


Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue “Focusing on the Elusive: Centering on Religious and Spiritual Influences within Contexts of Child and Young Adulthood Development”

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The religious is not elusive because it lurks behind ordinary phenomena, but because it is woven into the phenomena. (Capps 1974, p. 378)

The growing focus on the role of religion and spirituality in the development of children and adolescents intersects with the increasing awareness of unjust and highly stratified social contexts threatening the positive development of all youth, particularly those with marginalized identities. Religious and spiritual influences (R/S) have been described as elusive, given that they are deeply embedded in the social and cultural ecologies of family and community life (Capps 1974; Pargament et al. 2013). Such embeddedness contributes to the relative imperceptibility of R/S influences and their being overlooked within developmental scholarship. More recently, there has been a burgeoning scholarly focus on the role of religion and spirituality in the development of children and adolescents (c.f., Hardy et al. 2019; Hardy and Nelson 2023; King et al. 2023). Nonetheless, their elusive and multifaceted nature contributes to many of their nuances being missed within developmental scholarship. For example, R/S factors may vary in how they inform youth’s motivation, purpose, emotions, and other developmental processes and outcomes.

This Special Issue of *Religions*, “Focusing on the Elusive: Centering on Religious and Spiritual Influences within Contexts of Child and Young Adulthood Development” seeks to bring ordinary phenomena with R/S import into scholarly focus. This Special Issue takes an equity stance by exploring religious and spiritual experiences and individuals or groups who may have been left out of scholarship; relatedly we focus on groups who may be included in inadequately nuanced manners given ecologically grounded, intersectional, and emic perspectives. In particular, this Special Issue draws from interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks and their correspondingly diverse research methods to focus on R/S influences on underrepresented populations, processes, and outcomes. While this Special Issue draws from ecological frameworks and a lifespan perspective, it centers the (sometimes dissonant) experiences and meaning making around R/S experiences from childhood to young adulthood and how these experiences affect other developmental domains.

Relatedly, scholars’ heightened awareness of systemic injustices (e.g., racism, sexism, classism) may include how individuals and groups collude in reproducing stratified social contexts. Within R/S traditions, individuals and groups may marginalize their own members (i.e., perceiving or judging others as being “too strict” or “not religious enough” or as misunderstanding or ignorant of key religious messages). Across R/S traditions and their sanctioned gender roles, individuals and groups may reproduce stratified contexts through perpetuating beliefs and practices that enact sexism (e.g., reflecting sociocultural norms that disenfranchise girls’ and women’s physical, economic, or emotional safety), racism (e.g., devaluing the appearance and overall being of people and practices from minoritized racial or ethnic groups), and classism (e.g., benefitting from or maintaining economic domination of others, without providing tools for economic mobility and justice). Unjustly stratified



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social contexts threaten the positive development of all youth and compromise developmental trajectories, despite persistent calls for social justice including within R/S teachings and contexts. While personal–social issues matter for all youth and across contexts, they are particularly salient for youth with marginalized identities or R/S experiences.

Rather than presuming the inevitable perpetuation of inequitable systems, this Special Issue takes an agentic stance redesigning towards equity primarily by centering people and experiences that have been overlooked ([EquityXDesign Collaborative 2016](#)). In particular, this Special Issue draws from interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks and their correspondingly varied research methods to focus on underrepresented populations, processes, and outcomes. This focus highlights R/S influences within an intersectional framework that accounts for multiple identities simultaneously (e.g., ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, immigrant status) and acknowledges the unequal distribution of status and vulnerability across contexts ([Crenshaw 1989](#); [Spencer 2017](#)). Importantly, incorporating R/S influences centers on aspects of lived experiences that are often overlooked in public and scholarly discourse given the general relegation of R/S issues and common trepidation to engage “private” and contentious topics ([DelFattore 2004](#)). Further, engaging R/S influences goes beyond portrayals of their often-positive gloss to include potentially harmful ways R/S influences may be experienced personally and structurally within traditions or contexts (e.g., sexual violence or racism within religious institutions, without outcry or accountability) and between R/S groups (e.g., religious stigma and discrimination, religious coercion).

Broadly, this Special Issue contributes to the existing literature in multiple ways.

