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# Belief, Not Religion: Youth Negotiations of Religious Identity in Canada

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## Abstract

The role of religious beliefs and practices among youth has been an increasing area of research in the last decade. Youth is generally seen as a time of exploring religious identity and beginning to make one's own decisions in relation to religious practices. Further, some issues specific to youth and religion arise such as questions about whether youth have sufficient maturity to make medical decisions for religious reasons, or how religion is or is not integrated into schooling. This chapter will explore some of the recent trends regarding North American youth religion, providing a picture of the state of the field as well as complicating perceptions of youth religion by including data from the Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada project.

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As individuals appropriate and construct their own religiosities, youth's reflections on varied forms of religion become astonishing in their breadth. Religion is not singular or monolithic, and yet public debate and representation often essentialize religious identities. Scholars have also become increasingly interested in the religiosity of young people and the ways in which young people negotiate their religious identities in relation to media portrayals and education debates. This scholarly interest has been mirrored by interest in the development of policies related to religion, gender, sexuality, and youth in Canada. This chapter will integrate youth voices regarding the negotiation of their religious identities and will reference these identity reflections in relation to representation of religious interests regarding the sex education and controversy witnessed in Ontario.

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## Introduction

The role of religious beliefs and practices among youth has been an increasing area of research in the last decade. Youth is generally seen as a time of exploring religious identity and beginning to make one's own decisions in relation to religious practices. Further, some issues specific to youth and religion arise such as questions about whether youth have sufficient maturity to make medical decisions for religious reasons, or how religion is or is not integrated into schooling. This chapter will explore some of the recent trends regarding North American youth religion, providing a brief picture of the state of the field as well as nuancing perceptions of youth religion by including data from the Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada (RGSY) project.

Religion is not singular or monolithic, and yet public debate and representation often essentialize religious identities. Youth religion is every bit as varied and complex as adult religion, but sometimes youth appropriate religion in ways different from their adult counterparts. Scholars have also become increasingly interested in the religiosity of young people and the ways in which young people negotiate their religious identities in relation to media portrayals and education debates. This scholarly interest has been mirrored by interest in the development of policies related to religion and youth in Canada and, such policy interests also often include gender and sexuality as well because youth is a time of developing sexual and gender identity. This chapter will highlight youth voices regarding the negotiation of their religious identities and will reference these identity reflections in relation to the representation of religious interests regarding the sex education curriculum and controversy witnessed (and still debated) in Ontario.

This chapter will present a brief overview of some of the recent studies that have been done on youth and religion in North America, including a focus on recent research conducted from the Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada project. The ongoing Canadian project demonstrates what has been learned about youth religiosity, in particular around religious identity negotiation, translating religious teachings into values and practices and understanding what

religion means to the survey respondents. By way of illustration, the chapter will incorporate an analysis of a recent debate in Ontario regarding a proposed sex education curriculum, where religious identity and assumptions about the role of religion in “policing” youth and youth sexuality were narrowly constructed and repeatedly referred to within the media coverage of the debate. The RGSY data directly challenge the restrictive assumptions that are at play in these public debates regarding religious identity and youth.

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## Religion and Youth: An Overview

One of the issues in the study of religion and youth concerns the ages of those who are being studied. Teenage/high school religiosity is quite different from the religion/spirituality of those in the 18–25-year age range. Using data on 12–18-year-olds from the National Survey of Youth and Religion (in the United States), Christian Smith and Denton (2005) discovered that most teenagers follow the religiosity of their parents and practice that religion in a way that reflects their parents’ practices. They are not drawn to the idea of being “spiritual but not religious” (260). Parents are the prime influence on teenage religiousness. Further, these teenagers had not really concerned themselves with constructing their own religious identities. The work of Mark Regnerus (2007) also confirms that American adolescents are not really religious experimenters. Regnerus found that although most teenagers take on the religion of their parents, they do not, generally speaking, really have strong feelings about religion.

