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Perspective

Perspectives on Lifespan Religious and Spiritual Development from Scholars across the Lifespan

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to share our perspectives on the key influences of lifespan religious and spiritual development as scholars from across the lifespan (i.e., the four authors are from different generations, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Gen Z). Our perspectives are heavily influenced by our combined 60+ years of research experience in examining the connections between religion and family life. Our discussion is organized around Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework and the process-person-context-time model. Within this framework, the key factors we discuss that influence religious/spiritual development include (a) process (i.e., person-religion mismatch and family processes), (b) person (i.e., age, gender/sexual orientation, mental health, personal agency, and experience), (c) context (i.e., home environment, culture, and community), and (d) time (i.e., historical events and the duration of proximal processes). Where possible, we highlight underrepresented religious and ethnic groups. The key domains that we discuss that are influenced by religious/spiritual development include individual and relational outcomes. Finally, we suggest meaningful directions for future research. Given the significant contemporary dynamism in spiritual and religious identity and involvement, in this article, we discuss research and theory that can inform and assist scholars, religious leaders, parents, as well as youth and emerging adults.

Keywords: religious development; spiritual development; bioecological; phenomenological

1. Introduction

Most children, adolescents, and emerging adults are growing up in a significantly different religious and spiritual landscape from previous generations. Young people tend to be less religious and spiritual than their parents and grandparents and there has been a significant decline in how important or salient religion reportedly is to individuals (Pew Research Center 2015). The multi-faceted ecology in which children, adolescents, and emerging adults develop is ever changing; therefore, the context of their religious and spiritual development is shifting.

Despite an overall trend in developed nations toward secularization, decreased religious involvement, and declining religious salience, it is noteworthy and compelling that a significant portion of children, adolescents, and emerging adults remain continually religious and spiritual and express desire across time for ongoing deepening and strengthening of their religious beliefs, practices, and ties to their faith community (Marks and Dollahite 2017; Pearce and Denton 2011). For example, belief in God has been found to be fairly stable across adolescence, with the vast majority of youth in the United States consistently believing in God (Pearce and Denton 2011). Other trends, such as religious attendance, have been found to experience a greater decrease in adolescence, although an estimated 29% of late adolescents reported attending church weekly or more (Pearce and Denton 2011).

The religiosity and spirituality of children and youth are most influenced by their parents' religious and spiritual behaviors (Bengtson et al. 2013; Mahoney 2021). Nevertheless, many adolescents and emerging adults turn away from religion (Smith et al. 2011)—although some turn toward religion for answers to the "BIG" (Being, Intimacy, and God) questions that "have to do with existential mysteries about human origins and destinies; questions about ultimate concerns such as the meaning of existence and the purpose of life; questions about one's life calling or mission...; and questions about close relationships such as marriage and family life" (Marks and Dollahite 2017, p. 6; Dollahite and Marks 2019).

Given the profound need to belong (Hoffman 2012), some adolescents and emerging adults increase religious activity and/or become more civically engaged. However, others turn away from religion and other contexts that tend to promote positive youth development (PYD) and become withdrawn or seek anti-social company by joining hate groups or gangs (King and Boyatzis 2004). Vital decisions regarding development are influenced and made during these windows of time. Some flourish and some find themselves "lost in transition" (Smith et al. 2011, p. 1) without commitment to moral, civic, or political goals and standards.

The religious and spiritual trajectory of children's and adolescents' development can be strengthened or diminished by individual, familial, and outside contextual factors. At this time of great religious change, we argue that it is important to understand the key factors that influence change and religious/spiritual development. Therefore, in this article, we will discuss the key factors and processes that influence religious and spiritual development using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model to provide a framework for our discussion. Furthermore, the relational developmental systems (RDS) metamodel—a predominant theory that is in many ways consistent with the PPCT—emphasizes the bidirectional influence of the individual and their contexts (Lerner et al. 2015). Subsequently, we will also briefly mention some key domains that are influenced by religious/spiritual development. Because the context that is perhaps the most influential for religious and spiritual development is the family (Bengtson et al. 2013; Hardy et al. 2022), and due to our combined 60+ years of research experience and nearly 150 academic publications examining the connections between religion and family life, this article primarily focuses on family processes related to religious and spiritual development. Moreover, we argue that the qualitative nature of our research allows us to better pinpoint specific relational and spiritual processes that we believe are important to focus on and to better understand the processes of religious/spiritual development in context. This discussion is not intended to be exhaustive or a systematic review of the field, although this type of review can certainly be useful (e.g., Hardy et al. 2019b). The exhaustive and comprehensive nature of these reviews often necessitates that one narrows their focus to one that is feasible to systematically review (e.g., focusing exclusively on adolescent development). Rather, based on our combined experiences as scholars with prolonged experience with research that has examined religious development throughout the lifespan, as well as our different developmental positions within the lifespan (i.e., the four authors of the current article are from different generations, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Gen Z), we wish to discuss our perspectives on lifespan religious/spiritual development. We believe that the perspectives of budding scholars new to the field in conjunction with senior scholars might help in the advancement of thinking in this domain. As a foundation for this discussion, we first describe how we define religious and spiritual development, and then we will briefly describe what we mean by the PPCT model.

Given that this article is a perspective piece rather than a systematic review, this paper references our own published work extensively. It is necessary to note that we are family relationship scholars and our work focuses on the nexus of religion and relational processes. Therefore, our perspectives and this discussion focus more extensively on relationship processes rather than on individual spiritual development. Moreover, it is important to note

that these developmental processes may differ in nature across individuals and families due to the varied opportunities and oppressions in diverse ethnic, racial, and religious contexts (Spencer 2017). However, we respect and welcome other perspectives from diverse fields and recognize the value of interdisciplinary work to better understand processes of religious and spiritual development. We echo Li's (2003) discussion of the consequences of failing to engage in interdisciplinary research in understanding development: "because of the complexity of the developmental system involving interactions among multiple levels and time scales cutting across disciplinary boundaries, research efforts thus far have been local and divisional, missing the dynamic gestalt of such interconnections" (p. 175).

