# "SPIRITUAL, BUT NOT RELIGIOUS:"
# THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL DIVORCE ON THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL IDENTITIES OF YOUNG ADULTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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*In recent years, researchers have exhibited considerable interest in the distinctions between "religion" and "spirituality," and in the apparently growing numbers of people in western societies who self-identify as "spiritual but not religious." However, few studies have systematically examined the antecedents or correlates of these important constructs. Using data on a nationwide (US) sample of 1,500 young adults (ages 18-35), half of whom are children of divorce and the other half of whom were raised in intact, two-parent families, our results underscore the potential importance of parental divorce in giving rise to a "spiritual but not religious" identity. Specifically, offspring of divorce constitute the majority (62%) of this category in our sample. Even with controls for sociodemographic factors, offspring of divorce are significantly less likely to identify themselves as "religious" but no less inclined to self-identify as "spiritual," as compared with young adults from intact families. Implications of these patterns for the intergenerational transmission of religious faith and other aspects of contemporary American culture are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

In a burgeoning body of theoretical and empirical work, scientists have explored the distinctions between two related concepts: "religiousness" and "spirituality." Over the past two decades, researchers have also shown growing interest in a segment of the US public that self-identifies as "spiritual but not religious" (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Marler and Hadaway 2002). To

date, scholars have disagreed over whether this group reflects a waning of popular allegiance to institutionalized forms of religious expression or, conversely, whether it embodies continuity with a long tradition of spiritual seeking and experimentation (e.g., Fuller 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2004). Several studies have used individual-level survey data to examine (a) how the correlates of personal spirituality may differ from those of religiousness, and (b) how "spiritual but not religious" persons differ from others, particularly the majority of Americans who identify themselves as "religious and spiritual" (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Shahabi et al. 2002). Much of the discussion to date has centered on the social and cultural changes embraced by the Baby Boomer generation --especially the valorization of individual conscience over institutional religious authority--as critical antecedents of this development (Roof 1993, 1999). Beyond these broad cultural arguments, however, there is little consensus regarding the processes or mechanisms that have given rise to the "spiritual but not religious" identity category.

In this study, we call attention to the potentially important, but largely overlooked, role of parental divorce in helping to produce and sustain the appeal of "spiritual but not religious" identity. Briefly, numerous scholars have noted the close ties --indeed, the reciprocal influence-- between religion and family (Thornton 1985; Waite and Lehrer 2003; Edgell 2005). Family is a crucial arena for religious education and socialization of the next generation. When marital bonds crumble, generational religious linkages can also dissolve. Not only are divorced persons less likely to attend religious services than others, but parental divorce has also been shown to undermine the religious formation of offspring, and it is increasingly clear that the influence of childhood family disruption on religious allegiance and practice can extend into adulthood (Lawton and Bures 2001; Zhai et al. 2007). This raises interesting and important questions: Is parental divorce an antecedent of, and a contributor to, "spiritual but not religious" self-

identification in adulthood? Or might parental divorce undermine both religiousness *and* spirituality among young adults?

We explore these issues using data on a nationwide sample of young adults, ages 18-35 (Marquardt 2005). The sample is drawn to be evenly divided between (a) young adults who grew up in intact, two-parent families, and (b) young adults who experienced parental divorce prior to age 15. With these data, we begin by examining whether parental divorce influences young adults' perceptions of self-rated religiousness and self-rated spirituality. Then, following the approach of previous work in this area (e.g., Shahabi et al. 2002), we use survey responses to generate a 2x2 religiousness/spirituality typology. We estimate a series of multinomial logistic regression models to explore the impact of parental divorce on the "spiritual but not religious" and other identity categories. Finally, after presenting the results of these analyses, we discuss the implications, outlining promising directions for future research, and potential consequences for religious institutions.

## THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

### *Religious vs. Spiritual*

Over the past 20 years, scholars have wrestled with exactly how Americans understand and embody spirituality, especially as distinct from religiousness (Roof 1993, 1999; Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Marler and Hadaway 2002; Shahabi et al. 2002). Although a clear majority of American adults identify themselves as both "spiritual and religious," and perceive "spirituality" and "religiousness" to have overlapping meanings, there are still significant differences between these two constructs (e.g., Zinnbauer et al. 1997). For example, "religiousness" often implies a connection with established, institutional forms of worship, and a link with received theological doctrines and dogmas, most often those associated with Christian churches. By

contrast, "spirituality" is widely perceived to be more individual and subjective, reflecting personal practices and experiences that may diverge from religious orthodoxy or convention. More specifically, "being spiritual" often refers to expressions or experiences of the transcendent or sacred in one's personal life. Whereas "being religious" is generally linked with congregational affiliation, attendance at services, and orthodox beliefs about scripture or other core elements of faith, "being spiritual" is often related to spiritual seeking, exploration of Eastern or New Age practices, and/or focus on notions of self-fulfillment or self-actualization derived from modern psychology (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Fuller 2001).

