Developmental Implications of Children's Early Religious and Spiritual Experiences in Context: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract: Religious and spiritual experiences have implications for many aspects of development across the lifespan, including during early childhood. A focus on religion and spirituality expands beyond a discrete domain of social science (e.g., cognitive development) and involves developmental, social-psychological, affective and emotional phenomena, and personality. This conceptual paper contributes to the literature regarding the understudied role of religion and spirituality in the lives of young children and their families in order to contribute to a comprehensive study of human development. After a concise review of the literature on religious development, this paper draws from the sociocultural perspective and illustrative examples of lived experiences to frame young children's religious participation and gives particular consideration to religious minorities. While the sociocultural perspective captures the range of children's experiences, this manuscript introduces the understudied role of emotion as a motivator for children's selection of experiences. The paper concludes with implications for practitioners and suggestions for future research, practice, and policy.

Keywords: religion; spirituality; religious socialization; early childhood; socio-cultural perspective

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"Is God bigger than a dinosaur?"

"Where did I come from?"

"Where did Maggie *go*?" (asked by five-year olds after they had been told a pet dog had died and been buried)

1. Prevalence of Religious and Spiritual Themes across the Lifespan

Across the centuries, humans have posed such questions of epistemological significance. As evidenced by the above questions, young children also actively question and seek to understand their place in the world and the workings of life around them. These questions are sometimes triggered by an experience and sometimes emerge from children's own reflections, suggesting that engagement at this level of meaning-making is a pancultural developmental experience (Feldman 1994; Oser et al. 2006).

The majority of scholarship that explores religious or spiritual behavior, beliefs, and identity has been limited to the study of individuals who are at least adolescents (Barry and Nelson 2005; Benson et al. 2003; King and Boyatzis 2015). Most empirical studies of religion and spirituality that involve children have focused on discrete aspects of religious and spiritual life, and how they may be integrated with other emerging behaviors and beliefs in early and middle childhood. The scholarship has focused on the emergence of God concepts, particularly how they relate to maternal religious

denomination, attachment, and child-rearing practices (Barrett et al. 2001; De Roos et al. 2001, 2004), beliefs about the origin of species (Evans and Lane 2011), beliefs about evidence, and natural and supernatural beliefs about causality (Harris and Koenig 2006; Legare et al. 2012), the possible integration of biological and metaphysical beliefs about death and the afterlife (Giménez and Harris 2005), and natural and cognitive origins of religion (Barrett 2000). Because many of the studies were designed to explore beliefs within a particular faith community (i.e., Barrett et al. 2001 sampled Christian participants and Evans 2001 studied Fundamentalist and non-Fundamentalist Christians), the research design sometimes intentionally limits the religious diversity of the sample. The omission of an appropriately diverse, complex, and holistic treatment of religion and religious development in the lives of children and families limits researchers' and practitioners' ability to develop interventions that address the child and family unit comprehensively and contextually. For example, health professionals working with chronically ill children may be reluctant to ask parents about their religious beliefs and religious coping strategies (Pargament 1997), perhaps because of privacy or boundary issues, coupled with a lack of familiarity with what questions to ask and how to pose them. Given the largely positive outcomes associated with religious coping, particularly in traumatic health situations, there may be ethical issues in ignoring existing religious and spiritual resources that may support the family (Sexson 2004).

This manuscript assumes that religious and spiritual experiences are central to many aspects of cognitive and personal–social development across the lifespan, including in childhood (Roehlkepartain et al. 2006). One of the general critiques of existing religious/spiritual developmental theories is that they are too cognitive in their focus, and that they fail to account for religious content, context, and the agency of the child, i.e., the child's ecology, temperament, and the socio-emotional dimensions of the child's lived religious experiences and socialization (Grusec and Hastings 2007; Mattis et al. 2006). A focus on how religion and spirituality inform positive youth development expands beyond the discrete domain of social science and inherently involves developmental, social-psychological, cognitive, affective and emotional phenomena, and personality (Hill et al. 2000; King and Furrow 2004). Furthermore, an understanding that accounts for the dynamic and diverse nature of religion and spirituality in the life of individuals requires moving beyond decontextualized studies of religious beliefs and practices, and investigating the historically and culturally situated and intersectional nature of individuals' day-to-day experiences and understandings of their faith-related experiences. This context includes exploring the particular theology or belief systems of the religious traditions in which children are immersed (Tarakeshwar et al. 2003).

This manuscript explores the macro and micro levels of children's religious and spiritual development to forward three objectives:

(1.) To make a case for the study of young children's religious or spiritual practices, beliefs, questions, and religious socialization processes, given their phenomenological existence in children's everyday ecologies.

(2.) To consider how religious and spiritual development may affect and be affected by other aspects of development.

(3.) To use the sociocultural perspective and examples of lived experiences to illustrate and analyze how young children's participation in activities with religious import may inform their development.

