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Merril D. Silverstein

*Syracuse University*, [merrils@syr.edu](mailto:merrils@syr.edu)

Vern L. Bengtson

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**Syracuse University**  
Aging Studies Institute

# Policy Brief

## Return to Religion? Predictors of Religious Change Among Baby-Boomers in their Transition to Later Life

Merril Silverstein, Ph.D.  
Syracuse University

Vern L. Bengtson, Ph.D.  
University of Southern California

July 1, 2017

**Merril Silverstein, Ph.D. Syracuse University** is the inaugural holder of the Marjorie Cantor Chair in Aging Studies at Syracuse University in the Maxwell School Department of Sociology and Falk College Department of Human Development and Family Science. He received his doctorate in sociology from Columbia University. In over 150 research publications, he has focused on aging in the context of family life, with an emphasis on life course and international perspectives. He serves as principal investigator of the Longitudinal Study of Generations and has had projects in China, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Israel. He is a Brookdale Fellow and Fulbright Senior Scholar and between 2010-2014 served as editor-in-chief of *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*.

**Vern L. Bengtson, Ph.D., University of Southern California**, is a faculty research associate with the School of Social Work's Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging. Prior to this he held the AARP/University Chair in Gerontology at USC. He is past president of the Gerontological Society of America and a MERIT awardee from the National Institutes of Health. He has published 19 books and over 250 research papers in gerontology, theories of aging, sociology of aging, and family sociology. Early in his career, he started the Longitudinal Study of Generations, a multi-disciplinary investigation of families, aging, and social change, which has received continuous NIH funding over eight waves of data collection from families that the study has followed since 1971.

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Evidence suggests that engagement in meaningful activities in later life produces a variety of benefits to physical health, mental health, longevity, and overall quality of life (Levin, 1993; McFadden, 1995; Krause, 2003; Hill, Burdette, & Idler, 2011). Religion represents a key activity domain in which older adults participate at relatively high levels, particularly in the United States where religion plays an outsized role compared to other developed countries. Religious involvement operates at both personal and institutional levels. At the personal level, religion provides for many a belief system and moral philosophy, as well as a framework for approaching difficult and ineffable events. These functions are closely related to the capacity of religion to infuse life with meaning, offer a route for personal growth, and provide moral guidance.

The institutional role of religion involves more public displays of worship, and social and organizational activities such as volunteering. These more public manifestations of religious life may also benefit society by strengthening communities and improving the well-being of the populations that religious institutions serve (Idler, 2014). As such, religious organizations represent something of a haven for older adults who are desirous of meaningful roles, social integration and the opportunity to contribute to society (Idler, Kasl, & Hays, 2001).

Yet we know relatively little about how religion—and which aspects of religious involvement—changes following the transition from late middle age to early old age. In this paper, we examine the correlates of change in religiosity as individuals age from their 50s to their 60s as a function of cognitive and behavioral manifestations of religious involvement, religious participation in childhood, and challenges that emerge over this period of life.

### **Religion and Aging**

Research has generally found age differences in religiosity with older adults having stronger religious beliefs and involvement compared to younger adults (Ellison & Hummer, 2010; Krause, 2010). Only at the end of life, with increasing frailty, does religious participation appear to decline (Krause, 2010; Idler, McLaughlin & Kasl, 2009). Other aspects of religiosity, such as subjective religiousness and the strength of religious beliefs, are relatively consistent across age groups (Moody, 2006; Levin, 1989). The most convincing evidence for aging effects come from longitudinal analyses demonstrating that subjective aspects of religiosity declines across early and middle adulthood before increasing in later life (Dillon and Wink, 2007 ; Bengtson, Silverstein, Putney, & Harris, 2015). Research by Hayward and Krause (2013) shows that attendance at religious services rapidly increases in early old age, after a period of stability, and only starts to reverse in late old age. On balance, the evidence about age changes in religiosity is mixed, but generally point to an increase in subjective religiosity into old age, as well as a rise in religious participation when health permits.

