

# Examining the Impact of Religious Initiation Rites on Religiosity and Disaffiliation over Time

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*Early religion scholars stressed the importance of institutionalized “rites of passage” to integrate and reinvigorate groups themselves. Surprisingly, little work, however, has explored the efficacy of such rites for the religious lives of individuals. Although research has examined the transformative role of semi-institutionalized rites like short-term mission trips and pilgrimages, we shift the focus to consider the potential influence of more fundamental initiation rites such as baptism, first communion, and bar/bat mitzvahs. Utilizing surveys 1 and 4 of the National Study of Youth and Religion and focusing on overall religiosity and disaffiliation as the outcomes, we examine whether experiencing a religious rite of passage during or before one’s teenage years predicts the religious outcomes of young adults. We find no difference in religiosity over time between persons who experienced a religious rite passage and those who did not. However, those who underwent a religious rite of passage were 30 percent less likely to disaffiliate between data collection points. Tests for interactions show that the influence of such initiation rites does not vary across religious traditions. Findings suggest the experience of baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, confirmation, or other rites of passage matter primarily as durable markers of social identity, binding adherents to their faith community, if only nominally.*

**Keywords:** religiosity, disaffiliation, rites of passage, baptism, National Study of Youth and Religion.

## INTRODUCTION

Sociologists and anthropologists of religion have long held that religious rites of passage—and particularly initiation rites—serve a vital *social* role in recognizing the transition from religious outsider or novitiate to full member, reinvigorating religious affections, and reinforcing common bonds among members (Durkheim 1995 [1912]; Eliade 1959; Turner 1967; van Gennep 1960). For the initiates themselves, it is also assumed that undergoing the rite of passage holds consequences for their own religious experience, binding them to their religious identity and marking “personality maturation” (Geertz 1973: 135) or “social puberty” (Van Gennep 1960: 65) or in the extreme “a transformation *totius substantiae*” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 37).

Despite these long-held assumptions, however, surprisingly, little empirical work has either verified or clarified the influence of rites of passage for the religious lives of *individuals*. The symbolic content and procedure involved in religious rites of passage like bar/bat mitzvahs in Judaism, confirmation in Catholicism, or baptism in Protestantism suggests that the event itself is intended to be meaningful and efficacious, if not life-altering, for the individual initiate. But whether those who undergo religious rites of passage such as baptism, confirmation/first communion, bar/bat mitzvah, or other significant (initiating) rites of passage, in fact, exhibit different religious patterns over time than those who never experienced these rites is still an open question. Further, the extent to which key differences in rites across religious traditions (in terms of age requirements, content of the rite, ceremonial details, etc.) potentially impact long-term religious outcomes also is underexplored.

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The current study utilizes panel data from the first and fourth surveys of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) to address these issues. Specifically, we examine whether Americans who underwent a religious rite of passage (baptism, bar/bat mitzvah, first communion, or another rite) by the first survey exhibit different levels of religiosity or likelihoods of disaffiliating from their religious faith compared to others who did not undergo a rite of passage, net of other factors. We also test for the potential moderating effects of religious tradition. Findings from this study provide critical insight into how religious rites of passage matter (or not) for religious participation and membership over the life course.

### BACKGROUND AND EXPECTATIONS

Early scholarship on religion often gave explicit attention to the role of rites of passage, and initiation rites in particular, primarily because of their vital *social* and *symbolic* function. Durkheim (1995 [1912]) explains that initiation rites perform a twofold task of creating group members (“the specific purpose of initiation is to make, to fabricate, men”) (p. 297) and to symbolize the unity of the religious cult: “[the initiation ceremony] is the occasion on which the moral and religious unity of the tribe is best demonstrated” (p. 286). In his classic work on rites of passage, van Gennep (1960) argues that religious rites of passage also served to remind the social group of the division between sacred and profane worlds—a gulf so vast that periods of social liminality demarcated by such initiation rituals were necessary to cross it. Because these scholars were interested in the momentary social and symbolic significance of initiation rites, and concurrently had no need of data tracking individuals over time, there was little concern for the long-term importance of these rites for individual participants.

Beyond their limited focus, however, earlier research on religious rites of passage was also limited by the fact that the influence of such rites could only be assumed, not demonstrated. Because virtually, all group members considered by Durkheim, van Gennep, or others underwent these rites of passage, there would have been virtually no comparison group from which to observe differences in religious outcomes. Declines in religious participation, coupled with greater diversity within and across religious traditions in Western societies, make for greater ease of comparison between those who undergo religious initiation rites and those who do not.