### **1. It Models Self-Reflexivity and Highlights the Contributions and Limitations of Positionality**

Reflexivity is fundamental to the quality and transparency of social science scholarship and is central to this Special Issue. Reflexivity helps researchers conceptualize, define, and analyze the objectives of an inquiry ([Abo-Zena and Rana 2020](#); [Holmes 2020](#); [Whitaker and Atkinson 2019](#)). Reflexivity, or reflecting on one’s positionality including self-critique and appraisal, is the continued engagement of various selves in the processes and products of research through epistemological, methodological, disciplinary, and textual decision making ([Horburch 2003](#); [Whitaker and Atkinson 2019](#)). While positional reflexivity focuses on the awareness of the effects of our cultural, racial/ethnic, social, national, and religious backgrounds, our “intellectual unconscious” and “collective curiosity” as professionals across disciplines also affect the research areas that we investigate, the methodologies that we prioritize and welcome, and the texts that we use to understand and interpret our work and that of others ([Dowling 2006](#); [Whitaker and Atkinson 2019](#)). As such, both coeditors, Mona Abo-Zena and Meenal Rana, reflected on our backgrounds to conceptualize and situate ourselves in this Special Issue. We also encouraged the contributors to share their positionality in the context of their research process and often within the written product. Our positional reflexivity informs all other reflexivities: our research interests, the ways we conceptualize scholarship, including this Special Issue, the choices informing the research methods and design, the interpretation of findings, and the recommendations regarding future research and implications. Positional reflexivity helps us reflect on our biases and insights in order to move toward intentional and iterative interpretations of findings that draw from insider and outsider perspectives.

Both coeditors acknowledge and problematize our settler embodiment in the USA and identify as minoritized women of color developmental scientists, Mona Abo-Zena as a second-generation immigrant-origin Muslim and Meenal Rana as a first-generation immigrant Hindu. We both use ecological, lifespan, and intersectional approaches to examine youth’s experiences of R/S, with most of the work published with Muslim (Abo-Zena) and Sikh (Rana) youth, families, and communities in Western contexts. Both of us have discussed our lived R/S experiences with each other many times, beyond the conceptualization of this Special Issue, and learned about each other’s practices and perspectives, finding the commonalities and appreciating their uniqueness. Because developmental

scholarship, including that focusing on R/S, often does not reflect the nuances of our own experiences or those of the people and communities with which we work, we were keen to develop this Special Issue as a vehicle for contributors to provide scholarly windows and mirrors into understudied lived experiences (Abo-Zena et al. 2019). For example, as inclusive and critical scholars, we discussed topics such as the disparities in accessibility to religious texts in classical Arabic and Sanskrit, due to our own liturgical limitations and, therefore, the ability to understand and decode Islam and Hinduism, respectively. We encourage “epistemological curiosity”, where the lived experiences of scholars provoke them to ask research questions. For example, as Rana shares

“As a critical thinker myself, I often found myself asking lots of “why” and “how” questions about religion as a child and as an adult. I reflect upon the practices and rituals, their meaning in contemporary contexts, and sometimes their connections with scientific principles. For example, I always heard that we should not sleep facing our heads toward the north. But the only reasoning I received from most people was that Hindus believe that is the direction for dead bodies. My father, who always tried to provide more plausible reasoning for my young mind, explained, “The north direction has a positive magnetic field and so do our heads. When two positive ends come together, they repel, and hence sleeping with heads in the north can affect our blood circulation and sleep.” As an adult, my skepticism combined with curiosity led to finding a similar explanation in a text by Dwivedi (2016), “Scientific Basis for Hindu Beliefs” about why we should not have our head toward the north.”

Drawing on self-reflexivity, as coeditors of this Special Issue, we are committed to including research studies that utilize holistic, interdisciplinary, intersectional, ecological, and lifespan perspectives. Accordingly, we embrace methodologies that are attentive to nuances of lived experiences of individuals and groups that are rendered invisible or marginalized in scholarship.

## **2. It Centers on Underrepresented Populations and Religious/Spiritual Influences Across Traditions**

The field of psychology and specifically the psychology of religion has disproportionately focused on Protestant Christian samples, experiences, and theology (Snibbe and Markus 2002). Further, this narrow research focus often occurs within Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and (purportedly) Democratic or WEIRD settings (Henrich et al. 2010). By focusing on religious and spiritual influences in countries including El Salvador, India, and Pakistan and religiously and ethnically diverse immigrant-origin groups in the USA, this Special Issue broadens the scope of individuals and groups represented in scholarship and their related experiences. These experiences include reflections on death, mental illness, modernity and religious and cultural ideals, religious readings and interpretations of holy texts and liturgical languages, and ethno-religious coping to navigate challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **3. It Considers R/S Influences within a Developmentally Holistic Framing**

Early religious and spiritual developmental theories have been critiqued for their approaches that reflect “developmental psychology’s broader Piagetian-cognitive hegemony” (King and Boyatzis 2015, p. 981). Beyond a primarily cognitive framing, this Special Issue considers youth’s religious and spiritual development holistically (e.g., physical, social, emotional, inter/intrapersonal) and from a lifespan perspective. A primarily cognitive focus risks eclipsing the range of social and emotional factors embedded in positive development, which may include navigating mental illness and other challenges to well-being. Considering development holistically and within a lifespan perspective accounts for antecedents in early childhood and the sway of socializing agents throughout the lifespan, including caregivers and religious mentors (e.g., grandparents, teachers, peers).

