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Religion, Nonreligion, and Deviance: Comparing Faith's and Family's Relative Strength in Promoting Social Conformity

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Abstract The view that religion, as a source of moral guidance and social support, can function to prevent or protect individuals, especially children and adolescents, from a range of deviant and delinquent behaviors is largely (but not completely) born out in the literature. In nations with strong religious identities such as the USA, there is a normative expectation that adolescents who identify with religion are less likely to engage in deviant behavior than those who claim no religion. The present study explores this issue using data from over 10,000 American middle school and high school youth to examine the relationship between religion, nonreligion, and various forms of deviance. Results indicate that youth who identify with a religious (rather than nonreligious) label are not less likely to be involved in deviant acts after controlling for protective factors. The effects from some of these protective factors are significant and stronger than the effects from religion.

Keywords Religion · Nonreligion · Atheism · Deviance · Adolescence

The influence of religion in American society is both socio-politically consequential and important for sociological theorizing. Religious beliefs and commitments are intertwined with a variety of socialization patterns and behavioral outcomes. These relationships are complex and multidimensional, and it can be difficult to assess with precision what effect "religion"—in both its private and public forms—has on social life in the aggregate. Survey research on children and youth has frequently (but not universally) yielded a generic finding: that religious belief and practice protect against a range of delinquent behavior.

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Across the micro–macro spectrum, from the prayer habits and beliefs of the individual to the organizational collaboration of the interfaith community, the cognitive aspects of religion (e.g., supernaturalist beliefs, self-identifications) motivate and direct important behavioral outcomes (and vice versa). In short, religion, in both its private and public forms, shapes the behavior of our youth. As Regnerus (2008) argued in his study of religion's influence on delinquency, even youth who enjoy the resources and other advantages that already put them at low-risk for delinquency (e.g., two parent homes, higher SES) still benefit from religious affiliation compared to religiously unaffiliated youth. Based on his analysis of a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of American youth, he concludes: "Positive religious influences affect more than just at-risk youth. Religion also shapes the behavior of low-risk kids and steers some of them away from trouble of the types examined here—drinking, drug use, delinquency, and trouble in school" (p. 13).

Studies like this seem to support the cultural convention in America that holding theistic beliefs and being religious helps keep our youth out of trouble, and better attunes them to prosocial behavior. Given the importance of family socialization for early development, perhaps nonreligious children and adolescents are especially susceptible to delinquency because they lack the moral framework, structure, and social control that religion provides.

The last 2 decades, however, have brought about some significant changes in the religious landscape, especially with regard to younger generations (Hout 2017). Changing demographics, shifting patterns of religious affiliation and religious switching (Sherkat 2014), increasingly organized secularism (Cimino and Smith 2014), growing numbers of those claiming no religion (Hammer et al. 2012), and evolving attitudes on a wide range of social, political, and religious issues (see Wuthnow 1998) all have implications for the premise that religion reduces deviant behavior. This situation warrants continued study of this premise given these societal changes.

Therefore, the question remains: Does religion really prevent or reduce deviant behavior among American youth in general? And are adolescents without religious faith more likely to be delinquent? Although there is a large literature dealing with the relationship of religion to social deviance, and much empirical work has examined the behaviors of religious believers—and increasingly nonbelievers (Zuckerman 2013)—few studies directly compare them to each other (Didyoung et al. 2013), especially with regard to children and adolescents. The present study furthers this line of research, exploring whether such assumptions are justified by examining relevant empirical relationships between (non)religious identification and deviant behavior. Using multiple regression models, the effects of religious identification and worship attendance are estimated, while controlling for other risk/protective factors and demographics, in order to provide new insights into the effects from modern religious/nonreligious identification.

Religion, Nonreligion, and Deviance

Decades of sociological research has examined the relationship of religion and its various features to the areas of deviance and crime (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Baier and Wright 2001), adolescent delinquency (Longest and Vaisey 2008; Hirschi and Stark 1969), social control and conformity (Maimon and Khul 2008), health and well-being (McClure and Loden 1982; Sekulic et al. 2009), and altruistic and prosocial behaviors (Hardy and Carlo 2005; Saroglou et al. 2005). This body of research is rooted in a variety of theoretical frameworks, including structural, conflict, and interactionist theories, each of which has

been applied to substantive issues related to religion and deviance broadly. These include examining the construction of religious values and moral frameworks, and the functional aspects of religious identities, solidarities, and group dynamics.