Why should religion become more important with increasing age? Several strains of theory can be cited to explain why, as people grow closer to the end of their lives, religious or spiritual concerns gain in prominence (Johnson 2013, Krause 2009). These explanations can roughly be divided into those perspectives that consider developmental/cognitive aspects of religiosity and those that consider social/behavioral aspects.

Developmental/cognitive changes with aging are reflected in the work of lifespan personality theorists such as Erikson ([1959] 1982), Jung (1953), Kohlberg (1972), and Munnichs (1966) concerning the need of individuals to move beyond worldly pursuits and examine existential issues as a fundamental developmental challenge of later life. More recently, Tornstam (2005) advanced a theory of gerotranscendence, proposing that in advanced years, individuals experience “a shift in meta-perspective from a midlife materialistic and rational vision, to a more cosmic and transcendent one, accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction” (p. 42). Literature suggests that altruistic tendencies strengthen in later life (Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994), and pro-social motives to better the lives of others may manifest themselves under the auspice of religious institutions. Consistent with this perspective is the finding that religiously based volunteer work tends to be of particular relevance among older adults (Van Willigen, 2000).

Whether it is because of an awareness of finitude (Munnichs, 1966), a sense of completion (Butler, 1963), or a concern

for immortality (Jung, 1953), there may be a turning toward spirituality in the later years. Moreover, there may be more practical reasons for becoming more religious in the later years, reflected in the growing literature on congregational involvement and adjustment to the various losses associated with advancing years—health declines, widowhood, the shrinking of social support networks, and loneliness (Idler 2006; Krause 2006). Finally, there is simply the factor of additional time available: retirement from paid work and relief from family pressures of mid-life affords more hours and days for engaging in religious and spiritual activities. A less explored reason for religious change in later life relates to what may be labelled “pull factors” in the form of outreach by religious organizations to retain older congregants and increase their involvement; however, research indicates that programing for older adults is not common (Bengtson, Endacott & Kang, under review ).

Change in religious involvement and spiritual engagement, therefore, would seem to be expected in the later years—with an increase more likely than a decline occurring through the early stages of later life. Challenges and transformative family events associated with later life may trigger religious involvement and religiously oriented behavior. For instance, Ferraro and Kelley-Moore (2000) found that bereavement, poor health, and being out of the labor force prompted individuals to seek consolation by making use of religious resources. Adverse life experiences strengthen religious connections throughout the life course (Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002), with those experiences being more common in later life.



In this research, we take a developmental perspective on religious change in later life by examining how religious exposure in childhood is related to religious change from middle-age to later life. This perspective derives from the principles of life course theory, which maintains that earlier life experiences provide a basis for which roles are adopted later in the adult lifespan (see Elder, 1998). Research by Sherkat (1998) found that traditional socialization agents, such as parents and school, were most responsible for the religious beliefs and involvement of Baby-boomers. Thus, we take into account retrospectively assessed reports about religious participation in childhood, and relate them to contemporaneous religious involvement and change in religiosity over the past decade. While we expect early religious exposure to be related to current religious activities and beliefs, it may be that those who were less religious in childhood are more likely to become more religious between midlife and later life.

Finally, we note that the population of interest, the Baby-Boom generation, may possess characteristics that may mark them as religiously unique in their transition to later life. Scholars have noted that the Baby-boomer generation was the first to behave as religious “seekers” who selectively adopted belief systems within a marketplace of ideologies and spiritual communities (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998). Moving away from more rigid and institutionalized religious practice and beliefs, the transition of this generation to old age may present another opportunity for religious change and reinvention. Yet, as Sherkat (1998) has found, religious traditionalism rooted in the childhood socialization of Baby-

Boomers competes with the tendency of this generation toward innovation in religious matters. Given evidence in the literature that religiosity might increase as individuals pass into old age, we speculate that Baby-boomers may return their religious roots or seek meaning in new religious practices.

Based on the preceding discussion of the literature on this topic, we address the following research questions in this paper:

1. To what degree has religiosity changed among baby-boomers as they age from their 50s to their 60s?
2. Among those reporting an increase in religiosity, what reasons are given for this change?
3. Is change in religiosity independently related to cognitive and behavioral forms of religiosity?
4. What role does religious practice earlier in the life course play in religious change?
5. Are life course transitions--specifically retirement, widowhood, economic decline, and worsening health--associated with religious change?