In contrast, when Cherry et al. (2001) studied religion on four American university campuses, students were much more likely to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and to be much more critical of organized religion, even while many continued to participate in organized religious activities. These students often viewed themselves as on a quest for a spirituality appropriate to themselves and did not simply accept that religion was something given to them. Rather, their religiosity or spirituality was composite and self-assembled, not monolithic and singular, what Cherry et al. call “bricolating” (276). Further, the students in this study saw their spirituality/religiosity strongly linked to acts of service in the world. In general, the students found themselves free to be religious or not, generally as a matter of personal choice, although heavily influenced by their own backgrounds. And they also understood that their way of being religious was not the only possible religious path.

Likewise, Donna Freitas (2008) discovered that, with the exception of the students she interviewed from evangelical Christian colleges, students much more strongly identified with the label “spiritual” than with the label “religious.” She found that while their sense of what “spiritual” meant was often vague and not fully developed, students were searching for meaning and a sense of relating to something beyond themselves, sometimes seen as divine. Religion, especially organized religion, was much less a factor in directing the lives and identities of university students than Freitas imagined when she began her study.

In nonreligiously affiliated universities “[t]he dominant feelings toward organized religion were anger and apathy” (Freitas 2008, 36).

Peter Beyer’s research (Beyer and Ramji 2013) research has found that the ways in which Canadian-raised children from post-1970s immigrant families experience and understand their religious identities are part of a changing demographic of religious affiliation across Canada. Beyer’s research demonstrates that almost all second-generation young adults take personal responsibility for their religion and express a desire to understand the reasons for their beliefs and practices; they are engaged in the process of being religious. Youth demonstrate personal choice and expression in adapting their parents’ religious teachings and practices within Canadian society and reflect on their experiences as second-generation immigrants and Canadians within a multicultural society.

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## **Religion, Gender, and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada (RGSY)**

This section will present results from the Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth in Canada (RGSY), an ongoing research project consisting of three parts. The first is a Web-based survey open to all youth between the ages of 18–25 living in Canada. This survey went live on SurveyMonkey in July 2012 and closed July 2013. In the fall of 2013, interviews began with a selection of the survey respondents and a still smaller selection was asked to complete video diaries.

The survey closed with over 500 responses in total, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the results from the 484 English language responses.

This project was inspired by Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip et al.’s UK project, *Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-Faith Exploration* (2009–2011) which was funded by the *Religion and Society Programme* (2007–2013). The Canadian project was developed in collaboration with the UK team, stemming from a shared interest in conducting a unique survey of religion, Religion, Gender and Sexuality Among Youth. The goals of the RGSY project include developing a framework for connecting everyday religion and everyday sexuality, through an exploration of the intersections of lived religion in the experiences of youth in Canada. The project works toward fleshing out the categories of religion and sexuality, linking them with youth identity and practices, and builds on scholarship such as that done by Meredith McGuire (2008), Jeffrey Weeks (2011), Janet Jakobsen, and Ann Pellegrini (2003), among others.

The RGSY project has four primary aims:

- To explore the constructions and management strategies undertaken by young adults (aged 18–25) concerning their religious and sexual identities, values, and choices
- To examine the significant social, cultural, and political factors that inform the abovementioned processes
- To study how these young adults manage their religious, sexual, and gender identities

- To generate rich qualitative and quantitative data that will contribute new knowledge to academic and policy debates on religion, youth, sexuality, and gender

Because the Canadian and UK context differs, there were some modifications to the targeted demographic for the Canadian research. Whereas the *Religion, Youth and Sexuality* study was aimed at youth from six specific religious groups (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism), the RGSY project is aimed more broadly at the whole youth population of Canada. This includes youth who might not consider themselves religious, but who wanted to express their thoughts and experiences on the intersections of religion, gender, and sexuality.