Despite the potential efficacy of transformative religious experience for affecting long-term religious changes in individuals, recent decades have left the topic underexplored. Among the important exceptions, Loveland (2003) examined religious switching using 1988 General Social Survey, and found that formally joining a religious group while growing up (which could include formal confirmation, baptism, or some other initiation rite) solidified one’s religious identity, preventing switching later on. Focusing on religiosity as their outcome, Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009) use data from the first two surveys of the NSYR finding that adolescents who went on a short-term missions trip between surveys grew more committed to traditional religious beliefs and were more faithful in worship attendance, Bible reading, prayer, and personal witnessing. And using the first survey of the NSYR, Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler (2011) show that participation in a short-term mission trip predicted that adolescents would be more civically engaged, suggesting that such experiences contribute to the transformation of young Americans’ identities such that they begin to view themselves as civic-minded (see also Adler 2019).

Other recent work has focused on the potentially transformative influence of “pilgrimage” experiences in adherents’ lives. Using retrospective data on young Catholics who traveled to the 2008 “World Youth Day” in Australia, Singleton (2011) shows that participants who were moderately high Mass attendees before attending the event were more likely to increase their Mass attendance compared to infrequent or highly frequent attendees. Moreover, Nissilä’s (2018) qualitative analysis of youth who participated in large open air revivalist gatherings held by the Finnish national Evangelical Lutheran Church shows that the primary impact for individuals

was “emotional energy” and deepening a shared religious identity among youth, something that had been declining within the flagging Finnish Church. Unfortunately, because these studies only focus on individuals who all underwent these pilgrimage experiences, they are unable to compare outcomes of participants with nonparticipants. Avoiding this shortcoming, Loveland (2008) draws on a national sample of U.S. Catholics and finds that those who had been on a religious pilgrimage were more likely to endorse orthodox Catholic positions on contraception and the celibacy of priests (though not other issues). And in their recent study, Alexseev and Zhemukhov (2017) compared the religious outcomes of Russian Muslims returning from their Hajj to those who did not attend the Hajj. They show how the Hajj experience made Muslims both more devout and more tolerant of religious out-groups.

Because the intent of rites of passage, and initiation rites in particular, centers primarily on a transition of identity, from outsider to insider or child to adult, we propose that the primary influence of religious initiation rites will be on the religious identity of the participant over time. Drawing on data from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, Kosmin et al. (2009) found that 55 percent of Americans who identified as “unaffiliated” had experienced a religious initiation ceremony such as baptism, Christening, confirmation, or bar/bat mitzvah, compared to 71 percent of the U.S. general population. While the authors do not pursue that finding in any detail, the disparity could suggest that the relatively lower likelihood of experiencing a personally meaningful initiation rite contributed to disaffiliation for the “nones.” Building on this idea, we anticipate that youth who undergo religious rites of passage will be more attached to their religious identity later on, and consequently, less likely to abandon it as young adults.

While there are similarities in the general purpose of rites of passage across traditions, the particular differences between them may influence their impact across time. Despite this possibility, previous research provides limited empirical grounding to formulate a robust hypothesis in this regard. It could be that because certain religious rites of passage like believer’s baptism are often associated with intense emotionalism and collective effervescence (Collins 2011), they may be more transformative for individuals compared to rites accompanied by less expressive celebration such as first communion or bar/bat mitzvahs. In contrast, however, because traditional rites like bar/bat mitzvahs and confirmation leading up to first communion require preparation (e.g., studying Hebrew, attending classes) compared to baptism that may be rather spontaneous, these rites may be more transformative for adherents’ religious identities.

Lastly, despite some research suggesting that participation in a short-term mission trip (Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009) or pilgrimage (Alexseev and Zhemukhov 2017) seemed to bolster the religiosity of adherents, we expect that initiative rites of passage like baptisms and bar/bat mitzvahs, because they are so common and fundamental to religious life within their respective communities, are less *religiously* significant than they are *socially* significant. That is, receiving first communion or bar/bat mitzvah may provide a public event for young Americans that grounds their social identity (e.g., “I’m Catholic. I remember my confirmation and first communion.” Or “I am Jewish. I went through bat mitzvah.”), but it would likely require more repetitious “commemorative ceremonies” (e.g., worship attendance, corporate and private Scripture reading and prayer) to provide the sort of religious revitalization that Durkheim (1995 [1912]) envisioned as the goal of rituals. Thus, we do not expect experiencing an initiative rite of passage in one’s teenage years or before to predict one’s religious commitment as a young adult.

## DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS

### Data

Data for this study come from the first and fourth surveys of the NSYR, a nationally representative, longitudinal telephone survey of teenagers in the United States and, later, emerging

and young adults. The first survey (i.e., wave 1) of the NSYR interviewed 3,290 U.S. teenagers and one of their parents from July 2002 to August 2003. The sample was obtained using random-digit-dialing, drawing on a sample of randomly generated telephone numbers representative of all noncellular phone numbers in the United States. The survey attained an 81 percent cooperation rate among eligible households. Comparisons of the first wave of the NSYR data with 2002 U.S. Census data on households and with nationally representative surveys of adolescents confirm that the NSYR provides a nationally representative sample of U.S. teenagers ages 13–17 without identifiable sampling or nonresponse biases (for details, see Smith and Denton 2005). A second survey was conducted in 2005 and a third survey in 2007, although those data are not used in this analysis. The fourth survey (i.e., wave 4) of NSYR was fielded in 2013. At the time of this survey, the respondents were all between the ages of 23 and 28 (i.e., they have entered young adulthood).<sup>1</sup> The 2,071 complete responses represented a 66 percent retention rate from the initial survey. In the first three data collections, all surveys were conducted via telephone. In the final collection, only 15 percent of surveys were conducted on the phone; the rest were completed online.

