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CHAPTER

8 Psychological Perspectives on Religion and Education

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Abstract

This chapter uses a developmental lens to examine how education contributes to the religious and spiritual development of children and adolescents. First, the chapter presents methodological features of research on children's religious development that make it difficult to draw inferences with respect to religious formation, concluding that theoretical perspectives on religious socialization should move beyond static accounts of religious transmission to an emphasis on transforming religious input into a reflective, self-chosen religious identity. It then explores how educational contexts help students develop a religious identity, identifying three areas of influence: (1) the development of religious cognition; (2) students' attainment of spiritual maturity; and (3) the formation of intellectual virtues that contribute to religious tolerance. The chapter concludes by suggesting areas where further research is needed to explore and confirm the role of education in religious identity formation.

Keywords: adolescent development, child development, intellectual virtues, religious cognition, religious identity, religious schools, religious socialization, self-determination theory, spiritual identity, teachers

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Introduction

Psychology is a vast empire that ranges from biological and neuroscience investigations on one frontier to studies of social, cultural, and evolutionary processes on the other. In the domain of religion alone, for example, there have been significant attempts to identify the neurological foundations of religious belief (Azari et al., 2001; Boyer, 2003; Kapogiannis et al., 2009; McNamara, 2009; Newberg, d'Aquili, & Rause, 2001), the cognitive structures that permit inferences of supernatural agency (Barrett, 2013; Leech & Visala, 2011), the role of personality in religious behaviour (Piedmont & Wilkins, 2013), and the role of religious belief in promoting morality (McKay & Whitehouse, 2015), prosociality (Galen, 2012), conflict and cooperation (Norenzayan, 2013). Moreover, there is an emerging science of religious change that trades on themes in social-ecological psychology and cultural evolution (Jackson et al., 2021); and whether human religiosity is selected by evolutionary process or is an accidental byproduct of evolution continues to animate work in evolutionary psychology (Bloom, 2010; Wade, 2009).

The sheer multiplicity of perspectives at different levels of analysis in psychology (Paloutzian, 2017) makes it difficult to identify a unified psychological approach to inform religious education. This does not, however, imply that there is nothing to be gained from investigating the intersection of psychology, religion, and education. Developmental science, with its empirical contributions to the understanding of cognition, learning, and socio-emotional development, has long been a resource to the field of education. Developmental research on religious questions is still thin and there is much more to learn, but there are encouraging leads and exciting prospects for integrative research at the intersection of children's developing religious sensibilities and the educational contexts that help form their beliefs.

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This chapter uses a developmental lens to examine how education, especially religious education, contributes to the religious and spiritual development of children and adolescents. First, we observe methodological features of research on children's religious development that make it difficult to draw inferences with respect to religious formation. More promising are new theoretical perspectives on religious socialization that move beyond static accounts of religious belief transmission to an emphasis on transforming religious input into a reflective, self-chosen religious identity.

To that end, we focus the rest of this chapter on how educational contexts help students develop a religious identity. We identify three areas of influence: (1) the development of religious cognition; (2) students' attainment of spiritual maturity; and (3) the formation of intellectual virtues that contribute to religious tolerance. We conclude by identifying areas of future research that hold potential to enrich our understanding of education's role in the religious development of children and adolescents.

Religious Development and Models of Socialization

Despite over 100 years of research on the topic of children's religious development (Ratcliff, 2007), there has yet to emerge a consensus regarding how religious education contributes to it (Hood et al., 2018). Uecker (2009, p. 353) contends that 'methodological limitations and inconsistencies of the research literature are the primary reasons for this lack of consensus'. To support this assertion, Uecker observes that many studies are limited by confounding variables and shoddy research practices, marked by 'nonrepresentative samples, dated samples, failure to account for the family background of religious-school students, and treating "religious schoolers" from different religious traditions as a homogenous group'. To this list, we might add that most studies are not longitudinal, making it nearly impossible to observe true developmental change or make causal inferences.

Although methodological concerns limit the inferences we can draw from psychological research on religion and education, lack of shared theoretical understanding or even conceptual definitions also severely limits the

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field. Given these limitations, we will draw implications for religious education from broader perspectives on socialization that yield more promising insights on religious formation. In addition, we make an effort to clearly define key research terms and outline theoretical commitments.

Defining Religion and Spirituality

Religiosity is sometimes considered a broad-band construct that is not explicitly differentiated from spirituality (Mahoney, 2021), although researchers have found it useful to do so (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). A standard distinction is that religiosity is to seek the sacred or divine by means of formal religious observance or in institutional settings (for a more specific definition, see Smith, 2017). Spirituality, in contrast, is an experiential project of seeking the sacred or divine. At its heart the concept of spirituality is both
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↳ personal, focusing on individual experience, and transcendent, focusing on the numinous and a sense of connectedness to others (Astin et al., 2011b). Though the two constructs have significant overlap in individual experience, we still find the distinction to be a useful one.

For example, one could be spiritual but not religious, undertaking the search for transcendent meaning and purpose without joining a church, attending religious services, or otherwise participating in the formal activities of a specific religious community. In contrast, another individual might find the source of their spirituality in religious beliefs and practices, or that their spirituality bolsters their religious faith. Thus, although this chapter focuses on education and religion, it also considers the ways that spiritual practices or experiences might contribute to religious development.

Defining Religious Identity

Social identity theory argues that the self-system is a collection of personal and social identities (Tajfel, 1981). A social or collective identity defines a person in terms of the characteristics that are associated with membership in groups. A personal identity defines a person in terms of characteristics that are thought to be unique, distinctive, and individuating. An individual's religious identity can be a personal identity (based on the centrality of religion to one's sense of self) as well as a collective identity as a member of a religious group (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). This religious identity may be assigned like other identity markers (e.g. race, national identity, gender), or it may also be chosen, the result of conscious commitment to a religious tradition which may or may not be the religious tradition of one's family of origin (Grotevant, 1997).

