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Analysis of the Perceptions Shared by Young People about the Relevance and Versatility of Religion in Culturally Diverse Contexts

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Abstract: This paper analyses the relevance of religion for adolescents in the realm of peer relationships, both within and outside of educational institutions. The sample consisted of 385 young individuals attending different Secondary Education institutions located in a Spanish province characterized by its cultural diversity. The tool used to collect the information was the REDCo questionnaire. The results of the data analysis indicate that young people confer a certain relevance to religion on an internal and personal level, and that they attribute a historical value to it as a discipline. They also relate the versatility of religion to changing processes regarding beliefs and belonging to a religious community. Therefore, dialogue becomes the key tool for social cohesion in multicultural societies beyond mere tolerance, creating spaces for mutual transformation and generating a symmetrical relationship between the "Self" and the "Other".

Keywords: cultural diversity; religious education; religion; coexistence; spirituality

1. Introduction

Cultural diversity is a phenomenon that characterizes current European societies and educational institutions, as these spaces have turned into plural environments in which multiple interactions of a cultural, linguistic or ideological nature take place, as well as into inter-cultural and inter-religious spaces for coexistence. Significant and visible differences can be noticed in European countries in relation to the role of religion in society in general and to religious education in the educational systems in particular [1]. Coexistence of a wide diversity of religions in the European context has fostered the development of spaces that have allowed peaceful coexistence and inter-religious dialogue, all from a broad perspective so that confessional pluralism may be addressed from different perspectives. One of these environments has been the school system [2]. Regarding the teaching of religion within the educational agenda of countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, or the Czech Republic, it is presented as an optional offer. On the other hand, it is mandatory with the possibility of exemption in countries such as Germany, Austria, Greece, Luxembourg, Finland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Sweden.

The main characteristic of our current society is globalization, which leaves behind aspects such as uniformity and homogeneity to give way to plurality and complexity. These new characteristics have been mainly determined by the migratory processes [3], which have changed the image of isolated and impervious societies to permeable ones in continuous interaction, thus creating multicultural societies. This pluralist perspective presents different life and thought models [4,5].

Therefore, we can talk about a mosaic society [6] comprised by various and culturally-diverse social groups that generate multicultural primary socialization and which is, consequently, multi-religious and multilingual.

This multicultural confluence makes it possible for different cultures to intermingle, express themselves and respect each other in the same social space and, on many occasions,

also in the school setting [4]. For this it would be necessary to consider the principles that regulate inter-religious dialogue [7]: on the one hand, respect for a plurality of different beliefs, as well as the ability to listen, and, on the other, the recognition of a common religious experience and openness towards the different one. Taking these principles into account, religious plurality is not perceived or presented as a problem but as a socio-educational resource for peaceful and egalitarian coexistence, whose focus is respect for human dignity regardless of personal religious convictions and practices.

In addition, the studies that analyze the existence of a continuous and intense relationship between religious and intercultural education set out the need to design new and innovative teaching proposals to face the challenges inherent to multicultural classrooms, as well as continuous teacher training [8,9].

On the other hand, the number of research studies that focus their interest on religion and on its relationship with young people is increasing every day, showing different approaches and perspectives. Those that explore the relationship between the development of spirituality and its relationship with young people's well-being stand out [10–14]. There are also research studies addressing the importance of religious education as the main axis in the development and effective promotion of adolescents' mental health and peers relationships, highlighting religiosity as a protective and socially-supportive factor in the immediate context [15–18]. Other studies focus on detailing religious commitment and its relationship with civic and social values and with attitudes towards other groups [19,20]. Finally, there are studies that explore beliefs and religious identity development through the media [21].

From a sociological perspective, it can therefore be affirmed that religion plays different roles. In this sense, Durkheim (1995) [22] points out the importance of collective religious practices and their relationship with the symbolization of society. For this author "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden; beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called Church, all those who adhere to them" [22] (p. 91). In the same vein, from the perspective of social constructivism, Berger (2014) [23] points out that religion has the potential to provide a sense of purpose to individual lives, as well as a sense of social order. Drawing from the theory of social capital, King and Furrow (2008) [24] also explored how social interaction, trust and a shared vision enable social bonds associated with religiousness to influence moral behavior.

