The Development of Prayer in the Light of Czesław Walesa’s Cognitive Developmental Theory of Religiosity and Marcelina Darowska’s Concept of Religious Education

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to find an answer to the question of how prayer develops in children, adolescents, and young adults, and which psycho-pedagogical factors are conducive to its development. Czesław Walesa’s cognitive developmental psychological theory of the integral development of religiosity and Marcelina Darowska’s concept of religious education served as the theoretical basis of the proposed analyses. The authors showed changes in the development of prayer and expanded upon them in terms of pedagogical and religious aspects. It is proposed that pedagogical interventions aimed at the development of prayer should focus on supporting independence and responsibility in children, adolescents, and young adults. In educational work, one should be aware of the close relationship between the psycho-social conditions of human functioning and the development of prayer.

Keywords: prayer; development; Walesa’s development of religiosity; Marcelina Darowska’s concept of religious education

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of religiosity, which is being researched in many areas of human cognition, is of great interest to scientists, including educationalists and psychologists. Religiosity as a significant aspect of human life, a sacred space, can be defined as a complex human psychological structure expressed in the experience of a personal, conscious and voluntary relationship with God (Bednarczyk and Czekalski 2018; Klamut et al. 2023). Prayer occupies an important place in the lived relationship between man and God.

Prayer, as a unified but multifaceted phenomenon, is included in the psychological, social, cultural, and religious areas of human life. Although by its very nature it is a religious act, at its core, there are psycho-pedagogical conditions which follow the rules of human development and change at different stages (Gruchoła et al. 2024; Walesa 2005). At each of these phases, prayer has a slightly different form; however, the same manifestations can occur in adjacent or even more distant developmental periods. It is important to bear in mind that the development of prayer does not occur abruptly, moving suddenly from one form to another: the process is gradual and smooth (Walesa 2016). It can also happen that features indicative of more mature prayer may briefly or permanently disappear or that one form of prayer persists throughout the simultaneous development of new ones (Tatala 2009; Tatala and Wojtaśński 2021).

The aim of the presented study was to analyze the development of prayer in children, adolescents, and emerging adults, expanding the existing knowledge in the field with the perspective of Marcelina Darowska’s concept of religious education (S. Anuncjata od Trójcy Świętej 2010). This study quotes a number of unique and unpublished writings on the issues of women’s upbringing, religious formation and prayer. The development of prayer...
Walesa identifies nine periods in the course of the ontogenesis of religiosity development, five of them applicable to children and adolescents: (1) quasi-religious behavior (approx. 8 to 15 months of age); (2) first manifestations of religiosity (2 to 3 years of age); (3) magical religiosity (3.5 to 6.5 years of age); (4) authoritarian religiosity (7 to 11 years of age); (5) autonomous religiosity (12 to 17 years of age) and (6) authentic religiosity (18 to 24 years of age). In this text, the first three of the described stages are omitted because Marcelina Darowska was directly responsible for the religious training of teachers and sisters and only indirectly for young people and children. Moreover, at the time of Darowska’s lifetime, most children were already under the religious influence of their immediate environment, before they began their education.

2. Marcelina Darowska’s Concept of Religious Education

Marcelina Weryho Darowska, née Kotowicz, was a Polish nun, co-founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (commonly known in Poland as the Immaculate Sisters). In the rich body of writings she left behind, the depth of her spiritual development and her characteristic non-reductionist practicality can be observed (cf. Darowska 2003). Whether we analyze Darowska’s monastic rule or her educational system, she respected the complex and multifaceted nature of issues but did not neglect their real-life references. This dual and at the same time coherent way of perceiving reality was closely connected with her personal biography: She grew up in a patriotic family of noble origin in the first half of the 19th century (father Jan Kotowicz was of the Korczak coat of arms), and her parents were involved in social activism, e.g., for the local landowners in Szulaki (then Ukraine) during the post-partition period. In her youth, she lived her life religiously and spiritually (she was already intending to join a religious order at the time). Even though she got married at the urging of her father, she constituted a very successful and happy partnership. Upon the death of her husband and her young son, she became a single mother to her daughter (Jabłońska-Deptuła 2010).