Self-definition for just about everyone is built around multiple personal and social identities that co-exist at different levels of centrality and importance. The same individual can identify with many self-defining attributes, including political party, ideology, lifestyle, sexuality, occupation, sports teams, religious and spiritual commitments (or the absence of these commitments), among many others. How these coalesce to organize personality and motivate behaviour is the target of significant research traditions. A mature social or personal identity in a specific domain is one that is self-chosen, relevant to the individual's sense of self (though its relevance may be context-dependent), and integrated with other identity domains.

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Religious Socialization as Identity Development

Early research on religious development traded heavily on cultural socialization theories that focused on religious behaviour and value concurrence between parent and child as evidence of successful religious transmission (e.g. Dudley & Dudley, 1986; Hoge et al., 1982; Spilka et al., 1975). Even in the last three decades, these static models of religious transmission from parent-to-child have dominated most of the religious socialization literature (e.g. Bader & Desmond, 2006; Francis, 1993; Goodnow, 1992; Stearns & McKinney, 2018),
p. 146 despite the fact ↳ that newer socialization models now predominate in other research domains (Maccoby, 2015). These newer models emphasize transformation over transmission, a mutual process where adults and children are co-creators of knowledge (Kuczynski, 2003; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2003); and acknowledge the active role children play in their own development (Lerner, 2021), which are important theoretical commitments of developmental psychology.

In light of these new theoretical developments, Cohen-Mayalev et al. suggest that religious socialization should be understood as 'a process wherein adults engage children and adolescents in the course of constructing meaningful religious identities' (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014, p. 206). Self-determination theory posits that individuals are motivated to fulfil three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Children are more likely to internalize community values, including a value for religion, when these psychological needs are met by caregivers and teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Meeting the need for autonomy is especially important in the development of identity, with some studies showing that freedom to explore identity options and choose the option that authentically reflects one's beliefs is essential for healthy and age-appropriate identity development (Luyckx et al., 2009; Madjar & Cohen-Mayalev, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Smits et al., 2010), providing evidence that children consider, evaluate, and eventually transform input from parents, teachers, and other adults into their own internalized values.

A model of religious development that is concordant with current developmental research should therefore emphasize how children transform religious input from adults into meaningful religious identity commitments (Boyatzis, 2006; Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Flor & Knapp, 2001). While this predominantly takes place in family contexts (e.g. Mahoney, 2021; Smith & Denton, 2005), educational contexts are also key settings for identity formation (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

This is even true for religious identity. Contrary to popular belief, psychological research indicates that in some cultural contexts education, even higher education, is a boon to religion. In the United States, those who obtain a college education are more likely to be religious than those who do not (Pew Research Center, 2017b). And although social scientists have speculated that education leads to religious decline, international data indicates that this relationship only holds true for European countries (with a few exceptions, see Pew Research Center, 2017a). In many countries, religious individuals lead the unaffiliated in years of schooling, a relationship that is especially pronounced among younger generations in South American and African countries (Pew Research Center, 2016). Since younger generations are becoming more educated than previous generations, particularly in these regions (Barro & Lee, 2010; Lee & Lee, 2016), we might expect to see a re-emergence of the importance of religion for identity formation.

Further, religion and spirituality are important components of an identity that is 'personally expressive', that is, one that the individual feels truly represents their own beliefs and values, the attainment of which is a goal for many individuals (Luyckx et al., 2011). Psychological studies suggest that a reflective, chosen religious identity equips young people to live in a diverse society, have personal convictions, and practise tolerance (Bryant, 2011). In an increasingly global community, this means that developing a religious identity, and figuring out how that religious identity differentiates and unites one to others, are key educational goals.

Educational settings are a natural place to nurture student identity development. Indeed, as Flum and Kaplan
p. 147 (2012, p. 241) noted, 'identity and learning seem to go hand in hand'. ↳ These settings provide students with

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the range of experiences that reveal possible areas of identity exploration but also occasions to test provisional commitments. This also provides opportunities for research to inform practice. Features of the school context can either facilitate or inhibit identity development (Lannegrand-Willem & Bosma, 2006). Autonomy-supportive classrooms, for example, have been shown to improve a wide range of student outcomes including intrinsic motivation, self-regulated learning, task engagement, positive self-concept, and internalization of values, among others (Deci et al., 1994; Flunger, Mayer, & Umbach, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Rich and Schachter (2012) found that schools with identity-supportive features (i.e. teachers who were caring role models and a curriculum that engaged questions of ultimate meaning) encouraged identity development in students. And in two studies of youth in Israel, Madjar and Cohen-Malayev (2013) found that school support for autonomy and identity exploration increased students' identity commitments.

Moreover, cognitive maturity can contribute to an individual's ability to resolve identity conflicts, and religious education may help. Students who are better able to grapple with the complexities of their religion might also be better equipped to integrate religion into other aspects of their self-identity. This is consistent with research demonstrating that other identity changes can precipitate religious changes in adolescence (Lopez et al., 2011; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006) and emerging adulthood (Rockenbach et al., 2012), and that when moral and religious identity are entwined (i.e. through explicitly religious moral education), both identity aspects are more central to a student's self-identity (Kelley et al., 2021).

In light of the role educational contexts and content play in helping students develop identity, we now explore three ways that education can facilitate religious identity development: (1) formulating religious cognition; (2) encouraging spiritual formation; and (3) nurturing intellectual virtues.

The Development of Religious Cognition

The earliest research on children's religiosity focused on the development of religious cognition and understanding, and it is for this reason that it called into question whether children really could be religious (for a thorough historical review, see Ratcliff, 2007). For example, Piaget's constructivist view of how children learn prioritized 'hands-on' learning, unsurprisingly producing conclusions that children's understanding of religious content was concrete and based on their encounters with the natural world (Waite-Stupiansky, 2017). Much of this was compounded by the methods Piaget used to collect information from children (e.g. asking children to draw a picture of God), which lent themselves to artificialist interpretations since they did not provide means for abstract expression (Rottman & Kelemen, 2012). Goldman's application of Piagetian theory to his research with children in England led him to conclude that children were not truly capable of religious thought until adolescence (Goldman, 1964).