In order to fulfill these purposes, this manuscript outlines the significance of the field of religious and spiritual development generally in human development and its role for young children in particular. This paper provides key definitions, as well as reasons for their ambiguity. After a brief overview of the literature on religious and spiritual development, this paper outlines their limitations in accounting for contextual issues (e.g., religious beliefs and practices of parents) and particular religious populations, such as religious minorities. To address these limitations, the sociocultural perspective provides a lens for analyzing how children's development is influenced by young children's day-to-day participation in religious activities and engagement with their religious communities. We highlight the role of

the child's agency in selecting to participate in activities of religious import within the communities in which they are developing. The paper concludes with a discussion of the cognitive, emotional, and social consequences of religious participation on the development of young children, which is relevant to researchers and practitioners working with children and their families.

2. Defining and Conceptualizing the Domain of Religious and Spiritual Development

A comprehensive study of a child's religious and spiritual development requires investigating the diverse array of children's religious and spiritual experiences and children's phenomenological understanding of those experiences. For example, children's religious and spiritual development may include (but is not limited to) development of a spiritual sense, moral reasoning, religious identity, understanding of the existence of God and God-concepts, relationships with the divine, experiences of transcendence, acquiring of religious beliefs, learning and performing religious practices, entering religious communities, and negotiating relations between the self and others. To effectively study children's spiritual and religious development requires an interdisciplinary approach, that considers both macro-contextual factors, such as shared and diverse narratives, theologies, origins, and histories, as well as micro-contextual factors, such as individual families' approaches to faith practices and interpretations, as well as children's own interpretations and conceptualizations of such practices, including their own affective responses to and choices to engage in, question, or reject such practices and interpretations. For example, consider siblings raised in an interfaith family celebrating both Jewish High Holidays and Christmas, and drawn differently to these practices, given their distinct natures, how the children relate to the relatives and other social forces who help enact the practices (e.g., religious leaders, peers, public or media references), and their socio-emotional-cognitive encounters of the holidays and reflections on them.

Currently, the fields of psychology and developmental science have begun to recognize the limitations of studying a narrow subset of the population, usually Western and middle class, and generalizing these findings to other populations (see Arnett 2008; Rogoff 2003; Spencer 2006). A study sampling socioeconomically and economically diverse youth aged 12–25 across eight countries and five continents found that 77% reported having some type of religious affiliation (Benson et al. 2012). Nonetheless, few other studies have explored how the experiences of religiously diverse populations, including young children, across a range of contexts, influence their development. Issues of religious group membership are of special meaning for a variety of ethnic and religious-minority groups, because the religious group may both overlap with and provide a vehicle to promote ethnic group membership (Sirin and Balsano 2007). Therefore, theories of religious and spiritual development should both partition and integrate nomothetic and idiographic components (Lerner 2002), in order to determine what may be generalized across religious traditions and what must be specified within a religious tradition, within a community, or within an individual.

The study of religion and spirituality in developmental science faces the challenge of identifying scientifically tractable definitions of what both terms are substantively and what they do functionally (King and Roeser 2009). Definitions differ because people conceptualize religion and spirituality in different ways, including variations in the degree to which spirituality and religion are thought to overlap. Historically, the psychology of religion literature considered both religion and spirituality under the construct of religion (James 1985). From this perspective, spirituality and religion are inextricably linked and the implication of separating them would be tantamount to reducing religion to a set of ritualistic behaviors and symbols. More recently, though, there has been a separation between the constructs in the research literature (see Benson et al. 2003; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2005), including an international web-based research initiative of the Search Institute with a primary aim to disentangle religion from spirituality (Scales et al. 2014). This shift in the field reflects a shift in the beliefs and practices in the U.S. and the West, including individuals who define themselves as being spiritual but not religious, perhaps suggesting some critique or rejection of institutionalized or organized religion (Fuller 2001). Certainly, between both ends of the spectrum is a range of combinations of

spirituality and religion, with personal and theologically inspired reasons for the different combinations. This manuscript integrates both approaches.

While exploring the nuances of defining key terms is necessary for the field to develop, this protracted debate is not a central focus of this paper. Because religion and related concepts may take different forms in the lives of individuals and individual communities (e.g., spiritual, religious, atheist), it is imperative that researchers agree that, conceptually, there is a desire to reflect the phenomenon in the lives of individuals in all the manners in which it may exist organically. If the phenomenon is narrowly defined, features of religion and spiritual values that are salient to the individual may not fulfill the criteria put forth by researchers. Therefore, this paper applies a definition of development to the domain of religious/spiritual development, whereby an individual grows and becomes more complex and specialized within the structure and function of religious/spiritual values and behaviors.

