

Youth and religion. An international perspective

by
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Abstract

The sociological study of youth religion is a growing field of research. This article is concerned with the nature of young people's believing and belonging and its place in their everyday lives. It begins by considering the growth and sociological significance of increased religious diversity among young people. It goes on to explore the nature of belief and practice among young people who have a nominal or no religion identity. Significant in shaping both religious and non-religious young people's attitudes and approach to religion is the cultural trend towards individualization and subjectivity. In this context the shift from religiosity to spirituality is considered.

1. Sociological interest in young people's religion

Over the last twenty years sociological interest in young people's relationship to religion has begun to flourish. Prior to that, young people's religiosity was somewhat neglected as a topic of study. Sociologists of youth preferred to concentrate on the spectacular, deviant or problematic aspects of young people's lives, and religion was not seen as being particularly pertinent to such concerns. Equally, sociologists of religion overlooked young people because few were to be found in church. Studies of New Religious Movements (NRMs) provided some information on youthful religious engagement insofar as converts to such groups were generally young adults. However, the numbers of people involved in NRMs were small and research therefore left many questions about youth religion unexplored. The empirical study of young people's relationship to religion was therefore largely left to educationalists, psychologists and theologians concerned with religious education, faith development and faith transmission.

During the 1990s, however, things changed and young people's engagement (or not) with religion started to claim sociologists' attention. Three factors stand out as being particularly significant for stimulating the current interest. First, is the changing religious profile across the Western world. While traditional expressions of Christianity have declined in most Western countries, religious diversity has become more salient and particularly so for younger people. This raises questions about emerging faith identities, religious engagement in young people's lives, and the role of religion in education and community relations. Second, in the wake of a number of terror attacks in the West linked with religious extremism, there is a concern to understand the radicalisation of religiously minded youth. Third, alongside religious diversity, Western societies have seen a rapid rise in the number of people, again particularly among the young, who fail to identify with any organised religion at all. What this means for religious belief and practice, the transmission of faith, and whether or not young people are finding alternative sources of spirituality outside of organised religions is an important area of debate in contemporary sociology of religion and the focus of some innovative research programmes. The purpose of this article is to present an overview of this developing field of research and identify issues and challenges for future studies.

2. Religious Diversity

Western societies vary in the extent of their religious diversity and the rate of religious change among their populations.¹ Nevertheless across Western Europe there has been a generational shift away from traditional (i.e. Christian) religious affiliation, belief and practice. Voas makes the point in his analysis of the European Social Survey 2002/3: “The oldest cohort in every country outside Scandinavia is more religious than the overall mean; the youngest cohort in every country outside Greece and Poland (and marginally Italy and Ireland) is less religious than average. In terms of religiosity, young Italians are more like older Swedes than they are like their own grandparents.”²

Although Christians are declining in number, the populations of other faith groups, Muslims in particular, are growing, albeit not to the extent that is sometimes suggested by the mass media. People of ‘other’ faiths still remain in the minority by some margin. Table 1 is illustrative of the proportionate size of Christian, other faith and no faith populations based on data from the World Values Survey (WVS). Non-Christian faiths account for under 10% of religious affiliation in each of the selected countries, whilst at least 40% (and in some cases over 80%) of people still identify themselves as Christian. The remainder do not identify with any religion at all. Table 2 presents a picture for Britain, Australia, Canada and the United States based on census and survey data with larger sample sizes than used for the WVS.

Country	Christian %	Other Faith %	Not Applicable %	No Answer/ Don't Know %	<i>n</i>
France	44.0	6.0	49.7	0.3	1001
Italy	87.5	0.5	12.0	0.1	1012
Spain	80.0	0.5	18.1	1.4	1200
Germany	54.3	2.8	41.9	1.0	2064
Netherlands	42.5	6.9	46.8	4.0	1050
Norway	64.1	3.6	31.9	0.5	1025
Sweden	72.4	2.0	25.0	0.7	1003
Finland	84.1	1.8	13.5	0.7	1014

Table 1: Religious affiliation of adult populations by country (WVS 2005-2008)³

¹ See DAVIE 2002; 2007a.