Other attempts to characterize childhood religiosity used a Piagetian/Kohlbergian framework to classify stages of religious faith development, once again leaning heavily on religious cognition to determine stages (Fowler, 2001; Oser et al., 2006). Although there is more to childhood religiosity than cognition (see the discussion of children's spirituality later), these ↳ models suggested that religious thinking or judgement was the central component of religiosity, leading Hay and Nye (2006) to observe that such theories tended to dissolve 'religion into reason and therefore childhood [religious experience] into nothing more than a form of immaturity or inadequacy' (p. 57).

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More recent psychological research has undermined these long-prevailing assumptions of childhood religiosity, demonstrating that children 'are able to fluently reason about supernatural agents, intelligently designed purposes, the afterlife, and other fundamental religious ideas well before the onset of adolescence' (Rottman & Keleman, 2012, p. 222; see Barrett & Richert, 2003; Bering & Parker, 2006; Gelman, 2004; Kelemen, 1999, 2004; Rochat et al., 2004; Rottman et al., 2017; Schachner et al., 2017). While still developing, childhood religiosity is not inadequate. Here we explore how education, both formal and informal, guides children to

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think about religious content in the early school years (marked by the attainment and evaluation of religious claims) and in secondary education (marked by post-formal reasoning regarding religious coherence).

Primary Education

Contra the Piagetian assertion that children hold anthropomorphic concepts of God and artificialist views of the world, Barrett (2012) makes the bold claim that children are actually outfitted with cognitive biases that predispose them to believe religious claims. Trading on a paradigm from McCauley (2011), Barrett asserts religious belief is driven primarily by maturation, not socialization, arguing that children enter the world 'prepared' to accept supernatural claims when they encounter them and in fact do so from an early age (Barrett, 2012). Summarizing this work, Eames (2016) uses the term 'innate religiosity' to describe how easily young children develop religious belief with minimal adult guidance.

But there is increasing evidence that underscores the importance of education in religious belief formation, even in young children. In one foundational study, researchers asked children from Christian and nonreligious schools questions about where certain animals originally 'came from' (Evans, 2001). Overwhelmingly, the youngest age group (ages 5-7) chose a creationist account of the animals' origins. This preference for creationist explanations peaked between ages 8–10 and then declined rapidly. This was not the case, however, for attendees of Christian schools, who consistently gave creationist explanations at all ages, unlike their cohorts in nonreligious schools who showed a significant age effect. Evans concluded that a religious educational community provides both the narrative and the context children use to deem such a narrative plausible (Evans, 2001).

Striking a middle way between the Piagetian view of childhood religious cognition and a 'maturationally natural' view, Rottman and Kelemen (2012) suggest that though there are developmental constraints on religious thought, there are also socialization effects, as evidenced by the fact that religious belief tends to peak in middle childhood. A number of studies demonstrate that the development of religious beliefs is subject to developmental constraints like theory of mind, egocentrism, knowledge about the physical world, and abstract reasoning ability (Bering & Parker, 2006; Gelman & Heyman, 1999; Kelemen & DiYanni, 2005; Makris & Pnevmatikos, 2007). Nevertheless, very young children 'do in fact possess the mental capacities to think about
p. 149 abstract religious ideas', though these mental ↳ capacities are still developing (Rottman & Kelemen, 2012, p. 224). Furthermore, children appear to grapple with existential realities and contemplate metaphysical questions, a finding that is demonstrated in the broader research literature on religion in children (Boyatzis, 2013; Hyde, 1990; Rosengren et al., 2000).

Implications for Religious Education

This opens up a broad area of influence for religious education. Since cognitive development constrains religious belief in young children, teachers, and other religious educators can provide cognitive scaffolding to help children attain greater religious understanding. In particular, religious educators influence children's estimation of the plausibility of religious claims. A substantial body of literature indicates that in the absence of perceptual information, young children lean on the testimony of adults to make sense of their world, especially regarding unseen scientific and religious entities (Braswell et al., 2012; Canfield & Ganea, 2014; Clegg et al., 2019; Cui et al., 2020; Davoodi et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2018; Woolley et al., 2004; Woolley et al., 2011; Woolley & Phelps, 2001). Children observe cues in these conversations that indicate to them whether an entity is 'real' or if its existence is in doubt.

For example, McLoughlin et al. (2021) observed parent-child dyads in conversation about two types of invisible entities: scientific and religious. When speaking about religious entities, parents expressed more uncertainty, mentioned variation in people's beliefs regarding those entities, and made explicit claims about their

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ontological status. But this pattern was tempered by religiosity: the more religious the parent was, the less likely they were to express these 'uncertainty cues' regarding religious entities. Their children picked up on this: parents' confidence closely predicted children's ontological judgements of these entities. The authors conclude that 'subtle variation in adult testimony surrounding scientific and supernatural unobservable entities contributes to children's developing beliefs in their existence' (McLoughlin et al., 2021, p. 11).

This pattern holds true even for secondary socialization agents like teachers. In another study of children aged 5–6, those who attended a religious school were significantly more likely to categorize religious stories as 'real' or believe their veracity; school attendance had an even stronger effect than parental religious endorsement (Vaden & Woolley, 2011). This finding has been replicated in several cross-cultural studies (Clegg et al., 2019; Corriveau et al., 2015; Cui et al., 2020; Davoodi et al., 2019), and is strongest when children perceive that there is a consensus from the adults around them regarding supernatural entities, that is, when most adults in the child's life share such a view (Harris et al., 2018).

