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DOI: 10.34813/ptr4.2023.8

# Bond with God and empathy among young Polish Roman Catholics. Indications of religious education*

**Abstract.** In the article, we intend to describe the relationship between religiosity and empathy within the context of theory and contemporary research, through the psycho--pedagogical lens. The empirical stage of the study aims to ascertain the type of bond that young Polish religious adults have with God and determine the relationship between the bond and self-reported empathy. The Questionnaire of Attachment to God, designed by Matys and Bartczuk, was employed in this research. Empathy was measured using SSIE, a shortened version of the Empathy Quotient Scale. The study revealed that the perception of a relationship with God, defined by trust and security, correlates with empathy, while an approach to religion based on fear of God does not affect perceiving oneself as an

empathic person. The article ends with a list of interventions that pastors and teachers can implement to increase young people's connection to God and their capacity for empathy.

# Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between concepts found in the psychology of religion and the issue of empathy has been evoking growing interest. Researchers have focused on affective, behavioural, and cognitive factors determining these psychological constructs (Johnstone et al., 2018), while educators have majored on spirituality to recognise its importance for human development (Kong, 2003; Yates, 1969). Some psychological research has shown that religious people report higher levels of emotional empathy (Johnstone et al., 2018; Ments et al., 2018; Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2019). To address this issue among Polish young adults, we examined their self-ratings of empathy and religiousness depicted as the bond with God.

Multiple aspects clearly indicate the necessity to study this issue. Firstly, a measurable decline of socio-emotional skills, also in the scope of empathy among young adults (Beadle et al., 2019; Konrath et al., 2011); secondly, increasing secularisation of Polish society (Mariański, 2017). Finally, the relation between empathy and religiosity is significant due to its implications for socio-emotional functioning and religious education (Norenzajan et al., 2016; Spilka et al., 2003; Sosis, 2009; Tinklenberg, 2020). Looking through a pedagogical lens, we assume that it is worth studying socio-emotional connotations of religiosity to increase both. We have devised the survey to understand this relationship better and find perquisites to strengthen socio--emotional competency in religious education.

# Religiosity:
## practice, disposition, and bond with God

There are methodological difficulties in studying the relations between religiosity and other traits (Johnstone et al., 2018) as, depending on the adopted approach, religiosity can be variously defined: as a universal disposition, ritual practices, belief system, or type of feeling (Wulff, 1996). Temporarily, spirituality and religiosity are frequently compared because they both refer to a personal sense of meaning and transcendence and largely require emotional processing (Giordano et al., 2018; Johnstone et al., 2018).

For further reflection, we consider an understanding of religiosity as embedded in the group of theories of relations with the object (Bowlby, 1969/2007; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick 2008). In this theory, God functions on a psychological level as a form of attachment, and religiosity is a kind of bond (Marchwicki, 2003; Walesa, 2005). Corresponding with the attachment styles (Bowlby, 1969/2007), there are generally two religiosity styles: secure attachement and disturbed (anxious-ambivalent) style. They describe differences in the quality of the relationship with God and are observed in attachment behaviours, such as: raising hands while participating in the sacraments; increased intensity of prayer in a difficult or critical situation; as well as statements of people speaking about God in terms of "bond," "relationship" and deepening or renewal thereof (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Marchwicki, 2003). Although the representation of God is formed in childhood, the bond with God evolves throughout life and results from the relationship with parents, and is influenced by education (Tokarski, 2011).

## Empathy: emotional and cognitive dimensions

The Greek word *empátheia* literally means "to suffer with someone" or "to show compassion." In psychology, it means the ability to perceive other people's emotional states (Giordano et al., 2018; Davis, 1994), and it is a cognitive and emotional process (Baron-Cohen, 2011). Affective empathy is emotional 'following' the other person, identifying their emotional state and thoughts to understand and respond to them adequately (Hoffman, 2003; Singer & Lamm, 2009). Cognitive empathy (systemizing) is a process of analysing the thoughts and feelings of others to understand emotions or other people's motives (Decety et al., 2015; Frith & Frith, 2005; Jankowiak-Siuda et al., 2017). Experiencing empathy may evoke other feelings, defined as an empathic concern (Davis, 1994), compassion (Cornille, 2008; Preckel et al., 2018), or personal (empathic) suffering (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009), and these are the traits characterising a good Christian (Wulff, 1996).

