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## Psychological aspects of religious morality in middle and late adulthood

### Psychologiczna problematyka moralności religijnej w okresie średniej i późnej dorosłości<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** As a result of the study, structure of religious morality including the following categories was distinguished: basis of moral functioning, moral attitude toward conflict situations, moral attitude toward experienced dissonances, and reference to moral autonomy. In terms of basis of moral functioning, the following subcategories were identified: self, others, religion, consequences. For moral attitude towards conflict situations, the distinguished subcategories were: task-oriented, avoidance, emotional, religious. In regard to moral attitude toward experienced dissonances, the subcategories were: informative, normative, avoidance, conflict. In terms of reference to moral autonomy, these were: compliance and non-compliance. The participants of the study were 120 Catholics, 60 in middle and 60 in late adulthood. A Piagetian exploratory-critical interview designed on the basis of Walesa's model of integral religiosity development was used. Statistical analyses showed that the frequency of specific subcategories of religious morality was significantly differentiated by age for the domains: basis of moral functioning, moral attitude toward conflict situations, and moral attitude toward experienced dissonance. In late adulthood, religiosity serves an important function, especially in situations of conflict or events related to experiencing moral dissonances.

**Keywords:** religious morality, moral functioning, moral dissonance, moral conflict, moral autonomy

**Abstrakt:** W ramach badań wyłoniono strukturę moralności religijnej, która zawiera kategorie: podstawa funkcjonowania moralnego, stosunek moralny do sytuacji konfliktowych, postawa moralna wobec doświadczanych dysonansów, odniesienie do zasady autonomii moralnej. Dla podstawy funkcjonowania moralnego wyodrębniono subkategorie: Ja, inni, religia, konsekwencje. W przypadku stosunku moralnego do sytuacji konfliktowych są to: zadaniowy, unikający, emocjonalny, religijny. Dla postawy moralnej wobec doświadczanych dysonansów wyłoniono subkategorie: informacyjno-religijna, normatywna, unikająca, konfliktowa. W odniesieniu do zasady autonomii moralnej były to: zgodność i niezgodność. Zbadano 120 osób wyznania katolickiego, po 60 w okresie średniej i późnej dorosłości. Zastosowano Piagetowski wywiad eksploracyjno-krytyczny, którego konstrukcję oparto o model religijności Walesy. Częstość występowania określonych subkategorii moralności religijnej była istotnie różnicowana przez wiek osób badanych dla: podstawa funkcjonowania moralnego, stosunek moralny do sytuacji konfliktowych, postawa moralna wobec doświadczanych dysonansów. W okresie późnej dorosłości religijność pełni ważną funkcję – szczególnie w sytuacjach konfliktowych lub związanych z doświadczanymi dysonansami moralnymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** moralność religijna, funkcjonowanie moralne, dysonans moralny, konflikty moralne, autonomia moralna

<sup>1</sup> Artykuł w języku polskim dostępny jest na stronie:  
<https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/Presentations0/2021-4Tata2.pdf>

## 1. Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing modern science is building moral postulates which are strong and universal enough to be accepted by people in all the world, while not violating the conceptual frameworks of individual religions or political systems (Zagzebski, 2007). Most researchers agree that moral systems result from interaction of values, practices, and psychological mechanisms. Their integration aims to regulate selfishness and enable proper social relationships (Richerson & Boyd, 2008).

In order to analyze the phenomenon of morality, it is worth noting two main streams of research. The first is historically derived from developmental psychology, works of Piaget (1967) and Kohlberg (1978), who investigated understanding of moral concepts and the process of their acquisition. Their studies resulted in the conceptualization and measurement of development of morality influenced by cognitive development. According to Piaget (1967) and Kohlberg (1978), changes in moral development involve a transition from conformity to moral autonomy and are accompanied by internalization of universal ethical principles. The essence of moral development is self-mastery, gained not only by refraining from undesirable reactions, but also by acting in accordance with one's own value system (Borowska, 2020; Osewska, 2017; Chlewiński, 1991; Bandura & McDonald, 1963).