The majority of the independent variables for the current analysis come from the first survey, including the respondents' experience of a religious rite of passage, other youth religious measures, and key background measures, such as family socioeconomic status, parent religiosity, family structure, and race ethnicity. The religious outcome measures come from the fourth and most recent wave of the survey. Given our interest in the longitudinal impact of early religious rite of passage on later religiosity and affiliation, our analytic sample consists of respondents from the initial survey who participated in the fourth survey ( $n = 1,966$ ). To test the disaffiliation outcome, we limit the analytic sample to those youth who reported a religious affiliation ( $n = 1,730$ ) as others could not disaffiliate. Less than 2 percent of the remaining respondents had one or more missing values on the included measures, reducing the final analytic sample to 1,691.

## Measures

### *Young-Adult Religious Outcomes*

We use three indicators from the fourth survey to create an index measuring young-adult religiosity, which serves as our first outcome measure. The first of these component measures is frequency of attending religious services (not counting weddings, baptisms, and funerals), which ranged from never (= 0) to once or more per week (= 6). Next, importance of faith is determined by a question asking respondents, "How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life." The response options ranged from not important at all (= 1) to extremely important (= 5). The final measure of religiosity is the respondent's frequency of personal prayer, which ranges from never (= 1) to many times a day (= 7).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>There are five cases with reported ages older than 28. These cases may have been miscoded. Sensitivity analyses showed that these cases do not influence the results and are therefore maintained with their reported ages.

<sup>2</sup>One method to combine these variables would have been to take individuals' additive or average score across the three. This method, however, may not validly discriminate qualitative differences in respondents overall level of "religiosity." For example, a respondent, who attended two to three times per month, and said that religion was very important, and prayed many times per week would have the exact same average or sum as someone who only attended a few times per year but thought that religion was extremely important and prayed many times per day (i.e., they would both have summative scores of 9 or averages of 3). Yet, these two cases would seem to be different in terms of their overall expression of "religiosity." To overcome this challenge, we follow the combinatorial method used in Smith and Snell (2009) to create a four category (lowest, minimally, moderately, highest) ordinal measure of religiosity. Rather than a straightforward mathematical approach, this method groups respondents based on their reports for all three measures. For example, everyone who reported being in the two highest possible categories for all three measures was placed in the highest religiosity group, while those reporting either of the lowest two for all three were placed in the lowest religiosity group. It uses these types of rules to capture all of the possible combinations of responses and categorize the entire sample. For the full description of this method, see the online Appendix.

The second religious outcome is an indicator of disaffiliation. We assess whether respondents who reported considering themselves to have any religious affiliation in the first survey self-report being not religious at wave 4. Affiliation is determined through the question, "Regardless of where you may attend religious services or not, do you generally consider yourself to be Catholic, another kind of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, another religion, or not religious?" Respondents who self-identified with a religion at the first survey but then report not considering themselves to be a part of any religious group or self-identify as "not religious" at wave 4 are counted as having disaffiliated for this dichotomous outcome measure. Table 1 shows that 30 percent of first wave affiliates report having dropped any religious affiliation by young adulthood.

### ***Religious Rite of Passage***

The NSYR asked a series of questions to assess respondents' experiencing a religious rite of passage. These questions were worded similarly but altered to align with the respondent's reported religious affiliation. Depending on this self-report, respondents were asked: "Have you been confirmed or baptized as a public affirmation of your religious faith, not including infant baptism?" (If reported Protestant or Catholic); "Have you had a bar/bat mitzvah?" (If reported Jewish); "Have you taken First Communion, or not?" (If reported Catholic); "Have you done any religious rite of passage or public affirmation of your religious faith?" (If reported anything other than Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish). This last question captures all respondents, even those who did not currently report an affiliation at the time of the survey, which ensures that this measure captures ever having experienced a religious rite of passage as a youth. From these questions, we create a dichotomous measure indicating whether the respondent reported yes to any of the questions, with 57 percent of the sample being categorized as having experienced a religious rite of passage.

