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RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY: RESOURCES FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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A mia madre, per il suo coraggio
A mio padre, per la sua voglia di ricominciare
A mia sorella, per la sua fiducia nella vita
Ai miei amici, per il loro affetto

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Introduction

The aim of the present dissertation[1] is to investigate the influences of religiosity and spirituality on Italian youth development. The starting point of this work is the assumption that young people' adherence to rituals and practice of a religious congregation, as well as a broader, personal feeling of transcendence, can meaningfully contribute to their successful growth. Such a way of reasoning is in line with the Positive Youth Development (PYD) theoretical framework, an approach in science and practice about young people positing that religiosity and spirituality provide youngsters with a set of beliefs, values, moral norms, codes, worldviews, experiences, communities, and mentors helping them become competent, confident, connected, caring youth, and able to contribute to self as well as to commit to sustain greater society (Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling, 2006).

While in other parts of the world, especially in the USA, research on linkages between youth development and religiosity and spirituality is abundant and well-established, in Italy there is a delay in addressing these topics. Yet, the country is an important context to study these issues because of its unique religious landscape. In fact, as pointed out by Italian sociologists, on one hand, Catholicism is still the predominant religion in the nation, despite the increase of new cultures and religious traditions in the territory; on the other, new and flexible approaches to the mainstream religion are emerging, especially among younger populations (Garelli, 2016). In particular, a personal research for the sacred in one's life (i.e., spirituality) has started to permeate the lives of Italian youth in the last decades. However, the concept of spirituality has been declined in several ways, such as a private adhesion to the principles of Catholicism away from

[1] This doctoral dissertation was internationally mentored by Dr. Radosveta Dimitrova, Stockholm University, Sweden.

the institutionalized Church or as a personal journey toward transcendent entities or as "feeling good" about themselves and the others (Garelli, 2016). This dichotomy seems to be in sharp contrast with ages of history during which in the domain of Catholicism the constructs of religiosity and spirituality were inseparable.

On the basis of these important changes in the traditional religious practices, questions about the relative roles of religiosity and spirituality in affecting trajectories of Italian youth's growth should be addressed, also in the light of previous theoretical and empirical attempts of academics in understanding how the two phenomena can jointly and uniquely operate to promote *thriving*, that is one of the core feature of PYD perspective (Dowling et al., 2004). Rather than indicating the absence of criticalities and problems that may occur during development, this concept stresses the urgency to nurture within youth attributes propelling them to have a healthy life-style and to contribute to the progress of communities and societies they live in (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010). Religious and spiritual dimensions of young people have been shown to be significant promoters of positive development both at individual and social levels (King & Roeser, 2009).

Overall considered, the present dissertation offers interesting insights on the role of these two phenomena in supporting Italian youth's positive development. The dissertation is divided in two parts. The first one, *"Religiosity and Spirituality within the Field of Psychological and Developmental Sciences"*, is made of two chapters. Chapter 1 introduces religiosity and spirituality as psychological constructs and provides empirical findings of pieces of research, which investigated their impact on believers' mental health and behaviors. This overview highlights that the mainstream psychology intended religiosity in terms of the adherence to rituals and practice of an organized religious institution, whereas spirituality as a personal search for transcendence, ultimate truths, for innerness, and interconnectedness with something greater (humanity, universe,

nature, High Power). Also, it points out that religion *per se* is neither good nor bad for individuals' well-being and behaviors; in fact, its effects on outcomes are strongly related to people' religious styles and orientations. Chapter 2, instead, provides a historical *excursus* of past and contemporary contributions explaining how's and why's religious and spiritual dimensions apply to changes human beings undergo during their grow (Nelson, 2009), especially in the ages of transition from adolescence to adulthood. In addition, the PYD theoretical framework in general and its standpoint on religiosity and spirituality is introduced. Finally, a more detailed insight on the relations between religious and spiritual development and thriving is presented.

The second part, *"Religiosity, Spirituality, and Positive Development Among Italian Adolescents and Emerging Adults"*, reports two research studies performed among Southern Italy high school and college students. Study 1 aims at testing a model whereby spirituality affects adolescents' ethnocultural empathy through religious identity formation processes (commitment and exploration). Ethnocultural empathy is a culturally oriented type of empathy consisting of the ability of taking the perspective of members belonging to other ethnic groups (Wang et al., 2003). In other words, it examines the combined and unique role of spirituality and religious identity formation in promoting youth's positive attitudes towards culturally-different people. One of the unique contributions of this study is to be the first to test a model in which one specific facet of religiosity, that is religious identity in terms of its formation processes, mediates between spirituality and markers of positive development, such as view of diversity. Indeed, the starting point of this work is that spirituality may influence teens' intercultural attitudes over and beyond any combined intervention of religiosity (operationalized as religious identity formation), given that it yields a more universal view toward humanity predisposing individuals to be more accepting of strangers.

Study 2 is a cross-sectional developmental one and aims at examining the relative and joint role of religious commitment and optimism on middle and late adolescents and emerging adults' subjective well-being, conceived in terms of satisfaction with life. The novelty of this study is to investigate patterns of associations between religious commitment, optimism, and satisfaction with life in the light of the different ways adolescents and emerging adults experience religion in ages of transition. These different ways in approaching own faith are intended to be linked to the several developmental changes youth undergo during their growth. The starting point of this study is that, despite the increase of secularization and the emerging of new forms of individualized religiosity and spirituality, Catholic religion is still a salient social and cultural dimension providing Italian young believers with security and certainty (Garelli, 2013) in a country marked by a growing political, societal, and economic instability.

In the final section general conclusions integrate and discuss the two research studies; also, they suggest new directions for future works and practical interventions. Summing up, the present dissertation adheres to the field of research of the psychology of religion and spirituality from a developmental perspective and seeks to shed light on the controversial question whether religiosity and spirituality are beneficial for youth's positive development both at individual and social levels. In general terms, the dissertation unfolds on the long tradition of research of the psychology interested in elucidating how believing, whether in god or in any other form of transcendent reality, may affect individuals' psychological processes and behaviors.

THEORY

Religiosity and Spirituality within the Field of Psychological and Developmental Sciences

Chapter 1

Psychology, Religiosity, and Spirituality

Introduction

Psychology has always been interested in examining the effects of religiosity and spirituality on people's mental health, psychological well-being, and behaviors right since the discipline was founded. As a consequence, scholars so far have collected a number of theories and of empirical works explaining how and why these two phenomena shape attitudes of individuals and affect their psychological processes. Two academics' challenging tasks in approaching such topics were finding a clear definition of spirituality and religiosity, as well as understanding what kind of relation there exists between the two. In order to introduce these constructs, in this chapter a review of prior works about their nature and about their influences on believers' lives is provided, by also taking into account classical and contemporary contributions within psychological sciences.

1.1. The history of the Psychology of Religion

Between the XIX and XX century, the psychological nature of religion became a popular topic among Western academics, who sought to answer questions about the role of this phenomenon on individuals' mental health and lives (Pieper, 2004). For instance, the American physician and psychologist William James in his pioneering *"The Varieties of Religious Experience"* (1961) - a cycle of lectures held at the University of Edinburgh - pointed out the functional aspects of religion in satisfying many human beings' needs, and made a distinction between private and public religion. The former refers to the individual relationship with the sacred and the transcendent, whereas the latter to the adherence to rites and devotions of a specific, institutionalized congregation. In the meanwhile, by using a psychoanalytic perspective, in Europe Sigmund Freud (1961) posited the ideas that religion is a universal obsessional neurosis and that God is an illusion fulfilling individuals' wishes of gaining protection from suffering and fears. As such, religion cannot contribute to the development of human intellectual capacities; this task, in Freud's view, was proper of science. One of the main critique Freud's theory met is that it was too abstract and distant from individuals' concrete religious experiences (Nelson, 2009). While Freud did not make any effort to open to religion because of his devotion to naturalism and rationalism, Carl Gustav Jung (1960), was more concerned with spiritual dimensions of individuals. Briefly, he claimed that religion is just a psychological reality, something merely subjective, which is beneficial for human beings. In fact, it helps individuals with the process of personal transformation, by moving them towards the wholeness (the unity between unconscious with the conscious materials of psyche). However, his theories as well were criticized mainly because they were said to be based on metaphysical preconceptions (for a comprehensive review, Fizzotti, 2006; Nelson, 2009).

Despite these and other theoretical assumptions on the connections between religion and human psychological processes and development (see chapter 2), on Western countries there was a lack of valid empirical support about the influences of religion in individuals' lives. As a consequence, interest on religious topics declined, and psychology of religion was said to have a "pseudo-scientific dignity" (Wulff, 1998, p.182). In particular, by the second and third decades of twentieth century, the rise of behaviorism marked the fall of the psychology of religion, mainly because its uncritical methods were conflicting with positivistic science and were considered too close to the field of research of theology and of philosophy (Wulff, 1998). A turning point in the story of the psychology of religion were the years after the Second World War, when religion was considered a potent social force conditioning human behaviors, creating awe and terror, and unifying and dividing groups. At that time, for instance, Theodor Adorno (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford 1950) found a correlation between religious fundamentalism and anti-Semitism; similarly, with Gordon Allport (1966; Allport & Ross, 1967) religion was associated to violence and racism. Right after these pioneer works on the religious nature of prejudice, a number of empirical works, mainly conducted in the USA, investigated how religion might make and unmake negative attitudes towards culturally-different people (for review, Polinska, 2009).

In the meantime, in the USA a clear signal that purposes and interests of research in the domain of psychology of religion were evolving, was that the American Catholic Psychological Association, established in 1946, became more and more laical so that it was reorganized into the independent organization of *Psychologists Interested in Religious Issues* in 1970. This renewed community of scholars was admitted to the American Psychological Association in 1976 as the *Division 36* and was, finally, named *Psychology of Religion* in 1993 (see, Reuder, 1999). Additionally, between the '80s and '90s of the past century several books on psychology and religion were published.

However, the most prominent contributions of psychology of religion were collected in specialized international journals flourishing in those years, such as *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* established in 1990 and published in the United States or *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* established in 1998 and published in the United Kingdom (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Many issues have been deepened by scholars in the last decades, such as the associations between religion and human development, psychological well-being, mental and physical health, and prosocial attitudes (for review, Preston, Ritter, & Hernandez, 2010; Hill & Pargament, 2003; King & Roeser, 2009; Barry, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010).

1.1.1. The Psychology of Religion in Italy

Even if Italy has always been the center of one of the most spread religion of the world, i.e., Catholicism, in the country there has always been a few of academics interested in religious domains, mainly because not only ignored early secular scholars religion and considered it as a superstition, but also because the Roman Catholic Church limited the role of psychology in understanding religion, since it viewed the discipline as atheistic in nature (Wulff, 1998). Except for a few scholars, such as Agostino Gemelli, in the first half of the ninetieth century in Italy there was a delay in the investigation of religion from a scientific point of view. The ’60s were the years of an emerging interest about the connection between religion and psychology, during which insightful contributions on vocation, asceticism, and influences of religion on personality were published. At that time, one of the most important researchers in the field of psychology of religion in Italy was Giancarlo Milanesi, who significantly contributed to the establishment and development of the discipline both from a theoretical and empirical standpoint (for review, Aletti, 2001; Aletti, 2010). The constant headways in the study of religion led scholars to establish in 1987 the Italian Division of Psychology of Religion,

which was named *Psicologia e Religione (Psychology and Religion)* and was part of the Società Italiana di Psicologia (*Italian Society of Psychology*). Some academics were skeptical about such a division, mainly because they thought it to be still too denominational, i.e., too Catholic oriented; for this reason, they called for a secular epistemology. A meaningful change occurred when the name of the division was turned into *Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione (Italian Society of the Psychology of Religion)* in 1995 and, in the same year, the community of studious became an independent cultural association. Such reorganization resulted in a new way of approaching research on religion; in particular, it was clearly understood that the main goal of psychologists interested in religious issues is not to prove the existence of God, but to elucidate how believing may influence individuals' psychological functioning (Aletti, 2010). However, in the meanwhile Italian and Western academics had to face another challenge, that is to say psychologically defining the construct of spirituality as distinct from religiosity, in the light of the emergent schism and cultural differentiation between the two (Hill et al., 2000).

1.2. Defining Religiosity and Spirituality

Starting from the '50s of the past century, in Western countries the traditional role of dominant Christian churches has been put to the test by new, individualized forms of religious expressions, by secularism, and by religious pluralism (Garelli, 2013; Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, & Rye, 1997; Hill et al., 2000). In this changing context people searched for a personal relationship with the transcendent and for meaning in their lives by picking up "from several religious and spiritual offerings" (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999, p. 892). As these occurrences developed, a great deal of academic debate sought to define what religion was in comparison to such new forms of spirituality, and if they were separate or had something in common. Historically

speaking, till the first half of the nineteenth century religion and spirituality were intended as synonymic, and religion was investigated from two perspectives: the substantive one, taking into account emotions, beliefs, and practices related to the divine, and the functional one, focusing on how believing helps people cope with the problems of existence, such as death or illness (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1999).

However, with the coming of new expressions of spirituality falling outside the long-established religious institutions, religiosity and spirituality have been subjected to diverse interpretations. Specifically, scholars argued that religiosity entails the adherence to rituals, beliefs, and practices of an institutionalized faith and doctrine, whereas spirituality refers to a personal search for a meaning and for the sacred in own life (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Over the years this distinction resulted on a strict demarcation between religion as "bad" because of its institutional components, and spirituality as "good" because of its power to connect people with themselves and with something greater than themselves, such as the entire humanity or the transcendent (Hill et al., 2000). However, some academics warned that this kind of polarization does not take into consideration that both religiosity and spirituality have both social and individual elements in common (for review, Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013). Indeed, they ignore that spirituality is always culturally oriented and that organized religions seek to answer individuals' existential questions as spirituality does. Secondly, people often retain themselves both as spiritual and religious (Zinnbauer et al., 1997), and they experience spiritual dimensions in given religious congregations, which are still considered as places of focused spiritual training (King, 2008). Furthermore, both religiosity and spirituality can be positive and negative, helpful and deleterious for human beings, depending on the way individuals approach sacred matters (Zinnbauer et al., 1999; King & Roeser, 2009). For these reasons, some scholars overtook such way of

reasoning and looked for a common denominator of religiosity and spirituality. For instance, according to Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) religiosity and spirituality are united by the search of what is sacred in life, that is what is isolated from ordinary and is deserving of reverence. Briefly, in their views it is possible to differentiate the two constructs, while avoiding polarization. In fact, what distinguishes these phenomena, on one hand, is "the place of the sacred in the means and ends of the searching process" (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, p. 36) and, on the other, the context where religiosity and spirituality are experienced (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). In details, according to Pargament (1997) religion is "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred", whereas spirituality is the "search for the sacred" (*ibidem*, p. 6). Specifically, while the ultimate destination of spiritual individuals' search is the sacred, religious people may have other adjunctive goals and needs to satisfy through their beliefs and adhesion to a community, such as the material and the immaterial ones, the sacred and the secular ones (e. g., gaining social status and self-justification). As a consequence, religiousness is the broader construct entailing spirituality, which is considered as a "distinctive dimension of human functioning […] and the core function of religion" (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, p. 37). Such a perspective was and still is the predominant one among scholars of psychology of religion, who investigated the implications of the different ways (conformist and authentic) of experiencing religious beliefs and practices on people's social functioning, psychological well-being, and mental health. Contrary, in Zinnbauer's view spirituality is "a personal or group search for the sacred", whereas religiousness is "a personal or group search for the sacred that unfolds within a traditional sacred context" (*ibidem*, p. 35). According to this perspective, spirituality and religiosity always occur within a context, that is culture, a community, a tradition. However, spiritual individuals are often embedded in emergent, non-conventional and non-traditional contexts. Since spirituality entails a number of paths allowing people to put themselves in

contact with the sacred, and one of these maybe religious practices, Zinnbauer suggested that spirituality is the broader construct. Summing up both perspectives, it is possible to conclude that on one hand religion is a global concept and spirituality is one of its features together with the rituals, the practices, and the community; on the other, that spirituality is a distinctive dimension of all human beings subsuming a wide range of paths; among them there is religion, whose main peculiarity is the adherence to a specific social group/organization, which is not necessary to the spiritual search *per se* (Saroglou, 2003).

Beyond any theorizing about spirituality and religiosity and on their relationship, today there is consensus among scholars that the two phenomena are multidimensional. Religiosity, for instance, involves a number of indicators such as religious affiliation, frequency of public and private prayer, religious support, religious coping, religious commitment, salience of religious beliefs, church attendance. Spirituality, instead, refers to the emotional perception of the transcendent in daily life experiences, the interaction with and the immersion in it through meditation, and to the feeling of being part of something greater than oneself, which can be the universe, a high power, the nature, and the whole of humanity (Fetzer Institute, 1999; Worthington, Hook, Davis, & McDaniel, 2011). In light of these assumptions, in the last decades, from an empirical point of view, scholars called for research making a clearer distinction of the unique and relative contribution of religiosity and spirituality on individuals' outcomes such as physical and mental health, social attitudes and behaviors, and psychological well-being (Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, & Rosenthal, 2005; Saslow et al., 2013). At this point, it seems necessary to shift from theory to practice in order to understand what concretely religiosity and spirituality do in daily lives of individuals. Thus, a review of prior empirical studies will be provided.

1.3. Religiosity, Spirituality, and Psychological Well-Being

Pioneers of the psychology of religion anticipated that religious and spiritual experiences of individuals may have a role in preventing some forms of mental and physical illness, and bring people feelings of joy and happiness, together with meaning and stability in life (Fiz Pérez & Laudadio, 2010; Hackney & Sanders, 2003). However, in the last twenty years research pointed out that the salubrious effects of religion on mental health and psychological well-being vary depending on why, how, where, when one believes and who believes (Pargament, 2008). A clear explanation of this arises when considering the two classical religious orientations of individuals, which were firstly proposed by Gordon Allport (1966). Specifically, he distinguished between *extrinsically* religious people, who view religion as a means to other ends (e. g., social identity and self-justification), and *intrinsically* religious individuals, who internalize their religion and consider it a salient end in and of itself (Allport & Ross, 1967). According to such different ways in approaching religion, scholars found that individuals with a more internalized religious drive showed higher levels of mental health and self-esteem than those whose adherence to a religion was motivated by social pressure or sense of guilt (e. g., Ryan, Rigby, & King, 1993). Furthermore, what makes the difference in the link religion-well-being is the way people relate to God, especially in times of struggle. In particular, if individuals perceive God as a god of mercy and of love, they have the feeling that they will obtain support, consolation, forgiveness, and purpose in life. As a consequence, they will have higher levels of mental health. On the contrary, if they hold an image of God as punitive, they will likely to show frustration, guilt, and psychological distress (e. g., Flannelly, Galek, Ellison, & Koenig, 2010; Koohsar & Bonab, 2011; Bradshaw, Ellison, & Marcum, 2010). Also, religiosity may foster depression when spiritual conflicts - such as doubts about God's existence - and negative relationships with religious groups occur (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000; Pearce, Little, & Perez,

2003; Ellison & Lee, 2009). Finally, the benefits of religion on mental health have been found to be related to one's culture and ethnicity. For instance, Black American older persons display a greater sense of religious meaning than the White counterpart, which is associated with increases in life-satisfaction, optimism and self-esteem (Krause, 2003). This is likely due to the fact that religion and spirituality played an important role in helping Black people cope with various life stressors, such as racism and discrimination experienced in host societies (Reed & Neville, 2014). Additionally, some discrepancies between males and females have been found, that is females are more religious devoted than man (Francis & Penny, 2013), since they have an inclination for living the emotional features of religion, for creating a positive image of God in their lives, and for spending their time in church promoted activities (Miller & Stark, 2002; Ozorak, 1996; Donahue, 1985). Also, scholars found that, because of the proximity of women to religious groups and God, women are less likely to develop depression than man (e. g., Ellison, Finch, Ryan, & Salinas, 2009).