3. Religious and Spiritual Life as a Developmental Context

How a religion or theory of religious development conceptualizes children may include aspects of the physical context in which the child is raised or visits, child-rearing practices, and the psychology of the care providers (Holden and Vittrup 2009; Super and Harkness 1986). The idea that children are spiritual beings is not new, and most religious traditions explicitly reference children. Religious traditions that focus on purification rituals, such as Baptism or circumcision, imply that there is an original sin or fault that needs to be corrected. This approach can be contrasted by portrayals within other world religions of children as a blank page or clean slate, interpreted as pure or needing to be informed. Buddhist depictions describe souls as bubbles, starting at the bottom of the teakettle and moving up through the universe until they surface and are liberated (Smith 1991). This image suggests that children and adults have the same spiritual capacities, and are merely at different stages of the same cycle. Images are significant in religion, particularly the ones attributed to children. How a religious/spiritual tradition outlines the nature and form of childhood, and marks the passage to what the tradition considers more mature behavior or membership in the religious community, creates the socializing context that allows for children's changing levels of direct engagement in their community's faith practices. As a result, the context for children's religious and spiritual development is mediated by how parents, and other adults and institutions in the life of the child, channel children's experiences to meet particular religious/spiritual goals and expectations (Martin et al. 2003).

Furthermore, from a relational and dynamic systems perspective, positive youth development is constituted by the child's agency and their ongoing interactions with the many systems in which they are embedded (Lerner et al. 2015). This focus on ongoing, bidirectional interactions during childhood and adolescence has reflected the specific contours of religious and spiritual development (King and Boyatzis 2015). During these interactions between children embedded in diverse contexts, and particularly for individuals who may experience dissonance given expectations placed upon them (e.g., religious minority, immigrant-origin, racially or culturally non-dominant children), children and youth may experience religion/spirituality as both a resource and a challenge to their development (Abo-Zena and Barry 2013). Therefore, a holistic account of children's positive development requires investigating the mosaic of traditional, collective, and individual religious/spiritual experiences and socialization goals created, assumed, and implemented in the context of children's lives.

4. Need to Integrate Religion/Spirituality into Lifespan Perspectives of Development

A general critique of early religious/spiritual developmental theories is that their approach "has reflected developmental psychology's broader Piagetian-cognitive hegemony" (King and Boyatzis 2015, p. 981). A narrow cognitive-developmental approach may fail to account for religious content and context, or the agency of the child (i.e., the child's ecology, temperament, and the socio-emotional dimensions of the child's lived religious experiences and socialization). Similarly, Overton (2002, 2006) critiques the splitting of developmental processes, or reductionism, because

the reassembling or recomposing of pieces once reduced does not reflect their contiguous nature or their co-occurrence in space and time. An exploration of religious/spiritual development within the narrow domain of cognitive development may exaggerate its cognitive aspect and may fail to integrate religious/spiritual development with personal–social development and human development generally (Pritchard 1984). As an alternative to reductionist theoretical perspectives, Overton (2006) offers relational meta-theory, in order to generate, inclusive holistic understandings of the world, and methods that are inherently analytic–synthetic. The relational framework promotes a truly multidisciplinary, multimethod approach to inquiry, in which each individual approach is valued not as a potentially privileged vantage point, but as a necessary line of sight regarding the whole. This approach integrates the co-occurrence of the inter-related domains of individuals' development.

In sum, current theories of religious/spiritual development fail to adequately account for the rich variety of the world's religious/spiritual traditions. Because they are grounded in the cognitive-structural approach, current theories of religious/spiritual development share four major limiting themes: (1) they partition the cognitive aspect of religious development from other aspects of development, namely the personal, physical, social, and emotional aspects; (2) they insufficiently recognize diversity in religious/spiritual goals across traditions; (3) they insufficiently recognize the multi-faceted nature of religious/spiritual life within these traditions; (4) and they inadequately afford religious/spiritual value to the guided participation of young children in activities with religious import. Like other aspects of development, religious/spiritual development is both contextual and situated (Mattis et al. 2006). We will now illustrate how employing a sociocultural perspective may help address some of these limitations.

5. Children's Ecological Contexts and Faith: A Sociocultural Perspective

Children of faith, and children in general, actively observe and participate in a variety of spaces (community practices) where they learn to make sense of their social realities. From a sociocultural perspective, children enter a social world of meaning that is created and recreated through cultural artifacts, such as language (written or spoken), and tools, such as television and books (Cole 1996; Lave 1996; Holland et al. 2001; Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1978). Therefore, as part of their development, children learn not only how to act in different social spaces (e.g., school, family, after-school activities, religious spaces/temple/church/mosque/synagogue/monastery), but also to navigate the meanings embedded in the activities in which they engage. To understand children's development and its homogeneity and heterogeneity across communities, it is imperative to study the meaning or function/purpose of particular social actions, and behavior within those contexts (Rogoff 2003). This is especially important since, across communities, not all actions serve the same purpose, nor are shared purposes accomplished through similar actions. Therefore, as Rogoff (2003) points out, "[d]ifferent communities may apply similar means to different goals and different means to similar goals" (p. 34).

From a sociocultural perspective (Berk and Winsler 1995), considering the function or goal of particular faith practices is an important methodological component for any study of religious/spiritual development. Considering the function of particular faith practices captures both the diversity and similarity of parental religious socialization. For example, a young Muslim or Baha'i child may be exposed to the phrase "God willing" or "*Inshallah*," when asking about or requesting permission to do something in the future. In some families, children learn that it means that, unless extenuating circumstances prevent it, the caregiver will try to make it happen, whereas in other families, children quickly learn that the phrase is a discursive pacifier, indicating an unlikely outcome because the caregiver does not will it. Investigating the distinction in the function of this practice is necessary to consider how this particular practice informs a child's relationship to God's will, as well as adults' representation of it. A superficial investigation into only the existence of a particular faith practice (e.g., "how often do your parents mention God's will?"), would insufficiently capture how particular religious socialization techniques influence children's religious and spiritual development within differing religious, cultural, and family contexts.