Her experiences led to the formation of a strong, hardy and independent personality. A woman, wishing to be useful to her country, co-founded a religious congregation whose mission was to exert a broad spectrum of influence, especially in the field of educating women (the Immaculate Sisters run schools to this day). Darowska began and continued her work at a time of enormous political changes (upheavals after the French Revolution, World War I), social transformation (changes in the structure of the traditional family), cultic changes and thus also in connection with the conflict between church and state. Maciej Janowski (2015) refers to a decree that regulated the mutual relations between the state and the church in the Duchy of Warsaw. The very title of this document, “On the degree of supervision and care of the government over the clergy”, indicates the difficult situation of the clergy and church authorities at the time. Despite, or perhaps because of, these difficult conditions, Marcelina was deeply convinced that the rebirth of Poland from the influence of foreign forces also depended on mothers, wives and daughters. She believed that in order for women to have a positive impact, they should first be raised as self-reliant and able to think critically, also in the religious sphere. The rightness of this conviction allowed Darowska to formulate an original system of education, called nurturing education, in which the maxim “God to all, through all to God” took center stage (Ś. Grażyna od Wszechpośrednictwa NMP 1997, p. 14). This statement marked the theocentric direction of her world view, which was driven by personal prayer.

Prayer, according to Darowska, is as follows: “an agreement with God, being closer to Him, a conversation”. It should be the need of the heart, in which one can entrust
their affairs to God (Darowska 1873, pp. 60–61). In her autobiography, she wrote that while she did not know God (she pointed out that she was not even taught the basics of religious knowledge), she had an intuition of the Absolute, whom she contemplated while being around nature. These spiritual needs of Marcelina, combined with her outstanding intellectual talents and social activism rooted in her, formed the basis of a rich personality. They also caused her to overcome great difficulties associated with the realities of life at that time (partitions, Russification, liquidation of monasteries) and eventually led to the establishment of a religious congregation (Jabłońska-Deptula 2010). From the very beginning of the order’s existence, she pointed to the path of personal prayer as the best method of development and self-actualization.

Surprisingly, whether she preached to her fellow Sisters or talked to children about prayer, Marcelina conveyed similar content, only modifying the form of the message (she often used examples with the youngest audience). She placed high demands on herself and her pupils but did so with a keen understanding of human nature which came from her capacity for multifaceted observation and reflection, as well as her intra- and interpersonal skills. These competencies were revealed in writings Darowska left behind, referred to as “Texts”, e.g., “Four Talks from Retreats”, “Children’s Retreats”, “Retreats for Ladies Leaving the Institution”, most of which were never published.

Most noteworthy is “Children’s Retreats”, which is a transcript of conferences delivered in 1873 to children who were about to receive their First Communion. What is particularly impressive is Marcelina’s treatment of her listeners. According to pedagogical concepts of the 19th century, a child is a “future adult” (Buliński 2007). Although the need for support, care and education, understood as education in the cognitive sphere, was already recognized at that time, efforts were only just being made towards a fully fledged, personal perception of the child.

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a time of great change in Poland—first the Partition, then the time of regaining independence. These political events were associated with social changes. Women began to become economically independent, and the traditional understanding of the family was altered, but apart from the obvious benefits of these processes, there were also changes that were unfavorable for the young generation. The number of broken and newly formed families increased, as did the number of children left alone in a complicated legal situation. At the same time, the discoveries of experimental psychology at the end of the nineteenth century indicated, perhaps the obvious truth today, that the family is the most favorable environment for a child’s development.