² See VOAS 2009, 160.

³ Data captured from the online data analysis facility provided on the World Values Survey website. URL: <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSAnalyze.jsp> [checked on: 13-05-2012]. The author is responsible for the collapsing of data into four affiliation categories. Figures have been rounded up so may not total 100 exactly.

Religious affiliation	Britain ⁴ %	Canada ⁵ %	Australia ⁶ %	United States ⁷ %
Christian	71.8	76.6	63.9	76.0
Other Faith	5.4	6.0	5.6	3.9
No Religion	15.0	16.2	18.7	15.0
No Answer/Don't Know	7.8	-	11.9	5.2

Table 2: Religious affiliations in Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States (whole populations and adult population)⁸

Comparative data that specifically focuses on young people's religious affiliation across countries is harder to pin down. Few cross-national studies provide sample sizes large enough to be representative of teenagers in individual countries and allow comparative scrutiny of the range of faith traditions.⁹ Individual country studies which do have representative samples of young people (e.g. the National Study of Youth Religion in the United States,¹⁰ the Spirit of Generation Y Project in Australia¹¹ and the Teenage Religion and Values Survey in England and Wales¹²) can be difficult to compare insofar as they often concentrate on different age groups and/or were conducted at different times. Additionally, there can be problems interpreting and comparing answers to questions which were not originally commensurate. In the case of census data we can also note that questionnaires are usually completed by an adult on behalf of a household, thus young people do not necessarily get a chance to represent their religious affiliation according to their own self-definition. Moreover, published data of such surveys is often bracketed into age bands which do not match other studies and which sometimes extend 'youth' into the mid-thirties. Notwithstanding these problems, Table 3 presents combined figures for selected countries from the World Values Survey to illustrate a general pattern which commentators suggest is true for most Western Europe countries, Canada, the United States and Australia, namely that young people are more likely to identify with non-Christian religions than older people albeit that Christianity is still the dominant religion; and that young people are more likely than older people to say they are of 'no religion' at all. The American Religious Identity Survey, for instance, indicates that whilst 15% of the adult population as a whole do not identify with any religion, 22% of 18-29 year olds are classified as religious 'Nones'.¹³ The National Survey of Youth and Religion found 16% of 13-17 year olds in the United States identified with 'no

⁴ See 2001 Census, Office for National Statistics 2004, 2.

⁵ See 2001 Census – Major Religious Denominations, Statistics Canada 2003, 17.

⁶ See 2006 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010.

⁷ See 2008 American Religious Identification Survey of Adult population, KOSMIN AND KEYSAR 2009, 3.

⁸ Figures have been rounded up so may not add up exactly to 100.

⁹ However, interesting cross-national surveys of youth religion include the European REDCo programme (URL: <http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3481/index.html> [checked 13-05-2012]), The Confirmation Work in Europe Project (URL: www.conformation-research.eu [checked 11-05-2012]) and The Spiritual State of the World's Children Project (URL: <http://onehope.net/sswc/> [checked 11-05-2012]).

¹⁰ See SMITH / DENTON 2005.

¹¹ See MASON / SINGLETON / WEBBER 2007.

¹² See ROBBINS / FRANCIS 2010, 47-54. Also FRANCIS 2001.

¹³ See KOSMIN / KEYSARET AL. 2009.

religion'.¹⁴ The British Social Attitudes Survey indicates 64% of 18-24 year olds feel they belong to no religion compared to 50% of the population overall.¹⁵

Affiliation	Total %	15-29 years %	30-49 years %	50 plus years %
Christian	64.9	58.6	62.1	70.2
Other Faith	2.9	4.1	3.2	1.5
No Religion	31.0	35.4	33.3	27.0
No Answer/ Don't Know	1.1	1.5	1.1	1.1
n	9369	1817	3579	3973