While recognizing the positive contributions, we draw from the resilience literature to account for the complex role of human relationships, noting that their influences may be mixed (Masten and Barnes 2018). For example, relationships may be generally supportive, yet contain layers of inadvertent messaging (e.g., inducing guilt, feeling judged) that may be experienced both positively and negatively by an individual. Neuropsychology studies explore the neural underpinnings of how youth and adults experience social situations including ritual practice and their range of associated emotions (Riveros and Immordino-Yang 2021). This wide range of emotions surrounding experiencing religious rituals may contribute to transcendence, avoidance of family tension, loss, and an array of coping mechanisms that make processing R/S experiences very personal and idiographic. For example, Rana shares,

“I have experienced multiple major losses in the last ten years. I have realized that participating in any religious rituals brings memories, mostly good, but also not so good, of those loved ones, who were part of those rituals when they were alive. I often avoid participating in familial/communal prayers and rituals as my coping mechanism because the emotions that are evoked as a result are overwhelming. Religious rituals such as various ceremonies, chanting, and prayers have become a private affair and an avoidance technique.”

Beyond person-centered meaning making, there are patterns of other R/S relationships and experiences that may feature egregiously harmful effects of betrayal, abuse, or hypocrisy. Relationships exist throughout the “lifespan” and include worldviews with varied phases of pre-life and/or after-life or circular views of life or time that may reflect connections with ancestors, place, or reincarnations of body–spirit and often provide models or ideals for worthy living (Deloria 2023).

#### **4. It Considers Development within an Ecological Framing**

Ecological framings include historical and geographical influences (e.g., time and place) and the movement of families and communities voluntarily (e.g., migration, immigration) or involuntarily (e.g., war, natural disasters) on human development. Unjust ecological contexts are social constructions that we can reconstruct in a just manner, particularly given the purported social justice goals of many R/S traditions. Regrettably, given persisting conditions, this Special Issue highlights how contexts such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, colonization, and genocide affect religious and spiritual influences and inform youth development. Specifically, this Special Issue includes studies on groups experiencing anti-Asian hate, surviving sexual violence, striving to dismantle rape culture, and destigmatizing marginalized identities and experiences (e.g., LGBTQ, mental health and stigma, ethnoreligious discrimination). Explicitly identifying oppressive contextual factors helps inform interventions to redress them.

#### **5. It Draws from Interdisciplinary Perspectives**

Interdisciplinary perspectives help model the complexity of contextual circumstances and a person’s reflections on their lived experiences (i.e., from a phenomenological perspective). To contribute to a holistic representation of R/S issues, interdisciplinary scholarly approaches draw from developmental and clinical psychology, human development, family studies, education, critical race and gender studies, and ethnic studies. These interdisciplinary perspectives incorporate diverse research methods and conceptual models to understand complex developmental processes. Diverse methods help describe developmental processes that reflect the interplay between religious and other social identities as they inform lived experiences. Survey and interview methods explore understudied populations (e.g., Latinx youth, LGBTQ) and varied human experiences (e.g., family practices navigating illness, death, anti-immigrant status). In addition, this Special Issue features relatively less common research methods within developmental psychology such as digital storytelling, action research, and autoethnography as tools to explore elusive or underrepresented factors informing religious and spiritual development among youth.

## 6. The Special Issue

The current Special Issue comprises eleven manuscripts including (1) nine empirical articles, (2) one perspective article, and (3) one review article. Altogether, these manuscripts represent a diversity of sociocultural and religious groups in and outside the United States representing countries of residence (e.g., El Salvador, India, Pakistan, USA), immigrant countries of origin (e.g., Nepal), ethnic and racial groups (e.g., Latinx, Asian, white European/Danish), and religious groups (e.g., Muslim, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Later Day Saints, Hindu). The articles cover a wide range of topics relevant to lifespan and R/S development: resilience, death, sexual violence, hope, ethnic and racial identity, LBQTIA+ issues, mental health, and parent–child relationships.

