

Notes on the Substance and Function of Religion / Spirituality in Positive Development during Adolescence and Early Adulthood

Robert W. Roeser, Sonia S. Issac, Mona Abo-Zena, Penina Goldstein, Erin Phelps, Heather Urry, Dan Du, Sara Lazar (2), Shani Ofrat, Inbar Sharon, Amy Alberts, Alan Poey, & Richard M. Lerner

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the role of religion and spirituality in human development is being acknowledged as an important area of scientific study (Oser, Scarlett & Bucher, 2006).

We conceptualize the religion / spirituality construct in relation to young people's social and personal identities (substantive analysis). We then examine how these dimensions of identity are related to positive developmental outcomes during adolescence and early adulthood (functional analysis).

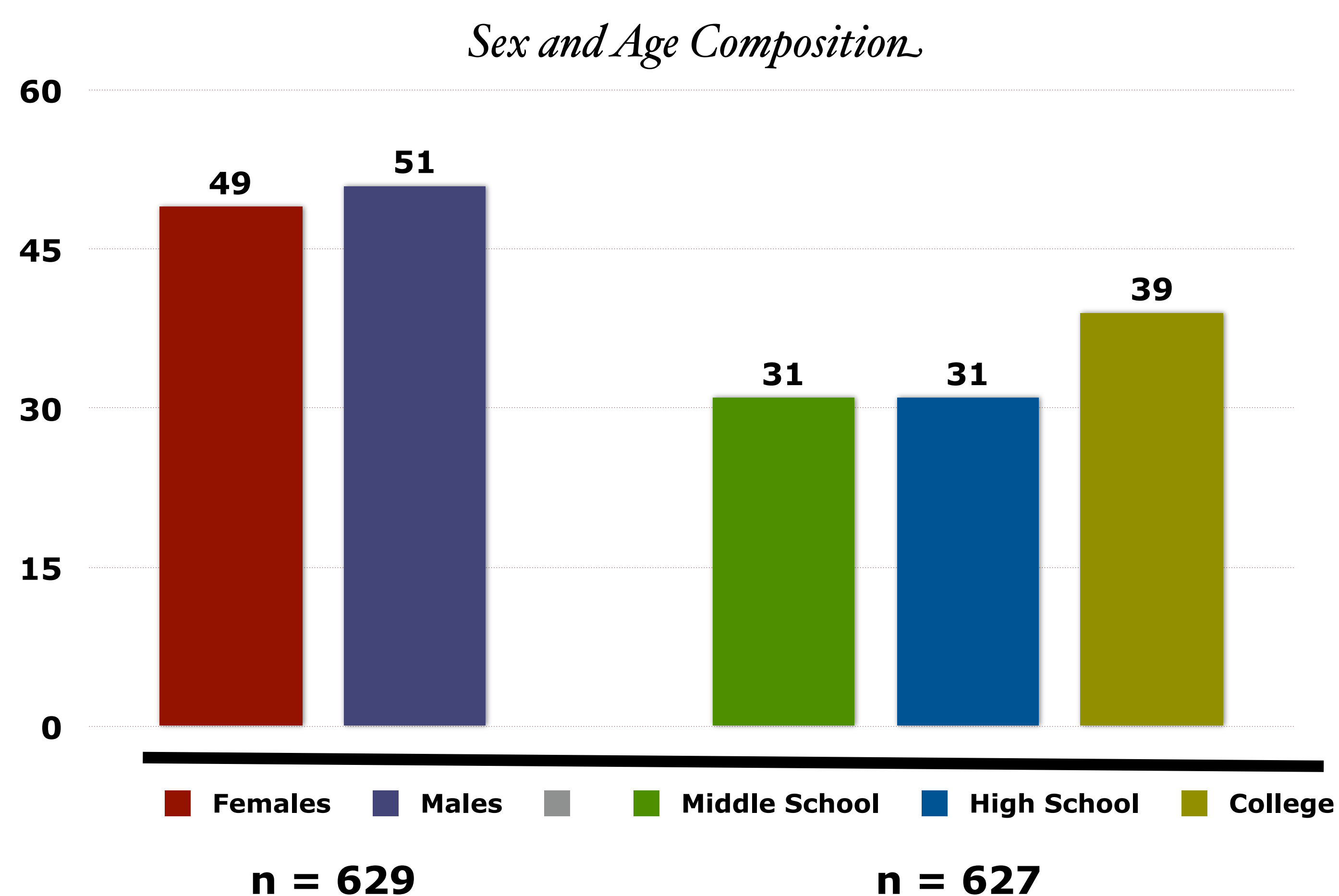
Our main hypothesis is that for a substantial proportion of adolescents and young adults in the United States today, what William James (1890) called *personal religion*, and we call *spirituality*, is an important and vitalizing source of motivation, meaning and moral direction.