### ***Religious Controls***

We include a series of religious behavior and belief measures from the first survey. Doing so helps to mitigate the possibility of self-selection and isolate the independent influence of experiencing a religious rite of passage, net of other religious characteristics that may be associated with the likelihood of going through such an event and the outcomes. First, we include a measure of denomination affiliation. We follow the Steensland et al. (2000) classification to determine the primary religious tradition of the respondent (see also Steensland, Woodberry, and Park 2018).<sup>3</sup> Conservative Protestant is the modal category (26 percent) and serves as the reference category. Next, we include the three-component measures of the religiosity outcome index assessed at the first survey. We use the individual measures, rather than a similar index, in order to assess which of these characteristics may be influencing the outcome. Each of these measures is identical to the fourth survey question wording for religious service attendance, importance of faith, and frequency of prayer. In addition to these three religious characteristics during youth, we control for frequency of reading the scriptures, ranging from never (= 1) to many times a day (= 7).

The next set of religious controls captures the religiosity of youths' networks. For parents, we incorporate measures of religious service attendance and importance of faith (same coding as for the youth), both coming from the parent survey. The last measure of adult influence is based on the adolescents' report of close adults in their lives. In the first survey, teen respondents were asked how many nonparental adults they can turn to for support or advice. They then were asked how many of those adults were part of a religious congregation or organization with which the respondent was also involved. From this question, a proportion is created representing the amount

<sup>3</sup>We use reported place of attendance for this measure, except for nonattenders and those with ambiguous places of attendance, for which we use self-identified denominational affiliation, which included a "not religious" response option.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for study variables

	Full Sample ( <i>n</i> = 1,966)		No Religious Rite of Passage ( <i>n</i> = 846)		Religious Rite of Passage ( <i>n</i> = 1,120)		Range
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
<b>Religious Outcome Measures</b>							
Religiosity (W4)	1.319	1.129	1.080	1.103	1.500	1.115	0–3
Service attendance (W4)	1.686	2.128	1.268	1.971	2.001	2.187	0–6
Importance of faith (W4)	3.050	1.392	2.760	1.415	3.269	1.334	1–5
Personal prayer (W4)	3.901	2.273	3.527	2.317	4.183	2.199	1–7
Disaffiliation ( <i>n</i> = 1,730) (W4)	.300	.458	.395	.489	.244	.430	0–1
Family income	58.248	27.942	53.945	27.724	61.498	27.677	5–105
Parents' education	2.239	1.207	2.083	1.202	2.357	1.198	0–4
Two-parent biological family	.575	.494	.486	.500	.643	.479	0–1
Age	15.517	1.401	15.452	1.411	15.566	1.394	13–18
<i>Race Ethnicity (white)</i>							
Black	.118	.323	.151	.359	.093	.290	0–1
Hispanic	.092	.288	.072	.259	.106	.308	0–1
Other race	.057	.232	.064	.245	.052	.222	0–1
Female	.530	.499	.517	.500	.540	.499	0–1
Highest degree earned (W4)	1.969	1.102	1.799	1.067	2.098	1.111	0–4
Religious rite of passage	.570	.495	.000	.000	1.000	.000	0–1
<b>Religious Controls</b>							
<i>Religious Tradition (Conservative Protestant)</i>							
Mainline Christian	.124	.329	.119	.324	.127	.333	0–1
Black Protestant	.082	.275	.098	.298	.071	.256	0–1
Catholic	.244	.429	.097	.296	.354	.479	0–1
Jewish	.019	.136	.007	.084	.028	.164	0–1
Mormon	.030	.169	.017	.128	.039	.194	0–1

(Continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

	Full Sample ( <i>n</i> = 1,966)		No Religious Rite of Passage ( <i>n</i> = 846)		Religious Rite of Passage ( <i>n</i> = 1,120)		Range
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Other religion	.030	.171	.057	.231	.010	.099	0–1
Indeterminate Christian	.020	.139	.027	.163	.014	.119	0–1
Not religious	.120	.325	.243	.429	.027	.162	0–1
Religious service attendance	2.449	1.553	1.734	1.575	2.988	1.297	0–4
Importance of religion	2.439	1.138	2.080	1.176	2.711	1.029	0–4
Frequency of prayer	2.329	1.236	1.992	1.322	2.583	1.102	0–4
Frequency of reading scriptures	2.568	1.703	2.268	1.605	2.794	1.741	1–7
Parent importance of religion	4.959	1.299	4.563	1.460	5.259	1.069	1–6
Parent attendance at religious services	4.347	2.190	3.472	2.252	5.008	1.890	1–7
Proportion of supportive other adults in congregation	.371	.404	.268	.368	.449	.414	0–1
Proportion of friends who are religious	.804	.322	.702	.381	.880	.244	0–1
Use religion to make tough decisions	.209	.407	.145	.353	.257	.437	0–1
Doubts about religion	1.467	1.016	1.288	1.132	1.603	.896	0–4

Note: All variables are from the first survey unless otherwise noted.

of the respondent's total adult support that comes from religious involvement. This measure more directly indicates the density of religiosity in the adolescents' adult network.

