

# The Positive Influence of Religiosity on Biopsychosocial Development: Guidelines for an Integral Education

*José David Urchaga Litago, Raquel María Guevara Ingelmo, Fernando González Alonso*  
(Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain)

**Abstract:** This study is based on the existence of the right to an integral education in childhood, which includes the spiritual and religious dimensions. Multiple studies show that, for religious people, religiosity is a fundamental dimension in their personal development. Religious development depends to a large extent on different factors, such as school education and family. However, not every religious context is positive for human development, which is why societies set limits on religious freedom. A summary of the main studies concluding that, in general, religiosity has a positive influence on people's development (e.g., it makes them happier, more tolerant, more resilient, less susceptible to illness, they have more positive relationships, etc.) is shown below. Finally, guidelines are provided for an integral education of religiosity during childhood and adolescence, valuing the differential role played by psychological development, the family context, the educational context and that of peers. This paper advocates the importance of comprehensive religious education for children who are believers; and of the relevance of teaching about different religious realities for all schoolchildren.

**Key words:** religious education, spiritual education, integral education

## 1. Introduction

The starting point is that the right to education is a fundamental and universal right, and that education must be integral (involving all aspects of the person as a biopsychosocial-spiritual being).

An integral education is a universal right. In the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, there were several sections explicitly referring to the right to education and the right to freedom of religion (UNICEF, 1990). From these, the following aspects stand out, which are taken as premises: Every child has the right to education (art. 21), to an education "aimed at: the development of the child's personality, (...) values..." (art. 29.1); together with this, we also find the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art. 14.1), the right to an education where there is continuity in their religiosity (art. 20.3), and where they learn to assimilate and respect religious differences (art. 29.3); as well as the right to religious practices (art. 30). It also recognizes the importance of spiritual development and the obligation of the states to promote it (art. 17, art 23.3, art. 27.1, art. 32.1).

These rights, the right to an integral education (covering all aspects of the personality, including values) and the right to religiosity, lead us to defend that religiosity should be included as a relevant dimension in education

---

José David Urchaga Litago, Dr. in Psychology, Professor, Pontifical University of Salamanca; research areas: religiosity, education, lifestyles, adolescence. E-mail: [jdurchagali@upsa.es](mailto:jdurchagali@upsa.es).

Raquel María Guevara Ingelmo, Dr., Faculty of Education, Pontifical University of Salamanca. E-mail: [rmguevarain@upsa.es](mailto:rmguevarain@upsa.es).

(logically with respect for those who take different positions on the religious question, including non-believers). In addition, States must ensure that personal as well as religious development be guided by respect for differences, having as limits “those prescribed by law which are necessary to protect public safety, order, morals, or health, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others” (art. 14.3). This forces the States to monitor the different religious socializations, including the educational system, because not all personal religious orientations and developments are in themselves ethical, as they can deviate and develop positions which are contrary to universal human rights. It has been proven that the type of religious and spiritual education has a significant influence on the development of individuals, and therefore special attention should be paid to it (Vargas & Moya, 2018).

At this point, it must be said that our position is fully in line with these rights, and therefore, we take these rights as our starting point.

The question now is whether religiosity/spirituality influences a person’s development; and if so, to what extent does it do so in a positive or negative way? This being said, it would be necessary to know whether cultural, social, interpersonal, educational, family factors... influence this development, because it would then be necessary to provide guidelines to positively influence this dimension.

The aim of this research is to provide answers to these questions based on the review of multiple scientific studies.

## **2. Influence of Religiosity on Personal Development**

Firstly, it is necessary to distinguish between religiosity and spirituality (Pargament, 2013; Urchaga, Morán & Finez, 2019). In short, religiosity is embedded within a religious tradition, and it involves a religious group, with its rules, dogmas, traditions... related to the sacred, so it has a “cultural” and optional component, while spirituality is universal, as it includes issues such as the meaning of life, the connection with the inner and outer world (whether I am part of a whole or not), values, search for self-transcendence, etc... which can be presented without reference to the sacred, and without an institutional context. Religiosity includes spirituality.

To the question of whether religiosity influences a person’s development, one has to answer that it does to the extent that people consider religiosity to be important in their lives. Following the classical proposal of Allport (1950) and Allport and Roos (1967), the appropriation of religiosity would become an intrinsic religiosity. Current personality models include religiosity and spirituality as key dimensions for coping with life, and therefore they can constitute important personal traits (Martínez Martí, 2006; Seligman, 2011). There are clear positive examples for the above: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela..., but there are also negative examples, such as religious fanatics, religious terrorists or leaders of destructive religious sects. Thus, religiosity has a significant influence on religious people, and this influence can lead to both positive and negative developments. A good systematization of most of these studies can be found in the specific work published by the American Psychological Association (APA) which is coordinated by Pargament (2013).