In different activities and ecological contexts children both bring in and are introduced to different meaning systems. As young learners, children are often guided to participate in particular communal practices (Cole 1996; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 2003). Children's guided participation involves not only what they can and are asked to do, but also what is not allowed or not taught (Rogoff 2003). In the U.S., for example, children may learn that they can pray at home, but that they should not at a (public) school. At the same time, children bring their own meanings and goals to the activities to which they are introduced. In a classroom, when the teacher asks for a moment of silence, one child may nap, another meditate, and another whisper a prayer. Furthermore, children's individual characteristics (e.g., gender, ability/disability), family background (e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religious affiliations and commitments), and their larger society's relationship to religion generally, and their religion in particular, at a given historical period (e.g., religious minority) influence the communal practices and meaning systems that children are exposed to and are able to actively participate in (as well as the meaning they ascribe to such practices).

These early experiences have implications for a person's development over their life span. For instance, a grandmother-in-law of Author 2 shared the changes in her relationship to religion over her lifespan. As a young girl growing up in a rural village in mainland China, she grew up non-religious, and often observed that those who were Christian in her village were persecuted. As a result, even after immigrating to Hong Kong, she often told her own children not to be Christian. However, as Christianity was allowed in her new social context and time-period, her children, when adolescents, all became Christian, as a result of being exposed to it through their peers. In the early 1980s, the grandmother and all her children immigrated to the U.S. After observing that her children and her grandchildren suffered no repercussions for being Christian in the U.S., but rather joined a supportive Christian Chinese community, she decided to be Baptized at age 82. How might the grandchildren understand this?

Children growing up in faith communities participate in a rich tapestry of activities and systems of meaning. As part of their faith, children learn many things, that may include the religious significance or meaning of their own names, a language of faith or liturgical language, sacred spaces, how to talk to God, how to express gratitude, how to say and read prayers and scripture, how to meditate, the meaning of religious symbols, stories of the prophets, heroes and martyrs of their faith, their family's history with their faith, songs, how to celebrate holy days and a (new) religious calendar (e.g., lunar, Sabbath, Badí). Many children also learn to interpret life events through the lens of faith, including how to make sense of birth, death, marriage, life, difficulties, illness and injury, and blessings. Children's daily routines are filled with faith practices and faith purposes, such as decisions on what to wear, guidelines on what to bring as a snack or lunch, and praying/meditating in the mornings, before meals, while traveling to school or sometimes at school, during sports events, presentations, and before exams. Therefore, to understand children's religious/spiritual socialization, it is necessary to investigate not only the symbols, language, and collective practices that children are exposed to and how they choose to participate, but also how children make meaning of such practices in their daily lives.

In summary, a comprehensive account of children's religious and spiritual development requires considering the goals, interpretations, and socio-historical context of the faith practices in which a diverse range of children are active participants. Presently, the empirical scholarship has yet to document the differences and similarities in religious and cultural communities' goals, meanings, and practices, across a religiously diverse sample of children. For example, Lambert and Lambert and Dollahite (2010) groundbreaking measure focused on Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith traditions in the home. As a result, the implications of children's engagement in religious and spiritual practices for their overall learning and development remain underexplored.

6. Highlighting a Sociocultural Approach to Illustrate the Complexity of Children's Religious/Spiritual Experiences

In this section, we present examples of young children's participation in faith practices, that illustrate the value of undertaking a sociocultural approach to capture the dynamic and complex nature of children's religious and spiritual development. Drawing on vignettes from well-known historical figures, as well as from the authors' conversations with parents and children from different faith traditions, we highlight how children engage in meaning-making while being embedded in, and actively participating in, multiple and interacting, historically situated social contexts, including home, the religious community and its theological and broader heritage, and school (Li 2003). While culture and cultural situatedness exist at a macro-contextual level, it is also useful to explore the micro-level contextual ecology of one's developmental niche (Super and Harkness 1986), particularly since cultural artifacts, such as language practices (e.g., *Inshallah*) or religious books, are also used at the individual level. In addition, we present an example that makes clear that an account of children's development must also consider the importance of racism, discrimination, oppression, and segregation on the developmental competencies of minoritized (and majority) children and families (García Coll et al. 1996; Spencer 2006). Next, we present and analyze three vignettes that illustrate religious/spiritual experiences in context. Ultimately, we suggest the sociocultural perspective as a methodology to investigate the richness of children's religious/spiritual development and socialization.