### **Sample**

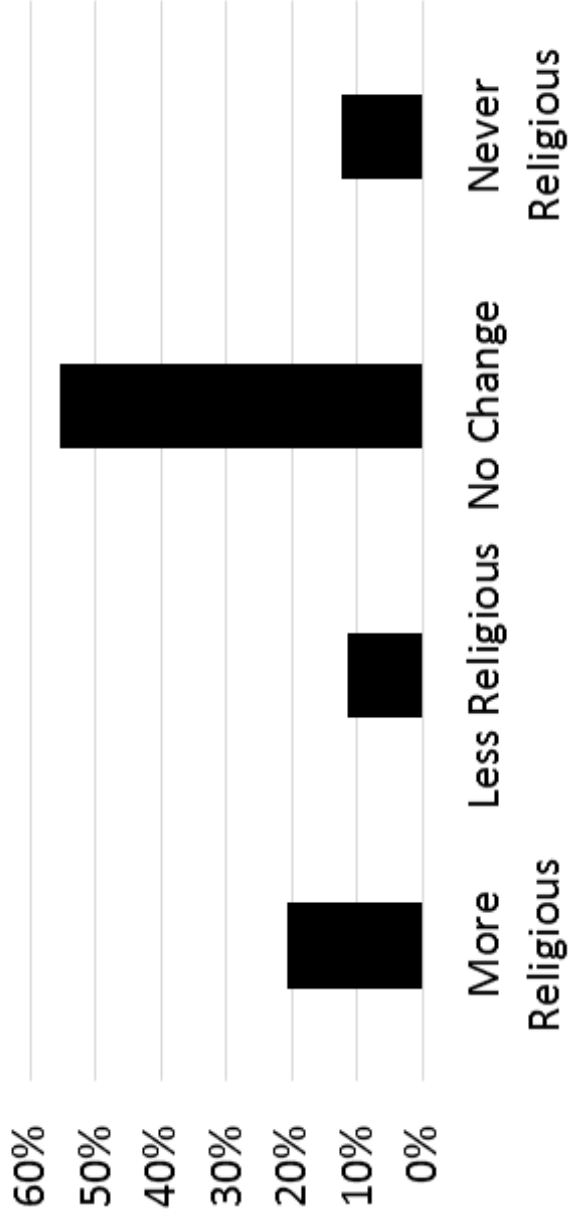
Data for this investigation derive from the Longitudinal Study of Generations, a multigenerational and multi-panel study of 418 three-generation families that began in 1971 and

has continued for eight additional waves up to 2016. The original sample of three-generation families was identified by randomly selecting grandfathers from the membership of a large health maintenance organization in Southern California. For the current analysis, we rely on data from the 2016 survey, which was administered to 684 members of the third generation, for an effective follow-up rate of 73.2%. The large majority (79.8%) of this sample responded via a web-survey with the remainder responding with a mail-back paper survey. We selected 585 respondents who were 60-70 years of age at the time of the survey, corresponding to early and middle waves of the Baby-Boom generation. This age-range provides a demographically interesting period of life when, for many, paid work ceases, and risk of health decline and widowhood increases. We note that the period between the last two surveys (2006-2016) straddles the financial crisis of 2007-2008, which may have caused economic distress for those nearing or entering retirement, introducing precarity to work roles, disrupting or accelerating retirement plans, and possibly providing reasons for engaging in religious pursuits.

### **Religious Change and Increased Religiosity**

Respondents were asked to retrospectively assess their religious change over the previous decade by responding to the following question: In the last ten years, have you become more religious, become less religious, or stayed about the same. The option of “I was never religious” was provided as an additional response option. Figure 1 shows that the majority of the sample (56%) indicated that their religiosity was stable over the period, but more than one in five (21%) reported an increase in religiosity. Smaller groups reported

Figure 1. Have You Become More Religious, Less Religious, or Remained the Same Over the Last 10 years?

