Abstract

Decety et al. (2015) posited that family religiosity has a negative effect on children’s altruism. However, a constructive reading of developmental psychologists suggests that religious nurture can enhance young children’s moral development. Bloom (2013) and Harris (2012) offer evidence that infants and toddlers exhibit moral sensibilities and preschoolers engage the world through charitable epistemologies primed toward consensus and care. Engel (2015) provides insight into the role of curiosity in exploring difference in the world. Taken together, their findings suggest new ways that religious nurture might promote prosocial behaviors congruent with religious and social tolerance.

Introduction

In November 2015, a group of developmental psychologists published a report in the journal Current Biology that purported to show that family religiousness has a negative effect on children’s morality. Jean Decety and his colleagues had studied 1,170 children ages five to 12 in six countries: the United States, Canada, Jordan, Turkey, South Africa and China. The researchers also had interviewed the parents of these children. Among the families in the study, 72 percent identified as religious (24 percent as Christian, 43 percent as Muslim, 2.5 percent as Jewish, 1.5 percent as Buddhist, .5 percent as Hindu, and .5 percent as other religious) and 28 percent as not religious.

The researchers hypothesized that children raised in religious households would have higher rates of altruism because religion has been assumed to promote prosocial behavior. However, using a resource allocation game, the study found that “religiousness was inversely predictive of children’s altruism and positively correlated with their punitive tendencies”, even though religious parents were more likely than non-religious parents to report that their children exhibit high levels of empathy and strong orientations to justice (Decety et al. 2015, p. 1). Comparisons among the three largest study groups, i.e. Christians, Muslims, and non-religious children, clearly demonstrated that “children from households identifying as either of the two major world religions (Christianity and Islam) were less altruistic than children from non-religious households” and “children with longer experience of religion in the household exhibit[ed] the greatest negative relations” (Decety et al. 2015, p. 2). A religious upbringing also correlated with higher levels of judgmentalism and condemnation of perceived asocial behaviors such as refusing to share or causing minor physical harm, e.g. pushing or bumping another child (Decety et al. 2014, p. 3).
Decety et al.’s research is provocative because it appears to undercut the value of religion for promoting strong prosocial development in children. While the study makes correlative rather than causal claims, its publication at a time when religious discord and violence are almost daily images worldwide means that its findings are raising serious questions about the ability of religions to contribute positively to society. In the rest of this paper, I propose to reflect on the work of three other developmental psychologists – Paul Bloom, Paul Harris and Susan Engel – and how their research might help religious leaders and families rethink the role that religious beliefs and practices might play in developing more prosocial forms of moral sense and moral action in young children.

**Paul Bloom**

Yale psychologist Paul Bloom has studied infants’ and toddlers’ moral sensibilities for decades. Analyzing videotapes of babies watching animated and puppet scenarios involving helpful and hindering behavior, he has noted that babies as young as three months have the ability to distinguish between kind and cruel behavior, preferring animated or puppet figures who act helpfully over those who hinder another figure’s actions. Infants also demonstrate greater and earlier sensitivity to negative behavior, i.e. they are more upset by hindering behavior than pleased by helping behavior (Bloom 2013, p. 29). They appear to have “the capacity to make certain types of judgments – to distinguish between good and bad, kindness and cruelty” – which is what philosophers have termed “moral sense” (Bloom 2013, p, 31). Bloom is careful to say that babies are not demonstrating moral understanding in terms of making reasoned determinations about right and wrong or moral behavior by willfully choosing to act for good over evil. But their preference for helpers over hinderers shows signs of “disinterested judgments” and aligns with the same categories more mature human beings would use for what constitutes goodness and badness (Bloom 2013, p. 30).

As they grow into toddlers, Bloom’s research suggests that young children become “natural-born egalitarians” with a bias toward an “equality of outcome”, particularly if they would be the one who gets less in an unequal sharing situation (Bloom 2013, pp. 65, 80). However, he finds that children younger than four are reluctant to share with strangers, and they also express a keen desire for adults to punish those who transgress their intuited rules of helpfulness and fairness (Bloom 2013, pp. 54, 78). In addition, as noted above, young children pay earlier and greater attention to what others do wrong than to good behavior, which feeds into moralizing activities focused on retribution and punishment. Bloom observes that children as young as two are accurate tattlers, reporting bad behavior to teachers and caregivers far more often than sharing about good actions. He contends that tattling is both an attempt by the child to receive recognition from the adult for moral sensitivity (Bloom 2013, p. 96) and to exact “third-party punishment” out of revenge (Bloom 2013, p. 90).