The second school of research offered by neuroscientific perspective explains moral behavior through neural processes, putting moral emotions in its core (Wilson, 2000). Shame, guilt, embarrassment and pride, which are examples of moral emotions, are evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation. They boost energy to do good and to avoid doing bad (Kroll & Egan 2004), because they provide immediate punishment (or reinforcement) of behavior (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). The main premise of this trend, which is based on evolutionary, neurological and social psychology is that evolution shaped the human brain to develop physical structures designed for the experience of moral emotions. Neuroscientific studies have attempted to verify locations of the brain responsible for moral judgments and empathy, centering on the role of cortical regions. Nonetheless, researchers stress the importance of more than one brain area, as moral thinking interacts with other cognitive functions, such as abstract reasoning, emotional and cognitive control, information integration, memories (Cuñat-Agut, Martí-Vilar, & Suay, 2016).

Researchers seek to integrate the two presented approaches, creating a synthesis that shows morality in the context of cognitive, affective, automatic and conscious processes (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Moral reasoning may reflect the use of abstract moral principles, but also specific life experiences or religious identities that are used to situate self in the world (Cushman, 2013). Both above-described perspectives present a holistic understanding of morality but have rarely addressed religious morality (Haidt, 2008).

The complexity of the relationship between religion and morality stems from the fact that both constructs are multidimensional and relate to different areas of reality. Just as religious values influence moral attitudes, moral content independent of religion can also affect its perception. Yilmaz and Bahçekapılı (2015) observe that cognitive, affective and behavioral components of religiosity are negatively correlated with engaging in morally questionable behaviors. At a general level, these findings support claims of high value and normative influence of religion on societies (Field, 1979; Skovoretz, Fararo, 1986; Walesa, & Tatala, 2020).

Religiosity plays important roles in human life. Chlewiński (1991) lists a few of its functions: giving meaning to life, ordering and hierarchizing values, enhancing a sense of trust and security, identifying with group and oneself, as well as playing a therapeutic role. Given that religiosity and morality are closely related, the issue of religious morality is of particular interest to researchers (Mariański, 2014; Tatala, 2008). In his cognitive-developmental model of integral religiosity development Walesa (2005) proposes that religious morality differs from the classically understood morality in that the criterion of reference here is religion, and its manifestation is the use of religious principles in making contentious decisions. Religious morality links together cognitive, emotional and social aspects of human existence; its function is to help people make the right judgment and take the correct attitude towards events of a moral nature. It stems from nature, cultural achievements and religiosity (Rydz, Walesa & Tatala, 2017; Tatala, 2009). The main thematic areas of religious morality by Walesa (2005) are: 1) base to which the person relates his/her moral functioning, 2) moral attitude towards the external world (including: conflict situations, experienced dissonances), and 3) understanding of moral autonomy, which is an expression of moral maturity. It can be assumed that the above-mentioned aspects may vary depending on the degree of maturity and stage of development of both morality and religiosity (Rydz, Walesa, & Tatala, 2017).

Human development, a continuous process of transformation of behavior and mental structures, features also the aspect of morality (Michalska, Szymanik-Kostrzewska, Gurba, & Trempała, 2016). In childhood and adolescence, changes in morality primarily depend on authority of parents, followed by teachers, and then peers (Młyński, 2020). During adulthood, these changes are linked to personal experiences and achievements (Czyżowska, 2008). This is when life wisdom emerges, expressed through understanding, kindness and the need to pass it on to the younger generation (Walesa & Tatala, 2020).

