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Faith and Volunteering at Midlife: Variation by Religious Continuity, Discontinuity, or Initiation Since Childhood?

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Volunteer service is an integral part of civic life in America. Prior research consistently finds that highly religious people spend the most time volunteering, but few studies assess the role of religious stability and change through the life course. This study focuses on exposure to religiosity in childhood and the (dis)continuity of religiosity into adulthood, as well as cases where people become more or less religious as adults. Drawing on nationally representative longitudinal data from the MIDUS study (N = 3,025), our results suggest that childhood religiosity, in isolation, does not provide a sufficient account of adulthood volunteering. Rather, people raised in highly religious childhood homes volunteered several more hours per year than those from less religious homes only if they carried religious importance forward into midlife. Moreover, people sustaining high religiosity from childhood to adulthood reported slightly more total volunteering hours than those who decreased and increased their religious importance over time after adjusting for baseline hours of volunteering. Counterfactual mediation analyses suggest that religious attendance partially mediates each of these associations, highlighting the importance of religious communities in encouraging volunteerism.

Key words: volunteering; life course; religiosity; attendance; counterfactual mediation.

It is estimated that between 45% and 65% of Americans volunteer in any given year (Jones 2022; Musick and Wilson 2008). These billions of hours of service provided by volunteers form an integral part of civic life in America. Indeed, without volunteer labor, the running of many social services and programs would

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be impossible or adversely affected. As early as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1885/1989), scholars have contended that civic engagement reinforces democratic norms and builds social trust. More recently, Robert Putnam and his colleagues have demonstrated how volunteer participation is foundational for vibrant democratic societies (Gamm and Putnam 1999; Putnam 1995, 2000).

Many studies have examined antecedents of volunteering (Musick and Wilson 2008). Of all the factors that have been considered, religiosity has consistently emerged as a top predictor (Beyerlein and Hipp 2005; Wilson and Janoski 1995). This work generally concludes that religiosity motivates and bolsters civic engagement—both religious and secular in nature—by providing access to volunteer opportunities and via religious messages which promote charitable giving, such as directives to "love one's neighbor" (Ammerman 2005; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Lewis, Ann MacGregor, and Putnam 2013; Wilson and Musick 1997). This pattern of findings suggests that religious investments, in the form of learned religious norms and practices, foster both competencies and propensities for civic engagement (Park and Smith 2000). Church involvement also presents opportunities to aid those very institutions as well as nonreligious organizations in the community (Ammerman 2001; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990).

In the current study, we focus on exposure to religiosity early in life and the (dis)continuity of religiosity into adulthood, as well as the possibility of a person becoming more religious as an adult. Does being raised in a religious way set into motion volunteering habits that carry on—even if the person is not religious as an adult? Or does this association depend on continued religiosity? Similarly, does sustained religiosity build the sorts of volunteering habits and dispositions that cannot be obtained by only coming to religion in adulthood? Early religious exposure predicts high religious importance and church attendance later in life (Hardie, Pearce, and Denton 2016; Silverstein and Bengtson 2018; Upenieks, Schafer, and Mogosanu 2021). And though both factors have strong links to volunteering, it remains unclear whether stable forms of religiosity will manifest different patterns from (a) *becoming more religious* after a non- or less-religious childhood or (b) *decreasing in religiosity* from a devout upbringing. Using a longitudinal sample of adult Americans, we examine the extent to which childhood religious socialization and changes in religiosity shape volunteering in midlife and the role of religious attendance in explaining these patterns.

BACKGROUND

The Role of Early Life Religiosity for Midlife Volunteering

Growing evidence indicates that early socialization has wide-ranging, enduring impacts on people's habits and preferences, value orientations, and psychosocial resources and well-being, a pattern sometimes referred to as the "long arm of childhood" (Hayward and Gorman 2004). Building from that premise, we have multiple reasons to expect that early life religious exposure is linked to

adult volunteering. First, highly religious homes tend to promote narratives about "loving one's neighbor" and embracing the "golden rule" (Ammerman 2005; Vermeer, Janssen, and De Hart 2011). Parents may draw from the weight and authority of religious traditions in communicating these values, aiding in their internalization (Park and Smith 2000). Relatedly, highly religious families tend to be integrated into religious communities, reinforcing and adding plausibility to values taught at home (Vermeer, Janssen, and De Hart 2011). Second, religious parents may serve as important models for prosocial behaviors; indeed, adult volunteers are essential to the organizational strength of religious congregations, aiding in tasks like teaching Sunday school, managing the choir, helping with childcare, and maintaining the church's building and property (Hoge et al. 1998). And third, beyond mere observation, children raised in religious homes could get hands-on practice volunteering alongside their parents and other family members—an early initiation into the volunteering role (Wilson and Janoski 1995). In all, because religious socialization processes take place during the formative years of childhood and adolescence, they could have a lasting effect on identity and social orientation (Perks and Haan 2011; Vollebergh, Iedema, and Raaijmakers 2001).

Still, empirical research on the linkage between childhood religious socialization and volunteering remains scant, offering little evidence beyond emerging adulthood. One study in the Netherlands reported that childhood religiosity was linked to volunteering among adults in their 30s (Vermeer, Janssen, and De Hart 2011). Another study among Texas undergraduate students documented similar results but specified that the effect of religious upbringing was contingent on the student remaining religious (DeAngelis, Acevedo, and Xu 2016).

Hypothesis 1. High childhood religiosity will be associated with greater volunteering behavior at midlife.