Teacher language regarding supernatural entities can shape not just children's estimate of their plausibility, but also their understanding of such entities' character. Two studies in the Netherlands explicitly examined the role of teachers in shaping the God concepts of preschoolers and kindergarteners (de Roos, 2006; de Roos et al., 2001). The first study found that kindergarten teachers' conceptualizations of God influenced the responses their pupils gave to open-ended questions about God: the more teachers described their experience of God as close and loving, the more their students used specific religious language in their description of God (de Roos et al., 2001). The second study found that even in the absence of direct religious instruction, the quality of the teacher-child relationship predicted the child's concept of a loving God, and when direct instruction was
p. 150 present, students were even more ↳ likely to perceive God as a powerful, helpful, and loving entity (de Roos, 2006). This finding held even when parental religious socialization was accounted for in the statistical model.

Of course, religious education is only one part of the overall context of religious identity development. This context also includes family beliefs and practices, peer affiliations, and religious congregation involvement, which together make up a religious 'plausibility structure'—that is, the sociocultural framework that makes a meaning system believable (Berger, 1969). Greater engagement in a plausibility structure can bolster religious belief (Ammerman, 2013) and increase identity domain strength and salience (Ammerman, 2018; Ecklund & Park, 2009; Layton et al., 2011; Petersen, 2001). When religious beliefs are shared by most of the child's social world, they become taken-for-granted, part of the 'givens' that govern the context in which cognition develops, and thus are more likely to be internalized by the child (Ammerman, 2018). As Berger contends, 'the reality of the [religious] world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to *them*' (Berger, 1969, p. 44, emphasis in original).

Educational contexts dominate children's time and social worlds, making them a potent element of an overall plausibility structure. Further, teachers have a level of expertise that enables them to more clearly communicate religious content with children (Markus et al., 2019), something many parents find difficult (Smith et al., 2020). And since religious understanding in the early years is constrained by cognitive development, promoting children's cognitive development is another way religious educators can facilitate the development of religious belief. In the way they talk to children, they can reinforce beliefs about supernatural entities, religious truth claims, and miraculous occurrences.

Exactly which pedagogical practices are most effective at helping children develop religious beliefs, however, remains largely unknown, as is religiosity's effect on cognitive development. Does helping children develop a theory of mind via perspective-taking exercises have an indirect effect on faith development? Does the consideration of non-anthropomorphic constructs of God strengthen abstract thought? All of these are topics for future research.

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Secondary Education

While psychological research indicates that cognitive development constrains and enables religious belief in early childhood and the elementary years, in adolescence, the story changes. Several maturational changes prime adolescents for religious growth; some researchers have even gone so far as to propose that adolescence is a 'sensitive period' for religious and spiritual development (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Cognitive development allows for more abstract thought, which in turn allows for the ongoing evaluation of religious claims. One study of religious doubts found that for most individuals, these had initially surfaced in adolescence (Hunsberger et al., 2002), and both conversions and deconversions are more common during adolescence than any other time in the lifespan (Christensen, 1965; Hood et al., 2018; Lee & Gubi, 2019; Streib et al., 2009).

Attending a religious school may be a protective factor against disaffiliation, as several studies have demonstrated (Perl & Gray, 2007; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). Educators can potentially forestall or resolve
p. 151 religious doubts by providing a rationale that makes sense ↳ of religious content, as well as engaging arguments against religious belief. In one longitudinal study of religious doubts among secondary school students in Canada, most doubt was focused on concerns that religion does not make people 'better', that religious scriptures are not infallible, and in response to inappropriate pressure to accept certain beliefs or behaviours (Hunsberger et al., 2002). Further, 'doubting was also associated with an inclination to consult anti-religious sources of information (rather than pro-religious sources), and these styles of consultation also predicted levels of future religiousness' (Hunsberger et al., 2002, p. 255). In other words, students who had doubts were unlikely to bring them to religious teachers, but engaging with religious sources made even doubters more likely to remain religious (Hunsberger, 2000; Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2010). This was true for students who attended both public and religious (Catholic) schools. In a second analysis, investigators found that engagement with both belief-confirming and belief-threatening sources also predicted religious identity achievement (Hunsberger et al., 2001). Teachers may also model how to work through and resolve religious and spiritual struggles, which take a more existential form but can include doubt (Bryant, 2011; Exline & Rose, 2013; Grubbs et al., 2016).

Furthermore, in light of the well-supported finding that adolescents use perceived value to parents as a measure of religious importance, it is likely that the way educators engage religious content is relevant in adolescence as well as early childhood (Flor & Knapp, 2001; Hardy et al., 2008; Okagaki & Bevis, 1999; Saroglou et al., 2004; Smith, 2010; Smith & Adamczyk, 2021; Smith & Denton, 2005; Smith & Snell, 2009). Educators 'model how they relate to the knowledge they teach' (Rich & Schachter, 2012), and this is certainly the case for religious educators. The teacher of religion is not merely transmitting information; he or she is also evidencing a stance towards that information (Youngs, 2021). A critical or disengaged stance can be interpreted by the adolescent as a lack of value for religion, which may in turn contribute to their estimate of the importance of religion.

Uecker (2009) suggests that another way religious schools influence the religious development of adolescents is indirect, through nurturing school community ethos and enabling the formation of religious peer networks: 'in other words, the religious environment fostered by these schools may make a religious life more reasonable to adolescents' (p. 354). Longitudinal research utilizing the U.S. National Survey of Youth and Religion found that school religious climate, including schoolmates' religiosity, was a protective factor against religious decline in adolescence and increased the likelihood of religious growth (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). Comparison between Catholic and Protestant Christian schools in the US found that Protestant school attendance was associated with higher religious salience and private religious practice for pupils than Catholic school attendance, which Uecker (2009) suggests is because 'Protestant-school students receive explicit religious instruction in school in the form of Bible classes and chapel services' and because Protestant schools are significantly more likely to see religious socialization as critical to the schools' mission (Uecker, 2008).

