

Religious development in adolescence through the lens of the developmental psychology of religion: Educational implications

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Abstract

Adolescence is widely recognized as a formative period in human development, marked by intensified identity exploration, expanding cognitive abstraction, and increasingly autonomous moral reasoning. Within this dynamic context, religious belief and spiritual orientation often undergo significant reassessment. Rather than remaining passively inherited, religious meanings are frequently questioned, reformulated, or consciously appropriated. This article offers a bibliographical analysis of religious development during adolescence through the lens of the developmental psychology of religion. Drawing on identity theory, cognitive-developmental research, moral psychology, and contemporary discussions of pluralism and digital mediation, the study examines how adolescents engage with, reinterpret, and sometimes reconstruct religious commitments. The article further explores the educational implications of these developmental processes, arguing that religious education in secondary schooling must take into account adolescents' cognitive and existential capacities if it is to remain intellectually credible and pedagogically meaningful. By synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship, this study contributes to a developmentally grounded understanding of adolescent religiosity in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Adolescence; Religious Development; Developmental Psychology of Religion; Identity Formation; Moral Reasoning; Religious Education; Pluralism.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a unique time in a person's life. It's often called a time of transition, but that doesn't really capture the big changes that happen during these years. The adolescent isn't just moving from being a dependent child to an independent adult - they're actually undergoing a lot of changes in how they think, feel, and interact with others, as well as in their moral values. This is a time when things that seemed certain before start to get questioned again. For example, authority figures who were once trusted without question may now need to explain themselves. And identity, which was once just assumed, becomes something that's thought about and explored. As Erikson (1968) and Steinberg (2017) have noted, adolescence represents a period of significant transformation across multiple domains of life.

As people grow and change, their beliefs about religion often become more complicated. The religious beliefs they learned from their family or community usually don't stay the same. For some adolescents, religious belief becomes a framework for self-understanding, whereas for others it may generate uncertainty, doubt, or critical questioning. In either case, religious commitment during adolescence remains developmentally fluid. It's always changing, and it's often hard to figure out. This is closely tied to how they see themselves and who they are becoming (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Smith & Denton, 2005; King et al., 2013).

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The way people understand religion changes as they grow up. Fowler (1981) proposed that religious understanding develops in identifiable stages. But others didn't agree with this idea, saying it's too simple. Even so, the main point is still important: when people become youngsters, they start to think in more complex ways, like considering different perspectives and making their own decisions (Streib, 2015). This means they don't just accept what they're told about religion because someone they trust says so - instead, they think about it more critically and make their own judgments. As they get older, they can understand more abstract ideas and think about their own beliefs in a more reflective way (Fountoulakis, 2024).

When we look at how youngsters think about religion, we can use something called identity theory to help us understand. A long time ago, Erikson (1968) argued that being a teenager is a time when you're trying to figure out who you are and what you want to be, versus being really confused about your role in life. He said this is a really important time for figuring out how you see yourself and how you fit in with what other people expect from you. Another person, Marcia (1966), took this idea and broke it down into four different categories: identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. When it comes to religion, youngsters often go through these same processes. Some of them just stick with what they were taught at home without really questioning it, while others start to wonder and experiment with different ideas. Just because a teenager is questioning their faith, it doesn't mean they're not stable - it just means they're trying to figure out what it all means. This is all part of growing up and trying to make sense of the world (Tsitsigkos, 2024).

As adolescents grow and develop, their thinking changes in big ways. They get better at thinking about abstract ideas, imagining different possibilities, and seeing things from other people's points of view. This happens a lot during adolescence, and it's a really important time for cognitive development. Because of these changes, youngsters are able to understand religious symbols and ideas in more complex and nuanced ways. They might start to see these symbols as metaphors or as ways to think about big existential questions, rather than just taking them literally. This shift in thinking isn't always straightforward, and it doesn't always mean that youngsters will become more religious. But it does mark a significant change in how they think about and understand religious ideas.

At the same time, youngsters' religious beliefs are shaped by the world around them, which is becoming more diverse and individualized. In many contemporary societies, religious belief no longer constitutes the default cultural position. Instead, it's just one of many options, alongside other ways of understanding the world, secular views, and blended spiritual practices (Taylor, 2007). As youngsters try to figure out who they are and what they believe, they're exposed to lots of different perspectives on life. Being around people with different views doesn't necessarily mean they'll lose their faith, but it does mean they have to think carefully about what they believe and why.

As Campbell (2013) observes, religious content increasingly circulates through online platforms where authority is decentralized and interpretive communities remain fluid. Adolescents encounter theological debate, critique, satire, and alternative spiritual narratives within algorithmically curated environments. Religious identity formation thus unfolds within hybrid symbolic ecologies rather than exclusively within family or institutional settings. The implications of this shift are still being examined, yet it is evident that digital contexts reshape how authority and authenticity are perceived.

It's really important to note that research shows questioning religion as a teenager doesn't always mean someone will lose their faith. In fact, studies that follow people over time have found that having doubts and thinking deeply about faith can actually help people develop more mature and well-thought-out beliefs as adults. Longitudinal research supports this interpretation (Hardy et al., 2011). Accordingly, understanding adolescent religious development requires moving beyond simplistic assumptions of either faith loss or faith retention. We need to understand how faith develops and changes over time, and that means looking at the underlying structure of how people grow and mature.