Numerous review studies have demonstrated the positive influence of religiosity on the biopsychosocial-spiritual development of human beings. Thus, Koenig, McCullough and Larson (2001) found that in almost 90% of the 12,000 studies reviewed, religious people enjoy better health. Although not exhaustive, the data show that religious people biologically have lower mortality and morbidity rates, less physical illness, lower hypertension, lower risk of certain types of cancer, better immune function, longer life expectancy; psychologically, they have lower rates of suicide, alcoholism, greater ability to cope with death and cancer, more

sense of life, higher self-esteem, more satisfaction with life, better coping with the challenges of aging, and different life difficulties; at the interpersonal-social level, they are more forgiving, more grateful, kinder, more generous, receive more social support, and show greater marital satisfaction, with lower divorce rates. Much subsequent research and systematic reviews support this positive influence of religiosity (Armas & Lopez-Castedo, 2018; Braam, & Koenig, 2019; Dew, Fuemmeler, & Koenig, 2020; Dew, Kollins & Koenig, 2020; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson; Naewbood, Sorajjakool, & Triamchaisri, 2012; Pargament, 1997, 2013; Pérez, Sandino, & Gómez, 2015; Salgado, 2014; Pérez, Sandino, & Gómez, 2015; Pham, Beasley, Gagliardi, Koenig, & Stanifer, 2020; Urchaga, Morán & Finez, 2019; Valiente, 2014).

Therefore, since the influence of religiosity on personal development has been demonstrated, it makes sense to study the importance of the childhood stage in religious development, its characteristics and the most influential factors. There are numerous studies answering these questions, particularly those carried out at the Catholic University of Louvain by Professor Vergote (Vergote & Tamayo, 1980), at the University of Helsinki by Tamminen (1991), and at the Pontifical University of Salamanca by Vázquez (1983) and Urchaga (2005). Based on these and other studies, we will summarize the main characteristics of religiosity during childhood and adolescence and propose educational guidelines for the Catholic/Christian context (Argyle, 2000; Benjamins, 2004; Brusselmans, 1980; Bucher & Reich, 1991; Fowler, 1981; Francis, 1979; Francis & Astley, 2003; Goldman, 1964; Lee & Early, 2000; Oser & Gmünder, 1991; Pargament, 2001; Strommen, 1971; Vitz, 1991).

### **3. Religiosity in Children**

From the aforementioned studies, and always in Judeo-Christian contexts, it can be stated that religiosity during childhood (approximately up to 12 years old) has its own characteristics. The main one is that during this stage, religion fits very well into their psychological development (this is due to concrete pre-operational thinking, as well as to the importance of the affective-relational dimension). As a result, for example, religion classes are highly valued, especially in Pre-school and the first years of Primary School (this will change in Secondary and Upper secondary). For this reason, they enjoy many of the readings from the Bible.

During this period, the child has a “magical perception” of God: they believe God is like a “magician” who sees everything, is all-powerful, and is good. Moreover, they visualize God with “human” characteristics: big, with beards, living in the clouds, etc., reflecting the images they have been shown. This conception will change in adolescence to a closer God, friend, confessor, and later to a more spiritual idea (light, energy, presence, mystery). The child has a “childish” vision of God, and it cannot be otherwise, since they are children. During this period, they see God with characteristics related to the people closest to them (mainly parents, but also other figures such as grandparents, catechists, teachers, etc.): love, affection, respect, rules, care. It can also happen that if there is a bad relationship with parental figures, this can be transferred to their relationship with God, and then God is seen as a punisher, bad, and distrusted, and sometimes they even stop believing (Rizzuto, 1991). Studies show that in order to believe in a loving and fatherly God (who has rules and limits, who tells us that we must distinguish between right and wrong, that not everything is acceptable, that not everything is irrelevant, the God of the Commandments), children during the first years of their lives (especially before the age of 5) have had to experience love, they have had to experience and feel that they have been loved unconditionally, only then can they lay the affective foundations for a relationship with a loving God. We would like to point out that this experience of love, the feeling of being loved, does not only affect religiosity, but all aspects of their lives: their

self-esteem, and their belief that other people can love them. If the child has not been loved, he/she will tend to reject, to not believe in the existence of a loving God (this is clearly observed in children with very problematic childhoods) (Rizzuto, 1991; Vergote & Tamayo, 1980; Vitz, 1991)

