

Institute for Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF  
RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT  
A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE**

by

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Prepared for the  
International Faith and Learning Seminar  
held at  
Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A.  
June 1993

**131-93 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA**

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE**

*This paper summarizes some stage theories of religious development which are rooted in the Piagetian tradition. Some of the assumptions and presuppositions of R. Goldman, D. Elkind, J. Fowler, F. Oser are discussed. On the basis of exploratory studies about the development of the concept of salvation in children and adolescents among the SDA population, some suggestions are presented as a new theoretical model of religious development applicable to many religious populations.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Religious development in children and adolescents is a research area of increasing interest to developmental psychologists, theorists of religious development, religious educators, and designers of religious education curricula, especially in Christian settings. Historically, however, religious development received little consideration during the growth of psychology as a science. Naturalism and evolutionism, which are denotative of scientific psychology, contributed to a secular, humanistic perspective of human behavior. Behaviorism and psychoanalysis, with their atheistic presuppositions, formed a generation of psychologists with an agnostic attitude about God and supernatural phenomena. Therefore, religious thinking and behavior were not dealt with as broadly as other psychological manifestations. In psychoanalytical works, religious experiences were studied, but as pathological occurrences. Analytical psychiatrists Rizzuto (1979, 1991) and Coles (1990) may be considered exceptions, as they attempted to explain religious phenomena from a psychoanalytical perspective, with an underlying criticism regarding its classical assumptions.

The few investigations performed in the area of religious development have occurred mostly during the second half of the present century. Some religious development constructs (concept of God, concept of prayer, faith, religious identity, religious thinking, religious judgment, faith consciousness) have been researched but, as Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch (1985) appropriately pointed out, "Little is known about the environmental factors that influence the stage of religious cognitive development" (p. 75).

In most cases, where an examination of the developmental course for some aspect of religious thinking or experience was intended, samples have been randomly selected. Therefore, most of the studies have been multid denominational--with subjects having diverse levels of commitment to their religious beliefs--or have been conducted with secular

populations—based on secular presuppositions. Gillespie's (1988) conception of faith, perceived mostly as a religious experience that more closely resemble the biblical and theological view of faith, led him to develop an approximation to a stage model of faith-experience development, which appears more applicable to genuinely religious persons. However, his stage theory lacks sufficient empirical support. The present paper begins with a review of salient research about stage theories of religious development from a psychological perspective.

## **ANTECEDENTS: STAGE THEORY OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

The development of cognitive psychology generated a theoretical framework which was adopted and applied in the field of religious experience, principally concerning the development of religious thinking.

### **Jean Piaget**

Piaget's theory of cognitive development has had an extraordinary influence in psychological research during the last 40 years. Originated and developed in Switzerland, this theory was practically completed by the 1950s and well known among psychologists, although it did not become popular in the United States until the 1960s and 1970s.

Although some scholars do not agree with his position, Piaget (1952) postulated that concepts are developed in a necessary sequence of stages related to age. At each developmental level, the products of thought are determined by the interaction of developmental and experiential factors. Piaget's developmental cognitive theory is briefly outlined here for purposes of understanding some of its principal postulates.

The **Sensorimotor Period** is the stage that extends from birth to the acquisition of language. The child is born with innate reflex mechanisms. At the beginning, his/her mental life consists of exercising his/her reflexes, then moves to being able to organize activities in relation to the environment (cf. Piaget, 1967, p. 9).

The **Pre-operational Period**, during which representation and symbolic functions appear, extends from two to six or seven years. In this period, the child learns to use symbols such as words to represent people, places, and events. The appearance of language in the child brings three essential consequences for mental development: the socialization of the action, the thought in itself, and the intuition.

At the age of seven, the **Period of Concrete Operations** begins. This period is characterized by internalized reversible actions (operations). The reversibility of thought

allows certain forms of balance in mental operations. Some operations at this stage are classifying, manipulating numbers, dealing with concepts of time and space, and distinguishing reality from fantasy. This is the beginning of logical thinking.

