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Supporting religious and pro-social education in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd within the cognitive-developmental framework of integral religious development

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Abstract

Research objectives and problem(s): This article aims to identify practical approaches to religious and pro-social (moral) education within the pedagogical framework developed in Rome during the 1950s by Sofia Cavalletti, known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS). The central research question guiding this study is: How does the CGS program support the religious education and pro-social development of preschool children in the context of the cognitive-developmental concept of integral religious development?

Research methods: To address these questions, we employed a method of document content analysis. The religious education content and its delivery methods were examined through an analysis of the CGS curriculum and methodological guides for children aged three to six years.

Process of argumentation: The article consists of an introduction and justification for the choice of topic, a presentation of methodological assumptions, an analysis of the literature to present the research context, research results in accordance with the research problem, conclusions and discussion.

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Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: A psychological and pedagogical analysis of the CGS program, viewed through the lens of holistic child development, suggests that it effectively integrates (a) the individual characteristics of the child, including age, psychological traits, religious socialization, and prior knowledge based on physical and psychological experiences; (b) the characteristics and role of the adults introducing the child to the faith, particularly the nature and quality of the relationship with the child; and (c) the content and delivery of religious knowledge.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Formal catechesis is important in supporting the religious development of preschool children as it complements the foundational experiences gained within the family. It considers the development of the child's religious awareness according to their unique religious disposition and their ways of understanding and perceiving reality. Cavalletti's content arrangement is kerygmatic, and fosters a relationship with a personal God, which forms the basis for pro-social (moral) development in subsequent stages of religious education.

Introduction

Teaching children to be responsible individuals is a key task for parents, ranking as the highest priority among twelve options in a survey, with 92 percent of respondents acknowledging its importance, regardless of their religious beliefs or lack thereof. This finding suggests that the vast majority of parents aspire for their children to grow into kind, pro-social individuals (Pew Research Center 2014, 2015). Moreover, many parents worldwide consider religion an essential part of their lives (Bornstein et al. 2017) and often associate their children's prosocial development with their religious and spiritual development (R/S).[1]

While the development of religiosity and spirituality has long been a focus in the psychology of religion, research on this topic, particularly concerning children, remains limited. Less than 0.5 percent of studies to date have been devoted to R/S development in children of different ages,

[1] We use the abbreviation "R/S" in line with the convention commonly adopted in social science research on Religion (R) and Spirituality (S). These are recognized as complex, multidimensional social phenomena that, despite their differences, share theoretical and empirical commonalities (cf. Mahoney, 2021).

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with the majority concentrating on adolescents (ages 13–20) rather than younger children aged 3–12 (Richert, Boyatzis, & King 2017). Scholars have identified the need for in-depth research and reflection on the R/S development of children and adolescents, especially in light of the rapid transformations in religion and the public sphere, which are rapidly altering traditional modes of religious socialization in Western countries (see Mahoney 2021). Broadly speaking, religious education (RE) plays a crucial role in the continuity of any religious tradition (Markeng and Berglund 2023), and its quality carries robust social implications (Mahoney, 2021).

The literature on the religious development of children and adolescents presents various models, yet there remains a notable lack of longitudinal studies that track this development over time, particularly in a way that would offer a holistic perspective incorporating cultural variations (see Mahoney, 2021). The goal of this article is to explore practical approaches to religious and pro-social (moral) education within Sofia Cavalletti's concept known as Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (or CGS), which originated in Rome in the mid-20th century (Cavalletti, 2015). The methodological principles of CGS are entrenched in Montessori's pedagogy and her early efforts to promote the religious development of preschool children (Montessori, 1922, 1931, 1949).

This article will examine religious education based on the Montessori method within the framework of the cognitive-developmental concept of integral religious development throughout the life course, as articulated by Czesław Walesa, polish psychologist (2005, 2023). This concept is grounded in research conducted among children and adults from families that prioritize religious education rooted in the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Methodology

Our research, grounded in psychological and pedagogical analysis, is dedicated to the content and methods of religious education proposed in the CGS program for children aged three to six years. The main objective

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is to identify practical solutions that support a child's development within a holistic view of human religiosity.

