

Article

I Am Young, Religious and/or Spiritual—Is It Beneficial to Me? Association of Religiosity, Spirituality and Images of God with Meaning in Life and Self-Esteem in Adolescents

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Abstract: Religiosity and spirituality (R/S) have been suggested to be positive factors in adolescents' well-being and development. The aim of this study is to explore the relationship of R/S and images of God with meaning in life and self-esteem in adolescents in a secular environment. A sample of Czech adolescents ($n = 984$, mean age 16.61, SD 1.21; 28% male) participated in an online survey. We measured religiosity, religious affiliation (Raf), religious attendance (Ratt), spirituality, images of God (IMG), meaning in life (ML), subdivided into components of presence (ML-P) and search (ML-S), and adolescents' self-esteem (ASE). Religiosity, Raf, Ratt, and a higher level of spirituality were associated with ML-P, with odds ratios (OR) ranging from 1.56 (95% confidence interval (CI) 1.34–1.80) for spirituality to 1.88 (1.27–2.80) for church affiliation. ML-S was associated with religiosity, OR 1.41 (1.10–1.82), and spirituality, OR 1.73 (1.51–2.00). No associations were found for self-esteem. The combination of spirituality with Raf and Ratt led to associations with ML-P, ML-S, and ASE for those who were spiritual and affiliated/non-affiliated, with ORs of 2.14–6.00, as well as for those who were spiritual and attending/non-attending, with ORs of 1.84–4.84. Respondents who reported positive images of God were more likely to report an increase in ML-P, ML-S, and ASE, whereas those reporting negative images were more likely to report a decrease. Our findings suggest that R/S, in particular their mutual interactions with higher levels of spirituality and images of God, are associated with adolescent development and encourage the internalisation of R/S values among youth.

Keywords: spirituality; religiosity; adolescents; self-esteem; meaning of life; images of God



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1. Introduction

Who am I, where is my life headed, and can I handle it? These profound questions accompany young individuals on their journey to establish a clear and enduring sense of identity, a crucial endeavour during adolescence (Erikson 1968). Adolescence serves as the transitional phase bridging childhood and adulthood, where young people expand their social horizons, strive to attain mature social roles (Crone and Dahl 2012), and also undergo significant developmental changes. They deepen their self-awareness (Branje 2022) and seek meaning in their lives, often engaging in exploration and questioning their life's purpose, passions, motivations, and destiny (Kiang and Fuligni 2010). In this quest, they construct a more nuanced self-concept and become increasingly attuned to the perspectives of others (Sebastian et al. 2008). In the context of developmental shifts and the process of identity formation, adolescence also provides a unique chance for individuals to shape their own spiritual values and either develop or reassess the essence of their faith (Kor et al. 2019). Consequently, religiosity and spirituality (R/S) can emerge as factors linked to adolescents' well-being and overall development (Abdel-Khalek 2011; King and Boyatzis 2015). In this study, we will therefore seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of the important content area of R/S in adolescence.

The development of adolescents and their overall well-being is intricately linked to the pursuit and attainment of meaning in life (Erikson 1968; Negru-Subtirica et al. 2016). Research has consistently demonstrated that the two distinct dimensions of meaning in life, as delineated by Steger et al. (2006), namely the presence of meaning (referring to individuals' perception of their existence as meaningful, significant, and valuable) and the search for meaning (which encompasses individuals' efforts to explore and enrich the meaning of their lives), have a profoundly positive influence on various facets of adolescents' lives. This influence extends to their emotional stability, life satisfaction (Brassai et al. 2011), and psychological resilience (Dulaney et al. 2018) and serves as a protective factor against a spectrum of health-related issues, including depression, diminished psychological well-being (Nielsen and Hansson 2007; Simonsson et al. 2008), and risky behaviours (Addad and Himi 2008; Brassai et al. 2011).

Another critical aspect that significantly impacts the process of adolescent development is self-esteem, which, according to Rosenberg (1965), represents a positive or negative attitude towards oneself and plays a pivotal role in shaping one's self-concept. High self-esteem, characterised by a sense of self-worth and adequacy, equips young individuals with the confidence to embrace new challenges and helps them understand themselves (Heatherston and Wyland 2003). It stands as a cornerstone for healthy social interactions and relationships and fosters robust mental development (Birkeland et al. 2012; Sakellari et al. 2018; Orth and Robins 2014). Conversely, low self-esteem has been correlated with a negative worldview, leading to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Heatherston and Wyland 2003; Sowislo and Orth 2013). It has also been linked to academic underachievement (Kim and Kim 2021), engagement in risky behaviours (Orth and Robins 2014), and even suicidal ideation (Soto-Sanz et al. 2019). It is therefore important to pay attention to what builds self-esteem and supports adolescents as they face a variety of challenges characterised by a range of high-risk social and environmental issues (Green et al. 2021).

