

Special Issue Reprint

Theology ‘In Exit’ for a Better World

Consolidating the Intersecting Features of Public Theology

Edited by
Francis-Vincent Anthony and Gnana Patrick

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Theology 'In Exit' for a Better World: Consolidating the Intersecting Features of Public Theology

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Guest Editors

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Contents

About the Editors	vii
Preface	ix
Francis-Vincent Anthony and Gnana Patrick	
Theology 'In Exit' for a Better World: An Introduction Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 1580, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16121580	1
Rudolf von Sinner	
<i>Vox populi (Dei), vox Dei</i> : Pope Francis' Theology of the People of God, the Priesthood of All Believers and Democracy Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 1347, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111347	3
Lap Yan Kung	
Navigating Civic Agency and Civic Space Amid Authoritarian Realities in Myanmar: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of Divine Mandate as Public Theology Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 96, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010096	13
Lluís Oviedo	
Public Theology as Practicing Theology from Below: Looking for the Right Sense of the 'Human' in Human Rights Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 370, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030370	29
Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos	
Fundamental Theological Ethics " <i>In Exit</i> ": New Categories and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Social Flourishing Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 448, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040448	41
Gaetano Sabetta	
Comparative Public Theology and Interreligious Education in the Age of Religious Pluralism Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 313, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030313	55
Francis-Vincent Anthony and Antony Christy Lourdunathan	
Public Religious Pedagogy Amidst Religious Pluralism: Qualitative Study Among Hindu and Muslim Educators in Salesian Institutions of Tamil Nadu, India Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 646, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050646	72
Ulrich Riegel, Daniel Engel, Marcus Penthin and Manfred L. Pirner	
Measuring Muslim Lifestyle Using a Halal Scale Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 1346, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111346	102
Santhosh-Kumar Appu	
Youth and the Structural Denial of the Right to Human Dignity: An Interdisciplinary Theoretical and Epistemological Approach Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 849, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16070849	118
Cecilia Collazos Ugarte, Giuseppe Crea and Joseph Jeyaraj Swaminathan	
Unveiling the Inner World: Exploring Emotional Intelligence, Faith, and Time Perspective among Italian Nuns Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 796, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070796	154

About the Editors

Francis-Vincent Anthony

Francis-Vincent Anthony, Professor Emeritus of Practical Theology, after over three decades of academic engagements at Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, is currently the Founding Director of Bosco Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Public Theology (BIRCPT) at the Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu, India. His areas of theoretical and empirical research are inculturation, interculturality, interreligious dialogue, human rights, migration, religious education, youth ministry, empirical theology, public theology, etc. He has published and edited over a dozen volumes and over a hundred and twenty-five articles in specialized journals and edited books. Noteworthy among his publications related to interculturality and dialogue are the following: *Ecclesial praxis of inculturation. Toward an empirical-theological theory of inculturizing praxis* (LAS, Roma 1997) and *Religion and Conflict. Religious beliefs and conflict attribution among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu, India* (Brill, Leiden 2014). The latter publication was written in collaboration with Chris Hermans and Carl Sterkens of Radboud University Nijmegen. Among the numerous publications on human rights, mention can be made of the recently edited volume, together with Hans-Georg Ziebertz, *Human rights and the separation of state and religion*, Religion and Human Rights, Vol. 10 (Springer, Cham 2023), as well as *Intercultural Theology vis-à-vis Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue*, Religions Special Issue Reprint (MDPI, Basel, Beijing, Manchester 2023).

Gnana Patrick

Gnana Patrick (b. 1962), Ph.D., formerly Professor and Head of the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, holds a doctorate in Christian Studies. He served the University of Madras as Dean of Endowments, Dean of Student Affairs, Dean of Research, and as Chairperson of the School of Philosophy and Religious Thought. In 2024, he was awarded a Visiting Scholar fellowship at DePaul University, Chicago, to conduct a study on the role of native catechists in the Jesuit Pandarasami Mission. In 2013, he was awarded the Fulbright Nehru Visiting Lecturer Fellowship to teach a course on Public Religion: Learning from Indian and American Experiences at the Divinity School, Harvard University, USA. His published books include *Democracy and Indian Christianity—Public Theological Explorations* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprint, 2025), *Pothuveli Iraiyiyal* (Public Theology [Tamil], 2022), *Public Theology—Indian Concerns, Perspectives and Issues* (USA: Fortress Press, 2020), *Indian Christianity and Its Public Role* (edited, New Delhi: Christian World Imprint, 2019), *Wings of Faith—Public Theologies in India* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2013), *Religion and Subaltern Agency* (2003); *Oral Traditions and Theology* (1996); and *Resonances* (Tamil). He co-edited a Festschrift volume titled *Negotiating Borders—Theological Explorations in the Global Era* (2008) with Prof. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in honor of Prof. Felix Wilfred.

Preface

Although the concept of “Public Theology” was vaguely familiar to me (F.V. Anthony) as professor of Practical Theology for over three decades at the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, it was the process of accompanying the publication of this Special Issue that stimulated me to delve deeper into it, and to engage the other Guest Editor (Gnana Patrick) who was already researching and publishing in the field. Exploring this field with a series of lectures and publications since the beginning of 2024, and successively becoming the founding Director of the Bosco Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Public Theology (BIRCPT) at the Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu, India, also led to becoming an institutional member of the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT). These developments explain the reason for proposing the Reprint of the Special Issue, with the hope that it will contribute to the advancement of the paradigm shift in theology.

Public theology, pursued today in different parts of the globe, has a rich diversity of contextual concerns to engage with. What is given priority in the Western hemisphere is different from what is focused upon in other parts of the globe. However, they all together constitute the contemporary genre of public theology. What is common in all these varieties is the concern of doing theology “in exit”, i.e., going beyond particular intra-textual borders to converse with multiple inter-textual traditions, including “secular” sciences. It is by so doing that public theology not merely gains visibility in the public, but becomes a voice for the publicness or relevance of theology to different domains of life. The domains that have emerged forcefully into public consciousness today are politics and public life, and their relationship to faith, spirituality, and religion needs to be explored in the light of public theology today. We are happy that this volume will be a small contribution in this regard, and we hope this inspires further interest in carrying forward the torch of public theology in our respective contexts.

We, as Guest Editors, are indebted to the authors who joined us in this adventure by contributing creatively to this Special Issue, each bringing their own specialization and scientific acumen into the emerging arena of public theology, opening up original trajectories and noteworthy advancements.

Francis-Vincent Anthony and Gnana Patrick

Guest Editors

Theology ‘In Exit’ for a Better World: An Introduction

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Pope Francis articulated the dynamic of an *Ecclesiae in exitu*, translated as Church that “goes forth”, in the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (Pope Francis 2017, no. 3). Subsequently he employed the Latin expression *theologia in exitu* in the Apostolic Letter *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (Pope Francis 2023, no. 3), underlining that a Church “in exitu” must correspond a theology “in exitu”; in other words, a Church “in exit” necessitates a theology “in exit”. Given that no official English translation has been provided by the Holy See, Catholic commentators commonly adopted “outgoing theology”. Yet, we prefer the expression “in exit” as it synchronizes better with the official translation of *Veritatis Gaudium* (no. 3) in other European languages, such as “in uscita” in Italian, “en salida” in Spanish, and “en sortie” in French, than the English “goes forth”. In our opinion, theology “in exit” brings out more emphatically the necessity of leaving the familiar ecclesial terrain and risking the public terrain of secular sciences and sociocultural and politico-economic complexity. Moreover, theology ‘in exit’ is in consonance with what had been emerging as public theology for the last five decades, since the pioneering pointers of Martin E. Marty (1974). The envisioned paradigm shift denotes a holistic theological advancement in the intersecting features of *ecclesial*, *societal*, and *academic* domains, engaging diverse research *methodologies* and *geographical* contexts.

The first set of four articles in the present Reprint focus on the social concerns of the *ecclesial domain*: Rudolf von Sinner’s contribution addresses ecclesiology with a democratic sensitivity of the people of God, while Lap Yan Kung focuses on Christian communities’ engagement in local civil society as a minority religious community. These two contributions also reflect the ecumenical sensitivity of the authors. In tune with these, Lluís Oviedo’s paper takes up the underlying anthropological dimension, as well as that of Carolina Montero Orphanopoulos, the ethical dimension of human social flourishing.

The next three contributions address the religious pluralism of the *societal domain*. Gaetano Sabetta underscores the necessity of comparative public theology for promoting inter-religious education, whereas Francis-Vincent Anthony and Antony Christy Lour-dunathan study the nature of public religious pedagogy amidst religious pluralism. The contribution of Ulrich Riegel, Daniel Engel, Marcus Penthin and Manfred L. Pirner focuses on the lifestyle of a religious community, specifically of a Muslim community, in a multireligious context.

The last two articles of this volume focus on the *academic domain* of secular sciences, with Santhosh-Kumar Appu taking a sociological perspective on the youth experience of the structural denial of human dignity, while Cecilia Collazos Ugarte, Giuseppe Crea and Joseph Jeyaraj Swaminathan take a more psychological approach to the exploration of emotional intelligence, faith and time perspectives among religious nuns.

As far as the research *methodology* is concerned, among the studies included in this Reprint, the last four use an empirical methodology, while the other five engage in analytical–critical and historical–critical discourse. Overall, the nine contributions exemplify how theology can exit into the public square engaging in intradisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

Considering the *geographical* areas in which the research papers of the Reprint situate themselves, we find that three of them refer to the Asian context (two to the state of Tamil Nadu in India and one to Myanmar). Two other contributions refer to the European context (German and Italian). The other four papers do not refer to any specific context in their reflection, although the authors are of Argentinian, Brazilian, Indian, Italian, and Spanish provenience.

The foregoing overview of the nine contributions concerning the intersecting domains of church, society and academy, besides methodological choices and geographical contexts, highlight the complexity and diversity of public theological discourse. Having received an overview of the contributions, the reader is equipped to engage with the details of the articles that explore the intersecting features of public theology.

We, as Guest Editors, would like to thank the reviewers who with their valuable feedback and constructive criticism contributed to the scientific quality of the articles and the Editorial included in the Reprint: Robyn Andrews, Douglas Barros, John Berry, Luís M. Figueiredo Rodrigues, Kjetil Fretheim, Marian Gavenda, Peter C. Hill, Linh N. Hoang, Amina Inloes, Wojciech Kućko, Matthew T. Lee, Angel Santiago-Vendrell, Corneliu Simut, Alfredo Teixeira, Rudolf Von Sinner and the anonymous reviewers. We are equally grateful to Bella Xu and the editorial staff at *Religions* for their professional and prompt support during the entire process of reviewing and publishing the contributions of this Special Issue and the production of this Reprint. It is our hope that the complex issues taken up for theoretical and empirical study can contribute to the advancement of public theology engaging more extensively with both theological and secular sciences.

As this Special Issue took inspiration from Pope Francis (2013–2025), and as one of the Guest Editors (F.V. Anthony) had the opportunity of attending his Funeral Mass on 26 April 2025 at St. Peter’s square, Rome, we would humbly like to dedicate this volume to his memory as a pastor who made the periphery the center of his concern, thus showing how exiting into the public sphere contributed to human and ecological welfare.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Article

Vox populi (Dei), vox Dei: Pope Francis' Theology of the People of God, the Priesthood of All Believers and Democracy

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Abstract: The Holy See is an absolute monarchy, both as a political and as a spiritual entity. The Second Vatican Council indicated, retrieving biblical terms and metaphors, a new way of giving value to the whole people of God, the laity (*laos theou*), constituted by baptism. Rather than a *societas perfecta* in a pyramidal system, the intention was to declericalise and in this sense democratise the church and its decision-making, not least seeking to secure its witness in an ever more secular world. Even if a sacramental and ontological difference is maintained, this indicates clergy are no longer a first class of believers against which the laity would be a second class; rather, they are rooted and stand with and within the whole people of God with their specific vocation and ordination. The notion of the royal and universal priesthood of believers, taken from 1 Peter 2:9 and emphasised by Luther and other reformers as they distributed power between ordained and not ordained leaders, was visible in the Second Vatican Council and finds new enactment in the synodality process which culminated in the Ordinary Synod in Rome, in October 2024. Based on his own theology of the people of God, developed during the dictatorship and economic oppression in Argentina, with strong cultural and religious connotations, Pope Francis seeks to further major involvement of the laity and especially of women in the church's administration and transformation processes. Not surprisingly, this process has been receiving criticism both from those who find it is not going far enough and from those who believe the process has already gone far too far. Based on bibliographical and documental research, the intention of this article is to describe and analyse the notion of the people of God as proposed by Pope Francis and its forms of concretisation including its deficiencies, as well as, in dialogue with ongoing debates on populism, highlight the precariousness of any "people" as a concept and as a reality. A dynamic notion of "people" and a theological accountability of the people and the clergy towards each other, towards God and towards the world can do justice to both the ambiguities and the irreplaceability of the people as citizens of the church as well as the world.

Keywords: priesthood of all believers; Pope Francis; synodality; Christian ethics; democracy

1. Introduction

In recent Catholic theology, especially since the Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2, superscripted *de populo Dei*, which is placed programmatically before the chapter on the hierarchical structure of the church, and again very clearly with Pope Francis, the people of God has become a central concept in Catholic ecclesiology (LG 9–17; Bergner 2017). While this might be, in fact, the "oldest definition of the Church" (Küng 1967, p. 12) within a wide variety throughout history, its renewed use indicates a clear change of perspective: not as *societas perfecta*, not as a pyramid from the hierarchy of the consecrated order down to the laity, but as the people of God on the way, in continuity with the chosen people of God of the Old Testament, from among whom some people are consecrated as spiritual leaders. This biblical view, as a nearly inevitable consequence, has to call into question the position of the pope as absolute monarch, overcoming what Canon Law formulates and the understanding that has developed in that direction since the 4th

century (Boff 2014, 10, 14–16), stating that “by virtue of his office he [i.e., the pope] possesses supreme, full, immediate, and universal ordinary power in the Church, which he is always able to exercise freely” (CIC 1983, can. 331). There have indeed been significant changes in that Pope Francis follows a pastoral rather than doctrinal or legal approach, but he has, so far, instituted only minor doctrinal and legal changes—using the very monarchical power that is to be overcome. Thus, non-sacramental ministries are no longer restricted to men (*virī laici* gave way to *laici* in CIC can. 230 §1) and the lay ministry of Catechist was created by Francis (AM), being that the vast majority of catechists are women. It is unclear if and when major changes—like the introduction of women deacons, the end of compulsory celibacy for priests, a more collaborative leadership between clergy and laity and a reformulation of the Pope’s power and role—will occur. Already now, the wind against Pope Francis’ attitude and transformations is stiff.

Although there is, in Brazil and in Latin America, a critical ecclesiological reflection on the hierarchy, a broad inclusion of the people and an evident public presence of the church, historically in particular through the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs; cf. von Sinner 2012), expectations for a more radical structural change in the Catholic church seem quite modest on our continent if compared to, for example, Germany. There, the *Synodaler Weg* (“synodal journey”), faced with the extreme erosion of the Catholic church in the perception of both the faithful and wider society as a result of the revelations of countless cases of sexual abuse, saw a huge commitment from the bishops and clergy, together with the laity, to find ways of effectively sharing power in the church. In Rome, however, this unilateral advance is not well regarded and has met with clear restrictions from the pope himself, which has frustrated expectations and concretely prevented the creation of a “synodal council” (*synodaler Rat*) with decision-making rights (cf. Vignon 2024).

No similar movement is visible in Brazil or Latin America. With regard to democratic leadership—or the lack of it—at the beginning of the 1980s, Leonardo Boff had already warned about what he saw as the “pathologies” of Catholicism and promoted an “ecclesio-genesis” from below (Boff 1985, 1986, 2014; cf. Nordstokke 1996). He promoted a more egalitarian, participatory and communitarian church inspired and formed by the divine Trinity (Boff 1988; cf. von Sinner 2003). As is well known, Boff was punished with a year of silence for his questioning, and his ecumenical, inclusive understanding of the *subsistit in* of LG 8 was explicitly rejected in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s declaration *Dominus Iesus* of 2000 (DI note 56). For his part, Boff continues to defend the interpretation that, according to the intention of the Council Fathers with the formulation *subsistit in (ecclesiam catholicam)* instead of the exclusive and identitarian *est*, they mean that “the Church of Christ can also subsist in other Churches” (Boff 2015, p. 919).¹ He has been honing high expectations for Francis of Rome to follow Francis of Assisi in “a new springtime for the church”, restoring Christ’s church as was the earlier Francis’ mission (Boff 2014, pp. 35–8).

On the Protestant side, none of this seems to be a problem. After all, the priesthood of all believers or universal priesthood is the basis of Luther’s understanding of community and church, founded on 1 Peter 2:9, which in turn reflects Exodus 19:6. In this view, the ordained ministry is not a sacrament, but a specific function and mandate of those called and trained for it, who exercise the office of proclaiming the Word in a special and public way. Or so the doctrine affirms. Matter-of-factly, however, we do find a tendency towards clericalism in Protestant churches. Considering the German context, the originally Catholic theologian Fulbert Steffensky² said: “The most clerical services I know are the Reformed ones,” because there are no fixed rules and everything rests on the shoulders—and the decision-making power—of the respective minister. The pastor is speaking “from beginning to end” and is “master of the sacred event” (Steffensky 2012, p. 42; cf. Plüss 2017, p. 145). The Swiss Reformed pastor—my own origin—has, so to speak, to recreate heaven and earth every Sunday, a duty he performs with more or less dedication and joy. One could attribute sacramental quality to this, although Protestant theology would reject it. In any

case, it offers a lot of freedom and room for creativity, which is certainly positive, but it can also be quite onerous.

With these contexts in mind, I add the element of insisting on “the people” in a programmatic way of looking at populism (Laclau 2005; cf. von Sinner and Gabatz 2021), a precarious category which indicates that “a people” is always under construction, something that resonates with the fragility and vulnerability of existence as such and of the Christian people, in particular, in the face of sin, failure, guilt and shame (cf. von Sinner 2022).

I will turn first to the theology of the People of God in the Catholic Church and Pope Francis in particular, followed by the universal priesthood in its theory and reality in Protestant churches, to finally comment on “people”, democracy, and citizenship on earth and in heaven.

2. The People of God in the Understanding of Pope Francis

As stated above, the concept of the people of God was central to the Second Vatican Council’s constitution on the church. It emerges again with emphasis in Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), of 2013. In the meantime, the authority of the See of Peter and the bishops under him and in communion with him had been strengthened by Pope John Paul II, which counteracted democratisation initiatives such as existed, already back then, in Germany. Munich dogmatics professor Peter Neuner had published a book on *Der Laie und das Gottesvolk* (“The Laity and the People of God”) in 1988. Twenty-seven years later, he published a new, extensively revised version of that book, now under the title *Abschied von der Ständekirche. Plädoyer für eine Theologie des Gottesvolkes* (“Farewell to the Church of Estates: A Call for a Theology of the People of God”—Neuner 2015). Neuner emphasises the fundamental and prioritarian character of the people of God, which predates the distinction between ministers (ordained or not) and non-ministers, and opposes a church organised on the basis of clerical and lay estates. Already in the introduction, Neuner refers to an innovation of Pope Francis on the occasion of the World Synod of Bishops on the Family (2014), when, in the preparatory phase, surveys were carried out of the opinion of the faithful in order to listen to them (cf. also Zulehner 2021). At the same time, Neuner recalls that the idea of the whole people of God—even if led by ordained ministers—being in charge of evangelisation dates back to 1922, defended by Pope Pius XI. in his inaugural encyclical *Ubi arcano Dei Consilio* (UA) which is considered to be the inaugural act of the Catholic Action. It refers to the laity as those who “participate in the apostolate, both individual and social” as, in the words of 1 Peter 2:9, “a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people” (UA 58). At the time, what was at stake was reconstruction after the destruction of the First World War and the perceived decadence of religion and morality, which had to be countered by the mobilisation of the laity. Catholic Action was an initiative for this mobilisation under the clear and undisputed leadership of ordained ministers in their distinction from the laity. More recent forms such as Belgian Catholic Action under Cardinal Cardijn, with its See–Judge–Act method, promoted a more participatory mobilisation and influenced Latin American Liberation Theology.

At the same time as Liberation Theology, and explicitly as one of its varieties (Cuda 2019), a Theology of the People (*Teología del Pueblo*) developed in Argentina, to which Pope Francis is heir. The 1974 Synod of Bishops echoed it, especially through Bishop (later Cardinal) Eduardo Pironio (1920–1998), Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) in 1975, followed by the Third General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Puebla, in 1979, and the Fifth Assembly in Aparecida, in 2007. “People”, already present in the Second General CELAM Assembly in Medellín, in 1968, became more central and more focused on the poor people—in Puebla, of a total of 368 occurrences of “people”, nearly all are related to poverty and liberation, or even to revolution (Salinas 2020, p. 46). According to Argentinian Jesuit Scannone (2016, 2021), who is himself one of the references of such TdP, the term emerged from two priests and professors at the Argentine Catholic University (UCA), Lucio Gera (1924–2012) and Rafael Tello (1917–2002).

Politically close to Peronism, they sought an autochthonous source for their theology that did not simply repeat what they saw as Western liberalism or exaggerated Marxism. This source would be the culture and religiosity of the people, seeking the church's engagement among the peoples (i.e., nations) as subjects of their history and culture. While a more cultural and national than social notion of "people" was used³, the fact that the vast majority of the people were poor brought TdP close to Liberation Theology. Obviously, the idea of the nation as a homogenous people never corresponded to reality. But the "wisdom" of the people, their genuine practice, belief, and knowledge, was valued, as it helped in the inculturation of the faith. The piety of the people became a *locus theologicus*, a place where theological truth could be found, as EG 126 states. Pope Francis' development of a TdP, on the other hand, recognises an irreversible pluralism, for which he uses the metaphor of a polyhedron (EG 236). The question of the democratisation of the church—very prominent in Leonardo Boff and also in central Europe—seems less central to this view of a TdP than the importance given to popular piety and wisdom, imbricated as it is by Catholic culture and religion, especially in the case of Argentina. The pope does, however, criticise what he calls "narcissistic and authoritarian elitism" (EG 94) as well as clericalism (EG 102), namely inasmuch as it hinders evangelism and the formation and position of the laity, explicitly including women. (Male) clerical power should not be domination, but service and administering of the sacraments (EG 104), and decision-making should be participatory. However, Francis does not discuss here the use and abuse of power in the church, nor mention democracy (or monarchy) in it beyond such hints.

The decree of the Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, of 1965, already emphasised that the "laity, sharing in Christ's priestly, prophetic and kingly office, share the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world" (AA 2). What is striking here is the emphasis on the *triplex munus Christi*, a Christological understanding prominent in Protestantism, where it had been developed namely by Calvin and Bullinger. Participation in this *munus* is based on baptism, strengthened by the seal of the Holy Spirit, which the text describes as consecration: "they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4–10) not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world." (AA 3).

For Pope Francis, the Church is essentially a Church "in exit", that is, a missionary Church, present in the world. In EG 135–59 there is a very long section on the homily and its preparation, where the Pope emphasises that "the preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear" (EG 154). Citing EN 63, the Pope emphasises that it is about speaking "to *actual* people, to using their language, their signs and symbols, to answering the questions they ask" (EG 154, emphasis mine). The "people" here are all the faithful in *their concrete context of life*, as evidenced in the congregational community.

"People" also appears in the sense of the *poor* which have a special place in God's people. Indeed, the Pope wants "a Church which is poor and for the poor" (EG 198). Concrete situations that arise again and again on an emergency basis should be characterised by an attitude of understanding rather than rigour, even though doctrine cannot be changed for the sake of it: "Who can remain unmoved before such painful situations?" he says, citing abortion as a result of violence or in a context of extreme poverty (EG 214). "People", often in the plural "peoples", also refer to the *population* or to *humanity as a whole*, when the Pope states that "small yet strong in the love of God, like Saint Francis of Assisi, all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples." (EG 216).

Finally, very much in line with the TdP, people can designate a *specific nation*, within which its people are configured as "committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers that be" (EG 220). A "people", therefore, is something that is not simply given, but is constantly being built, and is qualified by citizenship and conviviality (*convivência*) beyond simple coexistence: "Yet *becoming a people* demands something more

[sc. beyond exercising citizenship in the political sense]. It is an ongoing process” that aims at “the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter” (ibid., emphasis mine).

The Pope develops this idea of “building a people in peace, justice and fraternity” based on four principles “related to constant tensions present in every social reality” (EG 221) and which he has been developing, as Scannone says, since 1974. Francis explains these principles in EG 221–37: (1) *Time is superior to space*, in reference to the tension between fullness and limit, a “greater, brighter horizon”, that opens up to an “utopian future”. It is, according to the Pope, about “initiating processes rather than possessing spaces” (EG 223), in a necessary long-term vision. (2) *Unity prevails over conflict*, without denying, but rather transforming it, developing a “communion amid disagreement” (EG 228). Solidarity must prevail in a unity on a higher plane. The basis of unity is the Holy Spirit who “can harmonize every diversity” (EG 230). As a concrete example of the affirmation of unity in the midst of (conflictive) diversity, he cites the Episcopal Conference of the Democratic Republic of Congo. (3) According to the Pope, *reality is more important than the idea*, because while the latter is elaborated, the former simply is. Ideas as conceptual elaborations would be at the service of understanding and affecting reality. If the second principle is pneumatological, the third is Christological and incarnational. Finally, (4), the *whole is greater than the part*, showing a tension between the global and the local. The whole is more than the part, but neither is it equal to the sum of the parts. This is where Francis introduces the polyhedron as a model, “which reflects the confluence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness” (EG 236), different from the sphere, in which “every point [sc. on the surface] is equidistant from the centre.” Here, he speaks of the “convergence of peoples”, of the “sum total of people within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone” (ibid.). Here, as elsewhere in the text, one can detect a distinction, but also a porosity between the “faithful people” within their “mysticism” (EG 237) and the people of humanity, the peoples of the earth.⁴

There is undoubtedly a prominent place in Pope Francis’ theology for the people of God, taking seriously what the faithful think, believe and practise, the “simple” people, especially the poor, walking among them as he did when he was a priest and bishop in Argentina. However, the predominantly cultural bias comes from the experience of a people embedded in a Catholic, even if syncretistic matrix, as is the case in Argentina, and is not easily adaptable to more diverse contexts, even considering Brazil, which has changed in around 40 years from a clearly Catholic country to one that is increasingly religiously diverse, with an exponential growth in *evangélico* churches. Furthermore, the long-standing demand for greater democratisation of the church, present more in Brazil than in Argentina historically, and clearly in central Europe, seems to be treated with great caution. It is, of course, noteworthy that the pope, as sovereign in the church and among the states—as absolute monarch of the Vatican City State—endeavours to mitigate the concentration of power that comes with the office. Ironically, Francis receives a lot of “support” in this deconstruction from those who do not recognise him as pope, even though they are the same people who have always advocated recognising the absolute sovereignty of the pope as an office.

3. The Universal Priesthood of Believers from a Protestant, Namely Lutheran Perspective

On the Protestant side, decision-making from the outset was—and had to be, given the initial lack of ordained ministers—participatory at community level and between communities, in an emerging congregational or synodal–presbyteral system. In this system, even though there is leadership from the ordained minister in spiritual aspects and, depending on their degree of employment and dedication, also effective in leading the life of the community, the presbytery (of the “elders” = i.e., a local or regional council) is made up of lay people who also exercise their leadership and are elected by the community as a whole. They even decide on the election of their minister, something that is re-evaluated periodically, which can also result in a decision to discontinue a particular minister. Both lay

leaders and those exercising an ordained ministry must be accountable to God, of course, but also to the members of the community and to the civil authorities within the legal precepts laid down. This does not mean that there is not often a concentration of power and initiative in the hands of the ordained minister. At the time of the Reformation, in winning independence from the pope and in view of the inexistence of bishops that became Protestant, princes or city councils assumed (administrative) episcopacy and acquired power in and over the church in central Europe. While Luther distinguished between two regiments, he did not think of a separation of secular and spiritual power, given both were under God and both were, albeit with different means and responsibilities, to fulfil God's purposes.

In any case, there is some theological pride among Protestants in the principle and concept of the priesthood of the faithful or universal priesthood. For Luther, it was central to his understanding of faith and church, even if it did not result in a congregationalist church constitution—which is more common on the basis of a Reformed, Calvinist theology (cf. Sallmann 2018, p. 56). Through baptism, for Luther “we are all consecrated priests”, and there is no fundamental difference, except that of office, between priests and princes, religious and secular. All are “of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes”, even if not everyone has the same function to fulfil (LW 44, 129). From this perspective, the only *character indelebilis* of the people of God is baptism. Interestingly, not much is said about the “people of God” among Protestants, except in connection with the people of Israel in the Old Testament; however, with restrictions in applying that to the Christian church, namely after the atrocities of the holocaust that laid bare the long-standing antisemitism present in Christianity, including Protestant theology.⁵ Protestant ecclesiology rather focuses on the relationship between the ordained ministry and membership in the community—analogous to one of the main strands in recent Catholic ecclesiology—or else on the *Volkskirche*, the “national church”—not in the sense of a State or established church, however—to which one belongs by tradition rather than conscious adherence, in a term coined by Friedrich Schleiermacher (cf. Plüss et al. 2016; Beckmeier and Mulia 2021). Of course, the history of nationalist and exclusivist abuse of the term “people” (*Volk*) by German nationalism and especially Nazism has contaminated the term in the European context. However, in the current Schleiermacher-Renaissance in German-speaking theology and the quest to maintain the current shape of the Protestant church in that context as public law and influential in society, the concept resurfaces with the necessary caution.

An exception to the rule is the book written from an ecumenical perspective by Lutheran theologian, professor now emeritus at the University of Marburg, Hans-Martin Barth, *Einander Priester sein* (“being priests to one another”), unique even nearly 35 years after its publication (Barth 1990). Amongst other things, it notes that the most comprehensive study on the general priesthood in Luther had been written by a Catholic theologian (Bravo 1963)⁶! Beyond probing into Luther's universal priesthood of believers, Spener, Wichern, orthodox comprehensions and the Second Vatican Council, Barth also registers and discusses the impulses that came from (Catholic) Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America. He considered the latter of special importance as they were an articulation of the laity itself. Barth underlines that Luther did not only intend to combat an exacerbated clericalism, but developed a new vision of the church, based on the priesthood of Christians for each other that creates community. Although the praxis stayed, to say the least, ambiguous, the early Luther was very clear that *cum a laico nihil differat, nisi ministerio* (quoted in Barth 1990, p. 35, note 17)—there is no difference between clergy and laity, except for their office—thus refuting the *Decretum Gratiani* which had precisely introduced such distinction and, indeed, separation. For Luther, the *sacerdotium*, the priesthood, extends to all (LW, 40, 19—“Concerning the Ministry”, 1523), while the *ministerium*, the service as minister, is a specific task to which only some are called and installed. It is important to remember that the ordained ministry, as such also for Luther and other Reformers, was of divine, not human institution (e.g., LW 40, 11). The foundation of the universal priesthood is soteriological, not in the first place ecclesiological. To be a priest as a baptised Christian

implies, in Luther's view, hearing confession, praying, doctrinal discernment and to be Christ for one another (Barth 1990, pp. 39–46, cf. LW 40, 21–34; cf. on the whole Goertz 1997). Because of such spiritual responsibility of every Christian, exercising in this way her(his) citizenship in heaven, (s)he also acts responsibly in earthly citizenship, where her(his) vocation and profession (*Beruf* and *Berufung*) lies. This can be seen as laying the basis (not yet being the enactment!) for equal human rights and democracy. If populism today is usually connected with combating imagined or real elites, then here we have an affirmation of “the people” against spiritual elites, who at the time also had ample earthly powers. Some have argued there is not only a universal priesthood, but also a universal kingship of all believers as a foundation for the sovereignty initially of the princes, but eventually of the people (von Oppen 1968).

In more recent years, the principle of the universal priesthood of all believers has been elaborated less in systematic and more from the perspective of practical theology; for example, emphasising the theological productivity of the faithful as “lived theology”, based on the “people's world of experience and reality of life” which becomes theology to the extent that it “finds reflective expression and public resonance” (Müller 2018, p. 24). According to Protestant practical theologian Sabrina Müller, the primary task of the ordained ministry is to promote the realisation of the general ecclesial mandate of “communication of the Gospel”, through the “capacitation of universal priests and priestesses in their daily Gospel ministry” (Müller 2018, p. 39). The central issue here is *empowerment*, which I understand as the capacity and authorisation that recognises maturity and adulthood in the faith. This idea, *avant la lettre*, can already be found in pietism, when Johanna Eleonora Peterson claimed the principle of the universal priesthood explicitly for herself, so that she could legitimise herself in relation to potential critics to a woman who published (see Sallmann 2018, p. 60). In 1881, the Synod of the Reformed Church in Bern, Switzerland, promulgated not just a traditional regulation for preachers, but an “Order of the Congregation and Preachers”, with explicit mention of the universal priesthood, because, in the words of church historian Martin Sallmann, “the members participated in the development of Christian faith and life in discipleship and work for the Kingdom of God” (Sallmann 2018, p. 63).

4. People, Democracy, and Citizenship on Earth and in Heaven

It has become clear that both the Catholic—since the Second Vatican Council, reinforced by EG—and the Lutheran church have the universal priesthood as a basis for the emergence and construction of the people of God. Although this latter concept is used nearly exclusively in the Catholic environment, it is clear that it is a concept taken from the Bible, placing the Christian people in continuity with the Jewish people—with the danger, it is true, of a substitutionary theology, which must be avoided, since God's promises to the Jewish people remain intact—albeit with a more universal and supra-national connotation (Caliman 2015). In this sense, the use of people of God refers in the first place to salvation history and not to organisational matters, but it also extends to those inside and outside the church.

On the secular side, it is precisely “people” as a national and ethnic category, common in right-wing populisms—in left-wing populisms, a socio-economic understanding of “people” prevails—has become highly ambivalent. However, a shallow and superficial critique of populism can strengthen an elitist contempt for the (real) people, especially the poor and those with less formal education, which contradicts the inclusivity of the church in Jesus' intention. Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, hailing from the same context as Pope Francis' TdP (Cuda 2019; Salinas 2020), can be helpful in seeing “people” both in a secular sense and as God's people as precarious categories and, even more so, precarious realities (see further von Sinner and Gabatz 2021). A Christian, namely a Lutheran, should not be surprised at that, given their perception of a constant presence of not only individual, but structural sin. The journey of a Christian, a citizen of heaven through baptism, salvation

from the Cross and the promise of God's final redemption, makes them a committed, but also self-conscious citizen of this world.

Both the Catholic and Protestant churches today are clearly favourable to democracy in a secular, plural, constitutional state. However, what about democracy in the church? The Catholic church, while valuing ever more the contribution of the laity to its mission, maintains a not only functional, but ontological distinction between clergy and laity. This does not mean, however, that the sharing of responsibilities, administration and planning and, thus, power—except sacramental power—remains unthinkable. The actions of Pope Francis, the way to greater synodality, even with reservations towards the German process, show that there is some movement also on the level of the world church, and can be in local churches and parishes. On the other hand, Protestant churches have, even in Luther's times, often not lived up to their own claim to the equality of believers in the church. Matter-of-factly, as indicated, they are very much centred on the pastor. This should make them humble in criticizing other traditions, while it also shows all is not yet explored in terms of the universal priesthood. A merely functional view of the ordained ministry might, after all, not be enough to account for both a theological and sociological understanding. And no church of a people of God under constant construction will achieve this without a constant and thorough nurturing and formation of its members, not only, but also in theology and a critical perception of the world.

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Notes

¹ Translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

² Steffensky was a Benedictine friar for 13 years. In 1969, he left the order and converted to the evangelical Lutheran confession, marrying the also Lutheran theologian Dorothee Sölle (d. 2003). He was professor of Education and also Religious Education. With such trajectory, he is a critical, both external and internal observer.

³ According to Salinas (2020, p. 44), episcopal documents understand the "people" as a community of faith; as the "way of life of a population" in the sociological sense; associated with the degree of development, in the economic sense, and as a synonym for a "collective subject" with capacities and rights (of citizenship). The latter meanings stand out especially since Puebla. Inspired by Gramsci, the Argentinian Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) understood that "the people" could not, for its own construction, dispense with the figure of a leader who would articulate it.

⁴ The official English translation renders the Italian original "mistica popolare" (in quotation marks, as in Portuguese, Spanish, French, but also in German "Volksmystik") by "the genius of each people", without quotation marks. In Latin languages, "popular mysticism" is a common expression and refers to popular, i.e., common, inculturated mysticism that is already there, under (not exclusive) influence from the Gospel. In EG 124, the same expression is mentioned with a reference to the Aparecida Document (DocAp 262)—of which then Cardinal José Maria Bergoglio was the main editor—which further explains it as "faith that is incarnated in culture" which has to be "evangelized" and "purified", but already contains "evangelical richness"). In EG 124, the English correctly renders "the people's mysticism", in quotation marks as in the other languages. In my judgement, the official English translation of EG 237 is, therefore, incorrect and misleading, as "the genius of each people" seems to refer to a national, cultural character without a connection to transcendence, precisely without what in turn "mysticism" necessarily implies. It appears as a secularised expression. Pope Francis, for his part, within the logic of the TdP, thinks of an—even if

poorly—evangelised, albeit syncretistic people and their religiosity. On Pope Francis’ theological background see also Bergner (2017, pp. 481–9).

⁵ For a Catholic compilation and interpretation of Protestant positions on the People of God between 1880 and 1942, see Keller (1970, pp. 137–86).

⁶ This book was written at the eve of the Second Vatican Council, parting from the unquestioned conviction the Catholic Church is holding the “full treasure of truth” (Bravo 1963, xviii), but with a thorough reading of Luther’s works, tracing his understanding of the universal priesthood back to a sermon proffered in 1512.

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Article

Navigating Civic Agency and Civic Space Amid Authoritarian Realities in Myanmar: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of Divine Mandate as Public Theology

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Abstract: In recent years, civic space has been deteriorating in many countries in Southeast Asia, and there is an urgent need for a more proactive and mindful civic agency to foster a humane society. Drawing inspiration from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of divine mandate, this paper proposes a public theology within an authoritarian regime, namely Myanmar. It explores divine mandates as essential for protecting civic space, advocates for Christian discipleship as a means of civic agency, and sparks moments of possibility by recognizing the hidden God in times of suffering. This paper highlights that an ethic of responsibility towards others lies at the core of divine mandate. It encompasses being an agent of direction, memory, linguistic self-consciousness and transformation.

Keywords: authoritarianism; divine mandate; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Myanmar; public theology

1. Introduction

"Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them" (CIVICUS 2020). While an open and tolerant civil space does not ensure a society aligned with God's will, it does offer a better chance for self-improvement through critical and open debates, accumulating social capital and nurturing civic agency. More importantly, it reduces the chance of the use of violence in handling political differences. I consider a primary task of public theology is to safeguard, expand and actively engage in civic space. From a theological perspective, civic space can be seen as orders of preservation entrusted by God to shield people from the abuses of sin and as a divine mandate in which we can encounter God's saving work and learn to exercise our responsibility within a fallen world. However, we are currently facing a troubling trend of shrinking civic spaces influenced by factors such as political authoritarianism, (ethnic) nationalism, populism, poverty, religious fundamentalism and sexism (Hummel and Strachwitz 2023; Andersen et al. 2021). This study focuses on Myanmar, which is under an authoritarian governance and has civic spaces that, according to CIVICUS, is categorized as closed. During my visit to Yangon, Myanmar in early November 2024, I had the opportunity to meet with over forty individuals. This experience not only offered me insights into the current situation in Myanmar but also allowed me to cross-reference and authenticate information about Myanmar from various written materials and media sources. The gender ratio is evenly split at 50–50, with the majority being church workers and a small number working as schoolteachers. I intend to examine this theme through the theological lens of divine mandates in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), whose public theology,

shaped by his resistance to Nazi authoritarianism, ethnic nationalism and populism, makes him a relevant figure for this analysis.

2. Divine Mandates and Public Theology

Bonhoeffer's theology revolves around Christ, viewing Christ not just in an abstract theological sense but at "the centre of human existence, history, and nature" (DBWE 12, Bonhoeffer 2009, p. 324). The follow-up questions for him are how his Christological beliefs are in dialogue with his engagement in socio-political contexts, and conversely, how these contexts shape his Christology. This interplay is evident in his seminal work *Creation and Fall*, delivered during the winter semester of 1932/33 and marked by the decline of the Weimar Republic and the birth of the Third Reich. In his work, Bonhoeffer interprets creation through the lens of Christ. Since Christ is both the end and the beginning of a new era (DBWE 3, Bonhoeffer 2004, pp. 21–22), Bonhoeffer presents a theology of creation fundamentally different from his contemporary German liberal theologians, including Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch and Gerhard Kittel. Bonhoeffer's Christo-eschatological interpretation of creation distinguishes between orders of creation and orders of preservation. In the moment of original creation, "creation and preservation are two sides of the same activity of God" (DBWE 3, Bonhoeffer 2004, p. 45), but the fall of humanity altered the meaning of orders of preservation. God's preserving is no longer understood as the way in which "the world is continually wrested anew out of nothingness" (DBWE 3, Bonhoeffer 2004, pp. 46–47). The orders of preservation are not given with creation and cast in concrete forever afterward but, rather, they are the means by which God preserves the world from plunging into chaos in anticipation of its redemption. Yet with the fall into sin, when Adam and Eve wanted to become *sicut Deus* (like God), they lost their unique state before God and became alienated and isolated from themselves and one another. As Michael Mawson notes, "with the fall into sin, 'new social basic-relations' emerge" (Mawson 2018, p. 103). Instead of existing in harmony and community with God and one another, "every person exists in complete, voluntary [i.e., willful] isolation; everyone lives their own life, rather than living the same life in God" (Mawson 2018, p. 103). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that it is not "being in Adam" that humans learn to be humans but it is "being in Christ" with whom we are called to be. "Being in Adam" as the fallen humanity characterized by his "disunion" (the divided self) needs redemption from Christ in order to be "being in Christ" as a new creation characterized by "union" (the unified self) (Zimmermann 2019, pp. 129–138). The different understanding of preservation before and after the fall should not be confused. Bonhoeffer critiques liberal theology for overlooking the fall of humanity, leading to being less critical of human accomplishments and upholding the status quo until the coming of Christ. Consequently, liberal theology legitimizes specific forms or expressions of worldly order as orders of creation and lacks openness to God's revelation in Christ, that is, God's judgment and grace. In Bonhoeffer's context, theologians with strong ties to Nazi thinking used the concept of orders of creation to argue for God's inviolable creation and its orders. The Nazi regime's claim to ontological validity was based on orders of creation and the German "people" (*Volk*) as part of the orders of creation. Alternatively, Bonhoeffer contends that orders of preservation do not grant ontological validity to both the government and human cultures but focus on the government as God's vicarious representative action on earth exemplified by Christ. He states, "The government is to protect human beings from the chaos that sin causes" (DBWE 16, Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 509). "We recognize as order as God's order of preservation if the gospel can still be heard in it" (DBWE 11, Bonhoeffer 2012, p. 268). In cases where the government makes improper demands that cause discrimination, and the gospel cannot be freely preached in a given order, Bonhoeffer asserts that disobedience becomes the duty of Christians (DeJonge

2018; Pangritz 2019). For instance, the Nuremberg Laws (September 1935), the Law on the Alteration of Family and Personal Names (August 1938), the Decree on Passports of Jews (October 1938) and the Police Regulation on the Marking of Jews (September 1941) were passed into law during the Nazi regime but did not promote penultimate goodness and justice. Bonhoeffer writes, “All orders of our fallen world are God’s orders of preservation that uphold and preserve us for Christ. They are not orders of creation but orders of preservation. They have no value in themselves; instead, they find their end and meaning only through Christ” (DBWE 3, Bonhoeffer 2004, p. 140).

The notion of orders of preservation is not used in Bonhoeffer’s later works, but his concern with and insights into orders of creation and preservation still continue, and this is expressed in the notion of divine mandates in his work *Ethics*, written in 1940–43. This shift in emphasis reflects the pressing urgency of Nazism. Bonhoeffer explains, “We speak of divine mandates rather than divine orders because thereby their character as divinely imposed tasks, as opposed to determinate forms of being, becomes clearer” (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 68). On the other hand, the notion of divine mandates responds to Bonhoeffer’s concern with the structure of the new social order that was to be rebuilt after the war. The notion of divine mandates not only demands our obedience and discernment reflected in our exercise of responsibility but also that we witness God’s presence amid a sinful world.

Along with orders of preservation, the notion of divine mandates aims to overcome the distinction between the worldly and spiritual realm, the here and now and the ultimate. There are not two realms, only the one realm of the Christ-reality in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 58–59). The divine mandates are not derived from our empirical existence but are built on the Christ-reality. Bonhoeffer writes, “It is not because work, marriage, government and church are that they are commanded by God, but it is because they are commanded by God that they are. And they are divine mandates only in so far as their being consciously or unconsciously is subordinated to the divinely imposed task” (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 208). However, neither order of preservation nor divine mandates have salvific value. They are necessary for the continued existence of all creation because the world has no reality of its own independent of God’s revelation in Christ. The task of public theology then is about “how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world” (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 55). Bonhoeffer’s position is that it “allows the world to be world and reckons with the world as world, while at the same time never forgetting that the world is loved, judged, and reconciled in Jesus Christ by God” (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 264). In this sense, the notion of divine mandates serves as a mediation bridging the Christ-reality and world-reality with concrete domains and insights for analogical reasoning and practice. Bonhoeffer elucidates the concept of divine mandates as “the concrete divine commissions grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of Scripture; it is the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution. A mandate is to be understood simultaneously as the laying claim to, commandeering of, and formation of an earthly domain by the divine command” (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 389). An immediate question is the adequacy of Bonhoeffer’s proposed four mandates, namely work (culture), marriage and family, government and church in capturing the whole reality of life. I leave it open because the number of divine mandates does not affect the appropriateness of Bonhoeffer’s idea of divine mandates. Divine mandates in Bonhoeffer’s understanding are not rules but function like focal images in guiding analogical reasoning. Brian Brock rightly explains that “the mandates are thus not properly understood as metaphysical axioms, ethical blueprints, or programs; they are Christologically keyed signposts indicating the

features of reality that allow us to encounter Christ" (Brock 2007, p. 90). The fundamental concern of the divine mandates lies in the concrete forms of life expressed in four domains through which we can encounter God's action and experience, suffer and receive His will. For Bonhoeffer, the divine mandates form a real presence of Christ in the same sense that Luther spoke of the Lord's Supper. In the following, let us discuss some considerations stemming from the notion of divine mandates for public theology.

Firstly, no mandate is self-sufficient, but each mandate is with-one-another, for-one-another and over-against-one-another (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 393). They rely on each other to fulfill their purposes in serving others. There is no hierarchy among them; none can claim superiority, but all are mutually accountable. When one mandate infringes upon another, the entire system is disrupted. Bonhoeffer highlights that "the divine mandates of government presuppose the divine mandates of work and marriage. Therefore, it preserves what has been created, maintaining it in the order which is assigned to it through the task which is imposed by God" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 72). Unlike the mandates of work and marriage, the government cannot generate life or values on its own. Its role is to serve other mandates, not the other way around. When the government fails to recognize its boundaries and respect the integrity of other mandates, it oversteps its mandate of preservation toward redemption, ultimately harming God's creation and causing chaos, as seen in authoritarian regimes. Further, Bonhoeffer notes that the government has no knowledge to understand that the purpose of the law in restraining sin is for the sake of redemption and that this requires the guidance of the Church for understanding. Politically, the notion of divine mandates provides a system of checks and balances, the principle of subsidiarity and a focus on the common good. I will revisit these points when we discuss civic space.

Secondly, the notion of divine mandates is not rooted in natural law based on orders of creation. It is derived from the Christ-reality taking form in the world in concrete ways. In this context, Bonhoeffer introduces the ideas of ultimate and penultimate to clarify our life under the divine mandates. In short, "the penultimate is everything that precedes the ultimate, everything that precedes the justification of the sinner by grace alone, everything which is to be regarded as leading up to the last thing when the last thing has been found. It is at the same time everything which follows the ultimate and yet again precedes it" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 159). It is only in light of the ultimate that the penultimate becomes penultimate. The penultimate is a period permitted by God, characterized by anticipation, preparation and the grace of salvation (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 160–61). The penultimate is God's time in human time. Aware of the tendency of either radical detachment from or compromise to the penultimate, Bonhoeffer explains, "A Christian ethic built only on the incarnation would lead easily to the compromise solution; an ethic built only on the crucifixion or only on the resurrection of Jesus Christ would fall into radicalism and enthusiasm. The conflict is resolved in their unity" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 157). This is a kind of realized eschatology. Nevertheless, life in the penultimate is full of complexities because there is world reality. Despite this, the penultimate is not wasted time. Bonhoeffer argues that "The penultimate will be swallowed up by the ultimate, yet it retains its necessity and its right as long as the earth endures" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 168), and this is how Matthew 3:1–6 talks about preparing the way of the Lord. Bonhoeffer writes, "To give bread to the hungry man is not the same as to proclaim the grace of God and justification to him, and to have received bread is not the same as to have faith. Yet for him who does these things for the sake of the ultimate, and in the knowledge of the ultimate, this penultimate does bear a relation to the ultimate" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 163). It is crucial to recognize that the ultimate and penultimate do not oppose nature and natural life. Bonhoeffer clarifies, "Natural life is formed life. The natural is the form that inheres in and serves life. If life severs itself from the form, if it tries to

assert itself in freedom from this form, if it will not allow itself to be served by the form of the natural, then it destroys itself down to its roots. Life that makes itself absolute, that makes itself its own goal, destroys itself" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 208). The distinction between the natural and the unnatural lies in the latter's attempt to close itself off from Christ's coming (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 173). However, as a result of the fall, the natural "has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor" (Rom 8:22), eagerly awaiting God's redemption. It is in the divine mandates in which humans vis-à-vis "the one and whole reality find it revealed in Jesus Christ" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 74). The notion of ultimate and penultimate provides us with an important lens for articulating and imagining divine mandates as living in the tension between hope and reality.

Related to the second observation, the notion of divine mandates within the penultimate realm is fluid, contextual and filled with tensions. There is no fixed-in-advance, once-and-for-all principle, but a decision is made in the given situation. Bonhoeffer aptly stated, "No one has the responsibility of turning the world into the kingdom of God, but only of taking the next necessary step that corresponds to God's becoming human in Christ. The task is not to turn the world upside down but in a given place to do what, from the perspective of reality, is necessarily objective and to carry it out. But even in a given place, responsible action cannot always immediately do what is ultimately right. It has to proceed step by step, ask what is possible and entrust the ultimate step, and thus the ultimate responsibility, to another hand" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 257–58). There are several implications for living in the penultimate. First, living a responsible life in the penultimate entails living, acting and suffering with and for others, mirroring Jesus Christ's vicarious representative action. Bonhoeffer notes that "all human beings, not only Christians, participate in Christ's vicarious representative action and operate within vicarious structures, as parents, as teachers, etc." (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 258). Esther Reed explains Bonhoeffer's sense of responsibility as a You–I–You structure, not an I–You–I structure (Reed 2018). It begins in the other, not I. Therefore, responsibility is not about an affirmation of personal freedom and autonomy but, in a sense, of Christ's vicarious representative action. Second, a responsible action has to correspond with reality, action fitting context to it. Responsibility is located not in an ideal or abstract concept but at a particular time, place and event: "At the moment of being addressed, the person enters a state of responsibility or in other words, of decision" (*DBWE 1*, Bonhoeffer 1998, p. 159). In certain scenarios, "the free responsibility of the one who acts, a responsibility not bound by law" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 273). Violation of the law in those cases does not constitute a rejection of the law; rather, what occurs in those situations is an "act of breaking the law to sanctify it," or a "suspension of the law" that "serve[s] its true fulfillment" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 400). Third, in the pursuit of responsible action, decisions are never flawless, and guilt may seem inevitable. A responsible person does not excuse his/her action, but as Bonhoeffer says, "The man who acts out of free responsibility is justified before others by dire necessity; before himself, he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 283). Divine mandates are about a path of obedience with a clear destination, but the journey through the middle distance remains uncertain. Navigating this middle ground requires courage, discernment, knowledge, patience, responsibility, companionship (solidarity) and empathy, among others. These qualities are about civic virtues and civic agency, which I will follow up on in the upcoming discussion.

The notion of divine mandates is a Christo–eschatological ethic that takes the fallen world seriously. In the light of the ultimate, the penultimate is not simply a space and time waiting for something to happen and which we are not able to change, but rather, the divine mandates bring salvation and transformation in the here and now. The divine mandates

free us from self-justification and laws on the one hand and demand our responsibility for our neighbors on the other.

3. Divine Mandates and Civic Spaces

The government is one of the four divine mandates according to Bonhoeffer's understanding. The key question that arises is how the government as a divine mandate is understood. Christians are used to understanding the government as outlined in Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17, upholding what is right and punishing what is wrong, and how we are asked to be obedient. While I appreciate a government that fulfills its duties, I also see a potential issue with this view as it may inadvertently foster passivity among the populace. Individuals should not be one-sidedly asked to submit to governing authorities, but they have the right to participate in governance and request that the government hear and respect the voice of the people. I find the concept of civic space helpful in reflecting the interaction of the government and the people and articulating the meaning of divine mandate in public life. Unlike a Gramscian understanding of civil society as a battleground against hegemony, civic space includes the so-called opponents in civil society and acknowledges conflicts within the traditional view of civil society. More importantly, civic space emerges from processes of "co-production" between people and the state (Biekart and Fowler 2023, p. 34). Both people and the state have benefited from safeguarding civic space. On the contrary, "when civic space is restricted, human and civil rights are denied, government accountability is jeopardized, citizen voices are silenced, civic energy is sapped, confidence in state authorities is eroded and opportunities for dialogue and development are lost" (Malena 2015, p. 14). On the one hand, civic space is dependent upon the government's awareness of its boundary, legitimacy and accountability. "This (civic space) can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions" (CIVICUS 2020). On the other hand, civic space fosters a sense of civic agency that goes beyond mere submission to authority. Civic agency is "a human predisposition toward, and a capability for, leading life together with others in a society with concern for the whole" (Biekart and Fowler 2023, p. 36). The concept of civic space expands the role of the government beyond simply enforcing laws. It embodies a government that is of the people, by the people and for the people.

