

Importance of religion and subjective well-being among Italian adolescents: The mediating role of positivity and the moderating role of age

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the developmental psychology literature has shown increasing interest in the role of religiosity in positive adolescent development. Nevertheless, most studies have been conducted in the United States and Northern European countries, and little is yet known about the effects of potential mediating and moderating factors on the relationship between adolescent religiosity and subjective well-being. The present study examined the relationships between the importance of religion, affective well-being, and life satisfaction in a sample of Italian adolescents using a longitudinal design covering a 1-year time span. A mediating role of positivity and a moderating role of age were explored. The study involved 993 students, 34% of whom attended middle school (aged 13 to 14 years; 44% female) and 66% of whom attended high school (aged 15 to 19 years; 52% female). Consistent with national data, most participants (92%) were Catholic. The main findings indicated that the importance of religion was directly related to life satisfaction among middle school students and indirectly related to affective well-being and life satisfaction via positivity among high school students. The results are discussed in relation to the sociocultural specificity of the Italian context.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, developmental psychology has become increasingly interested in adolescent religiosity and the role of the religious dimension in adolescent adjustment (Hardy et al., 2019). Religiosity is defined as the degree of adherence to the practices, rituals, beliefs, and norms of an organized religious faith (Iannello et al., 2020; Jensen, 2021). Developmental studies typically distinguish between two components of religiosity: one that refers to the personal salience of religious beliefs and the perceived importance of religion to one's life, and one that refers to religious practice, including attendance at religious services, participation in faith-based group, and prayer (Hardy et al., 2019; Yonker et al., 2012).

One of the most important theoretical perspectives on religious development is Faith Development Theory (Fowler, 1981). Fowler proposed a sequence of stages of faith development from childhood through adolescence that parallel cognitive, moral, and identity development, in line with Piaget's cognitive developmental theory. In particular, early adolescents (ages 12–13) begin to develop abstract and internalized beliefs that accompany early formal, operational thinking. Nevertheless, their religious beliefs are usually characterized by conventionality and are essentially consistent with those of their parents. In adolescence (after age 14), religious beliefs may become more complex and are critically integrated into one's value system beyond rituals and

community support. This process is accompanied by a more general redefinition of identity and should be completed by young adulthood (around age 20) (Fowler, 1981; Fowler and Dell, 2006; Parker, 2010). Although this theory has been criticized for proposing invariant stages and only marginally considering interindividual variability, it remains a point of reference because it identified adolescence as a sensitive period for the development of religiosity (King et al., 2021; King and Roeser, 2009; Schnitker et al., 2021). Developmental psychology today generally views the development of religiosity from a developmental systems perspective that focuses on individual developmental trajectories and the active role of individuals in interaction with their sociocultural developmental context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 2006; Magnusson and Stattin, 2006). In particular, religious development, like other domains, is embedded in proximal microsystems (e.g., family, peer relationships, school) and is also influenced by macrosystems (e.g., historical and sociocultural influences) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; King and Roeser 2009). Thus, developmental systems perspective provides a useful framework for examining religious development and its role in psychosocial adjustment during adolescence.

Several studies have recognized the protective role of religiosity in relation to the various problematic situations that may arise in adolescence. In relation to adolescents' involvement in externalized problems, the protective role is mainly due to adherence to traditional values, which are in contrast to transgressive behaviors (Hardy et al., 2019).

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In addition, religiosity is associated with increased self-control and ability to regulate emotions, which counteract risk behaviors (Hardy et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2019). In addition, faith-based groups also exert a degree of social control by conveying moral values that are antithetical to transgressive behavior (King, 2003). Religiosity may also be protective for adolescent depression and internalized symptoms (Cooley et al., 2021; Wenger, 2011). Indeed, the value placed on religion can be an aid and comfort in coping with personal difficulties. Specifically, the religiosity experienced in organized religious activities allows adolescents to confront with peers and adults, receive psychological support, and contrast loneliness.