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## Youth Religious Identification in RGSY

Survey respondents define themselves religiously as follows:

- Buddhism 1.9 % ( $n = 8$ )
- Christianity 61.2 % ( $n = 252$ )
- Hinduism 1 % ( $n = 4$ )
- Islam 4.4 % ( $n = 18$ )
- Judaism 3.4 % ( $n = 14$ )
- Nonreligious 20.1 % ( $n = 83$ )
- Sikhism 0.2 % ( $n = 1$ )
- Spiritual but not religious 14.1 % ( $n = 58$ )
- Others 9.2 % (includes theist, agnostic, Wiccan, a combination of religions, etc.) ( $n = 38$ )
- (41.5 % state they are involved in their religious community)

Christianity is the clearly chosen majority among youth in this survey; however the increasing “others” categories (spiritual but not religious, nonreligious, and others) combine to create the second largest grouping of related religious identification (the three together total 43.4 %). Respondents to the pilot survey indicated that the survey did not include enough nuance in the religion categories. Many of those respondents commented that they did not identify with an organized religious group, hence the addition of “nonreligious” and “spiritual but not religious” as categories to the final survey.

65.6 % of survey respondents identify as somewhat to very liberal, while 16.5 % identify as being somewhat to very conservative (17.8 % identify as in the middle of the scale). This is to be expected, given the topic of the survey and the self-chosen nature of participation. In terms of regular religious practice, 1.7 % engage in public religious gatherings on a daily basis, while 22.2 % never engage in public religious gatherings. However, when asked about private religious practice, 28.1 % engage in private religious practice on a daily basis (though 32 % never engage in private

religious practice). That many participants engage in private daily religious practice, however they understand that, seems to indicate a sense of religious identity grounded in the personal sphere even though they may not be engaging in traditional institutional practice.

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## Religiosity and Youth in Canada

As indicated in the data outlined above, survey respondents present their religious identity, and indeed religiosity, in many ways as a fluid and nuanced aspect of their identity. When asked about the most important aspects of living as a person of “your” religious affiliation, there were some fairly common responses. For theists, God and a relationship to God through faith and prayer figured prominently. For Christians, following Jesus was very important. Respondents across the religious/spiritual spectrum list a number of attributes or virtues for which they sought and saw religious support: love, kindness, compassion, honesty, and patience. Many respondents also wrote about accepting themselves and others and used such words as equality, open-mindedness, and being nonjudgmental. Another common response highlighted work for justice and social action as religiously important.

Most respondents (64.1 %;  $n = 410$ ) had a religious upbringing of some sort, and 56.3 % ( $n = 410$ ) of respondents remained in the religious tradition of their parents. Whatever the tradition, 58 % ( $n = 410$ ) of respondents made their own active decisions about what religious/spiritual path to follow. 46.2 % of respondents indicated that religion is a force for good (26.2 % unsure, 25.1 % indicated it was not, and 2.4 % answered n/a;  $n = 411$ ). Over 50 % of respondents (56.7 %) did not think their religion is the only true religion (20.2 % did think their religion is the only true religion, 6.8 % uncertain, and 16.3 % answered n/a to this question;  $n = 411$ ). Here, clearly, respondents were open to the possibility that their chosen religious path is not the only salutary religious path. When asked if they made decisions with their religion in mind, the responses were quite varied; for some religion was crucial and for others, not a factor at all (43.3 % of respondents made decisions with religion in mind; 11.4 % were uncertain; 33.6 % did not use religion as a guide to decision-making, and 11.7 % answered n/a to this question;  $n = 411$ ).

Many respondents (46.9 %;  $n = 322$ ) think that religious people are stigmatized in Canada, and respondents made a wide range of comments about how religion is negatively stereotyped in Canada. Often these comments reference media and/or schooling as places where it was difficult to admit one’s religiosity.

As noted above, 20.1 % of respondents are “nonreligious,” 14.1 % “spiritual but not religious,” and an additional 9.2 % in the “others” category, some of these others being “atheist,” “agnostic,” or some similar answer, while others named a religious tradition such as Wiccan or indigenous religion. Thus, there is a large contingent of respondents who do not self-identify in a conventionally religious category, but who still are interested enough in religion to respond to a survey about the topic. The category “no religion” is a growing category in Canada as evidenced

by the recent release of data from the 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada 2013) where 23.9 % of Canadians name themselves as of “no religion.”