We also assume that respondents' friend network may influence their future religiosity. Respondents were asked to name up to five friends and then were asked a series of questions about these friends. For the purposes of creating the religious friends scale, we use the follow-up question that asked: "How many are religious?" As with the measure for supportive nonparental adults, we create a measure indicating the proportion of the youth's friend group that is religious.

As a final set of religious controls, we include two religious beliefs. The first comes from a question asking, "If you were unsure of what was right or wrong in a particular situation, how would you decide what to do? Would you most likely – do what made you feel happy; do what would help you to get ahead; follow the advice of a parent or teacher, or other adult you respect; do what God or scripture tells you is right?" A dichotomous indicator of having a strong religious salience is created by coding all respondents choosing "what God or scripture tells you" equal to 1 and all others to 0. The second is an ordinal measure of the level of doubts youth have had about their religious faith, ranging from "many doubts" (= 1) to "no doubts" (= 4).

### *Demographic Characteristics*

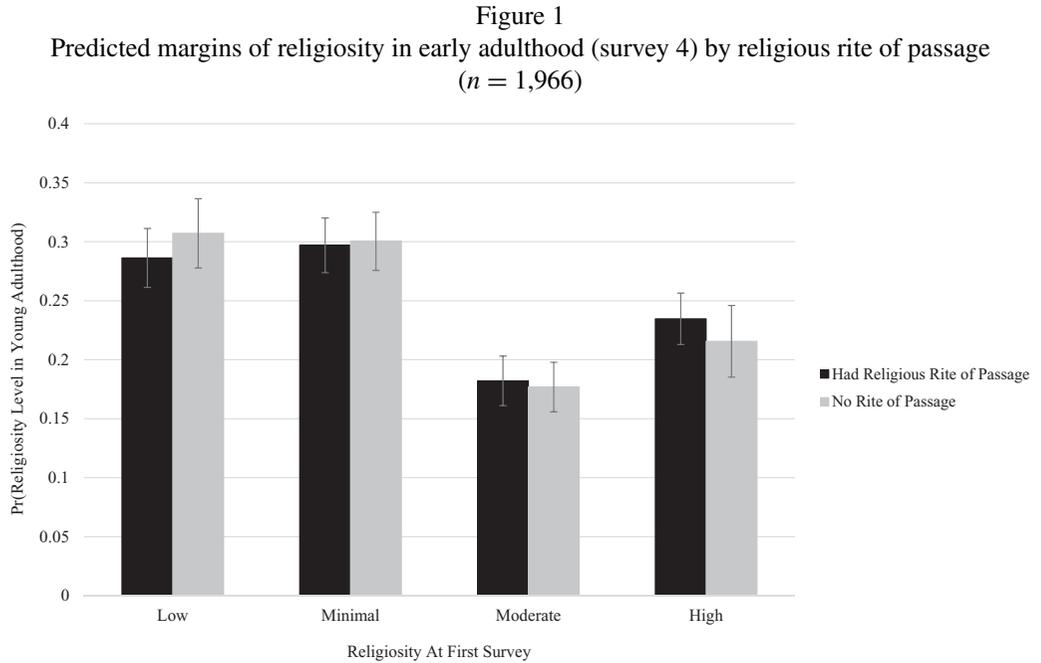
Several background characteristic measures are included to control for their potential covariance with the religious rite of passage and young-adult religious outcomes. A measure for household income based on parent respondent reports from the first survey is included as a continuous indicator in \$10,000 increments. Parent education was also reported by the parent respondent at the first survey and ranges from less than a high school degree (= 0) to a professional degree (= 4). An indicator of living in a two-biological-parent home at the initial survey (58 percent) is included, as is an indicator for being female (53 percent) and a continuous measure of self-reported age. Self-reported race in the first survey is included as a series of dummy variables indicating black (12 percent), Hispanic (9 percent), and other race (6 percent), with white (73 percent) serving as the reference category. Finally, a continuous measure of the respondents' highest earned degree, at the final survey, is also included. This measure contains a similar set of categories to parents' education.

### **Plan of Analysis**

The goal of the analyses is to assess the relationship between experiencing a religious rite of passage as a youth and young-adult religiosity. Specifically we address whether having gone through a religious rite of passage increases the level of religiosity and maintains religious identification in young adulthood. Given the first outcome measure of religiosity is ordinal and the second of disaffiliation is dichotomous, we utilize ordered logistic regression and logistic regression models, respectively, including a weight to adjust for differential selection in all models. We begin by estimating a model that includes only the demographic controls and the religious rite of passage measure. Next, we introduce all of the religious controls in Model 2. Using this two-stage analyses allows us to first estimate the overall influence of religious rite of passage and then assesses the extent to which this impact is mediated by other religious characteristics. The reduction in size and significance from Model 1 to Model 2 would suggest that much of the influence of experiencing a religious rite of passage stems from its interrelationship with other religious behaviors and beliefs.

