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Habits of the Heart: Youth Religious Participation as Progress, Peril, or Change?

By
MONICA R. MILLER
and
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The landscape of youth religious participation is an underengaged area across both the humanities and social science. While the humanities lack empirical data on the changing religious life worlds of youths, existing empirical work in the social sciences suggests that institutional religion buffers criminality and delinquency—a brand of engagement the authors refer to as “buffering transgression.” This is a process that both conceives and privileges religion as an institutional and a moral force responsible for creating prosocial behavior. While empirical studies on youths and religion keep religion arrested to institutional and moral functions, scholars in the humanities work hard to legitimate youth cultural forms, such as hip hop, by conflating its rugged dimensions with a quest (and hope) for democratic sensibilities—a motif the authors suggest is rooted in ideologies of teleological progress. Using the tropes progress, peril, and change, this article explores the utility (and limitations) of empirical work and the often misguided efforts to moralize religion. Here the authors raise queries regarding youth cultural change and religion and quantitatively model youth religious change over 16 years. The implications of these theoretical and empirical interventions point toward future work at the social scientific intersections of religion in culture.

Keywords: buffering transgression; hip hop; youth; religion; religious habitus; political ideology; latent class growth modeling

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NOTE: Although this article was not titled after Bellah et al.’s ([1985] 2007) classic text, *Habits of the Heart*, it certainly resonates with this seminal work. The idea of the connections between religion and radical individualism in the political moral fabric of the United States can be read in and through our analysis of the “buffering transgression” hypothesis and theoretical lens of religious habitus.

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It is often the case, particularly among traditions in African American religion, that religion has been understood and explicated as a modality of sociopolitical “progress”—one that reflects a quest for more equitable realizations of democracy. In fact, recent attention to Eddie Glaude’s (2010) provocative claim that the black church is dead highlights the manner in which debates about black religion are often grounded in questions about the promise or peril of its “prophetic” dimensions. Here, the question about prophetic weight is usually typed as social and political progress rooted in a social justice paradigm. The erroneous conflation between religion and progress is latently evidenced in work by both scholars in the humanities, working hard to legitimate youth culture (such as hip hop), and sociologists of religion, whose empirical studies on youth and religion suggest institutional religious participation among youths mitigates and buffers deleterious social behaviors and criminal activity (Smith and Denton 2005; Johnson et al. 2000; Patillo-McCoy 1998). While these efforts are often applauded as working on behalf of the moral fabric of American society, in this article, we refer to the empirical preoccupation with religion as the sanitizer and domesticator of crime as “buffering transgression”—an idea we suggest positions institutional religion as the ethical disciplinarian of social ills is constructed as a variable that produces prosocial behavior among “deviant” populations. What such studies do not reveal, however, especially for marginalized youths, is the extent to which “institutional” religion upholds purchase and relevance in a changing cultural climate and landscape. Moreover, studies such as these are not only complicit in the moralizing and “democratizing” of religion as progress and affirmative activity but, likewise, constrain, limit, and relegate religion to an institutional phenomenon, thus denying not only the symbolic violence of religion in American life but also the enduring structuring of the religious habitus (Barrett 2010; Bourdieu [1980]/1990) and its effects on social life—a point to which we return later in the article.

This article first explores the ways in which youth cultural forms of expression, such as hip hop, have often been conceptualized as a modality of progress—cultural practices expected to bear the responsibility of realizing the democratic project on behalf of marginalized groups, especially youths. While suppositions such as this one are helpful in authorizing cultural forms often stigmatized in larger society, such claims are often journalistic in nature and bear the mark of racial representational analysis. Understood in this way, youth culture becomes a tool by which to make larger sociopolitical critiques of American society—here, youth culture becomes a technique of critique and a tool of progress for what appear to be, at times, unsupported claims and moralized expectations. From journalistic claims about youth culture, we move into a discussion exploring existing empirical studies on youth and religion, suggesting that while such studies are useful in charting a portrait of youth religious participation, such work falls prey to the “buffering transgression” hypothesis, thus keeping religion arrested to institutional confines. Differing from the first trend, studies such as these take seriously empirical data, yet cut short the range of religious expression—this aborted perspective similarly denies the enduring durability of the religious habitus and maintains religion as a practice of morality and inherent benevolence. Moreover, these studies fail to

chart change in religious participation over long periods of time. This article raises both empirical and theoretical concerns. We suggest that representational claims regarding youth culture often lack an empirical and material base, yet we also hint that empirical data, too, often fall short due to the rigid and limited conceptualizations of variables such as religion. Beyond a concern with the necessities and complexities of empirical work, we suggest that existing social scientific work on youth, religion, and faith-based institutions is often ideologically misguided in its need to conceptualize religious participation as a moralizing force for progress, change, and social conformity.

To what extent should popular cultural forms bear the burden of political expectation? By conflating religious participation, youth culture, and political progress, do we not risk perpetuating hegemonic notions of democracy and progress? We suggest that to take such queries to task, we must likewise take seriously the empirical changes in and theoretical implications of youth religious participation. Through an interrogation of the tropes progress, peril, and change, this article critiques and yet advocates for empirical work on youth and religion—we seek to say something about the often misguided efforts of moralizing religion. Moreover, we seek to raise a theoretical query regarding youth cultural change and religion and their implications for future work at the social scientific intersections of understanding youth culture in religion and the religious in youth culture.