Religious Stability and Change

Complementing and refining the "long arm of childhood" view is a perspective highlighting *pathways* through the life course. As inferred by DeAngelis, Acevedo, and Xu (2016) findings, observing only early exposure is likely an insufficient strategy for explaining how religion matters for volunteer behavior. This prompts us to consider whether early exposure to religiosity matters primarily—or only—among those remaining religious as adults. Indeed, a life course perspective requires that "changes in human lives (as changes in personal characteristics and transitions between states) are considered over a long stretch of lifetime" (Mayer 2009:434).[1] Over the course of a lifetime, many people shift their level of religious belief or activity (e.g., Albrecht and Cornwall 1989; Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan 2002). Some of these changes are modest in scope,

[1]Changes in human lives can be observed prospectively (the ideal approach) or with the aid of retrospective reports. The current study takes the latter strategy due to data availability.

while others are more dramatic, such as religious (de)conversion. Overall, religious decline is more common than the reverse (Desmond, Morgan, and Kikuchi 2010; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). What remains unclear is whether volunteering behavior is sensitive to these patterns of upward/downward change and if the starting or ending point of religious involvement is more or less important than long-run stability.

We anticipate that people enmeshed in religious activities during both childhood and adulthood have the highest rates of midlife volunteering, as this pattern would signal the accumulation of religious engagement over the long run. Extended exposure to religion may help people build religious capital or the skills and experience that promote prosocial behavior, such as familiarity with religious values and friendships with fellow congregants (Iannaccone 1990). According to Janoski, Musick, and Wilson (1998:498), the "habit" of volunteering may arise when people are "routinely placed in social situations and social relationships where the social skills and dispositions requisite for volunteer work are developed."

Though childhood religiosity increases the chance of later life religiosity, being socialized into a religious family obviously does not guarantee continued engagement (Vermeer, Janssen, and De Hart 2011). Parents often make religious choices on behalf of their children, who are then expected to participate irrespective of their personal desires. Once an adult, individuals often opt more intentionally into or out of their familial religious traditions (Uecker, Mayrl, and Stroope 2016; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Downgrading the importance of religion usually coincides with lower religious attendance and weakened connections to religious friends (Fenelon and Danielsen 2016), which consequently may curtail volunteer opportunities. So, though one interpretation of the "long arm" metaphor implies that childhood religiosity should predict greater volunteering hours no matter the religious transitions that follow (hypothesis 1), here we present another possibility—that religious engagement in childhood might not be enough to overcome religious decline.

As for Americans who *increase* their religious importance between childhood and adulthood, we would expect subsequent increases in prosocial behavior, perhaps even equal to those with stable high religiosity over the life course. A pair of studies using panel data from the American Changing Lives Survey spanning nearly two decades, each found that increasing religiosity during adulthood was associated with more religious volunteering, even after accounting for time-varying life course statuses (Johnston 2013; Kim and Jang 2017). Neither study, however, considered experiences during the formative childhood years. Though the existing empirical record is based only on adulthood change, a new decision to embrace religion appears to signify a faith commitment accompanied by the active application of religious values.

We present the following two study hypotheses based on the evidence reviewed above:

Hypothesis 2. When compared to stable low or decreasing religious importance, continued religious importance between childhood and midlife will be associated with greater volunteering behavior at midlife.

Hypothesis 3. When compared to stable low or decreasing religious importance, increasing religious importance between childhood and midlife will be associated with greater volunteering behavior at midlife.

When it comes to life course change, the contrast between becoming more religious from childhood to adulthood and remaining highly religious is less clear. On the one hand, an accumulation argument supposes that increasers will fall short of the volunteering done by those reporting lifelong religious importance. On the other hand, if religious newcomers are highly motivated to live out religious precepts, their volunteering behavior may be indistinguishable from long-timers.

The Mediating Role of Adult Religious Attendance

Churches are important mechanisms in the link between religiosity and volunteering. Messages about helping others are often embedded in sermons, hymns, and group prayers that comprise worship services (Stark and Finke 2000). Many religious leaders make direct appeals for their congregants to volunteer, often citing the authority of sacred texts (Kim and Jang 2017); indeed, these directives are "morally freighted in a way that most secular ties are not, so that pleas for good works…seem more appropriate and weightier than comparable requests from a coworker or someone you know from the gym" (477). Further, the influence can be peer-to-peer. Regular attendance signals to other churchgoers that he/she is a committed member (Atran and Henrich 2010). Within many church communities, people may feel a duty to perform prosocial activity—and to experience guilt or social sanctions if they do not appear to actualize the values of the congregation (Son and Wilson 2012). Finally, religious congregations act as "feeder systems" by pushing individuals into other voluntary organizations (Cornwell and Harrison 2004; Musick and Wilson 2008) and forming bridges to networks in the broader community. Thus, the social influence and connective functions of religious institutions can reaffirm religious beliefs and help translate them into action.

Yet despite the connection between religious attendance and volunteering, no existing studies have tested this mediating pathway in the context of religious change over time. For obvious reasons, people for whom religion remains salient into adulthood will attend religious services, on average, more than those who have downgraded its importance (and those who were never committed). Therefore, the associations proposed in hypotheses 2 and 3 will almost certainly be mediated by religious attendance in midlife.

Less clear is what role church attendance plays for those showing a rise in religious importance. Assuming—in line with the accumulation perspective—that those coming to high religiosity in adulthood volunteer less than those who have been highly religious since childhood, there are several possibilities. One is that increasing religious importance sends only a weak signal about congregational involvement. As Hwang and colleagues (2023) discovered, one fairly common category of increasing religiosity from young adulthood to midlife is a *privately*

religious group—people with high levels of religious intensity but low religious attendance. Newfound religious importance without an accompanying rise in religious attendance would be consistent with the mediation account, where merely private expressions of religion fail to translate into volunteering because they do not include the enabling, reinforcing power of religious communities.