In terms of healthy-life styles, abundant research demonstrated that the endorsement of a religion acts as a buffer against risk behaviors, such as alcohol and substance use, and stimulates individuals to take care of their bodies, by regularly visiting doctors. Moreover, adhering to a community or religious groups prevent antisocial conducts, such as delinquency and violence. This is in mainly due to the fact that religiosity enhances self-regulation and self-control (for review, McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). In addition, interesting findings showed positive associations between common types of religious behaviors, like prayer and church attendance, and well-being. For instance, Krause and Hayward (2013) found that older people, who strongly believe that their prayers will be answered, are more satisfied with their lives. Finally, it must be pointed out that less research has targeted the role of spirituality, rather than religiosity, on psychological well-being. However, there is evidence that

personal spirituality helps individuals cope with mental and physical illness, alcohol and drug addiction (Piedmont, 2004, 2001), and to have a positive general evaluation of their lives (Sawatzky, Ratner, & Chiu, 2005).

Although the results of piece of research previously reported are illuminating about associations between religiosity, spirituality, and psychological well-being of individuals, they should be interpreted in light of some limitations. For instance, it has been pointed out that there is an overlapping between scales of religious and spiritual well-being and other well-being conventional scales (Koenig, 2008). Also, the non-distinction between religiosity and spirituality in such studies may overestimate the positive effects of religiosity at detriment of the ones spirituality may provide individuals with (Saroglou, 2012). Finally, the overabundance of measurements used in prior works to asses religiosity and spirituality discredits efforts to make any comparison among findings, mainly because the scales lack of a univocal conceptualization of the two constructs (Whitehouse & Hollings, 2008). In this sense, against the proliferation of measures of religiosity and spirituality scholars called for a deeper theoretical understanding of the two phenomena, and suggested some criteria to follow before new scales are established, such as modifying the current ones and adapting them to new conceptual advances and to the specific objectives of each research projects (for review, Hill & Maltby, 2009).

1.4. Religiosity, Spirituality, and Prosocial Attitudes

A number of studies established that religiosity can have both positive and negative effects on individuals' social attitudes and prosocial behaviors (Saroglou, 2006). In other words, although religions of the world teach universal love, a great deal of theory and research reveals that the relation between one's religiosity and one's helping and moral behaviors is controversial and not straightforward (Batson, Eidelman, Higley,

& Russel, 2001). For instance, in a recent review Preston and colleagues (2010) highlighted that believers' moral actions are strongly directed by the ways they interpret religious texts, and by the reasons why they decided to adhere to a religious congregation. In particular, scholars showed that, even if it is true that church attendance is linked to more volunteerism (Wilson & Janoski, 1995), it is likely that certain styles of religiosity best predict prosocial behaviors, also depending on the context and target of help. In fact, extrinsically religious people are less prone to be empathetic with others or to help them; in addition, they are more prejudiced than intrinsically religious individuals who, instead, display more compassionate attitudes. Yet, the motivation of intrinsically religious people to prosocially behave seems to be anchored to egoistic concerns rather than to altruism, that is they are more interested in appearing as good persons rather than really caring of others' needs (Batson, Anderson, & Collins, 2005). Religious fundamentalists, instead, whose mindset is mainly characterized by dogmatism, authoritarianism, conventionalism, and submission, have been shown to report high levels of prejudice and intolerance towards a variety of social groups, but to have the tendency to be prosocial towards members of their in-group. This religious limited prosociality is likely to be motivated by the fact that individuals derive their identities from the group they belong to; as a consequence, betraying it would impair their own selves-images and reputation (Blogowska & Saroglou, 2013). By contrast, there is another way of being religious, which has been shown to be negatively associated to prejudice and to be positively linked to a feeling of universal compassion (Batson, Denton, & Vollmecke, 2008). This is the so called *quest orientation*. People in quest intend religion "an endless process of probing generated by tensions, contradictions, and tragedies in their own lives and society" (Batson, 1976, p. 32).

Although findings so far reported are insightful about religiosity-prosociality association, as pointed out by scholars, one of their most recurrent limitation is that they

adopt explicit and self-report measures, which might lead to social desirability bias. Put differently, these measures do not allow to investigate behavior *per se*, but are prejudiced by the direct control of religious individuals, who are so anxious about their positive images that they want to appear prosocial rather than to really being helpful and generous (Pichon, Boccato, & Saroglou, 2007). Relatedly, to overcome the limits of paper-and-pencil measures, in the last decades researchers used priming techniques, which may reveal the non-conscious influences of stereotypes, social norms, and values on one's responses and behaviors (for review, Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). For instance, in an experimental design aiming at investigating linkages between religiosity and cooperative behaviors among unrelated strangers, Shariff and Norenzayan (2007) reported that God concepts (e. g., "divine", "spirit", and "God"), implicitly activated, meaningfully contributed to increase generosity of participants, who allocated more money to anonymous people in the context of the dictator game. As argued by scholars, one possible explanation of this positive association is that individuals who perceive God as a supernatural force watching them, are likely to more prosocially behave.

However, the emerging dimension of modern spirituality has broadened the debate on religious prosociality, by highlighting that spiritual individuals are likely to go beyond any form of in-group Vs out-group favoritism (Saroglou, 2006). Indeed, there is evidence that they extend their prosocial concerns from one's narrow networks to all of humanity. For instance, Einolf (2013) reported that daily spiritual experiences, i.e., the private relationship with and awareness of divine or transcendent, predicted a wide range of prosocial and helping behaviors not solely towards friends or family, but also towards distant others. These findings suggested that non conventional religious people are spiritually motivated to extend the boundaries of their moral communities. In other words, spiritual people value more universalism rather than benevolence (Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005), with the former referring to "the

understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people", and the latter referring to the "preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact" (Ros, Schwartz, & Surkiss, 1999, p. 52).

Nonetheless, spirituality may have a dark side. In this sense, it must be noticed that individual spirituality, taken to the extreme, may promote a sense of narcissism and selfishness which may lead persons to not actively contribute to societies. Also, a certain kind of spirituality, the one neglecting the good that can be gained from a community, deprives individuals of a useful web of support (mentors, gurus, peers), which is typical of an organized congregation, and which is optimal for the enhancement of one's personal and social growth (King & Roeser, 2009).

1.5. Explanatory Mechanisms

To conclude this wide-ranging overview, it is useful to shortly explicate how religiosity and spirituality exert their beneficial impact on individual's psychological well-being, mental health, and prosocial attitudes. With regards to well-being, researchers so far focused on influences religiosity and spirituality have on a variety of psychosocial variables, such as healthy beliefs, social ties, self-esteem, meaning and purpose in life, hope, optimism, or general positive responses to stress which are known to foster, in turn, positive psychological outcomes (Koenig, 2001; Ellison & Levin, 1998). However, three broad categories of explanations about mechanisms via which religiosity and spirituality affect individual well-being and mental health can be identified. The first one refers to the cognitive resources the two phenomena provide humans beings with, such as sense of coherence and meaning in life, which help individuals find their place in the world and frame life experiences, especially the negative ones, such as loss and illness. The second one refers to the social resources, such as the spiritual support individual may obtain from people of their religious group in

times of doubts and troubles (for review, Hayward & Krause, 2014). The third one refers to a more recent field of inquiry connecting religion and spirituality with emotions. Such a set of explanations reveal that participating to rituals or meditation fosters self-transcendent positive emotions - for example gratitude and peace - within people which, in turn, help them feel good about themselves (Van Cappellen, Toth-Gauthier, Saroglou, & Fredrickson, 2016a).

With regards to prosocial attitudes, there is less evidence about possible psychological mechanisms underlying the relations between religiosity and prosociality. However, a series of processes may be identified. First, religiosity and spirituality may motivate compassion and concerns for others through internalization of prosocial values and religious teachings, and through empathy; also, through modeling exemplars spiritual figures who spent their lives for others, such as saints and heroes. Additionally, religiosity and spirituality may foster altruism through moral principles or through self-enhancement and self-control (for review, Saroglou, 2013). Finally, some recent works highlighted the role of religiosity and spirituality in activating positive emotions - such as awe and love - which, in turn, lead religious individuals to feel connected to others and to behave in a charitable and generous manner (e. g., Van Cappellen, Saroglou, & Toth-Gauthier, 2016).

Conclusions

The main goal of this chapter was to introduce religiosity and spirituality as psychological constructs and to highlight some key points of the academic debate about their interrelations, and about their effects on individuals' well-being and behaviors. Firstly, the analysis of the literature revealed that the mainstream psychology retains that religiosity and spirituality are multidimensional constructs, and that religiosity can be intended as the adherence to practices and beliefs of a institutionalized doctrine, whereas

spirituality as a personal search for transcendence, ultimate truths, for innerness, and for interconnectedness with something greater (humanity, universe, nature). Secondly, the review stressed that it is difficult to establish whether religiosity and spirituality are related or distinct phenomena; as a consequence, it remains unclear what their relative positive or negative role on individuals' lives is. As to this, some academics argued that the positive effects of religiosity on believers' psychological functioning have been overestimated, and that religiosity benefits "undeservedly from being combined with spirituality" (Saroglou, 2012, p. 394). Thirdly, theoretical and empirical works so far presented pointed out that, when considering the effects of religion on believers' existences, it must be noticed that religion *per se* is neither good nor bad. Indeed, research demonstrated that the role of religion on individuals' outcomes is dependent of the way people approach religious teachings and beliefs. For instance, individuals who believe in an uncritical and conformist manner may exhibit greater prejudice and lower levels of psychological well-being than those who actively reflect on their beliefs and interiorize them.

Finally, mechanisms by which religiosity and spirituality affect individuals' markers of well-being and prosocial attitudes were taken into account. In particular, it seems that both religiosity and spirituality provide human beings with a set of cognitive, emotional, and social resources helping them cope with stressful events, and fostering moral and helping behaviors. A more comprehensive dissertation of the two phenomena will be provided in the next chapter, where religiosity and spirituality will be treated as important developmental assets, especially in the delicate phase of transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Chapter 2

The Positive Youth Development Perspective on Religiosity and Spirituality

Introduction

A unique contribution to the understanding of the role religiosity and spirituality play in individuals' lives has been offered by developmental psychologists. In fact, they sought to find explanations about how's and why's religious and spiritual dimensions apply to changes human beings undergo during their growth; conversely, they investigated whether such changes impact religious and spiritual development. In this sense, adolescence and emerging adulthood have been considered fruitful periods of the life cycle to explore religiosity and spirituality, as well as their effects on individuals' development. On the basis of these premises, this chapter will provide a wide-ranging overview of the literature documenting the connections of the two constructs with major trends of youth's optimal development in the light of the Positive Youth Development theoretical framework, a contemporary perspective in science and practice about young people positing that spirituality and religiosity are relevant resources for their thriving.

2.1. Introducing Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Adolescence and emerging adulthood are transitional times with the former bridging childhood and adult roles, marked by puberty and self-concept formation, and the latter connecting late adolescence and adulthood through a prolonged exploration and construction of one's identity. They have been defined as times of great opportunities and vulnerabilities, since they both are characterized by significant biological, cognitive, and social changes whose trajectories would condition future adults' lives (Arnett, 2014; Dahl, 2004; Barry et al., 2010).

With respect to adolescents (from 10/11 to 18 years of age), following pubertal development, they face alterations occurring in their bodies, such as maturation of genitals, and increase in weight and height. Relatedly to these pubescence-specific changes, adolescents experience emotional intensity and romantic and sexual interests. In terms of cognitions, they discover the ability of thinking in an abstract way and, consequently, they develop great engagements in ideologies. Finally, from a social point of view, they try to satisfy the need of being independent of parents, and intertwine new relations with peers as companions in the exploration of the world around them (for review, Dahl, 2004). However, the several challenges adolescents face both in relationships with others and within themselves may expose them to criticalities, decreased levels of satisfaction with life and well-being, as well as to unhealthy, dangerous behaviors (Fischhoff, Nightingale, & Iannotta, 2001; Casas, González, Figuer, & Malo, 2009; Good & Willoughby, 2008). Broadly speaking, adolescence has been intended as "the interval beginning with the physical changes of puberty" (Dahl, 2004, p. 13), but, as many scholars have highlighted, it does not end with the achievement of a mature identity and the assumption of adult roles (Arnett, 2000). In fact, nowadays these developmental tasks have been delayed and prolonged in the so called emerging adulthood (from 18 to 29 years of age).

Emerging adulthood can be defined as a "distinct period of the life course, characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) during which individuals are nor adolescents nor adults, but somewhere in between, living a time when everything is still possible in several life domains, such as work, love, and worldviews (Arnett, 2007). From a cultural point of view, it is interesting to note that emerging adulthood is typical of young people growing up in industrialized societies, the ones postponing important adult commitments and responsibilities, such as marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2000). If, on one hand, such a delay results in an exciting time for exploring various and unusual possibilities, on the other it may turn into a period of instability and identity crisis (Arnett, 2007). As such, during emerging adulthood there may be the prevalence of risky behaviors, such as substance use, sensation seeking, and unprotected sex (King, Nguyen, Kosterman, Bailey, & Hawkins, 2012). This is mainly due to the fact that not only are individuals in this stage of the life cycle out of parental control, but also to the fact that they want to live freely before assuming adult roles (Arnett, 2000). In terms of advances in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development, emerging adults go through important changes as well. For instance, from 18 to 25 years of age body maturation is completed and individuals look like and are perceived by others as adults; also, they display a more sophisticated and pragmatic way of reasoning, and live experiences in diverse domains leading them to progressively enter adulthood (Barry et al, 2010; Arnett, 2000).

2.2. Development of Youth's Religiosity and Spirituality: A Psychological Perspective

Starting from these considerations, past and contemporary psychologists wondered whether and how religious and spiritual maturation is related to youth's processes of growth, by proposing theories and models of faith development according to

the different conceptions of human beings' nature emerged at given historical times (King & Boyatzis, 2015). The first set of theorizations date back to genetic psychology, the one concerned with the evolution of individuals as well as of their mental abilities (Nelson, 2009). One of the pioneers of the psychology of religion, Stanley Hall, in his genetic perspective on human development posited that during adolescence religious conversions were normative, universal, and useful for young people to evolve and reach higher stages in the evolutionary scale. In fact, religion helped youth reduce their egocentrism, by nurturing within them moral values, and love for others (Arnett, 2006).

A more sophisticated model of interactions between religion and human beings' growth was proposed by the philosopher and psychologist James Mark Baldwin (2009). According to his comprehensive genetic epistemology elucidating biological and social elements of reasoning (Broughton, 1981), Baldwin posited that religious development is organized in a number of stages, ranging from a prelogical to an extra-logical one. Specifically, in early developmental phases of thinking (prelogical and logical) religion involves a sense of mystery and God is seen as a figure deserving reverence; as individuals cognitive competencies develop, religious sentiments and emotions struggle with the predominance of a more critical, logical, and intellectual thought. In higher developmental stages (hyper-logical and extra-logical), individuals move beyond an intellectual and emotional way of reasoning, which now are no longer separated, towards a practical and social oriented manner of thinking. This is also the time when an ethical self is formed, which may be influenced by the adherence to a set of shared ideals within a community (Baldwin, 2009; Nelson, 2009).

Both Hall and Baldwin's works constituted the background for cognitive-structuralist theories of development. The main goal of thinkers in this domain was to identify schemas of mental activity and the effects of such organized structures on individuals' acquirement of knowledge (Nelson, 2009). Also, they were interested in

investigating people's relationships with and their understanding of the transcendent (Cartwright, 2001). One of the most influential perspectives on epistemology was the Piaget's one, who viewed human mental processes of knowing as mathematical and, as such, they could have been studied with the methods of natural sciences (Piaget, 1971). In Piaget's theory the development of religious beliefs was connected with the different phases of maturation of cognition individuals undergo. In details, children display a concrete thinking, as a consequence, they attribute human properties and qualities to God, whereas adolescents show an abstract thinking allowing them to contemplate issues that are "embedded in existential and transcendental realms" (Markstrom, 1999, p. 205). Such a new ability helps them form a rational religion and abandon supernatural mysticism; also, it enables them to critically think about their beliefs, as well as to analyze, and negate them. Although Piaget did not specifically refer to adulthood, neo-Piagetians assumed that as individuals gradually enter into this stage of life, they develop a more dialectical thought and a reflective judgment permitting them to test the validity of what they have believed in. Particularly, they exhibit the abilities to ponder multiple logical systems of thoughts and to opt for the one they consider suitable for themselves (Cartwright, 2001; Sinnott, 1998).

In the early '60s of XX century questions about how's and why's religious and spiritual dimensions apply to changes human beings undergo during their growth were deepened by another point of view, that is the influence of religion on identity achievement. The prominent scholar who addressed such a topic was Erik Erikson in its psychosocial theory of development, which emphasized the relationships between the developing person and its cultural and social environment (Erikson, 1964, 1968). In particular, Erikson posited that development proceeds in eight stages, with each stage marked by a crisis. The resolution of such developmental crisis was fundamental to pass to the following phases (Erikson, 1968). Erikson attributed an important role to religion

in overtaking such turning points because (1) it provides individuals with answers to ultimate questions, (2) it enhances their self-worth and purpose in life by connecting them with a broader historical contexts, and (3) avoids feelings of alienation and isolation (Markstrom, 1999). In Erikson's theory religion is useful especially during adolescence, a time characterized by identity confusion during which youth look for ideologies and values that can guide their lives and give them a sense of hope and trust both in themselves and in the environment (Erikson, 1959).

A contemporary contribution on youth religious development is the theologian James Fowler's one, who sought to analyze the growth of individual faith in the light of their developmental underpinnings (Fowler, 1981). Particularly, he proposed a structural model of faith development that unfolds on Piaget and Erikson's works. Its model proceeds in 6 stages and "offers a framework for understanding the ontogeny of how people conceptualize God or a Higher Being" (King & Roeser, 2009, p. 445). As other cognitive and structuralist models, Fowler's one sees children's faith as conform to parents' one, whereas adolescence as fruitful time to develop a personally meaningful set of beliefs, which assists youth in their self-concept formation. In particular, because of their formal thinking, adolescents are able to mature abstract images of God and, gradually, to articulate a complex reflection on the content of their beliefs. However, if on one hand Fowler recognized that personal spiritual doubts and struggles may occur during adolescence, on the other he noticed that adolescents still cling to parents and authoritative figures' beliefs systems in order to find answers. An active, personal reflection on beliefs emerges during the twenties, when individuals question the assumptions of their faith and, in the attempt to find their own values systems, explore new, alternative worldviews (for review, Fowler & Dell, 2006).

Two last sets of theories investigating the interconnections between religious development and youth's growth are noteworthy: the Object Relations Theory (ORT),

and the attachment theory. ORT scholars interested in religious issues posit that God images serve as “transitional objects” individuals rely on in order to gain meaning, support, self-understanding, and purpose in life; modeled after early interactions with parents, such images may help youth reduce attachment insecurity as detachment from caregivers occurs (Rizzuto, 1979; Dickie et al., 1997). Of course, individuals’ images of God may change and be good or bad, depending on a number of factors, such as personal experiences and representation of deity persons are exposed to in the broader cultural context (Ulanov, 2001). Relatedly, the attachment theory claims that parent-child relationship conditions individuals’ images of God and their orientation to religion (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). For instance, adolescents with secure attachment to parents are likely to have better relationships with God; those with an insecure style of attachment are likely to whether compensate the lack of positive relations with parents by developing a belief in a loving, personal, caring God or to discard parents’ religion as a reaction to the difficulties they live in relationships with them (for a comprehensive review, King & Roeser, 2009; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Nelson, 2009).

Over all considered, each of these theoretical traditions so far reported have brought important insight into the linkages between religiosity and human development. However, several recurrent critics have been moved to them by scholars. For instance, some academics argued that these theories attempted to identify universal and invariant patterns of religious development, and that such efforts did not allow the transcendent to obtain a more serious scientific consideration within developmental sciences (Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2006). Others highlighted that such theories are individualistic in nature, reductionist, too cognitive oriented, and that they lack of adequate empirical support (Nelson, 2009). In particular, they ignored that individuals’ spiritual development is the product of transactions between persons and the various socio-cultural contexts they are embedded in (King & Roeser, 2009). In contrast with

these aforementioned theoretical assumptions, the contemporary Positive Youth Development represents one of the most intriguing perspective explaining how religiosity and spirituality may contribute to youth's successful growth.