1.1. Positionality as Framed within the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) Framework

As mentioned previously, the present article is grounded in the Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) framework, and thus it is fitting to discuss the positionality of the authors within this framework. Regarding *Person*, the four authors of the article are from different generations, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Gen Z, and their academic standings include one master's student, one adjunct professor, and two full professors. As we have argued elsewhere, project-relevant diversity is important in elevating the quality of research (Marks 2015). Therefore, we feel that the different ages and contexts of the authors helped in elevating our collective understanding of the processes described in the present article. The authors are all white, with the first being female and the remaining three being male. Although all authors are affiliated with family studies, the two younger scholars have gained additional perspectives from working with faculty from different departments, such as Religion and Developmental Psychology.

The *Process* by which the authors started to collaborate began in 1995, when the third author, then a new professor, mentored the fourth author, who was an undergraduate student at the time. Both authors have since become full professors and have continued to mentor other students, including the first and second authors. Upon learning of a special issue, the senior authors invited the junior authors to join them in writing an article exploring the factors that influence religious and spiritual development. The article went through several drafts before being submitted, and despite being labeled as a "Perspective" piece, it is not only an expression of opinion, but is based on a review of relevant literature and our combined years of experience in the discipline, which total more than 60. After submission, the article also underwent revisions and received feedback from reviewers and guest editors over three rounds.

Regarding *Context*, three of the authors are married and have children at various stages of development (from early childhood to adulthood), and all four authors are highly committed members of their religious communities. Furthermore, by examining our perspectives and knowledge of the literature on religious and spiritual development within the context of the PPCT, we have expanded our understanding of the phenomena as well as identified potential areas for future research. For example, one area we have not explored or seen others explore in-depth related to religious development is the duration of proximal processes. We now feel it is relevant to understand and explore this domain in future research.

Regarding *Time*, the perspectives of the authors have changed over time. Two of the authors began their studies on this topic from a psychological perspective, but over time became more convinced of the central developmental context of the family. One author began his career in marriage and family therapy (and was a practicing therapist), then added to that family resource management, and has since added religious studies.

1.2. Definitions

Religious and spiritual development are often assessed as connected entities (Oman 2013; Mahoney 2021), even for children and adolescents. Although there have been multiple attempts to define religiosity and spirituality, researchers have not reached consensus. Components of spirituality often parallel components of individual well-being, and re-

ligiosity shares considerable overlap with spirituality (Boyatzis 2012). Boyatzis (2012) emphasized that defining "spiritual *development*" for young children and adolescents is often more difficult, because "*what* develops?" (Boyatzis 2012). Despite the difficulty in reaching definitional or operational consensus, researchers have framed spiritual development as the change in or growth in "a personal search for a connection to divine entities or supernatural phenomena; a private quest for enlightenment or virtues; and/or internal motivation to seek out meaning, purpose, and self-transcendence within or outside of the self or organized religion groups" (Mahoney 2021, p. 5). As noted, spirituality does not necessarily need organized religion to develop, yet it is often coupled with religion. As Boyatzis (2012) explained, "Children are spiritual beings first then are acculturated (or not) in a religious tradition" (p. 153). Religious development has also been defined as a change in religious affiliation, practice, or belief (Storm and Voas 2012). Child and adolescent religiosity and spirituality are both influenced by different social contexts, ranging from family to culture (Boyatzis 2012).

Hardy et al. (2019b) have identified and defined seven "interconnected but distinct dimensions" of religious development including cognitive, behavioral, affective, identification, well-being, spiritual, and ecological dimensions. Hardy and Longo (2021) further suggested that within each of these seven dimensions of religious development, there could be specific "endpoints" toward which development might occur leading to optimal developmental outcomes. They argued that these endpoints are related to higher levels of religiosity/spirituality, and although some may object to the concept that the developmental endpoint of higher religiosity should be considered "optimal development," they defended this idea by citing the many positive outcomes of religiosity/spirituality (Hardy et al. 2019b). Subsequently, this article will often focus on what facilitates successful faith transmission as it pertains to this concept of optimal religious/spiritual development. Moreover, we note that the "optimal" developmental endpoints within these seven dimensions of religion may differ across contexts. For example, since conceptualizations of positive youth outcomes vary across contexts (Dimitrova et al. 2021), and even similar goals (piety, modesty) may manifest differently across and within traditions (i.e., based on gender, Chapman 2018), there may not be universal developmental endpoints of religion that prove to be adaptive across all contexts.

Furthermore, we mention Hardy et al.'s (2019b) dimensions of religiousness/spirituality to build a foundation for our discussion of a broader range of religious/spiritual experiences and processes. We acknowledge that although we discuss religious/spiritual development in more general terms for multiple reasons (in part because specifying the separate influences for each dimension of religion would be beyond the scope of this article), further empirical work needs to be carried out to understand how the key influences that we will discuss might vary across the specific dimensions of religion mentioned by Hardy and Longo (2021).

As an extension of the concept of optimal religious/spiritual development, we have developed a theory of intergenerational processes around spiritual and religious development in the context of family life that we call Generative Devotion (Dollahite et al. 2019a). In Dollahite et al. (2019), we discussed how the concept of generative devotion was part of how we defined positive religious/spiritual development:

> For us, positive religious/spiritual development involves growth toward what we call Generative Devotion, defined as a way of approaching religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and communities that attends to the long-term well-being of family members, is essentially other-oriented, responds to abiding needs of persons, respects the agency of others, and is consciously relational in nature. Generative Devotion is a process of continually becoming a better family member, one who approaches one's religious beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith community in ways that establish and nurture enduring, devoted family relationships across generations.

Grounded in the idea of Generative Devotion, we propose that positive religious/spiritual development involves growing in ways that are more likely to result in tending to the long-term well-being of others, becoming respectful of other persons' agency, being responsive to others' needs, and to being committed, loyal, and faithful to God, to family relationships, and to other human beings across time and generations.

1.3. Lifespan Spiritual Development Processes in Families

In their call for papers, the Guest Editors invited attention to lifespan spiritual development. We hypothesize that this is an essential next step in the research on spiritual development. We enjoyed being a small part of the early development of the field of spiritual development of children and youth (Boyatzis et al. 2006; Dollahite and Marks 2006) as well as the ongoing growth of this area of emphasis (Dollahite and Marks 2019). However, we are delighted that Abo-Zena and Rana are helping the field mature into an emphasis on lifespan spiritual development.