Bloom’s work suggests a couple of potential reasons for Decety et al.’s finding of a negative association between religiosity and altruism in 5-to-12 year olds. One would be the possible
correlation between young children’s bias toward punishing moral transgressors and the sin and judgment narratives strongly associated with some forms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam and transmitted as part of children’s religious formation. For instance, consider the cautionary tale of the sheep and the goats told to children from the Christian scriptures (Matthew 25), the Jewish ritual description of four types of children described in the Haggadah (Shire 2006, p. 51), and the uncomfortable disciplinary practices of the Qur’anic school in some Islamic cultures (Khan 2006, p. 139). Particularly in segments of the Abrahamic traditions that encourage childhood conversion, stories of moral failings and divine retribution reinforce the development of moral condemnation. Even in strands of these traditions that downplay concepts of damnation or eternal punishment, persistent scriptural and liturgical references to uncleanness, sinfulness, and accountability before God – as well as doctrines such as Christian beliefs in predestination and substitutionary atonement – teach children that their religious traditions divides people, places, things, and actions into categories of good and evil. Armed with such categories, through what Mai-Anh Le Tran has termed a “sacralized pedagogy of oppression” (Tran 2017, p. 48), young children are then implicitly encouraged to exercise their early moral inclination toward punishing transgressors with the tacit blessing of their religious communities.

A second possibility is that these many religious perspectives also construct a religious kinship group that may narrow or even supersede other constructions of in-groups and out-groups. For instance, in a conversionist perspective, those who ‘repent’ and are ‘saved’ become part of the ‘in’ group and all others are outsiders (Lawson 2006, p. 112). In a liberal Protestant perspective, those who embrace progressive social values are insiders and those who challenge such values are dismissed as ignorant outsiders in need of reeducation. For some Jewish communities, keeping or not keeping kosher (and the strictness with which one adheres to the laws of kashrut) denotes insider or outsider status. Observing Islamic dietary laws (halal) and dress codes may play a similar delineating role for Muslims. While Decety et al. controlled for kinship bias in their study by designating the target for sharing as a member of the same school and ethnic group as the study subject, it is unclear whether they considered matched religious fervor (either conservative or liberal) as a kinship factor. Yet religious identity could stand alongside school and ethnic identity as a potential kinship concern for children, particularly among children whose families self-identify as religious.

If heightened religious attention to moral judgment and religious kinship could be significant factors in the negative association of religiousness and children’s altruism, then religious leaders and families can choose to respond differently to the moral sensibilities Bloom identifies in infants and toddlers. Rather than accentuate narratives and practices of religious punishment, caregivers can create play scenarios that contrast helping and hindering behaviors, encourage children to practice choosing good (helping), and also playact compassion and redirection for children or play figures that chose badly (hindering). Caregivers can also affirm children’s preference for helping behaviors performed by unrelated (non-kin) figures, which reinforces the early inclination to make disinterested moral judgments, even if such judgments are uncritical
from a cognitive perspective. Such encouragement is particularly important given Bloom’s finding that compassion is primarily limited to family and friends before the age of four years.

Bloom’s research also suggests that there is value in blurring the distinctions among kin, in-group members, and strangers such that young children remain unclear as to just who they should prefer in the exercise of compassion. This means that caregivers need to moderate their rhetoric of ‘the other’, which reinforces a lack of compassion toward ‘outsiders’ and practice renaming others as fictive kin who should receive compassionate care. Bloom notes that it is not just the fact of familial relationship that matters. He observes, “The metaphor of kinship is powerful as well: if one wants to strengthen the bonds of a group, one way to do so is describe it as a family or brotherhood or sisterhood” (Bloom 2013, p. 179). Young children who hear people outside their close family categorized as brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, parents, and/or grandparents incorporate these outsiders into preferential systems of compassion. They are no longer viewed as strangers to be feared, but as kin to be cared for. If an adult refers to a woman who is homeless as “our sister who doesn’t have a house”, preschoolers are more likely to exercise compassion toward that person – to look for a way to help. Thus, the adult propensity to shield children from strangers reinforces their lack of compassion toward the other, whereas mediated introductions that rename strangers as family creates a porous boundary that children can cross to extend compassion to “fictive kin” now interpreted as appropriate receivers of compassionate care.