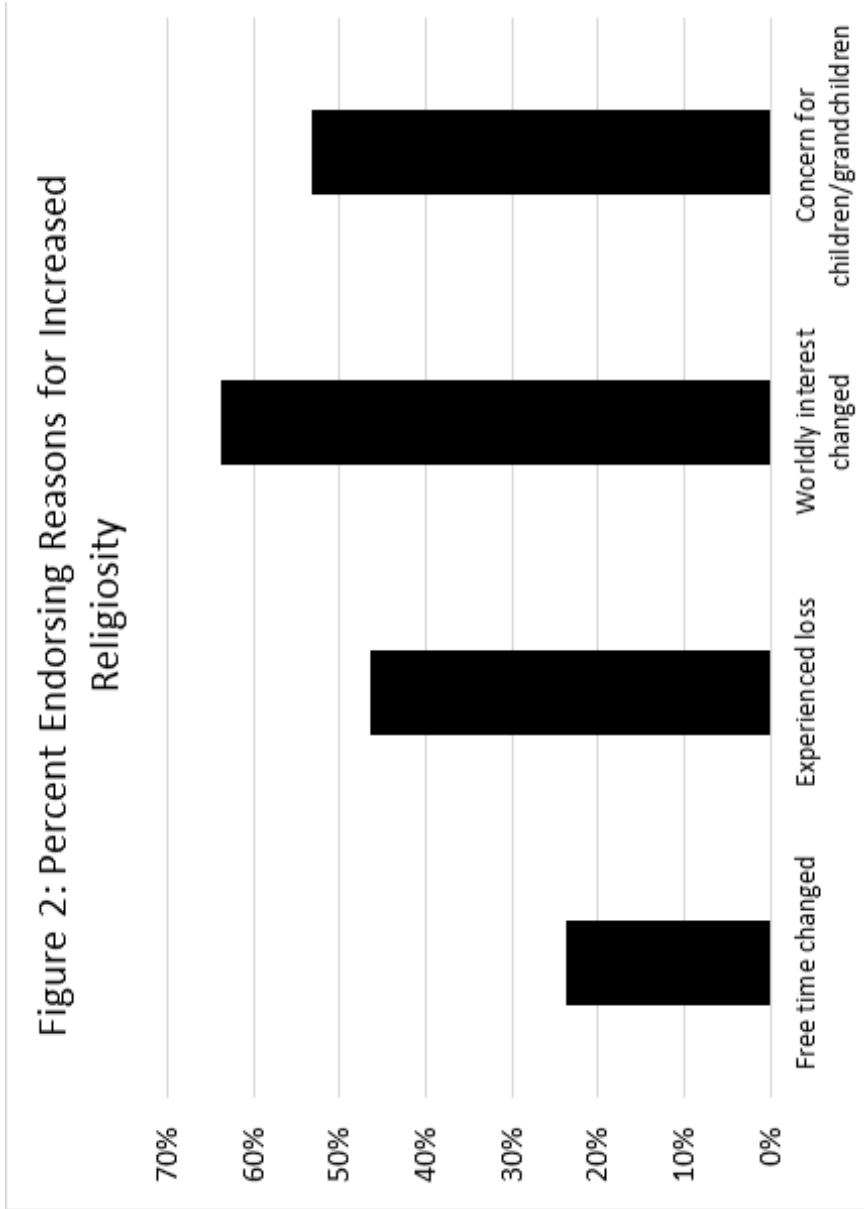


a decline in religiosity (11%) or stated that they were never religious (12%). Whether or not the never religious should be interpreted as being stable is arguable, we chose to omit this group from subsequent analyses because they represent a unique group in the sample for whom religion is not relevant.

The survey also asked respondents to provide the reason or reasons why they became more religious if they indicated this option (reasons for religious decline were not asked). These reasons were ascertained in previous research using in-depth interviews about religious life (Bengtson, 2013 ). The checklist included the following options: *the amount of free time you had changed; you experienced a loss; your interest in worldly things changed; you became concerned about the religious development of your children or grandchildren.* Multiple reports were possible. In addition, an open-ended response option was provided for respondents who chose to provide their own narrative explanation.

