination as having a relational organization (McDargh, 1997) and thus a typology of God objects should take into account types of relational bonds that are possible, such as

attachment (providing security and comfort), affiliation or community, alliance and commitment to well-being of others, collaboration, nurturance, and receiving help or guidance. In this view, our perception of God is related to the type and nature of these bonds (Hill & Hall, 2002), and it is these connections with a real God who relates and acts that puts God's love into terms that are believable, meaningful, and relevant to our experience (Meissner, 1987).

The concept of God image has also been criticized as being unnecessarily static. Shafranske (1992) has argued that it is the powerful process of transformation or the experience of that process which is represented in early objects, and that the trace of this initial transformational object can be found in other later object representations that have transformational power. God image theory has not yet been developed to help understand how it relates to transformation, other aspects of religious experience and belief, or other developmental and object relationship issues (cf. Schottenbauer et al., 2004; Kunkel et al., 1999). Research on the God image is also almost entirely dependent upon self-report measures, a limitation that this area shares with other research projects based on an object relations model (Piedmont, 2005).

## 8.4 Adolescent Description

Adolescence has been a topic of keen interest to psychologists and scholars in religious studies since the early 20th century (see e.g., Adams, 2000; Whittaker, 1932). Psychologists like G. Stanley Hall were convinced that adolescence was a key time for religious and spiritual development. Hall viewed adolescence as a new birth, a recapitulation of an ancient period of "storm and stress" (1905, p. xiii) associated with increased incidence of both psychological problems and religious change. He thought this was due in part to the onset of sexuality and other biological factors. Research over the years has continued to confirm that this period of life is an active one in terms of religious experience, and that this is true in both Western and non-Western cultural settings (Ahmed, 2004). For instance, in a study of high school students from the early 1960s, Elkind and Elkind (1962) found that religious experiences were frequent among adolescents, especially among honor students. These included experiences that strengthened and maintained faith, as well as testing experiences such as the death of loved ones or times of religious initiation ceremonies. While experiences occurred when alone or in prayer, they also frequently occurred within group settings, although they found ritual experiences to be less common among Protestants. Acute experiences seemed more related to chance factors, while recurring ones were related to subjective choices to seek out and engage in practices supportive of these experiences.

Contemporary scholars continue to find that the teenage years are very important for spiritual and religious development and the quest for meaning (e.g., King & Boyatzis, 2004; Bruce & Cockreham, 2004), although the perspective has changed somewhat from that of Hall. Many researchers now view adolescence as a social construction related more to social, economic and political factors than to biology

(Elkind, 1999). A number of recent studies conducted by sociologists of religion have expanded our understanding of the religious life of adolescents. These studies have used large national databases from the late 1990s (e.g., Smith & Faris, 2002a) and more recent data from the US National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a longitudinal study which involved in-depth telephone interviews with a national representative sample of over 3000 teens and their parents, as well as follow-up face-to-face interviews with a subsample (Smith, 2005; Schwadel & Smith, 2005; Smith & Denton, 2003; Denton & Smith, 2001).

The NSYR found religion to be an active force in a large number of teens, although there is a wide range of adolescent religiosity and religious practices. About half say religion is “extremely important” or “very important,” and although 2/3 do not believe it is necessary to be involved in a congregation in order to be “truly religious and spiritual,” about 40% say they attend religious services or other activities once a week or more. Substantial numbers of these also engage in other religious practices like prayer, fasting, Bible study, etc. The most religious teens tend to build lifestyles with other religious friends and religious activities, although in general most religious teens have a mix of friends. About 16% identify themselves as “nonreligious,” although they may have religious beliefs or occasionally participate in religious activities. Only about 3% identify themselves as atheists. Overall attitudes toward religion—even among those not involved—tend to be quite positive.

Religious participation tended to decline across the teenage years in the NSYR study, a pattern also observed in Europe where it is associated with declining positive attitudes toward Christianity and increasing negative attitudes toward religious practices (Kay & Francis, 1996; Goosen & Dunner, 2001). However, the effects of development on attendance and religious importance are different so that while *attendance* may decrease through adolescence, *salience* tends to remain constant (Kerestes, Youniss, & Metz, 2004). Other researchers have argued that adolescence is a time of religious polarization, when less religious adolescents drift toward increasingly less participation, and religiously active teens become more committed and involved (Ozorak, 1989). Some US research has supported this hypothesis (King, Elder, & Whitbeck, 1997), suggesting that religious development in adolescence may be for many a continuation of trends established in childhood.