According to the notion of divine mandates, the government derives its legitimacy from God. In modern politics, this legitimacy has shifted from God to the people. This transition should not be negatively viewed as anthropocentric versus theocentric because the government is always a human institution. On the contrary, a concern of legitimacy reflects that the authority of the government is not self-defined. Even authoritarian governments often claim that they are of, for and by the people, forming the bedrock of their legitimacy. It is the people who grant legitimacy to their governments to govern. To ensure this is not merely a slogan, the government must demonstrate this in concrete ways. In this paper, by safeguarding and expanding civil space, governments honor the legitimacy bestowed upon them by the people. Civic space refers to the set of conditions that enable all members of society to exercise freely and effectively their basic civil rights without discrimination. Such an idea of civic space was not prevalent in biblical times, and so caution is needed when applying biblical principles to modern politics. Since we are called to love God and our neighbors, loving our neighbors entails seeking the common good rather than meeting the needs of one particular class or race. As St. Ignatius of Loyola aptly put it, "The more universal the good is, the more it is divine". Unfortunately, there is a historical tendency to overlook the vulnerable, leading to discrimination based on factors such as disability, gender, race and religion. At times, the Church aligns itself more with cultural norms

than with divine mandates, as seen in the case of German Christians during the Nazi era. The Church is not immune to distortion, yet the Holy Spirit works within and without the Church. God is present within his mandates, and by living in these mandates, we encounter God. This is the meaning of the divine mandates.

Divine mandates highlight that there are boundaries to government. In the context of God's creation, God's act of drawing a boundary is an act of giving space for others to thrive, grow and interact rather than simply an act of separation. Recognizing and respecting boundaries is crucial in preventing corruption and enabling the government to fulfill its divine mandate of preservation within its designed scope. According to Bonhoeffer's view on divine mandates, the government's authority is constrained by other mandates, namely, the Church, family and work, which operate independently from governmental influence. The divine mandates are "with, for and against" each other. However, in authoritarian regimes, sectors such as education, family, media and others are often tightly regulated, and individuals are compelled to comply with government directives. The lines between different sectors of society in an authoritarian regime are blurred. During Bonhoeffer's era, the Nazi regime was the case. In contrast, civic space emphasizes the distribution of power and acts as a mechanism for checks and balances to limit the government's authority and safeguard individuals from coercion. Government interference in other mandates is required only when inaction would lead to injustice or public harm. It could be deemed tyrannical for the government to take action when private initiative could effectively address the issue equally well. This principle may be applied to other mandates in their relation to the government. This is seen in Bonhoeffer's resistance to Hitler's government.

I find that the Catholic social teaching of the principle of subsidiarity provides us with a different lens to understand both divine mandates and civic space. The principle has its roots in 19th-century social thought in France and Germany and first appears in Catholic social teaching in Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* Pope Pius XI (1931).

The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of "subsidiary function", the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State. (Article 80)

The principle of subsidiarity emphasizes that larger social entities should not take over decisions that are the responsibilities of small groups or associations (Pope John Paul II 1991; Wishloff and Pierucci 2024). It serves as a counter to collectivism, setting boundaries on state intervention to protect individuals. However, the principle is not understood as collectivism versus individualism because humans are social beings. Therefore, the principle of subsidiarity requires that governments are obliged to assist or support lower levels of the community in achieving their legitimate objectives, facilitating but never supplanting their initiatives. Further, the principle of subsidiarity does not weight civil communities over governments; both must work together to meet the common good in the prevailing circumstances and conditions of human life. Governments should protect, support and intervene less in civic space instead of scrutinizing and suppressing it. Authoritarian governments are used to limit and suppress civic space in the name of national security and social stability. They consider that this is the way to safeguard their authority. Paradoxically, the suppression of civic space brings insecurity and instability, not only because the legitimacy of the government comes from people rather than suppression

but also because people have very limited non-violent effective channels to express their concerns about government policy. In this paper, I argue that obedience to divine mandates involves safeguarding and fostering civic space to maximize the potential of the four domains outlined by Bonhoeffer and ultimately promote flourishing lives.

4. Military Authoritarianism in Myanmar

Civic space conditions are measured across five dimensions, namely, freedom of information and expression, the right to assembly and association, citizen participation, non-discrimination and rule of law (Malena 2015). According to CIVICUS in 2024 (CIVICUS 2024), Myanmar is rated as a closed civic space. On 17 September 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner published its latest report on the human rights situation in Myanmar, detailing a range of serious violations that continue to underscore the deepening crisis and lack of rule of law throughout the country. Since the coup, at least 5350 civilians have been killed and more than 3.3 million displaced (OHCHR 2024). Myanmar has been under military authoritarian rule since Ne Win seized power in a coup d'état back in 1962 (Yamahata and Takeda 2023; Connelly and Loong 2024, pp. 37–62). Military authoritarianism is basically a system of managing the government with the military, and it relies primarily on coercion. While there were slight openings toward democratic progress in the early 2010s, the military government still retained significant control. In a notable shift, the National League for Democracy emerged victorious in the November 2015 election, despite a quarter of the seats being reserved for the military. However, the 2008 constitution prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from assuming the presidency due to a clause disqualifying individuals with foreign citizen children. Consequently, she was appointed as State Counsellor, effectively serving as the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, the military continued to exert influence over the country.

In the national elections on 8 November 2020, the National League for Democracy secured an even greater majority than in 2015. However, on 1 February 2021, the military claimed the election was fraudulent, declared a national emergency, seized control, arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and established a government comprising generals under Min Aung Hlaing, the Chairman of the State Administrative Council and Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces (Connelly and Loong 2024, pp. 13–18). Following the coup d'état in February 2021, Myanmar's military regime made sweeping changes to the country's law, introduced new regulations and issued orders under the emergency clauses of the military-drafted Constitution of 2008. These led to the suspension of fundamental human rights that are protected under domestic and international laws, resulting in the unjust arrest and loss of lives of many innocent civilians. Numerous demonstrations erupted across the nation, which later became known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), but were met with severe crackdowns by the junta on both peaceful protests and armed opposition (Connelly and Loong 2024, pp. 116–20). In response to the activities of the opposition/resistance, especially in the Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, Sagaing and Shan states, the *junta* has imposed several incident-based restrictions targeting the whole population, as it labels everyone as “opposition”. Villages suspected of supporting the opposition have been destroyed, with civilians and opposition members being massacred (Mon 2024). Tragically, thousands have lost their lives at the hands of the military, and over twenty-five thousand individuals have been detained. The political upheaval and ongoing fighting have plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis. In the following, I share my recent visit to Yangon in early November 2024, during which I met nearly forty people on various occasions.

A Chin Christian family resides in Yangon and comes from a middle-class background. Their daughter, in her late twenties, participated in the CDM against the 2021 coup d'état

and was subsequently arrested and detained. Regrettably, her parents were unable to visit her, resorting to bribery to send her parcels and gather information about her well-being. After a challenging legal process, she was sentenced to 32 months in prison. The military regime occasionally grants amnesty on special occasions like National Day, raising hopes for her family that she might be released, but luck was not on their side. The prison conditions were deplorable, devoid of basic human rights. Eventually, she was freed in November 2023 and sought refugee status in a neighboring country. Tragically, the family's son, in his early twenties, was found dead in April 2023, with the suspicion that he was a victim of military violence. These heartbreaking events led the couple, now in their mid-fifties, to make the difficult decision to flee the country and live as displaced individuals out of fear of persecution by the military.

The people I met expressed concerns about the conscription law, which targets men aged 18–35 and women aged 18–27. Another order conscripts men up to age 65 to form local militia groups known as public security forces (Linn 2024). A 48-year-old man shared with me how he dangerously fled to Thailand to escape the conscription order with the help of revolutionaries, spending nine months in exile (Head 2024). On the other hand, many families found all possible means to send their children away from Myanmar. A woman shared with me that her daughter made the bold decision to leave university during her final year to join the protests against the government's dismissal of teachers supporting the CDM. She mentioned that numerous young people opted to forgo their education to protest against the government interference in the university system. With the financial assistance of her relatives in Great Britain, the girl was able to secure a UK visa and safely depart Myanmar recently.

Another man opened up to me about the traumatic experiences faced by many. He shared, "Every time when the doorbell rings at home, fear grips me as it reminds me of the impending of the police. I believe this is a common experience among people. We are on high alert". Since the police force has lost the trust of the people, the pressing question arises: who will ensure the safety of the people? While I did not personally witness any crimes during my time in Yangon, a friend informed me that incidents of kidnapping and robbery are unfortunately common occurrences.

During my visit to Yangon, I learned that nearly one-third of the city's population are not locals, and they come from different states in search for refuge. While some are taken in by relatives, many find themselves homeless, with their children lacking access to schools. Since the coup, foreign investors have fled, leading to rising inflation and widespread unemployment. Official reports from Myanmar's Directorate of Investments and Company Administration indicate that foreign investment amounted to USD 150 million in the first seven months of 2024, a stark contrast to the USD 3.8 billion recorded in 2020. The living conditions for the people must be incredibly challenging. A man overseeing a church office's support for the internally displaced people of the Chin ethnic group expressed, "We have 100,000 internally displaced people. The needs are immense. How to have enough food and reach them pose significant challenges. We find ourselves in a seemingly hopeless situation".

This visit brings to mind Psalm 13 (NRSV),
How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
 Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
 and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
 my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

How can public theology lead people to rejoice in God’s salvation and sing to God? What would characterize a public theology in this context? What Christian symbols can inspire the development of public theology? I consider that it is about civic agency.

5. Discipleship and Civic Agency

The concept of civic space is intricately linked to civic agency. Civic agency breathes life into civic space, just as civic space nurtures and sustains civic agency. Civic agency is defined as “a human predisposition toward, and a capability for, leading life together with others in a society with concern for the whole” (Biekart and Fowler 2023, p. 36). While civic agency can be influenced by civic space, it is not solely dictated by it. There is ample evidence of individuals exemplifying civic agency even within authoritarian regimes. In this study, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of this. He shows us that Christian discipleship is about civic agency. Christian discipleship is to follow Jesus Christ and to be in Christ. Since Christ is the life of others, Christian discipleship illustrates the formation and practice of civic agency.

It is quite natural to connect Christian discipleship with Bonhoeffer’s work *Nachfolge*. Bonhoeffer’s *Nachfolge*, published in 1937, provides an answer to these questions: What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? (DBWE 4, Bonhoeffer 2001, p. 37). The content of this book is primarily about his lecture course (1935–37) for a preacher’s school at Finkenwalde. It was an illegal seminary, training pastors for the Confessing Church. Five sessions were completed before the Gestapo closed the seminary in September 1937. The title of the book is very biblical because we are called to follow Jesus. At that time, the political title of Hitler was *Führer*, and his supporters were his followers. We may assume that Bonhoeffer’s use of *Nachfolge* also had a political agenda. Christians should follow Jesus as the Confessing Church, not *Führer* as the German Christians’ Faith Movement did. This context sheds light on why obedience is portrayed as the unequivocal response to Jesus’ call in his work. Bonhoeffer articulates, “Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes” (DBWE 4, Bonhoeffer 2001, p. 63). However, in a prison letter to Bethge on 21 July 1944, the day after the assassination attempt failed, Bonhoeffer reminisced critically on *Nachfolge*.

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We asked ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it’s quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn’t realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote *Nachfolge* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote. (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 486)

Bonhoeffer’s acknowledgment of *Nachfolge*’s semi-Pelagian undertow helps us see something else as well. His confession only a few days earlier—“only the suffering God can help” (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 479)—means that even *Nachfolge*’s commanding Christ cannot help. However, his commanding Christ Christology with a semi-Pelagian and obedience-focused anthropology is to respond to a Church mired in cheap grace. By con-

sidering Bonhoeffer's theological insights and taking Myanmar seriously, I reflect on what a public theology that nurtures civic virtues and embodies civic agency would be.

5.1. *Politics Is Not Everything*

Everything is politics, yet politics is not everything. The divine mandate for governance is just one of the four mandates. It holds power and affects our lives, but it does not define the entirety of divine mandates. It is the Christ-reality that imbues meaning. Individuals always retain an agency to respond to divine mandates in diverse ways. While individuals may face limitations in governmental participation, they can still engage in other domains of divine mandates such as family, church and work/culture, which are equally significant. Firstly, the notion of divine mandates is inherently public, making family, church and work/culture inherently public as well. Secondly, all four mandates are intricately interconnected and indivisible, meaning that our engagement in domains other than the government indirectly influences governance. In fact, no one can decide which divine mandate is more influential. Focusing on or exploring opportunities beyond the governmental sphere does not indicate avoiding politics. Rather, it strives to embody civic agency in alignment with divine mandates. In Yangon, I visited one school and talked to the headmaster and a few teachers. I found that there are teachers who aim to motivate and empower students rather than merely echoing the government's stance. There are churches dedicated to serving their communities regardless of their size or perceived significance. There are families who open their homes to house internally displaced people. We do not know to what extent these conscientious efforts can expand and strengthen civic space, but in Bonhoeffer's perspective, divine mandates are not understood as metaphysical axioms, ethical blueprints or programs. Instead, they are Christologically keyed signposts indicating the features of reality that allow us to encounter Christ. While the military may hinder our ability to encounter Christ in the realm of politics, it cannot prevent the presence of Christ in our daily lives. However, if the need arises to challenge the unjust government directly, we should not shy away from it. Bonhoeffer himself is an example of resistance to Hitler's regime. Despite this, Bonhoeffer warns that violation of the law in special situations does not constitute a rejection of the law. Among the revolutionaries in Myanmar, there are Christians. A young man expressed remorse when he shared with me, "I fear I may not be deemed worthy of heaven because I have taken the lives of military personnel". I empathized with his dilemma, and finally, I shared Bonhoeffer's words with him, "Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God's grace and judgment" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 268–69).

5.2. *Friendship as Civic Virtue*

Civic agency comprises people with civic virtues. Civic virtues are neither simply an inward journey nor a conformity to social norms. Rather, civic virtues include leading life together with others in a society that has concern for the whole. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, Christ's vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*) is a Christian civic virtue. Christ's work as *Stellvertreter* moves sinful humanity from being "in-Adam" to being "in-Christ". As God was freely for humanity in Christ, God's Church is now free for the other in love. The Church lives "with the readiness to do and bear everything in the neighbor's place, indeed, if necessary to sacrifice [oneself], standing as a substitute for [one's] neighbor" (Mawson 2018, p. 137). In an authoritarian regime, the civic virtue of Christ's vicarious representative action is best interpreted as friendship because authoritarian governments are used to create political dichotomy to divide and control people. Jesus' vicarious representative action in terms of friendship is to break down the dichotomy set by the authorities. Jesus was the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34).

Friendship in Jesus' words includes laying down one's life for one's friend (John 10:15; 1 John 3:16). Jesus laid down his life for people who were against him and crucified him. He died for us (Romans 5:8) in order that we would be healed and saved (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus' death is not simply a response to miserable people but an act of love transcending status and social boundaries. Friendship with Jesus is not confined to the inner circle between Jesus and his disciples but is a command that Jesus gave his disciples to love as he had loved (John 15:12, 14). Friendship from, of and with Jesus is always therefore an extended and inclusive invitation. Friendship as civic virtue is firstly a solidarity with suffering and suffering in solidarity. Second, it is to nurture and uphold a community vision characterized by a just, inclusive, peaceful and participating community. Third, friendship is to empower people to have the courage to make a new beginning in relationships. This is important for ending the cycle of revenge and overcoming dualism in terms of enemies and friends.

In Myanmar, there are more than three million displaced people, with many of them seeking refuge in Yangon. Many residents of Yangon generously offer them shelter and sustenance. My friend, a single woman, has taken in a baby girl whose father fell in the war and whose mother was too young to care for her. My friend tells me that this is not uncommon. A friend confided in me that he and his church have been steadfast in visiting and supporting a 40-year-old pastor sentenced to 18 years, a 31-year-old pastor sentenced to 15 years and a 22-year-old female university student sentenced to 10 years, as well as four widows of supporters of the CDM. Standing by each other in various ways has become a hallmark of life during these challenging times. In fact, people from overseas also show solidarity with the people in Myanmar.

5.3. *Hidden Transcript and Hidden God*

Hidden transcript is a concept employed by James Scott. It refers to forms of resistance and dissent that are kept out of sight from those in power. Ideas and visions of hidden transcripts are carefully kept below the radar by dissenting groups and individuals as a way of remaining safe in the face of power. People pretend to follow the hegemonies defining their social situation—something Scott called orthopraxy—and follow the social and cultural formats that protect them from sanctions but without agreeing to the ideologies informing the formats (Scott 1992). In Myanmar, the General Strike Coordination Body, which organizes boycotts of the military, has urged the people not to use the products owned by the military, such as beer and cigarettes. These are a form of political consumerism. Unlike expressing their political views and demands through the conventional electoral systems, political institutions and organized political movements, people involved in political consumerism exercise their political power through their wallets and their role as consumers. Firstly, this shopping for change signifies a more conscientious action. Secondly, it is the politicization of everyday life choices, including ethically, morally or politically inspired decisions. Thirdly, these lifestyle politics can be both individual and collective, encompassing lifestyle change, mobilization and politics. Boycotting military products demonstrates that individuals can make a difference, regardless of how small their actions or impacts may be. It is a movement driven by self-awareness and personal lifestyle change.

Many people choose to leave Myanmar but most of them remain due to various reasons. A man shared with me, "I had the opportunity to move to Australia, but I found a more compelling reason to stay. It is God's calling to stand by my people". He went on to express, "The hidden God reveals himself/herself in the depth of our affliction. God is here". Bonhoeffer highlights that "the Bible however directs him [sc. man] to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help". He said, "So it

is good to learn early enough that suffering and God is not a contradiction but rather a necessary unity; for me the idea that God himself is suffering has always been one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity" (*DBWE 16*, Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 294). Moltmann adds, "A God who cannot suffer cannot love either" (Moltmann 1981, p. 38). The idea of the suffering God can be traced back to Bonhoeffer's Lutheran tradition. In the Heidelberg disputation of April 1518, Martin Luther commented that "a theologian of glory calls evil good, and good evil" (Forde 1997). Luther called them glory liars. They accept two perspectives on their existence. In the outer world, evil things may occur. In the inner world, God has already won the struggle and all his followers have achieved glory. For Martin Luther, this is a false story, a dishonest way of telling the history of human beings. "A theologian of the cross", continues Martin Luther, "calls the thing what it actually is". For Luther, the main difference between the theology of the glory and the theology of the cross is a question of the understanding of power. The theologians of glory understand the divine power in the Scriptures as the political power of contemporary society. They may presume that divine power is a multiplying and exaggerated version of human power. Only the theology of the cross will bring human beings to a reality in which they are forced to face facts and what really happens, and give an understanding of what happens. The suffering God understands our suffering and, through his suffering, is ultimately dealing with the evil behind it. In other words, the suffering of Christ beckons us to embrace a view from below and in solidarity with the vulnerable and survivors. Who are the theologians of glory in Myanmar? Could they possibly be synonymous with the authoritarian regime? They love power more than using power to serve; they dwell in their own myths rather than being honest with reality. The suffering of the people in Myanmar offers us a perspective to go into God's mystery, the divine presence in times of suffering, and the assurance that God is with us and for us.

5.4. A Reflection

Civic agency encompasses civic responsibility, which embodies various roles. Firstly, civic responsibility involves being an agent of direction as interpreting the signs of the times. The concept of divine mandates serves as a reminder that we need not be disheartened by politics because God is present in our daily lives, allowing us to encounter the divine in our everyday experiences. Secondly, civic responsibility includes being an agent of memory. It is the suffering Christ in whom the memory of suffering is expressed through solidarity, resilience and hope. We must not abandon those in prison or exile or who are left alone. Thirdly, civic agency involves being an agent of linguistic self-consciousness. We must be cautious not to be consumed by the rhetoric of revenge, hatred and violence even in the face of injustice. Instead, we should strive to embrace the language of love. Finally, civic responsibility encompasses being an agent of transformation committed to bringing peace and justice to society. At the seminar, participants engaged in a discussion about whether Myanmar needs public theology or liberation. Regardless of the path chosen, they see themselves as catalysts for transformation.

To what extent can such a civic agency contribute to the emergence of civic space? To what extent can such a civic agency empower people not to lose hope? In Myanmar, public universities are under complete government control, whereas theological seminaries enjoy a certain extent of autonomy. These seminaries continue to offer courses like public theology and feminist theology, focusing on fostering civic engagement. For example, during a politically challenging period, a two-day seminar on public theology took place in November 2024, aiming to develop a curriculum on public theology for theological seminaries in Myanmar. While I am uncertain about the impact of such initiatives on

Myanmar's civic space, the essence of Christian discipleship always demonstrates resilience and perseverance. Rebecca Solnit writes,

Hope locates itself in the premises where we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and knowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone. (Solnit 2016, p. xiv)

Solnit does not approach her writing from a Christian perspective. Her exposition of hope is more about her conviction of a utopia, not reality. Nevertheless, her insight encapsulates the essence of civic agency. It is the agency itself that holds significance, not just the outcomes and impacts. Civic agency retains the power to spark moments of possibility. Jay Winter refers to these as minor utopias (Winter 2006). They produce "moments of possibility, of openings, of hopes and dreams rarely realized, but rarely forgotten as well". These are the narratives of people in Myanmar. In the light of the Christ-reality, truth, peace and justice prevail.

6. Conclusions

How to engage in public theology within an authoritarian regime is the research question of this paper. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's notion of divine mandate, this paper suggests that the divine mandate to the government is never isolated and, in fact, it exists within a complex interplay of various mandates. They are one way or another with, for and against each other. Therefore, individuals and churches should not fixate solely on the divine mandate of the government. Our participation in everyday life, guided by divine mandates, holds equal significance and even challenges the divine mandate of the government. However, the current shrinking of civic spaces in Myanmar is disheartening. Many consider leaving their countries while those who stay may feel powerless. Despite this, in the light of Christ-reality, the present moment as the penultimate is not time wasted. This is the time for responsibility. Vaclav Havel stresses the importance of living in truth to combat political falsehood, while Bonhoeffer speaks of discipleship as observing divine mandates and bearing one another's cross as God bears ours in Christ. Each person "takes up his position against the world in the world; the calling is the place at which the call of Christ is answered, the place at which a man lives responsibly... Vocation is responsibility and responsibility is the whole response of the whole person to reality as a whole" (DBWE 6, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 290–91, 93). Bonhoeffer writes,

Thinking and acting for the sake of the coming generation, but being ready to go any day without fear or anxiety—that, in practice, is the spirit in which we are forced to live. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative. (DBWE 8, Bonhoeffer 2010, p. 50)

Fuelled by Christian images of Christ-reality (such as the kingdom of God, Sabbath rest, marriage feasts, the garden of God, the city of God and the last judgment), Christians cultivate their civic agency in distinctive ways. This embodiment of hope in action underscores their commitment to remaining responsible and compassionate towards others.

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Article

Public Theology as Practicing Theology from Below: Looking for the Right Sense of the ‘Human’ in Human Rights

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Abstract: Christian beliefs and values have played an important role in the formulation of modern human rights. However, this influence does not hide the delays and some difficulties that Christian churches have experienced in this area. A cultural evolutionary framework is proposed to make sense of this ambiguity. In this sense, Christian anthropology is presented as both an evolving body of ideas and a wisdom based on empirical experience. Such a model makes it possible to deal better with the issue of human rights, which is subject to evolutionary pressures and seeks to adapt to new challenges and contexts. Christian anthropology, after a conscious interaction with real experiences and challenges, could favour to provide insights and discernment for this development following some minimal criteria, such as avoiding harmful effects, increasing well-being, and becoming a reference for sociality and vitality.

Keywords: cultural evolution; anthropology; modernity; empirical theology

1. Introduction: Human Rights as Theological Rights?

There is little doubt about the Christian roots and inspiration of contemporary human rights, as many studies have shown (Villa-Vicencio 2000; Wolterstorff 2011; Witte and Latterell 2015; Moyn 2015; Shah and Hertzke 2016; Hertzke and Shah 2016). What is more confusing or intriguing is why Christian churches and theology took so long to produce a similar code or a moral or legal system that could be assimilated to this programme. Several cases become quite striking on this defect or failure, such as the lack of respect for several forms of freedom, with religious freedom as the most important one;; or the difficulty to overcome slavery, or to reconcile human dignity—as man is created in the image of God—with a strong censure against human abuse. The list of missing rights, which we now take for granted, could be extended to include several neglects concerning women.

The thesis defended in this paper is that contemporary human rights are the result of a co-evolution between the Christian anthropological tradition and the modern Enlightenment mentality, a clear case of constructive entrenchment mutually correcting each other through an exercise of empirical testing and historical contrast, a form of “conjunctive thinking”—as some experts have recently proposed (Finnegan et al. 2023)—and a case of “theology from below” or building from reality and experience. Rather than a mutually exclusive programme within a secularising model, human rights have emerged from a conjunction of both sides, a joint effort, rather than a secularising move or “cultural appropriation” of Christian values, as Löwith long ago denounced (Löwith 1953). We are now counting on better theoretical models to analyse and follow this process and to overcome simple or reductive views that are unable to take into account the complexity and richness of the factors involved in most cultural evolutionary processes.

Another point to consider in this context is that human rights are an evolving programme, and as such, they are subject to time and cultural conditions that affect the way a society judges what is right and what is wrong. This process is reflected in the emergence of “new generation rights” and the many debates about which rights are justifiable as new demands arise in our social and cultural environment. It is obvious that theology can take part in these discussions, provided that it respects the rules of the conversation and that it can offer an original or interesting perspective. In this sense, theology needs to refresh its anthropology as a condition for offering the best criteria and discernment. In this sense, human rights should be seen as deeply dependent on an updated anthropology.

The main point of this proposal is the need to develop a better theological anthropology, based on concrete human experiences, needs, and capabilities, in order to provide a better basis and orientation for human rights research. Without a good sense and meaning of the human condition, it becomes difficult to develop appropriate human rights strategies. However, such development implies assuming a model of cultural and religious evolution that can be applied to this special area. Then, some historical issues need to be reviewed in light of this model. The third step in this proposal displays a theological programme that is more attuned with contemporary culture and sensibility while trying to remain critical and discerning at the same time. The ultimate issue we need to address is to what extent theology can offer a positive contribution to human rights and its discernment.

2. Cultural Evolution and Christian Theology

The topic of cultural evolution has undergone considerable development in the last decade, introducing a new framework for better understanding many processes in the history of ideas and in the configuration of values, legal systems, and even religious expressions. The Christian faith has developed over a long history, following patterns of cultural evolution that can be described in terms of its successive steps and adaptations to new social and cultural environments. Such variability may surprise those who are used to a more static and stable model of traditional religions, where there is little change over the centuries. This uneasiness will increase if we consider a consistent theological tendency which, in the twentieth century, has pointed to strategies of “resourcement”, or looking back to our origins and to the first Christian sources in order to find inspiration and to cultivate fidelity, as the main clues for renewal (Flynn and Murray 2014). In other words, for this style of theology, the only conceivable revival and progress consisted of re-enacting the origins, or in repeating as closely as possible the ideas, values, and forms characteristic of that original and normative time; subsequent expressions could be considered suspicious of deviating from the original model and therefore much less inspiring and useful for adapting to new times.

In my opinion, there is no doubt that religions—and Christianity is no exception—have evolved and changed over historical periods. The testimonies in the historical record are so numerous; the contrasts between the different periods are so obvious; the new challenges and conditions of adaptation are so pressing that to pretend that the Christian faith has not changed and is the same as it was in the time of the apostles or in the period of its formation in the first centuries means to ignore a consistent body in the history of so many ways of understanding faith and its moral application. Those who are more convinced of a model of stability and fidelity to the origins should look at the profound changes and how Christian churches and their theologies have dealt with the treatment of slaves and its moral justification, how we have adapted to reject the death penalty, how human rights become normative in these churches, the acceptance of democracy, or the role of women. The point is that even if the basic doctrines remain the same as they were when they were established around the fourth century, the practical consequences that can be drawn from

them have changed greatly to adapt to new conditions and views. As an experiment, we can look at the Catholic Syllabus of Errors of 1864 and compare it with what most Catholics and theologians think today to see how much evolution we can see in just 160 years¹.

The problem is not to accept this evolution as a fact, but to explain how it happens, what factors drive these changes, and what their long-term effects are. To begin, we can count on a body of multidisciplinary research that has tried to cover this evolution. It brings together different traditions and frameworks, which is worth recalling (Oviedo 2024). One starting point is evolutionary biology, which provides a standard model that governs such developments, following a dynamic of variation and selection of the fittest or more adapted, and reproduction, which gives rise to new variations; the same process happens for living beings and for cultural or religious expressions. The second framework is the cognitive, which analyses how the human mind interacts with cultural repertoires in search of better tools to navigate our own environment and find better conditions, a process that leads to a constant search and testing of more helpful cultural resources. Thirdly, the anthropological and cultural dimension has tried to better follow how cultures evolve in a progressive way, from simpler to more complex forms, improving their resources to face new challenges, even if other voices discuss a model that implies the superiority of some cultural forms over others left behind. The fourth model is suggested by a sociological tradition that has pointed out how societies evolve in a process that encompasses social structures and cultural forms, in a kind of hatchet effect, leading, for example, to the great social differentiation we know today. The fifth model draws on the history of ideas, in philosophy, to show the major developments that have marked the rise in modern views and how they have evolved from their earlier expressions, as Charles Taylor has done in a magisterial way (Taylor 2007; Bellah 2011; Knight 2020; Hemminger 2021).

The point of all this broad research and its specific approaches is to provide enough tools to allow us to better understand how and why Christian views, like many other cultural and religious expressions, have evolved over the centuries. Indeed, there has been a consistent effort to better assess evolutionary processes in religions, but there are several problems. For example, the development of early Christianity defies several patterns that should govern social and cultural evolution, and indeed such a real process points to the need to revise existing or standard models and to make room for alternative ones that could help to better explain specific cases and their own factors and dynamics. Religious forms that were apparently counter-adaptive, such as Christianity during the long period of persecution, could probably promote lifestyles that in the long run became much more adaptive than the previously existing or other available alternatives. For many people in those centuries, being a Christian meant risking one's life and possessions, as it still does in many contexts. However, this faith offered security, hope, and values that could be seen as more appropriate than other more comfortable choices, or some people could value this source of hope more than ever existential security. Indeed, factors other than sheer survival and reproductive success are likely to guide the cultural evolution of religious forms, such as the power of their beliefs to cope with uncertainty and adversity, the capacity of their rituals to provide meaning and social connection, their profound therapeutic virtuality, in addition to their ability to align with contemporary ideas or values, or their ability to offer more reliable and promising alternatives.

The framework described could help to better frame how Christian anthropology has developed over the centuries, following these general patterns. Such a process of trying to represent the human condition has played a central role in how human rights have grown and could become universal principles. But this is probably a controversial claim: to what extent such an evolution has positively influenced the development of human rights or to

what extent such a development reveals an overcoming of Christian views that are unable to assist in this emancipatory process.

3. Has Christian Faith and Tradition Played a Role in Human Rights?

This question needs to be better placed in a broader discussion of the real influence of Christian views and values in the formation of modern free and democratic societies. The issue has been debated for a couple of centuries. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Weber attributed the progress recorded in the West in some areas, such as politics, economics, and science, and the lack of progress in others to the presence and influence of some Christian confessions or styles; indeed, not every Christian version could offer the same positive results. However, after Hegel, many philosophers were able to understand this influence in a limited way, as an inspiring start or ignition, but without any lasting effects in the final stages of development. From the eighteenth century onwards, various projects inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of social progress, individual autonomy, and the search for personal fulfilment were able to gradually replace traditional models (including Christian ones) and their fixed rules, giving rise to emancipatory movements that spread in all directions in the following centuries. However, it is debatable to what extent that displacement, or in the terms Taylor applies, “subtraction”, could be completed or even be realistic.

The ongoing discussion has seen several versions in recent decades. For example, the debate between Karl Loewith and Hans Blumenberg in Germany in the 1960s is quite revealing: for Loewith, modern central tenets are nothing more than a secularisation of original Christian motives, but for Blumenberg, they were a way of revolting against or contesting such earlier ideas and a way of emancipating oneself from their oppressive tutelage (Löwith 1953; Blumenberg 1966). Other, more recent, versions of this question concern the extent to which liberal ideas, democracy, and human rights are deeply rooted in the Christian faith or are a reaction to overcome these outdated and debilitating traditions. Some examples may be cited: Nick Spencer, *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity has shaped our values* (2016); Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (2015); Theo Hobson, *God Created Humanism: The Christian Foundations of Secular Values*; Tom Holland, *Dominion: The making of the Western Mind* (2019); Sharon James, *How Christianity transformed the world* (2021); J. C. D. Clark, *The Enlightenment: An Idea and Its History* (2024).

The general point discussed in the former works just quoted is that without the Christian dimension, the development of Western systems of guaranteed freedoms and rights would have been much more difficult; or the Christian contribution has been paramount in the development of the liberal democratic system of rights. The argument can be pursued by other means. For example, studies of the “malaise of modernity” as a consequence of deep secularisation could be cited as counter-examples to those who take an overly optimistic view of a modern secular society and system (Kołakowski 1990; Taylor 1991). Even more incisive is the criticism of the thinkers of the so-called “Frankfurt School” (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse) of the “negative dialectic” that follow modern ideals, as revealed in the atrocities of Nazism and other modern totalitarian regimes. Levinas could be added to this sharp criticism that reveals again the dark destiny of a Western culture and a social model when moving far from Christian faith and inspiration.

All these arguments add to the reflection on cultural and religious evolution in order to try to discern the direction that evolution takes and its critical turns. Indeed, the history of ideas and interactions between totalitarian regimes and Christian churches reveals a greater complexity and a deep ambiguity in this interaction. The lesson to be learnt is that we need a better theology capable of discerning and guiding these interactions, beyond

political or conjunctural interests and strategies, or, worse, nationalistic emotions that have often colluded with Christian sentiments and traditions if real progress is to be sought and past mistakes are to be avoided.

To try to answer the question that leads this section, I would say that the Christian faith has played an irreplaceable role in the configuration of the modern map of human rights. But at the same time, we must acknowledge that it has not been the only factor contributing to this development, and Christian faith continues to inspire and support human rights, even if some situations in the past and present have shown some limits and doubts regarding this support, especially when other interests have mixed with these fundamental rights.

4. Christian Anthropology as an Evolved and Adaptive Cultural Form

It is important to ascertain the extent to which the development of Christian views about a human person is deeply rooted in a rather empirical, as opposed to theoretical or traditional, understanding of the human condition through constant testing and correction. Indeed, Christian anthropology has never been merely a theory or a hermeneutic exercise of canonical texts, but a view rooted in one's own experience and in the observation of human behaviour around us. This is already evident in the development of Augustinian anthropology, a powerful example of combining an approach learned from Scripture with the experience of one's own life and the observation of the behaviour of others. However, it is hard to determine to what extent the current debates on how to judge human nature, its sinfulness and the effects of grace, were more or less informed by inherited traditions, biases link to immediate perceptions or negative memories, or data from lived experience. In any case, the main approach in theological anthropology has been mostly built on previously held beliefs, founded on sacred texts or traditions, and sometimes in dialogue with philosophy (see significant examples of influential treaties of theological anthropology by Pannenberg 1983 and Pesch 1986).

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Scripture acted as a framework within which to frame any perception of human attitudes, or the extent to which the inspired text was developed—at many stages—as a result of lived experience, such as failures, conversions, perceptions of grace and rebirth. Many passages in the Old and New Testaments seem to have been inspired by experience rather than by direct illumination or revelation. This is evident in most of the sapiential texts and in the collections of sayings on human life, family, and social relations. A long process based on the interaction between revealed texts, traditions, and lived experience has resulted in a mature Christian anthropology, which is still in the process of formation, since the human condition and its cultural conditions are quite dynamic and adapting.

To some extent Christian anthropology has been historically configured and has matured through a process similar to other forms of cultural evolution; thus, we are still moving in an incomplete stage of that process. Indeed, we now have to deal with new data and developments in a highly contested and transdisciplinary field of views and theories about the human condition. Further complexity is added when we consider external factors that play a role in human development, such as the intrusion of intelligent technologies (Komuda et al. 2024).

The theological challenge lies in our ability to better follow and reconstruct this process in each relevant area of interaction, as well as in how theology can contribute to discerning, developing critical insights, suggesting orientations that allow for better coping with current challenges, such as dehumanising processes in several areas, such as health care or education, and designing sustainable models in threatening scenarios for humanity as a whole.

Christian anthropology has clearly been shaped by history, for example, by disputes between more optimistic and more pessimistic views, which have never been merely theoretical. If we revisit the disputes between Augustine and Pelagius, or even more so those that took place after the Reformation, between Lutherans, Calvinists, and Catholics, or even within the Catholic sphere, between Jansenists and Jesuits, we can always see a similar pattern of an unsatisfactory or always incomplete understanding of human nature; it is a mystery that defies a precise and definitive description. My suggestion is that we look at this tortured history from a cultural evolutionary framework, in which factors such as adaptability, contrast with reality, and the search for more fitting views of human nature, according to the time and conditions, might help us better reconstruct this process and understand the later results. This can only be performed as an exercise in “theology from below”, and therefore one that takes greater account of empirical data. This point is even more pressing in any attempt to do a “theology of human rights”.

We can even try research that follows a method of “reverse engineering” in order to better assess the interactions and circumstances that could lead to many anthropological perceptions. Anthropology is never just a theory, as can be seen in the questions that could motivate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially after the abuses and disasters of the Second World War or in the elaborations of radical anthropologies that stress more the alterity dimension, as happened with Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Henry.

The development of the second half of the twentieth century could also have an impact on Christian anthropology, since some issues have received more attention and emphasis than in earlier versions, such as the relational version of the *Imago Dei* or the growing interest in love, compassion, and similar expressions that go beyond a purely individualistic pattern. The question is open with regard to more recent cultural sensitivities rooted in the experiences—both negative and positive—of minorities who have been misunderstood and mistreated and who are now demanding social and cultural recognition. Theology should not ignore these issues and demands and should help to discern what rights can emerge from such demands. These developments once again invite a renewed anthropology, as well as a critical discernment, in order to better distinguish which anthropologies are more appropriate and helpful in each case.

5. A Plea for a More Empirical Theology of the Human Condition

A central part of the argument developed in this article is that we need to adopt a different approach to Christian anthropology, more inspired by empirical methods and more aware of its evolutionary condition, in order to better address the issues of human rights. Since this question—the determination and promotion of the fundamental rights to which every human being is entitled to—becomes a theological question, even in secularised societies, and is sometimes the subject of controversy, theologians who seek to enter into these debates must be well informed, and this includes not only a good knowledge of Christian revelation and the great traditions but also an acquaintance with the current factors, limits, and consequences involved in such a development and application of rights. In other words, an informed Christian anthropology that seeks to intervene in ongoing debates about which rights need to be claimed, which need to be better tested, and which raise questions or some controversy needs to complement its traditional wisdom with a set of data and analyses that can help discern these thorny issues.

The former claims need some further development and justification, relying on a convincing model of theological method capable of integrating empirical data and its elaboration. Probably the most difficult part of this process is to integrate an approach that has traditionally been top-down, based on received ancient wisdom or texts that we take to

be divinely revealed, with experiences, perceptions, and data that work bottom-up, in a more inductive way. In my view, there are two ways of approaching such integration.

The first approach uses empirical research and data to better attune central tenets of Christian claims about human nature. Some examples might help to make this case. Studies of altruistic behaviour—mostly empirical and experimental—help to build a realistic understanding of the balance between selfishness—linked to original sin—and the capacity to love, adding necessary content and nuance to Christian ideas about human nature. Many studies on the positive effects of religion—in the form of prayers, sacraments, or virtues—as a coping and resilience system clearly add content to Christian views of the effects of grace. Recent research on the cognitive and evolutionary study of religion clearly assist in better conceiving human’s religious nature. The list becomes even longer when we consider the findings of empirical sciences that describe human origins and evolution, or the biological basis of human behaviour, issues that have clear implications for the way we understand and teach doctrines such as man made in the image of God and original sin.

The second approach, when trying to integrate in Christian anthropology the traditional top-down doctrines and the knowledge from below, or a “lived theology”, points to the study of the effects and consequences of current interpretations or ways of proposing these doctrines. This model clearly adopts a more pragmatic stance, in the sense of looking for the fruits or practical results of the stated principles. This is a point already made by George Lindbeck in his classic book, *The Nature of Doctrine*, when he asserted that “the ultimate test is performance” (Lindbeck 1984, p. 134) to determine which theological model is more accurate and appropriate. There are many ways to test the extent to which an anthropological version—such as the extent of corruption as a consequence of original sin, or the reach of grace as a transforming instance—can have better or worse effects in Christian communities or in the transmission of our faith. After all, we are all aware of Christian expressions that have failed in recent decades, others that have performed better, and others that need to be tested and corrected.

The application of these orientations to the specific field of theology and human rights can be pursued after some previous steps that can reconstruct historical processes and interactions between theological principles and their application to human rights, specifically their successes and failures; history is indeed the first empirical field for a theology able to integrate inputs from below. Next steps need to pay attention to concrete experiences, data, and analysis about which rights are really helpful and needed, as well as which are less clear and need further discernment, such as some new rights related to sexuality and gender issues. These are questions that can be much better addressed by a theology that is well informed about the current research on the positive and negative consequences of the application of such rights.

Of course, the proposed programme does not render the traditional approach obsolete or redundant, since a systematic theological anthropology will always need to draw on central doctrines based on Christian revelation and their further elaboration, sometimes through difficult struggles and long confessional disputes. The point is that we now need the addition of more empirical approaches in order to make our views of humans more credible and in line with current scientific elaboration. To neglect this contribution would be to risk not being able to correct misinterpretations and misapplications of such principles, as has happened too often in the past, and to make their proclamation less significant.

The proposed approach is quite new and finds limited echo in contemporary theology. But it is by no means an isolated endeavour, as we can attest of a line of research applying these methods (Van der Ven and Scherer-Rath 2004). However, the works of great twentieth-century theologians such as Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Küng, and Lonergan have mostly followed the traditional patterns of deductive theology based

on a renewed hermeneutics of the Christian traditions and on a dialogue with influential philosophies. The case of Rahner's theological anthropology is paradigmatic, as he developed a neo-transcendental mode based on a reflection on the conditions of possibility of human experience and the search for answers to ultimate questions, which could be connected to Christian revelation (Rahner 1969). As far as I know, this model has not been empirically tested; it clearly proceeded as a reflection, deriving insights about human nature or characteristics that could provide a clear connection with Christian faith. This model has been very influential in contemporary theology, but I find certain limitations that suggest some alternative methods, such as those that take into account a more empirically informed approach.

To address some doubts regarding the proposed programme, theological or Christian anthropology is not just an adjective, but a framework or model for building a focused knowledge of human beings that has great normative consequences. Obviously this framework is above all a set of claims about what it means for Christians to be human, created, fallen, and redeemed by grace. But it cannot be just a set of doctrines if we overlook the difficult question of their interpretation at each stage of history and in each socio-cultural context. The key issue is how to prevent, detect, and correct misinterpretations or misapplications of such doctrines, for example, in the move towards the rejection of slavery, especially after a long theological tradition based on great Christian masters that legitimised such a terrible practice. Another more recent example is what we now see as a mistaken anthropology, based mostly on fear to condemnation, the one that presided over the rigorous strictures of sexual morality in the decades after the Second World War, which should be corrected. Charles Taylor's denunciations in this regard are very significant. The question is how we can correct interpretations of applications of these principles that have gone wrong or become clearly inappropriate, other than by empirical contrast or experience. The proposed approach is more aligned with the Catholic theology of "signs of time" (*Gaudium et Spes* 4, 11, 44) and the question of how can we develop a theology that is able to read and discern the signs of time without a focused attention to the empirical data and the lived experiences.

6. Human Rights, Christian Anthropology, and Empirical Research in Theology

As mentioned above, theological anthropology has never been just a theory or a hermeneutic, but a set of ideas, views, and values that have been strongly influenced by historical and contextual perceptions of human behaviour, sometimes under very difficult and testing conditions.

The current convergence between human rights and Christian anthropology is a point of arrival after centuries of maturation and many failures or negative experiences and processes that can be described in pragmatic terms of trial, error, and correction. The process could be repeated and has led to a renewed appreciation of human dignity and value, to the recognition of the sense of profound freedom, and to the contesting of alternative versions that could diminish the extent of this freedom or that were more prone to control and to limit rights. Indeed, this process is still open, and in many cases and in many cultural settings, it is far from certain that there will be respect or widespread understanding of those rights which in other societies and systems are seen as deeply dysfunctional for social stability and good governance (Villa-Vicencio 2000; Wolterstorff 2011; Witte and Latterell 2015).

Other factors that make human rights a rather open and uncertain project can be added to this process, such as the new forms of control, the new generation of expanding rights, and their connection with sustainability issues. The first is the emergence of new

technologies of control and manipulation, in many cases supported by intelligent systems capable of interacting with and better handling the human conscience and intercepting its interests and weaknesses. These trends represent a clear threat to the traditional view of human rights and pose a challenge when trying to update the current code of these rights, which must now include the right to information and to resist manipulation, or to form an accurate system of beliefs and judgements. This new panorama has justified the idea of a “fourth generation” of human rights, or digital rights (Risse 2023).

The second issue concerns the new generations of human rights, which can be articulated in different ways. The standard version refers to collective rights, such as those related to development, peace, a healthy environment and self-determination. The second version refers to sexual rights, such as non-discrimination, free sexual expression, abortion, equality, and even the freedom to choose one’s own sexual expression. In this case, things are more controversial because many cultures and religious views overlap and conflict with these new charters of rights, including many Christian traditions. This is an issue that requires more reflection, study, and discernment based on data and the assessment of practical consequences (Pocar 2015; Domaradzki et al. 2019). Only studies based on data can help to clarify to what extent the recognition of some rights, such as the determination of one’s sex or gender, is healthy. Indeed, there is an important debate going on about the consequences—purely from a health point of view—of accepting early treatment for gender reassignment.

The third issue at stake is related to the first, as the right to a healthy environment includes the principle of sustainability. However, the development of sustainability programmes in recent years creates the conditions for rethinking human rights and duties and placing them in a new context with foreseeable negative effects, even in the short term. In any case, it is difficult to express human rights as unfettered freedom in a context where individual free choices can have very negative consequences for humanity and especially for those populations most exposed to climate change, rising sea levels, or extreme weather events. These rights entail duties that, at the same time, imply some limitations (McGoldrick 1996; Woods 2010).

The question that remains is what theology can do in this very complex context with regard to the developments we are witnessing. One answer is to “wait and see”, since theology can only try to better understand what is happening in order to discern what to do and how to respond to these challenges.

Certainly, the developments described are taking place at a very practical level and can hardly be related to the great Christian traditions or judged from a moral system based on Christian revelation. Theology can do more than wait and see. It can accompany and observe real processes and their effects or consequences in order to discern what can be recognised as a “human right” and thus become something normative, as well as what needs to be approached critically, after assessing the negative consequences of an updated version, for example, the right to change sex freely at any age. But again, this is an exercise in “theology from below”, or a theology that needs to adopt empirical methods in order to better understand reality and lived experience.

Such an exercise is intimately connected with the anthropology proposed and to be developed. This means that anthropology—the Christian one, of course—is open to evolution, change, and adaptation, as has happened with the inclusion of rights previously ignored in the Christian tradition (such as the change on the death penalty in Catholic moral teaching or, more recently, the tentative changes on the religious rights of homosexuals). This is perhaps the most difficult point in the proposed programme, which claims that Christian anthropology and human rights must grow together and influence each other.

In this sense, few a priori ideas or claims can be assumed, and a very empirical approach inspired by a pragmatic general view is advisable.

Few guidelines can govern such interactions and processes. For example, “do no harm” or human rights should always be conceived in such a way that no one is harmed in the short or long term. Second, we should do the greatest good for the greatest number of people, in a sense similar to the utilitarian tradition, but which can be adopted in theological terms: human rights as an instrument for improving the human condition and maximising happiness or well-being for all. Third, human rights must be conceived in a way that increases sociality, compassion, solidarity, and concern for others more than in an individual way. And fourth, a principle of vitality can be added to these criteria: human rights must be conceived as a way to promote life in all its dimensions, to revitalise populations, and to heal the wounds inflicted on life by negative events (Flood 2019). Admittedly, the application of utilitarian ideas is far from simple, especially in case of conflicting interests, as happen between minorities and the rest of a society. However, the general principle holds, provided that we are aware of these nuances, the need to respect minority rights and to negotiate between competing interests. Such an approach could raise suspicions concerning unequal rights, depending on which populations we consider. This is not the intention of a more nuanced version of the utilitarian principle, which would pay attention to distinct contexts, conditions, and needs, avoiding the introduction of discriminations.

Christian anthropology understands human nature in the tension between its greatness as a divine creation and its profound limits and failings as a consequence or symptom of sin. It moves between the greatest capacity for love and distressing selfishness, between great vitality and mortality, between virtue and vice, between enlightened knowledge and deep ignorance, and between constructive and destructive tendencies. These tensions should be taken into account in the search for broad agreements on human rights, which could become normative and the guiding principles of human behaviour and social management, and as cautious principles informing about the complexities of the human condition.

Living in a cultural milieu mediated by strong prejudices, misinformation, and manipulation by interested parties, theology must become a tool of de-biasing and a means of obtaining critical information that shapes the right set of beliefs. This task is intrinsic to any attempt to qualify human rights, since they move in a cognitive sphere of beliefs and deeply held values, with all the factors involved. The task of theology can be understood as assisting in the formation of beliefs, from a normative point of view, to educate how to believe in the right way so as to avoid causing harm. This proposal should be again deeply rooted in a realistic anthropology grounded in empirical experience and a good acquaintance with the cognitive conditions that weigh in this process. Believing the right beliefs requires a constant contrast with reality as we experience it, a corrective instance after errors have been recognised. The normative aspect of beliefs and believing justifies a theological concern regarding how we can assist in forming the right beliefs or those more helpful in guiding human rights and the derived policies (Chrisman 2022).

The proposed criteria can easily be linked to Christian principles and values, and they therefore claim a continuity in that common programme described at the beginning of this paper: human rights must be thought in conjunction with Christian faith and values for a better development. This link must be tested and verified at all times and in all cases, not only in theory but also in practice.

The present proposal is a plea against the secularisation of human rights and for an active role for theology in this interplay, in the search for more appropriate and renewed rights needed in changing and new conditions. Theology—as in other fields—can save human rights from becoming a confusing and unbalanced charter of individual interests,

provided that it becomes a more “bottom-up” exercise, based on empirical observation and analysis of what is going on, what is working, and what is becoming unhelpful and even harmful to human development and flourishing. Here, we need to be aware of a “hermeneutic circle” that arises in the interaction between the theoretical representation of human rights and their application in concrete situations. The point is that in trying to avoid the mistakes of the past and to help discern new rights, we need to take into account the experiences and outcomes of current practices and regulations and to incorporate methods more attentive to the lived experiences (Swinton and Mowatt 2006). This means observing “from a Christian point of view” what is helpful and what is harmful in this practice; what rights enable effective flourishing, personally and socially; and what hinders human growth and well-being; this can only be assessed in an empirical way.

This is a new theological programme that needs further elaboration, justification, and even testing. The central question of how to render “Christian” an approach that could give normative character to empirical data is very pressing, since this perspective could denaturalise the Christian faith, which cannot depend on contingent data and human interests. However, the many errors we have noted in the past counsel a greater commitment to the empirical level in order to avoid the errors of an overly idealistic attitude. “Empirical” is understood here as a corrective, as a way of assessing the validity or suitability of theological interpretations and as a way of giving more content to some central tenets of Christian anthropology. For example, when we claim that “Christ saves us”, we can draw on a body of recent research on “religious coping” that testifies to such a positive effect of Christian faith.

The tasks described are part of a programme that takes on the character of a “public theology”, or a theology that engages with current issues of general interest and takes a critical stance in the public sphere to help discern what is better for us all. Christian anthropology becomes a criterion and a framework to better discern the direction and consequences of many cultural trends and developments that affect our meaning and purpose as human beings. But such an engagement is by no means one-sided, or one in which theology offers tutelage and guidance to a broad cultural and social environment, but one of active interaction, in which theology itself learns and grows, as it has done in the past, to better appreciate what contributes to human and global sustainability and resilience.

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Article

Fundamental Theological Ethics “*In Exit*”: New Categories and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Social Flourishing

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Abstract: Early post-Vatican Catholic moral theologians made significant global proposals for renewed theological ethics in their own time and culture. However, after the culmination of the work of these great scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, Catholic moral theology became anchored in contingent polemic and polarized debates. It ceased to offer integral proposals of fundamental Christian ethics for the new challenges in the personal, intersubjective, and social scenarios. Subsequent studies often focused on bioethics, sexuality, family, and social justice but rarely attempted to renew a public fundamental morality for the 21st century. The essential features of this article are the proposal of new categories and debates for fundamental moral theology, grounded on the conviction that promoting this discipline as a humanization proposal builds on the profound potential human beings are called to fulfill. Humanity understood in all its complexity requires a theological ethics capable of incorporating this human condition and its categories, such as vulnerability, corporality, and recognition from a transdisciplinary point of view. These challenges underscore the urgent need for a renewed ethical framework articulated in a significant language for our time. Drawing on extensive literature and analytical research methods, it examines the interplay between these multifaceted issues.

Keywords: public theology; human flourishing; interdisciplinary ethics; vulnerability; corporality; recognition

1. Introduction

Theological ethics experienced significant developments in the early post-Second Vatican Council period. Early reforms introduced a dynamic engagement with pressing societal issues, led by scholars like Bernard Häring, Josef Fuchs, and Richard A. McCormick. These theologians emphasized personalist and contextually grounded approaches to moral theology, moving beyond rigid manualist frameworks. However, since the late 20th century, the field has frequently faced stagnation, with debates often polarized mainly around bioethics and sexual morality. While these discussions remain important, they have narrowed the scope of theological ethics, limiting its capacity to address broader contemporary challenges. Social ethics, especially within the Church’s social doctrine, has been one of the few areas to maintain consistent development, as evidenced in *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis 2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (Pope Francis 2020). Nonetheless, fragmentation persists, constraining theological ethics’ ability to offer integrative solutions to complex, global issues.

The contemporary world faces unprecedented challenges, from rapid technological advancements to sociocultural and environmental crises that threaten global stability. These include the ethical dilemmas of artificial intelligence (Coeckelbergh 2020), the disruptions

caused by climate change (Méndez 2020), and the growing polarization in political and social spheres. In this context, theological ethics must reconsider its fundamental categories and practices to offer relevant and transformative responses. This requires a move beyond entrenched debates, embracing interdisciplinary epistemologies, contemporary moral issues, and language accessible to diverse audiences.