Spiritual seekers often express dissatisfaction and impatience with formal religious institutions and their leaders. Such critics sometimes perceive "being religious" as a superficial attachment to ritual practices and received wisdom, a process of "just going through the motions" without personal transformation or direct encounter with the sacred (Fuller 2001; Marquardt 2005). Viewed from one perspective, the existence of a "spiritual but not religious" group is hardly a fresh product of recent cultural shifts, but rather has deep roots throughout American religious history (Fuller 2001). More commonly, however, contemporary distrust of religious organizations has been viewed as an important antecedent of a growing desire for spirituality outside of institutionalized religion. As Marler and Hadaway (2002) suggest, scholars have sometimes touted the "spiritual, but not religious" identity as a yearning for greater personal spiritual freedom apart from the suffocating influence of ossified religious bureaucracies and established traditions. Taken to its logical conclusion, one type of individualized spirituality is typified by "Sheilaism," the personal creed of a young woman reported by Bellah and colleagues in their classic work, *Habits of the Heart* (1985):

> Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as `Sheilaism' ..."I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many ... "It's just to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, and take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other." Like many others, Sheila would be willing to embrace few more specific points (Bellah et al. 1985:221).

"Sheilaism" has become paradigmatic for many observers, in part because it vividly depicts two widespread features of the contemporary spiritual ethos: (a) the lack of interest in formal theology or religious dogmas; and (b) the valorization of individual conscience over institutional religious teaching as the ultimate source and arbiter of moral judgment (Greer and Roof 1992).

### *Spiritual but Not Religious*

Although a growing body of literature discusses differences between "religiousness" and "spirituality," there is little solid information about "spiritual but not religious" Americans, or what factors may accelerate the appeal of this identity category. In a series of landmark contributions, Roof (1993, 1999) argued that cultural changes during and following the 1960s made Baby Boomers the vanguard of this trend. According to Roof, many Baby Boomers were "highly active seekers" influenced by the Boomer counterculture. They tended to distrust traditional institutions and norms, to value individualism, and to embrace the self-help knowledge of modern therapeutic culture rather than conventional theistic forms of belief and practice. Personal conscience, rather than institutional religious authority, became the paramount source of moral insight and judgment. Subsequent analyses confirm that Baby Boomers and marginal Protestants tend to fit this profile (e.g., Marler and Hadaway 2002).

There are surprisingly few rigorous studies concerning the individual-level correlates of (a) self-reported spirituality as opposed to religiousness, or (b) the "spiritual but not religious" identity category. However, two survey-based investigations have cast welcome new light on

these issues. In a pioneering effort, Zinnbauer and colleagues (1997) examined data on a diverse, non-probability sample, while Shahabi and associates (2002) analyzed data from the 1998 NORC General Social Survey, a nationwide probability sample of US adults. Several clear findings emerge from these studies. First, self-reported religiousness is higher among older adults, women, racial/ethnic minorities, married persons, residents of smaller communities, and southerners. Religiousness is either unrelated (Zinnbauer et al. 1997) or inversely related (Shahabi et al. 2002) to education and income. Self-reported spirituality is higher among women, older adults, and well-educated persons. These two studies also reveal a number of intriguing patterns involving ideological and psychosocial correlates of these constructs. For example, religiousness is positively associated with conservatism, intolerance, authoritarianism, self-righteousness, and self-sacrifice for others. Spirituality, on the other hand, is inversely associated with conservatism and cynical mistrust of others.

In addition, these studies directly compared the characteristics of persons who claimed to be "spiritual but not religious" with those of their counterparts who are both spiritual and religious. According to Zinnbauer and colleagues (1997), persons in these respective categories tend to differ in several psycho-social characteristics, and on a number of variables tapping specific aspects of religious and philosophical practice and outlook, as suggested by the findings reported above. With regard to the demographic characteristics of these two groups, several findings of Shahabi et al. (2002) are instructive. They found that, compared to persons who identified themselves as spiritual and religious, the "spiritual but not religious" individuals were: (a) much more likely to be non-Hispanic whites rather than members of racial/ethnic minority groups; (b) younger; (c) less likely to reside in the South; (d) better educated; and (e) less likely to be married.