According to numerous research, empathy has a compound nature, and the method of operationalization differentiates the character of the relationship with religiosity (Hardy et al., 2012; Łowicki & Zajenkowski 2019). Emotional empathy and mentalizing, although related to social situations, do not always coexist (Epley et al., 2006; Preckel et al., 2018). Some researchers agree that empathy mainly depicts the affective process of sharing emotions with others (Hoffman, 2003; Singer & Lamm, 2009), and we adopt this understanding for the research study.

The process of forming a tendency to be empathic is the innate mechanism (inherited traits, temper) (Hoffman, 2003), also described as a result of social experience (Davis, 1994; Eisenberg & Eggum, 2009). Social cognition of empathic behaviour encourages studying the environmental factors, such as religious upbringing at home, growing up in a religious community, as well as attending educational institutions.

## Religiosity and empathy in research

Pizzaro and Salovey (2002) describe religion as a culturally confirmed system of beliefs and practices which is consistent with the emotional tendencies of an individual and can encourage empathy (Johnstone et al., 2018). Hereby, we shortly analyse interim research results to substantiate planned research and find perquisites to educational practice.

Nowadays, researchers are increasingly incorporating various understandings of religiosity to verify any possible relationships and their direction (Łowicki et al., 2020). We already know that religiousness, including the nature of a relationship with God is essential to both personal and social functioning (Ments et al., 2018). Researchers link participation in world religions with prosociality (Norenzayan et al., 2016). Several lines of evidence show that religions have an impact on the system of values, the sense of meaning in life, and self-esteem. It also changes the attitude toward other people including motivation to help (McFadden & Levin 1996). Some surveys show that religious engagement is related to greater reports of charity and voluntarism (Brooks, 2006; Putnam & Campbell 2010). Other social variables such as other-oriented feelings of compassion and sympathy experienced in response to observed suffering of other people's religiosity (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2019), agreeableness and prosociality (Decety et al., 2015; Gallen 2012; Tsang et al., 2020) have proved the significant and positive correlation with general religiosity. While it is unrelated or even negatively related with ethnocentrism, prejudice, intolerance, and aggression (e.g., Decety et al., 2015; Gallen, 2012; Hardy, 2012; Hunsberger, 1995; Shariff, 2016). Similarly, in studies on religious orientation, people with high scores on an internal scale – focusing on religion as a goal and internalising values, were more prosocial (Leak, 1992) and sensitive to the needs of others (Batson, 2009). In general, psychological research has shown that religious people report higher levels of emotional empathy and empathic concern compared to less religious individuals. More religious individuals are also perceived as more empathic by their close acquaintances (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2019).

Studies of empathy and religiosity depicted as a bond with God are less represented. Referring to the research conducted by van Ments et al. (2018), it is assumed that the image of God present in an individual's consciousness is of fundamental importance for empathy. Researchers have proven that the image of God based on trust (God as a stronger and wiser entity) led to empathic actions and emotions. In contrast, the image of authoritative and punishing God led to disempathic actions and emotions (Ments et al., 2018, p. 21). In general, religiosity is connected with prosocial behaviour, including emotional empathy, and studies on this link should take into account the general importance of religiosity for a person, the particular type of religious attitude/feelings, perception of God, and internalising values and beliefs (Jack et al., 2016; Łowicki et al., 2020).

These results, again, speak in favour of distinguishing dimensions of empathy as well as dimensions of religiosity within a broad domain of social cognition and behaviour. Consequently, it may be expected that religiosity will demonstrate a positive correlation with variables of an explicit emotional nature, as well as with affective and intuitive components of variables having a more complex internal structure (Voas, 2011), such as emotional intelligence or altruism (Decety et al., 2015). The relation might be rooted in the other-focused perspective common to both compassionate feelings and religiosity or spirituality (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2019).

