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# Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religious Orientations and the Development of Emerging Adults

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*Encouraging emerging adults to internalize basic religious doctrines, instead of focusing on outward actions and appearances, provides them with hope, peace, and life purpose.*

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A large portion of identity exploration and development occurs in emerging adulthood (i.e., roughly the ages 18-29; Nelson & Luster, 2015), which is characterized as a time of instability, transition, and meaning-making (Barry et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2017). An emerging adult will often choose the contexts around which they base their identity exploration by interacting with new environments and experimenting with new behaviors (Barry et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2017; Reymann et al., 2015). As such, an emerging adult's identity development relies heavily on the contexts they choose to immerse themselves in (Barry et al., 2020; Hardy et al., 2017; Reymann et al., 2015). Religion is cited as an important context for identity development, because it interacts with and thus influences the psychological and psychosocial development of an emerging adult, which often results in high levels of meaning-making (Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Singh, 2014).

The effect of religious identity on psychological development has been well-documented. Research suggests that religion is psychologically beneficial because when individuals actively participate in religious identity exploration, they tend to be less aggressive and experience more stability in emotion regulation (Hardy et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Singh, 2014). Specifically, religion has been shown to affect the intensity of experienced emotions because it helps individuals frame certain destabilizing events in a positive manner, which allows them to cope with high levels of stress and adaptation (Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Singh, 2014). Overall, religious identity is associated with greater positive and fewer negative emotions, reduced feelings of uncertainty, lower levels of stress and loneliness, and higher self-esteem, all of which contribute to the success of healthy identity development of an emerging adult (Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Reymann et al., 2015; Singh, 2014).

Emerging adults who participate in religious identity exploration also benefit psychosocially. Religious communities provide a social network of people that strives to uphold a specific set of moral standards and a common purpose in

life (Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Singh, 2014). Such social associations can provide a support system between members, an environment in which individuals can foster a strong moral character and prosocial behaviors, and a reinforced sense of one's purpose in life (Chenot & Kim, 2017; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014; Singh, 2014). Developing a sense of purpose in life is critical for the healthy identity development of emerging adults as a lack of purpose often contributes to existential frustration and consequent participation in risky behavior (Reymann et al., 2015; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014).

In an effort to determine what makes religion so psychologically and psychosocially influential, many researchers have divided religiosity by extrinsic and intrinsic orientation (Barry et al., 2020; King et al., 2020; Singh, 2014). Extrinsic religion is often referred to as religious practice and involves any outward actions and rituals that are shared by a religious community such as prayer, the study of religious texts, and church attendance (Barry et al., 2020; King et al., 2020). In contrast, intrinsic religion refers to an individual's spirituality, which develops psychologically through one's thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and identity (King et al., 2020; Singh, 2014). Though the two concepts are interrelated in many ways, studies shows that while researchers used to quantify spirituality as a result of religious involvement, today they consider it to exist independently of religion and even to be foundational to religiousness (Barry et al., 2020; King et al., 2020). In other words, today,

individuals consider themselves to be spiritual without associating themselves with a religious institution, and studies show that one's pre-existing degree of spirituality is often what pushes one to get involved in religion in the first place (Barry et al., 2020; King et al., 2020). Those who are intrinsically oriented toward religion tend to internalize the beliefs and attitudes of their religion, while those who are extrinsically oriented may not be as committed to certain religious principles and instead rely on their religion for a sense of community, social status, and material gain (Singh, 2014). The discovery of these two religious orientations has sparked a debate on which orientation is more inherently valuable to psychological and psychosocial well-being.

Although religion as a whole tends to have a positive effect on psychological and psychosocial development in emerging adulthood, emerging adults may benefit more from fostering their intrinsic religiosity than their extrinsic religiosity, since emerging adults who voluntarily commit to a standard of moral behavior have a greater chance of internalizing the benefits of their religion, identifying with a higher purpose in life, and developing a strong moral character that promotes more positive social interactions. This literature review will first discuss the respective roles of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity on psychological and psychosocial development in emerging adulthood, then discuss the arguments behind why intrinsic religiosity is more inherently valuable to psychological and psychosocial development.

