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Religion in the lives of today's youth

Spiritual beliefs and practices among youth are important to monitor, since research from developmental science, sociology, and character education has found they are positively related to identity and moral development; purpose and goal attainment; educational achievement and attainment; emotion and attention regulation; positive physical and mental health; life satisfaction and happiness; conflict resolution and social skills; prosocial behaviors, and a successful transition to adulthood.

Spirituality can be experienced and expressed in diverse ways, including being or becoming aware of the sacredness of one's soul, a connection to a unity of life that transcends oneself, and to a divine Creator and/or beings in a spiritual realm such as angels, ancestral spirits or guides. To date, population-level surveys of these spiritual dimensions have been limited, focusing on, for example, belief in God. Thus, our understanding of the diversity of spirituality and spiritual development is limited. Emerging theory-driven frameworks of spiritual development promise, with time, to expand and refine understanding of spirituality as a multi-faceted dimension of human experience.¹ Religiosity is often seen as overlapping with some aspects of spirituality, such as belief in divinity², but also generally involves following the specific practices of, attending services of, or identifying with the beliefs of a specific religion or religious community.

The data show three general patterns of spirituality and religiosity that reflect the influence of different religious, economic, and cultural heritages in these countries :

- High spirituality and religiosity. In some countries, 75 percent or more of young adults believe in God and find both God and religion to be important in their lives. In Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, and Iran, for example, nearly all young adults said they

believe in God. Three-fourths or more of young adults reported that God is important and that religion is important in their lives. Many of these countries have a history of an influential dominant religion (e.g., Islam) and a developing economy.

- High belief in God, moderate importance of God and religion in life. High proportions of young adults in other countries also report a belief in God. However, God and religion are only moderately important in their lives. In Poland, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, the US, and Canada, for instance, more than 80 percent of young adults said they believe in God. But, while 18 percent (Italy) to 87 percent (Brazil) reported that God is important in their lives, just 18 percent (Italy) to 59 percent (Brazil) said religion is important. These countries represent a mix of traditional faiths and other religions, as well as more developed economies.

- Moderate belief in God, low importance of God and religion in life. In still other countries, only moderate proportions of young adults believe in God, and the importance of God and religion in their lives is quite low. Examples of these countries are Taiwan, Russia, Spain, Great Britain, France, and Sweden. In these countries, 40-73 percent of young adults reported a belief in God, but neither God nor religion was important to more than about 10 percent. Like the countries described immediately above, this group of countries includes both dominant religious traditions and other religions, as well as more developed economies. Some are located in Europe and have a history of a secular social welfare system (e.g., Sweden, Russia).

The survey was given in 1999 to nationally representative samples totaling 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries, most of them in Europe, with a few in South America and the Asia/Pacific region, as well as the United States. Part of the survey asked youth about their participation in civic activities, including “an organization sponsored by a religious group”.

- Only a minority of 14-year-olds participate in religious organizations across the world.
- The highest participation rates are in the United States (42 percent) and Cyprus (47 percent).

- The lowest participation rates (less than 19 percent) are in Northern, Western, and Eastern Europe, especially the latter, except for Germany (20 percent) and Slovenia (30 percent).
- Intermediate participation rates (19-30 percent) are found in Southern Europe (except Cyprus), South America, and the Asia/Pacific region.

Young Europeans show low religious involvement but moderate adherence to beliefs. Forty-three percent of young Europeans said they have spiritual and religious beliefs but do not practice a religion. Such nonpracticing believers were more common than practicing believers in all countries except Ireland, ranging from 26 percent in the Netherlands to 56 percent in Spain. The second highest category was practicing believer, chosen by 19 percent of EU youth.

Nonpracticing belief in young Europeans is linked to age. Older youth (20-24 years) were more likely to be nonpracticing believers, whereas younger youth (15-19 years) were more likely to be practicing nonbelievers (European Commission, 1997).

More recent data on European countries are available from the Religion Monitor survey, conducted in 2007 by the Bertelsmann Foundation among 21,000 persons in 21 countries. The Religion Monitor found that 71 percent of European young adults (age 18-29) reported believing in God or something divine (41 percent strongly, 30 percent somewhat). Although 72 percent of young adults reported being religious, only 18 percent said they were “highly” religious whereas more than half (54 percent) said they were “somewhat” religious.³ While comparisons across time cannot be made given the different surveys and samples in each study, the Religion Monitor reports levels of spirituality and religiosity that are higher than those found on average for European countries in the World Values or the Young Europeans surveys.

This quick tour of data from around the world reveals several patterns of spirituality and religiosity among youth and young adults around the world. One is the relationship between a country’s level of economic development and the spirituality and religiosity of its population. As countries develop economically, there is less emphasis on dominant religious traditions and values and more emphasis placed on secular institutions, as well as educational and economic accomplishment, powered by the need

for trained workforces in industrialized societies.¹⁰

Another pattern is the clear imprint of religion on beliefs in countries with a history of an influential religious tradition, such as Islam or Catholicism, so that young adults from these countries score relatively high on questions of spirituality and religiosity. Likewise, there is an imprint of the secular traditions of communist, socialist, and welfare states, reflected in the low importance given to religion and God in countries of the former Soviet Union, where religion was suppressed for so long and atheism was espoused by the state and widely adopted by citizens, and in the Nordic welfare states. In addition, formerly Confucian societies (Japan, China) have a tradition of secular bureaucratic authority that is reflected in the low importance attached to God and religion in those countries.