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The Place of Religion in the Lives of Gifted People

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to show the place of religion in the lives of gifted people. The subject of the related research was gifted people's understanding of religion. It was conducted using qualitative methods in the interpretive paradigm. Proxemic analysis was performed on the research results, leading to the conclusion that religion is important in the lives of gifted people. It is an indispensable element on their path to personal maturity and comprehensive development. Faith in God allows them to discover the meaning of life and helps them to define their own goals and successfully achieve them. Thanks to religion, the respondents discovered a sense of community and gained the support of other believers—friends from the parish and family members. Faith strengthens them in their sense of security and the experience of individual fulfillment and it protects from repeating destructive behavioral patterns. Having general and specific abilities and achieving academic success did not prevent the respondents from living their faith. Among the pedagogical implications, it is worth emphasizing the need for an integral perception of a person who also needs faith in God for their holistic development. In this perspective, educators, teachers, and parents who share their faith in God can play an important role for the younger generations and can accompany them in their faith and everyday life.

KEYWORDS

gifted individuals,
talents, religion, faith,
spirituality

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Artykuły i rozprawy

Articles and dissertations

Introduction and definitions related to the research topic

This article analyzes the role of religion in the lives of gifted individuals, examining how they approach and understand religion and the personal significance they attach to it. It seeks to understand whether gifted individuals engage in prayer, talk to God, ponder existential questions, and develop their faith differently compared to those who do not achieve high academic results. This issue has not been studied in depth and represents a notable research gap, with no similar studies available in Polish literature. The author has been conducting qualitative research in this area for several years, though incorporating quantitative research could provide a more complete picture. For this article, key concepts such as religion, faith, spirituality, and giftedness will be defined in more detail. Clarifying these terms is essential, as their meanings can vary depending on the research context and researcher's perspective.

In the experience of religion, the focus is often on religious practices, belief in a personal God, and participation in church structures (Marianński, 2010: 207). Religion helps individuals satisfy their innate need to find the meaning of life, while also confronting the limitations of their existence, thus prompting them to seek God. Christian religion, in particular, manifests through personal faith and has both individual and communal dimensions (Walulik, 2011: 37). This article adopts Zbigniew Marek's definition of religion, which seems most fitting for this research. Marek argues that religion supports individuals in undertaking and fulfilling life projects, resolving conflicts, and navigating boundary situations through the authority of God. It serves educational and formative functions by helping students accept and absolutize moral values, integrate life experiences, hierarchize values, find life's meaning, gain a sense of security in the face of human transience, and determine a life path (Marek 2015: 18).

Regarding the concept of faith, this article follows Anna Walulik's definition, which seems to fit best with the author's study. Walulik believes that every person has some form of faith, even if it is limited to concerns about ultimate and eternal matters. While faith and religion are often used interchangeably in everyday language, they differ in meaning. In Catholic theology, faith is understood as a personal commitment to God and acceptance of revealed truths. This form of

faith matures with individuals over time as they gain various experiences (Walulik 2012b: 92). Another concept is spirituality, which differs from religion. Spirituality does not require religious contexts or a relationship with God. Instead, it refers to the human capacity for self-transcendence inherent in human nature (Mielicka-Pawłowska 2021: 25). For this article, we adopt David L. Fleming's definition of spirituality, which describes it as a set of attitudes, habits, and values that shape a person's conduct and promote a vision of life that is characterized by a reflective attitude towards everyday life (Fleming 2013: 5). This definition is particularly useful for analyzing how gifted individuals understand spiritual life.

The next concept to define is the "gifted person." Typically, this refers to someone who possesses both general and specific abilities and achieves high academic results, such as excelling in competitions and, importantly, in the final secondary school exams. Gifted individuals are motivated for continuous development in various areas of life. They are usually eloquent, well-read, and possess a rich vocabulary. Additionally, they are often socially engaged (Kamińska 2021: 38). These individuals have clearly defined interests and pursue them with determination, surpassing their peers in terms of ability and academic performance, and they are likely to achieve large success in the future. They are also characterized by non-intellectual traits, such as an exceptional, charismatic personality (Porzucek-Miśkiewicz 2022: 37). Gifted individuals generally value their cognitive abilities highly and are focused on achieving academic success, pursuing their goals systematically and skillfully (Gierczyk 2019: 146).

