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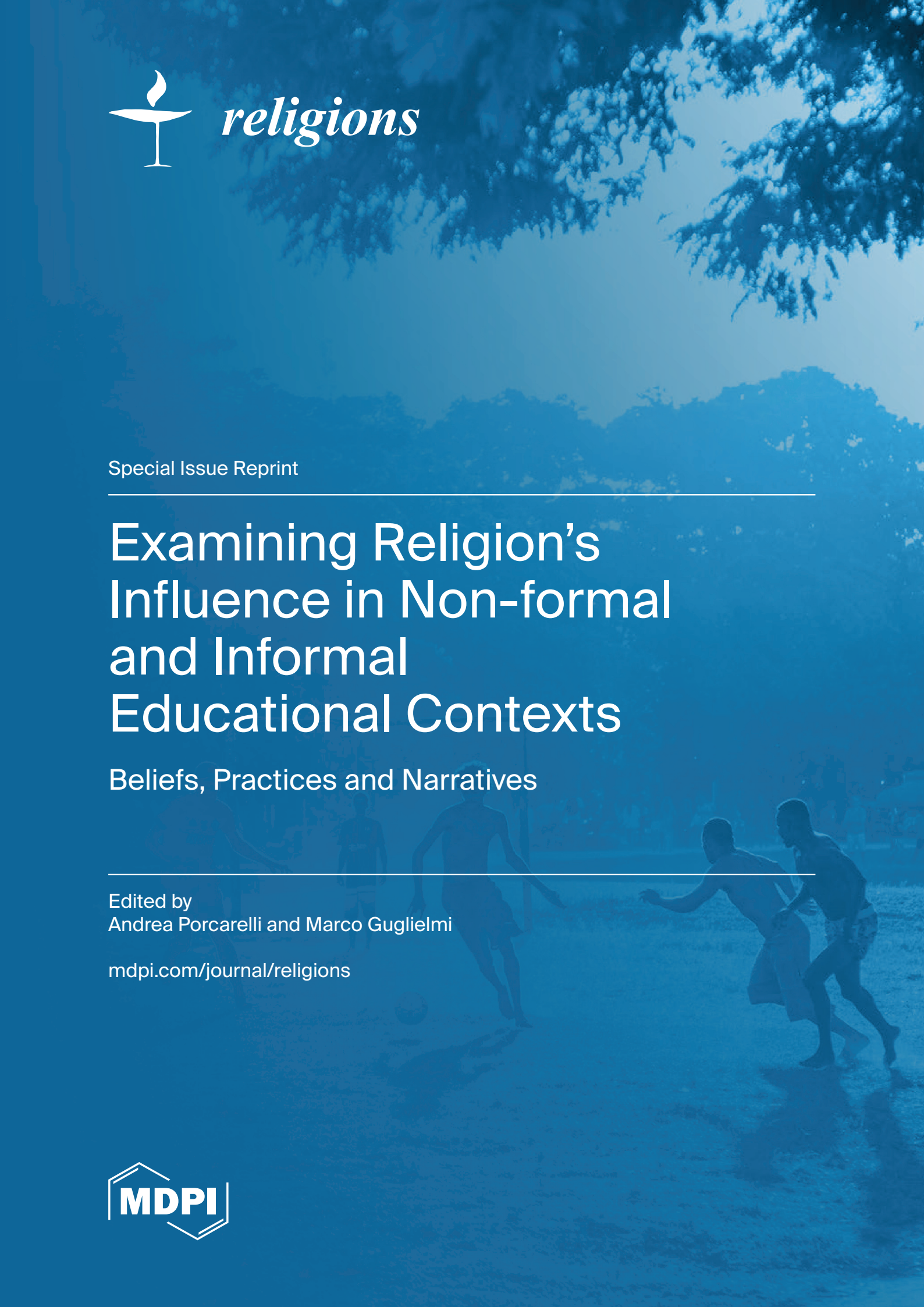

Special Issue Reprint

Examining Religion's Influence in Non-formal and Informal Educational Contexts

Beliefs, Practices and Narratives

Edited by
Andrea Porcarelli and Marco Guglielmi

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Guest Editors

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Editorial

Introduction: Religion's Influence in Non-Formal and Informal Educational Contexts

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This Special Issue of Religions, entitled "Examining Religion's Influence in Non-Formal and Informal Educational Contexts: Beliefs, Practices and Narratives", originates from the recognition that learning increasingly occurs outside formal institutions. In contemporary societies, the notion of a learning society (Ra et al. 2021) has reshaped the boundaries of education, highlighting how knowledge, values, and skills are continuously developed across the course of life and within a plurality of social environments. Within this broader transformation, religion continues to play a formative role in shaping experiences of meaning-making, belonging, and imagination.

The contributions gathered in this volume respond to an urgent need to understand how religion operates in non-formal contexts—such as cultural associations, sports clubs, religious communities, and voluntary organizations—and in informal ones, including families, friendship networks, and workplaces. Following Ammerman's (2021) perspective on lived religion, this Special Issue emphasizes that religious learning often takes place in everyday life, untied from official institutions yet profoundly influential in personal and collective formation. Likewise, educational research has long shown that religious thinking develops through early and adolescent socialization, particularly within these diffused non-formal and informal environments (Goldman 2022).

By focusing on beliefs, practices, and narratives, this issue invites readers to examine how religion intersects with educational processes that are not confined to classrooms. While beliefs and practices have been extensively studied (Dinham and Francis 2015), narratives open a less explored dimension, illuminating how religion permeates cultural images, digital environments, and popular storytelling (Mangone 2022). The multidisciplinary approach reflects the editors' intention to capture the multifaceted ways in which religion contributes to non-formal and informal education today.

Overall, this Special Issue aims to deepen scholarly understanding of religion as a dynamic, formative force in contemporary learning societies, revealing how faith, culture, and everyday practice intertwine to form both individual lives and broader civic horizons. There is a specific role that religion plays in the field of education (Arweck and Jackson 2014), making an important contribution to defining those horizons of meaning that allow every human being to develop a life project (Tayob 2020). Every growing person encounters various kinds of narratives (religious and otherwise) that carry value frameworks and possible worlds, through which they can gradually shape their own narrative identity (Ricoeur 1984, 1988)—that is, decide how to write their own story.

It occurs that the specific contributions offered by educational and pedagogical disciplines make it possible to develop a critical reflection that does not merely analyze what happens, but questions the educational strategies and logics that seem most appropriate to

today's cultural contexts. The issue of the epistemological identity of a pedagogy of religious experience has become particularly lively in recent years within the Italian academic debate (Caputo 2024), which has provided the integrative background for the contributions of various authors. The choice to compare the educational and formative potential of biblical narratives and fantasy narratives—as will be seen in some of the following articles—is closely related to considerations within the field of social pedagogy (Porcarelli 2021).

The ten contributions collected in this Special Issue reveal the multiple ways in which religion acts as an influential agency within non-formal and informal educational settings. Drawing on diverse disciplinary perspectives—including history, sociology, education, and philosophy—the authors explore how religious experiences, practices, and narratives shape processes of learning, moral development, and cultural mediation beyond institutional frameworks. Together, these studies show that religion remains a vital source of social education and ethical imagination across different societies. The empirical range of the volume is particularly wide, encompassing case studies from Austria, Brazil, China, Italy, and Turkey. This geographical diversity allows for a comparative understanding of how religion interacts with local traditions, cultures, and educational heritage. Despite their differences, all the contributions point to a shared assumption—education is not confined to schools or formal curricula but unfolds within everyday life, where religion continues to provide meaning, belonging, and interpretive frameworks for social action.

The first set of contributions examines how religion operates as a formative presence in collective and institutional settings. *Parish Futsal: A Technical–Educational or Pastoral Challenge?* explores the intersection between sports and parish life in Rome, showing that futsal teams affiliated with the Centro Sportivo Italiano can serve as spaces of moral learning and community building, though often loosely connected to formal pastoral aims. A similar emphasis on community emerges in "*I Learnt Much About. . ." the Impact of Cooperative Interreligious Education*, which analyses Austria's apprenticeship schools to assess the effects of co-operative religious education. While cognitive knowledge about other faiths remains limited, participants develop empathy, self-awareness, and interreligious understanding—key aspects of civic learning in plural societies. Complementing these perspectives, *Bible Narratives and Youth Religious Identity* draws on quantitative data from Italian youth, revealing that even minimal familiarity with biblical stories nurtures diverse interpretive frameworks across religious, agnostic, and atheist subgroups, thereby linking narrative imagination to moral identity formation.

A second cluster of studies engages the historical and biographical dimensions of religious learning. *Religious Education in Baden-Powell's Writings* revisits the spiritual foundations of Scouting, emphasizing how nature, discipline, and transcendence were integrated into Baden-Powell's vision of moral education—a notion of faith as experiential learning that anticipated later holistic pedagogies. *Female Religiosity in Self-Narration* approaches faith through autobiographical accounts by Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim women, illustrating how early religious education continues to inform adult identity, motherhood, and interreligious empathy. In *Changes and New Religious Orientations Among Practicing Catholics?*, large-scale survey data from Italy highlight shifting forms of lived religiosity: believers express individualized spiritualities and pragmatic moral orientations, mirroring the adaptive transformations of Catholicism within learning society. These three articles, taken together, reveal how religious experience evolves across life trajectories and historical contexts, remaining a resource for meaning-making, gendered identity, educational outcomes, and ethical self-formation.

The final group of contributions explores religion's educational impact in hybrid, exceptional, and intercultural societal environments. *Educational Functions of Biblical Narratives* investigates how young people use biblical and fantasy stories to structure personal

identity, showing that sacred texts continue to provide ethical and emotional guidance even outside institutional religion. *The Influence of Spirituality on the Education of Incarcerated Individuals* examines Brazil's APAC model of police-free prisons, where spirituality supports rehabilitation by cultivating responsibility, empathy, and purpose—an alternative pedagogy grounded in human dignity and liberation. *Relationship Between Secularization and the Level of Perceiving Religious Influence Among Individuals Receiving Higher Religious Education* surveys theology students in Türkiye, highlighting generational tensions between modern secular values and persistent faith commitments. Finally, *Between Confucianism and Christianity: Epistemological and Syncretic Challenges in Constructing a Chinese Catholic Educational Discourse* offers a philosophical reading of Chinese Catholic pedagogy, proposing a dialogical synthesis between Confucian virtue ethics and Christian personalism.

Collectively, these studies trace the diverse ways religion continues to shape moral, cultural, and civic learning across distinct social and cultural contexts. The ten contributions collected in this Special Issue portray religion as a multidimensional educational force operating beyond institutional frameworks. Across different contexts and traditions, they demonstrate that learning through religion is primarily an experiential, relational, transformative, and even narrative process that engages the moral and imaginative dimensions of human development. Religion emerges here not as a subject to be taught but as a social pedagogy (Porcarelli 2021)—a set of practices and narratives that cultivate reflection, empathy, and civic responsibility.

A first transversal theme concerns religion as experiential learning. In several studies, learning unfolds through embodied participation rather than formal instruction. The research on parish futsal in Rome illustrates how sport becomes a vehicle for moral and communal education, while the Austrian case on cooperative interreligious education shows how encounter and dialogue foster mutual understanding and self-awareness. Such findings point toward a constructivist conception of learning: knowledge grows from experience, interaction, and shared practice. A second theme, focusing on narrative and imagination, connects studies that investigate how biblical stories, autobiographical accounts, and popular narratives shape identity, as well as moral and ethical sensibility. From the exploration of biblical narratives among Italian youth to the life stories of women from different faiths, storytelling emerges as a pedagogical tool that allows individuals to make sense of their experiences and articulate values across cultural boundaries.

A third interpretative line highlights intergenerational and communal education. Family environments, parishes, youth groups, and rehabilitation communities appear as informal spaces of moral development and everyday education. The Brazilian study on spirituality in prisons demonstrates how care, responsibility, and faith can reshape human relations and foster learning in extreme contexts. Likewise, research on contemporary Catholicism shows that even amid growing individualization, communal belonging remains a vital pedagogical resource. Finally, the theme of hybridity and cultural change—particularly within the domain of education and social pedagogy—emerges in the contributions from Turkey and China, both examining the interplay between religious and secular systems of thought. These works illustrate how educational processes can mediate between tradition and modernity, integrating critical thinking and intercultural sensitivity. Religion thus contributes to a broader redefinition of education as a dynamic negotiation among worldviews rather than a static transmission of doctrines.

Overall, these findings invite a renewed understanding of religion's educational significance in contemporary societies. The articles gathered in this Special Issue reveal that non-formal and informal contexts—sports, families, media, prisons, and intercultural dialogue venues—are vibrant laboratories of learning, where crucial features such as encounter, empathy, and awareness are continuously cultivated.

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Article

The Influence of Spirituality on the Education of Incarcerated Individuals: Reflections on the Exceptional Experience of Police-Free Prisons in Brazil

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Abstract: The article seeks to read the contribution of religious practices in prison education within the broader framework of spirituality as a search for meaning in life. It argues that religious engagement can foster cognitive and emotional development, providing inmates with a sense of purpose, community, and resilience that supports their reintegration into society. In light of an exceptional and extremely significant experience with APAC in Brazil's police-free prison model, the authors aim to highlight the nexus between spirituality and re-education in contexts of deprivation and restriction of personal liberty. Indeed, the APAC (Association for the Protection and Assistance of the Convicted) model, central to this study, emphasizes nonviolent coexistence, responsibility, and spiritual care as part of its rehabilitative framework, with a significant reduction in recidivism rates and costs compared to traditional prisons. The model's approach, grounded in a collective sense of responsibility and spirituality, aligns with Viktor Frankl's and Paulo Freire's theories on meaning and liberation, illustrating how spirituality can transform prison environments and promote social justice. The study concludes that spirituality in prisons not only aids individual redemption but also calls for structural changes to support reintegration, marking a shift towards a more human-centered penitentiary system.

Keywords: spirituality; religion; prison education; search for meaning; APAC

1. Introduction

The moment of incarceration marks a particularly delicate and complex transition in which, regardless of the legal process and the outcome related to the crime and its personal and social implications, the individual temporarily deprived of freedom re-examines representations and perspectives, reference frameworks, and ideas about their life and experiences, including the spiritual and religious dimension (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Fabretti 2014). This can heighten the perception of punishment and guilt, increase stigma, but it can also serve as an anchor, helping the individual find key points of reference among the people encountered in prison (Said and Butler 2023).

The hypothesis we start from is that prior spiritual experiences, whether explicitly expressed or not, can influence the period of imprisonment through several elements: (a) the religious content and how it can help in understanding key moments in one's existential journey; (b) the resources in terms of resilience that can be acquired or strengthened through

religious participation in prison—both in rituals and internal communities; and (c) the risk of reinforcing identity and experiencing forms of overt discrimination or facilitation.

In direct experience, many inmates report that religious affiliation in prison can be associated with support upon release (Santoro 2020) and that figures such as chaplains and imams contribute to sustaining not only psychological but also physical well-being (for example, by helping maintain family ties or providing donations of clothing or food). There is a risk that, due to vulnerability and specific needs, an opportunistic relationship may develop, or conversely, forms of discrimination and marginalization could arise because of religious affiliation.

What we want to investigate, particularly in a reflective and theoretical manner, is the connection between religiosity, spirituality, and penitentiary re-education. After analyzing data on religious freedom in prison and the presence of religious figures in the penitentiary context, we aim to explore how interacting with religious leaders and "re-examining" oneself through spiritual paths may support a process of revisiting orientations and meanings. This, in turn, could help reshape educational and re-educational processes.

The hypothesis is that where religious practice nurtures the search for meaning and is linked to a broader path of caring for spirituality, practices can transform the prison experience into an exercise of reflexivity, self-revision, and accountability. The celebration of religious holidays, rituals related to prayer, and adherence to dietary practices can be seen as expressions of the individual's "vitality" as they question and explore their identity and social connections in light of their sentence. Alternatively, these practices might be emphasized as forms of fideistic "protection".

Certainly, religion, conceived as a complex of beliefs, emotions, and rituals that connect an individual or a human group to what they consider sacred, as a social and symbolic context, helps shape and fulfill a spiritual tension, a search for meaning (Frankl [1975] 2014). It assists the inmate in seeking personal balance in their situation, while also creating continuity with the past and enabling them to reflect on their life through valuable content and experiences. If it is true that the experience of imprisonment is primarily oriented toward a reevaluation of the past, it is also true that the re-educational process is rooted in the attraction to a possible future and the anticipation of Good, which can be tangibly experienced.

The sacred, as theologian and historian of religions Rudolf Otto describes in his 1937 work, opens up to mystery, offering a way to look beyond the frameworks of past experiences and to discover new interpretative keys. The sacred inspires fear (*tremendum*) while simultaneously offering reassurance and attraction (*fascinans*) through elements of love, mercy, and compassion; it also provides a sense of comfort in response to respect and veneration (*augustum*).

This dynamic is particularly significant during a transitional moment such as incarceration, which can either reinforce a definitive and peremptory stigma or, conversely, create a period of deep uncertainty in which the intensification of existential questions can intertwine with the possibility of encountering a compassionate humanity. The fear of emptiness and the end can merge with trust in the Transcendent.

The case study of the experience of the Associations for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), or police-free prisons, in Brazil will allow us to shed light on how spirituality impacts not only an internal and intimate space but also a social and communal one. This transforms the entire penitentiary context, requiring a reassessment of its very "nature" through concrete choices.

2. The Prison as an Interreligious Context: The Common Ground of Spirituality

Prisons are increasingly becoming environments marked by the coexistence of people who adhere to different religious faiths. The Italian penitentiary system recognizes the right of individuals temporarily deprived of their personal freedom to practice their faith, engage in religious worship, and receive instruction in their religion (Article 26 of Law 354/1975). Additionally, since 2018, inmates have also had the right to request meals that align with their religious beliefs (Legislative Decree No. 123 of 2 October 2018). Religious and spiritual assistance is ensured for all religious traditions. The presence of a chaplain is mandated and guaranteed in every institution for Catholic worship (there are nearly 1500 prison chaplains in Italy). For other faiths, the access of religious ministers may be arranged either through direct agreements with the Italian government or through specific *ad personam* requests to the Ministry of the Interior's Office of Worship.

The latest report by Antigone[1] on religious freedom in Italian prisons (Paterniti Martello 2017) reveals that 54.7% of the total prison population identifies as Catholic, followed by 11.4% who identify as Muslim. Orthodox Christians represent 4.2% of the total, while smaller percentages (less than 1%) include Evangelicals, Adventists, Hindus, and others. However, 26.3% of the population identifies as atheist or non-believer. A closer analysis suggests that many Muslim inmates either do not declare their faith or claim to be Catholic to "avoid the stigma associated with their religion in recent years" (Paterniti Martello 2017, pp. 3–4) and the risk of being accused of Islamic radicalism. This significantly skews the data and raises important questions about the full freedom of belief and worship, particularly in an environment where stereotypes and prejudices—religious or otherwise—can be amplified or result in harsher penalties.

The presence of chaplains in prisons, along with the many Catholic volunteers often associated with religious organizations, influences the routines and practices within the prisons. The opportunity for prayer and the celebration of Sunday Mass is provided in nearly all prisons. Additionally, religious figures frequently offer daily support to inmates through personal conversations and meetings, assistance with managing personal finances, maintaining contact with family members at home, and providing small goods (such as cigarettes, clothing, food, etc.). Where this occurs, namely, in prisons where chaplains and Catholic volunteers play a supportive and guiding role, similar assistance is also extended to inmates of different religious beliefs, fostering interfaith dialogue, hospitality, and the preservation of human dignity and relationships. As stated in the Antigone report: "The chaplain provides spiritual assistance to his followers but also material help to others, particularly to indigent inmates, who are often foreigners, of other religions, and lacking local connections. The priest brings clothing, tobacco, toothbrushes, and coffee into the prison, all of which are highly valued in this environment. It is also important to acknowledge the many volunteers, both Catholic and non-Catholic, who visit the prison almost daily and who, in many cases, manage the assistance counters" (ibid., pp. 5–6).

The dialogue with religious ministers is very important and plays a "therapeutic" role in the re-education process: the conversations can be much more open and spontaneous, oriented towards expressing emotions and personal experiences, characterized by immediacy and free from judgment. Unlike interactions with educators or psychological figures, these conversations are not part of the formal evaluations and assessments within the detention process. The role of the prison chaplain included pastoral and emotional support as well as religious, practical, and educational input. The impact included rehabilitation, creation of communities, calm, forgiveness and atonement (Jarrett et al. 2024, p. 137).

The idea that religiosity represents a resource both at the individual and collective levels has been the focus of many studies (De Galembert et al. 2016) The inner reconstruction

necessary to turn imprisonment into a life-improving experience, rather than a worsening one, can come through the search for meaning, with participation in religious rituals and meetings with religious ministers helping to fill the empty hours, which often become deep abysses where one can feel lost. Inner peace, in a place deeply marked by latent and explicit conflicts, is facilitated by participation in a personal and communal spiritual life. This is often recognized and encouraged not only by those temporarily deprived of their freedom, but also by the other figures who "inhabit" the prison environment (prison officers, educators, nurses, doctors, psychologists, etc.).

Furthermore, adopting a normative and value-based framework that goes beyond a purely earthly view of punishment and justice can help find meaning in what might otherwise seem meaningless, and allow for confronting human fragility from a different perspective.

We will now explore these themes further, drawing on the contributions of two authors: Viktor E. Frankl and Paulo Freire, who, though different in many ways, share a common view on the connection between spirituality and the pursuit of inner freedom, the ultimate goal of re-education following a crime or an existential mistake.

3. Spirituality and Re-Education: Their Relationship in the Prison Context

While often treated as synonyms, the terms religion/religiosity and spirituality refer to distinct, yet deeply intertwined, realms of meaning, each with its own specific characteristics.

Religion, by expressing an experience of bond and communal connection through shared rituals and beliefs, reflects a more structured and codified dimension that takes shape over time and space, also manifesting as a form of belonging, social and cultural integration, and a choice of faith.

Spirituality can be conceived as a pre-constitutive element of religious experience, expressing a personal search linked to transcendence and the meaning of life. It is this aspect that we particularly intend to focus on in order to explore the implications of prison re-educational pathways.

According to Viktor E. Frankl, the spiritual dimension lies in the individual's effort to perceive the unique meaning of each life situation: "every situation confronts us with a demand, a question to which we must respond by choosing how to act" (Frankl [1975] 2014, p. 101) Conscience is the *organ of meaning*, the intuitive ability to uncover the singular significance hidden in each situation (ibid., p. 105) and to respond, not abstractly, but through responsible action. From this perspective, spirituality, as the pursuit of meaning inherent in existence, is universal, shared by all individuals and present in every historical and cultural context.

In addition to the specific meaning of each *situation* and each *person*, universal meanings may also exist that connect different individuals and circumstances. These are referred to as values and relate to the dimensions of *creation* (dedication to work, labor, or commitment to something), *affective experience* (commitment to someone, recognizing their uniqueness, loving them), and the *attitude toward the inevitable sufferings* of life (Frankl 2009, pp. 56–57). Conscience inherently points toward transcendence and reflects the creaturely condition (Frankl [1975] 2014, pp. 61–62): it operates within the realm of the immanent but guides the individual toward transcendence. It opens up the possibility of glimpsing a "super-meaning" within a sequence of contingent meanings. Here, the religious dimension emerges, *bringing together* the various experiences of meaning in life, linking seemingly distant elements, and fostering a *shared communal experience* among individuals.

It is clear that the spiritual and religious dimension of each person's search for meaning can be highly valuable and closely tied to the educational or re-educational process, especially in a prison setting. In such a context, the search for meaning through education can often appear confused and vague, while concrete experiences of such a search, like work and relationships, are often particularly distant, obscured, or fragmented.

According to Frankl, the lack of meaning that can arise during imprisonment should not be viewed merely as a problem but rather as a genuine opportunity to build personal meaning. Like hunger and thirst, this lack of meaning can drive individuals to seek an authentic source of well-being and meaning, thus mobilizing inner resources and energy.

In an educational context, *caring for the soul* in a prison setting does not mean leading individuals towards a singular, predetermined experience of faith, nor does it involve offering pre-formulated answers or maintaining a rhetorical and overly optimistic focus on hope and resilience as the tools to face difficulties. Rather, it involves concretely supporting each person's search for meaning, particularly as they encounter experiences of suffering that raise a multitude of questions. It is precisely this inner process of "questioning" that proves to be especially formative, helping individuals reorient their lives toward new meanings and perspectives.

> Refining the conscience, as Frankl suggests, is a significant educational task that can be developed in any situation and context of life. This strongly echoes what Paulo Freire argues regarding the process of raising awareness (Freire 2017) in individuals and groups, particularly those living under conditions of oppression and dependence on total institutions and systems. Conscientization, i.e., the formation of an intentionality that allows one to break out of the state of oppression and actively modify one's life, is fundamentally developed through the practice of dialogue and in the search for generating themes, which allows one to give voice to what one is experiencing (Freire 2017, pp. 77–87).

Both Frankl and Freire agree that these processes are enhanced by giving voice to individuals and, most importantly, by allowing them to become aware of the complex reality in which they live, through generative and meaningful questions, open-ended questions that do not aim for a single, uniform answer.

The ability to question both themselves and reality is a skill that everyone possesses, but it is often dulled or manipulated, especially when individuals living in situations of marginalization and vulnerability become more susceptible to external influences. This can lead them to unknowingly perpetuate forms of dependency and labeling, both on themselves and others. Generative questions are never abstract; they are deeply rooted in reality, emerging from it and arising in moments of life or contexts where individuals experience ambivalence and paradoxes. In times of suffering and inner conflict, they often delegate the responsibility for liberation and change to others or to external circumstances.

Both Frankl and Freire share the idea that questions of meaning and generative questions cannot be delegated to anyone else: the individual who develops them is personally called, starting from their own lived experience, to seek direction and a possible answer, with the help and support of those who share the same condition.

Forms of spirituality in prison, sometimes mediated and supported by religious rituals, processes, and figures, serve to keep questions of meaning alive, guide them in the right direction, and help individuals understand the horizon within which they can seek answers.

From this perspective, mistakes and the punishment associated with them do not necessarily lead to withdrawal or reinforce dependency and stereotypes. Instead, they can become an opportunity for meaningful self-reflection, where individuals can explore important questions about their lives and create personal paths toward rebirth and new life plans.

We now turn to a case study that illustrates the concrete development of these theoretical positions, with these experiences shaped by the reflections of Frankl and Paulo Freire. The general idea behind this approach is the hypothesis that spirituality, while being a deeply personal, intimate, and introspective factor, also unfolds in a social context, in an environment that can either support or limit its potential in a re-educational direction. We hypothesize that the practice of spirituality not only helps individuals reconsider and renew themselves but also "asks" the community as a whole to change, embracing a shared perspective of meaning. Only by allowing the personal and communal dimensions to interact—especially in cases of social vulnerability and deviance—can spirituality reach its full educational potential.

4. Methodology and Case Study Selection: The Experience of Police-Free Prisons by the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts in Brazil

Here, we aim to emphasize the importance of research focusing on education, spirituality, and prison, and to analyze how the dimensions of spirituality explored so far can be concretely applied to a reality shaped by punishment and the restriction of freedom, radically transforming the very space of detention.

There is a global trend toward imprisoning those who are already excluded from society. According to Coyle et al. (2016), the imprisoned population faces a heightened state of vulnerability, as they generally come from economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, prisons house a significantly higher proportion of drug addicts, minorities, migrants, and individuals with mental health issues compared to the general population. The number of suicides and cases of self-harm is also higher within this context. Society imprisons and hides its social conflicts within these four walls. Different forms of spirituality coexist in the daily life of various prisons. Prison represents a major issue in today's society. Acknowledging the challenges posed by this institution, the United Nations (UN) recommends using incarceration only as a last resort. Most incarcerated individuals are considered low-risk by society, having committed non-violent crimes, and could serve alternative sentences (United Nations-Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2007). However, alternative measures seem ineffective in reducing the reliance on incarceration.

There is a broad international agreement, particularly prominent in Europe, that prioritizes re-education, rehabilitation, social inclusion, and the reintegration of individuals deprived of their freedom, with a strong emphasis on avoiding the stigmatization of the prison population. Since 2010, the Council of Europe has recommended investing resources in implementing alternatives to imprisonment (Heard 2016). However, recidivism rates for those released from prison remain over 50% in various countries around the world (Fazel and Wolf 2015). This highlights the need for ongoing research into alternatives to imprisonment and for developing new models of deprivation of freedom that can provide education aimed at fostering the real social inclusion of incarcerated individuals.

Expanding globally, the model of Social Reintegration Centers (SRC)[2], proposed by the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC), has been described by Prison Fellowship International (PFI) as "the most important development happening today in the field of prison reform" (Fraternidade Brasileira de Assistência aos Condenados (FBAC) 2016). PFI has been serving as a special advisor on prison issues to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)[3] since 1983.

APAC units manage more than 40 Social Reintegration Centers (SRC) across four Brazilian states (Minas Gerais, Maranhão, Paraná, Rio Grande do Norte) and are present in more than 20 countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the United

States, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Germany, Belarus, Bulgaria, Italy, Hungary, South Korea, Netherlands, and others) (Restán 2017). Spirituality is one of the core elements of this model, and its educational impact is the central focus of this article.

Interest in this model, which aims to educate individuals deprived of their freedom for reintegration into society, is growing. Official data show that individuals educated within these prisons have significantly lower recidivism rates compared to the common Brazilian prison system, ranging between 8% and 15%, as opposed to the national average of 70% (Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público 2016)[4]. There are also fewer cases of escape, indiscipline, rebellion, and violent incidents. These results are achieved at less than half the cost per person compared to the expense of maintaining an inmate in a traditional prison in the same context. The role of spirituality, seen as an educational factor, is key in motivating the volunteers involved in the reintegration projects.

We pose the questions: what kind of education takes place in this space, steeped in spirituality and designed to be an educational unit? What education is provided to those deprived of their freedom? What happens beyond the formal school and non-formal education workshops? What is the dynamic of peer education that unfolds in the living spaces when the school lights go out and the educators leave? What is the pedagogical value of the relationships that form between inmates and prison staff, where the staff are constantly present with adolescents without having any formal pedagogical training?

We will now explore how spirituality and education intersect in this model and what they produce in the next step. Next, let us look at the methodology used to study this experience.

Methodology

In order to achieve our goal, we conducted an analysis of the institution. The research was divided into two phases: the first was exploratory, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the prison model within current policies on deprivation and restriction of freedom, while the second focused on analyzing the educational experience provided by the APAC model.

We began the research with the aim of expanding and deepening our understanding of global policies on restriction and deprivation of freedom, which is necessary to better understand the contemporary prison model. As the first step of the initial phase, we took part in discussions that arose in the second half of 2017 within the working group on "education for youth and adults in situations of restriction and deprivation of freedom", which is part of the training offered by the Doctoral Program in Education at the Federal Fluminense University (FFU).

In the second step, we carried out bibliographic research aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the prison situation: we examined the number of incarcerated individuals, the characteristics of this population, and the number of staff along with the types of functions performed. We also discussed the so-called alternative sanctions and their effectiveness in reducing reliance on incarceration. Starting with a general overview, we then provided a more detailed description of the situation in Europe and Italy. The results of these first two steps of the initial phase can be found in the first chapter.

In the third step, the prison model was discussed through the theories of two classical authors: Foucault (1975) and Goffman (1961). We also analyzed two contemporary authors who have updated and complicated the theoretical framework regarding prisons: Garland (1999) and Wacquant (1999, 2009). We briefly explored abolitionist theories and, subsequently, Baratta's's (1990) theoretical proposal for social reintegration, mentioning the APAC reintegration model.

The fourth step of the initial stage focused on contextualizing the experience of APACs within the Brazilian context. An analysis of the Brazilian legal framework for the implementation of the penal execution policy was conducted, focusing specifically on the examination of the penal execution law. Reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations were also reviewed to illustrate how laws are transformed into practices within the Brazilian prison system. Additionally, the profile of the incarcerated population was analyzed to better understand who the subjects of the re-education interventions are.

In the second phase of the research, an analysis of the APAC model was carried out to understand how the model is described and how this description translates into practice.

The pedagogical concept arising from the spirituality of the model was examined through the study of the works by APAC's leaders, Mario Ottoboni and Valdeci Ferreira, which were used to promote the model. A literature review was then carried out, focusing on the production of theses in Brazil and Italy. Brazilian theses were retrieved from the database of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES). Italian theses were accessed through websites such as Tesionline and Publitesi, as well as the Florence library site, which has collected all Italian doctoral theses since 1995, thesis archives from various universities, and specialized journals on prison studies, such as Ristretti Orizzonti.

The main texts describing the APAC experience have been analyzed (Ottoboni 1997, 2014; Ottoboni and Ferreira 2004; Valdeci 2016; Valdeci and Ottoboni 2016), as well as those that critically examine the APAC model (Darke 2013, 2014, 2015; Grossi 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021b, 2021a; Massola 2001, 2005).

This article discusses issues related to education and spirituality.

5. Spirituality and Education in a Concrete Experience: The Case of APAC's Police-Free Prisons in Brazil

The APACs, which promote this model, are "nonprofit legal entities under private law created with the aim of rehabilitating inmates, protecting society, assisting victims, and promoting restorative justice" (Restán 2017, p. 6). Founded in 1974 within a Catholic prison ministry in São José dos Campos (São Paulo) under the leadership of lawyer Mario Ottoboni, they currently serve an average of 3500 people (2017 data), spending approximately BRL 1050 (EUR 250) per month for each person housed (Araújo 2017).

Unlike the traditional model, the Social Reintegration Centers of the Association for the Protection and Assistance of Convicts (APAC) are depicted as peaceful and aesthetically pleasing environments, with a relaxed atmosphere that neither humiliates nor generates anger, as is often observed in traditional prisons (Restán 2017). The inmates undergoing social rehabilitation wear their own clothes and are addressed by name, preserving their identity and being treated as citizens—holders of rights—serving a sentence. The spaces are not overcrowded, they are clean and free of unpleasant odors, with an architecture designed to support educational activities aimed at reintegration into society.

The APACs are described as being run by officials and staff who strongly believe in the social reintegration of individuals deprived of their freedom. Many come from strong Catholic and Evangelical spiritual backgrounds but there are also individuals who practice Afro-descendant religions, such as Candomblé, Umbanda, and Kardecist spiritualism (Grossi 2020b). The majority are officials and volunteers, trained to manage relationships and resolve conflicts without the need for weapons. All are considered educators through what is known as the *pedagogy of presence* (da Costa 2010): each person serves as a concrete example for others and, therefore, their life must be exemplary.

Inmates undergoing social rehabilitation are guaranteed spiritual, medical, psychological, and legal assistance provided by the community. Without these services, Restán (2017)

states, a potentially aggressive and violent atmosphere would emerge, leading to escapes, rebellions, and deaths. Restán (2017) also notes that there is no idleness in the units: all individuals deprived of their freedom leave the dormitories at seven in the morning and return only at ten in the evening. These *dangerous criminals* work, study, receive professional training, and engage in various other activities.

Education is considered vital to the social reintegration project of the APACs, and this includes spirituality in a broad sense, without being tied to any specific religious tradition (Restán 2017). Along with attending school and professional courses, the inmates participate in what are called "work therapy" activities during the closed regime. In the semi-open regime, priority is given to the training of specialized labor, with various professional workshops set up within the spaces of this regime. In the open regime, work is aimed at social reintegration, as the inmates work outside the SRC. Throughout these different regimes, they participate in different activities aimed at encouraging personal reflection, known as "human valorization" seminars, which are designed to help inmates reconnect with themselves.

The aspects of informal education are also highlighted as significant: living together in the units is seen as educational, utilizing the various open communication channels between inmates, volunteers, and officials, ranging from dormitory meetings to collective gatherings. The daily routine of cohabitation among inmates, who work within the units without being able to use any form of violence, is described as fostering awareness and enabling mutual education among them, embodying one of the APACs' slogans: "inmate helps inmate".

It is worth noting that education in the APAC model is not limited to inmates. Since the APACs rely on active community support to function, educating the wider public becomes another key goal. Volunteers, family members, and society, including its institutions, need to be prepared to welcome the inmates undergoing social rehabilitation once they are released. Restán (2017) highlights the ongoing dialogue with society, which engages with the units through visits, exhibitions, open activities organized at the SRC, and volunteer involvement, while the inmates undergoing social rehabilitation leave to work or provide community services. The SRC also provides spaces for visitors and researchers, which is where we stayed. Research is actively encouraged, and the Brazilian Federation for the Assistance of Convicts, which promotes and oversees the APACs, has established a dedicated research support center in Itaúna (Minas Gerais).

The absence of violence and armed security staff, according to official statements, is achieved through a security policy based on less strained relationships between staff and inmates. This is made possible by respecting human rights and individual dignity, with shared clear and well-known rules. Restán (2017) also emphasizes that trust is built through co-management of the spaces: inmates undergoing social rehabilitation are responsible for managing the keys to the "prison" and also take care of cleaning, organization, discipline, and security, working in "co-management with APAC staff, volunteers, and administrative staff" (Restán 2017, p. 9).

The APACs promote the recognition of humanity in crime and the normality of the person who has committed an offense, breaking away from the image of the criminal as a monster or sub-human, as recommended by current criminological theories (Baratta's 1990; Garland 1999). The APACs emphasize that "we are all in a process of rehabilitation" and that no one is beyond the possibility of being rehabilitated: everyone is seen as capable of change, regardless of the crime committed, and rehabilitation is viewed as a shared responsibility of society. The success of reintegration is not placed solely on *professionals*—whether social workers, psychologists, teachers, or social educators—nor entirely on the

individuals themselves, as is often the case in some contemporary reintegration programs (Garland 1999).

6. Conclusions

Spirituality emerges as a crucial factor in the process of re-education and social reintegration of people in detention, offering a unique opportunity for personal growth and redemption. The theories of Viktor Frankl and Paulo Freire provide valuable conceptual tools for exploring the transformative role that spirituality can play within the prison context, as exemplified by the Brazilian APACs. Although APAC represents a singular and exceptional case, it offers a lens through which we can reflect on possible experimental actions and choices in the legal–pedagogical field. It reveals a possible reality and outlines meaningful directions that highlight how spirituality can be useful in the practice of renewing prison systems.

Viktor Frankl, through his logotherapy, emphasizes how the search for meaning is an intrinsic aspect of the human experience, especially in situations of extreme suffering, such as incarceration.

The existential void often felt during imprisonment can be addressed by discovering a deeper sense of meaning in life. In this context, spirituality helps those in prison find answers to key questions about their lives and choices, transforming the experience of incarceration from mere punishment into an opportunity for reflection and personal growth. Frankl highlights that, even in the toughest circumstances, individuals have the freedom to choose their attitude toward suffering and to find meaning in difficult situations. Spirituality, then, is not just a psychological escape but a concrete path toward rediscovering oneself and building a new, meaningful life plan. The APAC model works to improve harsh conditions in order to enhance opportunities for spiritual growth, learning, and reintegration for those in prison.

Paulo Freire, with his concept of conscientization, encourages us to see education—and the educational effects of spirituality—as a process that reaches beyond the individual and into the social and collective spheres. The pedagogy of presence, central to the APAC model, demonstrates how spirituality can foster a dialogical and participatory form of education, where inmates are not passive recipients but active agents in their own transformation. While in detention, inmates are involved in community management, and many are later employed as permanent staff after completing their sentences.

Freire stresses that education should empower individuals to break free from oppression and dependence on authoritarian structures, helping them become aware of their condition and take steps to change it. Freire stresses that education should empower individuals to break free from oppression and dependence on authoritarian structures, helping them become aware of their condition and take steps to change it. In APAC, spirituality lays the foundation for this liberation, where inmates, through dialogue and collective reflection, can reshape the meaning of their lives and their role in society. The education rooted in spirituality ultimately holds transformative power, not only for the individuals in detention but also for both the prison system and the wider society.

By integrating the perspectives of Frankl and Freire, we can affirm that spirituality in the APACs is not merely an accessory or a source of comfort, but a central component of the re-education pedagogy. It provides a framework that supports both individual and collective transformation, fostering the development of a new identity grounded in responsibility, hope, and redemption. Spirituality not only helps manage pain and existential void but also promotes an education that restores inmates' ability to question themselves, actively engage in their own lives, and imagine a future beyond prison.

In conclusion, spirituality, as interpreted through the ideas of Viktor Frankl and Paulo Freire, serves as a bridge between the inner world of the individual and their social surroundings, connecting the search for personal meaning with a process of collective liberation. The APACs offer a concrete example of how spirituality integrated into education can humanize the prison environment, turning it into a place not just for punishment, but for genuine renewal. However, this transformation can only take root if it is accompanied by a broader rethinking of external social structures, which must be ready to welcome and support reintegrated individuals. Spirituality thus becomes a vehicle for social justice, capable of challenging the traditional penal system and promoting a more humane and inclusive model of rehabilitation and reintegration.

We can thus affirm that spirituality plays a crucial role in radically transforming the prison environment. A different kind of education is possible for those deprived of their freedom, and the APAC model stands as an alternative, with its merits, flaws, and challenges. This model, born and developed first in a Catholic, then ecumenical spirituality, and striving to transcend and embrace other forms of spirituality, offers formal, non-formal, and informal education that can aid in reintegration into society. Additionally, it better respects Brazilian laws and the rights of inmates, presenting a real alternative to the traditional Brazilian prison system. There is potential for global expansion, especially if the model embraces certain changes discussed in the conclusion.

There are, however, various contradictions that the APAC model can generate, as seen in the foundational texts describing the APAC experience (Ottoboni 1997, 2014; Ottoboni and Ferreira 2004; Valdeci 2016; Valdeci and Ottoboni 2016), as well as those that critically examine the APAC model (Darke 2013, 2014, 2015; Grossi 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021b, 2021a; Massola 2001, 2005).

These include the potential for proselytism or the pressure exerted on individuals to engage in specific spiritual practices, issues that have been explored in several studies. Other identified issues include the use of religion for opportunistic purposes and the persistent challenges individuals face upon reentry into a society that lacks essential support services. Another challenge of the model stems from the attempt to create a space that is inclusive of all religions, particularly Afro-descendant faiths such as Candomblé and Umbanda, which hold significant relevance in Brazil. Religion is not a panacea for all the challenges faced by incarcerated individuals. Rather, in exceptional cases such as the one presented, it can serve as a force to mitigate the harms of incarceration and transform these structures, which are notoriously difficult to reform (Foucault 1975; Garland 2001; Goffman 1961; Wacquant 1999, 2009).

Spirituality and education alone, however, are not always enough to change the world outside of prison. Structural challenges like unemployment and the lack of opportunities for a dignified life present significant barriers to social inclusion. It is crucial to view spirituality and education as strategic tools for bridging the gap between prison and society, gradually humanizing those who are incarcerated. Only by re-educating society can we open a dialogue to address the problems caused by the prison system and work towards either resolving them or, at the very least, significantly reducing their impact.

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Notes

1 www.antigone.it, accessed on 13 March 2025.

2 The Social Reintegration Centers (SRC) within the APAC system, known in Portuguese as Centros de Reintegração Social (CRS), are facilities focused on the rehabilitation and reintegration of incarcerated individuals, operating without armed guards or police presence. They embody the principle of "recovery" rather than "punishment", aiming to transform individuals through structured programmes in work, education, spirituality, and community support. SRCs provide educational programmes, vocational training, and psychological support, engaging families and the broader community in the reintegration process. This model seeks to reduce recidivism by fostering comprehensive rehabilitation rooted in respect, discipline, and personal accountability. SRCs offer an alternative to traditional prisons, grounded in the belief that, when treated with dignity and trust, individuals in prison can make positive contributions to society upon reintegration.

3 The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is a primary organ within the United Nations responsible for overseeing the economic and social activities of the organization. ECOSOC coordinates the work of specialized agencies, functional commissions, and regional commissions under its purview and serves as the main platform for discussing global economic and social issues and formulating related policy recommendations. Comprising 54 member states, ECOSOC also engages over 1600 NGOs with consultative status to collaborate on UN initiatives.

4 The issue of recidivism within the APAC model is a complex one, as discussed in various texts (Grossi 2020c, 2020b). These studies also highlight how problematic it is to use the recidivism rate as the sole indicator for evaluating the success of a reintegration policy. Such outcomes also depend on external factors that lie beyond the control of the reintegration programme itself—including, for example, the availability of employment, housing, and the persistence of societal stigma.

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Educational Functions of Biblical Narratives: Insights from an Empirical Research

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Abstract: The process of building personal identity can be interpreted in a narrative sense: each person is the author and protagonist of their own story. Educators use multiple narratives, some of which have a suggestive power and will become "structuring" for the narrative construction of the self. Here, we present some results from a research study that explored the knowledge and meaning a sample of young people attributed to biblical stories and some "fantasy" stories, focusing on biblical texts. The analysis of the data reveals a limited knowledge of the Bible, which is often vague and superficial, stemming from readings that took place during childhood. Three possible types of relationships between the process of constructing personal identity and biblical texts emerge. There are people who link reading the Bible to their personal faith life and consider these texts a source of inspiration for their life choices. There are people who had a superficial encounter with the Bible in childhood, and their relationship with the biblical texts is not particularly significant or structuring. Finally, there are people who have had significant engagement with biblical texts but, at some point in life, distanced themselves from faith, still considering those texts as a point of reference.

Keywords: narrative identity; biblical stories; fantasy; life choices; disaffiliation; great narrative

1. Introduction

Our theoretical framework connects several insights that, from different disciplinary fields, converge on the idea of the educational power of narratives. There is a pedagogical awareness, based on the philosophical considerations of Ricoeur (1984, 1988) and MacIntyre (1984), whereby each person progressively constructs their personal identity that takes the form of a story (narrative identity). This awareness is re-elaborated on the pedagogical level by presenting the entire educational process as a process of supporting the construction of personal identity (Xodo 2019). On the educational level, it is important to nourish this process through some grand narratives that can serve as points of reference. These are structuring narratives with which the growing person engages in constructing their own identity (Carr 2004). We can therefore ask ourselves what some significant narratives might be for the growth journey of young people. A third awareness is that of the narrative structure of the Bible and its potential capacity to always re-emerge (Goheen 2008; Loughlin 1999; Wright 2020), in different ways, as a grand narrative both on the cultural and existential levels. In such a broad and complex scenario, numerous research paths can open.

The contribution focuses on some data from exploratory research, still ongoing, related to the youth imaginary and narratives that imply conferring meaning to the world.

The exploration was conducted through a questionnaire administered only digitally to 872 young people enrolled in university or attending the last year of secondary school (aged between 18 and 23 years). The main research question of the questionnaire aimed to verify the knowledge of some figures and narrative themes present in biblical texts and fantasy literature, investigating their significance in the Italian context, characterized by a Catholic cultural tradition. This contribution focuses on biblical narratives, leaving in the background the many interesting issues related to fantasy literature. The research questions of our contribution can be formulated as follows:

- How much knowledge of biblical narratives is there in young people between 18 and 23 years?
- What meaning do such narratives have in their imaginations?
- What is the relationship between knowledge of biblical narratives, their meaning and some major educational issues?

The data from the questionnaire, consisting of responses to multiple-choice questions, were analyzed using a quantitative approach with descriptive statistics (Cohen et al. 2018, p. 753).

The first section of the paper illustrates the theoretical framework based on narrative identity (Ricoeur) and then explores the role that biblical texts can play in the construction of such identity on an educational level. The second section illustrates research design and methodology. This essay is part of a broader research project, which is still in progress, and focuses on some elements related to the educational role of biblical texts. The analysis and discussion of the data will allow us to give a first answer to the research question and open new avenues for further investigation.

Our hypothesis is that both biblical stories and fantasy narratives may have a suggestive power in shaping individuals' narrative identity, especially during the educational years. It will be necessary to verify whether this happens and under what conditions. In this essay, for reasons that will become clear in the exposition of the theoretical framework, we have considered only biblical texts, seeking to understand how they can play a structuring role in the narrative construction of the Self for both believers and non-believers.

2. The Theoretical Framework: Narrative Education and the Bible as a "Great Narrative"

2.1. Narrative Education

Building on Paul Ricoeur's reflections (Ricoeur 1984, 1988), we can speak of a narrative identity that takes shape progressively (Verhesschen 2003). It is a journey that each person constructs day by day, with their own peculiarities and specificities: "then we need, not a one-size-fits-all education for autonomy, but, instead, a pedagogy tailored to the peculiar challenges facing particular people in their fight for autonomy and responsibility" (Pickett 2023, p. 66).

According to Ricoeur, the construction of narrative identity develops through several progressive stages, starting with the prefiguration of possible future scenarios, moving through the configuration of present actions, and culminating in a meaningful reinterpretation of the different phases of one's existence. Every person's life is like a story, in which everyone is both the author and the protagonist at the same time:

> Ricoeur notes that the subject comes to self-knowledge through the construction of a 'coherent and acceptable story' about himself (. . .). Ricoeur's argument is that narrative identity can account for change within the general configuration of a life (. . .) and the subject can be both the writer and reader of his own life.

> (. . .) If narrative identity is inherently unstable then autobiography provides the exemplary articulation of that instability. (Crowley 2003, pp. 3–4)

Education aims at the formation of the whole person, and its ultimate goal is autonomy as a person, which entails the ability to act responsibly with freedom. In terms of narrative identity, the task is to become the principal author of the biographical narrative in which one is the protagonist. This is natural, as in the beginning (when we are children), it is parents and educators who write many important pages of our lives.

As a result, we need "an education for narrative coherence, an education leading to a narrative identity", Ricoeur says. With it, we can construct a complex but comprehensible character, one that is neither "immutable" nor "incoherent". In other words, we can construct a complex ipse-identity (from the Latin for "self"), in lieu of an unchanging idem-identity (from the Latin for "same"). Such an education can and should, once again, be cultivated on all sides: in both "judge" and "judged". We may have to do more than acknowledge another's complexity and narrative identity; we may have to complete, even co-create one another's stories (Pickett 2023, p. 68).

The growth of awareness of one's own narrative identity and becoming the author of what Ricoeur calls Ipse-identity entails the development of a life project. In other words, it means becoming—day by day—"Captains of oneself" (Xodo 2019), or, as expressed in English, "to be able to paddle your own canoe" (Baden-Powell [1922] 2017).

Becoming aware and responsible for one's life choices is a sign of achieved maturity, which is generally associated with adulthood and the successful outcome of the educational journey. This very educational journey can be described and guided through symbolic narratives that serve as genuine pedagogical archetypes (Moscato 1998). The narrative identity that each person develops is thus connected to a symbolic horizon that provides essential reference points for moral choices: "if narrative identity relates the self to itself (its different aspects), and if personal identity relates the self to others (its would-be dominators), then moral identity relates the self to a symbolic moral order (its norms and duties)" (Pickett 2023, p. 72). Each person's educational journey consists of the progressive and continuous construction of that narrative identity (Xodo 2019) described by Ricoeur. This process reaches an important milestone when an individual's existential references take on a sufficiently stable form, allowing the person—now an adult—to make their own choices freely and responsibly (Moscato 1998).

The symbolic narratives that nourish our moral order can be philosophical or religious in nature. "To develop a life-story that can situate itself in relation to obligations and the many competing claims on us, we need the sustained study, and the conceptual symbols, of moral philosophy" (Pickett 2023, p. 72).

However, these narratives should not be perceived as something external to people's lives; they can only play a structuring role in education if they are internalized. When they become part of an individual's personal narrative, moral and religious narratives contribute to shaping the storyline of a person's life journey. We need to improve our skills to be both the authors of and the actors in our life stories.

Where, though, can we learn this art? Many, of course, learn the art of narration from narratives—from reading. But we also, and more intentionally, cultivate narrative capability from writing, and analyzing others' writings. The examination of fictional narratives seems especially helpful. After all, if we can create intelligible selves out of nothing—out of mere squiggle marks on a page—then, perhaps we can learn to turn our own actual lives into similar selves, whether through the study of English, Arabic, Classics, or creative writing. We might, in fact, learn it from any discipline dedicated to the art of "emplotment": history, biblical studies, ethnography, etc., (Pickett 2023, pp. 70–71).