On the other hand, it is not enough to be loved, the child must also experience that there are social rules, that not everything is fine, that wrongdoing has consequences, in other words, the child must be educated about limits, about obligations, not only about rights. Rules are easily learned if they are transmitted, through word and example, by the person who respects and loves them. Rules without affection are impositions which are not assumed but feared (behind this type of relationship can be born the idea of a punishing God, who is frightening). At this point, it is important to emphasize that showing affection is not incompatible with setting limits; in fact, those who best transmit limits are those who love us. Love without limits is the basis of a person who believes they have the right to everything, who is overprotected, and therefore will not be autonomous as an adult, will not know how to relate to others, as they will not accept the rules of others and will tend to do as they please, and will also be a person who does not make an effort. It is the basis of a believer who assumes that there are commandments, that we have to work and strive to improve the world in which we live and share.

Finally, we would like to highlight a third aspect which has been found to be one of the most decisive in the transmission of religiosity: the example, the fact that the child sees and knows that his or her parents are religious. It has been shown that knowing that both parents (mother and father) carry out some of these religious practices (praying on occasion, attending mass several times a year, going to communion on occasion) will make it very unlikely that the child will be an unbeliever when he or she is young: people believe what the people we love and respect believe. If during childhood, children do not see their beloved parents practicing, they learn that religiosity is not important to them. At this point, we would like to stress that the key is not so much in the children's practice, but in that of their parents. In that sense, it is important to support all initiatives of family catechesis, and of groups where families practice together, especially when they are children. When a child attends religious services, this should be done not out of obligation, but in freedom, and he or she should be emotionally at ease, comfortable and happy (Tamminen, 1991).

#### **4. Religiosity in Pre-adolescence and Adolescence**

Pre-adolescence (12–14 years) is undoubtedly the stage where most changes occur in religiosity, and yet this period receives little attention. This is due to the fact that psychological changes do not usually emerge until adolescence, but it is during pre-adolescence that the child has ceased to be a child, and has been almost silently reviewing his or her religiosity. At this age, there are major psychological changes resulting from biological ones, which affect brain and body development. The physical aspect is the most visible, from a child's body to an adult's, but there are also great mental changes which allow the pre-adolescent to reason in a different way, especially in a more logical and abstract way (thus, he or she can now understand the laws of physics, carry out abstract problems, etc.). Therefore, at the beginning of this period we have a child who has a childish religiosity characterized by a vision of God as a "magician", where biblical stories are accepted and interpreted literally. They begin to systematically and logically doubt many of the religious ideas, for instance: "how is it possible that if God is good, He allowed my father to die? This leads to doubts about God's intervention in the world, and by extension about almost all religious ideas, which were logically wrong to a large extent because they were childish. During pre-adolescence, this religiosity will be reviewed, but they will do so almost "in solitude", because in this

period their doubts are hardly attended to, since they are barely asked any questions” (Oser & Gmünder, 1991; Tamminen, 1991).

With the arrival of adolescence (14–17 years old), the religiosity of pre-adolescents “blossoms”, “emerges”; and their position towards God will scarcely change throughout their lives. Whereas during childhood almost all children were religious, in adolescence they already show vital positions: believer, agnosticism (I don’t know if God exists), passivity (I don’t care whether He exists or not), atheism (God doesn’t exist). This change, which takes place in a period of 2–3 years, should not be attributed to the people responsible for their religious education (catechists or religion teachers), since this change has been observed in different cultures and with very different teachers and catechists. This does not mean that they do not have an influence, but the major factor in their religious positioning (whether they are more or less believers) has to do, above all, with how religiosity was experienced in their family environment during their childhood, and especially if their parents were practitioners. It has been proven that whether or not they attend a religious school has almost no influence on the greater or lesser religiosity of their students, since there is almost the same proportion of both believing and non-believing adolescents in both types of school. As previously mentioned, the key factor is family religiosity, which we underline once again here. The adolescent believer comes to a large extent from families who believe, practice and where there is a good family relationship. Agnosticism is usually associated with a non-religious family environment, and atheism with an atheistic family environment, or also very problematic family environments where it has been very difficult to experience love. Nowadays, we do not have a clear explanation as to why religiosity is more present in women than in men, but it is a fact that this is the case (Garzón & Barahona, 2018; Urchaga, 2007).