However, gifted individuals also face challenges, often emotional and social. They may be hyperactive and are sometimes perceived as socially maladjusted. It is not uncommon for them to isolate themselves from their peer group or be rejected by it (Borzym 1979: 55).

Outline of the methodology

For this article, qualitative research was conducted within an interpretative paradigm. The aim was to explore the place of religion in the lives of gifted individuals. The main research question was: "What place does religion occupy in the lives of gifted people?" The technique of proxemic analysis, developed by Anna Walulik and

Zbigniew Marek, was used. This method involves extracting actors and their network of interrelationships from the text, identifying the place and time of the utterance, isolating their values, and establishing the mutual expectations of the actors towards each other (Walulik 2022: 131). While this technique was helpful in determining the place of religion in the lives of gifted individuals, not all the mentioned categories could be extracted. Primarily, the mutual expectations of the respondents and, to a lesser extent, their professed values, were identified.

The research material comprised the personal narratives of four gifted individuals who shared their educational experiences. They also discussed their relationship with God and their attitudes towards faith and religion. These individuals excelled in their secondary school final exams, achieving nearly perfect scores. During their high school years, they participated in subject competitions and achieved high results. They are currently studying at some of the best universities in Poland.

Analysis of the author's own research and pedagogical implications

The study analyzed narratives from four gifted individuals (pseudonyms: Katarzyna, Joanna, Konrad, and Jacek) to preserve their anonymity.

The first narrator, Katarzyna, resides in Cracow with her parents and older sister. Her mother directs a kindergarten; while Katarzyna does not mention her father's profession. Her older sister works as a foreign language translator and is happily married. Katarzyna attended a Catholic primary school followed by a secondary school run by the Salesians, where she excelled in all subjects on her final exams. Demonstrating both general learning ability and a specific linguistic ability, she achieved academic success through high motivation and conscientiousness. During the interview, she displayed good manners, a rich vocabulary, and a friendly attitude towards other people. Katarzyna exhibited intrinsic motivation, particularly in mastering Italian, and demonstrated creativity by organizing excellent learning environment at school, both domestically and abroad in

Italy. Throughout the interview, she emphasized her close bond with her sister and parents. However, she also revealed struggles with peer rejection she experienced at almost every stage of her schooling.

The main actors in Katarzyna's narrative include God, the catechist, the priest, and friends from her parish. Central to her story is God. Katarzyna said:

I strive to make God the most important value in my life, to put Him first. The relationship with God differs from human relationships because it lacks direct, physical contact.

Katarzyna views her relationship with God as paramount, despite its ethereal and intangible nature. While acknowledging the absence of physical interaction common in human relationships, that is, experiences through the senses, Katarzyna affirms her personal connection with God. However, this was not always true for her. The narrator reflected:

There was a time in my life when I walked away from God. I even questioned whether I should receive the sacrament of Confirmation under such circumstances. However, there came a time when I started to wonder about the meaning of life and the point of our actions on earth. Without God, life felt so empty that it made me deeply sad. I started to wonder: if there is no God, where is my life heading, and what is its worth? This emptiness was somewhat frightening, and it led me back to God, making me realize that faith was essential in my life.

For Katarzyna, living without God brought a sense of hopelessness and sadness. She found no meaning or purpose in such a life. She compared her life with God's presence to her life without it and chose to live a life of faith because it felt more complete and fulfilling. Despite moments of doubt, abandoning her faith and questioning whether she should nurture her faith and proceed with Confirmation, she ultimately returned to her faith. This period of doubt seemed brief, as the narrator refers to it as a "moment" and does not talk about any of its deeper negative effects.

Katarzyna expected God to provide deep meaning to her life and this is what happened. Following Anna Walulik and Zbigniew Marek's interpretations, it appears the narrator sought personal growth and maturity by integrating faith into her daily life (Marek 2020: 12). For her, faith was crucial to managing everyday responsibilities, choices,

and problems. In Katarzyna's narrative, other key figures include the parish youth group and the priest.

