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Timothy J. Wang
Texas Christian University

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The purpose of this article is to examine the role religious secondary schools play in the religious identity formation of adolescents. Although several research studies have found a correlation between enrollment in private religious schools and adolescents' religious identity formation, the researchers of these studies have only speculated about which specific characteristics of religious schools are responsible for this formation in the lives of adolescents. Through a review of the literature, the present article identifies several characteristics of religious secondary schools that may contribute to the process of religious identity formation: a community of religious peers, the presence of religious adults, and an exposure to religious instruction. Implications for Christian secondary school practitioners are also discussed.

Religious Identity Formation Among Adolescents: The Role of Religious Secondary Schools

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Introduction

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you [saw] it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. (Lewis, 2001, pp. 45-46)

If C.S. Lewis's words are true, school teachers and administrators possess an incredible opportunity to

shape students' lives in a profound way. Every voice you hear in the hallway belongs to a student—a student with unique talents, interests, and quirks. Every face you see in the classroom or cafeteria represents a life—a life with the potential of reaching unprecedented heights, heartbreaking lows, or simply remaining in the middle ground of mediocrity.

The purpose of this article is to examine the role religious secondary schools play in the religious identity formation of adolescents. Religious identity formation is a term which may bring to mind a number of different mental images. For the purposes of this article, religious identity formation will be defined as the process in which an individual solidifies his or her worldview and manifests those convictions through participation in religious community and private aspects of faith. Uecker (2008) identified five factors specific to participation in religious community and private aspects of faith. Involvement in religious community consisted of religious service attendance, religious education class attendance, and youth group participation. Private aspects of faith included religious salience—the self-reported importance of religious faith in an individual's daily life—and the frequency of private religious activities such as personal prayer and scripture reading.

Although several research studies have found a correlation between enrollment in private religious schools and adolescents' religious identity formation, the researchers of these studies have only speculated about which specific characteristics of religious schools are responsible for this formation in the lives of adolescents. According to Uecker (2008), students in Protestant schools reported higher levels of private religious activity and religious salience than their public school peers. These findings suggest that there are aspects of Protestant schools which influence adolescents'

religious identity formation, but do not identify those school characteristics specifically. Similarly, students at Dutch Christian secondary schools indicated that those schools had a certain influence on their worldview (Bertram-Troost, de Roos, & Miedema, 2007). Once again, though, the researchers could only speculate at which specific aspects of religious schools were influential and called for further research to examine these issues more precisely. For example, future research should identify pupils' perceptions of what they have learned at school in regards to worldview. Compared to their public, Catholic, and non-religious school peers, Protestant Christian school graduates reported a higher frequency of religious service attendance, private prayer, and private Bible reading (Cardus, 2011). Compared to their public school counterparts, graduates of Christian schools reported a greater influence from their high school in the following areas: intellectually defending their beliefs, sharing their faith with others, and honestly examining their doubts and beliefs (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012). While these findings provide strong evidence that religious secondary schools do affect adolescents' religious identity formation, the specific influential features of those Protestant Christian schools are not identified.

Research on religious adolescents suggests several characteristics of religious secondary schools that may contribute to the process of religious identity formation. These features—a community of religious peers, the presence of religious adults, and an exposure to religious instruction—form the basis of this literature review.

A Community of Religious Peers

Many research studies suggest that a community of religious peers influences the religious identity formation of adolescents. When students are surrounded by such a community, religious identity formation is fostered. However, when adolescents are without this support, religious identity formation is hindered or weakened.