Depending on how it is conceptualized—from its conventional institutional forms, to its highly private expressions—religion has been shown to mitigate and discourage delinquency (Bahr et al. 1993; Regnerus 2008), as well as encourage and promote normative and prosocial behavior (Hardy and Carlo 2005). Traditionally, the bulk of scholarship drawing these connections operates from a religion *and* deviance/social control framework. That is, it explores the relationship of religious beliefs and practices with specific behavioral outcomes in other areas of social life. Another conceptual framing involves religion *as* deviance (Stark and Bainbridge 1996). This examines how some expressions of religion in society depart from normative and traditional forms of religious belief and practice. The behaviors of minority religious sects and cults, the lives of radical charismatic religious leaders, and the development of fundamentalist religious ideologies are examples. From this conceptual standpoint, the religion–deviance issue is not premised on the idea of a one directional religion-reduces-deviance relationship. This suggests that the claim that religion reduces deviance is really a claim about *some* kinds of religion, and not others. It is premised on traditional, institutional, or other normative types of religious systems already generally well integrated within broader cultural norms and values; not religious practices that radically depart from them.

But how strong is the empirical evidence suggesting religion reduces deviance overall, and how confident should we be in this general finding? First, by way of definition, this study conceptualizes religion, nonreligion, and deviance in sociological terms. Religion, in this context, refers to interrelated sets of beliefs, practices, and institutions oriented around some notion of the sacred or supernatural (Roberts 2004). Nonreligion thus refers to the absence of, indifference to, or rejection of religious beliefs, practices, or institutions. This meaning is broad and subsumes lack of affiliation with religion along with specific non-religious identifications such as atheist, agnostic, or no religion.

Deviance, like religion, is a broad concept and can simply refer to variation around any social norm. There are different functional types of deviance, including its positive, prosocial forms such as altruism (see Adler and Adler 2015), but by "deviance," this study refers to one essential type—negative deviance—which refers to violations of social norms that elicit a negative response from others, and often involve social sanctions (e.g., physical assault, shoplifting, cheating on an exam). Thus, unless otherwise specified, for the purposes of this study deviance and delinquency are used interchangeably.

Although research examining religion as a protective factor includes studies of both adolescents and adults, the former has tended to hold more interest because of the relevance and vulnerability of that stage of the life course with regard to entering deviant careers. Religion's protective effect covers a wide spectrum regarding the level of seriousness of deviant acts. This includes school delinquency (Wallace et al. 2005), illicit drug use (Longest and Vaisey 2008; Rodek et al. 2009), alcohol abuse (Burke et al. 2014; Rostosky et al. 2010), depression and anxiety (Miller et al. 2012), and risk of suicide (Caribé et al. 2012).

In sociological work, social control theory suggests that youth who are well-integrated into normative institutions—including family, school, and religion—are more protected from engaging in delinquent behavior (Hirschi 1969). Evidence shows that adolescents who lack these social ties are more likely to engage in deviant behaviors, such as illicit drug use (Bahr et al. 1993). Other applications of this theory find religion significant in curtailing many acts of delinquency, including physically harming other students at school

and other acts of aggression (Wallace et al. 2005). Although this is consistent with the literature generally, which suggests overall beneficial effects from religion in "steering" youth away from delinquent behaviors (Regnerus 2008), these analyses also found that other social factors can be more influential in preventing delinquent behaviors than religiosity itself (Wallace et al. 2005).

Psychological research converges with sociological arguments regarding the salience of status characteristics and the importance of cultural/environmental conditions in giving religiosity its deviance-mitigating effects. In summarizing the findings of psychological studies of religiosity in adolescence, Beit-Hallahmi (2015, p. 110) states "Religiosity has been found to be a protective factor against the many dangers of adolescence, from delinquency to drug abuse and a variety of high-risk behaviors." This research shows important differences across status characteristics—such as gender—that gives context to the relationship between religiosity and deviance. For instance, adolescent females tend to have closer peer networks and are more likely to rely on religion to deal with stressors that might otherwise lead to delinquency than adolescent males. Importantly for the present study, in discussing religiosity and impulse control, Beit-Hallahmi (2015) also argues that society's valuation of delayed gratification, overcoming selfishness, and other forms of the "master virtue" of self-control might better explain the protective effects of religion, rather than assuming religious beliefs or behaviors themselves are responsible. As he puts it, "Universal socialization towards self-control precedes the use of religious ideation" (Beit-Hallahmi 2015, p. 110).