This period was also the beginning and popularization of the pedagogical literature, also at the level of general access (e.g., writing activity of Maria Weryho-Radziwiłłowiczowa). On the one hand, parents’ interest in these proposals began, and on the other, there were grassroots initiatives related to the pedagogy of parents less aware in this area (most often coming from backgrounds of a lower socio-economic status). The twentieth century was a time when membership in social organizations and political parties became attractive, especially for young people. Combined with the further emancipation of women, this situation often further complicated the fate of the child. New philosophical and psychological concepts (e.g., pragmatism, constructivism) and pedagogical currents (e.g., the idea of a new upbringing, Maria Montessori’s pedagogy) emerged. Naturalism (paidocentrism) in education experienced a kind of renaissance as a response to the traditional model of a school not interested in the real needs of the child. Did Darowska support this educational model? Her pedagogy seemed to be a “pedagogy of moderation”. In many instances, she recommended that educators be aware of children’s needs, but she also paid attention to the development of their independence. She believed in the child’s abilities and encouraged teachers not to be afraid to make demands, both in the educational and spiritual spheres.

This is probably why in the abovementioned “Children’s Retreats” Darowska addressed the young audience subjectively, a priori so to speak, taking into account their ability to think independently. She considered educational interactions as a form of support
in the process of self-upbringing (Haratyk 2019, p. 66). The goal was to strive for the formation of mature prayer and thus to create a lasting disposition to maintain a relationship with God.

Three factors were cited as important in education: care (Latin: sanare), education (Latin: educare) and guidance (Latin: ducere). In the education of prayer, one should additionally include introduction and encouragement (Latin: initiare), helpful in establishing personal contact with God and cooperating with His Grace (Kulpażyński 2000). Although it is possible to identify and describe stages of prayer development according to theories of social constructivism (Kim 2001), without the adequate support from the environment, inhibition or regression can occur. In the subsequent parts of this paper, Marcelina Darowska’s concept of religious education is shown in reference to phases of the development of religiosity according to Walesa’s model (Walesa 2005).

3. Authoritarian Religiosity (7–11 Years)

The child demonstrates the ability to detach from the concrete content of objects and operate their mental representations, which leads to a boost in the understanding of different concepts; their systematization and hierarchization begins. The development of thinking and communication, the ability to take the perspective of other people, facilitates the child’s exit from individual and social egocentrism (Kesselring and Mueller 2011), which can be reflected in the richly structured image of prayer. According to Walesa (2005), even 7-year-old children believe that people ask God for things that go far beyond the children’s “here and now”. The following statements are an illustration of this: “[The people—MT and JP] pray for the souls in purgatory, that the world will be well, that there will be no wars, that everyone will be saved” (Peter, 7 years old); seven-year-old Margaret speaks of more concrete things: “[The people—MT and JP] ask God to give them bread and ham so that people can have a home of their own” (p. 261).

A school child is able to pray for a longer period of time and with greater commitment (Tatala 2009). Darowska seemed to intuitively spot this significant progression, motherhood being a source of her knowledge. She encouraged the young female retreatants to pray with these words: “My dearest ones! After all, when you love someone, do you want to stay and talk with them? Indeed, whenever there is an opportunity, you try to get close to them [. . .] Can you love God, then, and not love prayer? Not have a need for it? Not to seek it? That’s impossible”.

At this stage of development, the child’s participation in liturgy, especially the Eucharistic liturgy, becomes particularly important. Receiving the First Holy Communion also significantly influences the further development of prayer as God in the person of Jesus becomes closer and more real (Walesa 2005). As can be surmised from the emotional expression evoked in the communion songs, a certain amount of fascination, also present during the First Communion ceremony itself, can be extrapolated to individual prayer. The child’s understanding of God is anthropomorphic, with God being viewed as King or Ruler, which is a higher form of anthropomorphism. There is also an awareness of the distinctiveness of the Sacred, attributing spirituality to God (Walesa and Tatala 2020).

Children sometimes speak to God about things they do not discuss with other people (Kulpażyński 2000, pp. 106–8). In such prayer, especially older children go beyond matters happening in the present and extend their thoughts to a wider social sphere, e.g., praying for peace and love in the world (Walesa 2005). This characterization was observed by Darowska in her conviction regarding religious needs, as well as cognitive and even spiritual capacities of this age: “Would you do without His grace? Do you not need it for yourselves, for your parents, for your siblings, for your country, for the whole world?” (Darowska 1873, p. 139).