While it is crucial to continue to do excellent work on the spiritual development of children and youth from diverse religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, we hypothesize that it is equally important to explore spiritual development in young adults, middle adults, aging adults, and even very old adults. In our case, we believe it is important, meaningful, and helpful to consider lifespan spiritual development in the context of family relationships and family processes. In addition, we hypothesize that spiritual development would best be conceptualized in multifaceted, diverse, and nuanced ways, ideally in relational contexts. Our past, present, and future works emphasize that personal spiritual experiences, religious commitments, faith community involvement, spiritual transformation, and religious transitions can often be best understood in relational contexts. Erikson and Erikson (1997) in their landmark monograph, *The Life Cycle Completed*, discussed Lars Tornstam and colleagues' concept of *gerotranscendence*, defined as "a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one" (p. 123). This shift often takes place in very old persons as they prepare to die. We may well wait until the very end of our own careers/lives to explore the spiritual and relational lives of the very old. However, we look forward to this work (if not necessarily the challenges of those times).

1.4. Bioecological Theory and the PPCT Model of Human Development

The culmination of Bronfenbrenner's decades of development on the bioecological theory of human development resulted in the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Navarro et al. 2022). In the model, proximal processes (i.e., dynamic, direct, enduring, and reciprocal interactions) are the main driving force behind human development. Other factors, such as person (i.e., biological and psychological characteristics), context (i.e., the interactive systems that comprise our environment), and time (i.e., both one's place in historical events and the duration of proximal processes) interact together and influence one's engagement in proximal processes or the effectiveness of these processes in facilitating development. Next, we use each part of the PPCT model to identify key factors that influence religious/spiritual development. These dynamic interactions not only influence individual development, but individuals similarly influence the contexts and systems that they are part of (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Lerner et al. 2015). Therefore, we will also examine how religious and spiritual development influences other developmental domains within the individual, and how religious and spiritual development influences the surrounding relational systems.

In developing this article, we created an initial framework to outline our perspectives. However, as we further considered the best way to organize our discussion, we concluded that the PPCT model provided a meaningful framework that not only aligned with our initial themes, but also improved the theoretical clarity of the themes and processes that we had found in our work, as well as the work of others we had been exposed to in our years of scholarly experience. Then, we used the theoretical foundation that the PPCT provided to dive deeper into other parts of the literature that we had not before considered, in order

to check on some of our biases. Moreover, we sought to incorporate some understudied elements of the PPCT model, as it pertained to religious and spiritual development, into our directions for future research.

Overall, we felt that having the PPCT model as our organizing framework and foundation strengthened our discussion. First, it provided a well-tested and well-developed framework for us to build upon. Second, it provided readers with a well-organized way of understanding the literature using a pre-existing theoretical framework that might be familiar. Third, we felt that the model added to the rigor of the article, led to a deeper understanding of the literature, and provided meaningful directions for areas of future research. Furthermore, despite the fact that the PPCT is a prevailing model in understanding human development and that some empirical work has pointed to the value of utilizing the PPCT model in understanding religious and spiritual development (Goodman and Dyer 2020), little if any theoretical work has sought to apply this model to explore, understand, and explain processes of religious and spiritual development in children and youth.

2. Key Factors That Influence Religious/Spiritual Development

Next, we overview key factors pertaining to lifespan religious and spiritual development, but particularly during adolescence and emerging adulthood (see Figure 1), including: (a) *Process* (i.e., person-religion mismatch and family processes), (b) *person* (i.e., age, gender/sexual orientation, personal agency, and experience), and (c) *context* (i.e., home environment, culture, and community), and (d) *time* (one's place in historical events). As illustrated in Figure 1, the components of the PPCT not only influence religious and spiritual development but are also interconnected and influence each other. Furthermore, the interactions between these components can have potential ramifications for religious and spiritual development. Moreover, we wish to note that these processes are complex and may vary based on the context as well as the attributes of an individual. Therefore, these processes and characteristics are not intended to be a catalog listing or a checklist of steps that guarantee optimal religious development. Rather, we hope that our presentation of what we consider to be key issues related to religious/spiritual development will inspire additional research to explore the connections between these characteristics, contexts, and processes to best facilitate development in context.
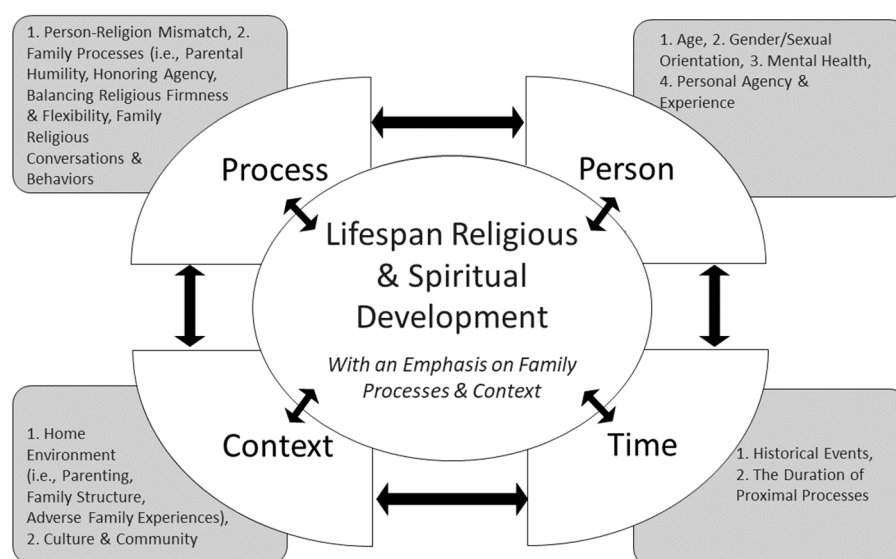

Figure 1. Person-Process-Context-Time framework of lifespan religious and spiritual development with an emphasis on family process and context.

2.1. Process

2.1.1. Person-Religion Mismatch

Paloutzian et al. (2013) theorized that one key factor in religious change and stability (as well as the outcomes of religious change) is person-religion fit. Specifically, if an individual has a poor fit or mismatch between their needs, beliefs, or behaviors, and their religion, they are likely to leave their religion. Similarly, if an individual finds a different religion that is a better fit or match, they are likely to join that religion. We extend their theorizing to claim that the mode by which individuals experience a mismatch involves the proximal processes that individuals have with religious communities and the individuals belonging to them. For example, among the reasons listed in one recent review of prior articles regarding why individuals leave religion include feeling out of place in the religious community, having intellectual, moral, or political differences with religion/religious leaders, and feeling that religion was irrelevant or inconvenient in one's life (Hardy and Longo 2021). Although each of these reasons are influences on religious change in their own way, we contend that the overarching concept of religious mismatch applies to these reasons for religious change and may also apply to other reasons.