The main research problem was formulated as the following question: How do the content and methods of the CGS program support the religious education and prosocial development of preschool children under the cognitive-developmental framework of integral religious development?

To address this question, we employed a method of document content analysis, following a problem-driven approach as proposed by Krippendorff (2022). The religious education content and its delivery methods were examined through an analysis of the CGS curriculum and methodological guides for children aged three to six years (Cavalletti & Gobbi, 1965–1971), as well as unpublished training materials, Cavalletti's lectures recorded by the author between 1997 and 1999, and both published and unpublished articles[2] and interviews with Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, the co-author of CGS.

Three categories derived from Walesa's model of human religious development constituted the analytical framework for the CGS program and the documents indicated above. These were: (1) knowledge of God, (2) knowledge of Jesus, and (3) knowledge of human communication with God, which correlate with both Walesa's research and Cavalletti's pedagogical thought.

Walesa's research was conducted among 120 preschool children to examine the deeper layers of religious consciousness—the knowledge that "regulates action and activates, organizes, and directs this action" (2005, p. 186). The goal was to understand how the child interprets religious situations, understands religious concepts and content, and what knowledge and skills they possess (Walesa, 2005) in three categories: knowledge of God, knowledge of Jesus, and knowledge of human communication with God. Walesa's findings and conclusions form the basis for the analysis of the CGS program.

[2] Unpublished source materials available in the private archive of the co-author of the text

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Contextualizing the research problem

The starting point for the psychological and pedagogical analysis of RE within the context of religious development (R/S) is Cavalletti's and Walesa's perspectives on religiosity. They understand it as a positive and personal relationship with God, which emerges and develops under favorable external and internal conditions and evolves according to different stages of child development. Establishing this relationship is also viewed as a source of pro-social development, a point articulated with force by Cavalletti. Their discussion centers on how children form an image of God that reflects their individual internal working models and emotional experiences of God as an object (figure) of attachment, and how they conceptualize God, prayer, and the afterlife. These concepts are assimilated through religious socialization and derived from the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Although the image and concept of God overlap, they are distinct constructs (Davis, Moriarty & Mauch 2013), each of which can be explored independently (Mahoney, 2021).

Walesa's research demonstrates how a child's religiosity develops and identifies external factors (including educational influences) that can either foster or hinder the child's relationship with God. The findings also indicate that a child's religious morality is shaped by their image of God, and that even in the preschool years, the complex issues of conscience and responsibility for oneself and others begin to emerge in embryonic form. This personal and positive relationship with God is expressed through human experiences, processes, and mental states.

In educational practice, it is vital for a child to accumulate a wide range of experiences, which involve the conscious process of acquiring information about objects and the resulting cognitive outcomes, such as concepts, judgments, or theories. Supporting the development of religiosity in preschool children should consider the specific characteristics of this developmental stage. This is the period when children begin to understand and use symbols and to grasp the symbolic meaning of objects and activities. The internalization of external behaviors and the intellectualization of all activities also begin during this time. By the end

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of the preschool years, behaviors that are accepted by adults become more consolidated, and social, moral, aesthetic, and religious feelings, along with a sense of self, begin to emerge and develop. Given the child's infantile ways of apprehending reality during this period, it is essential to skillfully cultivate those forms of religious thinking that are characterized by a participatory relationship namely, the inclination to perceive things and phenomena from within through communication with other believers (horizontal participation) and with God (vertical participation) (Walesa, 2005).

Findings

CGS is founded on a kerygmatic covenant theology, which is reflected in both the theoretical and practical principles of religious and pro-social (moral) education. These principles were formulated and refined over many years of observation with three age groups—ages three to five, six to eight, and nine to twelve—within an environment specifically prepared according to Montessori pedagogical principles (De Giorgi, 2013). Cavalletti emphasized the importance of extending formal catechesis to children as early as age three, as religious experiences at this stage serve as the foundation for later religious development and moral formation.

