

# **Studying Religious Practices Among African-American Adolescents: An Empirical Study**

**Joseph V. Crockett, Ed.D.  
American Bible Society**

*“We perceive to act, and we act to perceive.”*  
(Pick 1983)

## **Abstract**

Psychological and social interactions contribute to understandings of the micro-macro dynamics of religious life in general and of individuals' engagement with Scripture particularly. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" can assist in understanding this phenomenon.

Empirical evidence gives attention to the study of psychological and social processes involved in African-Americans' "engagement" with Christian Scripture, a religious cultural practice that is informed by many external factors including the operative social context. This presentation focuses on responses of 418 African-American adolescents, a subset of the overall research random sample. The study was conducted between June 2 and September 10, 2001. Analysis of the adolescent data set revealed significance in correlations and single factor analysis of variance (One-way ANOVA) pertaining to variables of subjects' (1) views of the Bible, (2) Bible use, (3) religious practice, and (4) personal orientation from subjects' use of Scripture.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescents are bombarded with challenges and opportunities that either threaten or facilitate their spiritual, social, and human development. The litany of challenges and crises adolescents face seems endless – weak moral character, low self-esteem, disrupted homes, school failure, truancy, no sense of personal control, emotional disintegration, substance use and abuse, the early onset of sexual activity, vandalism, gang violence, and more. Various segments of society, at the same time, expects and attempts to assist adolescents as they form their identity, thrive academically, mature emotionally, acquire social skills for their positive well being, develop moral values, and identify and employ spiritual resources.

Religious practices among adolescents in the United States (U.S.) are of growing importance to religious educators charged with responsibility for teaching beliefs and passing along the faith and practices of their religious traditions. In a post-modern environment, where society's agenda is other than propping up Christian faith and practice, church educators recognize the urgency to take on greater responsibility for adolescents' religious development. The most frequent question asked is: "How? How do we teach, learn, and live so that future generations uphold the faith and practice of a religious tradition?"

Traditional beliefs about the Bible have waned. The Bible's unquestioned authority is less than absolute. Belief that the Bible is the actual word of God has declined from 65% in 1963 to 27% in 2000 (The Gallup Organization, 2001).<sup>1</sup> What are adolescents to believe when Scripture, the primary referent of Christian communities, is held in suspicion? "Adolescent" refers to individuals between 12 and 18 years of age who live between the states of childhood and adulthood. "Adolescence," refers to the time youth share commonalities such as psychological de-centering, the onset of puberty, relational shifts with parent(s) or a primary care-giver(s), increasing autonomy from other adults and normative social institutions, and increasing frequency of interactions with peers.

Variance across social and cultural contexts results in teenagers' differentiated development, in spite of their sharing similar influences from the wider society.<sup>2</sup> Differences in adolescents' development are due, in part, to the varied challenges and opportunities they encounter, the interactions of those threats and opening and the social contexts in which those external forces operate. Teens' differentiated developmental trajectories include religious developmental pathways as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Gallup Organization, a market research firm founded in the 1930s, conducts nationwide polls to measure and track the public's attitudes concerning political, social, and economic issues of the day, including sensitive and controversial subjects. With offices in 40 countries, performance management ad studies measuring consumer product and customer satisfaction are additional services provided by Gallup since the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> Regnerus, et al. (2003:46). "Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature."

Researchers have followed several lines of inquiry to document, both qualitatively (Bass and Richter, 2002) and quantitatively (Smith and Denton, 2005)<sup>3</sup>, the ways and means by which teenagers nurture and develop their relationship with God and Jesus Christ, come to experience the fruits of Christian faith, act and serve the neighbour, and advocate for equity and social justice. Regnerus, et al. (2003) suggested that attention be given to a host of relational factors – peer, family, intergenerational, and group – as well as the social processes surrounding these variables.<sup>4</sup> Smith (2003) and Smith and Denton (2005) followed a different line of inquiry. Their theoretical and empirical research explored the motivations, attitudes, behaviours and barriers that contributed to the religious effects among adolescents in the U.S. While these lines of research yield fruitful insights, other lines of inquiry may be of equal importance.

To date, little is known about how psychological and social processes of teenagers interact with religious beliefs and behaviours to facilitate similar or dissimilar outcomes of faith. This study set out to explore, preliminarily, how a small set of religious variables interact to influence different adolescent religious outcomes.

## **2. Research Perspective**

Culture, language, and thought are three meta-concepts that shaped the contours and focus of this research. Religious activity, such as Scripture engagement, is a consequence, an artifact, of culture. Culture refers to humanly constructed habits, customs, practices, and systems of meaning that are learned, shared, and transmitted by groups in the world they inhabit (Bourdieu 1990). Language refers to a mediating system of classification that provides the basis for conceptualization and representation of experiences and the means to exchange ideas with others (Duranti 1997). Thought refers to social reasoning, that is, ideas about others, ideas about self, and ideas about others in relationship to oneself. Language derives from and influences culture. Language also shapes individuals' thoughts and reasoning. Reasoning and language provide individuals with resources for transcending historical constraints of habits, customs, and practices created by a group or society. A model of the relationship among the key concepts is presented in the diagram below, "Meta-concepts informing the study."

For the study, I asserted that Scripture use or engagement was embedded in religious cultural practices of interactions, actions that involve psychological and social processes. It was contended that the use of Scripture involves much more than divine revelation or rigorous hermeneutic methodologies, either alone or combined! I submit that Scripture use or engagement is fundamentally important activity for any Christian religious consideration of justice or equity. Beliefs or acts of justice or equity, naked of information about or formation by a sacred religious tradition, lose their life-giving ground of meaning. At best, such faith results in social activism divorced of a theological

---

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive and current review of the literature pertaining to quantitative studies of adolescents and religion see Mark Regnerus, et al. (2003), "Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature." A Research Report of the National Study of Youth and Religion, Number 3.