Conversely, other theoretical sources do connect the contents of religious belief to deviance prevention. For example, a deterrent effect has been found via specific beliefs about an afterlife, including damnation and hellfire (Higgins and Albrecht 1977). Religion might also influence behavior through deterrence from perceived repercussions in the present life as well. Harris's (2003) study of Mormon adolescents, for example, shows that beliefs in punishment and reward in *this* life had an effect on their perceived future "ascetic deviance" (e.g., abstinence from drugs, premarital sex).

Despite the studies that find a negative (preventative) relationship between religiosity and deviance, there has never been sweeping consensus on the general question. Stark and Bainbridge, for example, argued that social context and interaction are critical to the equation, proposing an "ecological solution" (1996, p. 172) to the problem in which the differential social environments in which religion has greater or lesser relevance is key. As Stark explains:

> What counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment… Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit deviant acts, but only in communities where the majority of people are actively religious (1996, p. 172).

This lends an important qualification to the otherwise empirically justified claim that religion reduces deviance: It depends on cultural context, life course stage, and other social relationship dynamics. For instance, a study by Sabatier et al. (2011) confirms Stark's argument in its finding that the benefits adolescents derive from the connections between religiosity, family orientation, and life satisfaction, are stronger in high religiosity cultures like the USA, compared to lower religiosity cultures like Germany.

This is by no means an exhaustive summary of the research on religion and deviance among youth, but it does provide grounding for understanding the relevant social, psychological, and contextual issues. In contrast, the research directly examining *non*religious identification such as atheism, agnosticism, and secular humanism—and its relationship to

delinquency—is much less developed. In fact, specific studies of, for instance, the deviant behaviors of atheist-identified teens are virtually nonexistent. More generally, studies of nonreligion and deviance constitute only a tiny fraction of the well-developed literature on religion and deviance. This is particularly the case regarding children and adolescents. As a result, much of what is assumed to be known about the relationship is actually only inferred. If, for example, frequency of church attendance is shown to be negatively related to delinquent acts, are we right to infer that youth who do not attend church at all would be the *most* involved in deviance?

One study of adolescent delinquency that did include atheists/agnostics is notable here. In her study based on self-reporting from a large sample ($n = 11,802$) of North American students, Ellis (2002) sought to distinguish any significant differences in delinquent acts by gender and denominational affiliation of 10–18-year-olds. Surveying a wide range of behaviors, Ellis notes that although atheist and agnostic females reported higher rates for some behaviors (e.g., drug use) compared to their religious peers, she stated that "no general denominational differences in self-reported offending" (2002, p. 189) and went on to conclude that:

> In no case were those professing to have no religious preferences unusually high in offending for any specific category. These findings call into question the view that commitment to a particular set of religious teachings inhibits most forms of crime and delinquency, especially regarding violent offending. (2002, p. 189).

Some scholarship addresses the morality of the irreligious specifically (see Beit-Hallahmi 2010), but most of the writing on religious and nonreligious morality is abstract and somewhat polemical in its treatment of constructs like immorality, altruism, and prosocial behavior. Few studies have sought to account for or explain specific acts of deviance among these groups through empirical means. One such study (Didyoung et al. 2013) divided undergraduate students into two groups—theists and nontheists—in order to compare their moral reasoning and disposition for altruistic behaviors. They tested students' moral decision-making abilities by assessing their responses to morally fraught situational dilemmas such as obeying unreasonable requests by authority figures, stealing medicine for a sick person, or having an abortion. Their findings suggested there is "no support for the existence of the stereotype that nontheists are less moral than theists" and that "religious identity did not conclusively determine whether or not an individual was more moral or more altruistic" (Didyoung et al. 2013, p. 1). Similarly, in their review of the literature on religiosity and prosocial behavior, Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) observed in their study of religious behavior and experience among college students that, when given opportunity to both cheat (an act of immorality) and perform an act of helping (a moral act), "there was no correlation between their eventual behavior and their religiosity level" (1997, p. 127).

Although taken as a whole the relevant literature discussed above suggests an "it's complicated" situation, it does establish basic empirical patterns regarding some of the benefits of religion. But it also raises questions, points to the need to examine the relationship between religion and deviance further, and suggests that knowledge about the relationship between *non*religion and deviance is lacking and in need of greater empirical attention. This is particularly the case given the rise in the USA of both the religiously ambivalent and the explicitly nonreligious in the twenty-first century (Hout 2017). With this in mind, the present study analyzes the connection between religion/nonreligion and deviance to move toward developing a better understanding of this complicated situation. Of particular importance is examining the magnitude of this possible effect in comparison with those of other risk and protective factors, and controlling for these factors as well. Given the inherit intermingling of

religion and culture, it is necessary to control for contextual exposure to other factors, which may be correlated with religion and nonreligion.

