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Lori Wright
UNH Media Relations

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New Book Provides Unprecedented Look At Role Of Religion Over A Lifetime

Contact: [Lori Wright](mailto:Lori.Wright@unh.edu)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

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EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Michele Dillon can be reached for interviews at michele.dillon@unh.edu, 781-239-3552 (home) or 617-899-8298 (cell).

RADIO JOURNALISTS: If you would like to participate in a Radio Media Tour with Michele Dillon on Wednesday, May 23, 2007, please contact Ted Birkey at MultiVu at 212-782-2439 to schedule a time for your interview.

DURHAM, N.H. – A new book by University of New Hampshire Professor Michele Dillon provides an unprecedented portrait of the dynamic role religion plays in the everyday experiences of Americans over the course of their lifetime.

"In the Course of a Lifetime" (University of California Press) relies on a unique 60-year study of close to 200 mostly Protestant and Catholic men and women born in the 1920s. The participants were interviewed first in adolescence and then again in the 1950s, 1970s, 1980s and late 1990s. Drawing on these extensive first-person interviews, the researchers paint a picture of the place of religion in people's lives and how it intertwines with their everyday experiences over time as well as with broader cultural changes, aging, and transitions in the life course.

Most longitudinal studies compare the responses of different groups people interviewed at different times about the same topics. The two studies used by Dillon and co-author Paul Wink of Wellesley College -- the Berkeley Guidance and Oakland Growth studies established by the Institute of Human Development at UC Berkeley -- provide rare, detailed data from interviews with the same group of people over their lifetime.

"As our data from the 1930s through the 1990s show, there is much autonomy in how Americans construe religion, church, and the sacred. At the same time, though it is not heavy-handed, religion matters a great deal in many people's lives, adding texture and meaning to their everyday reality, anchoring their personal and social commitments, and buffering them in times of adversity," the authors said.

In looking at the ebb and flow of religiousness over a lifetime, Dillon and Wink found that adolescence is a high point of religiousness for most people. This discovery was exciting considering only a few studies worldwide have the necessary survey data to trace religious change from adolescence to late adulthood. Religiousness dips slightly but remains high through early adulthood (people in their thirties) but then drops through middle adulthood (forties). It plateaus between middle and late-middle adulthood (people in their mid-fifties and early sixties) and then increases as people move into late adulthood (people in their late sixties and seventies).

Adolescents were attracted to church for many reasons, including the social network it provided. Many reported switching churches – and even denominations – because of a particularly endearing pastor, exciting social activities and friendship opportunities. They all also were part of the pre-World War II civic generation of Americans who were highly involved in community activities.

“Our adolescents clearly appreciated the social opportunities for interacting with their peers that church allowed, and, in fact, encouraged,” the researchers said. “There were strong expectations that young people would not simply attend Sunday school classes but also actively participate and assume social and leadership responsibilities in mixed-gender young people’s societies.”

The researchers attribute the drop-off in religiousness in middle-adulthood to parents feeling less pressure to socialize their growing children in religious circles as well as parents encountering increase career responsibilities. “Apparently, as a result of the confluence of children leaving home and newly emerging pressures exerted by work and other activities, our middle-aged participants assigned a lower priority to church involvement. The perceived need for church may also have dimmed because midlife is a time in the life course when individuals tend to see their mortality as still far off,” Dillon and Wink said.

Throughout their lives, women consistently were more religious than men. And conservative Protestants (evangelicals) had the highest levels of religiousness when compared to mainline Protestants and Catholics.

One of the most interesting discoveries of Dillon and Wink’s research is a more in-depth understanding of spiritual-seeking Americans, those who do not participate in regular traditional religious services but who would be incorrectly labeled as secular. The majority of surveys about religious behavior rely on the frequency of church attendance as a measure of a person’s level of religiousness. Those who do not attend church frequently or at all usually are considered to be less religious or not religious at all. These types of results are partially responsible for the debate about whether Americans are becoming more secular.

What Dillon and Wink found is that the vast majority of those interviewed were either religious or spiritual seeking. Instead of relying on traditional measure such as church attendance, the researchers took cues from those interviewed about how they lived their lives and whether they engaged in regular spiritual seeking behaviors, such as meditation. Simply saying they were interested in spiritual endeavors was not enough to be classified as a spiritual seeking person.

Discovering and measuring this spiritual seeking behavior was important, as Dillon and Wink found that people who were spiritual were just as concerned about the well-being of others as more religious people. “Our study suggests that there is more than one pathway to the development of an ethic of care for others,” they said.

And as people age, those who were highly religious fared much better than most. The authors found that people in the twilight years who were dealing with physical ailments but who had high levels of religiousness did not experience the same levels of depression as their less religious peers.

“In other areas of functioning – depression, sense of control, and fear of death – our data showed a more specific role for religiousness. In particular, among those who were in poor health, religiousness emerged as a strong buffer against depression and the loss of life satisfaction and personal control,” the authors said. “These findings strongly support the

common assumption that religious involvement helps individuals cope with adversity.”