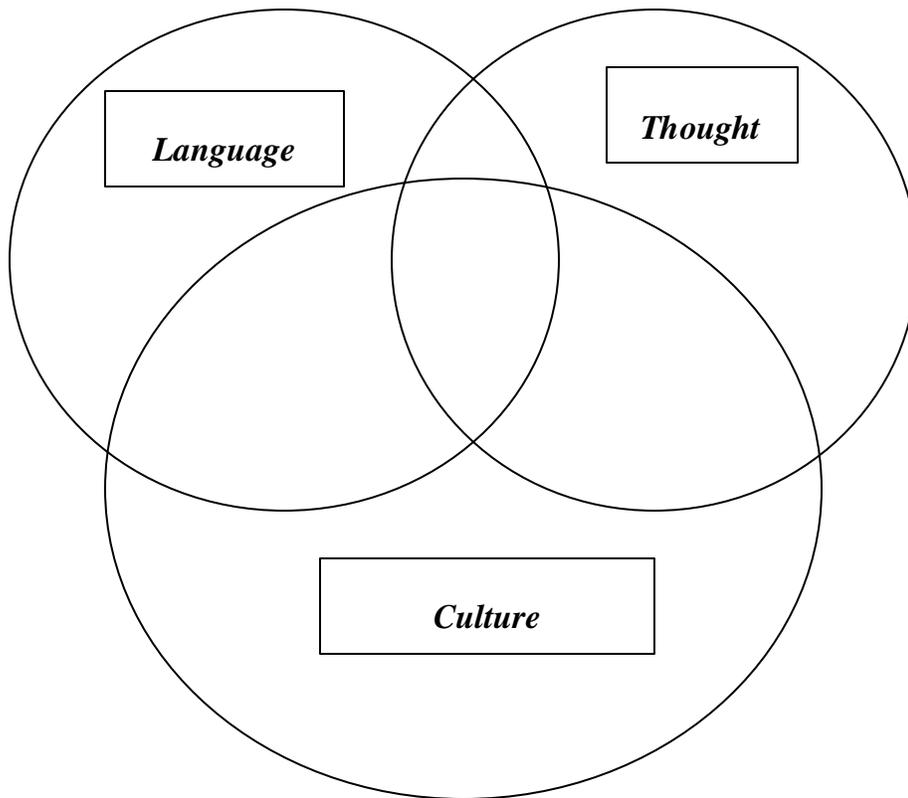
<sup>4</sup> Ibid. page 47.

heritage. At worst, it leads to a “do-good-ism” isolated from the transcendent, only to remain with a reliance on the self.<sup>5</sup>

Theories about the relationships among culture, language, and thought, and research about the connections between a person’s actions and their thoughts can contribute much to understanding how people use Scripture. These concepts have been examined by theorists and researchers among several intellectual traditions, including psychology, sociology, socio-psychology, socio-linguistics, and linguistic anthropology (Bourdieu 1977, 1989, 1990; Bruner and Goodman 1947; Circourel 1973; Duranti 1997; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Gibson 1966; Gibson and Spelke 1983; Giddens 1979, 69; Goffman 1967, 20-33; Hymes 1964a, 1964b, 1972; Silverstein 1987, 17-38; Vygotsky 1978, 19-57; Wertsch et al. 1985, 151-171; Wertsch 1991, 85-100).

People use Scripture in everyday situations. Scripture use involves an individual’s thoughts and actions. Moreover, the actions or interactions of social beings affect the constellation or distribution of effects that they ultimately perceive-- as noted by Pick (1983).

**Diagram 1: Meta-concepts informing the study**



---

<sup>5</sup> For a clear and forceful discussion of the assumptions and plight of “Empire Christianity” in post-modern Christian society, see Loren B. Mead (1991:47). *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*. Alban Institute.

Scripture use and engagement in day-to-day situations result from learned and shared patterns of behaviour and systems of meaning – cultural practices – that both contribute to and negate its authoritative character in society (Duranti 1997; Oswalt 1986). The psychological and social processes that influence cultural practices also affect how persons engage Scripture, namely how they interpret sensory stimuli and use their senses to modify, subsequently, the nature or process of engagement. In brief, thoughts and actions about Scripture are shaped by or filtered through the prism of an individual's socio-cultural experiences. More will be said about how this happens below.

## 2.1 Thought

Thought, as stated above, refers to social knowledge and is concerned with how individuals' ideas about others, ideas about self, and ideas about self in relationship with others. Others here may refer to either people or inanimate objects. While it is clear that people and objects are different, distinctions involving thinking about either "other" has not been proven to be significant (Flavell 1985).

The interactionist perspective used asserts that a social actor's reasoning about how social reality is filtered through psychological, interpersonal, social conventional, or moral explanations (Damon 1977; Smetana 1983, 1995; Turiel 1983). These explanations are shaped by perceptions of sensory stimuli and by how individuals make sense of experiences in terms of psychological domains of reasoning. In everyday situations, individuals engage Scripture to understand and explain their personal attitudes and feelings. They think about Scripture in relation to the actions and behaviors of family members and close, intimate friends, reasoning in the interpersonal domain. Individuals reason about Scripture with reference to the customs, rule-oriented behaviors, and social conventions of their locale, thinking in the social conventional domain. They think about Scripture with a psychological orientation toward some ought and should, thinking in the moral domain. Individuals use Scripture and think with reference to self, thinking in the personal domain.