A group in the parish that formed after the youth days helped me a lot. It was led by a young priest and had about ten people. They made me feel accepted for who I am.

Katarzyna felt welcomed by the parish group, unlike her class group, which was mainly made up of her peers. She emphasized that she felt comfortable and part of the group, likely experiencing a sense of community that was very important to her well-being. The narrator expected acceptance and friendship from her parish friends and the priest who led the group. Her friends expected the same from her, and they reciprocated by offering support to each other.

Katarzyna's experience supports Anna Walulik's idea that a parish can serve as a "social asylum" where individuals maintain special relationships and receive various forms of support—spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and even material (Walulik 2012a).

The catechist is also significant in Katarzyna's narrative, serving as a role model of a believer and motivating her to develop and cultivate her faith. The narrator stated:

After I came back to God, I started going to Confirmation preparation classes, led by a very nice catechist who showed me a deep, practical faith for everyday life. At that time, it was important for me to see that she was a layperson who showed me that it was possible to live Christian values not only as a priest or in a religious order but also while having a family and a job. It showed me that living in the so-called normal world, you don't have to give up what our faith offers. This has made faith the most important thing for me. I try to make it deep, thoughtful, and not just superficial.

The narrator expected the catechist to set an example of living faith in secular life, which greatly inspired her, and helped her prepare for the sacrament of Confirmation. The catechist fulfilled these expectations. Thanks to her guidance, Katarzyna found it easier to apply this advice to her daily life and practice her faith. She did not find the example of consecrated people as impactful, preferring to relate to someone who balanced faith with family and everyday roles she recognized from her own life. The catechist, in turn, expected Katarzyna to prepare for the sacrament and grow in her faith with her help. They shared a similar understanding of faith in God, remained

significant to each other and experienced faith similarly, although this was fulfilled in their different life contexts.

Katarzyna's story aligns with James W. Fowler's concept of faith, which suggests that, in general, people search for life's meaning and hold values such as love and respect before finding God. This search, even if a person is not fully aware of it or claims disbelief, often leads to spirituality and religiosity. Fowler argues that faith is a process of understanding and finding meaning in life that is born from personal attachment to values. These values help integrate life experiences and provide meaning to events, relationships, memories, and future aspirations (Fowler 1981: 5). Katarzyna's journey illustrates Fowler's concept well. During her search for God and the meaning of life, even while feeling lost, she continued to be guided by values such as love and kindness, which indicates that faith was quietly burning in her heart, i.e. it was always present, though she might not have seen it that way.

Another aspect of Katarzyna's narrative is her openness to gaining religious knowledge, as evidenced by her desire to prepare for the sacrament of Confirmation. Although she did not go into detail, it is likely that she aimed to deepen her religious understanding, which Anna Walulik emphasizes as important (Walulik 2017: 184). Religious knowledge can play an important role in achieving a sense of harmony and balance in the individual, social and transcendental areas. It provides a sense of order, also in the intellectual sphere (Walulik 2012a: 294).

The second narrator is Joanna, an only child living with her family in Cracow. Her story does not reveal much about her parents. Joanna is not only talented in general but also musically gifted. She also mentioned her skills in teaching math to children and her involvement in sports. However, her childhood and teenage years were heavily focused on music—specifically playing an instrument and attending music school alongside primary school. In her narrative, Joanna emphasized experiencing burnout from excessive practice, which led to health and emotional issues.

The key actors in Joanna's narrative include: God, faith, and prayer. Unlike in Katarzyna's story, there are no significant people mentioned in Joanna's life. The most crucial aspect for Joanna is her faith, which she considers a central value. She recalled:

I was receiving neurological treatment and was told that my migraines were dangerous. I started taking medication that made me lose consciousness, worsened my concentration, and caused dark circles under my eyes. One night, when I couldn't stand the tension any longer, I started praying to God, and that was when my life began to change. God and faith helped me regain my self-confidence. I realized that I didn't have to play an instrument; that I wasn't destined to do so. I needed to balance my strengths with my intentions and approach things rationally. Faith gave me the clarity to decide not to play anymore, even though I made this decision just two months before my secondary school exams. Faith was an important factor because I didn't have support from my family.