While the protective role of religiosity is recognized in relation to externalized and internalized risks, studies have only recently begun to focus specifically on the role of religiosity in promoting positive adolescent development and well-being (Iannello et al., 2020). According to the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework (Lerner et al., 2009), religiosity is considered a resource that promotes youth's individual and social development and growth. Specifically, religiosity has been shown to have a positive impact on prosocial behavior, social skills, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction (Abdollahzadeh Rafi et al., 2020; Bjorck et al., 2019; Fariddanesh and Rezaei, 2019; Yonker et al., 2012). Specifically, the importance placed on religiosity has a significant positive impact on psychological well-being beyond religious participation and frequency of public or private prayer (Hardy et al., 2019; Longo et al., 2018).

Referring to the PYD theoretical framework, the present study aimed to investigate how the importance attributed to religion is related to the subjective well-being in a group of Italian adolescents. In particular, the study focused on the private dimension of adolescents' religiosity, which refers to the perceived importance of religious beliefs for daily life and coping with problems (Bonino et al., 2005; Hardy et al., 2019).

Importance of religion is a dimension that changes during adolescence as a result of the development of faith (Fowler, 1981) and the interaction between individual and contextual variables (King and Roeser, 2009). While adolescence and young adulthood generally show a decline in participation in religious events, the decline in the importance of religion varies also in relation to cultural contexts (Schnitker et al., 2021; Simsek et al., 2019). The decline of religiosity in adolescence is a trend that can be observed in many Western countries against the background of secularization that characterizes a large part of the population (Jensen, 2021; Norris and Inglehart, 2011). In this regard, Italy is in a special position due to the cultural and social importance of Catholicism. In particular, the decline in religiosity among Italian youth has unique characteristics compared to other European Catholic countries (Garelli, 2016). According to national data, the percentage of non-believing youth (aged 13–19) in Italy is about 30%. Their number has increased in the last two decades, but is lower than in other European countries (e.g., France, Sweden, Germany), where it is 50–60% (ISTAT, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2018). Most Italian adolescents identify themselves as Catholic, and Catholicism is indeed the most widespread religion in Italy (about 75% of the population) (ISTAT, 2020). The presence of other religions is increasing, especially due to immigration, and the most represented group is Muslims, a percentage that is still lower in Italy compared to other European countries (about 4.5% of the Italian population compared to an average of 6.8% in Europe) (Molteni and Dimitriadis, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022). Attachment to Catholicism among Italian adolescents shows varying degrees of intensity. Most of them describe themselves as 'Catholic by tradition or education'; these are adolescents who identify themselves as Catholic due to a cultural influence that remains strong in the Italian context but who do not necessarily participate in religious practices (Bader et al., 2012; Garelli, 2013). Only a minority of adolescents describe themselves as "practicing Catholics," and religious commitment declines with age: weekly attendance at religious services is about 33% among young people between 10 and 13 years old, declining to 16% between 14 and 17 years old and 10% between 18 and 19 years old

(ISTAT, 2020). Nevertheless, the percentage of practicing Catholics in Italy is still higher than in other European countries (Pew Research Center, 2022).

The importance of religion has been shown to be associated with higher well-being in adolescents, although most studies have been conducted in the United States and Northern European countries (Ciarrochi and Heaven, 2012; Yonker et al., 2012). Since culture is expected to play a central role in the relationship between the importance of religion and adjustment, it is worthwhile to examine the issue in Italy, a cultural context still strongly influenced by the Catholic tradition and where studies targeting adolescents are still lacking (Ciziceno, 2021; Jensen, 2021).

Previous research in developmental psychology on the importance of religion for positive adolescent development has some shortcomings that could be addressed. First, previous research has generally either considered only the affective or cognitive dimensions of subjective well-being (Yonker et al., 2012). To address this gap, the present study examined both the affective dimension, which refers to the prevalence of positive emotions over negative emotions, and the cognitive dimension, which refers to life satisfaction (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Diener, 1994).