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Another longitudinal study utilizing data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that attendees of Protestant schools were more religious in adulthood than their peers who attended Catholic or nonreligious schools, even when taking into account parent religiosity and their own religiosity as adolescents (Uecker, 2009). The strongest predictor of adult religiosity for these graduates of Protestant Christian schools was the religious environment fostered by the school, leading Uecker (2009) to conclude that
p. 152 'religious environments early in life both serve as plausibility structures that uphold religious ↳ faith and steer individuals into other religious contexts that will serve as vital sustainers of religious faith and practice in later life' (Uecker, 2009, p. 365).

Two large, representative studies of secondary schools in Israel have underscored this mechanism. In one, investigators found that the effect of school identity climate—teacher modelling and school cultivation of the 'whole child'—on identity outcomes (exploration and confidence in meeting identity challenges) was mediated by students' beliefs that their studies are personally meaningful and a sense that the school constituted a positive social climate (Rich & Schachter, 2012). In another analysis of the same data, researchers found that this held true for religious identity development, even when parents' religiosity was taken into account (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014).

What makes religious studies 'personally meaningful' and what constitutes a positive social climate for religious identity development are still questions for future research. Rigorous field experiments and evaluation of religious curriculum and school climate initiatives are rare. But the current research seems to indicate that by engaging students' religious questions, training students to understand the complexities of their faith, and displaying robust value for religious teachings and practices, religious schools and teachers may serve as 'belief-affirming' sources when students have doubts. Best practices in this area are a fertile field for future research.

Reaching Spiritual Maturity

Although the transmission of religious content is a key means through which education impacts religious development, Oman and Thoresen (2003) remind the research community that 'religion and spirituality are not merely compendia of dogmas and codes of behavior ("Thou shalts"). Rather, a central component of much religion and spirituality involves high-level learned skills related to wise living and effective self-regulation' (p. 151). They suggest that religious teaching is given credence through 'observational spiritual learning, that is, the learning of spiritually relevant skills or behaviors through observing other persons' (Oman & Thoresen, 2003, p. 150). Religious educators function as examples of mature spirituality, even as they provide guidance for the development of spirituality through explicit instruction.

Primary Education

Similar to the proliferation of research on religious cognition, children's spiritual development has only recently begun to pick up steam as a research agenda. A number of excellent studies have demonstrated that children are indeed interested in spirituality and have spiritual experiences (Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 2006; Miller, 2016). Researchers in this domain argue that spirituality is the primary experience of religion in childhood (Hay & Nye, 2006; Miller, 2016; Ratcliff, 2004).

This is not to say that spirituality is impervious to socialization efforts. Indeed, Cervantes and Arczynski (2015) argue that 'a primary developmental goal is to gain increased relational competence and interpersonal
p. 153 awareness … to acknowledge the wonder and mystery in life ↳ and to integrate these experiences as meaningful aspects of living' (p. 248). Many studies in this arena have identified that in children, spirituality takes a form that is less about a quest for meaning (although children *do* ask existential questions; cf. Miller,

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2016) and more about connection with self and others. Such connection can be nurtured in an educational environment that takes seriously its role as a primary context for development (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In contrast to the development of belief, which is heavily influenced by cognitive development, Cervantes and Arczynski (2015) contend that 'spirituality, generally, and childhood spirituality, specifically, is characterized by and develops through relationships and cultural contexts' (p. 248). After interviewing English children from a variety of religious backgrounds, Hay and Nye (2006) summarized their findings by arguing that 'spiritual or religious knowing is very different from knowledge of factual information, or speculation about religion. It is much more like direct sensory awareness … [and] may be independent of the growth of intellectual abilities' (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 59).

For this reason Hay and Nye caution that modern educational contexts can do as much to stifle childhood spirituality as to nurture it. For example, since spirituality is holistic by nature,

> the fragmentation of the school curriculum for the sake of efficiency, specialization or the need to improve exam results is potentially very damaging … The temptation to think of one's curricular area as compartmented off from other areas or the personal life of the child can lead to an emptying out of meaning from that area.
>
> (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 156)

Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2017, p. 353) argue that 'many modern schools have become extremely focused on a *very* narrow set of cognitive goals, often to the neglect of the varied interests, talents and more holistic psychological and intellectual needs of students', causing students to experience schoolwork as meaningless and educators to feel pressed to drive student success by extrinsic motivators—'in short … controlling strategies often become the predominant approach to producing learning'. Such strategies are incompatible with student spiritual development and often tend to limit the very learning they sought to produce.

Implications for Religious Education

Hay and Nye (2006) conclude their study by providing suggestions and examples for how teachers can nurture children's spirituality. They suggest that a teacher can help children explore different ways of seeing and knowing through classroom practices that encourage authenticity, individuality, and respect for cultural differences. Teachers can also engage children in mindfulness practices as tools for encouraging students' personal awareness, empathy, and compassion, which help them to maintain healthy relationships and resist the isolated individualism that characterizes modern society. Finally, by becoming aware of the social and political dimensions of spirituality (that is, its ethical implications), teachers can help students develop a holistic understanding of how their studies relate to the rest of their lives. Many of these suggestions have been supported by subsequent studies of educational motivation in a wide variety of settings, including different cultures and ages, urban and rural settings, and public and private schools (for a review, including practical suggestions, see Ryan & Deci, 2017, pp. 351–381).

p. 154 The social and political dimensions of spiritual development underscore that 'spirituality quite evidently is not the preserve of religious education' (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 157), but should instead permeate the entirety of the school curriculum as well as administration and structure, creating a school ethos. Community values and rituals are especially effective at nurturing children's spirituality and are something that many religious schools, particularly Catholic schools, include as part of the school calendar and daily structure (Lapsley & Kelley, 2022). In their qualitative survey of head teachers at Catholic primary schools in England, Johnson and Castelli (2000) observed that head teachers saw themselves as responsible for nurturing spiritual community among teachers, students, and parents for the purpose of influencing students' spiritual development and Catholic identity formation.