## 2.2 Culture

Learned, shared, and transmitted patterns of behaviors and systems of meaning are necessary features for individuals and groups to acquire a common language or participate in shared religious cultural practices. Also, involvement in religious cultural practices necessitates some degree of social reasoning on the part of the individual participants. How adolescents participate in religious communities informs and supports or negates Christian views. Pierre Bourdieu theorized that *habitus* is the way in which individuals make historical events part of their individual disposition, and how they make their individual perceptions, thoughts, and meanings objective. How does adolescents' participation in communities of faith and practice contribute to their acquisition and support of alternative views of reality -- biblical perspectives?

Based on the works of Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Alessandro Duranti (1997), and Dell Hymes (1964a, 1964b; 1972), it is argued that Christian communities, like other linguistic communities, may be analyzed as cultural networks constituted by their linguistic practices. "Communication of consciousness," Bourdieu wrote from a critical perspective, "presupposes community of 'unconsciousness' (i.e. of linguistic and cultural competence)."

The objective homogenizing of group or class *habitus* which results from the homogeneity of the conditions of existence is what enables practices to be objectively harmonized without any intentional calculation or conscious reference to a norm and mutually adjusted in the absence of any direct interaction or ... explicit co-ordination (1977: 80)

Religious communities share certain perceptions, appreciations, attitudes, behaviors, dispositions, and judgments. According to Bourdieu shared realities, competencies, and ways of acting are socially and culturally mediated by *habitus*.

Habitus, then, refers to the mediating processes between individuals and a community that results in shared consciousness for representing the world in certain ways and for classifying, evaluating, and acting in a particular manner. Habitus are systems of durable, transposable dispositions. They are structuring structures that generate and regulate practices and representations without becoming the product of slavish obedience to rules (Bourdieu 1977:72). A result of Habitus is the dynamic exchange, negotiation, and creation of shared meanings and common views of reality. For example, religious communities have a language of their own, with words and phrases like, "sharing the peace," "benediction," and "holy communion." The communities themselves are structured structures, organized assemblies formed, not merely by buildings, but also by traditions, rituals, social arrangements and more. An individual may interpret an interaction on the subway based on the meanings constructed from their community. Different participants, however, while engaged in the same structures may offer a range of interpretations in response to the same subway interaction.

### **2.3 Language and culture**

"Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it" (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995:4). The Bible is "The Book of the Church," that is, a primary referent of Christian communities. The Bible, also, is a mediating system in that it serves as an instrument between the user and the Christian community's beliefs and practices. Individuals who use the Bible connect to groups; groups of the past and future, defining and sustaining shared but dissimilar worldviews, while linking current circumstances with other situations (Duranti 1997; Hymes 1964; Silverstein 1993). Participants' views of the Bible and their engagement with Scripture take shape through socially and culturally constructed mediating processes that are essential for their participation in Christian communities.

While Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1993) posited that the term Scripture may refer to the sacred text of any religious community, in this research the term is used with exclusive reference to the Christian Scriptures. Use of Scripture refers to the variety of ways individuals or groups use the text in daily life. Scripture may be used as a spiritual guide, a reference book, a text for religious practice, a tool for living, a book of rules for moral behavior, a basis for arranging human relationships, or a source for developing social policy.

As people use Scripture, they may or may not involve “faith.” When does the Bible become sacred? What makes Scripture for some “the Word of God?” Scripture becomes sacred, that is, set apart as special and distinct from other writings, when individuals allow Scripture to inform and guide their life situations.

Scripture engagement involves, and yet, need not be privileged by the status of the user in terms of her/his novice, apprentice, or expert level of understanding of the Bible’s content, history, culture, and geography, and the degree to which she/he allows her/his considerations of its texts to be authoritative. In this sense, as Bourdieu stated, “No obedience to rules, objectively adapted goals, or mastery of the operations is necessary to attain a particular meaning of the text.” (1977, 21-22). Modalities of structures also make it unlikely that the acquisition of objective data (the internalization of externality) is dependent on a facilitator to provide the orchestrating action as a conductor.

Scripture engagement also involves persons in their roles as reader, speaker, hearer, receiver, interpreter, or bystander. Each of these ways of engaging Scripture presupposes that engagement with the Bible is never an individual activity, even when it is used by a person alone. The Bible as a communal text is a book of multiple socially embedded voices that sometimes confirm, and at other times contradict, neighboring voices. Engagement with Scripture refers to a fuller human experience that recognizes the communal nature of speech itself, the relationship between speech and action, communicative action<sup>6</sup>, and its ways and means of connecting individuals to others across thresholds of time and space to equally diverse and multifaceted situations. Thus, Scripture engagement refers to the social act of reading, hearing, studying, or assisting other people to interact with the Bible. One goal of those who engage Scripture might be that the text becomes the Word of God that is, a text to which individuals afford deliberative thought, allegiance, and response.

## **2.4 Thought, language, and culture**

Thought, language, and culture are factors that inhibit and impel Scripture engagement and individuals’ acts of peace and justice that emerge from their engagement with

---

<sup>6</sup> For a definitive description of “communicative action” see Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society and Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, particularly “The Authority of the Sacred and the Normative Background of Communicative Action,” pp. 43-76; and “The Rational Structure of the Linguistification of the Sacred,” pp. 77-111.

Scripture. Individuals' reasoning and their words and symbols, the practices, customs, and habits performed are distinct, yet overlapping features that inform and transcend religious cultural practices, such as works of equity and habits of hospitality and shalom. Individuals' view of Scripture is important because it shapes persons' perceptions of bounded-ness pertaining to the transmission of received wisdom and the construction or invention of new revelations (Lave, 1996). Lev Vygotsky (1978) and James Wertsch et al. (1985, 1991) have asserted that all human actions are social acts. This, for me, includes the cultural practice of Scripture engagement. Benson Bobrick (2001), Alister McGrath (2001), and Vincent L. Wimbush (2000) have documented the continuous, historical, and cultural activities associated with individuals' and societies' engagement with Scripture as they have interpreted its meanings across changing contexts in history. For more than 60 years, researchers of religion have investigated trends and shifts in society's views about the Bible and its import for daily situations (The Gallup Organization 2001).