Wentzel van Huyssteen (2001) and Julie Thompson Klein (2018) emphasize interdisciplinarity as crucial for addressing multifaceted ethical challenges. Their work highlights the necessity of integrating diverse methodologies and epistemologies to construct a holistic understanding of human experience. Recent scholarship further supports this perspective. For example, Esposito and Maliandi (2021) propose frameworks that integrate philosophical anthropology and social ethics to confront the ethical dimensions of emerging global crises. Feminist theology also plays a key role in this interdisciplinary discourse. As noted by authors such as Carbine (2023) in *Nevertheless, We Persist: A Feminist Public Theology*, feminist approaches to theology critically engage with religious structures, advocating for gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms, all while addressing contemporary ethical challenges in the public sphere.

Theological ethics must rediscover its potential as a discipline capable of addressing fundamental questions of humanization and flourishing. The concept of “Theology in Exit” (*Teologia in uscita*), rooted in Pope Francis’s call for an outward-facing Church, advocates for theology to engage directly with societal and ecological issues, aligns closely with these goals, and proposes a paradigm shift inspired by public theology. This shift urges theological ethics to move beyond self-referential debates and actively engage the public sphere, contributing to human dignity, ecological well-being, and social justice (Francis and Ziebertz 2011). Such a paradigm calls for rethinking theological reflection, research, and action within diverse domains, fostering interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations to address shared global challenges (van der Ven 1993).

Contemporary moral theology can benefit significantly from integrating ethical and anthropological categories that illuminate human relationality and social responsibility, such as vulnerability (Montero Orphanopoulos 2021, 2022, 2024), corporality (Butler 2011, 2016; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2013), and recognition (Honneth 1996; Fraser 2003; Fricker 2007). These categories provide new avenues for dialog with fields such as psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Ultimately, this article seeks to recover the transformative potential of theological ethics, framing it as a humanizing drive. By drawing on interdisciplinary methodologies, engaging with contemporary ethical categories, and embracing openness to technological and social challenges, theological ethics can once again become a vital resource for fostering human flourishing in the face of unprecedented global crises.

Public theology also underscores the importance of community engagement, as seen in programs addressing systemic injustice and advocating for the sometimes called “vulnerable populations”. This perspective emphasizes interdisciplinary collaboration for the common good, urging theological ethics to address complex global crises, including climate change, migration, and technological disruptions. Historical examples of this approach include the Catholic Church’s involvement in addressing global poverty and climate advocacy through encyclicals like *Laudato Si’* (Pope Francis 2015). The categories that will be proposed provide a foundation for addressing ethical, social, and ecological challenges. The study also aims to demonstrate how these categories can be applied in practical contexts to foster human flourishing and ethical creativity.

Edgar Morin’s (1990) critique of reductionist paradigms further supports this interdisciplinary vision. By embracing complexity, theological ethics acknowledges the interconnectedness of social, cultural, and natural phenomena. Morin’s approach aligns with contemporary theological ethics, which must navigate the interplay of global chal-

allenges and local contexts. Thus, theological ethics integrates insights from philosophy, psychology, and sociology to enrich its understanding of vulnerability, corporality, and relationality.

This article argues that fundamental theological ethics have become fragmented and limited by a focus on issue-specific moral debates (e.g., bioethics, sexual ethics) at the expense of a holistic moral vision. The framework to be overcome is the residual neo-manualist approach that, despite Vatican II's renewal, still underpins much of contemporary Catholic moral theology. This approach emphasizes casuistry and normativity, often neglecting the broader anthropological and ethical questions foundational to human moral agency. In contrast, the interdisciplinary framework proposed here seeks to re-center theological ethics on categories that emerge from lived human experience—vulnerability, corporality, and recognition—thereby enabling a more relational and contextually grounded ethical reflection. This framework is inspired by moral phenomenology (Levinas 1969), relational ethics (Honneth 1996), and theological anthropology (Rahner 1976), offering a renewed vision of theological ethics that remains both doctrinally grounded and socially engaged. By doing so, it seeks to promote a vision of moral theology that is both humanizing and transformative.

2. Requirements for a New Theological Ethic Framework

In our increasingly interconnected world, globalization has profoundly reshaped human interactions in society, spanning every dimension of life. Heightened awareness of rights and global movements for minority advocacy have amplified the visibility of social struggles, while the COVID-19 pandemic underscored humanity's capacity for resilience through remote work, online education, and digital commerce. Environmental concerns now permeate national discourses, slowly embedding ecological care into cultural values and ethical norms. Simultaneously, unprecedented migration flows compel states to adopt public policies fostering openness to diversity. However, globalization has also entrenched neoliberal hegemony, exacerbating vulnerability and weakening social bonds through the rise in individualism and the decline of solidarity.

Modernity's trajectory has led to human-induced risks—climate change and nuclear threats—beyond our control, destabilizing societal, political, and cultural structures. This "risk society" cultivates pervasive insecurity and diminishes collective cohesion. Figures like Furedi, Bauman, and Beck highlight the fragility of modern selves, the fragmentation of communities, and the exhausting demand for individual self-construction in the face of institutional standardization. Against this backdrop, moral theology risks succumbing to rigid frameworks of universal norms that falsely promise certainty. Yet such approaches falter amid globalization's complexities and the Church's credibility crises over systemic abuses. Instead, Christian ethics must heed Pope Francis's call for renewal through discernment and the formulation of salvific truths into accessible, transformative expressions for all. Addressing the imperative of a theology in *uscita*, we begin by outlining the foundational requirements for a renewed framework before delving into its core categories.

2.1. Interdisciplinary Epistemology: A Fundamental Necessity

Addressing the complex problems of today requires theological ethics to adopt an interdisciplinary epistemology. Scholars like van der Ven (1993) and Thompson Klein (2018) have highlighted the role of interdisciplinarity in achieving these goals, emphasizing that collaborative methods can enrich theological discourse and its real-world impact. As Schweiker (2004) notes, collaboration among theologians, scientists, and humanists fosters constructive dialog that enriches the understanding of global challenges. This perspective is reinforced by Edgar Morin's critique of the modern paradigm of simplification. He

advocates complex thinking that acknowledges the interconnectedness of social, cultural, and natural phenomena. Morin (1990) emphasizes that complexity is a web of events, actions, and interactions that demands a relational and dynamic epistemology.

This call for interdisciplinarity is further supported by the work of Wentzel van Huyssteen (2001), who argues for a public theology that engages with science and other disciplines to create a holistic understanding of human experience. Similarly, J. Thompson Klein (2018) highlights the evolving relationship between interdisciplinarity and complexity, noting their importance in addressing multifaceted ethical issues.

2.2. *New Moral Categories: Adapting to Contemporary Realities*

A renewed theological ethics has the potential to address fundamental questions of humanization and flourishing by reclaiming its role as an engaged and relational discipline. Concepts such as the recognition of the other (Levinas 1969), corporality, vulnerability, care, ethical emotions, and responsibility are fundamental to addressing 21st-century challenges. These categories find their foundation in permeable and dialogical ethics, emphasizing the importance of constructing an open and relational epistemology that delves deeply into human and transcendent dimensions.

Climate justice, for instance, necessitates a revision of traditional moral categories to integrate intergenerational responsibility and ecological sustainability (Nussbaum 2001). The work of Pope Francis (2015) in *Laudato Si'* has been instrumental in framing ecological concerns as moral imperatives within theological discourse. Furthermore, scholars like Lisa Cahill (2015) stress the integration of feminist ethics and postmodern perspectives to address the complexities of contemporary moral dilemmas.

Additionally, the inclusion of moral emotions and corporeality in ethical discourse responds to the need to consider the complexities of the human being in their entirety. The works of Held (2005) on care ethics and Scheler (1973) on emotional intentionality contribute to a richer understanding of these dimensions within theological ethics.

2.3. *Significant Language: Communicating with Today's Men and Women*

A third essential requirement for a theological ethics "in exit" is receptivity to and dialog with history, circumstances, and the specificity of singular human experiences. This ethical orientation emphasizes engagement with concrete realities while steering clear of being reduced to a situational ethics framework. Instead, it aligns with Pope Francis's approach in *Amoris Laetitia*, where he underscores the importance of attending to lived realities as spaces where the Spirit speaks and guides the Church toward deeper understandings of human mystery. This attentiveness to the historical and the tangible enriches ethical discernment by rooting it in the dynamic interplay between divine presence and human history.

For theological ethics to be effective, it must be articulated in language that is meaningful and accessible to contemporary individuals and resonates with modern concerns and aspirations. Ricoeur (1995) emphasizes the importance of narrative and metaphor in theological discourse, highlighting their role in bridging abstract theological concepts with personal and communal experiences. Similarly, Tracy (1981) advocates for a public theology that engages with diverse audiences through accessible language and dialogical methods.

2.4. *Openness to Emerging Challenges: An Innovative Response*

Theological ethics that remain anchored in unresolved debates of the past risk irrelevance. Topics such as artificial intelligence, mass migration, the affirmation of LGBTQ+ rights, and the delegitimization of traditional institutions require a reconfiguration of moral categories. As Hauerwas (2018) argued, theological innovation must be informed by a

commitment to Christian praxis and openness to dialog with the contemporary world. This perspective is complemented by Mier's (1995) view of ethics as an "exegesis of human behaviors," advocating for an open and collaborative discipline with other fields of knowledge.

Recent scholarship on the ethical implications of artificial intelligence, for example, Coeckelbergh's work (2020), underscores the urgency of addressing these emerging issues within theological frameworks. Similarly, the works of Farley (2006) on sexual ethics and Arendt (1963) on the nature of authority provide valuable insights into rethinking moral categories in light of contemporary social challenges.

2.5. A Christian Proposal in a Plural World

Finally, Christian theological ethics must recognize itself as one among many post-modern offerings of life's meaning. Vattimo and Zabala (2011) stress the importance of a hermeneutics that renounces hegemonic pretensions and nostalgia for moral Christendom. Instead, it should present itself as a meaningful option for those seeking a profound sense of life and orientation toward integral well-being. This approach, as Montero Orphanopoulos (2024) notes, implies a permeable epistemology that respects the plurality of perspectives and facilitates dialog between faith and culture.

The works of Edward Schillebeeckx on the role of tradition and Johann Baptist Metz on political theology further illuminate the potential for Christian ethics to engage meaningfully in pluralistic contexts. These contributions demonstrate the importance of a dynamic and context-sensitive approach to ethical discourse.

The challenges of our time demand theological ethics that are interdisciplinary, adaptive, accessible, innovative, and pluralistic. Only through an approach that integrates these characteristics can theological ethics offer meaningful and transformative responses to help humanity navigate the complex problems of the 21st century.

3. Contemporary Moral Categories That Need to Be Incorporated into the Christian Ethical Discourse

Julio L. Martínez and Guy Jobin both advocate for a transformative approach to theological ethics, emphasizing its relevance and credibility in addressing contemporary societal challenges. Martínez, drawing on Pope Francis's vision, calls for Catholic moral theology to actively engage with the complexities of postmodern society—technological innovation, multicultural plurality, and ecological crises—through a method that is dialogical, interdisciplinary, and pastorally responsive (Martínez 2022). Similarly, Jobin underscores the need for theological ethics to articulate itself within the pluralistic public sphere, focusing on both rationality and recognition (Jobin 2006).

Martínez identifies "knots" within the Church—such as rigid dual moral frameworks and polarization—that constrain moral theology's adaptability. He calls for discernment and relational ethics to untie these knots, emphasizing the Church's active participation in public debates on justice, human dignity, and sustainability (Martínez 2022). This echoes Jobin's notion of "reconstructive discourse," where theology must integrate epistemological and ethical considerations to achieve intelligibility and credibility in the public domain (Jobin 2006). For both, theological reflection demands critical engagement with its sources and traditions, aligning with the conditions of pluralistic societies.

Jobin highlights the interplay between rationality and narrative in theological ethics, critiquing overly rigid rationalist frameworks that neglect the transformative potential of religious narratives (Jobin 2006). Martínez, too, champions a moral theology that prioritizes mercy and flexibility, resonating with Jobin's emphasis on the ethical responsi-

bility of theological discourse to incorporate diverse perspectives and shared experiences (Martínez 2022).

Both scholars stress the importance of dialog in their frameworks. Martínez advocates for a moral theology that fosters societal discourse, respecting pluralism while contributing faith-based insights to public ethics (Martínez 2022). Similarly, Jobin emphasizes dialogical processes that balance theological responsibility with inclusivity, fostering an ethics of recognition. Drawing on figures like Johann Baptist Metz and David Hollenbach, Jobin explores how theological ethics can transcend doctrinal rigidity and engage in constructive public dialog, offering a model for interdisciplinary cooperation and solidarity (Jobin 2006).

Ultimately, Martínez and Jobin align in envisioning a moral theology that is both deeply rooted in tradition and radically open to the transformative demands of contemporary life. Their shared commitment to dialog, critical reflection, and ethical responsiveness highlights the potential for theology to inspire pathways toward justice, solidarity, and hope in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

As an example of new core categories necessary for contemporary theological ethics and how they can be integrated into the discourse of contemporary theological ethics, three essential concepts are now reformulated adjusting to the requirements stated above:

- (a) **Vulnerability.** The integration of vulnerability into theological ethics transforms the discourse by shifting its focus to the relational and transformative dimensions of human existence. Vulnerability is not merely a condition to be mitigated; it is a dynamic interplay between fragility and resilience that opens pathways to solidarity and care (Montero Orphanopoulos 2022). This reframing positions vulnerability as a source of ethical creativity, fostering mutual support and engagement. For example, community-based programs addressing homelessness often leverage vulnerability to cultivate networks of care and solidarity.

Redefining vulnerability as a constitutive dimension of human existence highlights its relational openness and susceptibility to harm (Butler 2011; Montero Orphanopoulos 2022). This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of human lives, urging a moral response to marginalization and structural violence. Case studies from marginalized communities demonstrate how vulnerability serves both as a challenge and an opportunity for fostering solidarity and resilience.

Grounded in the methodological paradigm of *Gaudium et Spes* 46, which emphasizes integrating theological reflection with human experience (Montero Orphanopoulos 2021, p. 613), vulnerability emerges as a category with ethical-theological significance. By bridging theological anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and psychology, it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the human condition in its complexity (Montero Orphanopoulos 2021, p. 618).

At its core, vulnerability reflects the constitutive openness of human beings. This openness encompasses relationality, permeability, and exposure to transformative relationships, environments, and existential realities (Montero Orphanopoulos 2021, p. 619). It includes the capacity to be affected positively, through solidarity and care, and negatively, through harm and exclusion. Philosophical perspectives further enrich this framework. A. Gehlen (1980) emphasizes humanity's inherent incompleteness and reliance on culture for survival, while Nietzsche highlights human fragility as a defining characteristic.

The framework also draws on Adriana Cavarero's concept of "horrorism" (Cavarero 2009), which critiques the violence inflicted upon the vulnerable as a defining trait of modernity. Cavarero stresses that while vulnerability is a universal condition due to corporeality and exposure to others, it often manifests as an assault on dignity within systemic violence and dehumanization. Byung-Chul Han (2019) echoes this critique,

identifying neoliberalism's role in deepening individual vulnerability through atomization and self-exploitation, which erodes social solidarity.

Theological insights further expand the discussion. Karl Rahner's anthropology of human openness, or spirit, is pivotal in conceptualizing vulnerability as both a transcendental and relational condition. Rahner (1976) underscores the capacity for self-transcendence and relationality toward the divine, framing vulnerability as an ontological reality and a site for ethical engagement (Montero Orphanopoulos 2021, p. 629). Berríos complements this by situating vulnerability within the broader context of humanity's need for healing and restoration amid existential fragility, highlighting theological ethics as a space for transformative possibilities (Berríos 2004).

This interdisciplinary approach establishes vulnerability as a critical ethical-theological category. Engaging with this concept is essential for addressing pressing global issues such as social fragmentation, environmental degradation, and systemic inequality. The ambivalence of vulnerability—its potential to either foster solidarity or perpetuate harm—requires a moral theology capable of articulating human dignity while navigating the complexities of modern existence (Montero Orphanopoulos 2021, pp. 625–27).

- (b) **Corporality.** Human subjectivity cannot be understood apart from the body—or more precisely, the corporality—of the subject. One of the milestones of 20th-century philosophy was the so-called “corporeal turn,” which situated the human body as a pivotal subject of philosophical, theoretical, and even sociocultural reflection. This shift marked a true philosophical revolution, ending the paradigm of the soul or consciousness as the central and privileged referent for understanding humanity. Grounded in Merleau-Ponty's ([1945] 2013) phenomenology, corporality emphasizes the embodied nature of human interactions and ethical responsibility. It challenges dualistic paradigms that separate spirit from body, advocating for an integrated approach to ethical action. For example, ecological ethics often highlight the embodied impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations, showcasing the intersection of corporality and justice.

Corporality challenges the traditional separation of mind and body by emphasizing their interconnectedness in human experience. Phenomenological approaches, such as those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, frame the body as central to perception and engagement with the world. Recent research in cognitive neuroscience extends these ideas, showing how embodied cognition arises from the interaction between neural processes and physical contexts (Clark 2023). These findings have profound implications for ethics, grounding moral decision-making in the lived realities of embodied beings. Studies highlight how vulnerability—rooted in our corporeal nature—shapes ethical responsibility, a notion expanded by theorists like Fuchs (2022), who argues that embodiment forms the basis of relationality and moral empathy in contemporary ethics.

The distance between the self and the world is bridged not only through consciousness but also through corporality. Other philosophers, such as Gabriel Marcel and Michel Foucault, also placed the body at the center of ontological inquiry during the mid-20th century, initiating the corporeal turn. By the 1960s and 1970s, theories of the body in social life emerged, and by the 1980s, feminist theology, Black theology, liberation theology, queer theories, and the HIV/AIDS epidemics further solidified the body as a central focus of human inquiry, with profound religious, political, and cultural implications.

The universal human experience confirms that subjectivity is always embodied—an ambiguous fragment of space where spatiality, desire, and language delineate human

finitude. These same dimensions enable encounters between bodies, between groups of embodied subjects. The porosity of the human body is both its vulnerability and its capacity for affective connection, making it the locus of violence and love, along with a spectrum of intermediary experiences.

Corporality also carries significant implications in theological ethics, particularly through the lens of relationality and care. The Incarnation, a central doctrine in Christian theology, asserts the sanctity of the human body as a site of divine encounter and moral significance. This understanding compels theological ethics to prioritize embodied care, especially for the most vulnerable. Montero Orphanopoulos (2024) emphasizes that ethical frameworks must integrate the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of vulnerability to address systemic injustices effectively. Recent contributions from ecological theology align with this view, suggesting that embodiment is not limited to individual bodies but extends to humanity's interconnectedness with the broader ecosystem (Deane-Drummond 2021). Such perspectives underscore the urgent need for an ethics of care that recognizes the interdependence of human and ecological flourishing.

This perspective informs ecological and social ethics by stressing the interdependence of all embodied beings. Emerging research on ecological theology underscores that care for the environment and human vulnerability are inseparable dimensions of ethical responsibility (Francis 2015). These developments expand traditional theological concerns, bridging the gap between personal morality and collective ecological well-being.

In sociocultural contexts, corporality provides a lens for analyzing power dynamics and inclusion. Social identities, shaped by intersecting factors like race, gender, and disability, are experienced and contested through the body. Ahmed (2021) argues that societal norms often regulate and discipline marginalized bodies to sustain structures of power. In healthcare ethics, Garland-Thomson (2022) emphasizes the importance of recognizing bodily diversity to create equitable systems of care. Together, these perspectives challenge dominant frameworks that privilege certain bodies over others, advocating for a justice-oriented approach that accounts for embodied differences. Such critical attention to corporality aligns with growing interdisciplinary work on social justice, which positions the body as a key site for ethical engagement in pluralistic societies.

These insights resonate with the growing interdisciplinary recognition that ethics must be situated within the complex realities of embodied life. As Montero Orphanopoulos (2024) highlights in *Reframing Vulnerability*, acknowledging the embodied dimensions of human vulnerability challenges abstract moral frameworks, urging a more grounded ethical discourse that accounts for the fragility and agency of corporeal existence.

For Merleau-Ponty, the most decisive aspect of his philosophy of the body lies in recognizing human corporeality as an original and originating instance. Corporeality is a mode of being that resists reduction to the physical or spiritual and is entirely distinct from the realm of consciousness. The body is both subject and object, a "subject-object." For Merleau-Ponty, "the body is the being of subjectivity, the being of thought; it is also the way we access being or, rather, the way we reveal to ourselves the preeminence of being over our own reflective, intellectual, and cognitive consciousness" (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2013).

These interpretations have profoundly influenced Christian and gender studies, as well as cultural representations of the body. They necessitate integrating affectivity and sexuality while recognizing the social constructions of both the body and sub-

jectivity. Such representations mediate the individual's lived experience and their identity, their corporeality, or embodied subjectivity.

Considering the body and its reflective possibilities today allows us to conclude that the body is a *locus* where the subject's interiority—aware of its proximity to the world—becomes evident. This is a vital recognition and a phenomenal realization: to be in the world is to discover that the body perceives and inhabits the world, embodying the phenomena it encounters. Our corporeal experience situates us in the world, enabling us to inhabit and recognize things. Through this recognition, the body becomes aware of its surroundings and apprehends them for itself. Hence, sensations evoked by internalized experiences are intentional, as the body engages with the sensible world, initiating a form of reflection and self-awareness. The body thus becomes the link between the self and the perceived world, facilitating the comprehension of the everyday experience of being-in-the-world (Levinas 1969).

For this reason, the body should be considered a moral category within theological ethics not merely to regulate sexuality or conception, as has traditionally been the focus, but to reclaim corporeality as a fundamental dimension of living. The body is where we become aware of our surroundings, open ourselves to others, and truly exist as living beings within time and space—the coordinates from which we choose and act. As part of the human condition, corporeality is vulnerable, open, susceptible to injury, generative of bonds, and capable of error. These qualities encompass the full spectrum of human characteristics integral to vulnerability. In line with contemporary research, this approach advocates for a justice-oriented ethics that embraces bodily diversity while challenging societal norms that privilege some bodies over others (Garland-Thomson 2022). Corporality thus becomes a lens through which social justice movements and ethical theorists alike can critique and reimagine the structures of power and care that shape embodied life.

To construct an ethics that promotes humanization, it is essential to address corporeality—not merely as a material substrate but as the expression of the self, situated in space and time, in relational and social dimensions. Corporeality is the “place” of our shared vulnerability and must be studied as the complex reality it is: biological and sociocultural, affective and sexual, a site of exposure and recognition, a cornerstone of identity, and a continuous construction of self. It is a realm where both love and violence, care and harm, manifest. In contemporary times, no ethical framework aiming at greater humanization can ignore the essential role of the body in human experience.

- (c) Recognition. Drawing on Levinas (1969) and Honneth (1996), recognition affirms the dignity and relational essence of others. It situates individuals within broader social dynamics, promoting ethics of care and recognition. Practical applications include restorative justice initiatives, where recognition plays a central role in healing relationships and fostering community.

The first to explicitly address the issue of recognition from a philosophical standpoint was the young Hegel, within the framework of political philosophy, in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel [1807] 2017). In this work, Hegel examines the developmental process of self-consciousness and the formation of the subject as a self-aware being. In the section titled “Sense-certainty: the This and the Meaning,” Hegel introduces the notion of recognition as a crucial element in the formation of self-consciousness. Through interaction with other individuals, the subject is confronted with the need to be recognized and to recognize others as self-aware beings. This process of mutual recognition is fundamental to the constitution of identity and individual freedom. Hegel suggests, drawing from Fichte and Schelling, that recognition be understood

as a movement in which the subject-object knowledge perspective is overcome and a “subject-subject” relationship is developed, which also includes negativity. Recognition, therefore, is approached through struggle and love, at the core of the natural and formal relations that give rise to a threefold sphere: family, state, and civil society. These stages are essential for the political realm but are not confined to it alone. The intersubjectivity and the process of transcending the self and being open to the encounter with the Other to form a society are also the domain of “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). This is the world of ethical life and the ethical order that clearly requires attention to history and law.

The systematic globality of Hegel’s thought and the depth of his reflection have provided a theoretical foundation for subsequent developments. Two points in Hegel’s theory of recognition stand out as especially relevant to his philosophical thought and, simultaneously, to our study. The first element is the recognition that his philosophy is understood as dialectical, emphasizing the notion of the struggle for recognition at the intersubjective level. The second point is the concept of reciprocity, which demands recognition as a *sine qua non* condition.

Axel Honneth (1996), building upon Hegel’s notion of recognition, further elaborates on the social and ethical implications of the concept. Honneth argues that recognition is essential for human development, where individuals achieve self-realization through recognition from others within a community. For Honneth, recognition is not just about recognition as equal members of society but also involves validating their identity, capabilities, and contributions. When recognition is denied, individuals suffer from alienation and marginalization, which can have profound consequences on both the individual and social levels. Thus, recognition becomes a fundamental mechanism for achieving justice and fostering solidarity within a community. When coupled with Fricker’s analysis of epistemic injustice, Honneth’s theory underscores how recognition operates within power dynamics, particularly concerning who gets to be acknowledged as a legitimate knower and participant in social discourse (Honneth 1996).

Miranda Fricker’s (2007) theory of epistemic justice complements Honneth’s work by focusing on how knowledge and recognition are intertwined in the context of social justice. Fricker identifies two primary forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker’s credibility is undermined due to prejudices, and hermeneutical injustice refers to the lack of interpretive resources necessary to understand one’s own experiences. Both forms of epistemic injustice contribute to the marginalization of certain groups, preventing them from fully participating in the construction and dissemination of knowledge. According to Fricker, epistemic justice requires addressing both the misrecognition of the subject’s contributions and the creation of conditions where all individuals can be recognized as legitimate knowers. Her work emphasizes that denying recognition of one’s epistemic agency leads not only to social harm but also to cognitive and psychological damage (Fricker 2007).

Nancy Fraser (2003) builds upon Honneth’s and Fricker’s ideas by expanding the concept of justice to include both redistribution and recognition. Fraser argues that justice must not only address material inequalities (redistribution) but also the cultural and social recognition of identities and experiences. She introduces the concept of “participatory parity,” which calls for the removal of structural barriers that prevent marginalized groups from participating in the social, political, and economic spheres of society. Fraser’s focus on participatory parity highlights the need for a justice that accounts for both the distribution of resources and the recognition of individuals as

full and equal participants in society. In this way, her work enriches the discussion by emphasizing that social justice cannot be achieved without addressing both the material and epistemic aspects of recognition (Fraser 2003).

Hille Haker (2021) significantly extends this discourse by integrating recognition into a theological-ethical framework. In her work, she emphasizes the intertwining of recognition and responsibility, grounding her analysis in both philosophical and theological traditions. Haker identifies misrecognition not just as an epistemological or psychological failure but as a moral harm that disrupts self-identity and perpetuates structural injustice. Her analysis connects this harm to the broader narratives of Christian ethics, where recognition precedes and shapes moral responsibility. In this light, Haker critiques conditional recognition, which often reinforces power asymmetries, and argues for an ethics of recognition that is attentive to historical misrecognition and its moral injuries (Haker 2021).

Together, these theories of recognition—Hegel’s dialectical approach, Honneth’s social and ethical dimensions, Fricker’s epistemic justice, Fraser’s participatory parity, and Haker’s theological-ethical critique—provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between recognition and justice. They all emphasize that the failure to recognize individuals, whether in terms of their identity, knowledge, or participation, leads to social harm and injustice. As such, a holistic approach to social justice must encompass both the material redistribution of resources and the recognition of individuals as knowers and equal participants in the social fabric.

4. Conclusions

Theological ethics must evolve to address the interconnected and multifaceted challenges of the 21st century. This article has proposed a framework that integrates vulnerability, corporality, and recognition as key categories to reimagine theological ethics as a discipline grounded in both relational and practical dimensions. By drawing on interdisciplinary methodologies and engaging with contemporary issues such as climate change, migration, and systemic injustice, this approach highlights the potential for theological ethics to foster human flourishing.

A renewed fundamental moral theology offers a framework that moves beyond factionalism by reclaiming its role as a reflective discipline engaged in moral discernment instead of ideological entrenchment. Rather than aligning exclusively with progressive or conservative agendas, theological ethics centered on vulnerability, corporality, and recognition fosters a moral imagination that recognizes the dignity of all persons, regardless of their ideological stance. This approach does not propose relativism but calls for dialogical ethics that seek common ethical ground amid pluralism. By emphasizing relationality, theological ethics can facilitate encounters between divergent perspectives, cultivating a moral discourse prioritizing human dignity and justice over polarizing doctrinal disputes. This is particularly significant in contemporary ecclesial contexts, where ideological divisions often obscure the theological task of mediating ethical discernment in light of evolving human realities.

Rather than positioning theology in opposition to postmodern thought, renewed theological ethics recognizes postmodernity’s critique of grand narratives while affirming the theological task of articulating meaningful moral visions. The notion of ‘salvific truths’ need not entail rigid dogmatism but can instead be understood as the Christian ethical commitment to human flourishing, articulated in ways that resonate with contemporary experiences. As Gianni Vattimo suggests, a ‘weak thought’ (*pensiero debole*) approach allows theology to engage constructively with postmodern skepticism, reframing salvific truths not as imposed absolutes but as lived expressions of faith, justice, and solidarity. This allows

Catholic moral theology to contribute to public ethics in plural societies, demonstrating its capacity to engage critically yet meaningfully with contemporary moral and social transformations.

A renewed theological ethics does not seek to impose ecclesial authority on public life but rather contributes to moral discourse by offering an ethics of encounter. Catholic Social Teaching, particularly as articulated in *Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si'*, provides a vision of the common good that can serve as a bridge between ideological divides. While theological ethics cannot resolve every political or ecclesial conflict, it can cultivate ethical discernment that moves beyond reactionary positions. By grounding moral theology in principles of social justice, ecological responsibility, and the dignity of the vulnerable, theological ethics becomes a space where common ethical concerns can be articulated in ways that resonate across ideological lines. This does not require agreement on all doctrinal matters but invites engagement with moral principles that foster human flourishing in diverse social and political contexts.

Future research should deepen the exploration of the dynamic interplay between these categories and their application in diverse sociocultural contexts. For instance, longitudinal studies on the impact of vulnerability-centered community programs could provide empirical evidence for the transformative potential of this framework. Additionally, further investigation into the intersection of corporality and environmental ethics could illuminate pathways for addressing ecological degradation through embodied practices of care.

The framework must also grapple with critiques, such as the tension between universal ethical principles and the contextual specificity required for practical implementation. Engaging with counterarguments and alternative perspectives will not only strengthen the proposed categories but also ensure their adaptability and relevance across different settings.

A revitalized fundamental moral theology does not retreat into abstraction but actively engages with contemporary moral and social challenges. By addressing polarization, interdisciplinary barriers, and the ethical complexities of postmodernity, theological ethics can contribute meaningfully to both ecclesial and public debates. The task is not to dictate solutions but to cultivate moral discernment that is attuned to the relational, embodied, and structural dimensions of ethical life. In doing so, theological ethics reclaims its transformative role, offering a vision of human flourishing that is both theologically grounded and socially engaged.

Finally, the article underscores the importance of fostering a dialogical and inclusive approach to theological ethics. By engaging with marginalized voices and integrating insights from diverse disciplines, theological ethics can become a vital resource for navigating the complexities of our globalized world. This renewed vision positions the discipline as a catalyst for transformative change, promoting human dignity, social justice, and ecological well-being.

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Article

Comparative Public Theology and Interreligious Education in the Age of Religious Pluralism

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Abstract: The post-modern era is characterized by a structural religious pluralism, whereby the public dimension of religion has re-emerged as a prominent feature after the relative obscurity of the modern period. In the context of Christianity, the contribution of religion to the common good has been reflected upon in the extensive and profound field of Public Theology. Since its inception in the 1980s, this vast area of studies has encompassed a wide range of topics, including politics, civil society, economics, social issues, and justice. However, the interreligious dimension of public theology appears to be less developed. This is linked, firstly, to the discovery of the public dimension of neighbouring religions and, secondly, to the clarification of the relationship between this and Christian Public Theology. It is evident that the focus of this discussion is the development of a Comparative Public Theology as Interreligious Public Theology. This is a theology that considers the comparative study of religions in a pluralistic context, with the public aspect as its background. On this basis, the contribution has two main aims. Firstly, to identify the field of interreligious public theology, and secondly to concretise it by exploring the field of education from an interreligious and public perspective, i.e., as a contribution to the common good.

Keywords: pluralism; public theology; comparative public theology; religious education; interreligious education; common good

1. Introduction: Common Good in the Plural Scenario

The contemporary era is on a steep crest of history because the world, understood as a global society, will be very different from what it was at the end of the 20th century. Pope Francis (2019) himself foreshadowed this scenario of change when he stated: “ours is not an age of change, but a change of epoch”.

From a global and national perspective, several sociologists have defined our era in terms of local globalisation (glocalisation), which is marked profoundly by pluralisation (Robertson 1995). This pluralism is characterised by two dualisms. Firstly, there is the coexistence of religions in a single social and public space. Secondly, there is the dualism between religions and the secular in a sphere that is no longer solely private but also public (Berger 2020). The mutation in question entails a scientific rethinking, moving away from the traditional notions of society undergoing modernisation and religion becoming increasingly secularised. Instead, the contemporary era is characterised by a globalised society and a pluralistic approach to religion (Beyer 2020). In this new pluralistic context, the marginalisation of religious perspectives from academic discourse and the public sphere has gradually receded, creating space for a new religious presence in the public domain. This protagonism lends itself to a dual interpretation, given the ambivalence underlying the

religious phenomenon. On the one hand, there is the destructive and even fundamentalist dimension present in various religious traditions. On the other hand, there is the essential function of edifying a process of mutual understanding and social cohesion within plural societies, which require this unity in diversity and this harmony between different people to live in a peaceful coexistence within a culture of mutual recognition and acceptance.

The categories of intercultural and interreligious dialogue appear to delineate the route recommended by a significant number of scholars in the interdisciplinary field and politicians as a means of attaining social harmony and mutual recognition—two fundamental tenets necessary for the sustenance of any community. (cf. Council of Europe 2008).

The theological response to a multitude of issues that impinge upon the common good and the lives of entire populations in the social, economic, political, educational, cultural, ecological and religious spheres, with reference to the question of coexistence and the conditions for a good life, has constituted the subject of what is known as Public Theology in the Christian tradition. A theology that eschews parochial, individualistic and ecclesiastical considerations, and that is not limited to the use of a language accessible only to experts. Instead, it addresses issues of common interest and, in the pursuit of the common good, challenges people and institutions beyond the confines of the ecclesial enclosure. Martin Marty was the first to employ the term “public theology” to describe sociological analyses of civil religion within the American context (Day and Kim 2017). Furthermore, Brietenberg, to elucidate its scope, provides the following definition:

Public theology is thus theologically informed public discourse about public issues, addressed to the church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other religious body, as well as the larger public or publics, argued in ways than can be evaluated and judged by publicly available warrants and criteria (Brietenberg 2003, p. 66).

In the context of contemporary pluralism, the limitations of Public Christian Theology are becoming increasingly apparent on two sides. Methodologically, it carries the risk of colonising others, even when this is not the intention, unless it is open to the comparative study of religions and its methodology. In terms of content, public theology has primarily addressed ethical concerns, with relatively limited engagement with the dimension of religious pluralism and interreligious education.

To address the question of method, it is necessary, firstly, to discover the public dimension of neighbouring religions and, secondly, to clarify the relationship between this and Christian Public Theology. This will be done in the third section of this paper, after introducing the field of Public Theology in the next paragraph. To address the question of content, that is how to develop a public theology of interreligious education, this study will pursue two key aims. The first will be to delineate the domain of a Comparative Public Theology as Interreligious Public Theology (Cornille 2022), in the fourth section. The second will be to substantiate this domain through an investigation of the role of education in an interreligious and public context, thereby contributing to the common good in a pluralistic society, in the fifth section.

It is evident that in order to accomplish these objectives, it is imperative to delineate the concept of public theology from an interreligious standpoint. Subsequently, the capacity of religious and interreligious education to nurture the common good must be assessed. To address both these gaps, it is therefore essential to adopt an interreligious and comparative approach. This entails the development of a Comparative Public Theology (Chung 2018) or even a Comparative Theological Paradigm for Public Pastoral Theology (Bidwell 2015). The conclusion will therefore be an attempt to identify the contours of Comparative Public Theology.

2. Public Theology and Its Evolution

The concept of ‘public theology’ has undergone a significant evolution in recent decades, capturing the attention of numerous theologians. It has emerged as a fruitful and effective framework for articulating a form of theology that is particularly relevant in the present situation. This growth may be attributed to a desire to counter the ideological influence exerted by the privatisation of religion, on the one hand, and to challenge the perceived limitations of politicised and public religion, on the other (Cady 2014).

Public theology, therefore, will always move within the sacred/secular polarity in an attempt to redraw its contours. This is a first step, however, in which theologians like David Tracy (2014) question the meaning of *public* in public theology, and philosophers like Jürgen Habermas (2008) provide an epistemological reference in relation to the public secular sphere and religions, paving the way for multiple modernities other than the dry sacred/secular alternative, in which religions have a public role and secularity is open to the religious sphere.

The subsequent step is to identify and comprehend the religious plurality within the public context of a public theology. It is precisely at this locus that there emerges the opportunity for the comparative dimension of public theology. According to Chung (2018), Habermas’ contribution with his politics of mutual recognition, his acceptance of pluralism and religious tolerance: “provides a tool for a public comparative theology in the service of furnishing an epistemic stance with regards the secular public sphere and other religions. . . One consequence is that public theology can then exhibit the marks of a comparative study of religions”. Similarly, the contribution of the theologian and philosopher Raimond Panikkar (2022) is important. In his seminal work *Sacred Secularity*, he attempts to transcend the prevailing dichotomy between the sacred, as embodied in various religious traditions, and the secular. Instead, he seeks to contemplate the fundamental essence of secularity, positing that the sacred, in its manifold expressions, lies at the foundation of this phenomenon, no longer in opposition but rather in harmony with the secular.

Therefore, while public theology is frequently defined in reference to its relationship with Christianity, its fundamental tenets are not exclusive to a single religious tradition (Hosen 2012). Its future lies in its capacity to respond to the plurality marked by the two dualisms (many religions and sacred/secular). In the opinion of Sandal (2012), the notion of public theology furnishes a valuable framework for scholars engaged in the field of international relations, enabling them to engage in discourse pertaining to the inter- and intra-faith dynamics of economic, social, and political relations. It is important to note that these dynamics extend beyond the Abrahamic traditions, encompassing Dharmic and Chinese religions as well (Chow 2018).

The focus of this discussion is an area of research termed “constructive public theology” characterised by its interactive social process, which involves faith communities and different publics (Day and Kim 2017).

A frequently cited exemplar of “constructive public theology” is the pastoral letter published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1986). Entitled *Economic Justice for All*, this document is notable for its comprehensive analysis of economic issues. It was published in the context of the laissez-faire economic policies developed by President Ronald Reagan, which, in combination with globalisation, were causing rapid and unexpected structural changes in the economy. A notable element of the document was its ability to address two distinct audiences: the Catholic public and policymakers. The document’s language was meticulously chosen to ensure accessibility and credibility for both the religious community and the individuals with expertise and influence in policymaking. This process marked a shift from a theology addressing society, often from a perspective

of moral privilege, to a theology built with and through engagement with the diverse publics as responsible citizens (believers and non-believers) in civil and plural societies who have a power and a duty in building the common good. The same inclusive approach and spirit can be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Coexistence*, drafted together by a Catholic and Muslim delegation and jointly signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (Pope Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019). It is a document capable of addressing different publics (Catholics, Muslims, non-believers) with the aim of forming citizens committed to the common good.

Recent advances in the field of public theology have not entailed the establishment of a rigid doctrinal framework. Notwithstanding this diversity, there exist certain traits deemed indispensable in the process of “constructive public theology”.

Firstly, public theology is incarnational. Consequently, the objective of theological endeavour is to ascertain God’s intentions for all of creation, i.e., the common good (a holistic understanding of salvation where the whole human being, the whole humanity and the whole creation are involved).

Secondly, public theology is an endeavour that is perpetually engaged in addressing its reflection to various publics, each of which is unique and distinct, by means of posing questions and stimulating reflection. These publics include the church, the academy, society at large (Tracy 1981, pp. 2–5), economic sectors, the political sphere, civil society, social spheres, the educational sector and the public domain (Kim 2011, pp. 10–15).

Public theology is interdisciplinary in nature. Theology must draw inspiration from the social sciences, economics, law, history and anthropology.

Another distinguishing feature of public theology is its dialogical nature. This attribute appears to be inherent, given that it is a theology that no longer addresses society directly, but is constituted in conjunction with various publics. However, it should be noted that this dialogical nature is neither immediate nor universally accepted. Firstly, dialogicality recalls openness and thus issues of self-criticism, transparency and accountability/responsibility. Secondly, dialogicality relates to its ability to engage in dialogue with other theologies within a plural context. This capacity to engage in interreligious and comparative discourse is arguably integral to the definition of public theology. Therefore, its public character is shown in its openness to a comparative approach and to interreligious learning, especially when it comes to the development of a public theology of interreligious education.

The last characteristic of public theology is its globality. Public theologians and publications in this field invariably underscore that the focus of their reflections encompasses a broad spectrum of issues impacting humanity. Issues such as peace, human rights, integral human development, justice, national and global religious and interreligious education, war, and environmental concerns are among the political, social, economic, and civic domains that intersect with the concept of holistic salvation and the common good (cf. Day and Kim 2017, pp. 10–18).

3. Public Theology, Religions and Education

Within the framework of public theology, there appears to have been insufficient attention paid to the relationship between Christian public theology and other religions in terms of their contribution to the common good.

Conversely, it appears pertinent to acknowledge an interreligious and comparative dimension inherent within public theology. Public theology is not confined to Christianity, and it is conceivable to discern traces of it within world religions. Concomitantly, there is the potential for the acquisition of knowledge from these disparate perspectives, as they articulate their contribution to the public good.

Additionally, the evident interconnection of public theology with educational perspectives and contexts has been largely disregarded in the current discourse surrounding public theology. The role of religions in and for the public sphere, and especially for cohesion in a plural society, is always viewed ambivalently. While some perceive religions as sources of division, dissension and social instability, others advocate for their unifying and pacifying potential. From the latter perspective, the promotion of interreligious dialogue and understanding is posited as a means of enhancing the common good and mitigating extremist impulses. It can thus be posited that the promotion of interreligious dialogue and understanding is a significant component of public theology. In this regard, religious education and interreligious learning appear to be of paramount importance.

To elaborate further, two fundamental issues can be identified: firstly, the comprehension of public theology from diverse religious viewpoints; secondly, the challenge of interreligious dialogue and learning. Therefore, the necessity of religious education and interreligious learning for public theology, with a view to cultivating the common good in society. The initial issue is instrumental to the subsequent one, insofar as the public dimension of differing religions constitutes the basis upon which an interreligious educational and learning process is to be built.

3.1. Public Theology and Religions

In addressing the question of the contribution of the Jewish religion to global well-being, the concept of *Tikkun Olam* is arguably the most frequently cited (Worch 2018). Literally, *Tikkun Olam* means “repairing” or “mending of the world”. Consequently, the historical roots and contemporary significance of the Jewish concept of *Tikkun Olam* as a present-day concept for Jewish engagement in the pursuit of the common good is both real and consistent. Therefore, it may be suggested that this constitutes the genesis of a Jewish public theology.

Sahin (2018, p. 38)’s contributions to the fields of theology and education have led him to affirm that: “Today, more than ever, we need to develop an engaging ‘critical Islamic public theology’ that is able to elaborate on the educational vision of Islam so that its humanizing vision of upholding justice, showing gratitude and protecting the dignity and welfare of all can become apparent”. This is evidenced by his observation of the Qur’an’s core message to humanity and its vocabulary being embedded in a universe of embodied ethical meaning, merciful acceptance of diversity and searching for peaceful coexistence. The ethical logic of the Qur’anic narrative is easily perceptible: the act of benevolence on the part of the divine being is characterised as the bestowal of life upon humanity, with the expectation of gratitude and recognition in return. Those who express gratitude to God become Muslims/mu’mins (literally, those who are in a state of peace and gratitude) and are called to reciprocate this goodness towards the other and the entire creation. As articulated by a Prophet’s hadith, “He who is unable to express gratitude to people, is unable to express gratitude to the Creator”. In Islam, the concept of justice occupies a pivotal role. The Qur’an posits that the fundamental objective underlying the inspiration of numerous prophets is to serve as facilitators for enabling the establishment of justice among humankind (Q 57:25). The Qur’an illuminates the fact that God created humanity as women and men (the same essence) and as people of various religious and cultural orientations, with the intention that humans could be encouraged to acquire knowledge from one another (Q 30:22; 49:13). This suggests that ‘difference’ is recognised as a positive aspect, which has the potential to serve as an educational catalyst, promoting humanity’s openness to dialogue and mutual learning (Q 49:13). In a similar manner, the fundamental teaching of the Qur’an, *tawhid* (acknowledging Oneness of God), signifies the capacity to discern a more profound level of unity and equilibrium within the heterogeneity of life. It is imperative

for humans to strive to comprehend the interconnectedness and interdependence inherent in nature and human existence. This unifying vision of *tawhid* should serve as a guiding principle, facilitating the resolution of differences and potential conflicts. It invites us to transcend our differences and to identify a shared understanding and reach a fair compromise. This entails acknowledging the oneness of the Creator and engaging in virtuous deeds for the benefit of humanity (Q 3:64). In the event of any competitive undertakings, the Qur'an emphasises that such endeavours should be focused on performing good deeds, ensuring the dignity and welfare of all (Q 2:148). In the development of Muslim legal thought, this emphasis on justice and protecting the well-being of all was recognised as a fundamental source of law in Islam (*sharia*), as seen in the concept of serving the common good (*maslaha*). In the context of Islamic ethics and law (*maqasid al-shariah*), classical Muslim scholars have identified five rights that they suggest summarise the ultimate ethos. These five rights are: the rights to protect life, family (progeny), property, religion and human thinking/reasoning capacity. Sahin's experience as an educator within the Islamic context has led him to conceptualise education as a lifelong process of "compassionate transformation", with the overarching objective of fostering human flourishing. This transformative pedagogy, as posited by the author, is designed to cultivate values of critical openness to learning from one another, gratitude, active citizenship and civil engagement, and to guide towards a higher synthesis of mutual respect, spiritual and moral growth.

Heeson Bai (2018) delineates a Buddhist perspective on public theology by stating that Buddhism should be regarded as a system of lifelong education which promotes a post-egoic consciousness. This is a consciousness which is necessary for people who seek the common good through working with each other across the differences in worldviews, meanings, religions and spiritualities. The absence of any sustainable peace is due to humanity remaining at a level of egoic consciousness. It is therefore essential for humanity to mature beyond the egoic and move into a post-egoic, dialogic consciousness. The contribution of Buddhism to this transition is significant, as it provides a framework for transcending the limitations of the egoic consciousness and embracing a post-egoic, dialogic approach. The basis for self-other conflict, competition, both on the large and small scale, is dualistic consciousness, which perceives the world in terms of dichotomies (mind-body, good-bad, right-wrong, I-you, etc.). Most individuals, in most cases, experience egoic states of consciousness characterised by self-other exclusive divisions, a linear perception of time, and a sense of locality. However, experiences of post-egoic consciousness are not as infrequent as is generally assumed. Post-egoic consciousness is defined by the dissolution of conventional boundaries between the self and other, resulting in a permeable and malleable self-concept. This phenomenon can precipitate unconventional, that is, non-ordinary, experiences in the context of everyday life.

From a cognitive perspective, the concept of enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition involves a shift in consciousness, characterised by a transition from a perspective that perceives the world in dichotomous terms, such as self-other, friend-foe, good-bad, moral-immoral, animate-inanimate, and numerous other dualistic or polarising categories, to a perception of a more complex and dynamic interconnection and interpenetration of all phenomena.

From an affective perspective, enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition fosters feelings of *metta*, or love and kindness towards all beings, alongside *karuna*, or compassion for the afflicted, and *mudita*, or joy, in the company of happy individuals. These emotions are experienced in conjunction with a sense of *upekkha*, or equanimity, providing a secure and balanced perspective on one's place in the universe. The state of being enlightened is defined by the stable and sustainable establishment of these feeling states.

The lifelong learning process in Buddhism, known as the Eightfold Path, is considered to be the path to liberation from *samsara*. This process is comprised of eight integrated aspects: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. The initial seven elements are constructed to be foundational pillars that underpin Right Concentration. The absence of right concentration, in this case, results in the perpetuation of the ignorance that leads to the belief in an independently existing self, which in turn, is considered to be the root of *samsara*. As indicated previously, the deep dimension of the Eightfold Path can be regarded as a viable means of developing a Buddhist understanding of public theology (Walpole 1974).

3.2. Public Theology and (Inter) Religious Education

The necessity of religious education and interreligious learning for public theology becomes apparent when considering the cultivation of the common good in society. It is acknowledged that one of the most significant contributions that religions can offer to the common good is to mitigate feelings of hostility and estrangement between religions and worldviews, thereby facilitating peaceful coexistence and cooperation. It is contended that this issue should be accorded greater prominence in the domain of public theology. But to engage in a public theology of interreligious education means to explore the synergies of public and comparative theology, that is, to open up the field of comparative public theology. It is not possible to think simply of a public theology for interreligious education, but it is necessary to imagine a Comparative Public Theology for interreligious education, a common space where a dialogue between different public theologies can take place. In drafting the relationship between public and comparative, it is possible to speak of *public* theology as the final cause of the interreligious education process, since it provides it with direction towards the common good. In addition, *comparative* theology may be regarded as the material and formal cause, insofar as it provides the material and modalities that an interreligious education process requires.

4. Comparative Public Theology

4.1. Origins

Comparative Theology (CT) is a relatively recent approach to theological enquiry, despite the term's first utilisation in the 18th century to underscore the potential for formulating an alternative to the apologetic perspective on other religions. In the 19th century, the orientalist Max Müller (1972) employed the term extensively to denote a novel discipline focused on other religious traditions.

Almost a century later, the comparative study of religions emerged as a prominent field in the study of religions, characterised by the scientific principles of objectivity and neutrality. This shift represented a departure from the apologetic stance of mainstream theology. The comparative study of religion entered a postmodern crisis in the second half of the 20th century. The work of most of the old comparativists (Mircea Eliade and Gerardus van der Leeuw, for instance) was put under scrutiny, with the accusation that hegemony and imposition were inherent in the very process of comparing religions, calling into question its entire supposedly scientific approach.

In the contemporary context, characterised by its plurality and public nature, there is a resurgence of confidence in the comparative method and a renewed examination of methodological concerns in the study of religious phenomena. New comparative scholars have come to recognise the inherent value of comparison as an integral component of human knowledge and a potential means of comprehension in a pluralistic environment. Consequently, the argument for total incompatibility among religious traditions has proven

untenable, as evidenced by the existence of shared patterns that do not necessitate the adoption of a hegemonic or impositional posture.

4.2. Developments

Comparative theology is a field of study that involves the systematic comparison of religious doctrines, practices and beliefs. It goes beyond a simplistic scientific comparison of religions (comparative religion) to encompass a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis. A fundamental aspect of comparative theology is the understanding of at least two religious traditions, which requires the study of their respective texts, histories, teachings and rituals. It is important to note that any comparison is inherently premised on a particular aspect or issue that serves as the foundation for the comparison (*tertium comparationis*). It functions as a heuristic tool, which is perpetually open to elucidation and refinement. It may take the form of a generic theme, such as ultimate realities, love, the human condition, creation or knowledge in the different religions. Alternatively, it may be more specific, for example in the case of the different figures of salvific mediation, or certain rituals, texts or thinkers.

The overarching objective of comparative religion is to enhance one's comprehension of a religious phenomenon from an intellectual and scientific standpoint. In contrast, the primary objective of comparative theology is to further religious truth, thereby enriching the self-understanding of religious traditions and facilitating the spiritual transformation of religious seekers. The former pertains to the acquisition of knowledge *about* another religious tradition, while the latter involves the acquisition of knowledge *from* another religious tradition or the integration of the teachings of different religions with a view to transformation. The learning process can be understood in several directions, including intensification and rectification, recovery and reinterpretation, development and reaffirmation of the specificity of the truth of one or both traditions.

It is important to note that the common pursuit of truth through the medium of dialogue is at the very heart of comparative theology. This underscores its inherent public nature, as it is driven by the collective quest for truth that benefits all. As Cornille (2022)'s thought has shown, once the public dimension of comparative theology has been ascertained, four approaches can be indicated within it: the postcolonial, confessional, trans-religious and interreligious approach. Each perspective possesses its own significance and should not be regarded in an exclusionary manner, as it is from their collective examination that the most can be gleaned. However, it is this author's opinion that the interreligious approach to comparative theology characterises the entire learning process the most.

The postcolonial approach to comparative theology is predicated on the deconstruction of hegemonic practices and untrue dichotomies that project the identity or belief system of one religion against that of another. The almost natural approach of opposing religious identities is radically questioned, while the cross-cultural comparison highlights differences and similarities that cut across religious boundaries, thereby creating a climate for a non-dominant form of interreligious theological learning (Nicholson 2011). As a fundamental tenet of comparative theology, postcolonialism provides a foundation for all approaches within this discipline. Consequently, it can be considered a 'safe ground' from which other, more constructive forms can emerge.

"A confessional comparative theology involves a process of engaging in constructive theological reflection with other religions from within the religious framework of a particular religious tradition" (Cornille 2022, p. 591). This tradition is the starting point for engagement with other traditions. It is also the point of reference and the criterion for determining the truth of the teachings and practices of another tradition. Only the teachings that are in continuity with, or not in contradiction with, the core teachings of one's own tradition will be considered as possible occasions for learning. This approach

is predicated on a reframing of ‘faith seeking understanding’ *in the other*, with the aim of refining one’s own truth. It is a process that involves taking the other’s position into consideration and finding a renewed meaning in one’s faith only after confrontation with the other.