In prayer, as in the whole period of authoritarian religiosity, ritualism is a characteristic feature. The child takes over a whole range of external cult behaviors from adults, who are authority figures, and observes them in a precise, even scrupulous manner; in their view, deviation is often equated with sin (Walesa 2005). However, Darowska warned her pupils
against focusing too much on rituals. In her interactions, the educator reached out to the zone of proximal development of her pupils, many years ahead of the concept attributed to Lev Vygotsky (Langford 2005). According to this notion, the development of a child occurs not only due to the existence of higher cognitive functions similar in all people. An important role is played by the environment and tasks set out for the child, which should be at a slightly higher level than his or her current aptitude (this constitutes the zone of immediate development). If the child performs a task with the support of a more experienced person, the next independently conducted activity will improve not only the particular skill but also enrich their general knowledge.

A similar approach was displayed by Darowska: she encouraged children to transcend their capabilities, make efforts towards spiritual progress: “And pondering, does it also ever happen to you, my children? You could try that sometimes” (Darowska 1873, p. 62). One can see in this sentence a playful cheer to motivate rather than impose requirements. Moreover, she prompted children to go beyond a mechanical repetition of ready-made formulas in their prayer: “The prayers should be said carefully, not patted, not rushed as fast as possible in order to finish; say the words with understanding, then prayer spoken aloud will be very good, most often granting indulgences (Darowska 1873, p. 62). Darowska divided prayer into two types: oral and inner, without depreciating either of them. In the former, she stressed the importance of attentiveness, understood as the awareness of who the words are addressed to, and emphasized the importance of understanding the spoken sentences. This allows one to establish and maintain a relationship with God and on the other hand leads to inner prayer, which can be developed in the next developmental stage.

4. Autonomous Religiosity (12–17 Years)

The next period of prayer development is an expression of a better understanding of religious concepts and situations, greater criticism and formulation of own opinions, independent of judgment from others (Kulpačyński and Tatala 2000). According to Walesa, the central developmental task is to achieve capabilities, knowledge, competence and attitudes that characterize the adult in the biological, intellectual, social, moral and religious sphere (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz 2007). A young person adopts various forms of religiosity: spiritual exercises, meditations, references to other, sometimes non-Christian religions or religiously based psychotherapy (cf. Grom 2011). These phenomena are an expression of a gradual transition from heteronomous (external) religiosity to autonomous (internal) religiosity, followed by authentic religiosity (cf. Grom 2009; Kotlińska 2024; Walesa 2005).

Prayer at this time takes the form of an inner dialogue with God (Kulpačyński 2002). According to young people, it is “a system of communication with God”, “abiding in the presence of God, which is something beautiful”, sometimes “a form of confession of faith” (Walesa and Tatala 2020). This is illustrated by the following statements: “What encourages me to perform my religious practices is my faith that God hears my prayers.”—Ola, 12 years old; “I know that through prayer I can help myself and others for whom I pray—the sick, the deceased, or those in need”; (Arthur, 12 years old) (Walesa and Tatala 2020, p. 106).

Prayer in adolescence depends on a number of developmental factors. Among these are the following: (1) emotional ambivalence, (2) identity crisis, (3) disintegration of a worldview of a child and (4) influence of peer group (e.g., Grom 2009, 2011; Murawski 1989; Tatala 2009; Tucholska 2000).

As for the first of the abovementioned components, a young person is able to pray with fervor for some time because they experience positive emotional states (Murawski 1989). When, on the other hand, the emotional charge changes, prayer becomes unsystematic and sometimes even disappears. Darowska was probably familiar with this difficult state of ambivalence in the prayers of her pupils, as she served as an educator and superior of a religious community almost until her death. She spoke about feelings of this kind: “One believes that He [God] is, knows about it, but without any feeling; one is cold and dead
And then it’s so hard! So unpleasant!—And when prayer flows hot, then we are so happy, full in the soul.” (Darowska 1873, p. 116).