Given the contours of individuals' interactions with Scripture it can be argued that their perceptions, actions, interpretations, and perspectives matter. Individuals' perceptions and actions, based in part on their social contexts, their cultural practices, and their individual experiences, make for variety in interpretations and perspectives held by an individual across time, or by two or more individuals at any one time. Interpretations are mediated through the psychosocial world of individuals and they are contingent upon a host of other variables as well.

Other variables that contribute to variety in perceptions and Scripture interpretations may have little to do with an historic sacred text, because the processes among perception, interpretation, and perspective-taking are rooted in human consciousness and human creativity. These psychological, social, and cultural processes are conditioned by particular psychosocial contexts. The contexts, experiences, and events provide the capacity for diverse interpretations of Scripture and subsequent actions among individuals.

### **3. Research Design and Sampling**

Commissioned by the American Bible Society during Summer 2000, a team of researchers was organized to explore how and why African-American teens engage the Bible. In this formative stage of their lives, we considered how theological, psychological, cultural, and social factors might affect the ways the current generation of teens read, studied, and appropriated Scripture. These concerns drove the selection of the members of the research team as well as the formulation of its methodology. Because the emergent nature of this research required collaborative expertise from biblical scholars as well as social scientists, an interdisciplinary team was assembled under sponsorship of the American Bible Society.

To avoid biases, the research team did not prescribe – in advance of the study – its own assumptions about how African Americans would view the Bible or use the Bible. A decision was made to allow ideas to emerge from those African Americans who

participated in various phases of the research project. Although the study began with a focus on teens, the scope was subsequently expanded to include adults in order to generate similar knowledge about their engagement of the Bible.

The research project for the American Bible Society<sup>7</sup> was designed to provide a systemic empirical basis for addressing the above questions and concerns. Objectives of the study were twofold. First, researchers set out to discover what users of sacred Scripture expect to see when they read or hear the words, “Study Bible”. Second, they wanted to understand how teens and adults “engage” the Scriptures in everyday situations.

The research findings cited below are tied to three sets of hypotheses that framed the study in connection with the research needs of the American Bible Society. First, investigators assumed that African Americans would engage (make use of, apply, or appropriate) the Scripture in relation to:

- (a) How often they read or studied the Bible,
- (b) The length and duration of their use of the Bible, and
- (c) The intensity of users views about the Bible.

Second, the African-American Study Bible Research Project assumed that African Americans themselves could provide the best insights in response to the research hypotheses. The research team sought data out of the social contexts and conditions that affect African-American life with particular attention to the impact of the Bible. Moreover, there was a paucity of empirical research available to answer those questions in a meaningful way, distinguishing between teenage cohorts, genders, regional locations, and other variables. Third, after some preliminary brainstorming, the research team posited that youth might be affected by a variety of social and cultural factors in different or contingent ways.

The survey was developed with input from church leaders, Bible experts, and leading sociological and survey researchers in their respective fields and disciplines.<sup>8</sup> Biblical scholars who reviewed and critiqued survey questions were also trained to conduct the pre-testing and pilot phases of the research using a social science approach to understanding human activity.

Between June 2, and September 10, 2001, 418 teens and 591 adults responded to a range of questions in telephone interviews. To avoid event contamination, no interviews conducted on or after September 11, 2001 were included in the analysis. Categories and types of questions included the following:

---

<sup>7</sup> The American Bible Society has historically worked to provide African-Americans with Scripture. Its continued generous support, especially for this research is deeply appreciated.

<sup>8</sup> Special thanks to Drs. C. Martin of Colgate University, S. Reid of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Henry (Hank) Allen of Wheaton College, and Gosnell Yorke of the United Bible Societies, Southern Africa Region, for their wisdom, guidance, and support of the project in both its exploratory and experimental phases.

- ❑ Demographic information, such as ethnicity, gender, age, household income, and religious affiliation
- ❑ General activities, such as reading magazines and books, talking to friends, listening to music, and using forms of computer mediated communication
- ❑ Religious practices, such as length and frequency of devotional time, church attendance, attendance at educational and faith-based activities
- ❑ Bible usage, in terms of frequency, duration, use context, value and importance
- ❑ Attitudes towards and views of the Bible, such as literal view, inspired view, view as book of history, stories, and teachings by men
- ❑ Conceptions of “study Bible,” such as its desired features and components, and
- ❑ Impact of Scripture use, by degree and type on other attitudes, behaviors, and consequences

Data collection was carried out through a Computer-Assisted-Telephone-Interviewing system (CATI), and this was used also for data entry. Persons trained in telephone data collection conducted the surveys and were monitored by research specialists. Individual surveys were administered and completed in approximately 20 minutes per teen.

Quantitative methods of research were conducted among a nationwide sample of 418 African-American teens, 12-18 years of age. To qualify for participation in the study, respondents had to identify themselves as being either African American or of African descent, for example, Caribbean, East Indian, West Indian, or of some other African background. Respondents also had to be at least 12 years of age. All respondents were randomly selected and participated voluntarily.

Regional quotas were used to model the distribution of adolescent samples by gender to the dispersion of African Americans nationwide. Data for teens were weighted to national norms as established by the U.S. Census Bureau, and weighting was applied to gender and age variables to represent the distribution of African-American teens in the U.S. (census year, 2000).

