
Significance of the Religiosity and Educational Backgrounds of Young Refugees in Germany: Results from an Empirical Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This chapter reports the major results of the German research project “Religion as Resource or Risk” (ReReRi) funded by the Staedtler-Foundation. It starts with the observation that in the context of public discussion about the immigration of refugees to Germany, religion is usually depicted as a problematic, or even threatening, dimension. The results of this study offer a more differentiated and constructive picture of what religion means for refugees’ coping and integration on the basis of interviews with 45 young refugees from five countries. It also provides insights into refugees’ perception of religious education in the context of public schools.

Many respondents indicate that they were, and partly still are, lacking knowledge about other religions and worldviews, which influences their attitude towards them. The majority of the interviewees indicated that religious topics were generally avoided by their teachers, while several respondents had experienced discrimination due to their religious identity. The chapter concludes by demanding more sensitivity by teachers to the significance of young refugees’ religiosity in the interests of their well-being and their integration, as well as by caregivers and politicians.

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Theory and State of Research

In German public discourse, the religiosity of refugees seems to be both overestimated and underestimated. Religiosity is overestimated as a fear-generating, core characteristic of refugees (for example, “Muslims are flooding and alienating our country!” and, “Most asylum seekers are religious extremists!”). Religiosity is underestimated in its potentially positive effects on life coping and integration. A review of the research literature on this topic (see Pirner 2017) reveals a huge research deficit. We know very little about the actual role of religion in the lives of refugees who have come to Germany. The German Council of Experts of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (Sachverständigenrat Deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration, SVR) diagnoses “a clear discrepancy between the social discussion about the importance of religion and empirically based evidence on this” (SVR-Migration 2016, 61). The only interview study focusing on refugees’ religion in Germany was conducted in Berlin among 25 refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It provided evidence that most respondents practice their religion less, or more privately than in their country of origin (Deutscher Bundestag 2017, 213). Many of the interviewees believe they are better able to practice Islam in Germany because it is less politicized here. Some of them also appreciate the possibility of not being religious. These findings are supported by those of our own pilot study among 22 young refugees (Pirner 2017).

Psychological studies give hints that religiosity may, in general, function as a source of resilience in difficult life situations and may promote believers’ health and well-being (survey article: Klein and Albani 2007, e4; see also Koenig et al. 2001; Laurencelle et al. 2002; Pargament 1997). Furthermore, sociological studies point to the potential of religiosity and religious communities to support social integration. Religious belief may enhance believers’ trust in other people, and religious communities may provide both “social bonding” by promoting positive relationships between members, and “social bridging,” if the community is open to communities and people with different beliefs as well as to society as a whole (Trautmüller 2008, 2012; Pickel and Gladkirch 2011; Pickel 2012; Götze et al. 2013; Pickel and Schnabel 2018).

Certainly, religiosity can also have negative effects on an individual's personality, for instance, when they have developed the idea of a controlling, punishing, or merciless God (see Master and Hooker 2013; Park and Slattery 2013). Similarly, religious communities can prevent rather than promote well-being and integration if they are very restrictive and seal themselves off from the rest of society (Treibel 2009, p. 114 f.; Pickel and Schnabel 2018).

Consequently, if the role of religiosity for refugees' well-being and integration is to be researched, it will not be enough just to measure the level of their religiosity and religious affiliation; it will also be necessary to examine the nature of their religious beliefs and practices as well as the characteristics of the religious communities that they feel attached to. In our research project, therefore, we used a *broad and differentiated concept of religiosity* that we tried to operationalize with a diversity of methodical tools.

Looking at the situation of refugees in Germany and other host countries, it appears inappropriate to ask about the role of religiosity solely for integration purposes, but it seems advisable to widen the research focus to the role of religiosity for the refugees' comprehensive well-being, and thus adopt a human rights perspective. In this sense, we have, in our research project, put the focus on the concept of "coping with life" (in German: "Lebensbewältigung") that originates from the academic discipline of social pedagogy (Böhnisch 2016). This concept includes elementary aspects of "social integration" (Esser 2000) but is not restricted to this factor. To put it simply, even those refugees who are planning to leave Germany later have an interest in and a right to a decent and good life in their host country. In addition, psychophysical aspects of coping with life are a fundamental prerequisite for successful long-term integration. Put succinctly, those who have lost their inner stability and are plagued by depression or anxiety bring poor conditions for integration into our society with them.