Chaudhury and Miller (2008) asserted that safe havens—places where adolescents feel comfortable expressing and developing their faith—are crucial to the religious identity formation of Bangladeshi American Muslim adolescents. Such havens may be Islamic student groups or religious organizations. For most of the adolescents interviewed, school was seen as an inhibitor to religious identity formation

due to the relatively small Muslim presence found in those communities. Since these schools lacked a community of religious peers, they hindered their Muslim students' religious identity formation. Similarly, Rymarz and Graham (2006) found that Australian core Catholic youth lacked peer support from other like-minded individuals at school. Not surprisingly, most of these adolescents also expressed that attending Sunday Mass was motivated merely by family (not personal commitment) and predicted a decline in their future church participation. Such findings imply that if a community of Catholic youth did exist in these schools, perhaps the religious identity formation of Australian core Catholic youth would be strengthened. Religious secondary schools, therefore, may contribute to adolescents' religious identity formation because they likely contain a higher proportion of religious peers than non-religious secondary schools. For instance, an Islamic secondary school probably has a greater percentage of Muslim students than a public school. Such a community of religious peers, these studies suggest, facilitates the process of an adolescent's religious identity formation.

Lee, Chang, and Miller (2006) studied Korean American youth groups within Christian churches. Youth groups in the religious majority of their community exhibited a greater sense of religious pride and confidence within the school setting compared to youth groups in the religious minority of their communities. Although this study does not address religious secondary schools directly, its findings do imply that a community of religious peers—a feature of religious secondary schools—is related to greater religious pride and confidence in school. Such pride and confidence has the potential to strengthen adolescents' religious identity formation. For example, a community of religious peers might be so bold as to pray publically at school on a regular basis; such a habit would likely increase their religious salience and participation in private prayer.

The Presence of Religious Adults

Like a community of religious peers, the presence of religious adults appears to contribute to adolescents' religious identity formation. The following research studies suggest that religious adults—whether parents, teachers, or school

directors—do influence the religious identity formation of adolescents.

Bertram-Troost, de Roos, and Miedema (2009) asserted that, for students at Dutch Christian secondary schools, teachers and school directors have the ability to create an atmosphere where peers respect one another. This atmosphere of mutual respect, they argue, strengthens students' certainty about their worldview. Perhaps students gain this increased confidence about their worldview because they feel safe, valued, and esteemed at school.

When asked how their schools could improve, both public and private high school graduates identified "the need for hiring and retaining inspiring teachers who model moral behavior daily" (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012, p. 77). While religious identity formation is not mentioned directly, it could be argued that such teacher-role models shape and solidify their students' worldview (e.g., the nature of morality), a key component of religious identity formation. Therefore, religious secondary schools may be incredibly influential in their students' religious identity formation if they employ these teacher-role models. Sikkink's (2012) analysis of the Cardus Education Study suggested that evangelical Protestant schools, in particular, do employ such teachers. When asked whether their teachers are dedicated to being spiritual role models for students, 88% of U.S. evangelical Protestant school administrators and 81% of Canadian evangelical Protestant school administrators strongly agreed.

In an interview study by Beckman, Drexler, and Eames (2012), many Christian school heads asserted that their role was to "hire and empower teaching professionals who consequently apply the school mission and vision through their interactions with students, parents, curriculum, and other school-related activities" (p. 119). If a religious secondary school's mission and vision includes the shaping of students' worldview and/or faith practices, both school administrators and teachers may very well play an important role in their students' religious identity formation.

Since parents appear quite significant in their children's religious identity formation, perhaps religious adults at school are also influential in the religious lives of their students. Armet (2009) found a significant positive correlation between perceived

parental closeness and youth's religious salience. At religious secondary schools, perhaps a close relationship with a trusted, respected teacher or administrator also yields an increase in adolescents' religious salience. Religious Israeli adolescents reported that their parents, compared with their teachers and friends, had the greatest influence on their religious identity (Fisherman, 2011). Among these adolescents, teachers' influence varied based on adolescents' age, gender, and area of influence. For example, teachers and parents had a similar degree of influence on the religious behavior of adolescents, but only in grades 7, 9, 13, and 14 for males and in grades 13 and 14 for females. While this study suggests that teachers are less influential than parents when it comes to adolescents' religious salience, its findings still imply that school teachers do have the potential to influence this area of students' lives.