Methodology

The data used in the present study come from the Delaware School Survey (DSS), which is an annual survey of select grades in Delaware public and public-charter schools. The specific datasets used here are the 2012 eighth and eleventh grade surveys, so selected because they were the only ones to include questions about religion. In both survey designs, a census for each grade was attempted by surveying required classes (e.g., all eighth grade English classes within a school). A small number of classes were randomly assigned to a different survey instead, but all students within each grade had an equal chance of being randomly included in the DSS. Parental consent for the survey is obtained passively (parents are notified by letter and only required to respond if they refuse consent), so the surveys had very high response rates among children not otherwise absent on the day of administration (99 and 98%, respectively). In total, the eighth grade dataset includes 6252 students and the eleventh grade dataset includes 5278 students.

The primary independent variables of interest are religion and attendance of worship services. The former was measured by asking students, "Which of the following best describes your religious/spiritual beliefs or affiliations?" The available responses included: Christianity, Protestant; Christianity, Catholic; Christianity, Other; Islam; Judaism; Hinduism; Atheist; Agnostic; No Religion; and Other (please specify). The first phase of analysis examines this variable with these response categories, but later analyses reduce the responses down simply to whether one identifies with a nonreligion category (atheism, agnosticism, and no religion) or a religion category (all others). Worship service attendance is measured with the question, "In the past 12 months, how often have you attended a worship service (like a church or synagogue service or mass)?" Responses include: never, once or twice, less than once a month, about once a month, about twice a month, about once a week, several times a week, every day. Due to the rare occurrence of the final two categories, these were recoded into a single category for analyses.

Additional independent variables include parental relationship, parental education levels, average school grades, sex, race/ethnicity, and receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Parental relationship was the most complex of these measures. It is a scale made up of eight indicators: (1) My parents know where I am when I am not in school; (2) When my parents ask where I am or what I am doing, I tell them the truth; (3) I get along well with my parents/guardians; (4) When I do a good job at home or at school, my parents tell me about it; (5) How often do you argue or fight with either of your parents/guardians?; (6) How often do you hear or see violence between adults in your home?; (7) How often do you talk to either of your parents about how things are going at school?; and (8) How often do you go places with your parents such as concerts, museums, plays, historical sites or other educational trips or activities?" Taken together, these indicate the quality of the relationship between the child and parent(s). These measures were combined by using each student's mean score across their responses to these indicators, with higher values indicating a stronger parental relationship.[1] This scale was found to be reliable for both the eighth (α = .72) and eleventh (α = .74) grades.

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[1] The responses available for the first four indicators were: most of the time, often, some of the time, not often, and never. The responses for the other four indicators were: never, before but not in past year, a few times in past year, once or twice a month, once or twice a week, and almost every day. These responses were

To measure the education level of the parents, students were asked, "What is the highest level of schooling your mother or female guardian completed?" and "What is the highest level of schooling your father or male guardian completed?" Categories as coded here include: some high school or less, completed high school, some college, completed college, and graduate or professional school after college. The students' own grades were measured with the question, "What one category best describes your overall grades on your last report card?" Responses include mostly D or F grades, mostly C grades, mostly B grades, and mostly A grades.

Demographic questions are all dichotomous by nature or dummy coded otherwise. Responses to sex include only male and female. Race allowed for a variety of different responses, but many were very rarely occurring. Due to the large number of possible responses (including a write-in option), race/ethnicity is coded in the present study with the following dummy variables: white, black Hispanic, and other race/ethnicity. Because middle and high school students are typically unable to answer questions about income, they were instead asked whether they receive free or reduced-price lunches in school. This indicator serves as a proxy for poverty/income.

The dependent variables are all dichotomous indicators of school deviance, substance use, or criminal acts. These include: cheating on an examination in the past year, skipping classes in the past year, using alcohol in the past month, using marijuana in the past month, shoplifting in the past year, and vandalizing property in the past year. These variables were selected to represent a variety of different types of criminal and deviant acts. Some religious activities (e.g., Catholic communion) involve the use of a small amount of alcohol, so in order to exclude such uses from counting as alcohol use, the survey question specified that drinking alcohol for purposes of the survey is "not just a few sips." Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Cases with missing data for more than four of the predictor variables were dropped. This resulted in the loss of less than 2% of cases. Of the remaining cases, most (91%) had valid data for all or all but one of the predictors, so the degree of missing data is quite minimal. To avoid losing any additional cases, imputation was used for the independent variables to retain the remaining cases. The final datasets include 6138 and 5172 students. Sample sizes for individual models vary based on the number of nonmissing responses to the respective dependent variable.