The percentages endorsing these four reasons for increased religiosity are shown in Figure 2. The most commonly endorsed reason was that interest in worldly things changed (64%), followed by concern for the religious development of children or grandchildren (53%), experiencing a loss (46%), and amount of free time changed (24%).

Next, we examine 106 open-ended responses among those reporting religious strengthening. These responses fell three thematic categories that we list below with illustrative quotes.



One group of responses reflected the search for meaning and the desire for self-betterment with aging. For instance, religious practice allowed one respondent to “be a good example for my children” and provided another with “greater insights, growth and maturity.” Increased involvement with religion also provided perspective on end-of-life concerns for several respondents, such as coming to “to a greater understanding of the fleeting nature of this life”, and the desire to “meet my God on good terms.”

A second theme reflected the solace and strength that religion provided for overcoming challenges and losses, particularly with respect to close family members. Under this category, respondents mentioned that religion was useful for coping with “a husband’s prostate cancer”, “the illness and death of a spouse”, “the death of parents”, and “a marital crisis.”

Finally, a third theme consisted of idealistic reasons reflecting the sentiment that religion was necessary for dealing with worrisome global and societal issues. These responses mentioned the feeling that “the spiritual dimension is sorely lacking in society”, concern over the “moral decay of the USA” and the sense that the “world is increasingly more dangerous.” The virtue of religion as an ideal was expressed by one respondent who wrote that religion allowed him to “be able to see the world as it should be, not as it is.”

## **Predictors of Religious Change**

Next, we build an empirical model to predict religious change, testing the contribution of cognitive and behavioral religiosity, religious practice in childhood, and life transitions and challenges. We conceptually and empirically distinguish between cognitive and behavioral aspects of religiosity, corresponding to private and public manifestations of religious life. This distinction also differentiates between religion as a source of personal meaning and beliefs, and religion as a social institution with attendant practices and normative behaviors. Because these domains may relate differently to religious change, we treat them independently after ascertaining their measurement properties.

The cognitive dimension describes religious identity, beliefs, and private devotion, measured with the following survey questions (anchor response categories and their numerical coding shown in parentheses):

- *Regardless of whether you attend religious services, do you consider yourself to be religious? (Coded 1-4, with 1= not at all religious and 4=very religious)*
- *Religion is the most important influence in my life. (Coded 1-4, with 1=strongly disagree and 4=strongly agree)*
- *How often do you pray privately in places other than religious services? (Coded 1-4, with 1=never and 4=several times a day)*
- *Regardless of whether you are religious, do you consider yourself to be: not at all spiritual ? (Coded 1-4, with 1=not at all spiritual to 4=very spiritual)*



- *How much do you believe in God? (Coded 1-4 with 1= believes with certainty and 4=does not believe or atheist)*

The behavioral dimension of religiosity included religious practice and participation, as measured with the following survey questions (anchor response categories and coding shown in parentheses):

- *How often do you attend religious services these days? (Coded 1-6, with 1=never and 6=more than once per week)*
- *Besides attending religious services, how often do you take part in other activities at a religious congregation, such as committee work, and social activities? (Coded 1-6, with 1=never and 6=more than once a week)*
- *In the last year, have you done volunteer work for a religious organization? (Coded 1 or 6, with 1=no and 6=yes)*

Exposure to religion in childhood was measured by the following item:

- *When you were a young child, how often did you attend religious services? (Coded 1-5, with 1=never and 5=very often).*

Of particular interest were life transitions and challenges that may have precipitated a change in religiosity. These included loss of partner (divorced or widowed), retirement, experiencing an economic decline, and poor self-rated health. In terms of their prevalence, 11% lost a partner, 46% retired,

31% experienced an economic decline, and 19% evaluated their health as fair or poor. In predictive models, we controlled for age (mean = 64.1 years), gender (57% female), and education (82% college graduates).