In contemporary research on the development of children's religious consciousness, it is widely accepted that children's cognitive processes related to religious development operate according to the same principles of theory of mind, causation, and mental-physical causation that apply to other cognitive domains (Mahoney, 2021). The focus here will be on how children socialized in Catholicism understand and form a relationship with God, and how this understanding relates to the development of prosocial attitudes. The parameter under examination is religious awareness, which encompasses knowledge, concepts, understanding, skills, and views (including worldview) that manifest in a child's questions, prayers, and play. These activities are intended to sensitize the child to the discovery of mystery, the learning of religious signs and symbols, and the formation of an image of God. Initially, this awareness stems from

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the child's observation of and participation in the religious life of people close to them. Parents and immediate family members, both unconsciously and consciously, introduce children to transcendent realities. The RE of young children within the family should be supported by catechesis tailored to their needs.

Content and methods used in shaping children's knowledge of God

An analysis of the assumptions underlying Cavalletti's concept of religious education reveals that the content selection for preschool-aged children is predominantly Christocentric-Trinitarian rather than theocentric. This approach corresponds to the cognitive characteristics typical of children in this age group, such as anthropomorphism, egocentrism, and a primitive realism in their understanding of God and the Transcendent. As children reach the age of six, coinciding with significant cognitive development, the emphasis of the content shifts towards a more theocentric perspective. Younger children are introduced to biblical texts that facilitate their understanding of Jesus, who is presented as a gift from God the Father to humanity. The content is organized in accordance with the liturgical year, thereby ensuring that the teaching resonates with the children's religious experiences, which are further reinforced through catechesis. Cavalletti (1979) believes that to effectively support children's development in these areas, it is essential to tailor the content to their cognitive abilities and religious needs.

The analysis of the CGS program demonstrates that concepts such as God's immortality, omniscience, omnipresence, invisibility, and omnipotence are implicitly conveyed at the preschool education stage through a carefully selected range of liturgical content, including the Mass and Holy Baptism, as well as biblical content, mainly passages from the New Testament. Given the cognitive development of children at this age, the curriculum centers on the Person of Jesus Christ, the mysteries of the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and His Eucharistic presence.

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The CGS curriculum is structured into three cycles, each spanning three years, and as children grow and gain experience, the content is gradually enriched to develop their understanding of these theological concepts. The CGS approach recognizes that young children perceive the world in ways characterized by a naiver grasp of reality and a form of magical religiosity. Therefore, the content and methods of instruction rely heavily on signs and the symbolic discovery of transcendent reality. For example, the concept of God the Father as Giver is introduced to children over the age of six, as research shows that younger children are not yet capable of grasping such complex concepts. In the CGS, there is a gradual transition from learning about Jesus and His Father—through parables and narratives from the life of Jesus—to discovering the presence and activity of the Trinity in liturgical texts.

This content is communicated through a method that combines parables, character studies, and narrative with a timeline presentation developed by Montessori. Children engage with this content in a multi-sensory and holistic manner, and thus experience the idea that everything in the world was created by God and that the entire history of the Kingdom of God unfolds according to His plan. This narrative begins with the creation of the world and its gift to humanity, continues with the coming of Jesus, who died and rose again, and culminates in the Parousia, the second coming of the Messiah.

According to Cavalletti (1996), understanding the history of salvation, to which humanity is invited, represents a critical stage in pro-social development. History, with its inherent temporality, leads to ethical reflection. Participating in this history and cooperating with God requires an understanding of the moral order that governs it, which in turn reflects a cosmic order. Understanding and implementing these principles is facilitated by the tools of parenesis, which include the moral teachings recorded in the Gospels, such as parables, the Beatitudes, and other instructions (Surma, 2017).

The foundation for building the moral life of an older child is the satisfaction of their need to be loved in early childhood. Religious experience based on the child's enjoyment of God's presence in their life plays a fun-

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damental role in satisfying the need for love. All religious experiences in early childhood contribute to the harmonious formation of the child at this stage, and at the same time constitute indirect moral preparation in the subsequent stages (Cavalletti, 1993). Proclaiming God's love, helping the child to experience it and enjoy it through reflection and prayer should precede moral formation, understood as transmitting a set of principles. Morality in the Christian vision is a response to God's love. Without knowing and establishing a relationship with God, who is love, moral life is without foundation.