Analyses are conducted in three phases. The first phase examines responses to the religion question simply to determine the prevalence of each religion type, as well as the frequency of worship attendance, among this sample of youth. The second phase introduces the dependent variables in order to examine the bivariate relationship between religiosity and deviance.[2] The final phase is a series of regression models using all predictors to determine the effect of religion and worship attendance after controlling for various other predictors.

Footnote 1 continued

reverse-coded for the first six questions listed above so that higher values corresponded to a stronger parental relationship for all indicators.

[2] Religiosity is a more complex issue than we can account for here. For the purpose of the present analysis, we are largely conceptualizing it in terms of religious identification and frequency of religious activity, as measured by church attendance. We do not presume that faith, specific beliefs, or other cognitive dimensions of religiosity are captured by this measure.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Eighth mean	Eighth SD	Eleventh mean	Eleventh SD	Min	Max
Religion	.81	.39	.79	.40	.00	1.00
Worship attendance	2.65	2.20	2.19	2.11	.00	6.00
Parental relationship	4.74	.73	4.66	.70	1.75	6.00
Mother's education	2.14	1.28	2.04	1.22	.00	4.00
Father's education	1.93	1.29	1.83	1.25	.00	4.00
School grades	2.05	.85	2.00	.81	.00	3.00
Female	.51	.50	.51	.50	.00	1.00
Black	.24	.42	.25	.43	.00	1.00
Hispanic	.16	.37	.14	.34	.00	1.00
Other race/ethnicity	.12	.32	.11	.31	.00	1.00
Free/reduced lunch	.44	.50	.37	.48	.00	1.00
Cheated	.28	.45	.46	.50	.00	1.00
Skipped classes	.13	.34	.28	.45	.00	1.00
Alcohol use	.16	.37	.37	.48	.00	1.00
Marijuana use	.11	.31	.26	.44	.00	1.00
Shoplifted	.11	.31	.14	.35	.00	1.00
Vandalism	.12	.33	.11	.31	.00	1.00

Results

The first set of analyses are simple frequency analyses of the responses to the religion and worship questions. For religious affiliation and worship attendance, the frequencies are presented in Table 2. The noteworthy differences between grades seem to be within the Christianity responses, which shifts away from Catholicism for older students (although the total proportions of Christians only slightly vary from 73.2% in eighth grade to 70.5% in eleventh), and with the agnostic category, which more than tripled from eighth grade (0.9%) to eleventh grade (3.1%). The trend for worship attendance indicates that the older students are less likely to attend church and tend to attend less often than the younger students.[3]

The results for the bivariate analyses of religion and the dependent variables are presented in Table 3. The results indicate that students who identify with a faith-based religious label tend to be less often involved in these deviant acts. The acts with significant differences supporting this trend include skipping classes (eleventh grade only), drinking alcohol (eighth grade only), using marijuana, shoplifting, and vandalism. It is notable, however, that these differences, although statistically significant, are still quite weak. Regardless of faith, the vast majority of students do not engage in these acts and the differences only vary by a few percentage points. Nonsignificant differences include

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[3] Although there is a significant relationship between religious identification and attending worship services, the effect is by no means absolute. In eighth grade, for example, 33% of students identifying as atheist, agnostic, or otherwise without a religion reported at least occasionally attending worship. Thus, although these variables are related, they measure different concepts (belief vs. actions, for one) and provide different data. Collinearity statistics for the regression models indicate only trivial overlap.

Table 2 Religious affiliation and worship attendance by grade (percentages)

	Eighth grade	Eleventh grade
Affiliation		
Protestant	9.7	10.4
Catholic	32.9	26.9
Other Christian	30.6	33.2
Islam	2.0	1.5
Judaism	0.8	0.7
Hinduism	0.6	0.9
Atheist	3.2	3.4
Agnostic	0.9	3.1
No religion	14.8	14.0
Other	4.5	6.0
Attendance		
Never	23.9	29.5
Once or twice	21.1	23.8
Less than once a month	6.8	8.5
About once a month	5.5	5.3
About twice a month	8.6	8.3
About once a week	25.5	17.9
Several times a week or every day	8.7	6.7

Table 3 Proportion of students engaging in deviant acts by religion and grade

	Eighth			Eleventh		
	Religious	Non	Sig.	Religious	Non	Sig.
Cheated	28.6	27.8	–	46.1	46.1	–
Skipped classes	12.7	14.8	–	26.1	32.0	**
Alcohol use	15.5	20.1	**	36.9	39.5	–
Marijuana use	10.0	15.6	**	26.0	32.4	**
Shoplifted	9.9	13.3	**	13.5	18.9	**
Vandalism	11.3	16.4	**	9.8	13.4	**

*p < .05; **p < .01

cheating on examinations, skipping classes (eighth grade only), and drinking alcohol (eleventh grade only).