Empirical findings are consistent with the moral prescriptions of Christianity and other religions, which archetypally encourage love, compassion, assistance, and cooperation while opposing selfishness (Norenzayan et al., 2016; Spilka et al., 2003, p. 445). Although the word "empathy" does not appear in the Bible, it indirectly refers to this attribute, and various images of Christ and Mary that have functioned in the common consciousness over the centuries are its essential medium (Morrison, 2004). Especially the New Testament, with Christ's resurrection, provides excellent examples of prosocial behavior when death was "an act of mercy and sacrifice resulting from compassion for others" (Wulff, 1996, p. 313). This notion coincides with the concept of *homo religious*, which indicates Christ as the one who rejects the vindictive and authoritarian image of God in favor of care, forgiveness, and love (Erikson, 1969). The relationship between Christianity and empathy is evident not only in the figure of Jesus Christ but also in the doctrine itself. The examples from the Bible that encourage empathy are numerous (Hałas, 2011; Morrison, 2004; Wulff, 1996), but due to the purpose of empirical research, they can be only signaled. One of the most articulated imperatives in Bible teaching is the need to lead a social life based on love and positive relationships with people and God. Namely, Peter the Apostle recommends

showing mutual understanding, brotherly affection, and compassion (Holy Bibile, 1973/2011, 1 Peter, 3:8). Paul the Apostle encourages: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Holy Bibile, 1973/2011, Romans, 12:15,16). Referring to one of the best-known parables of the Good Samaritan, Christianity focuses on the movement outside, readiness to charity, and openness to others (Batson, 2009; Markstrom et al., 2010, p. 61).

Empathy is essential to remain in contact with the source of religious experience; it also enables an attempt to enter imaginatively into the religious life of another and understand it from within. Inter alia, Cornille revisits phenomenological approaches to empathy and religion and, using the terms related to Stein's philosophy, indicates that the nature and purpose of empathy are "the experience of foreign consciousness" and "the comprehension of mental persons" (Cornille, 2008, p. 108). Wherefore empathy constitutes the focal point of *inter-religious imagination*: a peculiar kind of transposition to another person's world to capture other people's intentions and may allow the imagination to stretch beyond its established religious boundaries and to conceive of symbolic universes not yet imagined (Cornille, 2008, p. 110). Understood this way, empathy enriches forms of religious life and acceptance of differences, also these implying from different religious traditions, and religious practices and community rituals intend to evoke empathic care and encourage involvement in assistance activities (Markstrom et al., 2010).

As far as a century ago, Suttie compared religion to therapy and drew attention to Christianity's positive and therapeutic value, which through social expression, strengthens collectivity and improves emotional contact with other people (Suttie, 1935/2014, pp. 127–158). In recent times, Norenzayan et al. (2016) depicted Christianity as one of the most influential humanistic and prosocial religions based on the experience of overcoming one's ego, love, and respect. In psychological models, being empathic means more focus on adherence to moral principles, including justice and honesty (Hoffman, 2003). Such behavioral tendencies of empathic people imply a lower propensity to retaliate or be hostile in a conflict situation (Davis, 1994; Kaźmierczak et al., 2007). In the humanistic psychology approach, religion is a critical term to analyze the psychosocial development in the human life circle. Just to mention Erikson who assigned religion and human values to each epigenetic stage as an important domain in the formation of one's identity (Yates, 1969). Although the specific relation between religiosity/spirituality has not yet been fully explored, it is assumed that through ideologies and transcendent worldviews provided by religion, we are able to generate a sense of meaning (King, 2003).

In this view, social sciences look for correlates of religiosity and empathy and other social qualities.

When considering doctrinal indications, the questions that arise are 1) whether more religious people are, in fact, more emotionally empathic or it is only a part of tacit knowledge, stereotype, or self-presentation of believers (Łowicki et al., 2020); 2) whether religious education complies its role and develop faith, morality, compassion, and empathy as it described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993, 1776–1802; Buksik, 2006, pp. 293–297). In the project, we gathered data to find the answer to the first inquiry.

## Current research and hypothesis

In the current research, we wanted to investigate the relationships between the sense of a bond with God and empathy at the early adulthood stage. It was hypothesised that a positive correlation between the level of trust in God and a higher empathy level occurs in young adults. It was expected that individuals who displayed trust in God exhibit greater empathy ($H_{01}$). The second hypothesis states that there is negative correlation between the level of fearing God and the empathy level in young adults. We assumed that people with an anxious attachment to God are characterised by lower empathy ($H_{02}$).

## Participants and procedure

This study involved a sample of young Polish adults. The participants were selected in purposeful random sampling using the snowball sampling strategy. A total number of 96 participants completed the survey: 50 women and 46 men aged 21–26 ($M = 23$, $SD = 2,12$). All of them were students, and 15 did part-time or full-time jobs. The prerequisite for participation in the study was a declaration of membership in the Roman Catholic Church, a declaration of practicing religion, and consent to participate in the survey. The respondents were informed about the scientific purpose of the study. Participants filled out measures of religiosity, empathy, as well as demographics.