Paul Harris

Harvard psychologist Paul Harris’s research has focused on children’s imagination and, more recently, on how social testimony activates imagination and tempers empirical data assessment. He identifies two highly significant ways in which young children gather information that might frame imaginative reassessments of direct experience: they ask questions and they observe other peoples’ actions. Questioning often arises in response to a child’s awareness of an anomaly in her or his environment. Children notice anomalies before their first birthdays and, by 30 months, they “increasingly and persistently probe the how and why of things” (Harris 2012, pp. 26, 31). They also return to puzzling observations repeatedly and over time, seeking new information through questions, incorporating that information into their mental understanding, and developing new questions based on new or persistent anomalies.

In addition, young children view other people as “cultural mentor[s]” and observe them to discern cultural norms related to behavior (Harris 2012, p. 55). Harris discovered that young children appear to take into account social niceties when invited to undertake a demonstrated task. Children as young as two will imitate adult actions that the child recognizes are empirically unnecessary to accomplish a task on the assumption that the adult holds some “cultural knowledge” invisible to the child that justifies the action (Harris 2012, p. 60). By the age of three, children who receive instruction from adults that encourages them to imagine a possibility that defies their assumptions about how something should work are much more likely to
overcome their bias toward a preconceived outcome than if they simply witness a different outcome or are told what the correct outcome is (Harris 2012, p. 74). It seems that “instruction helps to generate a kind of mental proxy or stand-in for” actually viewing a hidden process (Harris 2012, p. 74). Researchers remain unsure whether this “thought experiment” activates “latent knowledge” or “latent imagination,” but it seems clear that instruction from an adult helps children overcome errors that otherwise occur because of children’s naïve beliefs and overreliance on empirical evidence (Harris 2012, p. 75).

Who children trust as reliable advisers is predicated on familiarity, the quality of attachment, and the accuracy of the adviser’s information in the past. Harris has found that younger children place significant trust in the advice of adults they know (such as family members and other regular caregivers) regardless of the accuracy of that advice, whereas older preschoolers “look at the person’s track record and prefer to learn from someone who has been accurate, no matter what their relationship with the person” (Harris 2012, p. 93). Securely attached children balance trust and skepticism better than children who are avoidant or ambivalent (Harris 2012, p. 86). In addition, young children are swayed by consensus opinions, which they use to help them determine conventional norms and “act in accord with the proprieties of their culture” (Harris 2012, p. 106).

Harris’s findings suggest some additional potential reasons for the negative association of religiosity and altruism in 5-to-12 year olds. One possibility is that children are not receiving answers that evoke altruism when they question why they should share or treat others with care. Some religious traditions emphasize teaching unquestioning obedience to adult mandates as an important aspect of childrearing, particularly when scriptural admonishments to “honor father and mother” hold a place of prominence (Shire 2006, p. 46). This can result in responses of “because I say so” or “because God says you should do as you are told” when children challenge prosocial expectations. While perhaps effective in eliciting conformity in the moment, such responses do not encourage the process of serial questions and answers that Harris contends children need to help them construct strong mental understandings of social mores.

A second possibility is that the religious cultural mentors children are observing in their communities are modeling sharing and interpersonal care behaviors that are circumscribed by unarticulated in-group norms despite explicit instruction in prosocial expectations. A version of “do as I say, not as I do”, this implicit enculturation process may be tied to power dynamics within a religious body that practices hierarchical valuation of individuals or exhibits suspicion of outsiders in its interactions with its larger community. These models may act as a kind of “moral licensing” that Decety, et al. suggest can “disinhibit[s] selfish behavior and reduce[s] prosocial behavior” (Decety, et al. 2015, p. 3).