Content and methods shaping children's knowledge of Jesus

Walesa's research indicates that young children often use the terms "God" and "Jesus" interchangeably, and their understanding of Jesus tends to be syncretic. Partial information about Jesus (e.g., "the Lamb of God") becomes part of the child's overall statement. His study found that children's knowledge of Jesus often came from liturgical texts as well as from carols that they were familiar with. At this developmental stage, the mystery of the Incarnation was particularly challenging for them to grasp. For example, six-year-olds made statements like "God is a good man and God" (Walesa, 2005, p. 189). While most children struggled to explain the purpose of Jesus' coming to earth, some accurate responses were noted, even among younger children. For instance, a four-year-old said, "The Lord Jesus wants to come to people because He loves them," or a six-year-old explained, "Jesus came so that people would rise from the dead" (Walesa, 2005, p. 190).

To help children understand the meaning of the terms "God" and "Jesus" in the CGS, it is important to clarify whether we are referring to God the Father, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. It is also crucial to connect these terms to biblical and liturgical texts, which reveal how these three divine persons manifest themselves to humanity. For example, certain aspects of the liturgy, such as specific texts from the Mass, are designed to help children grasp the mystery of the Holy Trinity. These texts, combined with

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visible signs and gestures, assist children in developing an understanding of key concepts. Examples of such gestures include the epiclesis and the offering. Through the presentation of these gestures, children gradually come to understand the covenant as a gift (with bread and wine serving as visible signs) prepared by God the Father, who invites us to accept these gifts. The gestures of epiclesis and offering, along with the prayers spoken by the priest, demonstrate that everything originates from God the Father and returns to Him through His Son, Jesus, sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit (e.g., the gesture of the priest extending his hands over the gifts during the epiclesis, or raising the gifts during the offering). The image of God the Father as Giver is further affirmed through catechesis on Baptism, where the gift of the light of the Risen Christ is received through the Word of God and water. The overarching goal of liturgical education in the CGS is to prepare children for conscious participation in the Mass, using the method of signs and symbols.

In addition to the liturgy, the Bible serves as a main source for introducing children to Jesus within the CGS program. During Advent, selected Messianic prophecies are presented to the children (Isa. 9:1; Isa. 9:5; Isa. 7:14, Mic. 5:1, Num. 24:17). These passages are intended to prepare the children for the experience of Christmas and to teach them about Jesus as the Light announced by God the Father. The biblical texts read during Christmas also guide children toward the mystery of the Incarnation, and help them better understand that Jesus is not only a good person but is both God and man (Cavalletti, 1979). This understanding is deepened by encouraging children to seek answers to questions such as, "Who is this Child born in Bethlehem?" and "Why do the Wise Men from the East offer Him gold, myrrh, and frankincense?" These reflections also invite children to respond to God's call, marking the beginning of their first personal religious decisions. This is one example of cultivating a child's knowledge and understanding of the concepts that form their religious awareness.

An analysis of the CGS program content for children aged three to six shows that they also become familiar with the teachings of Jesus. Observations of how children engage with selected biblical texts have