Data was collected via an internet questionnaire, which the respondents returned upon completion. The respondents were initially given the instructions and asked to complete a personal information card containing, among other information, basic demographic data. The collected data were statistically processed using SPSS Statistics: first, we computed descriptive statistics and then the correlations between the variables.

## Measures

In this research, the Questionnaire of Attachment to God designed by Matys and Bartczuk (2011) was employed. The questionnaire consists of 22 multiple-choice questions. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements using a scale from 1 = definitely disagree to 7 = definitely agree. The tool's design is based on John Bowlby's attachment theory and describes the attachment bond to God. It consists of two scales: trust and anxiety. A high score on the trust scale proves a close relationship with God based on a secure attachment style. A high score on the anxiety scale suggests an ambivalent experience and perception of God, fear of rejection, and fear of closeness (Matys & Bartczuk, 2011).

The accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the Relationship with Attachment to God Questionnaire were confirmed. The internal consistency, measured with Cronbach's α coefficient, equals 0.93 for the overall score and from 0.91 to 0.97 for individual subscales. The measure is intended for studies on adults over the age of 18 and is suitable for the study of monotheistic religions (Matys & Bartczuk 2011).

Empathy was measured using SSIE – a shortened version of the Empathy Quotient Scale (Baron-Cohen, 2004). The use of the EQ scale allows for determining individual differences in empathising (Allison et al., 2011). According to this concept, empathising is a cognitive and affective process that includes identifying other people's emotional states and thoughts to understand them and appropriately respond to their needs (Decety et al., 2015). The scale consists of 22 statements combined into one overall factor (Muncer & Ling 2006). The questions address social skills, emotional reactivity, and cognitive empathy (Jankowiak-Siuda et al., 2017). The total score is the sum of the points from all 22 items on the scale. The scale achieved a satisfactory internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.783$). The confirmatory factor analysis verified the univariate structure of the scale (Chi$_2$ (209) = 964.10; $p$ <0.001; RMSEA = 0.063 (CI: 0.059–0.067). The authors of the adopted and shortened version recommend the use of the scale in studies on people under 50 years of age (Jankowiak-Siuda et al., 2017, pp. 726–727).

## Research results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for all measures. Women had higher and less varied results on both scales: trust ($M = 60.7$; $SD = 11.5$) and fear of God ($M = 35.8$; $SD = 9.50$) (Table 1). Women's results in the study of empathy

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, $N = 96$

|  |  | Gender | Trust in God | Fear of God | Empathy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N | 0 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |
|  | 1 | 46 | 46 | 46 | 46 |
| Mean | 0 |  | 60.7 | 35.8 | 27.0 |
|  | 1 |  | 56.5 | 32.1 | 24.5 |
| Median | 0 |  | 65.5 | 34.5 | 26.5 |
|  | 1 |  | 63.0 | 27.5 | 25.0 |
| Standard deviation | 0 |  | 11.5 | 9.5 | 6.41 |
|  | 1 |  | 16.8 | 14.7 | 5.85 |
| Minimum | 0 |  | 29 | 19 | 13 |
|  | 1 |  | 21 | 12 | 16 |
| Maximum | 0 |  | 74 | 59 | 38 |
|  | 1 |  | 77 | 71 | 41 |
| Shapiro-Wilk W | 0 |  | 0.887 | 0.980 | 0.970 |
|  | 1 |  | 0.846 | 0.919 | 0.936 |
| Shapiro-Wilk p | 0 |  | <.001 | 0.540 | 0.223 |
|  | 1 |  | <.001 | 0.003 | 0.014 |

Note: 0 = women, 1 = men.

Source: own elaboration.

($M = 27$; $SD = 6.41$) were slightly higher and less concentrated around the mean than men's ($M = 24.5$; $SD = 5.85$).

The distribution of the results for the fear of God scale ($N = 95$, $p = 0.05$, $W = 0.980$; $W > 0.963$) and empathy scales ($N = 95$, $p = 0.05$, $W = 0.970$; $W > 0.963$) are close to normal distributions. However, the distribution is not similar to the normal one on the trust in God scale ($n = 95$, $p = 0.05$, $W = 0.887$, $W < 0.963$). Considering the results of the Shapiro-Wilk W test, non-parametric techniques are used for further analyses.