The construction of each person's personality is thus found at the intersection of multiple narrative threads (McLean et al. 2007): the self-narrative that everyone progressively develops, the symbolic or meaningful narratives that one internalizes, and the narratives of others, insofar as they raise important questions or influence our self-image.

2.2. The Bible as "Great Narrative" and Fantasy Narratives

Studies on the structure and exegesis of biblical texts have a tradition spanning at least 20 centuries, with many perspectives having been expressed over time. In the last two decades, the narrative approach has become increasingly established, which Loughlin (1999) proposes as a way to engage with the uncertainties of postmodernity. Methodologically speaking, the narrative approach aims to go beyond all methods that focus solely on small fragments.

> We have fragmented the Bible into bits—moral bits, systematic-theological bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits, and homiletical bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way, there is no comprehensive grand narrative to withstand the power of the comprehensive humanist narrative that shapes our culture. The Bible bits are accommodated to the more all-embracing cultural story, and it becomes that story—the humanist story—that shapes our lives (Goheen 2008, p. 472).

A fragmented Bible runs the risk of being misinterpreted and read through the lens of other cultural narratives, as Goheen emphasizes: "if the story of the Bible is fragmented into bits, it can easily be domesticated by the reigning story of culture" (p. 479). Along the same lines, Wright (2020) suggests viewing mission as a hermeneutical framework that can unify the reading of the biblical text as a meaningful story.

The New Testament, in particular, is the narrative of Jesus' mission, which establishes the missionary nature of the Christian faith. Wright proposes reading the entire Bible as a product of God's mission. Thus, the Bible can be understood as a grand story—one that should have the power to reshape the world's other narratives as well as the personal stories of those who read it. Engaging with the biblical text should have an impact on life choices, provided that its message is embraced or at least authentically engaged with.

There is also another possibility: that individuals meet biblical narratives, especially during their formative years, if they receive a Christian education. Such contact entails a certain degree of involvement because, as Carr (2004, p. 52) points out, "given that the intellectual and spiritual import of religious narratives and myths is no less esthetic and affective than cognitive, it seems difficult to see how pupils might have full access to such meaning in the absence of practical and emotional exposure to such symbolic resources". This involvement may diminish over the course of a person's life, as they might distance themselves from a life of faith. However, they would still have absorbed certain elements—not only on a cognitive level or in terms of moral choices. It can be assumed that encountering religious narratives leaves a lasting imprint even on those who move away from Christian religious practice, retaining some aspects in the form of internalized narrative structures that may eventually become "secularized" (Moscato 2022).

It is also possible that, today, an increasing number of people do not find their encounter with biblical texts to be a significant factor in shaping their biographical narrative. Cultural substitutes for the grand symbolic narratives of biblical texts can be found in the Fantasy literary genre, particularly in works with spiritual or religious themes. Some works, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia or The Lord of the Rings* (Williams 2018), explicitly incorporate biblical imagery and are inspired by the Christian faith. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, biblical themes are particularly powerful and play a structuring role in the development of the story (Myers 2002). There are also interesting examples of the educational use of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, such as the *Narnian Virtues* education project at the University of

Leeds (https://narnianvirtues.leeds.ac.uk/, accessed on 1 March 2025), as well as various approaches to theologizing with children (Hanesová et al. 2019).

Other works draw inspiration from alternative forms of spirituality, such as the Star Wars saga, which evokes pantheistic themes inspired by Eastern religious traditions, or the Harry Potter novels, which explore a magical imaginary world (Mamary 2021). In some cases, these fictional narratives become sources of inspiration for actual beliefs and practices, leading to forms of spirituality that serve as alternatives to traditional religions.

In some cases, popular fiction not only inspires belief but also prompts readers and viewers to engage in religious practices that incorporate the story-world into their own lives. For example, members of Jediism, a new religious movement based on George Lucas' Star Wars saga, aim to live spiritual and ethical lives according to the Jedi Code and perform rituals (mainly meditation, but sometimes also prayer) to communicate with the Force (Davidsen 2016, p. 490).

Jediism is just one example of a fiction-based religion that can potentially be linked to many of the most popular Fantasy narratives.

Beyond some superficial similarities between biblical narratives and fantasy fiction, there are significant and profound differences (Feldt 2016). Fantasy fiction is explicitly a product of the creative imagination of its authors, who may draw inspiration from other narratives (including biblical ones) but are fully aware that they are constructing a wholly fictional world. Biblical narratives, on the other hand, are situated within the context of a real relationship with a God who reveals Himself. While certain biblical texts should not be interpreted literally (as some fundamentalist groups do), neither can they be read merely as works of fiction. The Bible requires a symbolic and allegorical interpretation (Cope 2022), a perspective already understood by the Church Fathers. For this reason, we can hypothesize that there is no full equivalence between the structuring power of biblical texts in shaping personal identity and that of fantasy narratives. Biblical texts, in some way, call the believer to align their life with their teachings. Fantasy fiction, by contrast, can provide inspiration for constructing a symbolic imaginary that individuals can freely reinterpret for their own purposes.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. The Research Question

This contribution focuses on selected data from an exploratory study (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024), in which the author also participated, aimed at investigating how certain narratives (both biblical and fantasy) can shape the youth imagination. The working hypothesis was developed by a research group based on a reflection on the results of a previous study conducted several years ago (Moscato et al. 2017). That study explored the religious beliefs of a sample of over 2000 Catholic adults, examining their theological awareness, relationship with biblical texts, engagement with liturgy, and sense of belonging to the ecclesial community. Particularly noteworthy in that research were the findings related to knowledge of biblical texts and the ways in which the participants interpreted them (Gabbiadini 2017).

The design of this new study expands the scope of the previous one by selecting an opportunistic sample that was not religiously oriented. For this reason, it was not possible to assume that all respondents would have a solid knowledge of biblical texts, leading to the decision to also include fantasy literature in the analysis.

This choice is based on considerations already partially outlined above (Mamary 2021), while also considering the profound differences between biblical texts and fantasy literature (Feldt 2016). Our hypothesis is that there may be analogies between the evocative power of certain fantasy narratives and that of biblical stories, particularly for individuals who

either lack sufficient knowledge of biblical narratives or do not consider them significant for their personal life project. In this contribution, due to space constraints and to develop a more in-depth exploration of a single research path, we will focus exclusively on the analysis of responses related to biblical texts. The research question this paper aims to answer can thus be formulated as follows: what is the level of knowledge of biblical texts among young people aged 18 to 23, and what role do these narratives play in their imagination? Underpinning this question are broader educational issues, which will be examined throughout the study.

Our research falls within the framework of a mixed methods design, which—at this stage of ongoing research project—translates into the analysis of questionnaire data that combines multiple-choice closed questions with a few open-ended questions.

The open-ended questions allow researchers to gain additional interpretative insights that can also guide the analysis of responses to closed questions, following an iterative approach (Kimmons 2022). In the future, focus groups are planned with university and high school students to further explore the findings.

3.2. Methodology of the Research

The research developed in an initial phase through the administration of a questionnaire to a sample of 872 young people aged 18 to 23. This is a convenience sample primarily composed of students in their final year of high school and first-year university students, mainly residing in three regions (Veneto, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna), where the four research units are based (University of Bologna, University of Padua, University of Verona, and the Catholic University of Milan), along with a group of students from the Province of Syracuse (Sicily).

The questionnaire was administered online using Microsoft Forms, with the link provided during class hours in both high schools and universities, accompanied by a brief explanation of the research objectives and purpose.

The questionnaire consists of 37 multiple-choice closed questions and ten open-ended questions. It is divided into three sections:

1. First section (items 1–15): explores respondents' perceived level of knowledge of selected narrative cycles and biblical stories;

2. Second section (items 16–37): presents seven narrative excerpts—four from fantasy literature and three from biblical stories.

The questions related to each passage aim to investigate the respondents' familiarity with and interpretative approach to these narratives. The final question (item 37): invites participants to write down a story or a character that they considered important for their life ("Would you like to tell us about a character and/or story that you consider as important in shaping your representation of life? Could you explain why?"). The third section (items 38–47) collects socio-demographic information, including data relevant to our research. This includes, for example, religious education, the frequency of Catholic religious instruction in school, and the respondents' perceived or declared religious identity.

The questionnaire data, consisting of multiple-choice responses, were analyzed using a quantitative approach with descriptive statistics (Cohen et al. 2018, p. 753). The open-ended questions received brief responses, which were examined through descriptive analysis. Both the questions related to biblical stories and those concerning fantasy narratives explicitly ask respondents to indicate their degree of familiarity with the stories and the sources of their knowledge. For fantasy stories (*The Lord of the Rings, The Chronicles of Narnia, Harry Potter, and Star Wars*), the analysis distinguishes between knowledge acquired through films or TV series and knowledge gained from reading books. For biblical stories, the distinction is made between direct, personal reading of the Bible and indirect

sources, such as scripture readings during liturgical services, stories encountered at school (Porcarelli 2022), catechism lessons, comics, or family narratives.

It is expected that familiarity with biblical tradition is strongly linked to the liturgical selection of biblical texts, narratives presented in catechesis, and exposure to Catholic religious instruction in school.

3.3. The Sample

Our sample consists of 872 participants (62.2% female, 37.8% male), with an educational background and age corresponding to the context in which the questionnaires were administered (final year of high school, first year of university). Regarding educational background (Table 1), most of the sample (84.5%) attended high school (liceo) (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024, p. 4).

Table 1. Types of secondary education attended by respondents.

Secondary School Type	Female		Male		Tot.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Lyceum	476	54.6%	261	29.9%	737	84.5%
Technical	34	3.9%	46	5.3%	80	9.2%
Vocational	32	3.7%	23	2.6%	55	6.3%
Tot.	542	62.2%	330	37.8%	872	100%

In terms of religious orientation, it is interesting to note that, while 82.5% of respondents report having received a Catholic religious education, only 24.5% identify as religious. In Table 2, we present the ways in which respondents to the questionnaire self-define their religious identity. Each respondent had the possibility to select up to two answers, so the total number of responses is higher than the number of individuals in the sample.

Table 2. Self-defined religious identity.

Do You Consider Yourself	Female		Male		Tot.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Religious	145	16.6%	69	7.9%	214	24.5%
Indifferent or agnostic	146	16.7%	98	11.2%	244	28.0%
Curious	94	10.8%	98	11.2%	192	22.0%
Atheist	103	11.8%	74	8.5%	177	20.3%
Religiously undecided	113	13.0%	50	5.7%	163	18.7%
Still searching	70	8.0%	38	4.4%	108	12.4%
Other	32	3.7%	30	3.4%	62	7.1%
Tot.	703	80.6%	457	52.3%	1160	133.0%

While it is true that most of the interviewees reported an initial Catholic religious upbringing, it is equally true that our sample shows a certain variety in terms of the degree to which individuals perceive their sense of belonging to a religious community, with a clear prevalence of agnostics and the uncertain. The number of those who declare themselves as 'in search' is less significant, a category that was probably more represented in past years.

Beyond religious education and current sense of belonging, it is worth noting that 78.1% of respondents state that they attended the Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) at school until the end of high school (Porcarelli 2022). This percentage rises to 86.0% when including those (7.9%) who discontinued TCR during secondary education. In the

following table, Table 3, we present the analytical data (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024, p. 4) regarding the attendance of Teaching of the Catholic Religion taught by the subjects in our sample.

Table 3. Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) attendance.

TCR Attendance	Female		Male		Tot.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Never	25	2.9%	8	0.9%	33	3.8%
Only until the end of primary school	22	2.5%	7	0.8%	29	3.3%
Only until the end of lower secondary school	38	4.4%	22	2.5%	60	6.9%
During upper secondary school	37	4.2%	32	3.7%	69	7.9%
Until the end of upper secondary school	420	48.2%	261	29.9%	681	78.1%
Tot.	542	62.2%	330	37.8%	872	100%

It clearly emerges that most of our sample attended this instruction until the end of upper secondary school, while only a small minority never attended it or dropped out after the early school levels. These data could explain a certain familiarity with some biblical texts even among those who have not received a Christian religious education.

The quantitative data analysis benefits from the work of two scholars, published in this same Special Issue (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024). Meanwhile, this paper focuses on certain aspects, including qualitative elements, related to the construction of identity in relation to narratives.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. The Knowledge of the Bible and Its Sources

One of the questionnaire items (Item 7: "Do you know any Bible story?") was designed to assess respondents' self-perceived familiarity with Bible stories. The question provided seven possible responses, as well as an open-ended option, "Other". Respondents were allowed to select up to two options. The collected and analyzed data (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024, p. 5) reveal that 9.9% of the sample do not recall any Bible stories. The remaining respondents claim to know them and indicate the sources from which they have acquired this knowledge (multiple answers were possible), as can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Respondents' self-assessed familiarity of Bible stories. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

Familiarity with Bible Stories	Female			Male			Tot.	
	N	% (T)	% (Tf)	N	% (T)	% (tM)	N	% (T)
No. None, as far as I remember	49	5.6	9.0	37	4.2	11.2	86	0.9
The ones I heard during mass	272	31.2	50.2	140	16.1	42.2	412	47.2
The ones I heard at school	135	15.5	24.9	79	9.1	23.9	214	24.5
The ones I heard at catechism classes	300	34.4	55.4	160	18.3	48.5	460	52.8
The ones I read in comic books	5	0.6	0.9	8	0.9	2.4	13	1.5
Some stories that were told me by my family	69	7.9	12.7	30	3.4	9.1	99	11.4
I know enough of them, and I have read them myself	69	7.9	12.7	58	6.7	17.6	127	14.6
Other	13	1.5	2.4	19	2.2	5.8	32	3.7

The respondents primarily heard Bible stories during catechism classes (52.8%) and at mass (47.2%). Only 24.5% heard Bible stories at school. Only 14.6% of respondents report had direct knowledge of Bible stories through personal reading and even fewer (11.4%) mentioned their family environment as a source. In other words, young people in our sample perceive themselves as familiar with certain Bible stories (the question did not require them to self-assess the depth or breadth of their knowledge). However, this familiarity is primarily based on indirect knowledge acquired during childhood catechism classes or attendance at mass, the latter being a practice that appears to have been progressively abandoned by most of the sample, of whom only 24% currently identify as religious.

It is noteworthy that only 24.5% of respondents consider their encounter with Bible narratives at school to be significant. This is particularly striking for two reasons: (1) The vast majority of respondents reported having attended Catholic religious education. (2) It is reasonable to assume that some Bible narratives are also introduced in other subjects, such as literature or art. This suggests that biblical themes are likely addressed indirectly in school settings, but that direct reading of biblical texts is not always given dedicated time and attention. This assumption is further supported by the low percentage of respondents who claim to have personally read the Bible, indicating that direct engagement with the texts remains limited.

Regarding the three biblical narratives presented in the questionnaire (Abraham, Jacob, Ruth), respondents report varying degrees of familiarity with them. See Table 5 (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024, p. 7).

Table 5. Respondents' self-assessed knowledge of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

Knowledge of the Bible Stories		Female			Male			Tot.	
		N	% (T)	% (Tf)	N	% (T)	% (tM)	N	% (T)
Yes	Abraham	293	33.6	54.1	190	21.8	57.6	483	55.4
	Jacob	134	15.4	24.7	86	9.9	26.1	220	25.2
	Ruth	33	3.8	6.1	22	2.5	6.7	55	6.3
No	Abraham	76	8.7	14.0	51	5.8	15.5	127	14.6
	Jacob	248	28.4	45.8	151	17.3	45.8	399	45.8
	Ruth	468	53.7	86.3	281	32.2	85.2	749	85.9
Perhaps. but I remember it partially	Abraham	173	19.8	31.9	89	10.2	27.0	262	30.0
	Jacob	160	18.3	29.5	93	10.7	28.2	253	29.0
	Ruth	41	4.7	7.6	27	3.1	8.2	68	7.8

The story of Abraham is the most well-known Bible story within the sample, with 55.4% of respondents stating that they were already familiar with it and 30.0% recalling it partially. However, 14.6% of the sample reported not knowing the story of Abraham after reading the excerpt, which represents a minority in absolute terms but is a significant percentage, slightly above the 9.9% who declare having no familiarity with biblical stories. The story of Jacob was less familiar, as only 25.5% of the sample selected the option "Yes", while 29.0% indicated "Perhaps, but I remember it partially", and 45.8% stated they did not know the story at all. Lastly, the story of Ruth was known to only 6.3% of the sample, with 7.8% recalling it partially, and 85.9% being unfamiliar with it altogether. There were no significant differences between the male and female subgroups, both of which followed the trends described above.

It should be noted that, during the questionnaire design process, the research group deliberately selected three biblical passages that were expected to have varying levels of presence in contemporary youth culture. The questionnaire responses confirmed this initial assumption. Additionally, there is a significant difference between asking respondents whether they remember any Bible stories in general (without specifying which ones) and inquiring about their specific knowledge of certain narratives. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the stories of Jacob and Ruth are less frequently encountered in liturgical settings compared to the call of Abraham, which is likely more prominent in catechism and religious education at school.

A further confirmation of the type of biblical knowledge possessed by our sample of young people emerges from the responses to the open-ended question asking them to indicate whether there is a Bible episode that has particularly struck them. In this case, we did not provide any biblical passages or suggest specific episodes; instead, respondents had to search their own memories (however vague) for texts they considered significant. Out of 872 respondents: 96 left the response blank, 239 wrote "no" or provided a similar explanation indicating that they were unable to name a personally significant biblical passage. This results in a total non-response rate of 38.4%, significantly higher than the 9.9% who had previously stated they did not know any Bible stories at all. However, this discrepancy is understandable: the open-ended question was more demanding, requiring respondents to not only recall a biblical episode but also to identify it as personally significant. As we will see, some responses demonstrate only an approximate knowledge of the texts, but they still reflect some level of engagement with the material as a personal reference point.

It could be interesting to administer the same questionnaire to a sample of people with Jewish or Evangelical Christian backgrounds, to verify if the number of those who

declare to have personally read the biblical texts would be higher, as well as the knowledge of these three specific episodes from the Old Testament.

4.2. Themes from Biblical Narratives

Some of the questionnaire items explicitly explored the narrative themes that respondents identified in the biblical texts we presented to them. The analysis revealed several interesting and significant findings, shedding light on how young people interpret these stories and the key themes they perceive within them. The sample identified "The test" (53.4%) and "The call/Vocation" (50.0%) as the most relevant narrative themes related to the story of Abraham, followed by "Faithfulness" (41.4%), "Courage" (36.5%), and "The overcoming of the test", which was selected by almost one-fifth of the respondents (18.8%). For the story of Jacob, 40.0% of respondents indicated "The overcoming of the test" as the most relevant theme, followed by "The test" (34.4%) and "Courage" (30.2%). Lastly, "Faithfulness" (52.2%) and "Loving solidarity" (52.1%) were the most frequently chosen themes for the story of Ruth, with "Courage" being the third most selected, though less popular, option (20.9%)" (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024, p. 7).

The analysis reveals a reading of the texts that primarily emphasizes faith and religious experience as a heroic act, something that individuals undertake through their own strength and that requires great courage. Only in the passage about Ruth (which was by far the least well-known) do other important aspects of the Christian religious experience emerge more clearly, such as trust in God and loving solidarity—themes that many respondents may more readily associate with the New Testament rather than the Old Testament narratives.

Using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2016), we conducted an immersive reading of the responses to the open-ended question about Bible stories, which was formulated as follows: "if there is a particular Bible story that you liked, could you name it and explain why?". A key finding—beyond the variety of stories mentioned—is that each respondent identifies their chosen story using their own words, which do not always match the terminology used by others. Nevertheless, we were able to categorize several distinct groups of commonly recurring responses, despite the 38.4% of respondents who did not recall any particularly significant Bible episode. Additionally, 21 respondents explicitly articulated the relevance and significance of Bible stories in general, without mentioning any specific narrative.

Among the Old Testament episodes mentioned, the most frequently cited are: the story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea (51 respondents), the sacrifice of Isaac (34 responses), Noah's Ark (26 responses), the story of Adam and Eve, from creation to sin (22 responses), the story of Joseph (20 responses), with some referring to him as "the king of dreams", Sodom and Gomorrah (12 responses), Cain and Abel (12 responses), The calling of Abraham (10 responses), The Tower of Babel (9 responses), David and Goliath (8 responses), the figure of Job (6 responses), Jonah in the whale (5 responses), with one respondent explicitly drawing a parallel to *Pinocchio*. Additionally, many other Old Testament episodes were cited, including Daniel in the lion's den, Tobiah and Sarah, King Solomon's judgment (4 responses), Naaman the Syrian, the anointing of David, Naomi and Ruth, and Judith killing Holofernes. In total, 36 Old Testament episodes were mentioned, accumulating 258 responses overall. The most cited episodes from the New Testament are: the Prodigal Son (48 responses), the Good Samaritan (27 responses), the multiplication of loaves and fishes (24 responses), the lost sheep (11 responses), the healing of the blind man (10 responses), the Book of Revelation (9 responses), Jesus and the adulteress (8 responses), the Parable of the Talents (8 responses), and the crucifixion of Jesus (8 responses). Many other episodes are cited (with a total of 48), ranging from the conversion of St. Paul to the figure of Judas (cited by 7 respondents), to the disciples of Emmaus and Peter's

denial, which receive—in total—238 responses, plus one that indicates St. Francis as a biblical character.

4.3. Personal Meanings Behind the Biblical Narratives

Some responses are very brief, simply mentioning the episode's title of the Bible, while others provide a short summary of the story or explicitly explain why they find it meaningful (as requested by the question addressed in the previous section). In some cases, the reasons appear to be more emotional, such as respondents citing Noah's Ark due to their love for animals or one individual mentioning the healing of the epileptic while stating that they suffer from epilepsy. Other responses are more elaborate, offering multiple types of reasoning. These can be broadly categorized into three main groups:

1. Theological/Spiritual Motivations: Respondents highlight religious or faith-related significance in the narratives;
2. Motivations Linked to a Distant Encounter with Biblical Texts: These responses suggest a connection to childhood experiences, catechism, or school teachings;
3. Critical or Polemical Motivations: Some respondents express skepticism, critique biblical stories, or question their relevance.

There are individuals who demonstrate a deep religious sensitivity and select a biblical episode for spiritual or even theological reasons. For example, one respondent who mentioned the Good Samaritan provided the following reasoning:

> The parable of the Good Samaritan moves me because, unlike the other passersby, he does not ignore the assaulted person who needs care and support. Pope Francis recently commented on this story, highlighting the difference between 'seeing' reality and 'looking at' reality. All the other passersby only saw the man in need—they did not truly look at him, did not take that moment to meet his eyes and understand his suffering. The parable of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the one that most concretely shows us the way to combat indifference. (n. 277)

In this case, the respondent does not merely offer a theological reading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan but also implicitly references Pope Francis' commentary on it in Fratelli tutti (nn. 63–65). This suggests a solid ecclesial culture, enriched by readings of the Church's magisterium. A similar depth of reflection emerges in another response, which cites the episode of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The respondent notes that this story has been the subject of numerous artistic representations but, more importantly, highlights its spiritual significance: an encounter with the Risen Christ that restores hope to disoriented disciples and is revealed in the breaking of the bread. The reflection concludes with an exhortation to Christians, framed in the first-person plural: "Too often we Christians forget that ours is the religion of the Cross but also of the Resurrection—not a suffering that ends in itself, but one that points the way to hope" (n. 309).

In several responses, the memory of childhood readings of biblical episodes emerges—likely encountered during catechism years or through Mass readings. These memories, though not recent, have left a mark based on what could capture a child's imagination. Many Old Testament stories are recalled in this way. For example, this is evident in the various responses mentioning the story of Adam and Eve, as well as in those who recall Noah's Ark with an emphasis on the salvation of the animals. A similar dynamic appears in references to the figure of Joseph, described as the "King of Dreams". This phrase directly cites the animated film *Joseph: King of Dreams*, released in 2000 in the United States and widely circulated in Italy. It is reasonable to assume that this movie was used in catechism meetings or religion classes, shaping young people's familiarity with the biblical narrative.

Given that most of those who perceive themselves as distant from the experience of faith likely did not answer this question, there are some responses that reveal a remote

religious upbringing, which has been reinterpreted over time in critical or polemical terms. One response cites the episode of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, "because it shows the hypocrisy of religion" (n. 128), without further clarification. However, it can be inferred that the respondent feels discomfort with the fact that this biblical episode is often used to justify moral condemnation of homosexuality. Another response, from a person who identifies as an atheist, offers a critical analysis of the Book of Job, recognizing the inadequacy of the simplistic explanations given by Job's friends but stating that they do not appreciate the overall meaning of the text:

> The Old Testament feels somewhat hostile to me, but (. . .) I find the story of Job interesting because, as an atheist, I do not understand it. (. . .) I do not like how this story ends, or perhaps my lack of belief has led me to misinterpret it: after all the suffering a man endures, can God's response really be reduced to "you have sinned a little out of pride because you thought you could interpret my actions better than I"? Honestly, the idea of a good and merciful God begins to fade long before the question of theodicy. . .. (n. 448)

The lengthy response, from which we have quoted an excerpt, reveals a structured religious background, with significant and thoughtful biblical readings. However, these readings are now being reinterpreted and reworked considering the respondent's new spiritual and religious identity. In this case, the respondent explicitly identifies as an atheist and likely feels the need to articulate, first and foremost to herself, the "good reasons" for having distanced herself from a religious experience that she had probably embraced with conviction at an earlier stage of her life.

One final insight can be indirectly drawn from the analysis of responses to the thirty-seventh question (the last open-ended question), which asks: "Would you like to share a character and/or a story that you consider important in shaping your understanding of life? Could you explain why?". Most respondents (459 people) either skipped the question or stated that they did not have any character they viewed as a source of inspiration. Additionally, 382 people mentioned non-biblical figures, including protagonists from the Harry Potter saga, parents or other significant individuals, characters from TV series, or video games. Only 21 respondents referred to characters from biblical stories, and among them, the most frequently mentioned (with a total of six responses) was Jesus, cited either as a model for life or as the savior of humanity. Other biblical figures previously encountered in the study also appeared in responses, including Abraham, Moses, Job, the Prodigal Son, and Mary.

5. Data Discussion

A growing person constructs their own existential narrative (Moscato 1998; Pickett 2023), drawing from other narratives encountered in their living environment. Our initial hypothesis aimed to verify whether certain biblical or fantasy narratives could be considered "structuring" in the identity formation of young people.

This hypothesis was only partially confirmed and applies to a relatively small percentage of our sample. Our findings align with other studies on significant texts, including literary works (Koopman and Hakemulder 2015), which suggest that such texts can provide valuable opportunities for self-reflection and personal decision-making. However, our data indicates that this does not necessarily happen spontaneously—except for those who already consider these texts meaningful for personal reasons. The ways in which some Christian respondents refer to biblical passages they find significant suggest that these texts genuinely serve as sources of inspiration in shaping their personal identity. The previously cited response referencing the Parable of the Good Samaritan (n. 277) is a clear

example of a religious reading of the biblical text, seen as a source of spiritual nourishment and guidance.

It is interesting to note that another respondent mentioned the same passage as significant, referring to a time in the past when they were "closer to the Catholic faith":

> One of the stories that struck me the most and remained most impressed in my mind, during my time of closeness to the Catholic faith, is that of the "Good Samaritan". The story speaks of mutual help that can exist even between people who are different or even enemies, and it was often told or cited as a reference during friendship education moments I experienced within the Scouts. I have always found this parable very simple, free from supernatural events or incomprehensible facts related to the divine (in which I still do not believe), yet extremely meaningful and powerful in its message. (n. 301)

This statement suggests a biblical text that was once read through the eyes of a believer at a certain stage in life, remaining important for its human significance even after biographical changes led this person to distance themselves from faith. However, they have not distanced themselves from the teachings related to friendship, solidarity, and care for others. One can almost tangibly perceive in this text what Moscato (2022) asserts when discussing the survival of the effects of religious formation, even in a secularized form.

It is important to consider that the ways in which biographical trajectories develop concerning religious affiliation, especially during adolescence, can vary significantly (Schnitker et al. 2021). In some cases, religious disaffiliation occurs without trauma, while in others, the distancing process can be more traumatic. In the first case, there may be a vague memory of a meaningful encounter with religious narratives during childhood, which is retained as a positive recollection:

> I liked the story of Adam and Eve and the creation of the world by God in seven days because, as a child, I read the story in the Bible on my own, and in elementary school, during religion class, we watched engaging films about it. (n. 273)

In this case, the reference to a childhood reading experience, situated in the elementary school years, is explicitly stated. However, we can interpret similarly the recollections of the Old Testament episode of Noah's Ark, often closely linked to a love for animals, or certain biblical stories retrieved through cinematic narratives, such as the story of Joseph in "The King of Dreams", as previously mentioned. A more mature reading of the biblical text, which has extended at least into adolescence, would likely be marked by an awareness of the need to interpret such texts in a more symbolic and allegorical way (Cope 2022). In contrast, a more literal or emotional reading is the legacy of a childhood religious education that was soon abandoned, even without the occurrence of traumatic events.

In other cases, the memory is more recent and may leave a deeper imprint, allowing for the internalization of moral teachings and the recognition of certain behaviors as having human value, even if they are no longer associated with their religious significance. This type of reading has likely led to a higher level of engagement and the ability to interpret biblical narratives in a more mature way, moving beyond a literal or emotional approach (Carr 2004). In general, a more mature reading of biblical texts also involves a contextual understanding that goes beyond the limitations of fragmented readings. As previously noted (Wright 2020), an overly fragmented approach to the Bible, focusing only on certain episodes, risks generating misunderstandings and superficial interpretations. Those who demonstrate a strong understanding of the human values present in biblical texts have likely had the opportunity to engage with them in the context of more structured educational paths.

In other cases, there are more polemical statements, likely linked to a more traumatic departure from religious life that has left inner wounds. Consider, for example, the person who cites the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because it "reveals all the hypocrisy of religion" (n. 128) or the one who identifies Judas as an alternative hero who "truly reflects human weaknesses in his way of being and (...) always seems the most sincere and real to me" (n. 156). It is probably considering such wounds that we can interpret certain more critical responses, where for instance, the idea of "blind faith" is emphasized in reference to the figure of Abraham. Particularly interesting is the statement of someone who demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the *Book of Job*—indicating that their past relationship with the biblical text had been deep—yet now reads it through a critical lens:

> Job challenges God, God condemns reason and preaches absolute surrender to faith. I believe this is a powerful representation of what the Catholic Church is and how history has evolved over the years at the expense of reason (just think of Bruno, Spinoza, Galileo, or Descartes). (n. 288)

This is an understandable representation when considering individuals who were raised with a Christian education in childhood but later abandoned religious formation during adolescence, engaging in "stopping rituals intended to facilitate connection to God, often in the form of ceasing public (e.g., worship service attendance) and private (e.g., prayer and scripture study) religious practices" (Hardy and Taylor 2024, p. 185). This process of progressive religious disaffiliation often begins with doubts related to the moral norms associated with the Christian faith and gradually extends to questioning the very image of God and the religious experience itself.

6. Conclusions and Future Directions

Our journey began with a cultural hypothesis developed within the theoretical framework. Education is an activity that supports human beings in their process of identity formation, which occurs in narrative terms (Ricoeur 1984), which is completed by the construction of one's personal identity (Xodo 2019) and the attainment of full capacity to act freely and responsibly (Moscato 1998). Educators can use narrative tools, both by creating their own stories and by drawing from the great narratives available in their culture. Biblical narratives can be considered particularly significant instruments for fostering the construction of meaningful perspectives. The real effectiveness of this approach, however, does not simply depend on the fact that children have encountered biblical narratives in some way, but requires that this encounter has been meaningful from an educational perspective. To achieve this result, it is necessary to adopt an appropriate methodology, which is not the subject of this essay but is explored in the contributions of other scholars. Let us cite, for example, a brief passage from a text that proposes a specific methodology for the educational use of biblical texts, based on a narrative philosophy (inspired by Ricoeur) and a narrative theology:

> If pupils are to engage with the Bible as more than a source of proof-texts for stereotyped moral dilemmas, the phases of learning set out in this article will need to be realized in resources and reading tools that acknowledge the Bible's complexity and the way in which it is understood by Christians as a collection of narratives that inform the development of character and virtue. (Reed et al. 2013, p. 309)

There is also a concurrent hypothesis, not explored in this study, suggesting that certain fantasy narratives might play a similar role, especially for those who have not had the opportunity to engage with biblical texts.

The research presented here is part of a broader study (Caputo and Rompianesi 2024) that examines the relationship a sample of 18- to 20-year-old students has with biblical and fantasy narratives. The findings reveal a complex and multifaceted picture, of which we focus here on certain aspects of biblical narratives, highlighting different possible approaches to biblical texts. These approaches are generally shaped by readings heard during Mass, catechism lessons, or religious education classes at school.

The most significant insight emerging from the data analysis and discussion concerns the depth of personal engagement with biblical texts, which varies depending on the age at which one stopped exploring their meaning. If religious practices were abandoned in early childhood, the understanding of biblical texts often remains at a very basic level. Conversely, if an individual continued reflecting on these texts over time, their comprehension can be more profound. To better understand how biblical narratives have been structuring and meaningful for some individuals, it would be important, as previously mentioned, to also examine the ways in which these narratives were encountered, not just the contexts in which they were encountered. Our questionnaire does not provide precise elements in this regard, but it helps us to infer in which contexts and stages of life the encounter with biblical narratives may have been most significant.

A key factor is whether the person maintained their religious affiliation or, at some point, distanced themselves from faith—either gradually or through a more traumatic break. Some critical but well-informed interpretations of biblical texts suggest that these individuals had a solid Christian formation but later left their faith at a relatively mature age, often through experiences that were not entirely peaceful or without inner conflict.

The research design presents certain limitations, stemming from the decision to focus on a convenience sample selected from four Italian regions, within cultural environments where the predominant religious sensitivity was that of Catholic Christianity. It may be worthwhile to administer the same questionnaire in different contexts, particularly in settings with a significant presence of Christians from Protestant churches, where the practice of directly reading biblical texts is presumed to be more widespread. Additionally, one could consider adapting the questionnaire for use in other cultures, whether similar or more distant. In such cases, it would likely be necessary to forgo the use of biblical texts in favor of symbolic narratives or religious stories that hold greater significance within those cultural contexts.

This is a highly promising research path, particularly because the role of narrative thought in shaping personal identity—both during the educational years and beyond—is full of fascinating insights and lends itself to exploration from a variety of perspectives.

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Informed Consent Statement: The study did not collect any personal data, and the participants are not identifiable. The opportunity to give informed consent was presented verbally or via email to the participants during each administration session, before providing the link to the questionnaire. The participants were informed on the contents and aim of research and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study with no consequences. The first page presented a brief introduction to the questionnaire in the form of a message from the research leader.

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Article

Religious Education in Baden-Powell's Writings

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Abstract: Robert Baden-Powell is well known as the founder of Scouting, an educational movement that spread rapidly around the world after 1907. This article aims to analyse an aspect of his writings that has been little studied: the religious dimension. A deeply religious man, Baden-Powell recognised the presence of God not only in the Bible but also in nature. It is interesting that some of his convictions are now, almost a hundred years later, topical educational insights. Baden-Powell encourages all Scouts in the world to cultivate religious practice by saying: "There can be no atheist Scout". He offers concrete insights that commit the scout educator to take on the innate religious need that many young people express in a personal search for faith motivation.

Keywords: Baden-Powell; faith; nature; non-formal education; religious education; scouting

1. Introduction

In the Italian context, there are numerous publications, mostly of a popular nature, dedicated to making the figure of Baden-Powell (1857–1941) more widely known. It should be pointed out that the founder of the Scout Movement did not delve into religious education with systematic reflections of his own, as he did with other subjects, but repeatedly returned to the subject, to which he showed great attention and an exquisite sensitivity, marked by his typical sense of concreteness. This historical and pedagogical contribution aims to offer a first approach to this often-neglected aspect, starting from a careful analysis of what emerges from those of his writings that are published in Italian. There are currently no statistics available on the spread of scouting in Italy. By 2024, there are expected to be about 190,000 scouts and guides belonging to the AGESCI ('Associazione Guide e Scouts Cattolici Italiani' [Association of Italian Catholic Guides and Scouts]), i.e., the main scout association in the Italian Catholic tradition.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a first approach to the dimension of religious education, a little-known and mostly neglected topic compared to other aspects of the Scout purpose and principles, based on Baden-Powell's writings published in Italian. From a methodological point of view, this study attempts to recompose Baden-Powell's reflections on religious education within an organic framework. It does not intend to be exhaustive and so is limited to an initial approach offering a first reflection that, in subsequent studies, can be compared with the contributions of other authors who were contemporaries of Baden-Powell or those who have subsequently addressed the topic. Furthermore, it will be possible to study how the scout educational proposal has been declined in various countries from a religious point of view.

The first scouting experiences, conducted in 1907 in England, soon spread rapidly around the world thanks to the publication in 1908 of the handbook, *Scouting for Boys* (Baden-Powell 1908). It should not be forgotten that scouting was viewed with much suspicion in Italy: there were numerous criticisms that it was of Protestant origin, as its

founder was the son of a Protestant pastor. The Catholic world, and in particular 'La Civiltà Cattolica', was raising doubts, perplexities and concerns. In short, the proposed study is not intended to be exhaustive, but to provide an initial reflection that can be compared in subsequent studies with contributions made by other writers who were contemporaries of Baden-Powell or those who have subsequently addressed the subject.

A careful reading of Baden-Powell's writings allows us to grasp a perhaps unprecedented dimension of his personality, that of an educator who was characterised by a profound spirituality that shines through and imprints the entire Scout educational proposal (Dal Toso 2007). Section 2 considers the invitation that he addressed to the scouts: read the book of the Bible and the book of Nature, learning to recognize God's presence there. Section 3 illustrates how Baden-Powell's religion permeates the Scout educational proposal and how, through Scout activities, it is possible to inspire faith in God in even the most educationally troubled boy. Section 4 provides some guidance on religious education. Section 5 contains some of Baden-Powell's reflections on non-denominational religiosity. Section 6 deals with critical and concrete points of reflection that commit the Scout educator to respond to the innate religious need that many young people express in their personal search for faith motivation. After hypothesising possible comparisons with other writers interested in religious education (Section 7), the article argues that Baden-Powell's focus on the religious dimension characterises the Scout educational proposal and would be distorted if neglected by the educator.

2. The Two Main Books: The Bible and Nature

The origins of Baden-Powell's religious spirit can be traced back to the upbringing that he received within his family: from his father, a Protestant pastor and professor of geometry at Oxford University, he learned a love for the books of the Bible, which he learned to read along with his other book, that of Nature, with the guidance of his mother. When she became a widow, she used to take her children on long exploratory walks in the countryside, awaking in them curiosity regarding animals and plants, and guiding them to observe and admire nature.

Thus, Baden-Powell learns that two great books speak of God: the Bible and Nature. He feels that he is part of a vast universe, he feels the strong communion that binds him to Nature and makes him capable of living in harmony with it, but above all, he manifests himself as a person with remarkable sensitivity regarding the sacred and a deeply contemplative spirit. With awe and gratitude, he is able to look at the works of the Creator with ever-new eyes, full of admiration. Faced with the splendour of Creation, he is able to pause; he learns how to remain silent and takes time to savour and enjoy the infinite beauty of the universe, which sends him back to its author, God. With this kind of attitude, man understands his littleness and recognises God as his Creator, with whom he can feel in more intimate contact.

Two recommendations are made to the Scouts: to read the ancient and wonderful books of the Bible and to observe and study that of Nature through the beauties of Creation. Since the wonders of nature exert a great fascination for children and young people—who are naturally inclined to religious discourse—Baden-Powell advocates the need to help them cultivate a taste for beauty by learning to open up to the vast horizons of the universe, so that they can recognise God's presence there. In fact, observing the life of Nature, God's temple, is the best preaching method to help bring them closer to Him, who is also present in the human body, which is His masterpiece to be guarded and developed, thanks also to those talents that He has entrusted to mankind. Baden-Powell believes that "If the simple elemental religion of Nature were more generally used in the first opening of the child's

mind to religion, in place of the theology that neither appeals to nor is understood by him, the result would be very different" (Baden-Powell 1921).

These indications were also referenced by Pope John Paul II:

> Your founder, Baden Powell, loved to point out the two great books that you must always know how to read: the book of nature and the book of the Word of God, the Bible. This is reliable and fruitful advice. By loving nature, living in it and respecting it, you learn to join your voice to the thousand voices of the woods that praise the Lord; immersed in nature, you continue to celebrate your moments of prayer and your liturgies, which will linger in the hearts of the young as unforgettable experiences. By cultivating your tradition of love and study of the Bible, you will always find new paths and ways for an original and effective catechesis, as part of the Italian Church's catechesis and marked by the wealth of symbols and occasions that are valuable to scouting. (Paul 1997)

3. Scouting and Religion

Baden-Powell is convinced that religion is the fundamental factor that pervades Scouting and affirms the possibility of being able to bring faith in God to even the most educationally problematic child through Scouting: "I have been asked to describe more fully what was in my mind as regards religion when I instituted Scouting and Guiding. I was asked: 'Where does religion come in?' Well, my reply is: 'It does not come in at all. It is already there. It is the fundamental factor underlying Scouting and Guiding'" (Baden-Powell 1926). Then, he specifies: "There is no religious side to the Movement. The whole of it is based on religion, that is, on the realisation and service of God" (Baden-Powell 1926).

Here, it is written that "Scout activities are a means by which the worst hooligan can be led to nobler feelings and faith in God can be born in him" (Baden-Powell 1919, p. 45).

After all, according to Baden-Powell, "The boy is naturally inclined towards religion, but it is necessary to educate him critically and gradually" (Baden-Powell 1963, p. 315). He repeats: "The boy is naturally inclined to religion, but to instruct him in the points which may appeal to the adult has often the result of either boring him off it or of making him a prig. A sure way to gain his wholehearted realisation of God is through Nature study, and of his Christian duties through the Scout's practice of good turns, etc". (Baden-Powell 1951, p. 243).

Convinced that it is necessary to give a religious basis to life, Baden-Powell suggests:

> If you are really out to make your way to success—i.e., happiness—you must not only avoid being sucked in by irreligious humbugs, but you must have a religious basis to your life. This is not a mere matter of going to church, of knowing Bible history, or understanding theology. Many men are sincerely religious almost without knowing it and without having studied it. Religion, very briefly stated, means:
>
> Firstly: recognising who and what is God.
>
> Secondly: making the best of the life that He has given one and doing what He wants of us. This is mainly doing something for other people.
>
> That should be your belief, not as a matter of thought for Sundays only, but as one to live up to in every hour and every phase of your daily life.
>
> As steps towards gaining these two points and avoiding atheism, there are two things I would recommend you to do.
>
> One is to read that wonderful old book, the Bible, which, in addition to its Divine Revelation, you will find a wonderfully interesting story-book of history and poetry, as well as morality.

> The other is to read that other wonderful old book, the Book of Nature, and to see and study all you can of the wonders and beauties that she has provided for your enjoyment. And then turn your mind to how you can best serve God while you still have the life that He has lent you. (Baden-Powell 1922, pp. 176–77)

In summary, he reiterates: "Religion seems a very simple thing: 1st: Love and serve God. 2nd: Love and serve your neighbour" (Baden-Powell 1963, p. 231). On the methodological level, Baden-Powell specifies:

> Religion can only be 'caught', not 'taught'. It is not a dressing donned from outside, put on for Sunday wear. It is a true part of a boy's character, a development of soul, and not a veneer that may peel off. It is a matter of personality, of inner conviction, not of instruction. The actions of a very large proportion of our men are, at present, very little guided by religious conviction. This may be attributed to a great extent to the fact that often *instruction* instead of *education* has been employed in the religious training of the boy. (Baden-Powell 1944a, p. 58)

Baden-Powell takes up the issue of religious education. He states: "Religion can and ought to be taught to the boy, but not in a milk-and-watery way, or in a mysterious and lugubrious manner; he is very ready to receive it if it is shown in its heroic side and as a natural everyday quality in every proper man, and it can be well introduced to boys through the study of Nature" (Baden-Powell 1944b). And again, he suggests: "If the simple elemental religion of Nature were more generally used in the first opening of the child's mind to religion, in place of the theology that neither appeals to nor is understood by him, the result would be very different" (Baden-Powell 1921).

Analysing the situation of young people in his time, he perceives the existence of a religious need, to the extent that he states: "Among our young people today, there is a serious desire for religion, a religion that they can understand and put into practice" (Baden-Powell 1922, p. 195).

4. Guidelines of an Education in Religion

Baden-Powell's position is clear: "By religion, I do not imply the formal Sunday respect paid to the Deity, but the higher realisation of God as perpetually within and around us, and the consequent higher plane of thought and of action in His service" (Baden-Powell 1920).

Analysing in an acute and critical manner the pedagogical methods of his time, Baden-Powell notes that in catechism courses, the concern is to instruct rather than to educate; furthermore, religious formation often resolves itself into empty ritualism, into formal Sunday homage paid to the divinity and into functions that have no impact on daily life.

This is why many young people slip into indifference and their actions are minimally guided by religious convictions. Moreover, the decline in their religious attendance is due to a serious neglect of and lack of Christian formation, as they are unable to connect what they were taught in catechism classes, of which they have vague memories, with their own conduct in adult life. Hence, there is a need for religious education, a theme that could be summed up in the invitation addressed to Cub Scouts: "Drink the good air of God" (Baden-Powell 1931, p. 150).

Practical and concrete man that he is, Baden-Powell knows how to combine spirituality with action in an original and happy synthesis. In fact, he never succumbs to certain forms of mysticism or spiritualism, nor to the temptation to resolve everything by simply "doing", or operating. Scouting does not inculcate negative precepts in the boy he addresses, nor does it propose to him theoretical ideals or generic behaviour that have to do with an abstract concept of "doing good". At the methodological level, Scouting is characterised by the direct involvement of the boy in question, who actively commits himself through the Promise of doing "his best" to fulfil his duty to God. The Promise is a way of living with the

highest fidelity to God, which means not only relying on His goodness and never forgetting Him but also remembering Him in everything one does, doing His will by enacting, in a way appropriate to one's age and abilities, the ideal of loving one's neighbour in all circumstances during the short time one lives on this earth. For the Scout, putting the principles of Christianity into practice in daily life means being faithful to the Promise, keeping the Law and performing a good deed every day. The exercise of the latter leads to developing the habit of concretely doing something for the benefit of someone else, i.e., to encourage one's own readiness to help others in all circumstances and to internalise the attitude of making others happy, constantly overcoming the temptation of selfishness.

Baden-Powell repeatedly invites us to consider the urgency of doing good to others, immediately and without delay, performing all the good deeds that depend on oneself, as if there were no other possibility, even in the immediate future. This is the best way for the child to adopt a positive and active attitude and become a Christian not in theory but in practice.

Regardless of religious denomination, the founder of Scouting intended to educate new generations in the love of God, which is expressed in service to one's neighbour. In every man, there is the spark of Love, which, if it is put into practice, grows more and more every day through service to others in small things as well as in big ones, which implies sacrificing one's own pleasure or convenience to lend a hand to those in need. Baden-Powell recommends that Scouts let Love guide their thoughts and actions. Furthermore, he is convinced that the more one dispenses Love to one's neighbour, the more one develops the "divine particle" that is in every man, i.e., the soul, until it becomes a part of God Himself. Thus, every man finds the happiness of being a player on God's team and the joy of paradise, here and now, on earth.

The most powerful weapon to successfully face all the difficulties one may encounter is Love. When faced with the uncertainty of carrying out an action, Baden-Powell invites the scout to turn to God and ask Him if He wants him to do it; he also suggests that the scout ask himself what Christ would have done if He had been in his place under the same circumstances.

No religious denomination rejects peace and goodwill, which are the fundamental aim of the training course proposed in Scouting and the highest form of civic duty: putting them into practice is a concrete way of realising the kingdom of God. Perhaps somewhat naively, Baden-Powell hoped that the Scout brotherhood, spreading with extraordinary rapidity in various nations, regardless of class, creed or race, would be a sure step in the desired direction, that is, of making the civilisation of Love prevail.

> To believe that Peace and Goodwill—instead of war and ill will—constitute the reign of God in the world is in itself a 'religion'. It is a religion to which all can subscribe, and one which no denomination will deny. Its practice is citizenship of the highest type.
>
> After all, are not these the tenets which are, and always have been, the underlying aim of our training in the Scouts? If you get them more fully understood and more widely extended it would be a direct and practical, if minor, contribution towards eventually bringing about the Kingdom of God in the world. [. . .]
>
> One man cannot hope to do much, but tiny individual coelenterata have built coral islands by co-operation in an ideal. It needs a highly optimistic acorn to start hopefully on producing an oak tree. (Baden-Powell 1939, p. 1)

At a time in history that was marked by the outbreak of world conflicts, Baden-Powell questions such tragic events: war stems from the fact that we neglect the bond of fraternity of the one human family by cultivating petty differences. Yet, in spite of the drama of

these unfolding events, he presents the Scouts with the utopian challenge to help develop peace by respecting others, because we are all children of one Father. In order to build the kingdom of God, with a repetitiveness that, at times, can even seem suffocating, he continually reiterates the urgency of educating the younger generations in goodwill and availability to others.

Baden-Powell's attitude is not pure naivety, obstinacy in achieving a goal in any way, stubbornness in realising a tenaciously pursued project, or an illusion of being able to save the world by engaging in a fight against windmills, but is instead an expression of profound trust in the possibilities inherent in an educational commitment, which he perceives can contribute to change and the improvement of the world, to achieve the realisation of the kingdom of peace and fraternity among men on earth.

In this task that he perceives as his own, Baden-Powell also expresses the opinion that Scouting is part of God's will. In fact, beyond all his expectations and subjective intentions, he interprets the development and spread of what might initially have been only a relatively important game worldwide as an evolution of human invention that God has used. The optimism that characterises Baden-Powell's personality does not consist of an attitude of superficiality or levity but stems from a profound spiritual dimension that, in the certainty that "For God we are, to God we go" (Baden-Powell 1926, p. 23), leads him to face human existence and even its conclusion with confidence and great serenity.

5. A Non-Confessional Religious Attitude

In scouting, there can be no division arising from the difference between religious denominations because the first objective is the active realisation of goodness. This is the perspective to aim for in the formation of scouts, who must have a religion in which the fundamental principles consist of loving and serving God and one's neighbour. Gratitude for what we have received from God is expressed in service rendered to others, towards whom Baden-Powell invites us to be helpful, generous and grateful.

Regardless of religious denomination, Baden-Powell intends to educate the younger generation in the love of God, which expresses itself in service to one's neighbour. In every man there is the spark of Love which, if it is put into practice, grows stronger every day through service to others in small things as well as in big things, which implies sacrificing one's own pleasure or convenience to lend a hand to those in need. Baden-Powell repeatedly urges Scouts and Guides to have love at the forefront of their thoughts and actions.

Furthermore, he is convinced that the more we dispense Love to our neighbour, the more we develop the 'divine particle' that is in every man, i.e., our soul until it becomes a part of God himself. Thus, every man finds the happiness of being a player in God's team, the joy of paradise, here and now on earth.

It is interesting that some convictions are described that now, almost a hundred years later, are topical educational insights. Baden-Powell seems to be ahead of his time, with an educational proposal marked by an ecumenical dimension, expressed by the Scout fraternity, which makes no distinction between social classes or nationalities.

> "As regards religion, we are inter-denominational. We do not assume or interfere with the prerogative of parents or pastors by giving religious instruction, but we insist on the observance and practice of whatever form of religion the boy professes". (Baden-Powell 1951, p. 294)

In fact, Scouting does not defend the superiority of any religious creed over others but intends to promote a precise educational intentionality: to help boys fulfil their duty to God through living life to the fullest, with daily attention to their neighbour. This is a precise purpose that can characterise a 'successful' life. To embark on the road to happiness,

a religious basis must be given to life. Therefore, religion is a part of Scouting; it is the fundamental factor that pervades Scout education.