In the NSYR study about 25–30% of teens said religion was unimportant; half of these could be described as alienated from religion, the other half as disengaged (Smith, Faris, & Denton, 2004). These rates are about the same as for the adult population and are about the same as the mid-1970s. Among those who were raised in a religious home, the most common reasons for lack of participation were lack of interest (about 50%) and intellectual skepticism (about 30%). Life disruptions (10%) and dislike of religion (7%) were smaller factors. Teens that were not religiously involved tended to live in what Smith called a “morally insignificant universe” characterized by a lack of inherent meaning or moral significance to human action, whereas highly religious teens saw themselves in a universe with ultimate moral significance, meaning, and purpose.

Parental religiousness, religious affiliation, and practice were the most important influence on teen religiousness and religious participation, particularly in families with religious parents (Smith, 2005, p. 57). Other sociological variables connected with religiousness and/or religious participation included quality of family life (intact family, positive caring relationship with parents) and peer relationships. Interestingly, low attendance was more common in families with less education. Regnerus (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004) found a strong relation between parental religious attendance and adolescent attendance and ratings of importance but also some influence by the attendance patterns of friends. They interpreted this as providing support for modeling and channeling hypotheses.

Although teens typically report religion as important, Smith argues that its visible salience appears low for the average teenager. In the NYSR study, teens often had a hard time articulating ways that religion made a concrete difference in their lives. It operates in the background; it is not something that they think about all the time or operate from on a conscious intentional basis. Smith argues that this is a consequence of intense competition for time and attention from other aspects of life such as school, sports, and the media, none of which provides opportunities for working out or integrating religion and spirituality. He characterizes the dominant religious view among US teens as that of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which includes the following beliefs:

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die (Smith, 2005, pp. 162–163).

Smith sees this as directly related to the American cultural worldview of “therapeutic individualism” that views the self as the source of authentic knowledge and institutions as barriers that constrain individual self-fulfillment, the ultimate purpose of life (Smith, 2005, p. 173). In this environment, religion becomes part of a consumer mentality. It is seen not as an end in itself but as a means to achieve personal goals such as happiness and personal development, or to overcome problems and gain perspective on life (see Section 10.3.1).

Although there is a lot of publicity in the US and Europe about teen (and adult) participation in alternate spiritualities like paganism, the actual number of US teens who identify themselves in this way is very low—less than 1%. The percentage of teens that identify themselves with a non-Christian religious tradition (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism) is around 2–3%, the majority of which identify with one of the main branches of American Judaism. The numbers of teenagers affiliating with a non-Christian religious tradition seems to be increasing, as is the number of nonaffiliated, suggesting a trend toward religious pluralism and perhaps polarization in US society (Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002). Overall about 52% identify with a Protestant Christian tradition and 23% with Roman Catholicism.

However, this does not mean that they subscribe to all the beliefs of their particular group. For instance, 10% or more of teens in various Christian groups indicate that they do not believe in life after death, and 60% of teens (including 50% of conservative Protestants) agree with the statement “many religions may be true.” There also appears to be a general lack of knowledge about the actual beliefs of their church group. Most tend to hold a highly individualistic stance toward truth and moral judgment—you should believe whatever you think is true.

## 8.5 Identity Development, Gender, and Religion

How do religious and spiritual changes in adolescence relate to other aspects of psychological development during this period? A key way appears to be through the process of identity development.

### 8.5.1 *Old and New Conceptions of Identity Development*

Traditional views of identity formation are based on the work of Erik Erikson. In his view, **identity** was a necessary human quality that involved continuity over time and a sense of historical sameness (see Section 5.3.1). He believed that each person needed to make a strong commitment to a particular identity, ideology, and group at the end of adolescence, but that this should be preceded by a period of exploration or struggle, and that the well-developed identity should be flexible and open to change. This view of identity development parallels many Biblical stories where identity development was often connected with personal struggle (Marcia, 1980; Parker, 1985). Marcia (1966; cf. Griffith & Griggs, 2001) developed a typology of identity status that placed people according to their level of identity exploration and commitment. His four categories were *achievement* (strong commitment with exploration), *foreclosure* (strong commitment without exploration), *moratorium* (no commitment but exploration), and *diffusion* (no exploration or commitment). In this view, identity is about choices made by an individual rather than social or cultural factors (Taylor, 2007, p. 482).