The results of the women and men were compared using the independent sample Mann-Whitney U test (cf. Table 2). The differences between the women's and men's results are statistically significant in the study of the negative bond with God ($p = 0.048$; $p < 0.05$) and empathy ($p = 0.037$; $p < 0.05$). Taking into account the average results in the studied group, it can be concluded that women declare fear in their relationship with God more often and are more empathic. No statistically significant differences on the trust in God scale ($p = 0.403$; $p > 0.05$) were recorded. The surveyed women and men declare a similar level of positive relationship with God.

To verify the hypotheses on the presumed relationships, the non-parametric Spearman's rho test was used (the distribution on the confidence scale is not

Table 2. Independent Samples Test Mann-Whitney

|  |  | Statistic | $p$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Trust in God | Mann-Whitney U | 1036 | 0.403 |
| Fear of God | Mann-Whitney U | 880 | 0.048 |
| Empathy | Mann-Whitney U | 867 | 0.037 |

Source: own elaboration.

similar to the normal one). Trust in God had a significant association with empathy, which was positive and moderate in size ($N = 96$; $p = 0.263$; $p < .01$) (Table 3). Based on this, we can accept hypothesis $H_{01}$: The people reporting a high level of trust in God are more emotionally empathic. $H_{02}$ hypothesis, which assumes that there is a negative relationship between the extent of fear towards God and the level of empathy in people in early adulthood, must be rejected according to the calculated correlation coefficient ($N = 96$; $p = -0.009$; $p < .01$). The connection between the variables is not statistically significant in the study group (Table 3). Negative reation to God seems not to differentaiate the level of empathy.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix, $N = 96$

|  |  | Trust in God | Fear of God | Empathy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trust in God | Spearman's rho $p$-value | – – |  |  |
| Fear of God | Spearman's rho $p$-value | 0.054 0.602 | – – |  |
| Empathy | Spearman's rho $p$-value | 0.263** 0.010 | −0.009 0.934 | – – |

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

The correlations retrieved from samples of women and men were tested against each other with the correlation test (https://www.psychometrica.de/correlation.html). According to test statistic $z = 1.629$, probability $p = 0.052$, taking into consideration that a probability value of less than 0.05 indicates that the two correlation coefficients are significantly different from each other, the difference between Spearman's coefficients is not statistically significant. Gender does not differentiate the relationship between a bond with God and empathy in the surveyed group.

# Discussion

In the light of the current study, in a group of young Catholics in Poland, empathy correlates with the perception of a relationship with God in terms of trust and security. People with high scores on the trust subscale experience God as a secure foundation. They tend to maintain a close relationship with God, who is loving and truly merciful, and in times of crisis, they turn to Him for help (Campos & Sternberg, 1981; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Marchwicki, 2003). At the same time, the approach to religion based on fear of God does not affect perceiving oneself as an empathic person. People with high scores on the anxiety subscale experience fear of rejection, and experience or perceive God in an ambivalent way (Matys & Bartczuk, 2011). The negative bond with God does not correlate with the level of empathy as appearing anxiety may lead to avoiding emotional contact and moving away from God (Green & Campbell, 2000) or, on the contrary, to intense or even compulsive performance of religious practices to increase the sense of security (Hall, 2007). The predominance of positive emotions is a characteristic of a trusting, emotionally significant bond in which a person tries to seek and maintain closeness with God, while religious practices and education contribute to the feeling of coherence with God. Such a bond provides a sense of security, and when the bond is lost or weakened, the person experiences sadness (Hall, 2007; Byrd & Boe, 2001).

The results are in line with previous findings that general religiosity correlates positively with empathy with Western samples (Jack et al., 2016; Lindeman et al., 2015; Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2019; Markstorm et al., 2010; Norenzayan & Gervais 2013; Routledge et al., 2017; Willard & Norenzayan, 2013) and with samples from other cultures (Khan et al., 2005; Ishii & Watanabe, 2022). Some studies confirm that perceived positive relationship with God is associated with a wide array of important psychosocial competencies. Among others, religiosity is consistently correlated with empathic concern, religious people are more likely to experience compassion directed towards others (Hardy et al., 2012; Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2019), and religious attitude is positively related to one's emotional understanding (Kwinta-Pietuszko & Pikul-Mlekodaj, 2014). While an anxious and avoidant relationship with God is negatively linked with empathy (Ments et al., 2018, p. 21), and social trust (Bradshaw, 2019).