2.3. Defining Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development (PYD) is a new approach to the scientific study of young people which emerged in the '90s of the 20th century. PYD stands in sharp contrast with psychological theories of early years of the same century, which considered adolescence just as a period of "storm and stress" (Lerner, 2005). It also refuses some myths on youth accumulated both in the psychological field and in the public arena, such as that they are slackers, suffering, unhappy, and passive individuals (Arnett 2007). Conversely, even though PYD does not neglect difficulties and challenges youth deal with, it does emphasize their ability to cope with stressful events, to hold a optimistic view of the future, and to meaningfully contribute to self and to the good of greater society (Larson, 2000).

PYD perspective has its roots in the general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) and in the developmental systems theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992), which moved away from identifying rigid and universal paths of human development. The main key assumptions of relational developmental systems PYD refers to are (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011; ; Warren, Lerner, & Phelps, 2012):

- ✓ development occurs through mutually influential relations between the biologically and psychologically developing individual and the multiple levels of his/her changing context; thus, the unit of analysis in the study of human development is the combination of actions of individuals on context and of multiple levels of context on individuals;

- ✓ these relations are bidirectional and may be graphically represented as *individual* ↔ *context*; this relation is termed *developmental regulation* and *adaptive developmental regulation* when mutual influences of person and context are beneficial for the growth of the two of them;
- ✓ these relations direct the course of development;
- ✓ each developmental system is diverse and complex, and can couple individual and context in many ways in order to enhance the probability of change for the better;
- ✓ temporality is part of human ecology and, as such, permeates all the developmental systems;
- ✓ a fundamental human strength, at both individual and contextual levels, is the potential for systematic change; this resource is called *plasticity*, it is not limitless, and its power may vary across time, space and life span;

Since adolescence is a time of multiple, dramatic changes both at individual and social levels, PYD defines it as "an ideal *ontogenetic laboratory* for studying the plasticity of human development and for exploring how coupling individual and contexts within the development system may promote positive development during this period" (Lerner et al., 2012, p. 366). Specifically, in line with the relational developmental systems theory, PYD focuses on the mutual relationship between the developing youth and their surrounding contexts. Broadly speaking, the main assumptions of PYD are (Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, & Bowers, 2010; Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, Lewin-Bizan, 2011):

- ✓ youth have the potential to grow and change, and play an active role in their development;

- ✓ youth have strengths (for instance, motivation, integrity, sense of purpose) - called *developmental assets* - that should be fostered in order to promote *thriving*;
- ✓ contexts (families, schools, communities) have resources as well - called *ecological developmental assets* - that should optimize young people thriving, by supporting them during transition times;
- ✓ thriving does not imply the absence of behavior problems, but it is defined as the nurture of attributes helping youth have a healthy life-style and contribute to the good of communities they live in;
- ✓ if strengths of youth are combined with ecological developmental assets, then successful growth may occur.

Grounded on such key points, several approaches to youth development arose within developmental sciences. For instance, William Damon (2004) mainly focused on the promotion of a stable purpose among youth which allows them to organize their life decision and actions, to express their potential, to satisfy their interests, and to contribute to the world beyond the self. Peter Benson (Benson, Scales, & Syvertsen, 2011), instead, defined individual and ecological assets of youth. The former refer to a set of talents and energies young people possess; specifically, they can be grouped into four categories: *commitment to learning*, *positive values*, *social competencies*, and *positive identity*. The latter refers to the external, social features which can be organized into four categories as well, depending on what resource they provide youth with: *support*, *empowerment*, *boundaries and expectations*, and *constructive use of time*; in Benson's and colleagues view thriving occur when individual and social strengths are aligned (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Similarly, Jacquelynne Eccles (2004) deepened the relationships between individual and context and proposed both theoretical and empirical works highlighting that not only should be aligned individual resources and contexts, but

also that contexts should respond to the changing needs of youth in order to efficiently contribute to their growth. However, as pointed out by Reed Larson (2000, 2006; Larson & Angus, 2011), young people may act as the producers of their own successful growth once they discover two fundamental human skills: *initiative* and *agency*. In this sense, youth programs should promote such abilities, by connecting young people with team works and adults pushing them develop leadership and autonomy. Positive youth development has been studied also from a phenomenological point of view by Margaret Beal Spencer (2006), who mainly stressed the ways youth make sense of their contexts and how such a perception can condition their relationships with the environments. In particular, she investigated the development of youth of color and disadvantaged young people. Another interesting point of view on positive youth development is the one proposed by Ann Masten (2001), who examined *resilience* in young people and considered it as a fundamental ability, that shoul be fostered by supportive systems. Finally, Hamilton and Hamilton (2006) mainly focused on youth transitioning from school to work, that is young people entering adulthood. In their view, the positive result of this phase of passage depends both on the competencies and experiences youth have previously accumulated and on the opportunities to succeed societies offer them (for a comprehensive review, Lerner et al., 2012).

Each one of these contributions significantly expanded the field of youth studies. However, one of the most prominent models of PYD incorporating concepts so far introduced - agency, personal and contextual assets, and multiple level of organization, such as biological and psychological changes within individual and changes occurring in its ecology - is the model of *Five Cs* forwarded by Richard Lerner and colleagues (Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Dowling, Anderson, 2003; Lerner et al., 2005; Gestsdóttir & Lerner, 2007). The *Five Cs* are attributes of thriving and represent five abilities of adolescents, which namely are: *competence, confidence, character, caring, connection.*

Competence refers to interpersonal skills in several domains (social, cognitive, or academic); confidence describes one's sense of positive self-worth; character refers to moral integrity and correct behaviors; caring concerns the ability to empathize with others; finally, connection defines positive relationships with people and institutions (Lerner et al, 2010). The main central hypotheses of this peculiar conceptualization of PYD are (Lerner, 2005; Lerner et al., 2010):

- ✓ the *Five Cs* are means to measure and operationalize positive youth development, that is PYD is included within these Five Cs;
- ✓ if internal developmental assets of youth are aligned with ecological assets, systematic promotion of positive youth development will occur. *Internal assets* are, for instance, hopeful future expectations, self-regulation - that is the ability to control one's behavior and to select, optimize, and pursuit goals according to the possibilities offered by the environment (Schmid, Phelps, & Lerner, 2011) - and school engagement. *Ecological assets* are, for instance, accessibility to resources of contexts and reciprocal commitment between youth and schools, institutions of society, or parents.
- ✓ if youth possess the *Five Cs*, they are less likely to develop internalizing and externalizing problems; shortly, the assumption is that promoting good behaviors in youth may decrease bad and risky ones;
- ✓ if the *Five Cs* are developed, youth will likely to be healthy, adult persons contributing to personal growth and to the good of society; particularly, they will exhibit the 6th C, that is *contribution* to self and society.

These hypotheses were tested in the *4-H Study*, a longitudinal investigation started in 2002, which involved for 8 years about 7,000 adolescents and their parents from 42 states in the USA. Briefly, results confirmed that the *Five Cs* constitute the structure of PYD, and that adolescents scoring higher on them exhibit lower problem

behaviors, such as depression or antisocial attitudes (delinquency, violence, and abuse of alcohol and substance), and higher levels of civic engagement and of sense of duty (Lerner, 2005).

Finally, not only is Positive Youth Development a theoretical model, but also, from an empirical and practical standpoint, it can be considered as a philosophy guiding "the design, the implementation, and the evaluation of community programs for youth" (Lerner et al., 2012, p. 479). Following its foundations, interventions should aim at promoting youth's physical, intellectual, psychological, and social development;. also, such activities and programs should seek to promote several abilities and qualities, such as emotional competence, bonding, clear and positive identity, or self-efficacy, by connecting youth with adults and safe environments helping them achieve these complex developmental tasks (for review, Lerner et al., 2011a; Lerner et al., 2012). According to PYD philosophy, programs should more and more implement spirituality and religiosity, given that they can be considered as active promoters of youth thriving (Warren et al., 2012; King & Boyatzis, 2004) for reasons that now should be addressed in order to understand how's and why's these two phenomena can guarantee successful growth among youth.

2.4. PYD Assumptions on Religious and Spiritual Development

Religiosity and spirituality are specific domains of development that in the last twenty years have been deepened by psychologists, who also sought to find connections between the two phenomena and young people's thriving. This was and still is a difficult task to accomplish because of the lack in the field of youth studies of a coherent understanding of these constructs as well as of their mutual relationships (King, Carr, & Boitor, 2011). However, in order to create conceptual clarity in this controversial field of inquiry (Boyatzis, 2012), it could be useful to turn back to some key points psychologists

highlighted about religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity is intended as the adherence to beliefs, rituals, and practices of organized religious congregations (Reich, Oser, & Scarlett, 1999), whereas spirituality as a universal, intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual experiences a personal relationship with something greater than the self, that may be the divine, nature, cosmos, humanity, or what he/she considers sacred in life. This feeling of transcendence pushes people search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility, and can be formed and experienced through a wide range of beliefs and practices both in and outside religious contexts (Hill et al., 2000; Yust, Johnson, & Roehlkepartain, 2006;).

Starting from these definitions, scholars interested in human development wondered how and "what" youth develop when they are said to spiritually grow (Boyatzis, 2012). Valuable answers may arise from positive youth development perspective and the broader developmental systems theory previously introduced, according to which spiritual development is relational in nature, that is it occurs through transactions between individuals and their multiple socio-cultural contexts of development (King et al., 2011). Also, from a perspective that focuses on adaptive developmental regulation between developing individuals and their ecology, spiritual development promotes youth's positive contributions to self and society (Lerner et al., 2003). As such, spiritual development can be defined as "a dynamic interplay between one's inward journey and one's outward journey […] that presses us to discover our potential to grow, […] and to connect with life, including being in relationships with family, community, the world, the sacred, or some form of universal reality" (Benson and Roehlkepartain, 2008, p. 20). When spiritual development unfolds within institutionalized religions, it is possible to systematically investigate the qualitative changes in ways youth approach religious beliefs, rituals and communities, that is to say their religious development (King et al., 2011). Although religious and spiritual

development should be differentiated, it should be noted that they are linked in the lives of some people belonging to certain cultures. In fact, in many cases religion constitutes the binds connecting individuals' personal research for ultimate truths with doctrines of specific beliefs systems (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, & Roehlkepartain, 2012).

At this point, features of spiritual development can be suggested (Lerner et al., 2003; Roehlkepartain, Benson, & Scales, 2011; Benson et al., 2012; King et al., 2011):

- ✓ it is universal in nature, and pertains all youth;
- ✓ it may be pursued also outside religious organizations, for instance through the engagement in politics and social groups helping youth be in contact with something greater than themselves;
- ✓ it involves processes of awareness or awakening of one's potential and energy; it also entails self-transcendence, interconnecting, belonging, and a way of living in which one is mindful of self and of others; such a manner in approaching life is based on purpose, meaning, compassion, and generosity;
- ✓ it fuels an orientation to self and stimulates individuals to commit in order to contribute to self, others and institutions beyond self in time and place;
- ✓ it pushes youth to explore and discover who they are, the world, and to find answer to existential questions.

Of course, all these advanced human qualities have been already investigated by other areas of psychology, but the value-add of seeing them through the lens of spiritual development is that they are now combined into "a synergistic system pointing toward high human aspiration for a life of connection, interdependence, contribution, and purpose, with a touch point at the deepest level of self" (Benson et al., 2012; 457). Briefly, spiritual development may be intended as the vital force that affects the trajectories of youth growth at different levels, such as cognitive, emotional, and moral; it is an impulse motivating youth to nurture social competencies and positive personal traits

(Johnson, 2008; James, Fine, & Turner, 2012). Put differently, spiritual development enhances behaviors that are markers of positive development and thriving, like holding an hopeful vision of the future, experiencing life satisfaction, self-worth, purpose, and meaningfully promoting the good of societies, families, and communities. As already stated, spiritual development lies in transactions between individuals and context; however, to be "spiritual" such transactions should be filled with transcendence, that is to say they should provide meaning beyond materialism along with ultimate values. These are the conditions under which they, then, may encourage and sustain youth's contributions to self and others (King et al., 2011). Overall considered, from a developmental perspective it can be argued that spiritual development seems to be broader in scope than religious one which, however, plays an important role in promoting youth's spiritual life; indeed, religious organizations can be seen as places of "focused spiritual training" (King, 2008).

Nonetheless, some lines of academic debate on youth religiosity and spirituality must be mentioned before analyzing their effects on thriving. Firstly, although some scholars within the developmental sciences retain religiosity and spirituality as distinct constructs (Dowling et al., 2004), others warn to be "wary of pushing this spiritual-religious distinction too far" (King & Boyatzis, 2004, p. 3) because of the several interrelations between the two phenomena. Secondly, if it is true that they are separated but in some ways related constructs, it is still unclear how they distinctly and jointly contribute to the promotion of youth positive development. With respect to this point, a comprehensive dissertation will be proposed in the first research study (Chap. 3) in which the relative and combined contribution of religiosity and spirituality on one specific aspect of thriving, that is empathy towards culturally-different people, will be examined. Thirdly, even if some scholars pointed out that the core element of spiritual development is the concept of transcendence - in terms of attaining one's sense of

identity or awareness, greater sensitivity, and the mindfulness that there is something beyond the self - this concept must be still fully deepened both theoretically and empirically (King et al., 2011).

Finally, from a developmental perspective, it should be noted that spiritual and religious development are process youth undergo over time. Although little is known about how the sense of religiosity and spirituality may change as young people grow, in a life course perspective there is evidence that religious participation declines among adolescents and young adults and increases when individuals enter adult roles such as being parents and partners in a marriage (Petts, 2009). Also, research shows that during adolescence individuals prefer to define themselves as "spiritual but non religious" (Denton, Pearce, & Smith, 2008), even if their religious identity and affiliation remains stable (Chan, Tsai, & Fuligni, 2015). Of course, a number of contextual factors may affect youth's trajectories of religious involvement and participation, such as families structures, religious socialization received in early life, the kind of religious tradition youth belong to (conservative or liberal), and the exposure to other spiritual and religious offerings proposed by peers and friends (Petts, 2009). A peculiar time of the life cycle to investigate the development of religiosity and spirituality is emerging adulthood as well. In fact, following the several changes occurring at this stage, such as having greater independence of parents, emerging adults exhibit a decrease in religious behaviors and engagement, whereas an increase on nonreligious spiritual orientations (Hall, Edwards, & Wang, 2015). A more detailed argumentation on such issues will be provided on the second research study (Chap. 4), in which effects of religious commitment on adolescents and emerging adults' well-being will be investigated in the light of the several developmental challenges youth deal with and which condition their ways in approaching sacred matters.

2.5. Religiosity, Spirituality, and Developmental Correlates

When adopting a perspective emphasizing that spiritual development motivates young people to care for themselves and to commit to the greater good, it follows that religiosity and spirituality contribute to youth thriving in two main ways: on one hand, they promote their personal well-being, on the other they propel them to behave prosocially (King et al., 2011). Their role has been shown to be salient especially during adolescence and emerging adulthood, considered as times of transition during which individuals are facing crucial changes in their lives, and are more vulnerable (for review, Yonker, Schnabelrauch, & DeHaan, 2012). In fact, religiosity and spirituality as ideological and social resources, and contexts where youth can experience a relationship with the transcendent, offer individuals opportunities for self-reflection, for contact with supportive networks, as well as with something greater than themselves, which enables them to move beyond their daily concerns (King, 2008).

In particular, religiosity and spirituality can provide youth with meaning systems helping them cope with adversity and stressful events. For instance, they can facilitate them in the process of understanding and bearing the loss of someone (Park, 2005), or sustain them in dealing with feelings of depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Carpenter, Laney, & Mezulis, 2011). In addition, not just beliefs or meanings, but religiosity and spirituality provide youth with social resources like communities and groups that support them during their growth and prevent depressive symptoms (Pearce et. al, 2003). In this sense, religious and spiritual congregations offer youth the opportunity to socialize with adults and authoritative figures, different from parents, young people can rely on and look at as moral exemplars (for review, Layton, Dollahite, & Hardy, 2011; Whitney & King, 2014). Furthermore, religious communities direct youth's way of living by establishing moral norms or codes that push them to keep away from risky behaviors and unhealthy life styles. For instance, it has been shown that regular service attendance and

participation in religious youth groups are associated with positive outcomes, such as avoiding drugs, marijuana, or alcohol, dangerous activities, delinquency, shoplifting, skipping school, violence, crime, and decreased suicidal intentions (Smith & Faris, 2002; Jamieson & Romer, 2008). In the meanwhile, religiosity and spirituality promote youth's academic achievement (Muller & Ellison, 2001), and motivate young people to take care of their bodies, by following diets, regularly exercising and resting (Wallace & Forman, 1998). Also, they increase youth's satisfaction with life, happiness, (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000; Abdel-Kahlek, 2007), self-esteem (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, & Drotar, 2006), control over their lives (Smith & Snell, 2009), and improve the quality of their parental relationships (Sabatier, Mayer, Friedlmeier, Lubiewska, & Trommsdorff, 2011). Finally, with regards to the benefits for the individual, religiosity and spirituality promote a feeling of transcendence through the participation in rituals, worships, meditation, and spiritual practices. This sentiment has been reported to incentive one's search for a meaning in life, and to lead people to experience a deep connection with supernatural entities and with others, together with positive emotions (King et al., 2011).

In terms of commitment to the common good, several lines of evidence showed that both religious adolescents and emerging adults are likely to participate more in volunteer services (Gibson, 2008; Ozorak, 2003). Similarly, Furrow, King and White (2004) reported that youth with a more integrated sense of religious identity displayed greater levels of compassion and concerns for others. Yet, interestingly, Hardy and Carlo (2005) found that adolescents' religiosity was positively linked to certain types of prosocial behaviors (compliant, altruistic and anonymous), but that it did not predict others (dire, emotional, and public). Nonetheless, remarkable insights on religious influences on youth's responsiveness to others' needs emerge from studies considering how the different ways young people may approach religion are linked to empathy, and prosocial actions. For instance, Markstrom, Huey, Stiles, and Krause (2010) found out

that the mere religious attendance is not the sufficient condition that can promote prosocial behaviours and an empathetic capacity within youths. In particular, they showed that a personal, intrinsic, and probing orientation to religious beliefs is the key factor propelling youth to feel connected with others and to care for them. Consistently, Francis, Croft, and Pyke (2012) reported that the images of god youth hold are more important than their religious identities and attendance in predicting empathy. In particular, in a sample of 5.993 adolescents from different religious traditions, they found that the image of god as a god of mercy was associated with higher empathy scores, whereas the image of god as a god of justice was related to lower empathy levels.

As it can be noted, the current literature painted a clear picture of the positive effects of religiosity and spirituality on several thriving indicators. However, it does not shed consistent light on the relative and joint effects of the two phenomena on youth development (King et al., 2011). This is mainly due to the fact that, on one hand, contemporary new forms of spirituality are not so widespread among youth in the Western countries, who have been mostly socialized within families and communities belonging to specific religious traditions; as a consequence, the most part of research has been carried out among religious youth (Saroglou, 2012). On the other, to the fact that religiosity and spirituality have been often treated as unique, undistinguishable variables in the context of empirical research (King et al., 2011). However, in recent years a new theoretical model of possible interrelations between religiosity, spirituality, and thriving has been proposed. This model operationalized religiosity in terms of institutional affiliation, whereas spirituality as capturing selfless concern for others and the greater good. Specifically, it posits that not only are the two phenomena associated with thriving, but that religiosity mediates the linkage between spirituality and thriving, and that spirituality directly affect thriving over and beyond any combined influence of religiosity (Dowling et al., 2004). Unfortunately, this model has never been further tested; in order

to fill in this gap in the literature the first research study of the present dissertation adopted it in order to investigate the unique and joint effects of one specific aspect of religiosity, that is religious identity, and spirituality on youth's attitudes towards culturally-different people (see Chapter 3).