Baden-Powell addresses the issue of religious education in groups open to young people belonging to different denominations. Everyone is expected to belong to a religious group and should be encouraged to follow their own manifestations of worship. Although this is in different ways, all religions worship God. Each scout must be accompanied in the formation according to his own religion, bearing in mind that transversal elements, common to all religious expression, are the love of God and love of one's neighbour. The religious moment, which is open to all denominations, should be of interest to the boy and be on his scale, i.e., conducted in such a way that he can follow and understand it, and characterised by hymns, prayers and short speeches.

Even if it is not possible to go to church or to interdenominational units, in a manner suited to different spiritual needs, Baden-Powell recommends devoting a moment of the day to a simple prayer of thanksgiving to God, from whom one can also ask for the strength to serve.

The following invocation, written by Baden-Powell and known as the "international prayer", is interesting because it was designed for worldwide gatherings of scouts from different countries.

> Father of us all,
>
> We meet before Thee here to-day, numerous in the lands we come from and in the races we represent, but one in our Brotherhood under Thy Divine Fatherhood.
>
> We come before Thee with hearts grateful and gladdened by the many blessings Thou hast granted us and thankful that our Movement has prospered as acceptable in Thy sight. In return we would lay on Thine Altar, as our humble thank offering, such sacrifice as we can make of self in service for others. We ask that during our communion here together we may, under Thy Divine Inspiration, gain a widened outlook, a clearer vision of all that lies open before us and of our opportunity. Thus, we may then go forth with strengthened faith to carry on our mission of heightening the ideals and powers of manhood, and of helping through closer understanding to bring about Thy happier Rule of Peace and Goodwill upon Earth.
>
> Father, hear us. Amen. (Baden-Powell 2022, p. 43)

6. Some Further Analyses

In this timely analysis, it can be seen that Baden-Powell offers critical and concrete insights that commit the scout educator to take on the innate religious need that many young people express in a personal search for faith motivation. These no longer tolerate the scout being governed by dogmas but instead by the search for knowledge, faith, motivation and the fundamental principles themselves, rather than the various ritualised forms with which they have been disguised.

"We aim for the practice of Christianity in everyday life and dealings, and not merely the profession of its theology on Sundays" (Baden-Powell 1940). For Baden-Powell, religion does not consist of a formal Sunday homage or an outward garment worn on Sundays, but of an awareness of God, which is relevant to each man's life. Since the child is naturally inclined to religion, they must, therefore, be educated gradually and certainly not by dogmatic and theoretical instruction, nor by imparting precepts and notions of theology. A school-style lesson risks boring them, whereas they could be initiated into religious education, which cannot be neglected, through the study of nature, which, with its wonders, leads them to realise God the Creator, and, with good deeds and service, to express love for

their neighbour. This forms a simple basis for understanding whatever form of religion the child belongs to.

> "Too often we forget when presenting religion to the boy that he sees it all from a very different point of view from that of the grown-up. Nor can true religion be taught as a lesson to a class in school. It is appalling to think what a vast proportion of our boys have turned out either prigs or unbelievers through misconception of these points on the part of their teachers". (Baden-Powell 1918)

Baden-Powell offers concrete suggestions on how to educate scouts in prayer. A scout should pray at least every morning and evening and perhaps also at other times of the day, for example, to express gratitude and thankfulness for what one has received during the day. In this way, the scout can develop a communion with God that can last a lifetime.

The founder of Scouting invites us to offer a thanksgiving prayer for the gifts received, a request for one's neighbour, an invocation of help in difficult tasks ahead. With great insistence, he reminds us to express our thanks to God. It is notable that Baden-Powell intends to use language that is accessible to children, concerned that they learn to pray and not merely recite prayers by heart with formal phrases that they probably do not understand because they mean nothing to them.

In order to initiate children into a personal dialogue with God, it is appropriate to accompany them when learning to pray, not to recite prayers, taking into account their issues with long and erudite supplications or formal phrases that are frequently recited by heart without understanding their meaning or understanding them only in small part. In addition, they should be urged to formulate prayers in their own words: gratitude for what they have received; a commitment to reciprocate with 'good deeds' done for others; and a request for help to remain faithful to their good intentions.

To promote a personal communion with God that can last a lifetime, Baden-Powell invites one to set aside a moment of the day to thank Him and ask Him for strength to serve. Insistently, Baden-Powell affirms the need to educate to express gratitude to God for His gifts and to thank Him for the benefits received, just as one would thank any person who gives us a gift. For example, some such occasions can be a good game, a pleasant day, a success achieved, or before and after meals. Another opportunity is physical activity: "If you mingle prayer with your exercises, you can, while looking up in this way, say to God: 'I am yours from top to toe', and drink in God's air (through your nose, not through your mouth)" (Baden-Powell 1931, p. 150).

Here is another concise and concrete indication proposed by Baden-Powell, who addresses young people as follows:

> Look higher above your daily grind or frivolities and think of what is more worthwhile. The most worthwhile thing that you can do is to serve God.
>
> You are not a parson—how then can you serve God? Well, it is open to every single one of you.
>
> We pray daily for God's Kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth.
>
> But it is no good praying without lending a hand to help.
>
> God's Kingdom is, as we know, 'Peace on earth and goodwill among men'.
>
> Just now the Devil's Kingdom is too prevalent: the rule of envy, hatred and malice of nation against nation, class against class, even creed against creed.
>
> This should not and need not be, if only men were all determined to be good-natured, tolerant, helpful and fair to one another. To be self-less instead of selfish.
>
> It is here that we all have our opportunity of serving God. Think it over in your Vigil, how best you can. (Baden-Powell 1928, p. 1)

When faced with a complicated task, or when faced with the difficulties that are certainly not lacking in life, Baden-Powell suggests asking God for help, who will give the strength to face it: "When you have a difficult job to tackle, ask God to help you to tackle it, and He will give you strength. But you must still do the tackling yourself" (Baden-Powell 1936, p. 169). And again, he repeats: "If you only strove in a world of difficulties to find God's help half as hard as you have been struggling to get breath when in the water, you would soon find Him" (Baden-Powell 1922, p. 179).

It might be interesting to check the extent to which Baden-Powell's suggestions have actually been implemented in the Scout training proposal for today's members, but there is no data on this topic, as this has never been the subject of research and verification. Another interesting aspect of research could be the religious inspiration that Baden-Powell received in his family, especially from his Protestant minister father: this is an aspect that has not yet been explored and one that probably affected Baden-Powell's personal spiritual dimension and his educational intention.

7. Authors Who Can Be Compared with Baden-Powell

Within the New Schools or Activism movements, nature has been rediscovered as an educational environment. Beyond the English context within which Baden-Powell operated, several authors can be mentioned. These were educators who reflected on the importance of a relationship with nature and the experience of spending time in the open air. The history of pedagogy, for example, includes Edmond Demolins (1852–1907), who founded, in 1899, the "École des Roches" in the countryside in the middle of a semi-wild park, surrounded by a stream, without fences: the children moved around in complete freedom. The school was equipped with a classroom–chapel for children of the Catholic religious faith, while Protestants were allowed to use the dining hall for their religious offices (Demolins 1901).

In Germany, Hermann Lietz (1868–1919) founded, in 1898, the first "Deutsche Landerziehungsheim", which was located in the countryside to realise the educational ideal of a healthy life within the great nature of God. Education took place in direct contact with nature, thanks to frequent excursions lasting several days, during which the young people would cook in the camp, bivouac by the fire and sleep in tents. In the last years of the 19th century, the Wandervögel (Wandering Birds) youth organisation was founded in Germany, inspired by Rousseau's 'return to nature', offering organised Sunday leisure time with excursions to the countryside and forests (Lietz 1910).

According to the Spaniard Andrés Manjón (1846–1923), integral education includes religious education, to which the "escuelas de l'Ave Maria" (Manjon 1962) contribute. Instead of a closed classroom, he recommends an open veranda on the green. In fact, most of the teaching in the garden school would take place in the open air, with its meadows and esplanades, its groves and pergolas and its fields for playing and working. Nature is "God's university", and the catechism is taught by giving life and voice to themes and situations in dialogue.

In his book *Theorie de l'education* (Laberthonnière 1901), the Frenchman Lucien Laberthonnière (1860–1932) distances himself from religious teaching based on mnemonic and formalistic practices, which leads to a faith lived as a passive habit that is imposed by the environment and circumstances. The educator is called upon not to make the pupil believe, but to help the child to encounter in a personal way the Christian truth – thus thereby fostering an inner commitment in the pupil.

Regarding Maria Montessori (1870–1952), from her vast body of work on the subject of religious education, the following books can be considered: *I bambini viventi nella Chiesa* (Montessori 1922), *La vita in Cristo* (Montessori 1931) and *La Santa Messa spiegata ai bambini*

(Montessori 1949). She considers that an environment must be adapted to the spiritual needs and direct experience of the child; therefore, the chapel, the liturgical furnishings and the rite of the Mass must be adapted to allow the child to participate directly in the religious experience.

Outside Europe, we can also mention Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). He is best known for his autobiographical work, *Walden or Life in the Woods* (Thoreau 1894). It is a reflection on man's relationship with nature, in the light of his personal experience of surviving for two years in a cabin on the shores of Walden Lake. As far as the present day is concerned, it is impossible to ignore the experiments that have proliferated in the last ten years, especially those based on the Scandinavian model of "schools in the woods".

8. Conclusions

A reading of Baden-Powell's writings on the theme of religious education allows one to grasp the profound spirituality that transpired from his personal experience and that imprints the whole proposal of true Scouting. Certainly, what emerges is a profile not of a theorist but of a person animated by a very precise educational intentionality, of which some traits are unpublished or of which, perhaps, we still have rather reductive knowledge.

Only certain aspects are known, for example, his passion for Nature, while his sensitivity to the religious dimension of life is indeed very rich and profound. A careful rereading of Baden-Powell's works allows us not only to rediscover him as an educator but also to rediscover the primary scout proposal, which cannot be offered to boys in a reduced form, lest this betrays the spirit that inspires it.

In Section 2, the two great books about God are presented as the Bible and Nature. Section 3 discusses Baden-Powell's belief that Scouting activities can be a means of instilling faith in even the most troubled boy. In Section 4, Baden-Powell's writings are analysed with more specific reference to the Scouting method, also arguing that everyone should be educated according to their own beliefs (Section 5). In Section 6, several concrete indications related to the previous suggestions are presented.

Lastly, Section 7 compares the works of several authors and educators operating outside the English context, who lived between the late 19th century and the early 20th century. These figures reflected on the formative and personal significance of man's relationship with nature and the environment for educational purposes. It would be appropriate to further develop comparisons and conduct cross-analyses among these authors and pedagogists to deepen our understanding of Baden-Powell's legacy and to highlight the fruitful educational and formative aspects of nature experiences and environment-based teaching programs.

Against this backdrop, the educational proposal of scouting is aimed at all religious faiths, so much so that it excludes the possibility of a scout being an atheist. "No man is much good unless he believes in God and obeys His law. So every scout should have a religion" (Baden-Powell 1908, p. 231). In today's multicultural and multi-religious context, the subject of religious education is of great relevance to Baden-Powell's thinking: Scouting's educational proposal is open to the acceptance of all religious beliefs and guarantees respect for personal freedom of choice.

In light of today's secularised socio-cultural context, I would like to mention the problem of Scout associations that sometimes betray the original Scout proposal by not taking into account the spiritual dimension. A Scoutmaster is asked to make a choice of faith, and his role is to support their scouts as they mature in the Scouting process.

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religions

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Article

Changes and New Religious Orientations Among Practicing Catholics?

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Abstract: This essay takes its cue from a re-examination of a previous research report. In particular, this paper aims to present some additional reflections, which have also been shaped by discussions with recent research on lived religiosity. The 2017 study involved 2675 individuals of Catholic faith who completed a detailed questionnaire, representing an opportunistic sample, and another 372 people who formed the comparison group. The objective was to investigate the languages, forms, and structures of religious experience and religiosity. In this new interpretation, we instead focus on those elements of the 2017 study that suggest new shared attitudes or possible historical transformations of religiosity among the subjects initially consulted.

Keywords: lived religion; conceptions of religiosity; transformations of religiosity

1. A Significant Sample and a Second-Level Reflection

1.1. Some Premises

This study operates a second-level reflection on a previous research report and on part of the materials analyzed in it, published in 2017 (Moscato et al. 2017, henceforth referred to briefly as *Research 2017*). The revision is made in light of further reflections of the authors in the continuation of their studies, and in particular, when comparing research on lived religion, such as, for example, the American research conducted by N. T. Ammerman (2013).

Research 2017 is substantially exploratory, and for several reasons, it constitutes a unicum in the framework of Italian scientific pedagogy. In fact, unlike the sociological and psychological fields, where there are well-established research interests on religious themes and specific active academic teachings, studies on religious themes have hardly appeared in Italian-language pedagogical production in recent decades. Moreover, there is almost no academic teaching dedicated to the pedagogy of religion.

It was not until 2014 that a working group was formed within the Italian Society of Pedagogy (SIPED) on the topic of religiosity and religious education, which opened a new season of research (cf. Triani 2015)[1]. *Research 2017*, carried out in the years 2013/14, therefore had no specific precedents from which to take its cue, and part of its originality is the request for scientific references on its first report and the attempt to initiate a multidisciplinary debate on the issues addressed even before the final publication of the data obtained. Its main merit lies in its attempt to produce a targeted survey instrument (a questionnaire), designed in Italian, and intended for adult subjects who were definitely religious and practicing. As a matter of fact, contemporary social research appears to be

more interested in youth religiosity (Bichi and Bignardi 2015; Matteo 2010) and more focused on "widespread" religious phenomena, or in any case, on the Catholic population as a whole (Cipriani 1988). One result that we certainly acquired, regardless of the limitations of the instrument and the overall results of our research, is that a targeted questionnaire can be produced and can create a "narrative" structure of religious experience with reference to a specifically characterized sample, obtaining useful and comparable data[2].

Our methodological approach tends to be phenomenological, oriented towards the orientation and understanding of religious experience in its concreteness and everydayness. We assume that the religious experience is in itself a dynamic element, both on the personal level and on the historical and anthropological ones; for pedagogy, however, it is not a matter of studying the permanence or disappearance of individual elements of the religious experience across generations, but rather of hypothesizing the overall characteristics of religious dynamism, first of all in the development and transformation of the individual person and, evidently, in the life of culture, considering that the socio-cultural horizon, from decade to decade, intervenes in turn in the formation processes of new generations.

We also assume that the way subjects represent and narrate their religiosity (the *lived experience* verbalized or expressed by mental images: cf. Campbell 2001) must be taken as a given in itself. We also believe that the dimension of the imaginary is as relevant as the formulation of ideas and concepts, inseparable from the languages used to express it. Consequently, any shared analysis of data, no matter how rationally controlled and justified, nevertheless constitutes an interpretation in its initial moment. And the reader must also be made aware of this. Within an assumed and shared interpretative responsibility, several revisions may therefore become physiologically necessary.

For *Research 2017*, as already mentioned, the choice of a questionnaire was functional to the comparability of the answers provided; such comparability is not normally allowed in in-depth interviews and similar tools, such as personal writings. Furthermore, the questionnaire somehow suggested *a narrative structure* to which respondents could "hook" their accounts of their personal religious experiences. In fact, the questionnaire ultimately reflected themes and sequences we had already encountered in previous biographical interviews (Gatti 2012) and in writings by university students, again on the theme of religious experience (Caputo and Pinelli 2014). The questionnaire was characterized by a relative breadth and internal articulation (31 items with at least eight different possibilities of choice, always including—as already mentioned—an open answer, "other").

The sample was identified among groups of subjects definitely engaged in Catholic ecclesial contexts in terms of its functionality to the research objective (*purposive sampling*) and, to some extent, the "convenience" of it (*convenience/opportunistic sampling*), as it was accessible to us (Teddlie and Yu 2007). We have always met our participants in the course of adult education activities and in institutional contexts: there are parish catechists and educators, teachers of religion (IdR), students of theological faculties aspiring to pursue teaching, and teachers at Catholic schools. The administration, on paper, was almost always carried out by our own research team, and the questionnaire was always freely proposed to those present, always at the end of the training activity. Very few refused to fill it out, and the vast majority subsequently declared that they liked it (judging it as "beautiful" or "nice"), and often adding evaluations and suggestions for our research at the end. With this modality, we actually achieved a relative degree of active participation of the respondents, bringing us partially closer to the model of a study conducted *with* them rather than *on* them.

In 60 different administrations throughout the country, we met 2675 subjects (72% of them were women). Similarly, we operated with respect to a comparison group of 372 people, in ten further administrations, again carried out in other training/upgrading

contexts. In retrospect, this second group, largely including individuals who were little or not at all religious, as we had hypothesized, turned out to be too small compared to the sample (also, for accidental reasons, there was a reduction in the number of presences expected). The comparison group, however, maintained a similar cultural level with the sample (they were teachers and other professionals in training or university students).

Our sample is in fact composed of 48% graduates (that is, more than double the average number of graduates in the national population in the same years, according to the OECD 2013 Report), and most of them have also had specific academic-level religious education at higher institutes of religious sciences (ISSR) or theological faculties. Religion teachers make up a total of 27% of our sample, and ISSR students 7%. Together, the two sub-groups reach 34%, assuming the same quantitative consistency of the largest internal sub-group, made up of catechists, parish educators, and members of parish groups in general (who also make up 34%). The latter sub-group is the most heterogeneous with respect to age groups. Finally, teachers from Catholic schools (less than 20%) and members of ecclesial associations and movements, identified as such, are present in modest percentages in the sample. However, the answers highlight the presence of members of congregations, ecclesial movements, and associations of religious inspiration even within parish groups. Altogether, there are also 94 presbyters and about a 100 nuns in the entire sample, including many born abroad.

As already mentioned, the sample is predominantly composed of women (72%). The sex composition changes in favor of men only in a small sub-group of 40 vocational trainers from a Catholic school and in another internal sub-group of about 200 scout leaders (these are also the youngest individuals within the sample). The female prevalence of the sample as a whole reflects the already known higher presence of women in all educational and school environments. It also highlights a more widespread presence of women in parish activities. This is a widely known fact but not sufficiently meditated upon, at least on a pedagogical level. In fact, given also the reduction in priestly vocations (cf. Diotallevi 2014), today, the educational and didactic mediation of religious experience is mainly entrusted to women, who fulfill additional professional functions, compared to the traditional religious mediation provided in the family by female/motherly figures. This phenomenon cannot fail to have consequences on religious formation in the age of development (just as the greater female presence among teachers influences many phenomena, for example, male school failure), but precisely, the dynamic relating to the greater female presence in educational environments does not currently seem to be sufficiently examined and studied from a pedagogical point of view.

With regard to the age groups present in the sample, the presence of the two central age groups in the adult season is noted retrospectively: the 35–44 group constitutes 27.25% of the sample, and the 45/54 age group constitutes 28.75%. Together, they make up more than 56% of the sample, and thus clearly characterize it in terms of age (this also applies to the comparison group). Of course, in *Research 2017*, all analyses take into account the different age groups present, but it should be emphasized that the general trends highlighted, and which we return to here, are mainly the expressions of religious subjects belonging to early and middle adulthood (35–54).

We must also point out that our sample is characterized not only by the prevalence of women, but also by the strong presence of educators/teachers (60% of the subjects) and by a greater geographical location in the Center/North (63%) than in the Center/South (36%), to which we must also add a tendency to locate in urban centers and provincial capitals (almost 60%) compared to small towns and suburbs. In general, the distribution of administrations across the country is uneven because we precisely sought out our subjects wherever we could and surveyed them within training activities and cultural initiatives in which at least one member of the team was involved as a speaker. This element also

guaranteed us a tendentially favorable attitude towards the questionnaire in relation to the appreciation of the rapporteur who proposed it. In conclusion (as then verified in the analysis of the questionnaires themselves), we collected a sample that was certainly religiously practicing, often with specific responsibilities in the ecclesial fabric, with a good general education and with a secure Catholic formation. In any case, this sample is not representative of the Italian religious population as a whole. It rather expresses an educated and religiously active component of contemporary Italian Catholicism, which welcomed the administration with cordial curiosity, mainly evaluating the proposed questionnaire in positive terms. Consequently, it can be assumed that, precisely because of its internal composition, this sample reveals orientations and potential transformations of religious experience not observable in the average practicing Catholic population, and that it therefore it provides us with a valuable observation point not otherwise obtainable from the analysis of representative samples.

On the other hand, we judge that research on religiosity and its formation still meets with strong resistance and little appreciation, if not open distrust, in the generality of the Catholic world. A representative sample would presumably not have welcomed us with the cordiality and willingness that we have encountered in our subjects. In short, this sample, due to its numerical consistency, its internal composition, the richness of the contents proposed by the questionnaire, and the very manner in which it was administered, provides an empirical material on religious experience which is still useful today and susceptible to possible new readings[3].

1.2. Research Objectives and Results 2017

Our initial research objective was to identify, by means of the questionnaire, some transversal indicators of concrete religiosity[4]. The recognized images of God were supposed to bring out (or at least suggested) a personal experience of God lived by each subject; similarly, the images of the Church were supposed to allow us to identify the function attributed by the subject to the ecclesial structure as such. We then probed the degree and form of participation in ritual practices, prayer habits, familiarity with Sacred Scripture, and, finally, consent/disagreement both with certain essential dogmas of Catholicism and with some apparently shared practices in the Catholic world (Porcarelli 2017). We realized from the very first analyses of our data that, although in a definitely and avowedly religious context (not, therefore, in a secularized horizon), our subjects present some elements of dissent from the practices and/or some difficulties with the dogmatic apparatus, which differentiate them within the Catholic world, and we sought explanations for this in the prevailing typology of their religiosity. It must be said that our interest in adult religiosity was prompted by W. Fowler's study on the *Stages of Faith* (Fowler 1981, 2017[5]). We have thus read the elements of dissent and variation, with respect to the dogmatic apparatus and with respect to certain practices, as expressions of the autonomy of the adult stages of faith. In reality, individual transformations of religious experience cannot be separated from generational collective transformations linked to cultural factors, transformations that are often difficult to identify and study. From a pedagogical perspective, the problem of transformations of religiosity in the life cycle, in its interweaving with educational and training processes, still remains to be adequately explored (cf. Gabbiadini 2024; Pinelli 2024).

For example, it can be observed that there is in fact, in today's adult religious generations, a form of greater independence vis à vis ecclesial institutions, independence that perhaps determines a lesser importance of the doctrinal apparatus (or at any rate, a lesser investment of the believer in theology and dogmas, but also in religiously derived ethical norms), and our subjects' responses could be explained in these terms in light of Beck's

observation of the hypothesized modeling of the "Personal God", which subjects would curate according to their personal religious experiences (Beck [2008] 2009).

In this review of *Research 2017*, we therefore wondered whether some of the traits specifically found among our subjects, although connected to their adult condition, were not also outcomes of a historical transformation of Italian Catholicism, linked to the present time, and also to the socio-cultural characteristics of our era. We recognize an ideal debt with the already cited study by Nancy Tatom Ammerman (2013)[6], firstly because Ammerman chose to investigate the transformations of religiosity and its latencies, showing how the reading category of secularization, which assumes the progressive disappearance of religiosity from Western culture, is approximate at best. With these assumptions, Ammerman conducted a qualitative study on 95 subjects of different religions (or not at all religious) in Boston and Atlanta by means of in-depth interviews, diaries and personal recordings, photographs, and individual narrations of "everyday religiosity", finding the transformations of everyday religion (where present) recounted in a myriad of short narratives. It must be said, however, that the 95 subjects studied by Ammerman are predominantly from Christian and Jewish backgrounds, apart from small numbers of non-theistic believers (for example neo-pagans), while Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are completely absent from her sample. This may be a limitation with respect to the cross-cutting characteristics of universal religious experience (which Ammerman acknowledges), but the comparison with her sample is certainly useful for us. For example, her conclusions about the transformations of American religiosity, and also with respect to the widespread overlap between religion and spirituality, make clear an evident coexistence of strong elements of continuity—at least in relation to the Western religious tradition (for example, in membership and community ties, in the celebration of religious holidays, and in the conception of family relations)—but also significant novelties (for example, the dynamism in the composition and recomposition of parish-type communities, linked to individual migrations from one confession to another or from one church to another, and above all, forms of theological and ethical dissent serenely lived out, in ways that remain religious, without thereby breaking community ties). The last underlined element led us to reflect further on our responses to certain dogmas, towards which our subjects express a relative distance (Porcarelli 2017). Obviously, the review led us to a more comprehensive reflection on our entire research path which, in many respects, is still in progress. In the present text, we therefore focus on those elements of *Research 2017* that suggest new shared attitudes or possible historical transformations of religiosity in the subjects we surveyed at the time.

2. Religious Experience in the Images of Personal Experience

Of course, the representation of religion and religiosity, even in questions asking to express it with definitions or concepts, remains inseparable from the concrete and subjective religious experience of an individual subject and the mental images that emerge in their experience, but also vice versa: the imaginary often refers to ideas and concepts of a theological matrix that remain subliminal. Many of the answers given should be interpreted in both aspects and in integrated terms, which is not always easy, as we shall see as we proceed.

We observe that, to question 2 ("*Do you consider yourself religious at this point in your life?*"), 78% of the subjects answer in the affirmative, but in two different formulations: A (*Yes. I am deeply religious*; 36%) and F (*Yes, I am serenely religious*; 42%). Note that two answers could be provided, and so "deep religiosity" can coexist with some of the difficulties highlighted by the two minority answers we will look at shortly, but especially by the "*other*" answers. In any case, the prevailing image in subjective experience is a positive view of one's religiousness and religiosity as a "serene" experience (42%). The

"deeply religious" option (36%) does not exclude difficulties of various kinds, but it seems to overcome them. On the contrary, the reference to "depth" can be read in a reinforcing sense. We then find fewer selections of the two options related to doubts about faith or the moral aspects of Christian doctrine (B: *Yes, I am religious though I have many doubts about faith* (10.31%); D: *Yes, although I have many doubts about the moral aspects of Christian doctrine* (9.60%)). In many cases, the subjects chose both of these less selected alternatives. There is therefore a minority of subjects (estimated between 10 and 15% of the total sample) for whom religiosity, while openly present, is lived in terms of uncertainty and problematicity, with doubt as a characteristic element.

For another aspect, the punctual analysis of the 111 "other" replies given to question 2 highlights elements of travail, self-doubt (uncertainty, walking a path, darkness, and difficulty in praying) and, above all, a distancing from doctrinal aspects and Church practices. The "other" answers illustrate elements that we will find later, but they already foreshadow that, for the majority of the sample, distancing and doubts coexist with a substantial depth of religious experience. This seems to us a first significant datum for this sample.

We find confirmation in the analysis of the replies to following question n. 3, which asked to mark the alternative that most expressed the present characteristics of one's religiosity. In this case, the sample clearly favors (with 76%) option B: *I am a Christian walking on a journey* (with a slight prevalence of women). The second most selected option (with 17.60%) is D, *I consider myself basically a seeker of God* (in this case, men prevail, with six percentage points more than women). A residual 10% of options favor alternative A, *I have remained religious despite the fact that scandals in the life of the Church, both past and present, have deeply scarred me*. Let us assume that this 10% is the real percentage of subjects encountering actual religious difficulty (part of whom also selected the aforementioned option "I consider myself a seeker of God"). However limited this percentage may be, the perception of scandals as "wounds" in one's religiosity somehow runs through all the answers given and emerges from many "other" replies. We believe that this specific perception is probably also a characteristic element of Catholic religious sensitivity at this historical moment, but it is not a decisive element, at least for the majority of the sample. The clear preference for the alternative "*a Christian on the road*" seems to highlight a basic serenity that accepts both the dynamism and the limits of one's own religious experience and lives it with sufficient confidence and hope. Thus, we read in a key of persistent and convinced serenity the following answers, most of which express the imaginations of the subjects.

Question 4 contained a series of images, mainly taken from the Bible and in any case expressed with terms recurrent in religious language. The subjects were asked to identify the one(s) which were most expressive of personal religious experience:

A. A bruised reed and a smoldering wick (7.17%);
B. A river of living water gushing from within (19.81%);
C. A little mustard seed (22.20%);
D. A hope with eagle wings (20.26%);
E. A fountain of light (7.25%);
F. A sentinel longing for the dawn (23.77%);
G. A grain of wheat buried in the earth (17.83%);
H. Other.

As can be seen, many of these images are symbolically equivalent to each other and the choice may therefore have been influenced mainly by personal taste. However, some clear orientations stand out in the sample, juxtaposed with the comparison group, which distributes its choices more evenly, presumably revealing the traces of a religious culture

in the subjects' formation. The religious sample seems to identify at least five images as most significant in the individual experience: F, *the sentinel* (23.77%, with a difference of six percentage points in favor of men); C, *the mustard seed* (22.20%, with no appreciable differences between the sexes and age groups); D, *hope with eagle wings* (20.26%, with a difference of five percentage points in favor of women); and B, *a river of living water* (19.81%, again with a slight prevalence of women). The differences among the top five choices are in any case modest, as can be seen. At least three among the first four preferred images (*mustard seed*, *hope with eagle wings*, and *river of living water*), express a substantial positivity of religious experience and an expansive dynamism of it. The observable differences between the male and female sexes and among the various age groups are in any case too modest to be significant. On the other hand, the modest primacy of the figure of the *sentinel*, and the greater male liking for it, could depend on the catechesis of the most recent Popes, starting with John Paul II, or more banally on the all-male experience of military service, which would facilitate men's identification with this image. The image appears more ambivalent, however, than the three previous ones: the sentinel's waiting is exhausting and surrounded by darkness, and his charisma is waiting for the night to pass and the light of dawn to return. There is indeed something heroic and active in the figure of the sentinel, who keeps watch in a dark space-time and anticipates the better time to come, and this would explain why the vigilance of the sentry solicits the male imaginary. But perhaps beyond the suggestions of religious and/or poetic language, this image reveals an element that could characterize the religious sensitivity of the present era: there is a need for vigilance, there are threats and dangers, there are enemies lurking, and it is necessary not to lose control, not to fall asleep. In the imagination, this religiosity cannot be called entirely "serene".

The image of the grain of wheat (17.83%), ranked fifth, seems to be slightly less favored among the possible answers to this question, perhaps because the grain is "destined to die" in order to bear fruit. But above all, the image of the *bruised reed and the smoldering wick* seems to be rejected (only 7.17%)[7]. In fact, images of fragility and sacrifice are not rewarded compared to the more positive and happy imaginary figures, such as living water, hope, and the mustard seed. Moreover, these latter images show an expansive capacity, a "power" and a salvific efficacy that seems congenial to this sample, as we will see immediately when we move on to question 5.

Question 5 overlaps to a large extent with question 4, commented on above, in that it asks for "a mental image to associate with the experience of God". The sample accepts the challenge, while in the "other" answers, they explain that this association poses difficulties. In this case, option E, *an expanding vital force*, seems to be the preferred one, chosen by 35.73% of the respondents, especially women (in this case, there is a difference of 13 percentage points). We can also see that option E tends to be chosen more often with increasing age. We can assume that the preferred image does not refer to God as such, but rather to the individual experience of God, i.e., the individual religious experience (as we had explicitly asked in the question). The subjects who chose "life force" as an option seem to express a lived experience in which religious experience is an intimate resource that progressively expands even outside of the individual. In this way, the subjects seem to confirm what they had already expressed as their own lived experience in terms of a serene and positive religiosity. If, on the other hand, option E, like the following two, is to be taken as a reference to an image of God, it is inevitable to suspect a creeping pantheism, at least in the imaginary, if not in the conceptual.

On the other hand, the two following most popular options certainly refer to an image of God, also because of the biblical echoes contained in the images themselves. D, *An infinite morning glow*, was chosen by 24.26% of the subjects and was preferred by women

(with a difference of about seven percentage points). B, *Gentle breeze*, was chosen by 22.13% of the subjects (with a 7-percentage-point advantage for men). Other respondents chose G, *The top of a high mountain* (about 14%—tending to be chosen by men)[8] and F, *An intimate disquiet* (13.94%, with men slightly ahead by less than five percentage points). The answers C, *A devouring fire* (4.67%), and A, *A dark/bright abyss* (2.76%), were discarded, even though they are also biblical images.

We found it significant that the comparison group, which understandably tends to avoid this question on the *experience of God*, nevertheless chose the same options in the top three places, albeit with lower percentages compared to E, *vital force* (22.14%), to D, *morning glow* (20.10%), and to B, *gentle breeze* (14.50%). We must therefore assume an analogy/affinity of taste in the imaginations of the same generations regardless of a strong religious experience. Perhaps the supposed "creeping pantheism"[9] has become a shared element in the collective imagination for reasons originating in the cultural horizon. This could be an interference of contemporary ecological sensibility becoming an element of the imaginations of the latest adult generations, or at least passing through the imaginary rather than through a philosophical or theological conception.

The above reflections can be compared and complemented with the answers given by the sample to question 5.1. *Is there a figure or mental representation that you most frequently associate with the idea of God?*

The seven alternatives introduce theistic images, all of them scriptural in origin and all of them plausible within Christian horizon. Although we are still moving in the dimension of the imaginary, it seems clear that the subjects have identified their privileged image, trying to give a definite shape to their idea of God. In fact, option B, *the Good Shepherd of the flock*, is strongly favored with 33.42% (chosen more frequently by women by four percentage points), followed by C, *the Father who feeds sparrows and clothes the lilies of the fields*, with 21.64% (over 23% of women prefer this image compared to about 17% of men). This is followed by F, *The Creator of the infinite universe*, with 19.43% (slightly favored by men). It thus seems that in fact, God's "tenderness" prevails over other divine attributes. Figures of divine tenderness reappear among the "other" replies in various formulations that are repeated, apart from only two options that reenact "a flow of energy". "Tenderness" therefore prevails even before the most obvious and common of divine images anchored to an *idea* of God, that is, the *Creator of the universe* (this is one of the most widespread images of God across different cultures and religions). We note the significant gap between the preferences attributed to the Good Shepherd (33.42%) and all other options, which are much closer together. They are followed in the fourth place by E, *The risen Christ of Easter morning*, with 17.08%, and in the fifth position is D, *The Spirit blowing where He wills*, with 16.71%, and in sixth place is A, *Christ the Redeemer Crucified*, with 16.59%. These are roughly equivalent percentages. Discarded, finally, appears only option G, *The Christ who will come to judge the living and the dead*, which totals less than 4% of options (both in the sample and in the comparison group). In all of these last alternatives, the differences between men and women are always around 2% and therefore not significant.

We note that option D, *The Spirit blowing where He wills*, only has 16% of support, and it could have reinforced option E, *Expanding life force* (from question 5), which had 35% options, in the direction of creeping pantheism. We actually think that the favored images reproduce the triune God, and from a Christian perspective, it is not strange that the Creator Father (F, 19%) and the Holy Spirit (D, 16.71%) are less emphasized than Christ the Good Shepherd, or even the Father who feeds the sparrows and clothes the lilies, presented by Christ in the Gospel. It seems more significant that the *Christ who will come to judge the living and the dead* was discarded (because it seems to show the disappearance of the "fear of God" from the experiences of a sample that is in fact religious). For all of these

options, a comparison by age group does not provide any indication because the percentage differences are always modest and do not show, as in other cases, any trend.

We also note that, when asked about the *idea* of God, the comparison group—understandably—responds more and with less difficulty than about the *experience* of God.

Does Religiosity Transform?

Leaving aside the imaginary dimensions, we would now like to dwell on another important element in the self-representation of one's religiosity, and that is the perception of its dynamism, introduced by question 11: *Do you think that your religiosity has been transformed, in a positive or negative sense, in the course of adulthood?* In this case, the perception of the transformation that has taken place is significant, and it is present in almost all of the sample (84.48% of the subjects, with a slight prevalence of women, but only by two points). Only 5.85% of the subjects believe that their religiosity has remained stable over time, and 2.87% declare that they "have never thought about it" (there is 7% who believe that they have not completed the path of adulthood, and this includes in part the 200 scouts who have lowered the average age of the sample). Questions 11.1 and 11.2 ask about the experiences that would transform religiosity in a positive (11.1) or negative (11.2) sense.

As far as experiences of positive transformation are concerned, we note two alternatives, each selected by 25% of the subjects, which presumably constitute two sides of the same coin, namely E, *Belonging to a parish group/community*, and G, *The catechesis/animation activities carried out and/or some experiences of volunteering and charity*. It is clear that E (belonging) is the precondition for G, but also C (*Belonging to a group/movement/ecclesial association*), which totals a further 20% of responses, constituting a precondition for G. In conclusion, there are at least 45% of subjects who report community participation as an element of positive transformation of their religious experience, but perhaps also as a condition for an adult religiosity[10]. In short, adult religiosity would be consolidated by experiences of service, of charity, and of voluntary work by forms of shared "commitment", which are, in turn, solicited by ecclesial affiliations. "Other" answers in this case specify memberships, encounters, and any pilgrimage experiences deemed significant, but also work experiences and stages of family life, such as marriage and the birth of children. Among the "other" replies, women are more likely to emphasize motherhood.

The data on membership that we have just highlighted were compared, in *Research 2017*, with the next two questions: 16 (Do you belong to any Christian-inspired cultural or professional association?) and 17 (Do you belong to an ecclesial movement?). We see that 32.26% of the subjects answer that they belong to a Christian-inspired association, and 19.40% say they have belonged to an association in the past. This means that 50% of the subjects have had at least one experience of Christian associationism. In this case, the male and female response percentages differ quite strongly because men declare a current associative militancy, totaling 43%, compared to 28% of women. As for joining a movement, slightly less than 20% of the sample declares belonging to one, again with a male majority (26.44% against 16.54 of women). On the other hand, again in question 17, 46% of the subjects declare that they only attend the parish (in this case, women prevail by about five percentage points). This sample therefore confirms that membership of church groups, associations, and movements is in any case an incisive element perceived in the individual's religious experience. The stronger male militancy, in a sample that is in any case predominantly female, presumably highlights the permanence, for adult women, at least in Mediterranean culture, of family and domestic commitments that reduce the spaces for concrete ecclesial participation. This datum is not in contradiction with the generally greater female presence in ecclesial environments: in our case, the prevalent age group is middle adulthood, which for women constitutes the season of maximum commitment, not

only to their work, but also to children who are not yet adults and to parents/in-laws who are already elderly.

Academic studies and *completion of a cultural education* are indicated as positive transformative experiences by 23% of the subjects (men predominate, accounting for almost 27% compared to around 22% of women). The element of significance is provided by the fact that the same option, relating to academic studies, in the same formulation also appears among the experiences that would lead to negative transformations. In this second case, it is chosen by only 6.72% of the subjects, with men prevailing by four percentage points. It should also be noted that, in the negative transformation of religiosity, the alternative most marked (but reaching only 5.60%) is F, *The commitments of real life...* with a very slight male prevalence, followed by G, *The bad example of men and women of the church* (4%). Actually, when analyzing the "other" answers, we observe that negative transformations are more often denied than acknowledged. Our subjects, who show a positive and expansive representation of their religious experience, consistently also consider the transformations of it throughout the seasons of adulthood to be positive. In any case, the elements of difficulty highlighted do not appear sufficient to damage or reduce religious experience.

3. Conceptions of Religiosity and Church Images

Let us now look at the answers given to some questions that aimed at obtaining representations of religiosity, the Church, and the dogmatic and normative heritage of Catholicism. Our attempt to obtain a representation of religiosity started from question 1, which opened our questionnaire.

The eight alternatives provided for question 1 are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases, the choices were combined (two answers could be given, and many gave more than two). We observe that the sample is clearly oriented towards option B (*Religiosity is an attitude of openness to the mystery of human life and reality, a journey, an expectation, a hope*). This alternative is favored by 64% of the subjects, with a slight prevalence of women over men. If the overall analysis of the entire questionnaire is taken into account, it can be seen that this alternative includes key terms (*journey*, *expectation*, and *hope*) that will return in many other choices in the sample. Immediately afterwards, alternative F (*Religiosity is a response to man's need for infinite meaning and fulfillment*) is marked by about 28% of the total number of subjects, again with a slight prevalence of women. In third place, we observe a different alternative, D (*Religiosity is a grace received, together with faith*), with by 20% of options. Here, the greater orientation of women for this alternative is evidenced by a sharper percentage choice (22% versus 15% of men). There is also a clear fourth place, highlighted by a 14% response for alternative E (*Religiosity is a strong conviction intertwined with affective elements, intuitions, experiences and other things that I cannot define with total clarity, and which also includes non-rational elements*). The three alternatives (A, C, and G) that attempt to propose a more objective and rigorous definition were in fact discarded, each chosen by only about 6% of the subjects. In all three cases, it is men who appear to be more inclined towards objective definitions. Overall, the sample thus shows that it responds—in our opinion—above all from its own religious experience, which, for 64% of the subjects, is best reflected in alternative B, although it could also be expressed by alternative E. Perhaps the lesser success of E is influenced by the presence of the term "non-rational elements", and at the same time, by the absence of the keywords (journey, expectation, and hope) which seem to characterize the orientation of this sample. We judge, in conclusion, that the majority of subjects (64%) chose an option which expressed their own perception and did not try to give a "right" answer, showing themselves to be free of any complexes towards the researchers.

The situation is different for alternative D, marked by a significant 20% of the subjects (but in this case, women outnumber men by about seven percentage points). In this case, a kind of "hard core" seems to emerge that will resurface in other questions with similar percentages, referring decisively to the terms "faith" and "grace", and which could express a more traditional religious position. As a matter of fact, the preference for option D seems to grow as age increases and peaks (37%) among individuals over 65 (a very narrow band in this sample).

Let us now look for feedback/confirmation regarding what was observed in the analysis of question 1 in a follow-up question placed towards the end of the questionnaire. Question 29 asks the following: *In your opinion, how does religiosity contribute positively to the development of human life and society?*

Let us see how the sample is oriented in its answers, observing that the alternatives rewarded are not in fact mutually exclusive, but the clear prevalence of alternative A (*It provides a meaning to life*), seems important to us. It is chosen by 56.26% of our subjects, without appreciable differences between the two sexes. The trend, however, is sharper with an increasing age (it reaches 60% in the 45/54 bracket). The other most selected alternatives present a consistent distance from the first and are instead closer to each other. Option B, *It determines universal human solidarity*, is marked by 20.71% of the subjects, with no difference between the male and female sexes. Option F, *It is the source of an inexhaustible joy of living*, reaches 16.85%, without differences between the male and female sexes, but it is chosen more often by younger age groups. Option E, *It makes universal brotherhood possible in the assumption of a single divine creator*, obtains 14.20% (with a slight prevalence of women). We see all of the remaining options discarded, with percentages close to 5%, as follows:

C. It mantains hope in the fulfillment of justice;
G. It puts curbs on human despair;
H. It determines the criterion for distinguishing good from evil;
I. It enables people to forgive each other.

We would like to point out that the N-A (not answer) for this question is also below 5%, and alternatives D (*It does not contribute significantly*) (0.41%), and J (*I don't know. I have never thought about it*) (1.12%) are also discarded.

It seems plausible that a sample that has already expressed serene and positive representations of their religious experiences could not admit that religion does not contribute significantly to the development of human life and society. But we found very significant, especially on a pedagogical level, the clear orientation towards option A, *It gives meaning to life*. This answer, often found in other empirical material such as writings of young people, identifies the psychological element that most radically and effectively makes religiosity a decisive existential resource (cf. Caputo 2022).

Let us now look at the answers to some questions which most highlight potential difficulties and disagreements among these subjects.

Question 25 expressly introduces the topic of dogmatic content: Is there any dogmatic teaching of the Christian Catholic faith that you still find hard to understand and/or accept? A total of 44% avoided the question by ticking alternative A, None in particular. The "other" replies point out that one can actually accept a dogma without necessarily understanding it. The answers indicating difficulties are fragmented, without showing a clear trend (G, The resurrection of the flesh (13.57); B, Original sin (12.59); H, Mary's virginity (11.88); C, The unity and trinity of God (11.62)). Among the other replies emerge, in additional terms (evil, hell, and the devil), the infallibility of the Pope. In short, no clear trend can be observed among the different options, and it seems to us above all that the sample implies in various ways a relative irrelevance of dogmatic issues in their personal experiences.

Partially different is question 26, *Is there anything you would prefer to change today among the norms of the Catholic Church?* As far as norms are concerned, we seem to observe a sharper tendency: *none in particular* is only chosen by 24%, while F, *The exclusion of divorcees from the sacraments*, is the option that ranks first with about 41% of approval (the objection among women is sharper with five percentage points more). It is followed by E, *The prohibition of any contraceptive practice*, with 22.57%, and again, women are the most decided with almost five percentage points. C, *The obligation of celibacy for priests*, is in third place with 20.44% without sex-based differences.

It seems to us that the sample moves cautiously with respect to dogmas, but also with less interest, and is freer with respect to norms, and more so with respect to practices, as addressed by question 27, *Is there anything you do not approve, today, among the practices of the Catholic Church?* In this case, the option *None in particular* goes down again (9.70%), while alternative D, *The presence of economic interests also in ecclesiastical circles and in the hierarchy*, prevails (48.71%), selected by 51.37% of women against 42% of men. This is followed by E, *The expression of political interests on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchies* (20.71%), without sex-based differences; G, *Some inadequate training of future priests* (14.65%); and finally, C, *The persistent clericalism found within the ecclesiastical structure* (13.79%), denounced by men (21.78%) more strongly than by women (10.83%).

We observe that, as far as norms and practices are concerned, the sample shows a sensitivity decisively linked to contemporaneity, to problems socially perceived as current, and freely denounces them. By analyzing the answers in detail, also with respect to internal crossovers, it can be observed that the economic interests of the clergy and the hierarchy give our sample more scandal than political interests, but above all, that the *persistent clericalism* is less detected, although we can, on the other hand, observe that the sample anticipates (in 2013–14), albeit in minority terms, a complaint that Pope Francis himself has expressed forcefully and clearly in recent times (2024). Clericalism is not a historical novelty, but the awareness of it as an objective limitation in the life of the Church is current.

Among our last questions were two that we considered "revealing" at the time and which still seem very significant to us. Question 30 asks, *In your opinion, what "disfigures the face of the Church" today?*

A. Nothing in particular (2.47%);
B. The defense of privileges and the coverage of material interests (30.31%);
C. The lack of charity and ecclesial unity (19.92%);
D. Hypocrisy (25.23%);
E. Illicit sexual conduct among priests (8.59%);
F. The indifference of Catholics to the fate of the oppressed and persecuted around the world (11.88%);
G. The pedophilia of some priests and the connivance of their bishops (32.22%);
H. Ethically irresponsible customs widespread even among believers (16.93%).

The sample is quite clearly oriented towards four of the eight options proposed, namely G, *The pedophilia of some priests*. . . with 32.22% of choices and a stronger orientation of women (35.72% against 23.42 of men); B, *The defense of privileges...* with 30.31% of choices and with no difference between the male and female sexes; D, *Hypocrisy*, which outrages 25.23% of the subjects and has no consistent differences between the two sexes; and C, *The lack of charity and ecclesial unity*, which touches almost 20% and is expressed more strongly by men (26.44% compared to 17.52% of women). These answers bring us back to the theme of scandals in the life of the Church, and it can be observed that *privileges and material interests*, which wound 30% of respondents here (but when cited among the practices, in the previous question, hurt 40% of respondents), are presumably the most serious of the "wounds" in the life of the Church (along with the pedophilia of priests

and the connivance of their bishops). It is significant that what is indicated as a cause of religious difficulty (between 10 and 15%) in the questions defining personal religious experience is now configured with a percentage value between 30 and 45% in terms of criticism, that is, in terms of a "wound" consciously present in the lives of religious subjects, even if it does not condition their personal experiences.

Finally, the answer given to question 31, the last one of the questionnaire (which asks *What "shines on the face of the Church" even today?*), seems significant to us. The wording is deliberately bent on terms peculiar to the Christian religious outlook. The eight options, all plausible, include the following:

A. Nothing in particular (1.86%);
B. The renewed charity that translates into works (23.36%);
C. An inextinguishable hope in the existence of good (27.10%);
D. An ongoing reminder of the potential fullness of life (16.82%);
E. The memory of divine revelation (8.03%);
F. The continuous call to conversion of life (16%);
G. Trust in divine mercy (42.65%);
H. A treasure of spiritual wisdom (9.53%).

We observe, first of all, that the majority of subjects lean towards alternative G, scoring "trust in divine mercy" for over 42% (without significant differences between the two sexes, but with a percentage that tends to increase with age). The other two fairly selected answers (C, marked by 27% of the subjects, and B, chosen by 23%) are quite distant from G, although they reach appreciable values. D and F each reach a 16% response rate. But what surprised us at the time was the low percentage of responses achieved by E (8.03%) and H (9.52%), with reference to a religion that historically, in its two millennia of life, has been grounded on divine revelation and has set its educational processes on doctrinal correctness.

Option G, which so decisively emphasizes "trust in divine mercy", actually presents a double aspect, because it not only attributes a specific salvific significance to the Church, but also reveals, in "mercy", the face of the worshiped and awaited God, consistent with other specific responses on the image of God previously provided by the respondents. These response values (for G, C, and B) emphasize three key words, namely "mercy", "hope", and "charity": they are certainly expressions of non-ideological religious experience, and one cannot fail to note that they put in brackets precisely the primacy of revealed truth, i.e., "faith", at least in terms of adherence to specific and unchangeable doctrinal content.

Some Tentative Conclusions

In light of all the observations already described, we feel we can provisionally conclude that this sample of practicing Catholics has shown us a relative autonomy with respect to dogmas, an autonomy that perhaps conceals a relative disinterest in the doctrinal component of the Catholic religion, or at least in some dogmas, such as *the resurrection of the flesh*, which, according to some "other" replies, are judged as "unnecessary". The fact that *the memory of divine revelation* is indicated as *shining on the face of the Church* by only 8% of subjects (even less than the almost 10% of subjects who attribute to the Church *a treasure of spiritual wisdom*) cannot fail to impress us because it signals an actual transformation of present Catholic religiosity.

A clearer autonomy seems to us to transpire from some decisive disagreements with certain norms (such as the exclusion of divorcees from the sacraments or perhaps Catholic sexual morality in general). These aspects seem to us to be linked to a different sensitivity of these adult generations, in relation to precise social transformations, both of customs and of ethics, among which the changed social position of women presumably stands out, and above all, the female self-awareness of the latest adult generations.

The criticism of certain ethically scandalous practices (economic interests, sexual abuse, and cover-ups of such conduct by the hierarchy) then appears strong and indignant. We reiterate that all of this "distancing" does not seem to affect the religious serenity of the respondents, so perhaps "distancing" constitutes a form of human maturity. In other words, it seems that the "conferring of meaning on the world", which religious experience has guaranteed, maintains its potential as a personal "resource" even in the full awareness of the existence of consistent and lacerating "wounds" on the ecclesial body. There emerges a clear, albeit implicit, distinction between the ecclesiastical social and institutional body in its ethical limits, and that "mystical" and sacramental body which the Catholic Church continues to make exists in the expectation of believers. A vital hope in *God's mercy* and an *inextinguishable hope in the existence of good* mark and identify around 40% of this religious sample and seem to guide it. Our re-reading would thus confirm N. T. Ammerman's central thesis: religion has not disappeared from the life and culture of the Christian West. It has transformed or is in the process of transforming itself, and we must find other means of investigation to recognize and understand it, and perhaps new pedagogical and pastoral strategies to protect it and accompany its new developments.

While all the considerations made in this last part appear to us to be quite recognizable in contemporary society, from the point of view of research in a stricter and more rigorous sense, it is clear that our exposition is still on an exploratory level: each of the points identified (e.g., relative autonomy with respect to dogma; distancing oneself from unacceptable practices; the primacy of hope with respect to the fear of God; freedom of religious choice with respect to the constraint of vocation; and reservations on the exclusion of divorcees and the sexual morality of Catholics) would require specific verification with specific research tools.

In more general terms, while there is no doubt that certain transformations that have taken place are evident, there is no possibility of comparing the trends observed with the social and cultural situations of fifty or thirty years earlier because there is no earlier research that is comparable with this. Even an indirect comparison of trends, thinking of now classic studies from the early 20th century[11], is not possible, precisely because the cultural climate and social conditions, over a century later, are no longer comparable.