Table 3: Religious affiliation by age (WVS 2005-2008)¹⁶

2.1 Influences on Religious Diversity

The two main causes of the growth of non-Christian faith populations in Western Europe are migration and the relatively high fertility rates of those migrants who settle and the subsequent generations that follow. Casanova makes the point that until recently most non-Christian immigrants to European countries were Muslim, hence Muslims form the largest group of the non-Christian faiths.¹⁷ Davie provides a helpful summary of how religious profiles in Western Europe have been differentially shaped by immigration patterns that reflect individual countries' specific histories and interests particularly in the latter half of the 20th Century.¹⁸ For example, Muslims (but also Hindus and Sikhs) from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India have been particularly important in shaping Britain's religious landscape. Whilst in France the Muslim influence has been primarily North African, in West Germany Muslims are mainly of Turkish and Eastern European (especially former Yugoslavian) origin. Immigration has also been significant for increasing religious diversity in Australia¹⁹ and Canada.²⁰

The fact that migration and fertility rates are the chief causes of the growth of non-Christian religions in Western countries is significant for two reasons. First, because it helps to explain why, compared to the Christian and no religion constituencies in these countries, non-Christian faith populations are relatively young. Second, growth primarily due to migration and fertility suggests that few individuals, including young people, are converting to a non-Christian faith. Reliable statistics on conversion rates are difficult to find, but one report looking at Islam in the United Kingdom estimated that at most only around 4% of the Muslim population (and less than 0.2% of the UK population as a whole) are converts to the faith.²¹ Frisina quotes statistics for Italian

¹⁴ See SMITH 2005, 16.

¹⁵ See LEE 2012, 173.

¹⁶ Data for Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden captured from the online data analysis facility provided on the World Values Survey website URL: <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSanalyze.jsp> [checked on: 13-05-2012]. The author is responsible for the collapsing of data. Figures have been rounded and hence may not add up exactly to 100.

¹⁷ See CASANOVA 2010, 142.

¹⁸ See DAVIE 2007a, 167-177.

¹⁹ See HUGHES 2007, 115.

²⁰ See LEFEBVRE / CHAKRAVARTY 2010, 42.

²¹ See BRICE 2010, 36.

Muslims which indicate that of the 1,250,000 Muslims in Italy only around 10,000 are converts.²² The picture is different in the United States, however, where between 30 and 42% of all Muslims are African American converts to Islam²³.

2.2 *Living with Diversity*

These figures on conversion suggest that religious diversity in Europe where Christianity has had a monopoly for centuries, is unlikely to stimulate religious interest among young people in the way that some rational choice theorists suggest it does in the United States.²⁴ Nevertheless, European populations are beginning to adjust themselves to the needs of the growing minority groups in their midst, particularly as religious diversity has come to be foreground in debates on assimilation and difference in multicultural societies. Often competing demands are worked out in young people's spaces. Schools are an obvious example. In Britain where around one third of state schools have a religious character, the vast majority are Christian.²⁵ Religious minorities have therefore made a case that their right to equality should encompass the provision of more state funded schools reflecting their own faith traditions.²⁶ At the same time schools of all types, as other organisations in general, are increasingly sensitive to the multiple religious needs and obligations of their pupils and staff. Thus schools make provision for halal menus, for example, and careful consideration is given to the content of religious education curricula, and inclusivity in relation to school prayers and acts of worship.²⁷

Perhaps the point that has drawn most publicity in various European countries is the wish of some young Muslim women to wear the *hijab* as an expression of their religious faith. Davie describes the *affaire du foulard* at the end of the 1980s in France, when three girls were sent home from school for wearing the Muslim headscarf. The sharp separation between religion and the state in France meant that religion and religious symbols, including the *hijab*, were proscribed from state schools. However, Davie points out that despite this injunction certain Christian and Jewish symbols had been tolerated. This raised questions and controversy about the status of Islamic symbols vis-à-vis those of other faiths. In 2004 the French state unequivocally affirmed its position with a new law that clearly stated the wearing of all signs and attire that conspicuously demonstrated religious affiliation is banned.²⁸

3. **The Fervent Few**

Of course not all young people of minority faiths practice their religion; nominalism exists among non-Christian youth just as it does among Christians. Those who do take their religion seriously, however, often face suspicion and in some cases racism following the fact that many teenagers of 'other' faiths are of minority ethnicity too. This is especially so for young Muslims (and those mistaken to be Muslim) since 9/11. Young people who wish to practice and own their faith have therefore had to be particularly reflexive in negotiating the complexities of their religio-ethnic identity in

²² See FRISINA 2010, 332.