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The role of warm, loving relationships in facilitating spiritual growth has also been underscored by findings in the realm of attachment (for reviews, see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Granqvist & Shaver, 2020): an emerging consensus suggests children imagine God to be strong, loving, accessible, supportive, and forgiving to the extent that their parents and other trusted adults embody these characteristics (Dickie et al., 2006; Dickie et al., 1997; Granqvist et al., 2007). When parents do not consistently provide children with loving and responsive care, a supportive, warm, and accepting teacher can compensate by 'fostering an intimate relationship with God among young children. That is, even when a child has negative relationships with both parents, a teacher can positively influence the development of a perception of God as a loving, kind friend' (de Roos, 2006, p. 100). Furthermore, 'young children with a close, open, and harmonious relationship with their teacher showed positive emotions, high involvement in groups and had high self-esteem, which led to a loving, caring God concept' (de Roos, 2006, p. 92).

Miller (2016) suggests that adults also facilitate the development of spirituality through their conversations with children about spiritual topics, particularly by supporting a child's sense of awe and wonder, affirming their questioning and curiosity, and by providing that child with love, acceptance, and guidance. Other theorists have suggested that wonder and exploration, important elements of spirituality, are also key components of a science identity (Glăveanu, 2019; Priest, 2017; Sideris, 2017); thus, stimulating these may help children and later adolescents to integrate the religious and scientific aspects of their identity.

Nurturing spirituality, then, is a way that educators can help a child develop a religious identity: by connecting them to a religious community marked by rituals and meaningful relationships, helping them form emotional connections to a God figure, and encouraging them to question and wonder. The picture becomes clearer in adolescence, where spiritual experiences of transcendence and connectedness play a significant role in identity formation.

Secondary Education

Like many identity domains, the work of developing a religious identity is most evident in adolescence. This is partly maturational, as neurological changes produce emotional sensitivity and attunement to social roles (Pfeifer et al., 2011; Siegel, 2020), as well as abstract reasoning, increased perspective-taking, introspection, and
p. 155 self-reflection, enabling ↳ consideration of possible selves and commitment to believed-in causes. In addition, in adolescence, power dynamics in the family shift, making secondary socialization processes more influential, and secondary socialization agents become significant contributors to spiritual and religious development (Benson et al., 2003; Hood et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2006). This makes secondary education an important context of spiritual growth and religious identity development during adolescence (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

One developmental process relevant to religious identity development is individuation. Individuation is a normative developmental challenge that confronts adolescents with the task of renegotiating the hierarchical relationships with parents in the direction of increasing balance, mutuality, and reciprocity (Lapsley & Stey, 2010). Navigating this process is 'the heartbeat of adolescence' (Lapsley, 2014, p. 10). During this process, adolescents begin to separate from their parents both literally and psychologically, resulting in 'a sharpened sense of one's distinctness from others, a heightening of boundaries, and a feeling of selfhood and will' (Josselson, 1980, p. 191). This results in a greater value for freedom of thought and expression, particularly in Western cultural contexts, and likely plays an important role in spiritual development (Steinberg, 2016).

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Implications for Religious Education

Religious education in adolescence has to acknowledge this desire for control over one's own thoughts, feelings, and decisions if it wants to effectively engage students' religious identity development (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Schachter & Rich, 2011). In a study conducted in Israel by Schachter and team, affirming student exploration and agency was one way that teachers impacted student identity development, mediating between their care for students and function as role models and student identity outcomes (Rich & Schachter, 2012). Another way teachers contributed to student religious identity was by creating a non-alienating religious atmosphere where students felt free to explore different worldviews (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014). In a second set of studies, researchers compared autonomy support between school and non-school youth settings, finding that although autonomy support in non-formal educational settings was more potent for identity development, school support for identity exploration increased student identity commitment (Madjar & Cohen-Mayalev, 2013).

Templeton and Eccles (2006) use the term 'spiritual identity' to refer to a personal identity that reflects an 'individual's personal reflection about the role of spirituality in his or her life' (p. 254). As such, they argue that a spiritual identity is by definition individual (rather than collective) and self-chosen (rather than assigned, like many other social identities tied to family of origin). They acknowledge that a spiritual identity might be developed through a number of developmental pathways, both religious and non-religious, but prioritize 'personal experience with the transcendent' as the most critical component, closely followed by a developmental context that meets psychological needs for connection (p. 254). Religious schools can provide personal transcendent experiences through religious rituals (prayer, singing, meditation, worship services, sacramental participation, etc.), and the social environment of the school can also meet needs for connection with a religious community. A qualitative study of religious commitment in adolescents from a wide variety of
p. 156 religious traditions also found that rituals and community were important 'anchors' of adolescent ↳ religiosity, mentioned by adolescents as elements that gave their religious affiliation deeper meaning and identity salience (Layton et al., 2011).

The development of a religious identity, like any other identity domain, may go through a period of moratorium where religious individuals suspend their commitment to a particular religious group while they explore their options (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Schwartz et al., 2005). During this time, however, adolescents raised in a religious context might spend more time engaging in 'exploration in depth' (deeply considering the religious tradition of their families) rather than in 'breadth' (exploring other traditions) (Hunsberger et al., 2001; Luyckx et al., 2011). This is especially true when the religious identity is entwined with other identity markers, especially ethnic and racial ones, which undergo a similar process of in-depth exploration (Jacob, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2014; Seol & Lee, 2012; Soehl, 2017; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; van de Pol & van Tubergen, 2014). Supporting this process by allowing for freedom of expression, even in an educational context, makes it more likely that an adolescent will integrate the religious community's spiritual values into their own spiritual identity.