These specific transformations of religious experience are the result of events and cultural dynamisms typical of the second half of the 20th century, which for Catholicism may also have tended to originate with the Second Vatican Council. Consideration should therefore be given to new and timely empirical research on individual elements of religiosity, possibly with further comparisons between observable attitudes and indications of the Catholic Magisterium, expressed in official documents. A comparison group should be found among practicing Catholics of peripheral parishes, with more modest or absent qualifications, with the caveat that a strong gulf has already been observed between certain documents of the Magisterium and the religious culture of the parish peripheries, which seems to offer a deaf resistance even to many stances of the current Pontiff (see the case of the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*).

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guidelines of the Italian Society of Pedagogy for ethical research (https://www.siped.it/la-societa/codice-etico/, accessed on 19 December 2024).

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Notes

1 Within this new phase of interest and studies also lies the launch of the Franco Angeli Editorial Series, dedicated precisely to religious experience, in a multidisciplinary key, but with a specific pedagogical orientation. The Series today is in fact a laboratory for research and scientific dialog in the area of religious studies.

2 We do not intend by this to underestimate the value of in-depth interviews in this type of research, but there is no doubt that interviews present enormous difficulties in finding available subjects and substantial problems in the comparability of the data obtained (cf. Gatti 2012). We chose a questionnaire as the preferred instrument for comparability and for the possibility of administering it to large groups of subjects, believing that a sample, however non-representative, must also have its own significance in numerical terms. The same reasons for choosing the questionnaire as an instrument led us to limit open-ended questions and answers within it. In the 2017 research, however, the alternative "other", which was always present and often used by respondents, provided additional data, which were also used in this review.

3 This text refers only to a part of our data. We will certainly also produce a revision of our data on knowledge of the Holy Scriptures (cf. Gabbiadini 2017) in light of other ongoing research, and presumably a review of our data on Marian devotion (Moscato et al. 2017).

4 At least "transversal" elements, rather than "religious universals", without underestimating the topic of religious universals in the international debate (cf. Filoramo 2014). G. Filoramo was one of the referees of *Research 2017*.

5 Fowler's fascinating thesis on the "stages of faith", linked to the phases of the life cycle identified by psychology, was widely cited in the 1980s, at least by some of the international literature, and it was perhaps overestimated, at least in terms of the empirical reference material. In the same years of research, we edited the Italian edition of Fowler (2017) for the Franco Angeli Series. Some limitations of Fowler's hypothesis only became clear to us in the course of the Italian translation, which involved a more accurate study of his research.

6 The Italian edition of this volume is currently being printed in the aforementioned Franco Angeli Series.

7 Taken from the Deutero-Isaiah, this image contains a number of powerful implications, with respect to the sin and weakness of the creature in general, and with regard to the announcement of salvation about that "Servant" who will "lead the blind by unknown ways". It seems strange that this sample, which in question 31 emphasizes 42% "trust in divine mercy", as the *proprium* that "shines on the face of the Church", should discard this passage. It can be assumed that they no longer know it and therefore do not recognize its theological content. Or the post-conciliar translations after the 1970s have made the image less incisive.

8 It is worth mentioning that the examination of the internal crossings showed that this image of the mountain peak is privileged by the subgroup of scout guides present among the younger subjects, a subgroup that was in fact predominantly male. Moreover, it is not surprising that the image of the summit, which requires discipline, sacrifice, and walking to be reached, positively encounters the sensitivity of subjects who live scouting.

9 The problem of pantheism was posed by Giovanni Filoramo in the *Research 2017* report.

10 This finding is in line with what Ammerman (2013) observed about membership forms in the American reality.

11 For example, James (1902) and Flournoy (2021), both of whom worked on writings and autobiographical narratives of subjects of a high cultural level, tending to be men.

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Article

"I Learnt Much About. . ." the Impact of Cooperative Interreligious Education

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Abstract: Population growth in Austria means that school classes—including those in apprenticeship training—are no longer homogeneous. Apprentices, too, often come from different cultural backgrounds and therefore belong to different religions and worldviews, which makes the classes "multi" in every respect. This can lead to encounters in their everyday working life that are not always smooth because they are accompanied by prejudices and misunderstandings. Can cooperative religious education based on didactics of facilitation and TCI help to gain new insights into religions/worldviews and thus reinforce social cohesion? It has been shown that cooperative religious education gives pupils an insight into religious communities to which they themselves do not belong but does not give much concrete knowledge. It creates an awareness of being different without devaluation and the importance of dialogue that leads to a better mutual understanding and consequently to an awareness of one's own prejudices and judgements towards others. It cannot be said that the attitudes towards religions/denominations/worldviews that were foreign to the pupils have changed with KORU but effects on social interaction are recognisable. The evaluation according to Philipp Mayring (content analysis) was carried out using a triangulation of data: Observation of religious education lessons, lesson preparations and interviews with the participating teachers and two group interviews with students and their written reflections.

Keywords: interreligious encounter learning; cooperative religious education; effects on social interaction

1. Introduction

Society is on the move due to migration and globalisation. As a result, schools are also becoming more colourful in terms of the cultural, ideological and religious diversity that characterises school life. The acquisition of skills that enable pupils and teachers to engage in intercultural and interreligious encounters and make fruitful dialogue possible for everyone is essential. Appreciation, tolerance of ambiguity, change of perspective, etc.—to name just a few skills—are necessary in a pluralistic society.

Of the 16 recognised religious communities in Austria, 15 offer religious education, which is organised along denominational lines throughout the country and is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain in its current form due to a variety of structural and content-related factors. The heterogeneity of the pupil population has led to considerations about new organisational forms of religious education that reflect the religious diversity of the pupils (Catholic, Protestant, Free-Church, Islamic, Alevi, Buddhist, New Apostolic and Orthodox, etc.), consider their lifeworld and enable learning through encounters, as well as offering opportunities to identify with their own religions/worldviews. Various models of cooperation are therefore being tested and evaluated in Austria: KoKoRu = confessional cooperative religious education (Bastel et al. 2006), dk:RU = dialogue-based confessional

cooperative religious education (Becks et al. 2022), KUER = Kultur (culture)—Ethik (ethics)—Religion (religion) (Kreis and Leitner 2022), WIR = Werte (values)—Interkulturelles Lernen (intercultural learning)—Religionen (religions) (Pruchniewicz, not publishes yet), Christlich-Islamischer Religionsunterricht im Teamteaching (christian-islamic religious education in teamteaching) (Gmoser et al. 2024) etc. However, a study of shared religious education in mixed learning groups in Germany has already been carried out by Kießling et al. (2018). All these models are located in compulsory schools or at upper secondary level. Forms of denominationally cooperative religious education have also been increasingly researched in Germany (Merkt and Losert 2014; Ziebertz et al. 2010a; Ziebertz et al. 2010b; Schweitzer et al. 2006; Biesinger et al. 2008; Kuld et al. 2009).

The accompanying studies show that the quality of cooperative teaching varies greatly and at the same time draws attention to the desiderata. For example, they point to the lack of teacher qualifications for cooperative religious education, but also to the lack of curricula, didactic support, teaching materials, etc. Nevertheless, it can be said that cooperative religious education enjoys undivided approval among all players and is seen in its various forms as a future model for a pluralistic society. In contrast, effectiveness studies in recent years, which have looked at different models of interreligious learning in religious education with regard to learning effects (Ziebertz et al. 2010a; Ziebertz et al. 2010b; Merkt and Losert 2014; Schweitzer 2018; Schweitzer and Bucher 2020), show no effects of interreligious learning on changes in attitudes or few effects in reducing prejudices and highlight the difficulties with regard to the practice of changing perspectives (Schweitzer 2018; Unser 2018).

However, Riegel and Schweitzer (2021) point out that there is still a fundamental "lack of suitable tests that reliably record the specific competences that are to be developed through denominational cooperative learning".

Regarding vocational schools and religious education, the research situation is rather sparse. Kenner, who is responsible for two studies in this area, should be emphasised here. One of the works is an intervention study from 2007 on intercultural learning. He notes that pupils are encouraged to reflect and that there has also been an improvement in the way they interact with each other. However, it cannot be ruled out that this is only a short-term change as the intervention was not designed to be long-term. Another of his works is an empirical study from 2018 on religious commitment and moral judgement.

Until now, religious education at vocational schools in Austria, which are characterised by a multicultural and multireligious student body, has remained completely unexplored. This exploratory study aims to contribute to shedding light on interreligious religious education in this area.

Religious education at vocational schools is not offered in all federal states. In Carinthia, there has been a model for religious education at vocational schools since 2013, "Project Religion", which includes pupils of all religions/worldviews. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Islamic teachers are involved. Even though religion is a compulsory subject in vocational schools in Vorarlberg, only the Catholic Church has so far made use of its right to offer denominational lessons. Most Roman Catholic apprentices attend these religious education classes. Apprentices of other denominations sometimes take part as guest students, although their participation cannot be counted as official attendance of religious education classes (according to the Religious Education Act). To maintain the possibility of religious education in school—the number of pupils who are catholic is falling—a Roman Catholic religious education teacher and an Islamic religious education teacher have joined forces to offer cooperative religious education (KORU).

The establishment of KORU means that the two largest religious communities in terms of numbers (Roman Catholic and Islamic) teach one hour of religion per week in team teaching and representatives of the other participating churches and religious communities, which cannot offer religious education due to the small number of pupils, help to organise the lessons to a proportionately calculated extent. The lessons are conducted by the teachers against the background of comparative theology according to Catherine Cornille (Cornille

2008) and based on enabling didactics (Arnold and Tutor 2007) and Ruth Cohn's theme-centred interaction (Cohn 1994). The concept is described briefly below.

2. Didactical Concept

According to Cornille, five basic attitudes come into play in interreligious dialogue, which she describes as doctrinal or epistemic humility, confessional attachment to one's own tradition (commitment), commensurability and perception of differences (interconnection), empathy and loving attention and hospitality. (Cornille 2008)

By a doctrinal/epistemic humility she means:

> "The impulse to dialogue arises from the desire to learn, to increase one's understanding of the other, of oneself, or of the truth. It thus presupposes humble awareness of the limitation of one's own understanding and experience and of the possibility of change and growth." (Cornille 2008, p. 9)

This means that when understanding another person's practice of faith, there is always a part that remains misunderstood due to the limitations of human understanding. This also applies to one's own conviction in faith and understanding of truth. For Cornille, the confessional bond is to be seen in being at home in one's own tradition and in lived faith, which are prerequisites for the encounter with the other. This also puts a stop to a syncretistic approach. Understanding commensurability and the perception of differences in Cornille's sense can lead to the perception of similarities and differences on the common basis of fundamental comparability and comprehensibility. The dialogue about this can be profitable but can also reach its limits when an incompatibility of religious convictions becomes apparent. Because religions deal with questions of life, new ways of understanding can always be found here. Cornille sees empathy and loving attention as the basis for a change of perspective in dialogue. This empathetic engagement with the religious beliefs of others can also lead to reflecting on and sometimes changing one's own way of thinking. The theoretical and lived beliefs in their affective dimension can be appreciated with this attitude and thus also make the spiritual dimension visible. Interreligious dialogue understood in this way must be careful not to exclude anyone. Finally, she mentions hospitality as a prerequisite for interreligious dialogue. Welcoming the other and recognising that—in Buber's sense—one's own way of thinking can change by engaging with "the guest" is what makes an interreligious encounter possible in the first place.

Enabling didactics should help in this process, which means that the motivation to acquire content depends on the learner—it remains to be seen in what form. However, the teacher can encourage this. The learning effect is greatest where the content can be linked to the learner's own world. These findings come from both learning research and the neurosciences and form the basis for enabling didactics (Arnold and Tutor 2007). The teacher acts as a learning guide for the learner to realise their individual learning goals, as self-organised learning promotes the development of skills. This means that the teacher is no longer a mediator of knowledge, and the learners are no longer mere recipients, which requires both groups to rethink their approach (Quilling 2015). In the so-called S.P.A.S.S. model (Arnold 2012a), Arnold outlines the methodological criteria: self-directed, productive, activating, situational, social and speaks of a "turn towards situational orientation" on the part of the teacher, who is responsible for marking competences with the learners. To do justice to this, teachers need to be open and flexible or have a constructivist, systemic attitude that can deal with the different acquisition logics and non-linear learning processes of the students (Arnold 2012b).

Enabling didactics offers the opportunity, particularly in cooperative religious education, to create a framework for religious learning that makes the different (religious) perspectives of the participants authentically visible in dialogue and encounters and goes beyond the acquisition of mere knowledge in the exchange. Through dialogue, the pupils practise changing perspectives, and, in the best case, this leads to new insights that not only concern the rational sphere, but also the emotional sphere, and have a positive effect on the social level in the classroom. These newly acquired insights and skills can also be

utilised in the workplace to prevent misunderstandings, prejudices and friction. This is one of the places where young people experience differentiation based on clothing, food, etc. Popp (2013) sees a connection here between discrimination based on religious affiliation in Europe.

Theme-centred interaction (TCI), as conceived by Ruth Cohn, is suitable for this learning process within the framework of enabling didactics. Inherent in it is social learning with the simultaneous promotion of personal development based on a topic that is also to be further developed.

Huber and Bernhard (2022) offer a good summary and describe three axioms as the foundation for TCI. The first axiom is the awareness that there is a tension between autonomy and interdependence, i.e., between independence and interconnectedness. Didactic concepts must take this into account and adopt a human image of an autonomous and at the same time interdependent individual. This is about personal freedom and individuality, which, however, cannot be conceived without the "assumption of responsibility for society as a whole" (Hufer 2001).

The second axiom addresses "the reverence for living things and their growth and the advocacy of this. The third axiom deals with the freedom to decide freely within limits and the possibility of extending these limits in favour of greater freedom of action. The axioms thus represent a philosophical-ethical concept that makes statements about a person's personal attitude and creates the basis for dealing and working with people" (Huber and Bernhard 2022).

There are also two postulates that describe TCI. Be your own chairperson—whereby this applies to both pupils and teachers in the classroom—and pay attention to disruptions. This prevents them from manifesting themselves in other ways and blocking the lesson. A chairperson, who is not necessarily the teacher, can take the lead. Communication at eye level is required for this.

There are four factors, IT/I/WE and GLOBE, which work together to ensure the success of communication in group work. IT: Topics are discussed in a results-orientated manner through the exchange in a group. I: The needs, experiences and competences of teachers and pupils are recognised and strengthened. WE: To strengthen cooperation, the group process must be reflected upon. Strengthening trust and promoting resources should help to deal constructively with conflict situations and competitive behaviour. GLOBE: The group is viewed systemically, not detached from its environment, etc. These four factors must be treated in a balanced way by the teacher (Huber and Bernhard 2022).

The Innsbruck model of religious didactics would also correspond to the TCI approach, in which the "educational processes are based on three steps, each with four directions or perspectives. The first step is dedicated to (empirically guided) analysis. It takes place in the four perspectives (a) subjective-biographical, (b) intersubjective-communicative, (c) content-related-objective and (d) contextual perspective" (Sejdini and Kraml 2022).

3. Materials and Methods

An inductive qualitative approach was chosen for the research design to gain a deeper insight into the teaching activities of the teachers involved. The explorative nature of the study required openness on the part of all participants to capture a wide variety of subjective perceptions and conclusions. The research question of interest here was:

Can cooperative religious education based on enabling didactics and TCI help to gain new insights into religions/worldviews and thus reinforce social cohesion?

Two classes at a vocational school in Vorarlberg were available as a sample for the study, a group with 15 pupils (9 Roman Catholic, 4 Islamic, 1 Protestant, 1 Serbian Orthodox) in first grade and another in second grade with 15 pupils (5 Roman Catholic, 4 Islamic, 1 Protestant, 2 without religious denomination, 1 Alevi, 1 Buddhist, 1 Serbian Orthodox). The pupils are therefore aged 14 or older. In addition, there were the religious teachers, who were made up of the religions/denominations to which the pupils formally belonged, apart from the Orthodox, who did not send a religious teacher to the project. The two

pupils with no religious affiliation were also not represented by their own teacher. The study was expressly requested by the initiators of the KORU project to visualise the effects of this interreligious model of religious education. The pupils gave their consent to the evaluation at the beginning of the school year. To ensure anonymity, the school was not named and any reference to the identity of students and teachers was avoided.

The data collection took place from October 2021 to June 2022 and was geared towards data triangulation. Lesson observations in both classes began in October 2021 and were completed in June 2022. A total of 14 lessons were recorded—seven per class. Whenever possible in terms of resources, two observers were on the job to observe the lessons in which three teachers of different denominations/religions organised the lessons together. The Islamic religion teacher (=RE teacher) and the Roman Catholic RE teacher were present in every lesson and were the main pillars of the KORU project, while the Alevi, Free Church, Protestant and Buddhist RE teachers organised the lessons with the two regular teachers in two lessons per semester.

In addition, all six participating teachers were interviewed in June 2022. The preliminary considerations led to the use of a focusing, problem-centred, guideline-based, semi-structural interview method. The following guiding questions led through the interview:

What does religious cooperation mean to you?

Please characterise your (Catholic, Islamic, Alevi, etc.) religious education.

Please characterise your contribution to religious education in the context of KORU.

What experiences have you had with KORU?

What requirements do you need as a religious education teacher to be able to work on a KORU?

What framework conditions are needed to be able to carry out a KORU well?

Does the KORU model have a future? Please give reasons for your answer.

What else would you like to say that wasn't mentioned in the interview?

The pupils were also interviewed in two group discussions in June 2022, whereby any language-centred bias that might occur was considered, as some of the pupils did not have German as their mother tongue. Two key questions were asked here to stimulate discussion:

How would you describe your religious education lessons this year?

Were there any differences or similarities to the lessons of previous years? If so, which ones?

Finally, an atmospheric picture was raised: Would you recommend this form of religious education?

The written entries of 15 pupils in their exercise books, which they were asked to write after each lesson as a reflection on the lesson, were available as further data. However, not all the pupils provided statements about each lesson.

The teachers' preparations for the individual lessons that were observed were available in written form.

The analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2021) after the interviews and observations had been transcribed. Initially, three coders with Islamic and Christian backgrounds worked together to sequentialise three of the four data sets. The students' notebook entries were not sequentialised. The coders then created initial codes independently of each other and recorded their key findings in individual memos. This allowed them to contribute their different perspectives and religious contexts. In the next step, regular meetings were arranged to discuss the individual codes and reach a consensus on them. This was intended to create transparency, reduce the subjective component of the analysis and ensure the reliability of the results. In these settings, code groups were agreed upon, to which data were subsequently assigned. As a final step, the data were triangulated and thus placed in relation to each other. The lesson preparations were used to understand the didactic intentions of the teachers.

To be able to categorise which data set the respective quote comes from, here is a brief description. The interviews with the religious education teachers are labelled as follows: I = interview, then the religious affiliation of the teacher I = Islamic, K = Roman Catholic, E = Protestant, B = Buddhist, F = Free Church, A = Alevi. The numbers indicate in which line of the transcript the statement is located, e.g., (I_K:44–49). The group interviews are organised as follows: G = group interview, 1 = 1st school level, 2 = 2nd school level; S = students; the numbers indicate the student who is currently speaking, e.g., (G1_S3:132–133). Here too, the numbers indicate in which line of the transcript the statement is located. The students' exercise book entries are cited as follows: S = student who was assigned a number for anonymisation (1–15) and the numbers indicate in which line of the exercise book entry the statement is located, e.g., (S_12:25). Finally, the lesson observations should be mentioned. These were quoted according to sequences. U = lesson observation; 6.10. = date of observation; S = sequence. The following number indicates the sequence S1 = 1st sequence. If this is divided into several sections, these are numbered consecutively with lowercase letters (a, b, c etc.), e.g., (U_6.10.:S1a).

4. Results

The lessons in September (the start of the new school year) help the pupils to get to know each other and to grow together as a group. This includes getting to know and perceive the other as a person, defining important points for an encounter in dialogue and introducing religious/worldview perspectives. It is also important for the teachers to get an impression of the class to be able to tailor the lessons to the learning groups. This lays the foundation for the joint learning process, the results of which are now described in relation to the research question.

4.1. Importance of Dialogue and Exchange of Opinions

The lessons are very much based on dialogue. Different forms of dialogue become apparent. There are so-called ping-pong conversations, which follow the pattern: question from the teacher—answer from the pupils. The Roman Catholic teacher in particular tries to involve all pupils in the lesson by asking a question and asking the pupils in turn for an answer. Longer conversations between the pupils mainly take place when working in small groups or when the lesson offers some freedom, such as during a joint celebration or group work in the classroom. More in-depth teacher-pupil conversations often result from questions asked by the pupils.

As early as the second lesson, the students discuss what it means to be in dialogue and thus establish a basic attitude for discussions. This unit clearly did not fail to have an impact on the pupils, as it is the only one reflected on by all 15 pupils in the exercise book and the statements are underlined many times with ratings such as "I really liked it", "very important" or "great". The learning effects noted by the young people here range from simply listening to other opinions to learning how to deal with other opinions to "that you should respect everyone when the person expresses their own opinion" (S6:4–5). Respect is already mentioned here as an issue for young people. The importance of entering dialogue with each other and discussing issues is recognised by the pupils. "Talking and conversing with each other is important and expressing your opinion" (S14:2–3).

They recognise the value of exchanging views and the importance of not only expressing opinions but also allowing different opinions to coexist. This includes them talking openly with each other—even within the family. In class, they have the new experience of being able to discuss texts—including texts from their own and other religious traditions—with each other and to contribute their religious/worldview perspectives. This applies in particular to stories that can be found in both the Bible and the Koran. They also recognise that there are different ways of thinking. "Everyone thinks differently about the same topics" (S9:8).

In the first phase of docking and getting to know each other, the students often use the pronoun "other" in their reflections. It is used in connection with getting to know

others, but also when it comes to expressing one's own opinion, exchanging opinions, diversity of opinion and dealing with it. In relation to religion, the term is used when reflecting on what has been learnt: "Other religions are also very interesting." (S9:3) and "→ got to know Christianity better -> explained to others what Islam is" (S10:5–6). Here the pupil puts themself in contrast to their non-Islamic classmates. Learning something new from others also means telling them something about their own religion. The exchange is therefore not a one-way street. While it is not possible to tell from the first statement which religious or worldview perspective the student belongs to, this is clear from the second statement. At the end of the year, one pupil also mentions this in the group discussion. He/she emphasises that he/she had no idea about other religions before and has learnt to have respect for them and for other opinions (G2_S13:93–101). Respect is also an important factor here and is extended from respect for other opinions to respect for religions. Getting to know other religions goes hand in hand with a respectful attitude towards them. In one booklet entry, respect is even seen as an important aspect of life (S5:14–15).

One teacher observes in class that, in contrast to the large group of students, in which the same pupils always take part in the dialogue, in the small group work it turns out to be positive that, on the one hand, there is always someone who records the results of the discussions in writing and, on the other hand, the pupils, who are otherwise rather quiet in class, get into an exchange with the other group members. They are also asked for their religious perspective on individual topics. The pupils are actively involved. "And I find that very harmonious" (I_E: 163–168).

4.2. Knowledge Expansion

In general, the group discussion in grade 2 emphasises at the beginning that you always learn something regardless of your age and that teachers can, therefore, also learn from their pupils. The young people mentioned the advantage of cooperative lessons, in which they learnt many things that would otherwise not have been possible. It is pointed out that the lessons about the different religions and not exclusively about Christianity were very popular and it is perceived that the KORU project always tries to develop a topic further. It is appreciated that you gain a better insight into other religions and get an impression of "how they work". But you do not just learn new things about a religion, you can also learn from a religion. If you realise that there are some pupils in the class who do not have German as their mother tongue, the comparison of interreligious learning with learning a language is easy to understand.

> "S4: Yes, I mean, we learn different things. For example, Turkish, Croatian, yes, Catholic, yes, it's just good for listening and you can learn something new." (G2_S4:41–42)

This can be an indication that the other religion is as foreign as the language you do not speak. But you can obviously learn and understand the language of the other religion if you listen carefully.

However, learning is not only abstractly related to the religions but is "personalised" to a certain extent by talking about having learnt something about Muslims as a Christian. But identification with the religion to which one feels one belongs is also expressed linguistically in the learning process.

> "S5: So far, I've really enjoyed the religion lesson. It was exciting because I am Buddhism, from Buddhism, yes. And I also have some experience with my own religion. And the different religions, Islam and so on, which I never knew about before. I knew that the pilgrimage site was in Mecca, but I didn't know many, many other, many other things, for example. Yes, and every week we learnt something new. Yes." (G2_S5:46–51)

Cornille speaks here of prerequisites for interreligious dialogue: being at home in one's own religion/denomination. At the end, the statement is confirmed with a: yes.

Most of the pupils' entries in their exercise books remain rather unspecific about concrete learning content and do not go beyond the wording "having learnt something new" (S12:5). Hardly any specific topics from the religions/denominations are named that are particularly reflected upon. This picture is also evident at the end of the year in the group discussions, where—when asked about content that the students specifically remember—few concrete details can be given, i.e., active memories of specific content cannot be recalled immediately. Statements of a content-related nature are prompted with the help of the Roman-Catholic teacher who is present during the group discussions. For example, one pupil remembers Buddhism, where there is no rosary, "but something similar" (G1_S14:132–133).

It becomes apparent that the label, the theme, which the teachers give to each lesson does not correspond to the associations of the pupils. The keyword "peace lesson" (introduced by the RE teacher as a reminder) does not evoke any remembered content for the pupils. Only when the content of the mentioned lesson is discussed in detail do memories—albeit without depth—come back to the pupils.

Nevertheless, the pupils have the feeling that they have learnt a lot about (other) religions. In the post-lesson reflections, the term "learnt" is used 34 times and is supplemented by "new insights", "informed", "experienced" and "more knowledge". Many of the reflections are accompanied by evaluations of the lessons. For example, many of the entries in the exercise book state that the pupils "liked it (very) much" and that "the lesson was good". Further entries mention "very interesting" and "really exciting". This shows that the teachers were very good at assessing the relevance of the chosen topics for the pupils and were able to arouse their interest.

This impression was also confirmed in the group discussion. The pupils appreciate the variety offered by the cooperative religious education: "The lessons are varied. And, you don't always go through the same thing, because like in primary school, in secondary school you already had religious education, just from your own religion. And if you always [go through] the same thing, at some point it gets boring and there's always a variety here" (G2_S11:85–88). This impression is shared several times and justified in different ways. You learn something new every week and can already do something with the new knowledge (G2_S27:198–203).

From the teacher's perspective, a large proportion of the pupils have an "aha" effect in every lesson and it is perceived that the pupils show interest, actively participate and listen, generate knowledge and gain experience despite being tired after the lunch break. This is clear from the young people's reactions to the lessons (I_I:60–64).

At the same time, the Islamic teacher indirectly provides a possible explanation for the sometimes fragmentary knowledge of the pupils. The time available to each religious community to take a position on an issue is limited. This forces them to formulate their content in a compact way. They are aware that the information is therefore superficial, but the pupils have at least heard something and that is "better than nothing" (I_I:229–235). The tight schedule of the school lessons can also mean that pupils do not even get a chance to ask questions because they are overwhelmed by the pace of knowledge transfer. There is little time to look at a topic from a different perspective and reflect on it to develop questions. This applies, for example, to the terms religion and denomination, which are not differentiated in the lessons observed. It is therefore not surprising that the pupils speak exclusively of religions, even if they mean a different denomination.

4.3. Community and Common Ground

In the classroom, the commonality is repeatedly emphasised, especially by the Islamic RE teacher, who stresses the solidarity of people and is also taken up by the pupils. This emphasises that people have a lot in common. The fact that the community in the classroom also plays a role for the pupils is particularly evident in a lesson that does not take place in the classroom. At Christmas, the teachers move the lesson to the schoolyard, where a fire bowl is set up. They meet there in a relaxed atmosphere to wish each other well

and bring the school year to a close together. The focus here is on "the communal aspect" (GI1_S9:84–86), which is less evident in the classroom. "In class, everyone sits and looks ahead, which is a different setting. You also memorise content better if you learn at a place outside of school" (GI_S11:106–112). The observation protocols of the lessons show that the pupils also discuss private matters in personal conversations and that the bond between them can be extended beyond the classroom. For example, the topic of skiing comes up in both classes and leads to the question of whether they could go skiing together one day.

Although not all of them celebrate Christmas according to their religious tradition, they wish each other a "Merry Christmas" when they are asked by the teachers to wish each other well. In the second grade, all young people, regardless of their religious/worldview affiliation, wish each other a "Merry Christmas", although there is an awareness of differences in religions—that not everyone celebrates this festival out of religious conviction or does not celebrate it at all. "Merry Christmas, even if you don't celebrate it", "Do you celebrate Christmas? What do you eat in China?", "Merry Christmas (handshake) let's go skiing (both laugh)", "Merry Christmas [a] Happy New Year" and "Merry Christmas and stay healthy!" (U_22.12.:S6c).

The community that this form of religious education leads to and that the classes have grown together into is also recognised by the religious education teachers. The example set by the teachers with their team teaching across denominational and religious boundaries plays an important role here. They show the pupils that it is possible to work together, laugh together and have fun together. Talking to each other about religions/denominations/worldviews is also community-building and peace work (I_K:240–244). In turn, this triggers a learning effect for the Protestant RE (religious education) teacher. She mentions the positive aspect of not teaching the class in groups but as a whole class. The effect is a great, visible class community (I_E:18–31).

Linguistically, the growing together of the group becomes visible in the use of the pronoun "other". While, at the beginning of the school year, the pupils' reflections often refer to the other religion when naming the respective denomination/religion to which they do not formally belong, this becomes more concrete at the end of the year. They no longer talk about having learnt about another religion, but about having learnt about Buddhism, for example.

In this community, it is possible for the pupils to discuss stories from the individual religious traditions from different perspectives. This is particularly noticeable with shared stories in the Koran and the Bible. Over the course of the year, the stories of Moses, Job, Noah and Jesus are examined in Christianity and Islam, leading to multiple entries in the exercise book about similarities and commonalities. "Certain themes are quite similar. Some prophets also appear in the Bible and the Quran" (S9:4–5). Not only are the similarities between the religions derived from the stories that are viewed from both perspectives, but also that "we humans in the world have a lot in common." (S2:8). Here, the insight gained from processing the stories that Christians and Muslims share in their scriptures, namely that the two religions have much in common, is applied to humanity as a whole. This shows that the discussions with the teachers, who emphasise in a wide variety of contexts that all people are equal in dignity and connected as brothers and sisters, have borne fruit. The image of humanity that they have conveyed is reflected by the pupils.

4.4. Internal Perspective and Insight

The pupils realise that there is a difference between someone talking about a religion/denomination from an external perspective and whether the content conveyed by the RE teacher comes from an internal perspective.

This internal perspective, finding out how someone does not talk about religion but speaks religiously, is an important experience for the pupils. It is also mentioned and valued in both group discussions in relation to the teachers. When asked whether it makes a difference who teaches the content, one pupil said: "S5: I mean, yes, if the Roman-Catholic [teacher] had talked about it, it would still have been exciting, but if a teacher from their

religion did it, they would have practised more [. . .]" (G1_S5:66–68) The practising religious teacher as a lecturer is given preference. Religion thus becomes visible and is not just a religion "for learning" because it is embodied by an authentic person (G1_S1:22–25), with whom one can "talk everything through" and "really understand, really delve deeper into the culture or religion [. . .]" (G1_S3:44–46).

Through this form of expanding knowledge about a religion/denomination and the associated insight into the religion/denomination to which one does not belong, it is possible for the young people to understand why people behave in a certain way "and how exactly they live and what they eat [. . .], you just hear and see religion very differently, yes" (G1_S2:37–39). On the one hand, this statement can be understood to mean that, when confronted with the teacher's or pupil's internal perspective on their own religion/denomination, they perceive this religion differently than when talking about it, but it can also mean that the new knowledge changes their view of a religious community. When asked whether one also sees the person who belongs to the respective religion/denomination differently, it becomes clear: "S2: No, that remains the same, but I can understand it more, then" (G1_S2:42). The insight into how Christians pray in church is also emphasised in a booklet entry.

In the interview, the Islamic RE teacher also mentions this as an important aspect, that the pupils do not talk about religions in class, but with religions, with the respective experts (I_I:177–184).

4.5. Religious Insights

In addition to the positive image of man, the image of God that the pupils have also becomes visible in the joint discussions. A lesson on the search for God, which the pupils have requested, is organised jointly by the Protestant RE teacher and the Islamic RE teacher. After the Protestant teacher moderates the discussion and asks the questions from her religious perspective, she uses the word "search for God", which is then also used in the pupils' answers. (But this term is also used exclusively in the exercise book entries.) They use images to consider what they mean for their search for God and associate hope, Noah in freedom, God is everywhere, the dark path will end with a light and seeking God's closeness. Those who seek God, will find him, even if you often do not see him at first glance (U_26.1.:S 2a/2b). Pupils also think that God should be characterised as having created Life and Matter.

In their booklet entries, the young people reflect on the image of God, saying that God is everywhere, and you are never alone. You can connect with him in nature. He is omnipotent and accompanies our lives. They come to the realisation that everyone has the same goal, but the ways to get there are different (S10:28–30). Not only the path to God is different. "Everyone sees God differently! But in the end, it comes out the same" (S13:20–21).

Some entries in the booklet are very personal and show the pupil's personal relationship with God. The dialogue with God plays an important role here: "I have the feeling that I have got back on track. Every day before I go to bed, I make the sign of the cross and say: 'Thank you God for such a beautiful day, I love you'. Then I tell him how I feel and then I say, 'Good night' and go to sleep" (S11:13–17). The realisation that you can pray anywhere and that praying calms you down are also emphasised.

The pupils also confirm that their RE teachers' view that the subject of God "can be seen in many ways" (S13:8–9). They see in him a God who is simply EVERYTHING and in whom one should never give up hope. He is just. "Allah" never appears as a name for God not even in the written reflections.

4.6. Relevance of Cooperative Religious Education Beyond the Classroom

The significance of the pupils' insights beyond the group is already evident in the "Christmas lesson" when one pupil speaks.

S11: May I also say something?

> L cath: With pleasure!
>
> S11: The way religious education takes place in the classroom is a great enrichment, together with the for. . . [Note from the minute taker: M falters, he doesn't want to say the word foreigner]—together with many religions, I learn a lot; otherwise religious education was always boring—we watched lots of films, I can do that at home too—now it's with the different religions—cool idea!
>
> S4: He almost said foreigner.
> L islam: The point where M. stopped himself is a realisation! (U_22.12:S7b/8)

Apparently, the cooperative religious education lessons have raised awareness that the term "foreigner" has a discriminatory effect, and the pupil stops when it crosses their lips—as it may have done more than once before. Another pupil notices this and immediately raises the issue. The RE teacher picks up on it and shows his appreciation by indicating that the pupil has stopped themself through this self-recognition, even as they were about to utter the discrimination. This sequence is addressed and commented on by all three religious education teachers present in the interview. The Islamic religious education teacher remembers and reflects on the situation afterwards:

> "There is an awareness, and the [pupils] have become more aware. They already know that they have no right to discriminate against someone else. [. . .] The most important point is that our pupils meet each other. First as human beings, that's important. Being human, yes. There is he or she, facing me and that is a human being, first. The religious beliefs and the religious communities and the whole thing should be secondary, three, four even. But first I should meet as a human being." (I_I:177–198)

KORU is seen as an interreligious and intercultural exchange with mutual appreciation and esteem. Pupils also reflect that the lessons have dispelled some prejudices and stereotypes that some of them may have had towards another religion.

Knowledge about the "other" religions is also useful in the workplace. Thanks to the newly acquired knowledge, statements made by Alevi colleagues, for example, can be better categorised and now make sense.

Another pair of terms that appears in different contexts throughout the year and that the pupils work through is freedom and responsibility. From a Protestant perspective, this would be categorised under "religious knowledge". The pair of terms is associated with the Protestant denomination, and they are related to each other. On the one hand, the meaning of responsibility is seen as being free and, on the other hand, it is seen as two terms that are very close and go hand in hand. Sometimes it takes a closer look to realise how much meaning these terms carry. Trust and equality are also mentioned in this context, but the relationship between them is not explained in detail. In relation to people, freedom for a responsible person means making their own decisions in life. Everyone has their freedom, but it ends where the freedom of others begins. They also reflect on what freedom means for themselves: It's "very important and that I shouldn't listen to other people" (S12:73–74).

Responsibility at work is also discussed in class and is interpreted to mean that you have personal responsibility, for example by handling materials and machines responsibly in the workshop. Freedom, on the other hand, means being allowed to live out your free time. Together we consider what a person needs to make responsible decisions. Terms such as mental maturity, self-confidence and assertiveness are used. They must also be able to judge what is good and what is not. The RE teacher also asks what responsibility they have when they drive at 200km on the motorway or whether it limits their freedom if they smoke at 16. One pupil is convinced that you can live out this freedom when you are alone and do not harm anyone, because you do not have to be restricted by a constraint. This contrasts with another opinion that it is ok to live out freedom within given boundaries. The opinions of the pupils remain separate, even if the teacher makes it clear that she has little understanding of fast driving on the motorway (U_16.3.:S2f/2g).

5. Conclusions

Even in the first lessons, it becomes clear how TCI and enabling didactics are realised in interaction. IT/I/WE/GLOBE. The "I" is addressed by making the individual pupils visible as individuals and getting to know each other. The question of where they come from does not refer to their ethnic origin but is based solely on the Vorarlberg region. This makes it clear that the pupils do not live in the same place, but in the same federal state—regardless of where they were born or where their families come from. This introduction, which deliberately does not focus on the topic of migration and divides the pupils into majority society and minorities right from the start, means that the young people who see themselves as minorities do not have to take a confrontational or defensive stance to emphasise and defend their religious identity, which never describes the whole person, as a unique selling point. The respective religious identity can thus stand alongside the other identities, such as athlete, social status, etc., that the young people also have. Very quickly, there is no longer any talk of "the others" in the pupils' reflections. It was possible to create a sense of togetherness but there was no co-optation.

Nevertheless, the pupils are aware of the differences that cannot be discussed away. Differences around religions/worldviews are not faded out and the individual topics are always negotiated from different religious/worldview perspectives. This is carried out in a subject-centred way by focusing on the pupils and their questions and interests. The topics (ES) for the following lessons are developed in the discussions of the RE lessons and lead to learning effects that have a direct impact on the group and its social structure. However, the lessons not only focus on what is different but, above all, on what we have in common. This is demonstrated by the fact that teachers often start from what is common. Bible texts are used that appear in both the Qur'an and the Bible. Practising differences in what is common to many pupils is proving to be a fruitful approach, from which even minorities whose written traditions have obviously not been considered can benefit. Peace work is also seen as a goal behind religious education (GLOBE).

Although religious truths also come into view to some extent in religious education, these are not negotiated under a claim to absoluteness. Cornille would categorise them under the first basic attitude. The concept of truth is introduced by the Buddhist RE teacher in connection with the four noble truths and is taken up by the Roman-Catholic RE teacher and the Islamic RE teacher without judgement. This means that no truth is given preference. This makes it easier for the pupils to engage in a change of perspective and, by distancing themselves, not only to be able to perceive the strangeness but also to accept that there are three truths that can stand side by side.

The study shows that dialogue is very important to the pupils. They want to be able to discuss everything and have different opinions without being put down. There is an understanding of dialogue that makes the pupils aware that it is not about adopting the opinions of others. Rather, it is a dialogue that is not syncretistic in Cornille's sense but aims at a change of perspective. The young people recognise that this has to do with a fundamental recognition of the other person and demand that the respect they show to their interlocutors is also shown to them. This is evident in class discussions throughout the school year.

The teachers, who show great appreciation for the pupils in the dialogues, play a major role in this, even if the opinions expressed diverge. For example, they often thank the pupils for their good work during the lessons and make them feel like great personalities. They offer their support for individual or group work. Even if the teachers, who are pursuing specific goals, sometimes try to control the dialogue, they remain open and responsive to unexpected answers from the students. This appreciation is shown to all pupils and is very positively received by them. It is possible that many of the young people do not often experience this attitude towards them and appreciate it even more in religious education lessons. The teachers, who show great appreciation for the students in the dialogues, play an important role in this, even when the opinions expressed differ. For example, they often thank the pupils for their good work in class and make them feel like great personalities.

They offer their support for individual or group work. Even when teachers with specific objectives sometimes try to control the dialogue, they remain open and responsive to unexpected responses from pupils. This appreciation is shown to all the pupils and is very well received by them. It is possible that many of the young people do not often experience this attitude towards them and appreciate it even more in religious education.

The teachers also act as role models in the way they work with their colleagues. The excellent cooperation between the two main leaders of the project is evident not only in the team teaching that works but also in the respect they show each other. This also extends to the "guest teachers", who always find their place well. In team teaching, the teachers develop their perspectives, which are also different in everything that unites them. In this way, they give the pupils an example of how to deal with each other in a cordial way, even if they have different approaches to the religious content and do not always have the same perspective. The focus is on human being. Here the pupils learn about tolerance of ambiguity.

In the spirit of comparative theology, the pupils also engage with religious rituals and welcome them with an attitude of hospitality. This is evident in the pre-Christmas celebration to which all pupils are invited as part of Religious Education. Lesson observations show that the atmosphere is joyful, and all pupils are happy to take part. The conversations during the celebration show an awareness that there are differences that cannot be resolved. This experience of otherness, of recognising the other as a stranger and knowing that they will always be misunderstood to some extent and that it is still possible to celebrate together, is possible in this safe space created by the teachers for both classes.

The young people are all integrated into the class community and celebrate as such: some because it corresponds to their religious tradition and others because they are all invited as guests. This counteracts the formation of groups in which minorities are quickly marginalised. It also prevents identities from being set against each other, as we experienced in the darkest times of our history (being Jewish meant you could not have been an Austrian).

It is exciting that the pupils have the impression that they know what Christians do at Christmas thanks to the pre-Christmas celebration. It is possible that this is more about getting a feeling for what Christmas can mean for Christians. In this context, it could be discussed, for example, what Muslims, Buddhists, Alevi or people with no formal religious affiliation do at Christmas. A discussion about the meaning of Christmas for Christians would also be appropriate. At this pre-Christmas celebration, people chat privately in a cosy atmosphere and do not talk about how Christmas is (not) celebrated in individual families. Instead, the topic of conversation is how the holidays are being spent and whether someone is skiing. Although Christmas is just around the corner, it is not discussed in detail. The question is whether Christmas has already become a secular cultural celebration for many, as even Christians often no longer focus on its Christian origins and meaning. In any case, Christmas is recognised by pupils as a major (Christian) festival, which is probably not the case for festivals of small minorities. A foundation needs to be laid for this. The background against which religious festivals are dealt with is usually the Christian one, with its main festivals of Christmas and Easter. Before these, for example, fasting and thus Ramadan are discussed.

These young people have the impression that they have learnt a lot, even if this learning does not relate to explicitly retrievable knowledge. The tight time frame makes it difficult to consolidate this knowledge, which works against deepening the content. This can be seen, among other things, in the use of the term religion. It is also used indiscriminately for denominations. This distinction is unlikely to play a role in pupils' lives and is not addressed in the RE lessons observed. It is possible that this is more a matter of knowledge based on the individual experiences and insights of the pupils in the cooperative RE lessons and that it plays a role for the young people on a personal—and not exclusively intellectual—level. It becomes clear that the pupils do not learn the content intended by the teachers, but rather what is important and applicable for them in

their life situations. It is about new insights into the religion/worldview practised or the faith/spirituality lived by the individual and how to deal with it in relation to oneself. The acquisition of knowledge stimulates a process of cognitive reflection that links information with experience.

The knowledge imparted may only be retrievable with assistance, but it unfolds its effect in the interpersonal sphere. The feeling of strangeness towards unfamiliar religions/denominations/worldviews diminishes and is replaced by the impression of knowing how they "work" and thus being able to better assess the other person. This implicit knowledge therefore fulfils an important function as a bridge builder and once again demonstrates the importance of imparting knowledge, even if compromises must be made due to a lack of resources. The effects can be seen in a well-functioning class community in which the young people recognise and name differences but are connected to each other. This removes the potential for othering. The pupils also move from the unspecific "I have learnt a lot about other religions" to "I have learnt a lot about Christianity, Islam, etc." in terms of knowledge acquisition. There are signs that this is obviously having an effect beyond school, for example when they consider going skiing together or when they talk about the workplace where they now understand their colleagues better.

The pupils repeatedly mention and appreciate the fact that the involvement of RE teachers from different faith communities means that there is not just talk about religion, but religious talk from people who practise their faith. The confessional connection that Cornille talks about also makes learning religion possible and not just learning about religion, which pupils can achieve through self-study with the help of a book. A possible nascent fear that the pupils would be indoctrinated in a cooperative religion lesson and would no longer learn anything about their own religious/confessional roots is refuted in the lesson observations. The Beutelsbach Consensus is not once violated in the lessons; instead, the pupils reflect on their own religious perspective in the confrontation with positions that are foreign to them. The fact that minorities such as Buddhists are also represented by a RE teacher means that they are in the spotlight at least twice a term and are visible to their classmates. It is a form of recognition. The study also shows that pupils who do not formally belong to a religious community and are therefore not represented by a teacher also benefit for their life experiences. This is evident from the entries in the booklets, which often mention a learning effect for their own lives.

The new knowledge acquired through cooperative RE creates an awareness of prejudices and hasty classifications. This can be seen, for example, in a situation where a pupil wants to address another pupil as a foreigner and stops himself in the middle of a word. With their positive feedback, the teachers show how well the pupil has learnt. The discussion of the concept of freedom and the associated realisation that one's own freedom ends where the freedom of others begins also provides a good counterpoint to the concept of freedom as it is used in right-wing populist circles. In this way, the lesson also addresses the political dimension of religion and carries out preventive work.

However, the validity of the study is limited by the small number of participants (two classes). Furthermore, it is not possible to say whether the learning effect extends beyond the classroom situation or whether it is limited to the safe space of the classroom, where the young people have built up mutual trust. As with the German studies (Ziebertz et al. 2010a; Ziebertz et al. 2010b; Schweitzer and Bucher 2020; etc.), it is not possible to say with certainty whether young people's attitudes have changed towards religions to which they do not formally belong. However, the pupils' increased reflection has led to an improvement in their interaction with each other. The study thus confirms Kenner's findings from 2007. A long-term study would have to be carried out to prove that this is a long-term effect and that the learning does not fizzle out after a short time. This also applies to the acquisition of knowledge.

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Article

Female Religiosity in Self-Narration: Some Indicative Elements and Suggestions from Empirical Materials

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Abstract: This study stems from a collection of autobiographical narrations collected during a seminar held in February 2018 involving a small group of adults, representing the three major monotheistic religions: Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam. The seminar was organized by the University of Bologna (Department of Arts) in collaboration with the Association for Interreligious Dialogue "Abramo e Pace". The aim of this paper is to re-examine the autobiographical narratives that emerged from the seminar, with a particular focus on the characteristics of female religious experiences in these religions, in order to identify distinctive trans-religious and transcultural signs. For this analysis, a sub-group of participants were selected, consisting of nine women, three Catholics, three Jews, and three Muslims, mainly between the ages of 35 and 45. The methodology used is a content analysis, which allows for a detailed examination of the narratives shared. From the narratives obtained, the religious education received in childhood and early adolescence emerges as a resource and support for the construction of personal identity regardless of the subsequent life paths taken by the individual. An additional pedagogical/educational theme of interest is represented by the intertwining of transformations of personal religiosity and dynamics of adult transformation, which is present in these narrations. Although the results do not aim for statistical representativeness, it is expected that the analysis will reveal certain constants that could inform subsequent, more systematic research efforts. In particular, it is expected that marriage, motherhood, and the education of children will emerge as moments of reactivation or revitalization of personal religiosity.

Keywords: religious experience; female religiosity; self-narration; religiosity as a personal resource; femininity and biophilic orientation

1. Introduction

In the pedagogical field, the subject of the specific characteristics of female religiosity still seems to be little explored. This silence, at least in Italy, is also part of a more general lack of interest that affects the whole religious phenomenon within studies dedicated to education.[1] The lack of specific studies on female religiosity and its characteristics seems particularly problematic today, considering that religious education (where it is practiced) not only still passes through the privileged mediation of female/motherly figures in the family context, but also seems to be entrusted to female subjects even in school teaching and catechesis, in relation to the progressive reduction in the number of priests. Teachers in Italian educational institutions seem to be more than 70% female, almost exclusively in primary and nursery schools. The female component is therefore now predominant even among religious education teachers and catechists. Although there is a lack of rigorous and in-depth empirical studies, there are useful indicators from already published research

material or from documented training experiences, e.g., writings by university students, dissertations, and reports from focus groups with adults.

This contribution operates a second-level re-reading of the materials produced in an adult education context, proposed in 2018 by the "Abraham and Peace" Association, to adult subjects of the three Abrahamic religions. The aim of the initiative was not specifically research, but rather to foster interreligious dialogue even with themselves (migratory experiences, multi-religious families of origin, adult conversions, and mixed marriages). There are existential conditions, such as those represented by this small group, which exacerbate or problematize the physiological difficulties of the educational relationship with their sons and daughters. Moreover, the reflections expressed by the subjects encountered are set in a social and cultural context in which the identity and role of women in society, in the family, and also in religion, are increasingly the subject of debate, rethinking, criticism, and vindication.

On the other hand, therefore, the theme of women's religiosity is part of a broader horizon of reflection, which cannot be adequately analyzed here. The issue of the definition of "institutional" roles and functions in the ecclesial sphere and, thus, the question of gender equality in the various religious denominations,[2] which is much discussed today, especially in Western Christian Churches, constitute important "background factors" of any reflection on femininity.

There are also important studies on the phenomenologically oriented gender perspective, such as Edith Stein's dual anthropology (Stein [1959] 2010) which, in the universal structure of humanity, recognizes the fundamental articulation in the two singularities of male and female (see also Ales Bello 2018). A significant philosophical position is currently the one inaugurated by the studies of Zambrano ([1986] 1995, [1990] 1992).

Another essential theoretical reference is the psychoanalytic literature, particularly the theories of archetypes formulated by Jung ([1938/1954] 1997) and the analytical psychology derived or influenced by him (Jacobi [1957] 2004; Neumann [1956] 1981; Paregger and Risé 2015).[3]

The Jungian theory of archetypes, especially of the psychic male/female integration as a maturation task of the subject, flows into the pedagogical approach and then into M.T. Moscato's studies on religiosity (cf. Moscato 1998, 2022a, 2022b), to which the author owes many theoretical suggestions and a long research experience, which also emerge in this study. In fact, a phenomenological methodological approach is currently being used, both in Europe and America, and in different disciplinary fields, even by different philosophical matrices (cf. Ammerman [2013] 2024).

The point, however, is not to what extent the theological, philosophical, and psychoanalytical positions developed in the 20th century (positions that would require lengthy and articulate presentations) are to be considered convincing and reliable today. Rather, it is essential to recognize that, having entered the fabric of culture, these visions influence researchers in their investigations as much as they condition ordinary men and women in their representations of identity. On the level of religious experience, then, the formative incidence of the sacred texts of the three monotheistic religions roots the representations in a fabric that is certainly mythical–archetypal, gathering propositional thrust as well as conflicting prejudicial residues. It must be a conscious premise to this exposition that what the narrators reveal about themselves expresses first and foremost a self-representation marked by culture and their religious training. To what extent their experiences realistically express "female" religious characters is another question to be examined and researched in other ways and with other methods. And yet, one cannot skip over, at least in an initial phase, how a human subject represents themself, either at the level of imagination or at the level of definition. Therein lies the value, even the scientific value, of collecting these

materials. In the following sections, we will search for possible typical features of female religiosity starting from the autobiographical narratives of a dozen or so women in middle adulthood belonging to the three great monotheisms of Abrahamic origin.

2. Materials and Methodological Approach

2.1. A Self-Narration Seminar

As already mentioned, this study operates a second-level re-reading on materials originally collected during a seminar cycle. This seminar, which took place over three sessions in February 2018, involved a small group of nineteen adults belonging to the three major monotheisms (Christianity, specifically Catholicism; Judaism; and Islam) and characterized by a lived experience of faith and the active exercise of an educational responsibility as parents or teachers. The opportunity was offered by a collaboration between the University of Bologna (Department of Arts, Chair of General Pedagogy) and the "Abraham and Peace" Association for Interfaith Dialogue, which identified the participants. The aim of the training activity, and of the entire cycle it was part of, was to explore the connection among religiosity/religious experience, educational processes, and citizenship.