The present article offers a bibliographical analysis of religious development in adolescence through the lens of the developmental psychology of religion. Rather than proposing a new model, the study synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship in order to clarify how cognitive growth, identity formation, moral reasoning, and socio-cultural transformation intersect in shaping adolescent religiosity. Particular attention is given to the educational implications of these findings. If adolescence involves structural reorganization of meaning, then religious education must take these developmental dynamics seriously (Kohlberg, 1984; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

The central question guiding this analysis is therefore the following: How does developmental psychology illuminate the processes through which adolescents engage, reinterpret, and sometimes reconstruct religious belief, and what implications does this hold for religious education in secondary contexts (Fowler, 1981; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Steinberg, 2017). To address this question, the article proceeds in six further sections. First, it outlines the developmental foundations relevant to religious formation. Second, it examines religious identity and meaning-

makingin adolescence. Third, it analyzes the relationship between moral development and the evaluation of religious norms. Fourth, it considers the impact of pluralism and digital mediation. Fifth, it discusses educational implications. The article concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of developmentally informed approaches to adolescent religiosity (Streib, 2015; Hood, Hill, &Spilka, 2018).

2. Developmental Foundations of Adolescent Religious Formation

Understanding how adolescents develop religious beliefs requires situating these processes within the broader developmental context of adolescence. Their beliefs don't just appear out of nowhere; they're connected to how their brains are maturing, how they're figuring out who they are, and how they're learning to deal with their emotions and get along with others. By studying how all these different areas of development overlap, we can gain a clearer understanding of how religious beliefs take shape during adolescence.(Steinberg, 2017; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Hood, Hill, &Spilka, 2018; Simos, 2026).

2.1. Identity Formation as Structural Context

Erikson (1968) argued that adolescence constitutes a critical period of identity formation. He conceptualized adolescence as a psychosocial crisis during which individuals attempt to clarify their identity and social role. This is a really urgent time for them, and they want to make sense of their personal life, their relationships with others, and what they believe in. Religion often gets caught up in this search for identity. The stories and beliefs that come from religion can give youngsters a sense of where they come from, what they're supposed to do, and how they should behave. When they're kids, they usually just accept these stories because they trust the people who tell them. But when they become youngsters, they start to question these beliefs and think about them more critically (Fowler, 1981; Streib, 2015; King, 2003; Boyatzis, 2013).

Marcia (1966) extended Erikson's framework by proposing four identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement.. These statuses are based on how much people explore and commit to different identities. Researchers have used these categories a lot to study how people develop their religious identities. For example, some adolescents might just adopt the religious beliefs of their family without really questioning them - this is called foreclosure. On the other hand, those in moratorium are actively searching for answers and might feel unsure or conflicted about their beliefs. Then there are those who have achieved a sense of identity, which means they've thought critically about their beliefs and have made them a part of who they are (Waterman, 1999; Crocetti et al., 2008).

Later studies that followed people over time have found that how people identify with a religion doesn't always follow a straight path. People may question and commit to their beliefs at different times, especially when they're around many different ideas. What looks like uncertainty might actually be a normal part of figuring things out, rather than giving up on their beliefs. This means we should be careful not to assume that when youngsters question their beliefs, it's a sign that they're losing their faith (Hardy et al., 2011).

Narrative identity theory helps us understand this idea even better. McAdams (2013) proposed that individuals construct narrative identities that integrate past experiences with anticipated futures. When it's relevant, religion can be a useful tool in creating these stories. As adolescents grow and develop new ways of thinking and socializing, they might look back at their earlier experiences with religion in a new light. This means that how they think about religion becomes part of the bigger process of figuring out who they are and how they fit into the world (McLean, Pasupathi, &Pals, 2007; King&Roeser, 2009).

2.2. Cognitive Development and Religious Interpretation

As youngsters grow and develop, their understanding of religion changes in big ways. Although Piaget (1972) has been subject to later revisions, his central insight remains influential: adolescents increasingly develop the capacity for abstract reasoning. This means they can start to really grasp complex religious concepts, like the idea of something being greater than themselves, or the idea of moral rules that guide their behavior. They can think about these ideas on a deeper level, using symbols and abstract thinking to understand them better (Keating, 2004; Kuhn, 2009; Simos &Karabatzaki, 2025).From a metacognitive perspective, cognitive and emotional development unfold through layered processes of self-awareness and regulatory integration (Drigas, Papoutsis, 2018; Chaidi I, Drigas A, 2022).

As people grow into their teenage years, they get better at seeing things from other perspectives and thinking about their own thought process. This means they can look at different ideas and consider them all at the same time. When it comes to stories from their religion, they might start to understand them in more than one way - either taking them literally or seeing them as symbols or metaphors. Importantly because they start to think about these stories in a new

way, it doesn't mean they'll lose faith. In fact, it might even make their beliefs stronger and more thoughtful (Flavell, 1979; Kuhn, 2000; Harris, 2012). Fowler's (1981) theory of faith development sought to articulate this shift, proposing movement from a synthetic-conventional stage—characterized by reliance on communal authority—toward individuated-reflective faith. Although Fowler's stage sequence has been criticized for cultural bias and structural rigidity, his emphasis on interpretive transformation remains influential (Parker, 2010).

Recent studies have changed the way we think about how people develop their beliefs. Instead of thinking that people go through a set of strict stages, researchers now believe that people can have different ways of understanding their faith depending on the situation. This idea is supported by other research that shows people don't always follow a straightforward path. For example, youngsters can still hold on to traditional beliefs while also questioning and thinking critically about them. This means that people can have multiple perspectives on faith at the same time, and that's okay. Rather than progressing through rigid predetermined stages, faith development appears to reflect contextual and interpretive flexibility (Day, 2010; Ammerman, 2013; Smith & Denton, 2005; Simos, 2025).

As adolescents grow and develop, they start to think about religion in a different way. They may begin to question their beliefs and feel uncertain about what they think is true. But this uncertainty isn't just about feelings - it's also about how they think. As they get older, adolescents get better at evaluating things, which means they can spot inconsistencies and ask tough questions. They might think about what would happen if things were different, or consider the moral implications of their beliefs. This kind of questioning can actually help them integrate their beliefs and values, rather than tearing them down. It's a natural part of growing up and figuring out what they really think and believe (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Nucci & Turiel, 2009).