Religiosity and spirituality (R/S) are significant factors that play a crucial role in shaping the personalities of young individuals (King and Boyatzis 2015; Yonker et al. 2012). They are particularly influential during phases of 'identity confusion' (Erikson 1968) and are associated with the development of a sense of purpose (Francis 2013; Pfund et al. 2020). While a conceptual distinction exists between religion and meaning (Yoon et al. 2021), their relationship is intricate and intimate (Park 2013). For many young people, both components of R/S seem relevant in addressing questions related to ML (Pargament and Mahoney 2009; Sözer and Eskin 2022). Studies also suggest a positive correlation between R/S and self-esteem (Abdel-Khalek 2011; Papazisis et al. 2014), with religious identity significantly associated with higher self-esteem (Davis and Kiang 2016). However, several studies have shown that R/S are not equally protective against adverse outcomes across diverse adolescents and evinces mixed or negative effects (Schnitker et al. 2021; Stulp et al. 2019). This could be linked to the wide variety of approaches to how R/S was conceptualised and measured (Lun and Bond 2013; Malinakova et al. 2020). Moreover, different aspects of R/S can overlap considerably during young people's development, and the ways individuals relate to the sacred may evolve (Kor et al. 2019). One of the key aspects shaping an individual's R/S are images of God (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2016), which refers to internal working models of a specific divine attachment figure and the self as experienced in relationship to that divine attachment figure (Davis et al. 2013). IMG can provide insight into the affective quality and influence of the relationship with God/the divine among adolescents, as studies show links between them and various religious and social outcomes (Exline et al. 2015), as well as well-being outcomes such as self-esteem, self-worth, and life satisfaction (Francis et al. 2012).

In contemporary times, adolescents have tended to move away from public religious practices, increasingly emphasising a personal relationship with God without a specific religious affiliation (Jensen 2021). This reflects a clear distinction between religiosity, which encompasses institutional affiliations, beliefs, rituals, prescribed theology, and church

attendance (Zinnbauer et al. 1997), and spirituality, which is perceived as more experiential, authentic, and connected to an individual's sense of contentment towards transcendence and personal spiritual well-being (Ammerman 2013). The Czech Republic, despite its Christian orientation (Furstova et al. 2021), stands out for its high degree of secularisation (Pew Research Centre 2016). This secular backdrop presents a compelling setting for research, as insights from a secular country can provide a valuable understanding of R/S variables and images of God associated with adolescents' pursuit of meaning in life and self-esteem in an environment where R/S does not function as a fundamental component of mainstream society.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the links between various aspects of R/S and images of God and the sense of meaning in life and self-esteem among adolescents in a secular context. Through this exploration, we aim to improve our understanding of the intricate interplay between these factors and their relevance in the lives of young individuals.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Data from Czech adolescents aged 15 to 21 were obtained for this study. The online survey was prepared at the researcher's institution. For the online questionnaire, the Google Forms application was used, which enabled respondents to access and answer the questions easily. In the first step, the questionnaire and all further procedures were piloted. Ten students of different age levels participated in the pilot study, during which they verified that there were no difficulties in completing the questionnaire and, above all, that all the questions were easy to understand. Their comments were implemented in the original version of the questionnaire. This resulted in creating the final version of the survey, which contained 41 items and took about half an hour to complete. In the second step, the survey was distributed as a cover letter that included information about the study and an interactive link to an online questionnaire for the management of vocational and high schools established by a church or religious society. Through the school management, the link to this study was passed on to the students of the respective schools. The students were asked to participate in this study, which was entirely voluntary, and participation or non-participation had no consequences for the students. The data were collected in January 2023.

992 students participated in the survey, which can be considered a high response rate given the number of schools that participated in the survey. However, respondents with incomplete items or unfinished surveys were excluded. Consequently, screening indicated three cases of inconsistent response patterns, e.g., reporting too high an age or responding to most of the survey items in the same way, which led to the exclusion of these respondents. After excluding these problematic subjects ($n = 8$), the remaining sample consisted of 984 respondents (mean age = 16.61, $SD = 1.21$; 28% male).

Participation in the survey was fully voluntary. Respondents did not receive any incentive for their participation in this study, and therefore, refusing to participate or not completing the full questionnaire had no consequences for them. Respondents had to explicitly express their informed consent to participation and were given the option of leaving the study at any time without giving a reason. At the beginning of the survey, participants received written information about the aim of the study and the anonymised handling of data and were made familiar with the system. The study design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Theology, Palacký University in Olomouc.

2.2. Measures

Faith was measured using the following question: "At present, would you call yourself a believer?" with the available answers: "Yes, I am a member of a church or religious society"; "Yes, but I am not a member of a church or religious society"; "no"; "no, I am a convinced atheist." For our study, response categories were dichotomised; participants who answered "yes" were categorised as believers.

Religious affiliation was measured based on the previous question about belief. Respondents who answered, “Yes, I am a member of a church or religious society”, were considered religiously affiliated.