The sample group, absolutely unrepresentative, was made up of those who had responded affirmatively to the invitation from "Abraham and Peace"; it had thus in fact self-selected itself, probably in relation to transversal needs for self-understanding and self-expression. The participants had agreed to talk about themselves and their own biographical/educational stories, also in relation to the religious dimension, with the exception of three subjects, two Jews and one Catholic, who asked to participate as simple listeners. The author was responsible for leading the group, which was conducted in a non-directive manner. Participants were asked to narrate, in turn, the events of their own history of religious formation, keeping as the only criterion the correspondence with the different seasons of life and the underlining of what the subject considered, within their own existential path, a particularly significant or "crucial" experience (see Draghetti and Pinelli 2019). In the Italian panorama, there are precedents in this direction, in which the criterion of recalling the different seasons of life in non-directive interviews was simply followed (Gatti 2012).

The group, as mentioned above, was made up of nineteen subjects in total; in reality, only sixteen of these made an active contribution, either by narrating their human and religious stories in front of everyone (four of Muslim affiliation, three of Jewish affiliation, and five of Catholic denomination) or by sending a contribution/narrative of themselves in written form, which was equally shared with all the participants (four Catholics).

Connelly and Clandinin, pioneers of narrative research in education, observe that "education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 2). Indeed, educational research cannot do without relating to narratives: those that pervade the socio-cultural world in which the educational process takes place and those that each person continually proposes to themself and to others in order to give the world a meaning capable of connecting experiences.

Firstly, the self/autobiographical narration as a tool of investigation allows one to understand what is relevant to the subject and to enter into their world of meaning-giving. Indeed, when people narrate their experiences retrospectively, they are never simply presenting objectivity. Even the most seemingly aseptic and objective account is actually the fruit of a retrospective work of selection, of highlighting or obscuring details, facts, and events, in a weave in which cognitive and affective–emotional elements are

welded together with unconscious components, linked to sensory perceptions and mental images/representations, themselves emotionally connoted.

Secondly, narration allows the subject, at the very moment in which they narrate themself to others, to reknit the threads of meaning of their own experience. By narrating, in fact, they also "explain" themself to themself, reconstructing themself and continually attributing meaning, in the body of the story, to the contents that surface in it.

Finally, as already said, in the autobiographical narration, broader and more ancient narratives live and palpitate: myths, fairy tales, great stories (including religious ones), and, with them, the archetypal images that populate them. The latter offer content and categories to the subject that thinks itself. Disseminated in various cultural systems, they converse in a certain way with the person's psyche, providing interpretive keys and principles for understanding reality while inserting the subject's personal history into the larger human story (Bruner 1990, 2002)[4]. Of course, the mythical–archetypal contents are themselves reworked and transformed through the dynamism of subjective narration because each narrator is also the interpreter of the archetypal fabric. Whether the narration brings about a reconciliation with one's own history and a "dressing" of one's wounds depends directly on the subject's personal interpretation of the archetypal material.

The self-narration seminar was thus structured according to the logic of Research Training (see Asquini 2018; Pinelli 2024b) and responded to the suggestions of the Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). It aimed to investigate the contribution of education and religious experience with respect to the subject's ability to positively experience the ethical dimension of citizenship. The theoretical assumptions had matured in previous research work, which identified the category of "religiosity" as an educable capacity/potentiality that every human being possesses: "a quality of personal being, which as originally natural remains a possibility for every human person" (Moscato 2015, p. 24). In this logic, it is possible to overcome the delegitimization of religious experience/religious education typical of our secularized societies.

The concluding focus group of the entire course had taken place at the end of the last of the three seminar appointments and had offered an initial confirmation of the starting hypothesis of the entire work (further substantiated by the analysis of the materials and the public restitution that took place the following October). Recurrent elements appeared in the narratives, apparently transversal and "transcultural", showing affinities of experiences between subjects of different origins and religious affiliations. Personal religiosity had emerged as a resource capable of sustaining the subject through life's vicissitudes (bereavement, abandonment, illness, migration experiences, etc.), generatively interwoven with them and therefore constantly evolving. This was significant with respect to the theme of citizenship in multicultural societies: the confrontation of personal life stories, rather than the dispute over respective faiths and dogmatic apparatuses, had proven capable of offering a meeting point from which to reciprocally "deconstruct the enemy".

As anticipated, this paper will propose a reinterpretation of the materials collected, starting from a different research question. The analysis will concentrate on the materials produced by a subgroup of nine women: three Catholic women aged between 35 and 40, three women of Jewish affiliation aged between 40 and 45, and three Muslim women (one of whom is in the 25/30 age group and two in the 55/65 age group).

2.2. Sample Composition and Profile

The following, in brief, is the composition of the subgroup that will be examined in this paper.

Sex	Age Range	Religious Affiliation	Form of Narration	Acronym	Country of Birth
F	40/45	Jewish	Oral	J1	France
F	40/45	Jewish	Oral	J2	Egypt
F	40/45	Jewish	Oral	J3	Canada
F	60/65	Muslim	Oral	M1	Italy
F	55/60	Muslim	Oral	M2	Italy
F	25/30	Muslim	Oral	M3	Morocco
F	35/40	Catholic	Oral	C1	Italy
F	35/40	Catholic	Oral	C2	Italy
F	35/40	Catholic	Oral	C3	Italy

Before delving into the analysis of the narratives, it is useful to construct a brief profile of the women involved to better contextualize the discussion of the results.

J1 was born in France into a Jewish family. Her mother, of Russian origin, gradually distanced herself from religious practice and embraced communism while maintaining a bond of belonging and identity memory with Judaism. J1's father, scarred by the death of his own father in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, experiences belonging to Judaism with difficulty. Because of this, no religion was ever practiced at home. Moreover, for the first few years, J1 and her siblings were not given any religious education; later, they were sent to religious school. Over the years, the family split up: in particular, J1 first lived in the USA, and then came to Italy, where she married an agnostic Italian, with whom she had two daughters (one of whom went through a serious illness in the first months of her life).

J2, an Italian citizen, was born in Alexandria, Egypt, to a Jewish mother and a Catholic father. She thus found herself experiencing the coexistence of the two religions, also materialized at home by the presence of her two grandmothers. Due to the Arab–Israeli conflict, she witnessed the progressive involution from a situation of positive multiculturalism to one of discrimination and distrust, with the impossibility of publicly manifesting the signs of Jewish faith and belonging. This also reverberated at home, in her upbringing, because her mother was afraid of exposing her children to risks. In order to leave home, J2 married an Egyptian ten years her senior, with whom she had a daughter. After the early end of her marriage, she moved with her daughter to Italy and later lived with her for a long time in Romania.

J3 is a Canadian Jew, the daughter of an American father born and raised in Judaism, and a mother from a German–Swiss Lutheran family, who converted to Judaism in order to be able to marry (the family of origin cut ties with J3's mother after her conversion and marriage). This conversion, initially "functional", saw J3's mother sincerely embrace Judaism in the course of the time. J3 grew up in an inner circle, frequenting only Jewish places and friends until she was 12–13 years old, at which point she applied to attend public school. She married a Jewish boy but divorced him after a few years. At a study course in Boston, she met an Italian from Bologna, later deciding to join him in Italy, much to her father's disappointment. After a crisis followed by a brief return to Canada, she returned to Italy and married and had two children.

C1 is an Italian from Bologna, born into a non-religious family. Attendance at a Catholic school and parish, in a climate of ferment following the Second Vatican Council, led her to embrace the faith sincerely, with a strong involvement in voluntary work. Her involvement with Catholic Action, a lay association, is strong. Her history and her work at

a Catholic publisher led her to also deepen her Catholic faith from a cultural perspective. She married a man eight years older than her, from Southern Italy, with whom she had three daughters.

C2 is an Italian from Bologna, who grew up in a strongly practicing Catholic family and then in Catholic Action, where her parents were also formed. There, she met her husband, with whom she had three children. She works as a teacher in a middle school.

C3 is an Italian Catholic. Her mother was born from the marriage of a Hungarian man and an Italian woman, both of deep faith. In particular, the figure of her maternal grandmother (very attached to devotion to the Virgin Mary, to whom she made a vow on the occasion of the troubled birth of C3's mother) marked her faith and human growth. Her grandmother also taught her the Hungarian language, which she learned for love for her husband. The maternal grandparents were an active reference point for many refugees from Hungary after the 1956 revolution. When her maternal grandmother died, C3 went on a long journey to Hungary. Further milestones were scouting, which she experienced in the Agesci association, and, during her studies, made contact with Jesuit priests involved in university pastoral work. C3 married a non-practicing man with whom she had two children. She works as teacher in a primary school.

M1 is an Italian born into a family of peasant origins, in which her father's communism and her maternal grandmother's deep Catholic faith coexist. She gradually distanced herself from her faith, although, starting in her university years and then in her work in the theater, she embarked on a path of rediscovery of transcendence. At work, she met her husband, of Moroccan origin, who led her to conversion to Islam. Two children were born from the marriage, one of whom came into the world after the family moved to Morocco, where M1 lived for twenty years until her return to Italy.

M2 is an Italian born in Liguria and later relocated to Bologna. In her youth, she abandoned the Catholic faith in which she was raised, only to convert to Islam after meeting her future husband. Before marriage, she already had a son with another man, while within marriage, she had two daughters.

M3 is a young woman of Moroccan origin. She was brought up in the Muslim faith by her parents and attended Koranic school. When she was still a young girl, her father moved to Italy. M3 joined him around the age of 17–18, followed later by the rest of the family. During her teenage years, she went through her mother's illness, taking on the care and education of her younger siblings. She is currently involved in an after-school program where she teaches Arabic and Muslim culture to second-generation children.

This brief synopsis allows us to observe some characteristics of the group, which will emerge in more detail in the analysis of the narratives. Firstly, the group is strongly marked by migration experiences, either between different countries or within different regions of the same country (J1, J2, J3, M1, M2, M3, and C3).[5]

Secondly, the families of some of the respondents appear to be characterized by intercultural or interreligious conditions, namely those of origin (J2, J3, and C3) or those they formed later with their partners (J1, J2, J3, M1, M2, and C3).

Obviously, such conditions are intertwined with the evolution of personal religiosity and with the representation/reconstruction that the individual provides retrospectively.

The theme of conversion deserves a separate mention. Declared conversions are those of M1 and M2, who, in late youth/early adulthood, went through the transition from Catholicism (in which they had grown up, but which they had abandoned) to Islam, through mediation with sentimental partners. However, the other narrating subjects, in reconstructing their own "religious history", also recognized moments of re-conversion, especially in connection with specific existential/chronological phases (such as the exit from an adolescence experienced as an "inner work") or at particularly tiring and painful

junctures, such as the death of a parent/grandparent or the illness of a child. These dynamics are part of the more general dynamics of adulthood as an existential place of "putting oneself to the test" that is recognized and admitted as such by the subjects who tell themselves about it: this is a sign that a religious conscience is speaking, for which, a posteriori, it is also possible to integrate moments of crisis and rebirth into one's own religious path (Pinelli 2024a).

A final notation concerns the existential condition. With the exception of M3, these are subjects who live in middle adulthood, distributed over several bands of it; according to Erikson's model, they go through the dialectic between generativity and stagnation/self-absorption. As is well known, with the term "generativity", Erikson refers to the ability/concern regarding the creation of a new generation and taking care of others and the world, which is expressed in the dimension of care. Stagnation, on the other hand, is the imprisonment of the adult within themself, a regression toward an eternal adolescence. In particular, the term "generativity", as applied to both femininity and religiosity here, also aims to highlight the adult's capacity to generate meanings and experiences that foster the development of the younger individual.[6]

As noted in the analysis of the narratives, this passage is also significantly intertwined with the events of personal religiosity and has a specific declination in female experience (Erikson [1964] 1968).

2.3. The Methodological Approach

The methodological approach employed here is part of the broad phenomenological tradition and is influenced by the insights of empirical phenomenology (Mortari 2023). Understanding religious experience does not start from predefinitions but from how it manifests concretely in each person's life, keeping in mind that the narrative is filtered through the narrator's self-awareness and mental images (both conscious and unconscious).

In the seminar, the request to organize the autobiographical narrative according to different life stages aimed to achieve comparability among the stories collected without losing depth. The goal was to initiate "research with" the participants rather than imposing preconceived theories and findings upon them.

As in 2018, the chosen methodology for analyzing the textual materials presented in this paper is content analysis (Schreier 2012). The initial plan to employ CAQDAS technologies, particularly the Nvivo software, was abandoned in favor of a manual analysis. This decision was based on the small number and compactness of the texts, which were not conducive to computerized clustering. Given the limited size of the corpora, computer-assisted coding would likely have overlooked nuances that direct reading can reveal. It was essential to delve into the subtleties of the text, into the choice of words and the implicit images contained within them (cfr. Cortelazzo 2013).

3. The Results

As previously noted, the narratives examined are structured according to a chronological criterion and by life stages, in accordance with the explicit "prompt" provided to the seminar participants. Thus, in all of them, there are accounts of childhood and adolescence or transitions such as partner choice, career decisions, and experiences of motherhood and parenting. However, within this predefined framework, deeper cross-cutting points of contact emerge, helping to outline the traits of a "feminine religiosity".

3.1. Generative Femininity

As noted, the reconstruction of childhood experiences was one of the requests made to the participants. The narratives obtained emphasize the significant role of female

solidarity—both intrafamilial and intergenerational—in the development of personal identity. When religious mediation is provided by female figures, it becomes a distinct component of both personal religious and feminine identity. Often, grandmothers, rather than mothers, serve as the true mediators of religious experience and meaning. Traditions, devotions, and rituals are profoundly shaped by a feminine imprint.

> My Jewish mother explained things from a religious perspective. My Catholic grandmother gave us the traditions, like Christmas gifts (J2).

> My mother distanced herself from religious practice but remained a believer. She was Russian and had embraced communism. However, being Jewish was something connected to her history; remembering this identity was like keeping the chain of memory and her past alive (J1).

> My mother was a simple, patient, and sunny woman, but she didn't pass anything on to me. My maternal grandmother, on the other hand, had faith—a very strong faith. I remember she taught me the Our Father in a mix of Latin and Italian (M1).

C3's words are particularly significant. As previously mentioned, her maternal grandparents are deeply connected to the Hungarian Catholic culture and faith. Her narrative dedicates considerable space to describing her maternal grandmother, who creates a "bridge" between two worlds. The Hungarian language is recalled by C3 as a "mother tongue", establishing a continuity between generations:

> The faith in the Holy Virgin for my grandmother was a mission. It was truly a matter of entrusting one's life. [...] I learned to pray in Hungarian, my mother tongue... the imprint of my family of origin was strong. Speaking to God who loves us in multiple languages is speaking the language of the heart, a communication that goes beyond a specific language (C3).

In recounting a vow made to the Virgin Mary by her grandmother at the birth of her daughter (C3's mother who came into the world in dramatic circumstances), the narrator adds that her grandmother had also asked to be able to live intensely and to keep her wits and lucidity throughout her life, which she did. It is evident in the narrator's account that there is a deep identification with this grandmother, who embodies the archetypal mother and represents a complete and generative form of femininity. Notably, the narrative extensively highlights the work of this grandmother and her husband in supporting Hungarian refugees after the brutal repression by the communist regime following the 1956 revolutions. This identification is so strong that C3 herself states that her grandmother's death drove her to embark on a journey of self-discovery, which can be interpreted as a transformative pilgrimage into adulthood (Moscato 1994). It is revealing that this journey does not lead to Romagna, the Italian region that was the birthplace of the maternal grandmother, but rather to Hungary, which was at most her adopted homeland. In C3's narrative (and thus in her self-understanding, laden with emotional and affective elements), the maternal grandmother is identified with Hungary and Hungarian culture. These, in turn, are perceived as a symbolically charged "Elsewhere".

The narratives cited so far reveal strong intra-familial feminine imprints: they mediate an image of life as a tapestry or skein, which the feminine aspect is capable of unraveling and weaving. These figures of mothers and grandmothers, which evoke the archetype of positive motherhood, are profoundly religious because they allow individuals to connect deeply with life and its cycles, also appreciating its inherent limits (cf. Paregger and Risé 2015, pp. 53–54). In particular, C3's depiction of multiple languages merging into a single "language of the heart" suggests that the encounter between different cultural horizons is not conflictual. Instead, it is framed within a profound relationship with God, who makes no distinction "between Jew and Greek, between slave and free, between man and woman"

(cf. Galatians 3:28) and embraces everyone. C3's religiosity emerges here as a personal resource (cf. Caputo 2022), also positively mediated by the grandmother.

Another maternal and mediating figure is the Arabic teacher described by M3, who, at the moment of an adolescent rebellion (also made explicit in the way she dressed, behaved, and spoke), found a turning point in the dialogue with this teacher: not only does the study of the sacred texts of Islam, provided for in the curriculum, cease to be a mere subject of study for her, but it is also linked to the entirety of her lived experience. As M3 notes, it was about "understanding that I had to accept my femininity" (M3). Thus, a dialogue focused on religious teaching actually prompted the young woman to a renewed self-awareness. Consequently, when her father emigrated to Italy and her mother became ill, M3 interpreted the responsibility for caring for her younger siblings—along with their religious education—as a "calling" connected to her own femininity and maternity.

In summary, female religious mediation seems structurally capable of embracing the life of the other within a unified perspective. Within this maternal/feminine gaze, the growing individual finds the space to unify themselves, progressively and increasingly fully expressing their own "self".

J2's narrative presents a unique variation in this context. As previously noted, she experienced her Jewish childhood in an increasingly hostile material and cultural environment, which led to forms of concealment. In her case, maternal mediation was interrupted, overwhelmed by fears for her children's safety. Thus, living in Romania as a young single mother, she gradually reconnected with a dormant religiosity through seeking a "Home/Womb"—a sense of belonging where she can be herself without reservations. She finds this belonging through her participation in community life.

> At first [in Romania], I didn't care about finding a synagogue; I simply continued with my traditions at home. [...] My religious identity was initially built on a personal level. But Judaism is based on belonging. [...] So, I started to seek out the community and began attending the synagogue more or less regularly (J2).

3.2. Femininity and the Space of the Other

In the narratives examined, there is a cross-cutting theme of the need for a personal relationship with God, which the subjects report having experienced during adolescence or young adulthood. This element certainly fits into a need for authenticity and a tendency to personally evaluate the inherited heritage, which are typical of adolescence. However, the narrated experiences are not limited to an adolescent "distance-taking" but express a genuine desire for contact with a transcendent "Other". The desire, in other words, is to go "beyond" forms and rituals perceived as "external" to reclaim the Mystery that pervades everything and thus also reclaim oneself. This Other is sometimes initially undefined but gradually takes on a personal face. Thus, a woman raised in Catholic education who later embraced Islam after a long departure from religious practice reconstructed her search and retrospectively acknowledges the religiosity of what initially seemed like disordered attempts.

> In the 60s and 70s at the University of Bologna, I had some contact with drugs [...]. That's when my approach to the beyond began, with what I call the "Other". I had the perception of another reality. There is more beyond normal life, and this "Other" made an entrance through my two or three joints. They opened another level of reality to me; I began to think that everything couldn't be limited to what I saw, touched, and felt. I started searching. During those years, I never heard about God. But I was looking for meaning (M1).

The experience described here is not yet strictly religious; it contains an embryonic religiosity, still indeterminate, non-immanent, and not purely subjective. A non-religious

vehicle opens the way to the perception of an otherness with which it is possible to establish a relationship. It is still M1 who recounts her early experiences in theater with a "shaman of Grotowski".[7]

> I had many shamanic experiences with her [...]. She worked with rhythm and dance to cross the threshold. These body techniques allowed me to perceive a different reality. I also practiced meditation. They provided me with a different perception of reality. I began to sense the luminosity of things, a great peace and love. When I experienced this love, I came closer to what I would later identify as God (M1).

Notably, this initial mediation, which introduces the protagonist to a direct experience of a divine-like dimension, is facilitated by a female figure, described by the narrator with attributes of a guiding or sacerdotal nature. In other instances, the attempt to transcend involves the mediation of concrete figures, "spiritual fathers" and "mothers", who awaken something that was never completely lost but merely dormant.

> I needed someone to teach me how to read the Gospel. I needed someone to teach me how to pray. I met priests, but also... people who awakened me. They awakened my deepest ideals and my lived faith (C2).

Research can become an actual journey, a deliberately chosen migration, following in the footsteps of a feminine identity received and preserved, which one intends to deepen to gain a greater depth of experience. For example, consider the Catholic descendant of Hungarians:

> When my grandmother passed away, I traveled alone to Hungary. I spoke Hungarian. [...] In Hungary, I sought out the scouts and the whole world connected to Taizé. I gathered many insights and tried to build my personal life" (C3).

C3 acknowledges the significant role of priests and spiritual guides in her journey. However, it is her maternal grandmother who provided her with the language and categories to address God. Therefore, her grandmother's death marks a new stage for C3, almost endowing her with a sense of mission. The return to Hungary might seem like a form of regression, a "return to the maternal womb". This is a constant temptation in the psyche of a growing individual, mirroring the degeneration of the maternal function in education—the "Great Mother" who engulfs the life she herself has generated, potentially negating the personal destiny of the child (Neumann [1956] 1981). In fact, as observed, the maternal grandmother exerts a positive form of motherhood; thus, C3's adult journey also takes on initiatory characteristics. The "proper name" (represented by the mother tongue) received through maternal/feminine mediation serves as a prophecy about oneself that the young individual commits to and seeks to verify in a dynamic typical of vocational callings.

Analogous traits of masterful mediation characterize the "highly trained nun" who leads a parish group focused on the reading and theological–analytical study of the Bible. This group, into which the Catholic C1 is integrated from the age of sixteen throughout her adolescence, is recognized by her as a milestone that profoundly influences her faith journey and shapes her personal development: "From the age of twenty onward, I have always been—and others recognize me as such—a challenging and very critical person. This is a source of pride for me; it's part of who I am" (C1).

In the quest for a personal relationship with the Other/Transcendent, the experience of prayer takes on central significance. M2 states, "There was something that no longer belonged to me; I needed to understand what my religious identity was, to understand who I was". In prayer and its various forms—ranging from inarticulate questioning to

conscious dialogue with God—these women make space for the Other and gain a deeper understanding of themselves in light of such encounters.

> At 18, I decided to return to studying in order to follow prayer, because for me, studying was strongly connected to prayer, and I resumed attending the Jewish community. [...] My father would tease me, saying, "If there were a Jewish convent, you'd already be in it" (J1).

3.3. Love Choices, Identity, and Intrapsychic Conflict

A significant chapter involves romantic relationships and partner choice. The "paths" followed by these individuals appear to differ according to their respective religious affiliations.

Regarding M1 and M2, as mentioned, their choice of partner coincides with their conversion to Islam. Both seem to have perceived their partners' proselytizing efforts as a form of affection. For instance, M1 recounts, "My husband was a Muslim from Morocco and began trying to convert me, but it was out of kindness [. . .]. If I know you, how can I let you go to hell?" Similarly, M2 shares, "When we met, [my future husband] was beginning a religious journey. He suggested that I try to understand his life, recommended readings, brought me books, and even taught me about the scientific miracles in the Quran". At the same time, these events responded to a quest for meaning that they felt and which found no answers in the forms of Catholicism they had inherited, which they perceived as "empty", extrinsic, and habitual. Not surprisingly, M1 emphasizes being "fascinated by the idea of living daily life with the continuous remembrance of God". Once converted and married to their respective partners, they fully embraced Islamic customs, rituals, and traditions. As M1 notes, "I entered Islam and accepted everything, including polygamy and the requirement to leave the house only if accompanied by my husband". Similarly, M2 recounts, "In Morocco, they have very strict customs... when my daughter was born, I began wearing the hijab to set an example".

Catholic and Jewish women, on the other hand, approach the choice of a partner from within the religious affiliation in which they were raised.

In the case of Catholic subjects, the predominant element is a desire for sharing the same faith (C1 and C2) or at least overlapping human values between the partners (C3), which aligns with a broader wish for complete life-sharing with the other. This can happen programmatically ("I looked for someone who [. . .] shared what matters to me so much that there was no need to even discuss it explicitly", C2) or be built through ongoing dialogue within the couple, which happened with C1 and C3.

In the narratives of women of Jewish faith, choosing a partner often involves conflict or a redefinition of relationships with their family of origin, reflecting a quest for autonomy.

> In Italy, I met an Italian man who was agnostic. I immediately found common ground with him, perhaps because he, although agnostic, had received a religious education as a child and young man. [...] My father was opposed; he didn't take my choice well. He said, "But where are you going, where do you think you're going? He's not Jewish!" And I replied, "But how can you say that, when you taught me that as long as we are good, religion doesn't matter?" (J1).

In this logic of "openness", forms of compromise are sought, which do not exclude sacrifices from these women who remain deeply rooted in their faith and do not wish to abandon it. Such a compromise/sacrifice is seen as necessary to allow the partner to remain true to themself without coercion: "We reached a compromise. We had a civil marriage ceremony with a friend who included seven blessings from the Jewish marriage ritual. I couldn't have a strictly religious marriage because my husband isn't Jewish, and thus it isn't allowed" (J1).

In the other two cases, the choice of a partner acts as the catalyst for conflict with the family of origin.

> In Egypt, our parents were very strict with us to protect us. But you can't live like that, amidst rigidity and vagueness. . . So I decided to leave home, but leaving meant getting married in that context. I was very young when I married and became a mother very early. I wanted to rediscover who I was. The marriage ended very quickly (J2).

Despite the end of the marriage and concerns about the "local Egyptian legislation, which was not in favor of a foreign woman with an Egyptian child", J2 acknowledges that "all of this strengthens you: if I am considered different, I want to understand better who I am. It's crucial to define one's identity if one wants to engage in dialogue. You have to engage in dialogue, but dialogue is truly impossible without having an identity".

In J3's case, falling in love with someone who does not meet the implicit standards defined by her family marks a breaking point in a situation that was already perceived as "constrained" by the individual. She recounts attending Jewish school until she was 12 or 13, in almost complete isolation from non-Jewish people. "It was quite a closed circle; at times, it was even a bit restrictive. [. . .] You saw the outside world, you knew it was there, but it didn't affect you much". For this reason, 13-year-old J3 asked and was granted permission to attend public school, wanting to broaden her world of reference. She remained anchored to her Jewish identity and was clear that she would marry an observant Jew, which happened when she was 22. The marriage was very short-lived. Reflecting on it, J3 comments, "Looking back, I think the closed nature of my original world made me miss many opportunities" (J3). When she divorced her first husband, she was in Boston (away from her family, who remain in Canada) for academic reasons.

> In Italy, I met an Italian from Bologna, who was Catholic. We were together for a year in Boston, then he returned to Italy. I was still set on marrying a Jewish man, but I was in love with him and didn't know what to do. I was torn [...]. It took me some time, but I concluded that love was stronger. When I finished my studies in Boston, I was single and hadn't accepted a job. I told my father: "I'm going to Italy for a year", obviously to come to Bologna. This caused a tragedy in my family. In particular, my father disagreed; he didn't want an Italian Catholic as a son-in-law (J3).

J3 does not hide the difficulties she faced in Italy: the struggle to integrate into a much smaller Jewish community than the one she grew up in; the pressure from her parents; and a growing sense of loneliness and depression. After a severe psychological crisis and a temporary return to Canada, she eventually settled in Bologna and married her Italian fiancé. In this case, there was also a compromise: "We got married at the Town Hall in Bologna [...]. Then we went to Canada and had a Jewish wedding with a reform rabbi, as there are mixed marriages there. My husband isn't Jewish, but I wanted to be married by a rabbi" (J3). The three Jewish women emphasize that they continue to fully live their faith. Each of them interprets their refusal to conform to family expectations and their willingness to embrace a partner who is different from themselves as a result of the religious education they received. Thanks to this education, they possess a profound resource, which appeals to an order—also an expression of the face of God—in which femininity is inscribed and intimately bound.[8]

In general, the narratives of both Islamic and Jewish women allow their marriages and religious conversions to be framed within a cultural and religious intrapsychic conflict, related to the pursuit and definition of their own identity.

3.4. A "Biophilic" Orientation

A distinctive chapter relates to the religious education of children. Among women of either religion, different emphases can be noted in their views on the religious freedom of their children. However, as will be seen, none of them outright denies this freedom. In some cases, the biophilic power of femininity emerges. The religious concern for the other's (both earthly and spiritual) salvation does not exclude the desire for the other to remain true to themselves and to freely meet their own destiny. Making space for the child as the "other" thus outlines a symbolic "space of the Other".

> I passed on to my daughter a religion with a very strong basis in spirituality. [...] My daughter has atheist, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim friends... [...] At Christmas, she is invited here and there. One Christmas, I went to her place, where she hosts students. I went to be the mom for all of them, with the Sabbath bread. And there I saw something unusual. Two years ago, Christmas coincided with the day of the Festival of Lights. [...] The Festival of Lights means that you need to look at the light; things happen, but if you look at the light, you will not get lost. We lived this message together at that Christmas dinner, where there were also Christians and Muslims. A miracle to commemorate. [...] When I think back to my years in Alexandria, Egypt, I still feel difficulty and pain. [...] The only way to avoid discrimination and mistrust is that Christmas table. I am proud of my daughter. [...] I want my daughter to be free in her religious choice, to have a personal journey (J2).

In some cases, the tension between loyalty to one's own religious affiliation and loyalty to the child's individuality is particularly pronounced.

> I've often wondered: how can you pass on to your children the warmth and experience of having God? You can't, not directly. We can't make them experience it as we do, in our place. So, usually, rituals are passed on. And at a certain point, things become rigid. I transmitted the rituals, which in Islam are heavy. I lived in Morocco for twenty years, in Fez. I did everything, the good and the bad. The situation indeed became rigid. When my daughter was six years old, she was asked to wear the veil. Once, my son was beaten for not memorizing the Quran. I am critical, if needed. But the Quran does not allow for choices. I have appreciated the Catholic and Jewish mothers who, in this seminar, said that it is important for their children's choices to be free and authentic, that they desire a free faith for their children. . . But it's difficult for a mother to say to her child: 'Be free to believe or not, go to hell if you must, as long as you are free to choose'. As a mother, you know what the truth is, you know that what you offer them is the truth. Then you say: 'My child must come to the truth'. Fine, but here we are talking about freedom of conscience versus paradise, coercion versus hell. If you see your child willingly throwing themselves into the fire, what do you do? You stop them! My daughter, in any case, has run away from home twice. [. . .] Now she declares herself an atheist, is covered in tattoos, and has a fierce hatred of Arabs. I am now content with her, and I hope my husband will be too. And I hope God is with her (M1).

> I have two daughters, one who is sixteen and one who is twenty. I also have another son, born from a previous relationship with another man, who is thirty-five. My son identifies as agnostic, but his child follows the Catholic practice. [. . .] My relationship with my daughters is mixed. They are Muslims, and we are raising them in Islam. [. . .] They are the children of a mixed couple. This causes issues for them; they don't feel part of the Muslim community. [. . .] Sometimes

> they wear the veil, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they come to the mosque when I go, but in other things, they are not involved. [. . .] I try not to force them, [. . .] to involve them as much as possible. I hope that as they grow up, they will also feel this need to embrace the faith and believe (M2).

This is a concern shared by the youngest of the women participating in the seminar, who, although she does not have children of her own, extends such care to her younger brothers and fellow believers: "I began to feel the role of the maternal figure. [. . .] I applied what I was taught to my younger brothers [. . .] I noticed the lack of teaching Islamic principles to the children of Muslims born here in Italy. So [. . .] I started an after-school program: not only to teach Arabic but also Islamic education" (M3).

In any case, loyalty to the child involves recognizing their individuality and aligning the maternal role with their desire for autonomy. God is approached here as an ally of femininity in the path leading to the children's happiness. It is this trust in a God with maternal attributes that supports the acceptance of the children's freedom, recognized as an essential prerequisite for any religious choice.

> In the religious education of our children, we decided not to force them. We lived our religious faith within the family, involving them in the experiences we had. [...] We care that our children remain in the faith and the Church, but we also want it to be a genuine choice, a choice of their own. [...] Faith stands strong only if there is a personal relationship between you and the Transcendent; otherwise, it is merely superficial, conformism, or worse. [...] It would not be an act of faith if it were not free (C2).

> [With my agnostic husband] we agreed that I would raise the children in Judaism because he understood that I would provide them with a free education. We both agree that it is the woman who transmits the education. [...] My eldest daughter has stopped practicing. At twelve, she rejected everything and wanted nothing more to do with it. But even the rabbi advised me not to insist with her. [...] I try at least to impart a sense of belonging and memory to her (J1).

> My children are Jewish [...], raised by Jews within the Jewish community, but they do not follow all the rules. [...] They socialize with other Jewish kids [...] but they also participate in the lives of their Catholic cousins. In our home, we only celebrate Jewish holidays, but my children also take part in Christmas and other Christian holidays with their grandparents. [...] If I could choose for my children, I would prefer a Jewish woman or someone willing to convert [...]. But I also hope that my children will marry for love; I don't think I would do like my father did (J3).

Motherhood is thus explicitly experienced by these women as a place of familiarity with the transcendent, which reveals itself even in the harshest and most dramatic circumstances.

> When my second daughter was born, we discovered that she had a congenital malformation. She had to spend a lot of time in the hospital. At that moment, I had many doubts about my faith: why does God allow this, why send such a bad thing to an innocent child? [. . .] [But] I was able to confront the doubt by drawing on Jewish culture, which allowed me to recognize signs in the events. For example, my daughter was operated on the day of Yom Kippur: it couldn't have been a coincidence. Believing gave me strength (J1).

4. Conclusions

The empirical material analyzed in this contribution has certain limitations, typical of an exploratory study. It is indeed meager and, above all, peculiar in nature: the subjects had joined an association whose aim is to foster dialogue among the three Abrahamic religions. They were therefore motivated by a desire for interfaith dialogue and peace. With this in mind, the author will now attempt to draw some conclusions, which could serve as a useful foundation for further research.

The first notable element—in the author's opinion—is the fact that these women all still experience themselves as being "on a quest": their religious journey is still ongoing, although they may not be fully aware of it. In reality, such awareness surfaces intermittently in their stories. An illustrative example, not without self-irony, is offered by M1: "Spiritual direction is not an easy experience for women in Islam. For men, it is easier to be in contact with the wise ones. I couldn't. [. . .] Recently, the most important reference for me is. . . a Catholic monk". It could be hypothesized that the very act of agreeing to participate in the seminar demonstrates this ongoing search, which unites them all.

The narratives examined also allow what, following Paden (2005), can be called "pan-human categories" to emerge, underlying and intertwining with the various religious sensitivities. In these women, what emerges first and foremost is the propensity to encounter "face to face with God", to seek and recognize Him by continually freeing Him from the accretions of habit, empty forms, and others' expectations that obscure His presence. This search for the "authentic God" appears, in turn, to be connected to the search for an "authentic Self" beyond the intrapsychic conflicts through which they seem to be traversed. It is as if the God they encounter, even following conversion experiences, is simultaneously posed as the "You" and as the "container" of the ego (Winnicott [1965] 1970). That is, the following becomes recognizable: "the implicit relationship [. . .] placed between the unity of God and the unity of consciousness, as if only by mirroring itself in the divine unity could the ego/consciousness maintain its own functional unity" (Moscato 2022b, p. 31).[9]

Feminine religiosity, as revealed in the narratives examined here, also embodies an attitude of care for both others and the world. Erikson ([1964] 1968) characterizes this aspect as a virtue or strength of the ego typical of adulthood. However, in femininity, it manifests as an orientation towards reconciliation, integration, and unification, enveloping vulnerable life in a gaze of ultimate benevolence and understanding. This is reminiscent of the figure of the "smile of the Goddess", a key element of the "demiurgy of the smile", as explored from various perspectives by Campbell (2013) and Moscato (1998).

In short, a coessential link with the religious sphere emerges in female religiosity, which is explained precisely by the specific traits of femininity in its entirety and appears inseparable from education. Indeed, if we observe the educational functions of the adult from an archetypal perspective, we find that those symbolically associated with the feminine/maternal aspect are characterized by the ability to respond to the subjective needs of the immature subject, including emotional security; the possibility of directly experiencing one's own being loved and capable of loving and, more generally, experiencing the world around oneself under the gaze of an encouraging adult presence; the recognition of one's personal identity, and with it, one's moral freedom; as well as the possibility of receiving forgiveness for one's transgressions and failings. In this "fidelity to the person of the child" on the part of the adult, resulting from a full identification with the "weakened" subject of the educational relationship, a religious nucleus shines through. This, as Maria Teresa Moscato (1994) suggests, can be found symbolized in the biblical passage of the Judgment of Solomon, where the wisdom of the King/Judge attributes the fullness of motherhood/femininity to the one who chooses the salvation of the child's life, even at the cost of losing him.[10] The feminine/maternal perspective is thus revealed as "biophilic"

(Fromm 1964), capable of sustaining life with a care that is poured over each individual existence, welcoming it and making room for it to be. This act of working for the other's being and growth under a protective gaze is, fundamentally, a religious act.

In summary, the connection between femininity and religiosity seems to lie in the potency of affirming personal life—both one's own and that of the other. The mystery of generation, understood both materially and symbolically, makes femininity the gateway to the sacred, and for femininity, it already represents an entry beyond that threshold[11]. It presents itself, then, as the "guardian of the Mystery", the "keeper of God's gifts". Like Pandora, who, by opening the jar in explicit defiance of the gods' command, manages to retain hope within it. As Moscato (2022a, pp. 194–96) suggests, more significant than the transgression itself is the archetypal figure of hope as the "gift of the mothers", the "gift of the archetypal feminine". A hope that is inherently religious[12] and serves as the foundational condition for life to unfold. As already mentioned, this hope represents the first, original "force of the ego" (Erikson [1964] 1968), which in the child's psyche begins to take form precisely through the experience of personal recognition and care received. It enables resilience against life's challenges, grounded in the belief that it is good to exist in the world, and that human events have meaning and direction, however inscrutable.

It is precisely this guardianship of hope—and the infinite horizon it opens—that constitutes the enduring contribution of female religiosity to contemporary humanity.

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Notes

1 An exception is the Working Group on *Religiosity and Religious Education*, established in 2014 within the Italian Society of Pedagogy (SIPED), which has given impetus to new ongoing research (see Triani 2015; Moscato and Triani 2017).

2 This "sociological" perspective, linked to the claim for more significant spaces for women in ecclesial or pastoral life, is well represented by the recently founded journal *Feminist Theology*, launched in September 2022. Regarding the evolution of this debate in Italy, the volume edited by Lirosi and Saggioro (2022) is emblematic.

3 Obviously, these references do not exhaust the vast field of studies on the psychology of religion, among which milestone authors such as Flournoy ([1902] 2021) stand out. However, these contributions are beyond the scope of this article.

4 Thus, Bruner, in a very significant passage, states the following: "The central concept of a human psychology is meaning and the processes and transactions involved in the construction of meanings. To understand man you must understand how his experiences and his acts are shaped by his intentional states; the form of these intentional states is realized only through participation in the symbolic systems of the culture. Indeed, the very shape of our lives—the rough and perpetually changing draft of our autobiography that we carry in our minds—is understandable to ourselves and to others only by virtue of those cultural systems of interpretation. But culture is also constitutive of mind" (Bruner 1990, p. 33).

5 This would deserve a specific analysis, which cannot be conducted here, regarding the emergence of the "Elsewhere" in the migrant subject's psyche. This "Elsewhere" presents a dual aspect: the idealized one of the places of roots, affection, and the Self and the one constituted by the country where the person arrives as a "foreigner".

6 The concept of generativity is still explored in sociological and psychological research as the foundation of positive and self-expanding social bonds (cf. McAdams and Guo 2015; Magatti 2018).

7 Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999) is renowned for his "poor theater" approach, which strips away everything that is not the actor and their corporeal expressive performance. Grotowski believed that this form of theater could foster an

empathetic connection with the audience. His method involved exercises designed to discipline the actors' bodies to the point of complete control.

8 Zambrano ([1986] 1995) explored the connection between the experience of love and the experience of transcendence in women's lived experiences.

9 A translation from the original Italian by the Author.

10 The episode is narrated in *1 Kings* 3:16–28.

11 This is why, commenting on the Genesis passage of the fall of the progenitors, Evdokimov ([1978] 1980) observes that Satan undermines the woman first, knowing that if he breaks her bond with God, that of humanity will also fall.

12 It is no coincidence that, according to Catholic theology, hope is one of the theological virtues, which humans can only fully experience as a gift of divine grace.

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Article

Parish Futsal: A Technical–Educational or Pastoral Challenge? Notes on a Multiple-Case Study in Rome

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Abstract: This article aims to present a multiple-case study of parish sports clubs affiliated with the Centro Sportivo Italiano (a Catholic-inspired sports promotion body), present in the Rome area. The purpose of this research is to explore whether there is a relationship between futsal activities and the parish pastoral project. It was a qualitative study that, after listening to key informants, conducted group interviews with some coaches (13) of the teams linked to the parish. This research brought out what the elements of distance between the sports groups and the parish community are, as well as what the strengths may be for the integration of the sports education project within a pastoral dynamic. Two lines of interpretation of the data in pedagogical-improvement terms were also provided: one of a deductive nature and one of a hermeneutic nature.

Keywords: sports education; pastoral project; church and territory

1. Introduction

Sports have been a central cultural theme in Italy from the 20th century to the present day. During the fascist era, it was often exploited in an oppressive and authoritarian manner, especially in football (Martin 2004), while at other times, it flourished as a free and creative expression, serving the individual. This considered, sports have consistently been regarded as an educational practice, deeply rooted in the cultural legacy of the Greek concept of *paideia*, which has influenced European culture over the centuries. In contemporary Italy, sports are now considered not only an educational practice and a value but also a fundamental right. The recent amendment to Article 33 of the Italian Constitution states, in fact, the following: "the Republic recognizes the educational, social, and promotional value of psychophysical well-being inherent in sporting activity in all its forms." (Gazzetta Ufficiale (G.U.) (2023)).

In contemporary Italy, Catholics have seen sports as a means to physical health and the soul's holiness. A few examples of this are the Fasci (Italian Federation of Catholic Sport Associations), constituted in the pre-fascist period (1906), the CSI (Italian Sportive Centre), which in the 1970s became autonomous from *Azione Cattolica*, up to the current office of sports in the Italian Episcopal Conference (Monaco 2023). Looking at data going from the post-war period to the 1990s, it is noticeable that there was a cultural climate favorable to the Catholic Church, probably due to the 40 years of the Christian Democratic party being in power (Scoppola 2006), and thus the Christian culture and sports culture were very close. Today, this is no longer the case.

Francis (2014) states that "today we are no longer the only ones who produce culture, nor the first, nor the most listened to. We therefore need a change in pastoral mentality". Nine years later, this was the opening statement of the first number of "Cultures and Faith" (2023), a journal of the Dicasterium de Cultura et Educatione. In the same issue, one also finds the conference "Deporte para todos: repensar el futuro del deporte tutelar la dignidad de todos" and a paper by a member of the Dicastero (Sanchez de Toca 2023). The interest shown towards this issue underlines that sports need to undergo some changes for them

to stay a cultural and pastoral tool. Hence, the title of this article: is futsal in the parish merely a matter of technical and educational development—teaching both technical skills and ethical values, as the noble Greek tradition intended—or can it also serve as a pastoral tool in today's context?

Currently, the FIGC (Italian Football Federation), the main body for promoting football in Italy, presents the sport as an educational means within the youth and school sectors.[1] What makes different, thus, a purely technical and educational approach to sports from one inspired by Christian values? Although they share several points of contact, "pastoral care and education are not the same thing, both in form and substance" (Tonelli 2008, p. 846), and this article aims to highlight those differences. This research was carried out within the Diocese of Rome and unfolded in two primary phases. Initially, essential information was gathered from key informants. Following this, meetings were held with representatives from five sports organizations in the Rome area that participate in a league called the Oratorio Cup, organized by the Italian Sports Centre (CSI). After analyzing and coding the data using MAXQDA 2020 PRO—some results of which will be discussed in the following paragraphs—we decided to interpret and use the findings to design a course of action, seeking to ensure that futsal in the parish can once again serve as a pastoral tool for the parish community and the local area.

2. The Explorative Study: Methodology and Tools

This study adopted a qualitative approach with explorative goals. This means that it did not have explanatory purposes; rather, its results can be used as a starting point for a broader study to better underline those criticalities and potentialities emersed here (Coehn et al. 2018, p. 379). This is confirmed by the tools employed to gather data, that is to say, the semi-structured interviews with key informants and the group interviews with the parish representatives. All of those sections of the interviews reported here have been translated by the author of this paper.

Due to this, one of the limitations inherent in qualitative research becomes evident in this investigation: the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation "may not always be as apparent and transparent as a reader may desire" (Altheide and Johnson 2011, p. 1102). However, this can also be considered an advantage for scholars and practitioners interested in the topic who are willing to explore it further. The analytical model employed was grounded in the identification of structuring themes of experience, as described by Van Manen (1990). This encompassed both the professional experiences of key informants and the experiences of parish sports teams. The coding process was facilitated by MAXQDA 2020 PRO, which allowed for an initial broad categorization followed by a more refined coding stage. The primary findings and interpretations resulting from this process are presented in the third section of this work, organized into two main macro-areas.

2.1. The Key Informants

When conducting research, it is crucial to engage with experts whose professional and academic backgrounds place them at the forefront of educational design and practice related to the research topic. For this reason, we decided to involve and work with three key informants.

The first is the director of the office of the youth ministry of the Roman diocese, with whom we discussed the topic of Pastorale in general and, more specifically, of the youth ministry. As he himself stated, the youth ministry is very keen on organizing sporting activities for young people, in accordance with what Francis argued at the end of the Synod on Young People:

> The Church should not underestimate the potential of sports for education and formation, but instead maintain a strong presence there. The world of sports needs to be helped to overcome some of its problematic aspects, such as the idolization of champions, subservience to commercial interests and the ideology of success at any cost. At the heart of the experience of sport is "joy: the joy of

> exercising, of being together, of being alive and rejoicing in the gifts the Creator gives us each day". (Francis 2019, art. 227)

If sports are considered a tool of youth pastoral work, then there is also a pastoral focus specifically dedicated to sports. For this reason, representatives from the Diocesan Office for the Pastoral Care of Leisure Time, Tourism, and Sport were chosen as the second key informants. This office recently released a document titled "*Compendium* for the Parish Sports Group" (Diocesi di Roma 2023, p. 1), which highlights a critical observation: "until today, many parishes in the diocese have neglected a pastoral care of sport." The document emphasizes that the time has come "to initiate change, which must be driven by an educational project capable of welcoming, guiding, training, and instilling hope."

Lastly, the president of the CSI of Rome was the third key informant and probably the most important for his professional curriculum. Besides being a manager, Daniele Pasquini (2005, 2021, 2023) is interested in both the pastoral and ethical dimensions of sports. His writings inspired most of the questions asked in the interview. Some of his responses to the interviews collected in this research were important keys to the interpretation and discussion of the other data as well.

Quotations deemed relevant are cited as follows:

- Youth ministry office = K1
- Pastoral sport office = K2
- CSI Rome = K3

After the interviews with the key informants were carried out, we defined the questions for the group interviews with the parish sportive groups.

The directors of the diocesan pastoral offices in Rome and the president of the CSI (K3, the only informant who authorized the publication of his name) signed an informed consent before the interview stating their role. Of course, the 13 futsal school coaches interviewed also signed an informed consent guaranteeing their anonymity.

2.2. The Case Study: Sports Clubs

As the next step of our research, we conducted a multiple-case study to explore the experiences of coaches and directors of parish sports groups. The case study approach (Yin 2017) was chosen as the most suitable method to address the questions raised in this paper and to gain a deep understanding of real-world situations. While case studies do not require strict sampling rules, we decided to focus on parish futsal teams with at least two categories competing in the CSI futsal tournament, the Oratorio Cup. The choice of futsal was driven by its status as the primary leisure activity within the parish, as well as football's cultural significance in Italy. Specifically, we selected five parish teams from various parts of the city, including two from the suburbs of Rome, all of which were registered with the CSI and had been playing on church-owned fields for at least five years.

For reasons of anonymity, it was decided not to name the teams involved but to only identify the areas. The quotations deemed relevant are cited as follows:

- Parish suburbicarian diocese 1: T1
- Parish Rome South: T2
- Parish Rome North: T3
- Parish Rome Centre: T4
- Parish suburbicarian diocese 2: T5.

3. The Research Context: Roman Diocese, CSI, Parish

To fully appreciate the findings of this study, it is essential to understand the context in which the research took place—including people, organizations, and offices. In this investigation, the context serves to ground the analytical framework. However, the results themselves contributed to the description of the context, thanks to the unique elements emerging from the interviews themselves. Hence, this section will anticipate some of the results to clarify the complexity of the Roman diocese for the benefit of the reader.

In particular, by uncovering the context, readers can gain insight into how the transition from a technical–educational approach to a pastoral one within the ecclesiastical setting of Rome is not only desirable but also challenging to achieve.

3.1. The Complexity of the Roman Diocese (Within and for the Diocese)

The Roman diocese is a peculiar one: it is the papal see, oversees a city of 3 million people (Roma Capitale 2024), and has strong ties with the other diocese traditionally called suburbicarian. It is among the most complex in Europe.

Very recently, Pope Francis (2023) issued a document to reorganize the Roman Vicariate, the administrative and pastoral center of a diocese that includes 334 parishes. In this document, the Pope asks the Roman Church for a missionary change [art. 3] and an enhanced 'testimony' [art. 4]. It is in accordance with this rationale that the two diocesan offices were enlisted in this research project: the youth pastoral office and the office for the pastoral care of leisure time, tourism, and sports [art. 33].

Two key elements arose in the interview with the representatives of these two offices. First, a difference between pastoral care within the diocese and of the diocese:

> "Specifically, I would distinguish between pastoral work within the diocese and pastoral work of the diocese, as this distinction is crucial. Pastoral work of the diocese [. . .] refers to aspects such as offices, services, and the administrative contexts of the curia [. . .] In contrast, pastoral work within the diocese engages with the territories. Let us therefore attempt to address this distinction in two parts." (K1)

Furthermore, K1 adds the following:

> "Of the diocese, the office collaborates harmoniously with the pastoral office for tourism, sport, and leisure. However, the feedback I often receive from the territories suggests that these are not always environments conducive to faith-based education. Frequently, there is no real alternative offered; for instance, stadium dynamics—where a father supports his son merely to excel—can create an atmosphere that seems anti-pastoral care, almost an "anti-gospel." [. . .] So, I would say that of the diocese is better than that within it; perhaps because it is more complex or I feel less connected to it." (K1)

In the dual dynamic of pastoral work within and of the diocese, youth pastoral care also embraces sports as a crucial element, given its significance to young people. If 'pastoral work is not an external action, but an action that arises from the verb [...] to inhabit' (K1), then it is essential to inhabit that context, to sow the seeds of the Gospel, or rather, to recognize and nurture the Gospel's presence where it already exists (K1).

The second aspect is the role of sports within the Diocese of Rome and the mandate of the Pastoral Office for Sport, which is integrated at the organizational level of the Vicariate among the offices related to the hospitable and 'outgoing' Church. The compendium of this office, echoing the document Giving the Best of Yourself (Santa Sede 2018), states the following:

> In sport, there is an aspect of redemption when respect for human dignity is prioritized and sport serves the growth and integral development of the person. However, the Church does not merely encourage qualified sports practice; it seeks to be 'inside' sport, viewed as a modern Courtyard of the Gentiles and an Areopagus where the Gospel is proclaimed. (Santa Sede 2018)

In line with this principle, the office has two main objectives: (a) a pastoral objective in the strict sense, focusing on evangelization (with respect for all beliefs) and an effort to create communion (K2); and (b) a technical objective, which may initially seem more sterile or arid. However, this technical aspect is vital as it provides structure to pastoral action, ensuring that educational services align with the laws of sport, canon law, and the ecclesial and territorial reality. The convergence of technical consultancy and the proclamation of

human and Christian values in sports has been described by the office's representatives as "being close" to parish sports groups and as a "manifestation of love for the community and the territory" (K2). At the same time, it is important to note that this resource—this drive to engage within the diocese—is not always well received, particularly by parish priests who, as we shall see, sometimes fail to recognize the importance of parish sports activities or to communicate the existence and initiatives of this office.