2.3. Emotional and Relational Dimensions

Religious development in adolescence cannot be reduced to cognition and identity alone. Emotional regulation and relational dynamics also shift significantly during this stage. Attachment research suggests that early relational experiences shape religious representations, particularly perceptions of divine authority and trust (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Drigas and Sideraki, 2021; Mitsea, et al 2023). As adolescents renegotiate relationships with parents and peers, their religious representations may also evolve (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006).

Peer influence becomes particularly salient during adolescence. Studies indicate that adolescent religiosity is shaped not only by parental modeling but also by peer norms and social belonging (Smith & Denton, 2005; Simos et al., 2025). In contexts where religious participation is socially valued, adolescents may experience reinforcement. In secularized settings, the opposite dynamic may occur. These social influences intersect with personal identity exploration (Voas & Crockett, 2005; Ammerman, 2013; Simos & Xyloparkioti, 2025).

Religious development in adolescence should not be understood solely as an intrapersonal process. It's actually connected to the people and relationships around them. Youngsters figure out what religion means to them by looking at the groups they belong to and the people who recognize them. When their social world changes, like when they switch schools or meet new friends from different backgrounds, they might start to question the religious beliefs they used to be sure about (Arnett, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2013).

2.4. Moral Development and Religious Evaluation

Moral development during adolescence provides another essential foundation for understanding religious transformation. Kohlberg's (1981) theory proposed progression from conventional morality—grounded in social conformity—toward post-conventional reasoning based on principled evaluation. While critiques of Kohlberg's universalism are well documented, empirical research supports the broader claim that adolescents increasingly evaluate norms through internal reasoning rather than simple obedience (Rest et al., 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Simos et al., 2025).

As people's ideas about what's right and wrong change and grow, they often look at religious rules and norms in a new light. Youngsters, in particular, might start to wonder about certain practices or teachings that don't seem to fit with their own developing sense of morality. This is made even more complicated by the fact that moral decision-making involves not just fairness and justice, but also empathy and caring for others—a point emphasized by Gilligan (1982) and subsequent research on prosocial moral development (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). So, when adolescents evaluate their religious beliefs, they're not just thinking logically, they're also using their emotions and considering how their actions might affect the people around them. This means that their moral reasoning is a mix of thinking deeply about abstract ideas and being sensitive to the emotions and needs of others.

Moral questioning doesn't necessarily weaken someone's religious beliefs. In fact, it can actually make their commitment stronger by helping them think more deeply about what they believe and why. This happens when they're able to reflect on their beliefs and values, and make sure they align with what they think is right and wrong. On the other hand, if they start to question their beliefs and can't find a way to resolve the inconsistencies they've found, it can create some distance between them and their religion. The key thing that determines what happens isn't whether or not they're asking questions, but rather whether they have the tools and resources they need to interpret and understand their beliefs in a way that makes sense to them (Smith & Snell, 2009; Streib & Hood, 2016).

When you look at all these factors together, it becomes clear that changes in a teenager's religious beliefs are connected to other big changes they're going through. This includes figuring out who they are, learning new things, changing relationships, and developing their own sense of right and wrong. Rather, it constitutes a normative dimension of adolescent development (Arnett, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2013).

3. Religious Identity and Meaning-Making in Adolescence

For youngsters, their religious identity is not just a continuation of what they believed when they were kids. It's actually formed when they're going through a lot of changes and are exposed to different social and cultural influences. As they try to figure out what's important to them, who they care about, and what they want to achieve in life, religion can play a big role in helping them make sense of everything - if it's something that matters to them, that is (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Arnett, 2015; McAdams, 2013).

3.1. From Inherited Faith to Reflective Appropriation

In early childhood, religious understanding is typically mediated through significant caregivers and socializing agents. Religious beliefs are initially transmitted through parents, primary caregivers, and other trusted adults. Going to church or taking part in religious activities is often more about feeling like they belong than about really believing in it. However, this pattern undergoes significant transformation during adolescence. The people in charge are still important, but they're not the only ones who matter anymore.

Research suggests that many adolescents move from externally regulated religiosity toward more internalized forms of commitment (King et al., 2013). This internalization process does not necessarily involve dramatic shifts in doctrine; rather, it involves reinterpretation. Adolescents begin to ask whether inherited beliefs resonate with their emerging sense of self. They may retain core commitments while modifying peripheral interpretations.

The transition to adulthood is a complex one, as demonstrated in research on young adults (Smith, 2009) study on young adults. Some people move away from organized religion, while others find their own way to believe. This change is not the same for everyone - some become less religious, while others become more spiritual, but in their own way. This process cannot be reduced to a linear increase or decrease in religiosity, but rather a unique journey for each individual. Importantly, reflective appropriation requires interpretive space. When adolescents perceive that questioning is discouraged, they may either conform superficially or disengage silently. Conversely, environments that allow structured exploration can support integration rather than fragmentation.

3.2. Doubt as Developmental Process

Doubt is a complex issue when it comes to youngsters and their religious beliefs. Some people think that doubt means a person's faith is getting weaker, or that it's a step towards not believing at all. But psychologists who study how people develop think it's more complicated than that. For example, some researchers, like Hardy and his team, found that doubt can actually help youngsters think more deeply about their faith, as long as they have supportive people around them. When youngsters struggle with questions about God or morality, they might end up with a stronger, more personal faith in the end. So, just because a teenager has doubts, it doesn't mean they'll lose their faith forever. In fact, doubt can be a natural part of figuring out what they really believe (Fowler, 1981; Simos, 2025).