Research Questions, Methods, and Sample

Our major research question is: *What role does the religiosity of young refugees play in their coping with life and their integration?* A sub-question is: *Are there any connections between their religiosity and educational aspects in their lives?*

To answer these rather open, general questions, we designed a cross-sectional, exploratory, essentially qualitative interview study. We could build on preliminary research experiences encountered by the first author in a pilot study ($N = 22$) conducted with the help of students in the context of a university course (Pirner 2017).

For the current study, funding from the Staedtler Foundation allowed us to question $N = 45$ young refugees in semi-structured interviews that combined closed and open-ended questions. The interview guideline was developed in cooperation with the Leibniz-Institute for Educational Trajectories (LifBi), Bamberg, that is conducting a large-scale, quantitative-longitudinal study entitled “Refugees in the German Educational System” (ReGES). Because in ReGES, religious aspects only play a marginal role, our research, with its focus on religiosity, was designed with the aim of complementing the ReGES research. We used several already tested items and scales from ReGES, integrated other established instruments, and developed additional scales and questions that we had already partly tested in the pilot study.

The structure of the interview guideline was as follows:

Section A: General personal data

Age, gender, origin, time of escape, religion/denomination.

Section B: Questions on religion and religiosity

Religion(s) in country of origin, meaning of religion in their own life, centrality-of-religiosity scale, faith and life coping, religious socialization and education, experiences with religious communities, attitude toward religious diversity.

Section C: Questions on education and school experience

School education in country of origin and at present (performance, experiences), career goal, education, and parents’ jobs, estimation of job chances, experiences with religious education (both in country of origin and Germany), experiences with teachers’ attitudes towards religion, experiences of discrimination at school.

Section D: Questions on social integration

Contacts and feelings of belonging, experiences of discrimination (in general), cultural differences, perceptions of gender roles, perspectives for the future.

For evaluation, we examined the quantitative data with the help of SPSS (descriptive reports and correlation analyses), while the qualitative data were, and still are, being evaluated with qualitative content analysis (according to Mayring 2015 and Kuckartz 2018). To gain more detailed and valid answers to our research questions, both types of data are merged in the sense of a theme-centered, multi-method triangulation (Flick 2011; Gläser-Zikuda et al. 2012). In this chapter, we will concentrate on the evaluation of data referring to religious and educational aspects (sections B and C). As the qualitative content analysis is not yet complete, we will tentatively, in part, combine the quantitative data with exemplary thematic quotations from the open-ended interviews.

Table 1 Survey over basic data of the sample (N = 45) (*Source* own research)

Country of origin	23 Syria, 12 Afghanistan, 5 Iraq, 2 Eritrea, 2 Libya, 1 Iran
Religion	32 Muslim, 8 Christian, 2 Yazidi, 3 others
Gender	35 male, 10 female
Age	Between 13 and 24 years; average: 17.6
Current school attendance	27 Mittelschule (lower secondary), 13 Berufsschule (vocational school), 8 (Gymnasium) high school, 6 German language course, 1 Realschule (middle secondary), 1 Gesamtschule (general secondary) (only 4 are part of a special integration class)
Duration of stay in Germany	Between 11 and 45 months

Our respondents were a random sample from the metropolitan areas of Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Berlin acquired in various ways using contacts to schools, asylum seeker hostels, intercultural cafeterias and clubs, gatekeepers, and via the snowball principle. We restricted our search to young people aged 13–24 from six major refugee countries (see Table 1).

In the following report of the major results, all the respondent names are pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted in German, and the first author made all the translations into English. Slight linguistic challenges and weaknesses of some respondents were smoothed out as it would have been virtually impossible to find equivalents for them in English.

Results on the Role of Religiosity in the Young Refugees' Lives

(1) *For most respondents, religion is very important and is perceived as a valuable resource for coping with life.*

The evaluation of the centrality-of-religiosity scale (10-item version; see Huber and Huber 2012) shows a mean value of 4.09 (SD = 0.78) on a five-point Likert scale, which indicates an average high level of religiosity. Similar results can be found in a question we used for cross-validation of the CRS when asked tick how important religion is for their lives on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important), more than half of the respondents chose 10 (mean value: 8.4). In both results there are no significant differences between adherents of different religions.