Religious attendance was measured as the frequency of church or other religious gathering attendance using the question, “How often do you go to church or other religious gatherings?” Possible answers were: never; occasionally; often, but not every week; once a week; more than once a week. As weekly attendance is compulsory for most Czech religions, those who reported attending religious sessions at least once a week were considered to be attending.

Spirituality was measured using the Aspects of Spirituality—Students (ASP) (Büssing et al. 2014). The ASP questionnaire is suitable for measuring a wide variety of key aspects of spirituality and, by operationalising even the informal aspects of spirituality, is suitable for use in secular settings (Büssing et al. 2014). It contains 25 items distinguishing four aspects of spirituality: Religious Orientation, Insight/Wisdom Seeking, Conscious Interactions, and Beliefs of Transcendence. All items are rated on a five-point scale ranging from disagreement to agreement, i.e., from ‘definitely doesn’t correspond’ (0) to ‘definitely corresponds’ (4). A score of >50% indicates higher agreement, i.e., a positive attitude (Büssing et al. 2010). For our analysis, the ASP score was treated as continuous, but for the assessment of different combinations of religious affiliation and spirituality, the variable was dichotomised in the following way: the total score was computed and referred to Büssing’s model (Büssing et al. 2010), where respondents with a higher score were considered spiritual (1) and the rest as non-spiritual (0). Cronbach’s alpha for the whole scale has excellent internal consistency, with $\alpha = 0.94$ in our sample.

Consequently, the respondents were categorised in order to distinguish between religious affiliation and spiritual experience. To assess the interaction of these categories, a composite variable was created: 1. Spiritual/religiously affiliated (S/Raf), 2. Spiritual/not religiously affiliated (S/Nraf), 3. Non-spiritual/religiously affiliated (NS/Raf), 4. Non-spiritual/not religiously affiliated (NS/Nraf). Similarly, to distinguish between religious attendance and spirituality and assess their interaction, a composite variable was created: 1. Spiritual/attending (S/Att), 2. Spiritual/non-attending (S/Natt), 3. Non-spiritual/attending (NS/Att), 4. Non-spiritual/non-attending (NS/Natt), and the respondents were categorised accordingly.

The image of God was assessed using 12 adjectives describing God, preceded by the question, “How well do you feel that each of the following words describes God? If you are not a believer in God, how well do you think they describe the view of a believer?”. These seven positive and five negative adjectives (e.g., friendly, loving, critical, distant) were taken from the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey (Baylor University 2005). Respondents chose from the possible answers ranging from ‘very well’ (1) to ‘not at all’ (4). While religious respondents described how well, in their opinion, the adjectives described God, non-religious respondents were asked how well, according to them, these adjectives described the opinion of religious respondents. This approach was chosen because non-religious respondents could not be asked directly about God’s characteristics. However, their responses can still offer a certain image of a God they do not believe in (Bradley et al. 2015). For statistical analysis, each item was dichotomised so that respondents from religious and non-religious groups who declared an agreement/disagreement with a specific adjective were considered to see God in this way.

Meaning in life was assessed using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), which was developed and revised by Steger et al. (2010). This 10-item scale consists of two five-item subscales. The first subscale, Meaning in Life Presence (ML-P), evaluates the presence of meaning in life, reflecting how individuals perceive the richness of meaning in their lives. The second subscale, Meaning in Life Search (ML-S), measures the degree to which individuals actively search for meaning in life, capturing their motivation and engagement in this quest. Respondents rated the frequency of each item’s applicability on a seven-point scale ranging from ‘absolutely untrue’ (1) to ‘absolutely true’ (7). One

item in the ML-S section is reverse-scored. Each subscale ranges between 5 and 35. Scores above 24 are considered to positively confirm both the presence of meaning in life and an active search for meaning in life (Steger 2010). Thus, for our analysis, the scores were dichotomised as follows: respondents with scores above 24 on ML-P were considered to have a presence of meaning in life, and similarly, respondents with scores above 24 on ML-S were considered to be actively searching for meaning in life. The MLQ has previously demonstrated good reliability, validity, and a stable factor structure (Steger 2010). In our sample, both scales possess great internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha, with values of 0.86 for the ML-P subscale and 0.92 for the ML-S subscale.

Self-esteem was measured using the Adolescent Self-Esteem Questionnaire (ASQ) (Hafekost et al. 2017). The ASQ is a 12-item scale developed to measure adolescent self-esteem (ASE). The scale includes both positively and negatively worded items, which are rated on a five-point Likert scale. For the first six questions, respondents chose their answers from a scale ranging from ‘almost all of the time’ (1) to ‘hardly ever’ (5) in order of frequency of occurrence. For the following six questions, they selected answers according to their level of agreement with the item, with options ranging from ‘strongly agree’ (1) to ‘strongly disagree’ (5). All items were summed according to the technical report of the scale (Hafekost et al. 2017), with positively worded items reverse-coded to determine an individual’s self-esteem score, where a higher score reflects higher levels of self-esteem. Accordingly, the respondents with the higher scores were dichotomised as having higher self-esteem (1), and the rest were considered to have lower self-esteem (0). The Cronbach alpha in our sample was 0.80.