A positive bond with God correlates with empathy, probably by reason of the emotional components measured in religiosity and taking account of the processing of religious content, not only the declared religious affiliation. Our findings are generally consistent with the research results on relational

attachments to God and the prosocial correlates (Granqvist et al., 2008; Hall, 2007). Nevertheless, some researchers challenge the existence of this relationship. For example, research by Decety et al. (2015) led to questioning the common-sense theory that children raised in religious homes (Christians and Muslims) are generally more prosocial and abiding by moral principles (Galen, 2012). The analysis of the relationship between the lower importance of religiosity in social life and social attractiveness (Duriez, 2004), racism (Duriez, 2003), conservative political views (Duriez, 2004), and value orientations (Fontaine et al., 2003) challenge the importance of religiosity in social functioning. In light of other contemporary studies, the relationship between empathy and religious belief seems to be culturally independent (Decety, 2015; Shariff, 2016). Consequently, some authors undermine the undeniable importance of religion for moral development by claiming that secularising moral discourse will not lead to a decline in socio-emotional competencies (Beit-Hallahim, 2009).

How can the inconsistency in results be explained? Probably the method of measuring religiosity matters for the relationships in question, the declaration of religious affiliation (being or not being religious) does not correlate with higher empathy (Duriez, 2004). Religiousness tends to correlate with empathy if it is operationalised as a way of processing religious content and not in terms of practising or doctrine knowledge (Hui et al., 2020; Jack et al., 2016; Pennycook et al., 2016). Accordingly, empathy is positively related to processing religious content from a symbolic perspective. Religiosness will exhibit a positive correlation with experiential-intuitive information processing, i.e., with unequivocally emotional variables, as well as with effective and intuitive components of variables with a more complex internal structure. Since the emotional dimension of religiosity plays a vital role in empathy, the type of emotions expressed through the image of God will affect the nature of this attitude towards other people (Hall, 2007; Jack et al., 2016; Pennycook et al., 2016). On the basis of our and other quoted research results, we support the idea that religious education can influence social competencies as well.

## Conclusions and educational implications

The study described here joins this debate about the socio-emotional functioning of religious people and religious education. Initial assumptions of the project were proved. Anxious attachment to God is not conducive to empathy. Since it is based on negative emotions that might cause compulsive religious practices and a tendency to withdraw from close relationships, in which em-

pathy is a crucial consolidating factor. In contrast, a trusting attitude, through positive emotions and a sense of security, cause one to open to emotions and relate to other people's needs. As religion with its prescriptions and communal rituals may facilitate an emotional exchange between people, participation in religious groups may create opportunities to experience empathic concern more frequently, nourish personal, empathic dispositions, and induce emphatic acting, i.e., engagement in volunteering (Markstrom et al., 2010; Xygalatas et al., 2013).

The presented research results require confirmation in further empirical studies. As Poland is a religious country with a predominant share of Roman Catholics, it is necessary to conduct the analysis of the correlation on a body of empirical data obtained from a more extensive and more demographically varied population. Subsequent research should consider whether the cross--cultural patterns of attachment (Jzendoorn & Sagi 1999) result in the cross--cultural nature of the relationship between religiosity, empathy, and gender. Since the level of religiosity may increase with age (Bengtson et al., 2015), it would be interesting to repeat the study in an older or more age-diverse group. Another variable worth including in future research is the attachment style developed during childhood (Granqvist et al., 2008, Marchwicki, 2003). Primarily, it may be helpful to examine the interaction between empathy and other factors that contribute to individual differences in religious belief, such as cognitive style (Jack et al., 2016; Pennycook et al., 2016), spirituality (Hui et al., 2020) or personality traits (Ments et al., 2018). The presence of emotional aspects in the image of God encourages research on the relationship between religiosity and a category more complex than empathy – emotional intelligence (Pizzaro & Salovey, 2002). The results in this field are still inconsistent (Hui & Prihadi, 2020; Paek, 2006).