Finally, from the standpoint of developmental systems theory, it is also possible to highlight that there exist some negative forms of religiosity and spirituality. In particular, in line with the assumption that spiritual development lies in the interactions between individual and the environment, the optimal spiritual context should engender both individual growth and young people's commitment to the greater good of societies (King, 2008). Accordingly, religion and spirituality may be deleterious (King, 2003; King & Roeser, 2009) when religious and spiritual groups devaluate youth's personal, unique resources in the attempt to preserve the unity of members or when they impose worldviews and do not let young people express their religious doubts and questions. In these cases they may hinder identity positive development and be a source of personal distress. Conversely, when individuality is overemphasized in religious and spiritual contexts, members' connectedness and feelings of belongingness to a broader community may be undermined (King & Roeser, 2009). Furthermore, when religious and spiritual communities use beliefs and ideologies as boundaries against members of other groups, they then can nurture social conflicts and prejudice (King et al., 2011).

2.6. The role of Religiosity and Spirituality in Youth Identity Formation

One central developmental task of both adolescents and emerging adults is the formation of a clear self concept (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; King, 2003). Abundant research has demonstrated the important role religiosity and spirituality play in helping youth achieve a positive identity (King, 2003; Markstrom, 2009). One of the first scholars to investigate the influences of religion on youth identity development was Erik

Erikson (1964, 1968) in his psychosocial development theory. Erikson fully recognized that religion is the most enduring institution to support adolescents' quest to discover themselves, for at least two main reasons: (1) it provides young people with answers to and ways of dealing with existential questions such as "Who am I? Why am I here?" (Markstrom, 1999), that is to say religious beliefs, morals and values allow youth to make sense of their struggles, of the world and to find their place in it; also, (2) it promotes the emergence of fidelity (Erikson, 1968), an important human quality defined as the commitment and loyalty to an ideology.

On the basis of Erikson's assumptions and from a developmental perspective, recently King (2003, 2008; Whitney & King, 2014) proposed a framework for better elucidating how religion and spirituality promote young people identity formation. In her view adolescents and emerging adults need "contexts in which to grapple with the spiritual issues of understanding their purpose in life, what they believe, and their place in the world" (King, 2003, p. 201). As such, religious congregations are distinct environments where youth can generate and internalize a belief system, can gain support and guidance in life from social networks, and can experience a feeling of transcendence. In details, as *ideological context*, religion offers to the developing individuals the opportunity (1) to have access to a wide range of worldviews that they can think about and question in order to create their own personal ones, and to (2) meet coherent ideological frameworks helping them resolve identity concerns. As *social context*, religious communities surround adolescents and emerging adults with people who live on their fleshes what they say to believe. Through observing and emulating them, young people can grow spiritually, and find that religion is more than abstraction but something effective that can be integrated into their self-concept. In addition, trustworthy relationships youth intertwine with adults, spiritual models, and peers, can be a repair in difficult times, and a spur to identity exploration and personal valuation. Furthermore,

religious congregations offer a variety of activities where adolescents and emerging adults can discover and express aspects of their identity, such as being leader or being an helper, or even being a model to emulate. Finally, as *spiritual context*, religion gives the opportunity to youth to feel a deep sense of connection with both supernatural and human other. This feeling of self-transcendence has implications for the construction of the self. In fact, on one hand it enables young people to experience god's love for them as unique individuals and, on the other, to sense that they are part of a greater community; also, it propels within youth the willingness to cooperate to the good and to the progress of their environment. Overall considered, religion can be defined as a support that leads youth to be in contact with the deepest sense of existence, to understand their purpose in life, and to find out who they are through the relationships with others. In particular, although King recognized that other institutions are potential promoters of youth identity exploration, she stated that the add value of religious organizations in promoting identity development is that they are simultaneously ideological, social, and spiritual contexts where "the young person can gain a sense of self as unique individual, as well as a self that is a contributing member to a larger whole" (King, 2003, p. 201).

Although not extensive, prior research showed that the ideological and interpersonal domains of religion are involved with identity developmental processes, and that different religious orientations and styles are related to specific kinds of identity statuses (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001; Fulton, 1997; Markstrom-Adams, Hofstra, & Dougher, 1994). In this sense, studies have been conducted on the two broad dimensions of identity - exploration and commitment - derived by Marcia from Erikson's writings. The former refers to the active search for various values, ideologies, goals to pursue, whereas the latter refers to the decision of engaging in one or more of these (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, & Meeus, 2010). In his works Marcia (1980) crossed and incorporated these two poles in a complex model consisting of four identity statuses:

diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and *achievement*. Individuals in the first status are not committed nor are looking for an identity domain to engage in; individuals in the second status have committed to a domain with little or without exploration; individuals in the third status explore different commitments but without making a definitive choice; individuals in the last status have engaged themselves in a specific domain after a period of exploration of different alternatives.

Interestingly, involvement in religious activities and practices has been reported to be positively associated with identity achievement and foreclosure (commitment statuses), whereas to be negative related to both moratorium and diffusion identity statuses (non-commitment statuses). In addition, extrinsic and dogmatic religion has been shown to predict foreclosure, whereas intrinsic religion to predict achievement status; finally, it has been reported that quest religious orientation predicts moratorium status, and that irreligiosity is often associated with identity diffusion or with exploration (for review, Saroglou, 2012). Whit regards to differences between adolescents and emerging adults, there is evidence that adolescence is a period of life during which religion is more associated with commitment than with exploration of one's beliefs and creeds, mainly because religion is often inherited from parents or authoritative figures rather than be personally chosen (Lee, Miller, & Chang, 2006). On the contrary, emerging adults go through a more systematic revision and exploration of their commitments in religious and spiritual domains, mainly because of their advanced cognitive skills and of their willingness to build their own set of beliefs and values (Barry et al., 2010; Arnett & Jensen, 2002).

Adopting Marcia's identity paradigm, Griffith and Griggs (2001) profiled individuals according to their religious identity status. As such, people in diffusion religious identity status lack an interest in religion but, in case they practice it, they display an extrinsic faith whose main characteristic is to be exclusionary, utilitarian, and

self-serving. Individuals in foreclosure religious status adhere to a religion in order to conform themselves to their groups and, as a consequence, they uncritically adopt beliefs and participate in practices. Instead, individuals in moratorium religious status quest their beliefs, move beyond a simplistic and dogmatic view of their creed, and look for alternatives. This is a process of spiritual exploration which helps individuals authentically comprehend the teachings of the faith they would like to commit to. Finally, people in achievement religious status have integrated their beliefs in their daily routine, after having gone through a period of questioning for the meaning of their faith in their lives. However, times of revaluation and doubts are common, but engaging in one particular religion is, now, a firm choice.

In the last decades, a new model for identity investigation has been proposed in the literature which is based on Marcia's one, but in some way expands it. It is a three factors process identity model focusing "on the dynamics by which teens form, evaluate, and revise their identities over time" (Crocetti et al., 2010, p. 173). The main features of this model are both that it can be employed to assess identity processes both in relational and ideological domains, and that it captures the process of identity development more than classifying individuals in single statuses. Also, it assumes that teens already have a set of inherited identity domains, for instance the ones internalized from parents, which they can decide whether to maintain or to discard. Specifically, the model is focused on the interaction of *commitment*, referring to the firm choice they make about an identity domain, *in-depth exploration* of such commitment concerning the extent to which they actively think and reflect about their choice; finally, *reconsideration of commitment* representing the exploration of alternatives when one's present commitment is no longer compelling. Given that this model posits that youth enter adolescence with a set of commitments appropriated from others (Crocetti, Jahromi, & Meeus, 2012; Crocetti,

Rubini, & Meeus, 2008), it seems useful to use it in the domain of the religious identity, which is mainly inherited from families and culture (see Chapter 3).

Finally, in the field of developmental sciences new suggestions on religiosity and spirituality relative contributions to youth identity formation have been posited (Roeser, Issac, Abo-Zena, Brittian, & Peck, 2008). On one hand, since religion binds individuals into communities and strengthens in-groups relationships, it nurtures processes of self-identification with such groups from which youth derive a sense of belongingness and self-understanding. In so doing, religion promotes the development of an identity which is collective and cultural in nature, the so called *religious identity*, which can be expressed through organized cultural forms. Because of its social nature, scholars relating to social identity theory highlighted that religious identity may endanger contact with outer groups (Graham & Haidt, 2010; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). On the other, spirituality helps youth feel connected to "the unity behind the apparent diversity of being" (King & Roeser, 2009, p. 449). In so doing, the function of spirituality, as an universal human aspiration to look for something of great value, is promoting a *spiritual identity*, the one fostering an identification with which is beyond the self, like the whole of humanity (Roeser et al., 2008). As such, spiritual identities simultaneously transcend and include worldviews of any given religious tradition, are *transcultural*, that is to say they move beyond ethnocentrism, and are *transpersonal* in nature, which means that their content is not about "one's personal uniqueness at all but rather about one's gradually developing understanding of what are really shared aspects of human experience across lines of creed, class, caste, race, and religion" (*ibidem*, p. 86). Religious and spiritual identities can co-evolve or evolve independently of each other, mainly because individuals can identify themselves as spiritual but not religious, religious but not spiritual, or spiritual and religious (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). That is to say, people's spiritual identity can develop through or without the mediation of religious organizations.

Conclusions

This chapter focused on spiritual and religious development during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood, which can be considered as times of great possibilities but also of vulnerabilities. In fact, these stages of life are characterized by radical biological, social, and psychological changes which can lead youth to live confusion and distress. The supportive role of religiosity and spirituality during youth's growth has been pointed out in the light of Positive Youth Development perspective, which sees the two phenomena as personal and contextual resources helping young people thrive. The concept of thriving is the central core of PYD theoretical framework, and can be defined as, on one hand, the absence of internalizing and externalizing problems and, on the other, in terms of meaningful contributions youth can give to self and to the good of larger society. In particular, PYD theoretical framework posits that thriving does not neglect that youth have to face several challenges and problems, but it stresses that youth have resources both at individual and social levels aiding them in flourishing. Among these resources, there are religion in terms of adherence to religious communities and practices, and spirituality as an intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence.

Generally speaking, PYD emphasizes that spiritual development (1) is a specific domain of the broader development process, (2) pertains all youth, and (3) can be achieved both within or outside religious contexts. Also, it is a vital force that affects the trajectories of youth growth at different levels (cognitive, emotional, and moral), and it is an impulse motivating youth to transcendence the self and to nurture both social competencies and positive personal traits (Johnson, 2008; James et al., 2012). According to principles of developmental systems theory, researchers adhering to PYD perspective stated that spiritual development occurs in the transactions between individuals and context and that it is through these interactions that youth can experience the feeling of

transcendence, the one propelling them to be aware of their potential to grow and to live in a way mindful of others' needs. In the light of such assumptions, the chapter introduced PYD as a new point of view on religious and spiritual development, which stands in sharp contrast with cognitively oriented theories, which mainly attempted to identify universal and invariant stages of maturation of religiosity and spirituality.

Finally, possible connections between spiritual and religious development, as well as their effect on youth thriving, have been identified. Summing up, spiritual development is something different than religious one, conceived as the ways youth approach religious beliefs, rituals and communities over the years. However, spiritual development can be fostered by individuals' adherence to a specific religion. In this sense, participation in activities and services of a given religious organization may be intended as "the external sign of a spiritual orientation" (Sinnott, 2002, p. 199). Since religious and spiritual development are distinct but in some way related, one of the main concern of developmental scientists was to disentangle the relative effect of religiosity and spirituality on youth development. Only few attempts have been done in the last decades in order to elucidate different pattern of association between religiosity, spirituality, and several aspects of youth growth. Recently, an interesting theoretical and empirical model revealed that spirituality influences youth thriving over and beyond any combined effect of religiosity. All the concepts so far introduced constitute the theoretical premises of the next two chapters, which will report interesting findings about the influences of religiosity and spirituality on two major trends of youth's optimal development: positive attitudes towards people from different cultural background and psychological well-being.

RESEARCH

Religiosity, Spirituality, and Positive Development among Italian Adolescents and Emerging Adults

Chapter 3

The Influences of Spirituality and Religious Identity Formation Processes on Youth Attitudes towards Culturally-Different People: Findings from Italian Adolescents

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the unique and combined role of spirituality and religious identity formation processes on ethnocultural empathy among adolescents. A mediation model whereby spirituality, in terms of a universal human capacity for self-transcendence, was associated to ethnocultural empathy via religious identity formation processes (commitment and in-depth exploration), was tested. Data were collected from 301 adolescents from Southern Italy (ages 13-19; M = 16.14, SD = 1.71) through a self-report questionnaire. Structural equation modeling showed that spirituality positively and strongly affected both mediators, and that it had a moderate positive direct link to ethnocultural empathy. Interestingly, the indirect effect of spirituality to ethnocultural empathy through commitment was moderate and negative, whereas through in-depth exploration was moderate and positive. Findings highlighted the potential of cultivating youth spirituality to foster a ethnocultural empathetic ability. Also, they pointed out that religious identity formation spurred by spiritual inclinations should involve processes of exploration, otherwise it would go at the detriment of several important aspects of positive youth development such as flexibility, critical thinking, and pluralism.

3.1. Rationale of the Study

Religious identity is a many faceted construct (Templeton & Eccles, 2006) which can be considered as an aspect of the broader concept of religiosity (Chan et al., 2015), intended in terms of the adherence to beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition both individually or within a community (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Spirituality is a universal, intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual experiences a personal relationship with something greater than the self, that may be the divine, nature, cosmos, humanity, or with what he/she considers sacred in life (Yust et al., 2006; King, et al., 2011). A substantial and growing body of research demonstrates that religiosity and spirituality can have a positive impact on adolescents' healthy psychosocial development (King & Roeser, 2009). However, little is known about how processes of religious identity development and spirituality relate to each other and how at the same time they might affect youths' attitudes towards people from different cultural backgrounds. While a few studies have examined relations between religiosity, spirituality, and prejudice, (e.g., Hunsinger, Livingston, & Isbell, 2014; Streib & Klein, 2014), no research to date has linked religious identity processes and spirituality to ethnocultural empathy (i.e., empathy towards people from other cultures; Wang et al., 2003) in adolescence. Additionally, the relative role of religiosity and spirituality in such youth outcomes remains unclear (Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, Dy-Liacco, & Williams, 2009; King & Boyatzis, 2015), mainly because scholars have usually treated these constructs as undistinguishable variables (King, et al., 2011). Some literature suggested that one possibility to investigate how religiosity (and, therefore, its related aspects, such as religious identity) and spirituality can work together in predicting youth thriving is by considering the mediation role of religiosity between spirituality and several developmental outcomes, such as view of diversity (Dowling et al., 2004). Hence, the purpose of the present study was to examine a mediation model whereby spirituality

influences adolescents' ethnocultural empathy by way of religious identity formation processes.

3.1.1. Defining Religious Identity

Religion is a closed system of beliefs and practices shared within an institutionalized organization (Mueller, Plevak, & Rummans, 2001). It unites persons into communities and strengthens in-group relationships, from which individuals derive self-understanding (Graham & Haidt, 2014; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). As a consequence, religion and its individual manifestation, that is religiosity (Miller & Thoresen, 2003), may play a relevant role in the identity formation process, by promoting a related religious identity (Roeser et al., 2008). From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), such a kind of identity is a collective one and can be referred to the sense of belongingness to a religious group and to the importance of this group membership in shaping one's self-concept formation (Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

Religious identity has been intended as one particular dimension of the broader concept of religiosity which also entails both the association with an organized faith or religious tradition (i.e., religious affiliation) and the involvement in rituals and services of such a religion (i.e., religious participation). In literature these constructs have been treated both as separated and combined phenomena constituting the core of one's religiosity (Chan, et al., 2015). Interestingly, although related, religious affiliation, participation, and identity can have different trajectories in one's development. For instance, some longitudinal studies reported that religious identity remained stable, whereas religious participation declined among high school adolescents (Lopez, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2011). On the basis of such assumptions, in the present study these three features are intended as separated and religious identity will be taken into account.

One of the main characteristic of religious identity is that it may derive from

parents, families, and the broader social context one is exposed to. While childhood is a period in which beliefs are objectively accepted and the source of such beliefs is not doubted, adolescence is a fruitful time to shift from an assigned religious identity to a chosen one (Templeton & Eccles, 2006; Good & Willoughby, 2008). In fact, youth possess a set of enhanced cognitive skills allowing them to articulate a more sophisticated reflection on the beliefs and principles of their religious faith (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Such new abilities lead adolescents to personally explore their creed and make a distinction between their own conception of religion and others' ones (Živković, Šuljok, & Bagić, 2008).

In the last decades, one prevalent paradigm to describe how adolescents choose, commit, and reconsider their engagement in the religious domain (e.g., Lee, Miller, & Chan, 2006) is Marcia's one (1980). Marcia derived two broad dimensions of identity - exploration and commitment - from Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory of development. Exploration refers to the active search for various values, ideologies, goals to pursue, whereas commitment to the choice of engaging in one or more identity domains (Crocetti, et al., 2010). Marcia (1980) crossed and incorporated these two poles in a complex model encompassing four identity statuses: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement (see chapter 2).

Recently, a new model for identity investigation has been proposed in the literature, which is based on Marcia's one, but in some way expanding it (Crocetti et al., 2012). It is a three factors process identity model (commitment, in-depth exploration, reconsideration of commitment) capturing the process of identity development more than classifying individuals into single statuses (Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti et al., 2010; see chapter 2). This model has been employed to target identity processes in several youth's important life domains, such as education and friendship, and their effect on diverse aspects of development, such as well-being and civic engagement (Crocetti, et al., 2012; Karaś,

Cieciuch, Negru, & Crocetti, 2015). However, to my knowledge it has never been used in the field of religious identity development, which is a relevant and common identity domain to all adolescents (King & Roeser, 2009). In the attempt to fill this gap, the purpose of the present study is to employ this conceptual tool in order to assess adolescents' different ways in adopting and experiencing the religious dimension and the relative impact of religious identity processes on their ethnocultural empathetic ability.

3.1.2. Distinguishing Religiosity from Spirituality

When addressing religious and spiritual issues, one of the main concern is to provide a clear conceptualization of religiosity (and its specific facets, such as religious identity) and spirituality. However, despite the increasing number of research studies in the domain of the psychology of religion, there is still a lack of consensus about what religiosity and spirituality precisely define as well as a great deal of academic debate whether they are interrelated or separate constructs (Zwingmann, Klein, & Büssing, 2011).

Although some scholars highlighted several points of commonalities between the two phenomena, such as the search for the sacred (Zinnabuer & Pargament, 2005), and the fact that both occur within cultural contexts (Hill et al., 2000), in this study their nuances already emerged in the second half of the Nineteenth century both in culture and scientific literature of Western countries have been taken into account (Hill et al., 2000; Zinnbauer, et al., 1999; see chapter 1). Broadly speaking, religiosity can be intended as "the formal, institutional, and outward expression" (Cotton et al., 2006, p.472) of one's relationship with the sacred and supernatural power (Reich et al., 1999). Spirituality, in contrast, as the individualized search for existential meaning of life experiences, for a personal connection with the sacred and transcendent realities (God/High Power), as well as for interconnectedness with something greater like the whole of humanity, nature, and all the living things (Zinnbauer et al., 1999; Worthington, 2011).

Adolescence is a crucial time for growing the intrinsic capacity for self-

transcendence (i.e., spirituality), since youth's increased cognitive and social skills serve as a stimulus to embed their identities with something beyond the self, whether within or outside religious contexts and communities (King et al., 2011). Given its general and universal nature, spirituality nurtures the formation of an identity which simultaneously transcends and includes worldviews of any given religious tradition, is transcultural, that is to say it goes beyond ethnocentrism, and transpersonal (Roeser et al., 2008).

From an empirical standpoint, the best part of research studies on youth religious and spiritual development has not made any differentiation between religiosity and spirituality (Saroglou, 2012). Thus, it was difficult to establish the relative and joint role of the two phenomena in promoting youth successful growth. For the purpose of the present study, one's sense of spiritual self has been considered as an individual characteristic which exists independently of religiosity (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2008), and affects youth development both uniquely and by way of religious identity, intended as a specific feature of one's religiosity.