All resources used were presented in the Czech language. Socio-demographic data such as gender, age, type of school, and year of study were obtained via the questionnaire.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the Population

The background characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. From the whole sample (n = 984, mean age = 16.61, SD = 1.21; 28% male), 381 respondents (37.8%) identified themselves as believers and indicated they were church or religious organisation members. 176 respondents (17.8%) stated that they were believers but not affiliated with a church. Church attendance was reported by 57.6 percent of those who identified themselves as believers. Furthermore, 316 respondents (32.1%) reported having a meaning of life present in their lives, and 467 respondents (47.5%) reported searching for meaning in their lives. Furthermore, 562 participants (55.1%) stated that they have high self-esteem. A comparison of the socio-demographic groups did not reveal any significant differences regarding age or year of study. However, regarding gender, the comparison revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) for respondents with ML-P and a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$) for ASE. Moreover, the respondents differed significantly in religiosity ($p < 0.001$ for ML-P, $p < 0.05$ for ML-S) and religious attendance ($p < 0.01$ for ML-P).

Table 1. Description of the sample.

	Total		Meaning in Life				Self-Esteem				
	n	%	Presence		Search		n	%			
Sex											
male	278	28.3	106	38.1	$p < 0.05$	127	45.7	n.s.	186	66.9	$p < 0.001$
female	706	71.7	210	29.7		340	48.2		357	50.6	
Age											
15	183	18.6	45	24.6	n.s.	85	46.4	n.s.	88	48.1	
16	346	35.2	110	31.8		156	45.1		191	55.2	
17	209	21.2	73	34.9		111	53.1		122	58.4	
18	167	16.9	62	36.7		80	48.2		96	57.8	
19–21	79	8.0	26	32.9		35	44.3		45	57.0	

Table 1. Cont.

	Total		Meaning in Life						Self-Esteem		
			Presence			Search					
Education											
Grammar school	684	69.5	227	33.2	n.s.	333	48.7	n.s.	397	58.0	<i>p</i> < 0.05
High school with graduation	298	30.3	89	29.9		132	44.3		145	48.7	
Vocational school	2	0.2	0	0.0		2	100		1	50.0	
Year of study											
1st year ^a	360	36.6	101	28.1	n.s.	156	43.3	n.s.	184	51.1	n.s.
2nd year ^a	260	26.4	85	32.7		134	51.5		140	53.8	
3rd year ^a	194	19.7	72	37.1		98	50.5		117	60.3	
4rd year ^a	170	17.3	58	34.1		79	46.5		102	60.0	
Faith ^b											
Believer, church member	381	38.7	156	40.9	<i>p</i> < 0.001	203	53.3	<i>p</i> < 0.05	220	57.7	n.s.
Believer outside a church	176	17.9	47	26.7		82	46.6		94	53.4	
Non-believer	359	36.5	98	27.3		152	42.3		192	53.5	
Convinced atheist	68	6.9	15	22.1		30	44.1		37	54.4	
Church attendance											
Attending	321	57.6	134	41.7	<i>p</i> < 0.01	111	47.0	n.s.	130	55.1	n.s.
Non-attending	236	42.2	69	29.2		174	54.2		184	57.3	
TOTAL	984	100	316	32.1		467	47.5		542	55.1	

Notes: ^a plus the corresponding year of a multi-year grammar school; ^b independently of church attendance; n.s. non-significant.

3.2. Meaning in Life and Self-Esteem

Table 2 shows the results of the binary logistic regression, crude and adjusted for gender and age, aimed at the associations between religious belief, spirituality, religious affiliation, attendance, and their different combinations with ML-P, ML-S, and ASE. We found that ML-P was significantly associated with all the variables assessed in Model 1. Respondents who reported themselves as believers, along with those with higher levels of spirituality and who were affiliated with a church and attended church services, were significantly more likely to report the presence of meaning in their lives, with ORs ranging from 1.56 (1.35–1.80) to 1.88 (1.27–2.80) for the adjusted model. Thus, being religious, having a higher level of spirituality, being in church, or attending church is significantly associated with a higher likelihood of perceiving the presence of meaning in adolescents. Associations were also found for belief and spirituality in searching for meaning in life. Particularly, those with higher levels of spirituality were significantly associated with this subscale, with an OR of 1.73 (1.51–2.00) for the adjusted model. So, students who are religious and have higher levels of spirituality are significantly more likely to search for meaning in their lives. No significant associations were found for self-esteem or assessed variables.