Joanna turned to God, faith, and prayer for encouragement, clarity about her life, self-confidence in her own abilities, and support in making the right life decisions. She found this support to be reassuring and effective. She discovered her faith during a period of profound loss and despair, when it seemed to her that nothing could help her and that her hope for a normal, happy life was fading. Emotionally and physically exhausted from hours of practicing music, she reached out to God in fervent prayer and total surrender. After fervent prayer and complete surrender to God, Joanna came to realize she needed to change her conduct, since her previous actions had led to negative outcomes. She decided to turn her life around and was successful in doing so. She sought God's guidance in choosing a career path in line with her interests perhaps even her mission and vocation. Her parents, who she felt were pushing her toward a career in professional music, did not offer the support she needed. Instead, God provided her with the strength to defy her parents' expectations and make her own individual and, as it turned out, correct choice. This moment of profound encounter with God was soothing, healing and inspiring, and marked an irreversible, positive shift in her life. Without God and faith, she believes she would not have been able to make this change.

In Joanna's case, her ability to connect with others is also noteworthy. Zbigniew Marek emphasizes that faith helps people consider not only themselves but also others. Through faith, people learn to build meaningful relationships and establish lasting social bonds, which can alleviate feelings of loneliness. According to Ignatian pedagogy, a relationship with God is central to these connections. Starting with a relationship with God, people then develop and nurture

their relationships with others, progressing through stages of personal development into successive stages that link them with the wider world (Marek 2017: 162). Joanna exemplified this transition: from solitude to a relationship with God, and then to forming connections with others, including friends from her studies and, eventually, her future students, as she aspires to be a teacher.

Although Joanna seems to have taken this step quite late in life, when her illness was more advanced and she felt depressed, she did so despite lacking supportive role models in her family. Her parents did not accompany her on her journey to God, discovering herself and pursuing her interests. She had to find her own path in a situation that was difficult for her, but she succeeded. There is a high probability that in the future she will, in turn, help others navigate similar journeys, and thus contribute to the spread of faith and the development of meaningful relationships with those around her.

The next narrator is Konrad, who lives with his parents and siblings in Cracow. He comes from a multi-generational family where parents and grandparents play an active role in raising children and shaping their worldview. His mother is a teacher, and he does not mention his father's profession. Currently, Konrad is a science student at a prestigious technical university in Cracow. He excelled in his secondary school exams, scoring 100 percent in all subjects, and was a top competitor in academic contests throughout junior and senior high school. His high grades, willingness to help fellow students, and adherence to ethical values have earned him considerable admiration from both teachers and peers.

Konrad is quite open about himself. He frankly describes himself as a perfectionist and a social worker who enjoys helping others and feels fulfilled by being useful. He is a fast learner with an aptitude for mathematics and a keen interest in the complexities of language. He remains resilient in the face of adversity and is determined to achieve his personal goals. In Konrad's narrative, the central themes are faith, religion, family, and what he refers to as "the contemporary person." Unlike other narrators, such as Katarzyna and Joanna, he does not discuss or describe other actors, including God.

Raised in the Christian faith Konrad considers it a vital part of his life. He practices his faith on a daily basis with his immediate family. He adds: "I am a believer and I go to church. In my family,

everyone is religious, and it forms the foundation of our family life.” For him, faith provides inspiration for cultivating a positive attitude towards himself and others.

When you think about it and compare it with other religions, you'll find that Christianity offers principles for everyday life. These principles encourage us not to focus selfishly only on ourselves, but to be mindful of others, to be part of a community and to help those in need. They represent a set of common, similar and desirable behaviors.

He believes that Christian principles related to community life can benefit anyone seeking happiness: “Even if someone is not deeply religious, following these principles will bring some satisfaction in their life.” Konrad is attentive to others’ needs and sees helping them as an intrinsically valuable pursuit that also brings him personal satisfaction. His perspective on faith largely revolves around its impact on interpersonal relationships. He also underscores other values that flow from religion, such as truthfulness, trust, readiness to help, and sensitivity to the needs of the most vulnerable. Konrad mentions the importance of the connection between truthfulness and trust.