Hip Hop and Youth Culture as Progress? Pushing the Democratic Project

The landscape of American society, often perniciously characterized as symbolically violent and repressive, has often been typed as a terrain of struggle represented by diverse and sometimes competing quests for democratic possibilities. Marginal groups have tenaciously wrestled for a seat at the table of freedom and justice. It is against this geography for justice in culture from which philosopher and cultural critic Cornel West engages the political and philosophical dimensions of youth culture and hip hop. Similar to the work of public intellectual Michael Eric Dyson, West sees in hip hop something fundamentally paramount to how marginalized voices challenge the very moral, social, and cultural fabric in which we live—sentiments often ignored but necessary for the opening of more faithful democratic sensibilities. What is more, West argues that such work requires something greater of the public intellectual; he writes, “I do not believe that the life of an academic—or at least all academics—should be narrowly contained within the university walls or made to serve narrow technocratic goals” (2004, 188), acknowledging that youth culture assists “to keep our fragile democratic experiment alive in the future” (2004, 200). In rap music, West lifts up what he sees as lyrical strands representative of a “Socratic commitment” to questioning, a mode of thought that embraces self-examination, critiques of authority, intellectual integrity, and moral consistency. West constructs rap music as part of the continued legacy of black

musical genius of the blues and spirituals—prophetic artistic creations that put forth an undeniable “indictment” of public agony and social misery according to this trend of engagement.

West often refers to rap music and hip hop culture as embodying aspects of “tragic-comic” hope, representing the best and the worst of American society. He sees it as a cultural form that embodies “a paradoxical cry of desperation and celebration of the black underclass and poor working class, a cry that openly acknowledges and confronts the wave of personal cold-heartedness, criminal cruelty and existential hopelessness in the Black ghettos of Afro-America” (2004, 482). In other works, West has boldly referred to hip hop as the “black CNN” for youths (2004, 178–79).

Similar to the social criticism of Dyson, West explicates hip hop culture within an articulated rhetoric of black struggle and crisis, manufacturing hip hop from a nostalgic poetics of political resistance to those of social ills on America’s underside. While hip hop certainly has historical beginnings in the context of urban struggle, this typing of hip hop as the (inevitable) progenitor of struggle and theodicy by poor black youth is indeed a problematic one. Lifting up hip hop’s political dimensions, West argues,

The best of rap music and hip-hop culture still expresses stronger and more clearly than any cultural expression in the past generation a profound indictment of the moral decadence of our dominant society. An unprecedented cultural breakthrough created by poor talented black youths in hoods of the empire’s chocolate cities, hip-hop by now has transformed the entertainment industry and culture here and around the world. (2004, 179)

Differing from Dyson, West engages the ontological angst in hip hop culture as representative of the political impossibilities of America, a less than perfect union that has constrained justice, fairness, and hope. With democratic sensibilities always at the fore of his intellectual projects, West understands how fundamental differences in both religion and culture constrain a more just and perfect society. In Christianity, he sees both “Constantinian” (destructive) and “Prophetic” (libratory) strands as crucial distinctions that threaten the “future of American Democracy” (2004, 146). With hip hop, he sees evidence of both productive and destructive dimensions—dimensions that can contribute to either the building up or breaking down of a more democratic world. Between the flag and the cross, there is hope, according to West. In hip hop and youth culture there is hope for the making of a more just society through struggle, self-examination, and critical questioning—the core of the Socratic philosophical project.

West’s analysis takes up and plays on themes such as “moral consistency” and “ethical integrity,” coupled with his long-standing argument that America is continually witnessing varied forms of nihilism—a term he uses to describe moral/social decay and the eclipse of hope and meaning in areas of culture and society. The epic struggle against social misery and pain grounds his work on hip hop culture; marginalized voices from the “underside” are figured as challengers of the ethical, social, and moral core of dominant complicit institutions throughout society. Because he understands hip hop culture as representative of the ingenuity and sentiments of poor black urban youth, he argues that black youth are “up

against forces of death, destruction, and disease unprecedented in the everyday life of black urban people" ([1993]/2001, 148) and the threat of nihilism, which he describes as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaningless, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness given shape by affective markers such as *psychic depression*, *personal worthlessness*, and *social despair* ([1993]/2001, 162).

This trend figures hip hop cultural workers as "thugged-out" philosophers with the ability to constrain or enable the renewal of justice through culture. The construction of such a narrative emerges out of West's own Emersonian/Jeffersonian-inspired sensibilities and prophetic Christian identity. With such a task at hand, street philosophers become agents who struggle against a society that, according to West, is not only in crisis but falling deeper into the depths of meaninglessness. While West's approach offers a subversive political commentary on reading rap music and hip hop culture as prophetic and political, we are reminded that this kind of engagement cannot be used as a stand-in for a rigorous exploration of the religious dimensions of youth culture. West often positions rappers as prophetic spiritual griots within the Christian tradition, yet these claims lack an empirical base and are at most representational. Additionally, similar to Dyson's, West's commentary (in rhetoric and form) fails to go beyond dominant religions.

The Perils of Youth Culture: Empirical Studies, Religion, and "Buffering Transgression"

Recent attention to the study of belief in material culture reminds us that "the problem of belief qua prescription is that it reduces a religion to a body of assertions demanding assent" (Morgan 2010, 2). Beyond searching for theological assertions in a traditional sense, Morgan suggests, "rather than marginalizing belief, we need a more capacious account of it, one that looks to the embodied, material features of lived religion" (2010, 7). While studies such as Smith and Denton's (2005) National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) and Byron Johnson's (2001) examination of black youths, crime, and the church are useful in demonstrating the affirmative role of religious institutions among youths and show the "buffering transgression" hypotheses to be empirically valid, they do not provide a trajectory (or rate of change) of youth church attendance over a more substantial period of time (Smith and Denton's study covers only five years). Charting such rate of change quantitatively and longitudinally offers a window into cartographical shifts in institutional religious participation, which raises important theoretical concerns regarding the role of religion in society, especially among marginal populations.