### **Analytic Model**

We first examine bivariate associations between religious change and contemporary and early religious involvement, as shown in Table 1. The trends indicate a monotonically increasing relationship between the strength of cognitive and behavioral religiosity and positive religious change. Across all contemporary religious indicators, those who expressed stronger religiosity were most likely to have become more religious and least likely to become less religious, with the probability of being in “stay the same” category somewhere in the middle. For childhood religious participation, the results showed a more nuanced pattern. Those who increased in their religiosity were more likely to have attended religious services weekly compared to than those who remained the same or decreased (69% vs. 65% and 2%, respectively); however, those who increased and stayed the same were more likely to have had childhoods with no service attendance (14% and 18%, respectively) compare to those who declined (7%). Perhaps this is not surprising, as those with the no religious experience would find it difficult to become even less religiously involved over their lifetimes.

In order to assess the dimensionality of the eight contemporary religiosity items, we used exploratory

**Table 1. Distribution of religion variables by change in religiosity over ten years.**

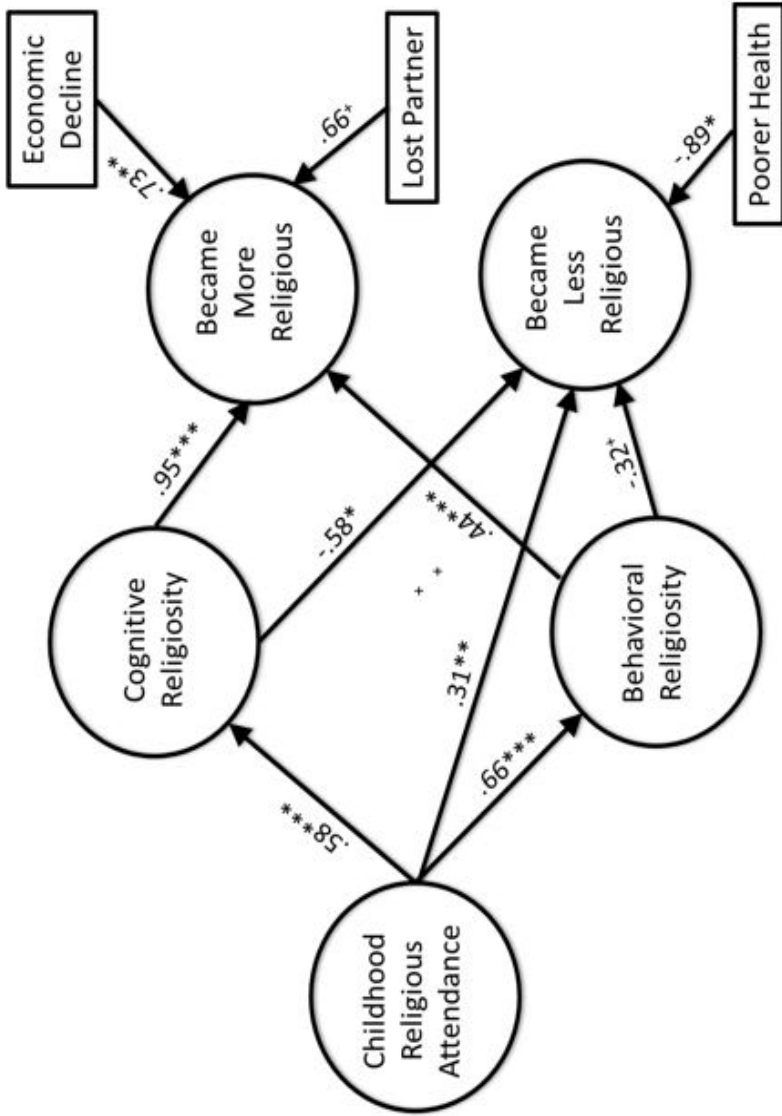
<b>Change In Religiosity</b>	<b>Religious decline</b>		<b>Stayed same</b>		<b>Religious Increase</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Religious intensity</b>								
Weak	69	85.2	215	57.3	29	20.6	313	52.4
Strong	12	14.8	160	42.7	112	79.4	284	47.6
<b>Religious importance</b>								
Low	70	87.5	252	67.6	36	26.1	358	60.6
High	10	12.5	121	32.4	102	73.9	233	39.4
<b>Private prayer</b>								
Never	25	30.5	91	24.5	2	1.4	118	19.9
Less than weekly	42	51.2	145	39.0	27	19.3	214	36.0
Weekly or more	15	18.3	136	36.6	111	79.3	262	44.1
<b>Spiritual intensity</b>								
Weak	48	59.3	21	37.1	21	14.9	208	34.8
Strong	33	40.7	120	62.9	120	85.1	389	65.2
<b>Belief in God</b>								
Does not believe	26	31.7	66	17.6	4	2.8	96	16.1
Weak belief	33	40.2	81	21.6	12	8.5	126	21.1
Strong belief	23	28.0	228	60.8	125	88.7	376	62.9
<b>Service attendance</b>								
Never	45	54.9	163	43.6	16	11.3	224	37.5
Less than weekly	35	42.7	124	33.2	39	27.7	198	33.2
Weekly or more	2	2.4	87	23.3	86	61.0	175	29.3
<b>Congregational activities</b>								
Never	59	72.0	222	59.2	34	24.1	315	52.7
Less than weekly	18	22.0	101	26.9	42	29.8	161	26.9
Weekly or more	5	6.1	52	13.9	65	46.1	122	20.4
<b>Religious volunteer</b>								
No	75	91.5	308	82.1	72	51.1	455	76.1
Yes	7	8.5	67	17.9	69	48.9	143	23.9
<b>Childhood attendance</b>								
No religious background	6	7.3	69	18.4	20	14.2	95	15.9
Less than weekly	14	17.1	62	16.6	24	17.0	100	16.8
Weekly or more	62	75.6	243	65.0	97	68.8	402	67.3