When people's life experiences don't match what they believe, they try to make sense of it all. This is especially true for adolescents, who are very sensitive to things that don't seem right between what they believe and what's actually happening in their lives. Being able to deal with these contradictions is a big part of growing up. Some researchers, like Streib, think that how people understand things changes over time. So, what might look like someone losing faith might actually be a change in how they think about things. Instead of thinking that people's beliefs just get stronger and stronger over time, it's probably more accurate to say that adolescent religiosity is more like a pattern of ups and downs, shaped by the people around them and the world they live in. This means that adolescents are constantly trying to make sense of their beliefs and the world around them, and this process is influenced by their relationships and the context

in which they live. As they navigate these challenges, they may go through periods of uncertainty and questioning, but this is a normal part of their development. By understanding this process, we can better support adolescents as they work to integrate their beliefs and values into their everyday lives (Smith & Denton, 2005).

3.3. Narrative Integration and Existential Orientation

Religion is not just about what we think, it's also about the stories we tell ourselves. McAdams (2013) proposes that individuals construct life narratives to make sense of who they are and where they're going. And religion often plays a big role in this, giving us words to describe our experiences, a sense of right and wrong, and a way to understand our place in the world. When we're youngsters, we start thinking more about our lives and how they fit into the bigger picture - where we come from, what we believe in now, and what we hope for the future. At this time, our religious beliefs can become a part of this story, either as a guiding force or as something we're not sure we agree with. This is a time when we're figuring out who we are and where we're headed, and religion can be an important part of that journey. As we look back on our past, think about our present, and imagine our future, our religious beliefs can help shape our sense of identity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Saroglou, 2011). Beyond discursive and narrative articulation, religious meaning may also be mediated through symbolic and non-verbal experiential processes, such as dream imagery, which function as transitional spaces between conscious reflection and existential integration (Fountoulakis & Simos, 2026).

Park (2010) emphasizes that meaning-making processes become particularly salient when individuals encounter stress, ambiguity, or moral tension. Adolescents frequently experience such tensions as they negotiate autonomy and belonging. Religious frameworks may either assist in interpreting these experiences or become objects of reinterpretation themselves. The degree to which religious identity becomes central to self-definition varies. Huber and Huber (2012) describe religiosity as differing in centrality across individuals. For some adolescents, religious identity forms a core organizing dimension; for others, it remains peripheral. Developmental trajectories must therefore be understood in relation to subjective salience (King & Roeser, 2009; Saroglou, 2011).

3.4. Family, Peers, and Social Context

Adolescents' processes of religious identity formation remain closely embedded in their immediate social environments. Even though they're becoming more independent, their family's influence doesn't just go away. Studies have shown that how religious their parents are and how they live out their faith can still predict how involved their youngsters will be in religion (Smith & Denton, 2005). But the way this influence works changes as they get older. Instead of just copying what their parents believe, youngsters might start to think about and discuss those beliefs in their own way. The friends they hang out with also have a big impact. If being religious is seen as a good thing in their social circle, they're more likely to feel supported in their faith. On the other hand, if being religious isn't popular or is even questioned, youngsters might have to work harder to figure out what they really believe. How much they feel like they belong and how committed they are to their beliefs are connected in complicated ways. As they navigate these relationships and influences, youngsters are trying to find their own place in their faith community (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Flor & Knapp, 2001).

Moreover, contemporary adolescents navigate pluralistic settings where exposure to diverse worldviews is commonplace (Taylor, 2007). Such exposure does not necessarily dilute commitment, but it introduces comparative awareness. Religious identity is increasingly shaped within multi-belief environments rather than homogeneous communities. Digital mediation amplifies these dynamics. Online spaces provide access to alternative interpretations, critique, and community formation (Campbell, 2013). Adolescents may encounter theological debates that extend beyond local contexts. Authority is assessed not solely by institutional affiliation but by perceived authenticity and coherence.

3.5. Commitment, Disengagement, and Continuity

Adolescents exhibit diverse trajectories in the development of religious belief. Some adolescents engage in reflective commitment to their faith. Others might stop going to church or practicing their religion for a while, or even forever. Then there are those who still go to church, but they start to question and change what they believe in. Studies have shown that when teens take the time to think about their beliefs and then make a commitment, they tend to be more sure of themselves and have a better sense of who they are. This is compared to teens who either commit to a belief without thinking it through, or who don't commit to anything at all. Exploration of religious belief should not be construed as inherently problematic (Boyatzis, 2015).

At the same time, we can't just blame individual psychology for when young people stop caring about religion. There are bigger things at play - like how society is changing, people not trusting institutions as much, and what's considered right and wrong shifting. All these things affect how youngsters think about religion. The way young people develop and grow happens within a specific time and place in history. So, when it comes to youngsters figuring out their religious identity, it's not just something that happens automatically or randomly. It's shaped by a mix of things they've been taught, how their brains are developing, what they think is right and wrong, who they surround themselves with, and what's going on in the world around them. It's a back-and-forth process where they're constantly negotiating what they believe and who they are. This process isn't predetermined, but it's not random either - it's a patterned way of engaging with big questions and ideas during a time of big change and growth (Marcia, 1966; Arnett, 2015).

4. Moral Development and the Evaluation of Religious Norms

As youngsters grow and develop, they start to think more about what's right and wrong, and this has a big impact on how they see religion. When they're younger, they might just accept the rules and values they're taught, but as they get older, they start to question and evaluate them more. This means they're not just blindly following what they've been told, but are actually thinking critically about what they believe in. Religion is often presented in a very structured way, with clear rules and guidelines, but youngsters are starting to look at these rules and think about whether they really make sense. They're using their own moral compass to decide what's right and wrong, and this can sometimes lead to them challenging the religious norms they've been taught (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014).