Comparative theology, understood as transreligious theology, is a form of encounter with the tenets and practices of another religion in which the home tradition does not play a normative role in engaging with religious diversity. As Hustwit (2016) asserts, a theologian who applies the outcomes of an encounter with another tradition to their own home tradition does so without necessarily seeking to align with any specific tenet of the traditions involved in the encounter. We could talk in this case of “understanding seeking faith” instead of “faith seeking understanding”, as in the confessional approach, since “a commitment to a faith community is not necessary, at least not at the beginning” (Neville 2022, p. 432). According to Jerry Martin (2020, p. 1), a transreligious theology follows a simple syllogism:

If the aim of theology is to know and articulate all we can about the divine or ultimate reality, and if revelations, enlightenments, and insights into that reality are not limited to a single tradition, then what is called for is a theology without confessional restrictions, a Theology Without Walls (TWW). Any approach that omits the insights of traditions other than one’s own falls short of being adequate to the ultimate reality. Any approach that insists on translating those insights into the terms of one’s own tradition risk narrowness, distortion, and misappropriation.

Lastly, the interreligious theological approach is predicated on the premise that both traditions engaged in comparative theological activity may be subject to “mutual illumination”. Consequently, it may be situated between the confessional and the transreligious. In its essence, it is faithful to the fundamental tenets of both traditions, like the former, while not being confined to the enhancement of the truth of a single tradition, as is the case with the latter. According to Arvind Sharma (2005), comparison is the hallmark of the study of religion. However, whenever two items are compared in religious studies, there is a tendency towards ‘theological reductionism’, whereby one item of comparison is assimilated to the other. This tendency can be illustrated by the understanding of Christianity in terms of Hinduism, and vice versa. A ‘methodological reductionism’ may also occur, whereby a religious tradition is studied through the lens of a specific method (e.g., dogmatic, genetic, etc.). These represent forms of epistemological reductionism. However, a more profound reductionism, termed ‘ontological’, is posited when one item of comparison is regarded as an incomplete representation of the other. According to this ontological reductionism, Christianity is regarded as the crown of Hinduism. In the context of the reductionist approaches, the author posits the following hypothesis: what if we were to compare phenomena not to evaluate one element against another, but rather to observe how our comprehension of these elements is enriched in the process, or even in an alternative dimension of religious experience that was not initially considered? This methodology of comparison, which the author has designated as “reciprocal illumination”, constitutes the central theme of much of his theological commitment.

The areas of possible mutual fertilisation or even compatibility between religions will be the subject of theological activity in this interreligious comparative approach. In this regard, the work of Aloysius Pieris’ *Love Meets Wisdom* (1988) as well as the contribution of Raimon Panikkar ([1964] 1981) with his *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, and more on the Hindu side, his *The Vedic Experience: Mantramañjarī* (1977), could be considered. It is evident from the outset that *Mantramañjarī*, for instance, is explicitly public and interreligious in its rereading of the Vedic experience. In the preface, the author asserts that

the presentation of the Vedic experience has not emerged from the dilemma of choosing the sacred or the secular, the Church or the State. The fundamental insight of the Vedic experience, as outlined by the author, is that there is neither essence without existence nor existence without an essence. This suggests the possibility of a sacred secularity. This sacred secularity, it is argued, is one in which the Vedic experience is able to articulate a meaningful message to the modern human being. Simultaneously, the Vedic epiphany, one of the most remarkable expressions of the Spirit, constitutes a part of the collective heritage of humanity. Its most effective function, akin to that of numerous other religious and cultural values of humanity, is not preservation, but dissemination in a spirit of fellowship with humanity at large (Panikkar 1977, pp. xxxv–xxxvii).

It is evident that this interreligious comparative approach is characterised by its openness to the potential for mutual learning and the exchange of ideas between different traditions. Both parties involved are cognisant of the truths they present and are susceptible to the truths that the other brings to the fore. Furthermore, the majority of the subjects addressed, and the language employed by theologians engaged in comparative interreligious theology, have the capacity to resonate with diverse audiences, encompassing not only adherents of a single religious tradition, but also believers of various faiths and nones, those who do not belong to any religion. Consequently, their discourse assumes a public dimension, as it is able to address the cultural and religious dimensions that pertain to the common good, peaceful living, and the establishment of a more just society. This is achieved by minimising distortions and enhancing mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.

In light of the emergent paradigm of religious pluralism and sacred secularity, the role of religion, and consequently its presence in educational institutions, is compelled to undergo a period of reflection and re-evaluation. Religion, it is proposed, should be recognised as a domain wherein religious phenomena are acknowledged, rather than silenced, and welcomed as a catalyst for human unity and the cultivation of fraternal bonds. Concurrently, the institution of religion should not be relegated to the domain of ‘someone’, but rather should be assumed by the State and religions collectively, without the constraints of competition or the threat of intrusion, while maintaining a stance of respect for established traditions (Olivero 2024). It is therefore possible to affirm that the educational project proposed by comparative public theology, in its diversity of approaches and unity of purpose, is capable of responding positively to the public role that religions are called to play in today’s plural world. It provides an entry point to the complex issues of *how* to address religious education and interreligious learning in the context of public theology from different religious perspectives.

5. Interreligious Education and Comparative Public Theology

Interreligious collaboration has an intrinsic educational value. Furthermore, the provision of interreligious education is instrumental in supporting the global imperative of peace, justice and human rights. Interreligious education continues to emphasise that the world’s religions uphold spiritual systems and religious values that repudiate violence and the pursuit of individual economic and political gains. In contrast, these religions advocate for the cultivation of love, understanding, and compassion for all individuals and the natural world. Furthermore, interreligious education aims to cultivate students’ awareness of the necessity for followers of religions across the globe to cultivate and nurture dialogical relationships characterised by respect and understanding. A fundamental objective of interreligious education is to foster understanding and engagement between individuals of different religious affiliations and avoid behaviour that may stereotype or demonize

other people or various traditions, thereby contributing to the collective well-being of the global community.

It is possible to propose an advanced definition of interreligious education as a continuous and interactive process through which individuals learn *about*, learn *into*, and learn *from* religions and the diversity of religions.

Interreligious education is a multifaceted concept that encompasses cognitive, affective, and experiential dimensions. The cognitive dimension of religion (learn *about*) refers to the process of acquiring knowledge about the various facets of different world religions, encompassing their breadth and depth. The cognitive dimension is intricately interwoven with the affective process of assimilating this knowledge at a personal level (learning *into*), thereby integrating religious education into their personal and intellectual lives. Finally, interreligious education is characterised by an experiential dimension, whereby students are immersed in the religious world of other faiths, with a view to learning *from* these other traditions. This experiential dimension encompasses a range of activities, such as interaction among people of different faiths, listening and learning about the experience of other religions, visiting places of worship, hearing about festivals and holidays, and listening to favourite religious stories in the holy books.

The field draws upon a range of disciplines including comparative religion and theology, sociology and phenomenology of religion, religious education, philosophy of education, peace education, and critical and transcultural studies.

5.1. Towards a Model of Interreligious Education

For some time now, the pedagogical–religious sphere has brought to public attention the question of how to theoretically rethink Religious Education (RE) and Interreligious Education (IRE) in a public and plural context and how to implement the related programmes (Engebretson et al. 2010).

Hermans' contribution (2003) on this point appears to be of significance. He commences his analysis by delineating the distinction between mono-religious, multi-religious and inter-religious education.

These approaches are then evaluated according to the content of religions and goal of religious education. In relation to the content, three points are emphasised, as follows: It is imperative that religious change and innovation be encouraged. It is crucial to avoid the pernicious influences of religious imperialism whilst simultaneously recognising and safeguarding religious diversity. Religion should be acknowledged as a distinctive yet integral component of the intricate tapestry of personal and social life (public aspect of religion).

The goal of religious education is the development of an individual's religious identity, which is achieved through engagement in religious practices (learning *into*). Hermans' interpretation of participation is defined as "peripheral participation", signifying that participation entails both a degree of identification with a specific practice and a process of negotiation concerning its significance. In the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the practice's meaning, learning remains unattainable, and this can be viewed as a form of indoctrination.

5.1.1. Mono-Religious

Mono-religious education is an approach to religious instruction that is characterised by its exclusive focus on a single religion. This pedagogical approach is also referred to as a transmission model, given that its objective is the propagation of a specific tradition. It does not inherently entail a complete disregard of other religious traditions. Indeed, it may manifest itself in two distinct forms. As an example, in Christianity, the 'hard version'

is based on an exclusive focus on Christianity, operating on the premise that salvation is the exclusive domain of the Church (exclusivism). This approach treats religion as self-contained and all external influences as irrelevant. All other religions are collectively referred to as 'them' or non-Christian. Conversely, the 'soft version' considers other religions as potential avenues for salvation, viewed within the context of and in relation to the Christian truth (inclusivism). In both instances, Christianity is regarded as the prevailing paradigm, both in terms of exclusion and inclusion, with religions being acknowledged only to the extent that they do not contradict the Christian self-understanding.

The mono-religious education in the 'hard version' is entirely averse to changes in terms both of religion and society, since it completely neglects any context, and proceeds in 'splendid isolation'. This version is predicated on a return to the past. In contrast, the 'soft version' permits some degree of contextualisation of faith, both social and religious, and to a certain extent, it allows for change. However, both versions lack provision for religious diversity. The hard model entirely negates it, while the soft model allows for it only from a Christian perspective. Regarding the third criterion, the model does allow for recognition of the distinctiveness of religion; however, it completely disregards the public character of religion and its cohesive role in society, since there is no meaningful context in which to grasp what is peculiar and what is common to one's tradition.

This model could be summarised as: sufficient learning *into* religion (not as peripheral participation in the 'hard version', rarely in the 'soft version'): "the learning goal remains participation *in* practices rather than development *through* practices" (Hermans 2003, p. 340); good learning *about* a single tradition; no learning *from* religious traditions.

5.1.2. Multi-Religious

The approach of multi-religious education recognises the current pluralistic context. This diversity of religions in society is the horizon of religious education. Other religions are not seen from the point of view of a particular religion, but each is described in its own terms. The theological basis for this educational approach is known as pluralism in the theology of religions: the same soteriological goal is shared by all and all lead to it. The reason for the variety of ways is cultural differences, but the ultimate goal is the same: The Real (Hick 1995). In terms of content dimension, the model appears to demonstrate a limited degree of interest in change and innovation, as evidenced by its profound sensitivity to the religiously pluralistic environment in which individuals reside. Religions are regarded as self-contained entities that must be understood in their own terms, without consideration for their dynamics, whether diachronic or synchronic, and their relationship. While religious diversity is a source of inspiration for this model, it appears to exhibit characteristics of religious imperialism (Knitter 2002). The third criterion concerning content is that religion should be both a distinct part of personal and societal life and integrated with it. The multireligious model is a pertinent example of this. It accords considerable attention to the distinctive character of each religion. Furthermore, religion is interwoven with other cultural phenomena and the personal lives of individuals, albeit to a lesser extent. In fact, it has a tendency to regard religion as a self-contained phenomenon, with the emphasis exclusively on knowledge of the different religions.

In terms of the objective of religious education, this model adopts a neutral, descriptive approach to religions. Religions are primarily viewed from an external perspective, thereby failing to facilitate the process of individuals appropriating the meaning of practices within specific religions. This model can thus be summarised as follows: inadequate learning *into* religion (lacking interest in 'peripheral participation'), effective learning *about* traditions, and limited learning *from* religious traditions.

5.1.3. Inter-Religious

Following the multi-religious approach, inter-religious education is deeply aware of the religious pluralism in society in general and in universities in particular. It is not so much the neutral description of religions that is at the forefront of interreligious education, but rather the dialogue between followers of different religions (learning *into*). Of course, dialogue is not possible without knowledge about them, and acquiring such knowledge is part of the process of dialogue (learning *about* and learning *from*).

The interreligious approach to education is possible in two variants: the simple and the complex model. In the case of a dialogue based on a specific religion (simple dialogical model) and aimed at cultivating a particular religious identity (e.g., a Hindu identity), the model employed aligns closely with the tenets of confessional comparative theology. On the other hand, if the dialogue involves several religions with the aim of promoting different religious identities (e.g., Hindu and Christian), it is classified as a complex dialogical model, which has similarities with the approaches of transreligions and interreligious comparative theology.

The simple dialogic model requires individuals to possess knowledge, insight and involvement in a specific tradition (Hinduism), as observed in mono-religious education. However, in contrast to this model, inter-religious education aims to foster knowledge and insight into diverse religious traditions. It endeavours to comprehend these traditions based on their own self-understanding rather than from a Hindu perspective. This model aspires to facilitate learning *about* both Hinduism and other religions. However, the ultimate objective of acquiring knowledge about others is to enhance one's understanding of one's own tradition (Hinduism). Through dialogue, differently from mono- and multi-religious education, individuals can broaden their perspective (learning *from*) and deepen their engagement with their own tradition (learning *into*).

In a public and pluralistic context, such as that of schools and universities, the simple dialogical model is insufficient. A more sophisticated form of dialogue is proposed as an educational perspective, in which individuals alternately adopt the perspective of each of the different religions (complex model). The aim of this is to achieve a process of "mutual illumination" for each tradition and the people involved. Therefore, the auto-perspective of one religion is critically explored from the perspective of another religion and vice versa. In the case of Hinduism and Christianity, for example, it is possible to elaborate the homoeomorphic equivalence between *agape* and *bkati* as two different but correlated ways of God's love, and to open up new dimensions to both Christian and Hindu faith as knowledge, precisely through a mutual fecundation (Sabetta 2020). In this context, Sheridan (2007, p. 6) invites us to think of most sacred texts as 'catalysts' that "can help to grasp afresh our own tradition and to make it our own in a way adequate to the demands and challenges of the modern culture that we live in".

In addressing the three criteria concerning the content of religions, the model of inter-religious education is characterised by its extensive capacity for change and innovation, its openness to religious diversity (which is regarded as a positive asset), and its resistance to imperialism. Furthermore, it fully embodies the involvement of religions in the public sphere. With regard to the objective of religious education, this model fosters inter-religious dialogue as a means to enhance religious self-development, thereby contributing to the common good and the welfare of society. Therefore, the field of comparative interreligious and transreligious theology demands a comprehensive and coherent understanding of at least two religions, in addition to the capacity to engage in critical dialogue and to draw insights from multiple traditions. Furthermore, it necessitates a learning *into*, that is, a "peripheral participation" in more than a religious tradition, at least in the interreligious version (in the transreligious version, this dimension is dispensable, but still important).

Peripheral participation is not the initiation in a specific tradition, but rather to understand the other religion or a particular religious practice *from the inside*.

The above evaluation establishes the third approach, the inter-religious one, as the most effective, albeit with certain limitations. They pertain to the hermeneutical dimensions of dialogue concerning the objective and methodologies involved in understanding and learning from other perspectives: to what extent does inter-religious education effectively engage with the other? What does it mean to understand the other?

It has been suggested that these limitations can be addressed by referring to Taylor (1994)'s 'hermeneutics of recognition', according to which there is a close relationship between identity (being oneself) and recognition by the other. Therefore, recognition implies both equal respect and equality for all cultures and religions in terms of meanings and developments of self.

In addition, the criticisms of Taylor's position have the capacity to reorient it in terms of recognition of *distinctiveness* (people do not ask to be recognised as equal, they want recognition of what is peculiar to them); recognition of *suffering and injustice* (non-recognition of cultural distinctiveness is often accompanied by social and economic marginalization) and recognition of *otherness*.

In relation to the third point, four fundamental attitudes towards the 'otherness of the other' can be identified: the first being the tendency to equate the other with oneself; the second is the recognition of the other as a completely unknown entity; the third is the search for complementarity; and finally, the fourth is the capacity to be oneself in a foreign context.

The development of this fourth attitude, the most effective, depends on the simultaneous fulfilment of three conditions: the recognition of the other as alterity, the acceptance of the concept of my self-identity as being open to the otherness within me (the other is not extraneous, but rather constitutes the other part of me), and the pursuit of communion and co-existence. Furthermore, it is imperative to derive three hermeneutical attitudes from the preceding conditions. Firstly, the observer must maintain a detached perspective to accurately and neutrally perceive the other. Secondly, the observer must engage in participatory observation to comprehend the other in the other's own terms. Thirdly, the observer must acquire a comparative interpretation to identify a space for coexistence (Sundermeier 1999).

Finally, it is this author's opinion that these three conditions and three hermeneutical attitudes are completely satisfied by referring to the entire educational programme that Comparative Public theology proposes in terms of four approaches: the postcolonial, confessional, transreligious and interreligious (Valkenberg et al. 2022). Therefore, when considering pedagogical approaches, Comparative Public Theology emerges as a particularly effective and suitable methodology for interreligious education. This is due to its ability to fully address the three dimensions of learning *about*, learning *into*, and learning *from*.

6. Conclusions

Reading the signs of the times means addressing the public and pluralistic context in which we live (cf. Acts 17, 28), where the public dimension of religion has re-emerged in a situation of multiple religious presence. The public aspect has been addressed using the tool of Public Theology, leading to the identification of an inter-religious public theological space where different theological approaches can dialogue in the right direction, that is towards the common good. Religious plurality has been approached theologically through the lens of Comparative Theology, which has helped us to understand how dialogue is possible. The synthesis of this double movement has been identified as Comparative Public

Theology. Interreligious education is a plural and pluralistic environment that we have chosen to address through the lens of Comparative Public Theology. At the end of our analysis, Comparative Public theology emerges as a particularly effective and appropriate methodology for interreligious education. This is due to its ability to fully address the three dimensions of learning *about*, learning *into* and learning *from*.

Clooney (2001) offers a comprehensive definition of *fides querens intellectum*, articulating its essence as interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional in nature. The term ‘interreligious’ signifies its presence across traditions, and there are no good reasons today to keep theological traditions and theologies separate; this concept is further reinforced by the notion of ‘comparative’, which underscores the process of elucidation through comparisons, facilitated by the acknowledgement of a common ground; the term ‘dialogical’ is employed here in the sense of ‘accountable’. This denotes the emerging necessity and capacity to justify one’s position in such a manner that it is as accessible and comprehensible as possible to individuals both within and outside one’s own tradition. In this author’s opinion, this quality might be more appropriately designated ‘public’; it is evident that the preceding reflections on theology as interreligious, comparative, and dialogical are intended to render more plausible the capacity of theologians to articulate their traditions’ confessional claims, even in a decidedly pluralistic and public world. This brief description is, in the opinion of the author, not far from a tentative definition of Comparative Public Theology.

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Article

Public Religious Pedagogy Amidst Religious Pluralism: Qualitative Study Among Hindu and Muslim Educators in Salesian Institutions of Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract: Overcoming its self-referential preoccupations, theology today is urged to exit into the public square characterized by multiple types of diversity. One of the crucial public domains in which religions have played a significant role is education. In the contemporary multireligious Indian context, the question that arises is whether we can consider Salesian pedagogy as public religious pedagogy, that is, if educators affiliated to neighbour religions can share the Salesian/religious pedagogy in Salesian educational institutions. It is our contention that the prism of public theology can shed some light on such a possibility. With this intent, we first elucidate the configuration of public theology amidst religious pluralism focusing successively on public practical theology of education, public religious education, and public religious pedagogy. This is then followed by a synthesis of Salesian pedagogy and the research design of a qualitative study on its lived experience among Hindu and Muslim educators, namely, professors in Salesian colleges, teachers in Salesian schools, and social collaborators in Salesian study centres of Tamil Nadu, India. Lastly, based on the emerging findings we highlight the relevance and advancement of Salesian pedagogy as public religious pedagogy.

Keywords: public theology of education; public religious pedagogy; Salesian pedagogy; neighbour religions

1. Introduction

Generally, the first use of the expression “public theology” is attributed to Martin E. Marty (1974); and yet we cannot disregard the ecumenical book series *Theologia publica* published since 1966, reaching the 14th volume by 1970. It was published by Ingo Hermann, Catholic theologian and radio journalist, together with Heinz Robert Schlette, professor at the University of Education in Bonn, Germany (Pirner 2019b, p. 41). Then there are those who had engaged in public theology much earlier, without making use of the term, like M. M. Thomas (1916–1996) in the Indian context (Moe 2024, pp. 88–95). We can safely affirm that, since the second half of the 20th century, public theologizing has evolved in varied ways, engaging progressively numerous intersecting perspectives and methodologies. On his part, Pope Francis (2023) recently urged theology to overcome its obsession with self-referential preoccupations and exit into the public square characterized by multiple types of diversity (religious, ethical, cultural, linguistic, social, political, economic, ecological, etc.) and contribute to a better world along with others engaged in the same venture. Instead of being reduced to another sector of theology, public theology transpires as a paradigm shift in theologizing as a whole that necessitates rethinking and widening of the entire field of

reflection, research, and action with reference to diverse realms of human and ecological welfare. By exiting into the public sphere, theology then can lay bare its public significance.

A manifest challenge and opportunity for public theology in the Indian context is its time-honoured religious pluralism that touches every other sector of the public domain. Religions with their anthropological vision bound to the transcendent or immanent Reality can differ in their notion of human welfare and fulfilment. In effect, the three major religions in the Indian context, namely, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, approach human reality in diverse ways. We can then expect differences between Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in their approach to human development and common good, not only on the basis of their specific religious beliefs, practices, and socialization but also on account of their relative group size: according to the last available census of 2011, Christians (2.3% in India, 6.1% in Tamil Nadu) and Muslims (14.2% in India, 5.9% in Tamil Nadu) are minority groups, while Hindus (79.8% in India, 87.6% in Tamil Nadu) form the majority.

In the multifaceted Indian context, youth is a crucial category for the present and future of society. According to the National Statistical Office of India, the youth population, defined as those between the ages of 15 and 29, comprised 27.2% of the country's overall population of 1.4 billion in 2021. This proportion is expected to decline to 22.7% by 2036, but the youth population is projected to still be large, around 345 million. It means that the welfare of Indian society is to a great extent determined by the education of youth who form about one-fourth of the population. Education of youth is a complex process that aims at their integral human development, encompassing religious, cultural, socio-political, and economic formation, and empowers them to be active agents of their own wellbeing and that of society at large.

The educational process that aims at the human development of the young in various sectors of the public domain cannot ignore the challenges and opportunities posed by religious diversity. Here our focus is on Salesian/Christian educational institutions. In effect, since its origin Christianity has witnessed its faith through diverse forms of service to those in need. Religious orders and congregations and Christian lay associations and movements articulate their service (ministry) in the public square on the basis of their charism inspired by the Spirit of God. According to Pope John Paul II (1998), charism and ministries are inspired by the Holy Spirit, with the variety of charisms corresponding to the variety of services (ministries). In this sense, Salesians, the religious congregation founded by St. John Bosco (1815–1888), popularly known as Don Bosco, display the charism of educating the youth. On the basis of his own experience among youth in Turin, Italy, Don Bosco developed a religious pedagogy, which he presented as a “preventive system” in 1877 as opposed to the then prevalent “repressive system”. In the contemporary multireligious Indian context, the question that arises is whether people of “neighbour religions”—an expression assumed by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC 2023) in the place of “other religions”—namely, Hindus and Muslims, can share the Salesian pedagogy, namely, the methodology of Salesian educational engagement. It is our contention that the prism of public theology can shed some light on such a possibility.

With this intent, we first elucidate the configuration of public theology amidst religious pluralism, focusing successively on public practical theology of education, public religious education, and public religious pedagogy. This is then followed by a synthesis of Salesian pedagogy and the research design of a qualitative study on its lived experience among Hindu and Muslim colleagues in educational engagement, namely, professors in Salesian colleges, teachers in Salesian schools, and collaborators in Salesian social service centres involved in education of the young in Tamil Nadu, India. Lastly, based on the emerging findings we highlight the relevance and advancement of Salesian pedagogy as public religious pedagogy.

2. Multiple Perspectives of Public Theology

The debate over the years has identified public theology as a theology intelligible, assessable, and convincing to those inside the Church and those outside in the public square. “Public” here refers to that which is available to all intelligent, reasonable, and responsible members of a society despite their religio-cultural differences. Public theology should then be capable of persuading and moving to action both followers of Christian and neighbour religions. In other words, public theology stands for how faith is accessible and accountable to the public; how it contributes to the public sphere of common good. As a theology focused on humanizing goals, it should encourage humanizing actions and challenge dehumanizing trends; with its ability for reason, debate, and consensus it should engage in public discourses that reinforce transformative processes. In a way, it adds to the public debate, to the vitality of a democratic society (Himes and Himes 1993, pp. 1–27; Breitenberg 2010, pp. 3–17).

2.1. Theology “Ad Intra” and “Ad Extra”

Theology *ad intra* has a centripetal focus of gathering everyone into the Church, the Universal Sacrament of Salvation, and making available the divine revelation and God’s offer of eschatological salvation. As such, theology is concerned with the comprehension and progressive realization of the Reign of God. In its evolution, theological tradition has gradually differentiated its various branches assuming specific methodologies: scriptural/biblical theology with its literary method of textual and inter-textual analysis providing the basis for ecclesial faith; systematic/philosophical theology with its analytical-critical method of seeking ever deeper and coherent comprehension of ecclesial faith; historical theology with its historical-critical method focused on the diachronic development of ecclesial faith and life; and practical/pastoral theology with its hermeneutical and empirical-critical method attentive to the ongoing synchronic development of ecclesial life and praxis.

The paradigm shift that is called for in these intersecting branches of theology stems from the “glocal” (global–local) nature of theologizing and accordingly reviewing the epistemologies and methodologies with reference to the public sphere. That is, in the academic sphere the envisioned paradigm shift induces a theological advancement in terms of public scriptural theology, public systematic theology, public historical theology, and public practical theology (cf. Jacobsen 2012; Day and Kim 2017). Such public theologies engage not only the academic agency but also the ecclesial and societal agencies (see Figure 1). In other words, public theology is conceived in the Church, critically developed in the academy, and co-generated in conversation with society at large, using the public criteria of rationality (Peters 2018).

In this vein, public scriptural theology with its literary method traces the source of Christian tradition beginning with the Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Western linguistic and cultural underpinnings. While scriptural/biblical theology, with its textual and intertextual analysis, delves into the origin and development of Christian tradition shaped by these linguistic and cultural resources, the public theological shift would require recognizing how neighbour religions’ scriptures/religious literatures (Vedas, Agamas, Quran, etc.) embedded in their own languages and cultures inspire their believers and contribute to human flourishing (Patrick 2023, pp. 222–25). Public theological thrust would also entail engaging religious and non-religious literatures of local and foreign languages in the process of shaping and representing human fulfilment and common good.

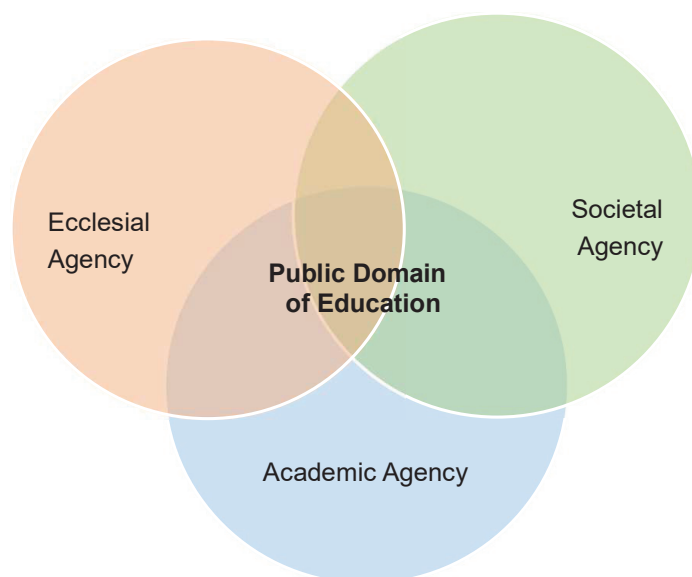


Figure 1. The three agencies of Church, Society, and Academy engaging the Public domain of Education.

Although systematic/philosophical theology—with its analytical–critical method—aims at the universal understanding of Christian faith, its development is marked by the contribution of contextual linguistic–philosophical traditions in which Christianity had taken root. The question that arises now concerns the extent to which languages, philosophies, and cultural context of contemporary local churches in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania can actually shape or should shape the development of public systematic/philosophical theology, taking stock of local religious and anthropological visions. In its search for the ultimate truth, public systematic theology must likewise dialogue with the scientific world, particularly with natural sciences. Forming an integral part of this sector of theology are the public fundamental theology with its apologetic intent and public moral theology with its ethical concern. These can contribute to human wellbeing and social welfare, taking into consideration the plurality of religious and secular worldviews and values (cf. Peters 2018, 2021; Jacobsen 2012).

Likewise, public historical theology, with its historical–critical method, has to trace the development of Christian tradition with its internal divisions and external conflicts amidst religio-cultural pluralism. Although it has been contributing to common good and human development, Christianity’s historic links with imperialism and colonialism through the centuries cannot be ignored and which now would call for its commitment to a new world order through planetary decolonial theology (Balasuriya 1984). In his recent letter on the study of Church history, Pope Francis (2024) bemoans the absence of historical awareness in the Church and in civil society and appeals for a participatory knowledge of history as fathoming the past can lead to transforming the present, overcoming ideological distortions. It is evident that Church history cannot be disconnected from the “glocal” history of peoples and nations.

Since our research study is focused on the academic sphere of public practical theology, in the pluralistic context, we shall elaborate on these in the following two subsections.

2.2. Public Practical Theology

With its hermeneutic dynamics of praxis–reflection–praxis, practical theology is already in tune with public theology (Graham 2008). In the case of practical theology, *ecclesial* praxis has to be understood in association with the underlying *Christian* praxis shared by other denominations, and, in turn, with the underlying *religious* praxis shared by

diverse religious traditions, encompassing as well the underlying *human* praxis common to non-religious or secularized persons. In other words, as its material object, practical theology is focused on the continuum of ecclesial–ecumenical–religious–human praxis with mostly *ad intra* concern for transforming the Church and thus building up the Reign of God (formal object) (Midali 2011b). In this vein, public practical theology with its interrelated view of ecclesial–ecumenical–religious–human praxis, but with a more *ad extra* concern, seeks to promote the humanization of society as a sign of God’s Reign of peace and justice (Peters 2018, pp. 160–62; Dal Corso and Salvarani 2020; Dal Corso 2022). Evidently, in humanizing society, the Church too acquires its authenticity, transforming its praxis ever more into authentic human action. Authentic human action is already Christian, just as Christian praxis is genuine when it is also authentically human.

In this vein, public practical theology seeks to transform current society along with other local religious and non-religious traditions by contributing in a collaborative manner to common good, human dignity, human rights, and human responsibility (Himes and Himes 1993, pp. 16–17). Public practical theology, therefore, assumes the empirical–critical method that can engage the three agencies of public theology, namely, ecclesial, societal, and academic (see Figure 1). Insofar as an individual’s agency comprises cognitive, affective, and operative dimensions, and societal reality encompasses religio-cultural, socio-political, and economic–ecological features, we can speak of intellectual (mental, emotional, spiritual), physical (health), psychological, cultural (linguistic, musical, aesthetic, etc.), social (relational, communicational), environmental, and economical/financial (occupational) welfare as the pursuit of public practical theology (cf Aziz 2022; Dreyer 2004).

As mentioned above, the material and formal objects of public practical theology necessitate the empirical–critical method of research that can engage the three agencies: ecclesial, societal, and academic. Intra-disciplinarity, i.e., assuming an empirical method in theology (analogous to incorporating literary, semiotic, philosophical, historical, archaeological, and other methods), enables appropriate interdisciplinarity with other human and natural sciences such as cultural, social, juridical, political, economic, biological, and ecological studies. In its turn, an interdisciplinary approach can enable a transdisciplinary (meta-disciplinary) focus on public aspirations of common good, human wellbeing, and environmental care. In this sector of public practical theology, we can situate the discipline of public spiritual theology aiming at physical, mental, relational, and spiritual wellbeing with its openness to mindfulness, zen, yoga, holotropic breathwork, etc. (Grof and Grof 2010). Likewise, with reference to the public domain of education, we can associate public practical theology—as we shall see further below—with public theology of education and public religious pedagogy. But before that we shall briefly examine public theology amidst multiple pluralism.

2.3. Public Theology in the Pluralistic Indian Context

Public theology is essentially contextual in that it is determined by the situational factors of religious traditions: their being native or migrant, their having a minority or majority status, their historical development, and their resilience to globalization. Public theology of a native religion like Hinduism in the Indian context is quite different from that of a deterritorialized or migrant religion like Christianity in India. As the core of the local context, a native religion flourishes spontaneously in reciprocal interaction with other subsystems: cultural–linguistic, socio-political, and economic–ecological. Its relationship is like a natural bond between soul and body. For this reason, the public theology of Hinduism rooted in all the spheres of life through local languages is a natural occurrence. In other words, native religion has a natural propensity for public theological discourse in its context. A non-native or deterritorialized religion, like Christianity, has the difficult task

of gradually entering the various spheres of local life, aware that it has been expressing itself in other subsystems inherent to its own origin and evolution. Of course, through native Christians the deterritorialized Christian tradition can become credible and meaningful to the extent it empathetically and critically engages the various spheres of life. Local language as an abstract representation of values and visions of these spheres is pivotal to Christian public theological discourse.

In order to contribute to common good in terms of public theology, deterritorialized Christianity, with its own culture of origin and historical development, will have to engage in the process of inculturation, interculturalization and conculcuration (Anthony 1997, pp. 42–48). According to Ignatius Hirudayam SJ (1910–1995), who coined the term, *conculcuration* refers to the ability of Christianity to insert itself in a new culture so deeply that it is capable of contributing to the further development of local culture, together with other agencies and stakeholders of the local society, and consequently shape the other subsystems. A non-native Christian religion in this process can also play a disruptive and creative role in furthering the growth of local culture and society. At the same time, Christianity itself can make its creative advancement by engaging in dialogue with native religions that nourish the local culture.

Since public theology implies a “glocal” perspective, conculcuration must be viewed in connection with interculturalization, moving towards transculturalization. On the one hand, public theology must emerge as the “lived theology” of those engaged in conculcuration, a common engagement for the transformation of the local societal situation favouring human flourishing. On the other hand, non-native religions have to attend to diachronic and synchronic interculturalization to maintain unity in diversity and be “glocally” relevant. In the case of a non-native religion, its public theology would show more hospitality received rather than hospitality offered in recognizing the sources of truth. This imposes not only interdisciplinary but also *inter gentes* dialogue based on the lived theology of people with their own specific religio-cultural identities. In addition, as cultures constantly evolve, public theological discourse evolves with intergenerational dialogue as well.

There is no gainsaying that the public significance of a religion is also determined by its majority or minority status. Obviously, a minority religion can play the role of a critical minority. In the historical development of Christianity up to the 4th century, it was a minority migrant religion in Europe, but during the next seventeen centuries, it progressively became a dominant presence. In the Indian context, up to the 15th century Christianity was a migrant marginal religion; but since then, although still a minority religion, it has been associated with the dominant colonial powers. This implies that public theology in the Indian context has to be a decolonial theology.

The contemporary milieu of globalization, modernity, and post-modernity has its impact on religion. Religion in such a secularized context appears to be outdated and reduced to the private sphere. In the context of separation between state and religion, civil society is the public sphere where individuals or non-governmental organizations can discuss issues of collective relevance of values and norms. Religions can use this public space to propose their worldviews, norms, and values. Religious praxis can combine “the material dimensions of social, economic, and human capital with other resources of metaphysical beliefs, ethics, and attitudes” (Graham 2019, p. 17). In effect, religions can potentially represent an answer to the societal quest for common goals and shared values. To play such a role, according to Habermas, in the first place, religion is required to accept and tolerate the societal presence of various cohabiting confessions and religions; secondly, religion must acknowledge the rationality of arguments as a form of discussion; and thirdly, religion is obliged to obey propositions of the constitutional state (Ziebertz 2011, pp. 14–15; Habermas 1992; Palmentura 2022). Likewise, by engaging at three levels of ethical discourse,

i.e., meta-ethical, normative ethical, and legal ethical (Magni 2011), public theology can become intelligible and assailable to all in local and global society.

3. Public Practical Theology of Education: Religious Education and Religious Pedagogy

Although the terms “education” and “pedagogy” are at times used as interchangeable synonyms, there is a subtle and significant difference between the two. Yet they cannot be considered as totally disconnected concepts as they to some degree involve each other. The etymological root of pedagogy takes us to the Greek terms *pais* or *paidos* (child, boy) and *agōgos* (guide, caretaker), referring to the function of *paidagōgos*, namely, of the slave or adult who had the task of accompanying the young to the gymnasium or school (Nanni 1997b). “Pedagogy” thus points to the educator and his/her task or art of forming and leading the young. On the other hand, “education” deriving from the Latin *educere* (drawing out, developing) or *educare* (cultivate, raise) can be understood to focus on the whole process of drawing out the potential or nurturing the multifaceted growth of the young (Nanni 1997a). This distinction and overlap are pertinent to what is emerging as public practical theology of education encompassing public religious education and public religious pedagogy.

3.1. Emerging Public Practical Theology of Education

In the academic sphere during the second half of the last century efforts were made to shape a theology of education. Already from 1945 theology of education appears as a distinct university discipline in what was then the Salesian Pontifical Athenaeum, Rome. Discussion and debate in the following years resulted in an ever-precise elaboration of its rationale and method. The theological nature of this discipline is founded on the scriptures and the faith-tradition of the Christian community. Given the focus on education, it necessarily involves interdisciplinary dialogue with educational sciences in drawing the ultimate significance of human activities—specifically of educational activities—for human development and wellbeing. It highlights the humanizing function of education (Grosso 1997). Such an orientation is already in tune with the concept of public theology of education. At this juncture, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus, the central figure of Christian faith, lived out his entire life in the public domain—i.e., in the religious, cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental spheres—from his birth in an abandoned grotto to his tragic death on the cross outside the city walls. In other words, the four gospels attest to the public life of Jesus, seeking to transform every sector of the public domain, embedding integral human wellbeing in the eternal good (Hughson 2013). Following this Christological archetype and the charism inspired by the Spirit of God, some religious orders and congregations and Christian lay associations and movements articulate their service (ministry) in the public domain of education.

Besides the initial work of Martin E. Marty (2000), the international and interdisciplinary conference on “Public Theology—Religion—Education” held at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, in 2016, marks an important milestone in the direction of public theology of education. The discussion revolves around three fundamental approaches to the educational domain. First of all, as Manfred L. Pirner (2019a, pp. 1–4) sums up, in the contemporary democratic world, there is the need for educating those affiliated to religious and other secular traditions to promote common good and human welfare, namely, a humane society founded on human rights and responsibilities. Secondly, education itself is a matter of public theology insofar as the right to education is a basic human right, vital for the functioning of democracy. Significantly, the educational institutions affiliated to religious traditions generally have paid particular attention to the lower rung of society, contributing thus to the welfare of individuals and of society at large.

Thirdly, religious and moral/value education in public institutions affiliated to religions and religious studies or ethics in public state institutions mark a specific feature of public theology of education, insofar as these courses aim at contributing to common good and peaceful co-existence. These perspectives vital to public practical theology of education converge on public religious education and public religious pedagogy.

3.2. Towards Public Religious Education

As in the ambit of neighbour religious traditions, educational institutions, like Christian schools, were established to cater to the faith formation of the younger generations. In effect, Christian faith education in schools aims at accompanying Christian students through various stages of faith maturation and moral development. The young are taught to grasp the Christian message, celebrate their faith meaningfully, and witness to it through their love for others and their service to the needy. In this vein, extracurricular activities for *enfaithing* include moments of prayer, reading of scriptures in assemblies, celebration of feasts, days of reflection, retreats, etc. For the progressive qualification of teachers, in-service formation programmes are also offered: for example, Professional Approach to Christian Education (PACE) as in the Salesian schools of Tamil Nadu. In these Christian schools and colleges, besides the faith education courses for Christian students, ethics/value education classes are provided for those belonging to neighbour religions. With reference to the latter, it is proposed that the wisdom literature in the Bible and in the neighbour religious and cultural traditions (like the classical *Thirukural* in the context of Tamil Nadu) could be integrated as shared wisdom offering insights for daily life (Kim 2019). With the view to engage in such ethics/value education, in-service formation programmes such as Professional Approach to Value Education (PAVE) are offered by the Deepagam (2024), the catechetical centre of the Salesians in Chennai.

With the changing shades of religious pluralism and secularism, Christian education cannot ignore the denominational and religious differences among students. Therefore, the preoccupation of transmitting one's own religious tradition has to be situated within a complex framework of integral human maturation exploring the specific function of religion with reference to the wider universal search for truth (Trenti 1997). As in some Western countries, religious education elucidates different religious traditions according to the identity of the student population that frequents public schools. It can also be an instruction *about* religious traditions rather than instruction *in* one's own religion, for inspiring peaceful and dialogical coexistence based on a pedagogy of difference (Alexander 2019). At higher levels of schooling and academic pursuits, it takes the shape of religious studies, entailing description, critical analysis, and understanding of religion as a phenomenon without implying the faith of educators or students. In some traditionally Christian countries secondary levels of schooling not only include knowledge about the Scriptures, doctrines, and history of Christianity but also about world religions: their history, myths, festivals, sacred places, belief systems, ethics, spirituality, etc. In other words, a scientific approach that promotes critical understanding and respect for religious and denominational pluralism and secular ideologies. Taking a critical approach to transmitting religio-cultural content, religious studies also seek to establish scientific dialogue: between religion and other disciplines, between one's religion and neighbour religions or ideologies, and between studied religion and lived religion (Hull 1987; Pajer 1987). These trends in religious education and religious studies are in line with what is emerging as public religious education, already advocated by German systematic theologian Sigurd Daecke in 1970 (Pirner 2019b, p. 41; Grümme 2019). As Manfred Pirner (2019b, p. 49) suggests the scope of public religious education is "to help young people find orientation and develop competence in matters of religion, worldview, and ethics—irrespective of their own present

belief or disbelief". In other words, public religious education addresses both believers and non-believers of religious traditions and explores the implications of religious beliefs, without the need to share them or practice them.

According to Bruce Grelle (2019) secular academic study of religion in public schools, colleges, and universities can contribute to the common good and human welfare. The aim of public religious education is to make students aware of the diversity of religious traditions and learn about them, as distinct from faith-based religious education. It contributes to religious, cultural, historical, and civil literacy, clarifying the basic beliefs, aesthetics, and practices of world religions, and how they have promoted literature, art, music, philosophy, law, ethics, politics, human rights and responsibilities, and ecological sensitivity. In effect, understanding religious and secular worldviews can help in responding to the contemporary crisis of sustainability and justice. Likewise, alternative worldviews and values can help students to be self-critical of their assumptions about the meaning and goals of their life, and their rapport with others and the surrounding nature, stimulating ecological and moral imagination. Moreover, world religious traditions stipulate specific dynamics of human and ecological wellbeing: meditation, mindful breathing, yoga, prayer, chanting, etc., leading to mystical experience and transformation of consciousness. In this way, helping the young to mature as committed citizens pursuing the common good amidst multiple types of diversity calls for the intertwinement of religious/worldview education, human rights education, and citizenship education, combining respectively the sacred, the just, and the civic, in the educational process (Miedema 2019).

3.3. *Towards Public Religious Pedagogy*

Religious pedagogy, as educational methodology, can be distinguished from the academic subject of religious education/studies. Pedagogy, as we mentioned above, focuses on the art and task of the educator: engaging in the varied sectors of curriculum (explicit, implicit, hidden, and null curriculum), employing teaching methods, setting educational goals, activating the style of relationality with students, creating a learning environment, etc. In this vein, religious pedagogy can be understood as the religious dimension that shapes the whole process of education, not just religious education/studies. While the official explicit curriculum of the school or college is set by the government educational policy, the extracurricular activities and hidden curriculum (the style of engaging the students and the configuration of the overall environment) are defined by the institutional policy and pedagogy. Through the specific resources of various sectors of the educational curriculum and by employing appropriate teaching methods, educators aim at shaping the young to be self-reliant and competent in contributing to the common good, aware of their human rights and responsibilities. This is what we mean by public religious pedagogy.

"Public Religious Pedagogy can be distinguished from Religious Pedagogy in that the former is a discipline that represents a broader outlook and does not focus exclusively on school and educational matters but is intended to provide more concrete recommendations with regard to social issues" (Platow 2019, pp. 122–23). In other words, public religious pedagogy goes beyond didactic contents, methods, and media and beyond the explicit educational curriculum of schools and colleges to include style or system of governance, general public religious tenor, environmental care, etc. (Platow 2019, pp. 129–30). Public religious pedagogy, with its inclusive approach to education, would aim at rendering the religious, cultural, and social differences a source of enrichment rather than barriers of isolation or conflict. It makes space for intercultural, interreligious, and ecumenical learning embedded in the life-world of students (Schreiner 2019; Anthony et al. 2014; Lourdunathan 2022). It underscores the close link between religious education and citizenship education, highlighted by the traditional formula of forming "good Christians and

honest citizens". From the perspective of public religious pedagogy, it means that nurturing the young to be a good Christian or good religious person necessarily requires that he/she at the same time be equipped to be a generative and responsible citizen (Gearon 2019; Anthony 2013).

If public religious pedagogy aims at forming mature citizens, aware of human rights and responsibilities, such a pedagogy and institutional policy cannot ignore that education itself is a basic human right. In other words, educational justice has its relevance for public religious pedagogy and institutional policy. Option for the poor and the marginalized in society, with the view to overcoming social inequality and enabling equal opportunities and participation, social coherence, inclusivity, and human flourishing, have to be viewed as integral to public religious pedagogy. This can find expression in supporting educational initiatives such as study centres and skill development programmes aimed at the underprivileged (Grümme 2019).

Pedagogy is a question of leading and moulding young leaders. Empirical research suggests that discernment competency, spiritual determinants, and situational contingencies shape educators in being transformational leaders (Anthony and Hermans 2020; Hermans and Anthony 2020). Making young transformational leaders in their turn can be viewed as a vital feature of public religious pedagogy. In the educational environment leaders emerge and function in groups, amidst both in-group and out-group relations. Forming the young to be leaders is more than just a transfer of skills, even more than shaping leadership traits and behaviours. It encompasses developing hermeneutic competence, critical competence, moral competence, collaborative competence, and technical competence (Fourie 2019).

With reference to the overall educational environment, public religious pedagogy can also be grasped from the image of ethics displayed in schools and colleges. Images can be grasped in the dialectics of revelation and concealment, presence and absence, presentation and withdrawal. As the name and image of God can be misused to justify war and conflict, as well as possessing the truth to feel superior over neighbour religions, it is crucial to acknowledge the unavailability of the divine and refrain from sanctifying images of one's own religious tradition. Obviously, goodness, truth, and beauty are not opposed to images but to a specific one-sided use that overlooks the unavailability or transcendence of the Sacred or the divine Reality. The educational effort is to help see "images as images" in the public educational domain. Obviously, images can also have a positive impact to overcome stereotypes, to see others and the context differently. The impact of images can also refer to the dynamic change of human beings, inspiring new beginnings, pointing to memory and new possibilities, e.g., images of reconciliation (Höhne 2019).

In the current digital world, the learning potential of digital media in religious education cannot be ignored, for the internet brings people into contact in the public domain. Given the digital divide, public digital theology should be conceptualized as a theology of presence, as well as of absence, addressing the power structures that lead to exclusion. A religious pedagogy in this context would have to consider the interdependency of connectivity and reflexivity (Simojoki 2019).

At the close of our discourse on public theologizing in the four sectors of public biblical theology, public historical theology, public systematic theology, and public practical theology, and the elaboration on public practical theology of education encompassing public religious education and public religious pedagogy, taking the cue from Gavin D'Costa (2005, p. 53), we postulate how the distinct orders of theological, religious, and secular disciplines can be viewed in an interrelated fashion (see Figure 2). Public theology demands a constant interdisciplinary openness and dialogue between these three sets and levels of disciplines, each with its own specific assumptions, objects, and methods. To engage in

this process, theologians must also grasp the worldviews and value systems underlying neighbour religious and secular traditions, having some grounding in social, human, and natural sciences. This warrants a genuinely plural voice in the public square, ensuring intellectual freedom, exchange, and excellence, with transdisciplinary convergence on truth, love, harmony, beauty, human wellbeing, and ecological flourishing.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES	RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINES	SECULAR DISCIPLINES
Public Biblical Theology (Ad extra stance of Scriptures)	Scriptures of religions Religious Literature	Literature, local and global
Public Historical Theology (Ad extra stance of Church History)	History of religions	National and World History
Public Systematic Theology (Ad extra stance of Fundamental, Dogmatic, Moral Theology)	Religious Education and Moral/Value Education	Philosophy, Ethics, Natural Sciences, etc.
Public Practical Theology (Ad extra stance of Faith Formation, Celebration, Community, etc.)	Religious Pedagogy, Religious Spirituality, Religious Organization, etc.	Human sciences: psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, economics, politics, etc.

Figure 2. Interrelationship between Theological, Religious, and Secular disciplines.

4. Salesian Pedagogy in the Perspective of Public Religious Pedagogy

For over a century and a half, Salesian pedagogy originating from the educative–pastoral experience of Don Bosco has found expression in the educational and social engagement of Salesians and Salesian Sisters (members of the Catholic religious congregations founded by him) and lay Christian co-operators and collaborators (Braido 2009). In the Indian context, since the arrival of Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB) in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu, in 1906, a growing number of persons affiliated with neighbour religions, principally Hindus and Muslims, render their qualified service as professors and teachers in Salesian educational institutions and as collaborators in Salesian social action centres of supplementary education at the service of the poor and marginalized youth. Most of the young beneficiaries also belong to neighbour religions. The question that we address in this research study is whether Salesian pedagogy functions as public religious pedagogy, allowing Hindu and Muslim educators and collaborators to engage in it for promoting the integral development of the young.

According to Pietro Braido (1997, 1999) and Michal Vojtáš (2021), who researched the origin and development of Salesian pedagogy, respectively, the “preventive system” of Don Bosco as opposed to the “repressive system” is founded on three operational principles of religion, reason, and loving kindness, along with the animating and preventive presence of the educator among the young. Being a religious pedagogy, in nurturing the growth and maturation of the young, educators are to appeal to Christian/religious worldviews and values and make them grow in these through education. As a pedagogy of reason and reasonableness, it requires that educators rely more on reasoning than on punishment while correcting or stimulating the young to grow in their human and spiritual potentials and responsibilities. And above all, as a pedagogy of love, the dealings with the young are to be a manifestation of educators’ concern, kindness, and friendliness, ensuring a family atmosphere of freedom, trust, joy, and wellbeing. For Don Bosco it is enough that a person be young to deserve educators’ kind attention, particularly if the young person is poor and marginalized. It is by making a preferential choice for the last and the least that one can be open to all youth. Given the reciprocity that love implies, Don Bosco would encourage educators not only to love the young but also to learn to be loved and be esteemed by them, rather than be feared.

The overall scope of Salesian educational engagement is stated in the formula assumed by Don Bosco: forming “good Christians and honest citizens”, a formula that can be traced back to the introduction of pastoral/practical theology as a discipline in the University of Vienna in 1774 by the Benedictine monk Franz Stephan Rautenstrauch (1734–1785) under the solicitation of Queen Maria Therese of Austria (Midali 2011a, pp. 22–25). It implies a fundamental commitment to civil society and its welfare fostered by generative and responsible actions: generative in the sense of creative and transformative actions; responsible in the sense of conscientious and altruistic actions. From a public practical theological perspective, we might say that the educative task of nurturing good Christian/religious persons is bound to making them generative and responsible citizens; without the latter, the former would lose its credentials (Anthony 2013). As Elaine Graham put it: the intent is to forge “powerful and sustainable bonds between the practice of faith and the exercise of citizenship” (Graham 2019, p. 23).

To explore the rapport between Salesian pedagogy and human rights, an international conference on *Sistema Preventivo e Diritti Umani* (Preventive System and Human Rights) was organized in 2009 in Rome. In effect, Salesian pedagogy proffers an educative perspective on human rights, not only to defend the rights of the young and their right to education but making them sensitive to human rights and responsibility and in this way contribute to societal welfare both locally and globally (Carazzone 2009; Muñoz Villalobos 2009; Villanueva 2021). In this vein, empirical studies have also been undertaken among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu school and college students in Tamil Nadu, India, on their attitudes towards the various categories of human rights as part of two international research projects, “Religion and Human Rights” (2005–2011, 2012–2023), with a series of publications. The aim was to verify the impact of religious beliefs, religious experience, religious practices, religious socialization, function of religion, approach to religious pluralism, etc. on students’ attitude and advocacy of human rights. Just to mention few pertinent examples: civil rights related to privacy, speech, assembly, religion, discrimination, and inhuman treatment (Van der Ven and Anthony 2008); socio-economic rights concerning work, social security, wages, leisure, recreation, and education (Anthony and Sterkens 2020); ecology and human flourishing (Anthony 2023a); and state–religion separation amidst religious pluralism (Anthony 2023b).

The objectives of Salesian pedagogy, described above, are generally specified in each institution’s vision and mission statements. For example, Sacred Heart College (1951)—Autonomous, Tirupattur one of the institutions participating in the present research—states its vision in these terms:

“We, the community of Sacred Heart College, inspired by the love of the Heart of Jesus and fundamental human values, following the educative system of Don Bosco, are committed to the creation of an educated, ethical, and prosperous society where equality, freedom and fraternity reign by imparting higher education to poor and rural youth which enables them towards integral human development”. This is to be achieved through academic excellence, healthy standards in extracurricular activities, socially relevant research, and an educational process that leads to employment and entrepreneurship. As mentioned, the college seeks to serve preferentially the underprivileged and rural youth, making them consciousness of their rights and responsibilities, to overcome social evils and build up healthy communities. Through the educational process the college strives to uphold core values such as primacy of God, honesty, respect for all, being responsible, and particularly pursuit of excellence in the academic sectors of arts (Tamil, English, economics, commerce), science (mathematics, physics, chemistry,

computer science, business management), and skill programmes (communicative English, life skills, placement).

Similar vision and mission statements, based on Salesian pedagogy, are also expressed by Assam Don Bosco University (2008) and by the network of Salesian Institutions of Higher Education (IUS Network 1997).

Besides formal educational institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities, Salesians also operate supplementary educational centres as a support strategy. One such organization is the Strategic Urban Rural Advancement Backing Institute (SURABI), a registered NGO of the Salesian Province of Chennai for holistic education, skilling, and empowering projects and programs. The projects include evening study centres for children and skill training and environmental awareness programmes for youth. In addition, programmes are also designed for women, farmers, and vulnerable communities. SURABI is of the view that education is the most effective tool for helping children to free themselves from the vicious cycle of ignorance, poverty, and environmental degeneration. It addresses the needs of the children both in rural and urban slums, with initiatives such as supplementary education and scholarships. Eight of these evening study centres were included in our research, besides five schools and four colleges of the Salesian Province of Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

5. Empirical Approach to Public Religious Pedagogy: Research Design

Theology of education offers the anthropological and Christological basis and perspectives for Christian educators, whereas public theology of education points to the religious experience underlying the educational engagement of Christians and of neighbour religions. In this vein, we examine the lived pedagogical experience of Hindu and Muslim professors, teachers, and collaborators in the public sphere of Salesian educational institutions. Such a lived experience of Salesian pedagogy is personal and autobiographical in nature, and as such, it is intersubjective, engaging aspects of institutional pedagogy and policy. We may describe it as the theological reflective horizon associated with personal and communal lived experience in the educational service, an instinctive theological–educational interpretation of one’s life situations and commitments (Francisco and Cornelio 2022).