Third, some religious communities are suspicious of the imagination, viewing it as a dangerous space open to spiritual attack that must be subjugated to an empirical mindset. Such traditions rarely encourage ‘thought experiments’ that might reframe social biases, preferring to provide
didactic instruction in moral behavior that conforms to their religious beliefs. Tran suggests that Christian communities too often cultivate spaces of “disimagination” that reinforce “the safety net of societal and institutional values, habits, inheritances, and infrastructures” around them (Tran 2017, p. 67). Quoting Eric Weiner, she defines imagination as “the capacity to ‘give credence to alternative realities’” (Tran 2017, p. 136), which is precisely what renders imagination frightful for religious communities wedded to particular, pre-determined or universalized understandings of reality.

If a reluctance to encourage moral questioning, problematic invisible norms, and suspicion of the imagination could be significant factors in the negative association of religiosity and children’s altruism, then religious leaders and families can choose to reconsider their religious formation processes in light of Harris’s findings. Instead of deflecting children’s questions, caregivers can embrace questions as opportunities to testify to the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of religious norms and practices. They can also choose to demonstrate altruistic behavior frequently in children’s presence, inviting children to imitate adult actions as part of a campaign to develop “habit memories” (Foster 2013, p. 79) tied to sharing and interpersonal care. These habits, or embodied understandings of what religious people do and say, need not be efficient, but they do need to be consistent. Harris found that “children can be sticklers for convention – even when convention dictates a relatively arbitrary way of doing things” (Harris 2012, p. 59). Young children are quick to trust the norming actions of adults with whom they have a trusting relationship and equally quick to insist that others should perform religious actions in the same way. They are motivated to interpret religious practices within the boundaries of what they have witnessed as orthopraxis even when they do not understand the relationship between practice and orthodox belief. Greater attention to modeling religious altruism, then, might generate more prosocial behaviors of the sort sought by Decety’s team among children raised in religious households.

Given the importance of the imagination in conceiving the existence of an invisible God, caregivers can invite children to employ their imaginations in reframing the world as God might altruistically want it to be. This idea picks up on the dual or proleptic reality concepts of various religious traditions, which hold that what persons experience of the world is ultimately not what is real or binding. Tran points to the power of a “reinvigorated imagination…to expose…the ‘hegemony of realism’ – the mind-set that ‘things will never change’” (Tran 2017, p. 136). Religious practices of zakat (mandatory giving) and sadaqa (voluntary charity) in Islam and tikkun olam (repairing the world) in Judaism depend similarly on reimagining reality. Thus, young children in religious households can use their imaginations to conceive of a more altruistic divine reality that transcends their experiences and then employ social testimony, conveyed in demonstrated actions and series of questions and answers, that supports that imagined reality.

Susan Engel
Susan Engel, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Williams College, studies the role of curiosity in children’s learning. Most of her work focuses on the culpability of educational systems in the diminishment of curiosity during the primary years (Engel 2015, p. 6), but she describes very young children’s development of curiosity as a foundation for her assessment. Like Harris, she is intrigued by “epistemic curiosity”, i.e. wondering about the how and why of things in addition to their utilitarian function (Engel 2015, p. 9, 28). She contends that “babies and toddlers are alert to meaningful novelty, novelty that guides them to understand the world around them in ever more powerful ways” (Engel 2015, p. 26). However, their interest in novelty is counterbalanced by anxiety and fear of the unknown (Engel 2015, p. 32). Young children need a secure “base camp” of emotional attachment from which to explore the world and human relationships (Engel 2015, p. 38).

Children also depend on adults to explain how others mediate, i.e. view and make sense of, the world (Engel 2015, p. 50), and they often gain knowledge about this mediated world via family storytelling (Engel 2015, p. 54). Adults serve as ‘docents’ of children’s experiences, steering children’s attention toward some ideas or activities and away from others (Engel 2015, p. 67). If children do not hear other people wondering and attempting to describe and explain situations, things, or actions, they do not easily learn that “people exchange knowledge through talk” (Engel 2015, p. 57). Engel notes that “one of the things children learn from adults is what kind of intellectual stance to take – contemplative or not, interested or not, detached or not. It seems that adults mold the stance children take toward events around them, but also model a stance as well” (2015, p. 81).