4.1. From External Regulation to Principled Reasoning

Kohlberg's theory, which was introduced in 1981, says that people's ideas about right and wrong change over time. At first, they do what they're told because they're supposed to, but as they get older, they start to think for themselves and make decisions based on their own principles. Some people have criticized this theory, saying it's biased towards certain cultures and focuses too much on fairness. However, many studies have shown that as people go through adolescence, they become better at explaining why they think something is right or wrong, and this is an important part of developing their own moral compass (Nucci, 2001; Killen & Smetana, 2015).

As people grow and develop, they start to think more about why they follow certain rules. When they're younger, they might do what their parents, teachers, or church leaders say just because they're told to. But as they get older, they begin to wonder if these rules are really fair or make sense. They might ask themselves questions like "Is this really right?" or "Does this align with what I believe?" This happens with religious rules too. It's not that they're trying to be rebellious, it's just that they're trying to figure out what they really think and believe. They want to make sure their beliefs and values match up. If they feel like the rules they've been taught don't fit with what they think is right, they might feel conflicted. It depends on the youngsters, in essence, how they will interpret and integrate the perceived conflicts between their moral conviction and the religious authority.

4.2. Care, Empathy, and Relational Ethics

Gilligan (1982) challenged the assumption that moral reasoning develops solely through abstract justice principles. Her work emphasized care, empathy, and relational responsibility as equally central dimensions of moral maturation. Adolescents increasingly integrate considerations of relational impact into ethical evaluation. This perspective has important implications for religious development. Many religious traditions articulate moral norms through both principled commands and relational narratives. Adolescents who engage religious teachings through an expanded moral lens may reinterpret them in light of empathy and contextual sensitivity. Moral growth, therefore, can reshape theological understanding (King & Boyatzis, 2015).

Turiel's (2006) social domain theory further clarifies that adolescents distinguish between moral rules (concerned with justice and harm), social conventions, and personal choices. Religious prescriptions may be evaluated within these differentiated domains. Adolescents may accept certain moral principles as universal while questioning whether other practices are culturally contingent. This differentiation is developmentally significant. It allows adolescents to negotiate continuity with tradition while exercising critical evaluation. Religious communities that fail to acknowledge such moral complexity may encounter friction with adolescents who are cognitively and ethically prepared for nuanced reasoning (Smith & Denton, 2005; Arnett, 2015).

4.3. Moral Conflict and Religious Reinterpretation

Adolescence often brings heightened sensitivity to social justice issues. Exposure to broader societal debates—whether concerning inequality, inclusion, or ethical responsibility—can intensify moral reflection. When adolescents perceive

tension between religious doctrine and contemporary moral discourse, interpretive negotiation becomes necessary. Nucci (2001) argues that moral education must account for adolescents' capacity to distinguish authority from principle. If religious instruction is framed exclusively as obedience to external command, it may fail to resonate with developing moral autonomy. Conversely, when religious norms are presented within coherent ethical frameworks, adolescents may engage them more constructively (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Fowler, 1981).

Questioning of religious norms during adolescence does not necessarily indicate disengagement from faith. Sometimes, they find ways to make the religious teachings fit with what they think is right and wrong. Other times, they might separate what they believe from how they think about morals. Everyone's path is different, but the fact that they're thinking critically about it shows they're growing and developing. It's also important to note that just because they're questioning things, it doesn't mean they don't care about what's right and wrong. In fact, a lot of many adolescents demonstrate heightened concern for fairness and authenticity. When they criticize the rules of their religion, it's often because they want to see the values they've been taught actually being lived out, not just talked about. They want to see consistency between what people say they believe and how they actually act (Barry&Abo-Zena, 2014).

4.4. Autonomy, Authority, and Moral Dialogue

Adolescents increasingly exercise autonomous moral judgment about right and wrong, the way they see authority changes. They no longer just accept what someone says because of their position, but instead think about whether what they're being told makes sense and is fair. Religious leaders who engage adolescents in dialogical exchange are more likely to be perceived as credible than those who rely on unilateral authority. Rest et al. (1999) found that as individuals mature, moral reasoning becomes increasingly principled rather than rule-bound. This means that religious traditions that encourage young people to think critically about ethical issues and practices may be more in line with how they're developing as individuals. By engaging with religious texts and ideas in a reflective way, youngsters can develop a more nuanced understanding of what it means to live a good life. This approach can help them make sense of their own values and principles, and figure out how to apply them in different situations (Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

As adolescents grow, they stay connected to the people around them. Being able to make their own moral decisions doesn't mean they're alone, it means they can balance their own beliefs with being part of a group. Some religious groups make space for talking about tough issues, which can help adolescents figure out what they really think and feel. This can be more helpful than groups that don't allow questions. The way moral growth and religious life come together in adolescence is complicated. It involves learning new things, being more aware of emotions, navigating relationships, and being exposed to different ideas from the world around them. Adolescents don't just blindly follow or reject religious rules, they think about them and decide for themselves. This process of thinking and deciding is an important part of growing up and becoming a moral person (Marcia, 1966; Hardy & Carlo, 2011).

In summary, moral development during adolescence reshapes the way religious norms are interpreted and evaluated. As young people move toward greater autonomy in moral reasoning, they seek coherence between ethical conviction and religious commitment. This evaluative process reflects developmental maturation rather than instability. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any comprehensive account of adolescent (Smith & Denton, 2005; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014).

5. Pluralism, Secularization, and Digital Mediation

The way young people develop their religious beliefs during adolescence is closely tied to the world around them. In the past, people thought that the environment where someone grew up was pretty stable when it came to religion. But nowadays, things are different. Young people are growing up in a world where there are many different beliefs, everyone is encouraged to be their own person, and the internet plays a big role in how they learn and interact. These changes don't dictate how someone will turn out, but they do influence how young people figure out who they are and what they believe in. It's a complex process, and the environment they're in shapes the way they navigate their religious identity (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014). Digital learning environments further mediate adolescents' exposure to religious narratives and belief systems, reshaping the way meaning is constructed in contemporary contexts (Chaidi, Drigas, & Karagiannidis, 2021; Simos & Katsinis, 2026).