A number of those who indicated they were “spiritual but not religious” spoke of mindfulness or meditation as part of their spiritual practice. One respondent talked about the “energy that surrounds us” and connects us all and responses that talked about appreciation of and care for the earth were common. Also commonly cited as important were such traits as honesty, compassion, and respectfulness to others.

The final question on the survey was open-ended: What does your religion mean to you? Responses ran the gamut of my religion means “everything” to my religion means “nothing.” Although, of course, not all respondents answered the question (there were 262 responses), most of those who did found their chosen religious path to be meaningful and useful. Some of the answers to this question were in traditional religious language, referencing a relationship with Jesus or God or following the five pillars of Islam. Most, however, were more generalized – that religion provided a sense of identity, community, or cultural history, or that it shaped their ideas and values, or it provided the impetus for their attitude to the world (e.g., love). Almost all responded to this question thoughtfully and in detail.

Here are four representative responses:

I am a follower of Jesus and this is the most important aspect of my life, around which everything is defined.

Religion for me is very important, but as I read once before, I would rather be friends with people who act “Godly” than people who just pray to God. I think that my faith is more important to me than my religion.

Religion is not a particularly powerful force in my life. I feel it was a gateway to access a spiritual side of myself I previously did not experience. I feel this was very valuable, but I find a greater sense of power and connection by not engaging directly with my “religion.” I feel religion is restrictive and often damaging, to both individuals and societies, but its ability to gather people and establish communities of support is extremely powerful. It is the fact that most religions are based on the fact that only that religion is the correct thing to believe that is the problem, when really people should be forming their own beliefs, based on their experience and the experiences of those around them.

I see religion as extremely interesting. It is very relevant for navigating the history and structure of culture (religious AND secular). There is much about the “religion” that I grew up with that I find deeply troubling, as a force of negativity and violence. However, I am not ready to abandon religion, because in examining and reflecting on it I can learn much about how people have nurtured conflict (with each other and the environment etc.), as well as explore ways to incorporate or seek the spiritual realm. I believe that the culture I live in, even where it connects with religion, is highly imbalanced in respecting the spiritual as well as the rational. While I do not adhere to particular institutionalized form or religion at present, I loosely hold to the tradition that I was raised in (Christianity), challenging aspects that I believe to be negative (hateful), and incorporating concepts and practices from other traditions that I feel a positive spiritual.

Except for the most traditional responses where there was no perceived difference between the response and what might be seen as a tradition's conventional way of talking about itself, the respondents generally used this space to grapple with how they had adapted their religious or spiritual ideas to suit their current lives.

While many respondents describe a very personal relationship with their religious beliefs, with their deities, and with their practice, a number of very interesting responses stem from the nonreligious or SBNR survey respondents:

Anyone has the right to believe whatever they will. I expect nothing of people other than to respect my lack of belief in the supernatural, including gods, ghosts, psychics, and other products of faith-based thought.

Being atheist is an important part of my identity. I adhere strongly to the belief that there is no higher being/power.

Nothing really. I just take the philosophical aspect to it, and leave the myth at the door.

I don't really have a religion, but my personal beliefs mean a lot to me.

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## **The Portrayal of Religion in Media: An Example from Ontario**

In April 2010, a new sex education curriculum for the province of Ontario was announced. This curriculum was the result of broad consultation with stakeholder groups and had received the support of then Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty. Within 3 days of the initial approval by McGuinty (CBC 2010a), however, the new curriculum was put on hold. McGuinty, reversing his initial position, stated that Ontario is a diverse province and that this provincial diversity (represented by parents) needed to be considered before implementing a new curriculum (CBC News 2010b). In the days between McGuinty's original support and then postponement, a media whirlwind occurred regarding the content of the curriculum, the opposition to the curriculum, and (still debated 3 years later) what is or is not suitable to teach within a sex education curriculum pre-high school. High school in Canada begins roughly around age 14, most of the concern about the new sex education curriculum was about what was being introduced for students under that age.