In the **Period of Formal Operations** that extends from approximately ages eleven/twelve to adulthood, the individual transcends the sphere of the concrete and places reality in a group of possible transformations (p. 130). This new level that is built during the preadolescent years is characterized by the employment of inter-propositional logic, which integrates the operations of classes and relations that have been obtained in the period of concrete operations. During the period of formal-logic operations, the adolescent begins to think in abstract terms and to deal with hypothetical situations.

Although Piaget published a number of books about cognitive development in different scientific disciplines, he never investigated religious development specifically. However, he made related observations and suggestions in one of his earliest projects: *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932). The framework established by Piaget and his colleagues at the International Center of Genetic Epistemology in Geneva, Switzerland, was adopted by many authors and was applied to diverse spheres of psychological research, including development of faith and religion. Some of the key contributions in this field are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.- Some contributors to research in religious development**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Religious Thinking	R. Goldman	<i>Religious thinking from childhood to adolescence (1964)</i>
Idea of God	J. Deconchy	<i>The idea of God (1965)</i>
Concept of Prayer	D. Long, D. Elkind, & B. Spilka	<i>The child's conception of prayer (1967)</i>
Religious Identity	D. Elkind	<i>The child's reality (1978)</i>
Faith	J. Fowler	<i>Stages of faith (1981)</i>
Theological Concepts	N. Wakefield	<i>Children and their theological concepts (1986)</i>
Spiritual Development	L. Steele	<i>Developmental psychology and spiritual development (1986)</i>
Spiritual Development	D. Helminiak	<i>Spiritual development (1987)</i>
Religious Judgment	F. Oser & P. Gmünder	<i>Religious judgment (1991)</i>

## **STAGE THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT**

The best known stage theories follow the tradition of constructive genetic epistemology and, therefore, use Piagetian constructs in their respective theories. Some of them are summarized as follows:

### **Ronald Goldman**

"It was the work of Goldman that brought to the forefront questions regarding children's ability to understand religious ideas" (Hyde, 1990, p. 23).

Goldman's findings, resulting from a study done in England, were presented in two books (1964, 1965) and several articles consistent with Piagetian theory. He maintains that religious thinking is no different in mode and method than non-religious thinking (1964, p. 3) and, therefore, follows the same developmental stages.

During **early childhood**, although there is an obvious interest in religion, there is no indication that children may think in any religious sense. Based on this finding, Goldman stated, "This is why I have characterized early childhood as pre-religious" (1965, p. 80). In the responses of children from five to seven years of age, he found the characteristics of intuitive thinking: distracted by irrelevant details, literal, distorted, often misunderstood (p. 81).

By the end of the preschool years, children adopt a new manner of thinking characteristic of **middle childhood**. They are moving from a pre-operational to a concrete operational mode of thinking. Their move towards a more realistic view of experience means that their religious ideas take on a materialistic and physical expression (1964, p. 103).

In **late childhood and pre-adolescence** concrete limitations continue. Children try to adjust themselves to a more realistic theology.

It becomes clear, for example, that children begin to recognize the problem of God being everywhere and at one place at one particular time. To overcome this problem God must be conceived of as a spirit, not bound by physical limitations, but the child's natural concrete form of thinking makes this concept difficult for him to grasp. (1965, p. 132).

For many people, religious development stops at the level corresponding to a mental age of approximately ten years, when a two-world mentality is developed--one a theological world where God exists and is especially active as in biblical times, and the other, the world of emerging scientific thought where God does not exist.

"Thirteen, on average, appears to be the decisive age for most children, when they move forward into more adult thinking about religion" (Goldman, 1965, pp. 132, 133). Goldman pointed out that "about the age of thirteen marks a change in religious thinking as

in other school subjects," when "propositions, ideas, relationships, can be thought of in more abstract terms, making the language of religion decidedly easier to comprehend" (p. 162).

Goldman's findings have shown that mental ability and mental age, as might be determined by an IQ test, are the major factors associated with the development of religious thinking, rather than other religious variables or the actual age of the child (cf. Ratcliff, 1964, p. 36; Hyde, 1990, p. 25).