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led to the inclusion of several parables that cater to the religious needs and perceptual abilities of the youngest children. The parable method, which is central to teaching Jesus' message, takes into account the developmental stage of each child, though it requires skillful presentation by the adult. Appropriately chosen parables enable children to gradually uncover the mystery of the Kingdom of God. After the age of six, as children become more interested in rules and principles of behavior, catechetical content expands to include more parables with moral teachings. In the CGS program, children are gradually introduced to the moral teachings of Jesus through selected parables about the kingdom of God. The purpose of these parables is to help them understand the mystery of the kingdom—what it is and where it is located. After the age of six, the parables of the merchant and the treasure begin to take on moral significance. Having learned that the kingdom is of immense value, children begin to contemplate what they must do to attain it. Other parables presented to older children include those about the feast (the invited guests and the wise and foolish virgins), which are connected to their preparation for communion, as well as moral parables concerning prayer (the Pharisee and the tax collector, the persistent friend), and love of neighbor (the Good Samaritan), including love for enemies. Guidance to help children make religious decisions and understand norms and rules is also provided through short passages from the Gospels, such as those on forgiveness (e.g., Matthew 18:22). In CGS, children who prepare for the sacrament of reconciliation experience that confession is a prayer, that is, responding to God's initiative in the process of conversion (Kielian, 2024). This sacrament is a direction for man towards the fullness of life with God.

Walesa's research found that younger children, when asked about the presence of Jesus, commonly responded that He was on the cross—an iconic representation—but also noted that He was alive, in heaven, or omnipresent. Children's descriptions of God, including His appearance, concept and nature, often displayed primitive anthropomorphism (e.g., "God looks like a man," "God is more like Daddy because Daddy is smarter than Mommy" [6 years old]), reflecting their early developmental stage (Walesa, 2005, p. 189).

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These findings raise important considerations about the development of children's image and concept of God and His presence, which catechesis can effectively support without surpassing their cognitive abilities. An example from the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is the parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10:3-5, 11-16), which acknowledges the anthropomorphic thinking of preschoolers but also addresses their fundamental need for love and security. It allows children to discover Jesus' presence and establish a personal relationship with Him, which is essential for moral formation at this stage of their development. In exploring the parable, children independently discern who the sheep are that the Good Shepherd knows by name. In their drawings of this parable, children often depict the person closest to them (frequently a female figure), thus expressing their understanding and experience of love. This moment of personal discovery marks the beginning of the child's relationship with Jesus.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and His relationship with the sheep, is later complemented by the metaphor of the true vine, which helps older children preparing for their First Communion better understand the significance of unity with Jesus and God the Father. Shaping the image of God through parables simultaneously involves self-discovery (e.g., "I am the sheep of the Good Shepherd,""I am a branch of the true vine"). Both texts reveal the mystery of a person living and abiding in a relationship with God, who extends a personal invitation to each individual. This awareness of one's identity in relation to God the Father and His Son naturally leads to moral reflection, prompting questions such as: What can I do to remain in this relationship?

Content and methods shaping the knowledge of human communication with God

Walesa (2005) asserts that "the establishment of a conscious and voluntary relationship with God represents a profound upheaval, marking the most significant turning point in a person's life: the emergence of the

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Other" (p. 170). He notes that this awareness can emerge as early as two or three years of age in some individuals. During this early stage, a child's religiosity is primarily shaped through participation in the religious activities of those closest to them, which they are often encouraged to join. The more frequent and shared these religious activities are, the more likely it is that the child will engage in independent and spontaneous religious behavior.

The formation of religious feelings during this period cannot be overlooked either, as they trigger the need for social interactions, interpersonal bonds, and stimulate other developmental needs, including psychomotor and speech development (Tatala, 2000). Walesa suggests that "the affective and cognitive reflection of certain social situations, especially religious ones, leads to the first value judgements" (2005, p. 170).

A child's capacity for social learning also enables the formation of specific "rituals" within the religious domain, which contribute to the development of religious intentionality. According to Walesa (2005), "the most important manifestation of a young child's religiosity seems to be their prayer" (171), which is one of the means of maintaining a relationship with God and communicating with Him. The children studied primarily associated prayer with petition, as well as specific times or places (rituals) for its recitation. Older children sometimes described prayer as an expression of love for God.

Walesa's research also offers insight into the motives behind prayer among young children. The most common motive (65.5%) was satisfying their own needs, which aligns with the prayer of petition mentioned by the respondents. A disinterested motive, reflecting altruistic intentions, was observed in only 14.5% of the children. Another notable motive was "necessity and parental order" (34.7%). However, despite adult guidance, children rarely engaged in spontaneous prayers of apology, thanksgiving, or praise (Walesa, 2005, p. 200).