2.1.2. Family Processes

One of the few points of consensus among leading psychologists is that the template for life is set down during the first six years but we have added:

> If the first six years of life are when the blueprint or template for life is sketched, it is often during the [later teen and emerging adult] years that early but vitally important aspects of *building* take place. (Marks and Dollahite 2017, p. 3)

These ideas regarding both the setting down of an early "template" as well as later "building" are germane to decisions involving faith involvement and family relationships (Bengtson et al. 2013).

Religion and spirituality are often important components of family life and family functioning, as 60% of parents of children under 18 years old reported that religion was "very important" or "somewhat important" in their life (Pew Research Center 2015). Many parents incorporate religious and spiritual beliefs and teachings (Goeke-Morey and Cummings 2017) given their desire to transmit their religiosity or spirituality to their children (Kelley et al. 2021). A significant amount of research has emphasized the importance of the family home environment to benefit both parents and children (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008). While religiosity is often assessed through religious behavior outside of the home (e.g., in particular, religious service attendance), children and adolescents are most likely influenced by participating in religious activities within their own homes with their own families[1] (Lambert and Dollahite 2010). The home-based religious and spiritual environment may be the best place for parents to transmit their own religious or spiritual beliefs to their children. Some of the key proximal parent-child processes for fostering children's religious/spiritual development include parental humility, honoring agency, balancing religious firmness and religious flexibility, family religious conversations, and family religious behaviors. Given the importance of successfully transmitting their religious identities to the next generation as reported by parents, this section includes some findings that provide a few practical suggestions for parents. Knight et al. (2019) provide several helpful suggestions for clinicians seeking to help family members in addressing religious differences.

Parental Humility. Chelladurai et al. (2021) explored the influence of the virtue of humility on family life in religious families. They found that pride was an obstacle to relational well-being and that religious beliefs and practices influenced humility in families. In religious families, humility was fostered through religious beliefs related to the importance of humility as a virtue or commandment, their place in God's plan, and the religious importance of selflessness. Religious practices, such as prayer, studying scripture, and attendance at worship services increased humility by fostering self-evaluation and emotional regulation, gratitude, opportunities for conflict resolution, and more considerate

views of the imperfections of self and others. Based on these findings, it is likely that when religious parents exhibit humility in their parenting style and parenting practices, then their adolescent and young-adult children are more likely to respond to parental efforts at spiritual and religious socialization.

Honoring Agency. Barrow et al. (2021) found that many highly religious parents made efforts to balance their own desires for religious continuity (i.e., desire that their children would continue the religious identity of the parents) by honoring their children's religious agency (i.e., respecting children's choices about their religious identity and observance). Given the results of this study, we suggest that parents will have greater long-term success in their efforts at religious and spiritual socialization when they make efforts to respect their children's choices about children's religious identity, spiritual practices, and involvement in a faith community.

Balancing Religious Firmness and Religious Flexibility. Dollahite et al. (2019c) explored the ways that religious parents strived to balance religious firmness (defined as loyalty to God and devoted adherence to those things that are believed to represent or uphold God), with religious flexibility (defined as loyalty to family members that results in a principled or pragmatic willingness to adapt religious beliefs and practices to better meet perceived familial needs). They concluded the following:

> This study may suggest that religious parents who wish the fruits of their faith to be enjoyed by their children and grandchildren need to be firm enough in their faith that they plainly show their loyalty to God... Yet our findings also suggest that strongly religious parents could benefit their children by striving to be flexible enough in how those beliefs and practices are applied in families that they also show their loyalty to their family members by attending to their needs, challenges, and circumstances. (p. 15)

Therefore, we suggest that parents who find creative ways to balance religious firmness and flexibility in their spiritual and religious socialization efforts are more likely to enjoy long-term parent-child relational well-being.

The way that parents approach religious beliefs and practices is often associated with how children believe and practice. Using a person-centered approach, some research has found parents to uniquely influence the starting point and trajectory of their adolescents' religiosity (Goodman and Dyer 2020). Parents feel that they transmit their religiosity to their children the most when they set a religious example, when they involve their children in a religious community, when they participate in religious practices as a family, and when they set rules and boundaries influenced by religious beliefs (Kelley et al. 2021). When reflecting upon how their parents' religiosity influenced their own religious development, young adults reported that their parents engaged in different strategies to transmit their beliefs to their children. These strategies included having discussions about religious beliefs and engaging in joint religious activities (Okagaki et al. 1999). Therefore, two of the most powerful ways parents transmit their religiosity, and thus influence their children's religious development, are through family religious conversations (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008; Flor and Knapp 2001) and family religious behaviors (Goodman and Dyer 2020; Lambert and Dollahite 2010).

Family Religious Conversations. Family religious conversations are highly correlated with how children and adolescents develop religiously, with adolescents reporting faith transmission to occur through conversations "more than any other method" (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008, p. 620). Bi-directional (e.g., transactional; Boyatzis and Janicki 2003) religious conversations, where both parents and children initiate and participate, have been shown to influence adolescents' religious behaviors (e.g., church attendance, prayer) and their religious salience (e.g., importance of religion in their lives; Flor and Knapp 2001). When religious conversations are more youth-centered (when adolescents initiate conversations about religious topics), both adolescents and parents benefit more than when parents initiate conversations about religious topics or when parents use these conversations as a way to "lecture" their children (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008; Flor and Knapp 2001).

The impact of religious conversations may differ by gender. As religious parents converse with children of the same gender (e.g., mothers with daughters), some have reportedly felt an increased desire for that child to hold religion as important (Flor and Knapp 2001). To help in aiding their children and adolescents to positively develop their religiosity in religious conversations, parents should "listen more and talk less" (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008, p. 629), especially when participating in religious activities as a family.

Family Religious Behaviors. Parent-child faith transmission is also more likely to occur when families participate in religious activities together (Goodman and Dyer 2020). When families pray together, children and adolescents benefit from the togetherness time as a family, the social support that is felt, and the bonding and unity that develops (Chelladurai et al. 2018). When families pray together (during meals or other family times) or when parents bless their children or pray with their children, children are able to deepen their faith (Chelladurai et al. 2018; Humphrey et al. 2008). Other family religious rituals that influence child and adolescent religious development include studying scriptures or other sacred texts, religious singing, shared religious activities, and celebrating religious holidays (Lambert and Dollahite 2010) including Shabbat (the Sabbath) for Jewish families (Marks et al. 2018) and the Ramadan fast for Muslim families (Alghafli et al. 2019). The family religious behaviors that may benefit child and adolescent religious and spiritual development most are those that build personal intimacy, safety, and emotional relationships between parents and children (Krok 2018).