Furthermore, a combination of groups in model 1 revealed that both S/Raff and S/NRaff respondents had a significantly higher increase in the odds of ML-P, ML-S, and also ASE. The strongest associations were found for the S/Raff group and the presence of meaning in life, with OR 6.00 (2.87–12.56) for the adjusted model. Respondents who are both spiritual and affiliated with the church are up to six times more likely to perceive the presence of meaning in their lives than those who are not spiritual and are not church members.

Similar results were revealed in Model 3. Both S/Att and S/NAtt were significantly associated with ML-P, ML-S, and also ASE, with ORs ranging from 1.84 (1.10–3.08) for S/Att and self-esteem to 4.84 (2.50–9.42) for S/Att and the presence of meaning in life.

Table 2. Associations of religious belief, spirituality (standardised to Z-scores), religious affiliation and attendance, different combinations of spirituality with religious affiliation and of spirituality with church attendance with the meaning in life, both presence and search, and adolescent self-esteem: results of binary logistic regression crude and adjusted for age and gender leading to odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals.

		Meaning in Life Presence	Meaning in Life Search	Self-Esteem
Model 1				
Believers vs. non-believers	crude	1.59 (1.21–2.10) ***	1.41 (1.09–1.82) **	1.12 (0.87–1.44)
	adjusted	1.58 (1.20–2.08) ***	1.41 (1.10–1.82) **	1.11 (0.85–1.43)
Spirituality	crude	1.56 (1.35–1.80) ***	1.73 (1.51–1.99) ***	1.13 (1.00–1.26) *
	adjusted	1.56 (1.34–1.80) ***	1.73 (1.51–2.00) ***	1.13 (1.00–1.28)
Affiliated vs. non-affiliated	crude	1.90 (1.29–2.82) ***	1.31 (0.91–1.87)	1.19 (0.83–1.71)
	adjusted	1.88 (1.27–2.80) **	1.34 (0.94–1.92)	1.13 (0.78–1.63)
Attendance	crude	1.73 (1.21–2.48) **	1.33 (0.95–1.87)	1.10 (0.78–1.54)
	adjusted	1.73 (1.21–2.48) **	1.37 (0.98–1.92)	1.05 (0.74–1.48)
Model 2				
Spiritual/affiliated	crude	5.94 (2.85–12.37) ***	3.69 (2.10–6.49) ***	2.16 (1.28–3.64) **
	adjusted	6.00 (2.87–12.56) ***	3.75 (2.13–6.61) ***	2.14 (1.25–3.63) **
Spiritual/non-affiliated	crude	4.03 (1.80–9.01) ***	3.84 (2.01–7.33) ***	2.24 (1.21–4.13) *
	adjusted	4.17 (1.85–9.37) ***	3.84 (2.01–7.34) ***	2.36 (1.26–4.42) **
Non-spiritual/affiliated	crude	1.87 (0.77–4.55)	1.20 (0.59–2.43)	1.20 (0.62–2.29)
	adjusted	1.79 (0.72–4.43)	1.26 (0.72–2.59)	1.10 (0.57–2.15)
Non-spiritual/non-affiliated		1	1	1
Model 3				
Spiritual/attending	crude	4.82 (2.50–9.32) ***	3.28 (1.92–5.59) ***	1.88 (1.14–3.12) *
	adjusted	4.84 (2.50–9.42) ***	3.34 (1.95–5.71) ***	1.84 (1.10–3.08) *
Spiritual/non-attending	crude	3.26 (1.63–6.54) ***	2.94 (1.66–5.22) ***	2.00 (1.16–3.46) *
	adjusted	3.27 (1.62–6.58) ***	2.96 (1.67–5.26) ***	2.01 (1.15–3.52) *
Non-spiritual/attending	crude	1.16 (0.44–3.09)	0.99 (0.45–2.18)	1.04 (0.50–2.14)
	adjusted	1.00 (0.36–2.78)	1.07 (0.48–2.36)	0.87 (0.41–1.85)
Non-spiritual/non-attending		1	1	1

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

3.3. Images of God

The results of binary logistic regression assessing ML-P, ML-S, and images of God are presented in Table 3. The results obtained from regression models revealed that ML-P has no significant association with an angry image of God. Apart from this image, ML-P was significantly associated with all other images for the adjusted model. Specifically, positive images (e.g., present, loving, paternal) were associated with a significantly higher increase in ORs, with the strongest association for seeing God as just, OR 2.12 (1.39–3.21), whereas the remaining negative images (e.g., distant, punishing, critical) were significantly linked to a decrease in ML-P, with the strongest association for seeing God as critical, OR 0.44 (0.33–0.61). Adolescents who have some positive images of God have a higher probability of believing in the presence of the meaning of life, and conversely, those who have negative images of God have a lower chance.

Furthermore, the search for meaning in life was significantly associated with seeing God as ever-present, friendly, just, and loving. Particularly, respondents with a loving image of God were more likely to report ML-S with an OR of 2.29 (1.47–3.57) for the adjusted model. No significant associations were found for ML-S and negative images of God.