Trust is the foundation of strong family relationships, allowing us to rely on others and seek their support when we have a problem. It also means we should be ready to offer help when those we trust need us.

Konrad values “the ability to recognize those who are genuinely in need, especially those who might feel ashamed when they have to ask for or accept help.” He expects his family to share and nurture his faith, and vice versa, faith being an important bond that strengthens their relationships. For Konrad, religion should underpin interpersonal connections and equip him with the right principles needed to thrive in society. This will enable him and others to live a happier life.

In his speech, Konrad also criticizes selfish individuals who fail to see the world around them. He attributes this disconnection from one’s surroundings mainly to excessive use and dependence on modern technology. He contrasts this with the values of empathy and engagement:

The opposite of these values is a growing indifference towards others, largely driven by technological progress. Nowadays, people often have headphones in, eyes glued to their phones, and the internet constantly on, and barely notice anything and anybody around them. People tend to isolate themselves because

they do not feel responsible for others and their problems. They often prefer to ignore these issues, as acknowledging them would mean they might have to help—and they're reluctant to do that. Conversely, if they do want to help but choose not to, they end up feeling guilty. This problem is getting worse in Polish society; what was once an issue mostly among younger people is now affecting older generations as well. While I see the benefits of technology and use it myself, especially for my studies, it's crucial that it doesn't lead to addiction and isolation.

While Konrad expects those he encounters to exhibit altruism and empathy and to be helpful to others, his expectations have unfortunately, often been unmet.

In addition, love is an important value for Konrad. He says that:

When you are loved and love others, life feels so much richer. I understand it when someone chooses to live alone or when a young man decides to become a priest. I understand everything, but I know that love has the power to transform a person; it can change them enough to be willing to make sacrifices.

Likely influenced by his Christian upbringing, Konrad is self-critical and aware of his imperfections, which he actively works on:

I also try to be aware of my negative traits and behaviors. My relationship with myself is not the easiest because I sometimes act or say things that surprise even me. These surprises can be positive or negative. I have a lot of different ideas, retorts and responses in my head—often humorous but sometimes pushing the boundaries of good taste. Occasionally, I say things that might not sit well with others, which can create problems. So it's difficult to know yourself, because it really all depends on the situation, and you might act unpredictably.

Konrad suggests that his faith will help him grow, and keep him self-critical and self-demanding. He believes that faith will provide him with the motivation and strength to overcome his weaknesses and limitations.

The narrator depicts a mature social attitude and a desire for self-improvement, under the influence of his values. He is not entirely satisfied with who he is and what he represents but strives to better himself in his relationships with other people and through self-reflection. He seeks a fulfilling and harmonious life with his loved ones and those around him. According to Janusz Mariański, such a narrator views religion as a socio-moral value and a remedy for emerging social problems, and appreciates the role of religion in everyday social life (Mariański 2004: 30).

The last narrator is Jacek, who comes from a Christian family where faith has always been integral to family life. His parents are doctors, and he does not mention any siblings. Jacek seems to be shy and finds social interactions very challenging. He seeks a mentor—a master he can follow. He is highly motivated to learn and has both general and specific abilities, especially in history. He does sports to strengthen his body. Like Konrad's, Jacek's narrative includes family, faith, and religion. Unlike Katarzyna and Joanna, he does not mention God or prayer in his account.

The narrator begins by saying, "My family is religious, and that is why I continue to cultivate the Christian faith and tradition even as an adult." He stresses the importance of religious practice in his life: "The Christian faith, although it was not explored intellectually or theoretically in my family, commands me, above all, to be honest and helpful to the weak and needy." Jacek recognizes that he has not read much about faith. He feels a strong desire to be useful to others, especially those who struggle to manage on their own. He highly values honesty and, and he strives to live it out daily. In addition to his faith, the narrator also appreciates the value of family. His appreciation for it developed later, likely due to a temporary separation from his relatives or even losing contact with them.

