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## The Influence of Early Childhood Religious Indoctrination on Cognitive Development and Moral Reasoning in Pakistan

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### Abstract

**Background** Induction of religion at an early age is significant for cognitive and moral development. In Pakistan where religion is embedded in the society, it is important to analyze its impacts on a child's development. This study seeks to determine the connection between religious teaching, cognitive learning, and moral reasoning among children between the ages of 7 to 14 years in different areas in Pakistan.

**Aim** The focus of the study was to determine the extent of the cognitive and moral reasoning development of a child that can be attributed to religious teaching, paying special attention to the gender and socioeconomic factors that moderate the relationship.

**Method** Utilizing a quantitative approach, a cross-sectional design was used to collect data from 1,200 children from 12 villages in Pakistan. Children were selected evenly from three different age groups (7–9, 10–12, and 13–14) in both genders. Several standardized instruments were employed, such as the Religious Fundamentalism Scale for measuring religious indoctrination and the Moral Judgment Test for measuring cognitive moral development. Analysis included Pearson correlation, t-tests, and moderation analysis.

**Results** It was established that there existed a strong positive relation between religious indoctrination and cognitive as well as moral development. Differences



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between genders were noted during the analysis of cognitive development and moral reasoning, with males excelling more than females. Moderation analysis showed that the relation of religious indoctrination with cognitive development was conditioned by gender and socioeconomic status.

**Conclusion** Indirectly in light with gender and socioeconomic conditioning, fostering religion at an early age is significant for cognitive and moral development in children. While these results are valuable it also suggests that issues of religion and child development be further investigated, especially religion's impact on child's cognitive structure.

**Keywords** Religious Indoctrination, Cognitive Development, Moral Reasoning, Gender, Socioeconomic Status, Child Development, Pakistan.

### Introduction

The impact of early religious exposure on moral reasoning and cognitive development is profound, especially in cultures which have a robust infrastructure for religion within education (Badshah et al., 2021; Sindhu et al., 2022; Qadeer et al., 2025). In Pakistan for example, Islamic teachings are introduced by the family, schools and other affiliated religious bodies which serve to greatly structure and mold a child's moral and cognitive abilities. The stories and morals associated with the religion, along with the scriptures, are a child's first encounter towards creativity (Noshili et al., 2022; Saleem & Thakur, 2024). Such framing dictates that faith, obedience, and moral reasoning that is conditioning in nature is promoted. While this level of faith based moral support is effective because it is structural, it poses important questions (Butt et al., 2020; Mehmood et al., 2022): What is the level of impact on cognitive flexibility, critical thinking skills, and moral autonomy? After all, restricting belief systems like these brings up the question of whether it enhances or constrains moral and cognitive development (Khadijah & Umam, 2023; Osman 2024).

Children's cognitive development is influenced mostly by the cognitive schemas children gain through social interaction, education, and parental guidance (Khyber et al., 2022; Huda, 2024). In Pakistan, where religion is part of everyday life, children tend to view the religious explanations as the primary source of knowledge about the world. This can have an impact on blooming cognition in numerous ways, including their ability to reason around abstract concepts and causality, as well as social norms (Muhammad Usman, 2022). For example, on the one hand, religious instruction provides an epistemological framework that helps children categorize social and moral behaviors in a coherent system (Aftab et al., 2021, Abbas et al., 2022). On the other hand, when religious ways of explaining things prevail, there is a risk of imposing some limits on cognitive flexibility (Qadri & Siddiqui, 2020; Tahir & Alkali, 2024). The balance between religious instruction and additional sources of information defines the scope of a child's critical inquiry and their ability to adapt to new perspectives (Ahmed 2020; Baig & Begum, 2023; Batool et al., 2025).