A second possibility is that those increasing in religiosity from childhood to midlife attend church at rates comparable to those who have been highly religious since childhood but that some *other* aspect of long-term religiosity—perhaps wider and deeper inter- and intra-congregational networks or simply a stronger, more natural "feel" for the religiously imbued volunteer role—is what drives up volunteering. This would imply that a mechanism *distinct from* church attendance explains the volunteering gap between the increasingly and remaining religious.[2] (Though, as we mentioned above, that gap itself remains to be determined; both groups could plausibly volunteer at similar rates, thereby obviating any consideration of mediation).

DATA AND METHODS

Data for the current study come from the Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS), a national study of middle-aged and older adults. MIDUS was initiated in 1995 with a survey of 7,108 English-speaking adults ages 25–74 (MIDUS I). A follow-up survey (MIDUS II) was administered beginning in 2004, with an average follow-up interval of 9 years and a mortality-adjusted response rate of 75%. The original MIDUS participants were recruited between January 1995 and September 1996 from a national random digit dialing sample of noninstitutionalized adults living in the 48 contiguous states. This sample included siblings for some respondents, some pairs of twins, and a city-specific sample. Our analytic sample consisted of all respondents who provided valid information at both Wave 1 and Wave 2 of MIDUS. After removing missing cases through the listwise deletion method, we retained a sample of 3,025 individuals.

Dependent Variable

Volunteering hours. At each wave of MIDUS, respondents were asked to report the number of hours they spent on all types of volunteering activities in the previous year. The measure of volunteer hours assesses the depth of commitment to volunteer work (Kim and Jang 2017). Follow-up questions targeted specific types of volunteering among those who did any such work, asking whether it was done in hospitals, schools, political organizations, or "other." Our primary outcome variable is the *number of volunteering hours* reported at Wave 2 of MIDUS because

[2]In mediation terminology, this would imply a controlled direct effect of religious stability rather than an indirect effect of religious attendance.

we are interested in longitudinal associations incorporating childhood religiosity as well as religious transitions. We took the natural log of the volunteering variable to adjust for skewness (see Mustillo, Wilson, and Lynch 2004; Thoits and Hewitt 2001 for a similar approach). We added a small constant (0.01) to all respondents who reported "0" hours of volunteer work to permit logs to be taken on these respondents. We also included a lagged measure of our dependent variable in the analyses by taking the natural log of respondents' volunteering hours at Wave 1.

Focal Independent Variables

Childhood religious exposure. As an indicator of childhood religiosity, MIDUS respondents were asked at Wave 1, "How important was religion in your home when you were growing up?" The response options were as follows: 1 = "Not very important" and "Not at all important" (Low) combined into one category to achieve adequate cell sizes (reference category), 2 = "Somewhat important" (Moderate) and 3 = "Very important" (High).

Religious transitions. We hypothesized that religious transitions between childhood and adulthood could affect volunteering behavior. At Wave 1 of MIDUS, respondents were also asked to rate the current importance of religiosity in their lives. This variable was classified according to the same scheme as childhood religiosity. To examine religious transitions, we created a five-category variable. The first category represents Stable Low Religious Importance between childhood and adulthood, representing respondents who fell into the "Low" category at each measurement point. The second category is Stable Moderates, who reported that religion was "somewhat important" in both childhood and adulthood. We refer to the third category as Stable High Religious Importance, capturing those who reported "High" religious importance in childhood and adulthood. The final two categories represent decreases in religious importance (a higher religious importance reported in childhood than adulthood) and increases in religious importance (a higher religious importance reported in adulthood than childhood).[3]

Religious attendance. MIDUS participants were asked about the frequency with which they "usually attend religious or spiritual services." This was coded as 0 = "Never,."5 = "Less than once per month," 2 = "One to three times a month," 4

[3]We recognize an element of awkwardness here—childhood religiosity is being inferred from a household-level retrospection, while adulthood religiosity is an individual-level report. That said, childhood religiosity is a direct product of socialization by parents or guardians, and religious exposure is relatively involuntary during the early stages of life (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Knowing the personal religiosity of a 5-year-old is different from that of a young adult transitioning to college or into the labor force—and while we would like to know something of the developing religious identity of MIDUS participants as emerging adults, that information is unfortunately not accessible in the survey.

= "Once a week," and 8 = "More than once a week." This coding scheme follows the approach of Bekkers, Posthuma, and van Lange (2017), assigning values to the frequency of attendance per month. Main results are consistent when toggling monthly score assignments (e.g., 0.25 for < monthly, 6 for > weekly) or if attendance was coded as a binary variable (1 = weekly attendance or more, 0 = all else).[4] We measure religious attendance at Wave 1 to be consistent with our conceptual framework of attendance as a mediator of the relationship between religious transitions between childhood and adulthood and subsequent volunteer behavior.[5]

Covariates

We included several basic demographic controls. These covariates included age (measured in years), gender (female = 1, male = 0), and race (white = 1, all other races = 0). We also considered which MIDUS sample the respondents originated from, contrasting the main random digit dialing sample (RDD) with respondents in the sibling, twin, and city oversample (each sample assigned a dummy code). Additional analyses found that neither proportional transitions in religious importance nor average volunteering hours reported differed significantly between the four MIDUS subsamples.

We also adjust for childhood covariates, which may be associated with both childhood religiosity and volunteering behavior. First, we include a dichotomous measure of whether a respondents' family was ever on welfare during childhood (1 = yes, 0 = no), as financial hardship could limit families' ability to volunteer. We also consider whether the respondent was raised in an urban childhood residence compared to those raised in suburban or rural areas. Finally, we include a measure of parental education, which was measured for the head of the family (usually the father, with mother's education used when father's education was missing). For this variable, less than high school education was the reference category, contrasted with a high school degree or equivalent, some college, or a

[4]We favor continuous or binary variables for the parametric counterfactual mediation models (described below), as these coding schemes are optimal compared to the original multicategory one.