Drawing from adaptationist approaches to religion (Norenzajan et al., 2016; Spilka et al., 2003; Sosis, 2009), we recognise the crucial role of religious elements in shaping the individuals' and societies' lives and the role of the cultural context that forms religions and rituals in both adaptive and maladaptive ways. There is for sure a feedback loop relation between religiosity in its cultural and educational context and social functioning (Łowicki & Zajenkowski 2019; Maij et al., 2017; Norenzajan et al., 2016), and this forces rethinking the practice of religious education. According to numerous research studies, religious beliefs significantly influence individuals' social and cognitive processes, and religion might positively impact social, emotional, and moral competencies (Furrow & King 2004). Empathy has been established within the field of religious studies as important in understanding the beliefs of the religious other. Furrow et al., (2004) and Stebnicki (2007) asserted that religiousness is significantly

related to more positive judgments about others' behaviours, positive social interaction, and trust. Highly emphatic people tend to focus on what others feel, think, and believe; thus, the empathic concern might facilitate learning about others' beliefs. Emphatic skills can influence moral behaviour, and as Markstrom et al., (2010) point out, we might influence one's empathic concern through religious education or participation in communal religious services, but results of many studies suggest that spiritual development holds more meaning than solely understanding religion and engaging in religious practices and rituals (Hui et al., 2020; Trothen, 2016). Specifically, religion might be considered a rich resource for individuals' moral development in a social context, conditioned that religious education is strongly associated with positive religious attitudes and spirituality (Giordano et al., 2018; Prosek, 2018).

The psychopedagogical study of religiosity correlates indicates necessary changes in religious education, already postulated by several authors (Mariański, 2016; Trothen, 2016; Zwierżdżyński, 2016). If religiosity is depicted broadly as spirituality, schools are not to accomplish the missionary tasks of particular religious organisations. In such an approach, building religious identity is less important than getting to know religious interpretative traditions, understanding values, their internalisation, and application in social and personal life. The school religious education should become a space for constructing the meaning of religion and teaching religion in an understanding and hermeneutic way. This way, the dialogue becomes basically one of the most important ways of shaping religious and social competence (Zwierżdżyński, 2016), and could harmonise life in multicultural and multi-religious societies by developing the ability to empathise, accept, understand, and respect multiplicity (also religious ones) (Mariański, 2016; Trothen, 2016).

Although a considerable step toward understanding the relationship between religiousness and socio-emotional functioning was made, not much was done to change the practice. Strengthening religiosity in terms of religious competence is considered in theory, but the suggestions are not implemented in educational practice, at least not as fast as they should, and not in Poland (Mariański, 2016; Zwierżdżyński, 2016). In general, religious education could be meaningful if it concentrated on spiritual development or implemented spiritual practices, not emphasising any particular religious doctrine (Hui et al., 2020; Trothen, 2016). Everyday life provides many opportunities to show and develop empathy during religious instruction, through participation in religious rituals, and above all, in contact with the empathic religiosity of parents.

Most importantly, in education, we should develop religiosity based on a positive emotional bond with God, which mutually leads to knowing, accepting, and trying to understand the doctrine, along with developing positive

social attitudes. Referring to the personal-existencial pedagogy of Tarnowski (2003, pp. 248–250), dialogue as a process and an attitude focused on a person is a universal method of education. Horizontal dialogue with God and vertical between teacher and student as a personal and warm relationship, based on authenticity, and understanding the emotional needs are *sine qua non* conditions for religious/spiritual development, moral and socio-emotional maturity. From psycho-pedagogical perspective, to build a relationship with God based on positive emotions, it is recommended to:

1) use teaching methods that convey religious content in a way that promotes the development of authenticity and not subordination to authority;

2) show the possibilities and the scope of freedom that religiosity provides instead of emphasising limitations;

3) create the image of God based on trust, care, empathy, and compassion;

4) do not use authoritarian methods of disciplining and do not threaten with "hellfire," as non-averse methods will strengthen a positive bond with God;

5) do not limit religion lessons to learning doctrine and consolidating practices, but develop reflexivity, critical thinking skills, and understanding of religious knowledge;

6) use experiential tasks like listening about specific cases, role-playing, and other simulation exercises, which can succour the development of empathy in general and in religious education;

7) develop a positive teacher-student bond, a relationship based on mutual respect;

8) do not limit religious education to pastoral care in church or school and participation in rituals. Instead, take action within and for the community by strengthening the involvement and sense of affiliation.

Assuming that how religious content is conveyed affects the image of God, we suggest training courses for catechists to improve their psychological, didactical, and emotional competencies. These competencies ensure that the religious education process is fruitful in the symbolic transformation of religious content and a positive image of God and can increase empathy based on cultural models of compassion, care, and help (Mariański, 2016; Zwierżdżyński, 2016).

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