It is widely understood that moral reasoning incorporates features such as the Kohlberg's stages of moral development, where it transforms from being externally controlled to self-derived ethical reasoning (Huda, 2024). In Pakistan where religious philosophy greatly dominates moral development, children are taught morals through texts, religious leaders, and even the society itself. This breakdown in morality builds an appreciation for morality that serves a higher



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purpose (Abbas, 2022). It is ingrained in divine incentives and punishments, promoting good deeds such as kindness and compassion (Aftab et al., 2021; Akram et al., 2024). And while this is some form of moral conditioning, it can also create a sense of moral absolutism, where there is no room for intelligent reasoning in morals because everything is considered religiously defined (Tahir & Alkali, 2024). The impact of religion on moral development thus rests on whether the same religious imposition permits self-moral reasoning, reflection, moral discussions and debates, and understanding of ethical challenges beyond religion (Aftab et al., 2021). Pakistan's sociocultural environment exacerbates religious imposition in relation to cognitive and moral development because one's religion is intertwined with his social and even national identity (Huda, 2024).

### **Problem Statement**

Most studies exploring cognitive growth and moral reasoning have concentrated on the educational, family, and socio-cultural influences, but the consequence of early religious teaching is yet to be studied in Pakistan (Muhammad Usman, 2022). Since religion is taught at an early age of cognitive and moral development, it is necessary to establish whether such Indoctrination leads to strict, authoritarian moral reasoning or a useful moral philosophy. This study is designed to fill this gap by assessing the potential impact of early religious exposure on cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, and moral judgment in children. The study will explore whether religious indoctrination increases moral sensitivity and prosocial behaviors or stifles independent moral reasoning and flexibility in ethical dilemmas. In Pakistan, it is critical to know the long-term cognitive and social consequences of such religious education on a growing child's mind.

### **Significant of the Study**

The significance of this study is in the detailed evidence documented about how one's religion conscience impacts their moral judgment, especially in a society where most aspects of life, including education, are religiously inclined. Considered in the context of the society where morality is intimately intertwined with religious teachings, there is a strong need to explore the cognitive and moral implications of religious indoctrination at an early age. This study will also support the arguments made in other countries regarding the effects of religious socialization on cognitive and moral reasoning and in particular, the ability to reason independently. In addition, the results of the study can inform educators and curriculum developers on how best to incorporate religious socialization without undermining critical reasoning skills in children.

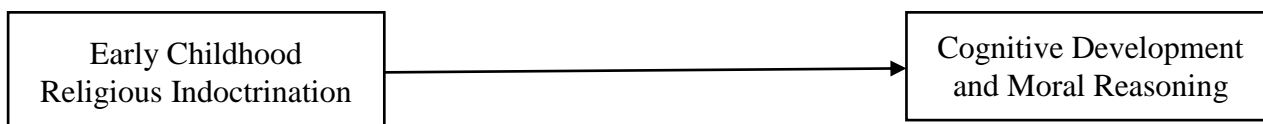
### **Aim of the Study**

The current aim of this study is to understand the impact of the religious indoctrination during the early years of a child's life on the cognitive abilities and moral reasoning of children in Pakistan. It intends to investigate the to what degree does religious education influence the cognitive schema's, moral ethics, and decision making at that particular age of development. Also, the study intends to find out if religious indoctrination children has extreme forms of moral absolutism or a more nuanced understanding that combine religion and reason. Through this analysis, the study seeks to explain the phenomenon of the



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psychological and moral consequences of early age religious teachings, furthering the discourse on child development, education, and religious moral psychology.



The basis of this study's theoretical framework derives from Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development as well as Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development which describes children's reasoning and moral judgments accruing with age and experiences. Structured learning settings like religious indoctrination shows how Piaget's theory defines cognitive growth while Kohlberg's framework describes the progression of moral reasoning which could also be affected by early religious instruction that set a rigid or flexible ethical boundaries (Ali & Shaffie, 2021).