### *The Possible Influence of Parental Divorce*

To date, the ascendancy of "spirituality" and the apparent growth of the "spiritual but not religious" identity category have been attributed mainly to large-scale cultural changes associated with the Baby Boomers and subsequent cohorts. However, empirical work has stopped well short of identifying specific social mechanisms by which these shifts may have been initiated and sustained. In this study, we hypothesize that parental divorce may be one such mechanism. Although numerous studies have examined the developmental consequences of parental divorce for children (e.g., McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Amato and Booth 1997; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae 1998), few studies have directly investigated the implications of parental divorce for children's spiritual development and identities. Nevertheless, prior theoretical and empirical work suggests several possible ways in which the experience of parental divorce may affect the religious and spiritual lives of offspring.

First, divorce may disrupt the intergenerational transmission of religious values and practices. Offspring who are raised by both biological parents are more likely to adopt their parents' religious practices and convictions (Myers 1996; Regnerus, Smith, and Smith 2004). In blended or divorced families, children may experience more stress, confrontation, and ambiguity, as parents lack firm agreement about how to instill spiritual or moral values. In the context of this lack of clear spiritual guidance, the young adults from divorced families may be more prone to reject their parents' religions, as compared with their counterparts from intact families (Roof 1999; Marquardt 2005). This loose guidance and poor spiritual role modeling might lead children of divorce to rely on their own conscience and moral judgments, rather than on family or religious authority figures (Marquardt 2005). To be sure, these individuals might abandon both

religion and spirituality. However, as they enter adulthood, it is also possible that they may find individualistic spirituality more comfortable and appealing than institutional forms of religion.

Second, studies suggest that a more permissive child rearing environment may foster less conventional religious practices in adulthood (Roof 1999). Permissive parents tend to show greater tolerance when their children begin to explore and adopt alternative religious practices. In the aftermath of divorce, parents confront a range of difficult challenges and issues (procedural, material, and emotional) that may reduce regular supervision of children by both resident and non-resident parents. It is possible that this may allow children greater latitude to explore alternative spiritual beliefs and practices, and to grow away from the traditions of their upbringing.

Third, family dissolution appears to disrupt institutional religious practices, such as regular religious attendance. For example, Lawton and Bures (2001) find that children who experience divorce in childhood and who are raised Catholic are more likely to switch denominations, or to abandon organized religion altogether, during adulthood than their counterparts from intact families. Further, as adults, offspring from divorced families are much less likely to attend religious services, although they display similar levels of spiritual engagement and practice (e.g., prayer, feelings of closeness to God) (Zhai et al. 2007). The social isolation and disconnection from previous religious communities may eliminate sources of support (e.g., coreligionist networks, positive congregational experiences) that otherwise could sustain their allegiance to institutional forms of religion. In these ways, parental divorce can accentuate a personal ethos of self-reliance, increase distrust of organized religion, and enhance the appeal of a more individual, private spiritual life. [1]

Our discussion to this point suggests the following hypotheses:

H1: Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood will be less likely to identify themselves as "religious" compared with offspring from intact families.

H2: Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood will not be less likely than others to identify themselves as "spiritual."

H3: Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood will be more likely to identify themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" compared with those from intact families.

*Covariates*

There are several other factors that could be associated with both parental divorce and young adults' religious or spiritual identification. First, previous studies show that children of divorce are less likely than others to marry and more likely to cohabit. Further, of those who do marry, the young adults from divorced families are more prone to experience marital conflict and divorce than their counterparts from intact families (e.g, Kobrin and Waite 1984; Glenn and Kramer 1987; Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995). At the same time, young adults in stable marriages and those with children tend to be more engaged with organized religion than other persons (Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Myers 1996; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, Waite 1995). By contrast, less religious young adults are more prone to cohabit, which in turn tends to reduce levels of religiousness (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992). Thus, in testing the hypotheses outlined above, it will be important to control for the relationship status of young adults as well as the presence of children in the home. Second, parents who were less religious may have been less interested or successful in imparting religious training to their offspring, and they may also have been more prone to divorce (e.g., Call and Heaton 1997). We account for this potentially confounding relationship by controlling for multiple indicators of religiousness during

upbringing (i.e., affiliation, frequency of organizational and non-organizational religious practices).

## DATA

The data for this study come from the *National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families* (NSMS), a random digit tailing telephone survey conducted by the survey firm of Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc. for the Institute for American Values in New York City in 2003 and funded by the Lilly Endowment. The principal investigators are Elizabeth Marquardt, of the Institute for American Values, and Norval Glenn of the University of Texas-Austin. NSMS is a nationally representative sample of 1506 young adults from 18 to 35 years old, with 751 respondents from divorced families and 755 from intact families (see Marquardt 2005). None of the respondents had experienced the death of a parent before they were18 years old, nor were any of them adopted. Participants from intact families had two biological parents who married before the respondent was born, stayed married, and were still married at the time of the survey unless one or both had died. Respondents from divorced families experienced parental divorce before they were 15 years old and, after the divorce, continued to maintain contact with each parent. These study participants were required to have seen each parent a minimum of once a year in the years following the divorce and before they reached age 18.   For further information on the NSMS, please visit http://www.betweentwoworlds.org.