About 82% of the respondents agree that their religion/ faith helps them “very much” (64.4%), or “pretty much” (17.8%), in dealing with life problems. About 71% indicate that their religion/ faith has, in fact, helped them “on their journey to Germany.” This is mirrored by the narratives of many respondents in the open-ended questions. For instance, Asif, a 20-year-old Muslim from Syria, told us this story:

“[...], when I was on the Mediterranean, I always used to pray that I will not fall into the water or that nothing will get broken so that we would all die. Therefore, it was so important that all people simply prayed that we simply retain peace and calmness and arrive in Greece and get to Germany.”

Amar, a 16-year-old Muslim boy with Afghan citizenship, who was born in Iran, also described a dramatic experience during his flight:

“It was at the border. There were policemen across the border and behind us were the terrorists. And then we couldn’t do anything. Then all the time I said, God, help me, help me, help me, help me, and then it worked. I simply walked across the street and upwards and then the policemen were behind me and could have easily shot me, but they didn’t.”

Hazim, another 20-year-old Muslim from Syria, comments on the importance of religion for seeing hope in one’s life:

“When there is no religion, there is not hope any more [...] I mean, if you don’t have hope, you need not get out of bed in the morning and you need not live any more. [...] If I hadn’t had hope, I wouldn’t have come to Germany. I would have stayed in Syria and risked dying.”

For Kidane, a male, 24-year-old Christian from Eritrea, life problems change their meaning when perceived through the eyes of faith:

“Since I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and God [...] I know that various problems in this world; it may be flight, it may be war, it may be different diseases, they are all a bridge to myself. So, various problems are a bridge to myself, so that these various problems strengthen my faith and give me much hope that I am a special person in this world.”

Bahria, a 16-year-old Muslim girl from Syria, also emphasizes that, as a believer, she deals with problems in a different way:

“Whenever I have problems, I don’t sit sadly or crying and so on, I rather say, what is God’s will he will do. Or we have the Qur’an, yes, we read it, we say, if we read, everything that happens is good.”

(2) *For most respondents, their faith and religious practices have changed since their arrival in Germany—but in different ways.*

While ten respondents indicate that their faith has not changed since their arrival in Germany, 14 say it has changed very much, ten quite a lot, four moderately, and two a little. When asked about changes in their religious practice, the respondents answered in quite similar ways. The direction of change differs significantly among the sample. For 12 respondents, their faith has become *stronger*, for seven of them it has become *weaker*, and 11 respondents indicate that their faith has become *different*. It is interesting to look at the reasons given for this change by the young refugees. Tamina, a 14-year-old Muslim girl from Afghanistan says:

“I think it [my religious faith] becomes stronger, because I have been talking more about it. Before, of course, in a country like Afghanistan, we are all Muslims and don’t talk so much about it, we understand anyway. But here, everybody asks questions about clothes or our religion [...] so we talk about it. And what I don’t understand, I ask my parents.”

Amir, a 15-year-old Christian Orthodox boy from Syria expresses almost the contrary:

“Simply because here you see people without religion, you talk less about religion, and then the interest in it is gone. [...] Before, I used to go to church every day, and now once a month. This is, because I do other activities at the weekend and that I have to study a lot.”

For Amar, the 16-year-old Muslim boy from Iran, praying to God seems to have become more important because it is partly a substitute for the missing conversation with his parents:

“In Iran, when I had a problem, I went to my parents; here, when I have problems I don’t have my parents, so I have to talk to God.”

Hazem, a 20-year-old young man from Syria, emphasizes that his faith has become more reflective and self-determined:

“I was born as a Muslim [...] In Syria there was no time to think about one’s self. You obeyed the rules, for instance, not to drink alcohol, because it would have been embarrassing, if somebody saw you. Now, in Germany, this is different. But all the same, I follow my religion, but now I do so because I want to. Not because I was born there and because my society would look unfavorably at me if I had different views.”