Internal consistency reliability was used to establish the degree to which different items measured distinct aspects of the same measure. Two major constructs, “religious practice” and “personal religious orientation” were found to demonstrate high internal consistency based on a four-item and a three-item construct, respectively. The coefficient alpha for “personal religious orientation” was .71, while the coefficient alpha for “religious practice” was .70.

Leaders from a variety of denominational judicatories and subject matter experts – religious researchers and biblical scholars – established content validity. These subject matter experts assessed the research constructs both in terms of the overall design of the instrument, and with regard to individual items studied. In addition, the research instrument was piloted among geographical samplings of adolescent and adult focus groups, including an additional group of biblical scholars who held affiliation in either the American Academy of Religion or the Society of Biblical Literature. Scholars gave verbal and written feedback pertaining to the appropriateness, relevance, and saliency of questions, and were invited to present items that they felt were pertinent but missing. Adolescents and adults provided feedback in terms of clarity, relevance, and length of survey.

#### 4. Results

As indicated in Table 1, there were 418 adolescents that participated in the study. Among female teens there were 125 (57.4%) 12 to 15-year-olds and 93 (42.6%) 16 to 18-year-olds, for a total of 218 female teens (52.1%). Among male teens there were 112 (55.8%) 12 to 15-year-olds and 89 (44.2%) 16 to 18-year-olds, for a total of 200 males (47.9%).

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of teens' gender and age (n = 418)**

		Age				Group Total	
		12-15		16-18		Count	Row %
		Count	Row %	Count	Row %		
Gender	Male	112	55.8%	89	44.2%	200	100.0%
	Female	125	57.4%	93	42.6%	218	100.0%
Group Total		237	56.6%	181	43.4%	418	100.0%

In addition to age and gender, this paper examines four key variables from the African American Bible Research Project. Teens' (1) "Bible use," (2) "views of the Bible," (3) "religious practice," and (4) "personal religious orientation" were items and constructs used to understand and compare African-American adolescents' engagement with Scripture.

- "Bible use" was an ordinal independent variable used to observe teens that did and did not read or study the Bible within the last 30 days.
- "Bible views" was a nominal, independent variable which measured teens' beliefs regarding the Bible, as either (1) "the actual word of God with no errors that should be taken literally" (literal view), (2) "an inspired word of God and has no errors, although some verses are meant to be taken symbolically rather than literally," (3) "an inspired word of God, with some factual or historical errors" or, (4) "not inspired by God, but tells... how the writers...understood God, or another book of teachings written by men that contains stories and advice." Items three

and four were combined for analysis. (Ordinal scales are ordered, but unequal intervals of measurement.)

- “Religious practice” was an ordinal, outcome variable comprised of four items, “church attendance,” “attendance at Sunday school,” “attendance at a faith-based group,” and “volunteer at church.” It was measured on a three-point scale, “heavy,” “occasional,” or “not at all.”
- “Personal religious orientation from Bible use,” (PRO from Bible use) was an ordinal, outcome variable comprised of three items resulting from Bible reading, (1) “receiving guidance and wisdom to make decisions,” (2) “growing closer in your relationship with God,” and (3) “better understand that the purpose of life is to know and serve God.” This variable was also measured on a three-point scale, “heavy,” “occasional,” or “not at all.”

Table 2 presents descriptive information about these variables.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics on key variables (n =418)**

<i>Variable</i>	<b>N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Bible use</b>	415	2	1	3	1.80	.81
<b>PRO from Bible use</b>	418	3.00	.00	3.00	1.68	1.12
<b>Religious practice</b>	418	4.00	.00	4.00	1.88	1.39
<b>Bible Views</b>	410	2	1	3	1.72	.75

Correlation analysis estimates the relationship between two variables, but mere association does not establish cause and effect. Results of Pearson’s correlation coefficients, as shown in Table 3 below indicated significant, but modest relationships between age and teens’ views of the Bible  $r(408) = .14, p < .01$  and between religious practice and personal religious orientation from Bible use  $r(416) = .18, p < .01$ . Adolescents who were older held fewer views of the Bible as a text without error to be read literally. Adolescents who participated in religious practice -- attending church, Sunday school, faith-based group, and who volunteer at church -- also acquired a personal religious orientation from their Bible use.

A significant and moderate correlation was indicated between reading the Bible in the last 30 days and views of the Bible  $r(405) = .23 p < .01$ . Adolescents who read the Bible in the last 30 days shifted away from viewing the Bible as a book to be read literally and without error. Significant, negative, and moderate relationships were observed between

reading the Bible and personal religious orientation from Bible use  $r(413) = -.24, p < .01$ , and between views of the Bible and religious practice,  $r(408) = -.29, p < .01$ .

Adolescents who did not read the Bible in the last 30 days also did not acquire a personal religious orientation from Bible use. Teens who did not participate in religious practice also shifted away from viewing the Bible literally and without error. Finally, a significant, strong, and negative relationship was indicated between reading the Bible within the past 30 days and religious practice  $r(413) = -.43, p < .01$ . Adolescents who did not read the Bible within the last 30 days did not participate in religious practice.