Goldman's work immediately brought adverse criticism including some hostile reactions. According to one of his most controversial postulates, Goldman suggested that while "the Bible is the major source book of Christianity *for adults*," it "is plainly not a children's book" (1965, p. 71). In another part (1964), he stated that "very little biblical material is suitable before Secondary schooling" (p. 225). Ryan (1968, p. 448) pointed out that she would like to discuss Goldman's stance on this point as well as the question of children's worship another controversial topic, since Goldman denounced the danger of adult forms and expressions of worship for children (1965, p. 94).

Hyde (1968) started his criticism by asking if Goldman's research was adequate to carry the weight of his conclusions. Among other aspects, the size of the sample (200 children) was criticized (p. 429). Goldman called the three stages he established the pre-religious stage, the sub-religious stage, and the fully religious stage, which correspond, respectively, to early childhood, middle childhood, and preadolescence (1965, pp. 46-48). Hyde considered that "these terms may be unfortunate, suggesting that children are not ready for any religious involvement" (1968, p. 432). Additionally, it must be remembered that thinking is only one aspect of the religious experience. Because these stages are defined in the context of rational conceptual thought, Hyde prefers to call them pre-theological and sub-theological stages.

Godin (1968) expressed a similar criticism:

. . . Has Goldman not related too closely the progress of *religious* thinking to stages which Piaget has described as peculiar to *conceptual* thought? This is a paradoxical connection since Goldman himself keeps reminding us that religious thinking is, in essence, *symbolic*, and he makes no effort to investigate the origins of symbolic thinking which Piaget had described. In our opinion, the stages of religious thinking are not so closely bound to those of conceptual thought, but perhaps more to those of *symbolic* thinking. (p. 442)

Freeman (1970) declared that "the presuppositions of Goldman, his method of research, his theological bias, and the implications for religious education that he draws, can, have

been, and still should be, challenged" (p. 2). Nevertheless, although he has doubts, reserves, and certain misgivings about Goldman's presuppositions, Freeman believed "the essential point regarding developmental stages is valid" (p. 61).

In evaluating Goldman's assertion about the lack of value of Bible study for children raises serious questions from an SDA perspective. Seventh-day Adventists believe that "most earnest attention must be given to the education which will impart a knowledge of salvation" (White, 1948, p. 127), and people "need to learn [this knowledge] and teach it to children and youth" (White, 1893, p. 147). In accordance with this concept, SDA "parents should explain and simplify the plan of salvation to their children, that their young minds may comprehend it" (White, 1945, p. 142).

### **David Elkind**

In the early '70s David Elkind (1971) stated that "we seem to be coming to the end of the qualitative descriptive phase of research into religious development and to be moving toward the quantitative experimental stage of inquiry" (p. 682).

Elkind's studies about cognitive development in religious understanding were among the first to be conducted and published in the United States. According to Hyde (1990), "David Elkind had played a prominent role in bringing the work of Piaget before an American audience, replicating a number of the Genevan studies, and his were the first published studies about cognitive development in religious understanding" (p. 18).

A well-known professor at Yale University, Elkind tried to apply Piaget's theory to different domains. In his classical work, *The Child's Reality* (1978), he summarized some findings which had been published in different journals since the early 1960s. He focused mainly on three developmental themes: religious development, perceptual development, and the problem of egocentrism.

Elkind distinguished between **personal** religion and **institutional** religion. Personal religion "would be the feelings, concepts, and attitudes that children manifest and . . . may be experienced in relation to living persons, to nature, or even toward animals." He thought that personal religion is difficult to study. Elkind studied "how children progressively reconstruct institutional religion--the beliefs, practices, and dogmas of established religions" (p. 5). With the assumption that religion is made possible by cognitive development (cf. Worthington,

1989, p. 559), in one of his articles (1970), Elkind postulated that cognitive need capacities, which emerge and become characteristic of different stages of children's development, such as the search for conservation, representation, relations and comprehension, find part of their solutions, respectively, in some of the elements of the institutionalized religion: the concept of God, worship, and Scripture.

Elkind carried out investigations about religious conceptions among children of different faiths: Jewish (1961), Catholic (1962), and Congregational Protestant (1963). What Elkind finally studied was the development of a denominational conception of religious identity, that is, how the child forms the idea of religious belonging (1964a). This approach is more objective and resembles Piaget's studies about children's reconstruction of scientific concepts and laws.