Although institutional religion may continue to serve as an affirmative space for populations such as black youths, how do such studies come to grips with changing practices of religiosity and belief in the cultural sphere? Rhetorical claims to religion as a meaningful construct (e.g., Smith and Denton's conjecture toward subjective religiosity) cannot be used as a stand-in for how youths live their lives in

particular cultural and social contexts, in ways that challenge unconscious and inherited affirmations of confessional beliefs. The slippage often grounding the analysis of belief has been taken up as a concern within anthropological research but has been slow to take its place within sociology. Sociologist of religion Gordon Lynch critiques the lack of critical attention given to the concept of belief within sociology. He writes,

In my own discipline of sociology of religion, such narrow conceptions of belief persist both in terms of the emphasis on survey data measuring respondents' attitudes to creedal statements . . . and the use of interviews to try to elicit the core beliefs and spirituality of those within and beyond institutional religion. The persistence of such propositional understandings of belief—even in the face of evidence that they make little sense to research respondents—makes David Morgan's grounding of belief in socially shared practices and aesthetic regimes a welcome corrective. (2010, 40)

Lynch's challenge is representative of new academic approaches to the study of religion in culture in more general terms. More traditional work explores religion as working on behalf of creedal belief; however, closer examinations of people's lived reality reveal more complicated uses of religion (and the materiality and performance of belief) than such literature assumes. What also remains absent within literature on youths and religion is a quantitative look (over time) into shifts of institutional participation both methodologically and substantively. If significant change is found in institutional participation over time, what does said change suggest for certain demographics? This article seeks to engage such queries by statistically examining church attendance over time using preexisting data.

Given shifting patterns of religious practice in our postmodern context, does the church still matter (in terms of institutional participation) for black, white, and Hispanic/Latino youths? Using data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), this article statistically examines the social distribution of the level and rate of change in church attendance from 1992 to 2006. Is there meaningful change in church attendance among youths between these years? If so, what social demographics (i.e., race, gender, social class, and urban/suburban/rural) predict such change in church attendance during this time? What are future implications for the empirical examination of religion beyond the four walls? How does such change over time, if found, alter "buffering transgression" hypotheses that so rabidly rely on the persistence of institutional religious participation, especially for marginalized youths?

Among various modalities of youth culture today, rap lyrics have replaced sacred scripture; CDs are played in place of old-time religion humming; sagging pants and skinny jeans are worn underneath or without the choir robe; and clubs, bars, and street corners have transformed into ecclesiastical spaces where the watchful eye of God is replaced by technological surveillance of cameras and effervescent blue lights. The rugged, edgy, and gritty terrain of youth culture is a growing reality in our world; it does not compete with more traditional ways of "practicing" religion as impressionistic work assumes; it does, however, reflect the myriad ways religion is being used to challenge confessional and apologetic postures.

Against the noise and mayhem of moral panic, nihilism, and other perceived pathologies of youths, tropes and narratives of church decline pervade both the popular and scholarly imagination on youth, religion, and popular culture. It is worth noting that popular exaggeration of a moral decline and proliferation of deviance among youths rests comfortably in the discursive interstices of literature that seemingly bifurcates religious classification (often through rhetorical distinctions in religious activity such as churching and de-churching). These distinctions are not representative of our social reality; they are deployed through plastic divisions that seemingly polarize and trade in religious difference for traditional sameness. Unsupported claims of deviance among youths ostensibly ignore the messiness and syncretism that characterize changing expressions of religiosity within the postmodern condition. In other words, fears of inflated secularization coupled with market worries of church decline (market maintenance) have forced a rather thin analysis of the changing cartography of religion and its uses in cultural practices. In a similar trajectory, motivations for exploring youth religious patterns are displaced, as we saw with the buffering transgression motifs. For example, Smith writes,

A series of high-profile events—including multiple school shootings and local epidemic outbreaks of sexually-transmitted diseases among youth—have heightened broad public concern about problems in youth culture. There appears to be a growing awareness of and interest in religious, spiritual, and moral influences in the lives of youth among not only religious leaders, but also educators, social service providers, public policy-makers, philanthropists and journalists. (2002, 598)

It is this kind of motivation for such work that contributes to the moralizing of religion as an inherently meaningful construct within society, endowing it and its practices as policing and disciplining behaviors and social practices. If youths are increasingly altering their relationships with and practice of religion in nontraditional ways, how will future empirical work engage and measure religion and “subjective religiosity”? Attention beyond institutional understandings and buffering transgression motifs has potential to yield much insight into how social and cultural communities make use of religion.

We must first chart how youths are in fact participating institutionally. Although institutional participation is not the standard, with studies suggesting that black youths espouse higher rates of institutional participation than their white and Hispanic/Latino counterparts, we must begin with a more foundational examination. As such, the exploratory study in this article seeks to give speculative popular imagination an empirical face and considers further the implications of such findings for future work on exploring the changing texture and geography of youth religiosity.

Change: Does the Church Still Matter?