[5]In additional analyses, we made use of the available three waves of data of MIDUS: Wave 1 (1995), Wave 2 (2004), and Wave 3 (2013–2014) to avoid simultaneous measurement of the mediating variable (religious attendance) with adult religious importance. We elected not to use three waves for our main analysis due to large amounts of sample attrition. However, our supplemental models tested the pathway between childhood and adulthood religious transitions in religious importance (both assessed at Wave 1), religious attendance (Wave 2), and the logged number of hours volunteered (Wave 3) on the 1519 MIDUS respondents who provided data at all three waves on our study variables. Supplementary Appendix table 1 presents results from this additional analysis. The results shown there are consistent with the results shown in table 4 of the main paper. Therefore, we can be confident that the results we report below are not being driven by the exposure (change in religious importance between childhood and adulthood) and mediator (religious attendance, Wave 1) being measured at the same time point.

university degree. Additional analyses were also adjusted for family structure (1 = living with both biological parents, 0 = otherwise), but the results remained the same, so we elected to exclude this measure from our final models.

PLAN OF ANALYSIS

We test our hypotheses with a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. The OLS models apply robust standard errors and a cluster for family identification, as some of the MIDUS samples were siblings or twins, thus originating from the same family. Mediation analysis in the counterfactual framework (described below) was used to test the mediating role of religious attendance. To address the potential of reverse causality and reduce concerns of confounding (e.g., that volunteering at Wave 1 may influence subsequent church attendance), we included an adjustment for a lagged measure of our outcome variable (volunteer hours) at Wave 1.

Model 1 tests the baseline association between childhood religiosity and volunteering hours, net of all study covariates. This serves as a test of hypothesis 1. No downstream covariates from adulthood are included (e.g., adult socioeconomic status), so the coefficients for childhood religiosity in this model represent "total effects." model 2 considers the relationship between adulthood religious importance and volunteering, net of all study covariates and a lagged measure of the dependent variable.[6] Though this model does not formally test any hypothesis, it is used to document the strength of the association of adulthood religious importance with volunteering before we examine the role of religious transitions. Model 3 then tests the relationship between our five categories of religious transitions and volunteering hours. This model serves as a test of hypotheses 2 and 3, which proposed associations between the direction of religious transitions and volunteering hours. Finally, Model 4 adds in our mediating variable, adulthood religious attendance, to assess its role in explaining the relationship between religious transitions and volunteering hours.

As a formal test of mediation, we use parametric mediation in the counterfactual framework (using the *paramed* command in Stata) (Emsley and Liu 2013). Parametric mediation analyses extend the traditional Baron and Kenny (1986) mediation procedure and use counterfactual definitions of direct and indirect effects. Estimates from parametric regression models were used to construct the controlled direct effect, the natural direct effect, and the natural indirect effect, the latter of which is the focus of typical mediation analyses. The natural indirect effect is calculated with respect to each mediator, conditional on the measured

[6]Additional analyses also adjusted for adult education, household income, marital status, and number of children in Models 2–4, as these factors could confound the association between adult religiosity and volunteering. Results across the three models featured nearly identical coefficients, so we ultimately elected to exclude these controls for the sake of parsimony.

covariates (Valeri and VanderWeele 2013). The natural indirect effect assumes that the exposure is set to some level *a* and then compared to what would have happened if the mediator (religious attendance) were set to an alternative value *a**. Valeri and VanderWeele (2013) suggest that the estimates will take a causal interpretation only in the absence of any residual confounding.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents all study descriptive statistics. Notably, volunteering hours (logged) had a mean of −0.64 (SD = 1.50), with a minimum value of −2 and a maximum value of 2.30. Prior to log transformation, this variable ranged from 0 to 200 h of volunteer work, with a mean of 6.74 h (SD = 13.94). As for childhood religiosity, the modal category was "very important" or high religiosity, with 44.8% of the sample falling into this category. This was followed by 35.8% of the sample falling into the "Somewhat important" category with the "Not at all important" category characterizing 19.4% of the sample. By adulthood, however, the modal category was "Not at all important" (38.3%), with only 24.9% of the sample reporting that religion was "Very important."

Our five-category variable of religious transitions reveals that just over 10% of the sample had stable low levels of religious importance between childhood and adulthood. Just over 17% reported stable, moderate religious importance, and just over a quarter of the sample reported stable high religious importance between childhood and adulthood. Additionally, 18.9% of the sample reported increasing their religious importance between childhood and adulthood, while 28.7% reported a decrease in religious importance over the life course. Finally, the most frequently reported category of religious attendance (measured at MIDUS Wave 1) was weekly attendance (27.8%), with 13% of the sample reporting attending religious services more than once a week. About 20% of the sample reported never attending religious services, while 27.5% attended less than once a month, and about 13% of the sample reported attending one to three times a month. Descriptively, pairwise correlations between religious attendance and religious importance in adulthood is $r = 0.58$, and adult attendance correlates with childhood religiosity with an r of 0.28, which are helpful benchmarks for our proposed mediation analyses.

We would also note that almost half of our respondents (44.4%) came from the main random digit dialing sample, while 16.8% came from the sibling sample, and just under 30% came from the twin sample. Meanwhile, 9.1% came from the city oversample. Demographically, the average age of participants at baseline in our sample was 46.45 (range 20–75), just over half (54.3%) of our sample was female, and 95.2% of our sample was white.