Recent work on identity has expanded and sometimes altered this traditional picture of identity formation. For instance, psychological views of identity have typically conceptualized it as an individual creation and accomplishment. As a consequence, people who do not go through a personal identity “crisis” during adolescence (e.g., foreclosed) are seen as inferior in accomplishment compared to those who search and struggle individually. Bosma and Kunner (2001) have questioned whether this picture is accurate. They found diffused or foreclosed identities in 50% of their adolescent sample, a high percentage for what is considered by some to be a pathological outcome. It would appear that the Marcia model is not very sensitive to or descriptive of developmental changes, and that there are many pathways to identity rather than just a fixed progression of stages. A kind of fluctuating

status is the most common, with periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium triggered by conflict or change and a clear progression toward “higher” levels in only 25% of cases. Identity formation is thus a long process affected by contextual and individual factors, and optimal development appears to involve a balance of differentiation and integration rather than achieving some ideal end state. In other words, identity is something that is continually achieved, not gained and then never altered (Cady, 1997).

Contemporary work also develops the idea that identity does not exist in a vacuum but is relational in nature and can be defined in terms of one’s connection to family, religion, community, and culture. In this model, identity development involves deepening relationships with others, as well as changes in commitments and in the process of forming them. Commitments that were once externally motivated became internally driven, and the individual seeks to carry through on these in their everyday life (Newman & Newman, 1988). Family is central to this, but peer and other relationships become increasingly important during adolescence. Overall, identity may be more a product of intimacy than foundational for it, which is the reverse of the picture drawn in Erikson’s theory (cf. Balswick et al., 2005, p. 180; Kneazel & Emmons, 2006; Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006). This relational effect can be seen in our **personal identity** or sense of unique personhood and in our **collective identity** that involves our self-concept as a member of various social or cultural groups (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). The traditional view—that identity formation must involve struggle and individualistic rejection of the expectations of family and community—is viewed by relational theorists as a feature of Western culture rather than as a human imperative. In this way of looking at things, destruction of community through geographical mobility, separation of religion from other aspects of life, and family disintegration are all barriers to identity formation (Koteskey, Walker, & Johnson, 1990). A way of dealing with this problem is to construct multiple identities based on the practices and worldview of all the communities a person may be a part of at different times (Jensen, 2003). However, this kind of pastiche identity (Gergen, 1991; cf. Lifton, 1999) sits uncomfortably with traditional psychological views that emphasize the importance of forming a core, consistent self.

If identity development is thought of as occurring in the context of relationships and community, then it becomes apparent that race and **ethnicity**—belonging to a group with common descent or national origin—can have a large impact on identity. Ethnic and religious identities can be intertwined, especially in cases where people of a common ethnicity or racial background all tend to practice a certain religion. In the US, this has traditionally been the case with African Americans, who have high rates of church membership, attendance, and participation in devotional practices. In this situation, a particular conception of spirituality may be part of one’s ethnic identity development. However, the effect of race and ethnicity is complex, and racial labels ignore the diversity that exists within groups due to cultural and personality factors (Chae, Kelly, Brown, & Bolden, 2004; Mattis, Ahluwalia, Cowie, & Kirkland-Harris, 2006; Taylor, Ellison, Chatters, Levin, & Lincoln, 2000).

### ***8.5.2 Religion and Identity Development***

Religion and identity development appear to have a bidirectional relationship, each affecting the other in complex ways. Traditionally, research has focused on how factors related to identity development affect our religious life. When the traditional model of identity formation is applied to religious development, the assumptions are that (1) religious crises are a normal part of adolescence, (2) rebellion against the church is inevitable because questioning is a normal part of adolescence, and (3) transition to higher levels of faith development is facilitated by dissonance in a supportive milieu (Hill, 1986; Meilman, 1979). So for instance Mischey (1981) in a study of college-age Canadian teens, found that low scorers on Fowler's faith development scale had identities marked by confusion or conformity and uncritical trust, while those at higher levels were more critical, challenging, and actively searching and had an identity status of achievement or moratorium. In the traditional view, this is a way in which the adolescent constructs a faith that is not a blind acceptance of institutional religion but more intensely personal (Elkind, 1999).

