Adolescent Conversion and the Search for Identity
Dramatic religious experiences may occur at any age. Leo Tolstoy experienced his at the age of 50, by which time he was already well known and admired for his masterpiece *War and Peace*. Thomas Merton, who converted to Catholicism, experienced his first profoundly moving religious experience at the age of 19. At the time he was vacationing in Italy, still mourning the death of his father a year earlier (Furlong, 1980). In the intense religious fervor of some revival meetings of the early 19th century, children as young as seven were reported to have undergone conversions:

> Services were held for seven days and sometimes all night. A girl of seven preached from a man’s shoulders till she fell exhausted, a lad of twelve exhorted till he fell and was then held up and continued till the power of speech was lost. (Hall, 1905, p. 286)

Studies indicate that the average age of people experiencing conversions does indeed span a wide range: from 46 in one study (Fren, 1959) to 16.4 in another (Coe, 1900). There is evidence, however, that religious conversions are most likely to occur during adolescence. At the turn of the century, G. Stanley Hall (1905) was the first to describe adolescence as a developmental stage worthy of psychologists’ attention, and he devoted a chapter in his book on adolescence to religious conversions, identifying the experience as primarily an adolescent