In fact, Elkind employed the semi-clinical interview designed by Piaget in 1929 as his method of investigation. He interviewed 790 children ranging in age from 5 to 11. According to their responses, children were assumed to belong to one of the three stages of development.

**Stage I** (usually ages 5-7) includes children having "a global, undifferentiated" quality of thinking and, for this reason, their conception of religious identity also is undifferentiated. "In general, first-stage children had little or no idea as to how a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew might be recognized" (1978, p. 14).

**Stage II** (usually ages 7-9) is characterized by a remarkable progress made in the conceptualization of religious identity. "The second-stage child . . . had abstracted certain concrete referents, primarily actions, characteristic of different denominational groups. It was the abstraction of concrete referent properties of denominational terms that was the outstanding characteristic of the second stage" (p. 18).

In **Stage III** (usually ages 10-12), children display a new level of thinking about their religious denominations. This stage is characterized "as one of *reflection*." The child looks for manifestations of religious identity "in the evidence of his or her innermost beliefs and convictions" (p. 22). Children use the term *religion*, which did not appear spontaneously until the third stage.

Elkind also studied children's conception of prayer. The following paragraph summarizes his findings in this area:

I would like to emphasize how, in the development of prayer as in the development of the child's conception of his/her religious denomination, three basic themes can be observed. At each stage of development, children construct a new concept of prayer that is neither entirely learned nor entirely spontaneous. Secondly, this process of construction is continuous, and the successive conceptions of prayer progressively approximate those held by adults. Finally, the concepts of prayer arrived at by children always reflect the interaction of mental activity and experience. At any stage of development, the child's conception of prayer represents the creative product of thought interacting with experience. (p. 45)

Elkind did not pay attention to the relationship with God because personal religion does not fit in a scientific analysis as institutional religion does. Institutional religion provides solutions to problems of adaptation. And adaptations are products of the interaction between individual and environment. "There are no drives, sentiments, emotions, or mental categories which are inherently religious. Psychic elements . . . become religious only insofar as they become associated with one or another aspect of institutional religion" (1970, p. 41).

Although Elkind recognized the concept of Transcendence, the Transcendent is understood not like a category of objective reality, but like a construction afforded by institutional religion in response to cognitive adaptation needs.

### **James Fowler**

Fowler (1981, 1991) offers a developmental model of faith consciousness. He conceives faith as "a dynamic and generic human experience" (1991, p. 31), but does not imply that it is identical with religion. Fowler describes faith as developing in stages. The first four stages of his theory parallel Piaget's four stages of cognitive development.

There is a **Stage 0** or pre-stage, inaccessible to empirical research of the kind he pursues. It is the stage of *Primal Faith*, the earliest faith, which is formed before there is language, in the relationships of oneself with parents and others.

In **Stage 1** children manifest an *Intuitive-Projective Faith*, which is characterized by productive imaginative processes filled with fantasies, and by the awakening of moral emotions. This stage is most typical of children ages three to seven years.

**Stage 2** is the stage of *Mythic-Literal Faith*, approximately coincident with the elementary-school years. At this age, faith takes the form of story, drama, or myth. As the concrete-operational thinking is developing, children's logic begins to separate the real and actual from fantasy and beliefs.

**Stage 3** begins to take form in early adolescence and it is the stage of *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*, when a person's experience of the world starts to extend beyond the family. At this stage, faith has to synthesize values and data. There are personal new relations with significant others which "correlate with a hunger for a personal relationship to God in which we feel ourselves to be known and loved in deep and comprehensive ways" (1991, p. 38). Fowler pointed out that this stage is typical of the adolescent period and becomes a fixed place of equilibrium for many adults.

**Stage 4** forms mostly during late adolescence and young adulthood. It is the stage of *Individuative-Reflective Faith*. To reach this stage, it is necessary explicitly to recognize one's identity and differentiate one's own worldview from those of others. Commitments have to be consciously chosen and critically examined. For this reason, it is a "demythologizing" stage where symbols, rituals, myths, and beliefs are critically evaluated. Their meanings are interrogated and reconstituted.