## **RESULTS**

As shown in Table 1, there are several notable bivariate differences by having experienced a religious rite of passage versus not. On each of the young-adult religiosity measures and the overall religiosity index, those who reported having gone through a religious rite of passage showed higher levels of religiosity than those who had not. The most sizeable difference is attending religious services, in which case young adults who had experienced a religious rite of passage as youth attend services many times a year (2.001), while those who have not only attend a few times per year (1.268). On the overall index of religiosity, those who experienced a religious rite of passage as youth are between the minimal and moderate levels, whereas those who did not are around the minimal level. These mean differences would suggest that having experienced a religious rite of passage increases religiosity into young adulthood.



*Note:* Results based on Model 2 from Table 2. Predictions calculated using average margins. Error bars represent a 95 percent confidence interval.

More notable are the differences by these groups in the percent that have disaffiliated from any religious identification by young adulthood. Again, for these analyses, we have limited the sample to only those who claimed an affiliation as youth. Although not shown in this table, having a religious rite of passage is not coterminous with affiliating with a religion as a youth. Of the 1,730 youth who identify with some religion in the first survey only 63 percent report having experienced a religious rite of passage. Among this subsample of having a religious affiliation as a youth, almost 40 percent of youth who did not experience a religious rite of passage have disaffiliated by young adulthood, while less than 25 percent of youth who had such an experience have disaffiliated. This descriptive finding provides initial support for the hypothesis that having gone through a religious rite of passage will decrease the likelihood of disaffiliating later in life.

Table 2 displays the results from the logistic regression models predicting religiosity and disaffiliation at the final survey. Model 1 for the religiosity outcome indicates that young adults who experienced a religious rite of passage as a youth have a significantly ( $p < .001$ ) higher level of religiosity as young adults than those who did not, when controlling for personal demographic characteristics. This influence is relatively strong, as having this rite of passage is associated with over a 100 percent increase in the odds of being in a higher religiosity group ( $(\exp^{.831} - 1) * 100 = 130$ ), meaning youth who have experienced a rite of passage are much more likely to be in a higher religiosity category than those who have not. Once youth religious characteristics have been included in Model 2, the magnitude of this difference is reduced (.143) and is no longer significant. While there was initial evidence to support the idea that experiencing a religious rite of passage as a youth could increase religiosity in later life, this bivariate association is accounted for by other contextual religious factors.

We illustrate this limited difference in Figure 1. This graph plots the average predicted margins of being at each level of young-adult religiosity based on having experienced a religious rite of passage as a youth. Across all four levels, there is virtually no difference by this youth

Table 2: Coefficients from ordered logistic and binary logistic regression models predicting religiosity in early adulthood (survey 4), by religious rite of passage, including religiosity and controls

	Religiosity <sup>a</sup>		Disaffiliation <sup>b</sup>	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Family income	-.006*	-.001	.009*	.006+
Parents' education	-.061	-.075	-.003	.013
Two-parent biological family	.386***	.194	-.615***	-.478*
Age	.034	.111*	-.093	-.160*
<i>Race Ethnicity (white)</i>				
Black	1.081***	.856*	-1.256***	-.792+
Hispanic	.223	.316+	-.046	-.029
Other race	.144	.334	.167	.055
Female	.548***	.469***	-.352*	-.243+
Highest degree earned (W4)	.066	.063	-.113+	-.131+
Religious rite of passage	.831***	.143	-.779***	-.378*
<b>Religious controls</b>				
<i>Religious Tradition (Conservative Protestant)</i>				
Mainline Christian		-.774***		.626*
Black Protestant		-.370		-.166
Catholic		-.350*		.038
Jewish		-1.091*		.450
Mormon		.424		.138
Other religion		-.202		-.006
Indeterminate Christian		-1.106*		1.341***
Not religious		-.346		
Religious service attendance		.066		-.030
Importance of religion		.311***		-.085
Frequency of prayer		.307***		-.230*
Frequency of reading scriptures		.129*		-.070
Parent Importance of Religion		.188***		-.105
Parent attendance at religious services		.053		-.065
Proportion of supportive other adults in congregation		.169*		-.192*
Religious friends		.082		-.270*
Use religion to make tough decisions		.283+		-.097
Doubts about religion		-.085		.270***

(Continued)

Table 2 (Continued)

	Religiosity <sup>a</sup>		Disaffiliation <sup>b</sup>	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>N</i>	1,966	1,966	1,730	1,730
BIC	50,144,707	43,299,038	19,333,924	17,335,552

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$  (two-tailed tests).

Note: Reference categories are in parentheses next to italicized headings. All independent variables are from the first survey unless otherwise noted.

<sup>a</sup>Ordinal logistic regression.