The other side of the religion-identity relationship is the effect that our religious life may have on our identity formation. Involvement in a religious community teaches a vocabulary and scheme for interpreting behavior, and this system can have an integrative function that assists in identity development, particularly among those for whom a search for security is important (Dykstra, 1986; Meissner, 2001; Vianello, 1991). Tightly knit communities with strong religious beliefs such as in fundamentalism might have an especially prominent role in identity formation (Elkind, 1999). Research with adolescent and college student samples does indicate that religion has a number of connections with positive identity development. Church attendance, religious commitment, and participation in practices like prayer are all related to lower levels of ideological, interpersonal, and identity moratorium or interpersonal diffusion (Donelson, 1999; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999; McKinney & McKinney, 1999). Development of a strong religious identity is also associated with lower levels of depression and higher levels of personal meaning, as well as prosocial activities and community service (Koteskey, Little, & Matthews, 1991; Furrow, King, & White, 2004). Religious ceremonies such as baptism or confirmation may play an important role as markers of the identity development process (Mattis et al., 2006).

Some research has considered how religious motivation may affect identity status. In a study using Christian undergraduate students, Fulton (1997) found that Marcia's achieved identity status—strong commitment with exploration—was associated with high intrinsic and low extrinsic-social motivation, while identity foreclosure or commitment without exploration was related to low intrinsic and high extrinsic motivation. The nonachieved identity statuses varied on their quest scores: moratorium had the highest quest values, foreclosed the lowest, and diffused fell in between. All three of the nonachieved statuses were associated with low values of intrinsic motivation. Results were consistent with the idea that achievement

is a temporary condition that alternates with periods of seeking and reevaluating. Other studies have confirmed this pattern with achieved and foreclosed identity status and have found attendance related to commitment identity, either foreclosed or achieved (Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996; Markstrom-Adams, Hofstra, & Dougher, 1994).

Meissner (1987) has argued that there is an inherent connection between spiritual development or the deepening of spiritual identity and the internalization of religious values systems in personality and life experience. For him, the ultimate expression and development of spiritual identity is disinterested love. The idea that identity and identity development are intimately related to practices and actions toward others has been confirmed by a study of community service by James Youniss and his colleagues (Youniss et al., 1999). They found that religious adolescents were more likely to engage in service activities, and that those who engaged in church-sponsored service were more likely to adopt religious rationales for the meaning of what they were doing, strengthening their religious identity. Their analysis of data from the Monitoring the Future project of data from the 1970s through the 1990s showed that almost 3/4 of those who rated religion highly were doing regular service vs. about 1/4 of nonreligious peers (cf. Section 12.4.3).

### ***8.5.3 Prosocial Effects of Religion in Adolescence***

The link between religious identity and service is part of a broader literature that has found adolescent religiosity related to a number of positive effects on health and prosocial behavior. Parents often give religious training to children and adolescents hoping that it will affect their ethical upbringing, providing a religious orientation and habits or regulatory skills that will lead away from deviant behavior (Vergote, 1997, p. 91; Litchfield, Thomas, & Dao Li, 1997). A number of studies with adolescents have found that high or increasing religiousness does indeed have a variety of positive effects. It appears to act by (1) promoting positive behaviors and (2) acting as a protective factor against risk behaviors and delinquency. Those with low or declining religiosity have higher levels of problems such as alcohol and drug use. This is true even when controlling for a number of possible confounding variables (Benson et al., 2003; Kerestes et al., 2004; Smith & Faris, 2002a, 2002b; Duncan, Duncan, Strycker, & Chaumeton, 2002; Donahue & Benson, 1995).