The article “Hira Makes a Sound: Nepali Diasporic Worldviewing through Asian American Studies Praxis during the COVID-19 Anti-Asian Hate Pandemics” by Ty, Tang, and colleagues, utilized a storybook titled “Hira Makes a Sound” that the team developed collaboratively through community-based digital storytelling methods. The story centers on an intergenerational Nepali immigrant family that includes three generations of women, with Hira being the child protagonist (youngest generation). Through the storytelling approach, the authors modeled the coproduction of cultural knowledge with community adults and elders that reflects the religious, cultural, and spiritual coping in the Gurung worldview. These communal methods and their messaging build resilience in youth from diverse backgrounds in the face of racism, misrepresentation, and systemic biases, especially during the increased anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 health pandemic.

“They Sit with the Discomfort, They Sit with the Pain Instead of Coming Forward”: Muslim Students’ Awareness, Attitudes, and Challenges Mobilizing Sexual Violence Education on Campus”, by Azmat and colleagues, examined the under researched and often socially taboo topic of anti-sexual violence programming for Muslim students in a university context. This mixed-method study found that Muslim women reported knowing more cases of sexual assault and had higher disagreement with victim-blaming statements compared to their male counterparts. The study examined the contextual influences of Islamophobia, the culture of denial that sexual violence is a problem, and several oppressive systems that affect sexual assault programming on campus for Muslim women. The findings contribute to demonstrating programming and intervention needs.

“Cultural Factors Influencing Mental Health Stigma: Perceptions of Mental Illness (POMI) in Pakistani Emerging Adults”, by Ahmad and Konscol, represented a cross-sectional study with 92 Pakistani emerging adults to explore whether collectivism was associated with attitudes toward mental illness. The authors piloted the Perceptions of Mental Illness (POMI) questionnaire in the context of Pakistan to understand the relationship between mental health stigma and awareness about mental health, perception, help-seeking attitudes, and exposure. The results from the POMI provided insights into ethno-religiously informed Pakistani beliefs and attitudes that relate to both stigmatizing attitudes and collectivism. The authors shared implications of the POMI to be used to design mental health awareness programs in Pakistan.

The study, “A Death in the Family: Links between Religion, Parenting, and Family Communication about Death”, by Zajac and Boyatzis, drew on surveys with 24 predominantly white and mostly Christian families who experienced a recent loss of a family member to assess parent–child communication about death and examine the predictors of such communication. When parents demonstrated warmth and acceptance, children initiated the discussion about death, and the parent–child dyad communicated more frequently. Psychological control, negative religious coping, private religious practices, and religious focus were negatively associated with the frequency of parent–child communication about death. The conversational topics regarding death often were religiously and spiritually oriented.

The article, “Kids Reading Tanakh: The Child as Interpreter”, by Hassenfeld, utilized task-based read-aloud interviews on the Hebrew Biblical text with two elementary school children to examine the ways Jewish children reflect their identities and experiences when

interpreting the Tanakh. Given the multiple case-study approach, the study made recommendations for educators and adults to sensitize them to the interpretive identities that children bring to their reading of Biblical texts and move from a deficit or prescriptive model of religious education to an agentic and asset-based perspective.

“Latinx Emerging Adults’ Religious Identity, Ethnic Identity, and Psychological Well-Being”, by Schiro, Barry, and colleagues, examined associations between religious and ethnic identity exploration and commitment and psychological well-being (PWB) among 683 Latinx emerging adults, with one-third of the participants being female (76%) and most of them having Protestant and Roman Catholic preferences (91%). Identity exploration (both religious and ethnic) and psychological well-being were not significantly related. However, identity commitment was a better predictor of mental health. The findings suggested that identity exploration when experienced in isolation from identity commitment may have a detrimental effect on mental health. The study demonstrated the relationship between religious/ethnic identity and psychological well-being in our understanding of the protective factors for Latinx emerging adults.

“Śravaṇ Kumār: Rethinking a Cultural Ideal for Indian Youth”, by Vikas Baniwal and Anshu Chaudhary, examined the story of Śravaṇ Kumār, a historical figure from Hindu mythology, who carried his blind parents on his shoulders to fulfill their wish for a pilgrimage. The paper explored the relevance of the idea of Śravaṇ Kumār in contemporary times with its connection to psychoanalytic identity development theories. It discussed the significance of having relevant mythical and cultural ideals for the identity development of modern youth.