<sup>b</sup>Binary logistic regression.

experience. Thus, it appears as though the influence of these symbolically important events does not extend into differences in levels of religiosity in young adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

The results are different for having disaffiliated from any religious identification. As shown in Model 1 for the disaffiliation outcome in Table 2, young adults who experienced a religious rite of passage as a youth are significantly ( $p < .001$ ) less likely to disaffiliate from religion than those who did not have this experience. Once the religious characteristics during youth are included in the model, this influence decreases in magnitude, but the relationship retains its significance ( $p < .05$ ), and remains relatively strong. Among youth who claimed a religious affiliation, those who experienced a rite of passage are over 30 percent less likely to disaffiliate ( $(1 - \exp^{-.378}) * 100 = 31$ ) than youth who did not go through a rite of passage. Even when controlling for a host of personal religious behaviors, beliefs, and network characteristics, having experienced a rite of passage has a significant, independent influence on the likely of maintaining a religious affiliation in young adulthood, such that those who go through such a rite are much less likely to disaffiliate than those who do not.

Figure 2 illustrates this relationship. The bar chart plots the average predicted margins for both maintaining a religious affiliation and disaffiliating in young adulthood by the youth experience of religious rite of passage. Young adults who went through a religious rite of passage have an almost 75 percent predicted chance of maintaining this affiliation into young adulthood. Those who do not have this experience as a youth have only a 65 percent chance of doing so. While these symbolically meaningful rites of passage may not differentiate levels of religiosity in young adulthood, they appear to prevent a total abandonment of a religious identity.

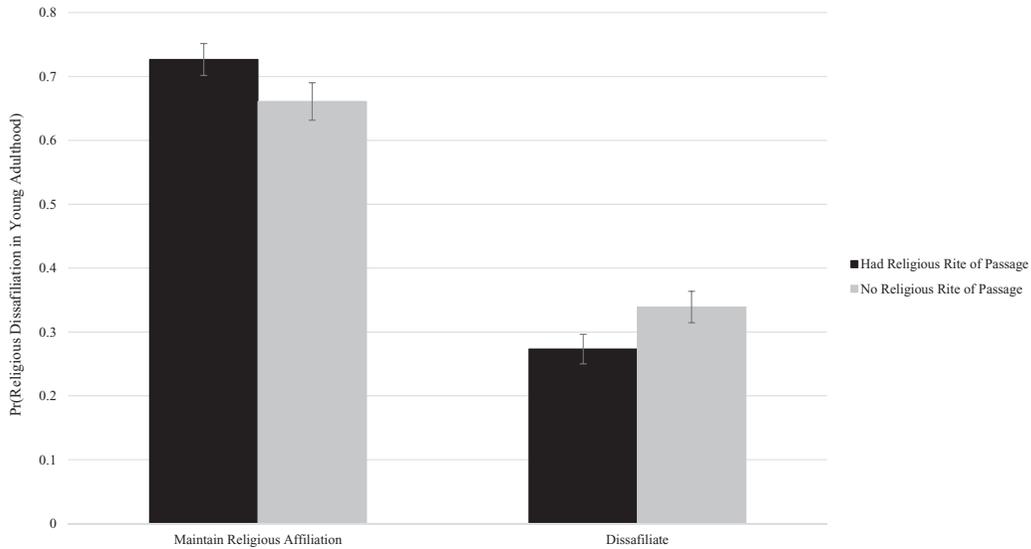
Finally, we sought to test whether the observed associations between experiencing a religious rite of passage and the religious outcomes were moderated by the religious tradition under consideration. Cross-product interaction terms (available upon request) between each religious tradition  $\times$  religious rite of passage were not statistically significant for either later religiosity or disaffiliation. In other words, the association between experiencing a religious rite of passage in one's teenage years or before and their religious life as a young adult does not seem to vary by the religious tradition in question.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>We also tested models with our composite religiosity outcome disaggregated into religious service attendance, importance of faith, and personal prayer, and the results were substantively identical. See Table A1 in the online Appendix.

<sup>5</sup>We tested several other possible factors that may interactively enhance or mitigate the influence of experiencing a religious rite of passage on later religiosity and likelihood of disaffiliation. The vast majority of these tests (results available upon request) did not demonstrate any significant interaction effects. The one exception was that the positive

Figure 2

Predicted margins of religious disaffiliation in early adulthood (survey 4) by religious rite of passage



Note: Results based on Disaffiliation Model 2 from Table 2. Predictions calculated using average margins. Error bars represent a 95 percent confidence interval.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While religion scholars have long recognized the importance of religious rites of passage, little empirical work has explored the efficacy of these experiences for the long-term religious outcomes of individuals. Using panel data from the first and fourth surveys of the NSYR and focusing on religiosity and disaffiliation as the outcome, we find that undergoing an initiation rite such as baptism, first communion, bar/bat mitzvah, or some other religious rite prior to the first survey did not predict young Americans' later religiosity, but it did predict a lower likelihood to disaffiliate by final collection. Interestingly, associations we observed between undergoing a religious rite of passage and disaffiliation were not moderated by religious tradition. Consistent with our expectations, these findings suggest that the experience of a religious initiation common within major world religions marks a significant social identity, one that binds adherents to their faith some years later and does not seem to be contingent on religious tradition under consideration, but does not provide an impetus to maintain higher levels of religious commitment or participation.