Several interview participants said that they do not go to mosque or church services anymore, because they have not found an appropriate community (see more on this below). Some have also stopped or reduced prayer practice, because they no longer live in a community in which regular prayer and mosque attendance is a social normality. Also, some respondents say that other obligations, especially school and learning the German language, have become so important that they tend to neglect their religious duties. For instance, Navid, a 17-year-old Muslim boy from Syria, presently attends the Hauptschule (lower secondary school), but plans to achieve a high school degree. Because he has a lot to do for school, and because he is without family or relatives here in Germany, he has overall given up mosque attendance as well as celebrating Islamic festivals and rarely prays. He does continue to read the Qur’an and fast during Ramadan. On the one hand, he regrets that he cannot live his faith so intensely anymore, on the other hand he appreciates the freedom here in Germany and feels at home.

Four respondents reported a kind of religious conversion; three of them are of Afghan origin. Rashed, a 19-year-old boy, told us that he became a Protestant-Methodist Christian after about six months in Germany. He was never a believing Muslim but his parents, who are still in Afghanistan, are Muslims and were shocked when he told them about his conversion. Hamed, a 20-year-old, also became a Christian in Germany; it is not quite clear how intense his affiliation to Islam was in Afghanistan. Talfari, a 21-year-old young man had lived in Iran for three years before he came to Germany. He converted to Christianity in Iran and was then persecuted. He criticizes refugees in Germany who let themselves be baptized just because they may have a better chance of staying here. Kidane, the 24-year-old Christian from Eritrea who has already been quoted above, was born into a Christian-Orthodox family in Eritrea but developed a kind of Protestant, free-church faith eight years ago, even before he came to Germany. He emphasized several times that he “accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and God” in 2009, and that before that he had had no idea of God or Jesus; his Christian-Orthodox church seemed only to maintain their tradition.

- (3) *Attitudes toward other religions vary. They are influenced by (a) the country of origin, (b) the understanding of one's own religious tradition, and (c) by the new context.*

20 respondents indicated that they had known nothing or little about other religions before they came to Germany. They didn't learn about other religions in their religious education at school and they had no or only rare contact with people of other religions in their home countries. Most of these respondents come from countries that are largely mono-religious such as Iraq and Afghanistan. However, it depends on the specific neighborhood in which people lived. Interviewees who used to live in multi-religious contexts tend to be more tolerant toward other religions.

One characteristic example is Sami, a 23-year-old Muslim from Iraq. He told us that in Iraq he had had a Christian neighbor; a lady who told him the New Testament miracle story of Jesus feeding the 5000, which impressed him a lot. Also, he has read the Bible in Arabic and presently goes to a Free Church service in Nuremberg every Sunday. While still regarding himself as a Muslim, he sees only small differences between Islam and Christianity, thus he seems to lead a kind of hybrid religious life.

The attitude of a number of respondents toward other religions is clearly influenced by religious teachings as well as the new context in Germany, as the example of Asif, a 20-year-old Muslim from Syria shows:

"Well, in my religion, for example, Islam says that you have to accept other religions and other people, regardless of which religion they have. The main thing is respect. [...].

There are some students in my class, if we were in Syria, I think I would not react as I am reacting here now. Perhaps in Syria I would be against it, because it would be more new that somebody comes and says he wants to have a free opinion and he does not believe in God and [...] but here, for example, I had to work on myself so that I could accept other opinions."

Obviously Asif, in his reflection on the question, tries to bring together the traditional teachings of Islam with current contextual experiences that seem to have widened his (religious) horizon. Typically, he finds it harder to accept people who do not believe in any God than adherents of other religions (see Sect. 4).

Karim, an 18-year-old Muslim from Afghanistan, argues that irrespective of how many religions there are, "we are all humans." He also appreciates the peaceful life in pluralistic German society:

“In Germany, what I really like is that there is no war. They have hundreds of religions here but still they live peacefully with each other; they are even friends with one another. But in Afghanistan or Iran there is one religion, yet every day there is war.”

Existing research provides evidence that, on the one hand, a distinction should be made between respondents' general attitudes toward people of other religions and loose contact with such people, and, on the other hand, between close friendship or even partnership relations (Leszczensky 2018). We have taken account of this distinction and asked three questions to this end. How important is it for the respondents that a) their friends and b) their partner adhere to the same religion as they do? While, for only eight of them, this is (“rather” or “very”) important concerning friends, it is (“rather” or “very”) important for 23 of them when it comes to partnership. Still, 13 respondents chose “not at all important” concerning the choice of a partner and eight “not very important.”