2.2. Person

We acknowledge that the following personal identities and experiences do not occur in isolation. Often important influences on religious and spiritual development are found at the intersection of identities and experiences. Although we recognize the importance of this intersectional framework for understanding development in context (Spencer 2017), we also recognize that an exhaustive list of intersecting personal identities and experiences that influence religious and spiritual development would be almost impossible to create and definitely beyond the scope of this paper. One important and complex intersection that we briefly note is the intersection of minority gender identification/sexual orientation, mental health, and religious development. Despite this limitation, we still feel it is important to discuss some key personal characteristics that influence religious and spiritual development, including age, gender/sexual orientation, mental health, and personal agency and experience.

2.2.1. Age

Children and younger adolescents tend to be more religious because they may be more willing to accept what their parents teach and willing to participate in religious activities with their families (e.g., attending church; Petts 2014). Miller (2015) proposes that adolescence is when a person's spiritual faculties come online. Older adolescents may choose not to participate in religious behaviors or accept religious teachings as readily or enthusiastically as they did during childhood and early adolescence (McNamara Barry et al. 2010). This general distancing may partly be a function of exercising increased autonomy and independence (Chan et al. 2015; Petts 2009) but is perhaps also due to what Erik Erikson associated with the crisis of identity (Erikson and Erikson 1997). Relatedly, the vast majority of changes in religious identification (e.g., converting to a different religion or leaving religion) happen during adolescence and young adulthood (Public Religion Research Institute 2016).

As noted previously, some adolescents may remain religious or may become more religious (Pearce and Denton 2011; Petts 2014). Using person-centered approaches, some researchers have differentiated groups of adolescents by personal and familial characteristics to help explain variations in individual involvement with religion, levels of spirituality, and beliefs in religious teachings or spiritual concepts (Pearce and Denton 2011). Findings indicate that adolescents are significantly more likely to remain religious if they reside with

two religious biological parents who attend church (Hardie et al. 2016; Petts 2014). We will return to this familial point later, but now turn our focus on gender.

2.2.2. Gender and Sexual Orientation

In general, girls participate more frequently in religious activity and hold religion as more important in their lives than boys (Pew Research Center 2015), perhaps due to gendered differences in socialization (Flor and Knapp 2001; Hardy et al. 2019a; Pearce et al. 2019). Girls express more religious behavior than boys (Pew Research Center 2015), and thus religiosity may be viewed as a more feminine characteristic. As adolescent boys develop their masculinity, they may participate in misbehavior; however, settings that require good behavior (e.g., their faith community) may not be as inviting for boys' development as faith community expectations may be at odds with their behavior (Heyder et al. 2021). In addition, parents' desire for their children to be religious differs by gender, where parental religious transmission may be amplified for boys (with boys benefiting from adult modeled religious behavior; Dollahite and Thatcher 2008; Flor and Knapp 2001) and reduced for girls (with girls finding greater benefit from the social aspects of religion; Goeke-Morey and Cummings 2017; Hardy et al. 2019a). Being a sexual minority may also influence religious and spiritual development. Of the transgender individuals that have been identified as part of religion in one recent national study, 58% reported leaving their faith community because they had experienced rejection or feared experiencing rejection (James et al. 2016).

Adolescents who identify as non-heterosexual may also fear rejection in their religious communities since many religions teach the opposition of any form of sexual behavior or sexual identity that is not heterosexual (Lefevor et al. 2018). In particular, adolescents who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community may not be as involved in their religious community or believe in their faith's teachings, especially if they feel that they do not have the same social support that non-LGBTQIA+ adolescents receive (Pearce et al. 2019). Other studies have examined LGB mental health as it is associated with religiosity.

2.2.3. Mental Heath

Sexual minority adolescents' mental health is often negatively associated with religiosity (Lassiter et al. 2019). As LGB individuals experience worse mental health in general, scholars have examined the influence of religion as religious institutions generally support and encourage heterosexuality. Interestingly, LGB individuals who report a specific religious affiliation report fewer suicide attempts compared to LGB individuals who do not affiliate with a specific religion (Kralovec et al. 2014). Perhaps this relationship exists due to the fact that as other religious individuals are loving and supportive, despite religious institutions' stance on gender/sexual identity, LGB individuals may feel accepted even if they may experience internalized homophobia (Sowe et al. 2014). Researchers should continue to not only investigate how religiosity is correlated with mental health outcomes for LGB individuals, but also how this association might influence religious/spiritual development.

In addition to examining mental health for LGB individuals, researchers have examined how religiosity might relate to mental health for all individuals, with a focus on adolescents. Generally, adolescents who rely on religious beliefs and hope to cope with difficulties in life, experience better mental health (Nelson and Padilla-Walker 2013). Research generally has often focused on how religiosity predicts mental health (Peterman et al. 2014; Power and McKinney 2014), yet more research is needed to explore how mental health might specifically predict religious/spiritual development (Dew et al. 2020).

2.2.4. Personal Agency and Experience

In addition to individual characteristics, such as gender/sexual orientation, age, and mental health, personal agency and individual experience influence how children and adolescents develop religiously and spiritually. Adolescents "attach their own value and

importance to particular concepts, ideas and practices in their religious and spiritual lives" (Hemming and Madge 2012, p. 44) and with age, adolescents gain autonomy and begin to make their own decisions using their agency; therefore, they are better able to decide why, how, and when to be religious and spiritual (Dollahite and Marks 2019), which influences how they develop religiously/spiritually. Religious denominations often require adherents to make sacrifices, and religious adolescents, in particular, may be asked to make sacrifices with respect to domains including societal expectations (e.g., honoring holy days that conflict with social events), rejecting some elements of popular culture (e.g., avoiding certain entertainment choices, abstaining from deleterious substances), sacrificing some comforts and pleasures (e.g., giving monetary donations, waking up early for religious education), dedicating time and energy (e.g., attending worship services, reading scriptural texts), and delaying or forgoing relationships with peers (e.g., delaying dating or courting practices, abstaining from sex) (Dollahite et al. 2009).