OLS Regression Results Predicting Volunteer Hours (Logged)

Table 2 presents the results from a series of OLS regression models predicting volunteer hours at MIDUS Wave 2. In Model 1, we see that respondents raised in

TABLE 1 Sample Descriptive Statistics (N = 3,025)

	Mean/%	SD	Min, Max
Outcome Variable			
Volunteering Hours, W2 (Logged)	−0.64	1.50	−2, 2.30
Volunteering Hours, W1 (Logged)	−0.85	1.44	−2, 2.62
Focal Independent Variables			
Religious Importance (Childhood)			
Very important	44.79		
Somewhat important	35.80		
Not at all important	19.40		
Religious Importance (Adult) (W1)			
Very important	24.93		
Somewhat important	36.76		
Not at all important	38.31		
Adulthood Religiosity			
Religious Attendance (Adult) (W1)			
Never attends	18.74		
Less than once a month	27.50		
One to three times a month	12.99		
About once a week	27.77		
More than once a week	13.00		
Religious Transitions, Childhood→Adulthood			
Stable Low	10.05		
Stable Moderate	17.02		
Stable High	25.26		
Increasing	18.94		
Decreasing	28.73		
Demographic Covariates			
Age	46.45	12.14	20.75
Gender (Female = 1)	54.31		
Race			
White	95.24		
MIDUS Sample Type			
Main RDD	44.40		
Sibling	16.83		
Twin	29.69		
City Oversamples	9.09		
Childhood Covariates			
Parental Welfare	5.09		
Urban Childhood Residence	47.64		
Parental Education			
Less than High School	39.80		
HS Degree	31.31		
Some college or voc. degree	11.77		
Bachelor's Degree or higher	17.12		

TABLE 2 Coefficients from OLS Regression Models Predicting Volunteer Hours, Wave 2 (Logged) MIDUS Full Sample (N = 3,025)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Volunteer Hours, Wave 1 (Logged)	0.44***	0.43***	0.43***	0.40***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Religious Importance (childhood)				
Very important[a]	0.19**			
	(0.07)			
Somewhat important[a]	0.05			
	(0.07)			
Religious Importance (Adult)				
Very important[a]		0.25***		
		(0.07)		
Somewhat important[a]		0.15***		
		(0.06)		
Religious Transitions, Childhood→Adulthood				
Stable Moderate[b]			0.09	−0.10
			(0.10)	(0.11)
Stable High[b]			0.35***	−0.16
			(0.09)	(0.11)
Increasing[b]			0.22*	−0.18
			(0.10)	(0.11)
Decreasing[b]			0.09	0.05
			(0.09)	(0.09)
Adulthood Religiosity				
Religious Attendance (Adult)				0.11***
				(0.02)
Demographic Covariates				
Age	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Female[c]	0.02	−0.02	0.01	−0.01
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
Race				
White[d]	0.07	0.11	0.07	0.18
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.13)
MIDUS Sample Type				
Sibling[f]	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.14
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Twin[f]	−0.02	−0.01	−0.02	0.01
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)
City Oversample[f]	0.09	0.13	0.09	0.02
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.11)
Childhood Covariates				
Parental Welfare	−0.24*		−0.25*	−0.22
	(0.12)		(0.12)	(0.12)

TABLE 2. CONTINUED

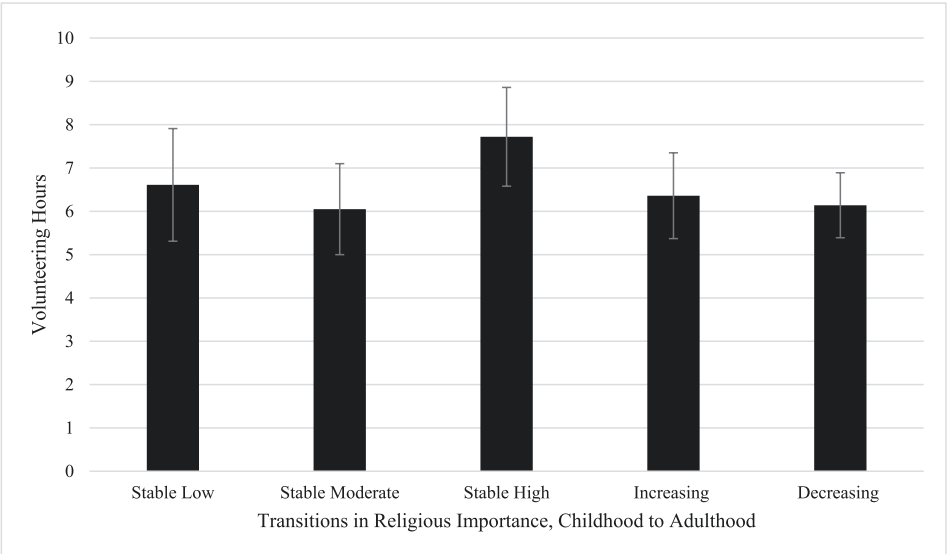
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Urban Childhood Residence	0.01		0.01	0.04
	(0.05)		(0.05)	(0.06)
Parental Education				
HS degree[e]	−0.02		−0.02	0.11
	(0.06)		(0.06)	(0.07)
Some college or voc.degree[e]	0.19*		0.19*	0.29**
	(0.09)		(0.09)	(0.09)
Bachelor's degree or higher[e]	0.29***		0.30***	0.288**
	(0.08)		(0.07)	(0.10)
Constant	−0.39*	−0.32*	−0.40*	−0.40
	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.19)	(0.19)

[a]Reference category is Not at all important.
[b]Reference category is Stable Low Religious Importance.
[c]Reference category is Male.
[d]Reference category is Other Race.
[e]Reference category is Less than a High School Education.
[f]Reference category is Main RDD.
***p <.001;
**p <.01;
*p <.05. Robust standard errors shown in parentheses.

childhood homes where religion was "very important" reported more volunteer hours in midlife (b = 0.19, p <.001) relative to respondents raised in homes where religion was "Not important," net of volunteering hours at Wave 1. Respondents raised in childhood homes where religion was very important volunteered, on average, 1 h and 12 min a year more than those raised in homes where religion was "not at all important." Rotating the reference group reveals that children raised in homes where religion was very important also exceed respondents raised in homes where religion was "somewhat important (b = 0.15, p <.001; results not shown). Both results support hypothesis 1. Moving to Model 2, we see that adulthood religious importance (measured at MIDUS Wave 1) was also predictive of greater volunteering at Wave 2. Indeed, MIDUS respondents who reported religion was "very important" (b = 0.25, p <.001) and "somewhat important" (b = 0.15, p <.001) reported more volunteer hours compared to respondents for whom religion was "not at all important."