A second shortcoming of the existing literature is the limited consideration of the effects of potential mediating and moderating factors on the relationship between the importance of religion and positive outcomes (Iannello et al., 2020; Yonker et al., 2012). Examining the role of intervening variables is important to elucidate the mechanisms of the relationship between religiosity and adjustment. Some research suggests that religiosity is related to greater optimism (Inguglia et al., 2017) and higher self-esteem (King and Roeser, 2009), which in turn promotes better adjustment among youth. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on the topic, particularly in the transition from early adolescence to adolescence. Therefore, there is a need to understand how the importance placed on religious beliefs can promote adolescent well-being by enhancing personal positive resources. For this reason, our study focused on positivity, defined as an evaluative disposition to view oneself, life, and the future from a positive perspective (Caprara et al., 2017). Positivity is a comprehensive construct that has been shown to be related to better adjustment (Miloni et al., 2016), while the relationship between religiosity and positivity remains unexplored. In the present study, we examined whether the importance of religion is related to affective well-being and life satisfaction both directly and indirectly through positivity. Given the developmental changes in religiosity during adolescence, we also examined the moderating role of age to explore whether the direct and indirect relationships between the importance of religion and subjective well-being differed between middle and high school students (ages 13–14 and 15–19, respectively). The transition from middle to high school coincides with the transition from early adolescence to adolescence. Existing studies suggest that this transition may also be crucial for religiosity as it increasingly disengages from religious practices and decreases the importance of religious beliefs (Fowler and Dell, 2006; Jensen, 2021). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies on this topic in relation to the Italian Catholic context.

A third shortcoming of research on adolescent religiosity and well-being is related to the cross-sectional nature of most existing studies which limits inferences about mediating processes. As outlined in recent reviews, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the role of religiosity on well-being over time (Hardy et al., 2019; Yonker et al., 2012). Italian data show that the transition between the second and third grades of middle school represents a departure from religiosity for many adolescents, and from year to year during high school a gradual downward trend in religiosity is observed (Garelli, 2013; IARD, 2010). For this reason, our study was based on a longitudinal research design covering a one-year period (i.e., the transition from one school year to the next). This time frame is useful for examining the relationships between our independent and moderating variables and the developmental outcomes studied one year later.

The hypothesized moderated mediation model

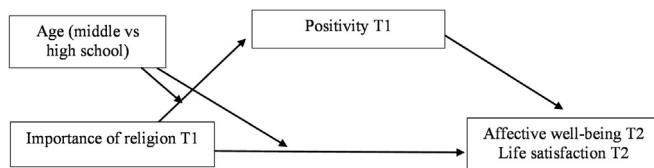


Fig. 1. The hypothesized moderated mediation model.

2. Aims and hypotheses

The study had the following aims and hypotheses:

- 1 To examine the direct relationship between the importance of religion (T1) and affective well-being (T2) and between importance of religion (T1) and life satisfaction (T2) with age (middle/high school students) as moderating factor. Consistent with the results of previous studies (Yonker et al., 2012), higher importance of religion was expected to be associated with higher affective well-being and higher life satisfaction. Regarding age, the analysis was exploratory in nature, so no specific hypothesis was formulated.
- 2 To examine the indirect relationship between the importance of religion (T1) and affective well-being (T2) and between the importance of religion (T1) and life satisfaction (T2) with positivity (T1) as mediator and age (middle/high school students) as moderator. Based on the literature on religiosity, self-esteem, and optimism (Inguglia et al., 2017; King and Roeser, 2009) and on optimism and well-being (Caprara et al., 2017; Milioni et al., 2016), it was expected that higher importance of religion would be related to higher positivity, which in turn should be associated with higher affective well-being and life satisfaction. Regarding age, the analysis was exploratory in nature and no hypothesis was formulated (Fig. 1).

3. Material and methods

3.1. Procedure and participants

The study included a convenience sample of students from middle and high schools in northwestern Italy. In the Italian school system, middle school lasts three years (from age 12 to 14) and high school lasts five years (from age 15 to 19). The study was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of [blinded for review], and written informed consent was obtained from participants and parents of underage students (< 18 years old). Participants completed an anonymous self-report questionnaire administered by trained researchers in schools during class time. Students completed the questionnaire individually, and there was an opportunity to ask the researcher clarifying questions. The teachers were not present, and it took about an hour to complete. Students were asked to write a self-generated code to combine the questionnaires from the two waves. The participants did not receive any payment or other benefits for participating in the study.