However, in-depth qualitative research has indicated that many adolescents feel strongly anchored to their religion (Layton et al. 2011)—and they are able to articulate and offer personal reasons for their willingness to make these sacrifices. These reasons may include the following: To connect to a higher meaning or purpose, to connect to God, to connect to a faith tradition or community, to fulfill expectations, to feel affective benefits, or to avoid problems (Dollahite et al. 2009). In summary, consistent with the Elder and Hareven life course perspective, human contextual agency is in play as children, youth, and emerging adults make decisions regarding religious and spiritual involvement and development (Hareven 2000; Marks 2021). While individuals exercise some level of volition in their decision making, whether religious or otherwise, the family context often yields substantial influence, as discussed next.

2.3. Context

2.3.1. Home Environment

The foundations of intimacy, safety, and emotional relationships are built and strengthened within the home environment. In addition to parents' direct religious influence on their children (e.g., by transmitting religious beliefs through religious conversations and family religious behaviors), other aspects of the home environment influence children and adolescents' religious and spiritual development. The type of home environment where children and adolescents develop is created by parenting styles and parent-child relations, family structure, and experiences—including challenging or adverse family experiences.

Parenting. Parental personal religiosity has been found to influence parenting techniques, behaviors, and styles (Goeke-Morey and Cummings 2017). Religious parents have been shown to express more authoritative behaviors, such as hugging and praising their children, and to display more healthy parental functioning (Goeke-Morey and Cummings 2017). However, some religious parents may use religiosity as an excuse to use authoritarian parenting behaviors, including expressing excessive strict or controlling behavior, using theistic triangulation, or having tolerance for abuse, all of which lead to unhealthy parent-child relationships (Goeke-Morey and Cummings 2017). Therefore, depending on the context, religiosity can positively or negatively influence parenting and parent-child relationships (Hardy et al. 2019a).

In relation to child and adolescent religiosity, parenting styles and the quality of parent-child relations may also foster religious development, independent of the example of parents' personal religiosity (Hardy et al. 2019a). For example, less authoritative mothering has been associated with less parent-adolescent religious transmission (Goodman and Dyer 2020) and more authoritative, warm, and supportive parenting has been associated with positive adolescent internalization of religious beliefs and practices (Hardy et al. 2019a) and with higher transmission of religious beliefs and commitments from parents to children (Bengtson et al. 2013). Religious parents and youth have both reported that parents are best positioned to transmit religiosity to their children when they set an example of belief-behavior congruence; are authentic and consistent; provide support, love, and help; and

teach religious values, the faith tradition, and importance of religious identity (Dollahite et al. 2019c). Therefore, parenting styles and the quality of parent-child relationships have the power to influence child and adolescent religious and spiritual development. This is particularly true when a child has positive and loving relationships with both a mother and father across time (Bengtson et al. 2013). This latter finding leads us to the consideration of family structure.

Family Structure. Family structure (e.g., parental marital status) may enhance or diminish child and adolescent religiosity and spirituality. Some research has found family structure to not be directly correlated to the strength of adolescent religiosity (Petts 2015); however, other research has found such a connection (Denton 2012; Lawton and Bures 2001). Adolescents are most likely to attend church and have strong religious salience when two biological (Petts 2014) or adopted (Petts 2015) married parents raise them. When adolescents are raised by stepparents, never-married-single parents, or cohabiting parents, their religious participation and religious salience may be lower (Petts 2015). In terms of parental divorce, more highly religious adolescents may be more likely to decrease their religiosity, leave religion, or switch to another religion (Denton 2012; Lawton and Bures 2001). These highly religious adolescents may view their parents' divorce as a sacred loss or religious desecration that could lead to increased religious questions and doubts (Denton 2012), thus leading to a decline in religious participation or religious salience. One scholar has observed that children of divorce experience a disruption of the "domestic church" of their home (Rubio Hanlon 2014). If, in addition to this disruption, children of divorce also become alienated from formal religious practice, they can experience what a leading psychologist of religion, Annette Mahoney, has called the "second silent schism" in their lives—the first schism being the rupture of their parents' marriage, and the second being the rupture of the child's connection to a faith community and even to a life of faith itself (Mahoney et al. 2010).

Research indicates that both schisms occur in the lives of many children and youth; however, a minority of adolescents who are less religious at the time of their parents' divorce become more engaged with their religion during the difficult time of the parental breakup since they may have used religious beliefs as a means to cope or to rely on their religious community, which can provide extra support (Denton 2012). In summary, the crisis of parental divorce often represents a turning point that typically diminishes child and youth religious involvement, but sometimes serves as a catalyst for deepening and increasing religious ties (Marks and Dollahite 2017). Theoretically, other family structures (e.g., number of family members, multi-generational home environments, or even birth order of siblings) may have unique influences on how young people develop religiously/spiritually. More research is needed to explore how unique family structures influence religious/spiritual development.

Adverse Family Experiences. Other difficult family experiences, in addition to parental divorce, including family trauma (e.g., death of a loved one), family crisis (e.g., natural disasters), and family migration (e.g., whether voluntary or not) may also impact child and adolescent religious and spiritual development. One recent study highlighted the important role of religion on mother-child conversations about death and reported that children were likely to initiate conversations on the topic—and mothers reported that their children's religious beliefs were strengthened by framing these conversations using a religious lens (Zajac and Boyatzis 2021). For children who have lost a parent, those who experienced adaptive functioning reportedly attended church more regularly and used religious coping (Howell et al. 2015). Dollahite et al. (2020) found that relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences during adverse personal and relational experiences can help in encouraging relational healing.

2.3.2. Culture and Community

Other religious individuals, including religious and spiritual friends and mentors, also influence how children and adolescents spiritually and religiously develop. By attending

church and being involved in a religious community, children (ages 6 to 13) who felt like they had church support, deepened their spirituality and prosocial behavior (Crosby and Smith 2015). Religious friends may also strongly influence the religious habits of adolescents, including church attendance and the importance of religion, since when friends are supportive of religious involvement, adolescents are more likely to engage in religion, whereas when friends are against religion, adolescents are less likely to be religious (Regnerus et al. 2004). Communities may influence how adolescents understand the world and how they believe they should approach religious/spiritual beliefs and practices, based on the messages received by the culture and people around them (Ebstyne King et al. 2014). In particular, religious communities may have unique cultures and norms, within specific religious denominations or geographically based congregations, on the basis of religious traditions or practices, that have the potential to influence how religious individuals engage and believe in religion (Coyne et al. 2022).