5.1. Plural Religious Landscapes

In many contemporary societies, religious belief no longer operates within a taken-for-granted framework. Berger's (1967) description of the "sacred canopy" captured a time when religious meaning was socially reinforced and culturally dominant. In pluralistic contexts, however, that canopy has fragmented. Religious belief now coexists with

alternative worldviews, including secular humanism, agnosticism, and diverse spiritual traditions.(Casanova, 1994; Taylor, 2007).

Adolescents are increasingly exposed to diverse belief systems and value frameworks, a process that can be developmentally significant. When they meet peers who have different religious views or no religion at all, it can make them question what they've been taught to believe. This can be a good thing, as it encourages them to think more deeply about their own beliefs. As Taylor (2007), we live in a "secular age" where having a belief is just one of many options, not the only way to be. This means that adolescents have to think carefully about why they believe what they do. Being around people with different beliefs can actually make some adolescents more committed to their own religion, because they've thought about it and chosen it for themselves. Others might start to question their beliefs and look for new ways of understanding their religion. (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; Fowler, 1981).Casanova (1994) cautioned that just because there are many different beliefs, it doesn't mean that religion is disappearing. Instead, it might just be changing and evolving.

Importantly, adolescents are developing within contexts that require active meaning-making rather than passive inheritance of belief . This process of figuring out what they believe can be really helpful for adolescents, as it allows them to develop their own sense of identity and purpose. It's not always easy, but it's an important part of growing up. By being open to different beliefs and ideas, adolescents can learn to think critically and make their own decisions about what they believe. This can help them become more confident and self-assured, and can also help them develop a stronger sense of their own values and principles. In the end, the key is to create an environment where adolescents feel safe and supported as they explore their beliefs and values. This can involve providing them with opportunities to learn about different religions and beliefs, as well as encouraging them to think critically and make their own decisions. By doing so, we can help adolescents develop a strong sense of identity and purpose, and can also help them become more empathetic and understanding of others (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; McLean & Syed, 2015;Drigas&Mitsea, 2020).

5.2. Individualization and Reflexive Commitment

In late modern contexts, increasing emphasis is placed on individualization and personal choice. This is closely linked to the idea of pluralism, where many different cultures and beliefs coexist. As a result, young people, especially adolescents, are more likely to create their own unique spiritual identities. They might take parts of traditional religions and mix them with their own thoughts and feelings. This approach lets them stay connected to their roots while still being true to themselves. This process reflects the selective appropriation of religious elements within individualized spiritual frameworks. Ammerman (2013) observes that many individuals engage in such processes of selective religious appropriation, many individuals are doing just that - blending old traditions with new, personal interpretations. For adolescents, this flexibility is really appealing because it allows them to hold onto what they've been taught while still exploring their own values and beliefs (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; McLean & Syed, 2015).

Excessive emphasis on individualized belief systems may complicate adolescents' efforts to sustain communal religious belonging. As identity exploration intensifies, adolescents may experience tension between personal conviction and collective affiliation. The challenge of integrating autonomy with communal embeddedness reflects a broader late-modern dynamic described by Davie (2015), who notes the emergence of "believing without belonging" in parts of Europe. Within such contexts, adolescents may construct personalized modes of religious expression that maintain subjective meaning even in the absence of formal institutional participation (Davie, 2015; Ammerman, 2013).

The developmental significance lies in the balance between reflexive commitment and fragmentation. Identity consolidation requires coherence. If individualization leads to piecemeal appropriation without integration, religious identity may remain diffuse. Conversely, reflective choice can strengthen internalization (Fowler, 1981; King & Boyatzis, 2015).Metacognitive capacities are central to this process, enabling adolescents to critically evaluate, reorganize, and integrate belief systems into a coherent sense of self (Drigas&Mitsea, 2021).

5.3. Digital Mediation and Religious Authority

Digital technologies have significantly transformed the ways in which religion is communicated and negotiated. Now, stories and ideas about religion are shared on social media, video sites, and online forums, and this often happens without any official supervision. Young people, in adolescence, are really active in these online spaces. Campbell (2013) argues that digital media are reshaping perceptions of religious authority the internet is changing how we think about who has authority when it comes to religion. It's not just traditional leaders who are in charge anymore; now we also have influencers, bloggers, and online communities that can shape people's beliefs. When people decide who to listen to, they often care more about whether the person seems authentic, relatable, and responsive than about whether they

have formal training or a official position. This is a big shift from how things used to be, and it's changing the way religion works in the digital age (Hjarvard, 2011; Simos &Katsiampoura, 2025).

The way people express their religious beliefs is changing because of the media. Hjarvard (2011) demonstrates that mediatization processes increasingly shape the public expression of religion, the media is having a big impact on how people show their religious side. Religious content now circulates in hybrid digital environments that blend entertainment, commentary, and informal discourse. Youngsters are seeing arguments about religion, jokes about it, and criticisms all jumbled up together in short, digital bits. This is making things both easier and harder for them. On the one hand, they can learn about lots of different viewpoints, which can help them understand more. But on the other hand, the way the internet filters out some information and shows them only certain things can make people more set in their ways. When they see simple or out-of-context religious ideas, it can slowly change how they think about things.

Hoover (2006) argues that media environments shape not only access to religious information but also the ways religion is experienced and interpreted. For adolescents, online religious discourse increasingly becomes integrated into processes of identity formation. This complexity may complicate adolescents' efforts to evaluate the credibility of religious sources (McLean&Syed, 2015; Cheong, 2014; Simos et al., 2025).