The stage of *Conjunctive Faith*, **Stage 5**, often appears at midlife or beyond and involves the reintegration of elements of strength from childhood faith (1981, p. 194). It also involves "the embrace and integration of opposites or polarities in our lives" (1991, p. 40). In the religious instance, symbols must be reunited with conceptual meanings.

**Stage 6** is very uncommon. The persons best represented by it have generated faith compositions in which they feel a sense of an ultimate environment which is inclusive of all being. "Persons in this stage are grounded in a oneness with the power of being or God." Universalizers have completed the process of decentralization. "They begin to see and value *through* God rather than from the self" (p. 41). But people who reach the sixth stage are generally honored and revered after death rather than during their lives.

Heywood (1992) recognized the importance of Fowler's theory stating that "as developed by James Fowler over the last ten years, faith development is one of a family of structural developmental theories of human development based on Piaget's work, the other most prominent being that of Lawrence Kohlberg" (p. 153). But Fowler's theory was not exempted from criticism. Heywood thought it strange "to use a theory of child development, whose final stage is completed by the age of sixteen, as the basis for a theory of development extending throughout adulthood." Besides that, "the philosophy underlying Piaget's work on cognitive development is fundamentally antithetical to some of Fowler's most important emphases" (p. 153).

Moseley (1992), in a sharp analysis of Fowler's epistemological presuppositions,

pointed out that "by basing his stages of faith on Piagetian constructivism, Fowler adopts the position that faith follows a logical progress of development" (p. 163). But Moseley concluded that "Fowler is caught between the empiricist demands of structuralism and the metapsychological and metaethical concerns of liberal Protestant theology." For this reason Fowler claimed for faith a "more comprehensive form of logic than is found in Piagetian constructivism" (p. 165). In other terms, "a stage of faith is more comprehensive than its cognitive-developmental operations" (p. 170).

### **Fritz Oser**

As professor of educational psychology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, Oser attempted to measure the development of religious judgment. He elaborated one of the more up-to-date stage theories of religious development. Like other psychologists mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Oser's main goal was to affirm the existence of a non-reducible, primordial, and natural religious domain against the postulates of an anti-religious psychology.

Studying the developmental changes occurring in religious consciousness, which determine that "different chronological ages lead people to make different religious judgements" (Oser & Gmünder, 1991, p. 9), Oser affirmed that

If one only takes these facts seriously, one has to draw a fundamental conclusion: Not only do fundamental differences exist between adults and children in the logico-mathematical, ontological, moral, and social domains but also concerning the interpretations of human existence from a religious perspective. (p. 10)

Oser attempted to develop a universal cognitive pattern to describe, explain, and predict religious development. Using the semiclinical interview and the religious dilemma as his methodology, Oser found five developmental stages and alluded to a sixth universal stage. The elements of this structural pattern "which are constant and regular are primordial in nature" (p. 17), like the regularities observed in the Piagetian processes of assimilation and accommodation.

According to Oser, there is **Stage 0** where children are still incapable of distinguishing between different forces outside of themselves. In his words, "they do not yet *have* different forms of exteriority that can be connected causally" (p. 69). **Stage 1** is characterized by an absolute religious heteronomy orientation and it extends mainly until ages eight and nine. **Stage 2** is predominantly from nine to eleven, when God still is viewed as being external, but "can be influenced by goods deeds, promises, and vows" (Oser, 1991, p. 10). Persons at **Stage 3** manifest absolute autonomy, because they consider God as "an entity outside the human realm" (Oser & Gmünder, 1991, p. 12). This conception begins to be observed during early adolescence, but also is seen in older people. **Stage 4**, which emerges mainly during

late adolescence and young adulthood, presents a mediated autonomy where "persons now have a decision-making self which they can bring into a correlationally mediated relation with the Ultimate" (p. 76). Individuals at this stage see themselves as being free and responsible, but freedom now is tied to the Ultimate (Oser, 1991, p. 12). In this stage social engagement becomes a religious form of life (p. 10). **Stage 5** is distinguished by an orientation to religious intersubjectivity and autonomy. According to Oser's model, in stage 5 "transcendence and immanence permeate one another and thereby establish the possibility of universal solidarity of all people" (Oser & Gmünder, 1991, pp. 12, 13).