As highlighted earlier, in accordance with the scope of Salesian pedagogy, educators aim at the human development of the young, namely, their intellectual, physical, spiritual, and all-round growth, with the intent of building up society in terms of social, political, economic, and ecological welfare. In Salesian terms, educational engagements aim not only at making the young generative, responsible, and upright citizens but also mature as authentic Christian/religious persons. Salesian educational service in the context of multireligious and pluricultural Indian society denotes these goals, without ignoring its scientific academic features. What we seek to explore here is how and to what extent Hindu and Muslim teachers, professors, and collaborators perceive and engage in Salesian pedagogy. Do Hindu and Islamic theological–cultural traits contribute to their educational service and experience in Salesian institutions?

Educational engagements are structured on the basis of educational theories and pedagogical sciences. With reference to the configuration of the curriculum in the public sphere of education (Anthony 1999, pp. 41–51), we can speak of an explicit curriculum involving not only secular sciences focused on scientific knowledge but also religious education for Christians and moral/value education for adherents of neighbour religions. Just as the religious and moral/value education is a fundamental resource for upholding the goals of human dignity, human wellbeing, and the common good, every other scientific discipline taught in the educational process encompasses values that further or disvalues that hinder the attainment of integral human development, as shown, for example, in the

analysis of school text books by the Value Education Group—Society of the Sisters of St. Anne (1991).

Implicit promotion of religious or ethical values can be attained through co-curricular/extracurricular activities in artistic sectors of music, dance, drama, etc. Then there is the hidden curriculum, that has a life-long impact on the students. It is neither explicit nor implicit, it just happens in the ambience of the relationship (loving kindness, friendliness, sympathy, hospitality, etc.) between staff and students and through the presence of signs and symbols that enliven the educational environment. The null curriculum—the one that is absent—can emerge when visiting educational centres affiliated with neighbour religions or from the collaborators and co-workers of neighbour religions. The goals of the common good sought through these varied sectors of educational curricula can be to a great extent concretized in the intersecting facets of human rights and responsibilities. Public theology of education would then have to attend to how the integral wellbeing of the young and of society—the goal of Salesian pedagogy—can be endorsed through various curricular sectors of educational engagement.

As mentioned earlier, the prism of public theology entails three agencies: church, society, and academy. The use of empirical methodology can engage these agencies: the Christian/Salesian community with their educational (college, school, and study) centres, the students and staff of Christian and neighbour religions in society, and the academic community involved in research. In other words, empirical research undertaken by the academic agency can address the lived experience of Church members and also of the members affiliated with neighbour religions in society; thus, engaging the three agencies conjointly.

The present qualitative research (undertaken between 15 October and 31 December 2023) seeks to explore the educational engagement of Hindu and Muslim staff as their lived experience of Salesian pedagogy. With the view to study this phenomenon it was limited to Hindu and Muslim college professors, school teachers, and collaborators of evening study centres in the Salesian Province of Chennai. The sample (representing more the phenomenon than the population) comprised a total of 27 respondents distributed in 17 institutions, as shown in Table 1 and represented in Figure 3 (see also Supplementary Materials S1).

Table 1. Classification of the sample of respondents.

Institution	Colleges = 4	Schools = 5	Social Service = 8
Profession	Professors (P) = 9	School Teachers (S) = 10	Social Collaborators (C) = 8
Age-group	23–29 years = 8	30–39 years = 10	Over 40 years = 9
Gender	Female (F) = 15	Male (M) = 12	
Religion	Hinduism (H) = 25	Islam (I) = 2	

(Codes P/S/C, H/I, F/M were used together with the serial number in referring to responses in the analysis).

As regards the type of profession, age group, and gender, the sample was found to be rather proportional. According to the last available census of 2011, 87.6% of Tamil Nadu's population are Hindus, 6.12% are Christians, 5.86% are Muslims, 0.12% are Jains, 0.02% are Buddhists, and 0.02% are Sikhs. This explains why all our respondents are Hindus, with the exception of two Muslims.

On the basis of its core features, the Salesian pedagogy in the public educational sphere seeks to ensure human wellbeing by educating poor and marginalized youth, forming them to be good Christian/religious persons and upright citizens, respecting human dignity and environmental upkeep. These goals and features of Salesian pedagogy (reason, religion, and loving kindness) are to enliven the curriculum domains (explicit/written, implicit/unwritten, hidden/spirit, and null/ignored curricula) in the multireligious

environment. Our structured interview schedule, soliciting written responses, included these intersecting features of Salesian pedagogy (see Supplementary Materials S2).

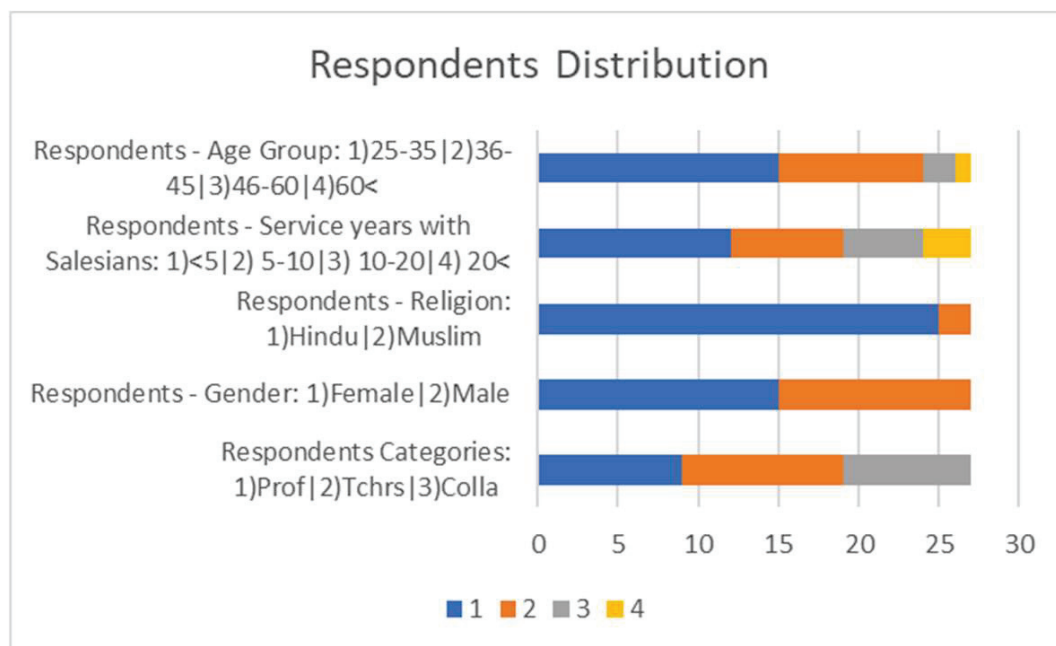


Figure 3. Distribution of Respondents.

The following section provides a concise view of the empirical analysis carried out, with its processes and a few cross-sectional data analyses from which interpretations and conclusions are drawn.

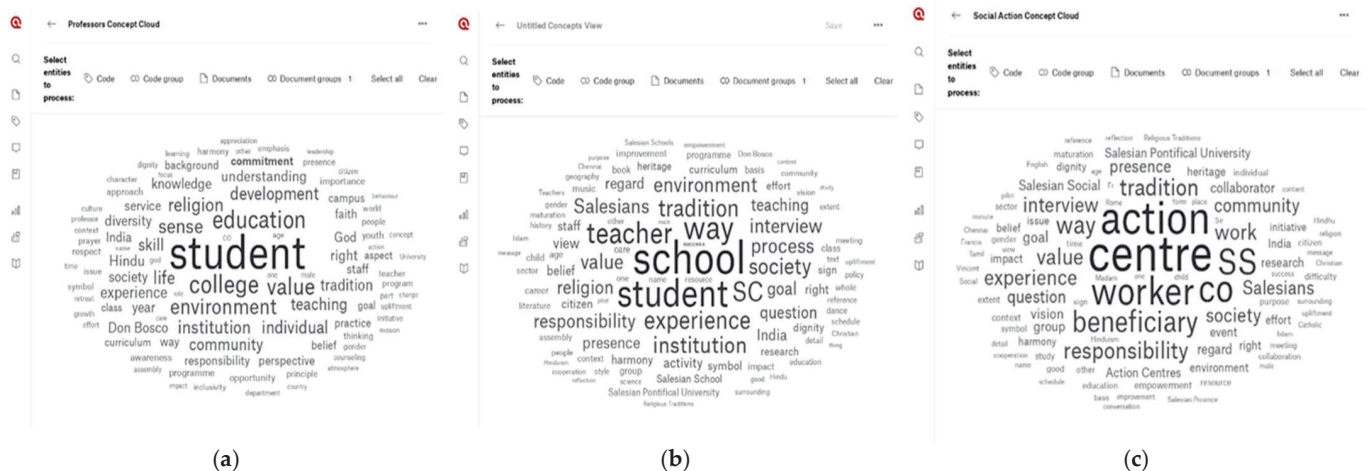
6. Empirical Analysis: Emerging Results

The qualitative data obtained from the 27 respondents were subjected to qualitative data analysis (QDA) using the QDA tool *Atlas.ti* which permits the classic methodology of codification. Three progressive levels of analysis were carried out, by way of codification, namely open coding, focused coding, and axial coding.

6.1. Open Coding

The process of open coding of the data resulted in 230 codes from the 27 texts analyzed. Codebook A (Supplementary Materials S3a) presents the resultant codes in alphabetical order and Codebook B (Supplementary Materials S3b) presents the same codes in order of frequency.

The open coding already offers a considerable indication as to how much the Hindu and Muslim colleagues appreciate the dedication of the Salesian educative system to holistic education, as the code (Code no.168) with highest frequency (19 times) emerges from at least 13 interview files, that is, 13 different persons, which is statistically 48% of the respondents (cf. Table 2). There is one typical statement that can be cited here (from *P-IM.07*): “The holistic approach, integrating values and academics, aligns with the broader goal of preparing the individuals not only for professional success but also for a life of purpose, service, and ethical leadership”.



Tables 5 and 6 present the respondent distribution of sensitizing categories and emergent categories, respectively, among which a specific comparison could be made of the levels of understanding arrived at between the various categories of colleagues and the Salesians who wish to share their religious pedagogy.

Table 3. Sensitizing Categories Question wise.

Q No.	Questionnaire & Themes	Sensitizing Categories (SC)
1	Recognizing the goals of Salesian engagement Interview question: On the basis of your experience as a professor/teacher/co-worker in a Salesian college/school/social centre, what would you say are the goals that Salesians seek to achieve through the educational/social-action process?	1. Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians [SC1-1] 2. Critique of Salesian Educational Goals [SC1-2]
8	Sharing the goal of uplifting the poor and marginalized Interview question: Overall, with its administrative and educational policies, the Salesian educational/social-action institution should be attentive to the upliftment of the poor and emarginated sector of the society. To what extent you personally share this effort of youth empowerment?	3. Affirmation of Salesian Social Empowerment [SC8-1] 4. Critique of Salesian Social Empowerment [SC8-2]
6	Sharing the goal of forming responsible citizens Interview question: Educational/social-action process on the whole is meant to help the young to grow as responsible citizens. Do you feel that through your teaching/social-action, you are contributing to building up a better Indian society? If so, how?	5. Affirmation of Salesian Education to Citizenship [SC6-1] 6. Contribution to Education to Citizenship [SC6-2]
7	Sharing the goal of safeguarding human dignity Interview question: The style of dealing with students in the Salesian college/schools/social-action centres is supposed to promote the values of human dignity and human rights. What improvements can be made in this regard in your college/school/social-action centre?	7. Affirmation of Salesian Promotion of Rights and Dignity [SC7-1] 8. Critique of Salesian Promotion of Rights and Dignity [SC7-2]
9	Sharing the goal of environmental care Interview question: The educational/social-action institutions are supposed to encourage the staff and the students/beneficiaries to take care of the natural surroundings and in this way contribute to common good. Are you sensitive to the ecological responsibility in some creative way?	9. Affirmation of Salesian Engagement in Environmental Care [SC9-1] 10. Critique of Salesian Engagement in Environmental Care [SC9-2]
4	Contribution of Explicit (Written) Curriculum Interview question: The college/school curriculum of various sectors of knowledge such as literature, history, economy, social sciences, etc. (text books and classes)/meetings, group works, conversations, etc. of social-action centres convey also some underlying beliefs, values and visions of different religious and secular traditions. According to you, in what way can these contribute to religious harmony in the multireligious context of India?	11. Affirmation of Prescribed/Explicit Curriculum in Religious Harmony [SC4-1] 12. Critique of Prescribed/Explicit Curriculum in Religious Harmony [SC4-2]
5	Contribution of Implicit (Unwritten/Extra) Curriculum Interview question: Extra-curricular activities (assemblies, group meetings, cultural programmes with dance and music, etc.) / social events are also meant to transmit the values and visions of Indian cultural heritage to students. Does your presence as a non-Christian add something original in this regard?	13. Affirmation of Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion [SC5-1] 14. Contribution through Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion [SC5-2]
3	Perception of the Christian environment (Hidden curriculum) Interview question: In what way your own religious tradition can be an added resource to favour the goals you mentioned above?	15. Affirmation of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum [SC3-1] 16. Critique of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum [SC3-2]

Table 3. Cont.

Q No.	Questionnaire & Themes	Sensitizing Categories (SC)
10	Impact of the Christian environment (Hidden curriculum) Interview question: In what way your own religious tradition can be an added resource to favour the goals you mentioned above?	17. Affirmation of the Impact of Christian Environment [SC0-1] 18. Critique of the Impact of Christian Environment [SC0-2]
2	Contribution of Hindu and Muslim religious traditions (Null/Ignored curriculum) Interview question: Working in a Christian educational/social-action institution probably has had some impact on your human and/or religious maturation. Could you explain, in what way?	19. Impact of Non Christian tradition on the Educational Goals [SC2-1] 20. Impact of the Christian Environment on the Collaborator [SC2-2]

QNo: Question Number.

Table 4. Emerging Themes and Emergent Categories.

Emergent Categories (EC)			
Cluster Code	Emerging Themes	EC Code	Emergent Categories
[EC-A]	Implicit Recognition of the Dimensions of Salesian Youth Ministry, in Schools/Colleges/Institutions	[EC-A0]	General acknowledgement of Salesian Educative System
		[EC-A1]	Dimension of Education/Knowing
		[EC-A2]	Dimension of Culture/Living
		[EC-A3]	Dimension of Faith/Spirituality
		[EC-A4]	Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others
		[EC-A5]	Group Experience/Togetherness
		[EC-A6]	Vocation Dimension/Call and Mission
		[EC-A7]	Ethics and Morals/Values
		[EC-A8]	Character Dimension/Human formation
[EC-B]	Recognition and Validation of Plurality and related Educative processes	[EC-A9]	Dimension of Media and Communication
		[EC-B1]	Intercultural Approach and Processes
		[EC-B2]	Interreligious Approach and Dialogue
		[EC-B3]	Element of Diversity and Harmony
[EC-C]	Education to Citizenship and Nation Building	[EC-B4]	Right and Freedom of Religious Plurality
		[EC-C1]	Need for Education to Citizenship felt and expressed
[EC-D]	The Dimension of Human Rights within Educational Process	[EC-C2]	Educational efforts towards citizenship
		[EC-D1]	Recognition of the need for Rights Perspective to Education
[EC-E]	The Dimension of Ecology	[EC-D2]	Education to Rights and Education with Perspective of Rights
		[EC-E1]	The consciousness of Ecology
[EC-F]	A sense of fulfilment in collaboration	[EC-E2]	Education to Ecological care/wellbeing
		[EC-F1]	Personal sense of fulfilment in collaboration
[EC-G]	The Role of Curriculum in the Educative Process	[EC-F2]	Professional sense of fulfilment
		[EC-G1]	Recognition of the specificity of the curriculum
[EC-H]	Educative Pact or Relationship within the process	[EC-G2]	Lack/Need of attention to the curriculum
		[EC-H1]	Teacher-Student-Environment Relationship aiding the educative process

Table 5. Sensitizing Categories: Respondent Distribution.

Sensitizing Categories—Respondent Distribution		C	P	S
SC0-1	Affirmation of the Impact of Christian Environment	15	25	17
SC0-2	Critique of the Impact of Christian Environment	2	5	1
SC1-1	Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians	29	55	29
SC1-2	Critique of Salesian Educational Goals	3	1	4
SC2-1	Impact of Non-Christian tradition on the Educational Goals	12	26	9
SC2-2	Impact of the Christian Environment on the Collaborator	16	24	15
SC3-1	Affirmation of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum	12	17	10
SC3-2	Critique of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum	0	1	0
SC4-1	Affirmation of Prescribed/Explicit Curriculum in Religious Harmony	3	4	5
SC4-2	Critique of Prescribed/Explicit Curriculum in Religious Harmony	0	5	5
SC5-1	Affirmation of Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion	17	38	20
SC5-2	Contribution through Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion	1	1	3
SC6-1	Affirmation of Salesian Education to Citizenship	0	0	2
SC6-2	Contribution to Education to Citizenship	10	7	3
SC7-1	Affirmation of Salesian Promotion of Rights and Dignity	3	4	7
SC7-2	Critique of Salesian Promotion of Rights and Dignity	6	11	3
SC8-1	Affirmation of Salesian Social Empowerment	30	29	17
SC8-2	Critique of Salesian Social Empowerment	6	3	6
SC9-1	Affirmation of Salesian Engagement in Environmental Care	6	11	5
SC9-2	Critique of Salesian Engagement in Environmental Care	6	2	2

C: Collaborators | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

Table 6. Emergent Categories: Respondent Distribution.

Emergent Categories – Respondent Distribution		C	P	S
EC-A0	General acknowledgement of Salesian Educative System	19	41	25
EC-A1	Dimension of Education/Knowing	18	39	10
EC-A2	Dimension of Culture/Living	32	34	25
EC-A3	Dimension of Faith/Spirituality	12	33	19
EC-A4	Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others	44	48	32
EC-A5	Group Experience/Togetherness	3	5	0
EC-A6	Vocation Dimension/Call and Mission	12	9	7
EC-A7	Ethics and Morals/Values	11	9	13
EC-A8	Character Dimension/Human Formation	20	25	22
EC-A9	Dimension of Media and Communication	5	4	3
EC-B1	Intercultural Approach and Processes	13	11	6
EC-B2	Interreligious Approach and Dialogue	17	36	26
EC-B3	Element of Diversity and Harmony	21	27	17
EC-B4	Right and Freedom of Religious Plurality	22	20	16
EC-C1	Need for Education to Citizenship felt and expressed	1	1	0
EC-C2	Educational efforts towards citizenship	18	12	11
EC-D1	Recognition of the need for Rights Perspective to Education	8	9	6
EC-D2	Education to Rights and Education with Perspective of Rights	5	11	4
EC-E1	The Consciousness of Ecology	7	10	7
EC-E2	Education to Ecological care/wellbeing	11	2	3
EC-F1	Personal sense of fulfilment in collaboration	26	28	23
EC-F2	Professional sense of fulfilment	37	48	31
EC-G1	Recognition of the specificity of the Curriculum	1	7	4
EC-G2	Lack/Need of attention to the Curriculum	1	10	4
EC-H1	Teacher-Student-Environment Relationship aiding the educative process	17	43	18

C: Collaborators | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

From an analysis of these two tables of respondent distribution (Tables 5 and 6), there could be an observation highlighted concerning the most frequent categories in each of the respondent groups. The results thus tabulated could be indicative of the fact that the Salesian religious pedagogy is shared by the colleagues on a large scale.

Table 7 reports an interesting fact that the top three referenced sensitizing categories for all the three respondent groups are the same, with the difference lying only in the order

of their frequency. The category “Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians” (SC1-1) is most commonly referenced among the professors (55) and the school teachers (29), while it is the second most common among the collaborators (29). It is an indication that reflects the importance that the colleagues attach to being aware of the educational goals proposed by the Salesian management. Another category on display is “Affirmation of Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion” (SC5-1), which is the second most common among the professors (38) and the school teachers (20), while third most common among the collaborators in social action (17). Again, the indication here is the awareness of the colleagues of the presence of and the importance of an implicit curriculum that the educational institution has for the promotion of value education. While it is no surprise that the category “Affirmation of Salesian Social Empowerment” (SC8-1) is the most commonly referenced among the collaborators in social action (30), the table reveals that it is also the third most common for the professors (29) and the school teachers (17). This evinces the place of social empowerment within the educational processes according to the respondents and their recognition of the presence of the same in the Salesian educational process. One of the collaborators (C-HF-20) observes, “Salesians actively promote justice by participating in initiatives that tackle challenges contributing to poverty and inequality” and she adds, “I am fully committed to the empowerment efforts of the Salesian social work centre, actively engaging in initiatives focused on uplifting the poor and marginalized sectors”. This is clearly a case of a collaborator who acknowledges not only the efforts of the institution but also one’s own contribution to the said mission. A category equally referenced, among the school teachers (17) is that of the “Affirmation of the Impact of Christian Environment” (SC0-1), which, although not among the top three, is frequently referenced in the other two respondent groups (professors—25; collaborators—15). This is an acknowledgement of the presence of Christians signs and symbols and the environment being Christian in general. The respondents not only acknowledge this fact but affirm that it has a positive impact on the overall educational process.

On the part of the emergent categories in the same table (Table 7), we find one category in all three respondent groups as the most commonly referenced (collaborators—44; professors—48; teachers—32): “Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others” (EC-A4), which forms part of the cluster of the emerging themes, which refers to the “Implicit Recognition of the Dimensions of Religious Pedagogy, in Schools/Colleges/Institutions” (EC-A). This is an affirmation of the way the educational process is structured to promote social consciousness through assuming responsibility for the other, both interpersonally and socially. Among the professors, however, there is another category too, that shares first place as the most commonly referenced (48)—“Professional Sense of Fulfilment” (EC-F2). This EC is the second most commonly referenced among the school teachers (31) and the collaborators (37). It establishes a crucial fact that the colleagues of Salesians in the educational mission find a sense of professional fulfilment. The cluster of this emergent theme—“A Sense of Fulfilment in Collaboration” (EC-F)—has a high number of references (collaborators—63; professors—76; teachers—54) spread over all the interview files (or respondents, $n = 27$) without exception. The other EC within this cluster, it is relevant to note, is “Personal Sense of Fulfilment in Collaboration” (EC-F1) which has a considerable number of references too (collaborators—26; professors—28; teachers—23). Again, this is a verification of the hypothesis of this research, which aims to establish the importance of the sense of fulfilment in the context of collaboration. One of the professors has this to say: “the sense of fulfilment I derive from my work at Don Bosco goes beyond career satisfaction; it’s a realization of a deep-seated aspiration to be an agent of positive change in the lives of the underprivileged” (P-HF-06). Another important emergent category to note could be, “General Acknowledgement of Salesian Educative System” (EC-A0) which

is the third most common among the professors (41), and, although not within the top three, it is considerably referenced in the other two groups as well (collaborators—19; teachers—25). It is a reference to the fact that the colleagues in general understand the Salesian educative system or Salesian pedagogy and acknowledge its efficacy, participating in it with knowledge, acknowledgement, and appreciation. This creates a possibility that the colleagues are not merely executors of the plan or project but in their own way proponents and protagonists too.

Table 7. Most Referenced Sensitizing and Emergent Categories according to Respondent Groups.

Respondent Group	3 Most Referenced Sensitizing Categories			3 Most Referenced Emergent Categories		
	n		Categories	n		Categories
C—Collaborators in Social Action	30	SC8-1	Affirmation of Salesian Social Empowerment	44	EC-A4	Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others
	29	SC1-1	Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians	37	EC-F2	Professional sense of fulfilment
	17	SC5-1	Affirmation of Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion	32	EC-A3	Dimension of Faith/Spirituality
P—Professors	55	SC1-1	Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians	48	EC-F2 EC-A4	Professional sense of fulfilment Social Dimension / Responsibility for Others
	38	SC5-1	Affirmation of Extra/Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion	43	EC-H1	Teacher-Student-Environment Relationship aiding the educative process
	29	SC8-1	Affirmation of Salesian Social Empowerment	41	EC-A0	General acknowledgement of Salesian Educative System
S—School Teachers	29	SC1-1	Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians	32	EC-A4	Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others
	20	SC5-1	Affirmation of Extra / Implicit Curriculum in Value Promotion	31	EC-F2	Professional sense of fulfilment
	17	SC8-1 SC0-1	Affirmation of Salesian Social Empowerment Affirmation of the Impact of Christian Environment	26	EC-B2	Interreligious Approach and Dialogue

n: Frequency.

7. Queries and the Phase of Axial Coding

The phase of focus coding takes advantage of the previous phase of analysis that has broken down the entire dataset into interpretable codes and clusters them into categories by substantiating the sensitizing categories already existing and by giving rise to the emergent categories from the clusters of the codes. These categories are already conceptualized interpretations of the data gathered. In the phase of axial coding, the categories are further correlated to theorize the data into interpretations and findings. The interpretations could be obtained by formulating specific queries from the categories and the way they

correlate among themselves. Here, following the sensibilities of the theoretical phase, a few highlights of the research data could be queried in these specific lines: the way Hindu and Muslim colleagues share in the educative goals of the Salesians; how the Christian environment does not necessarily create a conflict with the non-Christian colleagues in their involvement in the mission; and the possibility of the specific contribution of neighbour religions within the educational project in the Christian institution.

7.1. Non-Christian Colleagues Sharing in Educational Mission

Querying on the lines of the way Hindu and Muslim colleagues in the educative project share the educational goals of the Salesians, we find the sensitizing category “Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians” (SC1-1) (cf. Table 5) and the emerging cluster of themes (EC-A) on the “Implicit Recognition of the Dimensions of Salesian Religious Pedagogy, in Schools/Colleges/Institutions”, with 10 emergent categories (cf. Table 6), reporting 692 references (Table 8).

Table 8. Query: Non-Christian Colleagues Sharing in the Educational Goals.

The Way Hindu and Muslim Collaborators Share in the Salesian Educative Project			C	P	S
Awareness of Educational Goals of Salesians			29	55	29
Implicit Recognition of the Dimensions of Salesian Youth Ministry, in Schools/Colleges/Institutions	[EC-A0]	General acknowledgement of Salesian Educative System	19	41	25
	[EC-A1]	Dimension of Education/Knowing	18	39	10
	[EC-A2]	Dimension of Culture/Living	18	39	10
	[EC-A3]	Dimension of Faith/Spirituality	12	33	19
	[EC-A4]	Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others	44	48	32
	[EC-A5]	Group Experience/Togetherness	3	5	0
	[EC-A6]	Vocation Dimension/Call and Mission	12	9	7
	[EC-A7]	Ethics and Morals/Values	11	9	13
	[EC-A8]	Character Dimension/Human formation	20	25	22
	[EC-A9]	Dimension of Media and Communication	5	4	3
Total References (692):			205	302	185

C: Collaborators | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

The non-Christian colleagues in general find the Salesian educative system and its mission holistic in its approach and promoting a shared vision of its goals. A sharing of a Muslim respondent brings out this fact succinctly: “Salesian educators strive to instil within their students a work ethic based on mutual trust, confidence, respect and cooperation and serve students as advisers, creating a welcoming environment where every young man can maximize his potential to become something greater than himself and feel at home” (S-IM-15).

7.2. The Impact of the Christian Environment in the Eyes of the Non-Christian Colleagues

A similar line of query could be, within the purview of the multireligious context, whether there would be a possibility of conflict between the religious affiliation of the colleagues and the Christian environment that dominates the Christian/Salesian institutional ambience. While the sensitizing categories “Affirmation of the Impact of Christian Environment” (SC0-1), “Impact of the Christian Environment on the Collaborator” (SC2-2),

and “Affirmation of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum” (SC3-1) have together a considerable number of references (151), the contrary is reflected in the scanty references (9) that are noted from the two categories “Critique of the Impact of Christian Environment” (SC0-2) and “Critique of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum” (SC3-2) (Table 9).

Table 9. Query: Christian Environment—Affirmation and Critique.

Christian Environment Not Considered a Conflict		C	P	S
SC0-1	Affirmation of the Impact of Christian Environment	15	25	17
SC2-2	Impact of the Christian Environment on the Collaborator	16	24	15
SC3-1	Affirmation of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum	12	17	10
Affirmation (151)		43	66	42
SC0-2	Critique of the Impact of Christian Environment	2	5	1
SC3-2	Critique of Christian Environment as Hidden Curriculum	0	1	0
Critique (9)		2	6	1

C: Collaborators | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

There is an overwhelming embracing of the Christian ambience as more educative than in any way obstructive to the holistic formation of the young. A Hindu professor observes with appreciation that “the Christian Symbols and Signs that we see in our campus gives a positive vibration among us. As we place the image of our gods in our houses, we try to tell our children that god is looking at us. So are the images and symbols in the college. We feel we are loved by God”. However, the same person continues to remark that “there is chance of misunderstanding these symbols, so a proper education on these symbols should be given” (P-HF-04). The observation urges the Christian ambience to be reflexive about the role it has in the holistic formation of the young in the institutional setting.

7.3. Contribution of the Non-Christian Religions to the Educative Process

Assessing the contribution of the religious traditions other than Christian toward the educative process, the analysis presents these considerably referenced categories (Table 10): SC2-1—“Impact of Non-Christian Tradition on the Educational goals” (47); EC-B—“Recognition and Validation of Plurality and Related Educative Processes” (234).

Finding the opportunity for their own religious tradition, or traditions other than Christian, to contribute their part in taking forward the educational mission, a collaborator in social action states, “Many religious traditions emphasize the importance of community and fellowship. Leveraging this aspect can enhance the sense of belonging and support within the social-action centre, creating a tight-knit community that reinforces positive values” (C-HM-18).

Table 10. Query: Contribution of neighbour religions for Education.

Contribution of Other Religious Traditions for the Educative Process				C	P	S
SC2-1	Impact of Non-Christian tradition Environment on the Educational goals			12	26	9
[EC-B]	Recognition and Validation of Plurality and related Educative processes	[EC-B1]	Intercultural Approach and Processes	13	11	6
		[EC-B2]	Interreligious Approach and Dialogue	17	36	26
		[EC-B3]	Element of Diversity and Harmony	21	27	17
		[EC-B4]	Right and Freedom of Religious Plurality	22	20	16
Total References (281)				85	120	76

C: Collaborators | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

8. Public Religious Pedagogy Verified Through Emergent Categories

While an array of interpretations of the data are possible from numerous viewpoints, from the aforementioned and a gamut of tables that can be produced from the data analyzed with the help of the tool, we could conclude this part, identifying from the emergent categories the references that verify the three fundamental approaches of public religious pedagogy, as enunciated in the theoretical framework (cf. p. 7): that the educational process needs to offer an education that prepares one to promote the common good; an education that has a strong human rights perspective; and an education that is marked by an openness to religious education and moral/value education. We restrict ourselves to the emergent categories in this query, for the simple reason that the sensitizing categories were already formulated from these underlying theoretical principles and might have had a direct influence on the respondents, by the very formulation or the orientation of the interview schedule. The emergent categories, which are spontaneous themes emerging from the responses, can lead to an objective verification of the principles discussed or a nullification of them. What could be seen in the case of this research is that the emergent categories affirm and verify the three mentioned fundamental approaches, affirming in turn the hypothesis that the colleagues in the educational mission of the Salesians do share and wish to promote the educational goals, making it a quality experience of public religious pedagogy.

Indicating the presence of the trait of preparing the educand towards promoting the common good and human welfare (cf. Table 11), we find the query bringing out from the respondents a vast number of references (350), from all the interview files (that is, from all 27 respondents). It is an indication of the fact that the Salesian educative project is seen by all the colleagues, without any exception, as a preparation of the young towards contributing to the common good. A collaborator in social action looks at his collaboration positively, as he declares: “as a co-worker in a Salesian social centre, the efforts align with the Salesian mission to empower individuals, address systemic issues, and create a more equitable and harmonious society” (C-HM-19). A professor in the college shares: “my journey took a significant turn when I became a part of Don Bosco. Here, within the institution’s ethos, my dream of actively participating in social upliftment becomes a daily reality” (P-HF-06). Another professor affirms his contribution in this process of educating for promoting the common good, as he states, “Whether through incorporating sustainability themes in curriculum discussions or organizing eco-friendly

initiatives within the campus, I strive to instil a sense of environmental consciousness in both staff and students” (*P-IM-07*).

Table 11. Query: Educating to promote common good and human welfare.

1. Educating to Promote Common Good and Human Welfare		C	P	S
[EC-A4]	Social Dimension/Responsibility for Others	44	48	32
[EC-A5]	Group Experience/Togetherness	3	5	0
[EC-A6]	Vocation Dimension/Call and Mission	12	9	7
[EC-B1]	Intercultural Approach and Processes	13	11	6
[EC-B2]	Interreligious Approach and Dialogue	17	36	26
[EC-B3]	Element of Diversity and Harmony	21	27	17
[EC-E2]	Education to Ecological care/wellbeing	11	2	3
Total References (350)		121	138	91

C: Collaborators in Social Action | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

The other fundamental approach of implementing an educational process that has a strong human rights perspective is verified too by the respondents, as the query resulted in 145 references (cf. Table 12) from 25 respondents (of the total 27). In particular, here we find the category “Right and Freedom of Religious Plurality” (EC-B4), referenced highly in all the three respondent groups (collaborators—22; professors—20; teachers—16), which has a particular significance. It establishes the fact that the educative process does not depend only on some human rights education syllabuses or content but focuses on forming a mentality of respecting the rights of all, in the context of religious plurality. We notice largely that the non-Christian colleagues look at the ambience created as an effective means to promote this human rights mentality, more than merely an academic exercise. However, a lecturer also affirms the importance of formal education to human rights, saying, “When young pupils are exposed to human rights education, it teaches them to respect diversity from an early age. This is because no matter the differences between people—race, gender, wealth, ethnicity, language, religion, etc., we all still deserve certain rights. Human Rights protect diversity” (*P-HM-27*).

Table 12. Query: Education with human rights perspective.

2. Education with Human Rights Perspective		C	P	S
[EC-B4]	Right and Freedom of Religious Plurality	22	20	16
[EC-C1]	Need for Education to Citizenship felt and expressed	1	1	1
[EC-C2]	Educational efforts towards citizenship	18	12	11
[EC-D1]	Recognition of the need for Rights Perspective to Education	8	9	6
[EC-D2]	Education to Rights and Education with Perspective of Rights	5	11	4
Total References (145)		54	53	38

C: Collaborators in Social Action | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

Referring to it as one of the typical experiences offered in a Salesian educational setting, the respondents (at least 24 of the total 27) underscore emphatically the significance of religious education or an alternative moral or value education within the educational context. As seen from Table 13, this theme could be gathered broadly from the nine categories which amount to 446 references, proportionately distributed among the three respondent groups. However, numerically, the professors in the colleges emphasize it

more (172 references). We find references from the respondents that refer not only to the formation of the students but also to sustenance that they personally receive for their religious or spiritual wellbeing. A Hindu teacher in a school acknowledges, “working in a Christian educational institution has a positive impact of drawing me closer to God, developing my faith and creating a religious maturity in me” (*S-HF-16*). The Christian ambience, apart from not being an obstacle in the practice of one’s proper faith, is seen as a means to deepen one’s own faith although non-Christian. Highlighting the place of value education offered in the institution, a Hindu teacher (*S-HF-08*) feels empowered to be contributing to the building up of a better Indian society. She says, “through teaching and telling moral stories” she develops within the students “tolerance, brotherhood and humanity” which according to her will lead to forming “a good citizen and good society”. Going a step further a professor in the college reflects on the importance of example and personal witness in value formation: “Just imparting subject knowledge is not sufficient to play the role of a teacher. Through my behaviour, speech and actions I motivate the students to stay positive, smiling and be tolerant with others” (*P-HF-03*).

Table 13. Query: Openness to Religious and Moral/Value Education.

3. Openness to Religious and Moral/Value Education		C	P	S
[EC-A3]	Dimension of Faith/Spirituality	12	33	19
[EC-A6]	Vocation Dimension/Call and Mission	12	9	7
[EC-A7]	Ethics and Morals/Values	11	9	13
[EC-A8]	Character Dimension/Human formation	20	25	22
[EC-B2]	Interreligious Approach and Dialogue	17	36	26
[EC-B4]	Right and Freedom of Religious Plurality	22	20	16
[EC-E1]	The consciousness of Ecology	7	10	7
[EC-E2]	Education to Ecological care/wellbeing	11	2	3
[EC-F1]	Personal sense of fulfilment in collaboration	26	28	23
Total References (446)		138	172	136

C: Collaborators in Social Action | P: Professors | S: School Teachers.

9. Conclusions

This empirical research on the lived experience of the Salesian pedagogy among Hindu and Muslim professors in Salesian colleges, teachers in Salesian schools, and collaborators in Salesian social action centres corroborates the thesis that Salesian pedagogy can be considered as public religious pedagogy. It also points to the relevance of considering public religious pedagogy in its close link with public religious education, as interrelated features of practical public theology of education. In this way, the overall framework of Christian public theology evinces the significance of Salesian pedagogy in the public square of education in a multireligious context. Likewise, within the pedagogical experience, the Hindu and Muslim colleagues point to how they bring their respective theological vision and related values into the public sphere of the educational context.

Obviously, the empirical study carried out in Tamil Nadu can be extended successively to all other Salesian educational institutions in India and also in the world at large. The extent to which Salesian pedagogy functions as public religious pedagogy can be explored contextually and globally in the network of Salesian Institutions of Higher Education (IUS Network 1997). The IUS network today consists of more than 95 Institutions of Higher Education spread across five continents: India (36), Brazil (11), Argentina (9), and the rest distributed in 17 other countries; engaging over 150,000 students and over 8200 professors.

Sharing of lived experiences and best practices of the IUS network in this regard can lead to the further development of Salesian pedagogy as worldwide public religious pedagogy. Such an effort would be of help to the Salesians and their colleagues of Christian and neighbour religions to grasp the public theological underpinnings of Salesian pedagogy as they prepare to celebrate in 2027 the 150th anniversary of Don Bosco's first proposal of his lived experience as a model of religious pedagogy, the preventive system.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel16050646/s1>, S1 presents Figures of Respondent Demographics; S2, the Structured Interview Schedule; S3a, Codebook A—Alphabetical; and S3b, Codebook B—Frequency.

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Article

Measuring Muslim Lifestyle Using a Halal Scale

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Abstract: The background and motivation of the research presented in this article is the obligation of Public Theology to do justice to young Muslim refugees as a minority group in German society regarding the role of religiosity in the way they are coping with life. In the research process, the authors became increasingly aware that most instruments to measure religiosity have a Western and/or Protestant bias in that they are more interested in religious attitude than in religious practice and/or religious lifestyle, which is very important for Muslim religiosity. Therefore, this article focuses on the distinction between halal and haram as indicators of religious practice according to Muslim benchmarks. Both the concept and the operationalization of a two-dimensional instrument of living a halal life are described. The instrument distinguishes between the individual importance of halal goods (food, medicine, cosmetics) and services (doctors) and their availability in the local environment. Each of the two dimensions comprises four items. Construct validity is shown by confirmatory factor analysis ($CFI_{\text{robust}} = 0.934$, $TLI_{\text{robust}} = 0.902$, $RMSEA_{\text{robust}} = 0.114$ [0.073; 0.156]) of a sample of $N = 155$ Muslim adolescents who have fled to Germany from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. External validity is tested by analyzing the correlation of the measurement instrument developed by the authors with the Centrality of Religiosity Scale. The presented halal instrument offers an approach to Muslim lifestyle that meets the orthopractic character of this religion. At the same time, it addresses the consequential dimension of religion within quantitative research.

Keywords: Islam; religiosity; halal; quantitative study

1. Introduction

1.1. Empirical Research on Muslim Religiosity as a Matter of Public Theology

This article reports one characteristic aspect within an empirical research project that surveys the significance of young Muslim refugees' religiosity in the way they are coping with life and in their integration in Germany. The project and the reported research can be located at the intersection of three major theoretical perspectives of Public Theology, namely (a) a liberationist perspective, (b) an interreligious perspective and (c) a postcolonial perspective. Methodologically, there is still a "lack of attention to the role that empirical research plays in the construction of public theological discourse" (Cartledge 2016, p. 146); this article provides one example of how empirical methods can be meaningfully related to Public Theology perspectives. Our basic understanding of Public Theology is linked to the broad and diverse discourse in the context of the Global Network of Public Theology (GNPT), with an emphasis on the intention to bring in religious traditions and motivations to serve the common good of all, including people from other religions and those with no religious affiliation.

(a) From the start, Public Theology has especially focused on the marginalized, suppressed or disempowered, especially in what Duncan Forrester called the liberationist approaches of Public Theology (Forrester 2000, pp. 118–25). Heinrich Bedford-Strohm

has conceptualized his own Public Theology in the German context as “Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society” (Bedford-Strohm 2018). In his role as Chairman of the Protestant Churches of Germany, he actively engaged in rescuing refugees and drawing attention to their human rights (Bedford-Strohm 2022), as has Pope Francis with several official statements and symbolic actions. It has repeatedly been pointed out that, although Christian engagement for refugees is primarily motivated by the love of neighbor, Christian solidarity with refugees is additionally enhanced by the central role of the motif of the stranger and the refugee for the self-understanding of both Judaism and Christianity (Exod. 22:20; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 26:5; Ps. 39:13; Matt. 2:13–15), including the Christian belief that all of us are migrants on this earth. In this vein, as Christian theologians, we initiated our research project with the aim to reduce prejudice, generalized suspicion and discrimination against refugees because of their Muslim religiosity by empirically analyzing the factual, largely positive role the refugees’ religiosity plays in the way they are coping with life and integration. We thus also want to promote the refugees’ right to freedom of religion and belief.

(b) As a result of his comprehensive analysis of Public Theology literature, Pirner (2022) stated that interreligious perspectives have so far not constituted “an essential component in doing public theology”, as William Storrar had demanded, looking back at the New York terrorist attacks of 2001 (Storrar 2009, p. 246). To be sure, Public Theology does reflect inter-faith encounters and is interested in the daily experience of non-Christians (Kim 2007; Lewis 2015; Wabel 2019). However, in such studies, other religions and the experiences of adherents of non-Christian religions are often addressed within a Christian theological framework. Reflections on Public Theology within non-Christian traditions such as Islam are rather scarce (Hosen 2012; Pirner 2022; Pirner et al. 2018; Qurtuby 2013). Especially in the face of societal globalization, the question of how the experiences of non-Christian believers can be adequately captured is also becoming increasingly important for Public Theology. Even among those publications that Pirner (2022) presented and categorized as substantially including interreligious thinking, there are hardly any that promote the religious rights of non-Christian minorities. In this respect, our research addresses a deficit of Public Theology.

(c) However, although we developed our research in exchange with Muslim colleagues and employed Muslim interviewers, it was only during the research process that we realized that the concepts of religion and religiosity that we used had a Christian majority bias. This insight resonates with and supports postcolonial critique within and without Public Theology discourse. Within Public Theology, postcolonial voices have criticized the mostly Western and Christian concept of “theology” (e.g., Chung 2016; Maluleke 2011, 2021). At a more general level—mainly in the fields of religious studies and sociology—criticism has been voiced against the predominantly Western concept of “religion” or “religious” and corresponding empirical instruments that often do not do justice to non-Christian phenomena. On the one hand, it is noted that most of the available empirical instruments have a Protestant Christian bias (Ağilkaya-Şahin et al. 2015; Cutting and Walsh 2008; Lazar 2020). On the other hand, the question is raised whether theoretical concepts such as secularization and individualization adequately capture the dynamics in non-Christian religions and cultures (Dover et al. 2007; Ghorbani et al. 2018; Lazar 2004). Focusing on empirical research on Muslim religiosity, El-Menouar (El-Menouar 2014, pp. 54–57) identifies five characteristic problems, namely (i) conceptualizing multi-faceted Muslim religiosity as a one-dimensional construct, (ii) translating Christian instruments into Islamic terminology without taking the theological context into account, (iii) interpreting the results of Muslim religiosity within a Christian framework, (iv) using indicators that go beyond religiosity and (v) using statistical routines that do not meet the recent state of the art. Interestingly, only the fifth problem is a purely methodological problem, while the other four problems address issues of a theological nature.

1.2. Doing Justice to Muslim Religiosity as an Obligation of Public Theology

These theological issues are of special interest because Muslim religiosity differs in at least three aspects from the generic Western model of religion, which has a profound Christian bias (Höllinger and Makula 2021; Masuzawa 2005). First, Islam is not institutionalized compared to corporate institutions such as “churches” or “religious communities”. Interestingly, studies on the individualization of Islam exclusively deal with the integration of both Muslim individuals and Muslim communities into Western societies (Cesari et al. 2014; Duderija and Rane 2019). This does not mean that Islam does not have organizations or institutions of its own that mediate in spiritual affairs (Robinson 2004; Whyte 2024). The Arabic term “ummah”, however, which can be translated as “spiritual community”, rather refers to mutual support among believers who share common religious beliefs than to a well-defined body in terms of membership and structure (Mandaville 2006). Sometimes, this community has been associated with some local community but more often with the global community of all Muslims (Manzooruddin 1975). The ummah represents those who believe in God who has revealed Himself in the Quran. This ummah is pluriform in itself, and the conceptualization of Muslim religiosity should respect this pluriformity. Consequently, attempts to measure “Muslim religiosity” with the aim to distinguish between “highly religious” and “less religious” adherents appears to be deeply questionable.

Second, and especially relevant for our research, although there are currents in Islam that emphasize the right beliefs, Islam is often regarded as an *orthopractic religion* (Denny 1989; El-Menouar 2014; Ruthven 2012)—a term which is also applied to e.g., Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. In orthopractic religions, the main focus is on adequate religious practice and a religious lifestyle rather than adequate belief, because acting according to religious norms and morals is believed to express as well as stimulate a corresponding belief. Of course, the distinction between orthopractic and orthodox religions is first of all a theoretical one to orient research (Ghaneabassiri 2013). Nonetheless, in the case of Islam, it strikes at the heart of Muslim religiosity. For example, four of the five pillars of Islam are of a practical nature, namely fasting during Ramadan, giving zakat, the daily prayer (salat) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hadj). Also, there are many norms that steer everyday life, such as not drinking alcohol and not eating pork. Therefore, conceptualizing Muslim religiosity from an orthopractic perspective seems to meet the inner dynamics of this religious tradition.

Third, as a consequence of the orthopractic character of Islamic religiosity, the cultural context and in particular the *availability structures* that are necessary to practice one’s religiosity gain increased importance. To be sure, availability structures also become relevant for Christian religious practice as soon as Christianity is no longer in a majority situation. For instance, measuring Christian religiosity by the frequency of church service attendance—as is often done in standard measurement instruments such as the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (Huber and Huber 2012)—presupposes that appropriate churches are available within easy reach. This indicates that such an item has been created in a Christian majority context and that it will probably not work in a Christian minority context. Similarly, to just adapt this item to a Muslim sample by asking about the frequency of Friday Prayer attendance will not work in a Muslim minority context such as Germany, where in many parts of the country suitable mosques may not be available. It is also questionable because in Islam the obligation to attend Friday Prayers is primarily attributed to men. When it comes to other religious practices in orthopractic religions, such as certain dietary or clothing regulations, availability structures will also play an important role. It should be remembered that the possibility to practice one’s religion according to its characteristic regulations is a human rights issue. The right to freedom of religion and belief explicitly includes everyone’s “freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (Art. 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

Recent scales to measure Muslim religiosity address at least partly the orthopractic aspect of Islam. For example, the Ok-Religious-Attitude-Scale-Islam (ORASI) (Ok 2016)

lists two items directly related to practice (“I try to put my religion into practice in my life” and “I check that I am living my life in line with religious values”) and two items referring to such practice (“I feel moved when I listen to religious chanting/reciting such as Ezan, prayer or Qur’anic verses” and “I really enjoy taking part in religious activities”), although this scale is about attitude. In El-Menouar’s instrument, the orthopractic dimension of Muslim religiosity represents the consequential dimension of Glock’s model of religiosity (El-Menouar 2014). This dimension is operationalized by six items: (i) not drinking alcohol, (ii) eating halal meat, (iii) avoiding shaking hands with the opposite sex, (iv) sex segregation at weddings and other celebrations, (v) not listening to music, and (vi) charitable donations (zakat). El-Menouar’s instrument can, however, also serve as an example of the problems that may arise when the attempt is to measure “the” orthopractic dimension of Muslim religiosity; to varying degrees all six items are disputed as to their importance and their binding nature among differing Muslim denominations, communities and groups.

Yet, the Islamic discourse, which deals with a lifestyle according to religious principles by way of the distinction between haram and halal, seems to be of widely shared significance for Muslims (Qaraḍāwī 2011; Shinohe 2019). Both terms are of a juridical nature and refer to a set of rules and life principles that indicate what is allowed according to Islamic law (halal) and what is not allowed (haram). These rules and principles are not restricted only to eating and drinking but address a Muslim’s entire life. There are, for example, also discussions on halal banking (Rahman 2015), halal tourism (Echchabi et al. 2022), and halal media (Lövheim and Axner 2011). Moreover, the distinction between halal and haram not only focuses on the product but also on the process by which the product is made (Ali and Suleiman 2018). In the case of halal meat, for example, the method of slaughtering is as important as the type of meat. Finally, the distinction between halal and haram is fluid (Allievi 2006). Although both terms are of a juridical nature, their meaning is shifting according to time, to cultural context, to living conditions, and also to individual attitude. The Quranic verses and the hadiths to which those rules and principles refer have to be interpreted according to the relevant times and environments as well as to the relevant regulations of Sharia law. Therefore, the distinction between halal and haram is not a fixed one; it remains open to different interpretations by different Muslim denominations, communities and groups.

In consequence, the Islamic discourse on halal and haram seems to offer a suitable reference to conceptualize and operationalize the orthopractic dynamics of Muslim religiosity. This discourse should offer an answer to the call for empirical instruments that do justice to the orthopractic character of Muslim religiosity. It solves El-Menouar’s problems (ii) and (iv) as it uses authentic Islamic terminology and is clearly related to religious norms and motives. Thus, developing and using an empirical instrument for measuring a halal-haram-oriented Muslim lifestyle also seems to have the potential to avoid the abovementioned shortcomings of interreligious Public Theology and to address the postcolonial criticism.

2. Designing an Instrument Measuring Muslim Lifestyle

To take this step according to the standards of empirical research requires an empirical instrument that has been designed within the discourse on halal and haram. In this section we first report the state of the art on how this discourse is reflected in existing instruments and then proceed to the design of the Nuremberg–Siegen Instrument on Halal Lifestyle.

2.1. The Assessment of Halal and Haram in Existing Instruments

In the last decade, several journals on halal research have been launched, such as *Halal: Journal of Halal Research* (<https://jh-per.halal.ac.ir/?lang=en>, accessed on 5 August 2024) in 2018 as well as the *International Journal of Halal Research* (<http://ijhalal.org/index.php/hr>, accessed on 5 August 2024) and the *Malaysian Journal of Halal Research* (<https://sciendo.com/de/journal/MJHR>, accessed on 5 August 2024) in 2019. These launches indicate rising academic attention to this topic, predominantly in Islamic majority countries. The journals comprise articles from various scientific disciplines such as medicine, chemistry

and educational sciences. The most powerful strand of research, however, is that on the halal industry within economics. A recent meta-study identifies a tremendous increase of relevant papers in this academic field since 2010 (Zaki et al. 2023, p. 197). The most prominent research topics are consumer behavior, Islamic branding, Islamic marketing, halal supply chains, halal certification, and halal tourism (Putera and Rakhel 2023). From a conceptual perspective, within this thematic spectrum, research on the consumption of halal meat (Ahmed 2008; Alam and Sayuti 2011; Bonne et al. 2007; Bonne and Verbeke 2008; Sherwani et al. 2018; Vermeir and Verbeke 2006) is of particular interest because it offers important insights for designing an instrument to measure individual access to the discourse on halal and haram.

According to a recent meta-study by Mostafa (Mostafa 2020), there are four characteristic thematic clusters within this strand of research, namely (i) a focus on halal food consumer behavior and attitudes from a psychological perspective, (ii) a focus on halal food production, control and safety, (iii) a focus on Sharia-compliance issues and (iv) a focus on halal food policy issues. Often these studies are conceptualized according to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991), resulting in exhaustive approaches to halal meat. In the study of (Sherwani et al. 2018, p. 871), for example, attitude toward halal meat was assessed (“Halal meat is important to me”) as well as motivation to comply (“People who are important to me think I should eat halal meat”), perceived control (“How much control do you feel you have over eating halal meat?”), perceived availability (“There is a lot of choice of halal food products in Germany”), habit (“Eating halal meat is something that I do without reasoning”), moral obligation (“I would feel guilty if I did not purchase halal meat”) and behavioral intention (“How many times do you intend to eat halal meat in the next seven days?”). The first insight therefore is that economic research on halal meat offers a distinct spectrum of how to act according to the norms and principles of the discourse on halal and haram. Additionally, it provides relevant studies with tested items.

Another characteristic is that these studies do not specify what halal meat actually is. Instead of giving clear descriptions of such meat, the term “halal” itself is used in the item wording to qualify the meat. In consequence, the respondents are called to fill in their individual understanding of this term with regard to meat. This form of operationalization avoids the problem that the meaning of what is halal is answered differently in different Muslim traditions. It addresses the varying distinctions between halal and haram. Therefore, it does not reproduce stereotypes of what is halal and what is haram. The second insight therefore is that using the term “halal”, instead of qualifying what could be halal, meets the fluid distinction of what is halal and what is haram.