The study involved 993 students, as a results of a series of steps. Of the initial total of 1425 students (413 attending the second year of middle school and 1012 attending the first through fourth years of high school), 1191 were also present at the second wave 1-year apart (356 in middle school and 835 in high school). The attrition rate was 16.4%. Students who participated in the two assessments did not differ from the overall sample on demographic or study variables. From this group of 1191 participants, subjects who answered 'yes' to the question "Do you belong to a religion?" were selected ($N = 993$). Thirty-four percent ($N = 335$) were middle school students: 44% ($N = 148$) female, ages 13 to 14 ($M = 13.1$, $SD = 0.2$). Sixty-six percent ($N = 658$) attended secondary schools (42.4% lyceums, 32.2% technical schools, and 25.4% vocational schools), 52% ($N = 340$) female, aged 15 to

19 ($M = 16.4$, $SD = 1.2$). Regarding religious affiliation, most participants identified themselves as Catholic Christians ($N = 912$, 92%), followed by Muslims ($N = 25$, 2.5%), Orthodox and Protestant Christians ($N = 22$, 2.2%), and the remaining 3.3% ($N = 34$) belonged to a variety of religions (e.g., Buddhists, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses). Most participants ($N = 840$, 84.6%) lived with both parents and had brothers or sisters ($N = 811$, 81.7%). Parents' educational level was intermediate: high school diploma in 34.9% ($N = 339$) of mothers and 31.1% ($N = 300$) of fathers; university degree in 22.6% ($N = 219$) of mothers and 15.4% ($N = 149$) of fathers). Most parents were employed full-time (56.1% of mothers and 85.3% of fathers, $N = 553$ and $N = 833$, respectively).

3.2. Measures

The *importance of religion* was assessed using the Bonino et al. (2005) scale, following Jessor & Jessor (1977), which included four items assessing the perceived importance of: 1) relying on religious teachings when having a problem; 2) believing in God; 3) relying on religious beliefs as a guide for daily life; 4) turning to prayer when having personal problems. Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0=not at all important to 3=very important (range 0–12, Cronbach's alpha in this study = 0.85).

Religious practice was assessed with two questions about worship attendance and membership in a religious group. The first question asked, "How often do you usually attend religious services?" with the following response options: 1) never; 2) a few times a year; 3) about once a month; 4) about once a week; 5) more than once a week. Participants who reported attending a religious service at least once a week were classified as religious service attenders (Buchtova et al., 2020). The second question asked, "Do you attend religious groups for boys and girls your age?" to be answered yes or no. The two questions were combined into a measure of religious practice (coded as 0=no religious service attendance/no group membership; 1=religious service attendance or group membership only; 2=both religious service attendance and group membership), which was included in the models as a control variable.

Positivity was assessed using the Positivity Scale (Caprara et al., 2012), which consists of 8 items that assess the tendency to view life and experiences with a positive attitude (list of items: "1. I have great faith in the future; 2. I am satisfied with my life; 3. Others are generally here for me when I need them; 4. I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm; 5. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself; 6. At times, the future seems unclear to me (reverse scored); 7. I feel I have many things to be proud of; 8. I generally feel confident in myself"). The response format ranged from 1=completely disagree to 5=completely agree (range 8–40, Cronbach's alpha in this study = 0.84).

Affective well-being was assessed using the PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule) (Terracciano et al., 2003). This scale assesses hedonic balance, i.e., the difference between positive and negative affect. Participants were asked "How often in your daily experience do you feel..?" and then a list of 20 affective states is presented (10 positive items, e.g., determined, active, and 10 negative items, e.g., upset, scared), with responses ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always) (range -40/+50, Cronbach's alpha in this study = 0.78).

Life satisfaction was assessed using a modified version of the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS; Huebner et al., 2006). Eight items assessed students' satisfaction with various life domains ("How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your life?" health, friendships, relationships with best friend, relationships with school mates, relationships with teachers, school experience, family relationships, and leisure activities). Response options for each item ranged from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). Life satisfaction was the sum of the eight items (range 0–80; Cronbach's alpha= 0.78).

Table 1
Religious service attendance, religious group participation, and importance of religion (age differences).