The final phases of analyses consist of a series of regression models. The first series, predicting past year school deviance, is presented in Table 4. Beginning first with cheating on tests, the results are largely consistent across grades. Significant effects include religion, worship attendance, parental relationship, grades, race (eleventh grade only), and free lunch. Those who attend worship services regularly, have strong parental relationships, and get good grades in school, are significantly less likely to cheat. The effect of religion, however, conflicts with what literature suggests should be expected. Whereas theory and prior research would suggest religious students to be less likely to engage in deviance such as cheating on a test, those who identify with a particular religion are significantly *more likely* to cheat on tests in these models. The bivariate analyses did not indicate such an effect, so this relationship is only observable after controlling for the other variables in the

Table 4 Logistic regressions predicting past year school deviance

| | Cheated | | | | Skipped class | | | |
| | Eighth | | Eleventh | | Eighth | | Eleventh | |
	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds
Religion	.064	1.346**	.059	1.304**	.028	1.137	.003	1.014
Worship attendance	− .049	.960**	− .051	.957**	− .037	.970	− .044	.963*
Parental relationship	− .301	.472**	− .256	.516**	− .377	.391**	− .278	.487**
Mother's education	− .011	.984	.028	1.043	− .021	.970	.007	1.011
Father's education	.003	1.005	.028	1.042	− .009	.987	− .014	.979
School grades	− .099	.810**	− .071	.853**	− .214	.634**	− .218	.614**
Female	.009	1.035	.003	1.012	.045	1.175	− .028	.903
Black	.010	1.044	− .054	.797**	.064	1.318*	− .041	.841
Hispanic	− .005	.977	− .008	.958	.056	1.315*	− .010	.949
Other race/ethnicity	− .014	.926	− .054	.726**	.038	1.239	− .004	.978
Free/reduced lunch	− .077	.756**	− .077	.749**	.053	1.212*	.021	1.081
N		5688		4704		5697		4707

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

model (i.e., it is only after taking other factors into consideration that we can observe that this relationship exists). In terms of effect strength, the effect from parental relationship is about six times as strong as the one from worship, and five times as strong as the one from religion ($\beta = − .301$ vs. $− .049$ and .064 in eighth grade).

The models predicting skipping classes also indicate relatively strong effects from parental relationship ($\beta = − .377$ and $− .278$) and school grades ($\beta = − .214$ and $− .218$), with stronger parental relationships and better grades corresponding to significantly lower odds of skipping classes. In addition, worship attendance provides a weak, but statistically significant, effect ($\beta = − .044$) for eleventh grade students, while the effect from religion is nonsignificant and weak in both grades ($\beta = .028$ and .003). This collectively suggests that parental relationship has a stronger impact, separately, from religion and worship attendance in reducing school deviance.

The next series of analyses examines substance use, and the results are displayed in Table 5. For substance use across grades, parental relationships and school grades exhibit the strongest effects. As before, the effects from parental relationship ($\beta = − .240$ to $− .347$) are stronger by several magnitudes in comparison with most other effects. The only other effect that is consistently significant across all models for substance use is worship attendance ($\beta = − .069$ to $− .124$). Religion is not significant in most models, but is significant for eleventh grade students and alcohol use ($\beta = .072$). As in previous models with such an effect, however, the direction indicates that religious students are *more likely* to use alcohol than nonreligious students after controlling for other predictors in the model. These results indicate that social factors other than religion have a stronger impact on substance use than religion, even after controlling for religion and worship attendance.