While empirical work on changing rates of marginal youths' church participation is rather limited, many scholars, particularly social scientists, agree that the space

and infrastructure of the church matter because they buffer social transgression—otherwise referred to as delinquent and deleterious behavior. While they are not without their problems, as already discussed, what these studies do afford the field is a means by which to assess youths' institutional religious participation. The historical role of the black church for black communal progress and social and political advancement cannot be denied, as pointed out in the work of sociologist Mary Patillo-McCoy (1998). Moreover, scholars such as Cathy Cohen remind us that “while African American religious institutions are possibly the most significant institutions in Black communities, some raise the question of whether their role as social regulator and political mobilizer has waned in recent years” (2010b, 23). Social science studies have consistently argued that institutional religious involvement among African American youths has served as a significant space that buffers specifically youth crime and criminal activity, providing a means to somewhat buffer the deleterious effects of urban decay more generally. The recasting of church rituals in everyday social action becomes a means by which to produce similar effects. Other empirical findings have suggested that “the interaction between neighborhood disorder and religious involvement, which is non-significant for general crime, is negative and significant for the model of serious crime, and non-significant for the model of minor crime” (Johnson et al. 2000, 7).

Johnson et al. further suggest that “the severity of the effects of neighborhood disorder on an individual's behavior depends on the level of that resident's religious involvement (i.e., the effect of neighborhood disorder decreases as an individual's religious involvement increases)” (2000, 9). Religiosity in terms of church attendance is understood as a construct of social control that protects one from harmful effects. The ultimate goal of such study is to demonstrate the manner in which agencies of social control, such as the church, serve as an affirmative locus of moral infrastructure for neighborhoods that suffer social consequences and effects of social chaos and multiple forms of disadvantage. Beyond the focus on black youths specifically, other findings have suggested that “despite their frequent confusion and inarticularity about religion, American adolescents as a whole exhibit a positive association between greater teen religious involvement and more positive outcomes in life” (Smith and Denton 2005, 28), noting that institutional religiosity plays a key role in life outcomes between more religious and less religious youths. Although Smith and Denton make a cautionary note against the limited scope of causal inference, they add that “the more religiously involved teens are [they are] much less likely to smoke cigarettes regularly, drink alcohol weekly or more often, and get drunk every few weeks or more often” (2005, 221), again noting the moral use of church participation as a social strategy. Their findings are also statistically significant for variables such as teen gender, age, race, region of residence, parental marital status, parental education, and family income among various religious types.

The buffering effects of institutional faith participation suggest that for the purposes of producing, preventing, and maintaining social order, the context of the church matters. That is to say, the church matters as a space of participation.

What impact declining rates of attendance may have on such buffering hypotheses has yet to be seen. If there is a decline in religious participation over time, especially among people who are said to significantly benefit from such mitigation, how do we rethink the examination of social and cultural space and their merits within empirical research beyond moral policing? If institutions are being frequented less and less over time, what does this suggest about the topography of changing space and place of engagement among youths?

Do Social Differences in Religious Participation Matter?

While the aforementioned literature points to the affirmative role of institutional religion in the lives of young people, we are aware that social differences matter in regard to religiosity. Black youths, in comparison to their white and Hispanic/Latino counterparts, are said to espouse higher rates of religiosity. Social differences affect rates of religiosity among American youth in general, according to the NSYR. Findings from the NSYR suggest that factors influencing low- and non-attending teens include variables such as the religiosity of and relationship with parent(s), parent education, age, race, and regional location (Smith and Denton 2005, 107). Religiously devoted youths (top 8 percent) with higher rates of both devotion and attendance—understood together through six measures of religiosity (believe in God, attend religious services weekly or more often, faith is extremely important, regularly participate in youth religious groups, pray, and read the Bible regularly)—are significantly associated with outcomes described as positive. For example, teens who have parents who attend church more, have strong parental bonds and affirming relationships, have parents who are married, and are involved in organized activities are more likely to attend religious services themselves. Gender also plays a role—girls espouse higher rates of religiosity than boys (Smith and Denton 2005, 110–11). Smith and Denton found that highly devoted white youths were more likely than black and Hispanic/Latino youths to be religiously devoted (a finding that could be reflective of lower rates of youth group participation for black youth). Findings on many of the six religiosity variables, which included among them “religious attendance,” support that black teenagers and Hispanic/Latino youths tend to be more religious than their white counterparts. Both black and Hispanic/Latino youths are, however, less likely to belong to religious youth groups. On the measure of religious service attendance, the NSYR found that 20 percent of black youths attend religious services more than once a week in comparison to 16 percent for whites, 12 percent for Hispanic/Latinos, and 9 percent for Asian teenagers (Smith and Denton 2005, 273–74). Findings beyond this study strongly suggest that race matters for understanding differences in adolescent religiosity.

Aside from race/ethnicity, other demographic variables have an effect on adolescent religiosity, such as social class (defined by multiple factors including parental education), gender, age, and regional differences. Results for social class are mixed

and not significantly associated with teenage religiosity but do show that teens in low-income families appear to be less religiously involved in organizational aspects of religion (service attendance and youth group). However, using U.S. Census data from 2002, grouping counties into quartiles by median family income, Smith and Denton (2005) found that the highest levels of religiosity are among teens living in the poorest median income counties and that teen religiosity drops off as the median family income of counties increases. The social class variable that was significant on all religiosity variables, except for religious service attendance, is the median family income of one's county—teenagers in higher income counties score significantly lower on five of the six religiosity variables. When looking at gender, Smith and Denton found that on all six measures of religiosity variables, girls scored higher than boys. With regard to age, U.S. teenagers, at least through 16 and 17 years of age, appear not to be dramatically less religiously engaged than younger U.S. teens. Teenagers living in the South are consistently more religious than those in the Midwest, and those living in the Northeast are less religious than those in the Midwest. Controlling for all demographic variables in multivariate models, rural-urban differences (county population) become insignificant, but there is a significant regional difference in the religiosity of teenagers in the South in comparison to those in the Northeast. Overall, they suggest that adolescent religiosity in the United States is socially patterned but appears to be well spread out across ranges of family income and education; the most significant factor that differentiates levels of U.S. adolescent religiosity is affiliation, which gives rise to differences in theological perspectives and practices (Smith and Denton 2005, 106–12, 272–91).