²³ See CASANOVA 2010, 142.

²⁴ See DAVIE 2007a, 67-88.

²⁵ In Britain there are 6728 Christian affiliated schools compared to just 38 Jewish schools, 11 Muslim schools and 4 Sikh schools. See Department of Education 2010.

²⁶ See MODOOD 2009.

²⁷ All state schools in England are currently required to hold a daily act of collective worship which reflects the traditions of the country (i.e. broadly Christian).

²⁸ See DAVIE 2007a, 173-174.

Western society. Several qualitative studies, for example, suggest that a strategy adopted by young Muslims is the 'de-ethnicisation' of Islam,²⁹ whereby young people seek to make a distinction between cultural customs inherited from parents and grandparents and what they see as the authentic or 'pure' principles of the Islamic religion itself.³⁰ Minganti in Sweden, for example, describes how young Muslim women counter the accusations that Islam oppresses women by dismissing certain *hadiths* as false or androcentric and highlighting others that support women's interests.³¹ This approach is critical of institutionalized religious authorities and tradition for its own sake. The emphasis is instead placed on individual authenticity. In other words, what feels right and allows the individual to make sense of his/her own life is what ultimately is accepted as religious truth.

Frisina describes a similar approach to religion among young Italian Muslims seeking to work out what Islam means for them. She writes: "Islam for these young people appears to be a *spiritual* resource, which calls them to feel at peace with themselves and helps them in moments of difficulty, but also becomes a source of *ethical commitment*, of responsibility and social commitment."³² Harris finds similar characteristics among young Christian pilgrims to Lourdes. She notes how the pilgrims valued the "personal, embodied spirituality, exposure to collective religious experiences and the formation of an intense relationship with God and with fellow believers"³³ that the pilgrimage allowed them. Also important was the role the young people played in helping others on the pilgrimage, especially those who were sick or disabled. Such acts of service gave the pilgrims a sense of purpose.

Taken together these and other studies³⁴ suggest that religiously active youth are attracted to expressions of religion that afford them three things: First, the sense of an authentic and personal relationship with God that is not curtailed by a religious institution. Second, a sense of belonging to a community of like-minded believers. Third, an outworking of belief so that faith 'makes a difference' to how they live their lives, for example in terms of ethical choices, civic engagement etc. Observing post-boomers in the United States, Flory and Miller refer to this as 'expressive communalism.'³⁵ Each of these aspects of subjective spiritual engagement – intimacy with God, communal belonging and service – feeds into the other. Being with fellow believers can, in the Durkheimian sense, sensitize individuals to spiritual experiences. The working out of belief through service to others is likely to enhance communal belonging and social capital; and affirm the sense that belief matters. Among mainstream churches it has been the charismatic evangelical congregations which seem to have been most successful at fostering these dimensions of subjective spirituality among the young. Increasingly, however, religiously active young people of different denominations are finding value in the selective use of traditional symbols and liturgical expressions of faith as a means of fostering spirituality. This is perhaps more familiar territory to Roman Catholic than Protestant young people. Significantly, however, young people routinely eschew denominational labels. Other examples of expressive communalism may be found in the Protestant Taizé community in France which attracts thousands of young people each year to share in its particular form of

²⁹ See FRISINA 2010, 343.

³⁰ See ROELAND ET AL. 2010, 294-297.

³¹ See MINGANTI 2010.

³² See FRISINA 2010, 340.