Breskaya, Francis and Giordan (2020) [25] identify eleven basic functions of religion in modern societies, related to sociological, scientific and social factors such as serving marginalized groups, peace building and inter-religious/humanitarian dialogue, spiritual guidance, active public role, maintenance of collective beliefs and experiences, moral guidance, force of modernization, national and cultural identity source, significance (conferring meaning to individual life and to social order), providing social belonging and the advancement of religious freedom.

This brief review of the scientific literature shows an interest in investigating all of those key factors that gradually shape adolescents' collective identity. One of them would be religious education in educational institutions, which has been the focus of a large number of research studies [26,27] dealing with the importance attributed by adolescents to religion in the official curriculum in the formal educational context. These studies show that they consider religion to be an important element for their life and their development as human beings, showing other ways of interrelating with peers and, even in some cases, improving their academic results [28], in addition to becoming into a facilitating or limiting factor in the process of social inclusion [3].

This paper shares the concept of religious education proposed by Jackson (2019) [29] when used as a designation to refer to education about religions, taught in a way that provides young people with accurate information and some understanding of religious language, regardless of their spiritual affiliation. This approach to religious education or religious teaching carries a component of broad and liberal education and contributes to

the personal and social development of young people as citizens of democratic societies. As pointed out by Matemba and Addai-Mununkum (2017) [30], the teaching of religion should be aimed at instilling pro-social values in a world marked by religious diversity. In the same sense, Esteban Garcés (2020) [31] describes religious education as that which addresses "learning to be", that is, the humanistic dimension of education, cultivating the inner part of people in a globalized world (p. 32). The teaching of religion provides cultural learning as part of the cultural heritage of different groups. That is to say, "the teaching of religion, as a subject in the school curriculum, provides the social and ethical learning input that students need to understand their social reality and become responsible for its transformation and improvement" (p. 34).

2. Materials and Methods

The main objective of this research is to analyze the different attitudes or positions adopted by young people towards the teaching of religion in culturally diverse contexts. It is also worth defining the following specific objectives:

- To describe the relevance of the teaching of religion for young people within the educational system and in the immediate peer context.
- To identify the relationships between the versatility of religion and the beliefs or sense of belonging to a religious community for the young population.
- To determine the presence of significant differences in the perception of other people or other religious beliefs or cosmovisions in relation to the "gender" and "years of religion studies" variables.

Considering these research objectives, the hypotheses guiding this paper would be the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *The importance attached to religion during school learning varies among young people.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *The versatility of religion is related to changing processes regarding beliefs and a sense of belonging to a religious community.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Gender and years of religion studies contribute to the model created to explain the perception of other people or other religious beliefs.*

2.1. Research Design

This research is based on a quantitative approach, using the questionnaire validated by the European project "Religion in Education. A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries" (REDCo) as a tool to collect information [32–34]. This is an instrument consisting of 93 items organized into four blocks: the first one addresses sociodemographic data that describes the profile of the sample; the second one, called "Religion in the school", focuses on analyzing the role of religion in the school context; the third section, referred to as "You and religion" aims to examine the role that religion plays for each of the interviewees; and the last section, called "You and the others", gathers information about religion and about its role in coexistence at home and at school.

Descriptive data were collected for the purposes of this paper, as well as the information related to the participants' opinions about the relevance and versatility of the teaching of religion. Structured closed-ended questions were combined with other free-response open-ended questions and 5-point Likert-type scales, according to the response required. Data collection was performed in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and with the consent of the participants, guaranteeing their anonymity.

After the data collection process, the responses were coded and entered into the data matrix for subsequent analysis using the SPSS software package for Windows, version 21.0. After determining the reliability of the questionnaire by means of the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency analysis, the performance of the different descriptive variables was

evaluated through the formulation of the arithmetic mean and standard deviation, in order to obtain information about the context, as well as the input data.