(4) *It seems especially hard for certain respondents to understand or accept non-religious attitudes—yet, a learning process appears to be going on.*

This finding was already indicated in Asif's comment above. In the interview guideline there were two closed-ended questions, before the open-ended ones, on the topic of people with secular views. The first was: “What do you think about the fact that some people do not have any religion or faith?” The option “I do not think this is a good thing” was chosen by 13 of the respondents; the option “I think this is okay” was chosen by 23 of them; the rest were uncertain. The second question was: “Can you be a morally good and happy person without having a religion?” 22 respondents answered in the positive, 10 in the negative, while the rest were uncertain. Quite typical for those who were critical of non-believers, Hazem, a 20-year-old Muslim from Syria, argues that faith in God and morality belong together.

“Because if there were no God, there would be no norms [...] If there is no God, you don't have to do good things anymore. There are no firm principles anymore. But I think, as to principles, in the beginning somebody must have given them to humans. Somebody must tell you what is right and what is wrong. Otherwise these are just opinions.”

Also, quite typically, several respondents pointed to the fact of creation and saw it as clear proof that there must be a creator, even if they have some understanding why some Germans or Europeans do not believe in God—as Murat, a 19-year-old Kurdish Muslim from Syria does:

“Ah, okay, I can somehow understand that. For instance, the Europeans, well they had so many problems and wars because of religion. And so, they just wanted to have a distance from it. I can understand that. They find that simply bad and therefore they don’t want to have anything to do with it. They want to begin a new phase without religion.”

Asif, a 20-year-old Muslim from Syria, also has some ideas why people do not believe in God:

“Well, because most of them are questioning. I haven’t seen him, for example. I didn’t feel him or anything. They were also brought up as children by a family who had absolutely no faith, so for example in Europe there are many who believe in nothing, [...] because they simply don’t want to put themselves into rules, for example, like fasting, for example, without alcohol, without pork, nobody wants to establish and limit themselves by such a rule, but as a religious person I find that quite normal. I think it is much better for me not to drink alcohol, because you can see how crazy people are when they drink [...]”

Interestingly, 25 respondents indicated that they have non-religious friends, and even 29 of them could easily imagine having non-religious friends. Several respondents told us that, through positive personal contact with non-religious people (especially in the Leipzig area!), they have learned that you can, indeed, be a responsible and morally good person without religion. For some, this experience questions their own identity as a religious person and causes inner conflicts. For instance, Amir, a 15-year-old Christian-Orthodox boy from Syria, comments:

“The only thing that was special for me here [in Germany] was that many people here have no religion, we don’t have that. It doesn’t matter if the majority of us were Muslim, but everyone had religion. It was just so to speak embarrassing to have no religion in the community, that was not accepted.”

Like several other respondents, Tamina, a 14-year-old Muslim girl from Afghanistan, reports positive experiences with non-religious people in Germany:

“I have also seen here that they are Christians and yet do not believe in God, but they have a good life and are good to other people, because they have good hearts.”

(5) *Less than half of the respondents have regular contact with a mosque or church community—those who do experience it as helpful and supportive.*

Twelve respondents report community contact at least once a week and a further nine respondents several times per month or year, although 30 respondents indicated that church services or Friday prayers are “very” or “rather” important to them (of “medium” importance for a further six). This reveals a perceived deficit that some of them also articulated in their open comments. Many of the young refugees are not able to find a suitable religious community they can go to; this seems to be the case especially for Muslims, and especially if they live in the countryside or in small towns. One example is Sali, a 14-year-old Muslim girl from Syria. During her initial time in Germany she attended the Qur’an school in a Turkish mosque community in her town of residence. As she found that she already knew what was taught there, and that some Qur’anic rules were not obeyed, she does not go there anymore. Now only her father attends a Syrian mosque community in the nearest big city about 30 km away. For several Muslim respondents of Arab background, it is a problem that many mosques in Germany are Turkish speaking.

Those respondents who did find a religious community with which they have regular contact indicated that they feel supported by it and that most of these communities are open to people from other cultures and religions as well as to Germans.