The sociological instruments on Muslim religiosity do not add much to these insights (Nabi et al. 2023). Many instruments—such as “The Attitudes Toward Islam Scale” (Sahin and Francis 2002), the “The Muslim-Christian Religious Orientation Scales” (Ghorbani et al. 2002) and the “Knowledge-Practice Measure of Islamic Religiosity” (Alghorani 2008)—do not refer to issues that are clearly related to the discourse on halal and haram. Of course, specific items of these instruments may be discussed according to the halal–haram distinction, too. However, on the one hand, the authors of these instruments do not refer to this discourse when introducing these items and, on the other hand, one may discuss these items also without referring to haram and halal. For example, (Mahudin et al. 2016, p. 114) conceptualize their “Religiosity Scale” within the framework of the *Ḥadīth Jibril*, one of the most important collections of oral traditions of Sunni Islam, by discerning the three dimensions of (1) the bodily action or human activity (*islam*), (2) the mind or understanding of God (*iman*) and (3) the spirit or actualization of virtue and goodness (*ihsan*), but they do not refer to the concept of halal in operationalizing the level of bodily action and human activity. The link of these instruments to the discourse on halal and haram is—at best—random rather than deliberate and planned.

Also, there are some items with implicit references to this discourse on halal and haram in more recent scales. The “Religiosity of Islam Scale”, for example, has one item on drinking alcohol (“I drink alcohol”) (Jana-Masri and Priester 2007). The “Islamic Behavioral

Religiosity Scale” comprises 30 items, with one item representing an inverse item that might refer to a halal lifestyle motivated by religious reasons (“Although I am a religious person, I refuse to let religious considerations influence my everyday life”) (Ji and Ibrahim 2007). The “Muslim Daily Religiosity Assessment Scale” lists some morally negative behaviors (“use intoxicants like alcohol, whether drinking, selling, etc.”, “swear falsely in the name of God”, “waste resources, e.g., food, money, etc.”) that are tackled within the halal discourse without explicitly referring to it (Olufadi 2017). Finally, the religiosity scale of Mohd Dali et al. (2019) comprises two items with indirect reference to the halal discourse (“My religious beliefs influence which service providers I use”, “My whole approach to life is based on my religion”), but also one with an explicit reference (“I always keep myself away from earning through haram [prohibited] means such as interest from conventional banking”). This scale, however, was developed within the context of economic sciences and not in the sociology of religion. In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (“Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge”, BAMF) conducted empirical surveys about the life of Muslims in Germany; in its section on “religious practice”, one single-item question on the “observance of religious food and drink regulations” was integrated (for the most recent study, see Pfündel et al. 2021, p. 90).

In summary, it can be stated that the existing sociological measures of Muslim religiosity address the discourse on halal and haram more or less implicitly. Some of those instruments comprise items that refer to behavior that could be motivated by religious reasons. Instruments that originate in economics, by contrast, do address this discourse exhaustively by using different approaches. Furthermore, they avoid stereotypical attributions by using the terms “halal” and “haram”. Very rarely, the availability of halal products or services is included in the research instruments. Also, most of these studies address only the consumption of food, as far as everyday behavior is concerned. In addition, they use single items to assess the issue of halal and haram. Economic studies do not provide any scales on this topic.

2.2. The Nuremberg–Siegen Instrument on Halal Lifestyle (NSIHL)

In reaction to the gaps in previous halal research, the project team at Nuremberg and Siegen developed their own instrument with the goal to offer adolescent refugees who came to Germany from Islamic countries—namely Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria—a measure of Muslim lifestyle. The research context was an important stimulus for the development of this instrument. First, these refugees were brought up in an Islamic majority culture. It is very likely that they are confronted with a Western understanding of religion and of being religious for the first time when they arrive in Europe. Therefore, the question of an appropriate measure of religiosity that takes account of the largely orthopractic character of Islam is of special relevance in this context. Second, this orthopractic dimension of Islam is deeply rooted in the culture of the refugees’ home countries. Previous research shows that in Islamic majority countries all of life revolves around the distinction between halal and haram and that Islamic culture as well as public and private institutions offer the corresponding availability structures for halal products and services. What the refugees could take for granted in their home countries is likely to become a problem in everyday life in the Western host country, namely a halal-oriented lifestyle. In this situation a measure of the halal lifestyle is necessary that is more complex than the single-item measures of economic research.

As indicated in the previous sections, the distinction between halal and haram concerns not only the question of what kind of meat is allowed to be eaten but multiple areas of Muslim life. A halal lifestyle can be defined as an individual’s way to live their daily life according to halal principles, including their behavior, habits, activities and interests (Kamariah et al. 2018, p. 446). Such principles determine the production and consumption of food, beverages, cosmetics, fashion, medicine, travel, hospitality, finance and even electronic devices. Given the situation of adolescent refugees, the Nuremberg and Siegen project team decided to measure the relevance of a halal lifestyle by looking at products and

services in daily life. Other material aspects such as tourism or finance would have little effect on the living conditions of adolescent refugees in Germany. These considerations led to the following four aspects of a halal lifestyle: food, cosmetics, medicine and doctors. Everybody has to eat and drink as well as take care of their physical well-being in terms of both hygiene and health. Thus, the four chosen aspects of a halal lifestyle represent elementary affordances of daily life for all people. They are suitable indicators of a halal lifestyle. As in economic research, the halal character of these aspects has not been explicitly described in detail but is indicated by the term “halal” itself (“halal food”, “halal medicine” and “products for personal care that comply with halal rules”) or by a general description (“a doctor who is aware of the rules of Islam”).

Furthermore, the Nuremberg–Siegen instrument (NSIHL) takes care of the particular situation of refugees by discerning two dimensions of a halal lifestyle. First, such a lifestyle is a question of the individual’s will. As mentioned above, although all the major Islamic schools of law—with reference to the Qur’an and hadith traditions—require Muslims to live according to halal principles, and although these principles are regarded as binding in Islamic countries, their obligatory nature may be viewed differently among different denominations, communities, groups and individual believers, especially in non-Islamic countries. For instance, the above-mentioned BAMF study found that about 69% of the Muslims in Germany observe “religious food and drink regulations” (but about 13% only do this to a certain extent) (Pfündel et al. 2021, p. 90). Thus, it seems that there is some variance among Muslims concerning the observance of halal rules, at least in a Western country such as Germany. Consequently, a halal lifestyle is first of all an issue of individual choice and of the importance assigned to it. Therefore, the first dimension of the Nuremberg–Siegen instrument is about the importance of the four chosen aspects of a halal lifestyle for individuals.

Second, unlike in Islamic societies, in Western societies the availability of halal products is not guaranteed. Refugees in particular, who are not able to decide themselves where they live and normally do not have much money, might face challenges in buying halal products or finding halal services. This applies, despite the fact that, in parallel with the growing Muslim population in Germany, the number of shops that offer halal products has increased, online trackers of halal products (such as <https://www.mustakshif.com/public/list-of-products/list-of-Halal-Products-in-Germany>, accessed on 5 August 2024) provide information about the German market, and more and more online traders (such as <https://www.kamar-halal.de/en/>, accessed on 5 August 2024) help to overcome physical distances. In consequence, the second dimension of the Nuremberg–Siegen instrument is about the availability of the four chosen aspects of a halal lifestyle. It indicates to what extent the respondents are able to put their wish to live a halal lifestyle into practice.

In consequence of our discussion in Section 1.2 we deliberately refrained from including a set of questions on the frequency of using halal products or services. As we have argued above, the frequency of public religious practices cannot serve as an indicator of religiosity in a situation where the availability structures that make these religious practices possible are not guaranteed. We contend that the personal dimension of a halal lifestyle can be better captured by asking about its importance for the individual. The results from this scale will show how significant this aspect is for the respondents’ Muslim lifestyle. Furthermore, a comparison of the importance of a halal lifestyle for the respondents with the perceived availability of halal products and services can indicate the extent to which the young Muslims can practice their religiosity in this area—or the extent to which the practice of their religiosity is impeded. Although we thus constructed the two halal scales as representing two separate variables, it remained an open question whether they would also correlate with each other. Theoretically, three possible reasons for such correlations can be imagined. First, if halal is important for a person, they may be more attentive to halal products and services offered in their neighborhood. Second, the very presence of halal products and services as perceived by the young Muslims may prompt them to attach more importance to them. Third, the availability of halal products and services will probably

enhance a halal lifestyle among other Muslims around them and may consequently also influence them to consider it as important for their religiosity.

These conceptual decisions bring about the instrument (see Table 1).

Table 1. The items of the Nuremberg–Siegen Instrument on Halal Lifestyle (NSIHL).

<i>Dimension of individual importance</i>	
	How important is it for you to eat halal food?
	How important is it for you to have access to halal medicine?
	How important is it for you to have access to a doctor/psychologist/psychotherapist who is aware of the rules of Islam when treating you?
	How important is it for you to get products for personal care that comply with halal rules?
<i>Dimension of availability</i>	
	I have the opportunity to buy halal food.
	I have access to halal medicine.
	I have access to a doctor/psychologist/psychotherapist who is aware of the rules of Islam when treating me.
	I have the opportunity to get products for personal care that comply with halal rules.

The participants could respond to each of these items on a five-point Likert-type scale. On the dimension of individual importance, the categories are 1 = unimportant; 2 = less important; 3 = to some extent important; 4 = rather important; 5 = very important. The categories on the dimension of availability are 1 = does not apply at all; 2 = does not quite apply; 3 = applies to some extent; 4 = largely applies; 5 = completely applies.

In sum, the Nuremberg–Siegen Instrument on Halal Lifestyle (NSIHL) comprises eight items of daily halal life that represent the dimensions of both individual importance and availability. As such, it represents an economical measure of the orthopractic dimension of Muslim life, which addresses the challenges of Muslim refugees' efforts to lead a life according to the Islamic principles of halal.

3. Method

The NSIHL was validated within a study on the role of religiosity of adolescent and young adult refugees for coping with living in Germany. In this section, we describe the sample of this study, the data collection and the methods of data analysis.

3.1. Sample

The sample is part of a longitudinal study with three waves of data collection. The population of the study consists of those refugees who are aged between 16 and 26 years and who have a postal address in the federal regions of Bavaria, Hesse, North-Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony. From this population, a stratified sample was drawn according to the categories of (i) religious affiliation, (ii) country of origin, (iii) sex and (iv) time spent in Germany. Sampling took three steps. First, addresses were provided by the registration offices of the previously listed regions. Second, possible participants were contacted by post and invited to register for the study via the internet. Third, local refugee aid associations and organizations were asked to supplement the sample. All in all, 7521 letters and 1176 reminders were sent out. As a result of this, 572 participants registered, 285 of whom participated in the first wave of the study. For further details of the sampling process, see <https://osf.io/rdhku>, accessed on 5 August 2024.

The NSIHL was applied in the second wave ($n = 130$) of the study and—due to adaptive testing—in the third wave ($n = 25$) to those participants who had not taken part in the second wave. In both waves, the young refugees who were invited to answer the questionnaire were those who had already participated in the first wave. Consequently, the sample of the participants who completed the halal instrument comprises $N = 155^1$ Muslim participants. They are between 16 and 25 years old ($m = 21.06$, $sd = 2.86$) and come from Syria ($n = 118$), Afghanistan ($n = 19$) and Iraq ($n = 18$). The average time of stay in Germany is $m = 5.85$ years ($sd = 2.33$), with a range of 11 to 108 months ($n_{\text{missing}} = 30$). In

consequence, all participants had at least some time to adjust to the living conditions in Germany. Of this sample, $n = 62$ participants are female and $n = 93$ are male.

3.2. Data Collection

In the project, all the data were collected using CASI and CAPI questionnaires online. To overcome problems with language, the participants could choose between questionnaires in German, English, Arabic, Kurmanji and Farsi. Participants had the opportunity to receive assistance in their preferred language by specially trained interviewers via video-conferencing tools, telephone, messenger or e-mail.

The data collection of the second survey period lasted from 23 January until 27 February 2023, and that of the third survey period from 16 October until 6 November 2023. As an incentive, participants were offered a voucher worth EUR 20 (third wave: EUR 40), if they participated within the first week (push-to-web strategy) and EUR 10 (third wave: EUR 25) after that period. Where possible, care was taken to ensure that the participants were contacted by the same interviewers with whom they had already had contact in the first wave of the survey. The average time taken to complete the questionnaire for the complete wave was 12 (20) min. For further details, see <https://osf.io/rdhku>, accessed on 5 August 2024.

3.3. Data Analysis²

All the analyses were performed with R (version 4.4.1) using the package “lavaan” (Rosseel 2012, version 0.6.18). The analysis on item and manifest scale level was done using descriptive statistics, calculating the mean and standard deviation as well as the skewness and kurtosis, to have some indication of the distribution of the answers.

For all latent analyses, maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) was applied to correct for deviations from normal distribution (skewness range: -4.11 to 0.20 , excessive kurtosis range: -1.10 to 19.75 , Brown and Little 2015, p. 346). Missing values for the core variables of the NSIHL (eight items) as well as for the CRS-5 (five items, see below) occurred in 37.4% of cases (with 10 missing values per variable on average, $\min = 2$; $\max = 24$) and were estimated model-based, using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). The scaling of latent variables as well as the latent means was done via effects-coding identification (Little et al. 2006).

To determine construct validity, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted.

External validity was checked by two measures. First, the scales of the halal instrument were correlated with Muslim adolescents’ religiosity (Pearson’s r). Religiosity was assessed by the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS) (Huber and Huber 2012). It was chosen because it measures religiosity, even in its five-item short form (CRS-5), as more comprehensive alternative instruments do (Riegel 2020) and is available in a version for Muslim respondents. We assume a positive correlation of CRS-5 with the dimension “importance” and a much lower correlation of CRS-5 with the dimension “availability” due to obvious reasons. Second, the halal scales were tested for sex-specific effects, using the unstandardized solution of confirmatory factor analysis. The effect size of latent mean differences was determined by Hedges’ g , and for latent correlations by Pearson’s r . The dimension “importance” should prove to measure a dimension of the participants’ religiosity by showing sex differences similar to CRS-5. The dimension “availability” should not be sensitive to such differences.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics indicate that all four aspects of a halal lifestyle are rather important to the respondents, but that there are some challenges to realize such a lifestyle due to the limited availability of medical services (see Table 2). The most important issue of living a halal lifestyle seems to be halal food ($m = 4.10$), while halal cosmetics ($m = 3.29$) and medical services that comply with halal rules ($m = 3.23$) are important only to some extent. The availability of the goods is also rather high ($3.33 < m < 4.14$). Only medical

services that observe halal rules are somewhat hard to find ($m = 2.67$). None of the eight indicators is normally distributed in the statistical sense.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

	<i>n</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>	<i>skew</i>	<i>kurt</i>	<i>se</i>
<i>Dimension: Individual Importance</i>								
Food	153	4.35	1.06	1	5	−1.65	1.87	0.09
Medicine	146	3.86	1.36	1	5	−0.87	−0.61	0.11
Doctors/Psychologists	140	3.42	1.39	1	5	−0.42	−1.10	0.12
Cosmetics	148	3.48	1.37	1	5	−0.43	−1.09	0.11
Scale	146	3.78	1.14	1	5	−0.68	−0.66	0.09
<i>Dimension: Availability</i>								
Food	148	4.17	0.89	1	5	−1.08	1.08	0.07
Medicine	137	3.77	1.15	1	5	−0.94	0.21	0.10
Doctors/Psychologists	131	2.69	1.28	1	5	0.20	−1.01	0.11
Cosmetics	135	3.36	1.36	1	5	−0.39	−1.07	0.12
Scale	136	3.52	0.89	1	5	−0.39	−0.24	0.08

Notes. Scale scores based in each case on at least 75% of answered items per case; kurt = excessive kurtosis.

Confirmatory factor analyses resulted in two factors that correspond to the conceptual distinction between the availability and individual importance of halal goods and services (see Figure 1). The factors explained 72% and 46%, respectively, of the variance in the items, and the constructs were measured with good to very good reliability (congeneric reliability = ϵ [0.77; 0.91]), suggesting convergent validity (Hair 2019, p. 619). Discriminant validity of the constructs was ensured; the factor loadings are all substantial, though somewhat nominally higher for the dimension of individual importance than for that of availability (see online materials at <https://osf.io/uczs8>, accessed on 5 August 2024, for details on validity). In sum, confirmatory factor analysis indicates the construct validity of the Nuremberg–Siegen Instrument on Halal Lifestyle.

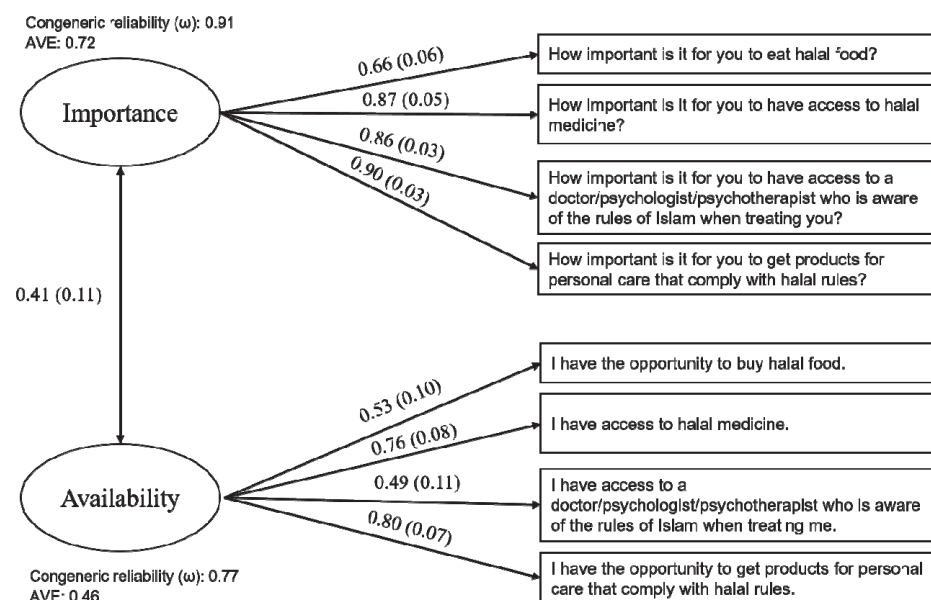


Figure 1. Confirmatory factor analysis for the NSIHL. Notes: $N = 155$; Model-Fit (robust): $\chi^2 = 51.62$ (19), $p < 0.05$; CLI = 0.934, TLI = 0.902, RMSEA = 0.114 [0.073; 0.156]; completely standardized solution; standard errors in parentheses; error terms not shown for the sake of clarity; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

For the first test of external validity, we analyzed the factor correlations of both scales of the halal instrument as well as the participants' religiosity measured by the Centrality of Religiosity scale (CRS-5) in a single-group three-factor-model. Both latent correlations are as expected and differ statistically significantly from each other ($r_{\text{difference}} = 0.25 [0.11]$). The correlation between religiosity and the individual importance of a halal lifestyle is high ($r = 0.78 [0.06]$). Therefore, 61% of the variance within the answers on the importance of a halal lifestyle is explained by the respondents' religiosity—and vice versa. The correlation between religiosity and the availability of halal goods and services is only moderate ($r = 0.53 [0.10]$). As expected, the importance scale represents the respondents' religiosity to a great extent, whereas the availability scale shows a moderate relationship to it. The correlation between availability and importance in this model ($r = 0.42 [0.11]$) is by comparison the weakest among all three correlations and statistically significantly different from that of importance with CRS-5 ($r_{\text{difference}} = -0.37 [0.10]$) but not from availability with CRS-5 ($r_{\text{difference}} = -0.12 [0.09]$), which is a further indication of validity. Analyzing the relationship between the NSIHL scales and CRS-5 in a multi-group model with partial³ invariant factor variances yielded higher correlations for men than for women for both availability and importance scales with CRS-5. Although the differences for the relationship between the two halal scales as well as between availability and CRS-5 are substantial, these differences are not statistically significant, as the standard errors are enlarged in the subgroups due to the equality restrictions of the factor variances required for a comparison of unstandardized factor correlations between groups in combination with the small sample size. However, there is a clear tendency for the two correlations outlined to be stronger for men than for women (see <https://osf.io/uczs8>, accessed on 5 August 2024, for details).

As scalar invariances hold, the second test of external validity is the check of sex differences by comparing the unstandardized latent means of men and women within the respective multi-group three-factor model (factors: availability, importance, CRS-5) with scalar invariance restrictions. Regarding religiosity, female participants ($m = 4.15$) are much more religious than male ones ($m = 3.69$), which represents a weak to strong effect (Hedges' $g = 0.67 [CI: 0.34; 1.00]$). This means that there is a 79% chance that, in a randomly selected pair of people, the religiosity of women is higher than that of men (common language effect size). Regarding the availability of halal goods and services, there is only a very small difference with a weak effect size ($\Delta m = 0.20$, Hedges' $g = 0.25 [CI: -0.07; 0.58]$). Therefore, the perception of availability is virtually not affected by the participants' sex. The importance of halal goods and services is more important to women than to men, with a weak to strong effect size ($\Delta m = 0.62$; Hedges' $g = 0.59 [CI: 0.26; 0.92]$; common language effect size: 67%). The latter resembles the higher religiosity of women compared to that of men.

During the analyses of the three-factor model, it emerged that, according to the modification indices, the item relating to the importance of halal-compliant food should load better on the religiosity factor rather than on "importance" in both groups. This item would then have the highest factor loading in the CRS-5 factor. This result shows that the importance of halal-compliant food is an essential part of the religiosity of Muslim adolescents.

5. Discussion

In the following section, we will first discuss the empirical results, then relate them to the discourse on appropriate measurements of a Muslim lifestyle, delineate some possible consequences for Public Theology and finally address the limitations of this study.

The core of this article describes the development and validation of an empirical instrument to assess the orthopractic dynamics of Muslim religiosity. Including items on halal food, halal cosmetics, halal medicine and medical services that comply with halal rules, the instrument comprises four aspects of orthopraxy that are common in Muslims' daily lives. In the instrument, these aspects are addressed according to two dimensions: individual importance and availability. The first dimension refers to the moral relevance of a

halal lifestyle, and the second to the specific situation in Western countries that are culturally non-Muslim and therefore do not offer halal goods and services as a matter of course. Confirmatory factor analysis proves this theoretical distinction as realistic by resulting in two solid factors that each represent one dimension of the theoretical model. The Muslim participants also distinguish in their answers between individual importance of halal goods and services and availability. Further, the reliability of both dimensions indicates that the participants see each of the two dimensions as a cohesive whole. However, they assess the availability of the four aspects quite differently, for example, the four aspects form one solid empirical factor with good reliability. In consequence, the NSIHL seems to operationalize the theoretical examination of the discourse on halal and haram appropriately.

As to the orthopractic dimension of religiosity, whose importance for an appropriate understanding of the religion of Islam is underscored by the surveyed young Muslims, our results confirm the assumption that the actual religious practice is conditioned by two factors, namely individual decision and contextual availability. As the results show, the dimension of individual importance is highly positively correlated with Muslim religiosity and shows sex differences that are analogous to religiosity. Both sets of empirical results indicate that either approach to Muslim religiosity—multidimensional centrality according to CRS-5 and the NSIHL—probably measures a similar latent phenomenon. Consequently, the importance scale has proved to represent a dimension of Muslim religiosity. As expected, the availability scale is only moderately correlated with the CRS-5 and unlike religiosity there are marginal sex differences. Yet, there *are* significant correlations between the importance of halal and religiosity ($r = 0.53$), as there are between the importance and availability of halal ($r = 0.41$). This can be explained by our theoretical deliberation in Section 2.2 that the very presence and accessibility of halal products and services may prompt Muslims to attach more importance to them and make use of them, and making use of them may even further enhance their sense that they are important for Muslim religiosity. This finding clearly goes against the grain of standard Western concepts of religion, according to which beliefs manifest themselves in actions, representing the so-called consequential dimension of religiosity. In this logic—which is very much rooted in (Protestant) Christian theological thought—there is primacy of belief over practice. From an orthopractic perspective, however, there may be primacy of practice over belief (Denny 1989; Ruthven 2012)—or at least an interaction between the two. In the case of Islam, by living according to halal principles, the believer may develop a corresponding mindset. In terms of the instrument, availability could be regarded as a factor contributing to individual importance or even a precondition of this. The correlation between both empirical factors may reflect these dynamics. This means that inadequate availability of halal goods and services may significantly impede the religiosity of Muslims in culturally Christian and secular Western societies or force them to transform their religiosity from a primarily orthopractic into a more orthodox religiosity that emphasizes beliefs and attitudes. The empirical results could also reflect such an adjustment of Muslims to Western living conditions. More research in this regard is needed.

Given the high correlation between CRS-5 and the scale of individual importance of a halal lifestyle ($r = 0.78$), the question arises of whether the new instrument is a real step forward in the assessment of Muslim religiosity. In empirical terms, studies are needed that allow comparison of the results of both instruments. Such studies should be conducted in both culturally Western and culturally Islamic environments to overcome cultural bias. In theoretical terms, measures such as the CRS-5 offer a comprehensive approach to religiosity (Huber and Huber 2012). Nonetheless, they are based on a Christian model of religiosity, which has been criticized for not meeting the self-image of Islam (Ağilkaya-Şahin et al. 2015). Furthermore, our analyses clearly show that the Muslim version of the CRS-5 misses a central aspect of an orthopractic lifestyle. On the other hand, comprehensive instruments from a Muslim perspective, such as that of El-Menouar (El-Menouar 2014), are not yet fully developed. Alternative instruments focus on attitudes rather than on behavior (Ok 2016; Şahin and Francis 2002). It is a philosophical and theological question whether attitude or

behavior is the more appropriate approach to Muslim religiosity. If one favors the latter, the NSIHL might be a suitable option.

From a Public Theology perspective, these results shed additional light on the tasks of fostering interreligious as well as inter-worldview dialogue and understanding. Promoting Muslim refugees' right to freedom of religion and belief includes their right to practice their religion in their daily lives. Christians and secular citizens need to understand that for most Muslims a halal lifestyle is not just a cultural 'add-on' but an integral part of their religious practice and thus of their religiosity. It is necessary to overcome Christian bias toward Islamic religiosity and accept Islam as a more orthopractic type of religion—and thus an intrinsically more *public* religion than Christianity. In addition, Christian theologians may also be challenged to re-think their own traditions and present theological concepts regarding the relationship between belief and practice. Even in Protestant theology, there have been controversial debates about this issue, for instance, around the Neo-Barthian approach of George Lindbeck (Lindbeck 1984; see also Pirner 2018), which may deserve renewed attention.

Finally, the limitations of this study need to be discussed. First, the sample of this study is not representative. Although the participants were selected according to a sampling plan (for details, see <https://osf.io/rdhku>, accessed on 5 August 2024), we accepted every positive response from those who met the criteria of this plan. Therefore, this study is based on a select sample. As this study is the first step in the development of the instrument, this limitation should, in principle, not be relevant. Still, more validation studies of this instrument are needed to determine its psychometric properties. Second, the sample comprises adolescents that predominantly live with their families. One can question whether this age group is able to make autonomous decisions about their lifestyle. If they are not able to do so, the scale would reflect the lifestyle choices of their families more than those of the participants. In an orthopractic framework, however, that distinction is of minor relevance because its approach to life is collective rather than individualistic. In addition, the validation of the structure of the instrument does not depend on the nature of the participants' responses to the items. Third, the chosen aspects of halal behavior were determined according to the living conditions of refugees. For example, halal tourism was not picked as an aspect because refugees in Germany have restricted travel options. Therefore, the NSIHL is not comprehensive in terms of a halal lifestyle. However, the question remains of whether it is reasonable to treat such an instrument as exemplary rather than as comprehensive. Fourth, the described instrument was designed by culturally Christian scholars. When developing the instrument, we intensively studied the Muslim discourse on halal and haram and, as mentioned above, discussed the instrument with some of our Muslim interviewers and the scientific advisory board of the project, in which Islamic expertise is represented. Nonetheless, the designers of the instrument are not Muslim themselves and have not been raised within an Islamic culture. The extent to which the NSIHL represents a Muslim self-image would therefore have to be discussed separately. Therefore, this article is also intended as an invitation to join this discussion.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ $n = 15$ participants gave a non-Muslim affiliation and were therefore not included in the analyses.
- ² We report all measures in the study, all manipulations, any data exclusions, and the sample size determination rule (for details, see <https://osf.io/rdhku>, accessed on 5 August 2024, the annotated script with the outputs at <https://osf.io/uczs8>, accessed on 5 August 2024, and the pre-registrations of the studies at <https://osf.io/3ugcv>, accessed on 5 August 2024, for wave two and <https://osf.io/dc5hr> for wave three, accessed on 5 August 2024).
- ³ As the variances for the importance factor were not invariant between the two groups, they were freely estimated.

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Article

Youth and the Structural Denial of the Right to Human Dignity: An Interdisciplinary Theoretical and Epistemological Approach

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Abstract: There are discriminatory, structured, opaque human rights violations that keep the socioeconomically vulnerable subservient, a social problem that goes against the core Christian principle: humans are created in the image of God and all share equal dignity. Studies show that sociocultural, political, and economic elements are available in society, which form into clusters, namely social representations, helping people to categorize others and interact with her/him. They carry with them the historical consciousness, providing the people with social-living tools such as social identity and the like. The qualitative empirical research conducted among the Catholic youth of Tamil Nadu, India, showed that the enslaving semantic elements contained in the social knowledge facilitate the youth to affiliate with a group and to disaffiliate from another. Caste-ridden endogamic semantic elements are part of this knowledge. This affects individual as well as social cognition. Therefore, besides conceptual understanding, epistemological approaches are necessary to eliminate the enslaving elements contained in social knowledge. This is possible through the Ego–Alter dialogue. Ego stands for an individual, group, institution, movement, or anything similar. Alter can stand for social knowledge, which is available in society.

Keywords: public theology; human dignity; patriarchy; misogyny; social representations; Trinity; casteism; dialogue; social cognition

1. Introduction

Continued atrocities against the so-called lower caste people of India take place in various forms. Ilangovan Rajasekaran, in his recent book, *Saathiyin Peyaraal (In the Name of Caste)*, documented seven inter-caste marriages that ended up in “honor killings” that took place in Tamil Nadu. Casteism is hierarchical and treats the people of lower strata as inferior and subhuman. Killing a boy from the lower caste for loving a girl from the upper caste is considered the rightful act of retaining the “honour” of the family as well as the caste group. This oversteps the social ethic that murder is inadmissible. A boy from a lower caste, in this way, is denied dignity and the right to life. And the girl from the upper caste is denied the freedom to choose her life partner and the embedded dignity. In Indian society, when brought to the public attention, under the existing law, the perpetrators of such crimes are punished, and, in a way, the rights of the victims are reinstated. But Ilangovan Rajasekaran sees this sense of “honour” as deeply rooted in the society, which is invisible but is passed on to the next generation through patriarchal norms and male chauvinism (Rajasekaran 2023).

In sociopsychological terms, it can be named a social psyche, which the members of a community share in common, having group-binding inhibitive elements. The social psyche, unlike the individual psyche, is shared by everyone in that particular community and is

part of their social cognition. They are like religious beliefs that demand blind adherence and obedience. It is structured in the society; thereby, lower caste people feel that they are destined to be treated as subhuman, and the upper caste people treat them discriminately. This is applicable to women as well, adversely affecting their freedom and equality. The denial of dignity, equality, and opportunity envisioned by the Indian constitution is reflected in the sociopolitical life of people. Structurally sanctioned subhuman treatment and denial of dignity are not always visible, as is the case with “honour killings.” That is only the tip of the iceberg. Since it is structured, its perpetuation happens very naturally. Thereby, denial of dignity takes place. Caste stratification and its nexus with marriage, dowry, and caste obsession are natural, such that the denial of dignity happens spontaneously. Their spontaneity is normalized, such that condemning and eliminating them is not a felt need in the public sphere. Structural denial of the right to dignity denies equal opportunities for all. This is found among the Christians in general and also among the Catholics.

Louis Nivedita’s *Christhavathil Jathi* (Caste in Christianity) research-based study shows it (Louis 2023). The much-appreciated Bama’s biographical work of *Karukku* (Sharp Edge) speaks about the caste discrimination that she had to undergo within a Catholic religious institution (Bama 2014). There are other writings (Dorairaj 2011) that bring to light the casteism that is prevalent within the Catholic Church. These are not open and publicly reported caste discrimination or the violation of human dignity. A known Tamil Nadu politician and Ambedkarite—the one who follows the ideology of Ambedkar, known as the father of the Indian Constitution—Mr. Thirumavalavan said, “the roots of caste have nourished Christianity (in India)” and it failed to spread the “roots of Christian values” (Kumar 2024).

Casteism is perpetrated through patriarchy and thereby denies equal dignity to women. Further, it is taken forward through dowry—the caste-patriarchy-woman-dowry nexus (Venkatanarayanan 2020) and *gethu*¹ (superiority complex). That is, caste is consolidated and kept alive through patriarchal norms that keep women subservient to men. Through dowry—via paying money to the bridegroom to marry the bride—women are objectified. Keeping the women subservient and feeling proud of safeguarding the ‘caste honour,’ a feeling of superiority (*gethu*) is also present. Casteism has consolidated itself structurally through various other forms of slavery and human rights denials. Caste, as a system of hierarchical stratification of society, has paved the way for other types of stratification: male chauvinism, women’s subservience kept alive through the marriage-dowry nexus, and rich–poor class division. They are structured and are part of social cognition. The author of this paper, having worked as a Catholic Youth minister for several years, was disturbed by this phenomenon and became inquisitive about looking deeper into this structural denial of the right to human dignity found among the Catholic College Students of Tamil Nadu. The author limited himself to the Catholic Youth, who conducted their studies in a multireligious, multi-caste student environment. Therefore, it is studied as a social phenomenon and is not restricted to caste groups or particular religious groups. Caste and its ramifications are socially present and inflict pain and deny the right to dignity to the socially subjugated.

This phenomenon of structural denial of human rights, as citizens of India, every Christian should treat as a democratic problem affecting the healthy public life, not only theirs but also the people of every religion (Patrick 2020, p. xii). For, every Christian is called to treat “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age” as their own (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 1). It is part of the prophetic role that God’s Kingdom preached by Jesus contains (Moltmann 1999, p. 5). In this respect, this paper brings to the public the Christian vision of the other with an interdisciplinary theoretical

and epistemological approach aimed at treating the differently other dignified, thereby contributing to public theology.

Since this study has a Catholic perspective, the Catholic theoretical foundations of human dignity are included. In order to explore these issues, the following questions were formulated:

1. What is the impact of Catholic culture on youth that upholds the image of God visible among humans?
2. What is the status and amount of structural denial of the right to human dignity and cognition that is operative among the youth?
3. What are the ways to enhance authentic living and contribute positively to the formation of humane social structures?

In order to answer the above questions, the qualitative empirical method was chosen. The data was collected using semi-guided narrative interviews. Since the interviewees were Catholic, the theological foundation is dealt with in a bit of detail, touching on the basics. In view of interpreting the collected data, the theory of Social Representations, which is part of social psychology, is also dealt with in this paper. Then the thematic presentation of themes is presented, followed by their interpretation and conclusion, having public theological prospects.

2. Structural Sin and Human Dignity—Catholic Foundations

Since this paper studies the phenomenon of structural denial of the right to dignity found among the Catholic Youth of Tamil Nadu, India, it is fitting to lay Catholic theoretical foundations. The selected 16 interviewees are Catholics and are studying in Catholic institutions. The data collected from them form the primary source for this research paper as well. Therefore, the Catholic theoretical foundations that follow will set frameworks in two ways. Firstly, it will facilitate data interpretation and bring out the elements that contribute to the structural denial. Secondly, it will help us establish prospects that will gradually eliminate unhealthy structures and introduce healthy ones.

Human rights denials, and thereby denial of human dignity, are direct attacks on the neighbour and go against the commandment, “love your neighbour.” It is a sinful act that needs sanctification. In this act, there are three dimensions: individual attacks, group attacks, and nuanced structural attacks that often go unnoticed. This moral principle is theologically founded. Simply put, the Catholic understanding is that humans are created in the image of God and possess inviolable human rights. It is the rationale that is followed in this part on Catholic Foundations.

If the denial of the right to human dignity is a sinful act, then it is fitting to know about sin. Catechism of the Catholic Church defines: “Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbour caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods” (Catholic Church 1994, n. 1849). Accordingly, the function of reason is to know the realities of the world in accordance with the ultimate order of things (John Paul II 1998, n. 20). If the human reason’s searches and findings go against this order, that is called as Divine law, then it becomes a sinful act: an act of perversity. When it works accordingly, it finds the truth that enhances individuals as well as the whole universe. Again, the Church says: “It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity” (Catholic Church 1994, n. 1849). The effects are twofold: personal and social. Therefore, every sin is, from one point of view, personal and, from another point of view, social, with social repercussions. In social wounding, there are individual attacks, group attacks, and structural attacks. The theological understanding goes as follows.

In theologising on the cause of sin, Pope John Paul II states that every sin is a personal act. In this vein, he writes that an individual cannot attribute the causes of sin to external

factors and evade her/his responsibility. For this would deny the freedom she/he enjoys that is attached to human dignity and the fact that he/she is created in the image of God. However, Pope also asserts that every sin is also social because of the solidarity that every person enjoys with the whole of humanity. In explaining further, the nature of sin, he connects it to the self-understanding of the Church that she is both a saint and a sinner needing constant purification (Vatican Council II 1964, n. 8). Pope juxtaposes communion in saintliness with communion of sin. If the first is one of human ascent, the latter is one of descent. In this trajectory, the Pope explicates the notion of social sin and says that every sin, even if it is committed very secretly, has social implications because of human solidarity. Secondly, some sins are direct attacks on the neighbor. However, the third meaning touches on the structural aspect of sin, which is why this paper is busy: “[t]he third meaning of social sin refers to the relationships between the various human communities. These relationships are not always in accordance with the plan of God, who intends that there be justice in the world and freedom and peace between individuals, groups and peoples” (John Paul II 1984, n. 16). The social sin can make humans “accomplices of one another and causes concupiscence, violence, and injustice to reign among them. Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to divine goodness. ‘Structures of sin’ are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to perform evil deeds in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a ‘social sin’” (Catholic Church 1994, n. 1869). Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, says that certain ideologies can kill human solidarity and enforce imperialism subjected to “structures of sin.” They, consequently, can grow, become stronger and can produce other sins having the capacity to influence people’s behavior (John Paul II 1987, n. 36). As vindicated by the modern human sciences, which the Church encourages (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 36), structural sin is capable of becoming part of the social psyche affecting social cognition of individuals and society. Thereby, human persons become victims of structuralized sin and, as it happens in the case of patriarchally linked caste discrimination and denial of equal rights to women, they perpetuate it. In this vein, an institution, a structure, or a society itself, which comprises persons, can promote social sin and systematically deny equal dignity to the other. Explaining further, though Pope repeatedly reiterated the personal aspects embedded in it, firmly holds that these sins leave a lasting impact on the society, creating enslaving, unjust, unequal, undignified, sinful structural layers, going against the very “will of the Triune God, his plan for the humanity, his justice, and mercy” (John Paul II 1987, n. 36).

The above-said moral principle is founded on the theological anthropological understanding that humans are created in the image of God. Creation is an act of the Trinitarian God who lives in perfect love and communion as persons. There is pure giving—*gratia*—of one another, and the Trinitarian God’s existence is perfect relational existence. His very substance is love, structured to love and share. John the Apostle defines: “God is love” (1 Jn 4, 8). Being created by God who lives in perfect communion, humans received their image and inviolable dignity from God. Pope Benedict states that faith in the Trinitarian God is “the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny” (Benedict XVI 2005, n. 1). Michael Purcell talks about the transition from the Trinitarian doctrine of God to Christian anthropology. He makes use of the concept of *perichoresis*.² The relationship that exists among the three persons of the Trinity is interpenetrative but never annihilates the other. God, who is resplendent with love, “created the world out of his overflowing love” (Catholic Church 2016, n. 5). Inner love that God enjoys is not “being-locked-in-self-identity” but rather whose identity is revealed and understood by humans as “being-for-the-other” (Veling 2005, p. 51). “Being-for-the-other” is expressed in creation. Thereby it becomes a “‘community project’ of the Trinitarian God”

(Catholic Church 2011, n. 44). Among the creation, humans created in His image (Gen 1: 27), with dignity, are endowed with the gift of intellect and freedom to acknowledge God and love Him in return. God, who created humans in His image, continued to protect them. The incarnation of the second person of the Trinity is theologically understood as an act of restoration of the dignity lost through sin.

Purcell, while explaining the third person of the Trinity, taking in the philosophy of Levinas, who insisted on infinite responsibility for the other, speaks of the Holy Spirit as the excessive responsibility between the Father and the Son. That is, I am responsible for the other before anyone else. Purcell writes: “the *I* is the one who ... is elected to bear all the responsibility for the World. Messianism is the apogee in Being—a reversal of being ‘persevering in his being’—which begins in me” (Purcell 2006, p. 162; Levinas 1998, p. 60).³ God reached out to humans with ineffable love and mercy that would overcome human and societal dysfunctionalities and restore her/his dignity. He sent his Son, and he, through his words and actions, lived God’s love tangibly. “He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart.” And “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 22). “Supreme calling” meant her/his union with God as being created in the Trinitarian image.

Based on these Trinitarian and Christological foundations, the Church categorically asserts that “man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself.” Thereby, humans are above all things and “his rights and duties are universal and inviolable” (Vatican Council II 1965, nn. 24, 26). Speaking about equal opportunities for all says: “Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious” (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 26).

In this vein, although the Council speaks much about culture and its ties to the message of salvation (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 58), with a sense of caution, admonishes the faithful that culture should serve humanity and have to be subordinate to human perfection (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 59). Instead of protecting and liberating humans, if the culture enslave them, it has to be purified. The Church should promote the removal of what is sinful and strive to elevate the morality of people (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 58). There is a need to break the “structures of sin.” Everyone is called to combat this evil and contribute constructively to eliminate it. The Church understands structures of sins as being contributed by personal sins. Therefore, the Church comes out with the warning. It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals (John Paul II 1984, n. 16). Casteism and the structural affliction inflicted on certain groups of people and the endogamic practices attached to it that deny equal dignity to women have to be amended. The Christian call to act proactively is addressed not only to the visible members of the Church but also to “all men and women of goodwill” (Francis 2015, n. 3; John XXIII 1963, n. 1). The call is clear: instead of condemning and retreating from the society that bears the brunt of structural sin, act proactively. Bringing in the aspect of personal responsibility, Pope John Paul II states

that, if a person supports this sort of evil or exploits it, or a person who is in a position to rid of it or abolish it or lessen it and, fails by being lazy or he/she is complicit about it, or is unwilling to make sacrifices to uphold the justice, is committing a sin (John Paul II 1984, n. 16). Therefore, the responsibility is binding.

There is another important face of the Church, which is touched by the suffering of the other. There is a sentient consciousness about the other, promoted by continental philosophers, which is often reflected in the writings of Pope Francis. In his recent encyclical, the Pope speaks of Jesus' proximity to the suffering. When he heals someone, he prefers to stay close to them, touch them, (Mt 8: 3; Mt 8: 15; Mt 9: 29). He says: "The Lord knows the fine science of the caress. In his compassion, God does not love us with words; he comes forth to meet us and, by his closeness, he shows us the depth of his tender love." (Francis 2024, n. 36). To be moved by the presence of the other, a sentient experience, the Pope calls everyone to fill hearts with faces. He writes: "[w]e achieve fulfilment when we break down walls and our hearts are filled with faces and names!" (Francis 2013, n. 274; Francis 2020, n. 195).

We have seen that the denial of human dignity is a sin that wounds the person and society. The structural sin that affects society makes the members of society silent accomplices; consequently, the denial of rights to dignity also takes place. This goes against the very plan of God, who created humans in His image. Being created in God's image, humans possess inviolable dignity. We also saw that Christians are called to purify the cultures that perpetuate the sinful structures. Therefore, the Catholic theological foundations provide the basis for data interpretation and guidelines to form prospectives.

In the following section, we will examine the conceptual tool, the dialogically based Theory of Social Representations, which is useful for data interpretation.

3. Dialogically Based Theory of Social Representations: Theoretical Tool for Research

Since this paper deals with the structural denial of human dignity, it is apt to look into the aspects that contribute to this sin. The best way is to analyse the social interactions that the youth make. For this, the conceptual tool, the Theory of Social Representations, proposed by Serge Moscovici and further developed by Markova, emphasizing the aspect of dialogicality, is employed. Individuals cannot exist without communication: human existence is communicative. Therefore, ontologically, human existence is dialogical. Dialogue cannot be solipsistic. It involves the other. Therefore, the objects or knowledge used for social interaction involve the other and are shared by more than one. In this sense, epistemologically, social knowledge available to the public is co-constructed and is not an individual construct. In this section, the ontological and epistemological aspects will first be dealt with. Secondly, various aspects of dialogical epistemology will be dealt with to draw *instruments* and *predictors* for the interpretation of the data. The instrument drawn is that social representations contain *core meaning and peripheral aspects*, and the corresponding predictor is how *their content and meaning are structured in society*. The last paragraph will provide the dyadic dialogical aspect, a tool for social intervention that would eliminate structural sins.

Social life is possible only through day-to-day social interactions. For social interactions, people need social knowledge that is readily available in society. Social knowledge comprises verbal and symbolic elements, namely social representations, which enable an individual to interact with others and with society at large. They are not static but transform with additions, deletions, and modifications. Transformation is indicative of its dynamicity, which explicates the cognitive elements it contains. Social representations, having verbal and symbolic elements, can carry with them enslaving elements. They are

often invisible and accepted as the normality of life. Because of their invisibility, they can promote structural denials of human rights. Therefore, this section is important to understand and interpret the verbal interactions that youth make. The elements contained in verbal communication help us to understand the structural enslaving aspects present in them. Since social representations are dynamic, well-designed interventions can alter the verbal and symbolic elements contained in them. For this, we need to understand the nature of operational dynamicity in social interactions. The Theory of Social Representations, proposed by Serge Moscovici and further developed by Markova, emphasizes the aspect of dialogicality and can help us. Dialogicality is explained with the triadic model: Ego—self, Alter—other, and the Object; therefore, the Ego–Alter–Object triad.

In every communication, Ego and Alter are already there. Communication constantly takes place in this Ego–Alter in social life. Human life, in this sense, ontologically, is communicative (Markova 2003, p. 83). But, in communication, there is always an *Object*. In scientific inquiry, the individual and the object are involved. But in social life, there is a triad, Ego–Alter–Object (see Figure 1). This model escapes dualistic thinking and insists upon relationship and interaction (Markova 2023, p. 195). This model helps us to understand the interaction process taking place among humans systematically (Moscovici 2001, p. 109). Viewing it from the perspective of this paper, the objects that youth use to communicate could contain enslaving sociocultural elements.

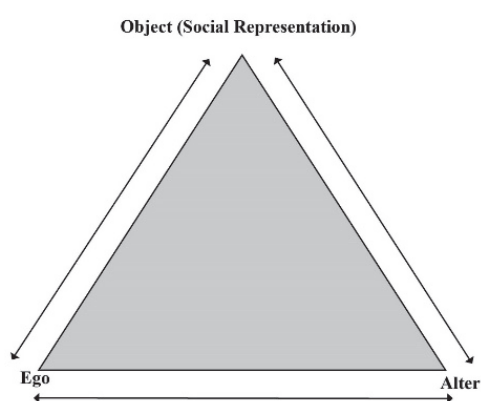


Figure 1. Moscovici’s Ego–Alter–Object Dialogical Model.

The dialogical approach, in the ontological sense, can situate the person in a sociocultural context and help us to understand their nature. It touches, first of all, the ontological aspect. For Wagner and Hayes, dialogue is the way of communication with the environment, and this leaves “the individual level—the processing of social information in the heads of people as an exclusive level of investigation—and . . . place[s] social processes, as a right, . . . precondition for individual psychic existence” (Wagner and Hayes 2005, p. 219). These are called collective conditions, and they remain inevitable in the study of the individual structures of social representations. Therefore, it is also, speaking from an individual point of view, existentialistic or ontological, since it touches the very existence of an individual. Secondly, while speaking about the epistemological approach that is necessary in order to understand social knowledge, Markova writes: “*Dialogical epistemology* . . . is at present the only viable alternative to traditional individualistic and static epistemology, which, as many have argued, it totally inappropriate to social scientific investigation” (Markova 2000, pp. 420–21).

This dialogical epistemology is multifaceted. Firstly, there is the Ego–Alter dialogical situation. They could be I-specific group, I-another person, I-nation, and group-community, etc. In a single Ego–Alter dialogue, several relations can happen. Those who take part in the dialogue will bring with them their present, traditions, and future projects.

Depending on their life-driven needs, priorities can change. There would be continuities and discontinuities, self-oriented dialogues, and Alter-directed dialogues. In this regard, there can be asymmetric knowledge between the Ego and Alter. That is, the ego has knowledge about a particular object, but the Alter may not know anything about it. Consequently, there can be coexistence of different types of thinking at the same time, which is named *polyphasia*. For example, Moscovici argues that, in every society, there is scientific knowledge and common-sense knowledge. Technically, they can be called a consensual and reified universe. This knowledge prompts a cognitive process called *polyphasia*. An example would be the representations around madness. There is irrational thinking that sees madness as the possession of ghosts, and rational thinking that gives medical reasons. Both of them can coexist in one person, who may undergo treatment and also will approach a sorcerer to rid the possessed ghosts. Contradictory thinking can take place in Ego–Alter dialogue (Wagner et al. 1999a; Moscovici 2001, p. 238). This can lead to *heteroglossia* as well. It refers to different types of voices. They can appear when Alter speaks under the influence of an external Alter who is not directly involved in the dialogue. For example, a politician can be influenced by the Alter-president of a political party, or a particular ideologue. Alter’s voice can thus become the voices of more than one, sometimes contradicting as well (Markova 2003, pp. 156–61). There is also another phenomenon called “thinking through the mouth” (Markova 2003, p. 89). There is a cognition that is taking place while conversing. This can be seen in any public debate, where during the exchange of ideas a new sort of can creep in, driving the same person to make new statements, which he did not intend previously.

Another epistemological aspect of social representations, proposed by Moscovici, to bring out historical and cultural aspects of Ego–Alter dialogues, is *themata* or *thematization*. *Themata*, Markova employs as the plural form of *thema*. It refers to dyadic oppositions such as freedom/opposition, hard/soft, light/dark, and good/bad. It refers to dyadic oppositions such as freedom/opposition, hard/soft, light/dark, and good/bad. It is something different from theme, which refers to the subject matter of a text (Markova 2023, p. 166). Moscovici and Vignaux argue that *themata* are “systems of oppositions (i.e., terms which are contrasted in order to be related) relative to the body, to being, to action in society and the world more generally; every language bears witness to this” (Moscovici 2001, p. 179). He likened it to concept images, primary conceptions, or primitive conceptions (Moscovici 2001, p. 177). Moscovici, while elaborating further, says that all the discourses and exchanges of symbols and words through language come from many other discourses that took place in the historical–cultural context. Thus, in order to reach the meaning and content of any social representation, this approach to reality or the Ego–Alter–Object triad becomes important. Because these contents and meanings are structured and are found in everyday language, the usage of binaries such as justice/injustice and freedom/oppression carries with it historically and culturally structured meanings and contents. Now, when someone shares this *thema*, she/he does not conceive its full meaning. It can vary from person to person as well. How are they structured? Markova writes: “social representations are organized into a structured body of information, beliefs, attitudes and opinions, which consist of the central core and peripheral elements” (Markova 2003, p. 179). The central core is that which unifies and consists of the core meaning. It is resistant to change and is the stabilising organ. For example, in the case of social representations around POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences), the categories would be minor/major, touch/non-touch, trauma/rehabilitation, good touch/bad touch, male/female, and exploited/exploiter. The peripheral elements protect the central core. It can be said to be the manifestation of social representation and can be found in discourse. In POCSO, much awareness is created through new media and metamedia. They are part of the discourse among the parents of

children and teachers, especially girl children. For the interpretation of data, the instrument drawn is social representations that contain core meaning and peripheral aspects, and the corresponding *predictor* is how their content and meaning are structured in society.

The concept of *themata* touches another important dimension in social representation theory, which affects the reflective-authentic selfhood, i.e., a self that is not carried away by the things around it. Most importantly, this affects the Ego–Alter relationship or the self and the other relationship. Markova argues that, for the survival and enhancement of humankind, there is another type of dialogicality, namely, dyadic Ego–Alter. This is a projective and aimed at advancement that Markova names, *the basic themata*. One example of this would be *social recognition and its denial*. This forms the basic *thema*, because it is the basic drive of the Ego to treat her/him with dignity by the Alter. In this sort of dialogue, there is no external object; Ego and Alter are themselves the object. These social representations focus on self-identity, personal responsibility, morality, and rights. These are judgmental and are the communication about the self and others. Although these are affected by many external ‘objects’ in the world regarding recognition or denial, the active part is that it happens then and there (Markova 2003, p. 188). In the projective phase, the dyadic dialogical aspect provides a tool for intervention that would eliminate the structural sins.

The dialogically based Theory of Social Representations, as we have seen, describes that social knowledge people use daily contains sociocultural elements, which can possess enslaving elements as well. People cannot live without using them, because philosophically, it is ontological. Epistemologically, they are not solipsistic constructs but dialogical co-constructs. Their basic nature has provided the instrument and the predictor. The instrument is that social representations contain *core meaning and peripheral aspects*, and the corresponding predictor is that *their content and meaning are structured in society*. The last paragraph will provide the dyadic dialogical aspect, a tool for social intervention that would eliminate structural sins.

4. Research Method

Within the empirical method, there are two: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research arrives at findings through statistical procedures or any other means of quantification. Qualitative research analyses a person’s life stories, behaviour, functioning of an organization, social movements, or some interactional relationship. It is also suggested to a researcher who adheres to a philosophical orientation, that of phenomenology. This research explores the phenomenon of interpersonal relationships that are facilitated by social representations about the other. It is an exploration into the Ego–Alter–Object triadic dialogue, which is dynamic. This brings out the fresh slants on social objects, which are part of interpersonal relationships (Strauss and Corbin 1990, pp. 17–19). Within qualitative research, there are different types, and one among them is narrative analysis (Riessman 1993, pp. 1–6).

Speaking about the nature of narrative, Riessman says that personal narrative is impulsive and natural to all across the globe (Riessman 2007, p. 2). Graham Swift sees storytelling as the ontological nature of humans. He writes, “man—let me offer you a definition—is the animal” (Swift 1983, p. 53). Broadly speaking, narrative is a way of storytelling. In an attempt to give it a precise meaning, Riessman says: “a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story” (Riessman 2007, p. 3). For what she/he feels is important, the speaker picks up those events, connects them in an organised manner, and expresses them meaningfully to the listener. The capacity of the narrated story occupies the primacy rather than the narrator or the storyteller. In the US circles, the narrative was an indicator of the personal trait of the individual. This is, however, not true in the complex context. In the complex context of South India, Riessman says: “where a

singular feeling self is not necessarily the primary axis of signification” (Riessman 2007, p. 2), the narrative is often polyphasic and is expressed in *heteroglossia*. The first single expression can be contradicted by the second expression, which in turn can be contradicted by the third. Narrative, from the researcher’s point of view, is a process of dealing with the research materials and the way the storyteller interacts with the researcher (Riessman 1993, p. 1). The story itself becomes the object of the study.