	Middle school students (N = 335)		High school students (N = 658)	
	N	%	N	%
Religious service attendance				
never	25	7.5	116	17.6
a few times a year	108	32.2	321	48.8
about once a month	55	16.4	90	13.7
about once a week	125	37.3	116	17.6
more than once a week	22	6.6	15	2.3
Religious group participation				
yes	162	48.4	129	19.6
no	173	51.6	529	80.4
Importance of religion (<i>mean, sd</i>)	6.3 (3.1)		4.8 (3.2)	

3.3. Statistical analysis

First, descriptive statistics and correlations between variables were calculated. The hypothesized moderated mediation models were tested using PROCESS SPSS-macro (Model 8) (Hayes, 2022). A first model was tested in which the effect of importance of religion T1 (independent variable) on affective well-being T2 (dependent variable) was mediated by positivity T1 (mediator) and moderated by age (middle vs high school). Age was expected to moderate the relationship between importance of religion T1 and positivity T1, and between importance of religion T1 and affective well-being T2. Gender, religious practice, and affective well-being T1 were entered as covariates. A second model was tested with life satisfaction T2 as the dependent variable, importance of religion as predictor, positivity as mediator, and age as moderator (gender, religious practice, and life satisfaction T1 were entered as covariates). The hypothesized model is presented in Fig. 1.

The significance of the index of moderated mediation suggested that the indirect effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable was conditioned by age. A bootstrapping procedure (95% confidence intervals with 5000 bootstrap samples) was used to assess the statistical significance of the effects. Confidence intervals that did not contain zero indicated a statistically significant effect. Continuous variables were mean centered to avoid multicollinearity. To interpret significant interactions, a simple slope analysis was performed for the two age groups (middle vs high school). Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 27.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptives

Participation in religious services was higher among middle school students than among high school students, chi-square (4) = 77.76, $p < 0.001$, and the percentage of affiliation to a religious group also was higher among younger students than among older ones, chi-square (1) = 88.59, $p < 0.001$. Middle school students placed higher importance to religion compared to high school ones, $t(991) = 7.12$, $p < 0.001$ (Table 1).

Means, standard deviations and correlations among variables are reported in Table 2. Gender was positively related to positivity, affective well-being, and life satisfaction: boys reported higher scores on all three variables than girls. Age was negatively related to all variables, indicating that high school students were more likely to report lower importance of religion, positivity, affective well-being, and life satisfaction than middle school students. The importance of religion was positively correlated with positivity, affective well-being, and life satisfaction. Positivity was associated with higher affective well-being and life satisfaction. Affective well-being was positively related to life satisfaction.

4.2. Moderated mediation models

4.2.1. Predictors of affective well-being

Positivity was significantly predicted by the interaction importance of religion X age ($b = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI LL 0.05, UL 0.43). The simple slope analysis showed that increasing importance of religion was related to higher positivity only among high school students ($b = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI LL 0.25, UL 0.49; middle school $b = 0.13$, $p = 0.11$, 95% CI LL -0.03 , UL 0.29) (Fig. 2).

Affective well-being T2 was significantly predicted by positivity, whereas importance of religion and the interaction importance of religion X age were unrelated to affective well-being T2, after controlling for gender, religious practice, and affective well-being T1. The R^2 of the final model was 0.41, $F(7985) = 96.29$, $p < 0.001$ (Table 3).

The decomposition of effects revealed that there was no direct effect of importance of religion on affective well-being T2 moderated by age. On the contrary, there was an indirect effect of importance of religion on affective well-being T2 mediated by positivity and moderated by age: specifically, positivity mediated the relationship between importance of religion and subsequent affective well-being only for high school students (index of moderated mediation 0.07, CI LL 0.01, UL 0.13) (Table 4).

4.2.2. Predictors of life satisfaction

Also in this model, positivity was significantly predicted by the interaction importance of religion X age ($b = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI LL 0.01, UL 0.40). The simple slope analysis showed that increasing importance of religion was related to higher positivity only among high school students ($b = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI LL 0.18, UL 0.42; middle school $b = 0.09$, $p = 0.274$, 95% CI LL -0.07 , UL 0.26).