5.4. Negotiating Identity in Hybrid Contexts

Pluralism, individualization, and digital mediation converge to produce hybrid symbolic ecologies. Adolescents do not construct religious identity solely within family or institutional settings; they do so across overlapping spheres. The impact of these conditions is not uniform. Some adolescents draw strength from exposure to diverse viewpoints, using comparison as a tool for clarification. Others may experience uncertainty or overload. Developmental capacity interacts with environmental complexity (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

What remains constant is the importance of dialogue and the negotiation of shared meaning. These days, youngsters don't usually develop their sense of religion on their own, without being exposed to different ideas. Instead, their religious identity is shaped by constantly interacting with people who have different beliefs. When they do commit to a particular religion, it's often because they've thought it through, rather than just following what they were taught. To sum it up, youngsters' experiences with religion today happen in a world where there are many different beliefs, people are more focused on individuality, and the internet plays a big role in how they communicate. These factors make youngsters think more critically about their beliefs, which is already a big part of being a teenager. So, we need to understand how youngsters develop their religious beliefs not just by looking at their personal thoughts and feelings, but also by considering the bigger social and cultural changes that are happening around them (Taylor, 2007; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

6. Educational Implications for Secondary Religious Education

The preceding analysis has highlighted that religious development in adolescence is neither accidental nor purely reactive. It is structured by identity formation, cognitive maturation, moral evaluation, and socio-cultural exposure. These dynamics inevitably shape how religious education is received in secondary schooling. If pedagogy fails to take them into account, misalignment may occur. If it responds thoughtfully, education can become a space of reflective integration rather than tension (Biesta, 2010; Wright, 2004).

6.1. Developmental Alignment in Religious Education

Working with adolescents can be challenging because they are still developing their abilities to think abstractly, consider different perspectives, and make decisions based on principles. If religious education just focuses on memorizing facts and historical events, it may not be using these developing abilities to their full potential. Grimmitt (2000) argues that effective religious education should move beyond the transmission of information and foster interpretive engagement, go beyond just presenting information and instead encourage students to think critically and interpretively. This means giving adolescents the opportunity to analyze, question, and compare different ideas, rather than just memorizing them. This approach doesn't mean giving up on the importance of doctrine, but rather presenting it in a way that invites reflection and discussion. When students are encouraged to explore the deeper meaning of symbols, consider the ethical implications of different beliefs, and express their own thoughts and feelings, religious education becomes more relevant to their lives. Jackson (2004) suggests that interpretive approaches enable students to engage dialogically with religious traditions, with religious traditions in a dialogue, is a good way to do this. This approach respects both the tradition being studied and the autonomy of the student, allowing them to think for themselves and make their own decisions. When adolescents feel like they are allowed to reflect on their beliefs and

values, rather than just being told what to think, they are more likely to internalize those beliefs and make them a part of who they are (Biesta, 2010).

6.2. Addressing Doubt Constructively

Given that questioning often accompanies adolescent religious development, educational environments must decide how to respond. If doubt is framed exclusively as deficiency, students may disengage or compartmentalize uncertainty. Conversely, when doubt is acknowledged as part of intellectual growth, dialogue becomes possible. Wright (2004) argues that religious education should cultivate critical literacy while avoiding the reduction of belief to mere relativism. The aim is not to dissolve commitment but to deepen understanding. Structured classroom dialogue where students examine multiple perspectives respectfully can support this process. Cooling (2010) argues that faith-based education need not fear critical inquiry. Adolescents who encounter thoughtful responses to difficult questions may develop greater trust in religious discourse. The alternative silence or avoidance risks alienation (Wright, 2004; Cooling, 2010).

6.3. Moral Dialogue and Ethical Reflection

As youngsters grow and become more independent in their moral thinking, religious education needs to change too. It should focus more on helping them think critically about ethics, rather than just telling them what to do. This can be done through discussions of real-life cases, exploring moral dilemmas, and looking at current issues. These approaches are supported by research that shows youngsters want to understand how their moral beliefs and values fit together. When religious education encourages students to think deeply about complex ethical issues, it recognizes that they are moving away from simply following authority and towards making their own informed decisions (Kohlberg, 1981; Rest et al., 1999; Simos, 2025). Additionally, by promoting respectful dialogue and mutual understanding, students from different backgrounds and beliefs can work together to develop their moral reasoning skills. This is crucial in modern, diverse societies where people need to be able to respect and understand each other's differences. By incorporating ethical reflection and dialogue into religious education, we can help youngsters develop into thoughtful, engaged, and responsible members of society.

6.4. Digital Literacy and Religious Understanding

The way adolescents learn about religion is changing because of the internet (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2006). They often come across religious stories and ideas online without anyone to explain what they mean. If religious education doesn't take this into account, it might seem out of touch. To make religious education more relevant, teachers need to help students develop digital literacy skills (Gilligan, 1982). This means more than just knowing how to use technology - it's about being able to critically evaluate the information they find online, understanding how algorithms can influence what they see, and discussing how authority and credibility are established in online spaces. By doing this, educators can help students navigate the complex online environments where they're forming their identities. When students learn to think critically about religious discourse online, they can develop a stronger sense of interpretive resilience. This means they'll be able to understand not just what different religious traditions teach, but also how religious ideas are shared, debated, and contested in the world today (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2006; Simos, 2025).