## The Respective Roles of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religiosity

First, it is important to note the pattern of religiosity among emerging adults. Because it is a period of development marked by great changes in many aspects of their lives (including educational, familial, and other social settings), emerging adults often begin to question their upbringing and experiment with different behaviors and environments (Barry et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2017; Reymann et al., 2015). Research has shown that religious participation usually begins to decline between the ages of 14 to 18 (Chan et al., 2015), and so the upheaval that occurs in emerging adulthood results in an even greater decline in religious activity (Barry et al., 2020; Koenig, 2015). However, studies show that while overall religious participation (or extrinsic religiosity) declines during emerging adulthood, spirituality (or intrinsic religiosity) does not (Barry et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2015; Koenig, 2015; Reymann et al., 2015). It appears that though young adults tend to move away from religion as an institution, they begin to construct their own set of beliefs rather than subscribe to a predetermined set of beliefs as established by a religious institution (Chan et al., 2015; Koenig, 2015). Thus, it is important to consider the respective roles that both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity play in psychological and psychosocial development in order to determine how to help emerging adults reap the benefits of a religious identity.

Intrinsic religiosity is associated with better psychological well-being, increased levels of moral development,

effective coping mechanisms, and a higher sense of purpose in life (Barry et al., 2020; Francis, 2013; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). This is because individuals who develop an intrinsic religiosity have internalized their religious beliefs and use them as a framework to understand their circumstances in life (King et al., 2020; Singh, 2014). This framework can influence an individual's sense of deservingness; for example, if an individual believes in submitting to the will of a higher being, they are more likely to accept difficult life events—such as the death of a loved one or the diagnosis of a serious illness—than nonreligious individuals (Singh, 2014).

Internalizing the beliefs of a religion may affect how an individual views their purpose in life and the contributions they wish to make to the world (Francis, 2013; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). Intrinsic religiosity is associated with a greater desire to make meaningful contributions that are not self-oriented (Francis, 2013; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). In other words, intrinsic religiosity acts as a catalyst for those who wish to engage in prosocial behaviors, adopt personal goals that are more valuable and meaningful, develop a stronger moral character, and participate more in their community (Chenot & Kim, 2017; King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Singh, 2014). Overall, the psychological and psychosocial benefits that come from internalizing one's religious beliefs are associated with higher levels of hope, happiness, and perceived well-being (Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel,

2018; King et al., 2020; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014).

Extrinsic religiosity develops as a result of active participation in a religious community. Emerging adults who consciously choose to engage in a religious community benefit from developing a shared sense of purpose, and such a community can foster healthy relationships and a level of bonding that is psychosocially healthy (Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Singh, 2014). Additionally, doctrines that are taught in religious settings often inspire hope and encourage an outward social orientation, which results in a higher level of engagement in community events and prosocial behaviors (Chenot & Kim, 2017; King et al., 2020).

However, while intrinsic religiosity is overwhelmingly associated with psychological advantages, the same cannot be said of extrinsic religiosity. Those who are solely extrinsically oriented may not be wholly committed to their religious beliefs, which leads to fewer psychological benefits and more depressive symptoms (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Singh, 2014). Because extrinsic orientation doesn't necessarily represent the internalization of religious beliefs, it is more difficult for an individual to reap the benefits of religion because they are less likely to believe that they are connected to a higher being or power, and therefore more likely to use their religious community as a means of personal gain and social status (Reymann et al., 2015; Singh, 2014).

However, several studies outline the importance of fostering both religious orientations in order to receive the most benefits from forming a religious identity. When intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity intertwine, one orientation can influence the other and vice versa (Chenot & Kim, 2017; King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017). For example, while intrinsic religiosity encourages social connection, extrinsic religiosity provides a religious community in which

an individual can participate. Forming healthy bonds with peers of a similar religion or set of beliefs can encourage emerging adults to discuss their spirituality, which then helps them to reinforce their beliefs (King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017). Specifically, the study done by King and colleagues (2020) found that the development of hope in young adults was a direct result of combining personal spirituality and social connections. Additionally, Chenot and Kim (2017) found that spirituality predicted positive *attitudes* towards certain prosocial behaviors, while religious practice predicted prosocial *actions*. Overall, research suggests that consciously developing both religious orientations benefits not only the individual, but society at large (Chenot & Kim, 2017; King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017).

### Arguments Supporting the Value of Intrinsic Religiosity

There is much speculation within the literature as to why the development of intrinsic religiosity alone results in greater psychological and psychosocial benefits than the development of extrinsic religiosity alone (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; King et al., 2020; Singh, 2014). The most prominent argument centers around the idea that because intrinsic religiosity is experienced psychologically and ultimately internalized as a personality construct, it is less likely to be affected by external sources (Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; King et al., 2020; Power & McKinney, 2014; Singh, 2014). In the words of Power and McKinney, those who are intrinsically oriented “do not live their religious lives to please others or gain status but instead do it for themselves and to fulfill their relationship with their higher power” (2014, p. 1530). In other words, for these individuals, religion is not used as a means to an end, but rather is satisfying in and of itself (Power & McKinney, 2014; Singh, 2014).