Concerning this work, it focuses on individual narrative stories. That is, it is restricted to the first-person accounts of the narrator. Therefore, the personal narratives become the data for the research. Language cannot be understood as a mere transparent medium that conducts ideas; it carries socially constructed realities and creatively authored content. Relying on Riessman’s approach, this research work takes an “interpretive thrust” in dealing with the data, and she names it the “systematic interpretation of their interpretations.” It can bring out the symbolic interaction that takes place among humans. It explores the interpretations of the narratives in terms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The Inner Ego–Alter–Object that happens within the person is brought out through this interpretation. Although personal narration is often distrusted, reliable studies have come out (Ellis and Flaherty 1992, p. 178; Hollway 1989, pp. 41, 45). “It is precisely because of their subjectivity—their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, and their perspective-ridden character—that we value them” (The Personal Narratives Group 1989, pp. 263–64). The narrator may speak of things as if they were natural, but for the researcher, it would be beneficial to obtain the cultural and historical contingencies. Many question the truth contained in what the participant says. Narrative analysis approaches truth differently. Assumptions tell us that language represents reality. Some say the narrative clause takes us to the original event in some sense. Influenced by phenomenology, some say that narrative constitutes reality.

Narratives themselves are interpretations that in turn need interpretation. The researcher interprets it carefully, taking into account the contexts that shaped these social representations. It takes the researcher into the narrator’s world and describes her/his place in the world she/he occupies. It would be better, as the Personal Narratives Group suggests, if the context is more familiar to the researcher. Having these elements in mind, the researcher has situated his research in Tamil Nadu, especially in the district of Kanniyakumari, where he hails from.

5. Context and Sampling

The District of Kanniyakumari⁴ is the southern district of Tamil Nadu, sharing borders with the state of Kerala. Historically, it was part of the State of Travancore, extending its territories to Cochin, Kerala, a Princely State, independent state even under British rule.⁵

Beyond the historical and topographical details, what interests us is its sociopolitical-religious history and its repercussions on the current society. The caste system was part of the society. The major division is Caste Hindus (Savarna) and non-caste Hindus (Avarna). The Caste Hindus included *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Ambalavasis*, *Nairs*, and *Vellalas*, and the non-caste Hindus *Ezhavas*, *Nadars*, *Kammalas*, *Fisherman*, *Pulayas*, *Parayas*, *Pallas*, *Nayadis*, and the Hill Tribes. In the caste-hierarchy, Brahmins occupied the top and were the high officials in the government. Then came the second, *Kshatriyas*, the kings of whom were from them. Then the *Ambalavasis*, the Hindu priests. The lower in the caste ranking were the *Nairs* and *Vellalas*. *Nairs* had the titles *Pillai*, *Thampi*, and *Menon*. They enjoyed military and other positions in the state, and *Nairs* were the land owners, *Jenmis*. They had the *marumakkalthayam*, a matrilineal system of inheritance. Polygamy was common among them.

Ezhavas from the non-caste, or who were outside of the caste hierarchy, enjoyed no privileges that the caste-Hindus enjoyed, and depended on coconut trees and the *Nadars’*

palmyrah for their earnings. Next to the Nadars were the other groups who even positioned themselves below the non-caste ladder in a descending order. They were imposed with restrictions such as ‘unapproachability,’ ‘untouchability,’ and ‘unseeability.’ According to the caste hierarchy, they had to distance themselves from the high caste people. There were killings and tortures for violating restrictions. *Nadars* had to keep a distance of 36 feet from a *Brahmin* and 12 feet from a *Nair*. Both men and women from these communities were prohibited from wearing clothes above their waists and below their knees. Entry into the temple was prohibited, a large amount of taxes was imposed, and there were other inhumane practices as well (Peter and Peter 2009, pp. 1–11).

Liberation of the people from the lower strata of society did not come easily. It was a constant struggle. ‘Upper cloth revolt’ (*Thol seelai porattam*), which started in 1822, continued till 1859 and gave every woman the right to wear upper cloth. (Vijayarethna Kumar 2022, pp. 118–27). Christian missionaries’ interventions and conscientisation programmes, education to women, and the new religious movement by Aiya Vaikundar (Kadavil 2023) had contributed to the revolt and freedom.

Besides the above-mentioned revolts and changes, a constant class struggle was in process. The struggle was between the caste-Hindus (*Savarna*) and the non-caste people (*Avarna*). Due to the influence of Christian missionaries and social activists, ‘modernisation’ took place, liberating the oppressed. There were social changes happening: education, social awareness, self-social dignity, medical aid, and transportation. On the other side, there were *Nambudris* and ‘foreign’ Brahmins who had access to government resources. There was a nexus between *Brahmins* and *Nayars*, with their movements to protect themselves. The constant struggle uplifted the downtrodden to a great extent. Kanniyakumari district has benefited much from it, unlike many other parts of India (Vijayarethna Kumar 2022, pp. 206–16).

Political parties that were gaining popularity in several other parts, such as the Congress party and Communist party, began to grow here as well. Communist parties set up trade unions. The Congress party played a pivotal role in reuniting the Kanniyakumari district to the state of Tamil Nadu on November 1, 1956 (Vijayarethna Kumar 2022, pp. 283–90).

Every society has its historical roots, and there is always a return of the unconscious as well. That is true of the people of Kanniyakumari as well. In our study of social representations about the structural sins among the youth, we come across the socioeconomic categorial objects in their relationships. They are the objects with which their identification as a member of society happens. These are macrosocial elements as well, that is, the elements beyond the individuals, historical realities, and their dynamics. An attempt is made to identify them. Wagner et al. write: “it enables the researchers to examine the relatively stable cultural, and the dynamic social, political and economic characteristics of the groups” (Wagner et al. 1999b, p. 100). It can be named as the public sphere where social life and social identity take place. Language, understood to include the symbolic elements, Heidegger defines, “is the house of the being” (Heidegger 1977, p. 193). It is where the communication with society takes place.

The social sphere is where the youth come in contact with other people. Firstly, they interact with other groups in the college on a regular basis. Classmates, small groups within the college, other class groups, and others are involved. Secondly, besides college, there are other social institutions such as family, relatives, social celebrations, churches, and clubs. Thirdly, there is a political sphere and the other ordinary citizens in the society. Fourthly, there are also new and mass media. All of these can be named as social actors. These agents do not exclusively belong to a particular group, but there is a crossover. For example, a politician may belong to other religious groups and be part of a club.

The youth of Kanniyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India, were the participants for the interview. Kanniyakumari is the southernmost district of Tamil Nadu. Since the

study is about the phenomenon of structural denial of human dignity found among the youth, 16 Catholic college students belonging to the age group of 18–25 were selected and interviewed. Eight out of 16 were girls, and the rest were boys. Of girls and boys, four were graduate students, the age group of 18 to 21, and four were postgraduate students, the age group of 21–25. Of graduate and postgraduate students from both girls and boys, two were from the urban area and the other two from the rural setting. Again, among these two, one is from the upper class and the other is from the lower class. As far as the ethical code followed in the selection of interviewees is concerned, the youth selected for interviews were from two colleges, for which the author obtained permission from the then-college principals. No written consent was obtained from the students, but they were orally assured of their privacy. It is clear from the paper that, in the transcription text as well as in the present article, only the codes are used to hide their real names and identities. The following Figures 2 and 3 show the division of interviewees.

1.	Lower Class, Urban, Graduate, Girl	– LUGG
2.	Upper Class, Urban, Graduate, Girl	– UUGG
3.	Lower Class, Rural, Graduate, Girl	– LRGG
4.	Upper Class, Rural, Graduate, Girl	– URGG
5.	Lower Class, Urban, Post Graduate, Girl	– LUPG
6.	Upper Class, Urban, Post Graduate, Girl	– UUPG
7.	Lower Class, Rural, Post Graduate, Girl	– LRPG
8.	Upper Class, Rural, Post Graduate, Girl	– URPG
9.	Lower Class, Urban, Graduate, Boy	– LUGB
10.	Upper Class, Urban, Graduate, Boy	– UUGB
11.	Lower Class, Rural, Graduate, Boy	– LRGB
12.	Upper Class, Rural, Graduate, Boy	– URGB
13.	Lower Class, Urban, Post Graduate, Boy	– LUPB
14.	Upper Class, Urban, Post Graduate, Boy	– UUPB
15.	Lower Class, Rural, Post Graduate, Boy	– LRPB
16.	Upper Class, Rural, Post Graduate, Boy	– URPB

Figure 2. Interview—Participants and their codes.

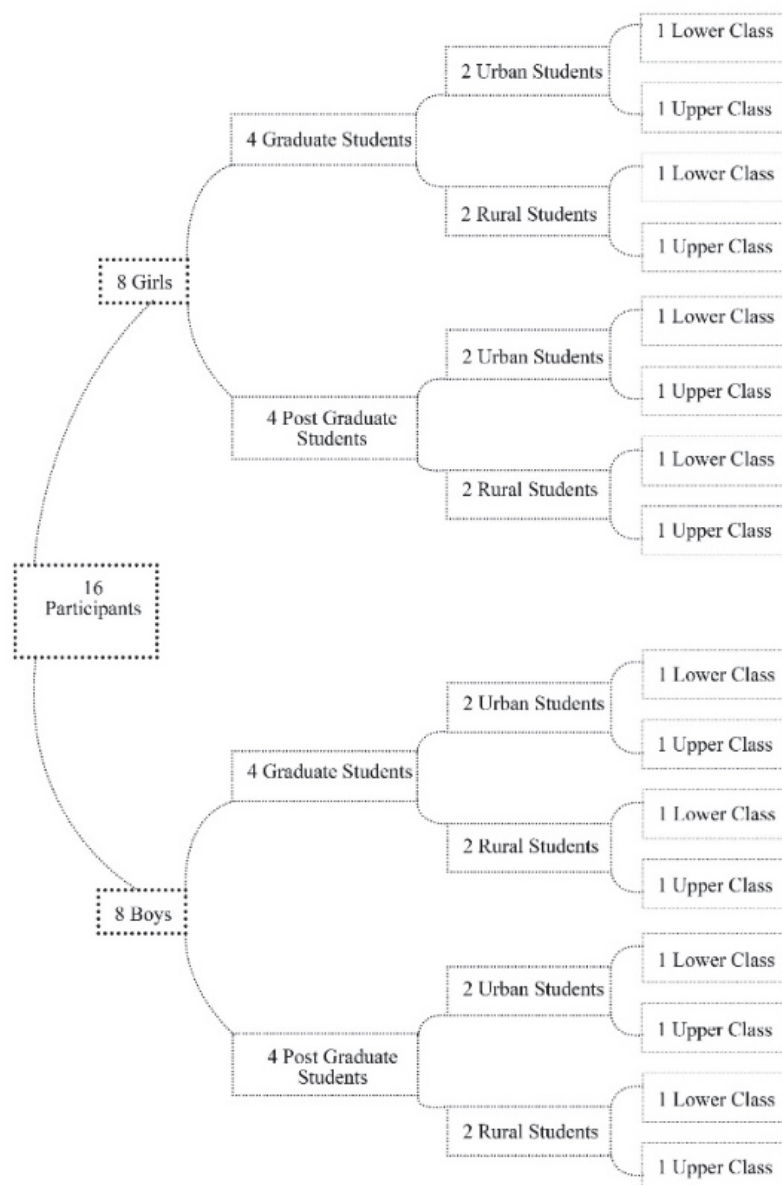


Figure 3. Distribution of the Participants.

6. Procedure for Data Collection

Riessman gives three principles for narrative analysis: telling, transcribing, and analysis (Riessman 1993, pp. 54–64). As far as the current work is concerned, telling involves the provision of an interviewee a facilitating atmosphere and a feel-good context to express the important moments in their life that are related to the encounter with the other. The semi-guided interview was held, giving them some open-ended questions to narrate about their family background, their relationship with relatives and friends, and interpersonal relationships that occur in the public sphere, such as the Church, colleges, and other inter- and intra-social groups. The participant was allowed to construct their stories around the events that happened to the other. The interview was conducted in the form of discourse. The questions were stimulating, encouraging the interviewee to construct and coordinate the events, such that the personal experiences with the other are narrated. The interview was recorded using an audio device. It lasted for approximately ninety minutes.

The second stage was transcription. The audio clips were played, and the contents were typed in the original language, Tamil. At first, transcription was performed roughly. Then, the narrative segments and their representations were identified. From the long-

transcribed text, the narrative segments pertaining to the social representations of our concern were separated. It was found useful to re-transcribe them in numbered lines. It was thematically presented to pull out the various representations that are available among the youth about their relationship.

The instrument measures core meaning and peripheral aspects, as well as the corresponding predictor, indicating that the content and meanings of social representations are structured. Wilhelm von Humboldt compared language to ripples in water (Markova 2003, pp. 177–81; Humboldt 1972, p. 133). The ripples spread into circles starting from the centre. As ripples move further away from the centre, they become less clear and almost invisible. This is the case with the meaning of the word. For example, the words ‘Christian,’ ‘Hindu,’ or ‘rich,’ and social representation of the other, can idiosyncratically be shared differently by different youths. They all elicit from the core meaning, but having its circles, often, because of the interpolation of various other meanings happening through dialogue, it can take different meanings. The best example would be the representation of the Muslim other. This can have a ripple meaning of ‘jihad.’ This ripple need not be shared by many. There is also sharing and non-sharing. Again, a particular group need not share the contents and meanings of one representation uniformly. There would be sharing as well as non-sharing. Many studies have used this instrument to explore the structure of content and meanings (Lotman 1977; Abric 2001; Guimelli 1998; Moliner and Abric 2015). They can include beliefs, attitudes, and opinions.

The above-mentioned instrument: core meaning and peripheral aspects, has guided the analysis of the collected data.

7. Thematic Presentation of Research Results

Using the *instrument*, social representations contain core meaning and peripheral aspects, and the corresponding *predictor*, their content and meaning, are structured in the society, and the collected data are analyzed. The method followed here is from Riessman’s tabulated transcription method (Riessman 1993, p. 59; West 1984, pp. 42–44; Labov 1972; Labov 1982, pp. 219–47). As far as this work is concerned, the original Tamil text is available on request. The text given in the tabulation is the English translation of the original Tamil transcription. The column provides more clarity to the theme. The numbering ends after each theme and starts anew with the next. Participants’ codes are mentioned before the text in the tabulation. The page numbers in the paragraph stand for the page numbers from the Tamil Transcription available from the author. The numbering of the lines is used for paraphrasing and interpretation. The data available to the author does not have numbering, but only page numbers. The interviews were conducted in January and February 2016, and therefore, the longitudinal study after fifteen to twenty years will reveal if there has been any change. The data has 518 pages of typed content. Portions about the topic under discussion in the paper are taken for thematic presentation and discussion.

Six themes are enumerated here. The first theme, Youth and Spiritual Practice, is presented to analyze the impact of faith in their personal lives and how faith practice carries on with the structural sins. The second theme is the Impact of Caste on Interpersonal Relationships. Open caste clashes are not visible in the data, but the language they use has caste colouring. The next theme is the Girl-Marriage Nexus and Troubled Friendship with the Opposite Sex. It will shed light on the objectification of women in society, a structural sin perpetuated through cultural practices. What follows next is the continuation of the effect of the previous theme: the Practice of Dowry: Endangered Intergender Relationships. The demand for dowry thrives in indirect forms, thereby making women a mere commodity. The next theme, Vainglory (*gethu*: Superior Inferior Dichotomy and Interpersonal Relationship, exposes the male chauvinism, sometimes having its effects on women as well.

The last theme in the list, Inner Alter–Ego Dialogue and Authentic Self, has a prospective dimension, elimination of structural sins. Let us see them one by one.

7.1. Youth and Spiritual Practice

Christians are called to be the salt of the earth, living the Kingdom values in their daily lives. In this present study, the role played by the Christian faith in influencing interpersonal relationships needs a closer look. A look into the frequenting of youth in liturgical celebrations, involvement in Church activities, and membership in the youth groups helps us understand their Christian praxis. The *Youth and Spiritual Practice* (Table 1) presentation will help us to know the social representations of faith in God and spiritual life, as well as their meanings and contents structured at the various levels of the public sphere where the youth live. Care is also taken to extract the family's role in faith formation.

Table 1. Youth and Spiritual Practice.

LUGG
1. <i>Amma</i> (mother) prays.
2. She would call us. We will not go.
3. To the Church, I go.
URGG
4. Prayer, we do it individually.
5. We try to pray together. We cannot. . . Sometimes, it happens (p. 86).
LRGB
6. I do not sit for prayer.
7. <i>Amma</i> will sit and recite (<i>Pannittu Iruppinum</i>).
8. Not interested in prayer.
9. I help others.
10. Reciting prayers, sitting and doing, those things, 'no' (p. 293).
LUPB
11. Those who come for Church, choir.
12. Some come only to sing.
13. That cannot be said as pious.
14. Some who are innocent, even though do not come.
15. When they come the pray. . .
16. Too much prayer like that is (not worth) (p. 390).
17. Father in the Church says, (some are) not coming to Church, not doing this.
18. But for feast, some give more money . . . they are bigger.
19. Those who come daily, they are kept away (p. 389).
UUPB
20. <i>Appa</i> (Father) comes to Church. But does not enter inside.
21. But in heart he has a lot of (faith).
22. He was an altar boy.
23. He is very pious.
24. <i>Amma</i> is CSI (Church of South India—a Non-Catholic Community in India).
25. After marriage confessed Catholic faith.
26. She does not have much idea (about Catholic faith).
27. But about CSI very much.
28. <i>Appa</i> will say: to be blessed, do such and such things (p. 402).
29. (In WhatsApp group) there is a (religious) brother in the Church, he will post bible sentences.
30. Sh. . . (giggles), we will not speak about that.
31. But when a boy is going wrong, we will speak about him (p. 404).

Table 1. Cont.

UUPG
32. Fathers' (priest) homily, when he gives it with a lot of stories, I like.
33. I love going to Bible conventions.
34. Taking the particular verse and reading it first I like much (p. 139).
LUGB
35. Prayer, I make it private.
36. Now <i>Amma</i> cannot sit down. . . now we pray in private (p. 219).
37. One boy wanted to know more about God.
38. I told him after prayer I will teach you something.
39. Then some stories from Bible, I taught him.
40. He knew something earlier (p. 225).
URGB
41. We don't pray.
42. Eight to eight thirty, in Matha TV, Rosary will be going on (p. 332).
LRPB
43. At home there is daily prayer. Otherwise, no food.
44. I don't go to the Church much (pp. 462–63).
UUGG
45. Boys (<i>Annans—elder brothers</i>) . . . they do not come to Church.
46. (They) don't come for the movement also.
47. Nearly 30 come. . . like that they are.
48. For Church feast, (we) gather them.
49. For the movement they come (pp. 41–42).
URPG
50. I feel I am missing it.
51. For the last one year I don't even to go to the Church. I feel like (out of place) (p. 204).
UUGB
52. Church means. . . Now second year I stopped (p. 266).

Amma can be said to be the propagator and guardian of Christian faith, spirituality, and religiosity at home. Compulsion is there from *Amma* to sit for prayer (LRPB 43–44). She prays, even if others are absent (LUGB 36; LRGB 7; LUGG 1). UUPB narrates about his *Appa's* affiliation to the Church, and his strong faith (UUPB 20–21). However, he cannot be said to practice the Christian faith explicitly, for he joins the community but does not actively participate in the liturgical celebration (UUPB 20). UUGB, LRPB, and URPG accept the fact that they no longer frequent the Church (UUGB 52; LRPB 44; URPG 51). Lower-class urban boy speaks about the mission that he takes up among the non-believers (LUGB 37–39). Upper-class Urban girl narrates about her interest in Bible conventions and reading the Bible in public (UUPG 33–34). These shed light on the situation of the Catholic faith practiced by the youth. Further, there is also the indication that traditional family prayer is being replaced by mass media prayers, especially the rosary, in prime time (URGB 42). LUPB talks about the discrepancy in faith and practice and also criticizes the preferences the parish priest gives to the rich. The parish priest insists on Sunday mass and participation in the daily activities of the Church, but when someone who is rich comes, the narration varies (LUPB 11–19).

The research shows that not everyone in the family takes part in the spiritual activities in the family and in the parish. There is the possibility that some family members, especially the gents who are free to engage fully in social activities, will be carried away by other

forms of faith and non-faith expressions and ideologies in society. This adversely affects the relationship with the other and the social representations of the other. *Amma*, being the guardian of faith, spirituality, and religiosity at home, brings out the core meaning of gender inequality. Men are free to move around at night, and women are confined to their homes, practicing their faith.

7.2. Impact of Caste in Interpersonal Relationships

Although there are no village systems in Kanniyakumari—except in the coastal area—that provide a spatial divide for caste groups to survive, the peripheral meanings of the caste system exist, affecting interpersonal relationships. The extract from the interview, given below (Table 2), exemplifies this phenomenon.

Table 2. Impact of Caste in Interpersonal Relationships.

LUGG	
1.	From sea shore eight to ten.
2.	Hindu College <i>Nadars</i> come more.
3.	No discrimination.
4.	Two seashore girls together, then two Hindu students sit.
5.	We comment about everything together.
6.	In the front bench all are Hindus. They roam together.
7.	We don't look at anyone differently (p. 9).
LUPG	
8.	Those who are from Nadar community will come with firecracker flowers (<i>Kanahmapoo</i>). ⁶
9.	Dress color, yellow orange.
10.	We will mock at them.
11.	In the college I have not seen much (caste difference).
12.	In the school, students say, we are OBC, you are MBC. We are high, you are low always.
13.	In college, when arguments come, we say, we are from seashore, we are high (pp. 110–11).
LRPG	
14.	Teachers are mostly Hindu Nair, that caste.
15.	They talk among themselves. Otherwise, no problem (p. 172).
LRGB	
16.	My <i>Appa</i> . . . <i>Nadar</i> that head-weight (pride, <i>thalakkanam</i>).
17.	He tells to all 'I am a <i>Nadar</i> .'
18.	He does not want to go bow-headed.
19.	I live in that area, so that thinking (<i>Puthi</i> —social cognition).
20.	I am also the same. But <i>Nadar</i> , that head weight I don't have (pp. 287–88).
UUPB	
21.	My friend looks at caste difference.
22.	He followed a girl, but he said that that girl is from seashore (<i>mukkuva ponnu</i>).
23.	I told him, if you like propose and marry.
24.	But if I marry her, someone pointing at me and tell, pointing at me, 'he married a seashore girl (<i>mukkuva ponnu</i>).
25.	But I didn't like, what he said (p. 425).

The references 'seashore,' '*Nadars*,' 'Hindu,' and '*Nair*' all refer to the structured caste content. 'We sit together,' and 'they roam together' are peripheral aspects that are part of the social psyche, which are not apparent as the term '*Nadar*' connotes (LUGG 2, 6; LUPG 8, 9; LRPG 14; UUPB 23, 25). Taking pride in themselves as being higher than others also prevails

(LUPG 12; LRGB 16, 19; UUPB 23, 25). Mentioning the name of the caste and attaching specific characteristics to them happens normally (LUPG 8, 9). LRGB speaks of caste as part of social cognition (LRGB 16, 19). Lower and higher, rather than being a well-constructed reality, fluctuate. LUPG speaks as if they are higher in the social order (LUPG 12), and UUPB points out the mentality of his friend that getting married to a seashore girl is inferior and would attract public humiliation (UUPB 22). UUPB wishes to overcome the caste-based endogamic marriage and invites its friends to overcome the caste divide (UUPB 23).

7.3. Girl-Marriage Nexus and Troubled Friendship with the Opposite Sex

Intergender relationship outside marriage is not looked at positively in society. This friendship has more adverse effects on girls than boys. Girls' marriage prospects are affected thereby. Parents are also preoccupied with the 'protection of girls' from all sorts of 'unsocial' behavior that can attract social negative 'branding,' casting a shadow on their and their parents' moral credibility. Table 3 gives us the details of this phenomenon.

Table 3. Girl-Marriage Nexus and Troubled Friendship with the Opposite Sex.

LUGG	
1.	Earlier in the village I used to speak with boys. Now, no.
2.	<i>Amma</i> will say something, if I speak to someone.
3.	'Why do you speak to boys?' people will ask.
4.	You have come to age.
5.	<i>Amma</i> scolds.
6.	Affects marriage prospects.
7.	In the village people will say badly. They will tell differently. Who is this boy? Who is this boy? Why she is speaking with, like that they will. (p. 10).
8.	Elder sisters always say—Be Good, (<i>ozhunka eru</i>) (pp. 26–27).
LRPG	
9.	(Church youth group). I don't go. There will be boys.
10.	Earlier, we girls and boys were together.
11.	Then, boys will be conversing with the girls.
12.	When elders see it, they see it differently, they will take note of it.
13.	(They will say to <i>Appa</i>) 'Your daughter was there.' So, my <i>Appa</i> will not allow.
14.	But now it functions separately (boys and girls as separate groups).
15.	Youth movement means, it is so (boys and girls talking unwanted things) <i>Appa</i> has fixed it, he made his mind accordingly (pp. 175–76).
16.	Suppose we four to five friends are going together, we crack jokes and laugh.
17.	Then the news will reach home (someone would report it to <i>Appa</i>).
18.	Then <i>Appa</i> will scold me: 'on the street, what is there to laugh at?' (<i>roadla enna siriuppu vendi kidakku</i>).
19.	At home also, if we make more noise, female children (<i>pompala pillanka</i>), so, what sound there (p. 178).
LUPG	
20.	When you see all these, villagers will say, parents are not proper (<i>Ozhunka illa</i>).
21.	'If they were all right, would these children go like this?' (They would comment)
22.	We speak with the boys very normally, but villagers will say: 'see, she is talking with that boy.'
23.	Their view is different (pp. 116–17).
24.	'See that girl, is it the way girl should be brought up.'
25.	'See how 'it' (<i>Ithu</i>) shows teeth (<i>pallu kattiddu nikku</i>) to that stranger.'
26.	In our home, they will tell us. Don't talk too much.
27.	Then our grandma will ask us to wear shawl properly. Even to children she will say so.
28.	(She would say) 'In public don't stand for a long time and talk too much.
29.	'Don't laugh in open place' (pp. 117–18).

Table 3. Cont.

UUPG
30. <i>Amma</i> admonishes to be patient.
31. You should get along patiently.
32. Whoever whatever tells you should adjust.
33. Today also I told to my friend. . . be patient. The patient will rule the world (<i>poruthaar bhoomi aalwar</i>).
34. 'If they throw bag away (classmates), take it back and sit quietly. We can't do anything.'
35. Why should we engage in quarrel?
36. It will be childish (p. 133).
37. I have a lot of desires. I love roaming with <i>Appa</i> and <i>Amma</i> .
38. But I am taken only once.
39. When there is dance, I love to make noise, clap.
40. On college day, <i>Amma</i> told to be disciplined (<i>ozhunka erukkanum</i>).
41. <i>Amma</i> told, don't clap too much, don't shout, be disciplined (<i>adakkam odukkama erukkanum</i>) (p. 139).

Nodding in agreement to the question, 'marriage will be affected,' 'villagers will see differently,' and villagers' questions like 'who is this boy?' '*Amma* will say something' (LUGG 6–8) are peripheral aspects of the main content of marriage that surround the young girls, narrated as 'you have come to age' (LUGG 4). The reference 'be-good' is a warning against falling in love (LUGG 8). 'What is there to laugh at,' 'while you are walking on the street,' and 'girls should not make noise' refer to the reality that they are meant for marriage (LRPG 18–19). Church youth groups are also affected by social representations around boy–girl relationships (LRPG 14). Although generally, girls are given respect in public places, when some 'unsocial' behaviour is seen from them, they are downgraded to an object 'it': in the Tamil language, *Ithu* (it) (LUGP 25). Tolerance is expected from girls normally, and *Amma* admonishes her continually to practice the associated virtue: patience (UUPG 33). 'Girl is meant for marriage'—this social representation is normally present in society. Ascribing marital value alone to women can be seen as the perpetuation of patriarchy and the denial of other rights to them.

7.4. The Practice of Dowry: Endangered Intergender Relationships

Dowry is present in society as a social norm. It is almost a 'right' for a boy to receive the maximum number of gifts, jewels, and money from the bride's family, and it is the 'duty' of the bride's family to give them. This is often associated with patriarchy and caste endogamy. The dowry system, in a way, provides socioeconomic protection to couples. Table 4 given below exemplifies it.

Table 4. The Practice of Dowry: Endangered Intergender Relationship.

UUGG
1. (Conversations around marriage at home). Yes, there are (prompt reply).
2. (Save jewels and money like that). Yah, certainly. Not directly about dowry.
3. But I don't like these. . . not this, like otherwise, they speak.
4. Like, they have given this much.
5. Good place (<i>nalla idam</i>).
6. I don't like this; <i>Amma</i> does not like.
7. Look at heart and marry.
8. (You are afraid, whether it would happen). Will it happen . . . If it is not so, is it marriage, like that, I think.
9. I don't like at all.
10. I have never heard that, no marriage knowing the heart. At home I speak. . . like, they have married her to a good place. This much they gave. Then I will say, that is not a good place. Like that I have spoken (pp. 56–57).

Table 4. Cont.

URGG	
11.	Elder brother five years older to me.
12.	Parents wished that I should be married first, then brother.
13.	Brother's lover is getting older. So, her parents want their daughter to be married now.
14.	At home nobody likes this.
15.	Because if he marries after getting me married, then he can see to my things.
16.	Whatever he earns also will belong to me.
17.	Now he cannot take care of me.
18.	My <i>Appa</i> has to arrange everything for my marriage. . . .
19.	Money, they give.
20.	Fear is, <i>Appa</i> thinks he should do everything for me.
21.	He arranged everything for my elder sister.
22.	<i>Appa</i> thought my brother would look after my things (pp. 88–89).
LUPG	
23.	Nobody looks for girls with job.
24.	'Are they rich,' their worry is that.
25.	If we give more money in Kanniyakumari 150 pawns.
26.	They come asking for. No education (not valued) (p. 115).
LRPG	
27.	They (uncle and aunt) say to <i>Appa</i> and <i>Amma</i> , hereafter need not send them for education.
28.	Get them married, need not educate them much, female children na (<i>pompala pillanka</i>) (p. 179).
29.	Recently an (marriage) alliance came.
30.	In dowry (matter), it was dropped.
31.	They asked 5 lakhs.
32.	From family 2.5 lakhs only.
33.	Then I have thought, I would have born in a rich family.
34.	(<i>Appa</i> said) If I get one girl married, I will be at peace (<i>Nimmathi</i>).
35.	Without much dowry, in good place I should get married, like that I have prayed.
36.	Because, at home, poor, their struggle they tell.
37.	Earlier <i>Appa</i> used to say, I love girls. They will only look after me.
38.	<i>Appa</i> has started to think, 'if I were able to get married one of my girls (daughters)' . . . Like that he has started to think (pp. 181–82).
39.	Without dowry, if it sets, how happy it would be!
40.	There are boys who do not expect dowry.
41.	No information about them.
42.	Boys, character we do not know.
43.	Some boys will be already married. Here they come, and get married. Then the life will be spoiled.
44.	Like that there are fears.
45.	If I get married without dowry, but when I go to some function, there people will come with a lot of jewels.
46.	They will look down upon us (<i>oru mathiri pappanka</i>) (p. 182).
UUPB	
47.	There will be talk about dowry. When someone is getting married.
48.	'Hei! he gets this much.'
49.	'Will we get this much?'
50.	In truth, I have no interest in it.
51.	To the boys I say, without 10 crores. . . (pp. 406–407).
52.	At home there is no talk about that.
53.	To younger sister, they have decided to give this much.
54.	<i>Appa</i> did not receive any money during marriage.
55.	Grandma will say, when you marry don't receive anything (as dowry) (p. 407).

The practice of dowry and the talk around it always accompany a girl. It is also a topic for discussion at the boy's home. Structured content and meaning of the social representations about the other related to dowry is found as 'saving money for a girl child,' and 'marrying them to a good place' (UUGG 5). The daily conversations around marriage function as peripheral aspects (UUPB 55) as well. The following peripherals—the girl's brother's task to have her married (LRPG 22), *Appa's* struggle to have her daughter married (LRPG 38), society's insistence that girl is meant for marriage and not for education (LRPG 28), the girls' conviction that without jewel no dignity (LRPG 46)—all indicate to the fact of structured content and meaning of dowry system in the society. Even in families where dowry is not 'promoted,' in the literal sense, the ripple effect continues (UUPB 53). In a way, a 'good place' also indicates the solid social and economic security that a family and society provide. There is also the promotion of marriage without dowry by family members (UUPB 54–55). When boys wish to marry without receiving a dowry, the girl's family is suspicious about it and is afraid to give their daughter in marriage. Because there is the problem of 'bad boy,' i.e., 'already married,' and other similar 'cheatings' (LRPG 43), it is also true that female children are loved by their parents, but the dowry system positions them as burdensome objects (LRPG 37). The right to dignity is alive in the perpetuation of the dowry system.

7.5. Vainglory (*gethu*): Superior Inferior Dichotomy and Interpersonal Relationship

Vainglory or *gethu* is popular among college students. It carries negative meanings rather than positive ones. It is prevalent among boys and also found among girls at a minimal level. It has its roots in caste domination and patriarchal supremacy, which normally exist, maintaining segregation, discrimination, and, more importantly, first-class and second-class treatment of the other. The following Table 5 gives the details.

Table 5. Vainglory (*gethu*): Superior Inferior Dichotomy and Interpersonal Relationship.

LRPG	
1.	When I was doing BA, 55 students were <i>Malayalees</i> (from the state of Kerala, having the mother tongue Malayalam).
2.	They join together; we are only five to six.
3.	They will maintain a distance.
4.	Malayalam girls, I do not know, may be because they are studying in <i>Malayalee</i> college, they have a <i>gethu</i> feeling.
5.	I did my school education in Tamil Medium. Now I am studying English literature. In the college, students who studied in English medium and Matriculation will come.
6.	We learn paragraph wise; they will look down upon us, implicitly conveying the message, 'you people are from Tamil medium' (p. 171).
URPG	
7.	Yes, they treat me differently.
8.	She is moving on. She is a girl with <i>gethu</i> .
9.	Even if people are not saying, I have feeling that, they are commenting me.
10.	I feel completely odd (p. 217).
UUGB	
11.	Money certainly.
12.	Now, boys think, you have to buy iPhone.
13.	iPhone <i>gethu</i> .
14.	Like that, iPhone, Sony brand.
15.	Boys with bike, scene (<i>bandha</i>), meaning 'showy.'
16.	Their family, a bit rich, whatever they ask they get.
17.	They can be like that, (p. 274).

Table 5. Cont.

LRGB	
18.	Caste is not a problem.
19.	Nadar, that <i>gethu</i> , that I have (p. 288).
UUPB	
20.	'Something we are,' that feeling we have.
21.	We are, we are <i>gethu</i> group.
22.	Not in studies, in other matters.
23.	Standing outside (outside the class room, punishment).
24.	Opposing the staff (giggles). In these matters.
25.	Coming late to the college.
26.	They will scold. . . whole class will laugh at us. That we will feel (positive).
27.	Then we will stand, standing (raising head and chest).
28.	You are coming late daily. When he says so, I feel happy.
29.	HOD will say in the other classes, in that class he is not ok.
30.	Insult . . . but I feel <i>gethu</i> (pp. 413–14).
LRGG	
31.	That boy does not come every day.
32.	When he comes, he does something. . .
33.	He does not study well. Knows nothing. But shows as if he knows everything.
34.	He comes in a white color bike.
35.	Enters class, shows style, over smart.
36.	Students call his scene scene scence (<i>padam</i> —showy).
37.	Among girls there are some (pp. 82–83).

Gethu is a common representation among college students, and it is used to express their superiority over other students. It is a social phenomenon that affects relationships. Richness, linguistic superiority (LRPG 4–5), caste (LRGB 19), having costly branded gadgets (UUGB 13–14), and bikes (UUGB 15) all contribute to their *gethu* feeling. But there is also another side. The financially well off feel that they are being sidelined, branding them as having *gethu* (URPG 9–10). Then, some boys also take a 'rebel attitude' as *gethu*. Punishment given to them, and the negative comments made about them, are taken positively as if contributing to their popularity, and they can create a fear complex among the students and staff (UUPB 23–30). URPG sees that richness is seen as the cause of her discrimination. She feels that she is discriminated against because she is rich (URPG 7–10). It is a social phenomenon of supremacy that creates troubled relationships among youth. In the Indian context, the cause for the phenomenon can be attributed to the prevailing caste system.

7.6. Inner Alter–Ego Dialogue and Authentic Self

Markova, besides the triadic dialogue, speaks about the dyadic dialogue that is taking place in every person. The agents involved are the inner Alter and Ego. By inner Alter, she means the social representations that are present in one's mind, with which the Ego engages in dialogue. It is a self-conversation. The following narrative segments from the interviews bring forth the dialogue that goes on within youth. Some can withstand the social pressure and act authentically, some yield to social pressure, and some are left with indecision. The examples are given below (Table 6).

The above narrative segments from the interview text bring to light three types of thinking going on in youth. They are centered around the inner Alter–Ego dyadic thinking that takes place individually among youth. One group of youth is able to withstand the unbecoming social pressure. UUGG narrates that there is always a tendency to think negatively, but she strives to take everything positively (UUGG 4–5). She believes that God has given her the capacity to think for herself and act rightfully (UUGG 2). LRGB withstands the usual social representations about an accident and the possible threats

surrounding it. He is under social pressure not to act proactively. But he overcomes through his self-dialogue and decides to act compassionately (LRGB 14–17). UUPG represents the inability to withstand social pressure. She likes a girl, treats her as a friend, and relates to her normally. But when a negative narration about her friend is fed to her by another person, she is not able to overcome social pressure and succumbs to it. She starts to treat her friend differently (UUPG 10–13). Thirdly, there are youth who are rather polyphasic in their thinking and indecisive. The excerpt from UUGB’s narration provides different pictures of migrant workers in Tamil Nadu (UUGB 18–22). LRGG’s narrations show the normal phenomenon among youth, who think a lot about the things happening around them and about their future (LRGG 6–9).

Table 6. Inner Alter–Ego Dialogue and Authentic Self.

UUGG	
1.	I like to look at everything positively.
2.	God has given the capacity to think.
3.	So, I take everything positively.
4.	It does not mean that I do not think anything negatively at all.
5.	I like treating everything positively (p. 39).
LRGG	
6.	I think a lot.
7.	I think about the things that take place in the class room.
8.	Those things I don’t share with anybody.
9.	I think about my future. How I will be in the future, like that (p. 81).
UUPG	
10.	Even if it is about a girl whom I like. . .
11.	But if somebody comes and tells me, badly about her and her character, then I will not like talking to her much, thereafter.
12.	I am hesitant to keep in touch with her.
13.	If . . . I speak to her, then others will think and treat me as bad (p. 149).
LRGB	
14.	(Seeing a man bathed in blood lying on road, the reaction). In that situation, there will be many things going on in mind.
15.	If I touch him and help, then there will be problems.
16.	When the police call me, I have to go. I have to go to the court and give witness.
17.	But I will help him, and take him to hospital (p. 325).
UUGB	
18.	(About migrant workers from north India). Now actually, Bengalis or Assamese are working here.
19.	What some think is, they are not given much salary here as well. But the salary they receive here is big for them.
20.	Some treat them good. They have come here to earn for their living.
21.	But some others think, they have come from outside, they can be pick-pocketers, or anti-socials.
22.	Some think that, their family struggles (pp. 226–27).

Six themes have been presented above. They are not exclusive. There is the possibility of extracting many other social representations from the 518 pages of the data available to the author. But pertinent social representations around caste discrimination and gender inequality are brought out.

8. Discussion

How can we interpret the themes presented above? The themes above are from the stories narrated by youth. Narratives are the points of view of the youth. There are disparities in ordering the event and narration. There are problems of lying and omission

as well. Therefore, it can be argued that individual narratives do not reflect the true reality, or they do not portray the reality out there. However, the point of argument in favor of individual narration is that they cannot come from absolute nothingness or out of the air. The narratives reflect what is out there in people's daily lives. More than that, the language they use carries the elements of daily life or social life. Wittgenstein writes: "[g]iving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (Wittgenstein 1969, p. 29). Riessman likes to call this something 'more' (Riessman 1993, p. 64). White sees the 'forms of life' as 'historically constructed and negotiated in communities of persons' and attributes 'canonical dimensions' to them (White 1991, p. 28).

These 'forms of life' identified among the youth do not rely on quantitative aspects, i.e., how many agree and how many disagree. Therefore, there is no attempt in this study to look into the agreement ratio. These social representations found among the youth facilitate their interpersonal representations, bringing into light the socioeconomic factors that are hidden and are part of historical consciousness.

We take the interpretative key for understanding research results from theology. Church, while explaining communion, which has its foundation in the Trinitarian union, speaks about double dimensions: "the vertical (communion with God) and the horizontal (communion among men/women) (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1992). Catholic college students, through their daily prayers, Church activities, and other forms of Church-related activities, establish a vertical relationship with God. This is expected to result in horizontal relationships with others. The analysis of the results tries to center itself within the ambit provided by the social representations theory, within social psychology. It looks into social knowledge and how it becomes normative and habituated, and further, into the modifications in encounters depending on the changing situations. The 16 samples selected give us an idea of the social milieu in which they are living and how variant social knowledge and, thereby, social representations are prevalent. Care is taken not to include individual psychological aspects. Having set this frame for discussion, below is the discussion of the themes. The interpretation will be conducted under three headings, which will answer the three research questions.

8.1. Image of God and the Other: Catholic Impact on Youth

The social representations of faith in God and the relationship with other human beings are found in society, which youth also share. This social representation is structured in society into meanings and contents.

"Women are generally more religious than men, particularly among Christians." (Pew Research Centre 2016). This is, however, true among the Catholic youth as well, in the social milieu under discussion. *Amma* sits for prayer, and she prays even if others are absent. The command by *Amma* 'no prayer, no food' (Table 1. 43) also points to the fact of women's role in prayer. It should also be seen in the background of the Indian context, where women remain the central figure in almost every religious practice. It is more prevalent in the so-called Little Tradition, where women's role is pivotal. The fertility cult and its identification with women are found in Tamil Nadu. These forms of fertility cults also became part of Christian tradition. An example can be given here. *Mulaippari* (முளைப்பாரி), meaning the seedling grown and taken in procession to be offered to the goddess, is also found as part of Christians' celebration of Christmas. Just before the Christmas night vigil from homes, the grown seedlings were taken in procession to be offered to the Child Jesus (Sivasubramaniyan 2010, pp. 111–23). It is also true that women are given the role of observing the rituals, and men take the role of performing or visible

forms of worship (Agnihotri 2019, pp. 14–17). UUGG speaks about the non-participation of boys in liturgical activities, at the same time they are active during festivals (Table 1. 45–49). LRGB's expression, *Amma* will sit and recite, expressed in local Tamil as *Pannittu Iruppinum* (she will be going on doing), conveys a 'don't care' attitude and an activity meant for *Amma* (Table 1. 6–7). In the family of LUGB, who engages himself in teaching the Bible to the Hindu friend, there is no family prayer (Table 1. 35–36). UUPB also implicitly says that prayer and liturgical activities are not taken up as a family. He says that his *Amma* is from a CSI background (Table 1. 24, 27). Again, he is also not very positive about the fact that his religious brother shares Bible verses in the WhatsApp group. He giggles in a way that belittles it (Table 1. 29–30). The practice of faith is not a family affair. The family prayer is replaced by the rosary telecast on the TV (Table 1. 41–42). URPB does not mention family prayer but speaks of the Catholic atmosphere that is maintained by her *Amma*, which is achieved by playing Catholic songs and Holy Mass telecast on TV. Here as well, *Appa* is passive (Table 1. 1–3). *Appa* does not play an active role in forming the children in faith. It is clear that *Appa* does not take part in the family prayer. The active participation of *Appa* in the liturgical celebration is also missing (Table 1. 20). This phenomenon is not in tune with the mind of the Church.

Second Vatican Council sees the family as “a school for human enrichment” (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 52). For this, the Council views prayer as a proper space for human training, salvation, and holiness (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 48). In this training, the Council gives due importance to the parents. It says: “The married couple must practice an affectionate sharing of thought and common deliberation as well as eager cooperation as parents in the children’s upbringing” (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 52). In this, the role played by the *Appa* of the family also finds special mention. The Council says: “The active presence of the father is very important for the training of children” (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 52). Again, it says that the Lord gifts them—both the parents, the dignity of fatherhood and motherhood, thereby father and mother occupy important roles in training the children, in the way proper to husband and wife (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 52). In this line, Pope Francis says, that the children, set by the example of parents, are “a couple with their personal story of love,” (Francis 2016, n. 9), learn to love God, practice faith and habituate the love culture (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 49). The current study shows that the family prayer, aimed at bringing the members under the aegis of God and training them to be the disciples of Jesus, is reduced to another ritual that is performed by the subservient *Amma* in order to protect her family from the snares of evil. Consequently, since the *Appa* is away from family prayers, the son is also trained to repeat them. Socially, this leads to gender cleavage affecting the intergender relationship as well.

The cultural overdose reflected even in the practice of faith, which creates gender inequality, is not in tune with the Christian theological vision of God. For every family, the Trinitarian relationship remains the exemplar par excellence. The family often fails to impart the exemplary love that forms the very essence of God, lived through words and deeds by God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. John Paul II says that woman also possesses a “subjectively beatifying existence” (John Paul II 1997, p. 182). The discrepancy in the practice caused by the negative influence of cultural elements affects the relationship between men and women. This core meaning of social representations is echoed peripherally, which is normally hard to recognize.

The family prayer also becomes the place for embodied cognition.⁷ It is the place that, as Pope Francis says, a “couple with their personal story of love” (Francis 2016, n. 9), provides the space and opportunity for the children to cultivate and imbibe the love and compassionate care for the other.

8.2. Structures and the Cognition Operative in Denying Right to Human Dignity

Under this heading, there are four subtitles: the caste system and the oppressive, Gender Cleavage, Girl-Marriage Nexus and the Objectification of Women, Caste-Marriage-Dowry Nexus and the Structural Objectification of Women, and Caste Obsession-Gethu Nexus and the Exercise of Power. These will provide data on the status of structural denial in society.

8.2.1. Caste System and the Oppressive Structures

Caste, which is part of the social fabric of society that historically dehumanised and discriminated against people, is still part of the social representation. It is also used to gather people to form a movement intended for upliftment and socioeconomic-political empowerment. The pre-post-independent India saw social upliftment based on the antinomy, upper caste/lower caste, honoured/untouchable, caste-privileged/marginalized. This is true in the context of Tamil Nadu, where *Thanthai Periyar* (E.V. Ramaswami) brought in the important antinomy of the Arians/Dravidians. For him, the Arians were equivalent to Brahmins, who dominated the sociopolitical space. He pitched them against *Avaranas*, the *Dravidians* in general, who formed the majority. His movement later, through his followers and sympathizers, paved the way for the formation of the regional Dravidian political parties, which have ruled the state of Tamil Nadu for the past fifty years. Today, the state of Tamil Nadu also sees the caste-based political parties as being for the good of the underprivileged.⁸ It is also sad that many times, they are vote banks—Dalits being reduced to numbers. Caste, which is part of the historical consciousness of people and forms part of the social fabric of society, brings people together and provides social identity easily. What is to be contested and eliminated are discrimination, socioeconomic-political deprivation, and marginalization. Caste can be treated only for the sake of the appreciation of their difference and the cultural richness they possess.

The caste as such is not a vivid factor among youth, especially in an educational institutional setup. They try to mingle and treat everyone equally (Table 2. 3, 7, 25). Coastal and other people differentiate themselves on the basis of caste (Table 2. 4–6). The difference between the open category (OC) students and the caste-Hindu group and the other lower caste students is more visible (Table 2. 12–13). Marriages are conducted on the basis of caste, and inter-caste marriages are very marginal. Caste hierarchy, although it places the coastal Christians (there are caste differences among themselves as well) and others on par with each other, there is no mutuality of recognition and acceptance when it comes to marriages (Table 2. 22–24). The core meaning of caste also exists often in explicit forms. The pride, the casteist social cognition, is more visible among the students of some local villages (Table 2. 16–20). Although the narrative segments that are brought here for exposition and discussion are minimal, this in no way minimizes the huge discriminatory role it plays in Tamil Nadu. It is only the tip of the iceberg. It should be treated as a social representation with heavy-burdened historical consciousness, which educated youth are normally hesitant to speak about in public. The caste system as a social phenomenon has serious implications in granting equal dignity to women in Tamil Nadu, especially in the context of Kanniyakumari.

The caste system has a patriarchal backup, which eventually subjugates women to men. The matriarchal system that existed in the extinct Travancore state among the Nayar community, *marumakkalthayam*, although it seemed to give primacy to women, was an attempt to consolidate the hierarchical caste system through women's subjugation. The women who had restrictions in movement, which the men enjoyed absolutely, became the custodians of property and the system. Women are the symbols of family, community, or caste pride. Today's honor killings are the extensions of patriarchal hegemony.⁹ This

central meaning is found peripherally in today's society as well. Patriarchy, which has institutionalized its domination over women through caste, exists today in the then-existent state of Travancore in the family as family honor, always enslaving women. Endogamy that takes place within the same caste system, as indicated by UUPB (Table 2. 22, 24), also promotes dowry. Women's value in Indian society is determined by their marital status and their reproductive abilities. Since these have to be realized within the socially set up caste boundaries, getting girls into a good 'state' requires money (Table 4. 5, 35). 'Good place' signifies an economically well-to-do family. Dowry becomes a great incentive to keep girls in a 'good place' (Venkatanarayanan 2020, pp. 26–29). These have prompted child marriage as well, which today exists in other forms. Girls are often not free to speak with boys in public, and acting against this norm would attract the title 'bad girl' as well. Since they are meant for marriage, the instrumentalized perpetrators of patriarchy, their free movement and socialization are prohibited and would bring dishonor to family members as well. The social representations and the interpretations given below are to be viewed as the extension of caste-based endogamy. It affects intergender relationships as well since the girl child is seen as the promoter of family values and honor.

8.2.2. Gender Cleavage, Girl-Marriage Nexus and the Objectification of Women

Regarding gender, there is something to be stated primarily. The Second Vatican Council says: "[i]t is regrettable that . . . basic personal rights are not respected everywhere, as it is the case with women who are denied the chance to freely choose a husband, or a state of life, or to have access to the same educational and cultural benefits as are available to men" (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 29). Here the Council advocates for equal rights for women and men, and it makes special mention of a woman's freedom to choose her husband. The Church also upholds the dignified differences between males and females, which accord each one a specific role in society, coinciding with the unique call that each one has received from God. Without denying "women's legitimate social advancement" the Council also insists on the role of mothers, especially in bringing up the young ones (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 52). Pope John Paul II says that in no way the resources of femininity are less than the resources of masculinity and confirms that they are merely different. He continues to spell out that men and women must understand the uniqueness of the resources they have received and live them for personal fulfillment. John Paul II points to the ontological composition and the difference, which in no way takes away equal dignity (John Paul II 1988, no. 10).

Caste, girl-marriage nexus, patriarchy, and family honor promoted in society affect intergender relationships. This is promoted as a family value. 'If I speak with boys *Amma* will say something,' meaning she could be scolded by her *Amma*, is a normal phenomenon (Table 3. 2), and her mother continues to remind her that she has attained the age of marriage (Table 3. 4). *Amma* is very particular that girls' marriage prospects are not affected (Table 3. 6). Since it is a social norm, the members of the society come and report to the family about the 'ill behavior' of their daughter (Table 3. 7). Other members of the family also insist on this. The Tamil expression *ozhunka eru* (be disciplined) (Table 3. 8) is a clear admonition against falling in love with someone or bringing dishonor to the family. This sort of social norm also prevents parents from allowing girls to take part in the parish youth activities. Since the parish community is a more familiar institution, many parents are careful not to allow girls to join with boys for the parish youth meetings (Table 3. 9–15). Again, *Appa* or *Amma* in the family takes care of girls' behavior in public (Table 3. 18, 25). Their voice inside the family is also very restricted (Table 3. 19, 41). Parents can even attract criticism for not bringing up their girl 'properly' (Table 3. 20–23). Society is also watchful about girls' behavior in public (Table 3. 22). Grandma, the eldest at home, is also

careful about girls' attire in public (Table 3. 27–29). Roaming in public by girls is not much welcomed in society, and it is constantly reminded by *Ammas* (Table 3. 37). It is not proper that they laugh and smile in public (Table 3. 18, 25). Amma is also very careful about her behavior in college, especially when there are functions. Especially when she mentions the words *adakkam odukkama erukkanum* (Table 3. 41). Here, the first word, *Adakkam*, means control of the five senses and their desires, and it carries with it the Tamil semantic elements, hidden in ancient, rich Tamil literature.¹⁰ But as it becomes part of public usage, it is used to fit the situations, a norm that is functional in social knowledge. This applies to the word *Odukkam* also. If the word *Adakkam* resonates with *Thirukkural*, *Odukkam*, meaning 'blind' obedience, resonates with *Kambaramayanam*, one of the five epics of Tamil Literature.¹¹ One of the leading cinema actors in Tamil cinema, Rajinikanth, used this and similar dialogues in his films. It is normal for people to memorize these cinema dialogues and repeat them in their daily conversations.¹² Again, *Amma*, as a virtue, admonishes her daughter, which the girl is reminded of, in her conversations with her friend: 'The one who is patient will rule the world'. This also resonates with the *Kural* or the couplet from Thiruvalluvar.¹³ This girl-marriage nexus takes us to another social representation of girls, namely, the marriage-dowry nexus.