However, ASE was found to be linked to negative images of God. Seeing God as critical and distant was associated with a decreased chance of reporting positive self-esteem, with OR 0.70 (0.54–0.92) for a critical image and OR 0.68 (0.52–0.88) for a distant image. On the contrary, ever-present, fatherly, just, kind, and motherly images of God were significantly

associated with an increased chance of reporting positive self-esteem, where the highest chance was found for a fatherly image with OR 1.65 (1.22–2.23) in the adjusted model.

Table 3. Associations of images of God with meaning in life, for both presence and search, and adolescent self-esteem: results of binary logistic regression crude and adjusted for age and gender leading to odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals.

Image of God		Meaning of Life Presence	Meaning of Life-Search	Self Esteem
Critical	crude	0.48 (0.35–0.65) ***	1.21 (0.93–1.58)	0.76 (0.58–1.00) *
	adjusted	0.44 (0.33–0.61) ***	1.23 (0.94–1.60)	0.70 (0.54–0.92) **
Distant	crude	0.49 (0.37–0.66) ***	0.86 (0.67–1.11)	0.66 (0.51–0.85) ***
	adjusted	0.50 (0.38–0.67) ***	0.85 (0.66–1.10)	0.68 (0.52–0.88) **
Ever-present	crude	1.66 (1.11–2.42) *	1.53 (1.08–2.16) *	1.49 (1.06–2.09) *
	adjusted	1.68 (1.13–2.49) *	1.55 (1.09–2.19) *	1.51 (1.07–2.14) *
Fatherly	crude	1.83 (1.30–2.58) ***	1.25 (0.93–1.68)	1.67 (1.24–2.25) ***
	adjusted	1.83 (1.30–2.59) ***	1.26 (0.94–1.70)	1.65 (1.22–2.23) ***
Friendly	crude	1.62 (1.11–2.36) *	1.45 (1.04–2.02) *	1.31 (0.94–1.81)
	adjusted	1.64 (1.12–2.40) *	1.46 (1.05–2.04) *	1.31 (0.94–1.83)
Just	crude	2.04 (1.35–3.09) ***	1.43 (1.01–2.02) *	1.47 (1.04–2.07) *
	adjusted	2.12 (1.39–3.21) ***	1.44 (1.01–2.03) *	1.51 (1.07–2.14) *
Kind	crude	1.70 (1.26–2.28) ***	1.21 (0.93–1.57)	1.40 (1.08–1.82) *
	adjusted	1.71 (1.27–2.31) ***	1.22 (0.93–1.59)	1.41 (1.08–1.85) *
Loving	crude	1.82 (1.11–2.97) *	2.24 (1.45–3.48) ***	1.16 (0.77–1.74)
	adjusted	1.94 (1.81–3.20) **	2.29 (1.47–3.57) ***	1.22 (0.80–1.85)
Motherly	crude	1.58 (1.18–2.13) **	1.28 (0.97–1.66)	1.47 (1.13–1.92) **
	adjusted	1.64 (1.21–2.21) **	1.27 (0.97–1.66)	1.54 (1.18–2.03) **
Punishing	crude	0.67 (0.51–0.88) **	0.96 (0.74–1.23)	0.91 (0.71–1.17)
	adjusted	0.65 (0.50–0.86) **	0.96 (0.75–1.24)	0.89 (0.69–1.16)
Angry	crude	0.93 (0.67–1.30)	0.93 (0.69–1.27)	1.12 (0.82–1.53)
	adjusted	0.90 (0.64–1.26)	0.93 (0.67–1.27)	1.07 (0.78–1.47)
Demanding	crude	0.78 (0.59–1.03)	1.32 (1.02–1.71) *	1.03 (0.80–1.33)
	adjusted	0.74 (0.56–0.98) *	1.33 (1.03–1.73) *	0.98 (0.75–1.27)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the association of religiosity, spirituality, and images of God with adolescents' meaning in life and self-esteem. It was revealed that the presence of meaning in life was associated with religious belief, higher levels of spirituality, religious affiliation, and attendance. The search for meaning in life, on the other hand, was linked to belief and spirituality, with no significant associations found with self-esteem. However, when spirituality was examined in combination with religious affiliation and attendance, significant associations emerged for both self-esteem and the search for meaning in life, with a stronger effect on the presence of meaning in life. Positive images of God were found to be connected to a higher likelihood of experiencing a sense of meaning in life, while negative perceptions of God were associated with a decreased likelihood of feeling meaning in life. The search for meaning in life was positively related to perceiving God as loving, just, friendly, and present. Similarly, seeing God as motherly, kind, just, and fatherly was significantly associated with increased self-esteem, while perceiving God as distant or critical was linked to a decreased likelihood of having self-esteem.