During adolescence, the relationship with the afterlife changes, God becomes more personal, more of a friend, confidant, someone who feels close, who understands and listens, where Jesus takes on great importance, and becomes a life role model. The relationship becomes almost one of friendship, whereas in childhood it was that of a distant God, like a “superhero”. In this period, religious beliefs suffer a “great earthquake” and are almost unsustainable because they are “childish”; and the adolescent believer, instead of entering into a theoretical and theological revision of them, simplifies them into a “I believe in God, Jesus, Friend”, closely related to the practice and the Church. At this stage, the group of friends and catechism classmates is very important, and if a positive relationship is established, it will be the best support during this stage. Adolescents will experience religiosity to a great extent if they find a group of peers with whom they can share their faith. In this period, the relational and emotional dimensions are more important than the theoretical, so that theological-dogmatic content “goes in one ear and out the other”. In this period, they claim that a retreat, a get-together or a similar meeting with a group of friends is more meaningful to them than all the lectures-catechesis they have received. Thus, religion classes, which were highly valued in primary school, are not so highly valued anymore (Tamminen, 1991; Urchaga, 2005).

It will be during youth and adulthood, with a more established personality and consequently, with a sense of life, when people individually demand a greater theological study, and that is why when they are older they sign up for courses to deepen their faith, as they need to understand God more deeply and thoroughly. It will be as adults when this childish God becomes a more spiritual God, where one assumes our smallness and thus our impossibility to see all of Him, but at the same time one becomes certain of His existence, presence and company, while placing oneself in His hands (Fowler, 1981).

## 5. Conclusion

Education must be integral, and therefore has to take into account the religious and the spiritual dimension. Religious education must also be multidimensional, so it must include the different aspects of religiosity (practices, affective, cognitive and interpersonal issues), and therefore a purely cognitive religious education will be insufficient. Religiosity has a great transformation power for the individual, and education must play a very important role in order to be for the better, as it has been generally demonstrated, since it improves biological, health, psychological and well-being aspects, as well as interpersonal and social dimensions.

It has been found that religious education must take into consideration the different stages of human religious development (childhood, pre-adolescence, adolescence and youth) and in its different dimensions (biological, affective, cognitive, behavioral and social). The significance of different factors at different ages has been proven: love, limit setting, the example, cognitive development, as well as the relevance of peers and adults.

Finally, it is noteworthy that not all religious development are necessarily positive, but that they can lead to negative developments (e.g., religious fanaticism), hence the importance of educational contexts. It is therefore concluded that different societies would encourage positive religious educational contexts for those who consider religiosity to be important in their lives. Otherwise, there is a risk of a non-integrated education, as well as of potential negative religious developments (pathological, immature, childish).

## References

- Allport G. W. (1950). *The Individual and His Religion: A Psychological Interpretation*, New York: Macmillan.
- Allport G.W. and Roos J.M. (1967). "Personal religious orientation and prejudice", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 5, pp. 432–443
- Argyle M. (2000). *Psychology and Religion: An Introduction*, London: Routledge
- Armas M. and López-Castedo A. (2018). "El sentido de la vida: factor protector de ansiedad y depresión", *Cauriensia*, Vol. 13, pp. 57–72.
- Benjamins M. R. (2004). "Religion and functional health among the elderly: Is there a relationship and is it constant?", *Journal of Aging and Health*, Vol. 16, pp. 355–374.
- Braam A. and Koenig H. (2019). "Religion, spirituality and depression in prospective studies: A systematic review", *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Vol. 257, pp. 428–438, doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2019.06.063.
- Brusselmans C. (Coord.) (1980). "Toward moral and religious maturity", in: *The First International Conference on Moral and Religious Development*, Atlanta: Silver Burdett Company.
- Bucher A. A. and Reich K. H. (1991). "Annotated bibliography on religious development", *New Directions for Child Development*, Vol. 52, pp. 107–120.
- Dew R., Fuemmeler B. and Koenig H. (2020). "Trajectories of religious change from adolescence to adulthood, and demographic, environmental, and psychiatric correlates", *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Vol. 208, No. 6, pp. 466–471, doi: 10.1097/NMD.0000000000001154.
- Dew R., Kollins S. and Koenig H. (2020). "ADHD, religiosity, and psychiatric comorbidity in adolescence and adulthood", *Journal of Attention Disorders*, doi: 10.1177/1087054720972803.
- Fowler J. (1981). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, New York: Harper and Row.
- Francis L. J. (1979). "Research and the development of religious thinking", *Educational Studies*, Vol. 5, pp. 109–115.
- Francis L. J. and Astley J. (2003) (eds.). *Children, Churches and Christian Learning: A Practical Resource*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.
- Garzón A. and Barahona N. (2018). "Diferencias personales en el perdón en universitarios españoles en función del sexo", *Cauriensia*, Vol. 13, pp. 175–192.
- Goldman R.G. (1964). *Religious Thinking From Childhood and Adolescence*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Koenig H. G., McCullough M. E. and Larson D. B. (2001). *Handbook of Religion and Health*, New York: Oxford University Press.

