

Religious change in adolescence

The need for longitudinal research

Religious change in adolescence has been a major topic in the psychology of adolescence in general as well as in the psychology of religion in particular. Religious change in adolescence is of interest for both the scientific study of religion as well as for whoever is involved in working with adolescents in practical contexts. Parents and professional educators, teachers of Religious Education and church leaders but also politicians have shown considerable interest and sometimes worry about what religious change occurs in adolescence. Yet while especially survey studies which most often work with one-time questionnaires have been quick to diagnose major changes concerning both individual change as well as far-reaching transformations affecting whole generations of youth, empirical evidence of religious change in adolescence has remained surprisingly scarce. It seems obvious that religious changes should be carefully observed by following individual persons with their trajectories of life. Yet very few researchers have actually done so, at least not in any kind of large-scale longitudinal studies on youth and religion.

Recently, however, things have started to change, at least to some degree. A certain breakthrough can be seen in the American National Study of Youth and Religion which provided empirical insights on religious change using a longitudinal approach on the basis of a representative sample (cf. Smith 2005; Smith 2009). Inspired, among others by this study as well as by long-term research from Finland on the effects of confirmation work (Niemelä 2008; 2015), the European studies on confirmation work produced comparable results from large representative samples (Schweitzer, Niemelä, Schlag, & Simojoki 2015a; Schweitzer, Schlag, Simojoki, Tervo-Niemelä, & Ilg 2017). Even if these European studies are related to a certain field of educational practice within churches (confirmation work), they nevertheless deserve the attention of the psychology of adolescence or the psychology of religion. As will be shown in this article, these studies used a number of innovative approaches which, especially in combination, can advance the understanding of religious change in adolescence in general.

In the following, in a first step the need for longitudinal approaches to religious change in adolescence will be described. In a second step the American and European studies will be taken up and discussed in a number of respects in

relationship to their results as well as to methodological questions. It will be of special interest in this connection to consider changes at the group level and changes at the individual level – a question which has rarely been addressed concerning religious change in adolescence, probably because most studies were too small for providing a sufficient data base for this crucial question. Moreover, changes at the individual level also allow for the identification of possible predictors of religious change which, in turn, may be of special interest in terms of what influence (religious) education may exert on adolescent development. Based on these considerations, a number of tasks for the future will be suggested in the conclusion of the article.

1. Religious change in adolescence: A major topic and its (weak) empirical basis

Ever since the empirical study of religion was introduced more than 100 years ago, changes affecting religion in adolescence have been of prime interest. The same holds true for the empirical study of youth. American classics like William James and even more, G. Stanley Hall and Edwin Diller Starbuck or, in Germany, Eduard Spranger put major emphasis on this aspect (cf. Schweitzer 1996). Later, developmentalists like the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson or the cognitive developmental approaches set forth by James W. Fowler and others offered accounts of religious development in adolescence (overview Schweitzer 2016). The publications of these authors have left a deep and lasting impression on the understanding of adolescence and adolescent religion, most often viewing religious change as the hallmark of this phase of life. Yet none of these theorists ever conducted any major longitudinal studies.

The same is equally true for most sociological research on religion in adolescence which instead tends to be largely based on one-time surveys and cross-sectional comparison between age-groups within such surveys. In many ways, the sociologist Christian Smith (Smith 2005; Smith 2009) was the first in the field of the social scientific study of religion in adolescence to present a large-scale empirical study based on a longitudinal approach. In the meantime, the European research project on confirmation work in seven and later in nine countries (Schweitzer et al. 2015a, 2017) also produced results based on questionnaires administered to adolescents over the course of three or, in the case of the German part of this project, even five years (2012–2015/2017). Moreover, major parts of the study were carried out twice (2007/2008, 2012/2013) in a manner which allows for direct comparisons. In Finland, Kati Niemelä was able to do follow-up studies covering even longer periods of time after confirmation well into the twenties of her respondents (Niemelä 2015). Through their methodologies

and research designs, the American as well as the European studies were able not only to follow a certain age-group or cohort over time but to also trace the responding individuals. In other words, the studies allow for interpretations at a group level as well as at an individual level. Change is not only studied as a group phenomenon but as an individual experience as well.