Life satisfaction T2 was significantly predicted by importance of religion and positivity, after controlling for gender, religious practice, and life satisfaction T1. The interaction importance of religion X age was not significant. The R^2 of the final model was 0.44, $F(7985) = 109.76$, $p < 0.001$ (Table 3).

The decomposition of effects revealed that there was a direct effect of importance of religion on life satisfaction T2 moderated by age. Specifically, the direct effect was significant for middle school students. Moreover, there was an indirect effect of importance of religion on life satisfaction T2 mediated by positivity and moderated by age: specifically, positivity mediated the relationship between importance of religion and subsequent life satisfaction only for high school students (index of moderated mediation 0.05, CI LL 0.01, UL 0.11) (Table 4).

5. Discussion

This study examined the relationships between the importance of religion and adolescent well-being, exploring the mediating role of positivity and the moderating role of age. This topic is still a neglected area

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD	Observed range
1	Gender	-								-	-	-
2	Age (middle/high school)	-0.07	-							-	-	-
3	Importance of religion T1	-0.01	-0.22**	-						5.31	3.26	0-12
4	Positivity T1	0.14**	-0.18**	0.24**	-					30.01	5.72	9-40
5	Affective well-being T1	0.24**	-0.08*	0.10**	0.57**	-				8.45	8.06	-17 + 34
6	Life satisfaction T1	0.14**	-0.20**	0.19**	0.55**	0.43**	-			65.94	8.59	28-80
7	Affective well-being T2	0.26**	-0.02	0.08*	0.47**	0.60**	0.35**	-		8.25	8.27	-25 + 36
8	Life satisfaction T2	0.19**	-0.21**	0.20**	0.47**	0.34**	0.63**	0.45**	-	64.77	9.20	19-80

Note: Gender was coded as 0=female and 1=male; age was coded as 0=middle school and 1=high school.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

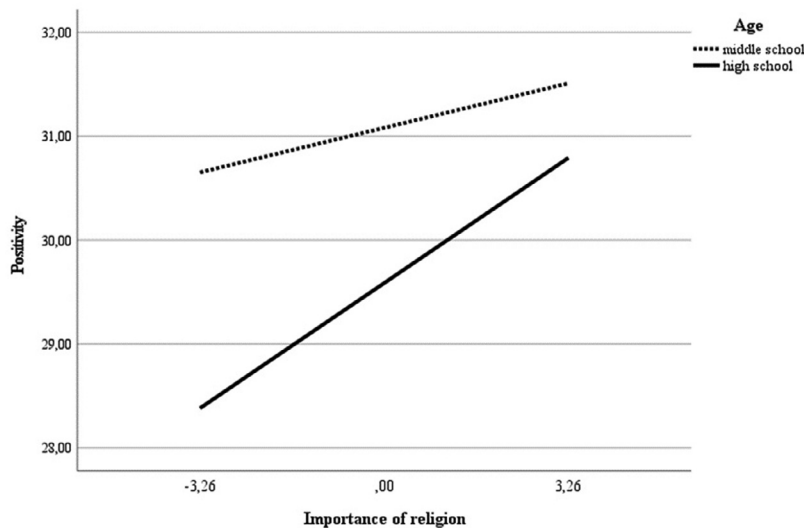


Fig. 2. The relation between importance of religion and positivity moderated by age.

Table 3
Moderated mediation analysis: predictors of affective well-being T2 and life satisfaction T2.

	Affective well-being T2				LLCI		Life satisfaction T2				LLCI		ULCI	
	b	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	b	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI		
Intercept	-6.14	1.37	-4.47	<0.001	-8.83	-3.45	20.06	1.92	10.45	<0.001	16.30	23.83		
Gender	2.15	0.42	5.14	<0.001	1.33	2.98	1.70	0.45	3.81	<0.001	0.83	2.58		
Religious practice	-0.03	0.30	-0.10	0.922	-0.62	0.56	0.52	0.32	1.61	0.107	-0.11	1.16		
Affective well-being T1	0.48	0.03	15.21	<0.001	0.41	0.54	-	-	-	-	-	-		
Life satisfaction T1	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.56	0.03	17.99	<0.001	0.50	0.62		
Importance of religion T1	-0.01	0.12	-0.10	0.918	-0.24	0.21	0.27	0.12	2.15	0.032	0.02	0.51		
Age	1.01	0.47	2.15	0.032	0.09	1.94	-0.78	0.51	-1.52	0.129	-1.78	0.23		
Importance of religion T1 x age	0.02	0.14	0.18	0.859	-0.25	0.29	-0.25	0.15	-1.66	0.096	-0.54	0.04		
Positivity	0.29	0.05	6.44	<0.001	0.20	0.38	0.24	0.05	5.14	<0.001	0.15	0.33		