## MEASURES

### *Dependent Variables*

*Self-rated religiousness and spirituality.* Respondents were asked the following separate two questions: "How spiritual do you currently consider yourself to be?" and "How religious do you

currently consider yourself to be?" The response categories ranged from 1, "Not religious (spiritual) at all," to 4, "Very religious (spiritual)." We code our measure so that higher values indicate higher levels of religiousness or spirituality.

In order to further explore religious/spiritual convergence and divergence, we create a typology containing four combinations of religion and spirituality: *"religious and spiritual," "religious but not spiritual," "spiritual but not religious," and "neither religious nor spiritual."* The "religious and spiritual" group contains respondents who consider themselves "fairly" or "very" religious and "fairly" or "very" spiritual; the "religious but not spiritual" group contains people who consider themselves "fairly" or "very" religious but "slightly" or "not" spiritual; "the spiritual but not religious" group includes people who are "fairly" or "very" spiritual but only "slightly" or "not" religious; and at last, the "neither religious nor spiritual group" contains people who consider themselves "slightly" or "not" spiritual and "slightly" or "not" religious. The "religious and spiritual" group is the reference group in our following analysis.

### Independent Variables

*Parental Divorce.* We use a dichotomous variable to identify respondents whose parents were divorced. If a respondent's parents were divorced before they turned 15, the measure is coded as 1; if a respondent was from an intact family, the variable is coded as 0.

*Childhood religious involvement.* Previous research consistently shows that childhood religiosity is strongly associated with adulthood religiosity, thus we include three measures of childhood religiosity as controls. First, the religious traditions in which respondents were raised are grouped into five categories: evangelical Protestant (15.76%), mainline Protestant (29.60%), Catholic (28.87%), other religious traditions (8.4%), and no religious affiliation (12.05%). [2]

Secondly, we measure childhood service attendance using responses to the following question: "Thinking about the period in your childhood when you attended religious services most often, how often did you attend?" Our measure is coded so that higher values represent higher levels of childhood attendance, corresponding to the response categories "almost never" (1) to "every week/almost every week" (4). Third, we also measure the respondents' childhood prayer using responses to the following item: "Thinking about the period in your childhood when you prayed most often, how often did you pray?" Response categories for this question ranged from "hardly ever" (1) to "every day" (4). This measure is also coded with higher values indicating greater frequency of childhood prayer.

*Current marital and parental status.* As we discussed earlier, scholars have consistently shown that married people with children attend religious services more often than either the non-married or childless. Therefore, in this study we control for the effects of marriage and family on current religious behaviors. We use four mutually exclusive categories to measure current marital status: currently married, single/never married, divorced or separated, and currently cohabiting, with "currently married" being the reference group. Parental status is measured using a dichotomous variable, coded 1 if respondents indicated "yes" to the question: "Do you have children or stepchildren now?"

*Other covariates.* Numerous studies have shown that demographic characteristics are significant correlates of religious participation. Thus in accordance with previous studies, we control for each respondent's age (measured in years), sex (1=male, 0=female), race (1=White, 0=non-White), region (1=south, 0=other), and education (measured in years of schooling completed).

*Analytic Strategy*

Our analytic strategy involves four steps: In Table 1, we provide information on the means and standard deviations for all variables used in our analyses, along with tests of mean differences between those who experienced parental divorce and those from intact families. In Table 2, we present ordered logistic regression models, estimating the net effects of parental divorce and covariates on self-rated religiousness and spirituality. We compare the base models (model 1) with only parental divorce as a predictor and the full models (model 2) with all other covariates. Since our dependent variables are ordinal variables (from 1 "not spiritual/religious at all" to 4 "very spiritual/religious"), we ordered logistic regression is the most appropriate statistical technique to use in such context (Powers and Xie 2000). Third, we further examine the association between parental divorce and the four-group typology of religiousness and spirituality in Table 3. Here we present a cross tabulation comparing our two subsamples across the four typological groups, along with Chi-squared tests of significance. Finally, in Table 4, we employ multinomial logistic regression to estimate the effect of parental divorce on the religiousness/spirituality typology, controlling for all other covariates.