Oser presented some remarks about **Stage 6**, which is conceptually elaborated—without empirical bases—and is reached by few individuals in any society, like stage 6 in Kohlberg's theory. This is "the highest possible structure of reasoning of religious consciousness" (p. 79) and its orientation "tends toward universal communication and solidarity" (p. 81).

## **THEORETICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS**

Ratcliff (1985) is right when he suggests, "While not minimizing Piaget's contributions, it may be best to first examine the exact nature of the child's religious concepts" (p. 35). Indeed, there is no reason to differ totally with the findings resulting from research on cognitive development. These findings can help give a base on which to elaborate curricular designs for religious teaching.

However, as asserted by Farmer (1992), "a fundamental error is being committed. Religious knowledge . . . has a different meaning than knowledge *about* religion" (p. 260). Psychogenetic tradition focuses on cognitive abilities and structures. But it is very important to distinguish religious heart commitment from cognitive religious understanding in the same way that we differentiate moral development (predominantly behavioral) from moral judgment (predominantly cognitive). Religious development involves more than cognitive understanding of religious content. Most studies focus on cognitive religious understanding because it is easier to validate scientifically. However, establishing a model of religious experience from a developmental perspective, beyond mere cognitive understanding, continues to be a challenge.

### **Secularistic Trends**

Most of the recent studies in the field of religious development have been done following secularistic presuppositions, which appear to be corroborated by findings obtained from mostly secular samples, randomly selected from the general population.

Referring to the development of faith and research, Fowler (1991) stated that "by incorporating both constructive and evolutionary perspectives, the theory and research are consonant with the epistemological breakthroughs inaugurated by the Enlightenment and by the nineteenth century" (p. 44). Some processes like demythologization and hermeneutic analysis, which "parallel the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century" (p. 38), belong, respectively, to stages 4 and 5 in Fowler's model. For people who genuinely believe in the existence of a transcendent God, in His intervention in human affairs, and in the divine inspiration of His Holy Word, these critical procedures are strange and are interpreted as constituting secularized phenomena. But according to psychogenetic scholars, people with such thoughts remain at a halfway station, fixed in juvenile stages of religious development. Because of their stereotyped beliefs, they cannot reach higher levels of religious maturity. Goldman's relativistic biblical hermeneutics is oriented in the same direction when he alerts against the danger of a literal reading of the Bible and affirms the need of adapting Bible content to this century's childhood mentality (1967, p. 227-230).

On the other hand, although these cognitive stage models are based on consistent findings, scientifically validated, such as Oser's results (cf. Oser & Gmünder, 1991, p. 170), the samples are selected through statistical procedures, involving nonreligious people or people with some religious but secularized affiliation. Some interpretations, like Elkind's (1970) conception of religious elements as responses to natural cognitive needs, are also elaborated within secularized frameworks. These facts raise the question of the applicability of these models to strongly Bible-oriented Christians. How does the development of religious experience, in general, and, more specifically, the development of religious thinking truly occur?

Even though some Christian groups obviously follow the same course of cognitive development as the general population, the course of their religious development may be different because they grow in their religious development adopting a biblical theological framework as their source of beliefs and as their basic conceptual presuppositions. Samples from the general population and from these religious groups differ in most of their basic religious presuppositions. Some of these differences are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.****Comparison between secular and biblical presuppositions**

<b><i>Secular Presuppositions</i></b>	<b><i>Biblical Presuppositions</i></b>
1. God does not exist or exists within the human sphere; created by the individual.	1. God exists and transcends the human sphere.
2. God does not intervene in human affairs.	2. God intervenes in history and in human affairs.
3. The Bible is a product of human thought and needs to be demythologized.	3. The Bible is a book inspired by God.
4. Human behavior should be regulated by social consensus.	4. Human behavior should be regulated by divine precepts.