Note: Gender was coded as 0=female and 1=male; age was coded as 0=middle school and 1=high school; LLCI=lower limit confidence interval, ULCI= upper limit confidence interval.

of research, especially in the transition from early to adolescence and in relation to the Italian context.

In our sample, the percentage of religious attendance was in line with national data (ISTAT, 2020) and was higher for younger students than for older ones. Participation in religious groups also decreased during the transition from middle to high school. In Italy, most children and early adolescents attend catechism groups to receive the Catholic sacraments. Then, from the age of 13-14, they increasingly distance themselves from religious activities and only a minority continues to participate in faith groups (IARD, 2010). In our study, the importance of religion was higher among middle school students than among high school students. This confirms a general trend toward declining religiosity that has been observed in other studies (Schnitker et al., 2021; Simsek et al., 2019).

Although most adolescents do not attend religious services and activities, this does not mean that religion is not important to their lives. In our study, the importance of religion emerged as a relevant dimension of adolescents' affective well-being and life satisfaction. Notably, the importance of religion was related to these outcomes both directly and indirectly through positivity and was also moderated by age.

Regarding the first aim, we found that the importance of religion was directly related to life satisfaction in younger students, whereas there was no direct relationship between the importance of religion and affective well-being. The results partially confirmed our hypothesis with an interesting moderating effect of age. The importance of religion was higher among early adolescents and appeared to directly promote the life satisfaction-related component of well-being. Thus, viewing religion as important to one's life appears to be a resource that helps adolescents

Table 4
Decomposition of effects of the moderated mediation analysis.

	Effect	LLCI	ULCI
Dependent variable: affective well-being T2			
Conditional direct effect: importance of religion → affective well-being T2			
Middle school	-0.01	-0.24	0.21
High school	0.01	-0.15	0.18
Conditional indirect effect: importance of religion → positivity → affective well-being T2			
Middle school	0.04	-0.01	0.09
High school	0.11	0.06	0.16
Index of moderated mediation	0.07	0.01	0.13
Dependent variable: life satisfaction T2			
Conditional direct effect: importance of religion → life satisfaction T2			
Middle school	0.27	0.02	0.51
High school	0.02	-0.16	0.20
Conditional indirect effect: importance of religion → positivity → life satisfaction T2			
Middle school	0.02	-0.02	0.07
High school	0.07	0.03	0.12
Index of moderated mediation	0.05	0.01	0.11

Note: LLCI=lower limit confidence interval, ULCI= upper limit confidence interval.

feel better about themselves in various life contexts (family, school, peer group). Relationships with family and peers could be the basis for this finding. It is known from the literature that the importance of religious beliefs among younger adolescents is influenced by both family socialization and participation in religious group activities (Fowler and Dell, 2006; King and Roeser, 2009). This sharing of religiosity with family and peers under adult guidance has been shown to provide support and promote well-being for adolescents during this challenging phase of life (Bjorck et al., 2019; Desrosiers et al., 2011; Yonker et al., 2012). It is possible, therefore, that what is important for well-being is not so much religious participation per se, but what it represents for the adolescent in terms of comparing and sharing values with peers and adults. The fact that religious practice was not significantly associated with well-being in our study seems to support this conclusion. However, the analyses conducted do not allow us to establish the links between religious practice and the importance attached to religion, so this aspect should be further investigated.