Given these recent American and European studies it is now possible to discuss the question of the actual benefits of a longitudinal approach to religious change in adolescence on a new basis which is the starting point of the present chapter. The interest in the longitudinal approach is social-scientific, concerning the possible contribution of this approach to the understanding of religion in adolescence. At the same time, there also is a strong educational interest in this question. To a large extent, education is concerned with change. While education also may include the task of stabilising young people so that they will not lose whatever they have achieved in their living and learning, in most cases the aim of education is growth in the broadest sense of the word. It is about learning new things, about acquiring new attitudes and abilities, about developing autonomy, etc. This is why it is of decisive importance to understand the processes involved in changes over time. Without such an understanding it will obviously not be feasible to identify possibilities for supporting adolescent development through education. Moreover, there is an increasing educational interest in achieving long-term effects, for example, through teaching because the traditional approach of being satisfied with pupils doing well in the next test is rightly considered insufficient (cf. Schweitzer & Boschki 2018; Schweitzer, Ilg, & Schreiner 2019).

A first beginning for educational studies which correspond to this interest can be seen in so-called intervention studies (cf. Ziebertz 2010; Schweitzer 2018). In their simplest form, they include testing pupils before (t_1) and after they take part in a certain exercise (t_2), for example, a series of lessons. Then the differences between the values at t_1 and t_2 are compared with those from a control group which did not take part in this exercise. If the study is limited to accompanying a teaching unit, the time-span in consideration is often rather short, typically only a few weeks. More and more such studies include a third measuring point (t_3) in order to capture possible effects after a few months or even half a year. Other educational studies try to capture possible changes during a whole school year (cf. Ritzer 2010). As opposed to clearly designed intervention studies, however, this design makes it difficult to identify certain features of Religious Education as predictors of change but again shows the interest in longitudinal approaches in religious education.

It has been observed that the interest in longitudinal studies has been growing in religious education research in recent years (Höger 2016). Yet the respective studies most often are rather small, working with short time-spans (there also are larger studies, for example, Forschungsgruppe 2015). Consequently the attempt

should be to also have large-scale longitudinal studies with more representative samples.

Recent discussions in research on religion in childhood and adolescence provide a good example for why longitudinal studies are needed. The Protestant Church in Germany has the tradition of doing surveys on its membership about every ten years. The latest of these studies (EKD 2014) includes the observation that there is a clear decline of religious socialisation in the family. In this study this observation is based on cross-sectional comparisons. The total sample is divided into a number of different age-groups. Then the different groups' responses to the question of if they were socialised religiously during childhood are compared. The resulting interpretation states that the younger the group, the less religious socialisation they experienced during childhood.

While this result sounds plausible and while it has been quoted as a major finding over and over in various contexts, the weakness of the empirical basis is quite obvious. The results exclusively rely on retrospective recollection. The authors do not even discuss the possibility that people may have different views of earlier periods of their lives at different times. They also do not consider the possibly creative – or distortive – nature of human memory. Finally, the authors make no attempt to support their claims by comparing their results to parallel results from earlier studies.

Sociologist Gerhard Schmidtchen put the same question to a representative sample about 40 years earlier (cf. Schmidtchen 1979, 28). The results were very similar to those from 2014. This implies that some of those who reported little or no religious socialisation during childhood in the 1970s, must have changed their minds – or even their own pasts. Because now they are of a different opinion concerning what they experienced during childhood.

Such examples indicate that there is a clear need for more reliable procedures in research on religious change, in adolescence as well as in other parts of the lifecycle. Not enough has been done to make sure that results are really valid. Long-term research approaches are a possible response to this weakness of the existing research.

2. Recent longitudinal studies on religion in adolescence: The American National Study of Youth and Religion and the European studies on confirmation work

In the following, the European studies on confirmation work will be used as the main example for discussing the possible added value of longitudinal research concerning religious change in adolescence. The studies on confirmation work are the largest studies of this kind conducted in Europe as well as beyond so

far (for the recent American parallel study see Osmer & Douglass 2018). In addition to this, the author of this chapter was part of the team which carried out these studies so that the discussion below can rely on special familiarity with these studies. However, the American study conducted by Smith and his team played the pioneering role in the present context and also inspired the European studies on confirmation work concerning their longitudinal design. This is why it will be presented here in the sense of a decisive background for the European studies.