3.1.3. Youth Outcomes of Religiosity and Spirituality

While there is still little agreement on the meaning of religiosity and spirituality, there is abundance of empirical evidence that the two phenomena strongly impact the developmental processes adolescents go through during their growth, such as the numerous changes involving self-concept formation (King & Boyatzis, 2015). In fact, not only they work as meaning-making systems giving answers to existential questions and an orientation in life, but also they provide teens with worldviews, models, norms and purposes guiding them in this pivotal phase (King & Roeser, 2009; Sink & Devlin, 2011). Specifically, they both play a salient role in a wide range of important adolescent outcomes (for reviews, see Cheung & Yeung, 2011; King & Roeser, 2009; Yonker et al., 2012). There are a number of possible mechanisms for this adaptive influence of religiosity and spirituality. Religiosity may help provide a sense of identity (King, 2003), a moral code

(Smith, 2003), psychosocial skills (e.g., self-control; Hardy, Steelman, Coyne, & Ridge, 2013), and social capital (e.g., positive role models and peers; King & Furrow, 2004). Spirituality may push youth to discover their potential to grow, to connect with something greater than themselves, to search for the sacred, and to embed their identities within a tradition or community, both within or outside a religious context (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008).

Religiosity and spirituality seem to play a role both in individual and social outcomes (Regnerus, 2003). In terms of outcomes for the individual, religiosity and spirituality help protect against mental illness (e.g., depression, Pearce et al., 2003) and health-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol and drug use or risky sexual behaviors; Jankowski, Hardy, Zamboanga, & Ham, 2013; Bartkowski & Xu, 2007; Lammers, Ireland, Resnick & Blum, 2000), but also promote resilience and coping (Kim & Esquivel, 2011), physical health (Rew & Wong, 2006), and psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem and life satisfaction; Abdel-Khalek, 2011, 2012). Regarding social outcomes, religiosity and spirituality prevent violence (Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Maynard, 2014), delinquency (Johnson, Jang, Larson, & Li, 2001), and aggression (Hardy, Walker, Rackham, & Olsen, 2012), as well as increase altruistic behavior (Furrow et al., 2004; Hardy & Carlo, 2005), civic engagement (Gibson, 2008), and empathy (Hardy et al., 2012; Huber & MacDonald, 2012).

Developmentally speaking, one intriguing argumentation shedding light on how and why the two phenomena are related to such positive outcomes is King's one (2003, 2008), in which religiosity and spirituality are defined as fertile environments for youth's thriving. In fact, as ideological dimensions, they offer adolescents a set of worldviews on which they can build their own identity; as social dimensions, religiosity and spirituality provide young people with supportive networks; also, they exert a certain extent of social control, in terms of moral and normative behaviors. Finally, as transcendent dimensions,

religiosity and spirituality nurture a sense of connection with "something beyond the self" which helps youth to be more conscious of themselves and others in the larger society (King, et al., 2011). However, this abundance of research have not made a clear distinction of the relative and combined role of religiosity, its related features, and spirituality on positive youth development.

3.1.4. The Influences of Religiosity and Spirituality on Intercultural Attitudes

One few explored social outcome of religiosity and spirituality is youth way of interacting with culturally-different people. Existing literature highlighted that youth religiosity had a strong impact on prejudice, but that such impact varied according to the different teens' religious styles. For instance, on a sample of 340 Christian German adolescents, Streib and Klein (2014) reported that teens literally interpreting religious texts showed higher levels of interreligious prejudice; on the contrary, adolescents displayed less pronounced levels of interreligious prejudice when having less dogmatic approach to their worldviews and beliefs. Similarly, on a sample of Italian young adults Brambilla, Manzi, Regalia, and Verkuyten (2013) found that different forms of religious internalization were independently associated with prejudice towards Muslims. In details, religious identification (adoption of religious beliefs which have been personally chosen) was negatively related to prejudice towards Muslims, whereas religious introjection (adoption of religious beliefs predominantly due to social pressure) was positively linked to negative attitudes towards this religious group.

From a historical point of view, studies on religion and prejudice date back to the pioneer works of Gordon Allport (1966), who argued that whether religion was a positive or negative influence on relations to out-group members depends on one's orientation to religion. Specifically, he distinguished between extrinsically religious people and intrinsically religious ones (Allport & Ross, 1967). The former view religion as a means to other ends, such as social status, self-justification and security, whereas the latter

internalize their religion and consider it as a guiding force in life. Batson (1976) proposed an additional dimension of religiousness, called *quest*. This is an open-ended, questioning orientation to religion which emphasizes the re-examination of beliefs, doubts, and the search for a meaning in life. Although Allport assumed that, unlike extrinsic religious people, intrinsic ones have lower levels of prejudice, abundant recent research reported controversial relations between people intrinsically oriented to religion and prejudice. In contrast, quest has been shown to be most reliably negatively associated with prejudice (Preston et al., 2010; Saroglou, 2013). Less empirical research has focused on the unique role of spirituality on making and unmaking prejudice. However, several lines of evidence suggested that spiritual individuals are more sensitive to the needs of others, even if they relate both to strangers or to close ones (Saroglou, 2013; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; Pichon & Saroglou, 2009). For instance, Hunsinger and colleagues (2014) found that spiritual practices, such as meditation, foster greater tolerance towards culturally different people; similarly, Cragun and Sumerau (2015) found that people self-identifying as spiritual rather than as religious positively evaluated sexual minorities. A possible way to further investigate the relative role of religiosity (and its relates aspects, such as religious identity) and spirituality on youth's attitudes towards culturally-different people is by examining how they affect their ethnocultural empathy. To my knowledge, no research to date has targeted links between religious identity processes, spirituality, and ethnocultural empathy among adolescents.

3.1.5 Defining Ethnocultural Empathy

Ethnocultural empathy is about understanding feelings and experiences of people from diverse racial and ethnical backgrounds. Specifically, it is the ability to take the perspective of members belonging to other ethnic groups (Wang, 2003). Historically, the broader concept of "cultural empathy" was introduced by Ridley and Lingle (1996), who proposed a comprehensive model of cross-cultural empathy consisting of three components

described as cognitive, emotional-affective, and communicative. The cognitive component refers to the capacity to see the world as it is seen by culturally-different people; the affective component consists of sharing feelings and emotions of people belonging to other ethnicities; and the last one refers to the ability of expressing these feelings and thoughts. Grounded on these assumptions, Wang and colleagues (2003) developed the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE), a self-report measure translated into several languages and useful in assessing empathy in multicultural settings. While the Ridley and Lingle's model was specific to the counselling environment and consisted of three dimension, the SEE is addressed to young and adult populations, and encompasses one more cognitive component pertaining to awareness of ethnic differences. The 4 factors of the SEE namely are the *empathic perspective taking, empathic feeling and expression, acceptance of cultural differences, and empathic awareness*. Respectively, the first one refers to the ability to understand and assume the perspective on the world of people from different traditions and cultures. The second refers to the communicative skills in expressing thoughts and sensations with regards to the discriminatory experiences members of other ethnic groups undergo. The third, instead, refers to the acceptance of values and customs of other ethnical groups; the last one refers to the extent to which people are conscious of how society treats and discriminates members from different cultures. The scale validation process has revealed that these four dimensions are highly correlated and that the SEE has good psychometric properties (Wang et al., 2003).

From a theoretical point of view, this specific type of culturally oriented empathy is a relatively new concept, in which there is a great deal of debate about how much it is similar or different from basic empathy (Rasoal, Jungert, Hau, & Andersson, 2011), that is the ability to perceive the inner experience of others and to concern about them (Buie, 1981). As to this, scholars argued that basic empathy does not fully take into account ethnical differences affecting the empathetic processes. Also, they suggested that it is more

difficult to assume the perspective of someone from different cultural traditions than it is of people within the same background (Rasoal, Elkund, & Hansen, 2011), making ethnocultural empathy a marker of heightened development. However, even though ethnocultural empathy could be very helpful in preventing prejudice and discriminating behaviors in contemporary multicultural societies, only relative attention has been paid by researchers to the ways it can be enhanced (Özdikmenli-Demir & Demir, 2014). For instance, what it is known so far is that quality of social contact, multicultural contexts, and cross-cultural and cross-racial interactions are potential predictors of ethnocultural empathy (Brouwer & Boroş, 2010; Le, Lai, & Wallen, 2009). Unfortunately, it is still unknown if religious identity processes and spirituality may promote adolescents' ethnocultural empathy and meaningfully contribute to its development. Nonetheless, adolescence may be considered as a fruitful period to conduct such an investigation, at least for two reasons. Firstly, adolescence is a time for religious and spiritual development (Good & Willoughby, 2008) during which adolescents change their approach to religious beliefs, rituals and communities, seek to contemplate existential questions (Markstrom, 1999), and to attain a set of human qualities also outside religious contexts (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008). Secondly, adolescence is a phase in the lifespan during which youth mature social identities, and contact with out-groups increases (Gniezwosz & Noack, 2015); but, since teens still do not know who they really are, they may show intolerance towards people from different cultural backgrounds as a reaction to their sense of identity confusion (Erikson, 1959). However, youth's attitudes and judgments against members of out-groups are particularly malleable and influenced by several individual factors, such as personality traits, cognitive and social-cognitive skills, and environmental as well, such as parents and peers relationships (Killen, Hitty, & Mulvey, 2015; van Zalk & Kerr, 2014; Gniewosz & Noack, 2015; Village, 2011). For instance, research has pointed out that identity development, principled moral reasoning, and empathy may positively affect

young people's openness to diversity (Gerson & Neilson, 2014). In light of this, works are needed looking at the role of religious identity processes and spirituality, as personal dimensions, in fostering the development of such a cultural oriented empathy.

3.1.6 The Relative Role of Religiosity and Spirituality on Youth's Developmental Correlates

Religiosity and spirituality have been mostly intended as interconnected but distinct constructs (Zinnbauer et al., 1999; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). However, there are few insights into the unique and joint contributions religiosity and spirituality play in youth's optimal development. The most common approach to studying the roles of religiosity and spirituality in adolescent outcomes is using regression analyses comparing religiosity and spirituality as predictors in a model. For instance, Cotton and colleagues (2005) found that spirituality, conceptualized in terms of religious and existential well-being, was negatively predictive of depressive symptoms and health-risk behaviors when controlling for religiosity (i.e., beliefs in God/High Power and importance of religion in one's life). Similarly, a more recent study found that spiritual individuals, i.e., those who experience feelings of transcendence and of connection to the divine, were more consistently and strongly linked to altruistic behaviors than those who defined themselves as religious, that is those who are involved in a formalized religion (Saslow et al., 2013).

Another analytic approach is to create pre-defined groups (e.g., religious and spiritual, religious but not spiritual, spiritual but not religious, and neither religious nor spiritual; for review, Ammerman, 2013; Berghuijs, Pieper, & Bakker, 2013; Zinnbauer et al., 1997), and then use ANOVA to compare the groups on outcomes. Typically, the religious and spiritual group fairs the best on outcomes. For instance, in a study of Canadian teens the religious and spiritual group, as well as the religious but not spiritual group, had higher psychology well-being and lower risk behaviors and delinquency (Good

& Willoughby, 2006). In a more recent study of emerging adults, the spiritual but not religious group reported the most criminal behavior compared to the religious and spiritual group or the religious but not spiritual group (Jang & Franzen, 2013).

A more sophisticated way to tackle the role of religiosity and spirituality is using person-centered approaches, such as clustering or latent profile analysis. With such analyses researchers use religiosity and spirituality variables to identify classes of people from the data, and then compare those classes on outcomes. Studies using this analytic approach have only involved adult populations, and have generally found classes that differ on overall level of religiosity and spirituality, with the groups high on both being the most adaptive in terms of outcomes such as happiness (Park et al., 2013), life satisfaction, and depression (Roh, Lee, Lee, & Martin, 2014), and prosocial and antisocial behavior (Nadal, Hardy, & Barry, 2016).

Although such approaches are illuminating, they do not test a hypothesized conceptual model of the mechanisms by which religiosity and spirituality work together in predicting youth outcomes. In other words, more conceptually-driven studies of the relative roles of religiosity and spirituality should examine moderation and mediation. For example, one study tested for an interaction between the two, but found that youth's dimensions of spirituality, such as having purpose in life, believing in a High Power, feeling connected to others and nature, were predictive of positive development regardless of the level of religiosity, intended as one's identification with a given religious group (James et al., 2012). Most studies have looked into mediation rather than moderation. Some studies have assessed at spirituality as a mediator of links between religiosity and outcomes. One work found that in Korean American adolescents spirituality, operationalized in terms of private religious practices, beliefs in God and daily spiritual experiences (e.g., feeling God's love), mediated between increased religiosity (i.e., church engagement) and lower depression (for girls) and higher grades (for boys; Kang & Romo,

2011). Furthermore, on a sample of young adults, Ahrold, Farmer, Trapnell, and Meston (2011) demonstrated that spirituality mediated the relationship between religiosity and conservative sexual attitudes. From a theoretical and empirical perspective, these mediation models show that religiosity and spirituality, rather than being seen as two opposing forces, might work together in promoting positive outcomes.

3.1.7. Religiosity as Mediator

Another compelling way of positioning the two phenomena in a model is to consider religiosity as the mediator between spirituality and several aspects of adolescents' development. Such a conceptual framework has been tested by Dowling and colleagues (2004), but it has not been further investigated. The model was conceived within the theoretical background of PYD, a new approach to the scientific study of youth that emerged in the '90s in contrast with the assumptions of early 20th century psychologists, who considered adolescence simply as a period of "storm and stress" (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner 2005). Grounded on developmental theories (Ford & Lerner, 1992), PYD posits that adolescents grow up in specific social and cultural settings that influence their thriving, essentially the absence of behavioral problems and the presence of healthy life-style such as school success, openness to others, and maintenance of physical health (Lerner, 2009). In addition, it assumes that adolescents have personal resources which need to be developed since they may propel youth to make productive contributions to self and society (Lerner, 2005). Spirituality is one of these personal resources, as it can be considered as a force directing adolescents' actions and lives. Specifically, it helps youth reach transcendence and nurture the idea that they are part of something greater than themselves; also, it motivates them to engage in communities and organizations, such as religious congregations, and to prosocially behave (Lerner et al., 2006).

Theoretically, the model stresses that religiosity, spirituality, and thriving are distinct constructs (Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2003), and that

there may be both direct relations between spirituality and thriving, and indirect by way of religiosity. Briefly, it highlights that spirituality, as a new conception of life moving beyond materialism towards generosity and concerns about others, as well as based on the ability to self-transcendence (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003), is the key factor in promoting youth thriving over and beyond any mediated effect of religiosity, i.e., the relationship with a particular religious institution (Dowling et al., 2004). As such, spirituality is an internal developmental asset affecting the trajectories of growth at a cognitive, emotional, and moral level (James et al., 2012; Johnson, 2008). However, more research is needed to validate this mediation model. In order to further test it, the present study will consider a specific aspect of youth's religiosity, that is religious identity in terms of its formation processes, and their mediation role between spirituality and a specific youth growth outcome, that is the development of an ethnocultural empathetic ability.

3.1.8. The Context of the Research

Italy is a relevant country to conduct this study, since adolescents are growing up in a multicultural society where they have daily interactions with different ethnocultural groups (Musso, Moscardino, & Inguglia, 2017). In fact, as reported by recent statistics, in Italy live about 5,000,000 of legal immigrants mostly coming from Eastern Europe, North-Africa, and Asia (Caritas & Migrantes, 2016). The presence of strangers is considerable also in the city where this study has been conducted, that is Palermo (674, 435 inhabitants), the state capital of Sicily, the Southern biggest region of the nation. In fact, in Palermo live about 26,000 legal immigrants who are part of some well long-established communities such as the ones from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Ghana, China, Philippines, and Morocco (D'Anneo, 2016). The presence of immigrants resulted in a patchwork of people, religions and cultural traditions that sometimes has been perceived as a threat by host society, especially during the last years, when economic recession increased unemployment rates and Italians' dissatisfaction with life (Musso, Inguglia, Lo Coco, Albiero, & Berry, 2016).

This situation requires innovative social policies aiming at promoting dialogue and encounter between groups (Inguglia & Musso, 2015; Musso, Inguglia, & Lo Coco, 2016). Although religion has been shown to play a significant role not only in promoting but also in counteracting discrimination and prejudice (Doehring, 2013), in Italy only a few studies have examined religion influences on attitudes towards culturally-different people, especially among younger populations (e.g., Brambilla et al., 2013; Bergamaschi, 2013). Nonetheless, the country has a long and deeply-rooted religious tradition (i.e., *Catholicism*) which makes it suitable to investigate the impact of one's religious identity on intercultural competencies. As to this, a brief description of Italians' religious and spiritual landscape is worthy.

Catholicism has always been an important feature of the socio-cultural life of Italy, which can be defined the heart of such religious faith also because of the presence in its territory of Vatican City State. However, nowadays its principles and teachings have been put to test by secularization permeating Western societies. Specifically, the instances of modernity radically changed the ways people approach Catholic tradition, exacerbated mistrust towards institutionalized religion, and paved the way to autonomous spiritual searches (Garelli, 2013). However, Catholicism still constitutes an important dimension of Italians' identity (Garelli, 2007). Particularly, scholars argued that two main Catholic identities coexist in the country: the one being something culturally inherited rather than profoundly experienced, and the other of people who exhibit an internalized and committed adherence to the doctrine of such religious faith (Bader, Molle, & Baker, 2012). This seems to be evident among younger generations, as some recent surveys reported. For instance, on a population of 3,000 Italian young people between 15 and 34 years of age from all over the country, 70% defined themselves as Catholic, but only 7% of them were fervent and practicing believers; also, 47% of interviewed admitted to attend religious services, at least occasionally (Grassi, 2006). These results seem to be in line with young

people's emergent tendency to privatize and personalize the traditional religious faith, which is increasingly experienced away from religious institutions and communitarian rituals (Salvini, 2013). One consequence of this process is that Italian young people retain some of the principles of the Catholic Church, while reject others (Garelli, 2013). For example, they rather criticize Catholic moral sexuality, whereas maintain a positive impression of Catholic values of solidarity and charity (Garelli, 2016). Briefly, being Catholic today is about creating one's own way of believing which mainly doubts rules and morals of religious institutions (Garelli, 2007).

With regard to spirituality, qualitative research studies indicate that for Italian younger generations this is a relative new concept that they use to express their desire to find a meaning of existence, to go beyond materialism, to be connected with transcendent realms or to feel in harmony with the whole of creation and with themselves. Consequently, one's spiritual journey can be pursued through a number of unconventional pathways, such as the search for a personal relationship with some supernatural entity away from Catholicism. Also, it can be carried out through aesthetic and humanitarian experiences putting individuals in contact with the inner selves and with something beyond the selves (Garelli, 2016).

On the basis of these considerations, it seems interesting to investigate how Italian youth accept, reconstruct and reexamine religious beliefs in a context where traditional religion and modernity coexist, and Catholicism is still strongly aligned with culture. Also, it seems insightful to evaluate how youth's emerging sense of personal spirituality relate to religious identity formation processes and how spirituality and religious identity jointly and uniquely contribute to promote youth's openness towards cultural diversity.

3.2. The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to test a mediation model whereby spirituality is associated to ethnocultural empathy via religious identity formation processes. A unique

contribution of this study is that it is one of the first to test a clear conceptual model of the relative roles of religious identity and spirituality, and is the first study to validate the model of religiosity as a mediator between spirituality and outcomes initially proposed and tested by Dowling and colleagues (2004). Another unique contribution is that this is the first study to examine the roles of religious identity processes and spirituality in predicting ethnocultural empathy among adolescents, which have been mostly an understudied group in research investigating connections between religiosity, spirituality, and attitudes towards culturally-different people.

Spirituality was conceptualized as the universal human capacity for transcendence, interconnectedness with others and Higher Power, and the quest for a meaning in life (Howden, 1992; Benson, 1997; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 2008), which can be experienced in and/or outside a specific religious context (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003). Religiosity was conceptualized in terms of the extent to which adolescents form, evaluate, and revise their commitments in the religious domain, namely religious identity formation. Religious identity formation was assessed by using the model of Crocetti and colleagues (2010), involving *commitment*, *in-depth exploration*, and *reconsideration of commitment*. In line with this model, first individuals must make identity commitments, such as to particular religious ideologies, but then can either deepen those commitments through in-depth exploration, or step back and reconsider those commitments, perhaps in preparation to disengage from them and redirect. In the present study, reconsideration of commitment, referring to the efforts one makes to change no longer satisfactory present commitments, was excluded, because it seemed to refer more to identity crisis than to identity commitment, and thus is not capturing religiosity per se.