7. The Intersecting and Historically Situated Nature of Spiritual & Religious Development

The following vignettes, while by no means exhaustive, illustrate the historically, culturally situated and intersectional nature of children's religious/spiritual development, as well as the interplay between emotions and religious socialization, and how children bring their own faith lens to make sense of different activities. The vignettes are selected to represent diverse research methods that help capture young children's lived experiences and the meaning-making around them. These illustrative examples draw from descriptions in the extant scholarship, an autoethnographic account, and a case from a practitioner-as-researcher intervention. As children are among the most vulnerable members of a population, the authors have taken considerable measures as a team to review ethical research standards as related to the cases presented. In addition, we have consulted with and received feedback from other scholars, representing different disciplinary perspectives, reviewers and editors, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) members. Given the relative invisibility of children's lived religious and spiritual experiences represented within social science scholarship, we also discussed the ethics of *not* including ecologically grounded, child-centered vignettes in scholarship generally, and specifically when exploring the utility of a sociocultural lens. To ensure the welfare of the children depicted, we have dis-identified the individuals who are not historical figures. Further issues regarding the validity, ethics, and acquisition of consent are discussed within each vignette and also generally.

8. The Case of Ruby Bridges

As a young, Black girl, Ruby Bridges integrated her all-White elementary school by wading through a mob of nearly a thousand people threatening to kill her. Still early in his career, Robert Coles offered psychological support for this vulnerable child and her family. When Coles learned that Ruby spoke to the mob, he asked her to share with him her words. Ruby explained that she had been praying the same prayer for the mob for months: "Please, please, God, try to forgive these people because they don't know what they're doing" (Coles 1995, p. 13). Ruby was uttering the same prayer that Jesus himself made when confronted by an angry mob. While Coles initially thought the prayer may have been a rote memorization with little significance for the child, upon probing he learned that Ruby had a relatively sophisticated understanding of its religious meaning and historical context. In addition, she appropriately applied it to a related situation in her own life. She explained the application of this particular story in the following exchange:

"'You know when Jesus was in trouble, there was a big mob there. And they were ready to hurt Him. And that's what He said. And I try to say the same thing.'

And, of course, skeptically, I pushed her and said, 'Well, Ruby, do you always believe that?'

She said, 'No, I don't always believe that, but I try to.'

'How do you try to?' I asked.

She said, 'I close my eyes and I think of what it must have been like for Him'". (Coles 1995, p. 15)

This 6-year old child was successfully able to de-center herself, and take on the perspective of another person, in order to connect in a very fundamental manner. She did this by combining an ability to imagine, recall, pray, and forgive. These combined activities suggest a considerable level of cognitive ability, socioemotional awareness and regulation, and religious commitment.

From a religious and spiritual developmental perspective, Ruby drew from the resources of her family's religious context to help cope with the challenges posed by her school and community. Ruby was confronted with a broad community that rejected her participation in their collective practice of attending school. This event involved both an interaction between Ruby's own family's characteristics (i.e., their decision that she should attend despite local pushback), her individual characteristics (i.e., her race and age), and the national and historical context (i.e., school integration policies in a racially segregated U.S.). As a 6-year-old, Ruby drew on the experiences of Jesus, a religious figure she had learned about in her community of faith, and employed references from that meaning system to interpret her own situation. Ruby's faith, and her understanding of the life of Jesus, mediated both her actions towards the rejecting community and her own self-regulation. She was able to empathize and draw on Jesus' example, a figure whom she never met, to respond to the crowd in a particularly prosocial manner (i.e., to forgive and pray for them), and to regulate her own emotions (i.e., close her eyes and consider Jesus).

A developmental account that is purely cognitive, ahistorical, colorblind, or religiously blind, would mask the richness and complexity of Ruby's experience. Previous scholarship would likely have interpreted Ruby's behavior as being an example of rote memorization and immature recitation of religious stories, questioning her cognitive ability to de-center, and overlooking her agency and the details of her context. However, we argue that the complexity of Ruby's actions becomes apparent when it is taken into account that she acted within a context in which the majority of the protestors were adults and also Christian. Technically, the majority of the individuals in the encounter had access to the same information. Her knowledge and use of her faith was in interaction with her situation, her being of school-going age, being of a minoritized race, living in a particular geographical location at a particular historical moment, and facing a group of people who were protesting against her. In addition, Ruby's own agency (and religious and spiritual level) becomes apparent when we compare her use of the retelling of Jesus' sacrifice with other religious adults' behaviors within the same context. with similar conflict. For example, the majority of adults do not respond to racial hatred by praying for, and in front of, their aggressor.

9. Religious Socialization, Emotional Development, and Faith

The next vignette draws from an autoethnographic account that analyzes a personal experience in order to better explain and understand broader cultural processes (Adams et al. 2015). Autoethnography provides a qualitative research method, utilized across academic disciplines including education, psychology, and religious studies. As a method, autoethnography uses personal experiences as a primary data source that expands understanding of a social phenomenon by creating "encounters and re-encounters with their memoires, with objects, and with people" (Chang 2013, p. 108). Given the embedded nature of the autoethnographic account within a participatory context, the consensual participation of the involved, and the dis-identified manner in which the individuals in the autoethnography are depicted, there are minimal risks to the human subjects described. Rather,

there is a risk to the ecological validity of understanding religious and spiritual experiences in context, if lived experiences, as depicted in the account, are inadequately reflected in the scholarship.