An interesting case is represented by Amir, a 15-year-old Christian Orthodox boy from Syria. His father founded an Arabic-speaking, Christian-Orthodox community together with other migrants. He reports that they have about 200 attendants for every church service, which take place once or twice a month. Amir helps in the preparation of the services but considers them to be quite “old-fashioned.” He also goes to a Catholic community “once a month or so, to also have a bit of contact and to also see the German church services.”

Maryam, a 17-year-old Christian-Orthodox girl from Syria, also attends this community and reports that, in addition to the church service, they meet once a month to discuss themes related to religion and science.

Several Muslim respondents told us that they also attend Christian church services from time to time, often together with friends.

Results on Educational Issues

(6) *The level of school education across the sample varies considerably.*

The duration of school education that the young refugees enjoyed in their country of origin varied considerably from none at all (three respondents) to 12 years (four

respondents), with an average of 6.8 years. 15 respondents attended some form of higher education school (qualifying for university), while 16 of them attended a kind of middle school (qualifying for a vocation), and 10 had only attended primary school. Most of them had attended a state-run school, only six went to an Islamic private school. When asked to assess their own overall achievement in school by assigning scores from 1 [highest] to 6 [lowest], about 59% chose grades 1 or 2 and about 36% grade 3, while only 5% chose grade 4 (average score: 2.24; $n = 41$). 24 of all respondents indicated that they are striving for a school-leaving qualification that would enable them to study at university.

(7) *No correlations could be found between the respondents' level of education and their religious views, but there were some hints to such links in the open interview passages.*

We tested potential statistical relationships between the respondents' level or length of school education on the one hand and a) their level of religiosity, as well as b) their level of religious tolerance on the other. We could not find any relationships. However, we found evidence in the open-ended interview responses that refugee youths with higher educational levels tended to argue more reflectively and to express a more contemplative kind of faith.

(8) *Several respondents who attend classes in "Ethics" rate the subject better than religious education in their home country, primarily because several religions are taught—not only one.*

38 of the sample attended religious education classes (RE) at school in their country of origin, while only four of them are presently attending RE in their German school (3 Protestant RE, 1 Catholic RE; Islamic RE is not available to any of them); most of the respondents (25) attend the school subject of "Ethics" (in German schools this is an alternative subject to RE), while 12 do not attend any of these subjects.

Some respondents commented critically on the kind of RE they had experienced in their home country. The two major points of criticism were that religions other than their own were either not dealt with at all or with a negative bias, and that the teachers' style of teaching was too old-fashioned and authoritarian. For instance, Amar, a 16-year-old Muslim from Iran with Afghan citizenship, did not like it that in RE in Iran other religions were devalued and Shi 'ite Islam was presented as the only good one.

Murat, a 19-year-old Kurdish Muslim from Syria, criticized that in his school in Syria Muslims and Christians had separate RE classes where they were only taught about their own religion:

“Well, it was actually funny with us in Syria. That Muslims should only be taught the Islamic religion and Christians should also be taught the same way. So, they had to learn the Christian religion. Nothing more. So, for example, if I am in a class with a Christian and we have religion, then he has to go to his course, and I have to go to another course. So, we don’t get to learn that together.”

Several respondents explicitly appreciate the school subject “Ethics,” because here various religions are presented and discussed, not only one.

Maryam, a 17-year-old Christian-Orthodox girl from Syria, criticized the teaching style of her teachers in Syria:

“Yeah, well, I like it better here, because this kind of lesson is better, because in Syria the teacher comes in, he tells everything, writes on the blackboard, and we copy. But here it’s like a class together, so the teacher asks us and writes our answers on the blackboard and we write them down. [...] There was not much of group work or partner work [in Syria], either.”

(9) *Although most of the respondents’ current teachers do not talk about religion in class, they experience them as widely tolerant concerning religious issues—with some exceptions.*

Beyond RE, we wanted to know more about how the young refugees perceive the way in which schoolteachers deal with religion at school. To this end, we offered a number of items that could be assessed by the respondents. The results are presented in Table 2.