An Exposure to Religious Instruction

Finally, adolescents' exposure to religious instruction seems to foster religious identity formation. While religious instruction in the following research studies may vary in terms of formality, the correlation between such instruction and religious identity formation appears to exist in each case.

Kaster (2011) studied a theological program for high school students at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary. The program utilizes the Youth in Theology and Ministry curriculum, which consists of theology classes, community service, and evening prayer. Kaster found that this curriculum stimulated theological learning and fostered faith practices in the lives of adolescent participants. Since religious secondary school curricula often possess the same components as the Youth in Theology and Ministry curriculum, perhaps religious secondary schools also facilitate adolescents' participation in private faith practices.

Dinter (2006) found that computer usage contributes to adolescents' religious identity formation. Adolescents reported using computers to explore the general cause of reality, admire virtual worlds, and reflect on their work as digital creators. Although this research study makes no mention of a formal religious instructor, it could be argued that these students are engaging in a form of self-directed religious instruction.

Candal and Glenn (2012) found that one way an evangelical Protestant secondary school encouraged students to adopt its worldview—one of critically evaluating and transforming contemporary culture—was through a senior research project. Each student would research a current issue and defend his/her stance in front of an outside panel. To the degree that this project helped students internalize the school's worldview, this form of religious instruction contributed to students' religious identity formation.

Bertram-Troost, de Roos, and Miedema (2009) found that, among students at Dutch Christian secondary schools, a relationship existed between the appreciation of religious education lessons and the amount of learning experienced by students regarding how to talk about one's worldview and learning about other worldviews. These findings imply that religious instruction, if delivered in a meaningful and effective manner, contributes to adolescents' religious identity formation, specifically their worldview.

Suggestions for Practitioners

The cited research studies suggest several characteristics of religious secondary schools that may be influential in adolescents' religious identity formation: a community of religious peers, the presence of religious adults, and an exposure to religious instruction. These characteristics inform the following suggestions for Christian secondary school practitioners.

- *Provide safe havens:* Chaudhury and Miller (2008) suggested that safe havens—places where adolescents feel comfortable expressing and developing their faith—are crucial to adolescents' religious identity formation. Lee, Chang, and Miller (2006) and Rymarz and Graham (2006) implied that a community of religious peers is a major component of such safe havens. If Christian secondary schools want to deepen students' faith, they should provide ample opportunities for students to gather in community with like-minded peers, to express their beliefs as they feel comfortable, and to apply the tenets of Christianity. Religious clubs like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Young Life may be examples of such safe havens.
- *Focus on the whole family:* Armet (2009) and Fisherman (2011) suggested that parents wield

tremendous influence in the religious identity formation of their children. Christian secondary schools, therefore, should focus not only on the student, but parents as well. For instance, the school could hold a special chapel service exclusively for parents at the beginning of the school year or invite parenting experts to speak at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting. Providing spiritual nourishment for parents can foster spiritual growth in the lives of their children.

- *Seek out feedback:* Religious instructors carry a special responsibility to deliver meaningful and effective teaching. As Bertram-Troost, de Roos, and Miedema (2009) found, student appreciation of religious lessons appears to be a major component of adolescents' religious identity formation. As a result, religious instructors should proactively seek feedback from their students, perhaps in the form of end-of-unit or end-of-course student evaluations. Gathering, considering, and implementing such feedback may lead to more meaningful religious instruction, and as a result, strengthen students' faith.

In conclusion, research on religious adolescents suggests several characteristics of religious secondary schools that may contribute to the process of religious identity formation: a community of religious peers, the presence of religious adults, and an exposure to religious instruction. Additional research on how these characteristics function in different settings (e.g., in a school setting versus a youth group setting, in a Christian school versus a Catholic school, in a North American religious school versus an Australian religious school) would provide a more nuanced and complete understanding of religious secondary schools' unique features. Nevertheless, Christian secondary school practitioners should consider these factors as they offer opportunities for student growth, distribute school resources, and shape pedagogical practice.

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