Differences in Religious Participation over Time

Little is known longitudinally about what kinds of patterned change may occur among youths' religious participation (institutionally). Smith and Snell (2009) consider change over five years of the same sample of youths studied in the first wave of the NSYR. They use second- and third-wave NSYR data (youth 13 to 17 years old) to chart change beyond high school age into emerging adulthood, ages 18 to 23. Their findings suggest an overall decline in religious service attendance and participation over this time span. Attendance and participation was 11 percent for those adolescents who attended more than once a week at 13 to 17 years old, 11.4 percent for those attending once a week, and 2.3 percent for those attending 2 to 3 times a month. Those who did not attend increased by 18.4 percent (Smith and Snell 2009, 112).

Youths who identified as Protestant at ages 13 to 17 (five years earlier) declined by 7 percent, those who identified as Catholic declined by 6 percent, and those who identified as nonreligious increased by 13 percent. Only about 2 percent switched to black Protestant churches from Catholic denominations. Overall, combining the decline for those who attended frequently and infrequently up to a few times a year (at ages 13 to 17), change in the same sample of youths

over five years suggests that a little more than half of emerging adults (54.6 percent) do not attend religious service.

Despite the decline in religious service attendance, Smith and Snell (2009) argue that there is not a decline in the importance of faith in daily life for emergent adults. They note that 44 percent say that faith is “very” or “extremely” important in their lives compared to 26.8 percent who say it is not. While church participation continues to decline among emerging adults, declining membership does not reflect the subjective value and weight faith holds in the lives of youths overall, according to Smith and Snell. Although black Protestant religious service attendance decreased by 17 percent for those attending once a week or more (an increase of 11 percent for those in the never-attending category at ages 13 to 17), black Protestant emergent adults are more likely than the national average (44 percent) to say that faith holds an extremely important place in their daily lives (72 percent) (Smith and Snell 2009, 113).

Studies that track a same sample over time yield important clues into the changing life worlds of teens, yet they are limited in that change is measured at only two time points. The more times something is measured, the more reliable the estimation of the rate of change will be. The study this article discusses, however, considers change over a more substantial amount of time—15 years. Research suggests that change scores between two time measurements (such as in Smith and Denton 2005) are unstable and statistically unreliable estimates of growth or change (Singer and Willett 2003). Additionally, change scores are limited to a linear functional form, masking the potential nonlinearity or variation in trajectories. In addition, percent-change scores do not allow for the conditioning or prediction of change by other variables, providing a very limited picture of who and what underlies these changes.

Change over Time: A Longitudinal Study of Youths' Religious Participation

Study sample

To investigate the level and rate of youths' religious attendance, we employed data from the NLSY79. The NLSY79 is a nationally representative sample of 12,686 young men and women who were 14 to 22 years old when they were first surveyed in 1979. In 1986, a separate survey was launched, known as the NLSY1979–Children and Young Adults (NLSY79-Children), to study 11,469 of the children born to NLSY79 female respondents. In addition to the mother's information from the NLSY79, the child survey included assessments of each child, as well as additional demographic and development information collected from either the mother or child. For children aged 10 and older, information was collected from the children biennially, beginning in 1988, on a variety of factors including

child-parent interaction, attitudes toward schooling, dating and friendship patterns, religious attendance, health, substance use, and home responsibilities.

Analysis variables

The dependent variable was religious service attendance, measured as a self-reported Likert scaled item, assessing how often youths attended a religious service in the past year. Respondents could answer “Not at all,” “Several times a year or less,” “About once a month,” “Two or three times a month,” “About once a week,” and “More than once a week.” Due to degree of missing data in 1988 and 1992, this article examines the religious service attendance of youths from 1992 to 2006.

The independent variables included measures of geographic residence, race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and age. Youth residence in urban or rural contexts was used for 1996 and 2006 to capture geographic residence and migration. Race/ethnicity included white (43.7 percent), black (34.3 percent), and Hispanic/Latino (22 percent). Females made up nearly half of the sample (48.9 percent). Social class variables included family permanent income, family wealth, and parental education. Family permanent income was an average over six years of family income: 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, and 1993. Permanent income accounts for the transitory shocks to annual income and is a better estimate of lifetime economic status. Family wealth was an estimate of the family’s net worth in 1988, that is, the sum of the family’s liquid and illiquid assets minus the sum of debt in 1988. Parental education was an ordinal categorical variable that ranged from high school diploma to a professional degree. Last, age was measured in years from age 10 to 22, beginning in 1992.

Statistical analyses: Latent class growth modeling

Latent class growth modeling was employed to estimate (1) the level and rate of change in youths’ religious attendance from 1992 to 2006, (2) if there was clustering in these estimated trajectories, and (3) what covariates predict the parameters of change and membership in the clusters of estimated trajectories. Latent class growth modeling is a multivariate statistical analytic technique that estimates individual trajectories of change for binary or ordinal categorical variables. These trajectories of change provide an estimate of the level of youths’ religious attendance and rate of change of youths’ religious attendance for each individual. The variation of the individual trajectory estimates is then examined for clusters of individual trajectory estimates that have meaningful between-group variation. The clusters form what are known as latent classes of growth or change. Thus, the latent class growth model estimates three parameter estimates that vary across individuals: level of youths’ religious attendance, rate of change in youths’ religious attendance, and their latent class membership. These latent classes, along with their individual trajectory estimates, can be conditioned by covariates to see who makes up these latent classes.