Adolescents, seeking their own identity, strive for autonomy. While rejecting authorities, they criticize the religiosity of adults and question the forms of religious life represented by them, considering them inauthentic and insincere (e.g., Dacka and Kopiczko 2024; Elkind 1999). An adolescent refers with distrust and suspicion to certain prayer formulas handed down by parents and religion teachers. Generally, after temporarily rejecting them, young people tend to return to the traditional ways but make sure that prayers they have known since childhood are said in earnest, with an inner conviction that they are their own expressions (Szczykiewicz 1998; Tatala 2009). Darowska understood this, as is clear when she explained to the youngsters: “That’s why we guide you in this way from the beginning, we don’t impose anything on you without explaining [...] these truths [of faith] become clearer and clearer to us; that is, the mystery itself remains a mystery, but its logicality, its wisdom, its beauty is demonstrated to us and it becomes closer, more accessible and finally more self-evident” (S. Anuncjata od Trójcy Świętej 2010, pp. 174–75).

The quoted mystic recognized the need for children to understand what pertains to faith but also outside of it. One of her pedagogical principles was “to teach children to think”, and she considered this rule in the education of young people as paramount. Her goal was to educate strong, independent, free-thinking women. She was against students learning incomprehensible content by heart (S. Anuncjata od Trójcy Świętej 2010, p. 75).

The developmental changes in adolescence lead to the breakdown in the current view of the world. This is manifested in a critical approach to prayer: questions are asked about essence, meaning of prayer, what place God occupies in this communication, whether this dialogue leads to any concrete effects and whether it changes anything in one’s life (Grom 2009; Walesa 2005). At the same time, Darowska warns against treating God instrumentally, saying the following: “<I prayed—and the Lord did not provide! Then I won’t pray anymore!> Oh my God! How foolish, and how audacious!” (Darowska 1873, p. 103).

Gradually, the search for one’s prayerful identity leads the young person to discover God as a Person, Creator, Father, Love (cf. Walesa and Tatala 2020). This, according to Marcelina, is the key moment when prayer becomes a real dialogue, a conversation, a need of the heart which gives joy: “Oh if you taste how sweet the Lord is! I tell you! I have touched human happiness in my life [...] but from my own experience I know: it is nothing compared to one moment with God” (Darowska 1875, p. 80).

The increasing importance of peers in entering the period of autonomous religiosity needs to be highlighted. When it comes to peer groups, a negative aspect of these influences is generally discussed (Maxwell 2002). Meanwhile, it is worth remembering that a young person can become involved in movements that offer positive values (Walesa 2005). In the educational institutions run by the Immaculate Sisters in Nowy Sącz, Szymanów and Wałbrzych, the constructive element of peer impact is still used today in the form of various academic (language, math), hobby (art, hiking, theater) or religious (the Oasis, Clean Hearts Movement) clubs.

5. Authentic Religiosity (18–24 Years)

With the formation of a worldview and as a result of the transition to emerging adulthood (Arnett 2007), authentic religiosity arises (Walesa 2005). It enables young adults to find their place in the world, provides a reference point when making life important decisions and is a source of ultimate justifications. Authenticity in religiosity usually follows a successful resolution of religious conflicts, involving the cognitive, emotional, motivational and behavioral spheres (cf. Arlin 1975; Walesa 2012). The motivation for prayer is a strong desire to maintain a relationship with God and the need to trust and confide in Him, regardless of life circumstances. As examples, we can take the statements of 24-year-olds who, apart from the aspects mentioned above, have a more accentuated personal thread: “I attend Holy Mass daily, pray morning and evening, fast often, pray the rosary every day and, when I can, the rosary. The fulfillment of these practices arises...”
from my inner need.” (Marcin, 24 years old); “I make sure that my participation in Holy Mass is as complete and deep as possible, so I leave what is inside me at the church door. Unfortunately this is difficult and sometimes I get distracted, but mostly I focus on getting in touch with God to hear what he is saying to me.” (Susan, 24 years old) (Walesa and Tatala 2020, p. 106). These statements suggest that prayer is more comprehensive, is expressed in a greater capacity for self-reflection and influences the formation of individual and conscious religious beliefs.

