Spirituality and Resilience in Adolescent Girls

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Each of us has to figure out how we can pray to [G-d]. Everybody is different. For me, I do not say the usual prayers we learn in church. For me, I write. I write and write and write what is on my mind, and then [G-d] comes through. (Angelina, a 15-year-old minister’s daughter)

Angelina’s highly personal process of relating with the Divine reveals some normative hallmarks of adolescent spiritual development. Theologians and theoretical psychologists have identified adolescence as a period of “spiritual awakening” characterized by a search for meaning, an intensified capacity for spiritual experience, and a process of using this personal spiritual experience to question many of the religious beliefs and tenets learned in childhood (Fowler, 1981; Groeschel, 1983). Such a process of spiritual individuation clearly relies on the concomitant emergence of metacognition, identity work, and, more uniquely, a quest to know and achieve harmony with the Creator. The energy and focus given to spiritual understanding might also be viewed as more concentrated in adolescence. So, too, the great reward of better knowing the Creator emerges in adolescence.

I had the most beautiful dream. I was in a library made of beautiful wood and it was showered with light. Lining the walls were books and books of knowledge about [G-d], and I knew that I was going to learn about Him. (Vivian, a 16-year-old Baha’i)

A growing body of quantitative research confirms as well as sheds further light on the developmental path of religiousness in adolescence. One line of quantitative research on developmental religiosity stems from Kendler, Gardner, and Prescott’s (1997, 1999) twin studies of adult women. The researchers empirically derived three dimensions of religiousness: personal devotion (a direct personal relationship with the Divine), personal conservatism (close adherence to creed), and institutional conservatism (relative
fundamentalism of religious denomination). These three dimensions of religiousness were replicated using confirmatory factor analysis in a nationally representative sample of adolescents (Miller, Davies, & Greenwald, 2000); the association between the former two dimensions was significantly higher in adolescents ($r = .77$) than in adults ($r = .33$), however, suggesting relatively less distinction between personal spirituality and creed in adolescence. In addition, compared with adults, a greater association was found among adolescents between religious denomination and personal devotion ($r = .37$ vs. $r = .18$) and personal conservativism ($r = .46$ vs. $r = .38$), respectively, indicating relatively less distinction in adolescents between personal religiousness and religious denomination.

The lesser distinction between the three dimensions of religiousness in adolescents potentially suggests that there is in childhood a process of mutual facilitation that necessarily precedes the articulation of distinct dimensions throughout adolescence. An example of mutual facilitation might be that involvement in a fundamentalist denomination encourages children to understand daily experience as part of G-d’s plan, which in turn fosters a relationship with G-d, defined in the research literature as personal devotion. Kendler and colleagues (1997) found that approximately 29% of the differences between adults in strength of personal devotion are attributable to heritable factors. If personal devotion is in part determined by nonenvironmental factors, then participation in religious denomination may clarify, define, and augment an innate awareness of G-d. Subsequent differentiation between the three dimensions of religiousness closely parallels Fowler’s (1981) theory of the Individuation Phase in the development of faith, a spiritual individuation process driven by reevaluation of religious beliefs based on personal religious experience.

**Developmental Religiosity and Resilience**

Further information on the developmental path of religiosity is gained through studies on religiosity and resilience against pathology or against the intergenerational transmission of pathology in high-risk samples of offspring.

Evidence for nonenvironmental contributions to spirituality in childhood includes the following: (1) as previously mentioned, twin studies show that 29% of the variance in personal devotion is attributable to heritability (Kendler et al., 1997); (2) child religiosity increases the level of personal religiosity in parents, suggesting that the child is not a tabula rasa upon which is inscribed parental religiosity; (3) normative rates of personal religiosity are found among children of parents with very low rates of personal religiosity, and religiosity carries customary protective qualities in these children (Miller, Weissman, Gur, & Adams, 2001); and (4) the process of religious socialization, underpinning mutual facilitation across dimensions of religiosity in childhood, appears highly resistant to distortion by parental pathology or aspiritual community norms.