3.2. The CSI of Rome and the Oratorio Cup

The CSI (Centro Sportivo Italiano) is a Christian-inspired organization that has received multiple civil recognitions, including designation as a sports promotion body by CONI (the Italian National Olympic Committee). Specifically, the CSI's territorial committee in Rome, with a deeply rooted history in both sports and Christian traditions in the capital (Monaco 2023), is currently the third largest committee in Italy, boasting over 400 affiliated sports clubs and more than 90,000 members (K3; CSI-Roma 2024). While not all sports clubs affiliated with the CSI are explicitly Christian-inspired, they all endorse the human and sporting values outlined in the CSI manifesto.

The CSI of Rome played a significant role in this study for two main reasons. Firstly, the organization, through its president, was instrumental in advocating for the reactivation of the Office for the Pastoral Care of Sport within the Vicariate of Rome during the diocese's internal reorganization. This initiative aimed to establish an active connection with the local Church concerning the sports activities conducted within parishes. Secondly, the CSI of Rome has shown a strong commitment to developing structured sports programs within parish settings. These programs are not merely occasional or recreational but are properly organized sports activities that emphasize continuity—encompassing training, competitions, and championships—hallmarks of the broader sporting world. Within the CSI-Rome, there exists a 'Parish Commission' that is responsible for both administrative functions and on-the-ground organization of various sports activities. For the purposes of this research, we have focused on the Oratorio Cup, described as "a circuit exclusively for parishes" (K3), which exemplifies the successful reconciliation of parish 'timings' and 'logistics' with the scheduling and bureaucratic demands of ongoing sports activities. To achieve this, flexible championship formats were devised, and measures were implemented to shield parishes from burdensome sports management costs, such as those associated with referees and sports facilities. Simultaneously, the commission emphasized parish co-participation in the CSI's broader mission, including initiatives like coach training, executive training, and the development of self-refereeing skills.

Established in 2003, the Oratorio Cup championship has seen a steady increase in participation over time. The head of the CSI Parish Commission in Rome wrote to me in an official email stating that in the most recent 2023/2024 season, 62 parishes participated, fielding a total of 208 teams across various categories, encompassing 2558 athletes. This championship represents a fertile ground for pastoral work in sport, as it is aligned with the CSI's commitment to fostering educational outcomes through sports activities.

3.3. The Oratory

The Oratorio Cup championship evokes the idea of oratory, a space for kids, teenagers, and young people affiliated with a parish or living in the territory. To fully understand this educative context, we briefly need to look at its history in Italy.

The subject of the oratory is an educational and pastoral issue that accompanied Italian social changes between the 19th and 20th centuries. Traditionally, two main models have been taken as references: that of Filippo Neri and that of Giovanni Bosco. The first one reflected the charisma of another century, in which the oratory was considered as a "hortus conclusus in which young people were gathered to fulfill their religious duties and spend some of their leisure time, to avoid the risk of moral corruption" (Alfieri 2019, p. 70). Filippo Neri's ideas were a reaction to the social and moral issues he had to deal with during his time. While having some points of contact with the Philippien Fathers, the Salesian

Model was more welcoming and open to society, less formal in structuring its spaces and organizing its activities, yet remaining an alternative model of 'moral prevention' (Braido 2018).

Currently, the oratory, while reserving some charismatic characteristics, is based on the common pedagogic characteristics dictated by the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana in its capacity as overseer of the youth pastoral office (https://giovani.chiesacattolica.it/; accessed on 14 September 2024).

What is interesting is that as a pedagogic context, the oratory has been attracting the attention of non-ecclesiastic realities, too. As noted by Castaldi (Castaldi 2019), the pedagogic offer of the oratory has been evolving in Italy so much so that it has become the object of study (Falcinelli and Moschini 2016) in non-religious universities, to the point of envisaging its own pedagogy for those areas in which family plays a fundamental role (Acerbi and Rizzo 2016).

4. Data Analysis and Coding

Following the analysis and coding of the data, the codes were grouped into two categories: (a) positive aspects of including sports in pastoral projects and (b) critical aspects. We believe that this approach can provide a response to the research question of whether and how futsal could be both a pastoral and educational activity within the parish. Pedagogical theoretical–practical categories are grouped within these thematic areas.

4.1. Reasons for Separation of Sports from Pastoral Care

In this paragraph, we will attempt to pinpoint the reasons why a team playing in a parish is not included in a pastoral project. The intention is not to imply that educational football is not there proposed but rather to suggest that sporting activities are not presented as useful tools for the development of a faith journey within both an individual and a community.

The "manager" priest

The first point concerns the purely organizational relationship with the priest. While he is well liked by the team and frequently interacts with the children while they play, his role is more aligned with ensuring that everything is in order, such as verifying that the pitch is closed or that the lights are turned off (T1). However, he does not assume a pastoral role within the football school. The reasons for this could vary: he may be preoccupied with liturgical duties, logistical responsibilities, or other activities (K1); it is possible that sports pastoral care was not thoroughly covered during his presbytery training (K2); or he may simply not view sporting activities as an integral part of the pastoral mission, sometimes perceiving them primarily as a source of revenue through the rental of the pitches.

No offer in pastoral training

None of the parish teams we encountered offered specialized training in sports pastoral care. On the contrary, some were keen to emphasize that sports and church are two distinct entities connected only by the physical presence of sports fields (T2). Moreover, only four out of five teams were aware of the diocesan office for sports counseling, suggesting a general acceptance of this separation. While various training programs in sports pastoral care and by the CSI are offered (to which 'the same people always participate in' K2), there is a prevailing notion that Christian inspiration is not a significant component of the sports program. As one coach pointed out, "to revisit our earlier discussion: the church merely provides the field, but never—at least not this year—to engage with the footbal team. Even the CSI focuses on sports, the situation, everything, but never, as you mentioned, at the level of the church." (T2)

It must be noted that within the football schools surveyed, the pastoral approach is neither clear nor explicitly articulated. There is no communication regarding why the Catholic Church, particularly the Diocese of Rome, views sports as both pedagogical and pastoral tools. This raises a critical question: if the parish priest is pastorally disengaged

from sporting activities and the pastoral message remains unarticulated, how can we expect parish teams to develop educational leaders who embrace the Christian dimension of sport? K3 highlights that one significant reason for the lack of pastoral engagement in sports is "the absence of witnesses—individuals within the parish who are expected to primarily embody and testify to the faith". It is important to clarify that the intention is not to advocate for a confessional approach to sport; "it is not that we need to proselytize for Catholicism" (K2). Rather, the goal should be to "bring faith closer through the sporting discipline, which shares many commonalities with faith" (K2).

Futsal is only a sporting activity

As emerged from some interviews, the greatest risk is that futsal becomes merely an accessory to community life, serving as an attractive activity that draws in large numbers of participants, including non-believers, but primarily as a means to maintain social harmony and adhere to the norms of coexistence. There is an implicit expectation that football activities will not conflict with other parish events, particularly catechism and mass. However, this often results in superficial interactions, where individuals coexist without truly connecting; in some cases, "the priests and the sports community within the parishes do not even know each other, as if they operate in parallel" (K2).

This 'detachment' (K1) effect creates a scenario where the parish community risks being perceived as a mere 'condominium,' governed by rules designed to appease everyone but lacking the genuine sense of community that is the cornerstone of pastoral care.

In this context, football within the parish is viewed as a service to the community, offering a sporting activity particularly valuable in areas with limited alternatives or where social poverty prevents families from accessing private clubs. However, it remains a social initiative rather than a central element of the pastoral mission. This is further evidenced by the fact that in some Roman parishes located in affluent areas where social needs are less pressing, parking lots have been constructed in place of futsal pitches (K1).

4.2. Elements for the Inclusion of Futsal in Pastoral Care

The research conducted has also highlighted several positive aspects, both in terms of pedagogical practice and the pastoral framework. This section aims to explore how the football school can be effectively integrated into a pastoral narrative, thereby fostering both human and Christian development, as well as a sense of belonging to the community. The goal is for each sports group to be able to proudly declare: "this is the church team!" (T4).

Football Team and the Oratory: An Important Relationship

One key element that has emerged is that when a team is structurally connected to the oratory, it becomes easier to imbue it with a pastoral dimension. Whether this connection is explicit, with the football school operating as a direct activity of the oratory (T3), or implicit, where the oratory functions more as a 'place' with loosely structured activities (T5), these links are nonetheless crucial. In this way, sporting activities within the context of pastoral ministry, particularly youth ministry, can also serve as an educational offering (Francis 2019, art. 218).

The testimonies collected suggest that this connection also facilitates the integration of various activities. For instance, as T5 noted, the older members of the team often participate in other parish activities, such as serving as entertainers during the summer oratory, helping with the soup kitchen, or with the preparation and logistics of the parish feast. T3 further describes this as an exchange (rather than a competition) between different facets of parish life: "Playing here on Sunday with the scouts, making friends... In short, you build a relationship where football, school, friendship, and church all become interconnected." (T3).

A third important aspect is that when the football school is part of the oratory's activities, the faith component is clearly integrated from the beginning. While no one is required to be a believer to play futsal, those who choose to participate in the parish futsal program understand that there will be moments of community and prayer throughout the year. The pastoral element is openly communicated within the sports proposal. Therefore,

when a coach says, "for Easter and various events, I was able to bring kids who did not usually attend church to church. For me, that was a win" (T5), they cannot be accused of having a hidden agenda. Futsal, like other oratory activities, is also intended to support or affirm a Christian choice.

Moreover, just as there are sons and daughters on the field and parents on the sidelines during games, the time for prayer can also extend to the families. For example, "On the 31st, there are no activities because there is mass in the oratory. So, it is not an obligation, but perhaps it is seen differently; it is a 'welcome,' inviting everyone, not just the children, but us parents as well" (T3).

This Oratorian dynamism operates on two levels: a social and territorial one through the involvement of families, and a pastoral one that emphasizes the value of community—especially the role of the pastor—and embodies an "outgoing church" model, serving as both a space for pre-evangelization and a welcoming environment for people of different beliefs.

Active Participation of Families

During an interview, a coach remarked, "I think the family is at the heart of the church" (T5). This observation opened up an interesting discussion about involving parents in the futsal team. Beyond the physical and psychological benefits that any sport provides, which naturally improve relationships, it was emphasized that football is not just what you see on TV or in stadiums; it can also be a means of bringing people together and having fun. In a country like Italy, where football can sometimes be a point of contention between spouses, sharing the same sport has introduced a new topic of conversation at the dinner table, one that was once seen as the exclusive domain of men and their sons.

Furthermore, families can be involved not only in playing but also in team leadership, referee training, and organizing events or celebrations. The football team fosters a sense of belonging that goes beyond mere fandom, encouraging co-participation in an educational mission—and for believing families, a pastoral mission as well.

The pronounced educational orientation of parish futsal serves as the foundational premise. In the interviews conducted, issues commonly referred to as "parental challenges," which might be prevalent in other football teams driven by a competitive ethos, are notably absent. Instead, the concept of "family" frequently emerges as a descriptor for the sporting atmosphere. This can be attributed to the clarity of the educational mission, wherein football is fundamentally regarded as an educational instrument. Equally clear should be the articulation of the "value framework [...] that are Christian values" (K3).

In this regard, families, whether through direct participation in the sport or by assuming various responsibilities within the team, contribute to enriching the quotidian experiences of both their children and themselves. While sporting activities may not always yield transformative outcomes (though occasionally they do), the element of continuity inherent in this model plays a crucial role in fostering equilibrium in the lives of families and the wider community.

The Football School as a Pastoral Activity Recognized by the Ecclesiastical Community

When addressing pastoral concerns, the ecclesiastical community plays a pivotal role as it "thinks, plans, acts, proclaims, celebrates, builds, and allows others to experience God's love for everyone and His passion for each person's life" (Pinna and Tonelli 2011, pp. 21–22). For parish football to truly embody this vision, the ecclesiastical community must acknowledge and affirm the educational significance of the football school. Otherwise, there is a risk that the football school "may become a mere extension [. . .] and one might ask, how can it foster a true sense of community?" (K1). The situation becomes even more challenging if the priest fails to recognize its importance.

Fortunately, three out of five coaches feel acknowledged by the community for several reasons: (a) the role of the coach is primarily educational, akin to that of catechists (T4); (b) some key contacts within the football school are also members of the pastoral council (T3, T4, T5); (c) some coaches/directors are involved in other parish activities beyond the

football school (T3, T4, T5); (d) they maintain a close relationship with the parish priest or the parish group (T3, T5); and (e) families who attend the parish express gratitude for their approach to sports, which aligns with the developmental needs of the children (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5).

A field for pre-evangelization

Even when practiced in a parish, sports do not require a specific religious belonging. Contrary to other Italian educational institutions, which while not being born as a Catholic movement (like the Scouts) had been 'catholicized' by statute and are thus considered a place of special Christian formation, parish futsal does not.

Futsal can be seen both as a playing field and as a pre-evangelization field. The promoter of such an idea was Pasquini, whose words are quoted as follows:

> I view sport as an integral part of pre-evangelization, that is to say sport prepares the ground. In the introduction to Giving the Best of Oneself, a document from the "Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life", Pope Francis emphasizes that "sport, first and foremost, is a place of encounter, and creates a culture of encounter." [. . .] Pope John Paul II described sport as a bridge between the Church and the street, and in a similar way, the oratory acts as a bridge too. Sport, like the oratory, functions as a means of engaging with the world. Pope Francis frequently speaks of "outgoing Churches," and sport exemplifies this concept by enabling the 'going in/going out' mutual exchange—sometimes we go out to play at someone else's place, and other times they come to ours. This creates a concrete possibility for interchange, going beyond mere philosophy. Sport serves as a meeting place. As Cardinal Ravasi would say, sport is the modern Courtyard of the Gentiles, where people come together, fueled by a shared passion for sport, and find common ground. This is the first step.
>
> On 2 January 2021, when Pope Francis was interviewed by Gazzetta dello Sport, he was asked, "So, are we ready for an encyclical on sport? Will you write one for us?" He responded, "But what is the point of an encyclical? There are already Olympic values." This was not just a casual remark! [. . .] The Olympic values have a clear Christian Thomistic foundation, making it evident that proposing the values of sport already establishes a groundwork conducive to Christian virtues. This is precisely the pre-evangelization I was referring to earlier. St. Paul, for instance, used the metaphor of sport to communicate effectively with the Greeks, bridging what were essentially two different worldviews. After being beaten and expelled from the Agora, he employed the metaphor of sport to engage in dialogue with the Greeks. I believe that sport is more than just a metaphor; it is an experience that can be deeply and authentically lived in a Christian way, starting with sport itself. (K3)

For this reason, sports "gather people". As we have seen in the preceding paragraphs, the numbers shown by the Oratorio Cup are quite interesting, even more so if one thinks that there is a family behind each and every athlete. Sports can be a moment of proposal and proclamation and not of renunciation to follow more 'solid' parish activities, like catechism, scoutism, and ministers' group. When futsal is considered a pre-evangelization place, such activity can be a moment of proposing Christian life, as testified by the words of a coach: "what is important is that we are succeeding in bringing people to the parish, not taking them away: those who once were in the streets can be now found here". (T5).

Witnesses and Mediators

If pre-evangelization is the first step, the second one would be the training of witnesses; that is to say, training people inside the team would be able to 'discover' the intrinsic pedagogic value of Christianity.

> The event of revelation, therefore, inherently aligns with a vision of education that, while not confined to the framework of confessional apprenticeship, nonetheless

> emphasizes the wisdom-oriented dimension of the educational relationship, its intentionality in proposing values, and its ethical depth. (Bozzolo 2017, p. 106)

One of the most compelling aspects of pastoral action is the power of testimony. This was true in the early apostolic communities and remained so in the post-conciliar period when Pope Paul VI emphasized that "young people need witnesses, not teachers." In a society that often relegates faith to the private sphere in the name of misguided neutrality that seeks to avoid contaminating social relations, the interviews reveal how the witness of a Christian life—lived out by coaches, managers, and parents—serves as an introduction to the Church community. This testimony is not limited to direct expressions of faith or involvement in other parish activities but extends to embodying Christian values, even among those who may not be particularly devout. This approach aligns with Pope Francis' post-synodal exhortation Christus Vivit (2019), where he suggests that sports can be "an opportunity to share the joy of the Gospel" (art. 177) and that even "sports competitions" (art. 210) can serve this purpose.

An intriguing development in this context is the concept of "sports mediators," a term discussed by both representatives of the Pastoral Office for Sport and the president of CSI Rome. This is an evolving project that began with an initial experimental phase in Rome and is now being tested nationwide by the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI). These mediators are leaders within sports groups who are skilled at networking within their communities—embodying the "outgoing Church" in terms of public theology—but more importantly, they bridge connections with other aspects of parish life to prevent the parish from becoming an "archipelago of separate realities" (K3). Additionally, these mediators are responsible for organizing activities that go beyond sport, encompassing social and ecclesial commitments. In doing so, they create a cross-sectional integration of evangelical values that permeates sport, charity, the parish community, and the wider society, a case in point of public theology (Körtner 2024).

Sports as a place of encounter (religious pluralism)

We previously mentioned that sports as a place of encounter serves as a pre-evangelization field. Given the multicultural nature of Roman society (IDOS (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS) (2024)), we examined how non-belief or differing beliefs were managed within parish futsal teams. In this context, all the teams interacting with non-believing families or those from diverse religious backgrounds have reported no issues. On the contrary, sports have fostered dialogue and exchange, acting as a true intercultural platform where children and youth from various religious traditions come together for the common good, peace, and human flourishing. As one coach put it, "The world of football and sport is a whole world in itself!"

Noteworthy experiences within parish teams include tournaments with Ukrainian Orthodox boys fleeing the Ukrainian–Russian war, where sports were complemented by moments of shared prayer (T5). Another example is a Muslim mother who played football and was accommodated in her choice to pause sporting activities during Ramadan (T4). These examples highlight how the intercultural value of sports can transform athletic activities into "actions for peace" (K1).

Certainly, even in an Italian social climate that can still be quite intolerant at times, the unique nature of pastoral service in terms of welcome and dialogue is made possible through the everyday presence of sports activities in parishes. In this regard, it would be interesting to quote the words of the Office for Sport Pastoral:

> Often, sports spaces become the only local setting where the parish can provide a religious profile while still promoting inclusion, integration, and interreligious dialogue. There is not a separate pastoral plan for sports; rather, the pastoral care for sports is always integrated into the community because the community exists within a specific territory or neighborhood!. (K2)

5. Discussion

From a pedagogical perspective, the case study methodology is valuable because the questions it generates are significant for educational inquiry. This study was intended to be exploratory rather than explanatory. Nevertheless, like any qualitative research that employs thematic data analysis, it offers insights that should be seen as part of an ongoing exploration rather than as definitive conclusions (Braun and Clarke 2021).

From this research, it is possible to outline the optimal educational trajectories that foster a connection between the educational value of futsal in the public sector and a community's pastoral plan. We propose two complementary approaches: a deductive path and a hermeneutics one.

The deductive approach is rooted in Church teachings and applies theological education to the sports field, identifying criteria for youth ministry (Sala 2017, pp. 210–41) that can be integrated into parish futsal. This path includes a clear proposal to transition from Olympian Greek values to Christian ones, enriched by the Gospel experience. While making the parish a place of encounter, it retains its Christian specificity. As the Youth Pastoral Director astutely noted:

> "It should be clear to anyone who sets foot there that this educational context has the Gospel as its horizon, with Jesus Christ as its horizon. Perhaps not always direct or explicit, but the Gospel should be palpable. So, pastoral care should be defined with the objective of generating faith. Every action, from the lady who welcomes to the person who cleans the floor, to the educator, to the one who explicitly proclaims the Gospel in the Church, should all contribute towards that goal." (K1)

Additionally, the hermeneutic dimension comes into play in an increasingly secularized Christian education, often entrusted to individuals who are not theologically trained but possess deep, experiential faith.

Secularization should not be seen as a problem or obstacle. It is a part of our time, and even in a post-secular age, it does not mean the end of secularization. Rather, secularization presents an opportunity for a deeper awareness and understanding of what it means to be Christian in today's world contributing to the common good and human welfare. This is particularly true for pastoral workers who do not engage in traditional Catholic activities like catechesis, and even more so for those involved in "bridging" activities with the broader community and society.

> Constantly engaging the truths of Christianity in dialogue with the truths of history undoubtedly demands significant interpretive effort and taking personal responsibility. [. . .] The central idea of the discussion thus far has been that of a hermeneutic Christian education—one that focuses entirely on the individual's ability to interpret the message of Christ within a secularized context. While some may argue that this approach reflects a position of weak thinking, a closer examination reveals otherwise. It is not the thought that is weak, but rather the inherent weakness of humanity itself. (Pagano 2001, p. 136)

Even the oratory, which had here been considered the best vessel through which to connect sports to the pastoral dimension, is now defined as a 'hermeneutic place' par excellence, in its being a frontier (Azzolari and Zappella 2020, p. 190), a public domain.

> The oratory, by its very nature as a bridge, serves as the quintessential hermeneutic space. It is a frontier, attracting many different people—an open place where individuals come and go with varying durations, goals, and interests. This openness also makes it a fragile environment, where affiliations may be fleeting. It sits at the intersection of pastoral care and education, requiring constant vigilance, updates, and reevaluation to maintain balance. The oratory straddles the line between public and private, between parish and community, between religious and secular. It operates as a private entity, yet it addresses a public good of the

> highest order: the education of new generations. (Azzolari and Zappella 2020, p. 190)

Regardless of the path one may choose, which can very well reflect the context and history of the parish group, such a path shall always need two key factors:

(a) A church community that values educational work on the playing fields and recognizes it as a foundational element of community pastoral work. This recognition must primarily come through the pastoral, not just administrative, involvement of parish clergy.
(b) A sufficient number of witnesses and educators who embrace the Christian model of sports becoming key advocates for sports ministry. They should cultivate meaningful relationships within the parish and Christian-inspired associations and actively promote the initiatives of the diocese's office for sports ministry in the public sphere.

6. Conclusions

The synodal journey of the Italian Church has recently begun, and some 'synodal sites' have been defined as "real listening paths and lived experiences of synodality" (Giannone 2023, p. 215). Three 'synodal sites' have been defined as follows: (1) "of the street and the village", (2) "hospitality and home", and (3) "diaconate and spiritual formation", and we believe that parish football schools, with all their criticalities included, should belong to the first, in their nature as a bridge between public domain (i.e., the street, the village) and the parish community.

This research has demonstrated that when a clear pastoral intention is established, particularly at the parish level, the concept of 'new evangelization', as envisioned by John Paul II, can indeed be effective. The best practices of parish teams, along with their challenges, the ongoing efforts of the diocesan office for sports, and the proposals of the CSI, can serve as foundational elements for developing a pastoral training pathway. These training paths must have recourse to public theology, which has the objective of developing significant theological discourse for plural society and wants to be a practical theology that listens to the social reality in which it lives, responds to it, and influences the development of society (Villagrán 2018, p. 5).

Moreover, parish communities are now called to engage with the public domain of playing fields. As Dianich (2003, p. 418) observed, parishes traditionally welcomed those already initiated into Christian life, focusing on providing catechesis and the sacraments. Today, this is no longer sufficient.

Parishes are tasked with the mission of proclamation, particularly in reaching those who participate in parish activities, such as sports, but are not yet believers. There is also a pressing need for the 're-evangelization of those who were previously evangelized' (K2), who may return to the Church through activities like their children's involvement in football.

Football within the parish context can be a powerful tool for the 'outgoing Church' and 'outgoing or public theology', even while operating within its boundaries. Christian initiation can no longer rely solely on catechism or the rituals of liturgies and parish festivals; it must be embodied through the service and witness of other educational figures within the parish (Roselli 2024). These figures deserve the full attention of all pastors, especially if they truly care about the salvation of the entire people of God, of all of humanity.

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Note

[1] https://www.figc.it/it/giovani/governance/il-settore-giovanile-e-scolastico/ (accessed on 14 September 2024).

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Relationship Between Secularization and the Level of Perceiving Religious Influence Among Individuals Receiving Higher Religious Education

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex relationship between levels of religiosity and attitudes toward secularization among individuals receiving higher religious education in Türkiye. Secularization is defined as the diminishing influence of religion in public life and the rise of critical attitudes toward religious norms, a process that accelerated particularly during the modernization period following the establishment of the Republic. The primary aim of the research is to analyze whether there is a significant relationship between secular attitudes and the perceived influence of Islam among theology faculty students. The study employs a quantitative, descriptive survey design and includes a sample of 380 undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students from the faculties of theology at Kocaeli, Sakarya, Marmara, and Istanbul universities. Data were collected using the "Perceived Influence of Religion Scale" and the "Secular Attitude Scale," both of which demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.70). Demographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, parental education level, type of education (formal or distance), and economic status were also incorporated into the analysis. The findings revealed statistically significant differences based on marital status, parental education level, type of education program, and previous educational background. For instance, single students reported perceiving a higher influence of religion compared to their married counterparts, while students with fathers who held university degrees perceived a lower influence of religion. These results offer valuable insights into how modern social transformations influence religious attitudes and practices.

Keywords: religious education; secularization; perceived religious influence; higher education; theology students

1. Introduction

Religion has been a fundamental force shaping societies' thought and behavior throughout history. Across all communities, the presence of religious beliefs is consistently observed. While these beliefs vary according to cultural, historical, and individual contexts, they have long served as a cornerstone for maintaining social cohesion. During the Middle Ages, religion functioned as a central element of societal order, and in the absence of scientific and technological advancements, many unknown phenomena were interpreted through religious frameworks. However, with the rise of the Enlightenment

in the 18th century, rationalist and knowledge-based approaches gained dominance, accelerating the spread of individualism, freedom of thought, and ultimately secularization. Secularization refers to the diminishing influence of religion in the public sphere and the emergence of critical individual attitudes toward religious norms. This transformation has led individuals to question traditional doctrines and to redefine the balance between religious beliefs and modern social practices (Dhima and Golder 2021).

In Turkey, the modernization process that began with the Tanzimat reforms gained momentum following the establishment of the Republic, fundamentally altering the societal role of religion. This transformation led to notable variations in individuals' religious lives and in the degree to which they experienced religious influence. In recent years, debates surrounding the place of religion in Turkish society have deepened, particularly after the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) (Karakus Öztürk 2018). Government policies, the strengthening of religious institutions, and educational reforms have expanded the visibility and influence of religion across various segments of society. Yet, it remains unclear how the dynamics of secularization, religiosity, and modernization interact specifically among theology students—individuals situated at the intersection of traditional religious education and contemporary social change. Given the increasing salience of religion in public discourse, it is crucial to explore how theology students respond to and negotiate the challenges posed by secular and modernizing forces within Turkey's complex socio-political landscape.

In this context, this study is motivated by the need to understand how theology students in Turkey experience secularization and perceive religion's influence within a complex modern society. As religion continues to shape both individual and collective identities, it is crucial to examine how modern developments—such as globalization, technological change, and political reforms—affect the religious attitudes and behaviors of individuals studying religion. By focusing on theology students, who are expected to play a key role in shaping future religious discourse in Turkey, this study aims to fill an important gap in previous research and contribute valuable insights into the ongoing transformation of the country's religious landscape.

Recent studies in Turkey have explored the complex relationship between religion and secularization. Mehmet Ali Sevgi (2024) critiqued Western secularization theories by emphasizing the need to consider Turkey's unique socio-cultural and historical context. Fatih Baş (2021) examined the state's dilemma in managing a secular social structure within a predominantly religious society, while Fatma Nur Şengül (2021) analyzed empirical studies and highlighted the diversity of secularization indicators beyond just levels of religiosity. Orhan Doğan (2024) argued that declining government performance might explain the rise of atheism in Muslim societies, challenging conventional secularization theories. Erol Erkan (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of postgraduate theses to explore Turkey's distinctive path toward secularization.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they predominantly rely on qualitative approaches or Western theoretical frameworks. Few studies have quantitatively examined the relationship between secularization levels and the perceived influence of Islam among theology students. This study addresses this gap by statistically analyzing how secularization, religiosity, and modernization interact among theology students in Turkey's unique socio-political context.

This study aims to examine the relationship between levels of secularization and the perceived influence of Islam among students enrolled in faculties of theology. Gaining insight into how modernization, globalization, and technological developments affect individuals who receive religious education will offer a meaningful contribution to understanding the evolving religious landscape of society. The study investigates various

demographic and educational variables—including age, gender, marital status, parental education level, type of education, academic standing, and high school background—in relation to both secularization and the perceived influence of religion.

Within this framework, the central research question is as follows: Is there a significant relationship between levels of secularization and the perceived influence of Islam among theology students? The following sub-questions have also been formulated:

1. Do secularization attitudes and perceived religious influence levels vary by students' age?
2. Is there a relationship between gender, secularization, and perceived religious influence levels?
3. To what extent does marital status affect secularization and perceived religious influence?
4. Does parental education affect secularization and perceived religious influence levels?
5. Do secularization and perceived religious influence vary according to educational type?
6. Is there a relationship between academic level and both perceived religious influence and secularization?
7. Does income level affect secularization and perceived religious influence?
8. Is there a relationship between high school type graduated from and secularization or perceived religious influence?

1.1. Research Method

This study adopts a quantitative research methodology, utilizing a descriptive survey design. The aim of descriptive survey research is to examine existing conditions as they are, facilitating the analysis of relationships among variables. For data collection, the "Perceived Influence of Religion Scale," developed by Asım Yapıcı (Yapıcı 2006), and the "Secular Attitude Scale," developed by Talip Demir (Demir 2021), were used. In this study, the reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated as 0.70. This value indicates that the scales exhibit internal consistency within the commonly accepted range for social science research, thereby confirming the reliability of the measurements. The questionnaire consists of 47 items, including nine demographic questions examining variables such as age, gender, marital status, parental education, type of education, income level, class level, and type of high school graduated from.

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1.2. Research Instruments

The questionnaire utilized in this study incorporates two previously validated measurement tools: the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale developed by Asım Yapıcı and the Secular Attitude Scale designed by Talip Demir. In addition, demographic data—including participants' gender, age, marital status, type of education, parental education levels, academic year, income level, and type of high school attended—were collected through the first nine items of the survey form.

1.3. Participants

The study group consists of 380 theology faculty students enrolled during the 2024 academic year at Kocaeli, Sakarya, Marmara, and Istanbul universities. Of these, 338 students participated in regular programs, while 48 students attended the distance education program (İLİTAM). Participants included 218 undergraduate, 129 master's, and 33 doctoral students. Regarding age distribution, 55.8% were aged 18–25, 35.8% were 26–40, 7.9% were 41–55, and 0.5% were 56–64. Gender distribution showed that 78.6% were female, and 21.4% were male.

In terms of marital status, 70.8% of participants were single, and 29.2% were married. Concerning parental education levels, 13.4% of mothers had no formal education, 55.8% completed primary education, 8.9% middle school, 9.5% high school, and 12.4% university. Fathers' education levels were as follows: 2.1% no formal education, 39.2% primary school, 16.8% middle school, 17.9% high school, and 23.9% university.

Regarding educational programs, the majority (88.9%) attended regular education, while 11.1% were enrolled in İLİTAM. Class distribution revealed 15.3% in preparatory classes, 42.1% undergraduate (years 1–4), 33.9% master's, and 8.7% doctoral levels.

Participants' monthly income levels were as follows: 23.4% earned $0–254, 37.1% $255–483, 21.8% $484–724, 7.9% $725–963, and 9.7% above $964. Concerning high school background, 66.8% graduated from Imam Hatip schools, 15.8% from Anatolian/Science high schools, 7.4% regular high schools, 5.3% vocational schools, and 4.7% other types of high schools.

Ethical considerations such as voluntariness and confidentiality were strictly followed throughout the research.

2. Findings

This section presents the statistical findings obtained through the survey.

2.1. The Distribution and Analysis of Participants' Responses to the Items of the Secular Attitude Scale

The findings of frequency analysis on responses given to items from the Secular Attitude Scale are presented in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the participants' responses to the Secular Attitude Scale reflect a predominantly conservative orientation, especially regarding issues that challenge established religious norms. Items such as "There is no harm in shaking hands with a person of the opposite sex" and "There is no harm in celebrating New Year's Eve" received the highest rates of strong disagreement—55.5% and 65.5% respectively—indicating widespread resistance to behaviors that may be perceived as culturally or religiously inappropriate. Similarly, on topics like abortion (73.4% strongly disagreed with its permissibility outside medical necessity), early religious education, and euthanasia, participants expressed strong religious adherence.

The data in Table 1 further highlight nuanced patterns of moral and social perception. For instance, while a majority rejected the idea that hijab is not essential for a religious life (40.5% strongly disagreed), a considerable portion (20.8% partially agreed) showed openness to alternative interpretations, suggesting a degree of internal plurality. On statements concerning interfaith salvation (52.6% strongly disagreed with non-Muslims entering paradise), and moral behavior being more important than ritual worship, responses were more mixed, pointing to subtle tensions between orthodoxy and ethical universalism.

Interestingly, certain items reflect greater variability in responses, such as the claim that "Religious groups exploit people's beliefs and feelings," with only 21.6% strongly disagreeing and a notable 40.8% moderately agreeing. This may indicate critical awareness of the institutional dimension of religion. Meanwhile, overwhelming agreement was seen in items like the desire to perform Umrah (83.2% completely agreed) and the classification of games of chance as gambling (62.4% completely agreed), underscoring strong devotional and doctrinal commitment.

In sum, Table 1 provides a comprehensive snapshot of students' attitudes toward secular issues, revealing a general pattern of resistance to secular behaviors with occasional openness to individual reasoning and ethical reinterpretation. The findings suggest that

while students predominantly adhere to traditional Islamic values, there is a spectrum of responses influenced by topic sensitivity and perceived religious significance.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants' Responses to the Secular Attitude Scale.

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Moderately Agree		I Agree		Completely Agree	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
There is no harm in shaking hands with a person of the opposite sex	211	55.5%	97	25.5%	44	11.6%	23	6.1%	5	1.3%
There is no harm in celebrating New Year's Eve	249	65.5%	79	20.8%	35	9.2%	13	3.4%	4	1.1%
It does not matter whether a person is religious or not as long as he lives morally	151	39.7%	121	31.8%	74	19.5%	24	6.3%	10	2.6%
Religion should not interfere in every aspect of human life	218	57.4%	110	28.9%	23	6.1%	17	4.5%	12	3.2%
Cosmetic surgery can be performed even if it is not compulsory	182	47.9%	132	34.7%	42	11.1%	18	4.7%	6	1.6%
It is not necessary to wear a hijab to lead a religious life	154	40.5%	95	25.0%	79	20.8%	38	10.0%	14	3.7%
Religious groups exploit people's beliefs and feelings	82	21.6%	71	18.7%	155	40.8%	44	11.6%	28	7.4%
A terminally ill adult patient has the right to end his or her own life	277	72.9%	90	23.7%	7	1.8%	6	1.6%	0	0.0%
Prayer has only a psychological effect in the healing of illnesses	169	44.5%	130	34.2%	36	9.5%	32	8.4%	13	3.4%
There is no difference between reading the Qur'an in Arabic and its Turkish translation	254	66.8%	107	28.2%	8	2.1%	7	1.8%	4	1.1%
Only religious knowledge that is logical and rational should be taken into account	220	57.9%	119	31.3%	18	4.7%	15	3.9%	8	2.1%
Abortion is prohibited except in cases of medical necessity	279	73.4%	76	20.0%	16	4.2%	5	1.3%	4	1.1%
It is not right to give religious education to children in the preschool period	275	72.4%	83	21.8%	15	3.9%	7	1.8%	0	0.0%
There is no harm in making statues of people	194	51.1%	99	26.1%	45	11.8%	36	9.5%	6	1.6%
Moral behaviour is more important than worship in religious life	92	24.2%	113	29.7%	95	25.0%	60	15.8%	20	5.3%
People from religions other than Islam can also enter Paradise	200	52.6%	93	24.5%	60	15.8%	21	5.5%	6	1.6%
Religion has a significant effect on the backwardness of societies	215	56.6%	93	24.5%	39	10.3%	23	6.1%	10	2.6%
Games of chance are a form of gambling	5	1.3%	8	2.1%	20	5.3%	110	28.9%	237	62.4%
Epidemics are a warning given to people by Allah	10	2.6%	39	10.3%	115	30.3%	132	34.7%	84	22.1%
I would like to go to Umrah if I could	3	0.8%	0	0.0%	4	1.1%	57	15.0%	316	83.2%
Whether a person is rich or poor is God's will	20	5.3%	42	11.1%	147	38.7%	87	22.9%	84	22.1%

2.2. The Distribution and Analysis of Participants' Responses to the Items of the Perceived Impact of Religion Scale

The distribution of responses to items on the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale was analyzed through frequency analysis, and findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Participants' Responses to the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale.

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		I Agree		Strongly Agree	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
People should mould their daily lives according to religion	3	0.8%	6	1.6%	34	8.9%	123	32.4%	214	56.3%
It is necessary to raise religious generations.	2	0.5%	4	1.1%	23	6.1%	78	20.5%	273	71.8%
I prefer the person I marry to be religious.	3	0.8%	1	0.3%	20	5.3%	80	21.1%	276	72.6%
The handshake between men and women is objectionable in our religion	4	1.1%	18	4.7%	22	5.8%	109	28.7%	227	59.7%
I don't drink because it's forbidden by religion	4	1.1%	1	0.3%	4	1.1%	39	10.3%	332	87.4%
I prefer my friends to be religious	10	2.6%	15	3.9%	87	22.9%	112	29.5%	156	41.1%
I do not approach such acts because sexual experiences outside marriage are haram	3	0.8%	1	0.3%	6	1.6%	37	9.7%	333	87.6%
I like to be seen as a good Muslim by my social circle	6	1.6%	9	2.4%	56	14.7%	116	30.5%	193	50.8%
I help those who ask for help for the sake of Allah	2	0.5%	3	0.8%	27	7.1%	125	32.9%	223	58.7%
I am saddened by the plight of Muslims in the world	2	0.5%	3	0.8%	6	1.6%	76	20.0%	293	77.1%
I don't mind using products containing lard	327	86.1%	46	12.1%	1	0.3%	3	0.8%	3	0.8%
In the relations between men and women, the measures determined by religion must be observed	3	0.8%	4	1.1%	13	3.4%	106	27.9%	254	66.8%
A person who observes the commandments and prohibitions of religion should be considered honourable	6	1.6%	17	4.5%	54	14.2%	127	33.4%	176	46.3%
I won't allow my sister to marry a non-Muslim	7	1.8%	18	4.7%	36	9.5%	103	27.1%	216	56.8%
If I marry a non-Muslim, I want him to be a Muslim	9	2.4%	8	2.1%	13	3.4%	100	26.3%	250	65.8%
I will not eat the meat of an animal sacrificed by Christians	19	5.0%	52	13.7%	41	10.8%	87	22.9%	181	47.6%
I try to do my behaviour with the awareness that Allah sees me everywhere	2	0.5%	3	0.8%	25	6.6%	116	30.5%	234	61.6%

As shown in Table 2, participants exhibited a strong alignment with traditional Islamic values, as reflected in their high levels of agreement with statements from the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale. Notably, the vast majority of respondents reported behaviors and preferences guided by religious beliefs—for instance, 87.4% stated they abstain from alcohol because it is forbidden in religion, and 87.6% rejected premarital sexual relations as religiously impermissible. Additionally, a significant portion of participants expressed a desire to raise religious generations (71.8%), marry a religious spouse (72.6%), and maintain

religiously appropriate gender relations, such as 59.7% agreeing that handshakes between men and women are objectionable in Islam.

The responses further reveal that religious principles heavily inform social and personal choices. For example, 66.8% strongly agreed that gender interactions should conform to religious norms, and 61.6% reported striving to behave with the awareness that Allah observes all actions. Moreover, participants showed concern for the broader Muslim community, with 77.1% expressing sadness over the suffering of Muslims worldwide. Religious identity also played a role in social relations; 41.1% preferred religious friends, and 50.8% liked being perceived as a good Muslim by their peers.

While most items indicated a high degree of religiosity, some showed greater variation. For example, regarding the consumption of products containing pork fat, 86.1% strongly disagreed with its permissibility, but a small minority expressed differing views. These nuanced patterns suggest a generally conservative yet contextually varied interpretation of Islamic practice among the participants. Overall, Table 2 demonstrates that the students' worldview is deeply embedded in religious belief, influencing both private decisions and public interactions.

2.3. Variation in the Secular Attitude Scale by Age Groups

Mean scores of the Secular Attitude Scale according to age groups and the statistical significance of differences among these scores were analyzed.

Table 3 presents the mean scores of the Secular Attitude Scale across different age groups. As seen in Table 3, there were no statistically significant differences among the age groups ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that secular attitudes are relatively consistent across age categories. This implies that factors other than age, such as educational background or family influence, may play a more significant role in shaping secular views.

Table 3. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Age Group.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	18–25	212	1.76	0.49	0.784	0.503
	26–40	136	1.84	0.68		
	41–55	30	1.72	0.58		
	56–64	2	1.90	0.71		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	18–25	212	4.14	0.61	1.236	0.296
	26–40	136	4.06	0.59		
	41–55	30	4.27	0.46		
	56–64	2	4.00	0.00		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

2.4. Variation in the Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale According to Age Groups

According to the age factor of the scale of feeling the effect of religion, the mean scores they received from the answers they gave to the scale and whether the difference between these averages was significant were analysed by one-way variance analysis.

According to Table 4, the perceived influence of religion was similar among all age groups, with no statistically significant variation ($p > 0.05$). Although the 56–64 age group had slightly higher mean scores, Table 4 confirms that age alone does not considerably impact how strongly religion is perceived to influence personal life.

Table 4. Variation in Perceived Influence of Religion Scale Scores by Age Group.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	18–25	212	73.06	8.41	1.062	0.365
	26–40	136	71.51	8.39		
	41–55	30	72.93	6.01		
	56–64	2	75.00	4.24		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

2.5. Variation in the Secular Attitude Scale According to Gender

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether the mean scores on the Secular Attitude Scale differed significantly by gender.

As displayed in Table 5, the comparison of secular attitude scores between male and female participants did not yield a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.445$). This suggests that gender does not play a major role in shaping secular views among theology students, as confirmed by the results in Table 5.

Table 5. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Gender.

Gender		*n*	Average	Std. Deviation	t	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	Woman	286	1.81	0.59	0.765	0.445
	Male	78	1.75	0.53		
Desecular Attitude Scale	Woman	286	4.08	0.57	−1.382	0.168
	Male	78	4.18	0.65		

2.6. Variation in the Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale According to Gender

The scale score averages of the scale of feeling the effect of religion according to gender and whether the difference between these averages was significant or not was analysed by independent samples *t*-test.

The results in Table 6 indicate no significant difference between males and females in their perception of religion's impact ($p = 0.456$). This reinforces the finding that religious perception levels are relatively stable across gender lines within this group.

Table 6. Variation in Perceived Influence of Religion Scale Scores by Gender.

Gender		*n*	Average	Std. Deviation	t	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	Woman	286	72.22	8.23	−0.746	0.456
	Male	78	73.01	8.76		

2.7. Variation in the Secular Attitude Scale According to Marital Status

The mean scores of the secular attitude scale according to marital status and whether the difference between these averages was significant or not were analysed by independent samples *t*-test.

Table 7 reveals that while secular attitude scores were slightly higher among married participants, the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). Thus, as shown in Table 7, marital status appears to have a minimal effect on secular thinking in this sample.

Table 7. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Marital Status.

Marital Status		*n*	Average	Std. Deviation	t	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	Single	269	1.76	0.51	−1.645	0.101
	Married	111	1.86	0.69		
Desecular Attitude Scale	Single	269	4.13	0.56	0.579	0.563
	Married	111	4.09	0.65		

2.8. Variation in the Scale of Feeling the Impact of Religion According to Marital Status

The mean scores of the scale of feeling the influence of religion according to the marital status and whether the difference between these averages is significant or not were analysed by *t*-test in independent groups.

Unlike previous comparisons, Table 8 shows a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in religious perception between married and single participants. Notably, single students reported higher levels of perceived religious influence, indicating that marital status may play a role in shaping religious sensitivity.

Table 8. Variation in Perceived Influence of Religion Scale Scores by Marital Status.

Marital Status		*n*	Average	Std. Deviation	t	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	Single	269	73.29	7.37	2.907	0.004 *
	Married	111	70.61	9.81		

* $p < 0.05$.

2.9. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale According to Mother's Education Level

The mean scores of the secular attitude scale according to the mother's education level and whether the difference between these averages was significant were analysed by one-way analysis of variance.

As presented in Table 9, no statistically significant differences were found in secular attitude scores based on the mother's education level ($p > 0.05$). Regardless of whether participants' mothers had no formal education or a university degree, secular attitudes remained relatively stable, suggesting that maternal education does not significantly influence students' secular views.

Table 9. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Mother's Education Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	No Education	51	1.76	0.62	1.009	0.403
	Primary education	212	1.76	0.58		
	Middle School	34	1.96	0.56		
	High School	36	1.80	0.61		
	University	47	1.81	0.46		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	No Education	51	4.13	0.55	0.701	0.592
	Primary education	212	4.15	0.55		
	Middle School	34	4.01	0.58		
	High School	36	4.05	0.74		
	University	47	4.06	0.71		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

2.10. Variation in the Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale According to Mother's Education Level

The mean scores of the scale measuring the perceived influence of religion, based on the mother's education level, were analyzed using one-way analysis of variance to determine whether the differences between these averages were statistically significant.

In contrast, Table 10 indicates a statistically significant difference in the perceived influence of religion depending on the mother's education level ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, students whose mothers had no education or only primary school education reported significantly higher levels of religious influence compared to those whose mothers had completed secondary or high school. These findings, shown in Table 10, highlight the role of maternal educational background in shaping students' religious sensitivity.

Table 10. Variation in Perceived Influence of Religion Scale Scores by Mother's Education Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	No Education	51	73.57	6.50	2.289	0.049 *
	Primary education	212	73.24	7.10		
	Middle School	34	70.76	8.58		
	High School	36	69.69	11.77		
	University	47	71.45	10.47		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

* $p < 0.05$.

According to the results of the TUKEY test conducted to identify the source of the significant difference, the perceived influence of religion was statistically significantly higher among those whose mothers had no formal education and who had graduated from primary school, compared to those whose mothers graduated from secondary school and high school.

2.11. Variation in the Secular Attitude Scale According to Father's Educational Level

The variation in Secular Attitude Scale scores according to the father's educational level was analyzed using one-way ANOVA to determine whether the differences between group means were statistically significant. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using the Tukey test.

According to Table 11, the father's education level significantly affects secular attitudes ($p < 0.05$). The data show that participants whose fathers had either no education or a university degree scored higher on the secular attitude scale compared to those whose fathers had only a primary, middle, or high school education. This suggests a non-linear relationship between paternal education and secular thinking, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Father's Education Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	No Education	8	1.93	0.84	2.823	0.025 *
	Primary education	149	1.70	0.55		
	Middle School	64	1.78	0.58		
	High School	68	1.74	0.49		
	University	91	1.95	0.62		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	No Education	8	3.86	0.45	2.251	0.043 *
	Primary education	149	4.22	0.54		
	Middle School	64	4.05	0.66		
	High School	68	4.09	0.58		
	University	91	4.03	0.62		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

* $p < 0.05$.

Examination of secular and non-secular attitude sub-dimensions by father's educational level revealed statistically significant differences. According to the results of the Tukey test, secular attitudes were significantly higher among participants whose fathers

had either no formal education or university-level education compared to participants whose fathers had other educational backgrounds. For the desecularization sub-dimension, participants whose fathers had completed primary education showed significantly higher scores compared to those whose fathers had other educational levels.

2.12. Variation in the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale According to Father's Educational Level

Mean scores of responses to the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale according to father's educational level were analyzed through one-way ANOVA.

Table 12 demonstrates that students whose fathers held a university degree reported significantly lower levels of religious influence compared to others ($p < 0.05$). This implies that higher paternal education may correlate with increased secularization in their children's religious experience, reinforcing the patterns observed in Table 11.

Table 12. Variation in Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale Scores by Father's Education Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	No Education	8	73.75	7.91	2.696	0.031 *
	Primary education	149	73.66	6.54		
	Middle School	64	72.19	10.29		
	High School	68	73.18	6.13		
	University	91	70.23	10.02		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

* $p < 0.05$.

When the change in the scale of feeling the effect of religion according to the father's education level was analysed, it was seen that there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$). According to the results of the TUKEY test conducted to determine from which group the difference originated; the level of feeling the effect of religion of those whose fathers are university graduates is significantly lower than those whose fathers have other education levels.

2.13. Variation in the Secular Attitude Scale According to Type of Education

The variation in mean scores obtained from the Secular Attitude Scale according to the type of education (regular vs. İLİTAM) was analyzed using an independent samples *t*-test to determine if differences were statistically significant.

As shown in Table 13, participants enrolled in formal (on-campus) programs exhibited significantly higher secular attitudes than those in the distance education program (İLİTAM), with a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest that in-person academic environments may expose students to more secular influences or critical thinking frameworks.

Table 13. Variation in Secular and Desecular Attitude Scale Scores by Type of Education.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	t	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	Formal	338	1.81	0.58	6.258	0.013 *
	Ilitam	42	1.58	0.46		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	Formal	338	4.10	0.58	1.418	0.234
	ILITAM	42	4.22	0.70		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

* $p < 0.05$.

2.14. Variation in the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale According to Type of Education

The variation in mean scores obtained from responses to the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale according to education type (regular vs. İLİTAM) was examined using an independent samples *t*-test to determine whether the differences were statistically significant.

In contrast, Table 14 reveals no statistically significant difference between regular and İLİTAM students in terms of their perceived influence of religion ($p > 0.05$). Despite differing educational settings, students' sense of religious impact on their lives remained relatively consistent.

Table 14. Variation in Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale Scores by Type of Education.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	t	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	Formal	338	72.70	7.77	1.788	0.182
	ILITAM	42	70.90	11.29		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

2.15. Variation in the Secular Attitude Scale According to Class Level

The variation in mean scores on the Secular Attitude Scale across students' class levels was analyzed using one-way ANOVA to determine whether the differences between the means were statistically significant.

The variation in secular attitudes by academic class level is clearly shown in Table 15. According to the analysis, significant differences exist ($p < 0.05$), with doctoral and master's students displaying higher secular attitudes than undergraduate students, especially those in the first and second years. This trend may reflect increased exposure to diverse perspectives and critical thinking over time.

Table 15. Variation in Secular and Desecular Attitude Scale Scores by Class Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	Preparation	58	1.76	0.43	2.269	0.037 *
	1	15	1.44	0.48		
	2	25	1.62	0.43		
	3	39	1.85	0.50		
	4	81	1.73	0.57		
	Master's Degree	129	1.84	0.64		
	PhD	33	1.96	0.67		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	Preparation	58	4.14	0.60	2.580	0.018 *
	1	15	4.56	0.49		
	2	25	4.20	0.80		
	3	39	4.10	0.54		
	4	81	4.19	0.52		
	Master's Degree	129	4.04	0.60		
	PhD	33	3.94	0.53		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

* $p < 0.05$.

According to the results of the Tukey test for the secularization sub-dimension, third-year students showed significantly higher secular attitudes than first-year students. Additionally, master's students exhibited significantly higher secular attitudes compared to first-year students, while doctoral students demonstrated significantly higher secular attitudes than both first- and second-year students.

For the de-secularization sub-dimension, first-year students demonstrated significantly higher de-secularization attitudes compared to third-year, fourth-year, master's, and doctoral students.

2.16. Variation in the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale According to Class Level

Mean scores obtained from responses to the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale according to participants' class levels were analyzed using one-way ANOVA to determine if the differences among these scores were statistically significant.