8.2.3. Caste-Marriage-Dowry Nexus and the Structural Objectification of Women

Parents are concerned about giving their daughters in marriage to a 'good place' (Table 4. 5). The girl is afraid of society that, if she is married without any dowry, then she might be insulted and will not be treated on par with other members of her husband's family (Table 4. 45). Then there is a suspicion about boys who do not demand any dowry, because they might not be genuine and might have married already and are afraid that their life would be spoiled (Table 4. 46–48). The *Appa* of the family, who enjoys the company of girl children when they are very young, feels burdened as they grow and attain the age of marriage (Table 4. 37–38). There are also other forms of talk, such as 'girls are meant for marriage and providing them with education is useless' (Table 4. 27–28). Society believes that it is the bound duty of the brother to have her younger sister give her in marriage (Table 4. 12–18). There is apparently discontent between both girls and boys about the existing dowry system. UUGG and LUPG believe that marriage does not result in a loving, happy life and ends up in the accumulation of money and ornaments (Table 4. 5–10, 23–26). UUPB expresses the view that he does not like the dowry system (Table 4. 50). Followed by caste, girl-marriage nexus, marriage-dowry nexus, there is also, in this line, girl-marriage-dowry skin color complexion nexus.

8.2.4. Caste Obsession-Gethu Nexus and the Exercise of Power

A caste-based hierarchical society bears the brunt of various levels of 'master-slave' type inequalities. One of them is *gethu*, commonly found among the youth and other publics. Although it has other meanings in Tamil, it means in the current scenario, 'superficial heroism' or 'vainglory,' but it is commonly linked to the word gut or gut feeling, referring to instinctive emotional response rather than considered thought. The word *get* can mean an instinctual response expressed as empty heroism, directed towards getting attention in public events to the point of being rowdy in the local area. Many times, the communication genre used and the actions exhibit villainism and elicit a fear response from local people. This *gethu* is found among the youth, especially in college circles. Girls are also not exempt.

LRPG speaks about *Malyalalee* (from the state of Kerala) girls, showing *gethu* in front of Tamil girls who are a minority. The distance between the two groups comes on the basis of the language medium, in which they completed their school education (Table 5. 1–6). Money, the branded gadgets, and the bikes they use also contribute to showing themselves

as heroes (Table 5. 11–17, 34). Even some take pride or have acquired *gethu* feelings, though they deny it outwardly, because they belong to a particular caste (Table 5. 18–19). This is expressed in many honor killings that take place in Tamil Nadu (Castro 2022). More subtle expressions are found in the narration of UUPB. ‘Something we are,’ ‘we are *gethu* group,’ ‘not for studies,’ but in ‘opposing the staff,’ ‘coming late to the college, getting punished and standing outside, being watched by all,’ ‘being fearful,’ ‘becoming subject of discussion among the students for wrong reasons,’ ‘in front of the HOD (head of the department) chest and face raised,’ ‘considering insults from others in the public as *gethu*,’ are some of the are the peripheral representations of the *gethu* feeling (Table 5. 20–30). In psychology, it can be branded as a superiority complex, but in social psychology, it is part of the social psyche. In the caste-ridden Tamil Nadu context, *gethu* is attached to ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ class stratification, where the former exhibits their superiority through some sort of rowdiness. ‘Being not regular to the college,’ ‘not studying well but showing off his richness’ are all seen by the collegemates as *gethu* or in another term, ‘scene’ (Table 5. 31–37).

8.3. Inner Alter–Ego Dialogue and the Authenticity of Existence

The third research question was about bringing authenticity to youth’s existence, that is, the capacity to filter what is Christian from the un-Christian. Due to the influence of various sociocultural-political elements and the pressure on social identity, youth find it difficult to practice the Christian representations of the other in their life. This touches on the aspect of authentic life, an authentic Christian life. Markova speaks of the dyadic dialogue. The individual self-engages in a process of the co-construction of the dialogue between I and Me, resulting in self-identity and self-esteem (Markova 2006, 125). In technical terms, she says, it is the Ego–Alter dialogue. Alter can be an individual, other, group, subgroup, or institution. It is dyadic and not a solipsistic mode of ‘taking the role of the other’ (Markova 2006, p. 125) but ‘collective voices in the self’ (Hermans 2001, p. 261). There is a collective other or Alter, which Markova names as inner Alter, to whom the self engages in dialogue; it is between I and Me. Here, the self can also be held responsible for the other, including Levinas’ third, which is the whole of humanity. Individual acts, their contributions, their artistic works, and many other innovative actions, Tarkovsky says, must be ethically responsible (Tarkovsky 1987, p. 102). In Levinas’ terms, it is the ethical responsibility that establishes the subjectivity or consolidates the self; otherwise, it would be merging into the other. Mead speaks of the ‘I’ in the process of making ‘me,’ the self-identity, which acquires from others, society, and neighbors a set of responses (Mead 1992, p. 277). The Christian understanding of the human person, created in the image of God, categorically affirms intelligence and freedom. And it also states that humans are naturally destined to choose the good and reach the good, par excellence, God. The freedom is to choose the good. This can be equivalent to a Christian conscience, which is seen as the voice of Christ inside everyone. There is a need to form and strengthen it.

In this research, three types of consequences that result from Alter–Ego dialogue are drawn. UUGG expresses her struggle to overcome the negative thinking that happens normally in her life. She believes that, with the thinking capacity that God has given her, she strives to overcome negative thinking and see positivity in everything (Table 6. 1–5). LRGG also engages in an I–Me, or Ego–Alter dialogue, taking into account the happenings around her. She thinks about her future (Table 6. 6–9). In this positive vein, LRGG narrates about his struggle to overcome the social pressure, not to act in case of seeing a man lying bleeding on the road. He thinks about the problems, or social representations around helping a man met with an accident: police inquiry, a witness in the court (Table 6. 14–17). URGG narrates a lot about the thinking that happens within her (Table 6. 6–9).

The second consequence is succumbing to social pressure. UUPG narrates about the social pressure created around her relationship with a friend. The negative narrative about her friend by another yields its fruits in changing her mind. She starts to withdraw from that girl around whom a negative narrative is constructed (Table 6. 10–13). She is afraid of societal exclusion.

There is a third consequence: undecidedness. UUGB narrates about society's attitude towards migrant workers. He is sympathetic towards them since they are humans who have come to earn a living. But he also views them as pickpockets and anti-socials. (Table 6. 18–22).

Under the Ego–Alter dialogue, three consequences that result from self-dialogue have been listed: overcoming social pressure through self-dialogue, succumbing to social pressure, and undecidedness.

9. Conclusions

As a Christian hailing from the civil district of Kanniyakumari, Tamilnadu, India, which was part of the erstwhile Travancore Kingdom, where casteism existed in its severity, the author of this paper can say that religion is not a private affair and, cannot be branded as “conversation stopper” as claimed by the American philosopher Richard Rorty (Rorty 1999, p. 171). The Church, which is ever young (Francis 2019, n. 34), dared to engage with the public sphere with its liberating God's kingdom values and became a solace to the oppressed by empowering them through education, healthcare, and sociopolitical conscientization. It is also called upon today, with different methods. The constitution of India provides legal protection to all the different people, upholding the universal ideals of justice, liberty, and equality aimed at promoting fraternity among all the people, respecting their linguistic, cultural, casteistic, and ethnic differences. These are God's Kingdom's values as well.

Although Christianity is a minuscule minority in India—biblically, it is the prophetic minority who made a deep impact on the lives of people of God—it can serve as an effective catalyst for the removal of oppressive structures. There is a very pertinent Challenge that Indian Christianity and the Indian Church face. Gnana Patrick, taking into account the changed civil and political scenario of today's India, raises the question to set aright the Church's public image: “Can it free itself from the casteist forces dominating its inner world?” (Patrick 2020, p. xii). This paper dealt with the problem of misogynic women's subservient nexus. The phenomenon of structured discriminatory casteist tendencies found among the youth goes against *the ipsum esse* of the Trinitarian God, the world order that God had established, the incarnation event of Jesus, and the mission that the Church serves.

While looking within herself, at the problem of casteism and the other oppressive structures embedded in it, the Church, in a way, opens new ways to the public—the way of doing public theology—with its Christian visions to deal with the problems that are appropriate to today's world. This current research, using the *instrument*, social representations contain core meaning and peripheral aspects, and the corresponding *predictor*, their content and meaning are structured in the society, showed, firstly, that the Catholics, using the social knowledge available in the society, conditioned by the social cognition, willingly or unwillingly perpetuate the structural denial of human dignity. Table 1 shows that the *Appa* does not participate in family prayers, which dissuades males from taking part in Christian worship. Again, prayers through media and male-absent family prayers obstruct embodied cognition—face-to-face interaction, and other types of conversations within the family—that would humanize the youth. Therefore, the enslaving cultural overdose, which is reflected even in the practice of faith, creates gender inequality within the family. This finds its repercussions in social life. Therefore, there is a need to promote family prayers and other liturgical practices, in which males also take part equally.

Secondly, due to the influence of culturally conditioned social representations, there exists a patriarchy, a caste-marriage nexus, and consequently, female subservience among the Catholic youth as well. These types of structural denials have become part of the cognition among the youth. Therefore, the epistemological process produces discriminatory social knowledge in society that facilitates inhumane rapport and second-class treatment of others. The caste practice that thrives through misogynistic patriarchal practices creates gender cleavage. Gender cleavage in the caste-ridden, multilayered pyramidal Indian society negatively affects girls, and their value is determined on the basis of their marriage prospects. Adding to the misery of women, dowry exists as a normal practice in different forms in various parts of India. This commodifies women and makes them mere objects. *Gethu*, a sort of superiority complex found mainly among males, comes as a social identity. With its covetous nature, it attracts the younger ones as well, paving the way for the perpetuation of the caste system as well as women's subservience, which also results in honor killings. The Church sees these as sinful structures. She asserts that the resources of femininity are on par with those of masculinity. The resources are different, but not one superior to the other. The ontological composition and the difference in no way accord less dignity to women (John Paul II 1988, n. 10). She also asserts that women have every right to choose their own spouse (Vatican Council II 1965, n. 52). Through intergenerational dialogues and other educational and pastoral programs, these sorts of evils are to be gradually eliminated.

Thirdly, dialogical social representations speak of inner Alter–Ego dialogue. Aquinas saw that beauty has three objective properties: *consonantia*—proportion, *claritas*—clarity, and *integritas*—integrity (Aquinas 1948, n. I, 39, 8). It can be stated as the aesthetic properties that enhance life as well. The objects that are created—artworks, pieces of literature, or ideas or concepts for social exchange—are required to have these objective properties. These properties orient oneself to an orderly and creative life. Hegel formulated the aesthetic relation that exists between the self and the object (Hegel 1977, p. 81). The relation between the self and the object is required to have the objective of enhancing humanity. Humans, as created reality, are ordered to have mastery over the objects and transform themselves. Aquinas' understanding of beauty aims at order, clarity, and integrity. They are aimed at doing away with the dissonating, shrouding, diminishing, and disintegrating properties. That is what human life is meant for. This is reflected in Hegel as well. Bakhtin would take in the dialogical aspect involved in these abstract rational concepts, thus taking it to the realm of social psychology. He argues for a dialogicality that is responsible. The self is to be ennobled to treat the Alter in a dignified manner (Bakhtin 1984, p. 194). This Alter stands for individuals, groups, subgroups, civilizations, cultures, etc.

This study shows that genuine Ego–Alter dialogues take place among the youth. Some come out of the social pressure that subdues their personal convictions, some succumb to it, and others are indecisive. It is necessary, in a complex context like India, where multiple elements intersect, to enable the youth to engage in genuine dialogue. In order to achieve this, they first need continued capacitation programmes that include family, ecclesial structures, and educational institutions. This grants them authentic life as well. Secondly, most of the enslaving social representations are perpetuated by the older generation. They also should be led through various programs aimed at eradicating discriminatory social representations from society, which also form part of this dyadic (Ego–Alter) dialogue. Through their conversations and dialogues, they can undergo changes and make changes in the lives of the youth as well. As a strategy, value education that should be taken forward in family, educational institutions, ecclesial structures, and a reflective prayer atmosphere is needed.

Given the reality of Christians being a minuscule minority and the shrinking civic space in the current political scenario in India, public theology dares to engage with the general public. Psychosociological research shows that the minority who are at the receiving end of atrocities can become a defining force in changing government policies and social mindsets. The historical victims of majoritarianism, the minority, can exert influence or change the majority. When the relationship between the majority and minority is measured with ethical instruments, then the majority will be placed on the wrong side of history (Moscovici and Pérez 2009). Having this historical advantage, the Indian Church should first continue to introspect about the treatment of its faithful. Secondly, through this introspection and continued dialogue with the general public, it can strive for a more humane society.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study. With regard to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I can provide the assessment report given by my guide, co-signed by the other two readers, from the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome, during my public defense on 23 February 2024. The third paragraph shows: In Part Two, the fourth chapter deals with research design, data analysis procedures and emerging findings. With the view to exploring the social representation of the other among the Catholic college students in the Kanniyakumari district, qualitative method was aptly employed for collecting and processing a set of sixteen personal narratives. The language used in the semi-structured interviews was Tamil (with the exception of one case in English), and the data thus collected makes over 500 pages. Meticulous care taken by the researcher is evident not only in the definition of the sample, but also in the designing of the research instruments for the data collection and data analysis.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In 2016, the Tamil movie *Gethu* was released. Then, there was a government order that gave tax exemptions to movies with Tamil titles. In that context, the movie title, *Gethu*, came up for public discussion, whether it is a Tamil name or has roots in other languages. The online debate found that it was a Tamil word, having the meanings stratagem, making sound in pride, and cheating. In Vijay TV, a popular channel in Tamil Nadu, an anchor named Gopinath conducts a programme called ‘Is it You or Me (wins)?—Neeya Naana (நீயா நானா?). He takes up many issues and conducts debates, and the participants are divided into two groups, expressing two different opinions or understandings about one phenomenon, e.g., dowry, the daughter-in-law—mother-in-law conflict, etc. On 6 November 2023, the debate was on *gethu*. In that programme, a teenage boy felt proud—*Gethu*, for beating his father, who compelled him to go to school. The attitude comes from Tamil Cinemas, (film makers would say that they portray the social reality of cinema, public would criticise film makers as the propagators of these ideas), which often presents the hero (nowadays) a man without job roaming about, poking his nose at everything which he finds to be unjust.
- ² It was Gregory of Nazianzus who brought in the Greek term perichoresis to explain the divine and human coexistence in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Later, John Damascene adopted the term to explain the interpenetrative existence of the Trinitarian persons. The term meant “to pass reciprocally,” and “interacting with.” During the medieval period, Perichoresis was translated into Latin initially as *circumsessio* and later as *circuminsessio* (Kasper 1984, p. 284).
- ³ St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta writes: “True love hurts. It always must hurt. It has to be painful to love someone; painful to leave him, you would like to die for him. When people marry, they have to give up everything in order to love each other. A mother who gives life to a child suffers much. The word ‘Love’ is misunderstood and misused so much.” (Catholic Church 2011, p. 33).
- ⁴ “Kanyakumari district is located at the southern tip of peninsular India. It extends from 77.08° to 77.58° East longitudes and 8.06° to 8.58° North latitudes. The total geographical area is 1680.7 Sq. km with undulating topography and elevation ranging from 0 to 1798 m. The district receives well-distributed rainfall from both southwest and northeast monsoons, with an annual

average rainfall of 1465 mm. In Kanyakumari district, 30.2 per cent of the total geographic area is under the forest. Coconut, paddy, and plantain crops are the major crops grown in the district.” Rubber is also a major crop (Meti et al. 2014).

The Travancore State is situated at the southwestern extremity of India, between 8°4' and 10°22' North Latitude and 76°14' and 77°38' East Longitude. It is a long narrow strip of territory, measuring 174 miles in length and from 30 to 75 miles in breadth, lying between the Malabar Coast and the Western Ghats which run almost parallel with the Western Coast of India and which divide Travancore from the British Districts of Tirunelveli and Madurai (Aiya 1906, p. 4).

Crossandra infundibuliformis.

There are advanced sciences and continental philosophies that speak of “embodied cognition.” This advanced field of human science opens up the scope for familial and communal belongingness, group sharing, and living together. This clarifies the possibility of a better humane practice that promotes compassionate, lively social living, adding meaning to the very existence of a human person (Gallagher 2014). The family prayer also becomes the place for embodied cognition. It is the place that, as Pope Francis says, the “couple with their personal story of love” (Francis 2016, n. 9), provides the space and opportunity for the children to cultivate and imbibe the love and compassionate care for the other.

Thirumavalavan can be said to be the leading Dalit talesman in Tamil Nadu. Under his leadership, social and individual empowerment continues to take place among the Dalits. One example would be the Tamil cinema industry, known as Kollywood (which comes from Kodambakkam, the place in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, where the industry thrives), which has seen many pro-Dalit films. Cinema, as a mass entertainer, speaks socially and psychologically, contributing much content to social debate and tea-shop conversations.

For an elaborate reading on honour killings in the name of caste, read (Rajasekaran 2023). The film director Mari Selvaraj’s debut movie, *Pariyerum Perumal*, released in 2018, deals with the problem of honour killings and the impasse that exists.

This resonates with the ancient Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar’s couplets. The couplets by the poet are highly valued in Tamil society. However, as it becomes part of public usage, it gets used to fit the situations, a norm that is functional in social knowledge. The couplet, called Kural 121, says: அடக்கம் அமரருள் உய்க்கும் அடங்காமை ஆரிருள் உய்த்து விடும்—*adakkam amararul uikkum adankaamai arirul uithu vidum*: Control of self does man conduct to bliss th’ immortals share; Indulgence leads to deepest night, and leaves him there (Thiruvalluvar 1886).

This expression is closer to the poem from Kamabaramaynam. Rama, who was the legal heir of the kingdom of Ayodhya, was denied the kingdom by the intervention of Kaikeyi, his stepmother, who was intellectually poisoned by her servant, Kuni. Kambar, the Tamil poet, in order to show his total obedience to her stepmother writes: வந்தவள் தன்னைச் சென்னி மண் உற வணங்கி, வாசச் சிந்துரப் பவளச் செவ்வாய் செங்கையின் புதைத்து, மற்றைச் சுந்தரத் தடக் கை தானை மடக்குறத் துவண்டு நின்றான்—அந்தி வந்து அடைந்த தாயைக் கண்ட ஆன் கன்றின் அன்னான்—*vanthaval thannai chenni man ura vananki vasachinthura pavala chevvai chenkeyin puthainthu, matrai sundara thada kai thaana madakkura thuvandu nintran—anthi vanthu thayai kanda aan kantrin annaan*. It can be translated as: “Rama turned to be like a calf which has seen its mother cow that returned in the evening. He saluted his stepmother falling on the ground with his forehead touching the earth. And then slightly closing his . . . mouth using his right hand and folding his cloth using his pretty left hand stood in salutation.” It is interesting that, even when he is denied the throne, he expresses no anger, but expresses total obedience and surrender to her. This sort of salutation was practiced in the caste system. The lower caste people were made to salute the upper-class people in the above-mentioned manner. Its repercussions can be found even today in the Tamil society (Kambar 2014, n. 1598).

Some of the movies in which these dialogues are used are: *Padayappa*, *Mannan*, and *Mappillai*. But in his recent movies, he does not use them. It is said that the failed marriages of his two daughters and their struggle to be independent in the cinema industry have brought this change in him.

அகழ்வாரைத் தாங்கும் நிலம் போல தம்மை இகழ்வாரைப் பொறுத்தல் தலை—*ahazhvarai thaankum nilam pola thammai ihazhvarai poruthal thalai*: As earth bears up the men who delve into her breast, to bear with scornful men of virtues is the best (Thiruvalluvar 1886, n. 151).

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Article

Unveiling the Inner World: Exploring Emotional Intelligence, Faith, and Time Perspective among Italian Nuns

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to verify whether emotional intelligence and intrinsic religious orientation have a positive influence on a balanced time perspective (BTP) in the lives of Italian consecrated women. A positive, balanced time perspective, together with the ability to recognize one's own emotions and those of others, is integral to people's experience of religiosity in their lives. In this way, a balanced time perspective can open the experience of religiosity, contributing to a better world, along with all those who are engaged in a religious sentiment that is no longer limited to single segments of self-interest. In this study, we provided evidence that religious beliefs (not just participation in corporate religious life) can provide an alternative source of understanding emotions and perceiving time, for the religious people who live their consecrated life together. We tested whether this phenomenon was specific to the potential associations between various aspects of religious belief, emotional intelligence, and time perspective. This research was conducted on a sample of 283 Italian nuns, and it was verified that both emotional intelligence and intrinsic religiosity contribute significantly to a BTP. Furthermore, the fact that emotional intelligence is mediated by intrinsic religious orientation increases the benefits of emotional intelligence on the BTP of Italian nuns. Altogether, our results suggest that religiosity is linked to a balanced temporal profile and to a positive way of understanding emotions. More specifically, the pattern of relationships between religion, emotions, and time can influence and deepen both the individual and collective understanding of humanity among these religious women and create space for mutual engagement despite obvious differences. These results are in line with the requisites of Public Theology, as they allow us to specify selectively the developments on a more secure and empirical basis of how religiosity can affect the life of people, by exposing the submerged theological assumptions that characterize the internal beliefs of religiosity. Moreover, the research data indicate that the deep aspects of religiosity influence greatly the day-to-day living of religious women. This practical influence of religiosity confirms the urgency of opening up theological reflection in the public sphere of life. In fact, as long as the religiosity of the nuns is not reduced to private practice, theological reflection will also be opened to its public significance in the different fields of their apostolic mission.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; intrinsic religiosity; balanced time perspective (BTP); balanced time perspective scale (BTPS)

1. Introduction

For many people across the globe, one of the most important meaning-making systems is their religion (Park 2005), as it provides a clear existential frame that enhances sense and meaning in one's life. There is growing evidence for the connection between many religious facets and psychological adjustment, such as self-reported emotional efficacy (Paek 2006; Liu 2010), or temporal categories that help to give order, coherence, and meaning to the events of life (Zimbardo and Boyd 1999).

In line with the recent magisterium of the Catholic Church (Vatican Council II 1965, nn. 12–17, 41; Paul 1979, n17; Francis 2013, n53), theological reflection is moving towards

an “outgoing” experienced theology (Francis 2013, n53), open to the new challenges of the modern world. This approach involves thinking of a theology that adheres to the reality of life, not as a one-way reflection, but as a multidisciplinary reflection that opens scientific investigations to the different realities of human experience in order to rediscover the constant presence and the plan of God, especially in those situations that seem to contradict the experience of the Gospel, such as injustice, war, and lack of human rights. This theology paves the way for a deeper reflection regarding our relationships, intercultural dialogue, respect for minorities and their beliefs and values, as well as religious pluralism, to name some of them (Pirner et al. 2018).

In the relationship between Public Theology and psychology, it is possible to recognize this enriching interconnection between human experience and theological reflection, especially when it refers to the way of translating theological principles into the practice of life (Paloutzian and Park 2005). The present study highlights this link by exploring the relationship between religious attitude and some personality characteristics which characterize the theology of consecrated life as a practical aspect of Public Theology, while anchoring it to the real life of people (Czerny 2021). The role of religion in recognizing one’s emotions and experiencing temporal orientations has been the subject of various investigations. It has also aroused certain interest in the field of theology and psychology (Emmons 2005; Łowicki and Zajenkowski 2017).

Exploring the relationship between religion, emotion and time perspective helps to understand better the role that these factors play in the interdisciplinary aspect of lived-religion, which bases its theological reflection on the religious, as well as the human experiences of people.

It has been found that religious belief has a significant impact on emotional regulation by influencing people’s goals, activating self-monitoring, and providing self-regulatory strength (Paek 2006; Liu 2010). At the same time, religiosity may also be connected with and reinforce the ability of people to balance their perception of time (Leach and Gore 2017).

This article explores the importance of emotional intelligence and religious orientation, especially intrinsic religious orientation, in developing a balanced time perspective (BTP). The initial premise is that when affective life (referring in particular to emotional intelligence) and spiritual life (referring in particular to religious orientation) of a consecrated person are coherent and gradually maturing, a balanced time perspective benefits them to such an extent that the consecrated person would possess a positive and reconciled view of their past life and a positive outlook on the future (Crea 2007; Stolarski et al. 2011; Coppa and Delle Fave 2009; Koenig 2012).

Conversely, the presence of significant problems related to affectivity and spiritual life can often be the reasons for the abandonment of one’s vocation (Rodriguez Carballo 2014), and for those who persevere despite these problems, these could become sources of suffering, dissatisfaction with life, mental distress, and a negative outlook on both the past and the future (Vicente-Galindo et al. 2017; Pegram 2018; Crea 2018; Isacco et al. 2016; Büssing et al. 2017; Francis and Crea 2016).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Emotional Intelligence: Bar-On’s Model

Bar-On’s theory of emotional intelligence has its roots in Darwin’s (Darwin 1878) work on the importance of emotional expression for the survival and adaptation of the species (Bar-On 2006, 2012). Other researchers who have influenced Bar-On’s thinking include Thorndike (1920), with his description of social intelligence and its significance for human performance, Wechsler, for his observations regarding the impact of non-cognitive factors, and Appelbaum, with his conceptualization of psychological mindset (Bar-On 2006).

Equally important are the studies on alexithymia that emerged in the late 1940s, particularly Sifneos’ description of it as the inability to recognize, understand, and describe emotions. This definition of alexithymia led Bar-On to consider whether it could represent the pathological extreme of emotional intelligence (Bar-On 2006, 2012). Moreover, Gard-

ner's introduction of the concept of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence in 1984, within the framework of multiple intelligences, significantly influenced the development of the intrapersonal and interpersonal components of the Bar-On model (Gardner 1984).

2.1.1. The Concept of Emotional Intelligence According to Reuven Bar-On's Model

Emotional intelligence, according to Bar-On's theoretical model, is a complex interweaving of interconnected socio-emotional competences, skills, and facilitators that determine how effectively we understand ourselves and others, relate to them, and cope with daily life (Bar-On 2006). This theoretical model is primarily founded on the intrapersonal capacity to be self-aware, to understand one's strengths and weaknesses, and to express one's feelings and thoughts in a non-destructive manner.

At an interpersonal level, being emotionally and socially intelligent involves the ability to be aware of the emotions, feelings, and needs of others and to establish and maintain cooperative, constructive, and mutually satisfying relationships. In essence, being emotionally and socially intelligent means effectively managing personal, social, and environmental changes by realistically and flexibly addressing the immediate situation, solving problems, and making decisions.

2.1.2. Effects of Emotional Intelligence on Consecrated Life

Emotional intelligence assists a consecrated individual in living their life in a better manner by enabling the development of skills necessary for maintaining a healthy relationship with oneself (intrapersonal capacity), such as self-regard, assertiveness, self-awareness, independence, and self-actualization. It facilitates the acquisition of skills vital for fostering positive relationships with others (interpersonal capacity), such as empathy, interpersonal relationship, and social responsibility (Crea 2007; Ritan 2015). Emotional intelligence aids in cultivating skills that promote better adaptation to the environment, stress management, and mood regulation. These skills include flexibility, problem-solving, reality testing, stress management, impulse control, optimism, and happiness (Brondino and Marasca 2002).

Emotional intelligence directly influences a positive view of the past and shapes one's projection into the future. Effective emotional management and impulse control enable a person to appreciate present gratifications while also envisioning a better future, leading to a balanced time perspective (Stolarski et al. 2011). In this regard, the study conducted by Toyota (2011) found that individuals with high emotional intelligence have a greater ability to project themselves into the future, while also seeing and recognizing the past as a source of growth and experience for a positive future.

Crea (2007) believes that for consecrated individuals, emotional intelligence is highly beneficial, as it helps them confront and overcome, in the present moment, those past negative emotions that inhibit their growth. It "can serve as a source of learning to exhibit different behaviours in the future and to proceed in a healthy manner towards fundamental choices for one's life" (Crea 2007, p. 209). In this sense, a positive attitude towards both the past and the future could be the result of using effective emotional coping strategies in various life situations (Stolarski et al. 2011). Bar-On (2006) contends that when emotions are managed in such a manner that they work for us and not against us, it is possible to become optimistic, positive, and self-motivated.

2.2. Theory of Religious Orientation According to Leslie Francis

Since the development of the Religious Orientation Scale (Allport and Ross 1967), there has been much discussion on the conceptualization and measurement of religious orientation. It is because of this conceptual and methodological problem that Francis (2007) examines the conceptual and empirical strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of intrinsic religiosity and extrinsic religiosity outlined by Allport and Ross (1967) and the quest for meaning outlined by Batson and Ventis (1982). In response to perceived weaknesses in existing measures of religious orientation, Francis (2007) developed a new scale: New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO), which contains the three main variables

of religious orientation: intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, and quest for meaning. In the following paragraphs, we shall explain these three variables in relation to consecrated life.

2.2.1. Intrinsic Religiosity

Fizzotti (2012) states that intrinsic religiosity, in the consecrated person, generates unity and makes her integrated, since her center is found in her relationship with God, and helps her open up to the future, characterized by trust in herself and in others. Poli and Crea (2014) believe that intrinsic orientation in consecrated life is a mature and propulsive religiosity, through which a consecrated person can integrate the hardships and difficulties of life, without losing sight of the values and motivations that underlie their vocational choice. This is due to the development of a growing trust in God and a constant internalization of values, together with the desire to evangelize and bear witness to God's love.

These authors hold that intrinsic religiosity allows the consecrated person to integrate her convictions, as well as her actions, into her life experiences, thus becoming a more coherent and consistent person. Religiosity is lived deeply and is considered the main reason for existence. This religiosity, according to Poli and Crea (2014), has positive repercussions on the mental health of the consecrated person.

2.2.2. Extrinsic Religiosity

In general, several authors consider extrinsic religiosity as an immature religiosity that does not correspond to consecrated life. For Fizzotti (1992), extrinsic religiosity arises on the basis of childhood needs for defense, seeking comfort and security. The author views it as a form of religiosity that remains closed off from society. Speaking about its role in the life of a consecrated person, Poli and Crea (2014) believe that extrinsic religiosity is limited to an external practice, which does not change lives or awaken the need for communion with others. On the contrary, this type of religiosity generates apathy and indifference because it is based on superficial and ritualistic behaviors.

Crea and Mastrofini (2010) observe that religious people who experience this type of religiosity may be able to fulfil their religious practices punctually, but this does not make them consistent in their lives, a fact that becomes clearer when they have to deal with deep values such as justice, tolerance, compassion, respect, friendship, and communion. The inner inconsistencies of these people come to the surface when faced with such values. Evidently, if a religious person's life is based on outward religiosity rather than progressing towards deeper spirituality, they risk becoming self-centered and living a mediocre life. This can lead to stereotypical behaviors, gradually generating dissatisfaction, which can compromise their vocation and potentially cause psychological distress.

2.2.3. Quest for Meaning

Poli and Crea (2014) consider this religious orientation, in which one experiences a fragile and 'doubtful' faith, important for spiritual growth because it allows one to deal with existential questions in a way that enables an ongoing dialogue between faith and life experience. For the authors, this orientation of 'questioning meaning' can lead to an increase in the faith of the consecrated person in its affective and experiential dimensions, which contributes to greater trust in God, especially in times of uncertainty.

The authors also believe, as Allport ([1950] 2017) had said referring to mature religious feeling, that those consecrated people who possess this religious orientation of quest for meaning can act generously, even if they are not absolutely certain about their faith. Indeed, this quest for meaning does not undermine their love for God; on the contrary, it helps it grow. Crea (2014) is convinced that the more a person's faith grows, the greater their ability to deal with doubts that arise about religiosity. The experience of faith that includes questions is not a rigid faith; on the contrary, it becomes more solid and capable of sharing with others.

According to Crea (2015), although intrinsic religiosity is positive, it does not always help one to overcome the trials of life and face the challenges of the world. In consecrated life, it is not uncommon that the occurrence of certain events can cause one's deepest convictions to waver, which is why it is necessary to have a certain level of this quest for meaning in religiosity, which allows the consecrated person not to focus on rigid and routine convictions but to be open to the new opportunities that God offers. Crea argues that those who are very secure in their religious principles are not always able to accept the elements of doubt and precariousness that life presents. Sometimes, these people, who are somewhat "rigid in their convictions", can feel very disoriented and even lose the sense of their vocation when they fail to integrate their convictions with the events of life.

Crea (2015) is convinced that the faith formation of consecrated persons should not only focus on the theoretical understanding of faith and its contents but also prepare them to face the uncertainty of faith. It must train them in such a way that the doubt and crises of faith are not perceived as dangers but as opportunities for growth. It is this kind of faith formation that will enable them to respond in a manner consistent with their vocation, especially when they go through difficult times.

Thus, Crea (2014) affirms that the quest for meaning is that type of religious orientation that orients the life of the consecrated person toward new horizons of meaning, often transcending their own psychological inconsistency. It is a religious orientation that allows an individual to live their life, always open to the signs of the times, even if they do not find answers that give security. Crea is also convinced that the experience of insecurity often allows the person to trust more in the mystery of God.

2.3. *Theory of Balanced Time Perspective Scale (BTPS) by Webster*

With his concept of 'Time', Webster (2013) holds that the past and the future are closely related. Therefore, remembering the past often triggers thoughts about the future, just as imagining the future can often stimulate memories of the past.

For Webster (2013), the "past" and the "future" have some characteristics in common that are distinct from the "present." One such characteristic is that both the past and the future are infinite in terms of possibilities compared to the present, which is limited.

Another important property to mention is that both remembering the past and projecting into the future have a strong constructivist cognitive element. This means that, in remembering, we construct our memories, just as, in projecting into the future, we use patterns and prior knowledge that allow us to create possible future scenarios. The present, on the other hand, involves a more direct sensory experience.

Regarding this relationship between the past and future, several neurological studies have shown that the same neurological areas are activated when one remembers the past or projects into the future (Schacter et al. 2007; Spreng and Grady 2010). In addition to the above reflection on the past and future, Webster (2013) notes that, according to research using the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI), having a positive frame of mind regarding the past and the future is associated with a number of positive mental health outcomes. Given this conceptual and empirical association between the past and the future and in light of their separate positive mental health outcomes, Webster believes that the combined effect of a positive past and a positive future can produce stronger mental health outcomes than from either one alone.

Webster terms this combination a 'balanced temporal perspective' and defines it as "a frequent and equal tendency to think about both one's past and the future in positive ways" (Webster 2011, p. 112). This combination allows people to use both the past and the future as sources of understanding, strength, and happiness. The author believes that finding comfort, strength, and personal meaning from examining one's personal past, as well as achieving a sense of optimism and clarity in future goals, is probably the most important factor in generating this balanced perspective.

To assess the balanced time perspective (BTP), Webster (2011) constructed a new instrument, called the Balanced Time Perspective Scale (BTPS), showing that people who

remembered their past positively and had a positive view of their future scored higher on measures such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and happiness (Webster 2011; Webster and Ma 2013), exhibiting higher levels of mental health and wisdom (Webster et al. 2014; Webster 2016). Studies suggest that the new instrument is suitable for investigating the relationship between a *BTP* and positive psychological characteristics. However, it is important to remember that the *BTPS* was not created to replace the *ZTPI*, which is used to investigate a more comprehensive spectrum of time perspective, but as an alternative, to measure subjective perceptions of the *BTP* (Webster 2016).

In the new instrument, Webster (2011, 2013) deliberately omitted the *present orientation subscale*. In any case, the relationship between the past and future scales is designed as a resource for dealing with the present time (Barsics et al. 2017).

The initial results of this scale indicated that the *BTPS* has excellent psychometric properties. Cronbach's alpha for the past and future subscales were 0.88 and 0.92, respectively. Webster (2011) noted that there are major individual differences between people in the way they experience time. To capture these differences, the past and future subscales of the *BTPS* were divided through a median, creating high and low scores for both the past and the future subscales. This generated the following four categories:

- *Time Restrictive*: refers to people who scored below the median on both the past and future subscales.
- *Reminisces*: refers to people who scored below the median on the future, but above the median on the past subscale.
- *Futurists*: refers to people who scored above the median on the future, but below the median on the past subscale.
- *Time Expansive*: refers to people who scored above the median on both the future and the past subscales. These are those who possess a *BTP*.

In addition, Webster (2011) found that people in the *time expansive* category, i.e., those with a *BTP*, scored higher on self-esteem, life satisfaction, and happiness, which is consistent with the results reported using the *ZTPI*.

It is important to mention that, at present, there is no translation of the *BTPS* in Italian; therefore, one contribution of this research is its translation, administration to a sample of Italian nuns, and validation of the *BTPS* in the Italian context. Thus, after performing a back translation, the Italian translation of the test was first administered to a pilot sample of 48 Italians. The results showed an excellent level of reliability, as shown by the Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 for the overall test, 0.90 for the past subscale, and 0.95 for the future subscale.

The *BTPS* was then administered to Italian religious women, and it again demonstrated a high level of reliability, as seen in the Cronbach's alpha of 0.94 on the overall test, 0.90 on the past subscale, and 0.92 on the future subscale.

The Italian sisters were also administered the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF), in which the *BTPS* was positively and significantly correlated with the MHC-SF ($r = 0.417^{**}$ with $p < 0.01$), and also the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), in which the SWLS was positively and significantly correlated with the *BTPS* ($r = 0.345^{**}$ with $p < 0.01$).

3. Method

3.1. Objectives and Hypothesis of This Research

The aim of this research was to test whether emotional intelligence and intrinsic religiosity have a positive influence on the development of a balanced time perspective in a group of Italian religious women, thus confirming what was already highlighted by the studies of Stolarski et al. (2011), Łowicki et al. (2018), and Öner-Özkan (2007).

To this end, we formulated the following two hypotheses: the first is that emotional intelligence and intrinsic religious orientation are positively and significantly correlated with a *BTP*, and the second is that intrinsic religious orientation mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and a *BTP*, which, in turn, increases the benefits of emotional intelligence on the *BTP* in Italian religious women.

3.2. Sample

This research is based on a sample of 283 Italian nuns, aged 28–89 years ($M = 52.29$; $SD = 13.77$). The nuns come from different geographical areas of the peninsula. The responses to the questionnaire were anonymous and confidential.

3.3. Instruments Utilized

3.3.1. Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) of Reuven Bar-On

In Italy, Reuven Bar-On's EQ-i was validated by Manuela Franco and Laura Tappatà in 2009. The test consists of 133 items, being divided into 15 subscales, grouped into five main scales, from which the overall score is obtained. The response scale is a Likert scale, graded from one to five points.

The test results provide an overall emotional coefficient score while offering a score for the five scales, as well as their respective subscales (Franco and Tappatà 2016).

3.3.2. New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO)

The New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO) created by Francis (2007) assesses three constructs that make up religious orientation: intrinsic religious orientation, extrinsic religious orientation, and quest for meaning.

Each religious orientation is assessed by nine items that make up a 27-item questionnaire in its full form. The questions are answered on a five-point Likert scale.

In Italy, the NIRO was introduced by Francis and Crea (2016), who conducted research on a sample of 155 priests working in Italy.

3.3.3. Balanced Time Perspective Scale (BTPS)

This test consists of 28 items; the test questions are divided into 14 items that measure a past positive orientation (the odd-numbered items) and 14 items that correspond to a future positive orientation (the even-numbered items). The items are presented on a six-point Likert scale (Webster 2011).

For the classification of the BTPS categories, Webster's (2011) method was used: "In terms of construct validity, four categories were created by crossing the two subscales (i.e., past and future) and performing a median split of each". Thus, the BTPS categories in the sample of nuns were chosen by applying a median, so we can say that each category was chosen in relation to the overall score of the nuns.

3.4. The Statistical Methodology Used

Data analysis was performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor (version 26). Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the different instruments used in this research. To relate the BTPS categories to emotional intelligence, we used an analysis of variance (ANOVA). As for testing the first hypothesis, two statistical procedures, namely Pearson's correlation and multiple linear regression were utilized. For the second hypothesis, the statistical process of mediation analysis was used.

3.5. The Analytical Design

First, the descriptive statistics of the BTPS in the group of Italian religious women will be described, followed by a description of the relationship between emotional intelligence and the BTPS categories, as well as the relationship between the New Indices of Religious Orientation (NIRO) and the BTPS categories; finally, the research hypotheses will be discussed.

3.5.1. Descriptive Statistics of the BTPS

In Table 1, it can be observed that 100 Italian religious sisters, or 35.3% of the sample, belong to the restricted type; 44 Italian religious sisters, or 15.5% of the sample, belong to the reminiscent type; 49 Italian religious sisters, or 17.3% of the sample, belong

to the futuristic type; 90 Italian religious sisters, or 31.8% of the sample, belong to the expansive or balanced-time type.

Table 1. Categories of *BTP*.

BTPS	Frequency	Percentage
Restrictive	100	35.34
Reminiscent	44	15.55
Futuristic	49	17.31
Expansive/Time-Balanced time	90	31.80
Total	283	100.00

3.5.2. Relationship between Categories of BTPS and Emotional Intelligence

In Table 2, the ANOVA shows a significant effect between a balanced time perspective and emotional intelligence. Comparing the averages of the four groups, we observe that the expansive type has higher emotional intelligence than the restrictive, reminiscent, and futuristic types.

Table 2. Relationship between categories of *BTPS* and *EQ-i*.

Total	N		Mean		Standard Dev.	
	283		431.7880		43.52244	
Groups	N	Mean	Standard Dev	G.L.	F	P
1 Restrictive	100	418.7800	45.37556			
2 Reminiscent	44	432.0929	40.01036	3/279	8.260	0.000
3 Futuristic	49	427.1020	35.53416			
4 Expansive	90	448.6444	42.04233			
Differences among categories of the same factor						
Groups	Mean A	Mean B	Dif A-B	Standard Error	G.L.	P
1/4	418.7800	448.6444	−29.86444 *	6.09275	1/188	0.000
2/4	432.0929	448.6444	−16.55354 *	7.71370	1/132	0.033
3/4	427.1020	448.6444	−21.54240 *	7.44468	1/137	0.004

* There is a significant effect.

3.5.3. Relationship between BTPS and NIRO Categories

In Table 3, the ANOVA shows a significant effect between a balanced time perspective and intrinsic religious orientation. Comparing the averages of the four groups, we see that the restrictive type has a lower intrinsic religious orientation compared to the other groups.

In Table 4, the ANOVA shows no significant effect between a balanced time perspective and extrinsic religious orientation. Comparing the averages of the four groups, we find that the restrictive and reminiscent groups have a significantly lower extrinsic religious orientation than the expansive group.

In Table 5, the ANOVA shows a significant effect between a balanced time perspective and religious meaning-seeking orientation. Comparing the averages of the four groups, it is observed that the restrictive group has a lower religious meaning-seeking orientation compared to the reminiscent group. Likewise, it is noted that the reminiscent group has a higher religious search orientation compared to the expansive group.

Table 3. Relationship between the categories of BTPS and intrinsic religious orientation.

Total		N	Mean		Standard Dev.		
		283	36.4452		3.75013		
	Groups	N	Mean	Standard Dev	G.L.	F	P
1	Restrictive	100	35.3100	3.86353			
2	Reminiscent	44	36.9773	3.45394	3/279	5.113	0.002
3	Futuristic	49	36.7143	3.39730			
4	Expansive	90	37.2889	3.69404			
Differences among categories of the same factor							
Groups	Mean A	Mean B	Dif A-B	Standard Error	G.L.	P	
1/2	35.3100	36.9773	−1.65727 *	0.66405	1/142	0.013	
1/3	35.3100	36.7143	−1.39429 *	0.64009	1/147	0.030	
1/4	35.3100	37.2889	−1.96889 *	0.53334	1/188	0.000	

* The difference in the mean is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4. Relationship between the categories of the BTPS and extrinsic religious orientation.

Total		N	Mean		Standard Dev.		
		283	22.2721		5.54097		
	Groups	N	Mean	Standard Dev	G.L.	F	P
1	Restrictive	100	21.4800	5.22906			
2	Reminiscent	44	21.3636	4.50572	3/279	2.499	0.060
3	Futuristic	49	22.5510	5.59412			
4	Expansive	90	23.444	6.06169			
Differences among categories of the same factor							
Groups	Mean A	Mean B	Dif A-B	Standard Error	G.L.	P	
1/4	21.4900	23.4444	−1.96444 *	0.79874	1/188	0.015	
2/4	21.3636	23.4444	−2.08081 *	1.01124	1/132	0.041	

* The difference in the mean is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 5. Relationship between the categories of the BTPS and religious orientation and quest for meaning.

Total		N	Mean		Standard Dev.		
		283	30.0424		5.18710		
	Groups	N	Mean	Standard Dev	G.L.	F	P
1	Restrictive	100	29.2100	0.54259			
2	Reminiscent	44	31.7500	0.79515	3/279	3.056	0.029
3	Futuristic	49	30.8571	0.61652			
4	Expansive	90	29.6889	0.54064			
Differences among categories of the same factor							

Table 5. Cont.

Total		N		Mean		Standard Dev.	
Groups	Mean A	Mean B	Dif A-B	Standard Error	G.L.	P	
1/2	29.2100	31.7500	−2.54000 *	0.92829	1/140	0.007	
2/4	432.0929	29.6889	−2.06111 *	0.94391	1/132	0.030	

* The difference in the mean is significant at the 0.05 level.

3.5.4. Emotional Intelligence and Intrinsic Religious Orientation Are Positively and Significantly Correlated with a Balanced Time Perspective

To test this hypothesis, we first confirmed that there is a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and the balanced time perspective ($r = 0.271$ ** with $p < 0.01$), then we confirmed that there is a significant positive correlation between intrinsic religious orientation (ORI) and balanced time perspective ($r = 0.280$ ** with $p < 0.01$). Finally, we performed a multiple regression between emotional intelligence and intrinsic religious orientation with balanced time perspective. Thus, we were able to conclude that emotional intelligence ($\beta = 0.234$) and intrinsic religious orientation ($\beta = 0.245$) contribute significantly to the balanced time perspective. Together, these two variables explain 13.2% of the balanced time perspective. Emotional intelligence explains 7.3%, and intrinsic religious orientation 5.9%.

3.5.5. Intrinsic Religious Orientation Mediates the Relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Balanced Time Perspective

Figure 1 shows that emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of intrinsic religious orientation, $\beta = 0.15$, $t(2.58) = 0.0102$, $p < 0.01$ (path as shown in Figure 1) and that intrinsic religious orientation is a significant predictor of balanced time perspective $\beta = 0.24$, $t(4.34) = 0.0000$, $p < 0.001$ (path b). Similarly, emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of the balanced temporal perspective $\beta = 0.27$, $t(4.71) = 0.000$, $p < 0.001$ (path c). The direct effect of emotional intelligence on the balanced time perspective after controlling for intrinsic religious orientation was significant $\beta = 0.23$, $t(4.14) = 0.0001$, $p < 0.001$ (path c'). The mean estimate of the indirect effect adjusted for a 95% confidence interval based on 5000 samples excluded zero (0.0021–0.0328), indicating that the indirect effect was significant. That is, we can conclude that emotional intelligence positively influences a balanced time perspective when it intervenes or mediates intrinsic religious orientation.

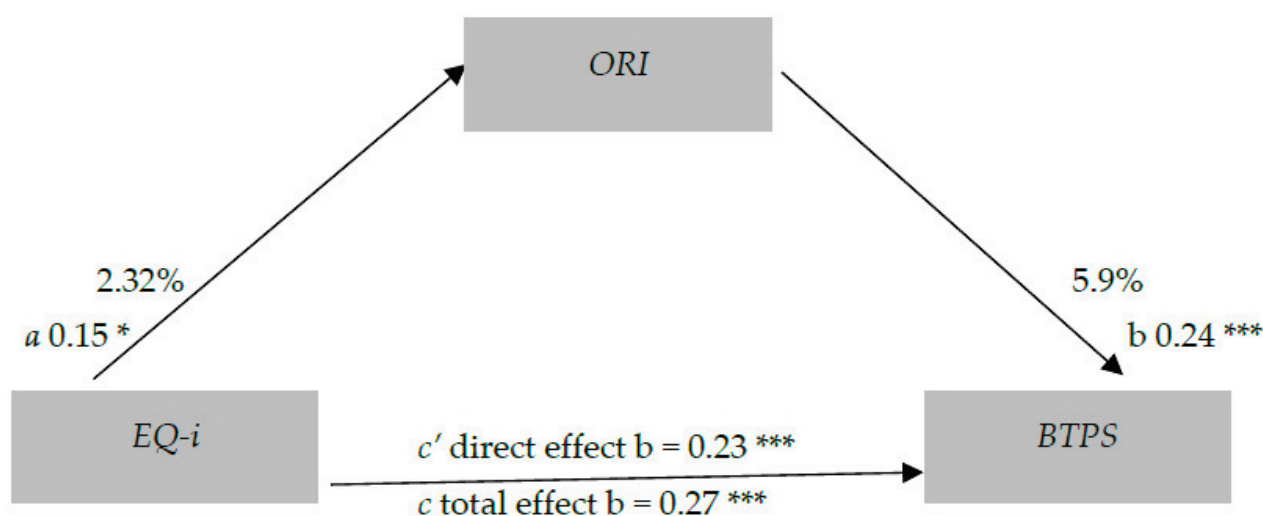


Figure 1. Partial mediation of intrinsic religious orientation between emotional intelligence and balanced time perspective. * $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

As it was said in the introduction of this study, Public Theology and psychological aspects of religious beliefs intertwine to form a unique spiritual and social challenge for those who belong to consecrated life. Public Theology refers to the manner in which the Church engages with the world, articulating its teachings and values in the public sphere. It seeks to address societal issues through the lens of faith, promoting justice, peace, and the common good.

The psychological aspects of religious conviction, on the other hand, refer to the specific spiritual belief guiding religious people in their mission in the practical life. It is expressed through various forms of apostolic service, prayer, and communal living, but above all, it is lived through the way they live their emotions and the way they balance their time perspective, especially in their interactions with society.

In this study, it has been verified that among consecrated women in Italy, as emotional intelligence increases, so does the balanced time perspective, and vice versa. This is in agreement with research conducted by Matthews and Stolarski (2015) and Stolarski et al. (2011). It was also found that, as intrinsic religious orientation increases, the balanced time perspective increases, and vice versa. This concurs with several studies, where it has been verified that there is a significant positive correlation between a positive past, positive present, and positive future and intrinsic religious orientation (Łowicki et al. 2018; Öner-Özkan 2007; Zimbardo and Boyd 2009).

Another result obtained from this study is that emotional intelligence, together with intrinsic religiosity, contribute more or less harmoniously to the explanation of the variance in the *BTP*. It has also been verified that emotional intelligence has a more positive influence on the *BTP* when intrinsic religious orientation intervenes or mediates. This finding corresponds with previous research findings that explain how self-control and self-regulation, which are characteristics of religion, influence the perception of time (Łowicki et al. 2018; Öner-Özkan 2007). This means that self-control and self-regulation, which also belong to emotional intelligence, can be enhanced by the presence of intrinsic religiosity, which, in turn, will have an impact on promoting a *BTP*.

One of the important contributions of this research is its validation of the *BTPS* in a sample of Italian consecrated women. This test has been administered to several samples of people, but this is the first time it has been administered to a special sample such as Italian religious women.

The results from this study, especially in relation to the balanced time perspective of Italian consecrated women, show that more than one-third of the sample of religious Italian women belongs to the restrictive type; that is, they are people who tend to look at their past and their future negatively. Likewise, nearly one-third of the sample belongs to the expansive or time-balanced type; that is, they are people who look at their past and their future positively. A smaller group belongs to the reminiscence type; that is, they are the people who tend to look positively at their past and negatively at their future. Similarly, a small group belongs to the futuristic type; that is, they look positively at their future but negatively at their past.

This research has also shown that in this sample of Italian religious women, the time-balanced type is more positively related to emotional intelligence than the other three types of temporal categories. This result is in line with previous research which showed that a time-balanced perspective is correlated with greater positive life outcomes (Tomich and Tolich 2021; Wiesmann et al. 2018).

From a larger perspective, it can be ascertained that the current investigation contributes substantially to a better understanding of the relationship between psychological adjustment and religiosity, in the effort to develop a comprehensive, integrated understanding of the life of faith in contemporary society. Our findings suggest that intrinsic religiosity may be essential for promoting emotion self-regulation abilities, which in turn foster people's psychological adaptation and their ability to balance their approach to temporal categories.

These results are very important in terms of interdisciplinarity, as they highlight the dynamic characteristics of the factors examined. This may have two important consequences from the point of view of practical theology. First, religiosity is not a static factor, but rather a dynamic dimension of human life (Francis 2010). It may vary both according to the form of religiosity assessed and according to the samples being studied. Second, religiosity is an important educational element in the growth of both the individual and the social environment. It means that religious belief, involvement, and practice contribute to the growth of each individual and that of the society (Day 2017).

Religion is a particularly strong source of support in this process of development, especially when it is associated with positive and practical dimensions of human experience, such as emotional self-regulation and a balanced time perspective.

5. Some Practical Implications

The present study showed that intrinsic religiosity is associated with higher levels of emotional intelligence and a balanced time perspective in a sample of Italian religious women. This key finding has both theoretical and practical applications within practical theology and pastoral involvement.

At a theoretical level, in line with the literature (Piedmont 1999; Henningsgaard and Arnau 2008), the data confirm that religiosity is not separated from the different dimensions of personality: the way people live their religiosity is correlated to their understanding of the time perspective and to the way they regulate their emotions (Łowicki et al. 2018; Paek 2006).

From a practical perspective, this empirical study supports the need for a balanced way of living the time perspective, through a deep spiritual motivation, which can be influenced by the way people experience a positive adjustment of their emotions, especially among women (Danner et al. 2001), and particularly religious women (Francis and Wilcox 1998).

This tendency will have a distinctive effect on the endurance of their vocational project in Catholic institutions. In fact, the empirical data of the present research show that high levels of intrinsic experience of religiosity will influence positively their capacity to look at their past as a time of enrichment and also to have a positive regard for their future as a time of concrete involvement that bears witness to their beliefs.

In other words, their intrinsic religiosity is not a passive but a demanding way to put their theological convictions into practice, in order to be really “women in exit” rather than people preoccupied with defending their faith from the danger of the outside world.

Moreover, this perspective may provide encouragement for female religious congregations engaged in pastoral actions to take the first step in becoming involved and supportive in situations where there is a need for hope. In this way, they can feel part of a Church which “goes forth” (Pope Francis 2013, n24) and learn to live Practical Theology in their day-to-day lives, starting from the existential peripheries, which will require their doors to always be wide open to welcome all those who are looking for God.

6. Limitations and Future Prospects

One contribution of this research was the validation of the *BTPS* test in a sample of Italian consecrated women. However, we believe that the validation of this test with a larger and more heterogeneous sample would be a valuable aid for the future use of this scale.

As we have seen, about one-third of the Italian consecrated women have a negative view of their past and future. In this regard, emotional intelligence has much to offer them, as it can provide them with emotional coping strategies. Therefore, focusing on the development of emotional intelligence will help these consecrated women to have a more positive view of their past and future.

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