

CHAPTER 7

MEMBERSHIP OF RELIGIOUS
COMMUNITIES AND ITS CONSEQUENCES
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT –
PRESENTATION OF MODEL RELATIONS

Summary

The scientific knowledge about religiousness of adolescents is relatively rich. The results of previous explorations provide solutions to some of the pitfalls concerning the religiousness of adolescents and form the ground for new queries and setting new directions in exploring this area.

This article is devoted to the importance of belonging to youth religious communities for the choice of religious stress coping strategies and its relationship with developing world view with special regard to the system of values as well as the development of the dimensions of identity among adolescents who declare belonging to the Catholic church.

Key words: youth, religious communities, religious stress coping strategies, system of values, identity

INTRODUCTION

It is assumed that religious stress coping is more effective in adolescents who regard religion as an important element of their world view. Increased religious engagement leads to simultaneous growth of religious strategies of coping stress. Religion provides people with beliefs and practices which may help dealing with

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stress in a difficult life situation, solving internal difficulties and interpersonal conflicts. Coping stress benefits psychical well-being and exerts other positive effects for the health and functioning of a subject. Religion has a significant impact on the world of values and the process of forming social and personal identity. It is noteworthy, however, that young Catholics are religiously immature to a certain extent and the religious stress coping strategies may have a negative character/dimension. The very declaration of belonging to the Church may not yet be treated as an indication of the level of religious maturity or the effectiveness of religious coping with difficulties.

Religious stress coping

A growing number of psychological research and articles are being created about the notion of spirituality and religious stress coping. Thus far, the studies involved people of various age and health condition. A great deal of research was carried out over clinical groups i.e. groups where spirituality becomes especially important. The results of previous research into spirituality and religious coping among adolescents do not allow for drawing consistent conclusions. This article reviews current reports about spirituality and religious stress coping among adolescents whether or not they belong to parish religious communities. Its main aim is to answer whether belonging to a religious group may protect a young person from breaking down in difficult situations and whether or not it decides upon applying constructive stress coping.

Research including more than twelve thousand adolescents – male and female – prove that belonging to a religious group and regarding it as important in life indirectly reduces the symptoms of depressiveness through increased social support, both perceived and/or obtained (Petts, Jolliff, 2008). Belonging to a religious group and accepting its priorities displays a negative correlation with using psychoactive substances (Mason, Spoth, 2011). Longitude, 7-year research carried out over a group of 667 male and female teenagers and their families proved that seeking excitement is connected with using psychoactive substances and such connection is not moderated by spirituality. It is also observable that religion is a source of positive development of young people (King, Furrow, 2008). Another study explored the importance of religion and belonging to religious groups as well as ethical values of teenagers with regards to the store of social capital (social interactions, trust, common views) among 735 teenagers living in a city. Religiously active adolescents revealed a higher level of social capital resources and proved that the spirituality of adolescents influences their ethical values. Religion has a significant and positive influence on the process of forming identity (Lefever, 1977). Taking on the role of a clergyman results in

focusing on spiritual education, reflexion and spiritual development. This leads to clergymen forming their professional and personal identity in relation to God (Pargament et al., 2001). Therefore, being a member of a religious community at the period of adolescence may be a circumstance influencing the development of the dimensions of identity. The engagement of religion in stress coping strategies is significant in the context of a healthy self-understanding and healthy understanding of oneself in relation with others (Spencer et al., 2003). Religious engagement leads to significant changes regarding the development of identity (in dimensions: exploration and commitment in all spheres (ideological, social and spiritual) (King, 2003). Behaviour of religious character tends to be organised according to its own system of values and norms which facilitates its development and maintenance (Lefever, 1977). A greater engagement in religious practices facilitates the expression of a stronger commitment to religious values (King et al., 1997). The said research concerning depressive states were not confirmed in a group of Asians: subjects who do not belong to religious groups and do not consider religion important have a lower level of anxiety. This may be explained by the traditional and patriarchal character of religion. Differences were also observed with regards to gender: Hispanic girls were more anxious (more depressive) in a situation when they undertook actions contrary to their religion (e.g. sexual activity). It has been stated, however, that declaring religiousness was related to less frequent undertaking risky behaviour and more effective realization of set aims (McNamara, Johnson, Burns, McCorkle, 2010). Therefore, religiousness may be regarded as a protective factor against risky behaviour. Research into the psychology of religion are mainly conducted in clinical groups (Petts, Jolliff, 2008; Carpenter, Laney, Mezulis, 2012; Mason, Spoth, 2011; McNamara, Johnson, Burns, McCorkle, 2010). These research usually concern adults rather than children and adolescents (Pargament et al., 2001, Mattis, 2002, Bosworth et al., 2003, Raab, 2007, Lowis et al., 2009). Consequently, an analysis of the situation of young and healthy Catholics regarding whether or not they belong to religious communities seems worthwhile.