Model 3 shows results from a model assessing the relationship between religious transitions between childhood and adulthood and volunteering hours. Compared to the stable low religious importance group, those in the stable high (b = 0.35, p <.001) and the increasing religion group (b = 0.22, p <.05) group reported greater volunteering hours. To make further comparisons across our five categories of religious transition groups, we draw attention to figure 1, which shows the predicted number of total volunteer hours across the transition groups

FIGURE 1. Religious Change and Volunteering Hours, MIDUS W2.
Note: Estimates Are Derived from Model 3 of table 2. All Other Covariates Are Held at Their Respective Means. 95% Confidence Intervals Are Shown.



(with 95% confidence intervals) using the *margins at()* command in Stata 18, holding all other covariates at their respective means. This figure helps to show differences across groups. We first observe that the stable high religious group reports significantly higher volunteer hours (on average, 7.72 h in the past year) compared to all other groups, including those increasing in religious attendance. Those increasing in religious attendance, however, reported volunteer hours that were significantly higher only than the stable low group. In addition, those decreasing their religious importance from childhood to adulthood had significantly lower reported volunteer hours than those with stable high religious importance, but they did not report greater or fewer volunteer hours relative to the three other transition groups.

Building on the results described in figure 1, we applied a Bonferroni correction to adjust for multiple testing because we were performing 10 pairwise comparisons among our five categories of religious transitions. table 3 presents the adjusted *p*-values. As seen in table 3, significant differences were found in the logged volunteering hours between the stable high vs. stable low religious importance group (p =.001), the stable high vs. stable moderate group (p =.001), the stable high versus decreasing group (p =.001), and the increasing versus stable low religious importance (p <.01).

Therefore, from the results in figure 1 and table 3, we observed support for hypothesis 2, that continued religious importance between childhood and adulthood would be associated with more volunteer hours than continued nonimportance and declining importance. With respect to hypothesis 3, we found that increasing

TABLE 3 Bonferroni Adjustments for Religious Change (10 Pairwise Comparisons)

Comparison groups	Adjusted *p*-value
Stable Moderate vs. Stable Low	1.000
Stable High vs. Stable Low	.001
Increasing vs. Stable Low	.010
Decreasing vs. Stable Low	1.000
Stable High vs. Stable Moderate	.001
Increasing vs. Stable Moderate	1.000
Decreasing vs. Stable Moderate	1.000
Stable High vs. Increasing	0.874
Stable High vs. Decreasing	.001
Decreasing vs. Increasing	1.000

Bonferroni corrections are performed on Model 3 of table 2. All other covariates are held at their respective means.

religious importance was only marginally associated with greater volunteer hours relative to the stable low group, thus not directly supporting this hypothesis. Interestingly, those increasing in religiosity also volunteered less than the stable high group.

Parametric Mediation Analyses Predicting Volunteer Hours via Religious Attendance

The final stage of our analysis considers the extent to which religious attendance mediates observed differences between religious stability and change categories. We measured attendance at MIDUS Wave 1, contemporaneously with adulthood religious importance, though supplemental analyses used additional waves as a check (see footnote 5). Results from parametric analysis are shown in table 4. The two counterfactual levels of religious attendance compared were *a* (never attends religious services) and *a** (weekly attendance).

Because four comparisons were statistically significant after Bonferroni corrections in table 3, we tested a series of four mediation models for each comparison of the religious transition category. The first comparison shown in table 4 is between the Stable High ($a^* = 0$) versus Stable Low religious transition groups ($a^* = 1$). As shown in Column A of table 4, stable high religious importance has a significant natural indirect effect through religious attendance ($b = 0.32$, $p < .001$). This implies that logged volunteering hours would increase by 0.32 for the stable high group if religious attendance levels were changed from the level associated with the stable low-importance group to the level associated with the stable high-importance group. This translates into approximately 1.38 more h of volunteering per year, net of the previous waves' volunteer hours. To put this counterfactual worship attendance change into context, the average religious attendance score of the stable high religious importance group is 4.49, which

TABLE 4 Parametric Mediation Analyses for Religious Change→Religious Attendance (W1) Predicting Volunteering (Logged), W2 (N = 3,025)

	A Stable high vs. stable low	B Stable high vs. stable moderate	C Stable high vs. increasing	D Stable high vs. decreasing
Controlled Direct Effect	0.13	0.08	0.07	0.05
Natural Direct Effect	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.05
Natural Indirect Effect	0.32***	0.13***	0.19***	0.06***
Total Effect	0.37***	0.17***	0.24***	0.11***

Estimates are derived from a model adjusting for all study covariates.
***p <.001;
**p<.01;
*p <.05 (two-tailed tests).

corresponds to weekly attendance, compared with only 0.50 (roughly once-a-year attendance) in the stable low religious importance group.

Moving to Column B of table 4, we compare the Stable High (a^* = 0) versus Stable Moderate (a^* = 1) religious transition groups. As in Column A, we see that stable high religious importance has a significant natural indirect effect of 0.13 (p <.001). Indeed, logged volunteer hours would increase by 0.13 for the stable high group if religious attendance levels were changed from the level associated with the stable low-importance group to the level associated with the stable high-importance group, corresponding to 1.14 raw volunteer hours. The average stable moderate respondent had a religious attendance score of 1.51 (less than monthly attendance), compared to an average score corresponding to weekly attendance for the stable high transition group.

