Mounting evidence suggests a relation between religiosity and positive health and well-being outcomes (George, 2000; Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001). Participation in religion has been linked to positive mental health and fewer problem behaviors, but few studies have focused on understanding the nature of the relation. Why is religiosity/spirituality beneficial in people’s lives? Pargament and colleagues (2000) found that interpreting stressful life events in terms of God’s love, a sense of working with God to solve problems, and giving and receiving care from other religious people is negatively correlated with depression. Intrinsic reasons for religious faith are associated with a decreased risk of depression, whereas extrinsic reasons for religious faith are associated with an increased risk of depression (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001). George and colleagues (2000) suggest religiosity/spirituality provides a sense of coherence and meaning by helping people understand their role in the universe, purpose in life, and thus provides courage to endure suffering. The present study builds upon previous research by examining the relations between adolescent spirituality, achievement attitudes and behaviors, problem behaviors and identity.

This research used data from the longitudinal Maryland Adolescent Development in Contexts Study (MADICS). The quantitative and qualitative analyses reported here were carried out for a sub-sample of 11th graders and post secondary young adults. The qualitative and quantitative components of the study were used to explore the role of spirituality/religiosity in the lives of youth from variable-centered and person-centered approaches. Survey questions about the importance of religiosity/spirituality in their lives are enhanced by in-
depth semi-structured interviews of 35 participants to understand how adolescents view the role of spirituality in their lives. The quantitative analyses were based on three variables: religious beliefs, religious behavior and value placed on spirituality. Religious belief assessed how important religion is in day to day life. Religious behavior indicated church attendance, how often religion was talked about in the family and participation in community religious activities. Spiritual value assessed the extent to which individual’s receive spiritual comfort or support. The qualitative analysis explored the meaning of spirituality in the lives of fourteen adolescents. In taped journal entries adolescents described the role of spirituality in their lives and how it has shaped their identity.

As expected, the quantitative analyses indicated higher scores on religious beliefs; religious behaviors and spiritual value were linked to positive outcomes such as fewer problem behaviors and better academic performance. Religious involvement provides a unique contribution to positive outcomes in this sample. The qualitative analysis explored the meaning of spirituality using discourse analysis to interpret adolescent journal entries. Spirituality helps adolescents cope with hard times, provides meaning in their lives, promotes positive values and supplies a positive caring community. Adolescents also describe their spirituality as shaping their identities and providing guidance in decision-making.