Like morality, religiosity also develops over the course of life. In childhood religiosity is magical and relates to authority and laws, while in adolescence and young adulthood it is characterized by autonomy and authenticity (Tatala, 2008). In adulthood, stages of religiosity are divided into three periods, early, middle and late adulthood respectively. Religiosity in early adulthood is realistic and stable, in middle adulthood it is fulfilled, and in late

adulthood – eschatological (Walesa & Rydz, 2019). Fulfilled religiosity is a time of building a sense of accomplishment, forming close relationships. This period is associated particularly with crystallization of religiosity and establishment of one’s own hierarchy of values based on religious morality. Eschatological religiosity is a time of justifying the meaning of life, an attempt to synthesize previous experiences (Tatala, 2020). This stage of religiosity is expressed by deepening one’s relationship with God and directing attention towards religious experiences (Tatala & Walesa, 2020). Religiosity serves a protective function against feelings of loneliness and loss (Łoś, 2020).

The purpose of the presented research was to identify subcategories of domains of religious morality proposed by Walesa (2005) in adults. It was also examined whether the subcategories are differentiated by middle and late adulthood.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The study was conducted among people of Catholic faith involved in religious life and belonging to various communities of the catholic church. The participants were 120 religious individuals (60 in middle and 60 in late adulthood); the sample was gender-balanced. Respondents resided in the following provinces: Podkarpackie, Małopolskie, Mazowieckie, Lubelskie, Podlaskie, and Świętokrzyskie.

### 2.2. Procedure

The conducted study was qualitative in nature. Interviews with respondents were conducted during individual meetings. The participants were informed about the aim of the research and were assured of anonymity and voluntary participation in the study. The research was cross-sectional due to the fact that the influence of the historical cohort was small (Shulgin, Zinkina, Korotayev, 2019; Bengtson, Silverstien, Putney, Harris, 2015). The authors used exploratory-critical interview on the development of religious morality in adults, which is based on Walesa’s (2005) cognitive-developmental model of integral religiosity development. The respondents were asked the following questions:

- 1) What are you guided by in recognizing moral right and wrong?
- 2) How do you deal with the things that disturb your relationship with God and people?
- 3) How do you deal with the fact that moral authorities do not judge important events uniformly?
- 4) What is your understanding of the principle: *Love and do as you please*?

The results of the study were categorized: qualitative data was transformed into quantitative data which allowed for statistical analysis of the collected material. The

psychometric value of the method was checked with the reliability assessment: test-retest. A retest study was conducted after two weeks on a group of 40 participants. Five competent judges rated similarity of the subjects' responses obtained during the first and second round of testing on a scale of 0 to 100. The judges were consistent in their ratings, which was shown with nonparametric *W-Kendall* concordance coefficient ( $p < .001$ ). No significant differences between the results from the first and second study were found which indicates the stability of the obtained data.

The obtained data allowed to identify 14 specific subcategories within the four main domains of statements: (1) basis of moral functioning; (2) moral attitude towards conflict situations; (3) moral attitude towards experienced dissonances; (4) reference to moral autonomy (Walesa, 2005) (see Figure 1).