We have observed, according to the results shown in Table 2, that self-identification as a religious individual, higher levels of spirituality, church membership, and regular church attendance significantly enhance the likelihood of experiencing a higher sense of meaning in life. These findings align with prior research that has explored the connection between R/S and ML among adolescents (Davis and Kiang 2016; Francis 2013), and provide support for the notion that religious identity and active participation in religious activities may serve as predictors of psychological well-being in adolescents and young adults (Davis

and Kiang 2016). It appears that if a young person establishes a strong connection to their R/S identity during adolescence, a period marked by developmental changes and often relational and social shifts as well, whether in terms of internal faith and spirituality or external church involvement and attendance (Francis 2013), then this identity can provide an effective framework for their future development. It allows individuals to integrate their experiences into a coherent and comprehensible whole, serving as a lens through which they can interpret their experiences and their existence (Park 2013) and also helps them navigate the challenges of adolescence by providing a sense of purpose (Krok 2015).

Moreover, our findings shown in Table 2 contribute to a deeper understanding of the distinction between the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning (Steger et al. 2006). We observed that the search for meaning in life is linked solely to faith and spirituality rather than church affiliation or attendance, which is in line with the study results of Davis and Kiang (2016), who similarly concluded that religious identity in terms of church affiliation does not serve as a predictor of the search for meaning in life. It appears that adolescents seeking meaning may explore new interpretations of religious values (Kor et al. 2019), question religious truths (Mayrl and Uecker 2011), and move away from traditional religiosity (Jensen 2021), tying their pursuit of meaning to an internal expression of faith and spirituality that connects with the transcendent and the sacred. We can also surmise that for those not affiliated with a church or exposed to religious teachings about the meaning and significance of human life, a dynamic interplay exists between the presence and search for meaning (Steger et al. 2010). In such cases, adolescents may not experience ML-P in their lives but simultaneously embark on a quest for it in ways that relate to God and the transcendent.

In our study, we did not find any significant associations between ASE and the examined dimensions of R/S, as shown in Model 1 of Table 2. These results align with previous studies conducted by Donahue and Benson (1995) and more recently by Davis and Kiang (2016). However, our findings contrast with research that has reported a positive impact of spirituality on self-esteem (Ollivaud et al. 2023) and a significant positive relationship between religiosity, belief practices, and self-esteem (Abdel-Khalek 2011; Yonker et al. 2012). These disparities may be attributed to variations in the measurement of R/S concepts in relation to self-esteem (Lun and Bond 2013). Moreover, during this developmental period, ASE appears to be primarily shaped by factors such as an individual's perception of their abilities in comparison to their peers, body image development, academic challenges, and social interactions (Robins and Trzesniewski 2005). In our sample, adolescents may not strongly connect their self-esteem with faith, spirituality, religious affiliation, or attendance. Instead, they seem to associate self-esteem with feedback, acceptance, and their immediate environment (Ollivaud et al. 2023), which in our study are mainly linked to a secular context.

However, the combination of different groups of spirituality, which can be seen in Models 2 and 3 of Table 2, revealed R/S interaction in association with ML and ASE. These findings shed light on the contrasting outcomes in studies on R/S and adolescent well-being, underscoring the multifaceted nature of R/S concepts and the interplay between them (Yoon et al. 2021). Our results emphasise that a link between R/S and well-being emerges when the external facets of religion are rooted in spirituality and connectedness (Pargament 2002). Being part of a religious community and participating in communal worship services can fulfil young people's spiritual needs, providing a sense of belonging to like-minded individuals (King and Boyatzis 2015; Yonker et al. 2012). Nevertheless, when religious communities fail to align with adolescents' inner convictions and only offer conventional religious practices, adolescents may prefer to rely on their own personal interpretations of spirituality and move away from traditional religiosity (Jensen 2021). Likewise, some adolescents may engage in religious affiliation and participation primarily due to external pressures, such as parental influence, without possessing deeper spiritual convictions (Soenens et al. 2007). Thus, our results emphasise that it is not just religious affiliation and practice, but more crucially, the internalisation and integration of faith values,

that play a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' sense of meaning in life and self-esteem (Hardy et al. 2019).

Furthermore, we confirmed the anticipated positive associations between positive images of God and negative associations with negative images regarding both meaning in life and self-esteem. These findings, which can be seen in Table 3, align with previous research emphasising the link between one's concept of God and well-being, purpose in life, and a sense of comfort during difficult times (Exline et al. 2015; Kruizinga et al. 2017) and underscore the significance of an individual's perceptions of God as an essential component of the R/S realm (Schaap-Jonker et al. 2016). If an adolescent holds an image of God as distant, critical, or punishing, it suggests a lack of a secure relationship with God (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013), potentially making it more challenging to discern a sense of meaning in life. Conversely, positive images of God can provide young individuals with purpose and a sense of refuge, reducing discontent (Stroope et al. 2013). Additionally, our findings highlight the significant connection between positive God images and ASE. Self-esteem is developed, in addition to the need for autonomy and competence, through relationships and the support of significant others (Ryan and Brown 2006). According to attachment theory (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick 2013), one of these significant others may be God. Thus, if adolescents view God positively, it fosters feelings of security and a foundation for positive self-evaluation. Conversely, a distant and critical image of God can lead to negative self-assessment and self-esteem. In addition, some research suggests that an individual's self-image and their concept of God mutually reinforce each other, implying that youths who view themselves positively are likely to have positive perceptions of God (Dickie et al. 2006; Utsch 2014). Thus, enhancing positive images of both self and God while minimising negative ones can have a positive impact on adolescents' self-esteem.