The development of a chosen rather than assigned identity will require reflection and perhaps some religious or spiritual struggle (Kelley, 2020) as adolescents develop a worldview, a crucial component for identity development (Erikson, 1968). Secondary teachers who encourage religious exploration and questioning appear to encourage worldview development and help students to resolve spiritual struggles. One study in the Netherlands of four religious secondary schools (all Protestant Christian, although some had substantial Muslim enrolment) found that students who agreed with the statement 'at school I learn more about different world views' showed higher evidence of religious commitment and exploration (Bertram-Troost et al., 2009), and religious post-secondary education that engages other religious traditions appears to result in increased faith for its students (Burge, 2020), an effect that is likely present in adolescence but under-studied.

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In light of the primacy of observational learning, particularly for spirituality, Oman and Thoresen (2003) suggest that modelling is another critical pathway for spiritual formation. In one qualitative study of religious exemplar youth from a wide variety of cultural contexts, 96% of participants reported relationships with religious adults were deeply influential to their spiritual development (King et al., 2017). These adults influenced adolescents through offering encouragement and support, teaching and advice, and spiritual modelling. Some participants explicitly mentioned the influence of teachers, even though not enrolled in religious schools. One participant explained that even though his teacher did not share his religion, he was a source of support for the student's spiritual identity: 'He'll talk to you about anything. And he'll just support you. Like, he may not believe in exactly what you believe. He's not Jewish but he talks to me to the end of the day about my Judaism' (King et al., 2017, p. 133).

The Israeli studies mentioned above found strong evidence that perceiving teachers as role models contributed to religious identity formation (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Rich & Schachter, 2012). Similarly, the massive, longitudinal U.S. National Study of Youth and Religion found that one of the strongest predictors of faith transmission was connection to non-parental adults in a religious community (Smith & Denton, 2005). This may even be the case when the models are not individuals the student knows personally, but spiritual exemplars from scripture or religious tradition (King et al., 2017; Silberman, 2003).

The research domain of spiritual development is still a young one, and its explicit connections to educational
p. 157 contexts are few. What kinds of modelling behaviours contribute ↳ to student identity development? How can schools, which are primarily concerned with cognitive development, also support relational spirituality and other ways of knowing? The field is ripe with research questions waiting to be explored.

Intellectual Virtues and Religious Tolerance

Though religious schools have long considered part of their mission to be the inculcation of moral virtues, there is now increasing interest in elevating the importance of intellectual virtues as part of what it means to teach 'the whole child' (Baehr, 2013; Baehr, 2017; Battaly, 2006). Cultivating virtues such as curiosity, determination, humility, and courage as they apply to intellectual pursuits endows a student with 'personal qualities or characteristics of a lifelong learner' (Baehr, 2013, p. 249). But it may serve an additional purpose: teaching children how to live with religious convictions in a religiously pluralistic world.

In an increasingly diverse world marked by division over identity, developing a strong religious identity could be seen as a detriment to human flourishing, something that further divides rather than unites. For example, Jenkins has suggested that 'the twenty-first century will almost certainly be regarded by future historians as a century in which religion replaced ideology as the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 54) and Harris has asserted that 'certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one' (Harris, 2004, p. 13).

There is some evidence that this is the case. Studies have found that religious group membership can predict prejudicial views against other religions or those otherwise considered 'outgroup' members, including racial and sexual minorities; a recent meta-analysis of studies since the American Civil Rights Act of 1964 found that in the US this relationship was declining, but still present (Hall et al., 2010). In a study conducted in Turkey, being primed to think about Muslim religious content increased the likelihood of participants displaying low warmth towards religious outgroup members (Christians and Jews) and sexual minorities (Yilmaz et al., 2016); in another priming study, American Christian undergraduates showed similar patterns of prejudice against Muslims (Rowatt et al., 2005).

But the picture is more nuanced than these studies might initially suggest. Recent work on religion and prejudice has found that the type of religious content used for priming is important for eliciting prejudicial

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attitudes (Preston et al., 2010), and that certain religious practices are effective in reducing prejudice (Hunsinger et al., 2014). A thorough review leads Hunsberger to conclude 'it is not religion per se, but rather the ways in which individuals hold their religious belief' that determine whether religiosity correlates with prejudice (Hunsberger, 1995, p. 113). Further development found evidence that 'endorsement of a fundamentalist orientation, which is characterized by unwavering commitment to particular beliefs, tends to be associated with *higher* prejudice, whereas the quest orientation, which is characterized by a focus on the *process* of investigating spiritual questions, is generally associated with lower prejudice', (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; summarized in Hunsinger et al., 2014, p. 139). The intellectual virtues of curiosity and humility appear to be implicated in how religious individuals develop and display religious tolerance.

p. 158 Intellectual humility, in particular, holds some promise for how individuals resolve religious doubt and remain willing to connect with outgroup members (Van Tongeren, 2022). Religious individuals with intellectual humility are less likely to see difference in opinion as a threat to their beliefs (Hook et al., 2017; Hopkin et al., 2014). They are more likely to practise forgiveness and maintain relationships in the face of disagreement (Rodriguez et al., 2019), and display more cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity (Leary et al., 2017; Zmigrod et al., 2019), all of which may better prepare students to wrestle with intellectual doubts, keep an open mind, own their cognitive limitations, and seek out the influence and opinions of others. In addition, emerging research on the construct of religious judgement, which involves using religious reasoning to make sense of difficult or tragic events (Oser & Gmünder, 1991), suggests that the greater the cognitive complexity and nuance in an individual's religious understanding, the greater religious tolerance they display (Kelley et al., 2022). Intellectual virtues, then, can lend themselves to social virtues in a religiously diverse world.

Implications for Religious Education

Religious education, particularly worldview education, can help students to perceive religious questions and differences in religious belief as a source of curiosity, rather than a threat (Youngs, 2021). There is a substantial body of research associating threats to identity with intolerance (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013; Hall et al., 2010; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Rock, 2004; Verkuyten, 2007). This would explain why in some cases prejudice appears to be mitigated by strong religious identity (Fulton, 1997)—a strong identity is less likely to be threatened.