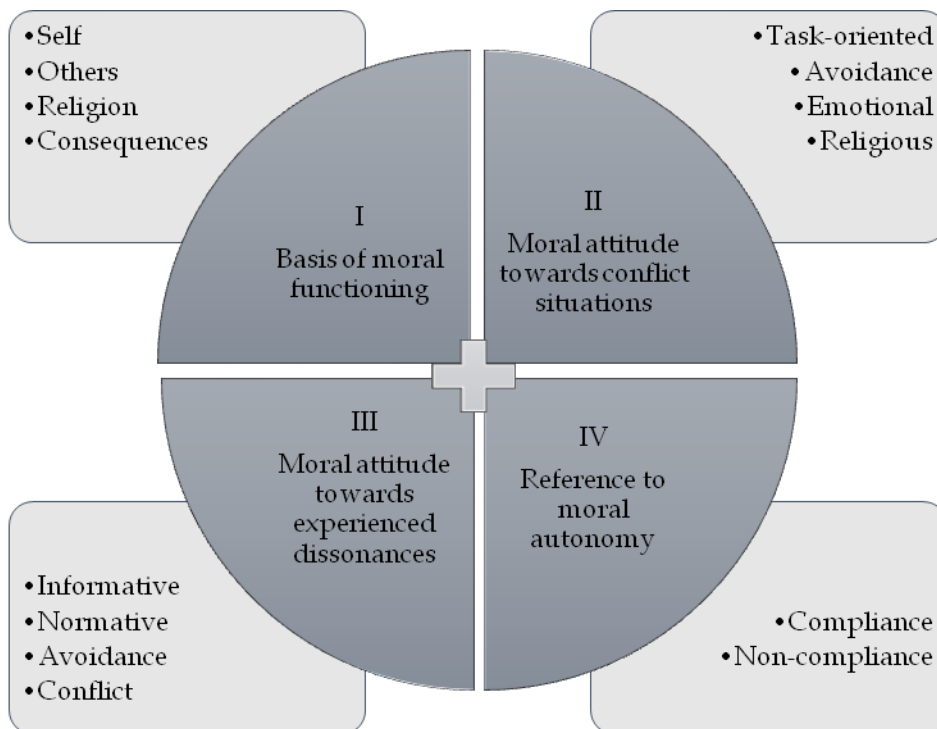


Figure 1. Structure of religious morality.

With respect to statements relating to basis of moral functioning, four subcategories were distinguished: (1) self; (2) others, (3) religion, and (4) consequences. The subcategories relate to knowledge of rules of moral conduct, indicating competence in moral functioning. The self subcategory includes statements of recognition of moral right and wrong as well as self-improvement, e.g.: *I don't think I have much trouble distinguishing between moral right and wrong. Worse is choosing what is right and not wrong* [56M42<sup>2</sup>]. The others subcategory indicates contribution of moral authority figures, which is usually a clergy person or a religious community leader: *I have a regular confessor who helps me in special cases, to judge when I have doubts* [24M68]. Statements indicating religion subcategory imply following only the religious principles (e.g., Decalogue, Scripture) and making moral choices that take into account individual relationship with God: *I am guided by the Commandments, by God's light, by living according to God's principles* [48F52]. The consequences subcategory mainly refers to following principles that help maintain social order, which leads to experiencing moral satisfaction from the realized good: *When I do something wrong, I feel anxious, irritable, angry, dissatisfied. Goodness brings fruit, joy, peace* [12F31].

With reference to statements encompassing moral attitude towards conflict situations four subcategories were distinguished:

- 1) task-oriented,
- 2) avoidance,
- 3) emotional
- 4) religious.

Task-oriented subcategory refers to statements that indicate experiencing doubts, crises, and taking actions that lead towards feeling moral satisfaction from the realized good, e.g.: *I'm trying to overcome my shortcomings with willpower. I work on my weaknesses. When I feel anger towards someone, I'm trying to change it by looking for positive qualities in that person and our relationship* [39M38]. Statements linked with the avoidance subcategory are characterized by lack of engagement with experienced hardships, as exemplified by the following statement: *I'm trying to push such things away* [29M30]. The emotional subcategory refers to bearing the psychological costs of negative emotions. The experienced emotions are often expressed through rebellion, crisis, or feelings of loneliness: *I am straightforward by nature, not to say naive. It took me a long time to realize that not all people are honest and fair with me* [72F68]. The religion subcategory refers to choosing to take certain activities in conflict situations. Those activities are expressed through prayer, hope, strengthening the relationship and closeness with God. They result in an increase in trust in God, a sense of security, despite bearing possible personal costs: *What helps me is frequent confession, prayer, where I can stop, rethink the situation* [7M50].

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<sup>2</sup> This abbreviation is a reference to the booklet containing the whole interview with the participant. The initial number indicates the ordinal number of the interview, followed by an indication of gender and age of the respondent.

Statements regarding moral attitudes toward experienced dissonances were divided into four subcategories:

- 1) informative,
- 2) normative,
- 3) avoidance,
- 4) conflict.