### Methodology

The study uses a cross-sectional approach to data collection in the study. The purpose is to assess the impact of religious philosophy on intellectual and moral development of children in Pakistan. The novelty of the study lies in conducting it within 12 selected villages from four major provinces: cultures and religious Ghazies Punjab (shown by Kot Radha Kishan, Chak 89, Jahanian), Sindh (shown by Goth Saeedabad, Bhit Shah, Keti Bandar) , Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (shwon by Shabqadar, Matta, Bara), and Balochistan (shown by Mastung, Panjgur, Turbat." A sample of 1,200 children 7 to 14 years old will be obtained in the following manner: 100 children per village which will amount to 1,200 overall. A purposive non probability sampling technique will be used to select the sample comprising families whose children have received religious instruction formally (through madrasas) or informally (through home, mosque, and community). The required children must reside in these villages for five years and have supportive guardians, whilst children suffering from cognitive impairment, learning disability, or no religious instruction of any kind will be omitted.

The study will have a demographic sheet in order to capture information on the participants such as age, gender, parental education, and socio-economic status. For religious indoctrination, the participant's level of religious rigidity, moral absolutism, and obedience will be measured using the Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) Religious Fundamentalism Scale which has a Cronbach's Alpha reliability of 0.89 (Aftab et al., 2021; Phillips) et al., 2024. To assess cognitive moral development, the participant will take the Lind (2008) Moral Judgment Test which has been designed to measure ethical flexibility and justice-oriented reasoning with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability of 0.85 (Bronikowska et al., 2023; Tahir & Alkali, 2024). Data will be analyzed using SPSS statistics version 28. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis will be computed along with inferential statistics such as Cronbach's Alpha reliability testing, Pearson correlation, and independent t-tests. Those analyses will identify the correlation and changes among religious indoctrination, cognitive development, and moral reasoning.