2.2. Participants

The sample consists of 385 subjects aged between 12 and 18 years (74.2%). Specifically, they are students attending four educational institutions in the province of Córdoba (Spain): three in urban settings and one in a rural area, three of public administration and one under private management. Regarding the "gender" variable, 50.9% of the participants are women ($n = 196$) and 49.1% are men ($n = 189$). Taking the training level as a reference, 51.7% of the participants are in their third year of mandatory high school ($n = 199$), 29.1% are in their fourth year ($n = 112$) and the rest (19.2%) are in their second year ($n = 74$). In turn, for the "nationality" variable, the data indicate that the majority of them are Spanish (97.7% [$n = 369$]) and that the rest are Venezuelans and Nicaraguans. Regarding the "language" variable, the most commonly spoken in the family is Spanish and, less frequently (in no case more than 0.3%), this first language is combined with English, Italian, German, Arabic, French, Cambodian or Catalan. Concerning the worldview or religion of the sample subjects, it can be noted that 77.9% ($n = 300$) declare that they have a religion or worldview while the rest (22.1%) state that they do not currently have a religion or worldview. Specifically, more than half of the respondents (59.9%) indicate that they are Roman Catholic, ($n = 219$), followed by atheist (11.2%, $n = 43$), evangelical (4.4%, $n = 17$) and, to a lesser extent, Islamic, Hindu or Buddhist. Only 4.2% of the students ($n = 16$) are connected to another religion or denomination

Regarding the amount of time devoted by these young individuals to the study of religion at school, it is worth noting that only 13.5% report having done so for less than 7 years, this number of years being the one with the highest percentage of responses (23.6%; $n = 91$). However, the number of students who state that they are attending religion classes (57.9%; $n = 223$) is slightly higher than the number of those who are not (42.1%; $n = 162$). Likewise, differences can be seen in terms of the number of years of religion studies at school according to gender (see Figure 1), therefore partially accepting Hypothesis 3. Although the number of men and women is similar in the lower end (0–4 years), there are more women who have studied religion for at least 10 years ($n = 116$) compared to men ($n = 54$), whose number increases in the range from five to nine years ($n = 144$) in relation to women ($n = 109$). It should be added that the highest number of responses in both genders corresponds to 6 years.
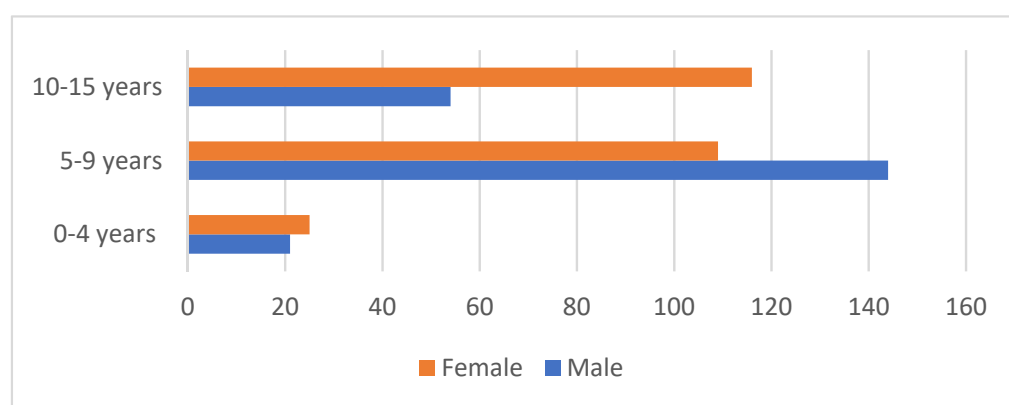

Figure 1. Years of religion studies by gender. (**Note**: Prepared by the authors).

3. Results

This section has been divided by subheadings in order to provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

Once the context has been established, we proceed to the data analysis in order to help achieve our objectives and thus understand how young people assess religion at school and their attitude towards it. The items are grouped around three major sections. The analysis is focused on the first two ("Religion at school" and "You and religion"), specifically on the following main components: the level of agreement with the help offered by the school through religion lessons and the attitude of adolescents with respect to the different positions related to religion.

In each of the sections of the questionnaire, items have been proposed with which the participants have indicated a different level of agreement or disagreement through a Likert-type scale (1-2-3-4-5), where 1 indicated "I totally agree" and 5 indicated "I totally disagree". An exploratory factor analysis was performed to assess construct validity. In addition, Bartlett's test of sphericity was applied to each group of items, allowing us to continue with the extraction of factors in one of the components. Thus, we obtained Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin's sample adequacy measure to determine the acceptable degree of common variance between items. Initially, the solution was rotated using the Varimax method, although the significant and intense correlation obtained made us review the initial decision, choosing an oblique rotation method (Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization [delta = 0]). In this same sense, the next step was to test the hypothesis against the predictive values through Pearson's correlation coefficient (r).