Kenneth I. Pargament's concept of religious stress coping

The concept of religious stress coping has been created by Kenneth I. Pargament, professor of Bowling Green University. He has transferred Lazarus' interactional approach to stress onto the psychology of religion. The modification of the well-known concept of stress and coping enabled him to create a totally new model in which the primary assessment of a situation as a threat to significant objects is followed by a secondary assessment of resources and limitations. The tertiary assessment allows for choosing the best stress coping method. Only then a subject

is able to apply the chosen method and meet the requirements of a situation as well as find the significant object. Both Lazarus' and Pargament's concepts are part of the phenomenological-cognitive current and are characterised by a subjective assessment of a situation, personal resources and the choice of coping strategy (Pargament, 1997; Talik, 2013; McIntosh, 1995). Pargament defines coping strategies with regards to sacrum, hence, he understands religious coping stress as a constantly changing process through which a subject tries to understand and deal with significant personal and situational requirements in their lives (Talik, Szewczyk, 2008, p. 516).

Religion may serve both positive and negative functions in human life. It is the source of meanings (Allport, 1988; Park, 2005), the source of the system of values (Prężyna 2011, Chlewiński, 1982) and the source of personal development (Jung, 1970; Chlewiński, 1982; Allport, 1988; Furrow, King and White, 2004; Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2004). It also serves social (Prężyna, 2011; Chlewiński, 1982), autopsychotherapeutic (Kozielecki, 1991) and regulatory functions (Pargament, Koeing and Perez, 2000). It may be claimed that people engage religion in everyday lives. It occurs that an individual tends to assign destructive meaning to religion when he or she makes mistakes or finds it difficult to overcome obstacles or when something does not go the way they had expected (Pargament, 1997).

Previous methods of measuring the frequency of religious practices have been replaced by a measurement of spirituality as specific, situational methods of coping through religion. It allows scientists to determine the role of religion in times of stress. The measurement of religious strategies shows how individuals use religion to understand and solve stressful situations (Pargament et al., 2000). Since there are various ways to seek meaning in times of stress, it is possible to distinguish three main styles of religious stress coping. A self directing style sees human as fully independent from God's actions; the second, deferring style, indicates an absolute dependence on God. The third style allows for a cooperation (collaborative style) between God and the personal human strength. Regarding this division and elaborating on the applied processes of ascribing meanings and coping with difficulties, the following positive and negative scales of religious stress coping have been distinguished (Pargament, 1997; Pietkiewicz, 2010; Talik, 2013).

Positive religious stress coping strategies create such scales as:

1. *Life transformation*, i.e. seeking help in religion to radically change person's life and looking for a new goal and direction in life through religion.
2. *Submission to God's will*, passing a difficult situation on to God after an attempt to individually deal with the problem.

3. *Seeking support in the Church* through searching for spiritual support and prayer from clergymen and other members of the Church.
4. *Religious concentration* – diverting attention from the problem through focusing on the matters of religion (thinking about spiritual matters), engagement in religious practices (prayer, going to church).
5. *Cooperation with God*, collaboration with God as a partner in dealing with the problem; perceiving personal situation as part of a God's plan.
6. *Begging for direct intervention* in a form of help in solving a problem.
7. *Spiritual support* consisting of seeking as well as providing others with spiritual support.
8. *Faithfulness to religious practices*, i.e. active participation and faithful lasting in the preaching of the religion an individual believes in as well as refraining from false preaching.
9. *Positive religious redefinition*, i.e. perceiving a stressful situation as potentially beneficial (the experienced stress is an opportunity of getting closer to God, personal strengthening and learning something valuable).

Negative religious stress coping strategies create such scales as:

10. *Punishing God*, result on this scale indicates perception of a stressful situation as a punishment from God for sins, lack of faith or lack of piety.
11. *Independent coping*, manifesting itself as autonomous dealing with a stressful situation without God's help.
12. *Demonic redefinition*, result on this scale suggests perceiving a stressful situation as a work of Satan.
13. *Religious passivity*, i.e. taking on a passive attitude of expecting God to take control of a situation, transferring responsibility for solving the problem to God.
14. *Dissatisfaction with God*, which manifests itself as expressing dissatisfaction and anger mainly with regards to God's and Church's attitude towards an individual at time of stress (the feeling of being abandoned, rejected, unloved).
15. *Questioning the God's power*, i.e. disputing the God's power with regards to his ability to change the stressful situation.
16. *Dissatisfaction and questioning of the Church*, manifesting itself as expressing dissatisfaction with clergymen and non-conforming with the preaching of the Church (Talik, Szewczyk, 2008).