Spirituality, whatever else it may be, concerns itself with basic human needs for belonging and mattering, for meaning and truth seeking, and for transcendence of self and service to the world. As such, when it is central to one's identity, then it likely has functional consequences for individuals' mental and physical health, educational persistence, service to others, and capacities to cultivate a purposeful and satisfying life.

SAMPLE

Data for this study come from the John Templeton Foundation-sponsored study, "The role of spiritual development in growth of purpose, generosity, and psychological health in adolescence (Richard M. Lerner, Principal Investigator).

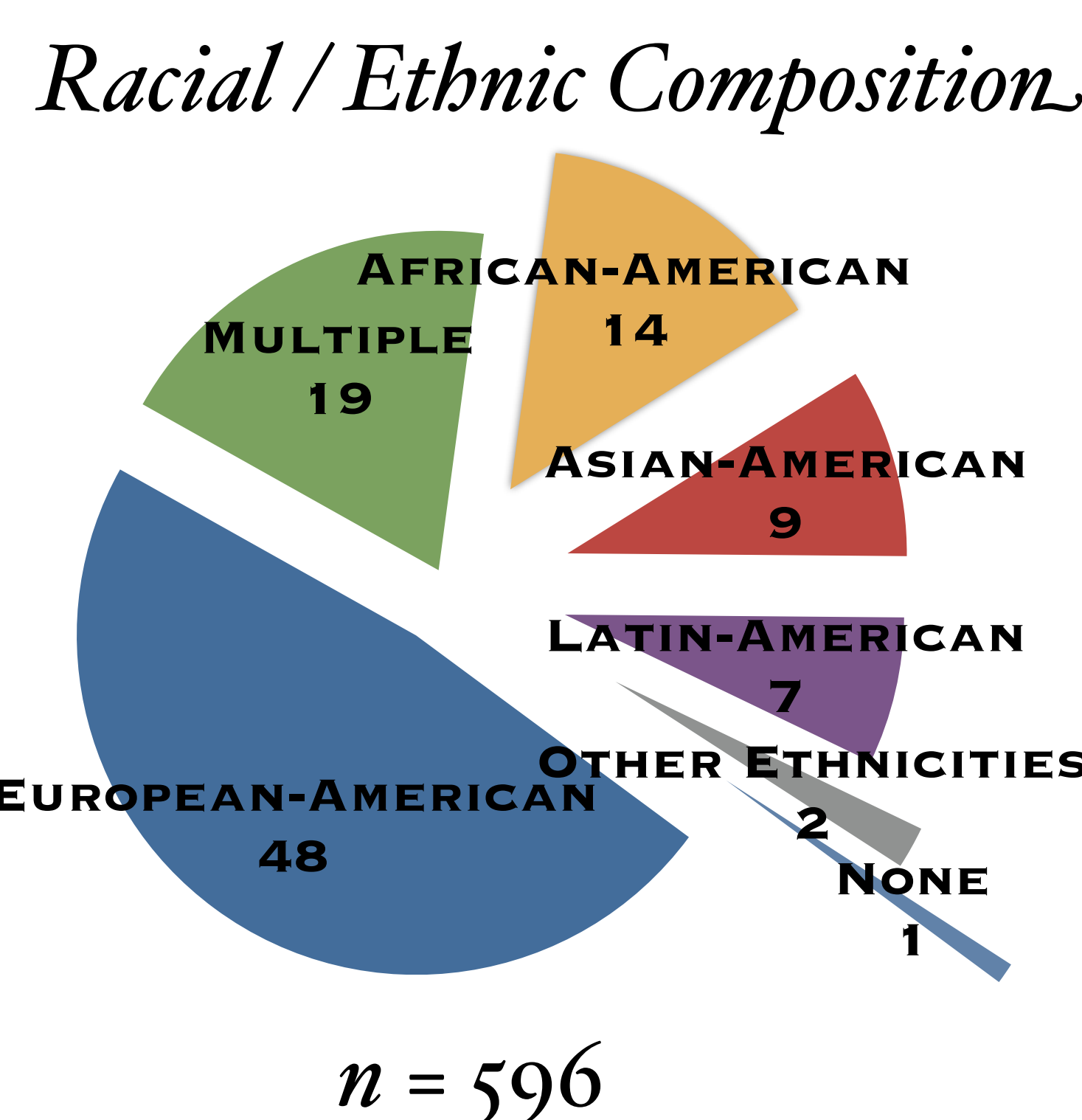
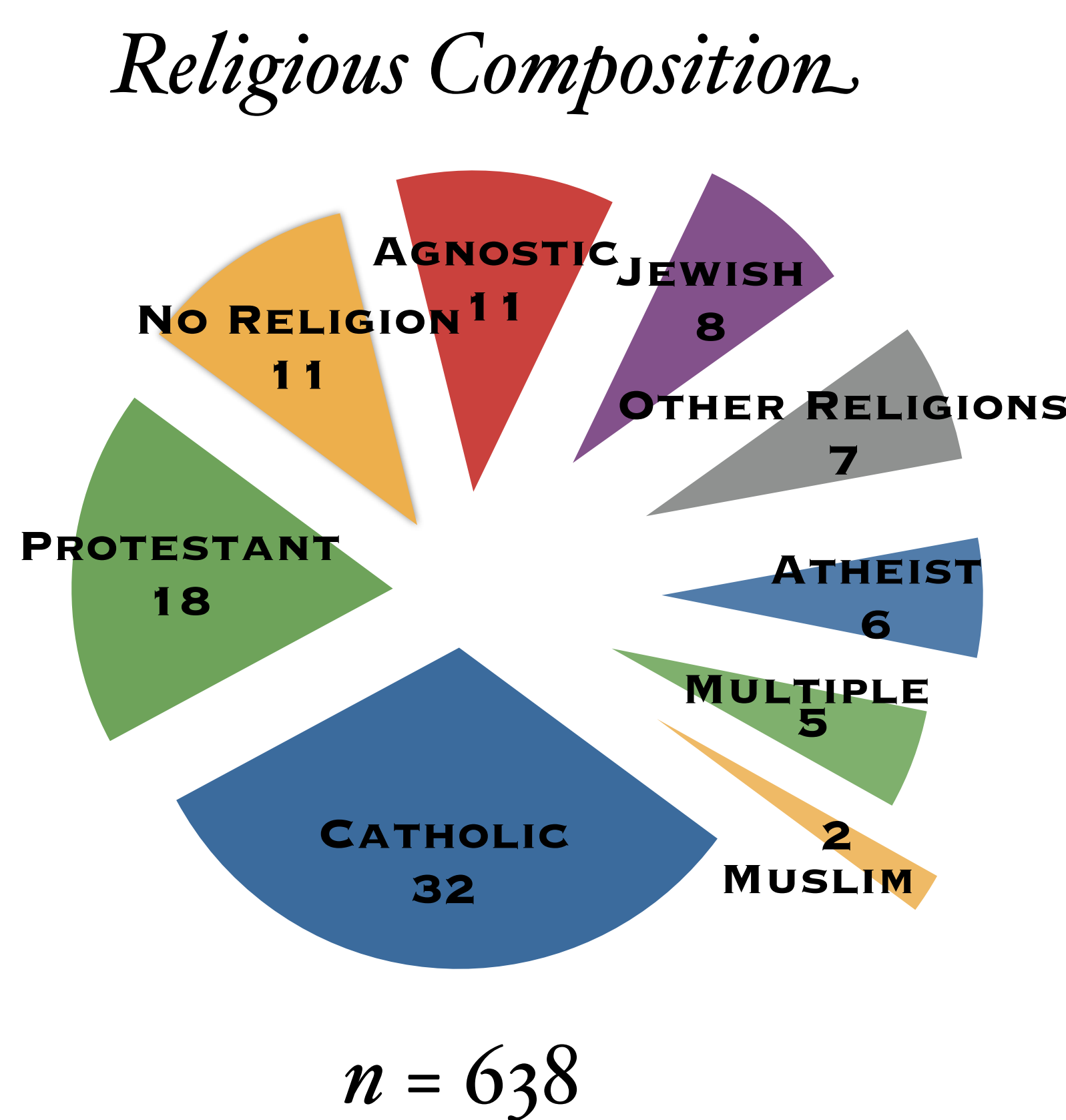
Three age-groups of participants completed surveys assessing aspects of religion/spirituality and positive youth development. The sample was 37% immigrants. Other demographic characteristics of the sample are presented below and above center:



METHODS AND MEASURES

Survey measures were administered on hand-held PDA computers with voice-enhancement for middle and high school students, and via the Web for college students. All measures were statistically reliable at $\alpha > .65$. Identity measures were drawn from Fetzer (1999), the spiritual transcendence measure from Piedmont (1999), and the religious practices measures from Smith (2005). Single items created for this study were used for sense of purpose, grades, educational expectations (plans) and physical health (Roeser et al., 2007).

1 Tufts University
2 Harvard/Mass General Hospital



RESULTS

Multiple regression analyses were used to assess the relative predictor contributions of spirituality identity beliefs, sense of transcendence, and engagement in religious practices on positive outcomes.

	Contribution	Purpose
Demographics		
Sex (1=female)	.03	.00
Middle school-aged	-.09*	-.02
College-aged	.01	-.14**
Parental education level	.04	.00
English proficiency	.04	.11**
Immigrant status (1 = yes)	.02	-.02
Spirituality Indicators		
Spiritual / religious identity	-.05	.03
Transcendence	.39**	.47**
Engagement in practices	.15**	.05
<i>E</i> - Value	16.04**	20.56**
Total Adjusted <i>R</i> - Square	.21	.26
<hr/>		
	Academic Grades	Educational Plans
Sex (1=female)	.13**	.07 [‡]
Middle school-aged	.06	-.11**
College-aged	.26**	.24**
Parental education level	.21**	.23**
English proficiency	.05	.19**
Immigrant status (1 = yes)	-.12**	.07 [‡]
Spiritual / religious identity	-.08	.00
Transcendence	.11**	.00
Engagement in practices	.13*	.15**
<i>E</i> - Value	17.75**	22.07**
Total Adjusted <i>R</i> - Square	.23	.27
<hr/>		
	Well-being	Health
Sex (1=female)	-.19**	-.13**
Middle school-aged	.12*	.09 [‡]
College-aged	-.03	-.09 [‡]
Parental education level	.06	.12*
English proficiency	.04	.02
Immigrant status (1 = yes)	-.05	-.13**
Spiritual / religious identity	.14*	.17**
Transcendence	.01	.01
Engagement in practices	-.06	-.06
<i>E</i> - Value	4.23**	5.44**
Total Adjusted <i>R</i> - Square	.07	.07

[‡] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; Degrees of freedom (9, 505)
Standardized beta coefficients presented.

DISCUSSION

Results indicated significant correlations between spirituality and contribution, purpose, education and health and well-being.

The developmental processes by which spirituality may contribute to these positive developmental outcomes await further investigation. Processes such as social support, social capital formation, meaning and coping, moral guidance, and the development of self-regulation through spiritual practice are all candidate mechanisms.