In addition, as a covariate, a latent class growth model was estimated for urban/rural residence and migration from 1996 to 2006. These analyses were conducted with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation using Mplus, a latent variable modeling software package (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2010).

Results

Latent class growth models were fit for both youths' religious service attendance and urban/rural residence. The most plausible latent class growth model for both were found to have two latent classes based on fit statistics (e.g., Akaike information criteria [AIC], Bayesian information criteria [BIC], and entropy). Both the AIC and the BIC had the smallest estimates, indicating the plausibility of the model and the entropy was 0.69. An entropy value closer to 1 indicates clearer delineation of latent classes (Celeux and Soromenho 1996). Table 1 shows the estimated percent change from 1992 to 2006 for the two estimated latent classes for religious attendance.

As can be seen from Table 1, there is an overall decline in youths' religious service attendance. Latent class 1 is made of youths with frequent religious attendance and a steady decline, whereas latent class 2 comprises youths with infrequent religious attendance and a sharp decline. It was estimated that approximately 47 percent of the sample were in latent class 2.

Table 2 shows the estimated percent change from 1996 to 2006 for the two estimated latent classes for urban/rural residence.

Latent class 1 captures those youths who resided in either an urban or rural context and by 2006 resided in a rural context, whereas latent class 2 captures those youth who resided in either an urban or rural context and by 2006 resided in an urban context. It was estimated that approximately 83 percent of the sample were in latent class 2.

In modeling the effects of covariates on the level and rate of change in religious youths' attendance, the latent class growth model of urban/rural residence and migration interacted with the latent class growth model of religious youths' attendance. Thus, there were four different latent classes of growth models of religious youths' attendance. Table 3 presents the four classes and percentage within each.

Meaningful effects predicting the level and rate of change in religious youths' attendance were found. As age increased, the level of religious attendance decreased and the rate of change in religious attendance increased. Black youths had a higher level of religious attendance than both Hispanic/Latino and white youths for each latent class, and Hispanic/Latino youths had a higher level of religious attendance than white youths. It was also found that as family wealth increased, the level of youths' religious attendance increased.

Meaningful effects predicting the composition of the two latent class trajectories of religious youths' attendance were also found. Those who resided or migrated to rural areas by 2006 were slightly more likely to be a member of the latent class of frequent, steady decline religious attendance than those who resided or migrated

TABLE 1
Latent Class Growth Trajectories of Youths' Religious Attendance

	1992	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
Latent class 1: On average frequent religious attendance, with steady decline								
More than once a week	26.8	24.7	22.7	20.9	19.2	17.6	16.1	14.7
About once a week	37.4	37	36.3	35.5	34.6	33.5	32.3	31.1
Two or three times a month	<i>15.6</i>	<i>16.3</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>17.6</i>	<i>18.1</i>	<i>18.6</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>19.3</i>
Once a month	<i>7.4</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>9.1</i>	<i>9.6</i>	<i>10.2</i>	<i>10.7</i>	<i>11.2</i>
Several times a year	<i>9.8</i>	<i>10.7</i>	<i>11.7</i>	<i>12.8</i>	<i>13.9</i>	<i>15.1</i>	<i>16.3</i>	<i>17.7</i>
Not at all	<i>3</i>	<i>3.3</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>4.1</i>	<i>4.5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5.6</i>	<i>6.2</i>
Latent class 2: On average infrequent religious attendance, with steady decline								
More than once a week	3.4	2.9	2.5	2.1	1.8	1.5	1.3	1.1
About once a week	11.4	9.9	8.6	7.5	6.4	5.5	4.7	4.1
Two or three times a month	12.9	11.7	10.5	9.3	8.3	7.3	6.4	5.5
Once a month	12.1	11.4	10.6	9.8	8.9	8.1	7.2	6.4
Several times a year	<i>36.1</i>	<i>36.8</i>	<i>37.1</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>36.5</i>	<i>35.5</i>	<i>34.1</i>	<i>32.5</i>
Not at all	<i>24.1</i>	<i>27.3</i>	<i>30.7</i>	<i>34.3</i>	<i>38.1</i>	<i>42.1</i>	<i>46.2</i>	<i>50.4</i>

NOTE: This table presents the predicted probabilities of the latent class growth model of youths' religious attendance. Bold = decreasing; italics = increasing.

TABLE 2
Latent Class Growth Trajectory of Urban/Rural Residence and Migration

	1996	2006
Latent class 1: Rural migration		
Urban	36.7	0
Rural	63.3	<i>100</i>
Latent class 2: Urban migration		
Urban	<i>80.6</i>	<i>100</i>
Rural	19.4	0

NOTE: This table presents the predicted probabilities of the latent class growth model of urban/rural residence and migration. Bold = decreasing; italics = increasing.

TABLE 3
Estimated Proportion of Latent Class Membership: Final Model Latent Class (LC) Membership for Religious Attendance by Urban/Rural Residence and Migration

LC: Urban/Rural Residence	LC: Religious Attendance	%
LC 1: Rural residence/migration	LC 1: Frequent, steady decline	20.4
LC 1: Rural residence/migration	LC 2: Infrequent, sharp decline	6.7
LC 2: Urban residence/migration	LC 1: Frequent, steady decline	49.6
LC 2: Urban residence/migration	LC 1: Infrequent, sharp decline	23.3

to urban centers. Hispanic/Latino youths were 1.45 times more likely to be a member of the frequent, steady decline religious attendance latent class than were white youths. And black youths were 2.42 times more likely to be a member of the frequent, steady decline religious attendance latent class than white youth. Parental education and family income did not have a meaningful effect, and there were no meaningful differences between males and females. Net worth (wealth) did have an effect. We suspect that the race/ethnicity effects overlapped with the potential covariation of gender differences.