The final set of analyses examines criminal acts, and the results are shown in Table 6. The consistent effects indicate that those with a strong parental relationship ($\beta = − .333$ to $− .427$), those getting better grades ($\beta = − .125$ to $− .163$), and those who are female

Table 5 Logistic regressions predicting past month substance use

	Alcohol				Marijuana			
	Eighth		Eleventh		Eighth		Eleventh	
	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds
Religion	− .001	.998	.072	1.381**	− .032	.863	.018	1.086
Worship attendance	− .073	.942**	− .121	.901**	− .069	.944*	− .124	.899**
Parental relationship	− .344	.425**	− .250	.525**	− .347	.422**	− .240	.538**
Mother's education	.028	1.041	.086	1.136**	− .007	.990	− .009	.987
Father's education	− .058	.921*	− .025	.964	− .077	.897*	.007	1.011
School grades	− .152	.722**	− .135	.739**	− .193	.662**	− .192	.650**
Female	.055	1.219*	.002	1.008	− .074	.765**	− .047	.844*
Black	.007	1.032	− .131	.576**	.003	1.013	− .044	.832*
Hispanic	.032	1.171	− .020	.900	.040	1.219	− .018	.909
Other race/ethnicity	− .034	.824	− .053	.729**	.011	1.063	− .036	.806
Free/reduced lunch	− .014	.950	− .035	.877	.067	1.279*	− .002	.992
N		5518		4568		5465		4545

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

Table 6 Logistic regressions predicting past year criminal acts

	Shoplifting				Vandalism			
	Eighth		Eleventh		Eighth		Eleventh	
	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds	Std. β	Odds
Religion	− .010	.953	− .017	.926	− .023	.897	.013	1.062
Worship attendance	− .022	.982	− .073	.939**	− .057	.954*	− .088	.927**
Parental relationship	− .425	.347**	− .333	.422**	− .427	.345**	− .382	.371**
Mother's education	− .002	.997	− .018	.973	.026	1.038	.058	1.090
Father's education	− .021	.971	.036	1.055	− .040	.946	.042	1.064
School grades	− .163	.707**	− .154	.708**	− .125	.765**	− .128	.752**
Female	− .069	.778**	− .063	.797**	− .203	.480**	− .273	.372**
Black	.049	1.234	.011	1.049	.078	1.402**	− .013	.946
Hispanic	.020	1.101	− .041	.806	.033	1.178	− .014	.930
Other race/ethnicity	.002	1.014	.015	1.091	.053	1.345*	.017	1.108
Free/reduced lunch	.065	1.266*	.067	1.285**	.018	1.067	.037	1.147
N		5709		4741		5651		4663

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

($\beta = − .063$ to $− .273$) are less likely to engage in criminal acts. Those attending worship are similarly less likely to engage in criminal acts ($\beta = − .022$ to $− .088$), although the effect is weak and is not significant for eighth graders and shoplifting in particular. Once

again, the effect from parental relationship is the strongest; the effect, for example, is four to nineteen times as powerful as worship attendance (depending on the grade and act) after controlling for other factors. Religion has no significant effect on either criminal behavior.

Discussion

The findings from the present study raise doubts about the assumed strength of the relationship between religion and deviance in modern American society. Although youth who identify with a religious label are less likely to engage in some forms of delinquency than those who do not identify with a religion based on bivariate analyses, the difference between these groups is substantively small and subject to various caveats. Specifically, after controlling for other protective factors and demographics, the effect of religion is reduced to nonsignificance for most types of deviance/delinquency. For the effects from religion that do remain significant, they actually indicate a positive effect from religion on deviance. Said differently, religious youth are *more* likely to cheat on examinations and use alcohol than nonreligious youth after controlling for other factors.

Examining worship attendance, however, results in different conclusions than religious identification does. The more often youth attend worship services, the less likely they are to engage in deviance. One can potentially reconcile these seemingly contradictory results using the greater context of the other findings. All models consistently found the youths' relationship with their parents to be the most influential effect and that effect was often several magnitudes stronger than any other. Within the context of religious identity being neither unimportant nor a risk factor, and parental relationship being a powerful protective factor, it is quite possible that worship attendance's effect is less about religion (i.e., religious belief and practice per se) and more about its contribution to the familial bond. In short, it is not the "contents" of religion that protects kids, but the way worship attendance, as a regular family activity, consolidates and strengthens the family as a social unit.

Moreover, given the age demographic of our population of interest, it is reasonable to suggest that church attendance and religious identification are themselves more indicators of parental bond than products of autonomous religious preference or religiosity. The general socially integrative process of participating in activities that strengthen the family bond, reinforce broader community values, and validate the cultural norm of religious belief and practice bears the most responsibility for the delinquency-reducing effects of religion. Insofar as adolescent religious identification is an expression of parental closeness, guidance, and supervision, the assumption that specific religious beliefs themselves play the leading role in curtailing acts deviance should be viewed with skepticism.