When prayer becomes more stabilized and internal, it is then possible, according to Darowska, to follow a certain pattern. The mystic distinguished the following stages in this spiritual dialogue: preparation, meditation, resolution and thanksgiving (Świerszcz 2007). In preparation for prayer, she stressed the importance of focusing on the Person of God and pushing away anything that may pose as a distraction. In the next phase, the topic of prayer is decided. The mystic pointed out that excerpts from the life of Jesus, Mary or the saints, as well as truths of faith and awareness of received graces, can be helpful. The meditation itself is not about gaining knowledge, but it is intended to be an inspiration to strengthen the will and evoke feelings, especially love towards God. The mystic wished that prayer builds intrinsic motivation to align one’s life with God’s plan. Making a resolution and giving thanks to God for the received graces should be the last stage which concludes the act of prayer.

However, prayer in the period of authentic religiosity is not free of difficulties. Darowska mentioned external and internal absentmindedness, as well as experiencing the so-called states of torpor (Świerszcz 2007). The former do not depend on a person’s will and do not have a significant impact on religious life. They are the result of performed or planned activities, require an analysis (during the examination of conscience), and in case a source is not identified, the mystic encourages people to develop a state of acceptance. Absentmindedness is a consequence of human nature and the circumstances of daily life.

The situation is different with torpor defined as “painful feelings of lack of inner consolation” occurring despite one’s devotion to religious practices (Świerszcz 2007). According to Darowska, these difficulties can be indicative of progress in spiritual development or even entering the next level of prayerful dialogue. Her advice seems truly simple: “[...] one does not need to be discouraged or distressed, but should persist in seeking God in prayer as if there were no torpor” (Darowska 1889, p. 103).

The second type of prayer which can constitute the next stage in its development is contemplation. The following is what Darowska said about it: “a deep concentration and closing of all our authorities before God, so as to listen to the voice of the Creator, understand His requirements, and then apply them, put them into practice” (Darowska 1875, p. 4). In this way, contemplation as a gift can be developed, but according to Marcelina, people are not able to learn it on their own. Being endowed with this unique ability herself, she was reluctant to discuss it, fearing that the recipient would seek mere experiences in prayer. Świerszcz points out that despite a certain passivity of the soul understood as a state of tranquility, suspension of thought and contemplation, some effort to prepare for prayer is needed. Nonetheless, it no longer requires the discursive process associated with awareness and imagination essential during meditation (Świerszcz 2007).

The prayer of people in the period of emerging adulthood is characterized by a far-reaching stabilization. Individuals display certain preferences and actively deepen those forms of prayer which give them a sense of fulfillment while consciously abandoning others that interfere with their psycho-religious predispositions (Walesa 1999). Contact with God is dependent on temperamental and personality traits. For instance, an introvert needs seclusion, isolation and tranquility for prayer to take place. On the other hand, an extrovert prefers communal prayer, combined with, e.g., verbal expression. It is clear that an introvert can also pray in a group of people, while an extrovert can pray individually; however, the difference lies in the occurrence of certain types of prayer (Tatala 2009). Darowska seemed to have an understanding that “[...] each soul is a separate thought of God, separate in itself, but
being part of the whole, in connection with the others” (Jabłońska-Deptuła 2010, p. 73). She emphasized the duality of human nature in referring to individual and social needs.

As mentioned, the broadening of the scope of prayer results from entering new social roles of emerging adulthood. On a larger scale, prayer encompasses problems not only of one’s family or the local community but also covers national issues, e.g., unemployment, and worldwide issues, such as wars, terrorism and consumerism (cf. Czerwińska-Jasiewicz and Wojciechowska 2011; Walesa 2005).