2.1 Brief description of the American National Study of Youth and Religion

The American National Study of Youth and Religion started out with a focus on religion in adolescence with a first study carried out between 2002 and 2003 with teenagers aged 13 to 17 years (Smith 2005, 6). The first step (2002) consisted in a representative quantitative study (N = 3.370) based on telephone interviews. In a second step (2003), 267 in-depth face-to-face interviews were carried out (Smith 2005, 6, 302). Two additional waves of questionnaires followed in 2007/2008 (N = 2.532 for the third wave, Smith 2009, 311) and 151 in-depth interviews (Smith 2009, 312).

Later publications from the project are more theoretical – concerning emerging adulthood – and on innovative evaluation strategies concerning religious stability and change in adolescence (Smith 2011; Pearce & Lundquist Denton 2011). Moreover, there was strong reception in the field of Christian education in the United States (cf. Dean 2010).

The rich results of these studies cannot be presented here in detail. However, three of the major findings deserve special attention in the present context:

- Contrary to wide-spread assumptions, comparing results on various religious indicators from 1990 to 2006 showed no religious decline (Smith 2009, 89–90). Including data from even longer periods of time (1972–2006) also showed few changes, except for certain groups (Catholics, Black Protestants, Smith 2009, 95–97). This is interpreted such: “on the whole, 18- to 24-year-old Americans have not since 1972 become dramatically less religious or more secular” (Smith 2009, 99).
- Concerning religious change in adolescence and into early adulthood the results confirm the general expectation of decline, at least in part: “the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years involves in general an impressive amount of stability but also, when it comes to change, a significant decline in religious commitment and practice” (Smith 2009, 213). There also were noteworthy differences related to different religious or denominational traditions (Smith 2009, 114, 116).

- One of the most important findings is related to differences between the group level and the individual level: “some do become more religious and others less religious between waves” (Smith 2009, 213). In other words, religious change should not be viewed as a homogenous phenomenon but deserves deeper scrutiny. More complex statistical evaluation based on latent class analysis also cautions against stereotyped assumptions concerning religious decline. Instead, the authors also perceive evidence of processes of “religious refinement” happening between adolescence and early adulthood (Pearce & Lundquist Denton 2011, 167).

2.2 The studies on confirmation work

The studies on confirmation work are documented in a number of books (main publications in English: Schweitzer et al. 2015a, 2017, altogether 12 volumes, overview Simojoki, Ilg, Schlag, & Schweitzer 2018). At this point, the intention is not to repeat what can be read in these books but to focus on the question of longitudinal studies on religious change in adolescence. More specifically the main question will be about possible benefits from a longitudinal approach.

2.2.1 Overview on the studies

The basic design of the studies included questionnaires in the beginning (t_1) and towards the end of confirmation time (t_2) which, in many cases, lasts for about one year. This part of the studies was conducted twice, in 2007/2008 and in 2012/2013, with the first study in seven European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland) and the second in nine countries (in addition to the participating countries of the first study: Hungary and Poland; moreover, there also were parallel studies in the German Methodist Church and in the United States, cf. Beisswenger & Härtner 2017; Osmer & Douglass 2018; in Belarus, a study on Sunday School was carried out, using items from the confirmation studies, cf. Danilovich 2016). In the second study, another questionnaire was administered two years after confirmation (t_3). In the German part of the study, a final questionnaire was administered four years after confirmation (t_4 ; cf. Ilg, Pohlers, Gräbs Santiago, & Schweitzer 2018). This means that the adolescent respondents were 13, 14, 16 and 18 years old (t_1 to t_4). The total of the young people involved in the different studies amounted to more than 28.000 (second study). The samples were representative in t_1 and t_2 while the t_3 - and t_4 -samples were considerably smaller.

It was a special feature of the studies that every individual can be followed over the whole time-span covered by the questionnaires. Each respondent was asked to create a code for herself/himself which was based on characteristics like a certain letter from their mother’s name. In this way, the questionnaires

filled out at three or four different times could be assigned to a particular person without violating that person's anonymity. Consequently the results allow for considering changes at the group level as well as at the individual level.