The following specific hypotheses were tested:

H1: Spirituality will positively predict ethnocultural empathy, given how spirituality fosters greater connection to all of humanity.

H2: Spirituality will positively predict religious identity processes. In other words, spirituality will act as a force motivating commitment and exploration in the domain of religious identity.

H3: Religious identity commitment will negatively predict ethnocultural empathy, while in-depth exploration will positively predict it. This is because in multivariate contexts, each predictor only gets credit for its unique contribution to the outcome. In this case, given that commitment and in-depth exploration are related, it is expected that the part of commitment that is independent of in-depth exploration may be akin to identity foreclosure in the identity status paradigm (Marcia, 1980), in that it may capture the more passive part of identity commitment often appropriated from parents or authoritative figures. From a religious orientation framework, this would be similar to extrinsic religiosity and, thus, likely predictive of less ethnocultural empathy (Allport & Ross, 1967). On the other hand, in-depth exploration infers pursuit of deeper religious identity, as with identity achievement (Marcia, 1980) and quest religious orientation (Batson, 1976), and thus would be predictive of greater ethnocultural empathy. Since prior works reported that individuals scoring high on identity foreclosure have more negative stereotypes about people from different racial backgrounds, whereas individuals who are in the process of identity exploration hold less stereotypic thinking about members of out-groups (Fulton, 1997; Streitmatter & Pate, 1989), it seemed plausible to expect a negative relation between religious identity commitment and ethnocultural empathy and a positive one between in-depth exploration and the outcome. Given the above argumentations, the fourth hypothesis (H4) is that religious identity (commitment and in depth exploration) will mediate relations between spirituality and ethnocultural empathy, with the indirect path being negative through commitment and positive through in-depth exploration.

3.3. Method

3.3.1. Sample

Participants in this study included 301 adolescents living in Palermo (Southern Italy). The sample included ninth through 13th graders that attended two Italian public (i.e., unconfessional) high schools and was racially and ethnically homogeneous, with 99% being identified as Italian. The participants' age ranged from 13 to 19 years (M = 16.14, SD = 1.71). The majority of the participants was female (86%) due to their prevalence in the specific schools (i.e., psycho-pedagogical lyceum and vocational school for tourism and communication) where the sample was recruited. The participants primarily came from middle-class families: 21% of mothers and 16% of fathers had education beyond high school. Most of the participants declared to be Catholic (75.4%), 2% to be Muslim, 4.6% to be affiliated to other religious confessions, and 18% to be unaffiliated. Also, 85.3% of the sample declared to be spiritual. The entire sample was considered in the following analyses for two reasons. First, someone who declares to be unaffiliated in a categorical item response (adolescents were asked for their religious affiliation, e.g. "Catholic" or "Muslim") just may have less religious identity, i.e. he/she could be someone who not fully identify with a religion, but experiences it in a personal way. Second, including religiously unaffiliated participants might be a more stringent test of the hypotheses, according to which religious identity and spirituality are distinct constructs (e.g., you might have people low on religious identity who are not low on spirituality). This way of reasoning was also confirmed by the fact that 60% of participants defining themselves as religiously unaffiliated stated to be spiritual.

3.3.2. Procedures

The local psychology department's ethics committee approved this study, and all procedures were performed in accordance with the Italian Association of Psychology's

ethical principles (2015) for psychological research. Four public schools representing different educational tracks to recruit participants were initially visited. Permission was obtained only from two schools (see above for the type of school) to administer questionnaires during class time. Then, parents of involved adolescents were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation and the anonymity of responses. All the parents and their children provided consent for participation. The questionnaire was administered collectively during class time under my supervision and of two postgraduate students. Participants had about 40 minutes to complete the questionnaires. All measures included here are self-report.

3.3.3. Measures

Socio-demographics. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, gender, religious affiliation, and their maternal and/or paternal level of school completed.

Spirituality. Spirituality was assessed using the 28-item (α = .91) Spiritual Assessment Scale (Howden, 1992). The measure assesses these specific dimensions: purpose and meaning in life (4 items, α = .76), innerness (9 items, α = .81), unifying interconnectedness (9 items, α = .75), and transcendence (6 items, α = .65). Items (sample item: "I enjoy being of service to others") were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and were averaged to create a score for overall spirituality. The scale was translated from English into Italian following the recommendations of the International Test Commission (2010). Focus groups and interviews with developmental experts to assess face and content validity of the measure with adolescents were conducted. Based on their feedbacks, the items were adapted in a more concrete and age-related way, in the attempt to maintain the original conceptual meaning.

Religious identity formation. Two dimensions of religious identity (commitment and in-depth exploration) were measured using 10 items from the Italian version of the Utrecht-Management of Identity Commitments Scale (U-MICS; Crocetti et al., 2010). The

U-MICS assesses identity formation processes (commitment, in-depth exploration, reconsideration of commitment), and can be used to capture identity within different ideological and relational domains. As a reminder, in the present study only commitment (5 items, α = .97, sample item: "My religion gives me security in life") and in-depth exploration (5 items, α = .97, sample item: "I try to find out a lot about my religion") were examined. Items were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*completely untrue*) to 5 (*completely true*). Items were averaged within subscales.

Ethnocultural empathy. Ethnocultural empathy was measured using the 31-item (α = .85) Italian version (Albiero & Matricardi, 2013) of the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003). The measure assesses these specific dimensions: empathic feeling and expression (15 items, α = .80), empathic perspective taking (7 items, α = .62), acceptance of cultural difference (5 items, α = .74), and empathic awareness (4 items, α = .70). Items (sample item: "I share the anger of those who face injustice because of their racial and ethnic background") were rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), and were averaged to create a score for overall ethnocultural empathy. Although the scale has been primarily used with adults, in their Italian adaptation Albiero and Matricardi (2013) included late adolescents in their sample, showing good validity and reliability. Also, in a study of Le and colleagues (2009) the measure was effectively administered to youth between 11 and 15 years of age. This shows that the scale can be a valuable tool also for adolescents.

3.3.4. Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics for observed indicators were obtained using SPSS (version 23). Then, a series of structural equation models were estimated in Mplus (version 7.11). First, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted specifying latent variables for spirituality, commitment, in-depth exploration, and ethnocultural empathy, as well as all covariances between them. Second, a partial mediation model was estimated that specified

a direct path from spirituality to ethnocultural empathy as well as indirect paths through commitment and in-depth exploration. Third, a full mediation model was estimated that omitted the direct path from spirituality to ethnocultural empathy. As indicators of model fit, the Chi square (χ^2) statistic, the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA; values below .05 indicate good fit, and below .10 moderate fit), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; values above .95 indicate good fit, and values above .90 indicate moderate fit) were used.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Observed Indicators

Variables	*M*	*SD*
Spirituality		
Purpose and meaning in life	3.54	.91
Innerness	3.14	.82
Interconnectedness	3.36	.65
Transcendence	3.00	.76
Commitment		
"My religion gives me security in life"	2.73	1.29
"My religion gives me self-confidence"	2.67	1.27
"My religion makes me feel sure of myself"	2.61	1.26
"My religion gives me security for the future"	2.50	1.24
"My religion allows me to face the future with optimism"	2.67	1.30
In-depth Exploration		
"I try to find out a lot about my religion"	2.79	1.31
"I often reflect on my religion"	3.03	1.34
"I make a lot of effort to keep finding out new things about my religion"	2.62	1.29
"I often try to find out what other people think about my religion"	2.59	1.35
"I often talk with other people about my religion"	2.62	1.32
Ethnocultural Empathy		
Empathic Feeling and Expression	4.42	.77
Empathic Perspective Taking	3.71	.85
Acceptance of Cultural Differences	5.05	.97
Empathic Awareness	4.29	1.14

Note. Samples sizes ranged from 295-301.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Preliminary Analyses

Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. All items had acceptable skewness (<2). Bivariate correlations among latent variables were obtained by estimating a confirmatory factor analysis model in Mplus (see table 2). The model fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(129) = 382.86$, p = .0001, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .94, and all factor loadings were adequate (.46 to .98). All bivariate correlations were statistically significant and positive (see Table 2). Spirituality was moderately correlated with ethnocultural empathy, but strongly correlated with commitment and in-depth exploration. These last associations are not surprising since spirituality and religious identity processes, although conceptualized as distinct, may at different levels satisfy the need of individuals to find meaning and connectedness in life (Templeton & Eccles, 2006). Commitment and in-depth exploration were strongly correlated with each other. This is in line with Crocetti and colleagues' findings (2010) suggesting that adolescents with strong commitments are prone in simultaneously exploring these commitments. Finally, commitment and in-depth exploration were only moderately correlated with ethnocultural empathy.

Table 2
Estimated Bivariate Correlations Between Latent Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Spirituality	-			
2. Commitment	.52***	-		
3. In-depth Exploration	.48***	.87***	-	
4. Ethnocultural Empathy	.24***	.15*	.25***	-

Note. $N = 301$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

3.4.2. Mediation Model

Next, the partial and full mediation models were estimated. In the initial estimate of the partial mediation model age and gender were controlled for (added them as predictors

of the mediators and outcome); however, age was not a significant predictor of any of these variables and gender was only predictive of ethnocultural empathy. Thus, age was dropped and the only path retained for gender was the one to ethnocultural empathy, and the model was re-estimated. This partial mediation model fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(145) = 405.96$, $p = .0001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .08. Next, the full mediation model was similarly estimated, only adding gender as a control predicting the outcome, and this model likewise fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(146) = 414.26$, $p = .0001$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .08. Lastly, a chi-square difference test was conducted to compare fit of the partial and full mediation models, which found the full mediation model to be a significantly poorer fit to the data, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 8.30$, $p < .05$. Thus, the partial mediation model was considered the final model.

In this partial mediation model (see Figure 1), spirituality positively and strongly predicted both mediators: commitment ($b = 1.52$, $p = .0001$; $\beta = .52$) and in-depth exploration ($b = 1.34$, $p = .0001$; $\beta = .49$). Additionally, spirituality had a moderate positive direct link to ethnocultural empathy ($b = .37$, $p = .004$; $\beta = .21$). The two religious identity mediators were significantly and strongly linked to the outcome of ethnocultural empathy, with the link being negative for commitment ($b = .-24$, $p = .008$; $\beta = .-39$, $p = .005$), but positive for in-depth exploration ($b = .31$, $p = .001$; $\beta = .48$). Furthermore, the indirect effect of spirituality to ethnocultural empathy through commitment was moderate and negative ($b = .-36$, $p = .01$; $\beta = .-20$), while that through in-depth exploration was moderate and positive ($b = .42$, $p = .003$; $\beta = .23$).

Of note is that while the bivariate correlation between commitment and ethnocultural empathy was positive, the association became negative in the mediation model. Such flipping of the sign is sometimes called a suppressor effect. In essence, when taken in whole, commitment is positively predictive of ethnocultural empathy, but, given the overlap between commitment and in-depth exploration, the unique contribution of commitment in the multivariate context becomes negative in sign. In other words, the part

of commitment that is positively linked to ethnocultural empathy is redundant with in-depth exploration, and the remaining overlapping variance between commitment and ethnocultural empathy is negative.

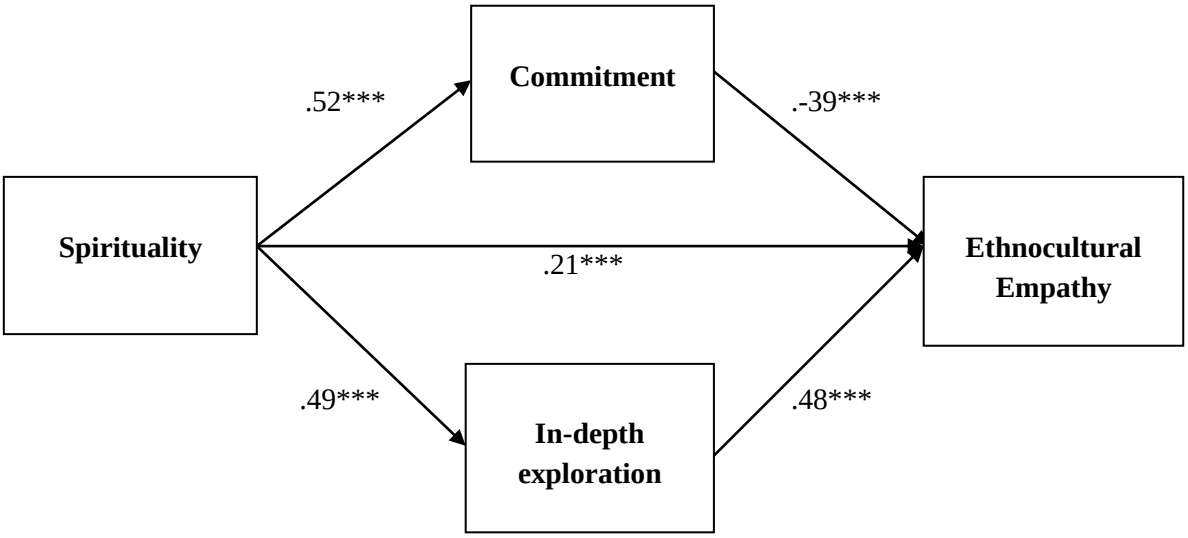


Figure 1. Path diagram for best-fitting model. *N* = 301. Model included gender as a control variable predicting Ethnocultural Empathy, and included covariances between Spirituality and gender, and between Commitment and In-depth Exploration. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients (betas). **p* <.05, ***p* <.01, ****p* < .001.

3.5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the relative and combined roles of spirituality and religious identity formation processes in predicting youths' empathetic capacity towards people from different cultural and racial backgrounds. Specifically, the conceptual model proposed in this study is that one way spirituality is linked to ethnocultural empathy is through its role in religious identity processes of commitment and in-depth exploration. Religiosity (and, therefore, its related aspects, such as religious identity) as a mediator of relations of spirituality with outcomes was first proposed by Dowling and colleagues (2004), but this was the first study to further validate this model,

and the first study to examine the relative role of spirituality and religious identity formation processes in ethnocultural empathy. Results supported the model in that indirect paths were found from spirituality through religious identity processes to ethnocultural empathy, as well as a direct path.

As expected, findings demonstrated that adolescents with an increased sense of spirituality may have higher levels of identity commitment and in-depth exploration in the domain of religiosity. This was one of the first studies to suggest spirituality as a potential predictor of processes of religious identity development. This result seems consistent with the notion of spirituality as a universal drive for something more than the mundaneness of daily life, which may stimulate young people to search for meaning and purpose, and connection to something greater than themselves, such as Higher Power or institutions and organizations (such as the religious ones) that transcend the self in space and time (Benson et al., 2012; King & Boyatzis, 2015). In the specific case of religiosity, spirituality may be a critical motivator of youth to search for, commit to, and further explore religious communities, ideologies, and practices.

The study also showed that more spiritual teens seem to have a greater empathy towards those of other cultural backgrounds. This was the first empirical work to link spirituality to ethnocultural empathy among youth. This result is in line with prior research reporting that spirituality relates to lower levels of prejudice, to higher prosocial interactions with others, and to greater empathy (Hunsinger et al., 2014; Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Markstrom et al., 2010). In terms of ethnocultural empathy specifically, it makes sense that a mindset of searching and introspection along with a desire to connect with “something greater” (universe, nature, the world) would predispose adolescents to be more accepting of others and to hold a more universal view toward humanity seeing all people as in-group members of the entire human race (Saroglou, 2013).

Another unique result of the present contribution was that one important way spirituality might foster greater ethnocultural empathy is through motivating in-depth exploration of one's identity commitments, particularly or at least in the religious domain. In other words, when young people use their spiritual inclinations to deeply explore their faith and to understand what it means to them personally, they, then, may be able to go beyond any conservative approach to beliefs and practices. In the process of doing so, they might become more open to accept someone else's religious and cultural perspective, may transcend ethnic identities and boundaries and, thus, may feel to be connected to a broader circle of humanity (Saroglou, 2013).

What is striking about the results of the present contribution is that the relation between religious identity commitment and ethnocultural empathy was actually negative, when accounting for religious in-depth exploration. As expected, religious identity commitment, distinct from in-depth exploration, maybe akin to identity foreclosure. In other words, adolescents uncritically adhering to religious beliefs and practices, that is teens whose commitment cannot be linked to conscious, personal choices, are likely to be less disposed to make efforts in order to take the perspective on the world of people from different cultural and racial backgrounds. These results are consistent with some prior works reporting that individuals in foreclosure (commitment without exploration) displayed greater prejudice (Fulton, 1997) and that it is the manner in which persons explore and process religious contents that predicts higher levels of empathy and racism, rather than mere religious practices (Duriez, 2004). As a consequence, it can be argued that it is not enough to be committed without a well integrated and internalized systems of religious beliefs for youth to develop positive intercultural attitudes.

Two important suggestions emerged from the present study about the influences of religious identity development and spirituality on adolescents' openness to cultural diversity. Firstly, religious identity formation seems to have a double-faced function on

such a marker of development. In fact, on one hand a uncritically adopted religious commitment might increase a self centered and conformist personality, as well as a closed-minded approach to the world, whereas reflecting on own beliefs might lead adolescents to move beyond the self, and toward more acceptance of other ethnic groups. For that matter, Saroglou (2012) pointed out that religion without openness to novelty consolidates social stability and personal coherence, but it goes at detriment of several important aspects of positive youth development such as autonomy, plasticity, flexibility, pluralism, and critical thinking. Secondly, adolescence might be defined as a fertile stage of life to develop a spiritual identity, the one likely promoting an identification with the world.

Overall considered, this work showed that one's sense of spiritual self and a mature explorative religious identity may be the fuel propelling younger generations to become competent citizens who are able to live in a way mindful of self and of others' as well as respectful of others' worldviews and cultural traditions (King et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2006). As such, spirituality and religiosity should be implemented in youth interventions aiming at promoting positive development, also in laical contexts. Schools, in particular, are places where a spiritual education should be always more increased, with this one promoting youngsters' critical thinking skills and personal reflection, as well as offering answers to existential questions, orientation in life, pushing youth to feel that they are part something greater than themselves, and transmitting them universal values of love and compassion (see Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

However, the role of religious communities in promoting optimal development should be taken into account as well. Specifically, they should be environments where youth feel free to express and share doubts and opinions, i.e., communities should encourage youngsters to explore their identity. In so doing , they should help youth better understand the meaning of their religious beliefs and practices, as well as integrate them in real life and relationships. Finally, they should push youth use their faith as a bridge

towards people who have different worldviews, while avoid any form of violence in the name of religious principles and any kind of distinction between “in-group” as good and “out-groups” as bad (King et al., 2011).

3.5.1. Limitations and Future Research

Although interesting, these findings should be considered in light of some limitations. First, the data were cross-sectional and correlational, thus not permitting to ascertain the causal nature of links between the studied variables, and to firmly establish the mediating processes as well. Thus, future studies should use longitudinal design in order to better ascertain temporal ordering and causality.

Second, the sample was primarily composed of Italian high school students self-categorizing as Catholic. As a consequence, it is not clear whether findings generalize to other different populations. In fact, as highlighted in several prior works, there are differences and similarities in ways religions and spirituality permeate human beings’ psychological functions according to the ages, countries and cultures they are experienced (Saroglou & Cohen, 2013; Chan et al., 2015). Future studies should include more diverse samples, particularly those that would allow for comparisons across religious affiliations and spiritual traditions. In addition, most of the sample was composed of girls. Prior investigations underlined significant differences between males and females in religiosity and spirituality (Francis & Wilcox, 1996), as well as in ethnocultural empathy (Wang et al., 2003). Consequently, future research should take into account the role of gender when examining the influence of religiosity and spirituality in such a type of cultural oriented empathy.