³³ See HARRIS 2010, 148.

³⁴ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010.

³⁵ See FLORY / MILLER 2010.

liturgical worship and pattern of communal life; and the World Youth Day pilgrimages that encourage thousands of young Catholics to travel together and share a Mass with the Pope at the end of the journey.

Expressive communalism can be understood in relation to the 'subjective-turn'³⁶ in wider contemporary culture.

4. The Subjective-Turn

One of the characteristics of late modern society is that it prioritises individualisation and subjectivity. We are increasingly free – compelled even – to choose our 'lifestyle'.³⁷ Young people in particular face the responsibility of finding their own way through life without the steer of normative expectations that were more obviously available to their parents and grandparents. In Britain, as educational opportunities have increased, young people are encouraged to plan and work towards a career of choice. Whether they achieve their aspirations or not, they cannot in any case expect a job for life and more than likely will have to find their way through a series of jobs, possibly marked with periods of unemployment, to form their own unique portfolio career. Similarly, finding a partner, setting up a home and starting a family is no longer constrained by a normative trajectory that everybody takes for granted. Marriage is an option (not necessarily for life), so too is civil partnership or cohabitation or living alone. There is none of the social stigma that previous generations would have faced for moving away from a heterosexual married norm. By the time young people come to make these decisions as they transition to adulthood, many will already have navigated the difficult waters of parental divorce and 'blended families'. Leisure activities too are multifarious and replete with opportunities for exploring interests and creating identities through consumption. Of course not all young people are equally equipped to take advantage of such choice and freedoms – a certain degree of psychological resilience, social and economic capital are required to fare well in these circumstances. Nevertheless the expectation is that one can and should choose who to be and how to live.³⁸

Given that young people have to make choices, the question then becomes on what basis do they choose? Heelas and Woodhead suggest that choice is *five*.³⁹ Rather than making choices according to roles, duties and obligations set down by social structures and normative conventions, the emphasis is on listening and responding to one's own inner states and subjective experiences – heeding one's "own unique needs, desires, capabilities and 'relationalities'"⁴⁰. Authenticity becomes paramount in this context.

4.1 *Religiosity, Spirituality and Religion*

Under these circumstances people's relationship to religion comes to be characterised by choice and subjective feelings: Whether or not to engage with religion at all is a matter for the individual to decide. 'Religiosity' in the sense of living up to the external demands of a religious institution and authority gives way to 'spirituality' in the sense of emotional engagement with a tradition or several traditions in a way that is personally satisfying, enhances the inner self and one's relationships with God and/or

³⁶ See TAYLOR 1991.

³⁷ See BECK / BECK-GERNSHEIM 2002.

³⁸ See SAVAGE ET AL. 2006.

³⁹ See HEELAS / WOODHEAD 2005.

⁴⁰ See HEELAS / WOODHEAD 2005, 3.

others. In this respect Heelas and Woodhead distinguish between a 'life-as' orientation in which life is lived as duty and as external conventions dictate; and a 'subjective-life' orientation that prioritizes "deep connections with the unique experience of my self-in-relation"⁴¹. It follows from this distinction that one can talk of 'life-as religion' which is focused on the external Other, "a 'higher' authority of transcendent meaning, goodness and truth"⁴² to which one submits subjective-life to. In contrast, one can talk of 'subjective-life spirituality' which is committed to deep truths found within the world and, very often, the Self. Subjective-life becomes sacralised rather than subjugated. Much of the Mind-Body-Spirit movement and New Age philosophies and practices fall into the latter category. Since truth is determined by the individual rather than an external religious system, with subjective-life spirituality there is the potential for individuals to draw selectively on a range of religions and philosophies as cultural resources to create their own uniquely tailored personal spirituality.