Positive behaviors identified in the literature as related to adolescent religious participation include (1) better diet and exercise, which in turn are related to enhanced physical health; (2) more seat belt wearing and responsible alcohol use leading to lower mortality rates in accidents (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998; Wallace & Forman, 1998); and (3) greater altruism and service orientation, which appears to persist into adulthood (Hodgkinson, Weitzman, & Kirsch, 1990; Smith & Faris, 2002a; Youniss et al., 1999; Wilson & Musick, 1997). Better school performance is also reported, especially for the students with the strongest and weakest academic records (Regnerus, 2000; Regnerus, Smith, & Fritsch, 2003).

In the mental health literature, studies about protective effects have focused on suicide, substance abuse, and sexuality, with significantly fewer problems reported by religiously active teens, especially in groups with traditionally high levels of religious involvement like African Americans (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Weaver et al., 2000; Heath et al., 1999; Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003; Ball, Amistead, & Austin, 2003). In Britain, positive attitudes toward Christianity are associated with stricter attitudes toward alcohol use (Francis, Fearn, & Lewis, 2005). Lower rates of depression and higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction are also associated with higher levels of religiousness, perhaps because of the enhanced sense of purpose and hope for the future that can be provided by religion (Wright, Frost, & Wisecarver, 1993; Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001; Leffert et al., 1998; Markstrom, 1999; Smith & Faris, 2002b). Lower levels of danger-seeking and risk-taking behavior, including less premature sexual involvement and lower frequency of sexual activity with fewer partners have also been found (Smith & Faris, 2002a; Wallace & Forman, 1998). Some protective effects are substantial but appear to be less in families where there are considerable differences in religious affiliation or involvement between the parents (Petts & Knoester, 2007). Chandy, Blum, and Resnick (1996) found that self-reported religiosity or spirituality was the strongest protective factor out of 55 variables against the negative effects of sexual abuse or parental alcohol misuse.

Studies with adolescents or college-age adults find that religiousness has a moderate deterrent effect on crime, especially minor or nonviolent crime like underage alcohol use. The effect is stronger in more religious samples—those from conservative Protestant families, and for women and individuals of color. On the other hand, higher delinquency rates are associated with religious disagreements with parents (Gorsuch, 1995; Bayer & Wright, 2001; Johnson, Jang, Larson, & Li, 2001; Smith & Faris, 2002a; Regnerus, 2003). In at least some cases, this deterrent effect may be due to reduced alcohol and drug use, especially by those who engage in personal religious practices like prayer and Bible study (Benda & Corwyn, 1997; Corwyn & Benda, 2000; Gorsuch, 1995).

The positive and protective effects of religious involvement persist even after ruling out possible confounding variables and self-selection factors. Some of the positive effects of religion might be indirect, as when religion causes people not to associate with drug users, thereby lowering the risk of drug use. This kind of indirect effect seems especially important in protecting against early or risky sexual behavior. Other effects are more direct such as through dense community networks of social support, moral direction that promotes self-control and virtue, and spiritual experiences that help solidify moral commitments and constructive life practices, as well as positive role models (Regnerus, Smith et al., 2003; Smith, 2003a, 2003b; Wallace & Forman, 1998).

Much of the research on positive and protective effects has been done without any kind of guiding theoretical model, other than vague ideas that religious identity development may be a contributing factor. A stronger theoretical view is the *developmental asset model*, which has been influential in recent work on adolescence and religion. This model is based on an ecological view of develop-

ment as an increasingly complex reciprocal interaction between the person and the environment (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1995). In this interaction, an individual actively works to acquire external and internal developmental assets from contact with cohesive communities and adults that provide a repeated, consistent message promoting values and standards. These assets are thought to be more effective than prevention programs in preventing problematic behaviors, as they are more likely to produce sustained change (Leffert et al., 1998). External assets include social support from extended family, mentors, and the community. These assets lead to positive behaviors and values, as well as empowerment through meaningful roles, opportunities for constructive use of time, and clear boundaries or expectations. Internal assets include social competencies and self-perceptions, commitment to learning, positive values, and positive identity or view of self. Research has found a strong negative relationship between these assets and at-risk or antisocial behavior, especially among males. The assets also appear to have an additive or cumulative effect, boosting resiliency and coping ability (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Wagener, Furrow, King, Leffert, & Benson, 2003; King & Furrow, 2004; Benson, Masters, & Larson, 1997). In this model, religion has the possibility for producing positive effects in multiple ways by providing access to a number of external assets and supporting the development of internal ones.