The comparison between the stable high group and those increasing in religious importance is depicted in Column C. The results show evidence of a significant natural indirect effect (b = 0.19, p <.001). This converts to roughly 1.21 more hours of volunteering per year for the stable high group, assuming that such adults attended church at levels observed for the increasing group. Accordingly, the levels of religious attendance were higher for the stable high religious importance group (4.49) compared to the increasing importance group (3.13), the latter corresponding to bimonthly but less than weekly attendance.

Finally, Column D of table 4 addresses whether differences between the stable high-importance group and the decreasing-importance group are mediated by religious attendance. The statistically significant natural indirect effect (b = 0.06, p <.001) supports our proposed mediation argument. The natural indirect effect translates into about 1.06 h more of volunteering per year among the stable

high group, should attendance frequency be toggled to their level up from the decreasers. Religious attendance levels were only 1.38 among the decreasing attendance group, corresponding to less than monthly attendance compared to average levels of weekly attendance for the stable high group.

We recognize that increases and decreases in religious importance are a heterogeneous group based on starting and ending point. For example, those increasing include people starting from the lowest level of importance and surging to the highest, but also those who started with low religious importance and made it only to moderate importance as an adult. We provide a detailed set of supplementary analyses on this point in Supplementary Appendix tables 2–4. In summary, on the basis of both the main parametric mediation analyses and their corresponding robustness checks in the appendix tables, we find that for each pair of transition groups where there were significant differences in volunteer hours, religious attendance partially mediated the association.

Supplemental Analyses

Specific forms of volunteering. Because our primary outcome variable did not provide specific information about which organizations respondents volunteered in, additional analyses made use of specific questions asking respondents whether they had ever (1 = yes, 0 = no) volunteered in (a) a hospital (8%), (b) a school setting (19.4%), (c) for a political organization or campaign (4.5%), or had (d) engaged in some "other' form of volunteering beyond hospitals, schools and political organizations (32%). These questions were asked of respondents who reported volunteering any hours in the past year. We conducted the same series of models that we presented in table 2, this time using binary logistic regression to account for the dichotomous nature of the outcome variables. Supplementary Appendix tables 5–8 (available in the Supplemental Analyses section) show results for each type of volunteering, with all study covariates adjusted for but not shown in the tables for the sake of brevity. Models also include an adjustment for a lagged measure of volunteering hours in each respective form of volunteering type (e.g., hospital, school, politics, and other) for their respective analyses.

As we observed in Supplementary Appendix table 5, neither childhood religiosity, adulthood religious importance, nor transitions in religious importance significantly predicted greater odds of having volunteered in a hospital. High childhood religiosity was, however, related to greater odds of volunteering in a school (OR = 1.33, $p < .05$) (Supplementary Appendix table 6). For school volunteering, those who reported stable high religious importance (OR = 1.66, $p < .01$) and increasing religious importance (OR = 1.52, $p < .05$) between childhood and adulthood also had higher odds of school volunteering. Recognizing that school volunteering is primarily done by parents, we re-estimated the models when restricting the sample to parents with children under age 18 living at home and found substantively similar results. Conclusions were also unchanged when we adjusted for marital status and number of children.

Results shown in Supplementary Appendix table 7 show no significant associations between religiosity variables and political volunteering. For "other" forms of volunteering, shown in Supplementary Appendix table 8, we see that high childhood religiosity (OR = 1.71, p <.001) was associated with a greater probability of engaging in other forms of volunteering. Stable high religious importance (OR = 2.56, p <.001) and increasing importance between childhood and adulthood (OR = 1.50, p <.01) were both associated with higher odds of engaging in some "other" form of volunteering.

Variation by religious tradition? Finally, we also considered whether the associations we observed in the main text were contingent on adult religious tradition. Some research finds that Mainline Protestants demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement and volunteering behavior compared to Conservative Protestants (Driskell, Lyon, and Embry 2008; Park and Smith 2000). Using the data available in the first wave of MIDUS, we created a modified version of the RELTRAD coding scheme to capture respondents' adulthood religious tradition (Steensland et al. 2000), which contrasted Mainline Protestant (reference group) to Liberal Protestant, Conservative Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, None/Atheist/Agnostics, and Other religion. A series of interaction models (not shown) found that neither the effects of childhood religiosity, adulthood religiosity, nor transitions in religious importance on volunteering hours differed significantly by religious tradition.

DISCUSSION

The central aim of the current study was to assess how religiosity, measured in a life course fashion between childhood and adulthood, might affect volunteering behavior. Leveraging retrospective data from a sample of midlife Americans (MIDUS), we examined how childhood religiosity and transitions in religiosity from childhood to adulthood are related to volunteer behavior. And given the propensity for formal involvement in a religious community to spark volunteer efforts (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Ruiter and De Graaf 2006), we also assessed whether our focal associations could be explained by greater frequency of church attendance.

The results of our study revealed several key findings. First, we found that childhood religious importance was associated with a greater number of hours volunteered in adulthood, net of demographic and childhood covariates as well as hours volunteered at the previous wave. This is consistent with the findings of prior research conducted on more limited segments of the life course (DeAngelis, Acevedo, and Xu 2016; Vermeer, Janssen, and Scheepers 2012). However, a far more novel finding we observed was that *continued religious importance*—reporting that religion was vital in one's childhood home and salient in adulthood—was robustly associated with more total volunteering hours in adulthood. Indeed, the

stably high religious importance group had higher volunteering hours than *any of our other four transition groups*. It is especially notable that the stable high group had higher total volunteering hours than those increasing in religious importance between childhood and adulthood. This suggests that early exposure to religion, when sustained into adulthood, promotes the greatest total volunteering hours into the midlife years. Additionally, the stable high group also reported more total volunteering hours than those who decreased in religious importance. In fact, our results suggest that exposure to religion in childhood, if lapsed over time, is associated with levels of volunteering that are indistinguishable from the stable low-importance group.