Discussion of findings

This study suggests that there is a consistent church attendance decline across the board for white, black, and Hispanic/Latino youths over time. Those who either reside in or migrate to urban locations are slightly more likely to have a sharper decline in attendance over time. We further suggest, as existing literature demonstrates, that race and wealth matter. Contrary to existing literature, our findings suggest gender is negligible. We suspect that gender is being overpowered by the racial/ethnic differences. Nevertheless, we did look at mean differences in religious attendance by gender descriptively outside of the model—a cursory look at what was happening with gender and the mean differences in religious attendance between males and females shows findings were small. More specifically, when

disaggregated by race and ethnicity, the mean differences in religious attendance for white youths were very small, but for black and Hispanic/Latino youths, they were larger, thus suggesting that the nonmeaningful gender differences that we found in the model are overpowered by (1) small mean differences in religious attendance by white youths and (2) the independent effects of race/ethnicity. We further suspect that there is likely a meaningful interaction effect between race/ethnicity and gender; this is one of the questions we are currently examining. The other question currently under examination, but not discussed here, is to what extent there are differences in the effect of family wealth on religious attendance by race/ethnicity. Although we accounted for education and family income, our results show that family wealth is the strongest meaningful social class predictor of youths' religious attendance.

Last, we did not account for faith affiliation in the models. While we can hypothesize that declining religious service attendance for black youths is more specific to black Protestant traditions, we lack the empirical evidence to prove this. While the NLSY does include a measure of faith traditions, one of the issues we experienced is how to proceed on this measure considering the amount of missing data. Incomplete case analyses were conducted on each of the dependent variables of this study using full information ML assuming data missing-at-random. Despite these limitations, this study indicates that across the board there is a decline in youths' religious attendance.

Religious Habitus and Political Ideology

While the results of this study suggest a declining relevance of the institutional structure of religion in youths' lives, it does not suggest that religion is not still relevant in youths' lives. As discussed earlier, the material culture of religion goes beyond the walls of the religious institution's edifice to include an ideology and embodied rituals and practices, such as prayer, reading of religious text, what is eaten, and the social/political views and understandings of the world. These are embodiments that are not only socialized within the confines of religious institutions but also socially inherited at home, in the community, and in society.

Social inheritance is a process of double injunctions of appropriating the social world—to be chosen and to choose or to be appropriated and reappropriate (Dixon-Román 2010). As the human organism is born into the social world, the parents' religious/spiritual (non)beliefs and practices become socially inscribed on the child and, in effect, choose and appropriate his or her body. That is to say, the human body initially has no choice. However, it is this very appropriating process that enables the possibility for the child to find his or her own way of reappropriating and choosing how to be faithful or faithfully unfaithful to familial religious inheritance and, subsequently, the religious inheritances of the cultural communities and social spaces of which he or she is a participant. It is this social process of religious inheritance that enables the embodiment of religion and production and reproduction of religious ideology and rituals and practices.

The embodiment of religious inheritance can be further elaborated with Bourdieu's (1977, [1972]/1977) theory of social and cultural reproduction. For Bourdieu, the process of reproduction occurs, in part, as the objective social world produces a scheme of dispositions, which, in turn, produces individual and collective externalized actions and practices. That is, given one's social and economic conditions of existence, a scheme of thoughts, perceptions, appreciations, and actions is produced. This scheme of dispositions externalizes a homology of practices that is socially classifiable and, ultimately, reifies their social location. While the scheme of dispositions is conditioned by social structures, the externalized actions and practices generated are infinite and merely limited by social structures, but they are not socially determined. This description of the process of reproduction in and through inheritance is what Bourdieu ([1980]/1990) referred to as *habitus*.

Habitus can also be conceptualized within the fields of religious production (Barrett 2010). As Bourdieu defines them, fields are markets of production and reproduction that have particular rules of engagement. There are different types of fields (i.e., cultural, educational, economic, religious, etc.), and the rules of engagement are particular to each field and the localization of that field. Thus, the field of religious production socially structures a religious *habitus*; that is, the objective social structures of religion condition, structure, and produce religiously framed thoughts, perceptions, and appreciations of the social world. These religiously framed thoughts, perceptions, and appreciations, in effect, produce socially distributed and religiously classifiable actions and practices in the world. It is in and through this social and religious process of inheritance that the reproduction of religious ideology, rituals, and practices is enabled, intra- and intergenerationally. In fact, it is these religiously framed thoughts, perceptions, and appreciations of the social world that contribute, in part, to the constructed and reconstructed social and political views and positions of the world.

Religious *habitus* provides a framework for how to rethink the influence and social inheritance of religion beyond the walls of religious institutions. In fact, religious *habitus* explains how religion is embodied and materializes in everyday practices and interactions in the social world. It further suggests that someone does not have to ever enter the walls of religious institutions to socially inherit a religious *habitus*. The embodiment of linguistic, ritual, and everyday practices of religion and religious ideology can be and is socially inherited in other social spaces, such as the home, the community, media, and society.

The social process of religious inheritance and *habitus* becomes very important in light of the results presented in this article. While there is a decline for all youths in religious attendance, this does not cancel out the strength of the religiously inherited social and political views and dispositions. Thus, the often morally conservative political positions that are produced by religious ideology do not have to be produced through participation in religious institutions but can be and are produced by the inheritance of religious ideology in other social spaces beyond religious institutions.