Based on the analysis of survey results, it can be concluded that the form and content of children's petitionary prayers reflect those of the adults (primarily parents) who initiate, encourage, and model prayer for them. Children's attendance at Mass, particularly when they are given the

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opportunity to actively participate in the Prayer of the Faithful—a form of petitionary prayer—further reinforces this practice (e.g., prayers for the deceased). It is important that children express faith in the efficacy of prayer. Those able to articulate their beliefs affirm that "God is all-powerful, holy, good, and loves humanity, especially good people" (Walesa, 2005, p. 199). Interviews with the parents of the surveyed children revealed that the most common forms of prayer were those recited from memory, such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Angelus. Parents noted that children often felt bored and needed encouragement to pray

In contrast, Cavalletti offers a markedly different perspective on young children's prayer. Observing children, she noted that "children have an extraordinary capacity for prayer in terms of duration, spontaneity, and the sublimity of expression. Their prayers are filled with praise and thanksgiving, and express both the closeness and transcendence of God" (1979, p. 52). She attributed this to the "metaphysical" capacities of the child, who "feels perfectly at home in the transcendent world, and with contentment and serenity, rejoices in communion with God" (1972, p. 52).

The child's inherent tendency toward transcendence was also discussed by Walesa who noted that "through participation in the life of adults, particularly their religious life, the child gradually becomes capable of transcending the phenomenal sphere and mentally transforming it into a vehicle for religious meanings" (2005, p. 184). He argues that this capacity for transcendence "coincides with the functioning of self-directed activity and is especially evident in children whose religiously committed parents provide only minimal guidance" (2005, p. 184). These observations are vital for understanding how to support young children's religious development and may explain differences in the preferred and observed forms of children's prayer.

In the CGS, the adequate preparation of the adult is essential, along with the recognition that a child's religious life is intrinsically different from that of an adult. It should not be judged by the standards of adult religiosity (Cavalletti, 1979, p. 55). In CGS, "non-intrusive assistance" takes the form of observing the child's behavior and providing support that considers their developmental and religious needs. This introduction

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to religious reality involves transmitting truths and values through the adult's life and words. Initially, this takes the form of proclaiming and evangelizing, through which the child comes to know God, who reveals His love through Christ.

This proclamation bears the characteristics of a kerygma, grounded in selected biblical texts that describe events where God reveals His presence. The first and most significant moment of prayer is the child's contact with the Word of God, listening to the message together, which serves as an invitation to respond—a conversation with the One who speaks. Prayer, therefore, must be rooted in the kerygma. In this way, the child will not merely associate prayer with a routine obligation imposed by parents, where morning and evening prayers are recited out of habit, often as memorized phrases lacking meaningful context or understanding.

In the catechetical practice at the CGS, prayer follows the reading of biblical texts. Through a brief narrative in their own words, the catechist directs the children's attention to the central theological themes, prompting their reflection with questions such as, "What do you think this means?" or "What is Jesus trying to tell us?" This invites children to contemplate on the message, which they can continue during their independent work, drawing, or personal prayer.

The prayer formulas suggested for memorization, often drawn from the Psalms, are carefully selected to align with the kerygma of the Word of God proclaimed during catechesis. Before being encouraged to offer prayers of petition, children are allowed to express the joy of being with God and experiencing His love. At this early age, children often do not experience a sense of lack, so their prayers of petition usually arise from imitating adults. Introducing prayers of petition too early can reinforce magical thinking and contribute to a distorted image of God as a wizard or magician. Additionally, prayer should not be used as a disciplinary tool, which is a common practice among adults struggling with a child's behavior.

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Conclusions

Walesa's research is consistent with other studies suggesting that children generally hold anthropomorphic conceptions of God and that their ability to grasp more abstract notions of God depends on their cognitive development, particularly on moving beyond the stage of concrete thinking. Although research by Walesa and religious education at CGS confirm a progressive development of individual religiosity, where the understanding of truths about the nature of God becomes more abstract, symbolic, internalized, and individualized, rather than concrete, literal, absolutist, and externally adopted as cognitive development progresses—they also challenge the common perception that children's religious thinking is purely irrational. Instead, the study suggests that the magical thinking children display in matters of faith is not merely a cognitive limitation but a potent heuristic tool for environmental learning and creativity.