**RESULTS**

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 presents means and standard deviations on all variables used in the study for the overall sample and for each of the two key subgroups, young adult children of divorced parents and those from intact families. We also provide tests of the statistical significance of mean differences between these two groups. As H1 and H2 suggested, young adults from intact families consider themselves much more "religious" than young adults from divorced families

(means = 2.85 and 2.63, respectively, p<.001), but not substantially more "spiritual" (mean=3.05

and 2.98, respectively, p<.10). We also note that, consistent with previous literature, young

adults from divorced families report lower levels of religious attendance and prayer during

childhood, compared with young adults from intact families. Young adults from divorced

families are also more likely to have been raised with no religious family affiliation and less

likely to be raised as a Catholic, compared with young adults from intact families. Additionally,

young adults from divorced families are more likely to be currently divorced or cohabiting

compared with young adults from intact families, and they generally have lower levels of

educational achievement compared with their counterparts from intact families (means=4.85 and

5.16 respectively, p<.001).

[Table 2 about here]

In Table 2, we present the results of multivariate analyses to further examine the impact of

parental divorce on religious and spiritual identity. Since our dependent variables (self-rated

religiousness and spirituality) are ordinal, we use ordered logistic regression (Powers and Xie

2000). Table 2 presents the odds ratios (calculated with STATA) of the estimated net effects of

parental divorce and other covariates on self-rated religiousness and spirituality. We calculate

these odds ratios using STATA; these are based on the exponentiated ordered logistic regression

coefficients. The multivariate results are consistent with the findings from the binary analysis:

after controlling childhood religious variables and sociodemographic variables, young adults

from divorced families are still much less likely to perceive themselves as religious compared

with their counterparts from intact families (OR=.71, p<.01 in Model 2). However, there is no

significant difference on the level of self-perceived spirituality between these two groups

(OR=.98, p is not significant, in Model 4). Our Hypotheses H1 and H2 are continuously supported even after controlling these other factors.

There are also noteworthy findings regarding the impact of childhood religion and sociodemographic factors on perception of religiousness/spirituality. Compared with women, male respondents report significantly lower levels of both self-perceived religiousness and spirituality (OR=.68 and .51 respectively, p<.001). People from the south report higher scores on both religiousness and spirituality, compared with respondents who live in other regions (OR=1.602, 1.478 respectively, p<.001). Additionally, the more years of schooling the respondent has completed, the more likely he or she is to perceive themselves as highly "spiritual," but not necessarily more "religious." Finally, respondents who were raised as Catholic or with no religion report lower scores on both religiousness and spirituality, compared with those who were raised as evangelical Protestants.

[Table 3 about here]

In order to evaluate H3 and further investigate the divergence between religiousness and spirituality, we create four mutually exclusive identity categories as described earlier: (a) both religious and spiritual; (b) religious, but not spiritual; (c) spiritual, but not religious; and (d) neither religious nor spiritual. Table 3 presents a bivariate table depicting the association between parental divorce and religious/spiritual identity categories. As expected, roughly 21.5% of the offspring of divorce identify as "spiritual but not religious," as compared with only 12.7% of the children from intact families. Indeed, approximately 62% of the young adults in this category are the offspring of divorce. At the same time, more than 62% of young adults from intact families, but only 50% of their counterparts from divorced families, consider themselves "both religious and spiritual." These patterns offer clear preliminary support for H3. Chi-square

statistics for the table confirm that the overall association between parental divorce and identity category is statistically significant (Chi-Square =27.9, df=3, p<.001).

[Table 4 about here]

For multivariate analyses of the impact of parental divorce on the four spiritual/religious identity groups we use multinomial logistic regression. With a nominal dependent variable having more than two categories, multinomial logistic regression is the most appropriate type of regression (Powers and Xie 2000). The equation for multinomial regression models is shown below:

$$\ln \Omega_{m|b}(x) = \ln \frac{\Pr(y = m \mid x)}{\Pr(y = b \mid x)} = x\beta_{m|b} \quad \text{for } m = 1 \text{ to } J \quad [3]$$

The results in Table 4 lend additional support to H3. Young adults from divorced families are approximately two times more likely (OR=2.02, p<.001) than those from intact families to be in the pivotal "spiritual but not religious" category, as opposed to the "religious and spiritual" category, even with controls for a broad array of covariates. However, in the multivariate model there is no significant effect of parental divorce on the odds of being in the "religious but not spiritual" category (OR=1.10, ns). In the bivariate model it appears that the offspring of divorce are approximately 1.5 times more likely (OR=1.51, p<.01) than their counterparts from intact families to be in the "neither religious nor spiritual" category, as opposed to the "religious and spiritual" category. This was a possibility we acknowledged earlier. However, this association evaporates when controls for covariates are added (OR=1.26, ns). Taken together, these patterns bear out H3; young adults who experienced parental divorce while growing up are disproportionately inclined to adopt a "spiritual, but not religious" identity.