“I’ll Give Them All the Time They Need”: How LGBTQ+ Teens Build Positive Relationships with Their Active, Latter-Day Saint Parents” by Sorrell and colleagues utilized 19 separate interviews with LGBTQ+ teens and their Latter-day Saint (LDS) parents (38 total interviews) to explore the ways the teens contributed to the development of positive relationships with their parents. The findings suggested that the LGBTQ+ teens engaged in several behaviors that benefited their relationships with their LDS parents: communication, family connections, meaningful conversations with parents, openness about their LGBTQ+ identity, and patience with parents’ understanding. The study also reported several challenges, one of which was parents and teens avoiding LGBTQ+ and religious topics.

The article, “Agentic and Receptive Hope: Understanding Hope in the Context of Religiousness and Spirituality through the Narratives of Salvadoran Youth” by Vaughn and colleagues, explored how religiousness and spirituality (R/S) informed agentic and receptive hope that might be useful in many challenging contexts, using content analysis from the interviews conducted with 18 thriving Salvadoran adolescents, who were involved in a faith-based program. Agentic hopes, the beyond-the-self hopes, were focused on benefiting three distinct targets: God, community, and family. Sanctified hopes, as described by youth, focused on fulfilling God’s purposes. Receptive hopes, which consider how hope is shaped and empowered by context, were experienced by youth in seven key contexts: self, caring adult relationships, family, God, youth development sponsor, social activities, and peers.

“Perspectives on Lifespan Religious and Spiritual Development from Scholars across the Lifespan,” by Gale and colleagues, discussed the key influences of R/S development as scholars whose personal–professional identities represent perspectives from across the lifespan. The discussion in this paper was organized around Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework and the application of the process–person–context–time model to understand religious/spiritual development. The article discussed the key domains of religious/spiritual development including individual and relational outcomes. The article presented future directions for research in the dynamic area of R/S development.

The review article “A Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Audit of the American Families of Faith Project: Exploring Lifespan Spiritual Development in Religiously and Racially Diverse Families” by Dollahite and colleagues evaluated the diversity, equity, and inclusion of the American Families of Faith (AFF) project’s (a) research team, (b) products, and

(c) samples. This audit examined the strengths and limitations of the project, opportunities for growth, and future directions for the AFF project. The authors argued that previous reviews lacked diversity among scholars and samples in the field of psychology and recommended increasing the representativeness in science.

## 7. Conclusions and Future Directions

This Special Issue draws from ecological frameworks and a lifespan perspective and centers on the (often dissonant) experiences and meaning making around religious and spiritual experiences from childhood to young adulthood and how these experiences affect other developmental domains. Despite the contributions outlined above, the progress is overdue and incremental; there remains a pressing need to extend inclusive scholarship efforts. In particular, not all world faith traditions are represented. In addition to exploring different denominations or sects within Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, multiple representations should include Baha'i, Buddhist, Confucian, Jain, Indigenous, Naturalist, Pagan, Sikh, Tao, Zoroastrianism, and others, as well as non-religious worldviews. Beyond initial studies that center on representing youth experiences, research should illustrate the range of within-group differences. Not only does adequate representation require ample studies with samples and methods to saturate the within-group variations, but ongoing studies are needed to explore the changing sociocultural contexts. These contexts include issues related to religious coping, growth, and prosperity, as well as religiously affiliated and intersectionally manifested strife, violence, and genocide. The nature of the studies needs to go beyond broad representations and descriptive studies to capture the nuances of diverse individuals' experiences and religious life. Outlining these nuances would reflect the ebbs and flows of the faith calendar within a particular tradition and how daily routines lead into rituals across months and throughout a year or relevant cycle (e.g., lunar) within the R/S tradition.

Similarly, future scholarship reflecting R/S influences would outline the seasons or phases of life throughout the "lifespan", as portrayed within a particular tradition. In both faith-specific and comparative manners, these studies may feature understudied areas that have religious significance, such as the meaning of full moons and the lunar cycle, the menstrual cycle, numerology and other symbols of meaning, and the religious significance of water, fire, and other elements. To explore these topics, existing methods and research designs that include participatory and other engaged methods need to be employed and adapted to capture the minor and major meanings of experiences for individuals and groups within and beyond the religion. Drawing on audits from within and across traditions, teams of researchers and other inquirers can explore religious and spiritual issues hidden in plain sight or elusive in other manners, but that inform development throughout the lifespan. In these emerging manners, we can continue to work to understand the everyday or ordinary ways religious and spiritual matters inform development.

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