That information is important, but before collecting the pertinent information approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) will have to be earned



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alongside informed consent from parents or guardians. Permission will also be granted through relevant local education authorities, school headmasters, and any necessary religious institutions. Competent study assistants will provide the questionnaires in controlled environments to capture the dependent variables accurately. The study will respect ethical considerations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the subjects, ensuring anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage. To maintain the primary concern in such study with ethical norms will be observed for the sake of study validity and participant safeguarding.

### Results

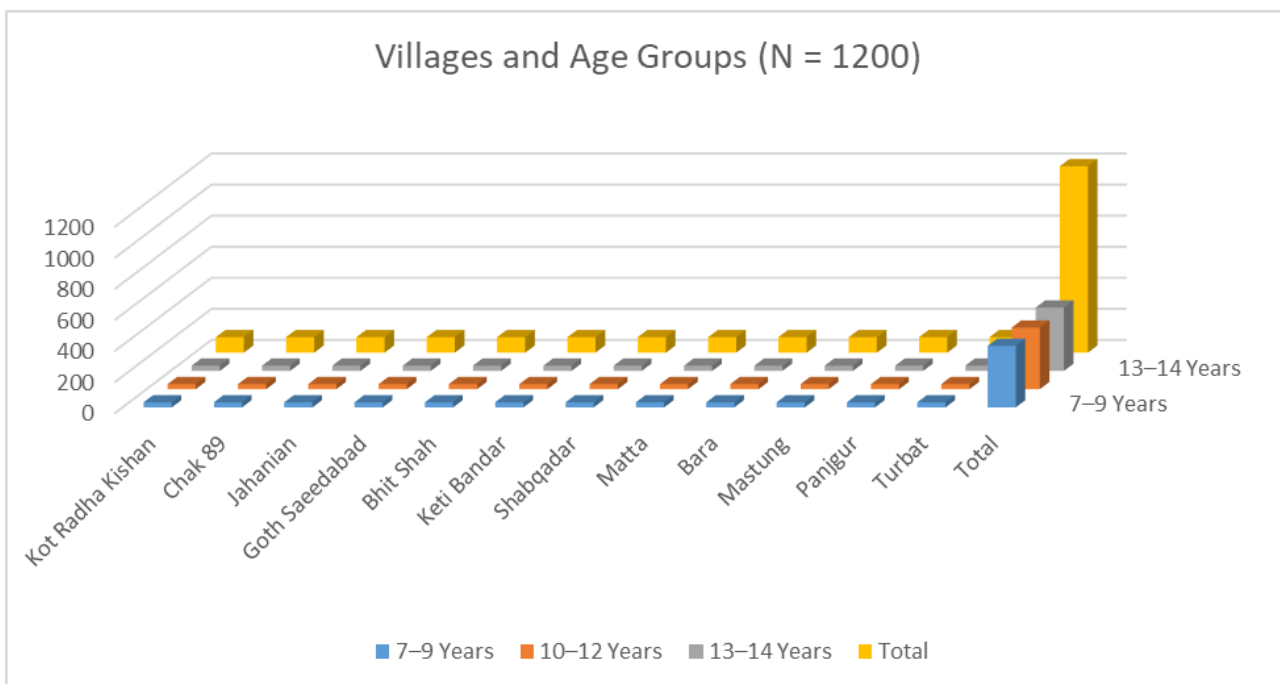
Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 1200)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	600	50.0
	Female	600	50.0
<b>Age Group</b>	7–9 years	400	33.3
	10–12 years	400	33.3
	13–14 years	400	33.3
<b>Province</b>	Punjab	300	25.0
	Sindh	300	25.0
	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	300	25.0
	Balochistan	300	25.0
<b>Parental Education</b>	No Formal Education	250	20.8
	Primary School	350	29.2
	Secondary School	400	33.3
	Higher Education	200	16.7
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	Low	500	41.7
	Middle	450	37.5
	High	250	20.8
<b>Number of Children per Village</b>	Kot Radha Kishan	100	8.3
	Chak 89	100	8.3
	Jahanian	100	8.3
	Goth Saeedabad	100	8.3
	Bhit Shah	100	8.3
	Keti Bandar	100	8.3
	Shabqadar	100	8.3
	Matta	100	8.3
	Bara	100	8.3
	Mastung	100	8.3
Panjgur	100	8.3	
Turbat	100	8.3	