3.1. How Learning about Religions Helps Young People

In order determine how young people value the knowledge about religions fostered at school, an exploratory factor analysis was performed in SPSS by means of principal components analysis. Bartlett's test sphericity showed a significant difference between the empirical correlations matrix and the identity matrix (χ^2 [15] = 857.023, $p < 0.001$), which has allowed us to continue with the extraction of factors. On the other hand, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin's sample adequacy measure indicated a high degree of common variance among the items (KMO = 0.875). However, the solution could not be rotated because only one factor had been extracted. The variance explained by the solution with this single dimension was 57.76%, which is acceptable for the purposes of the subsequent analyses.

According to the content of the items, the interpretation was that young people regard the help they receive from religion lessons (LR) as valuable, referring to peaceful coexistence, understanding of history and of current events, critical and moral development and learning about one's own religion. The reliability coefficient obtained (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.853. The internal consistency of the construct is good, so it was further used in critical analyses.

A mean of 2.18 is obtained in the descriptive analysis of the new variable, which confirms the benefits gained from learning about religions and indicates a high level of agreement regarding its importance (see Table 1).

Table 1. Young people's assessment of the help received at school through learning about religions.

How Learning about Religions (LR) at School Helps	M	SD	N
16. Understanding the others in order for a peaceful coexistence	2.02	1.01	385
17. Understanding history	2.23	1.08	385
18. Gaining a better understanding of reality	2.38	1.09	385
19. Developing my own point of view	2.12	1.04	385
20. Developing moral values	2.24	1.05	385
21. Learning about my own religion	2.08	1.10	385
Total	2.18	0.80	385

Note. Significance level: $p = 0.05$. M (mean), SD (standard deviation), N (sample size) (Source: the authors).

3.2. Young People's Stance towards Religion

In order to compare the attitudes of participants of the same age, but from other countries, an exploratory factor analysis was performed in SPSS by means of principal

components analysis. The values of item 43 were previously recoded so that they were fit for subsequent analyses. Bartlett's test of sphericity showed a significant difference between the empirical correlation matrix and the identity matrix (2 [15] = 355.19, $p < 0.001$), which allowed us to continue with the extraction of factors. Likewise, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin's sample adequacy measure has shown an acceptable degree of common variance between the items (KMO = 0.711). The "eigenvalue higher than 1" criterion was taken into consideration, as it yielded a solution with two factors in accordance with the explained variance, from which adequacy of the model to explain the correlation matrix was deduced. The variance explained by the solution with two dimensions was 57.48%, which was suitable for the purposes of the subsequent analyses.

Initially, the solution was rotated by the Varimax method, although the distributions of factor scores resulting in the factors that proved to be reliable demonstrated a significant and intense correlation, which led to reformulating the initial decision and to the use of an oblique rotation method (Oblimin with Kaiser normalization [delta = 0]). The rotated model is presented in Table 2, which shows the rotated configuration matrix (saturations of variables in the factors).

Table 2. Attitudes towards religion shared with young people from other countries.

Attitudes If Young People towards Religion	Factors	
	1	2
41. Religion helps me face difficulties	**0.842**	−0.020
44. Religion determines my whole life	**0.750**	−0.112
45. Religion is important in the history of our country	**0.690**	0.201
43. Religion makes sense	**0.689**	−0.059
46. You can be a religious person without belonging to any religious community	−0.108	**0.764**
47. My beliefs about religion can change	0.090	**0.753**
Explained variance	37.35	20.13

Note. The highest saturations of the items in each factor are highlighted in bold type. Significance level: $p = 0.05$. Source: the authors.

In this case, the regression method was used to obtain an estimate of the factor scores, verifying high correlations between factors 1 and 2 (r = 0.806, $p = 0.001$). According to the content of the items that were most saturated in each factor, the following interpretation was subsequently made:

- Factor 1: Relevance of religion (RR). This factor groups the highest number of items: a total of four (41, 43, 44 and 45). It includes items that refer to the importance of religion at the internal and personal level, as well as to its historical value.
- Factor 2: Versatility of religion (VR). It groups a total of two items (46 and 47). Both refer to the changing processes of religion, in terms of beliefs and a sense of belonging to a religious community.