**The Problem of Naturalistic Anthropological Presuppositions**

Some underlying psychogenetic presuppositions are inadmissible from a biblical perspective. Piaget advocates for a science free from religious and ideological prejudices and from supernatural and transcendental phenomena. He holds that the source and the settling of the psychosocial individual is the biologic organism, which is part of the physical world. In the anthropological scope his naturalism acquires the biologic character that molds his entire psychogenetic approach. The following text exemplifies this posture:

At birth, mental life is limited to the exercise of reflex apparatuses, i.e., of heredity determined sensory and motor coordinations that correspond to instinctual needs, such as nutrition. . . . These reflexes bear on the behavior that will play a role in subsequent psychological development. (1967, p. 9)

Following the hypothesis offered by Lamarckism and classical neo-Darwinism, Piaget sees cognitive development as a product of the human biological processes. He states that "cognitive processes seem . . . to be at one and the same time the outcome of organic autoregulation, reflecting its essential mechanisms, and the most highly differentiated organs of this regulation at the core of interactions with the environment" (1971, p. 26).

How, then, may this biology-oriented system be used to study scientifically a religious phenomenon? How can such a system be used to study children's religious development when, for example, Piaget's (1932) complete essay about children's moral judgment assumes that all "revealed" truth and all external authority goes against the development of intelligence and moral judgment? The biblical idea of a human being created by God as a whole, from His divine image, is incompatible with his evolutionist and naturalist conception of anthropology (Korniejczuk, 1991).

## **TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT**

It is necessary to seek a new model of religious development from a psychological perspective and to base it on a study of people who genuinely believe in transcendence and in the Bible as a book inspired by God. In other words, this model should be designed to examine the religious development of genuinely religious people who practice their beliefs. The subjects for such research should be obtained specifically from a practicing Christian population. A study of religious development makes sense when taken from observation of people who portray in their behavior that they live in accordance with what they profess.

This new model should be founded on research in which methodological requirements are scientifically met, but without the naturalistic, atheistic, and secularistic assumptions or presuppositions of current theories. Instead, it should consider and adopt biblical presuppositions which are not contrary to psychological scientific principles (cf. Cosgrove, 1988, pp. 196, 197).

Summarizing, the model that this paper hypothesizes would retain stages and theoretical constructs similar to those postulated by Piaget, but the characterization of each stage would be revised. For example, the intuitive-thinking stage corresponding to Goldman's pre-religious stage probably will show other features resulting in different implications for religious education. Instead of Goldman's two-world mentality (biblical-theological versus scientific-secular), there would be an integrated unique worldview from which all of life is perceived from a biblical-theological perspective. Fowler's "demythologizing" stage would be viewed differently: the tacitly accepted may become explicit and, the uncritical convictions may be consciously assumed without affecting a person's relationship with God--the richness of the religious experience. Instead of abandoning one's earlier immature beliefs, one would begin to view them in a more mature perspective. Oser's immanence and religious intersubjectivity would give place to transcendence. In the search for this new model, probably none of the preceding models of religious development would emerge clearly as a whole, but some elements and/or theoretical constructs of each may be retained.

Taking into consideration the preceding framework, some preliminary findings from a research conducted by Habenicht (1993) looking for a developmental pattern in SDA children's and adolescents' concept of salvation, and the theoretical model suggested by Winn (1991), the following ideas attempt to contribute some specific elements related to the development of the concept of salvation in SDA children and adolescents toward a future design of a more general model of religious development.

### **Preoperational Period (2 to 6/7 years old)**

During the preoperational period, the elements of salvation are not conceptualized; they are perceived intuitively. Children may "feel" sorrow for their sins and may confidently assume to be forgiven. They can ask Jesus to come into their lives and allow Him to control them. Children in this stage handle separately different pieces of information relating to the plan of salvation. It is hard for them to reach a whole picture of the doctrine of salvation. They conceive sin as "something bad" or "something wrong," mostly related to children's own actions or behavior. Misbehavior, to them, is equated with sin; therefore not everyone sins, since "good" people do not sin. God may become angry when people do something bad. People have to overcome sin mainly by their own effort. Children have a preconceptual awareness of Jesus' earthly mission, but the perception is limited by the constriction of this period; a connection with the plan of salvation rarely occurs. In the mind of little children, good people who love and obey God will be saved. This age group has a spontaneous and unconditional assurance of salvation.