Consider the group of Muslim congregants gathered after a series of recitations by the *Imam* or religious leader, to participate in the special supplication made at the completion of the reading of the entire Qur'an. Seated on the floor of the mosque with hands raised in prayer, they followed the lead of the *Imam* in supplications for a range of requests and glorifications of God (*Allah*), lasting nearly 30 min. Among the congregants included a three-year-old girl, seated quietly at her mother's knee, who observantly scanned the people around her. During the prayer and extended supplication, the girl's mother, typically attentive, became unavailable to her daughter, due to the mother's immersion in the religious practice. During this supplication, the young child observed her mother begin to cry and weep. While the young child had been scanning others, when her mother's crying intensified, the girl fixated on her mother's face alone. How would observing this religious/spiritual and emotional practice affect this young child at the time and over time?

An initial foray into reflecting on this situation would suggest that the three-year old might also cry. Instead, she silently observed her mother and made no move to comfort her, although she likely would have done so in other contexts. Observing one's parent crying during prayer is quite common. In conversations with friends and colleagues from diverse faith practices, it became clear to the authors that most children have observed caregivers cry while they prayed. Weeping while praying highlights the emotional component of faith practices. Children are introduced not only to what they should think or do, but also to what emotions and emotional expressions are associated with these thoughts and actions. Like many other behaviors, faith-related activities involve children's developing understanding of emotions and emotional regulation (Cole et al. 2004).

Observing parental faith practices, and how emotions are embodied and brought forth by particular activities, can ascribe different emotional and cognitive meanings to them. Author 1 observed the situation as a fellow-congregant and remained captivated by the memory of her friend and her young daughter, wondering if observing her mother's emotional display was distressing to the daughter, given her developing cognitive and emotional understanding. Consequently, she has been particularly attentive to her own children's concerns about her faith-based emotional displays. When recounting the event and her interpretation to Author 2, Author 2 recalled herself as a young child in a similar context and reported a recollection of an altogether different emotional response, one of a longing to experience such a spiritual connection herself.

Religious/spiritual traditions and practices often conjure up particular emotional experiences and are designed to socialize prosocial emotions and related behaviors, as well as regulate or manage emotions considered antisocial, such as jealousy and greed (Smith 1991). Young children may observe a span of behaviors and emotions in people around them, that are associated with particular activities, such as at a funeral, where they observe a range of expressions of grief and loss. Furthermore, as they observe and participate in faith practices, children are taught to ascribe "new" meanings and emotional responses to particular events. For example, children of faith are often told to associate death and loss with peace and happiness, that there is joy and spiritual significance in fasting (and feeling hunger) during Ramadan or Lent, that there should be fulfillment in giving away belongings, and that being still and closing their eyes may bring a sense of peace. How individual young children experience particular religious events and process them emotionally at the time, as well as how they re-make meaning, may have implications for a child's functioning and development over time (Elfenbeim and Ambady 2002).

10. Religious Meaning-Making in Modern Contexts

This vignette draws from a practitioner-as-researcher model (Huberman 1993) and occurs within a research-based meeting, where consultants (including Author 1) discussed story-based interventions and how religiously diverse young children may incorporate matters of faith in their stories. Young children receive messages from a range of sources and strive to make meaning of them, often in ways that may not be understood or condoned by the adults in their context. Young children's positive

development can be assisted by the ability of adults in their socialization network to help assist them in the process, coordinate messages, and troubleshoot challenges they may encounter. Consider the conversation on Good Friday between the Catholic father of a 10-year old boy growing up in a New England town in the U.S. and the boy's Evangelical Christian bus driver, as recounted by the father to Author 1. As the children were being dropped off, the bus driver approached the father, concerned that the son had been saying inappropriate things on the bus. The father got a little nervous, imagining what a pre-teen might say on a bus. Then, the bus driver reported that the boy had been referring to Jesus as a zombie and maintained that if the boy was going to be a true Christian, he needed to be set straight on who Jesus is. The father took the concern under advisement and initiated a conversation with his son, where the son explained that Jesus had been killed by the Bruins. The father inquired whether he meant Romans, and his son self-corrected "Oh yeah, yeah, that's what I meant," and proceeded to explain that Jesus was killed, put into a grave, and came back to life, just like a zombie. When recounting the story, the father laughed, indicating, "[i]t made perfect sense" and the father proceeded to discuss different interpretations of the resurrection story and the textual evidence, supporting a range of literal and broad interpretations of the resurrection (DeVito 2019).