Once the structure of the construct had been explained, the internal consistency was calculated. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for both factors was 0.733 and 0.388, respectively. The internal consistency of the construct was good for the first factor, and so it was in subsequent critical analyses. That was not the case for the second factor, which was therefore rejected. Considered the only reliable factor, we decided to use the dependent variable "Relevance of religion" (RR) in the subsequent analyses.

The descriptive analysis of the new variable shows a mean of 2.80 in the statements referring to the relevant role of religion (54.6%), which indicates a high level of agreement regarding its importance (see Table 3).

Therefore, Hypothesis 1, which proposes that the benefits young people gain from their learning about religions at school change the relevance attributed to religion, is accepted. The RL variable (how learning about religions at school helps young people) and the one resulting from the factor analysis (relevance of religion [RR]) were taken into account.

Table 3. Attitudes of young people from different countries towards the relevance of religion.

Factor 1: Relevance of Religion (RR)	M	SD	N
Religion helps me face difficulties	2.87	1.13	385
I respect believers	1.62	0.96	385
Religion makes no sense	3.63	1.13	385
Religion determines my whole life	3.53	1.13	385
Religion is important in the history of our country	2.45	1.06	385
You can be a religious person without belonging to any religious community	2.23	1.05	385
My beliefs about religion can change	2.81	1.09	385
Total	2.80	0.83	385

Note. Significance level: $p = 0.05$. M (mean), SD (standard deviation), N (sample size). Source: the authors.

The results from Pearson's correlation test (r) shows significance at the 0.01 level (bilateral) with a high relationship between the benefits gained at school from learning about religions (LR) and the level of agreement regarding the relevant role of religion (RR) ($r = 0.609$, $p < 0.001$). These data confirm the relationship between the different variables, according to the results from GEMRIP (2019) [35].

Thus, this research points to the fact that the religion curriculum face a sociocultural challenge, that is to say, the importance of establishing a critical culture based on the challenge of giving meaning to the experience of culture as an expression of human experiences and relationships, as well as of the religious beliefs (as part of that culture). That requires creating suitable spaces for its development among human groups to dignify people based on their beliefs, convictions, knowledge, values and predisposition towards peaceful coexistence, seeking the common good. In this sense, the idea of rethinking an education which is not focused on following the pace of market but which responds to the need of train people with a critical attitude becomes important [36].

Next, the participants were questioned on whether the "gender" and "years of religion studies at school" variables exert any influence on their perception about religion and its relevance among young people. The first analysis focused on verifying if there were statistically significant differences between the students' perception about the relevance of religion in relation to the "gender" variable by applying Student's t test for independent samples (s.l. = 0.05). The results allow us to affirm that the students' perception about the relevance of religion (RR) by gender is not significant ($t = 1.56$, $p = 0.423$). However, other research studies have revealed gender differences, such us more positive experiences in relation to religion at school in the case of Christian women [26] and the consideration of religion as important during adolescence for Israeli Orthodox Jewish women [37].

After that, based on the assumption that the number of years that young people have studied religion at school influences their level of agreement on the relevant role of religion, a one-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. Again, the variable resulting from the factor analysis (RR) was taken into account for the relevance of religion. In order to contrast the hypothesis, it was decided to perform the ANOVA statistical test, which is considered a robust test. In addition, the homoscedasticity assumption has in fact been previously verified for the RR variable using the Levene test, obtaining a value below 0.05: RR ($F_{14,370} = 1.743$, $p = 0.046$). The variance homogeneity assumption is not met, so it was decided to use the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test, which did not allow for rejecting the null hypothesis (2 (16) = 2.02, $p = 0.844$). Thus, it was deduced that the number of years of religion studies of young people does not influence the importance attributed to it, the reason why Hypothesis 3 is partially rejected. Nevertheless, previous studies point out the relevance of religious education for the development of this group, as it promotes their development and positive prosperity [38], as well as the need to review the development of the religion curriculum across the different educational stages [26].