Although they are not the main focus of this study, given the dearth of information on this topic, we also briefly summarize the estimated net effects of covariates. Several patterns are particularly interesting. Men are much more prone to embrace "religious but not spiritual" and "neither religious nor spiritual" identities, as opposed to the "religious and spiritual" identity that is the modal category in this sample. Younger respondents are somewhat more inclined to adopt these identities as well. Southerners are particularly disinclined to identify as "spiritual but not religious" or "neither religious nor spiritual." Not surprisingly, the religious upbringing of respondents has important implications for their identities in adulthood. Compared to those raised as evangelical Protestants, those who were socialized as Catholics and mainline Protestants are more prone to identify as "religious but not spiritual," while those raised without a religious preference are more likely to eschew any "religious" identity category as young adults. Higher levels of religious practice --especially attendance at services-- while growing up apparently increase the likelihood that young adults will adopt a "religious and spiritual" identity. Finally, our data reveal that cohabiting respondents are much more likely than their married counterparts to identify as "spiritual but not religious" or "neither religious nor spiritual" --i.e., to disavow any "religious" identity-- in early adulthood.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Recent discussions have highlighted the distinctions between religiousness vs. spirituality, and have called attention to the (ostensibly) growing "spiritual but not religious" identity category among contemporary Americans. To date, however, few studies have (a) provided empirical evidence about the characteristics of this segment of the population, or (b) examined specific mechanisms that might help to account for the rise of this identity. Our study has

addressed this gap in the literature. Using data on a nationwide sample of young adults (ages 18-35), evenly divided between young adults from divorced families and those raised in intact families, we have explored one possible influence --the experience of parental divorce-- on individual perceptions of religiousness and spirituality.

Our results demonstrate that young adults from divorced families constitute the majority (62%) of the "spiritual but not religious" category in our sample. Even after controlling for sociodemographic covariates, young adults who are from divorced families are significantly less likely to identify themselves as "religious" than their counterparts from intact families are, although they are just as likely to perceive themselves as being "spiritual." Moreover, young adults who experienced parental divorce prior to age 15 are much more likely to identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious" than others.

 As we noted earlier, parental divorce may disrupt religious socialization of young people by several possible mechanisms. For example, divorce may hamper the ability of parents to provide solid religious guidance and training. Specifically, it can disrupt patterns of religious attendance and family religious practice, and reduced supervision and engagement by parents can allow young people greater latitude to explore alternative religious and spiritual perspectives. Further, the acrimony and conflict among parents before, during, and after the divorce may discourage children from relying on them as religious teachers or role models (King, Furrow, and Roth 2002). In the aftermath of divorce, the social and psychological challenges and financial hardships may distract custodial parents from investing time in religious institutions and communities. In addition, some coreligionists may stigmatize divorce, and many congregations offer limited outreach and pastoral support to divorced persons and other non-traditional families (Wilcox, Chaves, and Franz 2004; Edgell 2005). All of these dynamics may encourage a

distinction between "religion" in its institutional forms, and "spirituality," which may imply a more personal relationship with the transcendent; the latter is less likely to be damaged by the processes of marital dissolution (Zhai et al. 2007).

In her influential study, *Between Two Worlds*, Marquardt (2005) also points out that many children of divorced families reported experiencing loneliness when attending religious services following parental divorce. Because many congregations provide children's programs, religious education and moral training, some parents insist that their children remain active in church, although the parents themselves may disengage from organized religion. According to Marquardt, many of the young adults from divorced families recall lonely church experiences as "poignant," and the negative memories associated with solitary religious attendance may continue to haunt them in adulthood. Such experiences may have the unintended effect of pushing them further away from organized religion, although they may still engage in private, interior spiritual pursuits. For this reason, too, parental divorce may lead offspring to identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Thus, our study contributes to a growing body of research documenting the important, and far-reaching, consequences of parental divorce for offspring. Our work complements previous studies, most of which have focused on the implications of divorce for health and well-being, deviance and status attainment, and subsequent family patterns (Amato and Booth 1997; Biblarz and Raftery 1993; Cherlin et al. 1998; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Simons et al. 1996; Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995).

Given that the respondents in our sample were 18-35 years old in survey year 2003, they were born between 1968 and 1985; most of these persons were children of Baby Boomers, and belong to what is loosely termed "Generation X." These young adults were raised amid a maelstrom of social and cultural changes, including unprecedented divorce rates that peaked in

the early 1980s before plateauing at what are still historically high levels (Heaton 2002). In many respects, these young adults may reflect the consolidation of spiritual orientations that emerged first among the Baby Boomers, including the preference for a "spiritual but not religious" identity and skepticism of institutions (especially marriage and organized religion)--hence the elevated rates of cohabitation among members of this cohort. Although discussions of "Gen X" religious sensibilities have highlighted a number of cultural themes --e.g., multiculturalism, ambiguity, irreverence, technological literacy, etc. --the possible conditioning role of parental divorce has been little more than a footnote in most analyses (e.g., Beaudoin 1998; Flory and Miller 2000). As the young adults of Generation X mature, it will be extremely important to gauge the extent to which their experiences and outlooks are cohort-specific, and the extent to which their distinctive ethos may impact the intergenerational transmission of norms and practices involving faith, spirituality, and family life.