factor analysis with oblique rotation. A two-dimensional structure provided the best solution verifying the cognitive and behavioral groupings shown above. Religious change was assessed as a three-category outcome, contrasting increasing religiosity and declining religiosity with no change in religiosity as the reference category. Theoretically relevant variables related to potentially disruptive transitions (loss of partner, retirement, economic decline, and poor health) were entered as predictors, as were control variables (gender, education, and age).

Statistically significant estimates from the causal model that links the constructs of interest are shown graphically in Figure 3. There are positive effects of childhood religious attendance on the strength of contemporary cognitive and behavioral religiosity, but no effect of early exposure on increasing religiosity. However, there is an effect on declining religiosity; those with more exposure in childhood were more likely than those with less exposure to report a decline in their religiosity over the last ten years.

Turning to the effects of contemporary religiosity, we see that cognitive and behavioral aspects of religiosity were positively associated with religious increase and negatively associated with religious decline. That is, strong religiosity of both types was more likely to be reached by increasing religiosity and less likely to be reached by decreasing religiosity, as contrasted with religious stability during this period.

Figure 3: Structural Effects from GSEM



Examining the indirect effects of childhood religious attendance, we see that greater religious exposure early in life heightened the risk that religiosity increased over the ten-year period by strengthening cognitive and behavioral religiosity. Similarly, greater early exposure lowered the risk of declining religiosity by strengthening both types of religiosity.

The effects of life course transitions on religious change revealed that those individuals who experienced an economic decline in the last ten years were more likely than those who did not experience such a decline to become more religious, as contrasted with the religiously stable. In addition, losing a partner was associated with increased religiosity over the period. Individuals in poorer health were less likely to decline in their religiosity—and more likely to be religiously stable—than those in better health.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, we examined perceived change in religiosity in a sample of Baby-Boomers over which time they transitioned from late-middle age to early old age. In general, we found that religiosity is characterized more by stability than by change; however, an important segment of the sample—about one in five—religiously increased during that period.