**Table 3: Correlations between all variables in study (n = 418)**

	Age	Gender	Bible Use	Bible Views	Religious Practice	PRO from Bible Use
<i>Age</i>	--	-.02	.07	.14**	-.06	.00
<b>Gender</b>		--	-.05	-.00	.09	.015
<b>Bible Use</b>			--	.23**	-.43**	-.24**
<b>Bible Views</b>				—	-.29**	-.058
<b>Religious Practice</b>					--	.18**
<b>PRO from Bible Use</b>						—

\*\* Correlations are significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

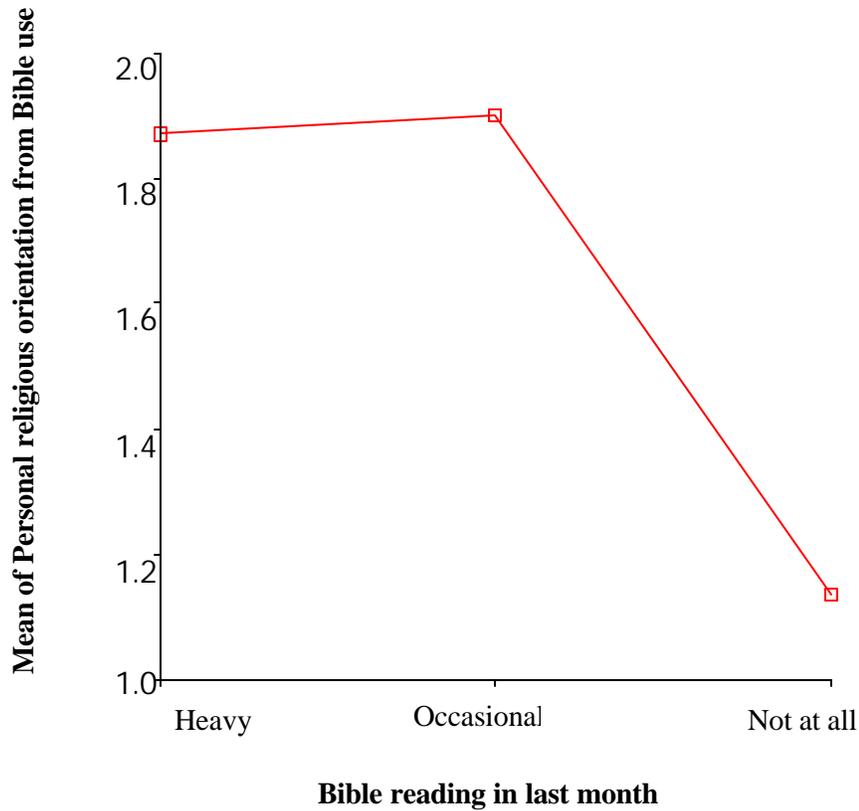
To understand which pairs or combinations of teens were responsible for differences pertaining to Bible reading in the last 30 days related to views of the Bible, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. To further clarify the influence of Bible use on teens' religious practice and personal religious orientation from Bible use, the Scheffé post hoc test was also conducted. Overall group mean differences were observed related to Bible use and personal religious orientation from Bible use,  $F(2,411) = 18.70, p < .001$ . Overall group mean differences were observed also related to Bible use and religious practice,  $F(2,411) = 51.13, p < .001$ .

Using the Scheffé post hoc test<sup>9</sup>, clarification among different pairs and combinations of variance was determined. Five distinct mean differences were found related to teens' Bible use and the two outcome variables. First, there was a significant group mean

<sup>9</sup> Once it has been determined through analysis that differences exist among the means of subjects, comparisons are conducted to understand which means differ. Scheffé test is designed to allow all possible linear combinations of group means to be tested. Scheffé test is more conservative than most post hoc tests, which means that a larger difference between means is required for significance.

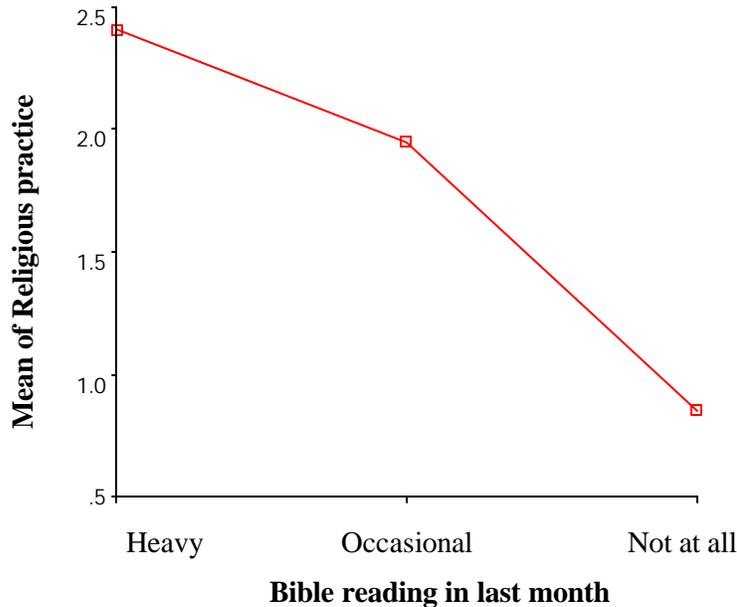
difference between teens whose Bible reading in the last 30 days was heavy ( $\underline{M}$ =1.87) and teens who did not read the Bible at all in the last 30 days ( $\underline{M}$ = 1.14) related to personal religious orientation from Bible use,  $p < .001$ .

**Chart 1: Means Plots for Bible use and personal religious orientation from Bible use (n = 415)**



Second, there was significant group mean difference between teens whose Bible reading in the last 30 days was occasional ( $\underline{M}$ = 1.90) and teens who did not read the Bible at all in the last 30 days ( $\underline{M}$ = 1.14) related to personal religious orientation from Bible use,  $p < .001$ . Third, there was significant group mean difference between teens whose Bible reading in the last 30 days was heavy ( $\underline{M}$ = 2.40) and teens whose Bible use in the last 30 days was occasional ( $\underline{M}$ = 1.94) related to their participation in religious practice,  $p = .007$ .