2.4. Time

2.4.1. Historical Time

Across eras of historical time, the way that religious identity and involvement are perceived by adolescents can change. For example, Uecker (2008) found that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had a temporary and modest effect on various dimensions of young adult religiosity and spirituality. Twenge et al. (2019) found that American Millennials were significantly less religious than previous generations (Boomers, Generation X) at the same age. Some research suggests that contemporary youth and emerging adults are less likely to trust religious institutions; therefore, they are even more likely than previous generations to withdraw from religious identity and involvement. For example, the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape study (Masci 2016) found that Millennials are considerably less likely to pray or attend religious services regularly or believe that religion is important to them. While historical change can influence adolescent and emerging adult spiritual development, in any given historical time period, it is important to recognize that individuals follow personal spiritual paths. Lee et al. (2017) identified seven distinct pathways of religiosity from adolescence to adulthood around issues, such as levels of religious affiliation, service attendance, personal importance of religion, and prayer.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a historical event that has impacted children, youth, emerging adults, and adults in significant ways, including spiritually and religiously. In a mixed method design study of 1510 American adults in the summer of 2020, Kelley et al. (Forthcoming) found that engaging in spiritual practices, such as yoga and meditation, mindfulness, and enjoying nature was associated with increased emotional closeness in families and a greater likelihood of reporting a positive lasting effect of the pandemic on family relationships. Using the same sample and mixed methods, while controlling for a large group of demographic variables and other factors, Dollahite et al. (Forthcoming) found significant associations between the frequency of religious practices, such as family prayer, scripture study, shared sacred rituals, and home-based worship, and family relational well-being.

2.4.2. Duration of Proximal Processes

As mentioned previously, another element of "time" in the PPCT model is the duration of proximal processes. Although little empirical evidence has directly tested differences in the influence of proximal processes across different periods of duration (e.g., differences in the influence on religious/spiritual development of consistent family prayer for only a month compared to consistent family prayer for a year), qualitative research has found that parents perceive that consistency over an extended duration of time (while allowing room for flexibility) was important for religious transmission and development (Dollahite et al. 2019c). However, even proximal processes with a relatively short duration (e.g., a Christian summer camp) have been found to meaningfully impact development up to a year later (Schnitker et al. 2014a, 2014b).

3. Key Domains Influenced by Religious/Spiritual Development

3.1. Individual

Burr et al. (2012) observed in a book-length study of religion and families that "It is what we *do* as a result of [our perceptions], ideals, and beliefs about the sacred that determines whether the sacred is helpful or harmful in families" (Burr et al. 2012, p. 17). Recent work has offered evidence and elucidation of this proposition with reports of both help and harm resulting from religion—as well as significant religion-related struggles (Dollahite et al. 2018, 2019b; Exline et al. 2014; Marks et al. 2019).

In their systematic literature review, Hardy et al. (2019b) examined 241 studies regarding the processes by which adolescent religiosity and spirituality affect youth outcomes. In general, they concluded that religious and spiritual processes promote positive youth development; however, in some instances, it may be at least in part maladaptive. These maladaptive outcomes were more common for religious or sexual minorities (Abo-Zena and Barry 2013; Dahl and Galliher 2012). Due to their recent and thorough review of individual youth outcomes, we will briefly describe some of their relevant findings and then expand their work by examining how religious/spiritual development influences the context of the family.

Hardy et al. (2019b) examined all longitudinal, experimental, and quasi-experimental studies on religion/spirituality and adolescent outcomes, and found evidence for a causal relationship between dimensions of religion/spirituality and adaptive youth outcomes, including decreased problem/risk behaviors and internalizing, and increased hope, life satisfaction, mature identity formation processes, virtue development, self-control, resilience, and psychological well-being. A number of mediating and moderating studies similarly point to the same conclusion that dimensions of religion/spirituality facilitate positive youth development. When comparing all qualitative studies which explored how RS processes influenced youth outcomes, some of the highest recurring outcomes in youth experiences were support and positive coping/resilience (Hardy et al. 2019b).

3.2. Relational

Religious and spiritual changes in adolescence and early adulthood have the potential to unify or divide family relations (Kelley et al. 2020a, 2020b), and specifically the parent-child relationship. Increases in adolescent religiosity appear to have a positive influence on the parent-child relationship (Regnerus and Burdette 2006), even if it results in the child being more religious than their parents (Stokes and Regnerus 2009). However, religious discord that results in the parent being more religious than the child is related to negative parent-child relationship outcomes (Stokes and Regnerus 2009), and when children leave their parent's faith, the relational difficulties surrounding discordant affiliation may last for decades (Hwang et al. 2018). The influence that changes in religious identification have on family relationships appear to also differ by faith community, with worse relationship outcomes being associated with evangelical Christianity and Islam (Parekh and Egan 2021; Stokes and Regnerus 2009).

4. Future Directions

4.1. Methodological Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

Although a significant amount of research has examined how child and adolescent religiosity and spirituality are defined, how these concepts are measured, and what factors influence religious and spiritual development, significant gaps remain in the empirical literature. Given the religious diversities that exist (e.g., across faith traditions and within faith traditions across various racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural-economic groups), there is an ongoing need to work toward increasing the diversity of samples used to explore spiritual and religious development, as well as relational processes in families around spirituality and religion. Similarly, researchers may benefit from studying religious/spiritual development through an intersectional lens to better understand development in context (Spencer 2017). Researchers could emphasize and focus on underrepresented popula-

tions, including children and adolescents of families from non-Christian based faiths. As some research has examined adolescent religious and spiritual development for Muslim (Abo-Zena 2022) and Jewish adolescents and emerging adults (Dollahite and Marks 2019), more research is needed to identify how children, in particular, develop their religious faith and spirituality in other religious denominations. A further examination of family religious contexts for non-Christian faiths will further help researchers in understanding the processes of religious and spiritual development from childhood into young adulthood.

Another important consideration is that previous research has placed emphasis on understanding child and adolescent development in religious families with two married parent households (Petts 2015), yet more research is needed to further examine the many other family structures that exist (e.g., including single parent, mixed-family, grandparent caregivers, or same-sex parents). As children and adolescents develop in a variety of family structures, their religious and spiritual development may differ based on the religious or spiritual environment that is provided (or the lack thereof) based on the caregivers by whom they are raised.