The sample was evenly distributed in terms of gender (50% male, 50% female) along with age, and had an equal share representation from all the provinces of the country. A majority of the respondents were children of parents who possessed at least secondary education, and most of them belonged to a low to a middle socio-economic class.



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The figure 1 identifies the distribution of respondents across 12 villages, with each group of 400 respondents aged between 7-9 years, 10-12 years, and 13-14 years. The overall sample was 1,200 participants.

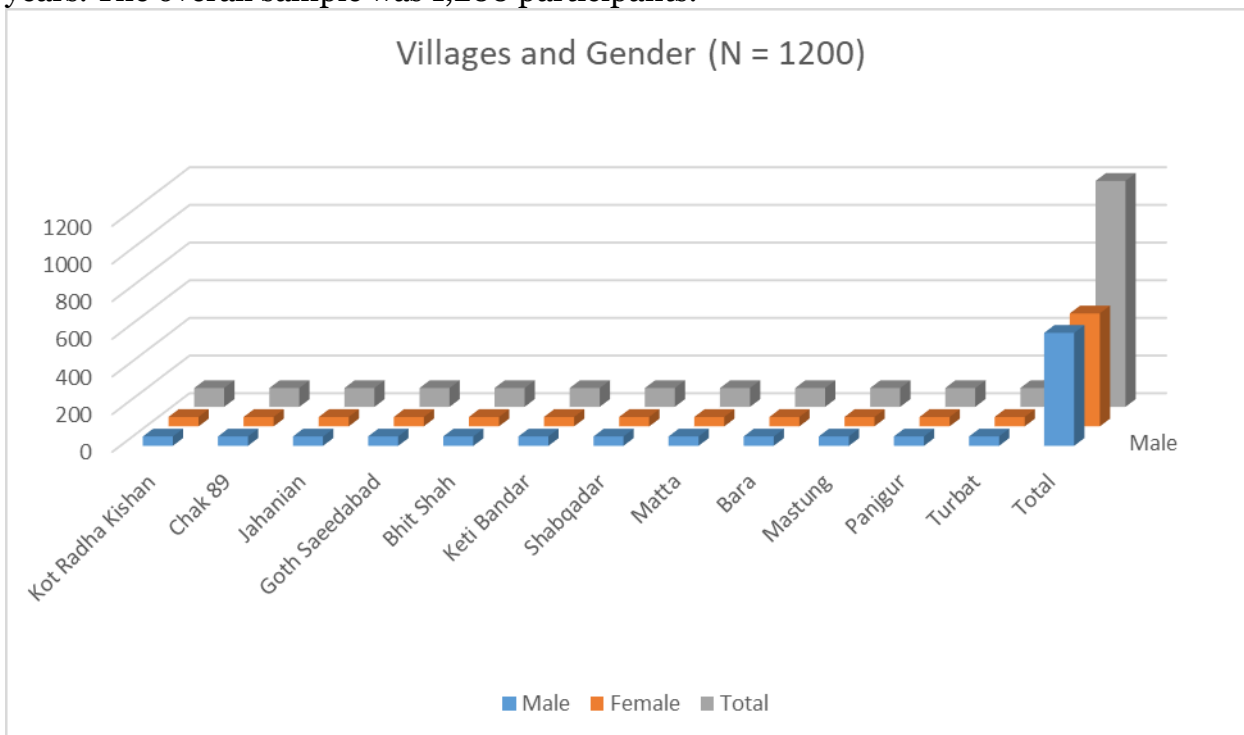


Figure 2 highlights the participants' gender demographic in the 12 villages. Each village had 600 males and 600 females, culminating in a total of 1,200 participants.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations between Study Variables (N = 1200)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
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1. Religious Indoctrination	34.21	5.67	—		
2. Cognitive Development	28.45	4.98	.42 (p < .001) **	—	
3. Moral Reasoning	30.12	5.31	.38 (p < .001) **	.51 (p < .001) **	—

There was a positive correlation between religious indoctrination and cognitive development ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ), and with moral reasoning ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ). There was also a positive correlation between cognitive development and moral reasoning ( $r = .51, p < .001$ ).

Table 3: Independent Sample t-Test for Gender Differences in Cognitive Development and Moral Reasoning (N = 1200)

Variable	Gender	M	SD	t (df = 1198)	p-value	Cohen's d
Cognitive Development	Male	29.10	4.85	2.98	.003	0.17
	Female	27.80	5.02			
Moral Reasoning	Male	31.02	5.28	3.51	.001	0.20
	Female	29.22	5.12			

Males had systematically higher means than females in cognitive development ( $t = 2.98, p = .003$ ) and moral reasoning ( $t = 3.51, p = .001$ ) but had small effect size values (Cohen's  $d = 0.17$  and  $0.20$ ).

Table 4: Moderation Analysis: Gender as a Moderator between Religious Indoctrination and Cognitive Development (N = 1200)

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t (df = 1196)	p-value
Religious Indoctrination	0.48	0.05	.42	9.60	< .001
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 0)	1.28	0.42	.15	3.05	.002
Interaction (Religious Indoctrination $\times$ Gender)	0.22	0.08	.12	2.75	.006

Gender was a significant moderator with respect to the effect of religion on the child's cognitive development ( $\beta = .12, P = .006$ ) suggesting that males have stronger effects than females.

Table 5: Moderation Analysis: Socioeconomic Status as a Moderator between Religious Indoctrination and Moral Reasoning (N = 1200)

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t (df = 1196)	p-value
Religious Indoctrination	0.51	0.06	.45	10.12	< .001
Socioeconomic Status (Low = 1, High = 3)	1.92	0.55	.18	3.49	.001
Interaction (Religious Indoctrination $\times$ SES)	0.28	0.09	.14	3.11	.002

Socioeconomic status was a significant moderating factor in between religious indoctrination and moral reasoning where, higher perceived SES indicated a stronger effect ( $\beta = .14, P = .002$ ).

