Spiritual, Moral and Social Development as the Outcomes of a Program for Youth

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and to the best of my knowledge, it does not contain material previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the text.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of, and relationships between, religiosity, spirituality, moral thinking and social attitudes among religious adolescents participating in an early morning weekday religious education program in Australia.

Students participating in the Early Morning Seminary program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints form the population of interest for this study. These students demonstrate high levels of religious practice, making them an important group to research when seeking greater understanding of the outcomes of religious and spiritual developmental arising from such programs and when investigating how religiosity relates to moral and attitudinal aspects in the lives of religious youth.

The research is survey based and entails the administering of four waves over a two-year period, enabling longitudinal observations to be examined. A sample of convenience is used consisting of Seminary students from South Australia and Victoria. Various survey instruments are used to measure characteristics such as family background, educational background, student religious activity, Seminary program involvement, relationships with God, moral decision making and social attitudes. Data analysis includes the use of Rasch scaling procedures, path analysis and Hierarchical Linear Modelling software in order to investigate multilevel effects on change in key dimensions over time.

The fact that specific research regarding highly religious youth in Australia is not common and that research regarding Latter-day Saint youth in Australia is almost non-existent makes this study an important and seminal contribution in the Australian religious research field. This study provides several other important contributions to the field as it explores developmental outcomes of a specific religious education program across a range of religious and psychosocial dimensions.

The oft-reported strong influence of the family on the religiosity of teenagers is reflected in the findings of this study. There is also evidence to indicate that private religious activity is especially important for the level of spirituality among students. The findings indicate that spirituality, rather than public or private religious practice, influences moral reasoning. Furthermore, private religious practice tends to have more positive influence than spirituality on social attitudes. Participation in the Seminary program appears to influence religiosity and spirituality significantly and independently of other variables included in the study, although the influence of participation is mediated by the feelings of students concerning the program.

Generally, students show a decline in both participation levels and feelings towards the Seminary program over time. However, there is evidence of increased positive attitude toward a religious lifestyle, religious belief and awareness of God’s influence in life. Religious practice appears to influence change in several practical, attitudinal and spiritual dimensions positively. The findings indicate that the developmental role of Seminary participation is largely through the influence of the class environment.

From this study it appears that religious participation in both public and private forms can have a major influence on key dimensions of spirituality and that religious
and spiritual characteristics can have some influence on moral decision making and the forming of social attitudes. Participation in a religious education program, such as the Latter-day Saint Seminary program, can influence these dimensions especially if there is a positive attitude towards the program on the part of students and the class the environment is appropriate.

In recent decades, the role of religion in psychological and social reality has seen greater attention and acceptance in academic circles. Accordingly, the body of academic research regarding religion and associated fields has increased and diversified opening the way for further exploration of the role of religion in the broader context of human life as is found in this study.