Altogether, this pattern of results suggests that while childhood socialization is an important factor, it alone is not sufficient to predict increased time spent volunteering in adulthood. Childhood is often touted as a "sensitive period" of the life course (Ben-Shlomo and Kuh 2002); this tradition is pronounced in epidemiology, but it is also inferred by research identifying parents as crucial role models for faith formation in the impressionable early years (Perks and Haan 2011; Vollebergh, Iedema, and Raaijmakers 2001). Our results, however, suggest that childhood religiosity must be carried forward into midlife if we are to observe any increase in time spent volunteering. Still, there is room to interpret religious upbringing as a "necessary cause," given that respondents beginning life in less religious homes volunteer less, on average, in adulthood than those demonstrating sustained high religiosity—even if they came to embrace high religious importance in midlife. Together, these findings lend qualified support to the "long arm of childhood" idea when it comes to prosocial outcomes.

The third main finding of our study was that greater religious attendance consistently explained each significant difference between the religious transition category in volunteering hours. One striking takeaway from our parametric mediation analyses was that those who rated religion as "very important" in both childhood and adulthood were on average weekly church attenders, by far the highest observed frequency relative to all other transition groups, including those who increased their religious importance from childhood to adulthood. Our supplemental analyses showed that, even after removing people with modest increases in religiosity (low→moderate) who attended religious services far less frequently than the low→high or moderate→high groups, higher religious attendance still explained why the stable high group spent more time volunteering. This reinforces that high childhood religiosity, while again insufficient on its own, may serve to engrain greater religious participation and by extension prosocial tendencies, leaving even those who embrace religion as adults slightly behind.

Before closing, we acknowledge some shortcomings of our study and highlight several directions for future research. First, the MIDUS data contained no information about the number of hours the respondents spent in each type of volunteer organization they participated in. A related and perhaps more significant limitation is that MIDUS measures do not allow us to determine the total number of hours that respondents volunteered for secular versus religious organizations

(though see the Supplemental Analyses). Supplemental analyses showed that high religious importance between childhood and adulthood predicted a greater likelihood of volunteering in schools and for "other" volunteer organizations but was not associated with volunteering in a hospital or in the political realm. The "Other" volunteer category in many cases would include religious organizations, but likely also a range of secular volunteering opportunities beyond schools, hospitals, or political organizations. Some studies argue that religious people spend a disproportionate amount of their volunteering time in religious settings (Galen 2012), where fellow congregants, rather than people outside the church, stand to benefit the most from their efforts (but see Kim and Jang 2017). Yet other studies show that religious congregations tend to be connected to outside organizations, and so even "religious" volunteering has considerable benefits for the larger community (Ammerman 2001; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Our results cannot weigh in on this debate or provide information on the degree to which religious institutions steer people into nonreligious volunteering. Future research would be well advised to study the life course antecedents of various types of volunteering activities.

Third, our measure of childhood religiosity was asked retrospectively, prompting participants to assess the religious atmosphere of their childhood home. This summary evaluation is probably preferable to asking respondents to recall their service attendance, and it certainly encompasses such institutional aspects of early religiosity. Still, having distinct measures for religious importance and attendance during childhood would offer an ideal complement to their dual availability in the adult measurement section. Most importantly, however, the retrospective nature of the data constrains our ability to establish firm causal conclusions.

Future research could also employ qualitative methods to better understand motivations, either religious or secular, for volunteering. Although religious importance seems important for predicting an increased number of volunteer hours, this measure does not allow us to determine *how* religion may influence the decision to volunteer and the amount of time devoted. Future studies could examine, for instance, how long-term religious engagement shapes personal networks and recruitment into volunteer efforts or how life course religious trajectories shape people's receptivity to prosocial messaging.

Finally, we would note that the MIDUS data capture earlier cohorts of Americans (those aged 25–74 in 1995) who were considerably more religious than current generations. The United States has witnessed an increase in the number of people reporting nonreligion over the past few decades (Voas and Chaves 2016). Recent work highlights the diversity of nonreligious individuals and emphasizes the implications of such heterogeneity for volunteering and other prosocial behavior (Frost and Edgell 2018; Speed and Edgell 2023). Results from a national survey by Frost and Edgell (2018), for instance, found that atheists, agnostics, and spiritual-but-not-religious Americans value civic engagement and volunteer for many social and political groups at either similar or greater rates than religious individuals. Further, a growing number of political and community

groups are now oriented to the nonreligious (García and Blankholm 2016). Future research should examine how socialization processes intersect with these trends and shape volunteering in nonreligious households. Manning (2015), for instance, shows that nonreligious individuals are equally as likely to socialize their children into prosocial behaviors as religious parents, even despite the historical marginalization of nonreligious groups. Further exploration of the lifelong implications of various forms of volunteering for children raised in these diverse contexts is clearly warranted.

CONCLUSION

Our results clearly show that experiences with religion during childhood are positively related to self-reported adulthood volunteering behavior to the extent that religiosity is continued into adulthood. Previous studies, mostly cross-sectional in nature, have attempted to parse out the link between religion and volunteering yet have failed to address the effect of religion on volunteering in individuals' lives over a significant portion of their adult life course. Although early exposure to religion in the family plays a role in the formation of both religious and volunteering practices, we find evidence that the relationship between religious attendance and volunteering is dependent on religious continuity past the childhood and adolescent phases of the life course. The ongoing process of secularization in the United States may affect the level of volunteering moving forward, as involvement in religion has long been part of American civic and social life, providing various opportunities for participation in the wider community. Still, to the extent that religious socialization still exists, it is possible that the behavioral and attitudinal patterns established in childhood will carry into adulthood and shape the extent of one's prosociality.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

A supplementary section is located with the electronic version of this article at *Sociology of Religion* online (http://www.socrel.oxfordjournals.org).

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