**Chart 2: Mean Plots for Bible use and religious practice (n = 415)**

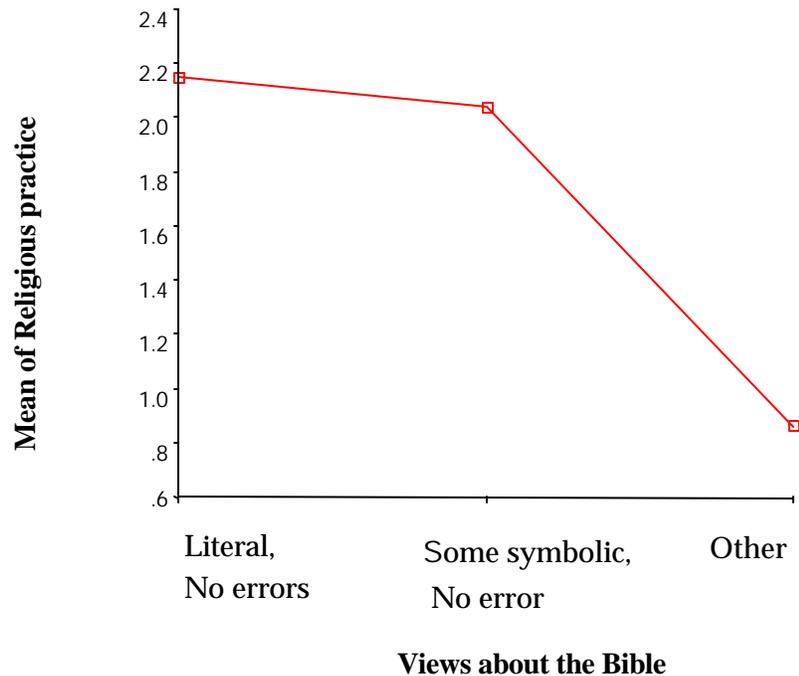


Fourth, there was significant group mean difference between teens whose Bible reading in the last 30 days was heavy ( $\underline{M} = 2.40$ ) and teens who did not read the Bible at all in the last 30 days ( $\underline{M} = .85$ ) related to participation in religious practice,  $p < .001$ . Finally, there was significant group mean difference between teens whose Bible reading in the last 30 days was occasional ( $\underline{M} = 1.94$ ) and teens who did not read the Bible at all in the last 30 days ( $\underline{M} = .85$ ) related to their participation in religious practice,  $p < .001$ . A 95% confidence interval for the true value of these means was indicated, as the means did not overlap.

To clarify and understand which pairs or combinations of teens were responsible for differences pertaining to teens' views of the Bible related to religious practice and personal religious orientation from Bible use, again, one-way analysis of variance and the Scheffé post hoc test were conducted. Overall group mean differences were observed related to teens' views of the Bible religious practice,  $F(2,407) = 26.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, no significant group mean difference was found between teens views of the Bible and personal religious orientation from Bible use,  $F(2,407) = .74$ ,  $p > .480$ .

Using Scheffé post hoc test, clarification among different pairs and combinations of variance was determined. Two distinct group mean differences were found related to teens' views of the Bible and religious practice. First, there was a significant group mean difference between teens who held a literal, no error view of the Bible ( $\underline{M} = 2.14$ ) and teens that viewed the Bible as a book with error ( $\underline{M} = .86$ ),  $p < .001$ . Second, there was a significant group mean difference between teens that viewed the Bible as a book with symbolism, but no error ( $\underline{M} = 2.04$ ) and those who viewed the Bible as a book with error ( $\underline{M} = .86$ ),  $p < .001$ . A 95% confidence interval for the true value of these means was indicated, as the means did not overlap.

**Chart 3: Means Plots for views of the Bible and religious practice (n= 410)**



## **5. Discussion and Implications**

Differences were observed between African-American adolescents who participated heavily or occasionally in Bible reading in the last 30 days and those who did not participate at all. Some of these differences were associated with the acquisition, or a lack thereof, of a personal religious orientation from Bible use. Adolescents who read the Bible either heavily or occasionally were more inclined to gain a personal religious orientation from Bible use than those who did not engage Scripture at all. Differences were observed between African-American adolescents who read the Bible in the last 30 days and participated in religious practice and those who did not read the Bible at all. Although African-American adolescents who participated in this study had crude, if any, skills in biblical interpretation, significant distinctions existed between adolescents who held literal or symbolic views of the Bible with regard to their participation in religious practice and adolescents who did not hold those views of the Bible.

In this study of 418 African-American adolescents, Scripture engagement was found to positively mediate religious practice – church attendance, Sunday school attendance, attendance at a faith-based activity, and volunteerism – among those who engaged, while those who did not engage in use of Scripture during the period of 30 days, did not participate in the same conduct and customs. Adolescents' engagement with Scripture resulted in their performance of practices and habits that are customary for Christian community participants.

Scripture engagement is a mediating cultural practice for religious commitment. Scripture engagement may be viewed as a *habitus*, that is, a system of religious cultural

practices that enable and facilitate interpretations and meanings to be objectively harmonized without intentional calculation, or conscious reference to a norm, even in the absence of any explicit coordination.

Cultural practices and language as a mediating system do overlap as language represents the experiences of cultural practice and as those representations are a means to exchange ideas with others. Scripture engagement influences adolescents' view of the Bible and their behaviors. Enhancing teenagers' awareness of the Bible and guiding them toward deliberative, responsive allegiance may result in increased participation in the customs and practices of the Christian community in general, and in acts of peace and justice specifically.

Scripture engagement is a mediating activity of Christian culture. When learners and teachers work collaboratively to translate and to re-present the biblical world in the contexts of today's adolescents, the mediating function of Scripture can help facilitate religious practice. Scripture engagement can assist in the exchange of ideas about justice and peace as well as the interpretation of meanings.