**Discussion**

The findings show that children who undergo religious faith indoctrination in their early years perform better in cognitive development and moral reasoning. This is in-line with other studies that suggested that religious practices have impact on moral actions and cognitive development (Koenig et al., 2012). More specifically, the relationship between religious indoctrination and cognitive development is extremely profound ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ). This suggest that once a child is introduced into a religious setting that involves active problem solving



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and reasoning, their cognitive skills are likely to improve. These findings are in concordance with developmental psychology theories in which it is claimed that children who grow up in actively religious regions do tend to have higher levels of cognitive functioning (Piaget, 1952).

In addition, the practice of religious indoctrination was positively associated with cognitive moral reasoning ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ) proving that children who undergo religious teachings do possess the aptitude to understand complex moral aspects and ethical behavior. Many studies have suggested that a religious background can be instrumental in nurturing one's moral character and ethical actions (Berkowitz, 2012). The current researches findings show that whether religious education is taught formally or informally, it leads to children developing higher grades of moral reasoning.

Gender gaps regarding cognitive development and moral reasoning are interesting. Males show higher averages than females in both categories. The t-test results ( $t = 2.98, p = 0.003$  for cognitive development and  $t = 3.51, p = 0.001$  for moral reasoning) suggest that the differences are statistically significant, even though the effect sizes were small. These results are consistent with previous studies that noted gender differences in cognitive development and moral reasoning among children (Ali & Shaffie, 2021). Nevertheless, these results alongside their small effect sizes indicate that, while gender difference exist, other factors such as religious instruction and social class may prove to be more significant.

The analysis showed that gender plays a major role in moderating the relationship between the religious indoctrination and cognitive development. The gender moderation showed that males tend to receive more favorable effects than females from religious treatment in the three areas of cognitive development which showed the highest value ( $\beta = .12, p = .006$ ). This finding is consistent with some literature suggesting that men are more heavily impacted by cognitive structured settings such as religious schooling (Altinyelken et al., 2021). Even so, as much as gender differences have been established, more analysis is required to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon.

Moreover, socioeconomic status was found to moderate the correlation between religious indoctrination and moral reasoning. The relationship between religious indoctrination and SES ( $\beta = .14, p = .002$ ) indicates that children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may benefit more so than others in terms of moral reasoning. This corresponds with studies showing that the father's SES of children undergoing religious education can alter the results with children with higher SES doing better (Aftab et al., 2021; Lalani et al., 2024). This study seeks to address the gaps we have in understanding how different factors such as family wealth or cultural context may intersect with religious teachings and influence the moral or cognitive development of children.

This study sheds light on understanding the significance of early religious indoctrination and its effects on the child's moral and cognitive growth. The findings suggest that religious teachings affect cognitive development and moral reasoning in children, and gender as well as socioeconomic status moderate the effects. Further studies should consider investigating longitudinal effects of religious indoctrination on developmental progress of children while including other moderating factors like the level of engagement of guardians and even other cultures.





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## Future Direction

Policymakers and educational planners must concentrate on how integration of religion into education impacts the ethical and intellectual growth of learners in the pre-adolescence and adulthood stages. Subsequent studies should also target the integration of religion into education and analyze its effects on children from multicultural settings. More enduring impacts of early religious approaches by various religions on one's critical thinking and moral reasoning abilities also requires attention in these studies.

## Limitations

Even a well-developed study cannot neglect its limitations. One of the main limitations in this study stems from the fact that the participants were only chosen from these regions. A more collaborative and participatory approach shall, therefore, be adopted which involves a broader base of individuals from these regions. Given the cross-sectional nature of the study, somewhat arbitrary conclusions can be drawn concerning religion and cognitive and moral growth. Further, explanations that stem from self-reported figures suffer from major bias. Such problems could be resolved by introducing a range of experimental designs.

## Conclusion

This study underlines the importance of targeted religious teachings at an early age as a tool for supporting cognitive and moral growth in children. It also illustrates how gender and social class may moderate these relationships. Although this study has its shortcomings, it serves as a reminder of the need to balance both religious and contextual variables in child development study and offers a basis for future investigations in the field.

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