Conversely, extrinsic religion is usually developed

through habit and upbringing brought about by an individual's caretakers. Thus, when an emerging adult becomes more independent and eventually leaves home, they often challenge their upbringing and change their habits drastically as they experiment with new behaviors and beliefs (Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Reymann et al., 2015). Frequently, the development of their religious identity is pushed to the side in favor of other social identity developments (Chan et al., 2015; Koenig, 2015).

When religious identity becomes part of an individual's personality construct, it becomes a context outside of a religious institution in which positive meaning-making and personal convictions may form (Chan et al., 2015; Francis, 2013; King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Singh, 2014). Consequently, individuals can more easily and automatically construct personal narratives of hope, service, and prosocial behavior based on their own spiritual convictions rather than on weekly rituals or religious traditions (King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017). A personal spiritual construct can also aid as a coping mechanism, as it ensures that an individual's spiritual convictions continually shape the way they understand and experience the world, thus helping them to frame certain destabilizing events in a positive way (Singh, 2014). In essence, it is the internalized nature of intrinsic religiosity that makes it more beneficial over time.

Another argument for the inherent value of intrinsic religiosity is that in almost every study that controlled for the separate effects of each orientation, extrinsic religiosity was rarely beneficial on its own (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). Individuals almost always needed a spiritual foundation in order to reap the benefits of religious involvement (Chenot & Kim, 2017; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Reymann et al., 2015; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). Conversely, intrinsic

religiosity was often cited as highly beneficial on its own, thus suggesting that the benefits that come as a result of developing a religious identity are heavily dependent on an intrinsic orientation (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). The literature suggests that the level of commitment that an internal belief requires brings about psychological and psychosocial benefits because individuals experience less cognitive dissonance between their beliefs and their behavior (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Reymann et al., 2015; Singh, 2014). In other words, intrinsic religiosity is inherently valuable because it aligns an individual's religiously ritualistic actions with their beliefs, whereas extrinsic religiosity alone may not accurately represent an individual's deeper beliefs or moral code (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen-O'Neel, 2018; Power & McKinney, 2014). The cognitive dissonance that an individual may experience as a result of a purely extrinsic orientation may lead to feelings of depression and loneliness, as the individual is less likely to feel like they are living a true, authentic life.

## Conclusion

The formation of a religious identity during the years of emerging adulthood provides many psychological and psychosocial benefits. However, recent research shows that the orientation of this religious identity is significant: intrinsically oriented individuals, or individuals that have internalized their religious beliefs, benefit more from a religious identity than do extrinsically oriented individuals, or those who simply participate in religious traditions and rituals (Barry et al., 2020; Chenot & Kim, 2017; Francis, 2013; Ibrahim & Gillen O'Neel, 2018; Power & McKinney, 2014; Reymann et al., 2015; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014). This is because, for the intrinsically oriented, religion often provides a context of hope, peace, and life purpose

in which an individual can frame his or her experiences (Chenot & Kim, 2017; Francis, 2013; Ibrahim & Gillen O'Neel, 2018; King et al., 2020; Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Reymann, 2015; Sillick & Cathcart, 2014; Singh, 2014). Because it is internalized as a personality construct, intrinsic religious orientation is rarely affected by outside factors (Ibrahim & Gillen O'Neel, 2018; Reymann et al., 2015).

On the other hand, extrinsically oriented emerging adults are often those who simply go through the motions of their religion out of habit or upbringing. Because habit and upbringing are greatly affected by the upheaval that is characteristic of emerging adulthood, those who are extrinsically orientated are more likely to experience cognitive dissonance because their religious actions or practices may not accurately represent their true, internal beliefs (Barry et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Gillen O'Neel, 2018). Cognitive

dissonance is associated with higher levels of depression, loneliness, and anxiety, which is not healthy for psychological and psychosocial development (Barry et al., 2020). It is important to note, however, that when the positive aspects of both orientations are developed together, extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity can influence and benefit each other.

This research is relevant because it shows religious leaders and caretakers of emerging adults that the focus of any religious education should be on the understanding and internalization of basic religious doctrines, rather than on outward actions or appearances. Doing so will help the emerging adult to understand how their personal narrative fits into the overarching narrative of their religion and will encourage them to live their most authentic lives within the context of religion.

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