Spirituality need not, however, only exist outside of religious institutions. Indeed many religious people would describe themselves as acting spiritually when they submit to God and observe religious practices. Another type of spirituality – 'life-as spirituality' – can therefore be identified as one that thrives within a religious tradition but at the same time emphasizes subjective experiences and meanings, and is freer to respond in a personal way to what the tradition might offer. The examples of expressive communalism discussed above (the young Muslims women working out what Islam means for them as modern individuals living in the West, and the young Lourdes pilgrims) can be seen as an example of life-as spirituality. Critically engaging with a religious tradition, making a personal commitment to live out the implications of faith and sharing in community provides these individuals with a means of self-development and a source of peace, purpose and joy.

The move from obedient religiosity to critically and emotionally engaged spirituality suggests that religion becomes a matter of consumption rather than obligation.⁴³ This way of thinking has become ubiquitous throughout the Western world, and especially so for young people. Smith and Denton make the point for young people in the United States: "For most teens, nobody *has to* do anything in life, including anything to do with religion. 'Whatever' is just fine, if that's what a person wants."⁴⁴ Mason et al. found the majority of Australian teens thought it was fine for people to 'pick and choose' religious beliefs.⁴⁵ Collins-Mayo et al. found an attitude of 'each to their own' among English youth.⁴⁶

5. Nones and Nominals – An Indifferent Majority

If the subjective-turn has influenced the minority of young people who are committed to practicing their religion, it has also contributed to the rise in the number of those who describe themselves as 'no religion' (the 'Nones') or who are only nominally attached to a religious tradition, usually by way of an ascribed identity that follows their family's religious association. These young people certainly see religious affiliation, belief and practice as personal choice, but it is not a choice they themselves prioritise or give much thought to because religion simply does not matter very much to them –

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See HEELAS / WOODHEAD 2005, 5.

⁴³ See DAVIE 2007a, 96-98.

⁴⁴ See SMITH / DENTON 2005, 143-144.

⁴⁵ See MASON ET AL. 2007.

⁴⁶ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010.

they are indifferent to it. In this respect Voas refers to 'behavioural drift'. It is not so much that people deliberately choose against religion but rather that they choose to do other things instead, which means religious observance declines and that in turn shapes the view that religion is not particularly valuable or important.⁴⁷ Table 4 indicates levels of religious practice for Australian, English and Welsh, Canadian and American teens.

Selected Beliefs and Practices	Aust 13-15 years %	Eng / W 13-15 years %	Aust 15-19 years %	Can 15-19 years %	Aust 13-17 years %	US 13-17 years %
Attend church weekly	16	13	13	21	15	40
Attend church less than weekly	47	37	45	32	46	42
Never attend church	37	49	42	47	39	18
Pray privately once/week or more	-	-	27	30	27	65

Table 4: Religious practices of teenagers in Australia, England and Wales, Canada, US⁴⁸

If religion does not matter very much, what does matter to young people is being happy in life and having good and satisfying relationships with family and friends. Indeed, family and friends can be seen as central referents of 'faith' in the broad sense of the organisation of one's meaning, hope and purpose. Collins-Mayo et al. refer to this as the 'immanent faith' of young people⁴⁹ and Day to young people 'believing in belonging'.⁵⁰ Significantly in terms of the 'subjective-turn' we can note that family relationships and friends are themselves increasingly fluid and subjectivized in nature. For example, Collins-Mayo et al. found generational boundaries seem to have become blurred as parenting styles have become less rigid in England. In their study it was not uncommon for a young person to refer to a parent as their 'best friend' and for friends to be referred to as 'like family'.⁵¹

5.1 *Belief*

Whilst religion is peripheral to the Nones' and Nominals' way of thinking, many of these young people still believe (or at least are open to the possibility of belief) that a God of some sort exists or that certain religious or supernatural tenets may be true. Such beliefs tend to be selectively drawn from religious ideas held within the family and the wider cultural memory (which is largely Christian), and are held more as a matter of opinion than conviction. At the same time, other people's beliefs are usually regarded as being equally valid to one's own. Day⁵² makes a helpful distinc-

⁴⁷ See VOAS / DOEBLER 2011, 58.