Another possibility that this study did not explore is the influence of parents and peers on teens’ spiritual and religious development, and on the development of attitudes towards culturally-different people. Since their roles have been found to be important in directing youth’s approach to religion and spirituality (Good & Willoughby, 2006; King &

Roeser, 2009) and to others from different cultures (Miklikowska, 2016; Killen et al., 2015), more research is needed in the future to investigate these issues. Finally, the measures were all self-report, thus, they have the potential to lead to social desirability bias. Future studies might utilize mixed methods, multiple approaches to measurement, or experimental design.

3.6. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to better elucidate the relative role of spirituality and religious identity formation processes in positive youth development, particularly in relation to how youth interact with those of other cultural backgrounds. It was found that more spiritual teens show an associated greater ethnocultural empathy, and that one process spirituality may be linked to such form of empathy is through processes of religious identity formation. Thus, the present study highlighted the potential of cultivating youth spirituality in order to foster within them a mature religious identity, and an ethnocultural empathetic ability. Briefly, spirituality may motivate teens to search, reflect, and connect, and these processes in turn help them be more open to and accepting of diverse worldviews and lifestyles. However, the caveat of the study is that religious identity formation spurred by spiritual inclinations should involve processes of exploration or it will be like to backfire, resulting in a closed-minded approach to the world and other cultures. Put differently, spirituality seems to have the potentiality to engender a movement "from an identification with a particular vision of meaning as instantiated in a particular cultural tradition towards a transcultural outlook in which an identification with the whole of humanity" (Roeser et al., p. 82). Future work should continue to clarify and investigate the relative roles of spirituality and religious identity processes in youth development, and seek to unpack the inherent complexities involved.

Chapter 4

The Association of Religious Commitment with Life Satisfaction of Italian Adolescents and Emerging Adults: The Mediating Role of Optimism

Abstract

According to PYD theoretical framework, religion plays a relevant role in promoting youth's subjective well-being. However, some scholars questioned direct association between the two constructs and turned to delineate mechanisms by which this relationship operates. In this perspective, the second study of the present dissertation aimed at testing a mediation model whereby religiosity, in terms of religious commitment, predicted satisfaction with life by way of optimism on a population of middle and late adolescents, and emerging adults. The novelty of this cross-sectional developmental study was to investigate pattern of associations among the considered variables in the light of the several changes that youth undergo in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Data were collected from Southern Italy middle (n = 164; mean age 14.78) and late adolescents (n = 131; mean age 17.85) and emerging adults (n = 167; mean age 22.10) through a self-report questionnaire. A multiple-group path analysis, using structural equation modeling with age group as the grouping variable, revealed a direct invariant association of religious commitment with life satisfaction in all three age groups as well as a significant mediating role of optimism in middle adolescents and emerging adults, but not in late adolescents. Conclusions afforded implications about why and how religiosity and optimism may contribute to positive development in different age groups of youth and emerging adults during critical phases of growth.

4.1. Rationale of the Study

Religiosity in terms of adherence to religious rituals, values and practices of an institutionalized doctrine (Hill et al., 2000), has been linked to satisfaction with life as a relevant dimension of youth's subjective well-being both within Christian and non-Christian traditions (King & Roeser, 2009; Yonker et al., 2012; Abdel-Khalek, 2011, Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2013). However, scholars have questioned direct associations between one's religiosity and life satisfaction by arguing that other social and cognitive factors might mediate such relationship (Hayward & Krause, 2014). In the attempt to shed light on the mechanisms by which religiosity can exert its salubrious effect on life satisfaction, some researchers tested models whereby religiosity influences life satisfaction by way of optimism (e.g., Salsman, Brown, Brechting, & Carlson, 2005). In fact, optimism, as a tendency to expect good things in life (Carver & Scheier, 2014), may be both a predictor of satisfaction with life (Mishra, 2013), and a positive outcome of religiosity (Krause, 2002; Schutte & Hosch, 1996; Plante, Yancey, Sherman, & Guertin, 2000). These potential relationships are also partly suggested by some recent piece of research. For instance, Zeb, Riaz, and Jahangir (2015) showed that religiosity, but not optimism, was a positive predictor of mental health. Moreover, Ferguson and Goodwin (2010) found that optimism is positively associated with both subjective and psychological well-being. Although these studies refer to a broader view of well-being, it may be that a similar set of associations is applicable also in the more specific domain of the satisfaction with life. However, further research is needed in the field. In fact, despite the increasing interest of scholars, little is known about the structural relationships amongst religiosity, optimism, and life satisfaction, especially during the passage from adolescence to emerging adulthood.

On the basis of these premises, this study aimed at testing a mediation model whereby religiosity predicted satisfaction with life both directly and by way of optimism in

adolescents and emerging adults. This contribution was framed within the Positive Youth Development perspective (PYD; Lerner, 2005) positing that religion as a significant ideological and social resource promotes young people's successful growth (King & Roeser, 2009). Indeed, not only religion serves as a meaning-making system helping youth answer existential questions and orient their lives, but it also provides them with worldviews, values, beliefs, and social support, guiding them in the ages of transition from adolescence to adulthood (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014).

4.1.1. Religiosity, Well-Being, and the Mediating Role of Optimism

Empirical evidence suggests that religiosity is positively associated with psychological well-being and mental health of adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., Kirk & Lewis, 2013; Yonker et al., 2012; Wong, Rew, & Slaikeu, 2006). Particularly, religiosity was shown to be positively linked to life satisfaction (Abdel-Khalek, 2012; Kelley & Miller, 2007), considered as the conscious cognitive judgment of one's personal well-being (Pavot & Diener, 1993). However, scholars have questioned the direct influence of religiosity on life satisfaction, reporting that religiosity might also work in conjunction with other socio-cultural, cognitive, and individual variables (Hayward & Krause, 2014; Van Cappellen et al., 2016a). For instance, Sabatier and colleagues (2011) showed that religiosity promotes family relationship values and family interdependence (i.e., family orientation) among adolescents which, in turn, enhances their satisfaction with life. Moreover, they highlighted that such links are stronger in high religious countries than in secular ones. Regarding cognitive variables, on a sample of university students Steger & Frazier (2005) reported that religiousness provides individuals with meaning in their lives which, in turn, increases their well-being and psychological health. Nonetheless, more research is needed to explain how and why religiosity can exert its beneficial effects on well-being among adolescents and emerging adults.

In order to clarify this mechanism, it is possible to consider the mediating role of optimism. Indeed, studies have found that optimism is positively linked with markers of psychological well-being, such as life satisfaction, sense of meaning and purpose in life, and overall quality of life (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Mishra, 2013), and acts as a positive outcome of religiosity (e.g., Krause, 2002). Relatedly, research by Salsman and colleagues (2005) found that religiousness and prayer fulfillment are associated with satisfaction with life through optimism among emerging adults. However, further studies are needed to take into account the developmental changes youth undergo in the passage from adolescence to adulthood. In fact, this transition period is a time of both great opportunities and vulnerabilities (Dahl, 2004; Kirk & Lewis, 2013), during which religiosity has been shown to play a salient role in protecting adolescents against mental illness (e.g., depression, Pearce et al., 2003) and health-risk behaviors (e.g., alcohol use; Jankowski et al., 2013). Also, it prevents destructive behaviors such as violence (Salas-Wright et al., 2014), delinquency (Johnson et a., 2001), and aggression (Hardy et al., 2012). Such beneficial effects have been also reported among emerging adults (for review, Magyar-Russell, Deal, & Brown, 2014). As abundant research pointed out, there are several possible explanations about why religiosity promotes positive youth development (King & Boyatzis, 2015). For instance, faith based organizations exert a certain extent of social control, and provide adolescents and emerging adults with beliefs, values, and spiritual mentors guiding them during their growth (King, 2003; Whitney & King, 2014).

4.1.2 Relationships between Religiosity, Optimism, and Life Satisfaction in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Adolescence (approximately from 10/11 to 18 years old) and emerging adulthood (approximately from 18 to 29 year old) are two critical phases in the life cycle. The former is a period of transition from childhood to adult roles marked by puberty and self-concept

formation, while the latter bridges adolescence and adulthood through a prolonged exploration and construction of one's identity (Arnett, 2014; Dahl, 2004). Abundant research underlined that adolescents and emerging adults experience religion in different ways because of the numerous developmental changes they go through (Barry et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2015). During early and middle adolescence, individuals' images of God begin to be more abstract, internalized and personal than in childhood, but their religious beliefs are still not critically articulated and, to some extent, conform to the ones inherited from parents (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Differently, during the transition from high school to college, adolescents possess a greater set of cognitive capacities helping them to reflect on different aspects of the self and on the culture they live in (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). As a consequence, they start to search for a beliefs system consistent with the values they have accumulated (Steinberg, 1999). Once they age into emerging adulthood, individuals tend to disaffiliate from religious practices and communities, and to show a greater interest in exploring their religious identities. This is mainly due to their advancement in pragmatic and rational thinking, to their willingness to be self-sufficient and to form their own beliefs. At this phase, religiosity becomes a private concern, often characterized by skepticism toward religious institutions (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Barry et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2015).

In light of these developmental underpinnings, it is reasonable to suppose that the links among religiosity, optimism, and life satisfaction may change with age according to differences in the ways of experiencing religion. For instance, given that younger adolescents might hold more idealized representations of God as a supporting entity (Fowler & Dell, 2006), they may tend to be more optimistic about life when religiosity is a salient dimension. In addition, they are encouraged to see their lives as meaningful by religious communities and groups they belong to, and by peers, clergy, or adults with whom they share the same beliefs (Kelley & Miller, 2007). Contrary, late adolescents may

report weaker associations with optimism because of their more probing approach to religiosity, which may not be necessarily seen as something that gives security and positive expectations for the future. However, it could be that, regardless of such more critical approach to religiosity, religious beliefs are still likely to be a dimension guaranteeing late adolescents purpose and well-being. Adolescents transitioning to adulthood, in fact, always increasingly explore and reexamine their faith rather than definitely reject it (Chan et al., 2015). Put differently, the role of religiosity as a protective factor against distress and maladjustment remains relevant when religiosity is salient, despite adolescents at this stage of life put their positive expectancies of future in the achievement of other developmental tasks (Ek, Remes, & Sovio, 2003). In emerging adulthood, instead, the relationships among religiosity, optimism and life satisfaction may be strengthened, since religiosity is now chosen and experienced in a more private, autonomous way (Magyar-Russel et al., 2014). In other words, emerging adults have an individualistic approach to religion leading them to retain religious beliefs and principles fitting their interests and making them feeling good; also, they tend to experience a more close, personal relationship with God that, rather to be seen as a negative force, is considered as a loving, forgiving one (Smith & Snell, 2009; Barkin, Miller, & Luthar, 2015). This new way of living religious faith could be a promoter of a generalized expectation of positive future outcomes and of an overall satisfaction with life. Unfortunately, to date, to best of my knowledge, there is no empirical research investigating age related trends in the associations between religiosity, optimism and life satisfaction. Thus, the novel aspect of this study is to fill in this gap. In doing so, the way these associations occur in a particular cultural context, like the Italian one, has been explored. This is a relevant point considering that culture may play a key role in the association between religiosity and well-being (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011).

4.1.3. Context and Cultural Distinctiveness of the Study Sample

Italy represents an important context for studying this topic, given that Catholicism is a very influential and salient cultural feature of the nation because of social and historical reasons. In fact, differently from other European countries, especially the Northern ones, in Italy young people continue to grow up in a society strongly marked by traditional religious culture, although secularized. As a consequence, in line with studies that have found that religiosity affects both happiness and life satisfaction of people from different countries (e.g., Graham & Crown, 2014), it might be that in Italy Catholic religious beliefs act as an anchorage offering security and assurance (Garelli, 2013), especially in a time of difficult social and economic crisis (e.g., unemployment, limited social policies) that may disorient youth, increase uncertainty toward the future, and negatively affect their well-being (Crocetti, Rabaglietti, & Sica, 2012; Karaś et al., 2015). In other words, religiosity may represent a resource for young people to enhance their life satisfaction both directly and indirectly by way of optimism in line with the predictions of PYD. Notwithstanding this background, in Italy there is a delay on investigating this topic, mainly due to the lack of reliable and valid instruments to assess religiosity (Laudadio & D'Alessio 2010); consequently, such a situation may hinder cross-cultural comparisons with other contexts.

4.2. The Present Study

On the basis of previous research (e.g., Salsman et al., 2005), as well as on the need of a deeper understanding of how religiosity, optimism and life satisfaction relate during adolescence and emerging adulthood, the purpose of the present contribution was to test a partial mediation model (see Figure 1) whereby religiosity is associated with life satisfaction also by way of optimism in three age groups (middle adolescents, late adolescents, and emerging adults). Religiosity was conceptualized in terms of religious

commitment that is “the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices and uses them in daily living” (Worthington et al., 2003, p. 85). Optimism was conceived as a mental attitude consisting of the tendency to expect good things in life (Carver & Scheier, 2014). Satisfaction with life was defined in terms of judgments individuals make about how much their life, as a whole, is good (Pavot & Diener, 1993). In particular, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1. Religiosity is positively associated with life satisfaction in all age groups.

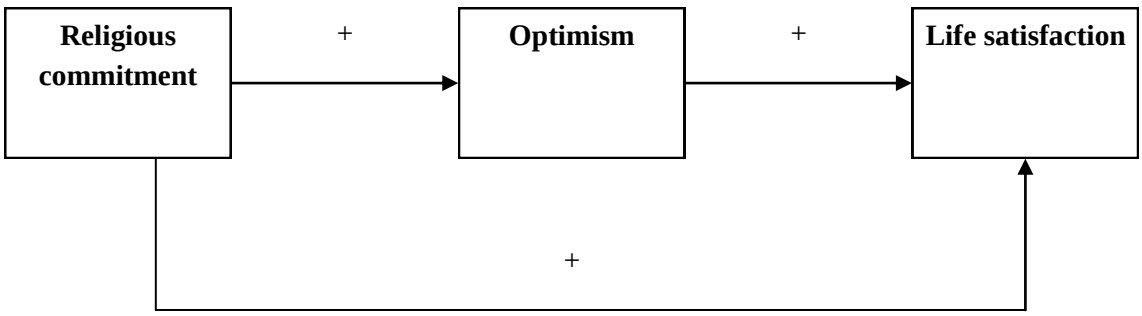
H2. Religiosity is more positively associated with optimism in middle adolescents and emerging adults than in late adolescents.

H3. Optimism is positively associated with life satisfaction in all age groups.

H4. Optimism has a more relevant mediating role in the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction in middle adolescents and emerging adults than in late adolescents.

Unique contribution of this study is that it is one of the first to test a clear theoretical model of the joint and relative role of religiosity and optimism in promoting Italian adolescents and emerging adult’s well-being, in terms of life-satisfaction. Moreover, it is the first study to examine these relationships in a cross-sectional developmental study in the Italian context.

Figure 1
The Theoretical Model



4.3. Method

4.3.1. Sample

Participants were 164 individuals in middle adolescence (146 girls), 131 individuals in late adolescence (109 girls), and 167 individuals in emerging adulthood (153 girls); they were of Italian origin and were living in Palermo, one of the largest cities in Southern Italy. The middle adolescence group included ninth through tenth graders attending Italian high schools. The participants' age of this group ranged from 14 to 16 years (M = 14.78, SD = 0.84). In terms of religious affiliation, the majority of participants declared to be Catholic (78%). Seventy-three percent of their mothers and 72% of their fathers had at least a high school education. The late adolescence group included twelfth through thirteenth graders attending Italian high schools. The participants' age of this group ranged from 17 to 19 years (M = 17.85, SD = 0.82). In terms of religious affiliation, the majority of participants declared to be Catholic (72%). Fifty-eight percent of their mothers and 61% of their fathers had at least a high school education. The emerging adulthood group included undergraduate students attending psychology classes at the University of Palermo. The participants' age of this group ranged from 20 to 30 years (M = 22.10, SD = 1.88). In terms of religious affiliation, the majority of participants declared to be Catholic (80%). Fifty-nine percent of their mothers and 56% of their fathers had at least a high school education.

4.3.2. Procedures

The local psychology department's ethics committee approved this study and all procedures were performed in accordance with the Italian Association of Psychology's (2015) ethical principles for psychological research. Participants were recruited from two public, unconfessional high schools - a psycho-pedagogical lyceum and a vocational

school for tourism and communication - and from the Department of Psychological, Educational, and Training Sciences of the University of Palermo. After obtaining written consent from school principals and teachers, university dean and faculties, and from participants and their parents (in the case of adolescents), a survey assessing different aspects of religiousness and well-being was administered collectively during class sessions, both at the high schools and at the university, under my supervision and of two postgraduate students. The survey took no longer than 40 minutes to complete; all the measure were self-report.

4.3.3. Measures

Socio-demographics. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, gender, religious affiliation, and their maternal and/or paternal level of school completed.

Religious commitment. Religious commitment was assessed using the 10-item Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003). The items (e.g., "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life") capture commitment in terms of adherence to one's religious values, beliefs, and practices. Items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not all true of me*) to 5 (*totally true of me*) and were averaged to create an overall score with higher scores indicating higher levels of religious commitment. Cronbach's alphas varied between .91 and .95 across age groups. The scale was translated from English into Italian following the recommendations of the International Test Commission (2010). Focus groups and interviews with developmental experts to assess face and content validity of the measure with adolescents were conducted. Based on their feedbacks, the items were adapted in a more age-related way, in the attempt to maintain the original conceptual meaning.

Optimism. Optimism was assessed using the 10-item Italian version of the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Giannini, Schuldberg, Di Fabio, & Gargaro, 2008;

Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). The items (e.g., "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best") capture positive expectations for future outcomes, except for the four filler items that were not scored. Items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). After reversing the three negatively worded items, responses were averaged to create an overall score of optimism, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the construct. Cronbach's alphas varied between .63 and .80 across the age groups.

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was assessed using the 5-item Italian version of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Goldwurm, Baruffi, & Colombo, 2004; Pavot & Diener, 1993). The items (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life") capture the perception of one's quality life. Items were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and were averaged to create an overall score of satisfaction with life, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the construct. Cronbach's alphas varied between .83 and .87 across age groups.

4.3.4. Analysis Plan

A multiple group path analysis was performed using structural equation modeling with age group as grouping variable. All analyses controlled for age within each group and gender (assumed as uncorrelated in the model). According to Faraci and Musso (2013), to evaluate model fit, different indices were inspected (adopted cut-offs in parentheses): chi-square test with the associated *p*-value ($p > .05$), comparative fit index (CFI $\geq .95$), and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA $\leq .06$; RMSEA 90% CI $\leq .10$). Initially, an unconstrained model in which path coefficients were allowed to vary between three age groups was tested. Next, a constrained model where all path coefficients were set equal across age groups was tested and compared with the unconstrained model using the chi-square difference ($\Delta\chi^2$), the difference in CFI values (ΔCFI) and the difference in

RMSEA values (ΔRMSEA). If $\Delta\chi^2$ had been smaller than the chi-square critical value at the difference in degrees of freedom of the two tested models, ΔCFI > -.010 and ΔRMSEA < .015 (Chen, 2007), the more restrictive model would have been preferred; otherwise, the less restrictive model would have provided a better fit to the data. In the latter case, a partially constrained model would then have been tested.

4.4. Results

Descriptive statistics for the key study variables are summarized in Table 1. The initial unconstrained model had a good fit, $\chi^2(3) = 1.66$, $p = .64$; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00 [90% C.I. = .000 - .10]. The constrained version of the model had a significantly worse fit compared to the unconstrained model, $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 16.15$, $p < .05$, ΔCFI = -.040, ΔRMSEA = .080. Inspection of modification indices suggested releasing the constraint between religious commitment and optimism for late adolescents. The partially constrained model had excellent fit, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 6.33$, $p > .05$, ΔCFI = .000, ΔRMSEA = .000. Standardized coefficients for this final model are shown in Figure 2.