If there is no real attitude towards God and religion, that is, if authentic religiosity is not formed, the individual is exposed to a regression in the development of prayer or even to its periodic disappearance (Walesa 2017). However, hunger for the supernatural that exists in people stimulates them to seek ways of contact with God, which can take various forms of prayer. Nowadays, non-religious spirituality is also practiced, which leads to a change in the definition of religion and spirituality. They are sometimes treated as opposing phenomena (Gutierrez et al. 2017). Nevertheless, this kind of behavior confirms the existence of higher spiritual needs of humans, which inspire reflection on prayer.

6. Discussion

The presented study was an attempt to show the development of prayer as an important aspect of human life, including the succession of changes aimed at a higher quality of religious life. Inspirations were drawn from Czesław Walesa’s cognitive developmental theory of the integral development of religiosity and Marcelina Darowska’s system of religious education. It was pointed out that educational activities should focus on supporting children and young people in shaping their independence and responsibility for the development of prayer. The development of prayer can be continuous and abrupt, one-dimensional and multidimensional and in actualized and potential forms, as the zone of proximal development. It takes place in antinomic (disintegrative) and syntonic (integrative), heteronomous, autonomous and authentic forms (cf. Grom 2011; Walesa 2005). Even though the course of prayer development takes on an individualized and unique form, developmental periods can be distinguished, which was presented in this study.

The qualitative nature of prayer changes with age. Among other things, this process is an expression of the cognitive functioning of children and adolescents, and from about 11/12 years of age, it acquires the characteristics of formal thinking. According to Piaget (Inhelder and Piaget 1999; Piaget 2001, 2023; Wadsworth 2004), adolescents are characterized by centration, which is a focus on the most easily grasped, perceptual aspects. This translates into a holistic view of prayer. In further development, centration is replaced by decentration, which triggers the occurrence of more subtle forms of prayer (cf. Walesa 2012). The aforementioned process undergoes further qualitative changes in subsequent age groups, when autonomy and authenticity are formed, leading to a higher quality of religious and prayer life (cf. Czerwińska-Jasiewicz 2007; Walesa 2017).

As an educator of young people and a prioress in charge of the spiritual life of her sisters, Darowska devoted much of her teaching to the religious formation of women. An important place in her texts is occupied by the theme of prayer, which is an expression of individual maturity and responsibility not only in the religious sphere; it is a source of happiness and a feeling of fulfillment regardless of life experiences.

7. Conclusions and Guidelines for Religious Education

The analyses presented in this paper allowed us to offer conclusions and learnings of a pedagogical–religious nature:

(1) The teachings of Marcelina Darowska largely confirm the described classification of the developmental periods in prayer, despite the fact that her educational and didactic concepts were developed much earlier than most of the psychological and pedagogical theories on the subject.

(2) In the early stages of development, the child mimics the forms of expression of faith from adults. The child, participating in the communication of family members, takes
over the value system and patterns of behavior they represent. Hence, it is advisable to make parents, as first educators, and catechists aware of their role in creating the patterns and climate of prayer at home.

(3) The processes of identification and generalization play an important role in the formation of prayer. Based on the relationship with parents, the child forms an image of God. Depending on the type of experience, God can be seen as harsh and punishing (negative affective anthropomorphism) or caring and tender (positive affective anthropomorphism).

(4) From early years, Marcelina Darowska recommended guiding children and adolescents in making independent efforts directed towards their own religious development. It is advisable to help a young person shape an attitude of taking responsibility for prayer and to motivate efforts in this regard.

(5) Therefore, it would be appropriate to stimulate the development of conscious and voluntary prayer in children, adolescents and young adults, so that they courageously take the lead in communicating with God in the style suited to them, through individual and community prayer. Community protects against becoming too individualized, self-centered or deviating from the religious practice.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The considerations made for the purposes of this article represent an innovative approach to the development of prayer, but they have some limitations. These include the lack of a broader religious context in the development of prayer. Subsequent analyses should take up this issue and consider the following: (1) the occurrence of religious crises, (2) the decline in participation in religious practices, (3) the processes associated with deconversion, (4) the formation of the image of God and (5) the search for one’s religious identity, which is an experience that fills the space between the sense of security characteristic of childhood and the autonomy of an adult.

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