⁴⁸ See MASON ET AL. 2010, 92. Data collated from MASON ET AL. 2007, FRANCIS 2001, BIBBY 2009, SMITH 2005.

⁴⁹ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010.

⁵⁰ See DAY 2010.

⁵¹ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010, 33-36.

⁵² See DAY 2010.

tion between belief as a propositional statement (belief *that* God exists) and belief as a faith statement (believing *in* God). It tends to be the latter that has consequences for how one lives. Under this rubric we could say that many of the Nones and Nominals may believe *that* God exists but they believe *in* family and friends.

5.2 *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*

Characterising the generality of religious belief among teens in the United States, Smith and Denton describe what they call 'moralistic therapeutic deism' (MTD).⁵³ MTD cuts across faiths and denominations, and mediates between young people's individual beliefs and organised religion. The implicit 'creed' of MTD is as follows:

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other; as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy, to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

According to Smith and Denton, under MTD young people see religion in a benign light. It is 'good for you' insofar as it provides a moral framework and has the capacity to help people feel happy, secure and at peace. A similar benign (if indifferent) attitude towards religion has also been found in English Nominals and Nones.⁵⁴ God, according to MTD is best characterised as a divine butler-cum-cosmic therapist, there to help with problems and make people feel better but otherwise not be too involved in individuals' lives. The subjectivization of belief here is clear.

5.3 *Prayer*

Insofar as young people's attitudes are benign rather than hostile towards religion, the door is open to their turning to religion when needed.⁵⁵ Thus as well as selectively believing, the Nones and Nominals also occasionally (even if only very occasionally) engage in religious practices when it suits them (e.g. carols services at Christmas or rites of passage). Although this can be primarily for family or cultural reasons the spiritual dimension is not entirely absent. One type of religious practice that young people occasionally engage in is prayer. Nine percent of Australian teenage Nones said that they prayed at least once a month, 48% 'never to less than once a month' (such a large time period bracket suggests that some at least might pray very occasionally).⁵⁶ Twenty-nine percent of non-churchgoing 13-15 year olds in England and Wales pray at least occasionally and 3% almost daily.⁵⁷ Just what young people mean when they say they pray is a question worthy of more research. English None and Nominal youth hint that however vague prayers might be, they are nevertheless distinct from purely wishful thinking and suggestive of a purposeful action – to have prayed is to have 'done something' even when nothing else can be done. As

⁵³ See SMITH / DENTON 2005, 162-163.

⁵⁴ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010.

⁵⁵ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010, also BIBBY 2002.

⁵⁶ See MASON ET AL. 2007, 119.

⁵⁷ See FRANCIS / ROBBINS 2006.

one might expect, prayers are often said at times of difficulty or crisis. They are seen to 'work' if the prayer feels better afterwards. Prayers are additionally used as a way to psychologically process feelings of wrong-doing, guilt or shame; and also sometimes to take stock and acknowledge good things in one's life and offer 'thanks'.⁵⁸ The subjective aspect of prayers among teenagers is evident from this. Certainly for Nones and Nominals prayer is not a discipline to be worked at or something to be done when one does not feel like it.

5.4 *Managing and Making Sense of Death*

Another area where subjective engagement with religious traditions is apparent is in relation to mourning and death. Late modern Western societies tend to have an ambivalent relationship to death. On the one hand it is hidden away in hospitals and hospices and handled by professionals so that it is outside of most young people's experiences. On the other hand the proliferation and glamorizing of death in video games, television programmes and films often takes young people's attention. Youth gang violence and young suicides can also bring death close to home. Young people struggle to make sense of and manage death outside of religious concepts and symbols. It was in thinking about death that English young people were most eclectic in their beliefs drawing on concepts of ghosts, karma and reincarnation as well as heaven.⁵⁹ Increasingly people of all ages but especially the young innovate mourning rituals. In doing so, they often draw on traditional religious practices such as the lighting of candles or the creation of shrines albeit emptying them of their original theological meaning.⁶⁰ Even so, such rituals usually run alongside, or are held within, more established ways of mourning that involve traditional institutional forms of religion, thereby adding to rather than replacing them entirely.