- Lee C. and Early A. (2000). "Religiosity and family values: Correlates of God-image in a protestant sample", *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 28, pp. 229–239.
- Martínez Martí M. (2006). "El estudio científico de las fortalezas trascendentales desde la Psicología Positiva", *Clínica y Salud*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 245–258.
- McCullough M., Kimeldorf M. and Cohen A. (2008). "An adaptation for altruism? The social causes, social effects, and social evolution of gratitude", *Current Directions in Psychology Science*, Vol. 17, pp. 281–285.
- Naewbood S., Sorajjakool S. and Triamchaisri S. (2012). "The role of religion in relation to blood pressure control among a Southern California Thai population with hypertension", *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 187–197.
- Oser F. and Gmünder P. (1991). *Religious Judgement. A Developmental Approach*, Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press (First German edition in 1984).
- Pargament K. I. (2001). *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*, Guilford Press.
- Pargament K. I. (1997). *The Psychology of Religion and the Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*, New York: Guilford Press.
- Pargament K. I. (Ed.). (2013). *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*, Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Pérez A., Sandino C., and Gómez V. (2015). "Relación entre depresión y práctica religiosa: un estudio exploratorio", *Suma Psicológica*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 77–86.
- Pham T., Beasley C., Gagliardi J., Koenig H., and Stanifer J. (2020). "Spirituality, coping, and resilience among rural residents living with chronic kidney disease", *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 59, pp. 2951–2968. 10.1007/s10943-019-00892-w.
- Rizzuto A. M. (1991). "Religious development: A psychoanalytic point of view", *New Directions for Child Development*, Vol. 52, pp. 47–60.
- Salgado A. C. (2014). "Revisión de estudios empíricos sobre el impacto de la religión, religiosidad y espiritualidad como factores protectores", *Propósitos y Representaciones*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 121–159.
- Seligman M. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, London: Free Press.
- Strommen M. (1971). *Research on Religious Development*, New York: Hawthorne.
- Tamminen K. (1991). *Religious Development in Childhood and Youth: An Empirical Study*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.
- Tsang J., Schulwitz A. and Carlisle R. (2012). "An experimental test of the relationship between religion and gratitude", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Vol. 4, pp. 40–55.
- UNICEF (1990). "Convention on the rights of the child", *UNICEF*, available online at: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.
- Urchaga J. D. (2005). "Evolución de la idea de Dios entre los 8 y los 18 años: Propuesta de un marco teórico general, revisión bibliográfica y estudio según sexo (tesis doctoral)", Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, Salamanca.
- Urchaga J. D. (2007). "Juventud y religión. Aportaciones desde la psicología", in: *Nuevos Valores, Nueva Juventud*, Bilbao: Desclée De Brouwer.
- Urchaga J. D., Morán C. and Finez M. J. (2019). "Religiousness as a human strength", *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 309–316.
- Valiente C. (2014). "Cerebro, salud y espiritualidad: Evidencias psicobiológicas para el diálogo", in: C. Valiente (Ed.), *13 Académicos Ante el Diálogo ciencia-fé*, Madrid: Síntesis, pp. 261–290.
- Vargas Herrera F. and Moya L. (2018). "La espiritualidad como fortaleza humana y su relación con la construcción de sentido vital. Algunas notas específicas para el campo educativo", *Cauriensia*, Vol. 13, pp. 277–299.
- Vázquez A. (1983). "Psicología Religiosa", in: G. Pastor (Ed.), *Temas de psicología*, Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca.
- Vergote A. and Tamayo A. (Eds.) (1980). *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God. A Cross-Cultural Study*, The Hague: Mouton.
- Vitz P. C. (1999). *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, Dallas, Texas: Spence.