4. Discussion and Conclusions

According to the results obtained, it can be affirmed that young people give some relevance to religion on an internal and personal level, attributing to it a historical value as a discipline. Moreover, the findings of the study allow relating the versatility of religion to changing processes in terms of beliefs and belonging to a religious community, as proposed in Hypothesis 2. Religious pluralism and globalization are examples of social dynamics that rase important challenges which, as pointed out by Baeza and Aparicio (2020) [36], are not just circumscribed to the teaching of religion, but to the very complexity of school, which requires a continuous development of critical thinking and improving the scaffolding of such a way of thinking to meet the needs of free and socially-conscious generations. The teaching of religion should aim for achievements not in the face of or despite the change, but within the change. These results serve as a basis to propose actions that promote peaceful and respectful coexistence among young individuals belonging to different spiritual universes, from an inclusive and culturally relevant approach to education.

On the other hand, the school poses a hard-to-solve challenge for its protagonists, placing the teaching of religion in an open dialogue with the new social and educational realities. Although, as Gan (2010) [39] stated, it would be a dialogue that goes beyond a mere verbal interchange and turns into a significant and referential expression process, which also "permeates both the synchronic and diachronic axes" (p. 67). Breskaya, Francis and Giordan (2020) [40] showed that young people mostly support the religious freedom principles when they hold such freedom responsible for the promotion of tolerance, the interconfessional dialogue and ideas of religious freedom. In line with this thinking, our results endorse the potential of religion in the transformation and promotion of a culture of religious freedom in society. Brettschneider's transformative theory of religious freedom (2010) [41] is in consonance with society, as it balances in the relationship between the state, religion and individual citizens, whether religious or not, due to their potential in this process of change. Inter-religious dialogue gains significant importance in this respect [7].

Regarding the study of religious and spiritual development in adolescence, Schnitker, Williams and Medenwaldt (2021) [42] have provided relevant data from an approach based on individual differences and human communities through the fields of personality and social psychology. According to these theories, the results of the present research suggest that the religious and spiritual development of adolescents should be studied considering their traits, characteristic adaptations and narrative identity (at three personality levels). This study supports the potential of religion in relation to behavioral beliefs, social belonging, and connection in various cultural contexts. In the words of Buelvas (2012) [43], religion must also face the challenge of being as up to date as science in order to respond to the new challenges of a globalized society.

The construction of universal spirituality should be based on religious pluralism and respect towards the other, with the aim of achieving a peaceful coexistence. As pointed out by Edara (2017) [10], "thus, religion is considered to be a part of culture and it acts as one among many forms of overtly expressing and experiencing spirituality that is inward, personal, subjective, transcendental, and unsystematic. In other words, cultural values are seen as a foundation to religiosity" (p. 273). Human beings are then called upon to coexist peacefully. Cifuentes (2005) [44] (p. 271) explains the sublime Kantian thought as follows:

> *Kant argues that the purpose of Nature is harmony and peace, regardless and independently of what human beings think and want. [. . .] Whether by «chance» or by «providence» of a higher cause that directs Humanity, it always resorts to the mechanisms and tricks needed to lead human beings towards coexistence.*

At this point, it is time to present the corollary of the study and suggest some lines of action. The educational system is currently facing the challenge of establishing a critical culture that gives value to experience as an expression of human relationships and religious beliefs, in accordance with human development and not with the economic growth of

the market society. In this sense, it will be necessary to address the religious question from the school and encourage an educational dialogue to promote coexistence [45]. The classrooms where religious education is taught must become scenarios for dialogue or encounters between young people where different ways of approaching the complexity of theology and human life must be shared (Bonilla, 2012) [46], in addition to learning to live with others (Esteban Garcés, 2020) [31]. From this dialectical didactic approach, the teaching of religion should be a process of accompaniment where dialogue, reflection and critical thinking are encouraged. It would be a didactic model focused on the pedagogy of interiority (Esteban Garcés, 2020) [31].

On the other hand, without identifying differences attributable to gender regarding the experiences with religion in the school setting, but taking into account other results gathered in different research studies, further research on this topic is considered necessary. Finally, the versatility of religion and young people's beliefs is related to belonging to a religious community, not so much for the number of years of study but for favoring their positive development and prosperity, the reason why it is considered opportune to review the content of the religion curriculum at school across the different educational stages.

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