Many field experiments and a recent meta-analysis indicate that school-based interventions are efficacious for reducing prejudice toward sexual, ethnic, and racial minorities (e.g. Dessel, 2010; Mevissen et al., 2018; Paluck et al., 2021;Stathi et al., 2014). A study conducted in Oman with Muslim 10th-grade girls found this was also the case for religious tolerance. Though 'religion is one of the most salient components of Omani pupils' "identity" ', a school-based programme to learn about other religions significantly reduced prejudicial attitudes toward religious others (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013, p. 466). The authors suggest that 'intolerance towards non-Muslims, and towards the notions of freedom of religious worship and conversion, may be explained on the basis that these participants perceive non-Muslims and freedom of religious conversion and religious worship as a threat to their own identity' (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013, p. 465). Post-intervention interviews with participants indicated that the most notable mechanism at work in reducing prejudice was an awareness of similarities between their religious identity and that of others, which the authors suggest represents a decrease in identity threat (Al Sadi & Basit, 2013).

Higher education research also appears to indicate that mature religious identity formation is correlated with religious tolerance. In the massive longitudinal study, Spirituality in Higher Education in the United States, Bryant found that post-secondary educational institutions 'that expose students to worldview and other forms of diversity—through challenging co-curricular experiences and academic environments in which religion and spirituality are salient—stimulate acceptance of, interest in, and understanding of others' (Bryant, 2011, p. 456). In her study, 'discussing religion and spirituality in class and with professors; having professors who

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p. 159 encouraged discussion of religious/spiritual ↳ matters … and having professors who acted as spiritual role models' contributed to the development of an ecumenical worldview by provoking religious and spiritual struggles, which Bryant conceptualized as the 'crisis' needed for religious identity development. More recent research in higher education has replicated this finding, and emphasized that one key mechanism through which this takes place is the development of intellectual virtues like humility (Dougherty et al., 2022).

Another possible pathway is through the nurture of curiosity and wonder. In a qualitative study of Dutch teachers in religious (Reformed Protestant Christian) primary schools, Markus and team found that nurturing 'inquisitiveness'—a construct that the research team defined as 'not taking a statement, answer, or situation for granted, but asking critical questions in order to deepen one's understanding of a phenomenon, as well as others' perspectives of it' was one way teachers saw themselves supporting religious socialization (Markus et al., 2019, p. 520). According to their participants, 'inquisitiveness is essential for people in order to develop their own opinions, to know why they have these opinions, and to be aware of other opinions' (Markus et al., 2019, p. 520).

The research team identified three ways that teachers stimulated student inquisitiveness: (1) helping students realize that there are other religious perspectives beyond the ones to which they have been exposed; (2) encouraging students to ask questions and seek more information about their own religious traditions; and (3) creating space for student questions, discussion, and reflection before giving any kind of opinion or definitive answer. Teachers felt that by stimulating students to deeply question and consider their own and other religious traditions and teachings, they could help students be 'more deeply rooted in their faith' (Markus et al., 2019, p. 520). This echoes earlier research on encouraging identity exploration in educational settings in order to strengthen identity commitments (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2013).

Further research is needed, but these studies provide some insight into how religious education may contribute to human flourishing. By engaging students cognitively, developing students' spirituality, and forming student virtue, religious education can stimulate the development of mature religious identity—one that is chosen, personally expressive, and meaningful to the student, the result of a transformation of religious input into an identity aspect that is owned and integrated with other identity markers. This mature religious identity may enable the religious individual to practise religious tolerance and encounter religious others without feeling threatened.

Conclusion

Suggestions for Future Research

It is our assessment that the field is wide open for quality research on religion and education. Integrative research that applies a developmental psychology lens to questions of religious cognition and identity in school settings is sparse and necessary for inquiry to proceed. Producing quality research not plagued by 'nonrepresentative samples, dated samples, failure to account for the family background of religious-school students, and treating "religious schoolers" from different religious traditions as a homogenous group'
p. 160 (Uecker, ↳ 2009) should be a top priority. These studies should seek to apply newer models of religious transmission, examining how teachers and other religious adults support the transformation of religious input into religious identity commitments (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; Kuczynski, 2003).

The vast majority of research on the development of religious cognition is non-specific to educational contexts. Exactly which pedagogical practices are most effective at helping children develop religious beliefs remains unclear. How children in religious education learn to engage in religious critical thinking and evaluate religious

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claims is an area of research that as yet remains unexplored. Evaluation of pedagogical language regarding religious topics and its long-term impact on religious identity is much needed.

Additionally, the research domain of spiritual development is methodologically limited to mostly qualitative studies, many without explicit connections to educational contexts. Future research can, for example, seek to uncover which activities and values nurture a religious school climate (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006), or the mechanisms through which the transcendent experiences afforded by religious rituals are used for student identity development (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). One research question of interest is whether the integration of identity domains—for example, sexual, racial, or academic identity—with religious identity makes students more likely to resolve doubt and spiritual struggles in favour of retaining their religious identity (Kelley et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2011).

While the amount of research on intellectual virtues is proliferating, very few studies address the specific pedagogy religious schools engage to develop them (Lapsley & Kelley, 2022; Meidl & Meidl, 2013). We suspect that much of this work is remanded to the hidden curriculum or the opaque world of 'school ethos', making it especially difficult to tend since it cannot be intentionally promoted, improved, or targeted for explicit instruction (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013). How religious schools can promote intellectual curiosity, humility, and wonder and integrate them into the curriculum are promising avenues for future research.

Finally, prospective longitudinal studies examining the longevity of any effects of religious school attendance on religious identity are needed in order to address the impact of religious education on global society. Are those who attend religious schools or who receive explicit religious education more likely to display intellectual virtues? Are they more focused on religious questions and the process of religious development than on fundamentalist commitments? Do they display more religious tolerance? Are they engaged in spiritual practices or connected with spiritual communities? Are they engaged in more prosocial behaviour that lends itself to human flourishing? In short, do religious schools meaningfully contribute to religious identity development, and is that something to be desired?

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