I came to appreciate family quite late, i.e. when I grew up and realized that nothing is given to us forever, that people pass away, that certain things cannot be returned to. Family ties were not verbally emphasized as a value in my family. However, as an adult I realized how important they are.

Like Konrad, Jacek looks to his family for support and a shared experience of faith. It seems that Jacek's family expects the same from him. For Jacek, the most important thing is to be good to others. He believes that faith is precisely what shapes the right human attitudes in his life.

This sentiment corresponds with Janusz Mariański's observation that young people are generally morally sensitive and strive to live according to Christian values, respecting tradition, family, and the ties that bind family members together (Mariański 2004: 31).

When summarizing their accounts, Katarzyna and Joanna both explicitly mention God and faith. They have encountered God on their path of faith—Joanna through prayer, and Katarzyna through

reflection and thought about her life. For them, contact with God is essential, as it changes their lives for the better and gives meaning to their actions and their whole existence. God occupies a very important place in their personal and professional lives. They established and maintained contact with God on their own, inspired by the difficulties they were experiencing and their sense of meaninglessness in their lives. The narrators consider their relationship with God as the most important one, influencing everything else: the quality of their lives, their self-perception, their relationships with others, and their success at university and work. They were not encouraged to seek contact with God by their parents or at least they do not mention this and do not mention whether their families are believers. They found their way to God independently, not through social or family traditions. For them, the encounter with God is very important. This individual approach to the role of religion and faith in the lives of talented people stems from personal reflection.

Konrad and Jacek, on the other hand, emphasize that their families—parents and grandparents—have been believers, so they naturally continue the tradition of Christian faith. They cannot imagine their family or social life without it. The practical aspects of living according to Christian principles are important to them, and they both try to follow these guidelines, particularly those related to relationships with family, community, and others. These include honesty and helping those in need. They observe that some people around them, both younger and older, prioritize technological innovations over good interpersonal relationships. For Konrad and Jacek, moral principles stemming from the Christian faith are the essential foundation of social life. However, they do not discuss their personal relationships with God, meeting God in prayer, or self-reflection influenced by encounters with God. This approach to religion and faith can be described as cultural and social.

Analyzing the narrators' statements reveals that religion occupies an important place in the lives of these gifted individuals. It aids in their personal development, helping them become integrated individuals who make decisions based on their abilities, interests, and needs. Belief in God enables them to define their path in life in line with their values. Religion directly facilitates their maturation. Through religion, they share a life philosophy with loved ones

(with their families and friends, including those in the parish), build a community, and become an integral part of it. They have been able to overcome feelings of emptiness, loss, and meaninglessness, gaining a sense of protection by God, which motivates them to engage in activities that were conducive to their development rather than feeling frustrated, depressed, ill or destructive, as was previously the case for some respondents. Religion, especially its cultural and social aspects, helps them shape their identity and navigate interpersonal relationships. Through religion and faith, their relationships with others gain meaning and quality. Acting according to Christian guidelines brings them satisfaction and allows them to evaluate whether others follow similar principles, which enhances their understanding of social relationships.

Another insight from analyzing the narrators' statements is that many gifted individuals with high intellectual potential and strong academic achievements are also deeply religious and take their faith seriously. The respondents emphasized their desire to broaden and deepen their religious knowledge. Gifted people often have a strong curiosity and a passion for learning: they enjoy exploring, inquiring, and solving problems. Some respondents acknowledged their own shortcomings in this respect. They believe that a deeper understanding of their faith can help them better comprehend and shape their relationships with loved ones and their social environment. For contemporary people, especially those with strong cognitive abilities, mere belief is not enough; they also want to intellectually explore the world around them.

Therefore, educational approaches should view the human person as whole, not just their intellectual capabilities but also their emotional and spiritual dimensions. Only through the balanced development of all these aspects can one achieve complete personal growth and contribute to both their own happiness and that of others. Talented individuals are not only knowledgeable and educated but also tend to uphold high moral standards.

Caregivers, parents, and teachers play a crucial role in nurturing faith among young generations and supporting them in their daily lives and growth. Young individuals need positive personal and religious role models to guide and inspire them.

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