Within the middle adolescence and emerging adult groups, direct links showed that religious commitment was significantly connected with increases in optimism and satisfaction with life as well as optimism was significantly related with increases in satisfaction with life. Also, there was evidence of mediating positive role of optimism between religious commitment and satisfaction with life (respectively, $\beta = .12$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .13$, $p < .001$). Within the late adolescence group, direct links showed that religious commitment and optimism were significantly connected with increases in satisfaction with life, but no significant relation emerged between religious commitment and optimism. As a consequence, no evidence of mediating role of optimism in the relationship between religiosity and life satisfaction was found ($\beta = -.03$, $p > .05$).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables

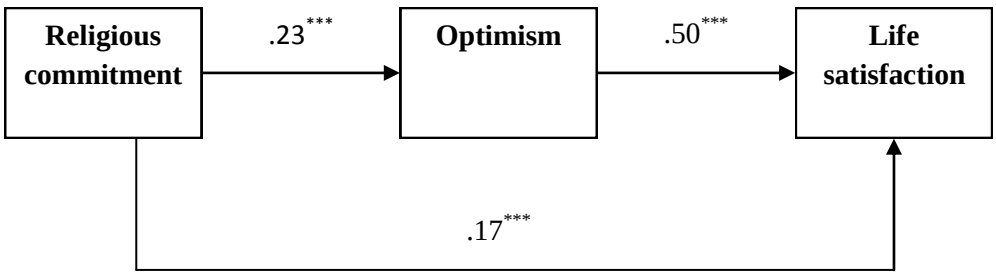
Variable	1.	2.	3.
Middle adolescents (*n* = 164)			
1. Religious commitment	-		
2. Optimism	.33***	-	
3. Satisfaction with life	.35***	.61***	-
M	2.14	3.10	4.20
SD	0.74	0.71	1.47
Late adolescents (*n* = 131)			
1. Religious commitment	-		
2. Optimism	-.01	-	
3. Satisfaction with life	.22*	.49***	-
M	2.10	3.18	4.36
SD	1.01	0.63	1.20
Emerging adults (*n* = 167)			
1. Religious commitment	-		
2. Optimism	.17*	-	
3. Satisfaction with life	.26***	.50***	-
M	2.17	3.18	4.28
SD	1.06	0.68	1.25

*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$

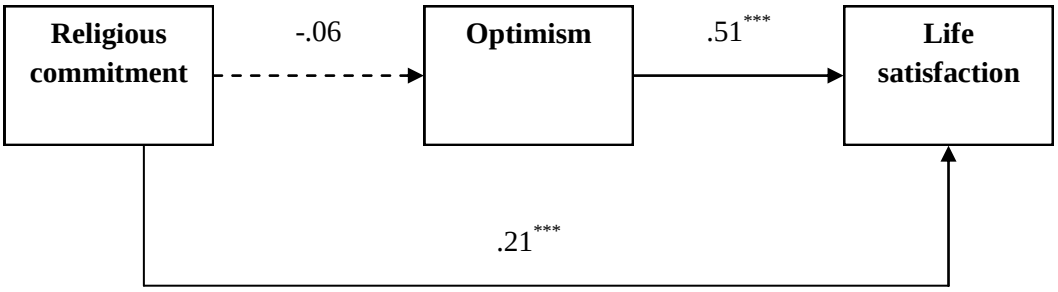
Figure 2

Final multiple-group path model for the relationships between study variables, moderated by age group.

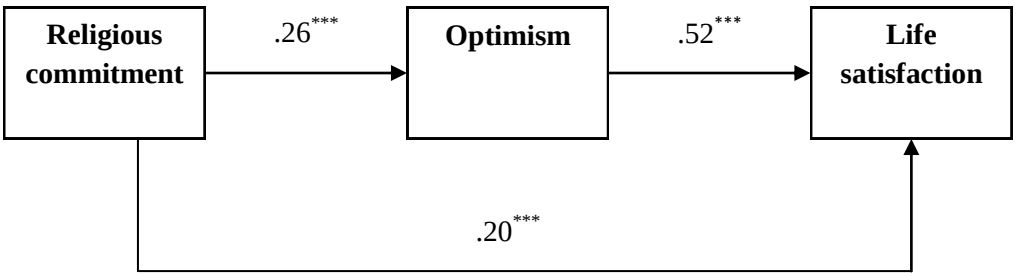
Middle adolescent group



Late adolescent group



Emerging adult group



Note: Maximum likelihood standardized coefficients are shown. Solid lines represent significant pathways, dashed lines represent non-significant relationships. Controlling variables (age within each group and gender) are not presented for reasons of parsimony. $^{***}p < .001$.

4.5. Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to better elucidate the relative and combined contribution of religiosity and optimism in promoting adolescents and emerging adults' well-being. Framed within the PYD perspective, the tested conceptual model assumed that religiosity is linked to positive evaluation of life also through its role in directing one's view of life events in a hopeful way, i.e., optimism. The present study was the first to test such a model in Italy, a cultural context in which religiosity (i.e., Catholicism) is widespread and particularly salient for individuals' life (Garelli, 2013). A close look to recent surveys reveals that 62% of Italians declare to be practicing Catholic, whereas 38%

to be non-practicing Catholic. With regards to young population, statistics show that 68% of people between 15 and 34 years of age define themselves as Catholic (Doxa, 2014). However, some scholars have pointed out that in the nation two kinds of Catholic religious identities coexist: the one being something culturally inherited rather than profoundly experienced, and the other of people who show an internalized and committed adherence to the principles and to the doctrines of such faith (Bader, Molle, & Baker, 2012).

Another novelty of this study consisted in investigating how religiosity, optimism, and satisfaction with life relate to one another in different phases of the life cycle.

In general, results are in line with the predictions. Direct paths from religiosity and optimism to life satisfaction were found in all the examined age groups (middle adolescents, late adolescents, and emerging adults). Religiosity was directly and positively associated to optimism as well as indirectly and positively related to life satisfaction among middle adolescents and emerging adults, but not among late adolescents. These findings demonstrated that both adolescents and emerging adults with an increased religious commitment tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction, as suggested by previous work (Kim, Miles-Mason, Kim & Esquivel, 2013; Abdel-Khalek, 2012). This kind of connection may also be mediated by the role of the optimistic views, but it seems to depend on age specific developmental characteristics of adolescence and of emerging adulthood. In fact, a positive association between religious commitment and levels of optimism was found only among middle adolescents and emerging adults, whereas no significant relationship was found among late adolescents.

From a developmental standpoint, the presence of age-related differences in the association between religiosity, optimism, and life satisfaction may be explained by considering the changes in the ways of experiencing religiosity that occur during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Middle adolescents are more influenced by the religious beliefs and values of their parents and other social agencies (King, Furrow, &

Roth, 2002). Also, their conception of religiosity is quite idealized and immature given that they are still not able to find their own manner to personally interpret religious contents and beliefs, because of their lower levels of cognitive and identity development (Fowler & Dell, 2006). However, it might be that, in a context like Italy, where a collective dimension of religion is still salient (Garelli, 2007), middle adolescents showing high religious commitment rely on practices and communities of their religious tradition to find purpose in life, hope, and support. Late adolescents, instead, develop a more critical thinking and stable sense of identity helping them to reflect on the culture they live in and on their religious beliefs (Chan et al., 2015; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). As a consequence, they become more able to differentiate diverse domains of their lives, such as religion, family, school/work, and personal relationships; at the same time, religiosity is not necessarily considered as a dimension that guarantees security and positive expectations for the future. On the contrary, it might be questioned and doubted (Chan et al., 2015). For this reason, late adolescents are likely to put their optimistic expectancies of the future in something different than religiosity, which may be identified in other individual and social resources (e. g., personal qualities, success at school, work, or in social relationships; Ek, Remes, & Sovio, 2004). Finally, further cognitive and social advances make emerging adults more able to frame their lives through the lens of a personal set of religious beliefs that they have matured independently of parents or of the influence of religious institutions (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Therefore, during this period, religious commitment is experienced with higher awareness and its associations with optimism and positive expectations towards the future are positively reconsidered. This is especially valid in a cultural context like the Italian one where religiosity represents a resource in times of struggle that enhances hope that things can get on the right side (Garelli, 2013).

In summary, religiosity seems to be an important positive correlate of well-being in terms of life satisfaction. This link can be both direct and indirect through the mediating

role of optimism. However, the latter case depends on age specific developmental characteristics that adolescence and emerging adulthood undergo. Still, these processes are primarily relevant in cultural contexts in which the religious dimension is clearly salient and helps individuals hold religious beliefs - either inherited, or passively accepted or personally chosen - that provide them with optimistic expectancies about future and an overall positive evaluation of their lives.

4.5.1. Limitations and Future Research

Although results provide interesting insights into the associations between religiosity and well-being among Italian adolescents and emerging adults, they should be considered in light of some limitations. First, the data were cross-sectional and correlational, which hinders the possibility of clearly establishing the mediating processes. Thus, longitudinally research is needed to determine temporal ordering and causality. Second, the measures were all self-report and, as a consequence, they might lead to social desirability bias. Future studies should adopt mixed methods to provide additional information about the views of adolescents and emerging adults on religiosity and its effects on well-being, as well as experimental designs in order to obtain more rigid results. Third, the sample was mostly composed of girls within both adolescents' group and emerging adults' one. As a consequence, although gender as a control variable was inserted in the tested multiple group model, it was not possible to reliably investigate gender differences in this contribution. However, as suggested by literature, there exist differences in the ways males and females approach religiosity (King & Roeser, 2009; Chan et al., 2015), even though such discrepancies might be considered as culture-specific, rather than generalizable (Loewenthal, MacLeod, & Cinnirella, 2002). Also, gender has been found to be a moderator on the association between religiosity and well-being (Maselko & Kubzansky, 2006). Consequently, future research should take into account the

role of gender in examining the influence of religiosity on well-being. In addition, it would be useful to investigate potential differences emerging when adopting an approach that distinguishes between religious and non-religious people. In this sense, the main question would be whether those declaring themselves non-believers would also show a significant relationship between optimism and life satisfaction, and, thus, have a hopeful and optimistic mental attitude in life. Although prior works pointed out that optimism is linked to satisfaction with life independently of individuals' religiosity (e.g., Mishra, 2013), next investigations should mainly implement such facet to better elucidate the specific contribution of religiosity and optimism on youth and emerging adults' good life conditions. Finally, this research mainly focused on an individual level of analysis while neglecting the impact of social resources, such as family or peers (Barry et al., 2010; King et al., 2002; King, 2003), on the associations between religiosity and adolescents and emerging adults' well-being. Further studies should also investigate these issues.

4.6. Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study made a novel contribution to the literature. First, it highlighted that religiosity is likely to positively affect youth's psychological well-being, contrary to prior works showing that it might be associated with mental health problems such as depressive symptoms (Cotton et al., 2005), and with negative emotions such as feelings of guilt and alienation (Exline et al., 2000). Second, it extends the understanding of how religion is related to the trajectories of psychological well-being among adolescents and emerging adults growing in contexts where religion is closely aligned with culture. In fact, while some other studies confirmed the mediation role of optimism in the relationship between religiosity, well-being and mental health among emerging adults (Salsman et al. 2005) and adults (Hirsch, Nsamenang, Chang, & Kaslow

2014), to my knowledge this is the first one to address such a topic including Italian adolescents along with emerging adults.

Over all considered, the questions and the issues so far addressed shed light on the mechanisms by which religiosity may help adolescents and emerging adults enhance their positive expectations about future outcomes, and promote their life satisfaction. In addition, the current research highlighted that there are age-related changes in these mechanisms. In line with the PYD framework, such findings may be useful for the design of age-specific intervention programs considering religiosity as a significant resource promoting young people's successful growth. These interventions may result in an enhancement of optimistic and satisfactory life-styles among youth and, in turn, in a potential strengthening of their contribution to self, family, and society, as the PYD literature suggests (Lerner et al., 2006). In this sense, religiosity, optimism, and satisfaction with life as well as their relationships can be considered as significant resources that can positively contribute to the ecology of youth and emerging adults, in terms of both theoretical explanations and practical interventions.

General Conclusions

Youth growing up in a globalized world and in industrialized countries face challenges that may hinder their full potential to develop both in relationships with others and within themselves (Van Dyke & Elias, 2007). Religiosity and spirituality have been shown to play a meaningful role in promoting youngsters' successful growth both at individual and social levels in different countries and within diverse religious traditions and ethnic groups (e. g., Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996; Markstrom, 1999; Abdel-Khalek, 2012; Abdel-Khalek, 2007; French, Purwono, Triwahyuni, 2011; Sun & Shek, 2010). In line with previous research, the two works of the present dissertation highlighted that spiritual and religious development of Italian adolescents and emerging adults may be the fuel propelling them to contribute to self and to the good of greater society.

These pieces of empirical evidence were consistent with the PYD theoretical perspective on religiosity and spirituality which assumes that the two phenomena offer young people a set of ideological and relational resources promoting their thriving along with the opportunity to experience a growing sense of transcendence, an emotional and motivational force pushing individuals to search for innerness, interconnectedness with others and High Power, answers to ultimate questions, meaning in life, and the sacred (King, 2003; Yust et al., 2006; Benson et al., 2012; Lerner et al., 2003).

In details, turning back to the two studies, they revealed that an achieved religious identity together with a personal sense of spirituality fostered within Italian youth both a feeling of belongingness to a broader circle of humanity including members of out-groups with different traditions and worldviews, and a great sensitivity towards culturally-different people. Moreover, they reported that endorsing a religion, such as Catholicism, and daily relying on its values, beliefs, and practices may help young people have a positive approach to life events as well as to feel satisfied with their lives in general.

In the context of the important changes occurring in the Italian youth religious landscape, such as the increasing number of young non-believers, the emerging of individualized forms of adhesion to Catholicism, and the participation in new, alternative expressions of spirituality (Garelli, 2016; AIED, 2014), the results of the two works showed interesting features of Italian young people's spirituality and religiosity and of the relations of the two phenomena with markers of positive development (ethnocultural empathy and subjective well-being). Firstly, for Italian adolescents and emerging adults religion is an important source of certainty and security in a society strongly marked by solitude and individualism, by the collapse of moral values and solid ideals, and by the lack of point of reference providing them with purpose and meaning in life (Marta & Serio, 2014). This seems to happen at least in Southern Italy, that part of the country where Catholicism has always been greatly diffused and attractive to youngsters who, nowadays, may find in it an anchorage in a time of hard economic and societal difficulties. Secondly, young people's spirituality, on one hand, is the key factor pushing them to commit to, explore, and quest religious beliefs and ideologies which, in turn, enhance their ethnocultural empathetic capacity. On the other, spirituality seems to act as a drive putting youth in contact with something of great value, such as the whole of humanity, independently of their religiosity. This seems to reveal that in Italy young people's spiritual dimension has a life of its own, but that in some way it still coexists with and is related to the traditional religious beliefs and practices; such a situation opens up to new profiles of religiosity and spirituality among Italian youth (Garelli, 2016).

Beyond theoretical considerations, the two studies provided useful suggestions for planning youth interventions in diverse contexts, both laical and religious. As to attitudes towards other cultures, study 1 highlighted the role of spirituality and religious identity formation in predicting ethnocultural empathy, a learned ability and a personal trait which needs to be fostered during the lifespan (Wang et al., 2003). In particular, it revealed that a

spiritual vision of life and a mature religious identity may uniquely and jointly develop such kind of empathy which, in turn, may prevent prejudice and discriminating behaviors among youngsters. In line with PYD assumptions on religious and spiritual issues, interventions aiming at increasing young people's positive attitudes towards culturally-different people should implement the several ideological, relational and transcendent resources offered by religiosity and spirituality. For instance, these interventions might use stories of men and women (religious and spiritual persons) who acted to reduce intergroup conflict, that is people who lived in their fleshes the values of universal love and peace; also, they might promote meditation in order to help youngsters experience feelings of love and compassion. In addition, they should help youth shift from a literally approach to religious contents and texts to a more flexible interpretation of them (Doehring, 2013). This would permit youth to be in a constant exploration of their beliefs and religious principles, and to be more accepting of other traditions. Relatedly, programs should introduce values and doctrines of other religions in order to (1) guide young people to compare own religious faith with other ones, (2) help them find point of communalities, (3) better understand what they are used to believe in through the examination of their creed from new perspectives, and (4) facilitate encounters with people relying on different religious worldviews and practices. In other words, such programs should promote processes of knowledge in the attempt to reduce distances between groups and to foster perspective taking.

As to subjective well-being, study 2 suggested that interventions in support of young people's psychological well-being should consider age-related differences in the ways adolescents and emerging adults experience and rely on their faith in order to allow religion to be beneficial for youth's mental attitudes and health. Following such assessments, interventions may efficiently tap specific young people's existential needs and provide them with effective answers to stressors weakening their psychological well-

being. In particular, in a context like Italy with challenging societal circumstances, but with a salient religious dimension, programs should implement religious and spiritual beliefs of young people as coping mechanisms helping them frame life events in a positive way (Frank & Kendall, 2001; Pargament & Raiya, 2007). In fact, it has been shown that beliefs in a deity, such as the Christian God, can be very functional in providing strategies to overcome crisis. As such, interventions should help youth see personal experiences in the light of a greater plan God has for them, as well as lead them to feel that God is in control in situations over which they may are not (for review, Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, 2013). In other words, such programs should promote a personal positive relation with the divine which may foster feelings that things will go in the right way. As pointed out, religion is not a solid source of optimism for late adolescents. In this case, interventions (for example within religious organizations or movements) could primarily, but not exclusively, focus on social aspects of religiosity, that is to say on relationships intertwined in the communities. Briefly, such interventions should promote adolescents' positive identification and connection with members of religious organizations, both peers and adults. In fact, trustworthy relations may be the means by which youth gain self-worth, self-understanding, hope, and well-being (King, 2003). Alternatively, they could focus on other cognitive resources available through religion, such as meaning in life, which has been found to mediate in relationships between religiosity and psychological well-being (Steger & Frazier, 2005).

Of course, the two studies of the present dissertation have some limitations that should be taken into account. For instance, they are cross-sectional, thus they did not permit to establish the mediating process, as well as to ascertain temporal ordering and causality. Nonetheless, they suggested promising grounds for further investigations with longitudinal samples. Additionally, results are strictly circumscribed to the present operationalizations of spirituality and religiosity which took into account some aspects of

adolescents and emerging adults' religious and spiritual dimensions and ignored others, such as frequency of prayer, church attendance, involvement in spiritual and religious groups, or the adhesion to non-traditional expressions of modern spiritual offerings (e.g., the oriental ones). Also, the two studies did not consider both the influences of familial and extra-familial relationships on youth's personal spiritual journey (Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006; Barry et al., 2010), and the effects of individual differences (personal traits and values) on youth's approach to religiosity and spirituality (Heaven & Ciarrocchi, 2007; Saroglou, 2012). Future studies should implement and investigate these important issues. In addition, it could be illuminating to use in the future person-centered analyses to identify typologies of religiosity and spirituality in adolescents and emerging adults and compare these groups on psychological well-being and ethnocultural empathy. Finally, the research studies did not allow for cross-cultural comparison, mainly because of the limited ethnic, racial, and religious composition of the samples, which were mostly constituted of Italian Catholic high school and college students. Future research is needed to determine whether associations between spirituality, religiosity and markers of positive development depend on one's religious affiliation, on the ethnicity of believers, as well as on the socio-cultural context where religiosity and spirituality are experienced.

However, one of the strengths of the present dissertation was the solid theoretical background, that is the PYD perspective that, to my knowledge, for the first time was used in Italy in the domain of youth's religious and spiritual development studies. As shown in this contribution, PYD in an innovative way posited that spiritual and religious development of young people are essential aspects of their growth, since they propel them to meaningfully contribute to self and larger society. In other words, according to PYD spiritual dimension of youth is very helpful in fueling adaptive developmental regulations between individual and context (Dowling et al., 2004). As such, adolescents and emerging adults' spirituality and religiosity deserve greater attention both from academics and

greater, civil society. In this sense, this work was intended as a first step in Italy in the yet scarcely explored field of research interested in understanding how religiosity and spirituality apply to Italian youth psychosocial development. It is hoped that the insights offered will move the field forward in better understanding "whether, when, and under what ecological conditions, and for what youth, spirituality and religiosity provide independent or combined sources of exemplary positive youth development" (Lerner et al., 2006, p. 70). This seems to be urgent in a historical time where sacred matters divide societies rather than unifying them, foster religious violence rather than promoting peace.

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