6.5. Balancing Autonomy and Belonging

Balancing independence with being part of a community is a complex challenge for religious education when it comes to youngsters. On one hand, they're trying to figure out who they are and make their own decisions, but on the other hand, they also want to feel like they belong. Effective teaching does not seek to force students to make up their minds too quickly or encourage them to pick and choose bits of information without thinking about how they fit together. Instead, it gives them a safe space to explore and discuss their ideas. Biesta (2010) argues that education is not merely about knowledge transmission but about supporting human development, education is not just about passing on knowledge, but also about helping people develop and grow. When it comes to religious education, this means recognizing that youngsters are still developing and learning, rather than just seeing them as passive listeners. If teachers respect the fact that youngsters are still growing and learning, it can actually make them more effective and authoritative, rather than less. This has important implications for religious education in adolescence. It means that teachers should try to understand where their students are coming from, in terms of their cognitive development, their sense of identity, their ability to make moral decisions, and their experience of the digital world. If teachers can do this, they'll be better able to engage with their students in a meaningful way. Importantly, religious education need not avoid complexity and difficult questions. In fact, when it's done well, it can be a space where students can explore and question their beliefs, while also deepening their commitment to their faith (Cooling, 2010; Wright, 2004).

7. Conclusion

The way youngsters develop their religious beliefs is more complicated than just saying they're losing faith, staying the same, or rebelling against their parents. When you look at all the research from different fields, you see a more complex picture. Being a teenager is a time of big changes, when who you are, how you think, what you believe is right and wrong, and where you fit in with others all come together in ways that can really affect your religious life. Your beliefs during this time aren't just going up and down - you're actually rethinking them, questioning them, sometimes feeling unsure, and often changing them as you figure out who you are and where you fit in the world.

Identity formation stands at the center of this transformation. As adolescents seek coherence across personal values, relational belonging, and future aspirations, religion may function as anchor, tension point, or interpretive resource. Inherited commitments are rarely discarded without reflection; nor are they simply preserved intact. Instead, they are negotiated. Exploration, even when uncomfortable, appears to be a developmental mechanism rather than a deviation from it. The evidence suggests that reflective engagement—rather than passive conformity is more likely to produce internally coherent religious identity in adulthood.

As young people grow and develop, their thinking becomes more complex. They start to see things from different perspectives and understand abstract ideas better. This changes how they think about religious stories and ideas. They may start to question literal interpretations and look for deeper meanings. They also begin to think more independently about what is right and wrong. These changes aren't necessarily about becoming less religious or more religious - they're just a natural part of growing up. What matters is how youngsters use their new thinking skills to understand the world around them, and how they fit their new ideas into their existing beliefs.

As young people grow and become more independent in their thoughts about right and wrong, they start to think more critically about the rules and values they've been taught. They begin to wonder if these rules really make sense, and if they align with their own personal values. The big question isn't whether they'll start to question these rules - because they probably will - but how they'll be supported or held back as they do. If they're allowed to think deeply and critically about their faith, they might find that their own values and principles match up with the teachings of their religion. But if they're made to feel like questioning is a bad thing, or that it means they're not loyal, it can create tension and conflict. Research shows that as young people become more confident in their own moral decisions, it doesn't have to mean they're turning away from their faith. In fact, it can actually make their faith stronger, as long as they're able to find a way to bring their own values and principles together with the teachings of their religion.

The broader socio-cultural environment further shapes these trajectories. Plural exposure, individualization, and digital mediation create conditions in which religious identity is formed within overlapping and sometimes competing symbolic frameworks. Adolescents encounter difference routinely. They navigate belief within comparative contexts rather than homogeneous ones. Digital environments complicate the landscape by decentralizing authority and accelerating exposure. Yet these conditions do not determine disengagement. They create contexts for negotiation. The adolescent task remains interpretive: to situate self within available narratives.

Educational implications follow directly from this developmental portrait. Religious education that assumes stability without reflection may misjudge the developmental moment. Conversely, pedagogical approaches that reduce religion to detached information may fail to engage existential depth. Adolescents require neither doctrinal imposition nor content-neutral abstraction. They require structured engagement that respects cognitive growth, acknowledges moral reasoning, and permits reflective exploration.

The real challenge for teaching religion to youngsters is making sure it's relevant to their lives. This doesn't mean watering down the traditional teachings, but rather being aware of how young people think, ask questions, and make sense of the world. When schools acknowledge that questioning is a natural part of growing up and learning, they're more likely to keep students engaged. But if they ignore the fact that kids are exposed to many different ideas and influences, both online and offline, they risk seeming out of touch with the real world. By being attentive to the ways adolescents think and learn, educators can create an environment that supports their intellectual and spiritual growth. This means recognizing that youngsters are constantly constructing their own meaning and purpose, and that they need guidance and support to navigate the complexities of faith and belief in a rapidly changing world.

This study has tried to bring together ideas from different fields, like how people develop, how we figure out who we are, what's right and wrong, and how society and culture affect us, to understand how youngsters experience religion. It's not about creating a one-size-fits-all model, but rather about highlighting the common patterns that show up in different situations. Being a teenager is a time when a lot can happen and things can change - it's a time of big

possibilities. When it comes to religion, this stage of life isn't necessarily set in stone or easily broken; instead, it's a time when things are taking shape.

More research in the future could look into how these changes happen in different cultures and settings. It would be helpful to do long-term studies to see how what youngsters explore affects their religious beliefs as adults. We should also pay more attention to how people participate in religion online, which could help us understand how being part of a digital community affects how committed people are to their faith and how they interpret it. This kind of research would add to what we already know about how people develop, rather than replacing it. It's possible that by studying these things, we can get a better sense of how people's religious beliefs change over time and what influences those changes.

Adolescence isn't something to be alarmed about or romanticized. Instead, it needs our attention. When it comes to religious development during this time, it's really about figuring out how to bring together our beliefs, sense of self, and moral values as we navigate different situations (Arnett, 2015; Erikson, 1968). If we look at adolescent religiosity through the lens of developmental psychology, we can see it's not so much about being unstable, but rather about changing and growing. By understanding this, we can respond in a more thoughtful and caring way - whether we're educators, researchers, or just part of the community. This means being more nuanced in how we approach things, and that's really important.

Compliance with ethical standards

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