In an age with an onslaught of media images targeting children and featuring zombies, young children integrate a range of "textual" sources of evidence. For some adults, the children's attempts to make meaning are starkly incorrect and warrant an intervention, lest children stray into becoming nonbelievers. For other adults, like the teacher (who happened also to be Catholic) who in an impromptu manner attempted to explain why a number of students were absent from school on Good Friday, adults reflect their own trepidation discussing religious issues in public contexts, navigating both social mores and legal guidelines. For adults like the father, the child's link between Jesus and a zombie represents a creative integration of different textual pieces of evidence and an entry point into discussions of evidence and its interpretation, as well as other tenets of faith within their particular faith tradition. In recounting his son's experience, the father lamented that adults did not seem excited to engage his son in exploring and deepening his meaning-making, but rather considered the situation a "problem" that needed to be addressed and contained.

As illustrated by the above example, children are actively engaged in making sense of their experiences. However, children's meaning making may be a source of confusion for adults. If children's acts of making sense are dismissed, the question becomes: How can children develop positively in areas related to religion/spirituality when adults seem unwilling to engage with them? In addition to contributing to children's overall wellbeing, there is value in understanding children's meanings because they can be a place for creating better understanding and development, at home, school, and in religious/spiritual and broader community contexts.

11. Discussion

Young children are often participants in faith practices that support their spiritual and religious development. As argued in this paper, young children's participation in their communities' faith practices interacts with how they make meaning of their experiences inside and outside of their communities, as well as influencing their development across domains, including their emotional regulation. A sociocultural approach, we argued, allows for the capturing of the historically and culturally situated and intersectional nature of children's religious and spiritual development.

On a general level, the sociocultural perspective's focus on mediating symbols, tools, and activities is a natural match with studying religious/spiritual systems. World religious traditions are rich in their use of symbols and tools, as evidenced in special prayer clothes, ceremonial food, and holy texts. For example, a focus on the architecture of places of worship illustrates that some of the most ornately designed and spacious edifices constructed throughout human history are ones constructed for religious purposes. Within the overall architectural structure, there may be other dedicated physical spaces (e.g., pew, prayer space, Confessional) with distinct purposes aligned with other religious beliefs and practices. Religious life is often characterized by ritualistic practices, and the sociocultural

perspective can be used to excavate the meanings of particular activities, conducted through the use of tools and other mediated symbols. Furthermore, the sociocultural perspective can help situate the meaning of an activity within a religious and overall context, as well as suggest the developmental outcomes related to participation.

The sociocultural perspective encompasses the notion that children's meaning-making is socially constructed and develops within a supportive context that includes adult mentors. The focus on children's participation at once validates children's involvement, as well as providing a concrete point to begin to understand religious and spiritual meaning-making for the child, especially within a family context (Boyatzis et al. 2006). Whether or not a child's behavior is considered to have moral merit, a child's participation in religious activities, such as formal services and informal questions about God and justice, deserves the serious attention of parents, practitioners, and researchers. Just as cognition-based theories of child development try to ascertain a child's intention regarding a moral scenario, the sociocultural lens can be used to better explore a child's "private speech" with respect to religious thinking and reasoning (Berk and Winsler 1995). In order to have data about a child's inner thoughts about religion, we would need to have an understanding both of the socio-cultural context and of the child's particular participation and related meaning-making.

Ways of thinking are socially situated, and it should be assumed that the particular context of religious thinking privileges certain types of cognition. Religious traditions that are based in sacred text promote interaction with them in a variety of ways. For young Muslim and Jewish children in the West, this may require instruction in or learning of a liturgical language. For the Abrahamic traditions, young children are often immersed in stories of Prophets, or Bible stories. While religious educators such as Goldman (1964) considered the primary religious and cognitive objective of such stories to be a particular metaphorical interpretation of the story, other parents and educators may identify different cognitive tasks using the same tool. For example, based on Piagetian stages of cognitive thought (Inhelder and Piaget 1958), we would suggest that young children could not cognitively understand abstract concepts about which they have had no direct experience, such as God, angels, the devil, prayer, heaven, and hell. However, if some of these concepts are an integral part of a young child's religious experience, then it is likely that the child has appropriated them, at least in part, as meaningful cultural tools. The adult participant in the activity would have been eager to promote the process of inter-subjectivity, so that the adult and child can reach a shared understanding of the task (Berk and Winsler 1995).

Not only is knowledge culturally situated, but culture, and the institutions within it, select different tasks for children to learn (Berk and Winsler 1995). For example, Jewish communities of early twentieth-century Europe marked a boy's first day of school with a major ceremony to communicate the holiness and attractiveness of studying, that included the boy being carried to school and covered with a prayer shawl, and the rabbi writing the alphabet in honey on a slate, while other adults showered the boy with candies and told the boy that the candies were gifts from angels (Rogoff 2003). In some religious institutions, a primary task for a young child is to learn to comport oneself with the proper etiquette for a holy place, or when interacting with sacred materials. In some contexts, this may mean a particular type of dress, such as dressing and acting their "Sunday best." In other contexts, there may be particular behaviors, such as removing shoes or learning to sit quietly during a service. In some religious communities, young children may be responsible for parts of the service, thus embedding them in a religious context with the full community of believers. This may include participation in an individual or group prayer, recitation from a Holy text, or song. In other religious communities, adults and children are segregated from one another during the service, so children may have a different set of religious tasks, or are encouraged to participate in religious activities at a later age.