6. Conclusion

The subjective-turn of late modern culture seems to have profoundly affected young people's religious engagement, leading towards the subjectivization of belief and practice both for the religiously inclined and the religiously indifferent, and promoting a shift from religiosity to spirituality. The subjectivization of belief and practice, however, makes the transmission of religious traditions from one generation to the next difficult.⁶¹ Religion is most readily passed on within believing, intentional communities where beliefs and practices are rehearsed and validated by a group. Outside of such communities religious truths and expressions can become relativized and irrelevant. The fact that only a minority of young people in most Western countries go to church does not bode well for the long term future of Christianity. Moreover, there is a wariness on the part of young people and adults alike about the imposition of belief and practice on others. In England parents often refrain from being too directive with their children in matters of faith preferring them to make up their own minds. Consequently, many young people grow up learning little about the faith tradition of which their family is a part and become indifferent to religion (or its absence) in their lives. The precariousness of religious transmission in Britain is demonstrated by Voas and Crockett's finding that even if both parents are regular church-goers, the chances of their children becoming so are less than 1 in 2 (46%), if only one parent goes to church regularly the chances are halved again that their children will, and if neither

⁵⁸ See COLLINS-MAYO 2008.

⁵⁹ See COLLINS-MAYO 2010, 41-44.

⁶⁰ See LEFEBVRE / CHAKRAVARTY 2010, 57.

⁶¹ See WARNER / WILLIAMS 2010.

parent is a church-goer then it is very unlikely indeed that their children will become so.⁶² While this may be troubling for the churches and other religious institutions, it does not appear to be a problem for teenage Nominal and Nones. Studies in England,⁶³ the United States,⁶⁴ Australia,⁶⁵ Finland⁶⁶ and elsewhere suggest that on the whole young people are not engaged in proactive 'spiritual searching' and very few are seriously involved with subjective-life spiritualities such as paganism or 'New Age' religions. On the whole, young people seem happy enough to get by on the limited and fragmented religious resources they have and are not particularly spiritually inclined. In Europe, if not so much in the United States, only a minority of young people are therefore keeping religious traditions alive. This resonates a little with Davie's suggestion that in Europe religion is often engaged with 'vicariously'. That is to say, the minority keep religious traditions going, and the majority (implicitly at least) are happy that they do so, for occasionally they take advantage by selectively drawing upon those religious ideas, traditions and services as and when they need or want to.⁶⁷

Whilst the sociological study of religion is growing as a discipline it is clear from the above that there is still much to learn. Cross-national studies are rare but are important for gauging the broad religious trends that accompany cultural changes in modernity and more research of this nature needs to be done. There is much to be gained from further studies into the meaning of religious affiliation, belief and practices in everyday life for young people, even if this is quite minimal. Why, for instance, do Nominals retain belief at all? How else might young people make sense of death? How significant is prayer for young people and what is going on for them at the point of petition, confession and thanksgiving? What are the implications of religious belief and practice on routine decision-making in young people's daily lives? All of the questions are worthy of further research. The meaning of religion for young people growing up in the developing world is another area of study which is likely to become urgent in the near future. Longitudinal studies with young people are difficult to manage but would prove invaluable to help our understanding as to how the meaning of religious belief and practice changes over time and in relation to specific life events. The influence of ethnicity, gender and sexuality on religious engagement has received some attention but more research is needed especially, perhaps, in relation to non-Christian faiths. The list could go on. One thing is clear, the research agenda for the years ahead therefore promises to be rich and varied and the sociology of youth religion set to continue flourishing.

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⁶² See VOAS / CROCKETT, 2005.

⁶³ See COLLINS-MAYO ET AL. 2010.

⁶⁴ See SMITH 2005.

⁶⁵ See MASON ET AL. 2007.

⁶⁶ See NIEMELÄ 2010, 211.

⁶⁷ See DAVIE 2007b, 21-35.

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