Furthermore, in their 2002 landmark study, Hout and Fischer argued that conservative politics, together with cohort effects, are leading more Americans away from institutionalized religion (Hout and Fischer 2002). Our study provides a different point of view. While Hout and Fischer identified a strong association between "religious nones" and displeasure with the Religious Right, we believe a more fundamental, and perhaps more powerful, force is contributing to religious disaffection: family decline. We provide compelling evidence that a major factor driving more Americans to claim no religious preference is the long-term effect of parental divorce. Thus, sustained high levels of divorce may be greatly altering the American religious landscape by pushing young Americans to become "spiritual but not religious" or "neither spiritual nor religious." The collection and rigorous analysis of data on the linkages between family decline and religious decline are needed to complement the discursive cultural

discussions that have dominated the literature to date. New studies will enhance our understanding of shifting bases of religious and spiritual identity, and will help to clarify the challenges for religious organizations and communities in the coming decades.

All research is characterized by limitations, and that is true of this study as well. For example, these data are cross-sectional; although we believe that our interpretation offers the most reasonable interpretation of the findings, without longitudinal data we cannot firmly establish the causal relationships among key variables of interest. The availability of multiple waves of panel data could also permit a more fine-grained analysis of the emergence of individual religious and spiritual identities during the transition into adulthood. In addition, the survey items on religious upbringing were framed in general terms, without focusing on specific time(s) or age(s), and for offspring of divorce the items were not asked in reference to the timing of the parental divorce. It might have been advantageous to have more specific items with which to gauge these important covariates.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Table 1.**

**Mean and Standard Deviation (in Parentheses) of the Study Variables**

| Dependent Variables | Total sample | Offspring of Divorce | Offspring from Intact Families | T-Test |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| self-rated religiousness | 2.74 | 2.63 | 2.85 | *** |
| | (.94) | (.94) | (.92) | |
| self-rated spirituality | 3.02 | 2.98 | 3.05 | + |
| | (.86) | (.88) | (.84) | |
| *Socio-demographic Variables* | | | | |
| Age | 28.76 | 28.68 | 28.83 | |
| | (4.61) | (4.51) | (4.72) | |
| Male | .41 | .4 | .42 | |
| | (.49) | (.49) | (.49) | |
| White | .88 | .88 | .87 | |
| | (.32) | (.32) | (.32) | |
| South | .36 | .38 | .34 | * |
| | (.48) | (.49) | (.47) | |
| Education | 5.01 | 4.85 | 5.16 | *** |
| | (1.42) | (1.41) | (1.41) | |
| *Childhood Religion Variables* | | | | |
| Raised Evangelical Protestant | .16 | .16 | .15 | |
| | (.36) | (.37) | (.35) | |
| Raised Mainline Protestant | .3 | .3 | .3 | |
| | (.46) | (.46) | (.45) | |
| Raised Catholic | .29 | .27 | .32 | * |
| | (.45) | (.44) | (.46) | |
| Raised other religion | .09 | .07 | .11 | * |
| | (.28) | (.26) | (.31) | |
| Raised no religion | .11 | .13 | .09 | ** |
| | (.31) | (.33) | (.28) | |
| Childhood attendance | 3.19 | 3.03 | 3.35 | *** |
| | (1.1) | (1.15) | (1.04) | |
| Childhood prayer | 3.05 | 2.95 | 3.15 | *** |
| | (1.12) | (1.16) | (1.08) | |
| *Current Family Status variables* | | | | |
| Current married | .61 | .59 | .63 | * |
| | (.49) | (.49) | (.48) | |
| Currently single | .27 | .26 | .28 | |
| | (.44) | (.44) | (.45) | |
| Currently divorced or separated | .06 | .08 | .04 | *** |
| | (.24) | (.28) | (.21) | |
| Currently cohabit | .06 | .07 | .04 | ** |
| | (.24) | (.26) | (.21) | |