We additionally argue that research on lifespan religious development would benefit from fostering greater generational inclusivity. In our experience of studying religious and spiritual development, we believe our research has improved because our research team includes people across the age spectrum. Some of the specific improvements we have experienced are that we have focused on more relevant research questions and have become more sensitive to participants' experiences. Specifically, not only do intergenerational research experiences offer meaningful growth opportunities and mentoring for the rising generation of scholars, our experience is that this inclusivity encourages growth for the research itself, particularly our research on religious and spiritual development.

Future research should also continue to examine and explore how and why religiosity and spirituality change across developmental life changes (e.g., childhood to adolescence, adolescence to emerging adulthood, etc.). In addition to examining the presence of developmental transitions, future research should explore the mechanisms and processes that may influence religious and spiritual change. For example, one idea proposed by the PPCT, but that has not yet been systematically explored to our knowledge, is how differences in the duration of proximal religious/spiritual processes might influence religious/spiritual development. In an attempt to better understand the several relationships discussed in this article, we call for more qualitative work to examine in-depth the "whys", "hows", and perceived "processes" behind statistical relationships (Marks and Dollahite 2011). For example, prior research has shown that changes in relationship systems and adverse family experiences influence individual religious change. Moreover, future qualitative research could lead to meaningful contributions by asking individuals to explain why they think these relationship changes have influenced their religion, and the specific processes by which this influence occurs.

Both quantitative and qualitative research are needed to explore, understand, and test the theoretical proposition that religious mismatch is a factor in religious/spiritual development and change. We suggest exploring the various ways that people can experience mismatches around faith issues, such as: (a) Personality issues (e.g., introverts experiencing a mismatch with faiths that expect substantial social interactions; those who score high on openness experiencing a mismatch with more orthodox faiths), (b) political issues (e.g., progressives experiencing a mismatch with more conservative faiths), and (c) gender issues (e.g., mismatch between gender experiences and expectations and religious expectations).

Navarro et al. (2022) found that although Bronfenbrenner's original theory has been cited tens of thousands of times, few studies use the PPCT model and even fewer accurately implement the model. Their outline of the methodological requirements of a process-person-context-time (PPCT) study design is worth a careful read for anyone preparing to implement this model in their research. Unfortunately, as most studies have used only one or two items to measure religion, such as church attendance or affiliation (Mahoney 2010), many of the processes described in this article require further testing. Specifically, many of

the family religious processes come from our qualitative research and require additional quantitative results to validate findings. Relatedly, further research is needed to examine the differences between religious development and spiritual development in the family context (Zaloudek et al. 2017).

Since there are varying ways that religion can develop (e.g., cognitively and behaviorally; Hardy et al. 2019b), researchers would do well to specify what dimensions they are looking at and more carefully examine what factors are most related to development in each of the dimensions of religion. Furthermore, since careful work has already been carried out to understand how the development of different religious/spiritual dimensions are tied to individual outcomes (Hardy et al. 2019b), similar work should be done to understand what religious/spiritual dimensions are most tied to relational outcomes.

The guest editors called for "exploring who and what religious and spiritual experiences have been left out of scholarship." We hypothesize that an important neglected area of exploration is the influence of personal sacred spiritual, religious, and/or mystical experiences on identity and choices. Moreover, we hypothesize that in order to begin to address this, we would need to invite persons from diverse backgrounds (e.g., racial/ethnic groups), perspectives (e.g., religions and ideologies), and experiences (e.g., immigrants, trauma survivors, disabilities) to share their sacred spiritual, religious, and/or mystical experiences, and how those experiences have influenced their sense of identity and their life choices.

4.2. Future Theory

While the growing body of empirical findings on religious and spiritual development across the lifespan is impressive and encouraging, social science also benefits from conceptual and theoretical development about these issues. Two theories we find compelling based on our experience are (a) the theory of Generative Devotion and (b) rational choice theory.

The theory of Generative Devotion focuses on intergenerational relationship processes that influence spiritual and religious development, including processes that are self-oriented in ways that may have either positive or negative impacts on relationships (Dollahite et al. 2019a). The Generative Devotion framework proposes that religious processes in families can manifest in ways that range along a continuum from generative to destructive. This theory may provide some guidance for scholars interested in studying the ways that different kinds of parenting might influence spiritual development across the life span. Space does not permit an exhaustive exploration of the ways that this model might contribute to research on spiritual and religious development. For the purposes of this article, it is enough to say that we believe that the field will be well served by more conceptual models, such as Generative Devotion, that (a) are relationally oriented, (b) are process oriented, (c) include concepts pertaining to ethical intergenerational relationships, (d) include ideas about ways that relationships can both help and harm spiritual and religious development, (e) emphasize the importance of attending to long-term development, and (f) seriously consider the importance of extended families and faith communities in spiritual and religious development. We invite our colleagues who study spiritual and religious development to consider the potential value of ideas from (or similar to those in) the Generative Devotion framework.

Kimball et al. (2021) used rational choice theory to explore the reasons that religiously devout parents and youth remain devoted to their faith. They found complex connections between religious expectations (what was expected from a faith community and from parents) and relational compensators (benefits to family relationships resulting from living a religious life). For the purpose of this article on religious and spiritual development and socialization, their most interesting and relevant finding was a "triple combination" of connections between religious expectations, providing service, and relational compensators. They found that, "many participants reported that as they strived to meet the religious expectation of serving others, they reaped relational blessings and a deeper sense of

meaning as well." Creative use of rational choice theory to explore choices at the nexus of religious and spiritual development within families has the potential to provide additional insights into the difficult, complex, and layered decisions people make surrounding their faith and their family relationships.

5. Conclusions

In summary, we have tried to demonstrate the potential conceptual value in applying Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model to spiritual and religious development across the lifespan and, in particular, for youth and young adults. We invite our colleagues to consider other innovative conceptual and methodological approaches to the study of the many fascinating ways that spiritual and religious development occurs, especially within families. Religious parents and religious leaders who are concerned about the religious and spiritual well-being of the next generation of children and youth, and about establishing and maintaining long-term strong relationships with them, would be well-served to carefully attend to the set of empirical findings reviewed in this article.

Note

[1] One Catholic mother described the importance of home-centered family religious practices, "We go to Mass on Sunday and to church activities, but our practices, the daily practices, are more home centered. Grace before meals or prayer together, prayers at night or something, you know the daily stuff. It's more home centered" (Lambert and Dollahite 2010, p. 1446).

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