Development of religion and spirituality in childhood and adolescence can be part of a general orientation in the family toward generativity, the passing on of gifts to others. Dollahite (e.g., Boyatzis et al., 2006) argues that a generative spirituality develops when the family shares (1) a common spiritual paradigm or set of beliefs about the transcendent, (2) a set of common spiritual practices, and (3) a spiritual community of care. This generativity becomes an important part of what gives life meaning. However, in contemporary society many traditional religious beliefs and practices are seen by some as outdated or irrelevant, leading to a sense of meaninglessness, which may in turn be connected to at-risk behaviors, violence, and suicide in adolescents (Verma & Maria, 2006; see Section 5.3.2).

#### ***8.5.4 Gender, Identity, and Religion***

One of the most consistent findings in social scientific studies of religion is that women appear to be more religious than men on a variety of measures. In general, researchers have rejected the idea that there are inherent sex differences between men and women with regard to religiousness. Rather, explanations have focused on the issue of **gender**, “the socially constructed roles of men and women implicating different social norms and cultural expectations for both sexes” (Möller-Leimkühler, 2003, p. 2; cf. Fulkerson, 1997). In Western cultures, female gender identity tends to have a relational emphasis, while for men it is more defined in terms of achievement and competition.

Despite the observed differences between men and women, there has been surprisingly little specific research on the subject of gender and religion, although

the topic is of increasing interest (Miller & Stark, 2002; Anderson & Lewis-Hall, 2005). Early figures in the field like Freud, James, or Jung neglected gender, and issues dealing with gender and sexuality are hard to investigate due to concerns that research might promote bias or discrimination (Jonte-Pace, 1997; Sherkat, 2002). The effect of gender is often thought to interact with culture and ethnicity, either when culture with its gender roles affects religious practices, or when religious identities support the formation of more traditional gender roles, as in American Muslim female adolescents. These interactions further complicate attempts to study gender as a variable (Elkind, 1999; Markstrom, 1999; Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999). The lack of attention to gender in psychology is in contrast to contemporary theology, which has seen more intensive conversations about the relationship between our gendered and embodied nature and the religious life (e.g., Anderson, 2007).

Perhaps because of the neglect of the topic in research, few studies have been done that have identified specific gender effects beyond general differences in religiousness. Specific effects that have been found include a stronger relational orientation for women than for men, with stronger correlations between religiousness and social activities, while there are indications that religion for men may be more practical and rule oriented (Dillon & Wink, 2007, pp. 31–32, 196; Tamminen, 1994b). In adolescents, occasions for religious experience appear somewhat different for boys and girls. Girls report strengthening religious experiences more often when alone, anxious, or fearful, while boys have them more often in prayer or when involved in ethical situations (Elkind & Elkind, 1962). In men, gender role conflict—not living up to gender role expectations—has been linked to lower levels of spiritual well-being (Mahalik & Lagan, 2001).

Interestingly, while research in Western societies has consistently found higher levels of religiousness in women and older adults, no gender or age differences appear in agrarian societies, suggesting that the effects are related to socioeconomic or cultural differences (Norris & Inglehart, 2004, pp. 70–78). Two specific theories have been proposed to explain this effect. First, *social structure theory* argues that social forces like patriarchal domination force women to assume roles such as religious ones, perhaps as a way of coping with a repressive situation. Second, *socialization and personality theory* argues that women are socialized to participate in religion and develop personality structures that find it attractive (Thompson, 1991). Taylor (2007, p. 494) believes that the emphasis on family and childrearing in Western churches are a primary factor in this differential attractiveness. Presumably these factors are present in Western societies but not in agrarian ones, explaining the difference in gender effects. However, it is of interest that monastic movements have often included more women than men; this appears to have been true of ancient Christian communities at the time of the Desert Fathers, as well as more recent examples such as 20th-century Russian monasticism (Bolshakoff, 1976, pp. 222–223).