Note:  + p<.10. * p<.05. ** p <.01. *** p<.001

**Table 2**
**Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Self-Perception**
**of Religiousness and Spirituality**
**(Odds Ratios)**

| | Religiousness | | Spirituality | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Model1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
| Parental divorce | .618*** | .711** | .847+ | .984 |
| *Sociodemographic variables* | | | | |
| Age | | 1.008 | | 1.035* |
| Male | | .679*** | | .514*** |
| White | | 1.151 | | 1.047 |
| South | | 1.602*** | | 1.478*** |
| Education | | .981 | | 1.107** |
| *Childhood religion variables* | | | | |
| Raised Mainline Protestant | | 1.074 | | .782+ |
| Raised Catholic | | .734* | | .659** |
| Raised other religion | | 1.086 | | .801 |
| Raised no religion | | .399*** | | .567* |
| Childhood attendance | | 1.389*** | | 1.278*** |
| Childhood prayer | | 1.364*** | | 1.299*** |
| *Adult family status variables* | | | | |
| Single | | .775+ | | 1.001 |
| Divorced or separated | | .684+ | | .684+ |
| Cohabited | | .501** | | .595* |
| -2 log likelihood | 3613.7 | 3289.54 | 3472.62 | 3131.54 |

Note: N=1392 in all models.
 +p<.10.  *p<.05. **p <.01. ***p <.001

**Table 3**
**Bivariate Association between Parental Divorce and Religious/Spiritual Typology**

| Row percentage Column percentage Frequency | Neither Religious nor spiritual | Religious but not spiritual | Spiritual but not religious | Religious and spiritual | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Offspring from intact family | 19.1% 46.1% 135 | 5.7% 53.3% 40 | **12.7%** 38.0% 90 | **62.56%** 56.3% 443 | 100% 50.9% 708 |
| Offspring from divorced family | 23.1% 53.9% 158 | 5.1% 46.7% 35 | **21.45%** 62.0% 147 | **50.3%** 43.7% 344 | 100% 49.1% 684 |
| Total | 21.1% 100% 293 | 5.4% 100% 75 | 17.0% 100% 237 | 56.5% 100% 787 | 100% 100% 1,392 |

Pearson Chi(3) = 27.9  p<.001

**Table 4**
**Odds Ratios from Multinomial Logistic Regression of Religious/spiritual Typology,
Controlling Demographic Characters and Childhood Religious Factors**

| | Neither religious nor spiritual | | Religious but not spiritual | | Spiritual but not religious | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parental divorce | 1.507** | 1.261 | 1.127 | 1.097 | 2.103*** | 2.017*** |
| *Sociodemographic variables* | | | | | | |
| Age | | .965+ | | .914** | | .989 |
| Male | | 2.477*** | | 2.117** | | 1.095 |
| White | | .911 | | 1.361 | | .807 |
| South | | .551** | | .636 | | .645* |
| Education | | .893+ | | .879 | | 1.071 |
| *Childhood religion variables* | | | | | | |
| Raised Mainline Protestant | | .982 | | 2.336* | | .946 |
| Raised Catholic | | 1.188 | | 2.884** | | 1.096 |
| Raised other religion | | 1.204 | | 2.135 | | 1.073 |
| Raised no religion | | 2.019* | | 1.363 | | 1.782+ |
| Childhood attendance | | .658*** | | .775+ | | .818* |
| Childhood prayer | | .673*** | | .968 | | .792** |
| *Adult family status variables* | | | | | | |
| Single | | .956 | | .703 | | 1.254 |
| Divorced or separated | | 1.341 | | 2.092 | | 1.338 |
| Cohabit | | 2.892** | | 1.041 | | 2.412** |
| -2 log likelihood | 3060.1 | 2489.7 | 3012.3 | 2727.26 | 3454.7 | 2987.6 |
| N=1392 | | | | | | |

Note: the "religious and spiritual" group is the reference category.
+p<.10.  *p<.05. **p <.01. ***p <.001

# ENDNOTES

1. Although Marquardt (2005) points out that if children of divorce continue to be religious during adulthood, they are more likely to become born-again or evangelical Christians than children of intact families (41% of the offspring of divorce vs. 37% of the offspring of intact family become born again/evangelical). However, we used the same data source and found that this difference is not statistically significant (Chi2=2.64, p=.104).

2. The classification of Evangelical Protestant and Mainline Protestant denominations follows the scheme proposed by Steensland et al. (2000). In one departure from their approach, however, African Americans are not clustered into a separate religious category, but instead are included in the Evangelical and Mainline Protestant groupings. In our statistical models Evangelical Protestant constituted the reference group (omitted category). Groups classified as "other" religious traditions include Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, Orthodox, and various non-Christian religions (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, etc.).

3. In the equation, $b$ represents the base category of the dependent variable religiousness/spirituality typology (b= both religious and spiritual), $m$ represents other values of the dependent variable (1= neither religious nor spiritual, 2= religious but not spiritual, and 3= spiritual but not religious).

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