4.1. Strengths and Limitations

This study has several significant strengths. Foremost among them is its utilisation of a large sample with a notably high response rate. Furthermore, the completed questionnaires administered in this study have no missing data values. Moreover, this research delves into diverse aspects of R/S and how they relate to each other, thus contributing to a better comprehension of the role of R/S in adolescent development. Notably, it stands as one of the rare studies that explores the connections between ML and ASE in adolescents within a secular environment, encompassing various aspects of R/S.

However, despite the contributions of this study to our deeper understanding of the relationship between R/S and God images and their impact on adolescent well-being, it is not without limitations. The primary limitation lies in the study's cross-sectional design, which precludes the drawing of causal inferences. Additionally, the study relied on self-report methodology, introducing the potential for information bias since the data are derived from adolescents' self-assessments. Moreover, religiously affiliated respondents may have responded in accordance with their religious teachings, possibly leading to socially desirable responses, a challenge difficult to circumvent considering the subjectivity inherent in the various topics under examination. As one of the limitations of the study, we also consider the fact that, although this study took place in the secular context of the Czech Republic, students were approached from schools that are established by a church or a religious society, where there is a greater representation of students who describe themselves as religious and where the religious environment of the school itself can affect the sample and findings. However, at the schools that participated in the research, students are accepted regardless of their religious affiliation, and there are no stricter religious requirements for admission or study. In addition, although students spend their classes in a school established by a church or a religious institution, they are in contact with their non-religious classmates or teachers and also spend time outside of classes in an environment that is predominantly secular in the context of the Czech Republic. However, we are aware of this limitation, and our findings should be followed by a future study examining adolescents from high schools that are not established by a church.

4.2. Implications

Our findings highlight the profound connection between R/S (especially when they are combined) and perceptions of God with a sense of meaning in life and self-esteem among adolescents. Understanding these associations carries significant importance for individuals working with adolescents and for professional counselling interventions within the realm of spirituality and care. Additionally, these results expand our understanding of the factors influencing adolescent development, proving invaluable for those facing challenges related to a lack of meaning in life or lower self-esteem.

Simultaneously, our research underscores that the internalisation of religious values and spirituality holds great significance for youth in secular settings, as distinct from traditional religious participation. These findings should be considered by both parents of adolescents and pastoral care workers. They can play a pivotal role in guiding young individuals on their journey of discovering R/S, emphasising the cultivation of positive God images, and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach of traditional concepts or coercive religious participation, which may not align with the unique spiritual needs of young people.

Our research also suggests that when exploring adolescent well-being and R/S, it is imperative to differentiate between these two concepts and, whenever feasible, assess each separately. This approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between R/S and the well-being of adolescents, shedding light on how they interplay together and influence one another.

4.3. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the links between various aspects of R/S and images of God and the sense of meaning in life and self-esteem among adolescents. We found that the examined R/S domains are associated with young people's adolescent development and well-being. More specifically, religious belief, church affiliation, church attendance, and higher levels of spirituality were linked to the presence of meaning in adolescents' lives. In contrast, non-affiliation and non-attendance were associated with the search for meaning in their lives. The combination of spirituality with church affiliation and attendance led to associations with meaning in life and self-esteem for those adolescents who are spiritual. Regarding images of God, respondents with positive images were more likely to report increases in both meaning in life and self-esteem. Conversely, those who reported negative images were more likely to report decreases.

This research underscores the important role played by religion, spirituality, and images of God in affording adolescents a profound sense of meaning in their lives and bolstering their self-esteem. By enabling young individuals to interpret their experiences within the context of existential meaning rooted in the sacred, these factors can prove crucial for adolescents' self-esteem, psychological well-being, and their ability to navigate life's challenges.

However, our study also reveals that significantly higher associations between meaning in life and self-esteem are found in adolescents with higher levels of spirituality. Mere church affiliation or religious participation, devoid of a spiritual dimension, is of little assistance in the perception of meaning in life and self-esteem among adolescents in a secular environment. Thus, this research highlights the importance of internalising adolescent religious values and underscores its profound influence on the perception of meaning in life and self-esteem, suggesting the need for further research and attention on this intriguing subject.

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