Religious stress coping in adolescents belonging to religious communities

According to the research by Pargament et al. (2001), clergymen declare a higher level of positive religious stress coping than other members of the Church. According to Pargament (1997), religious coping with stress obtains the highest results when religion is a significant element of the orientation system, the level of availability of religious coping resources is higher as well as when solving life problems is more significant. Presuming that adolescents belonging to religious groups are likely to become members of clergymen, this hypothesis seems worth verifying. It has been proven that the increase in religious engagement is related to a more frequent use of religious stress coping strategies (Talík, 2013). Religion generates beliefs and practices which may help confront stress in a difficult life event through solving internal difficulties and interpersonal conflicts. This contributes to the general psychological well-being and is beneficial for an individual (Smith, 2003; Roesch, Ano, 2003).

Religious stress coping in adolescents not-belonging to religious communities

The available research results show that negative religious stress coping significantly moderates the effects of stress leading to depressiveness. Positive religious stress coping only marginally buffers the effects of stress that lead to depressiveness. The highest depressiveness in adolescents is observed under a high exposition to stress and high level of negative coping. A high level of religious engagement, however, strengthens the negative effects of religious coping (Carpenter, Laney, Mezulis, 2012).

Polish research reveal that adolescents are characterised by a widely defined religious immaturity. Seeking help in religion is connected with experiencing great difficulties. Being aware of having no control of a situation activates the escaping functions of religion (religious concentration). Despite a positive religious attitude in critical situations the image of God may be deformed. The choice of negative religious coping strategies is connected with lower personal strength of girls and lower perseverance of boys (Talík, 2013).

The above discussion aimed to answer whether belonging to religious communities is significant for the choice of religious coping strategies, the system of values and the development of the dimensions of identity.

A proposed model of relations

Constructing such a model requires:

- Recognising religious stress coping strategies applied by young Catholics;
- Inspecting the system of values of young Catholics;
- Determining the dimensions of identity development in young Catholics;
- Spotting the relationships between belonging to religious communities and values, identity and religious stress coping in young Catholics;
- Assessing the significance of values and identity as mediating factors between belonging to religious communities and religious stress coping strategies among young Catholics;
- Recognising the relationship between identity and values among young Catholics;
- Identifying the role of sociodemographic factors (gender, age, education level etc.) in the choice of religious stress coping strategies, preferences in values and development of the dimensions of identity of young Catholics.

The period of growing up is packed with challenges and developmental tasks. It is the time of forming identity and the system of values. A question arises whether belonging to a social group like religious community may become a protective factor against behaviour disorders (e.g. using stimulants) and account for a constructive strategy of handling difficulties. A positive answer may give ground for creating psycho-educational programmes of working with young Catholics who find it difficult to overcome the obstacles in fulfilling developmental tasks and hazardous life events. The knowledge concerning the likely resource of belonging to a religious community by adolescents and young adults may become significant for the prophylactics and psychotherapeutic work.

The possibilities of exploring relationships in the assumed model

Previous research (Berzonsky, Ciecuch, Duriez, Soenens, 2011) prove that identity styles characterising single units are related to preferred values. The styles of identity were also explored with regards to the choice of stress coping strategies. The obtained results (Berzonsky, 1992) show that the choice of stress coping strategies may be significantly related to the styles of identity. The results may suggest that religious stress coping, similarly to coping, is possibly related

to the development of the dimensions of identity and, hence, to the choice of a system of values.

The following research tools may be useful for recognising the relationships introduced to the reported model:

- a. The Religious Coping Questionnaire (RCOPE) designed by Kenneth I. Pargament in the Polish version adapted by Elżbieta Talik and Leszek Szewczyk (2008). The Polish version of the questionnaire consists of 105 statements which form 16 scales, 9 of which are positive (Cronbach's Alpha =0,91). The remaining 7 are scales of negative religious strategies (Cronbach's Alpha =0,71). The scales are unipolar which means that the higher result obtained by a subject, the more frequently he or she uses a particular strategy. The results for particular statements are summed up and divided by the number of the statements which allows for a comparison of the obtained differences. The use of this tool returns two general results indicating either negative or positive religious stress coping.
- b. Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ-R2) designed by Shalom Schwartz, adapted to the Polish version by Jan Cieciuch (2012). The tool consists of 57 statements which create 19 values (Cronbach's Alpha from 0.63 to 0.87). The 19 values can be further grouped into four higher order types of values: openness to change, self-enhancement, conservatism and self-transcendence.
- c. Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) created by K. Luyckx, S. Schwartz, M.D. Berzonsky, B. Soenens, M. Vansteenkiste, I. Smits, L. Goossens and adapted to the Polish version by Anna Izabela Brzezińska and Konrad Piotrowski (2009). The tool consists of 25 statements grouped into 5 scales (Cronbach's Alpha from 0.70 to 0.85). The described tool uses cluster analysis to determine the statuses of identity.
- d. a survey collecting basic data, such as: gender, age, the specificity of the religious community, the character and period of belonging, time devoted to religious practices,
- e. SWLS – a tool which provides information about the level of satisfaction of life,
- f. a guided conversation concerning the perceived level of experienced stress, its intensification and areas as well as the feeling of having control of events.

In the model of the authors own studies the choice of religious coping strategies was given the status of a dependent variable (explained) (fig. 1). Belonging to religious communities, identity and values were assumed as independent variables (explanatory). Identity and values were given the status of mediating variables in the relationship between belonging to religious

communities and religious stress coping. Age, gender, character and time of belonging to a religious community, time devoted to religious practices as well as the level of experienced stress, its areas, satisfaction of life, the feeling of having control of events were treated as controlled variables which can moderate identity, values and religious stress coping and their possible relationships.

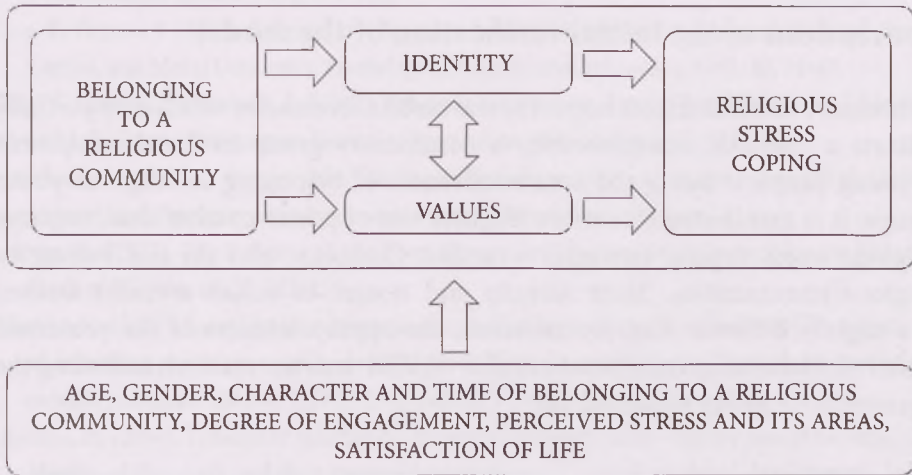


Figure 1. The proposed model of relationships between engagement in the life of a religious community and chosen aspects of functioning and development of adolescents (source: self-designed)

Research aimed to verify the presented model have already been planned. The study may clarify the nature of the influence a religious community (regarded as a social group) has on the construction of identity and world view of adolescents as well as their coping with difficulties in comparison to young people who do not belong to religious communities.

The sample group is planned to consist of members of youth religious communities aged between 13 and 28 yrs. The first group will be made up of people up to 17 yrs old. Another is going to include subjects between 17 and 22 yrs (the phase of entering early adulthood) whereas the third group is going to comprise people between 22 and 28 yrs (cf. Levinson, 1978). With respect to the concept of moratorium being prolonged onto adulthood, it seems worthwhile that the research includes people in the phase of noviciate at the early adulthood (Liberska, 2007, 2008, Harwas-Napierała, Trempała, 2008). The research group is going to comprise members of Roman-Catholic religious communities forming prayer communities, parish musical ensembles and liturgical service who declare themselves as believing in God. The control group, in turn, is going

to be made up of people who declare believing in God, yet do not belong to any religious communities. The total number of participants is planned as 180 people forming three various age groups and 180 people chosen purposefully with regards to gender and age (control group) to match the members of the communities.

Conclusions of the initial verification of the model

Preliminary research in this respect reveal certain tendencies which may partially indicate a resource, constituted by a community group in the development of young people – being the constructiveness of belonging to religious youth groups. It is manifested by a more frequent use of positive rather than negative religious stress coping strategies – unlike Catholics who do not belong to religious communities. Their identity and system of values are also formed in a slightly different way. Nevertheless, the appropriateness of the presented model of relationships may no sooner be verified than the research including the representative group is carried out.

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