This can be observed in Cohen's (2010a) recent public opinion data of youths' attitudes and opinions on various political issues. Using an item that measures the importance of religion in one's life, Cohen found that:

- black youths who were more religious were 13 percent more likely than the least religious black youths to believe that the following are always wrong: sex before marriage, homosexuality, and abortion;
- black youths who were more religious were 16 percent more likely than the least religious to agree that the government should make abortion illegal under any circumstance;
- black youths who were the most religious were 43 percent less likely to agree with the legalization of same-sex marriages, compared to those black youths who were the least religious;
- Hispanic/Latino youths who were more religious were more likely to support legally restricting access to abortions irrespective of circumstance;
- black and white youths with greater religiosity were more likely to agree that having a baby before getting married would be embarrassing to themselves and/or family; and
- Hispanic/Latino and white youths who were more religious were more likely to agree with the assertion that negative consequences would result from having a baby before marrying.

The measure of religiosity that Cohen (2010a) used does not specify religious attendance or practices but simply how important religion was in the lives of these youths. This very broadly measured item surely included both youths who attended and did not attend religious institutions. Thus, we are unable to parse out whether there are meaningful differences in the observed associations between these two sets of youths. Despite this methodological limitation, each of these findings indicates the meaningful association between a more broadly conceived religiosity—what we are calling here religious habitus—and youth political ideology. The associations that these data indicated suggest that the more prominent one's religious habitus is, the more conservative his or her views are toward important social and political issues. Thus, these data suggest that religious habitus matters for youths' political ideology. Hence, if youths do represent the political moods of the future (as is often posited), then political progress, not the youths, may be the very thing in peril.

Progress, Peril, or Change?

The purpose of this article was to offer an empirical landscape for youths' religious participation in general and black youths' in particular to further not only the empirical findings in this area but also theoretical inquiry and attention to practices and uses of religion not accounted for in institutional ideations of religion. The landscape of youths' religiosity is certainly vast, ever-changing, and

complex. The postmodern conditions in which we find ourselves and the effects of forced and voluntary migration among other social processes necessitates multidisciplinary lenses and methodologies when analyzing such subject matter. As existing studies already show (Smith and Snell 2009), empirical findings that suggest youths' religious attendance declines over time are not necessarily implying that these youths are less religious than more highly devoted adolescents who participate (institutionally) at higher rates. As documented by Smith and Denton (2005) and others, the majority of adolescents who are declining in religious participation over time still maintain rather conventional theological beliefs. In other words, church attendance may decline, but there still remains intact for many adolescents a salience and resilience to their ideological religious commitments and subjectivities. What we are suggesting here is that the connections between belief and practice are complex and complicated and not always best captured through empirical studies where survey instruments remain confined to traditional and bifurcated ways of living and understanding religiosity. Empirical studies citing "institutional participation" as paramount in affirmative life development may need to conceptually discriminate whether it is religious participation (context) that matters or, rather, the salience of religious and theological subjectivities that matter (belief). Or are both necessary in assisting in healthy life options that "buffer" social deviance?

On the other hand, it would be insufficient to say that practices do not matter—while outward religiosity in terms of practice and habit is increasingly altered (as evidenced in the decline this study suggests), subjective religiosity for the most part may stay intact while outward practices shift. More attention to cultural practices among youths is necessitated by the gap between professed faith and everyday practice to gain a clearer picture between youth practices, ideologies, and familial inheritances of religious belief. In other words, to what extent are traditional meanings of more conventional theological signifiers being held in place, and how does this complex arrangement manifest in practices?

While religious service attendance cannot and does not offer a full picture of the complex dimensions of youths' religiosity, such findings force a much needed exploration of youths' everyday practices outside of conventionally conceived religious practices, such as prayer and youth group attendance. For studies that suggest religious participation buffers the effects of crime and delinquency among youths, more specifically in disadvantaged neighborhoods, a decline in religious service attendance among affected youths necessitates a further look into what may alternatively be taking place. Moreover, it could be found that activities conceived as "deviant" in buffering transgression literature serve affirmative capacities in the lives of youths; perhaps such studies need to rethink their labeling of deviance. It is also important to keep in mind, as others have found, that youths' religious participation is contingent on a host of other factors, such as strong parental bonds. The decline in youths' attendance calls for a deeper look into the larger fragmentation of the life worlds of youths in general. Scholars who are interested in the religious life worlds of youths should consider more expansive,

less traditional, and less institutional understandings of the construct and measure of religion, and more attention should be paid to the manner in which ideations of religion are being shifted in our postmodern moment. While it is certain that there will always be segments of youths who claim religiosity/religion as a meaningful construct in their lives, what is left underexplored is the change, shift, and shape of this religiosity both methodologically and substantively.

The sharp decline in youths' religious attendance as evidenced in this study is not, we argue, a finding that should signal exaggerated alarm. Rather, such findings offer a window into youth-family, youth-peer, and youth-social relations rather than misplaced decline narratives grounded within an economy of fear. The foreclosure of church efficacy (buffering transgression) narratives open up yet new possibilities on the religious horizons to think further about the limits of postmodern religiosity and what uses and effects religion serves beyond moral social control.

Beyond empirical findings, and the institutional marketplace, material youth culture and youths' everyday practices hold much promise for the scholarly investigation of religion in everyday life. While faith institutions hold a supportive legacy for communities affected by disadvantage and deleterious effects, popular culture and its everyday manifestations hold the promise for a future that has more robust and invigorating investigations into the shifting religious presence and practices in the lives of youths in general.

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