While Table 16 shows slight variations across class levels, the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). Thus, perceived religious influence appears to remain stable throughout the academic journey, despite growing secular attitudes at advanced educational levels.

Table 16. Variation in Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale Scores by Class Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	Preparation	58	72.86	9.28	1.828	0.093
	1	15	76.73	4.74		
	2	25	73.60	13.23		
	3	39	72.69	6.32		
	4	81	73.73	6.46		
	Master's Degree	129	71.30	8.07		
	PhD	33	70.61	8.55		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

2.17. Variation in the Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale According to Income Level

A one-way analysis of variance was used to examine whether the mean scores on the scale measuring the perceived influence of religion differed significantly across income levels.

As shown in Table 17, participants' income levels did not significantly affect their perception of religion's influence ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that financial background is not a determining factor in shaping how students perceive the role of religion in their daily lives. In other words, the perceived influence of religion is similar across individuals with different income levels.

Table 17. Variation in Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale Scores by Income Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	0–4200	89	72.96	10.64	1.141	0.337
	4200–8000 TL	141	73.25	7.41		
	8000–12,000 TL	83	71.70	7.09		
	12,000–16,000 TL	30	72.47	7.23		
	16,000 and above	37	70.43	7.62		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

2.18. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale According to the Type of High School Graduated from

The mean scores of the secular attitude scale according to the type of high school graduated from and whether the difference between these averages was significant or not were analysed by one-way analysis of variance.

As shown in Table 18, the type of high school from which students graduated did not result in statistically significant differences in their secular attitude scores ($p = 0.254$). While students from vocational high schools exhibited slightly higher secular attitude scores (mean = 1.98) and those from other types of schools had slightly lower scores (mean = 1.67), these differences were not statistically significant and did not suggest a consistent pattern. Similarly, in the desecular attitude sub-dimension, no statistically meaningful differences were observed ($p = 0.204$). These results indicate that high school background alone may not be a decisive factor influencing secular or religious orientations among theology students.

Table 18. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Type of High School Graduated.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	Plain High School	28	1.75	0.70	1.341	0.254
	Vocational High School	20	1.98	0.79		
	Imam Hatip High School	254	1.76	0.55		
	Anatolian-Science High School	60	1.88	0.54		
	Other	18	1.67	0.52		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	Plain High School	28	4.21	0.56	1.493	0.204
	Vocational High School	20	3.85	0.97		
	Imam Hatip High School	254	4.14	0.57		
	Anatolian-Science High School	60	4.06	0.49		
	Other	18	4.08	0.61		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

2.19. Variation in the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale According to High School Type

Mean scores on the Perceived Influence of Religion Scale were analyzed using one-way ANOVA to determine whether there were statistically significant differences based on the type of high school from which participants graduated.

As demonstrated in Table 19, the perceived influence of religion varied significantly across high school types ($p < 0.05$). According to the results of the Tukey post-hoc test, students who graduated from Imam Hatip High Schools (mean = 72.95) and Anatolian-Science High Schools (mean = 73.50) reported significantly higher levels of perceived religious influence compared to those from vocational high schools (mean = 67.55). These findings suggest that certain educational environments, particularly those with stronger academic or religious orientations, may foster a deeper internalization of religious influence among students.

Table 19. Variation in Perceived Influence of Religion Scale Scores by Type of High School Graduated.

	n	Average	Std. Deviation		F	*p*
Feeling the Impact of Religion Scale	Plain High School	28	70.68	7.37	2.707	0.030 *
	Vocational High School	20	67.55	14.63		
	Imam Hatip High School	254	72.95	7.93		
	Anatolian-Science High School	60	73.50	6.22		
	Other	18	71.28	8.57		
	Total	380	72.51	8.23		

* $p < 0.05$.

2.20. The Change in Secular Attitude Scale According to Income Level

The mean scores of the secular attitude scale according to the income level and whether the difference between these averages was significant were analysed by one-way analysis of variance.

As shown in Table 20, there were no statistically significant differences in secular attitude scores across income levels ($p = 0.420$). Although participants with higher income (16,000 TL and above) exhibited slightly higher secular attitude scores (mean = 1.90) compared to those with lower income (0–4200 TL; mean = 1.70), these variations were not statistically meaningful. Similarly, the de-secular attitude scores showed no significant differences among income groups ($p = 0.309$). Therefore, Table 20 suggests that income level does not substantially influence the secular or religious tendencies of theology students.

Table 20. Variation in Secular Attitude Scale Scores by Income Level.

		n	Average	Std. Deviation	F	*p*
Secular Attitude Scale	0–4200	89	1.70	0.51	0.977	0.420
	4200–8000 TL	141	1.78	0.58		
	8000–12,000 TL	83	1.83	0.60		
	12,000–16,000 TL	30	1.81	0.56		
	16,000 and above	37	1.90	0.63		
	Total	380	1.79	0.57		
Desecular Attitude Scale	0–4200	89	4.12	0.71	1.203	0.309
	4200–8000 TL	141	4.18	0.59		
	8000–12,000 TL	83	4.10	0.48		
	12,000–16,000 TL	30	4.03	0.54		
	16,000 and above	37	3.96	0.56		
	Total	380	4.12	0.59		

3. Discussion

The findings obtained in this study provide important insights when evaluated within the framework of the relevant literature. In line with the main objective of the research, the relationships between participants' demographic characteristics, education levels, and socioeconomic status and specific variables were analyzed. The data were compared with previous studies, highlighting both similarities and differences, and potential reasons for these were discussed. Additionally, the study offers both theoretical and practical evaluations of the findings, along with a discussion of its limitations and suggestions for future research.

The findings of this study reveal both parallels and noteworthy differences when systematically compared with the existing literature. For instance, in the study conducted by Coşkun and Çalışkan (2018) on students at Marmara University Faculty of Theology, the majority were found to maintain a high level of religious sensitivity in belief and practice, integrating religious values into daily life and not adopting a secular outlook. Similarly, the present study determined that most students continued to perform basic religious practices and showed strong adherence to religious values. For example, the finding that 97.7% of the students stated they refrain from alcohol consumption due to religious prohibitions illustrates the persistence of religious sensitivity.

However, in contrast to earlier studies, the present research observed a degree of flexibility in students' religious attitudes, likely influenced by the process of modernization. Notably, 13.7% of the students expressed a tendency to normalize participation in New Year's celebrations, suggesting an emerging influence of secularization on their social behavior. While Coşkun and Çalışkan (2018) reported that 93.9% of students rejected a secular perspective, this study indicates that modernization has introduced a degree of adaptability in how students engage with social life.

Additionally, while 42.5% of the students identified themselves as conservative in Coşkun and Çalışkan's (2018) study, it was observed in this study that students' interactions with different faith groups and social circles during their formal education process led to a certain flexibility in the rigidity of their beliefs. This finding also aligns with the result of this study that formal theology students exhibit higher tendencies toward secularization compared to ILITAM students.

Another prominent aspect of this study is that its findings correspond with those of Mevlüt Uğurlu's (2023) research conducted with students at METU. In Uğurlu's study, it was highlighted that religious students developed strategies—Central, Semi-Peripheral, and Peripheral areas—to manage the tensions they experience in secular public spaces. In this study as well, it was observed that students developed various strategies to pro-

tect or transform their religious identities and displayed flexible attitudes in different social environments.

Moreover, Yavuz and Çavuş's (2024) study on university students identified a positive relationship between secular mindset and Machiavellian behavior. This finding parallels the observation in our study that tendencies toward secularization in some students also increased their inclination toward individualism and rationality-based thinking. However, while Yavuz and Çavuş's study directly examined the relationship between secular attitudes and behavioral tendencies, our study analyzed the multidimensional effects of theological education and the social environment on students' perceptions of religion.

In conclusion, the findings of this study were systematically compared with the previous literature, revealing both similarities and differences, and the contribution of these findings to the literature was discussed. The study offers new theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature by explaining how modernization and social interactions transform students' religious attitudes and tendencies toward secularization.

It was observed that the rate of students who answered 'completely agree' to the item 'There is no harm in celebrating New Year's Eve' was 4.5%, while the rate of those who answered 'moderately agree' was 9.2%. These data indicate the existence of a secularisation tendency among the individuals participating in the research. According to Islam, there is a widespread opinion that the food and entertainment organised on New Year's Eve are similar to Christian customs and therefore are not considered appropriate (Işık 1997, p. 464).

In this context, in the religious evaluation of New Year's celebrations, individuals with religious education are expected to show a more sensitive and conservative attitude towards these activities. However, with the approach of the new year, preparations for this situation begin in social life. Pine trees are decorated in the community, gift draws are held, cafes, restaurants and shopping centres are decorated with lights and New Year's themed decorations. The normalisation of similar preparations for New Year's Eve and the acceptance of these elements by the society over time, starting with exposure to these elements in social life areas such as streets and squares, suggests that New Year's Eve celebrations have become widespread. It has been observed that some individuals who believe that New Year's celebrations are religiously wrong think that there is no problem in the adoption of such visual ritual elements in society. It can be thought that these individuals approach their religious beliefs from a more modern and flexible perspective, unlike those who are firmly committed to traditional religious practices.

It was observed that 71.5% of the participants disagreed with the statement, "It is not important whether a person is religious or not, as long as he/she lives morally." Furthermore, 8.9% of the participants stated that they believe there is no relationship between moral life and religiosity—that is, they think being religious does not depend on living a moral life. The high rate of those who believe that moral life and religiosity are interrelated reflects the notion that Islam is based on good morals (Çetin 2021b, p. 103). Therefore, a parallel relationship between religion and morality can be observed, with both elements developing through mutual influence. There are also hadiths of the Prophet emphasizing that Islam attaches great importance to moral excellence (Ü. Kılıç 2009, pp. 79–97).

When the responses to the statement "Religion should not interfere in every aspect of human life" were analyzed, it was found that 7.7% of the participants agreed and 6.1% moderately agreed. The commands and prohibitions set forth by religion significantly affect and shape the lives of individual believers. These beliefs contribute to societal unity and solidarity. Since the beginning of human history, people have tended to live communally, starting from the smallest social units, benefiting from the shared values offered by religion (Güneş 2016, p. 162).

The commandments and prohibitions in Islam encompass a wide scope of human life. Young people who identify as religious and conservative are also expected to follow these rules. In this context, it can be said that it is difficult to maintain a lifestyle where religion does not influence daily life. However, the majority of young people tend to act in the present moment and focus on instant gratification, often disregarding religious guidance in situations they face. This may suggest a tendency among young people to prefer a life centered around entertainment and freedom from responsibility rather than one rooted in religious discipline.

When the responses to the statement "It is not necessary to wear a hijab in order to lead a religious life" were analyzed, it was found that the majority—86.3%—strongly disagreed. On the other hand, 13.7% agreed, stating that they believe hijab is not obligatory to live a religious life. According to the traditional understanding of Islam, hijab is considered obligatory for Muslim women and is explained in detail in the Holy Qur'an (Çetin 2021a, pp. 117–20). However, the findings suggest that 13.7% of theology faculty students do not perceive religiosity as strictly formal. In the study "Perception of Religiosity in Turkey" conducted by Ete and Yargı, 43% of participants stated that they disagreed with the statement that Muslim women must cover their heads, whereas 42% agreed (Ete and Yargı 2023, p. 76). This finding closely aligns with the results of the present study.

When the responses to the statement "It is only necessary to consider religious knowledge that is logical or rational" were analyzed, it was observed that 89.2% of the participants disagreed with this view, while 10.7% moderately agreed. According to the findings, students tend to prioritize transmitted religious knowledge (naql) over rational inquiry. This may indicate that the theology curriculum does not sufficiently encourage critical thinking. Although religious beliefs may sometimes align with the experiences of the geographical and cultural context in which they originated—or in some cases diverge from them—unquestioning belief remains a significant factor in determining the depth and strength of one's faith. Evaluating every religious command based solely on its rational acceptability is not considered an appropriate approach (Oral 2022, pp. 286–88).

When analyzing the students' responses to the statement "Being moral in religious life is more important than worship," it was found that 21.1% agreed while 53.9% disagreed. These findings indicate that students generally regard worship as a fundamental aspect of moral behavior. Recognizing worship as a practice that elevates one's moral standing, religious belief can motivate individuals to avoid harmful behaviors. For example, those who intend to perform prayer may consciously abstain from alcohol and other detrimental influences, contributing to both their mental and physical well-being (Asar 2020, p. 298). Islamic teachings define what is right, good, lawful (halal), and unlawful (haram) through divine commands and prohibitions. Individuals who integrate worship into their daily lives and internalize it as a lifestyle are believed to cultivate virtue and morality through their actions. Worship also serves as an external manifestation of one's devotion to the Creator, helping maintain a balance between right and wrong via ongoing self-discipline (Asar 2020, p. 312). Traditionally, Islam views morality and worship as deeply interconnected. However, modernization has led to the neglect of concepts such as self-discipline and inner purification, once considered spiritually essential. Consequently, some individuals may perceive certain acts of worship as less significant or choose not to perform them altogether.

The findings indicate that a significant majority of students reject the notion that individuals belonging to religions other than Islam can enter paradise, suggesting a prevalent exclusivist attitude among the participants. This perspective aligns with ongoing scholarly debates in Turkish Islamic thought, as reflected in the discourse between Talat Koçyiğit's article "Paradise is the Monopoly of the Believers" (Koçyiğit 1989) and Süleyman Ateş's "Heaven is Not a Monopoly of Anyone" (Atmaca 2013). Such views highlight

the complex and nuanced understandings of salvation and religious identity within the student community.

The analysis of students' responses regarding the perceived influence of religion reveals a strong preference for religious compatibility in marriage decisions. Despite an overall trend toward secularization indicated in the study, the majority of students receiving religious higher education continue to prioritize religiosity when choosing a spouse. This preference is consistent with findings from previous research, which emphasize that shared religious beliefs and values contribute significantly to marital harmony and longevity (Kirman and Apaydın 2004; Yapıcı 2018). Marital conflicts tend to be less frequent and more easily resolved when spouses share similar levels of religiosity, as common ground fosters better mutual understanding. Divergences in religious commitment or practice, conversely, may lead to tensions within the marriage. These insights highlight the continued importance of religious principles among theology students in shaping personal and familial decisions. Similar patterns have been observed in other studies, such as Teke's (2017), reinforcing the role of religiosity as a critical factor in spouse selection.

The analysis highlights that students pursuing religious higher education generally exhibit strong adherence to religious norms and are significantly influenced by their faith in daily life. This observation is consistent with Yapıcı's (2006) study, which found that theology students demonstrate heightened sensitivity to religious influence compared to their peers (Yapıcı 2006, pp. 65–115). Such findings underscore the enduring role of religion in shaping the values and behaviors of students engaged in formal religious education.

The analysis reveals that students place significant importance on religious compatibility when considering marriage, emphasizing not only shared religiosity but also a common Muslim identity. This preference reflects broader societal attitudes that associate shared religious beliefs with marital harmony and longevity, as highlighted in the literature (Kurt 2009). These findings suggest that the students in this study prioritize both religious commitment and Muslim identity in their partner selection, underscoring the enduring role of religion and cultural identity in personal relationships.

The findings suggest that some students receiving religious higher education may have limited understanding of specific jurisprudential matters, such as the permissibility of consuming meat sacrificed by People of the Book, which is clearly addressed in the Qur'an (al-Ma'idah, 5:5). This highlights a potential gap in theological education and underscores the importance of enhancing awareness and instruction regarding such religious issues among theology students (Genç 2019).

According to our research, while the "secular attitude levels" of married and single participants were similar, the "level of feeling the influence of religion" was significantly higher among single participants. These findings suggest that single individuals are statistically more religious than married ones. One possible explanation is that the duties and responsibilities imposed by marriage may reduce the time and energy available for worship and religious reflection. In addition, variations in religiosity between spouses may also contribute to this difference (Arvas and Hökelekli 2017, pp. 129–60). After marriage, tasks such as household chores and the increased need to care for children may take time away from the religious practices that individuals maintained when single. Thus, religiosity may vary depending on one's life circumstances and the time period in question. It is possible that the perceived influence of religion increases when an individual performs acts of worship regularly (Kaya and Küçük 2017, pp. 17–43).

In cases where general trends were similar, it was observed that participants whose mothers had lower levels of education tended to feel the influence of religion more strongly than those whose mothers had completed secondary or high school education. Consistent with the literature, increasing levels of education are associated with stronger tendencies

toward secularization. In this context, our findings suggest that as mothers' education levels increase, their tendency toward secular attitudes also rises. These results highlight the significant role of the family in shaping and guiding an individual's religious tendencies. Islam also emphasizes that parents are primarily responsible for the religious education of their children (Gümrükçüoğlu 2017, pp. 39–60). Furthermore, working mothers may not be able to allocate sufficient time for their children's religious development (A. İ. Kılıç 2022, pp. 483–511). In such cases, children often receive religious education from caregivers or elder family members, whose own knowledge and practices may vary in accuracy. Therefore, children may grow up with a form of religious education shaped by subjective interpretations rather than formal instruction. In this context, the limited time available to working mothers can influence both the religious education and the overall religiosity of their children. It is also likely that children of mothers with a secular worldview will adopt similar perspectives.

It was observed that there was a significant difference between the 'secularism tendencies' of individuals whose were university graduates and those whose fathers were not. This situation reflects the changes in family structure, religious perceptions and parents' attitudes towards their children due to the influence of the modernisation process. The development of science and technology shapes the values and priorities of society, which in turn affects the priorities of religious education. University-educated fathers are often thought to have the goal of providing a better education for their children and leading a financially well-off lifefathers. Societal expectations lead families to focus on their children's academic achievements, which often causes religious education to be put on the back burner or less emphasised. In addition, as we mentioned before, it has been observed that as the level of education increases, the tendency towards secularisation also increases. The relationship between the father's level of education and the secularisation tendency of the child suggests that modernisation and social change processes change family dynamics by affecting religious priorities.

When the change of the secular attitude scale 'according to the type of education' was analysed, the secularism tendency of those who received formal education was found to be significantly higher than those who received ILITAM education. Students who are completing their religious higher education at the Faculty of Theology in formal education are usually together with individuals from different cultures and disciplines in the university environments where they receive education. In such social environments, a wide diversity of beliefs is observed in the dormitories or houses where students live. This situation may cause mutual interaction among students by bringing together those with different beliefs. As a result of this interaction, changes can be observed in individuals who have doubts about their beliefs. Even unaffected individuals may think more deeply about their own beliefs in the face of this diversity in social environments and may lead to a change in the level of religious feeling (Gökçe and Tekin 2021, pp. 182–205).

Students may face certain challenges in sustaining the practice of a religious life. In particular, fulfilling time-bound religious duties such as daily prayers may require them to leave their immediate environment. Furthermore, participation in activities shaped by popular culture—such as visiting venues or engaging in entertainment practices that do not align with Islamic norms—may lead students into tension with their religious values. These challenges experienced by formally educated students can contribute to the perception that religious life has become "outdated" in contemporary times.

Another contributing factor is the structure of formal theological education itself. Students enrolled in theology faculties are required to attend more academic courses, and the critical, questioning, and sceptical orientation of formal education encourages them to examine knowledge in greater depth. This educational approach equips students

with the ability to critically assess and interrogate the knowledge they acquire, rather than accepting it passively. However, this orientation may also lead them to engage with religious knowledge solely through the lens of critique—focusing on evaluating its correctness rather than internalizing and applying it in daily practice.

With regard to the secularity tendency sub-dimension, it was found that third-year undergraduate students exhibited significantly higher levels of secularity than first-year students. Similarly, master's students demonstrated higher levels of secularisation compared to first-year students, and doctoral students had significantly higher levels than both first- and second-year students. These findings indicate a positive correlation between increasing educational attainment and rising secularisation. Our research findings align with the results reported by Apaydın and Kirman (Kirman and Apaydın 2004, p. 106). Additionally, Yapıcı (2012, pp. 1–40) found that university students aged 25 and older reported a lower level of perceived religious influence. As the level of formal religious education increases, so does the individual's theoretical knowledge.

In this case, it becomes possible for an individual receiving religious education to question every information he/she learnt and to have problems in the dimension of belief. As the level of education increases, the age of the individual also increases and the individual tends to be more free and clear about living his/her belief. An analysis of the scale measuring the perceived influence of religion, based on the type of high school graduated from, reveals that graduates of Imam Hatip High Schools (IHL) and Anatolian/Science High Schools report significantly higher levels of religious influence compared to their counterparts from vocational high schools. This distinction may be attributed to the educational orientation of these institutions: IHL students often make a deliberate choice to pursue religious education and tend to view the Faculty of Theology as a conscious academic and professional path. The curriculum in these schools places strong emphasis on cultivating individuals who are not only knowledgeable in religious sciences but also committed to moral and spiritual development. Likewise, students from Anatolian and Science High Schools, despite receiving an education centered on scientific inquiry and academic excellence, may experience a comparable degree of religious influence, possibly due to the integration of ethical and belief-based frameworks alongside secular instruction. In contrast, vocational high schools typically prioritize technical and occupational skills, offering limited engagement with religious subjects, which may account for the relatively lower sense of religious influence reported by their graduates. These findings suggest that the type of secondary education students receive plays a formative role in shaping the extent to which they feel the presence and relevance of religion in their lives.

4. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between secularization attitudes and the perceived influence of religion among theology students in Turkey. The findings demonstrate that while variables such as age, gender, and income level do not significantly impact either secular attitudes or religious perception, other factors—such as marital status, parents' educational background, type of education, and high school type—can affect students' religious sensitivity or secular orientation in different ways. Notably, students in formal education programs and those at higher academic levels exhibited stronger tendencies toward secularization, whereas graduates of Imam Hatip High Schools and students whose parents had lower education levels reported a stronger perceived influence of religion.

These results suggest that theological education interacts with both sociocultural background and academic context, shaping the balance between traditional religiosity and modern secular attitudes. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how

religious and secular values coexist and evolve among students of Islamic theology in contemporary Turkey.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted within the scope of this study's limitations, including its reliance on self-reported data and its focus on theology students from selected universities. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating comparative studies across different faculties or by employing longitudinal methods to trace changes over time.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations can be made:

- The curricula of Faculties of Theology and Islamic Sciences can be revised to incorporate more topics related to current religious issues and social life.
- Courses aimed at developing critical thinking and analytical reasoning can be added to the Theology/Islamic Sciences curriculum.
- Training for young people can be expanded to promote the ethical and informed use of technology, social media, and modern communication tools.
- Content providing accurate religious knowledge can be produced for social media platforms where young people spend a significant amount of time.

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Article

Bible Narratives and Youth Religious Identity: An Italian Exploratory Study

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Abstract: Our article analyzes data from a broader exploratory Italian study on youth imaginaries and the role of narratives in attributing meaning to the world. The research gathered responses from 872 young people (aged 18 to 23) through a digital questionnaire. The data were analyzed with quantitative methodology using descriptive statistics. Our research questions can be formulated as follows: What level of familiarity do respondents have with biblical narratives? What narrative themes and categories do they use to define those stories? In relation to these elements, what are the characteristics of the respondents' subgroups that defined themselves as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist"? The questionnaire items analyzed in this article provide an account of the respondents' familiarity with some biblical narratives and their characters (Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth), as well as their choices related to the stories' narrative themes and categories. The results from our sample open the field for further investigations, particularly in contexts characterized by different religious backgrounds (e.g., Protestant contexts), which may offer more nuanced interpretations of the educational process in relation to religious identity.

Keywords: Bible narratives; youth imaginary; young adults; teaching of Catholic religion (TCR); religious identity; Catholic education; religious education; sacred

1. Introduction

This contribution focuses on some of the findings of an Italian exploratory research project on the youth imaginary and "religious identity" (Caputo 2024). The study aimed to verify the presence and diffusion of certain fantasy narrative cycles and Bible stories from the Old Testament within the youth imaginary. Our interest in the field of the youth imaginary stemmed from the key role narratives play in the construction of reality's meaning and the formation of individual identity (Bruner 1996; Caputo 2012). The fundamental hypothesis of the study framed fantasy narratives as significant references within the youth imaginary, fulfilling, for many young people, an inherently educational function by ascribing mythical or religious meanings to both the world and themselves—at least in relation to the conflict between good and evil. A similar function may be ascribed to Bible narratives; thus, we aimed to investigate the position and role that certain Old Testament stories—previously explored by (Moscato et al. 2017)—may have assumed within the youth imaginary.

The construction of reality's meaning and individual identity represents a fundamental focus of pedagogical research and constitutes the core of educational processes. In the attribution of meaning to reality—which is closely connected to the significance of one's own I, or Self (Erikson 1968)—the dynamisms of mythopoesis and religiosity come into play (Aletti 2022). Through narratives, the meaning of both the world and the individual assumes pedagogical value, as narratives can represent frameworks for human existence, its collective dimension, its rules—or, in other words, its culture. Ricoeur highlighted the symbolic (and not only psychological) dimension of the human growth dynamism:

"How does a man emerge from his childhood, how does he become an adult? At first sight this seems to be a purely psychological question, since it is the theme of every genetic psychology and every theory of the personality. But in fact it takes on its true meaning when we begin to examine which figures, which images and symbols, guide this growth, this maturation of the individual" (Ricoeur [1969] 1989, p. 324). In these regards, pedagogical research requires a continuous hermeneutic effort to grasp the symbolic significance of the figures of the imaginary, as well as their permanence and educational relevance for new generations.

The topic of the imaginary, as Franco Cambi pointed out (Cambi 2010, pp. 130–32), has not received significant attention in the Italian pedagogical environment, except for some contributions in the historical–pedagogical sphere. Similarly, the pedagogy of narratives, despite Jerome Bruner's *Italian lessons* (Bruner 2002), has been explored by a few scholars in Italy, among whom we mention Maria Teresa Moscato (Moscato 1998, 2022a). In this regard, this exploratory research represents (to our knowledge) the first attempt in Italy to empirically investigate the contemporary youth imaginary from a pedagogical perspective.

A questionnaire was administered to over 800 young subjects forming an accidental, non-representative sample, as we shall show below. The narratives included in the questionnaire were drawn from four major fantasy narrative cycles (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, and *Star Wars*), with the addition of three Bible stories from the Old Testament—specifically, the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth[1]. In this article, we will explore respondents' familiarity with these three Bible narratives, as well as the narrative themes and categories they identified. Furthermore, we will examine the relationships between these elements and the subgroups of respondents who self-defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", or "Atheist". Our research questions are: What level of familiarity do young people have with biblical narratives? What narrative themes and categories do they use to define those stories? In relation to these elements, what are the characteristics of the respondents' subgroups that defined themselves as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist"?

As we shall show, a high attendance in teaching of Catholic religion (TCR) and Catholic religious upbringing/education characterize the sample, highlighting the features of the Italian context and making them available to an international audience. Although the results are positioned within the Italian cultural and religious context, they offer valuable insights that can stimulate further research paths, both nationally and cross-nationally, on the dynamisms of religious education from a phenomenological–comparativist perspective (Moscato 1994).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Questionnaire and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. The first one consisted of 15 questions (items 1–15) aimed at assessing respondents' self-evaluated knowledge of the selected narrative cycles (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*) and their general familiarity with Bible stories. These narrative cycles were chosen based on grey research materials we collected across different studies carried out in the last decade[2]. For each narrative cycle, the questionnaire comprised one multiple-choice and two open-ended questions. The multiple-choice question sought to determine whether and to what extent respondents were familiar with the movies and/or books of each narrative cycle. The following open-ended question asked respondents to name a character they liked ("Can you indicate a character of that narrative cycle that you particularly liked?"), while the third question invited them to explain if and why they liked the narrative cycle ("If you liked the narrative cycle of [title], could you tell us why?").

The second section of the questionnaire (items 16–36) was structured around seven narrative excerpts, four of which were drawn from the fantasy narrative cycles and three from Bible stories (Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth). Respondents were asked to read each excerpt and then answer 3 questions. The first question inquired about the respondents'

familiarity with the excerpt ("Did you already know this text?"). The second asked them to identify the narrative themes of the text by selecting up to two of nine available options or by using the open-ended option "Other" ("Which narrative themes do you recognize in the text?"). The third item provided nine literary genre labels, and respondents were asked to select up to two that best defined the text or suggest their own through the open-ended option "Other" ("Taking into account that the text belongs to [fantasy fiction/the Old Testament], how would you define the text you have just read?"). The section concluded with item 37, which invited respondents to write down a character or story that they considered significant in shaping their perspectives on life ("Would you like to tell us about a character and/or story that you consider as important in shaping your representation of life? Could you explain why?").

The third section (items 38–47) focused on demographic information, namely age, gender, region or country of birth, educational background, current school or university attendance, and subject areas of education. It also collected culturally relevant data such as information about teaching of the Catholic religion (TCR) attendance, religious education or upbringing, and self-defined religious identity. These last three items were placed at the end of the questionnaire to prevent potential influences on responses to earlier sections.

The questionnaire was designed using Microsoft Forms and administered digitally in two waves (from 2021 to 2022) in various schools and universities across different regions in Italy. After data collection, responses were compiled into a comprehensive database using Microsoft Excel and analyzed though descriptive statistical methods (Cohen et al. 2018; Bryman 2012).

2.2. Sample

The exploratory nature of this study informed the decision to administer the questionnaire to a specific group of young people—students in their final year of secondary school and undergraduate students—who were accessible through the networks of the research team members (University of Bologna, Catholic University of Piacenza, University of Padua, University of Verona). Accordingly, we adopted a convenience/opportunistic and purposive (Cohen et al. 2018) sampling strategy, which we deemed appropriate for the research aims.

We collected 872 valid responses from the university campuses and schools we were able to access. As anticipated, the data collection sites did not necessarily correspond to the geographic origin (province or country of birth) of the respondents. The sample showed a varied distribution across the country, with a clear predominance of responses from Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Sicily, and Tuscany. Additionally, a small but highly diverse group of students (4.1% of the sample) reported being born in countries outside Italy. These characteristics highlight the non-representative nature of the sample and the resulting non-generalizability of the findings, without diminishing their significance, as we will show later.

The following table (Table 1) presents the age and gender distribution of the sample, which was predominantly composed of female respondents (62.2% of the total):

Table 1. Age and gender of the respondents.

	Female		**Male**		**Tot.**	
Age	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
17	3	0.3	2	0.2	5	0.6
18	218	25.0	140	16.1	358	41.1
19	126	14.4	73	8.4	199	22.8
20	82	9.4	59	6.8	141	16.2
21	77	8.8	34	3.9	111	12.7
22	31	3.6	14	1.6	45	5.2
23	5	0.6	8	0.9	13	1.5
Tot.	542	62.2	330	37.8	872	100.0

Of the sample, 60.7% were attending the final year of secondary school, while the remaining 39.3% were distributed across the three years of bachelor's degree programs.

Table 2 provides additional details about the types of secondary schools attended by the respondents, the majority of whom were enrolled in lyceums:

Table 2. Types of secondary education attended by respondents.

	Female		Male		Tot.	
Secondary School Type	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Lyceum	476	54.6	261	29.9	737	84.5
Technical	34	3.9	46	5.3	55	9.2
Vocational	32	3.7	23	2.6	80	6.3
Tot.	542	62.2	330	37.8	872	100.0

In Table 3, we show the distribution of the sample in terms of teaching of the Catholic religion (TCR)[3] attendance. A substantial majority (78.1%) attended TCR until the end of secondary education, a figure that rises to 86.0% when including those (7.9%) who discontinued IRC during secondary education.

Table 3. Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) attendance.

	Female		Male		Tot.	
Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) Attendance	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Never	25	2.9	8	0.9	33	3.8
Only until the end of primary school	22	2.5	7	0.8	29	3.3
Only until the end of lower secondary school	38	4.4	22	2.5	60	6.9
During upper secondary school	37	4.2	32	3.7	69	7.9
Until the end of upper secondary school	420	48.2	261	29.9	681	78.1
Tot.	542	62.2	330	37.8	872	100.0

The predominance of the Catholic religion among the respondents is further confirmed by the data collected through item 47 (Table 4), which focused on the religious education/upbringing respondents declared to have received ("If you received a religious education/upbringing, in which tradition did it take place?"). The responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2022). The coding process led to the identification of the following categories: "Other religions", "Atheism", "Catholic", "Muslim", "None", "Orthodox", "Protestant/Evangelical", "Humanist/Laic", and "Theist", as well as "Not answered" ("N/A").

Table 4. The religious traditions/frameworks in which the respondents were educated.

	Female		Male		Tot.	
Religious Upbringing/Education	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Catholic	451	51.7	268	30.7	719	82.5
N/A	37	4.2	29	3.3	66	7.6
None	22	2.5	18	2.1	40	4.6
Muslim	9	1.0	4	0.5	13	1.5
Humanism/Laic	7	0.8	4	0.5	11	1.3
Theist	6	0.7	2	0.2	8	0.9
Orthodox	5	0.6	0	0	5	0.6
Atheist	3	0.3	2	0.2	5	0.6
Protestant/Evangelical	1	0.1	2	0.2	3	0.3
Other religions	1	0.1	1	0.1	2	0.2
Tot.	542	62.2	330	37.8	872	100.0

3. Results

The first subsection of this section presents the answers given by the overall sample to items 7, 16, 22, and 28, focused on the respondents' familiarity with Bible stories. In the second subsection, we will outline the narrative themes and categories identified by the respondents concerning the Bible narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Finally, the last two subsections discuss the characteristics of three specific subgroups—namely, the respondents who defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist".

3.1. Familiarity with Bible Stories

Item 7 ("Do you know any Bible story?") was designed to assess respondents' self-perceived familiarity with Bible stories. The question provided seven possible responses, as well as an open-ended option, "Other". Respondents were allowed to select up to two options. Table 5 below presents the frequency of each response, along with the corresponding ratios for the total sample, females, and males.

Table 5. Respondents' self-assessed familiarity of Bible stories. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

	Female			**Male**			**Tot.**	
Familiarity with Bible Stories	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tF)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tM)**	**N**	**%(T)**
No. None, as far as I remember	49	5.6	9.0	37	4.2	11.2	86	9.9
The ones I heard during mass	272	31.2	50.2	140	16.1	42.4	412	47.2
The ones I heard at school	135	15.5	24.9	79	9.1	23.9	214	24.5
The ones I heard at catechism classes	300	34.4	55.4	160	18.3	48.5	460	52.8
The ones I read in comic books	5	0.6	0.9	8	0.9	2.4	13	1.5
Some stories that were told me by my family	69	7.9	12.7	30	3.4	9.1	99	11.4
I know enough of them, and I have read them myself	69	7.9	12.7	58	6.7	17.6	127	14.6
Other	13	1.5	2.4	19	2.2	5.8	32	3.7

The respondents primarily heard Bible stories during catechism classes (52.8%) and at mass (47.2%). Only one-quarter (24.5%) recalled encountering Bible stories at school, with even fewer—11.4%—mentioning their family environment as a source. More broadly, 9.9% of the sample reported having no familiarity with Bible stories, while only 14.6% stated they knew "enough of them" and had "read them" themselves. This result seems noteworthy, given that the vast majority of the sample attended TCR during or until the end of upper secondary school (Table 3) and received a Catholic upbringing or education (Table 4). Regarding subgroup differences, females and males generally followed similar trends. Females scored higher on the options "The ones I heard at mass" and "The ones I heard in catechism classes", as well as slightly higher in relation to stories heard within their family environments. Males, on the other hand, scored marginally higher on the option "No. None, as far as I remember", and nearly 5% higher on the option "I know enough of them, and I have read them myself".

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to read three quotes from the Bible belonging to the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth (Table 6).

Table 6. Excerpts belonging to the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Jacob's and Ruth's texts were accompanied by a brief synopsis aimed at framing the excerpts within the broader stories.

Bible Narrative	Reference	Excerpt
Abraham	*Genesis* 12: 1–5 13: 14–15 (USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002)	Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [. . .] and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". [. . .] Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. [. . .] The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever".
Jacob	*Genesis* 32: 25–32 (USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002)	Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking". But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me". So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob". Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed". Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name". But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Penuel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved". The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.
Ruth	*Ruth* 1: 16–18, 22 (USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002)	But Ruth said, "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! for wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the Lord do so and so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you!" [. . .] Thus it was that Naomi returned with the Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, who accompanied her back from the plateau of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Items 16, 22, and 28 ("Did you already know the story of Abraham/Jacob/Ruth?") were designed to assess respondents' self-perceived knowledge of these Bible stories. Each item offered three response options: "Yes", "No", and "Perhaps, but I remember it partially", with only one option selectable per question. Table 7 (below) presents the distribution of responses to items 16 (Abraham), 22 (Jacob), and 28 (Ruth), along with their breakdown by female and male subgroups.

Table 7. Respondents' self-assessed knowledge of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

		Female			Male			Tot.	
Knowledge of Bible Stories		**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tF)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tM)**	**N**	**%(T)**
Yes	Abraham	293	33.6	54.1	190	21.8	57.6	483	55.4
	Jacob	134	15.4	24.7	86	9.9	26.1	220	25.2
	Ruth	33	3.8	6.1	22	2.5	6.7	55	6.3
No	Abraham	76	8.7	14.0	51	5.8	15.5	127	14.6
	Jacob	248	28.4	45.8	151	17.3	45.8	399	45.8
	Ruth	468	53.7	86.3	281	32.2	85.2	749	85.9
Perhaps, but I remember it partially	Abraham	173	19.8	31.9	89	10.2	27.0	262	30.0
	Jacob	160	18.3	29.5	93	10.7	28.2	253	29.0
	Ruth	41	4.7	7.6	27	3.1	8.2	68	7.8

The story of Abraham is the most well-known Bible story within the sample, with 55.4% of respondents stating that they were already familiar with it and 30.0% recalling it partially. Only 14.6% of the sample reported not knowing the story of Abraham after reading the excerpt. The story of Jacob was less familiar, as only 25.5% of the sample selected the option "Yes", while 29.0% indicated "Perhaps, but I remember it partially", and 45.8% stated they did not know the story at all. Lastly, the story of Ruth was known to only 6.3% of the sample, with 7.8% recalling it partially, and 85.9% being unfamiliar with it altogether. There were no significant differences between the male and female subgroups, both of which followed the trends described above.

The results align with the level of familiarity reported by the sample in item 7 (Table 5), where only 14.6% indicated that they knew Bible stories and read them directly. We hypothesize that the lower familiarity with the stories of Jacob and Ruth may perhaps be due to their being less commonly known and less frequently read during mass or catechism classes. These are the settings where approximately half of the sample reported encountering Bible stories (Table 5), but the data we collected do not allow for further insights on this matter. Given the general religious background and high TCR attendance of the sample, these findings confirm the low level of familiarity respondents have with Bible narratives.

3.2. Narrative Themes and Categories

Items 17, 23, and 29 asked respondents to identify the narrative themes ("Which narrative themes do you recognize in the text?") of the Bible excerpts from the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. The respondents were asked to select up to two options among the nine provided, in addition to the open-ended option "Other". The results are shown in Table 8 (below).

The sample identified "The test" (53.4%) and "The call/Vocation" (50.0%) as the most relevant narrative themes related to the story of Abraham, followed by "Faithfulness" (41.4%), "Courage" (36.5%), and "The overcoming of the test", which was selected by almost one-fifth of the respondents (18.8%). For the story of Jacob, 40.0% of respondents indicated "The overcoming of the test" as the most relevant theme, followed by "The test" (34.4%) and "Courage" (30.2%). Lastly, "Faithfulness" (52.2%) and "Loving solidarity" (52.1%) were the most frequently chosen themes for the story of Ruth, with "Courage" being the third most selected, though less popular, option (20.9%).

Table 8. Respondents' selections of narrative themes connected to the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

	Abraham		**Jacob**		**Ruth**	
Narrative Themes	**N**	**%(T)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**N**	**%(T)**
The test	466	53.4	297	34.1	107	12.3
The creation	64	7.3	51	5.8	40	4.6
Transgression/Rebellion	46	5.3	214	24.5	51	5.8
Loving solidarity	60	6.9	56	6.4	454	52.1
Courage	318	36.5	263	30.2	182	20.9
The overcoming of the test	164	18.8	349	40.0	66	7.6
The temptation	68	7.8	78	8.9	38	4.4
Faithfulness	361	41.4	113	13.0	455	52.2
The call/Vocation	436	50.0	175	20.1	56	6.4
Other	27	3.1	26	3.0	40	4.6

In terms of narrative themes, there were no significant distinctions between the male and female subgroups, which generally followed the trends of the overall sample. However, there were two instances related to the story of Abraham and one related to the story of Ruth where the subgroups diverged. As shown in Table 9 (below), 40.8% of female respondents

selected "Courage" as a narrative theme for the story of Abraham, making it the third most selected theme in the female subgroup, while only 29.4% of male respondents chose this option. In contrast, 45.8% of males selected "Faithfulness" as the third most popular theme in their subgroup, compared to 38.7% of females. Regarding the story of Ruth, "Loving solidarity" (the second most popular choice for the overall sample) was selected by 54.1% of females and 48.8% of males. Aside from these instances, there were no notable differences between male and female respondents' selections of narrative themes across the Bible stories.

Table 9. Respondents' selections of narrative themes connected to the Bible stories of Abraham and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

	Female			Male			Tot.	
Narrative Themes	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tF)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tM)**	**N**	**%(T)**
Abraham								
Courage	221	25.3	40.8	97	11.1	29.4	318	36.5
Faithfulness	210	24.1	38.7	151	17.3	45.8	361	41.4
Ruth								
Loving solidarity	293	33.6	54.1	161	18.5	48.8	454	52.1

Items 18, 24, and 30 provided the respondents with a list of nine keywords (in addition to the open option "Other") referring to the narrative categories the Bible excerpts could belong to. The question asked the respondents to select no more than two options and was formulated as follows: "Taking into account that the text belongs to the Old Testament, how would you define the text you have just read?" Table 10 (below) shows the occurrences of each option.

Table 10. Respondents' selections of narrative categories connected to the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

	Abraham		Jacob		Ruth	
Narrative Categories	**N**	**%(T)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**N**	**%(T)**
Historical	95	10.9	86	9.9	78	8.9
Mythical (Religious)	576	66.1	554	63.5	410	47.0
Spiritual	259	29.7	251	28.8	195	22.4
Realistic	11	1.3	18	2.1	114	13.1
Magical	23	2.6	20	2.3	28	3.2
Metaphorical	184	21.1	164	18.8	118	13.5
Fantastic	40	4.6	44	5.0	32	3.7
Symbolic	333	38.2	279	32.0	225	25.8
Moral	196	22.5	166	19.0	279	32.0
Other	9	1.0	15	1.7	26	3.0

The most selected option across the three excerpts was "Mythical (Religious)", chosen by 66.1% of the sample for the story of Abraham, 63.5% for the story of Jacob, and 47.0% for the story of Ruth. The dominance of this option over all others is particularly clear for the stories of Abraham and Jacob, where the second most selected option, "Symbolic", was chosen by 38.2% and 32.0% of the sample, respectively. In the case of the story of Ruth, the difference between the first and second most selected options is less pronounced, as "Moral" was selected by 32.0% of the sample, but the difference remains significant. While the respondents seemed slightly more varied in their selection of the most relevant narrative themes (Table 8), their choice of narrative categories was more straightforward, with "Mythical (Religious)" emerging as the most significant category.

In comparing responses between females and males, we did not detect any major discrepancies in the trends followed by the two subgroups. In one case related to the story of Abraham (Table 11), 26.4% of males selected the option "Metaphorical", while only 17.9% of females chose the same. Additionally, two divergences were noted regarding the story of Ruth. Among females, 34.3% selected "Moral" (the second most popular choice), and 28.4% selected "Symbolic" (the third choice), while 28.2% and 21.5% of males opted for these respective options. Aside from these cases, there were no notable differences between the choices made by females and males concerning the narrative categories of the Bible stories.

Table 11. Respondents' selections of narrative categories connected to the Bible stories of Abraham and Ruth. The percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

	Female			Male			Tot.	
Narrative Categories	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tF)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tM)**	**N**	**%(T)**
Abraham								
Metaphorical	97	11.1	17.9	87	10.0	26.4	184	21.1
Ruth								
Symbolic	154	17.7	28.4	71	8.1	21.5	225	25.8
Moral	186	21.3	34.3	93	10.7	28.2	279	32.0

3.3. Self-Defined Religious Identity: The General Sample

Item 47 aimed to capture respondents' self-assessed religious identity. The question was intentionally framed in an open-ended manner ("Do you consider yourself:") and allowed respondents to select up to two options from the six provided, as well as to offer personal responses through the open-ended option "Other". The options were designed to include commonly used labels for defining one's religious identity ("Religious", "Atheist", and "Agnostic") along with other potential personal orientations ("Curious", "Still uncertain", "Still searching"). Table 12 (below) displays the number of occurrences for each option and the distribution across the genders of respondents. We also calculated the ratio (expressed as a percentage) between the occurrences of each response and the total number of respondents (%(T)), as well as the total number of females (%(tF)) and males (%(tM)).

Table 12. Respondents' self-defined religious identity. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

	Female			Male			Tot.	
Self-Defined Religious Identity	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tF)**	**N**	**%(T)**	**%(tM)**	**N**	**%(T)**
Religious	145	16.6	26.8	69	7.9	20.9	214	24.5
Indifferent/Agnostic	146	16.7	26.9	98	11.2	29.7	244	28.0
Curious	94	10.8	17.3	98	11.2	29.7	192	22.0
Atheist	103	11.8	19.0	74	8.5	22.4	177	20.3
Still uncertain	113	13.0	20.8	50	5.7	15.2	163	18.7
Still searching	70	8.0	12.9	38	4.4	11.5	108	12.4
Other	32	3.7	5.9	30	3.4	9.1	62	7.1

The options selected by the total sample show a distribution where the most selected option was "Indifferent/Agnostic" (28.8%), and the least selected option was "Still searching", chosen by only 12.2% of respondents ("Other" was selected by 7.1% of the total sample). These two options were also the most and least selected within both the female and male subgroups, though we observed some differences in the other options chosen. Among females, 26.8% and 26.9% selected "Religious" and/or "Indifferent/Agnostic",

respectively, to define themselves, while nearly one-third of the male subgroup chose "Indifferent/Agnostic" and/or "Curious" (29.7% for both). On the one hand, we noted a high occurrence of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" option in both subgroups. On the other hand, the female subgroup showed a slightly higher preference for "Religious" and a slightly lower preference for "Curious" compared to the male subgroup, which exhibited the opposite trend.

We compared the distribution of responses for item 47 with those for items 45 and 46, which focus respectively on TCR attendance (Table 3) and religious upbringing/education (Table 4). Even though the vast majority of respondents reported having attended TCR during or until the end of upper secondary school (86.0%) and having received a Catholic upbringing/education (82.5%), their self-declared religious identities vary significantly. Only 24.5% of respondents defined themselves as "Religious", while almost one-third (28.0%) selected "Indifferent/Agnostic", and 20.3% identified as "Atheist". A portion of the sample identified as "Curious" (22.0%) and "Still uncertain" (18.7%), with a minority choosing "Still searching" (12.4%). In other words, the respondents' religious background and education do not seem to be directly reflected in how they describe their current religious identity[4].

3.4. The Subgroups "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist"

A high TCR attendance and a Catholic religious upbringing/education characterize the vast majority of the sample. However, the self-declared religious identities provide a more varied portrait, allowing us to identify significant subgroups. In the final subsection of the Results, we will present the characteristics of the subgroups that defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist". These three subgroups will be analyzed in relation to their familiarity with Bible stories, as well as their selections of narrative themes and categories.

In terms of familiarity with Bible stories, the three subgroups exhibit distinct characteristics in relation to some of the responses to item 7 (Table 13 below). The group that identified as "Religious" reported less unfamiliarity with Bible narratives (4.7%) compared to the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (13.5%) and "Atheist" (15.5%) groups. Respondents who identified as "Religious" also indicated encountering Bible stories at mass (53.3%) and through their family environment (16.4%) slightly more often than the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (43.9% and 10.7%) and "Atheist" (42.4% and 6.8%) groups.

Table 13. Familiarity with Bible stories of the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(R)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

Self-Defined Religious Identity	**Religious**		**Indifferent/Agnostic**		**Atheist**		**Overall Sample**	
Familiarity with Bible Stories	**N**	**%(R)**	**N**	**%(I)**	**N**	**%(A)**	**N**	**%(T)**
No. None, as far as I remember	10	4.7	33	13.5	27	15.5	86	9.9
The ones I heard during mass	114	53.3	107	43.9	75	42.4	412	47.2
The ones I heard at school	49	22.9	74	30.3	49	27.7	214	24.5
The ones I heard at catechism classes	110	51.4	126	51.6	87	49.2	460	52.8
The ones I read in comic books	2	0.9	8	3.3	6	3.4	13	1.5
Some stories that were told me by my family	35	16.4	26	10.7	12	6.8	99	11.4
I know enough of them, and I have read them myself	61	28.5	17	7.0	17	9.6	127	14.6
Other	5	2.3	7	2.9	7	4.0	32	3.7

From another perspective, less than one-third (28.5%) of respondents in the "Religious" group stated that they know enough Bible stories and have read them independently. The

familiarity with Bible narratives is even lower in the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (7.0%) and "Atheist" (9.6%) subgroups.

We also analyzed the three subgroups' knowledge of the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth (items 16, 22, 28) (Table 14). Among the "Religious" subgroup, 72.9% declared familiarity with the story of Abraham, compared to 42.2% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup and 51.4% of the "Atheist" subgroup. Furthermore, only 28.5% of the "Religious" subgroup reported knowing the story of Jacob, and just 10.7% knew the story of Ruth. While the "Religious" subgroup appears to have greater familiarity with the story of Abraham than the other two subgroups, the differences become less pronounced for the stories of Jacob and Ruth—arguably less commonly known.

Table 14. Knowledge of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth in relation to the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(*R*)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

Self-Defined Religious Identity		**Religious**		**Indifferent/Agnostic**		**Atheist**		**Overall Sample**	
Knowledge of Bible Stories		**N**	**%(R)**	**N**	**%(I)**	**N**	**%(A)**	**N**	**%(T)**
Yes	Abraham	156	72.9	103	42.2	91	51.4	483	55.4
	Jacob	61	28.5	42	17.2	33	18.6	220	25.2
	Ruth	23	10.7	7	2.9	11	6.2	55	6.3
No	Abraham	17	7.9	54	22.1	35	19.8	127	14.6
	Jacob	70	32.7	130	53.3	96	54.2	399	45.8
	Ruth	165	77.1	229	93.9	152	85.9	749	85.9
Perhaps, but I remember it partially	Abraham	41	19.2	87	35.7	51	28.8	262	30.0
	Jacob	61	28.5	72	29.5	48	27.1	253	29.0
	Ruth	26	12.1	8	3.3	14	7.9	68	7.8

Regarding the selection of narrative themes related to the Bible stories (items 17, 23, and 29), the three subgroups distributed their choices differently in certain respects, as shown in Table 15 (below). For the story of Abraham, "The test"—the most selected option in the general sample—was the most popular choice among the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (54.1%) and "Atheist" (57.1%) subgroups, but not among the "Religious" subgroup (46.7%). An opposite trend was observed for "The call/Vocation", the second most selected option in the general sample, which was the most chosen theme among the "Religious" subgroup (56.1%) but not as dominant among the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (48.0%) and "Atheist" (47.5%) subgroups—although the preference remained high. Another noteworthy distribution was observed for "Faithfulness", selected by 43.0% of the "Religious" subgroup and 45.2% of the "Atheist" subgroup but only by 36.9% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup. Finally, "Courage" was identified as a relevant narrative theme by 44.9% of the "Religious" subgroup, 33.2% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup, and only 26.6% of the "Atheist" subgroup.

For the story of Jacob, "The overcoming of the test" was the most selected option both in the general sample (Table 8) and in the "Religious" subgroup (50.0%) (Table 15). It remained the preferred choice among the "Atheist" subgroup, though with a lower percentage (39.0%), but was not the most chosen option for the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup (31.6%). In contrast, "The test" was the second most selected option in the general sample and among the "Religious" (35.5%) and "Atheist" (28.2%) subgroups, but it emerged as the most chosen option among the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup (35.7%). "Transgression/Rebellion" was selected by 23.4% of the "Religious" subgroup, 26.6% of the "Atheist" subgroup, and 29.9% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup.