Regarding the second aim, we found that the importance of religion was indirectly related to both affective well-being and life satisfaction through positivity in older students. Thus, our hypothesis about the mediating role of positivity was confirmed with a significant moderating effect of age. Consistent with other studies, we found that the importance of religion is lower among older adolescents than among early adolescents (Hardy et al., 2019; Jensen, 2021). Nevertheless, it appears to play a central role in fostering positive attitudes toward self, life, and the future, and indirectly continues to exert a role in affective and cognitive well-being. During adolescence, the questioning of traditional beliefs may cause most young people to place less importance on religious beliefs and to turn away from faith itself. However, some adolescents are likely to make a more conscious choice to embrace the values of religion, which has a positive impact on their self-image. This was also found in a meta-analysis, which showed that the effect of religiosity on self-esteem was greater among older adolescents (Yonker et al., 2012). This is indeed an age when increasing cognitive abilities and abstract thinking allow for deeper reflection on self and identity, and when religious beliefs become more internalized and independent of the influence of others (Fowler and Dell, 2006; King and Roeser, 2009).

These data must be interpreted in the context of Italy, where the influence of Catholicism is still deeply rooted in society and culture and indirectly influences values, albeit independently of religious participation. Although Italy is a secular nation, the Catholic religion is fully integrated into the national culture and the influence of religious values may be more pronounced than in other countries (Garelli, 2013, 2016). This influence affects different ages, as values are internalized during the socialization process that begins in childhood and continues throughout life. For young Italians, adolescence is also a time when religious

values are questioned, but this occurs in a context where the religious dimension is still present. Therefore, some are more likely to choose to maintain religious values as a personal choice, even if religiosity does not necessarily manifest itself in strict adherence to religious rituals and the Catholic Church's instructions on certain topics such as sexuality or family issues (Garelli, 2016).

The study has some limitations. First, the study was based on a nonrandomly selected convenience sample; although the sample consisted of students from public, non-Catholic schools and the data on religiosity were consistent with national data and those of similar studies (ISTAT, 2020; Villani et al., 2019), the results cannot be generalized to the Italian population of adolescents. Second, our data did not allow us to examine this issue by considering differences between the dominant Catholic religion and minority religious groups. This aspect would need to be explored in future studies, as other religious denominations, such as Islam, seem to have higher numbers of practicing believers compared to Catholicism, including among adolescents (Simsek et al., 2018). Specifically, Muslim adolescents living in Europe showed a lower decline in religiosity and attached more importance to religion than Catholic-majority adolescents (Cordero et al., 2021; Simsek et al., 2019, 2018). Thus, in future studies, it would be interesting to examine the role of religiosity in well-being by comparing young people of different religious denominations. Third, in the present study, we did not examine how family, and in particular the model of religiosity offered by parents, is related to the importance that adolescents place on religion and their well-being (Mahoney and Cano, 2014; Petts, 2014). Gender issues should also be explored in future studies of the influence of religiosity on well-being. The literature generally reports gender differences in adolescent religiosity. In particular, greater involvement in religious practice and higher importance of religion in general is observed among girls, at least among Christian adolescents (Simsek et al., 2018). Finally, future studies based on a person-centered approach would enrich the present findings, for example, by comparing groups of adolescents with different levels of religiosity in terms of subjective well-being.

Overall, our study contributes to the literature on religiosity and adjustment in adolescence and reveals promising lines of development for future research. First, the study examined the role of the importance of religion on subjective well-being using a longitudinal design that accounted for age differences, contributing to the developmental psychology literature that has examined the role of religiosity in positive youth development. Second, our study examined the relationships between religiosity, positivity, and well-being in Italy, a context where the influence of Catholicism is deeply rooted in the culture and influences values, albeit indirectly through socialization processes. From a developmental systems perspective, this is an example of how the macrosystem influences individuals and the microsystems in which they are embedded

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 2006). As mentioned earlier, it would be interesting in future studies to assess cultural influence and socialization processes by examining, for example, family religious practice and beliefs, as well as the influence of school and peer relationships on adolescent religiosity (King and Roeser, 2009).

In terms of practical implications of the study, these findings underscore the usefulness of viewing religiosity as a resource that can promote adolescent growth and positive development (Lerner et al., 2009). Interventions aimed at improving adolescent well-being should therefore not ignore the relevance that religious beliefs may have for some adolescents in terms of their successful adjustment.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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