### **Concrete Period (6/7 to 11/12 years old)**

Conceptualization begins during the concrete thought period, but in concrete and literal terms. Children at this time can integrate different pieces of information and elaborate simple patterns of the process of salvation. They see sin is seen in terms of disobedience to God and often describe it through concrete examples. God does not become angry because people sin, but He is sad and is willing to help them overcome sin. Children conceive Jesus' mission on earth as part of the divine plan of salvation, but they don't form abstract concepts like atonement, substitution, and vindication until the next stage. They cannot explain the relationship between faith and being saved, or between choice and being saved, but they can affirm the existence of some connection between them. Their assurance of salvation is not as spontaneous and unconditional as it was in the previous level. They have some questions and doubts about forgiveness and readiness.

### **Formal Period (11/12 years old or more)**

In the formal period, individual children can think in abstract terms, use inter-propositional logic, and deal with hypothetical situations. They conceptualize sin as a transgression of God's commandments. During middle adolescence, children begin to attribute to sin a separation from God or, in other terms, as a broken relationship with Him. Because sinfulness of human nature is an abstract notion, it does not appear before the period when young people are able to diagnose how sin permeates God's creation. Children at this age believe a closer relationship with God, depending on and submitting to Him as a result of trusting in His grace, will help people to overcome sin so they may be saved. Even though some symbolic aspects of baptism are grasped in the previous period, children hardly

understood its meaning before 11 years of age. The idea of public confession rarely appears until middle adolescence. Although SDA young people are certain in their beliefs about the objective existence of the salvation warranted by Christ's sacrifice, an important proportion of them have some degree of subjective uncertainty. This may be attributed mostly to attitudinal differences and to their awareness of the possibility of failure when they ask sincerely for forgiveness or unconditionally accept salvation.

### **Elements Not Age-related**

Some elements do not seem to be age-related nor are they strongly conditioned by cognitive development. These are aspects of the doctrine that appear to be more related to instructional and environmental factors, such as the quality of affective family support, the quality of religious education, and certain personality traits. For example, except for those in the preconceptual period who appear to be more behavior oriented, children among all age groups do not exhibit significant differences in their perception of the role of behavior and works as well as the role of trust and grace in Christian salvation.

Some children believe that salvation is related to behavior and fulfillment of the law. They do not refer to the role of faith or grace. Other children think salvation is related to faith and a trusting attitude toward God's grace. They do not refer to behavioral aspects.

Finally, some children with a more comprehensive perception of how Christian salvation works believe that salvation is related to a personal relationship with God, which implies a trusting acceptance of Jesus' merits and a faithful dependence on Christ. Reference to a good lifestyle or behavior resulting from this commitment may be present.

Even though additional research is necessary for delineating a valid model of development of the concept of salvation, the following hypotheses provisionally could be assumed:

- a) In analyzing the development of the concept of salvation in SDA children and adolescents, children cognitive stages will correspond to those formulated by the Piagetian cognitive-developmental theory.
- b) The development of the concept of salvation in the subjects of this study will be affected not only by cognitive but also by affective and religious-instructional factors.
- c) The preoperational period is characterized by a spontaneous assurance of salvation. Some questions and doubts which arise during the concrete period diminish children's assurance of salvation. Although SDA young people are certain in their beliefs about the objective existence of salvation, an important proportion of them experience some degree of subjective uncertainty about their own salvation.

- d) The passage from a lower to a higher stage of development in the concept of salvation in a religious population will convey a significant change in the level of elaboration and conceptualization of the doctrine but will not imply an increasing presence of social and self-centered elements in determining convictions as exhibited in findings drawn from samples randomly selected from the general population.

## **APPLICATIONS**

First, this new model may benefit developmental psychologists because it will broaden the existent knowledge about religious development during the growth years. Second, people interested in psychology of religion may profit from the findings related to developmental aspects of the religious experience of individuals. Third, religious educators in both church and school settings may obtain information useful in formulating the psychological bases of curriculum design for religious instruction. In most Christian schools, each member of the faculty is considered a religious educator, not only the Bible teacher or the chaplain. Therefore, the range of applicability of a new model in these settings is ample.

Finally, parents and those offering workshops and other educational training for parents may gain some ideas concerning the fundamental mission of parents to provide continuous nurturing for the spiritual life of their children.

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