There were also qualitative parts in the study but for the present context only the quantitative parts will be considered. The qualitative results can also be of special interest in terms of longitudinal questions but since they are retrospective, they are hard to connect to the quantitative results. For example, if an 18-year-old respondent says that his commitment to voluntary work with confirmands has changed his appreciation of the Christian faith, this statement reflects a retrospective biographical experience as interpreted by this respondent. However, it gives no reliable insights into how this person may have actually evaluated his or her faith two or three years earlier.

Altogether, the design of the studies allows for a number of comparisons over time:

- comparisons of the responses given in t_1 – t_4 ,
- comparisons between the two studies 2007/2008 and 2012/2013,
- comparisons between group and individual level.

Only the first and the third perspective refer to truly longitudinal data which come from the same persons. Comparing results from the studies 2007/2008 and 2012/2013 implies that respondents are different but since the studies were representative and since about 60% of the items used stayed the same, comparisons are nevertheless legitimate.

In addition to these three perspectives, it is also possible to consider how religious change affects different aspects of the Christian faith. The questionnaires used in the studies included a number of different items referring to religious attitudes so that it can be checked if change affects all of them in the same way or not.

2.2.2 How the responses changed between the ages of 13 and 18 years

In this case, considering changing responses between the ages of 13 and 18 years, there are two observations which determine the interpretation of the results: the first concerning the general tendency, the second the difference between individual items.

The general tendency with the adolescents' religious development is, not surprisingly, a clear decline of the approval of faith-related items. In this respect, the results confirm the wide-spread assumption of religious decline in later adolescence, more so than the American results mentioned above. However, the decline is not steady and it does not equally apply to all items.

- There is a steady decline concerning faith in God as the creator (“God created the world”). Of all the faith-related items used in the study, this was the one

which received least approval from the adolescents and there was no change in this respect over the years (cf. Ilg et al. 2018, 181). Faith in God as the creator of the world has come under serious pressure, probably through the influence of popularised understandings of natural science in general and of theories of evolution in particular.

- In some cases, most notably with the item “faith in God helps me in difficult situations”, the adolescents become more positive during confirmation time. In other words, there is an increase between t_1 and t_2 which, however, is followed by a decrease between t_2 and t_3 as well as t_4 (cf. Ilg et al. 2018, 181). Yet the affirmation concerning life after death is the highest of all items in the study at t_4 while a general belief in God had attracted the highest approval rates in t_1 to t_3 . Such developments point to a possible influence of the experiences during confirmation time as well as to a lasting importance of the questions concerning death and afterlife even in later adolescence.

These results have two important implications for research on religious change in adolescence. First, there are important differences between different age-groups in adolescence itself so that taking together, for example, the 12- to 18-year-olds or the 14- to 25-year-olds as it is sometimes done in other studies can be quite misleading. The different age-groups in adolescence are not responding the same way. Second, religious change obviously is a concept which is too general in order to capture different forms of change. It is not differentiated enough to capture different strands of development as they show up in the present study with the item referring to life after death.

2.2.3 How the responses changed between the two studies

Since the studies in 2007/2008 and in 2012/2013 (t_1 and t_2) had an overlap of about 60% of the items used in both studies and since both studies were representative, it is legitimate to compare their results. In this case, the data are not truly longitudinal since it was not the same persons who responded. Yet the comparisons of the adolescents at an interval of five years allows for insights concerning changes over time in the two cohorts’ religious attitudes.

Contrary to the first set of observations concerning change between the ages of 13 and 18 years, the results did not fit the expectation of decline. With almost all of the items used in the study there was no change to be detected in the responses. Instead, the general impression speaks for a high degree of stability. The clearest exceptions were faith in God as the creator which declined between 2007/2008 and in 2012/2013, although by less than 3 percent points while, for example, assent to the item “belief in God helps me in difficult situations” increased by 9 percent points (cf. Schweitzer, Maaß, Lißmann, Hardecker, & Ilg 2015b, 41). Moreover, the attitude towards the church also became more positive (Schweitzer et al. 2015b, 43).

The expectation of decline on group level often comes from theories of secularization which speak for a steady decline of the influence of religion on young people. The results just presented, however, do not conform to such expectations. One may object to this interpretation, for example, by saying that the five years between the two studies were too short in order to make religious change visible. It is indeed possible, that an interval of ten or more years would show different results. Yet generally speaking, finding increases in religiosity does not fit the wide-spread picture of declining religiosity.