Social structure and socialization theories are influenced by feminism, which has had a minimal impact in psychology but a significant role in molding the study of religion in the social sciences, humanities, and theology. Woodhead (2001) has identified three phases of this influence. First wave feminism includes the late 19th and early 20th centuries that emphasized equality between men and women and

discouraged theories or research that would find substantive differences. Second wave feminism from the 1960s through the 1980s critiqued the system of male patriarchy as tied to traditional religion and sought liberation for women. This critique has had a strong impact in the humanities, theology, and religious studies. Third wave feminism, which began in the 1990s, has focused on understanding gender as a complex construct that is only loosely connected to our bodily makeup. These researchers see the feminine and masculine as gender roles or identities and argue that it is feminine attitudes and values which incline people toward religion, not their biological sex. This viewpoint is sometimes known as **gender identity theory**.

Gender identity theory has been supported by empirical work, indicating that gender differences in religiosity disappear when sex role or gender orientation is introduced as an explanatory variable (Thompson, 1991). In UK research, personality characteristics that are negatively related to religiousness like psychoticism appear to be associated with masculinity and negatively related to femininity (Francis, Lewis, Brown, Philipchalk, & Lester, 1995; Francis & Wilcox, 1998; Maltby, 1999). Using data from the US General Social Survey and the World Values Survey, Miller and Stark (2002) found that religiousness was not related to socialization or empowerment but to feminine personality and gender role characteristics. They did find a relation between religion and aversion to risk which was more common in women, suggesting that in some situations women are more religious than men because to be less religious is risk taking (e.g., Miller & Hoffman, 1995). Thompson and Remmes (2002) have expanded the model by drawing the helpful distinction between masculine gender orientation and gender ideology or endorsement of traditional masculine ideas of toughness and seeking status. In a study of older adults, they found that intrinsic motivation as well as higher levels of attendance and private religious activity were related to feminine gender orientation, while extrinsic motivation was related to the acceptance of masculine toughness ideology. Quest motivation was more related to masculine gender orientation.

Third wave feminism has affected the dialogue between psychology and religion in several other ways. It has been associated with the turn toward relationality in theology and the psychology of religion field, and an understanding of how social changes for women related to work and family have affected women differently than men. These changes may have impacted their ability to participate in religious communities and activities and thus affected the institutions as a whole (Ammerman & Roof, 1995; Marler, 1995; Hertel, 1995). Jonte-Pace (1997, 2006) argues that feminist influence in the psychology of religion has led to three projects: a critical project, looking at how and why women have been excluded; an inclusive project, bringing in women's experiences and issues; and an analytic project, studying how gender affects experience and vice versa. Consideration of personal and social factors that have excluded women and broadening a view of experience to be more inclusive of their perspective has affected therapy and how it might be applied to religious issues (McKay, Hill, Freedman, & Enright, 2007). Feminism has also profoundly affected the companion fields of theology and religious studies, producing such important movements as feminist theology (Briggs, 1997).

Finally, feminism has affected religious practices. Some new religious movements have grown from feminist attempts to define a spirituality of women outside of traditional religion as an alternative to systems that are perceived to be patriarchal and repressive. These alternatives often draw on New Age beliefs or practices (see Section 12.4.3) and have encouraged revivals in neopaganism, Goddess worship, and even witchcraft. This retreat into past spiritualities is sometimes related to the belief that earlier societies were matriarchal and worshipped female rather than male gods (Eller, 1991).

Consideration of gender and its influence on religion is critical, but much remains to be done. One danger is to assume that “female” or “feminine” are somehow unitary categories, when modern feminist thought would argue that there is no single experience of women (Davaney, 1997a, 1997b; Jones, 1997).

## 8.6 Conclusion

**Key Issue:** *One of the three great contributions by psychologists in the dialogue with religion has been an understanding of the importance of childhood and adolescence for adult faith.*

While religious traditions have tended to treat childhood as a precursor to adulthood and genuine spiritual accomplishment, it is obvious that for most people the foundations for adult faith are laid in childhood. However it is true that, contrary to Piaget’s view, childhood is not the end of the story, as we will see in our next chapter. It is also the case that both psychologists and religious writers have yet to really explore and appreciate childhood faith on its own terms. The vital connections between childhood religion and other important aspects of development suggest that a better understanding of childhood spirituality may teach us much about a number of important aspects of development.