In each case, the religious/spiritual tradition selects the content and structure of the child's participation, sometimes along gendered lines. Based on regular participation that highlights certain proficiencies, one can expect variation in developmental outcomes, such as the emergence of literacy skills, behavior and etiquette in religious and other settings, or memorization of religious text. The child

emerges with certain skills, such as language proficiency, that may be translated to other contexts. By participating in the group, the child gains membership, even if afforded differently for children, to the religious/spiritual community. The degree to which early participation may predict later participation types and their forms, however, is not something that can be explained through the sociocultural perspective. Further, given that world religions have diverse endpoints regarding what constitutes a mature religious individual, there is value in, and a need for, considering diversity and commonality in faith practices.

12. Limitations

While the application of the sociocultural perspective to understanding religious/spiritual experiences of young children may help to address the limitations of other approaches, it also has limitations. Although the sociocultural perspective assumes a purposefulness and harmony in the planning and structuring of the learning context by the adults in the community, it does not provide detailed insight as to how adults with divergent perspectives or levels of commitment organize activities for children. In addition, aside from the general concept of tailoring activities to the child, the sociocultural perspective does not fully explain and address the individual variation between, and within, children, such as how to engage a child who is reluctant to participate despite numerous and varied attempts to solicit participation.

13. Conclusions and Future Directions

In order to support the positive development of children in a holistic manner, there is a need to study young children's religious and spiritual development, and the interaction between religious/spiritual and other types of development. This manuscript has illustrated the value of employing a sociocultural approach. While the developmental theories that explain most of the differentiated religiosity of adolescents focus on variations in adults actively socializing or channeling youth towards certain religious experiences, and on social learning and spiritual modeling (Bandura 1977; Martin et al. 2003), theories generally do not address the religious socialization and religious development of young children. In a critical analysis of religious socialization and young adults, Klingenberg and Sjö (2019) describe it as an overt process where youth are not "objects" of socialization, but bi-directional and agentic partners, navigating issues including socialization towards an implicit (adult) norm. What remains unresolved are how children's individual choices align with both converging and divergent contextual influences. In this paper, we argued that much is lost if children's spiritual and religious development, including their religious/spiritual socialization, is not taken into account. Through a focus on children's increasing participation in faith practices, we gain greater insight into the intersections between children's religious/spiritual understandings, their emotional development, moral behavior and reasoning, and their processes of meaning-making in general.

Ultimately, we make the case that developmental studies that do not account for religious and spiritual development are incomplete, while studies that do not consider children's sociocultural contexts (including their intersectional nature), the function of the practices that they engage in, and the meaning that they ascribe such practices, are inadequate in capturing the complexity of children's religious and spiritual development. The sociocultural lens provides a robust tool to help capture the range of young children's religious/spiritual experiences, particularly when combined with methodologically eclectic research tools to document the experiences and their meanings. Additionally, it provides windows into helping understand how experiences may inform children's positive development by considering the meanings that children bring into their developmental process as active participants in different activities and social practices.

This manuscript has several recommendations and suggestions for future research. Future research should investigate in more detail the processes and meanings ascribed to children's faith practices. In addition to observing young children's participation in specific faith practices, there is a need to investigate both socializing agents' goals (including how they may differ or conflict), as well as

how children come to employ these practices in their own lives. Future studies should draw from more diverse populations and examine the relationship between faith practices, children's conceptual understanding, and other aspects of development. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the vignette about observing a parent crying during prayer, the study of emotion is essential to a comprehensive study of religious/spiritual development in childhood and beyond. While the sociocultural approach can help capture the child's participation in activities of religious import, this perspective does not provide explanatory power for why a child chooses to participate in a given activity. It is generally thought that children seek to gain proximity to care providers by focusing on the objects and behaviors that the adults are drawn to (Rogoff 2003; Hay 1980). Of the thousands of activities a child observes in a given day, what may it mean for a child to select to participate in a given activity, specifically one of religious/spiritual import?

Finally, despite trepidations that policy makers and practitioners, including educators and healthcare providers, may have regarding how to discuss and respond to issues of religion/spirituality in their applied work or policy, these issues are central to the lives of children and families. Consequently, it would be implausible to develop efficacious and inclusive training programs, human services, or policies and best practices that do not plan for how to address religious/spiritual similarities and variations in everyday life. Examples include a public school teacher responding to a spontaneous prayer circle that some second graders formed when invited to ready themselves for the standardized test about to be administered, a coach contesting league restrictions on variations to sports uniforms requested for religious reasons, and a school administrator addressing public demand to modify the school calendar, given the large percentage of students and teachers of a faith tradition, followed by similar demands from a members of a faith tradition who are less represented. Practitioners and policy makers across contexts are actively making decisions that inform the sociocultural context of all children. Adults need to have opportunities throughout their personal and professional trajectories to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage with insight and curiosity into issues related to religious/spiritual practice and literacy, so that they can co-create a context that promotes their own continued positive development, and that of young children, throughout their lifespan.

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