The media coverage of the debate about the sex education curriculum repeatedly referenced that the opposition was stemming from religious groups, including, specifically, opposition to modifications that were proposed regarding the teachings on "invisible differences" in grade 3 which included teaching on gender identity and sexual orientation as examples of invisible differences (CBC News 2010c; McParland 2010; Hammer and Howlett 2010a, b). What was not made clear in the coverage, however, was that the groups the media cited regularly or referred to as opponents in fact consisted of a relatively small group of religious individuals and organizations, some of whom previously had joined together to oppose other policies, such as same-sex marriage legislation (Rayside 2010).



The headlines and media coverage portrayed this small group as “representative” of diverse religious identities across the province, which further led to a largely mistaken assumption that they represented a multiculturally diverse group (CBC News 2010c). Although the coverage does not name culturally or religiously “diverse” groups, in Canada, where multicultural policy, experiences, and debates about the accommodation of minorities has become a core topic of controversy, there is an assumption that such objections would be, in part, made by culturally diverse groups (Ryan 2010; Ibbitson 2011). When some parents interviewed by CBC reporters were quoted as saying they were disappointed that McGuinty had “bowed” to the pressure, the result was seen in responses such as the one following by Sherri-Anne Medema: “It goes beyond religious beliefs. It goes beyond what culture the people are from, and [McGuinty] should stick to his guns and say, ‘OK, we’re going to continue on’” (CBC News 2010c).

A media study conducted in the aftermath of the 3 days of controversy demonstrates that the coverage of the debates narrowly focuses on a few religious groups in Ontario (Shipley 2014). Overwhelmingly in national and regional coverage, media cited Charles McVety of Canada Christian College (a small evangelical college located in Toronto, Ontario, founded in the 1950s) as the dominant voice of opposition to the new curriculum (50 % of articles reference McVety). Although McGuinty states that the “diversity” of the province needs to be considered, and while some media outlets broadly stated that “religious groups” were opposed (CBC News 2010c; McParland 2010; Hammer and Howlett 2010b, c), the coverage of the opposition during those few days does not represent a spectrum of religious diversity, but rather, concentrates on certain conservative Christian objections. McVety is cited as challenging the curriculum twice as often as the official opposition, the Progressive Conservative party led by Tim Hudak. And McVety’s statements (specifically about the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in grade 3, but additionally about the inclusion of sexual acts at later ages) range from misleading to inflammatory; he was rebuked in 2010 by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council for making false claims about gays and lesbians (Regg Cohn 2013).

All education curricula are subject to review on a 2-year cycle; however the Ontario sex education curriculum has not been updated since 1998 and is currently the oldest sex education curriculum nationwide. And although Kathleen Wynne, the current premier of Ontario, said in January 2013 she would reintroduce the sex education curriculum (Babbage 2013), amidst a fair amount of urging from the executive director of the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association, as of June 2013 nothing has yet changed regarding the modified curriculum. An online poll by the Environics Research Group (2013) saw 93 % of parents surveyed as supporting the updated curriculum.

This particular example demonstrates a number of the problematic assumptions the RGSY project aims at dispelling. It is clear from the respondents that religious and sexual identities are negotiated in complex and nuanced ways and that youth’s understanding and expression of these identities is informed from multiple sources, including parents, friends, the Internet, and so on. Youth opinions about sexuality

cannot be simply inferred from the religious group to which an individual belongs, nor do youth hold uncritically the “official” opinion of those religious groups about sexuality. When “religion” is represented narrowly, as demonstrated by the coverage of the sex education curriculum, media repeat and reaffirm inaccuracies about religious identity and also foster the notion that religion and sexual diversity are inherently in conflict. This notion is demonstrated, through RGSY data and other research on the subject, not to be true. Joyce Smith (2008) reflects on the way journalists cover religion, positing that journalists continue to cover religion in narrow ways for a variety of reasons: it is how they have historically covered religion, these are the religious representatives willing to be quoted, etc. Although there might be a set pattern to the way religion has historically been covered, it is possible to break that cycle in contemporary coverage. However, finding a multiplicity of religious voices on any given subject is not so easy. Mark Jordan (2009) has argued that it is time for affirming and welcoming religious groups and people to make their voices heard; this could offer one space for a multidimensional picture of religiosity.