Before elaborating the implications of these findings, several data limitations should be mentioned. One of the primary concerns is the inability to assess the age at which youth experienced the religious rite of passage (which the exception of Jewish respondents who undergo bar/bat mitzvahs at around age 13). This time effect may particularly salient for youth who go through these rites later in adolescence, as this would seem to signal a more active transformation as opposed to a simple rote transition (Pearce and Denton 2011: 26). However, the high percentage of youth who identify with a religion but had not undergone a rite of passage would suggest that many youth, even younger ones, are being allowed to choose whether they make these symbolic

influence of having a religious rite of passage as a youth was tempered if that youth had higher doubts about their religious faith. We believe that this is an interesting finding and one that should be explored in future research.

transitions. Similarly, while we are able to control for religious behaviors, beliefs, and networks during youth, we are unable to fully determine whether these religious factors preexisted the religious rite of passage. That is, we are not able to completely account for potential selection factors, making certain youth more likely to undergo such rites and then potentially being different in young adulthood. Although not ideal, we are still able to determine the net impact of experiencing a religious rite of passage net of coterminous religious factors. Given that we find no significant difference in young-adult religiosity by such experiences, it is difficult to explain how preexisting difference in religiosity would cause this null relationship. Indeed, while Loveland (2003) found formally joining a church while growing up reduced the likelihood of switching to another faith later on, religious socialization was unassociated with religious switching, further suggesting that religious self-selection factors would not tremendously affect our observed outcomes. Lastly, we acknowledge that quantitative analyses can only scratch the surface in terms of accounting for multiple mechanisms connecting religious rites of passage within specific religious contexts and young-adult religious identities and experiences. Future research on this topic would obviously benefit from qualitative data to flesh these out.

Another potential area of exploration would be the influence of religious rites of passage for those witnessing the ritual. Perhaps, even more than the *individual* impact of experiencing such rites, Durkheim (1995 [1912]) and others (Collins 2011; Eliade 1959; Geertz 1973; Turner 1967; van Gennep 1960) observed that these rites serve to reinvigorate *collective* identity and effervescence among all those involved. Future research would thus benefit from data assessing how repeated exposure to *others'* initiation rites might predict religious outcomes like those we observe here.

Despite these few limitations, our findings provide important empirical grounding for our understanding of how religious rites of passage matter for individuals. Previous research on transformative religious experiences such as mission trips (Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, and Adler 2011; Trinitapoli and Vaisey 2009) or pilgrimages (Alexseev and Zhemukhov 2017; Loveland 2008) identify the potential of semi-institutionalized collective religious experience to influence the religious practices and identities of adherents.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, our findings suggest that religious rites that are more fundamental to group membership, what we would consider initiation rites that are experienced in one's childhood or early teenage years, can also be efficacious for predicting certain religious outcomes into young adulthood, but only in terms of affiliation, not religiosity. While Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009) find that short-term missions experienced between the first and second surveys of the NSYR predicted greater religiosity by the second collection point, it could be that the longer duration between survey waves nullifies any influence religious initiation rites might have on one's religious commitment. Alternatively, it could be that religious initiation rites in particular—as opposed to the voluntary, semi-institutionalized short-term mission trip—are at their core more about group identity than they are about consistent religious practice (see also Loveland 2003, 2008). Because rites like baptism and first communion mark one's entrance into the religious community in a way that a short-term mission trip does not, the potential impact for individuals involves not the *subjective level* of one's religious commitment, but its socially recognized *existence*.

Importantly, our finding that the predictive power of religious initiation rites on young-adult affiliation did not seem to vary by religious tradition suggests that the efficacy of such rites is not contingent on the specific content of the teaching, or the age at which young people typically undergo such rites in different religions. Rather, as Durkheim (1995 [1912]) argued, it seems that the experience of the religious initiation—whether bar/bat mitzvah, first communion, baptism, or some other rite—serves to create a “new individual” (a Catholic, a Jew, a Protestant Christian) and

<sup>6</sup>We consider the Hajj semi-institutionalized because so few Muslims (less than 10% globally) actually ever make the trip (see Ghani and Lipka 2013).

bind those individuals' identities to their respective religious community, even if only in name. One potential line of future research would be to consider whether the efficacy of such religious rites to bind initiates to their religious identity changes if and when societies secularize. Following Loveland's (2008) argument, increasing differentiation between religions and their surrounding culture could strengthen the effectiveness of such rites as they become more powerful symbolic markers.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Table A1.** Coefficients from ordered logistic regression models predicting religiosity in early adulthood (survey 4), by religious rite of passage, including religiosity and controls