In terms of future research this observation speaks for using studies which work with the same items (at least to some degree) and also are representative so that reliable comparisons over time become possible.

2.2.4 Changes at group level and individual level

Since all people belong to certain groups or cohorts, there often is the expectation that changes at the group level and changes at the individual level should follow the same patterns. This assumption becomes even stronger in the case of adolescents, given the well-known prominent influence of adolescent peer culture and peer pressure. However, as described above, the studies by Smith and his group point into a different direction. They show that there are many changes at the individual level which do not follow the patterns at the group level. In other words, earlier studies which did not capture both levels did not yield adequate results in that they did not take account of the multifaceted nature of religious change in adolescence.

The studies with the confirmands also include results for the group level as well as for the individual level. The results showed a similar picture as the American study. Comparing the responses from t_1 and t_3 , for example, in the German study (Schweitzer et al. 2015b), 60% of the adolescents showed no change. 25% became more negative while 15% became more positive concerning the index for Christian beliefs (Schweitzer et al. 2015b, 54). The international study showed similar results.

Given these results, two interrelated questions can be raised: First, what are the predictors of the different developments at individual level? Second, what role does (religious) education play in this context?

Clearly, more detailed work needs to be done concerning the full range of possible predictors of individual development. Yet the results available show that, for example, positive experiences with confirmation work are a strong predictor of positive attitudes towards the church in later years. This is also in line with the results from Finland presented by Niemelä (2008; 2015) who was able to show that such experiences have an effect on people's relationship to church and church membership even in the third decade of their lives. Moreover, becoming a volunteer in confirmation work is another powerful predictor

for more consent with religious beliefs (cf. Schweitzer et al. 2017). And for becoming a volunteer, certain experiences during confirmation time are a clear predictor, most of all the chance to try out voluntary commitment on a limited basis.

As stated above, these results are no more than a beginning for more detailed research on the effects and the effectiveness of certain educational practices. Yet they show that education can make a difference and that it will be important in future research to also capture religious change at the individual level. This is also one of the reasons why the recent study on faith in adolescence carried out at Tübingen put much emphasis on both a longitudinal approach as well as changes at the individual level (so far with t_1 and t_2 questionnaires, a third wave is on its way, cf. Schweitzer, Wissner, Bohner, Nowack, Gronover, & Boschki 2018). Again, differences between the group level and the individual level became clearly visible.

3. Conclusions and perspectives for the future

This chapter highlighted the advantages of longitudinal research using the question of religious change in adolescence as test case. Consequently the emphasis was on what additional insights this type of research has to offer concerning the understanding of religious change in adolescence and the result turned out to be very promising. Long-term approaches can indeed provide insights which are not available from other approaches and these insights are of interest in terms of their scientific value as well as in terms of their meaning for (religious) education. It was also pointed out that more research is needed to arrive at a clearer and more comprehensive understanding the predictors of individual change. Moreover, different educational influences will have to be identified more systematically, including wished for influences as well as unwished for ones.

At the end it must also be said that there are numerous challenges which longitudinal research has to master. The first and most crucial of them refers to the samples. With each new measuring point the sample tends to dwindle (so-called panel mortality). This loss of respondents will often make samples non-representative which implies that the value of longitudinal data consists more in the possibility of truly following development over time than in representative results. In any case, sample sizes in t_1 must be planned such that results will at least still be meaningful even after losing respondents. In addition to this, the composition of samples in t_2 and later must be carefully evaluated in comparison to the original sample, including an analysis of what specific distortions the reduced sample may imply and how these implications can be taken into

consideration in interpreting results. For example, later samples in the research on confirmation work tended to be more female, more committed to religion or the church as well as from families with a stronger educational background. This meant that the results had to be interpreted with a constant eye to these special features of the samples.

Finally, there is no doubt that longitudinal research tends to be more costly and more demanding than one-time surveys. In certain respects, they also require additional methodological expertise which may not be available in the field of religious education (cf. Blossfeld, von Maurice, Bayer, & Skopek 2016; Fitzmaurice, Laird, & Ware 2004). Yet these caveats are practical considerations which should not be confused with scientific arguments. The promises of longitudinal approaches should not be left aside because of the demands they also bring with them.

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