This model of religiosity also acknowledges that feelings "are not inherently religious but become so through their reference to God" (Tatala, 2000, p. 47). These feelings are shaped by religious consciousness and the attribution of meanings and significance to lived experiences, which, in the CGS program, are supported by the teaching content and the use of symbols and parables. Other significant components of religiosity include religious decision-making, community bonds among believers, religious practices, morality, experiences, and forms of creed. Decision-making in a religious context involves evaluating situations, acquiring necessary knowledge, and making choices within the intellectual, emotional, and volitional realms. This process entails not only the individual's relationship with God but also concerns their interaction with the world in light of transcendent reality. Thus, religious decision-making is tied to religious morality, which governs relationships with people, objects, and phenomena by distinguishing between criteria of good and evil that provide the basis for making choices and motivate actions. The psycho-social dimension of religiosity is characterized by a sense of connection to a community of believers, which is initially fostered within the family

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and further developed through participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, parish activities, and religious education, such as religion classes and retreats. This communal bond creates the opportunity for building new religious experiences, facilitates the development of religious awareness and attitudes, the expression of religious feelings, and active participation in religious practices.

Research on the moral development of preschoolers indicates that they understand what it means to experience pain and suffering and recognize actions that cause these as wrong. When explicitly asked to explain why hitting others or taking their possessions is wrong, children often cite the harm and suffering that would be inflicted as the main reasons (Davidson et al., 1983). However, translating these moral intuitions into consistent behavior is complex (Smith et al., 2013). In general, preschoolers' moral reasoning is not a strong predictor of whether they will actually behave in a moral or prosocial manner (Tan et al., 2021). This research suggests that adult authority plays a key role in encouraging children to act in accordance with their moral reasoning. While children may arrive at certain moral conclusions with some adult guidance, they rarely treat these conclusions as binding moral imperatives (Harris, 2023).

Religion does not create morality for children or adults; rather, moral intuitions exist independently of religion, with many moral values being cross-cultural and universal, regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof. However, religion influences morality in various ways. First, it reinforces universal moral intuitions related to care and justice, directing them toward specific, though not all, ends. Second, religion ties these intuitions to values that are not universally shared, such as social order, self-control, and purity, thereby creating a more restrictive moral framework. Third, religion can promote moral absolutism and strictness by grounding these intuitions in deontological norms of behavior. Finally, religiosity may enhance conformity to religious norms and authorities, which can sometimes undermine moral autonomy and lead to prioritizing religious beliefs over moral ones (Saroglou, 2021).

In the religious education and prosocial development of children, it is necessary to consider the interaction between (a) the child's individual

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characteristics, including age, psychological traits, religious socialization, and prior experiences with physical and psychological realities; (b) the qualities of the adults introducing the child to the faith, particularly the nature and status of their relationship with the child; and (c) the content and quality of the religious knowledge being taught. These factors, which are psychologically significant for the development of mature religiosity, are taken into account— as demonstrated in our comparative analysis—by the CGS model of religious and prosocial education.

Walesa's research findings on the development of religiosity in children, despite civilizational changes and the increasing secularization of society, highlight aspects that should be taken into account in the context of family upbringing. Since they concern development that proceeds through specific stages, they can be considered immutable. CGS, on the other hand, is a program that takes into account the religious needs of young children in all the areas studied by Walesa. Although there is a lack of scientific research on the effects of religious education according to CGS, it should be emphasized that there are numerous notes from catechists observing children's behavior at CGS, as well as statements and drawings which indicate that the content and method of signs/parables used by Cavalletti support religious development, including moral development.

CGS offers many innovative solutions to support the holistic religious development of a child, including moral development, but requires appropriate preparation of adults (parents, catechists) and the environment. It requires further analysis and research.

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