Although these findings are robust in their indication that religious identity is not a clear protective factor based on these data, future research will need to build on this study to further advance understanding of these findings. One limitation of the present study is the cross-sectional nature of the data. Parental relationship's effect, for example, may be damaged through previous delinquency and therefore a co-outcome rather than a protective factor. As a result, this means that the time-order of any relationship is uncertain and therefore causality is not necessarily established. Noteworthy, however, is that this limitation does *not* add a substantial concern to the conclusions about religion's lack of effect, as time-order and the related concern about causality is moot when there is no correlation relationship on which to assert causality.

Further, this study did not use more open-ended questions of participants' actual self-reflections or their thoughts about their religion or nonreligion. That is, survey responses simply reflect identification with a religious/nonreligious category, rather than an expression of specific beliefs, religious experience, or theological commitments. This is particularly the case with children and adolescents who have not yet reached a level of autonomy regarding their religious preferences. Because those who identify with a particular religion may hold views counter to that label, and any beliefs may vary in intensity, further research on belief's potential impact on deviance is also necessary.

Substantially more research will be needed in order to understand the relationship between nonreligion per se, and deviance/delinquency. The results of this study support themes emerging from other works (e.g., Beit-Hallahmi 2015) suggesting that the conventional wisdom that religious beliefs and practices *themselves* are responsible for reducing crime, delinquency, and other forms of deviance will be revealed as problematic as future research examines this relationship more closely. Based on these data, it would be premature to make direct claims about the effects of nonreligion itself on delinquent behavior or to claim that the absence of religiosity necessarily fuels prosocial behavior. Nor should one argue based on this evidence that nonreligious kids are more likely to possess greater moral acumen than their religious counterparts. Notwithstanding, these results show clearly that being nonreligious does not *prevent* adolescents from being at least as ethically responsible as their religious peers.

Because more researchers are turning their attention to the nonreligious generally, it may be advisable that a greater portion of this interest be directed at children and adolescents, given that the fastest growing "religious group" in the America since the early 1990s actually include the "nones" and other groups subsumed under the broad category of the nonreligious (Zuckerman 2013). Research on nonreligion that does relate to children has so far focused on parents and the issue of how they raise their children without religion (see Manning 2015), while the investigation of nonreligious children themselves remains undeveloped. Young people make up a large portion of the growing nonreligious population, and if we are to understand the inter-generational implications of religious and nonreligious socialization, the impact of nonreligion on the family generally, and how (or whether) nonreligious families differ from religious families, considerably more research will be needed. As Manning observes, despite the increasing numbers of nonreligious, there remains in America "a widespread perception that religion and family go together" (2010, p. 20). Pursuing further research on the relationship between religion, nonreligion, and deviance is one step toward greater clarity on the issue of our increasingly diverse and complex religious/nonreligious landscape, and almost certainly, interesting and important sociological insights on these questions await.

Already, the growing scholarly interest over the last decade has increased our understanding of those who identify with no religion. Issues of socio-demographics, identity, and organized secularism have centered much of this analysis. Social stigma too has been a focus, with findings suggesting that atheists, secularists, and other nonreligious groups are viewed with distrust by much of the public (Edgell et al. 2006; Hammer et al. 2012). Given the relevance of the family in the context of these findings, one recent study in particular is noteworthy here. In an examination of the "coming out" process of atheists, Zimmerman et al. (2015) focused on family relationships and the consequences interview subjects faced in disclosing their atheism to family members. Using the circumplex model of family functioning, the authors found that participants ultimately experienced both rejection and support from family, contingent on a variety of other factors, when they "came out" as atheists. The process itself was, for most, fraught with anxiety and other negative emotions.

They argue this is the product of the stigma of atheism in the USA, and respondents' awareness of the opprobrium they may face from religious family members. This is consistent with the observation of Hammer et al. (2012) that, for children in particular, a nonreligious identity can potentially produce extremely stressful encounters. They cite examples of children being harassed by their peers or left out of other social activities because of their lack of religious belief or affiliation. This adds another layer to the problems of understanding the relationships between religion, nonreligion, and deviance. The question regarding the behaviors of nonreligious youth with religious family members remains an open one.

After publishing their then controversial finding that, essentially, "religion didn't matter" when it came to the question of adolescent delinquency, Stark and Bainbridge—part in jest—stated that among researchers, "the word quickly spread that kids on their way home from Sunday school were as likely to strip your car as were kids on their way home from the pool hall" (1996, p. 163). Although we do not take a position on this particular observation, we do echo Stark and Bainbridge's underlying sentiment that our beliefs about the relationship of religion, nonreligion, and behavior should be grounded in empirical evidence rather than conventional wisdom.

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