On June 10, 2013, Ontario Today (a CBC call-in show) Petty (2013) hosted a discussion about the sex education curriculum in Ontario, prefaced by announcing the 10-year anniversary of the first same-sex marriage in Ontario. The responses of the callers overwhelmingly criticized the government’s inability to implement a new curriculum, stating that youth needed to learn about these subjects, and they preferred it to be in a classroom setting. Although this is anecdotal, it mirrors the numbers coming out of the Environics poll (2013) on the same subject. If this is the popular opinion expressed by parents in the province, whose voices are the government responding to when they say provincial diversity (represented by parents) was not considered in the original proposal?

The portrayal in this snapshot of the sex education curriculum debate of religion, religious identity, and religion’s role in “policing” youth and youth education is at odds with the experience of religious identity and identity negotiation among Canadian youth. And yet these essentialized representations of religion, particularly here regarding the role “religion” takes in directing the learning and conduct of youth, are uncritically repeated in public and media debate. By providing space for youth voices to represent their own religiosity and their religious experiences, in relation to other identity categories and in response to education and media, hopefully a more nuanced picture of religiosity and youth will emerge.

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## Conclusion and Future Directions

The two dominant religious choices in the RGSY survey were Christianity and some version of nonreligious. Even most of those youth who claimed Christianity engaged in a process of critical reflection where their own version of the tradition was updated to include their beliefs about and experience of contemporary sexuality. Religious identity is not generally drawn from religious authorities, but much more vaguely from a sense of what the tradition is, at heart, about.

While adults often seem to see sexuality as a stumbling block for religion, or vice versa, the youths who took part in the survey were much more able to let religion and sexuality be mutual influences on one another. These young people simply accept a variety of sexual and religious identities and, regardless of how they themselves choose to act religiously or sexually, they know there are others who make other choices, and they do not generally condemn those choices.

This survey has found that youth is a time of sexual and religious experimentation – not unthoughtful hormone-fuelled action, but thoughtful desire to live lives of integrity, to appropriate from religion what they find to be good and useful, and to set aside what they find to be outdated or unhelpful to their current lives.

The findings of the survey contrast sharply with the way that the sex education debate in Ontario took place. Youth voices were almost silent in the public debate. It seems apparent that if youth had been asked what they wanted, their responses would have been more measured than the alarmist responses that the media kept repeating.

As in the findings from other studies in North America, the youth in the RGSY study are not necessarily invested in the official positions of their self-identified religious tradition. Those who are members of religious groups see the possibility that religious traditions can and should change with the times. They hold strong positions about equality and justice and look to their religious groups to uphold those values, not to stand in their way in attaining them.

It is clear from the research conducted on youth religiosity in North America that there is a wide and dynamic field of youth understanding regarding their religious identity, their parents' religious identities, and the ways in which they integrate religiosity in their day-to-day life. Future directions for studying youth religion in North America would be to continue the development of multifaceted and multipronged research programs. There have been to date a limited number of studies on youth religion in North America, considering the size and breadth of the population. Many of the studies have had a narrow focus (limited sampling demographic) which has meant that the results provide an interesting, but narrow, picture. Examining religious identity across intersectional lines provides a more fleshed out picture of the ways religious identity interacts with other categories of identity for youth (be it ethnic, sexual, gendered, or cultural identities).

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Citizenship: Inclusion and Exclusion](#)
- ▶ [Critical Moments? The Importance of Timing in Young People's Narratives of Transition](#)
- ▶ [Current Debates in Social Justice and Youth Studies](#)
- ▶ [Participating as Young Citizens in Diverse Communities](#)
- ▶ [Spirituality, Religion, and Youth: An Introduction](#)

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