In previous studies, we identified four religious cognitive styles with the help of MDS (Multi Dimensional Scaling) analysis. The MDS graph suggested a developmental process. In a study involving 98 adults we examined this developmental process, based on the subject’s description of their own development. In a research and thinking model we put forward various possibilities, indicating possible variables that play a role in these different trajectories.

1. Introduction

It is obvious that the concept of religious maturity is fundamentally related to the process of religious development. The most influential author on the subject of religious maturity is Allport (Allport 1953, 57), whose theoretical model posits six characteristics of religious maturity: well differentiated, dynamic in character in spite of its derivative nature, productive of a consistent morality, comprehensive, integral, and fundamentally heuristic. Allport himself did not describe a developmental process. Meadow and Kahoe (Kahoe & Meadow 1981; Meadow & Kahoe 1984) did look at religious maturity as a developmental process, but they also did so on a purely descriptive and theoretical basis.

The best known model of religious development is that of Fowler (Fowler 1981), who developed a model of six stages of faith development. Fowler’s model has certainly exerted the greatest influence on thinking about religious development in recent decades. Another model is that of Oser and Gmünder (Oser & Gmünder 1988), which again comprises six stages, and is more concerned with the development of religious thinking. Both of these models are influenced by the father of cognitive developmental models, Piaget, as well as by Kohlberg’s model of moral development. We will not describe these models here because they are well known in the field. Indeed, we can consider them classic models, providing inspiration for many studies about human, religious and moral development.

The models of Fowler, Oser, Kohlberg and Piaget share certain basic characteristics of cognitive models: linear development in which regression is
theoretically not possible, only stabilisation at a stage without further development; universal (the same development should be present in different cultures); and a clear order of the stages. This last point is perhaps the most important, because it means that the order of the stages is fundamentally coloured by the meaning of the last stage, generally the sixth one. The meaning of the last stage gives meaning and place to the preceding ones. In this sense one can say that the last stage is normative for the preceding ones. And perhaps there is a problem here. How can a psychologist give meaning to the highest stage of development? What criterion does he use? Is it an empirical one? It is obvious that both Fowler’s and Oser’s models have problems defining on a purely empirical basis the meaning and content of the last stage. Both of them use extrapolation to suggest what the last stage could be. The empirical basis however is very weak or non-existent.

Cognitive linear models seem very attractive. They provide a frame of reference for situating persons and predicting further development. In this sense, it is understandable that these models will be very attractive for the pursuit of educational goals.

2. Religious Cognitive Styles

In previous studies (Hutsebaut 1996; 1997; Duriez, Fontaine & Hutsebaut, 2000) we identified four types of religious cognitive styles, which we see as intervening variables between the individual and his/her religious representations. Starting from the theoretical model of Wulff (Wulff 1991; 1997), we analysed the results using MDS (Multi Dimensional Scaling) and found that four styles could be delineated. The MDS graph also suggested that a developmental process was occurring (Duriez, Hutsebaut & Fontaine, submitted article).

The four religious cognitive styles can be briefly described as follows:

- **Orthodoxy**: characterised by literal thinking and belief in the existence of transcendence. The scale is seen as an operationalisation of Wulff’s literal affirmation.
- **External critique**: Similar to orthodoxy in that it is also characterised by literal thinking, but unlike orthodoxy the person with this religious cognitive style is a non-believer and hence does not believe in transcendence. The scale is seen as an operationalisation of Wulff’s literal disaffirmation.
- **Relativism**: Belief and religious tradition are seen as dependent on contextual elements. This attitude can be present in believers and unbelievers. This scale is seen as an operationalisation of a reformulated form of Wulff’s reductive interpretation.