Relatively few individuals ascribed their motivation to practical matters of time availability and engagement in religious activities, contradicting our speculation that free

time might be a driving force behind increased religiosity. Instead, common reasons included a newfound affinity for spiritual matters, gaining insight into the fleeting nature of life, personal growth and development, insuring religious continuity in descending generations, and providing a resource for coping with family loss and crises. Many of the reasons cited for increased religiosity revolved around private and family concerns rather than benefits deriving from public participation in religious organizations. For many, religion provides a coherent schema for comprehending the inevitability of loss and the finitude of life.

In the structural equation model, predictors of religious change mostly complemented descriptive findings. In both sets of analyses, disruptive events were associated with strengthening or preserving religious engagement, suggesting a compensatory or salutary role of religion in dealing with social, financial, and health loss in the transition to later life.

Increased economic stress and loss of a partner present challenges for which religion may provide solace and social outlets that help individuals cope with the challenges imposed by such negative events. We note that retirement was statistically significant without economic decline included in the model, suggesting that, economic strain induced by retirement serves a viable explanation for increased religiosity. To the extent that the economic crisis of the last decade led to premature or unwanted retirement, this interpretation seems reasonable. The Great Recession of the last decade lowered standards of living for many middle-aged individuals and their families, possibly leading them to rely on

informal community resources of which religion represents a key institutional domain.

Notably, both cognitive and behavioral aspects of religiosity independently predicted the two types of religious changes, suggesting several routes by which religious increase is achieved and religious decline is avoided. Religious attendance in childhood did not predict increased religiosity but positively predicted the two forms of contemporary religiosity; this pattern of findings suggests that the influence of early exposure to religion lies in structuring contemporary religiosity but not in producing a boomerang back to the religious practice of childhood. Those with greater early exposure were more likely to experience religious decline, implying moderation of religious commitment in the transition that may be associated with leaving orthodox denominations of childhood.

Several limitations of this research deserve mention. First, religious change and early religious exposure were measured retrospectively, thereby introducing elements of memory bias as well as unknown sources of systematic variance into the data. Retrospective assessments may imperfectly map onto objective changes in religiosity, and individuals may differ in their interpretation as to what constitutes religious involvement and change. Although the LSOG dataset provides an opportunity to examine pre-post change in several elements of religiosity, it was not until the 2016 survey that a module of detailed questions on religion were added to the survey.



Second, the sample of Baby-Boomers in our analysis were descendants of grandparents who originally derived from Southern California. These descendants were not geographically restricted; nevertheless, they were disproportionately living in California. Thus, we urge caution in generalizing our results to the national level.

Third, the sample was disproportionately white and non-Hispanic, resulting in more muted religious involvement than would have been found among older African Americans (Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994) and Hispanics (Stevens-Arroyo & Diaz-Stevens, 1998) who historically tend to have deep life-long connections to their respective dominant faith communities. It is also noteworthy that the sample is highly educated, which also might have lowered religious involvement. Future research will explore the role of denomination in accounting for religious change and stability in later life.

Finally, the question of whether non-religious activities and beliefs provide benefits equal to those provided by religious involvement is a relevant one. Secular individuals facing losses of the types studied may find alternative belief systems and supportive communities to help them cope with the vicissitudes of aging.

We end by addressing the question raised on our title: Is there a “return to religion” among Baby-Boomers as they pass the

threshold into old age? The answer is yes and no. Religiosity is more likely to be stable than to change, but a significant minority report an increase in their religious commitment during this transitional period. Given that religion is salient for many older adults, we suggest that religious institutions play a more important role in sponsoring programs that engage congregants in activities that promote health and encourage health maintenance - especially in communities where those institutions are strong. Policies that capitalize on the infrastructure, trust, and good will of existing religious organizations will go far toward serving more marginalized older individuals, including those prone to social isolation.

Our research shows that Baby-Boomers gravitating toward religion are characterized by their growing interest in spiritual matters and their need to cope with challenges caused by social, health, and economic losses. These are issues that will magnify as Boomers advance to later stages of the life course when the salience of religion intensifies and the seeds of religious experiences planted earlier in the life course come to fruition. This may be the last generation to have had such widespread exposure to religion in childhood and to have been such active religious consumers in their earlier lives—providing another example of how Baby-Boomers are a transitional cohort, even now in their later years.

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