Engel’s findings suggest yet more possible reasons for the negative association of religiosity and altruism in 5-to-12 year olds. Some religious traditions characterize curiosity, like imagination, as dangerous, particularly if a child’s object of inquiry is religiously taboo. If a young child is regularly restricted to familiar spaces and warned against venturing outside those limits, she or he learns to repress interest in the world beyond their community. If a toddler is repeatedly chastised for exploring her or his body or asking questions about ‘inappropriate’ topics, the child learns to limit his or her curiosity to socially acceptable arenas or face censure. Such children are less likely to express curiosity about other children’s needs and interests and be more anxious and fearful that engaging an unknown will threaten their well-being. Without a trusted caregiver nearby to dictate proper behavior, they will err on the side of self-preservation.

A second possibility is that children raised in some religious environments bring a set of family stories about human relationships that devalue indiscriminate altruistic behavior. Spiritual narratives that promote ideas of moral worthiness, divine initiative, and human entrepreneurial spirit may teach a child that sharing and interpersonal care should be restricted 1) to those worthy of moral concern, or 2) is dependent on the providence of God, or 3) is a by-product of self-initiated actions (i.e. God helps those who help themselves). Thus, the way religious parents mediate the world for their children may encourage them to direct altruistic concern in less than universal ways.
If a suspicion of curiosity, heightened anxiety when facing the unknown, and problematic family narratives could be significant factors in the negative association of religiousness and children’s altruism, then religious leaders and families can choose to reconsider the relationship between curiosity and altruism in light of Engel’s findings. Caregivers might explicitly encourage exploration of new objects, spaces and people, managing concerns for young children’s physical and moral safety more dynamically rather than through excessive social circumscription and deprivation. In order to ease young children’s anxiety in new social situations, adults might intentionally expand their own social networks and adopt indiscriminate kinship language for everyone they and their children meet. This approach combines Bloom’s finding that children prefer to share with kin with Engel’s observation that children need a safe base camp of parental support from which to venture curiously into new situations and relationships. Sharing is a new situation for young children; expecting them to share with an unknown child potentially multiples the anxiety of the interaction, but past experiences mediated by the presence of a parent may excite their curiosity rather than invoke concern for self-preservation.

In addition, families (immediate, extended, and congregational) might deliberately develop narratives that model indiscriminate altruistic behavior and encourage children to explore practicing such behavior themselves. These stories might include tales of family altruism that include a participant’s surprise at the positive feelings generated and social goods witnessed by altruistic actions, as well as fictional accounts of unexpected altruistic behavior that transgresses assumed social boundaries or religious taboos, e.g. the stories of the good Samaritan (Luke 10), the reuniting of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 32), and Joseph’s welcome of his traitorous brothers when they come to Egypt for food (Genesis 43-45).

**Concluding Thoughts**

Paul Harris concludes his book *Trusting What You’re Told* (2012) with the assertion that young children are more like anthropologists than scientists, learning about the culture into which they have been born through immersion in their local language, participant observation, and reliance on trusted informants (p. 210). We might extend this assertion to include the idea that children are religious reflectors (i.e. theologians and orthopractitioners) in a similar fashion. They learn about religious beliefs and practices by listening to the words and tones others use to talk about God, observing how religious people act, and asking questions of those with whom they have secure relationships and who have proven to be reliable informants. Their theological ideas are thus expressed in the language of their family’s faith and negotiated in relation to – but generally do not replace – empirical data. While they are able to make autonomous judgments about what they believe, they remain open to and highly influenced by the verbal and enacted testimonies of others, particularly when they perceive that there is consensus about certain beliefs and practices among family and friends. Thus, if their religious faith communities and households do not mold and model altruistic generosity, they are unlikely to adopt such altruism in their social relationships.
The preceding reflections are not meant to refute the findings of Decety and his colleagues as presented in their *Current Biology* article. Nor are they meant to depict all religions or religious practices as culpable for lower levels of childhood altruism. Instead, I have tried to suggest several ways that other recent discoveries in developmental psychology could help religious education scholars and practitioners understand why negative associations between family religiousness and children’s altruism might occur and how some religious formation strategies and practices might be altered to better encourage children’s altruistic behavior. I welcome your response to these brief reflections and your additional thoughts on how we might interpret the implications of the Decety et al. study findings for children’s spirituality and religious education.

**Bibliography**