The informative attitude involves an active search for religious justification while being open to new information. It manifests itself through subjective acceptance of the values necessary to realize one's moral principles, despite experiencing possible conflicts: *This is where the Holy Scriptures helps. Thanks to the fact that I know the Word of God, I participate in retreats, catechesis, I can look for answers. I have formed an understanding, an opinion* [44F44]. In contrast, adopting a normative mindset is characterized by defending and wanting to maintain the status quo; it is characteristic of people who follow moral conformity: *If someone is a moral authority to me, I'm trying to obey* [29M30]. The avoidance attitude is characterized by behaviors that defer confrontation with moral issues: *I cut myself off from it. I don't listen to it, I just live how I please, the way I think* [53F66]. The conflict subcategory illustrates the occurrence of moral dilemmas which result from the fact that acknowledged moral authorities have failed to formulate clear and unambiguous verdicts. This leads respondents to experience discomfort and express disapproval of the solutions proposed by them, e.g.: *I then ask myself if this is a moral authority? Then it bugs me and I give up on it. I look for another moral authority* [76M54].

In terms of moral autonomy, two subcategories emerged: compliance and non-compliance. Statements regarding the compliance subcategory refer to the knowledge of norms of conduct, consideration of more subtle and existentially meaningful rules that do not disregard the well-being of others. This is illustrated by the following statement: *Through this principle of Love and do as you please, God tells us: love other people and be free to do what you want, just don't hurt others in the process* [15F34]. The subcategory of non-compliance is essentially expressed in one-dimensional, literal interpretation of the rules, e.g.: *For me, the words "Love and do as you please" are exclusive. I understand love as totally selfless devotion to someone. But to do as I please is for me selfishness and pride, demanding what I want* [51M43].

### 3. Results

The main purpose of statistical analyses was to verify the variation in occurrences of subcategories within two developmental periods - middle and late adulthood. To determine the frequency of individual observations, Cramer's V test was applied for each of the four domains of religious morality.

Table 1. Variation in occurrences of the domain basis of moral functioning

		Developmental period						Sum	
		Middle adulthood			Late adulthood				
		<i>n</i>	%	Adjusted residuals	<i>n</i>	%	Adjusted residuals	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Basis of moral functioning</b>	Self	8	13.3%	-8	11	18.3%	.8	19	15,8%
	Others	24	40%	3.8	6	10%	-3.8	30	25%
	Religion	24	40%	-2.2	36	60%	2.2	60	50%
	Consequences	<5	<i>n</i> <5	<i>n</i> <5	7	11.7%	.9	11	9.2%
<b>Sum</b>		60	100%		60	100%		120	100%

Cramer's  $V = .35; p < .01$

For the domain basis of moral functioning, it was observed that the statements of those in middle adulthood were more often characterized by the subcategory others, while for late adulthood it was religion.

Table 2. Variation in occurrences of the domain moral attitude towards conflict situations

		Developmental period						Sum	
		Middle adulthood			Late adulthood				
		<i>n</i>	%	Adjusted residuals	<i>n</i>	%	Adjusted residuals	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Moral attitude towards conflict situations</b>	Task-oriented	21	35%	2.1	11	18.3%	-2.1	32	26.7%
	avoidance	18	30%	2.0	9	15%	-2.0	27	22.5%
	emotional	<5	<i>n</i> <5	<i>n</i> <5	<5	<i>n</i> <5	<i>n</i> <5	5	4.2%
	religious	20	33.3%	-2.9	36	60%	2.9	56	46.7%
<b>Sum</b>		60	100%		60	100%		120	100%

Cramer's  $V = .32; p < .01$

For moral attitude towards conflict situations, it can be observed that the statements of people in middle adulthood were more often characterized by the subcategory task-oriented and avoidance, while for late adulthood it was the religious subcategory.



