Religious Practices of Adolescents in a Southern Community: 1964-1974*

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Religious practices of black and white adolescents in a southern community were measured between 1964 and 1974 by the variables frequency of church attendance, frequency of Bible reading, and grace at meals. Questionnaires were administered to 367 adolescents in 1964 and 432 in 1974. Analysis of variance was used in analyzing the data. Adolescent religious involvement was found to be declining. The decline is especially great for males according to data analyzed here. It was also found that differences in religious practices were greater for sex than race in church attendance and Bible reading but greater for race in the saying of grace at meals.

The present study will address the question of declining religious practices of adolescents in a southern community. Following measures of religious practice used by Stark and Glock (1968), the dependent variables are frequency of church attendance, frequency of Bible reading, and whether grace is said at mealtime; independent variables are race (black and white), time (1964 and 1974), and sex (male and female). The study was conducted in a high school in a northeast Texas community with a 1970 population of 5007 (4076 in 1960) and with a race composition of approximately two-thirds white and one-third black. Racial desegregation of the high schools was effected in 1970.

METHODS

Data were gathered through questionnaires administered by the author in all English classes of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades in both the 1964 and 1974 studies as part of longer questionnaires. The number of respondents in 1964 was 367; 432 adolescents responded in 1974. A three-way analysis of variance (race by time by sex) was used to investigate the changes in religious behavior.

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RESULTS

The three-way analysis of variance for each of the dependent variables did not indicate a triple interaction among race, time, and sex. However, the significant time by sex interaction for frequency of church attendance ($F = 10.25, df = 1, p < .002$) and Bible reading ($F = 4.35, df = 1, p < .04$) indicated that the simple effects of these two variables (time and sex) should be analyzed; for grace at meals the significant race by time interaction ($F = 4.01, df = 1, p < .04$) indicated that the simple effects of these two variables (race and time) should be analyzed. The data are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
MEANS AND SELECTED FREQUENCIES OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE, BIBLE READING,
AND GRACE AT MEALS, BY TIME, SEX, and RACE

	WHITE				BLACK			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	1964	1974	1964	1974	1964	1974	1964	1974
Church Attendance								
Mean ^a	3.98	3.19	3.76	3.98	3.77	3.10	3.78	3.90
% 1/week or more	81	52	73	77	79	51	75	77
(N)	(124)	(128)	(118)	(159)	(47)	(70)	(55)	(72)
Bible Reading								
Mean	3.84	2.45	4.26	3.53	3.42	2.14	3.16	2.70
% 1/week or more	75	29	83	55	59	16	51	30
(N)	(128)	(128)	(102)	(158)	(41)	(70)	(51)	(70)
Grace at Meals								
% "Yes"	61	53	64	59	92	71	95	79
(N)	(134)	(126)	(118)	(158)	(49)	(69)	(56)	(72)

^a Means were calculated by assigning scores to responses. Scores assigned were: "at least twice a week," 5; "once a week," 4; "less than once a week but at least once a month," 3; "less than once a month," 2; "never," 1.

Church Attendance

A statistical difference was found between males and females for 1974 ($F = 13.55, df = 1, p < .001$), while no statistical difference was found for 1964 suggesting that the gap between the sexes for frequency of church attendance widened. While no statistical difference was found for church attendance between 1964 and 1974 for females, a statistical difference was found for males over the decade ($F = 26.4, df = 1, p < .001$). Thus while females did not change significantly in church attendance in the decade, male attendance decreased. Black and white males decreased in attendance at about the same rate over time while females' attendance actually increased slightly over the decade.

Bible Reading

The simple effects of time and sex for frequency of Bible reading between males

and females revealed a statistical difference for 1974 ($F = 6.45, df = 1, p < .01$) but not for 1964 suggesting a greater difference by sex in Bible reading for 1974 with females reading the Bible more frequently than males in 1964 and 1974. When analyzing the relationship for frequency of Bible reading between 1964 and 1974, a statistical difference was found for males ($F = 37.65, df = 1, p < .001$) and females ($F = 10.59, df = 1, p < .002$). Thus while females are reading the Bible more regularly than males, both groups were reading less in 1974 (see Table). Despite an overall decline in Bible reading, whites continued to be more avid readers than blacks.

Grace at Meals

Analysis of the data pertaining to whether grace is said at mealtimes shows blacks to have changed significantly over time ($F = 16.01, df = 1, p < .001$) while whites have not significantly changed; however, a significant difference was revealed between the races both in 1964 ($F = 31.36, df = 1, p < .001$) and 1974 ($F = 3.93, df = 1, p < .046$). As is shown in the table, blacks continued over the decade to say grace more than whites, yet both groups decreased over time. However, the blacks' saying of grace decreased more than it did for whites.

CONCLUSIONS

As measured here, adolescent religious involvement generally decreased from 1964 to 1974. Differences in religious practices were greater for sex than race in church attendance and Bible reading but greater for race in the saying of grace at meals. Since grace at meals is a family oriented phenomenon, a difference by sex would not be expected since siblings eat at the same table and would therefore either say or not say grace.

REFERENCE

- Stark, Rodney and Charles Y. Glock.
1968 *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment*. Berkeley: University of California Press.