Adolescence is a time of transitions that is a period in teenagers' lives when they have crossed the boundary between childhood and adolescence on one end of the continuum, and are poised to cross the boundary from adolescence to adulthood on the other end of the continuum. This occasion can be a learning point when language, thought, and action – Scripture, meaning-making, and religious practice – interact to facilitate teenagers' acts of peace and justice. Adolescents can carry out activities aimed at improving community services to those most in need. They can assess and redirect their time and talents to help siblings and peers develop their potential. Teenagers can collaborate with adults to enhance conditions at school and in their neighborhood. They can work with different community factions to engender understanding and support mutual interests. And Scripture engagement can ground these acts so that adolescents see and perceive themselves as followers of Jesus – servant-leader and Prince of Peace.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study of culture, language, and thought is a fruitful field for investigating emerging theories pertaining to macro-micro interactions, particularly the interactions of individuals and groups as they use religious cultural practices, mediating systems of classification, and reason about themselves, about others, and about their relationship to others. Future research needs to study Scripture engagement in adult populations to explore its effects on religious practice and personal religious orientation. Subsequent studies may look at similarities and differences between Scripture engagement, religious practice and personal religious orientations between adolescents and adults.

There is a need to establish evidence about how Scripture engagement undertaken in different social strata, including class, gender, and in communities with different racial/ethnic compositions, has similar or dissimilar results. There are multiple conceptualization and methodological challenges to be addressed regarding ways to

investigate domains of social reasoning as it pertains to Scripture use and engagement. Specifically, educators may have to come to terms with beliefs and practices they hold as moral – that is, prescriptive, generalizable, and global – that under closer examination may turn out to be arbitrary, culturally specific, and conventional.

Since the Bible is an intercultural text that is used globally, there is a host of fields for exploration, including the impact of non-native language on individuals engaging with Scripture. For example, how do geographically and culturally distinct *habitus* give shape to understandings of scriptural authority, and the personal, interpersonal, social conventional, and moral domains of reasoning? How do these differences influence intended and unintended outcomes? Understanding ways and means by which historically situated meanings can mediate dispositions to new generations is crucial for the existence of communities and institutions.

Scripture engagement involves (1) the degree to which individuals are aware of Scripture's meaning as presented by biblical authors, and (2) the degree to which individuals allow Scripture to be authoritative over their decisions and behaviors. The Bible represents a history of people's actions. While engagement with Scripture has resulted in limiting and constraining people's freedom, its moral code has the potential to liberate those who learn and adhere to its teachings, also. Scripture engagement is religious cultural practice that enables novice users to acquire competence of historical import. Educators who inspire others to engage with Scripture lay a foundation for individuals to share new expectations about the world. Adolescents, who learn and live by Scripture, make possible different ways of being in the world for themselves and for those with whom they interact.

## Works Cited

- Bass, Dorothy C. and Don C. Richter (eds) 2002. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books.
- Bobrick, Benson 2001. *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Bourdieu P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- 1989a. "Social Space and Symbolic Power". *Sociological Theory* 7: 14.
- 1989b. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press.
- Bruner J., and C. C. Goodman, 1947. "Value and Need as Organizing Factors in Perception." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 42:33-44.
- Circourel, Aaron V. 1973. *Cognitive Sociology*. London: Macmillan.
- Damon, William 1977. *The Social World of the Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Duranti, A. 1997. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duranti, A. and C. Goodman, 1992. *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flavell, J.H. 1985. *Cognitive Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall
- Gibson, J. J. 1966. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Gibson, E. J., and E. S. Spelke, 1983. "The Development of Perception." in *Handbook of Child Psychology, Vol. 3. Cognitive Development* J. H. Flavell & E. Markman eds. New York: Wiley.
- Giddens, A. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London: Macmillan.
- Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Habermas, Juren (1981). *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume One: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- (1981). *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functional Reason*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hymes, D. 1964a. "Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication." in *The Ethnography of Communication*. J. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds. Washington, DC. *American Anthropologist*. Special Issue pp. 1-34.
- 1964b. *Language and Culture in Society*. New York: Harper & Row.
- 1972. "Models of the interaction of language and social life" in *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication*. J. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Lave, Jean 1996. "The Practice of Learning" in *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave, eds. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- McGrath, Alister E. 2001. *Christian Theology: An Introduction 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Mead, Loren B. 1991. *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*. The Alban Institute.
- Oswalt, W. H. 1986. *Life Cycles and Lifeways: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield.
- Pick, H. 1983. "Report on Perceptual and Perceptual-motor Development for 5-year Plan." Report prepared for the Learning and Behavior Branch, National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development.
- Regnerus, Mark, Christian Smith and Melissa Fritsch 2003. "Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature. A Research Report of the National Study of Youth & Religion, Number 3.
- Silverstein, M. 1987. "The Three Faces of 'function': Preliminaries to a Psychology of Language." in *Social and Functional Approaches to Language and Thought*. M. Hickmann, ed. New York: Academic Press.
- 1993. "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function." in *Reflexive Language*. J. Lucy, ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 33-58.
- Smetana, Judith G. 1983. "Social-cognitive Development: Domain Distinctions and Coordinations". *Developmental Review* 3:131-147.

- 1995. "Context Conflict, and Constraint in Adolescent-parent Authority Relationships." in *Morality in Everyday Life: Developmental Perspectives*. M. Killen and D. Hart, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, Christian 2003. "Theorizing Religious Effects among American Adolescents." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42 (1):17-30.
- Smith, Christian and Melinda L. Denton 2005. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, W. C. 1993. *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Turiel, Elliot 1983. *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, James V. 1991. *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp 151-171.
- Wertsch, J. V., N Minick and F. J. Arms. 1985. "The Creation of Context in Joint Problem-solving" in *Everyday Cognition: Its Development in Social Context*. B. Rogoff and J. Lave, eds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Wimbush, V. L. 2000. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*. New York: Continuum.