Table 3. Variation in occurrences of the domain moral attitude towards experienced dissonances

		Developmental period						Sum	
		Middle adulthood			Late adulthood				
		<i>n</i>	%	Adjusted residuals	<i>n</i>	%	Adjusted residuals	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Moral attitude towards experienced dissonances</b>	Informative	<5	<i>n</i> <5	<i>n</i> <5	21	35%	3,8	25	20.8%
	Normative	29	48.3%	1.3	22	36.7%	-1.3	51	42.5%
	Avoidance	13	21.7%	.7	10	16.7%	-0.7	23	19.2%
	Conflict	14	23.3%	1.7	7	11.7%	-1.7	21	17.5%
<b>Sum</b>		60	100%		60	100%		120	100%

Cramer's  $V = .36; p < .01$

For the dimension of moral attitude toward experienced dissonances, it is observed that the statements in late adulthood were significantly different due to informative subcategory. No statistically significant differences were found for reference to moral autonomy ( $p > .05$ ).

### Discussion

Relationship between religion and morality has been the subject of considerable debate. The question can be asked: Does religion make a person more moral? The conducted research allowed to categorize the qualitative results and describe religious morality by the following domains: basis of moral functioning, moral attitude towards conflict situations, moral attitude towards experienced dissonances, reference to moral autonomy. In terms of basis of moral functioning, four subcategories were identified: self, others, religion, consequences, indicating the criterion of reference when making moral judgments. For moral attitude towards conflict situations, four subcategories were identified: task-oriented, avoidance, emotional and religion. Regarding moral attitude towards experienced dissonances the following subcategories were proposed: informative, normative, avoidance and conflict. Statements concerning reference to moral autonomy were classified into two subcategories: compliance and non-compliance. Variation found in aspects of religious morality results from many factors, distinctiveness of groups, cultures, but also variation in social experiences (Ryś, 2015; Turiel, 2006). Thus, just as some dimensions of religion may promote certain aspects of morality, others may suppress or impede same or other aspects (McKay & Whitehouse, 2014). Depending on which aspects interact, individuals may prefer a particular domain of religious morality. People engage in moral reasoning primarily to support their key intuitions and to resolve difficult cases where antagonistic intuitions pull them in different directions (Haidt, 2008).

In the presented study it was verified whether the distinguished subcategories vary in terms of frequency among people in middle and late adulthood. For three out of the four separated domains, the differences in frequency were found to be statistically significant. Persons in late adulthood were more likely than persons in middle adulthood to include religious aspect of morality: for basis of moral functioning, moral attitude toward conflict situations and moral attitude toward experienced dissonances. In turn, persons in middle adulthood were significantly more likely to be guided by and take into account the opinion, advice and support of others in their basis of moral functioning. In addition, for moral attitudes toward conflict situations, those in middle adulthood were significantly more likely to choose a task-oriented or avoidance moral coping strategy. This is consistent with results of research which place religiosity as a predictor of moral behavior (Conroy & Emerson, 2004).

The observed differences between individuals in middle and late adulthood may also indicate that the latter are characterized by higher levels of religiosity in general (Bengtson et al., 2015) and possessing a clearer and more coherent picture of God (Kostrubiec-Wojtachnio & Tatala, 2014). This can be explained by achieving eschatological religiosity which is expressed in a tendency to relate everything to God more comprehensively (Walesa & Rydz, 2019). It is spurred by greater life wisdom, consequence of evaluation of one's whole life (Erikson, 1963).

Through the novelty of the distinguished subcategories, the present study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the exploratory nature of research design does not ensure the accuracy of the presented model. The validity of the introduced theoretical terms was supported by the stability of ratings coming from expert judges. In the future, however, it would be worthwhile to create scales for the isolated subcategories. Secondly, a comparison of subcategories in the two developmental periods was conducted, however, it is certain that other variables, such as psychological and sociodemographic aspects, are behind the variation in those subcategories. In future research, it would be useful to control the level of religiosity in each age group, as it may have an important role in assigning individual statements to a particular subclass.

The results presented in this article belong in the discussion of religious morality, which is a subtle process and can be extremely difficult to observe in the general population. Higher level of religious aspects of morality found in late adulthood may inspire search for other potential predictors determining the frequency of particular subcategories of religious morality found in this research.

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