Table 15. Narrative themes of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth in relation to the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(R)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

	Abraham				**Jacob**				**Ruth**			
Narrative Themes	**%(R)**	**%(I)**	**%(A)**	**%(T)**	**%(R)**	**%(I)**	**%(A)**	**%(T)**	**%(R)**	**%(I)**	**%(A)**	**%(T)**
The test	46.7	54.1	57.1	53.4	35.5	35.7	28.2	34.1	11.2	11.5	13.6	12.3
The creation	8.9	7.8	4.5	7.3	5.6	7.4	4.0	5.8	5.1	5.3	4.5	4.6
Transgression/Rebellion	5.6	6.6	4.5	5.3	23.4	29.9	26.6	24.5	7.5	7.4	6.8	5.8
Loving solidarity	9.3	7.8	4.5	6.9	7.9	6.1	4.0	6.4	56.5	49.2	51.4	52.1
Courage	44.9	33.2	26.6	36.5	29.4	29.5	32.2	30.2	21.5	15.6	26.0	20.9
The overcoming of the test	18.2	20.9	19.8	18.8	50.0	31.6	39.0	40.0	8.4	8.2	6.2	7.6
The temptation	7.9	7.8	10.2	7.8	7.9	13.1	7.3	8.9	3.3	5.3	3.4	4.4
Faithfulness	43.0	36.9	45.2	41.4	12.1	11.9	12.4	13.0	52.3	49.2	49.7	52.2
The call/Vocation	56.1	48.0	47.5	50.0	19.6	20.1	19.8	20.1	8.9	7.8	6.2	6.4
Other	3.3	2.9	2.8	3.1	2.8	2.9	2.8	3.0	3.3	5.3	2.8	4.6

For the story of Ruth, the distribution was more consistent. "Loving solidarity", the second most selected option in the general sample, was the most popular choice across all three subgroups, selected by 56.6% of the "Religious" subgroup, 49.2% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup, and 51.4% of the "Atheist" subgroup. Lastly, "Courage" was selected by one-fourth (26.0%) of the "Atheist" subgroup, one-fifth (21.5%) of the "Religious" subgroup, and 15.6% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup.

In terms of narrative categories (items 18, 24, and 30), we observed some cross-cutting trends among all three subgroups, as shown in Table 16 (below). The "Religious" subgroup tended to define the Bible stories as less "Mythical (Religious)" than the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups, the latter of which showed the highest values for this category across all three Bible stories. While the occurrences are high in all subgroups, this trend is most evident in the stories of Abraham and Jacob and less pronounced—but still significant—in the story of Ruth. Conversely, the "Religious" subgroup more frequently considered the stories of Jacob, and especially Abraham, as "Symbolic" compared to the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups. However, this trend does not extend to the story of Ruth, where the results among the three subgroups are quite similar, and the percentage of the "Atheist" subgroup is the highest (27.1%).

Table 16. Narrative categories of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth in relation to the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(*R*)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

	Abraham				**Jacob**				**Ruth**			
Narrative Categories	**%(R)**	**%(I)**	**%(A)**	**%(T)**	**%(R)**	**%(I)**	**%(A)**	**%(T)**	**%(R)**	**%(I)**	**%(A)**	**%(T)**
Historical	14.0	9.4	7.9	10.9	14.0	10.2	6.2	9.9	14.5	7.8	5.6	8.9
Mythical (Religious)	58.4	69.7	75.7	66.1	53.3	68.4	72.9	63.5	43.5	45.9	55.9	47.0
Spiritual	36.4	24.2	25.4	29.7	30.8	24.2	24.3	28.8	26.2	23.0	19.2	22.4
Realistic	2.3	1.2	0.0	1.3	1.9	3.3	1.1	2.1	16.4	13.1	9.0	13.1
Magical	0.9	3.7	6.8	2.6	2.8	2.0	4.5	2.3	5.1	2.0	4.0	3.2
Metaphorical	20.6	21.7	23.7	21.1	22.9	17.2	15.8	18.8	13.6	12.3	11.9	13.5
Fantastic	2.3	4.9	10.7	4.6	1.9	6.1	9.0	5.0	3.7	6.1	6.2	3.7
Symbolic	58.4	35.7	29.4	38.2	35.5	28.3	29.9	32.0	26.6	24.2	27.1	25.8
Moral	25.2	21.7	17.5	22.5	19.6	20.5	17.5	19.0	26.6	30.7	35.0	32.0
Other	0.0	1.6	3.4	1.0	0.9	2.5	2.8	1.7	2.8	3.3	2.3	3.0

The "Religious" subgroup also tended to view the texts as "Spiritual" more often than the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups, with this difference being more prominent in the story of Abraham and less significant for the stories of Jacob and Ruth. Finally, the Bible excerpts were consistently regarded as "Historical" by 14.0% of the "Religious" subgroup for the stories of Abraham and Jacob and by 14.5% for Ruth, whereas the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups reported lower percentages for this category.

4. Discussion and Future Research Pathways

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis (Cohen et al. 2018; Bryman 2012) offer some cautious, non-generalizable insights—though still significant, as we shall discuss—regarding the sample's familiarity with biblical stories, as well as their preferences in terms of themes and narrative categories.

As a premise, it is relevant to underline that the sample predominantly consists of participants who attended TCR in secondary school (86.0%, Table 3) and have a Catholic background (82.5%, Table 4). Nonetheless, the sample's responses to item 47 ("Do you consider yourself:") were relatively evenly distributed among the options (Table 12). The results illustrate that the overall sample encompasses a broad range of religious identity positions, with the largest group identifying as "Indifferent/Agnostic" (28.0%), followed by "Religious" (24.5%) and "Curious" (22.0%). In addition, 7.1% of respondents selected the open-ended option "Other", suggesting that the provided alternatives did not fully capture their religious identity. Gender-related differences were also observed, with females tending to identify more as "Religious" and less as "Curious" than males, who showed the opposite trend. Furthermore, females appeared to define their religious identity as "Still uncertain" more frequently than males.

These findings—while not generalizable and only related to the characteristics of this incidental sample—open avenues for further investigation into young people's self-defined religious identity and the categories they use to define it (Bichi and Bignardi 2015; Matteo 2010). The plurality of educational outcomes and individual positionings in terms of self-defined religious identity might seem surprising if it is interpreted through the lens of a transmissive pedagogical model—where the students are expected to passively absorb contents, norms, and values transmitted to them by their teachers and educators (Moscato 2013). From this perspective, if one were to assess the effectiveness of religious education and TCR based solely on respondents' self-defined religious identity, there would be many reasons to declare the failure of Catholic education in Italy. However, it seems more appropriate for us to adopt a different interpretive paradigm—one that emphasizes the subject's development and maturation processes rather than the mere transmission of religious content. In this interpretive framework, the value of religious education does not rest on the outcome of religious contents' transmission but rather on the support of subjective meaning-making processes (Aletti 2018; Moscato 2022b, 2024).

Despite the strong Catholic background of the sample, familiarity with biblical narratives was found to be relatively low. Only 14.6% of respondents indicated that they had read some Bible narratives, and 9.9% reported knowing none (Table 5). Bible narratives were most commonly encountered during mass or catechism classes. This finding is consistent with the respondents' self-assessed knowledge of biblical excerpts. Just over half of the sample was familiar with the story of Abraham, about a quarter knew the story of Jacob, and only a small percentage knew the story of Ruth (Table 7). The limited familiarity with Old Testament texts may be attributed to Catholicism's historically limited emphasis on direct engagement with Scripture, a practice only actively encouraged following the Second Vatican Council (Paul VI 1965). In this context, a similar study conducted in a Protestant setting might gather significantly different results, which highlights the potential relevance of cross-national studies.

We identified some differences among the subgroups of respondents who defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", or "Atheist". Those who identified as "Religious" showed greater familiarity and lower self-reported non-familiarity

with biblical stories than the "Atheist" and "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroups (Table 13). The differences are particularly pronounced for the story of Abraham but tend to diminish for the stories of Jacob and Ruth (Table 14). "Religious" respondents often defined the story of Abraham as a narrative of "The call/Vocation" and "Courage", while the "Atheist" and "Indifferent/agnostic" subgroups emphasized the theme of "The test" (Table 15). For the story of Jacob, "Religious" respondents selected the theme of "The overcoming of the test" more frequently than the other groups.

It could be hypothesized that the "Religious" subgroup, being generally more familiar with Bible stories (particularly Abraham, as shown in Table 14), may have had the opportunity to frame the excerpt on Abraham within the broader vocational context of the story of the character. They might also have been more attuned to recognizing the theme of "The test" in Jacob's story. This hypothesis, which cannot be proven with the data we collected here, could be further explored to examine whether, and to what extent, one's self-defined religious identity can influence one's interpretation of biblical texts—and potentially other literary sources.

Finally, with regard to narrative categories, some cross-cutting characteristics emerged across the different narratives. The "Mythical (Religious)" category was the most frequently selected in all subgroups, consistent with the overall sample (Table 16). "Atheist" and "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroups defined the Bible stories as "Mythical (Religious)" more often than the "Religious" subgroup, with a peak of 75.7% among the "Atheist" subgroup for the story of Abraham. This trend is particularly evident in the stories of Abraham and Jacob, though less pronounced for Ruth. In contrast, "Religious" respondents tended to view the stories of Abraham and Jacob as "Symbolic" more often than the self-defined "Atheist" and "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroups (for Ruth, the percentages were similar across groups). Additionally, the "Religious" subgroup identified the stories as "Spiritual" more frequently than the other ones, particularly in the case of Abraham. These findings suggest potential avenues for further research exploring how young people interpret categories such as "Religious", "Mythical", "Spiritual", and "Symbolic", examining their connotations, possible meanings, their connections to young people's religious identity, and the role they play in attributing meaning to the world and oneself.

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Informed Consent Statement: The study did not collect any personal data, and the participants are not identifiable. The opportunity to give informed consent was presented verbally or via email to the participants during each administration session, before providing the link to the questionnaire. The participants were informed on the contents and aim of research and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study with no consequences. The first page presented a brief introduction to the questionnaire in the form of a message from the research leader.

Data Availability Statement: Data can be made available upon request.

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

Notes

1 The selection of Old Testament narratives was guided by the possibility of comparisons with a previous study that examined the same stories (Gabbiadini 2017).

2 These materials belong to various data sources and include case studies, student reports, and research activities carried out in schools for TCR teachers. The results provided insights on the fact that fantasy narrative cycles can have a high significance for adolescents and young adults, who often consider them not as mere stories but as existentially meaningful narratives.

3 In Italian pedagogical and political culture, the topic of Catholic religious education has permeated the history of Italian schooling and has been closely intertwined with the history of Church–State relations since the Risorgimento. In the post-World War II era, teaching of Catholic religion (TCR) became a field of boundary and conflict between the dominant Catholic viewpoints and the anti-clerical secularism of the radical and Marxist cultural political forces (albeit with internal variations within each group) (see Caputo 2018). Following the revision of the *Lateran Pacts* (of 1929) in 1985, TCR gradually adopted new pedagogical characteristics, becoming more receptive to the demands of a multicultural society and its religious pluralism (Porcarelli 2022a, 2022b).

4 From a pedagogical perspective that prioritizes the transmission of educational contents, the emergence of various self-defined religious identities among respondents with the same religious background may seem incomprehensible, or even a sort of educational failure. In contrast, a pedagogical perspective that emphasizes the inherent dynamisms of the educational process views diversity as a legitimate result of the individual's freedom to selectively interpret and filter the educational content they receive (Erikson 1964).

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Article

Between Confucianism and Christianity: Epistemological and Syncretic Challenges in Constructing a Chinese Catholic Educational Discourse

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Abstract

The relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism in contemporary Chinese Catholic educational settings is marked not only by significant cultural and philosophical differences, but also by profound analogies that open promising avenues for dialogue and mutual enrichment. Drawing on dialogical-interpretive methodology grounded in hermeneutic philosophy, the study explores core ontological and pedagogical concepts in both traditions. Confucianism conceives education as the ethical cultivation of virtue in alignment with cosmic and relational harmony, while Catholic pedagogy emphasizes the integral formation of the person in freedom, responsibility, and relationship with a personal God. Despite theological differences, both systems prioritize moral development, teacher exemplarity, and holistic human growth. The analysis proposes a critical pathway for creative inculturation, whereby Confucian relational ethics, contemplative practices, and communal sensibilities enrich Catholic educational practice without compromising doctrinal integrity. Such engagement contributes to the construction of a spiritually grounded, interculturally aware pedagogy responsive to pluralistic religious contexts.

Keywords: Confucianism; Catholicism; Catholic education; Chinese Catholicism; comparative religious education; intercultural education

1. Introduction

As a vital carrier of ethical values and normative systems, religion plays a dual role—both shaping social order and deeply informing personal identity. In the context of contemporary globalization, large-scale population movements have significantly complicated the cultural composition and religious ecology within nation-states. The increasingly prominent religious plurality poses a challenge to traditional models of social integration (Walton and Mahadev 2019). However, in intercultural contexts, the encounter between different religious and cultural traditions, while potentially giving rise to cognitive tensions and cultural conflicts, also contains possibilities for dialogue, complementarity, and co-creation.

Such tensions and dialogues are evident across many parts of the world, but they are particularly pronounced in China. Since the advent of modern China, Catholicism and Protestantism entered alongside the unequal treaties, with certain missionary activities entangled with colonial powers. This association triggered public resistance, frequent "missionary incidents" (*jiaoan* 教案), and, during the Cultural Revolution, led to

their weakening, suppression, and, in some cases, near-eradication. However, since 1979, the country has undergone a widespread religious revival (H. H. Lai 2003). Religions and local traditions, especially Confucianism, have been increasingly instrumentalized as part of a state-led "civilizing mission" aimed at cultivating patriotic citizens, reinforcing moral norms, and projecting soft power globally (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Within this intricate interplay of religion, culture, and national ideology, China emerges as a unique site for the collision, fusion, and reinterpretation of diverse spiritual and philosophical traditions, offering a valuable vantage point from which to re-examine religious plurality and intercultural educational dialogue.

While some elements of Christian engagement with Chinese culture are shared across denominational lines, this study deliberately focuses on the Catholic tradition (Chu and Mariani 2020). The Catholic Church, as the most historically structured and institutionally consolidated Christian presence in the Chinese Mainland and Hong Kong, has cultivated sustained theological and cultural dialogue with Chinese tradition. Its hierarchical organization and the Vatican's diplomatic role grant it distinctive political and cultural significance, particularly in relation to state-led processes of "Sinicization" and debates over religious autonomy (Zhao 2018). Concentrating on Catholicism allows for an interdisciplinary approach—integrating history, theology, sociology, and political studies—while drawing upon a rich repertoire of inculturation practices and conceptual tools relevant to Chinese contexts.

Importantly, no monolithic "Contemporary Chinese Catholic Educational Discourse" exists, due to the political and cultural divergences between the Chinese Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In the Chinese Mainland, the state's emphasis on Sinicization requires that religious activities be guided by political principles, as reflected in recent normative developments such as the Patriotic Education Law (National People's Congress 2023). Within this framework, the Catholic Patriotic Association has intensified patriotic education among clergy and laity (S. Li 2024; Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of Shaanxi Province 2024; Chinese Catholic "One Association and One Conference" 2023). Under the principle of separating religion from education, religious institutes do not fall within the national education system, and qualifications obtained through religious education are recognized only within religious communities. In religious institutes, curricula are divided into specialized and general courses. General courses shall cover ideological and political theory and Chinese culture and society, with the aim of strengthening knowledge of traditional culture, socialist values, legal norms, and the national language (National Religious Affairs Administration 2021). In Hong Kong, by contrast, a more pluralist political environment enables Catholicism and Chinese culture to interact in a dynamic of mutual adaptation, producing scholarly works that critically engage Confucianism from a Catholic perspective (Lam 2019; Yuen 2014). Taiwan offers yet another model, where Catholicism has been inculturated into Chinese culture through symbols, architecture, and devotion, most notably to Our Lady of China, and through the Catholic contribution to education and social services, in dialogue with Buddhism and Taoism (Batairwa Kubuya 2020).

In all these contexts, Confucianism has been officially or informally integrated into educational discourse as part of the "excellent traditional culture," serving as a moral and cultural reference for personal virtue and collective ethics. It is not merely a backdrop, but an active resource for religious educators seeking locally resonant pedagogy. Among the many global traditions of religious education, Catholic pedagogy, by virtue of its philosophical depth and global institutional presence, emerges as a particularly significant counterpart to Confucianism. The two traditions reveal both divergences and potential

complementarity in moral cultivation, teacher–student dynamics, and educational aims, making them especially relevant for comparative education research.

Historically, the interaction between Confucianism and Catholicism dates back to the late Ming dynasty, when Matteo Ricci adopted the posture of a Confucian scholar to facilitate cultural and theological negotiation. This continued into the Republican period, when Neo-Confucian thinkers engaged Christian theology in their efforts to modernize Confucianism (Bresciani 2001). In the present era, the state-led push for "Developing Catholicism in the Chinese context" has again brought the two traditions into structured interaction, while Catholic scholars in Hong Kong and Taiwan have explored their philosophical intersections in educational settings.

Contemporary scholarship on the Confucian–Christian encounter falls broadly into three categories: ethical comparisons (P.-c. Lai 2016; Rauhut 2020; Tian 2022), historical studies of Ming–Qing converts (Standaert 1988; Leung 1990; Xiao 2021; Ding 2019), and pedagogical analyses. At the level of theory, existing studies compare ultimate aims, teaching methods, and the teacher–student relationship, noting both convergence, such as dialogic teaching (Tan 2021b) and real-life exemplars (Kwa 2008), and divergence, particularly in eschatological orientation. In practice, integrating Confucian values like filial piety into Catholic curricula, alongside case-based pedagogy and reflective writing, has been shown to enhance intercultural ethical understanding (Westbrook 2012), with further innovation seen in mindfulness-based teaching (Tan 2021a) and initiatives like Encountering Dignity (Moore and Kim 2018).

In summary, although research has examined Confucian and Catholic education from ethical, historical, and practical angles, there remains a lack of a structural comparative framework grounded in core philosophical questions. No integrated educational model has yet been proposed that could serve curriculum design and teaching activities in a coherent way, making it difficult to translate such insights into practical approaches, particularly in the diverse realities of Chinese Catholic education. This paper addresses that gap by asking: How do Confucianism and Catholicism, respectively, understand the nature of the human being and the methodology of education? How can these traditions be brought into constructive dialogue, and what pathways might lead toward a contextually grounded Chinese Catholic educational discourse?

2. Research Design and Methodology

This article adopts a dialogical-interpretive approach grounded in hermeneutic philosophy (Ricoeur 2007), with specific attention to the epistemic value of intercultural co-authorship. The collaboration between a Chinese Confucian scholar and a Catholic European pedagogue is not merely a matter of biographical detail; rather, it constitutes a central methodological asset. The epistemic positionality of both authors is explicitly acknowledged and theorized as a source of interpretive richness, in line with contemporary perspectives in critical hermeneutics (Kögler 1999, 2007) and dialogical theory (Bakhtin 1981).

Building on Hans-Georg Gadamer's ([1960] 1975) concept of the "fusion of horizons" (Horizontverschmelzung), we view the encounter between Confucian and Catholic worldviews not as a confrontation of opposites, but as a potentially generative interplay in which differences in value orientation, ethical focus, and educational aims are brought into conversation. This dynamic process of mutual interpretation unfolds according to a hermeneutic circle that moves continuously between part and whole, text and context, individual perspective and shared meaning. In this light, the act of reading and interpreting educational texts and traditions becomes an opportunity for intercultural co-construction of meaning.

The use of dialogical co-authorship in this context echoes the interpretive model proposed by Jackson (2011), who advocates for dialogical engagement in religious education

as a means to foster understanding across difference. Our work similarly resists homogenization or simplification of cultural voices. Instead, we embrace the tensions and resonances that emerge from our respective backgrounds, allowing them to inform not only our interpretations, but also our research questions, analytical priorities, and narrative choices.

Kögler (1999) emphasizes that interpretation is never disembodied: it always reflects the interpreter's historically situated perspective, which must be rendered visible rather than neutralized. Accordingly, our positionalities, as an insider to Confucian tradition and an insider to Catholic thought, are not treated as biases to be eliminated, but as dialogical resources that enrich the interpretive process.

The dialogic method adopted here is thus simultaneously epistemological and ethical. It reflects a commitment to critical openness, to what Bakhtin (1981) calls "answerability" in the presence of the other's voice. Rather than seeking consensus or synthesis, we aim to make space for multiple layers of meaning to coexist in tension and dialogue.

3. Educable Beings: The Ontological Conceptions of the Educational Subject in Confucianism and Catholicism

The construction of an educational philosophy often begins with an understanding of human nature (Carr 1985). Theories of human nature not only lay the philosophical foundation for educational aims and methods, but also directly determine how education conceives the possibility of individuals "becoming better human beings." At the heart of this lies a fundamental ontological question: Is the human being oriented toward goodness, or inherently fallen?

3.1. The Tendency Toward Goodness and the Possibility of Moral Cultivation: The Confucian Ontology of the Human

Confucian educational thought is rooted in the philosophical premise of the inherent goodness of human nature (*xing shan* 性善). Confucius's statement, "By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart." (*Analects* 17.2), affirms a shared human foundation while highlighting the profound influence of acquired habits. This dual perspective provides the basic framework for the later development of Confucian educational theory. "The ability possessed by men without having been acquired by learning is intuitive ability, and the knowledge possessed by them without the exercise of thought is their intuitive knowledge" (*Mencius* 7b.15), thus revealing the inborn quality of moral capacity in humans. Mencius elaborates on this by asserting, "The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards." (*Mencius* 6a.2). This metaphor illustrates not only that goodness is intrinsic to human existence but also that evil is derivative, like water flowing upward only under external force, evil arises from environmental distortions of an inherently good nature.

By the Song and Ming dynasties, this doctrine was metaphysically reconstructed. Zhu Xi's distinction between the "nature of Heaven's decree" (*tian ming zhi xing* 天命之性) and the "nature of physical endowment" (*qi zhi zhi xing* 气质之性) upheld Mencius's doctrine while explaining the origin of moral failings through individual endowment. Wang Yangming's proposition that "innate knowledge is the principle of Heaven" (*liangzhi ji tianli* 良知即天理) further elevated the moral nature to a cosmological unity between Heaven and humanity.

Based on the philosophy of human nature rooted in the theory of inherent goodness of human nature, the Confucian view of education fundamentally affirms the possibility

of moral transformation through teaching. It develops its teleology of education around two complementary dimensions: recovering one's nature and fulfilling one's nature.

The notion of recovering one's nature refers to the return to inherent goodness through educational practice. Its possibility is grounded in the a priori assumption that "All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others." (*Mencius* 2a6). On this level, the task of education is to awaken the obscured moral consciousness, enabling individuals to internally and consciously realize and manifest the goodness of their original nature. As Mencius says, it is about "seeking for the lost heart" (*Mencius* 6a11). The essence of education, therefore, lies not in the forced imposition of external norms, but in the inner activation of one's moral potential.

However, recovering one's nature is not the endpoint of education. In order for the initial moral sprouts to be expanded and sustained, thus forming a stable and enduring virtuous character, it is necessary to enter the process of fulfilling one's nature. This involves cultivating virtue and completing one's moral personality on the foundation of recovered goodness, through ritual and music education and environmental influence. At this stage, emphasis is placed not only on the individual's internal cultivation but also on the transformative power of external institutions and cultural settings, helping to actualize latent moral potential into socially normative behavior. From the elementary stage of childhood education, where one learns proper manners in daily conduct, such as sprinkling and sweeping the ground, answering and replying, advancing and receding (*Analects* 19.12), to the advanced stage of Daxue (The Great Learning 大学), which focuses on investigating things, completing knowledge, making thoughts sincere, rectifying heart, cultivating the person, regulating the family, governing the state properly, and bringing peace and happiness to the whole kingdom (*Classic of Rites* 39.2), the Confucian educational system embodies the fundamental logic of originating in nature and being completed through teaching. Education guides innate goodness to externalize into steady virtue, graceful conduct, and social responsibility. This ultimately leads to the ideal of integrating humaneness with ritual, and achieving a harmonious personality that both cultivates the self and brings peace to others. The Confucian notion of "men learned with a view to their own improvement" (*Analects* 14.24) thus becomes the value core of its educational philosophy. Its aim is not utilitarian gain, but the perfection of one's moral life and the ultimate realization of the ideal moral personality. Learning, therefore, is not merely the accumulation of knowledge or the enhancement of skills, but a life process of awakening one's true heart, expanding innate goodness, and achieving moral self-completion (Huang 2016).

Confucian education is not a utilitarian form of technical training, but rather a life practice concerned with the awakening of the true heart and the cultivation of virtue. The theory of the innate goodness of human nature not only affirms the possibility of moral transformation through education, since all people possess an initial inclination toward goodness and the potential to be taught, but also powerfully highlights its necessity: these moral sprouts are easily obscured by acquired habits, and innate potential requires the guidance of education to be fully developed into virtue. Education thus becomes a practical bridge to the path of the sages, and the essential means by which individuals realize moral self-awareness and attain their ideal moral character.

3.2. The Dignity of the Person and the Call to Freedom: The Christian Ontology of the Human

From the first pages of the Bible's first book, we read that man and woman were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27). And while that same passage also speaks of a moral fall (the "original sin," Gen 3:1–7), both the Old and New Testaments are filled with affirmations that highlight the value and dignity of the human being (cf. Ps 8:4–5; Isa 43:4; 1 Cor 3:16; Matt 10:31). It is important to keep in mind that God knows

every person even in the womb (Jer 1:5), and calls each one by name (Isa 43:1), even more so does Jesus, the "Good Shepherd," who calls each of His sheep by name (John 10:3). Not only is the human being, in general, a creature of great worth, but each human person is also important to God (Vorster 2012), who loves each one and desires that all be saved (1 Tim 2:3–4).

A separate in-depth analysis is warranted for the concept of the person, which took shape within the context of Christian philosophical and theological debate (Sokolowski 2006; Lingua 2022). However, our focus here lies in its anthropological and pedagogical implications. The definition of "person," which Boethius identifies as rationalis naturae individua substantia—that is, an individual substance of a rational nature—applies to human beings, angels, and God alike. According to (Aquinas 1265–1274), the concept of personhood implies a high degree of dignity: "Persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura, scilicet subsistens in rationali natura. Unde etiam hoc nomen persona videtur esse nomen dignitatis".[1]

This implies that the human person, according to the reflections of the Doctors of the Church, such as Thomas Aquinas, holds a uniquely special ontological status (Udoh 2022), as they occupy the horizon and boundary between corporeal substances and spiritual substances (such as angels and God). Owing to this distinctive ontological configuration, the human person is an educable being, meaning that they begin to exist (from the moment of conception or birth) as a human person, endowed with full ontological dignity, yet they are not immediately capable of fully acting as a person. Rather, they must develop, often over many years, the complete faculties of intellect and will. In Christian anthropology, the human person's educability is intrinsically linked to the unique manner in which they actualize the act of being.

The affirmation of the inherent dignity of every human person serves as the foundational basis for human rights, as clearly stated in the Preamble to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Among these rights is the right to education, which is emphatically upheld by the Church's Magisterium throughout its most authoritative documents. A particularly explicit statement can be found in the conciliar declaration Gravissimum Educationis, which not only affirms the universal right to education but also specifies the nature of the education to which each human person is entitled:

> All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal, their ability, their sex, and the culture and tradition of their country, and also in harmony with their fraternal association with other peoples in the fostering of true unity and peace on earth. For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share. (Vatican Council II 1965a, no. 1)

Pedagogical personalism is arguably the school of thought that most effectively expresses the Christian sensibility in the field of education (Skotnicki 2020). However, based on the biblical and theological foundations previously discussed, it would also be possible to construct alternative conceptual frameworks, such as the ecumenical approach (Oeldemann 2023). In this context, though, we have chosen to focus on the personalist perspective, as it allows for a particularly meaningful engagement with Confucianism. The main consequence of conceiving the human being as a person is that he or she can never be treated as a "something," but always as a "someone," endowed with individuality and inherent dignity. The educational relationship must, therefore, be shaped accordingly.

The aim of education is to guide the human person toward becoming fully capable of acting according to who they truly are—that is, to lead every child and adolescent toward

the ability to act rightly, with freedom and responsibility. This educational goal stems directly from the Christian understanding of the human person, as previously outlined, and is in full harmony with the core demands of Christian life. For Christianity, each person is called by God to respond freely to His loving plan and to enter into a relationship of friendship with Him. Such a friendship can only be realized in freedom. Likewise, moral living requires rightly ordered freedom, enabling one to act according to conscience. Within the Christian tradition, there is a profound connection between a moral life in accordance with God's law and the possibility of a genuine friendship with Him.

Cultivating what the Church's Magisterium identifies as the "inner sanctuary" of conscience is the central task of Christian education:

> In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. (Vatican Council II 1965b, no. 16)

4. The Path of Cultivation: Methodological Foundations of Educational Practice in Confucianism and Catholicism

The legitimacy of teacherly authority is a central, inescapable question in educational philosophy. In both Confucian and Christian educational traditions, the teacher is entrusted with the dual role of guiding students in knowledge and in moral development. However, the philosophical foundations of this authority are partly similar, partly different: Confucianism grounds it in human relational ethics and cosmic order (*tian dao* 天道), while Christianity takes into account both the human reasons that stem from the metaphysical identity of the person and the reasons rooted in divine revelation.

4.1. Teaching Rooted in Virtuous Authority: A Confucian Approach

In the Confucian tradition, the authority of the teacher is rooted in the cosmological and moral vision of the unity between Heaven and humanity (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一). Confucianism views Heaven not only as the metaphysical origin of the cosmos and the source of natural order, but also as the ultimate foundation of moral principles. The cultivation of the self is thus understood as a process of aligning with, and approaching, the Way of Heaven. Accordingly, a teacher's authority does not derive from institutional mandates, but from an inner legitimacy grounded in moral cultivation. As "If one is upright in oneself, others will follow without being commanded; if not, even with commands they will not obey" (*Analects* 13.6) states, true moral influence arises from the teacher's personal virtue; only by being rooted in virtue can education attain its proper function.

The statement "What Heaven has conferred is called The Nature; an accordance with this nature is called The Path of duty; the regulation of this path is called Instruction" (*Classic of Rites* 28.1) further underscores that the role of the teacher is not limited to the transmission of knowledge. Rather, teachers are expected to cultivate their own moral character and, through personal example, guide students in understanding and practicing the Way (*dao* 道), thereby advancing moral development and achieving true transformation. Within this framework, respecting teachers is not only essential for maintaining the order of education but also serves as a foundation for the transmission of the moral tradition (*daotong* 道统). The intrinsic link between reverence for teachers and reverence for the Way is highlighted in the note that "In pursuing the course of learning, the difficulty is in securing

the proper reverence for the master. When that is done, the course (which he inculcates) is regarded with honour. When that is done, the people know how to respect learning." (*Classic of Rites* 16.12). This suggests that the teacher's authority is rooted not merely in personal virtue or social status, but in their role as bearers and transmitters of the Way itself. Respecting teachers, therefore, ultimately reflects an acknowledgment and reverence for the moral Way. Furthermore, Confucian texts place teachers among the most fundamental pillars of ethical and political order. For instance, Xunzi notes that "the three foundations of ritual are Heaven and Earth, the ancestors, and the rulers and teachers" (*Xunzi* 19.5). By situating teachers alongside cosmic and ancestral forces, the tradition emphasizes their indispensable role in upholding social harmony and cultivating moral life.

However, the Confucian understanding of teacherly authority is neither static nor monolithic; rather, it embodies a dynamic and dialectical tension. Although the authority of the teacher is supported by the moral legitimacy of the Way, its actual unfolding in the teaching process is characterized by mutual engagement and subject-to-subject interaction. "A student is not necessarily inferior to his teacher, nor does a teacher necessarily be more virtuous and talented than his student. The real fact is that one might have learned the doctrine earlier than the other, or might be a master in his own special field" (是故弟子不必不如师，师不必贤于弟子，闻道有先后，术业有专攻，如是而已) (Han 1991) highlights that the teacher-student relationship is not one of absolute hierarchy, but one of reciprocal inspiration and shared growth. Teachers guide and enlighten learners, but students, through their studies, may advance even further. The saying that "indigo is extracted from the blue plant, but it is bluer than the plant itself; ice is made from water, but it is colder than water" (*Xunzi* 1.1) suggests that although students receive instruction from their teachers, they may eventually surpass them. Such transcendence does not undermine the authority of the teacher; on the contrary, it represents the highest realization of the teacher's transformative influence, a continuation and elevation of the teacher's virtue in the life of another.

Regarding teaching methods, Confucian teaching is not merely about the transmission of knowledge; more fundamentally, it is a process in which the teacher, grounded in virtue, guides students toward an embodied understanding of the Way. It is precisely because a teacher's authority stems from the accomplishment of personal virtue that the teacher must lead by personal example, a point Confucius particularly emphasized. He used the metaphor of Heaven to illustrate that true teaching, like the workings of nature, should exert a silent and pervasive influence on the human heart.

> The Master said, "I would prefer not speaking." Zi Gong said, "If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?" The Master said, "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?" (*Analects* 17.19)

From a Confucian perspective, the foundation of teaching lies first and foremost in virtue. When a teacher's conduct is upright, moral transformation follows naturally. Furthermore, effective teaching requires discernment of each student's unique character and moral potential, and thus the practice of teaching in accordance with individual aptitude. This is evident in how Confucius gave opposing answers to the same question.

> Zi Lu asked whether he should immediately carry into practice what he heard. The Master said, "There are your father and elder brothers to be consulted—why should you act on that principle of immediately carrying into practice what you hear?" Ran You asked the same, whether he should immediately carry into practice what he heard, and the Master answered, "Immediately carry into practice what you hear." Gong Xi Hua said, "You asked whether he should carry im-

> mediately into practice what he heard, and you said, 'There are your father and elder brothers to be consulted.' Qiu asked whether he should immediately carry into practice what he heard, and you said, 'Carry it immediately into practice.' I, Chi, am perplexed, and venture to ask you for an explanation." The Master said, "Qiu is retiring and slow; therefore I urged him forward. You has more than his own share of energy; therefore I kept him back." (*Analects* 11.22)

Zhang Zai later echoed this insight, remarking, "The most difficult thing in teaching is to fully understand a person's capacities; only then can one avoid leading them astray" (*Zhang Zai's Collected Works* 6.206). Moreover, Confucian pedagogy advocates inductive and heuristic teaching, opposing mechanical transmission and passive reception. It emphasizes a balance between learning, reflection, and action. Confucius' dictum, "I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself" (*Analects* 7.8), emphasizes the importance of timely guidance—teachers should offer instruction precisely when students are on the verge of understanding but have not yet fully grasped the idea. In Confucian pedagogy, leading by example and verbal instruction work in tandem, allowing moral cultivation to emerge naturally. In terms of the teacher-student dynamic, Confucianism promotes mutual growth through teaching and learning (*jiaoxue xiangzhang* 教学相长). As the Record on the subject of education notes, "when he learns, one knows his own deficiencies; when he teaches, he knows the difficulties of learning." (*Classic of Rites* 16.3). This reflects the belief that teachers themselves grow through the act of teaching.

Moreover, Confucianism advocates heuristic and inductive teaching, opposing mechanical indoctrination and passive reception, and emphasizes a balanced integration of learning, reflection, and practice. Confucius famously stated, "I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson." (*Analects* 7.8), underscoring that a teacher should offer timely guidance precisely when a student is inwardly striving for understanding but has not yet grasped it. He also warned, "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous" (*Analects* 2.15), highlighting the interdependence of study and reflection. Mencius took this further, cautioning that "To believe in all the Books indiscriminately is worse than having no Books at all" (*Mencius* 7B49), urging scholars to maintain critical awareness and avoid blind reverence for the classics. Wang Yangming later asserted that true moral insight must be "trained and polished in the actual affairs of life" (*Instructions for Practical Living* 12.4), arguing that only through concrete engagement with the world can one embody innate moral knowledge and bring education to full fruition. Together, these views reveal that the realization of education depends not only on verbal instruction and moral modeling, but also on the learner's active, embodied practice.

4.2. An Integral Methodological Personalism: The Catholic Perspective

Christian education, from a personalist perspective, aims at the integral formation of the human person in all dimensions. This has very profound implications also at the level of educational strategies and methods, which is why we can speak of an integral methodological personalism (Maritain 1943). While moral education and the cultivation of conscience lie at its center, equal importance is given to the intellectual, emotional, and even physical aspects of development, since the human being is composed of both soul and body. The education of the intellect is not limited to performance and skills; rather, it must form minds that are critically oriented and genuinely open to the pursuit of truth and wisdom.

When it comes to the education of the will, beyond developing responsible freedom in light of the moral law, it is essential, within the Christian worldview, to clearly affirm the ultimate goal of human life: to love God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself, in order to partake eternally in God's love in Heaven. In this sense, the entire earthly life may be seen as a pilgrimage toward the heavenly homeland, during which each person must be supported in discovering their path, discerning their vocation, and developing their unique talents. The idea, pedagogically powerful, of discovering, developing, and making use of one's talents finds its roots in the well-known Gospel parable (Mt 25:14–30), in which Jesus exhorts his listeners not to hide or leave their talents unused, but rather to invest them for the sake of spiritual growth. The Christian educator is particularly attentive to recognizing and valuing the uniqueness of each individual, believing that God has a specific plan for each one. For this reason, a key component of Christian education is to help each person build their own life project (Pérez Guerrero and Ahedo Ruiz 2020).

To educate is to exercise authority, but educational authority in the Christian sense has very specific characteristics. It must always respect others' freedom, since the development of authentic freedom remains the primary goal of education. It is also an authority rooted in love, not only because all Christians, including educators, are called to fulfill the commandment of love ("love your neighbor as yourself"), but also because the educator genuinely seeks the good of the persons entrusted to them, desiring their full development as human beings (Määttä and Uusiautti 2012).

This educational authority must always be accompanied by a credible witness of life. No one can ask others to believe what they themselves do not believe, or to do what they are unwilling to do. Jesus Himself strongly criticizes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who "say but do not do" (Matt 23:3), and calls His disciples to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. Matt 5:13–16), but this requires that the salt not lose its flavor.

In addition to freedom, conscience, and personal development, hope emerges as the vital soul of education. As Pope Benedict XVI eloquently stated in his Letter to the Faithful of the Diocese and City of Rome on the Urgent Task of Educating Young People:

> The soul of education, as of the whole of life, can only be a dependable hope. Today, our hope is threatened on many sides and we even risk becoming, like the ancient pagans, people "having no hope and without God in the world", as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Ephesus (Eph 2: 12). What may be the deepest difficulty for a true educational endeavour consists precisely in this: the fact that at the root of the crisis of education lies a crisis of trust in life. (Benedict XVI 2008)

Benedict emphasizes that in order to educate responsibly, one must cultivate a belief in the future, anchored in hope, a hope grounded in the personal encounter with God. This hope is never solitary, but extends outward, inviting us to "educate one another in truth and in love". This theological insight resonates with contemporary pedagogical research. For example, Shade (2001), in Studies in Philosophy and Education, positions hope as a pragmatic disposition that empowers learners to resist despair and actively engage with their environments through goal-setting and community solidarity. In light of these reflections, Christian education can be enriched by integrating hope as a formative principle, not simply as optimism, but as a responsible, future-oriented virtue that sustains the educational process and anchors personal growth in transcendent meaning. After all, the educator sets the goal of their action within the contingent future of free individuals, who will be able to make their own choices even regarding what they have been taught. All of this entails a hope grounded in deep roots.

5. From Comparison to Syncretism: Constructing a Cross-Cultural Integration Pathway Between Confucian and Christian Educational Thought

5.1. Bridging Traditions: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Confucian and Catholic Pedagogies

Both Confucianism and Catholicism offer a deeply ethical and humanizing vision of education, rooted in an understanding of authority as a service to and a responsibility for others. However, the two traditions diverge significantly in their ultimate foundation and teleological orientation. Confucianism presents a harmonious perspective on education, viewing it as the ethical refinement of the human being within the cosmos and society. Although it does not refer to a personal God, it recognizes an ethical-cosmic transcendence, toward which education directs the human being through a process of harmonization with the natural and moral order (Tu 1993). Catholicism, on the other hand, understands education as both the full realization of the human person and a spiritual journey toward God, undertaken in freedom and hope.

In both Confucianism and Catholicism, education is based on an ontological conception of the human being as educable, open to moral transformation and integral development. Nevertheless, the two traditions develop this idea from profoundly different anthropological and cosmological perspectives, resulting in educational practices that are only partially overlapping.

In classical Confucianism, the ontology of the human being is marked by a strong anthropological optimism. Human nature is considered intrinsically good, as famously stated by Mencius and exemplified in his theory of the "four beginnings": compassion, shame, respect, and a sense of right and wrong. These are regarded as the pre-reflective roots of the cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice) (Liu 2006). In this framework, education does not impose an external moral order but rather guides the unfolding of a potential already inscribed in the student's inner nature. Even in the Neo-Confucian reinterpretations, such as the distinction between "Heavenly nature" and "qi-based nature" in Zhu Xi, or the identification of innate knowledge with li in Wang Yangming, the fundamental assumption remains the same: the human being is naturally ordered toward the good, and education is the process of harmonization with the moral-cosmic order (Yao 2001).

Catholicism, while affirming the original dignity of the human person created imago Dei, also takes into account the presence of original sin and its consequences for human nature, including the "wounds" that must be addressed in the educational process. The human being, endowed with rationality and freedom, is called to responsibility, but is also in need of redemption. Christian pedagogy, in this light, is conceived as an accompaniment of the person toward self-realization in openness to grace. It aims to overcome the wound of sin through the formation of conscience, the exercise of freedom, and responsiveness to God's personal call. The human being is not good per se in the Confucian sense, but possesses absolute value by virtue of being relationally connected to God, who loves and calls each person by name (John Paul II 1979). The experience of sin becomes part of a relational dynamic that links human beings to God, and finds its healing in the salvific mission of Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to restore humanity.

Despite these foundational divergences, both traditions prioritize moral and spiritual growth as the core of education. In Confucianism, the teacher is not legitimized by external authority, but by *de* (德 his moral virtue) and by the coherence and exemplarity of his behavior, which serves as a silent and performative guide. In Catholicism as well, the educator is credible insofar as he or she is a witness: one cannot teach what one does not live. Yet Christian authority is strongly relational and personalistic: the educator is never a mere transmitter of values or norms, but someone on a journey, who walks in friendship

with God and leads others toward freedom in truth, motivated by charity and invoking divine grace (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education 1977).

On a methodological level, both traditions exhibit a surprising convergence in their rejection of mechanistic approaches and their emphasis on dialogical and personalized practices. Confucian pedagogy values inductive reasoning, intuition, the adaptation of method to the character of the student, and the complementarity between study and reflection (J. Li 2016). Catholic education, for its part, promotes the integral development of the person in all dimensions—intellectual, moral, emotional, and spiritual—with particular attention to the discovery of one's vocation and the realization of personal gifts. Both reject a conformist pedagogy: to educate is not to standardize, but to help something emerge, in a process that is both ethical and ontological.

In summary, while Confucianism grounds educability in the natural goodness of the human being and in alignment with the cosmic order, Catholicism founds it on the dignity of the person as created and redeemed, called to holiness through a path of freedom and responsibility. Two distinct visions, yet deeply convergent in their ultimate intent: to make the human being more truly human, according to the high measure of his or her moral vocation.

5.2. Toward a Creative Syncretism: Enriching Catholic Pedagogy Through Confucian Spirituality

In light of the convergences and divergences explored thus far, one can envisage a harmoniously integrated form of pedagogy drawing on both Confucian and Catholic traditions, particularly within the Chinese catholic educational context. This is not a reductive syncretism that risks flattening differences or compromising the integrity of either tradition. Rather, it is a proposal for a fruitful inculturation, where compatible elements of Confucian wisdom enrich the understanding and practice of Catholic education.

A theological foundation for such openness emerges from the post-Conciliar magisterium on interreligious dialogue. The Declaration *Nostra Aetate* affirms that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in other religions" (Vatican Council II 1965b, n. 2). Even more explicitly, *Redemptoris Missio* asserts that encountering other religions can help Christians "purify" their religious expressions and rediscover the deeper dimensions of their faith through comparative engagement (John Paul II 1990, n. 56; Pope and Nicolaides 2021). This opens a space for a transformative dialogue capable of generating new educational insight (Vilà et al. 2020).

Within this framework, certain Confucian components appear especially congenial to Catholic vision and, therefore, amenable to integration. First among these is the relational ethics inherent in Confucianism, based on interdependence within the community and reciprocal responsibility. Manifest in filial piety and social solidarity, this relational model resonates with the Christian anthropology of the person as a being-in-relationship, called to communion in freedom and love. The biblical centrality of family is implicit from the Ten Commandments, including mandates concerning adultery, coveting one's neighbor's wife, and the injunction to honor one's parents (Exod. 20:1–17).

Similarly, the Confucian notion of education as moral formation through the example of the teacher, ritual practice, and inward cultivation (self-cultivation), finds a parallel in Christian pedagogy. The Confucian ideal of the *junzi* (君子, the virtuous person) evokes the evangelical model of the credible witness, one who not only imparts norms, but also lives a truth oriented toward the good (Jeffrey 2015). In Christianity, this ideal finds its fullest expression in Christ the Teacher, whose authority is inseparable from charity and self-giving, as evidenced in His critique of hypocritical religious leaders, who "say and do not do" (Mt 23:3). According to Yuen (2014) we can note "Both Confucius and Jesus taught their students or followers according to their particular circumstances and personalities, to

help students develop their personalities and potentials according to their gifts and stage of development. Jesus is well-known for employing real-life contexts and elements of his environment in his parables for teaching. Confucius (and Mencius) also referred to actual events or circumstances, and taught according to the personalities and qualities of students and interlocutors" (p. 35). Authentic teacher–student relationships are grounded in sustained whole-person contact, free from purely utilitarian aims such as grades, credentials, or fame. In-class dialogue is valued above correct answers, and informal interactions, like sharing meals, traveling, or working together, serve as powerful 'living examples' that deepen natural solidarity and cultivate care for others (Shim 2006). There are also strong correlations between the rich and multivalent concept of the Confucian cardinal virtue of *ren* (仁 humanity), that contains meanings of specific virtues such as love, benevolence, reciprocity, and working toward the good of a society, with many Christian social virtues, such as justice and solidarity. "the virtue of solidarity is closely linked with justice as it teaches us to think beyond our own individual good to the common good. Solidarity makes justice both intelligible and imperative because it recognizes that human life is shared life. It fosters us into persons who are willing to take care of the needs of others, particularly the poor and vulnerables" (ivi, p. 36).

Crucially, there is a promising integration with interior spiritual formation. Confucian practices of silent reflection, listening, and self-cultivation can help revitalize interiority in Christian formation, often neglected in favor of purely intellectual or normative models. Emerging studies on mindfulness, viewed both as psychological practice and as a meditative discipline (Brown et al. 2007), draw effective parallels between Confucian contemplative traditions and Christian contemplative practices. In a Chinese Catholic educational context, Confucian emphases on gradual growth, harmony, and relationality may dialogue constructively with deep spiritual and meditative traditions within Catholicism. Catholic tradition offers centuries of slow, relational spiritual paths where interiority, attentive listening, and personal transformation are central, such as Lectio divina, which invites deep engagement with Scripture in a slow, transformative process (Dalton et al. 2021), and Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, a highly relational and reflective form of spiritual education (Marek and Walulik 2022). Further meditative avenues, such as Carmelite mysticism (Hardy 2013) and Eastern Christian hesychastic spirituality, cultivate inner freedom through love and union with God. These paths, though expressed in different languages and styles, can supply spiritual-pedagogical models sensitive to Eastern spiritual sensibilities without compromising the centrality of Christ. Far from threatening the radicalness of the Gospel, such elements may predispose the human heart toward encounter with Mystery, functioning as semina Verbi in long-standing theological tradition.

More broadly, it is essential to maintain a critical balance. Confucian anthropological optimism, holding that human beings are by nature ordered to the good, must be held alongside the Christian perspective, which acknowledges both the original goodness of creation and the wound of sin requiring redemption. Christian education must go beyond virtue cultivation to openness to grace, as a transformative power that transcends human capacities.

Likewise, although Confucian notions of Tian and Dao articulate an ethical-cosmic transcendence, one must not overlook the radical difference from the Christian revelation of a personal God revealed in history and communicated in love. An authentic Confucian-Catholic dialogue requires mutual recognition of difference, not assimilation.

In sum, the Catholic tradition, especially in its Chinese expression, stands to gain substantially from engagement with Confucianism, provided that such engagement proceeds in a spirit of discernment, openness, and fidelity. Confucian pedagogy may help Christians rediscover the moral-relational heart of education, value authority as virtuous

service, and promote a culture of harmony that coheres with evangelic justice and mercy. In that sense, intercultural dialogue is not a marginal option; it is a privileged path toward making the Christian message incarnate, meaningful, and transformative, even in its educational dimension.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the comparative exploration of Confucian and Catholic pedagogical models, conducted here with a specific focus on the Chinese context, has demonstrated how these two traditions, despite differing theological and anthropological foundations, share a profound commitment to the holistic formation of the human person. Core values such as moral exemplarity, relational ethics, personal cultivation, and spiritual interiority offer fertile ground for meaningful dialogue.

Yet this is not a matter of superficial harmonization or syncretistic dilution. Rather, it calls for a discerning and critical process of inculturation, wherein compatible elements of Confucian wisdom may genuinely enrich Catholic educational practice, particularly in informal or non-formal contexts across East Asia. The Confucian emphasis on familial relationships, communal harmony, and gradual moral development can invite Catholic educators to rediscover dimensions sometimes neglected in favor of overly normative or intellectualized models. Simultaneously, the Christian understanding of personal transcendence, rooted in the self-revealing love of a personal God, offers Confucian ethics a new theological horizon and anthropological depth. Catholic thought, with its emphasis on human dignity and openness to grace, can complement Confucian educational traditions by bringing into dialogue dimensions less central in classical frameworks, such as individual freedom and transcendence. In this way, the encounter between the two traditions is not a matter of compensation but of complementarity, revealing a dialogue that is genuinely reciprocal and mutually enriching.

If nurtured in mutual respect and theological clarity, such an encounter has the potential to shape an intercultural pedagogy of dialogue, one that forms individuals not only in virtue and relational responsibility but also in openness to grace and spiritual transformation. In this perspective, intercultural dialogue is not a mere accessory to Christian education but a privileged path to make the Gospel both incarnate and transformative, particularly in diverse cultural settings.

Moreover, this integrative vision aligns with broader post-conciliar theological frameworks, which emphasize both the universality of truth and the pedagogical value of encounter. As affirmed in *Redemptoris Missio* (56), the meeting with other religious traditions may purify and deepen Christian self-understanding and foster more authentic expressions of faith. Within educational frameworks, especially informal and non-formal, this dialogical dynamic can inspire innovative approaches that are faithful to the Gospel while rooted in local cultural narratives.

Ultimately, the Catholic tradition, especially if it continues to take root in Chinese soil, stands to benefit from this fruitful engagement with Confucian thought, provided that the encounter remains grounded in discernment, theological integrity, and spiritual openness. Far from threatening the radical novelty of the Christian message, Confucian categories may function as seeds of the Word (semina Verbi)—cultural and spiritual intuitions that prepare the human heart for an encounter with the Mystery. Such seeds, when engaged through educational praxis, can bear fruit in the form of new pedagogical paths that are both contextually meaningful and theologically rich. Future research may further explore how this encounter can inform religious formation, intercultural dialogue, and spiritual education in non-formal settings across global contexts.

True educational equality does not lie in dissolving all forms of authority, but in transforming authority into a medium for growth—one that is open to dialogue, subject to scrutiny, and ultimately capable of being transcended. This is the modern expression of the Confucian idea "mutual growth through teaching and learning", and it echoes the Christian affirmation that "the truth will set you free".

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Notes

[1] English version: "Person signifies what is most perfect in all of nature, namely, a subsistent being in a rational nature. Hence, the very term 'person' appears to be a name of dignity".

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