The table shows that the respondents experience their teachers as being widely tolerant and not critical of or unfair against religion(s). However, some of the young people also told us about problematic teachers. For instance, Abdul, a 23-year-old Muslim from Syria, describes two of his teachers in “Ethics” as “racist,” meaning that they would talk “normally” with German students, but always used negative examples from Islam in an unfair way.

However, most teachers do not talk about religious issues in class—although 64% of the respondents attend RE or Ethics; in both subjects, religion is a substantial part of the curriculum.

Table 2 How schoolteachers deal with religion (measured by a five-point Likert scale from 1 = “I completely disagree” to 5 = “I completely agree”; top two = “I completely agree” + “I somewhat agree”) (source: own research)

Items	Top two	Mean
Teachers are tolerant of religions and other views	75.7%	4.27
Teachers are insecure about religion and faith	24.1%	2.55
Teachers do not talk about religion in class	67.5%	3.90
Teachers say bad things about religion(s)	0%	1.18
Teachers say that religion is not important	14.3%	1.57
It is okay for teachers that religion is important to many of their students	68.8%	3.97
Teachers deal with the subject of religion in class	15%	2.1

Yet, when the respondents were asked if they would like to talk more about religion in school classes only twelve of them affirmed this, while 29 said no (four were not able to answer the question). The reasons for saying “no” vary. Some feel that their competence in the German language is not good enough to understand and talk appropriately about religious issues. Others, especially girls, have experienced discrimination because of their religion and obviously do not want religion to be made a topic of class discussion, because they are afraid of being further exposed to derogatory comments. For yet others, religion had become a taboo topic in their home country because it was the subject of violent clashes.

In our interviews, we presented two questions to the respondents to examine potential discrimination at school: “Are you treated worse than others at school because of your religion?” and, “Are you treated worse than others at school because of your background?” Table 3 shows that discrimination because of one’s background (being a refugee) is more frequent than because of one’s religion.

Table 3 Experiences of discrimination at school (source: own research)

Frequency	Because of religion	Because of background
Always	0	1
Often	2	3
Sometimes	6	8
Seldom	5	7
Never	30	22
	n = 43	n = 41

As already mentioned above, discrimination can be practiced by teachers, but more often it seems to come from classmates, as the example of Sami, a 23-year-old Muslim from Iraq who attends a vocational school, shows:

“So far in my class I am alone. No one wants to sit next to me. They do not talk with me, uhm, what else shall I say? No idea, they believe I come from a different planet. That’s how it is. [...] Usually, I come in the morning and see the guys stand next to our classroom. I say ‘Morning,’ but no one answers. I have done so once, twice, three times. Then I thought, Okay, fuck off! I don’t care. I am doing my thing. I go to school I do my tasks. [...] And then, bye!”

However, there are also examples of respondents who experienced discrimination, but went on the offensive. For instance, Jasira, a 14-year-old Muslim girl from Syria, felt excluded by the others at the beginning of her school time in Germany because of her religion and the headscarf she wears. But she consciously wanted to stand by her religion and decided to keep on wearing the hijab, even though her parents did not insist.

Sali, also 14 years old and a Muslim from Syria, reports similar experiences and a remarkable initiative:

“Well, at first I was the only one at school who had a headscarf. At the beginning of the school year, everything was rather strange. They were all looking at me. Then I talked to the teacher, I gave a presentation. It was a bit about Syria, about my religion. Then they understood that.”

This example also shows quite clearly that more information, interreligious learning, and with personal encounters at school can be valuable building blocks for fighting prejudices and preventing discrimination.

Summary and Discussion

Our major research question *What role does the religiosity of young refugees play for their coping with life and their integration?* can be answered well, and in a differentiated way, based on the results of this study. It has confirmed the findings of various empirical surveys that in Germany, refugees, as well as most people from immigrant backgrounds, tend to show higher levels of religiosity than the rest of the population. We have been able to specify and partly correct previous findings and assumptions that the religiosity of refugees becomes weaker over time once they have come to Germany. Our results rather indicate that, while this may be

true for some, the faith of others becomes stronger and their religious practice more significant due to the special needs of their new situation, and also due to the challenges posed by the newly experienced religious and worldview plurality; obviously, they feel stimulated to position themselves in a more self-determined way than they had to, or were allowed to, in their home country. Furthermore, several respondents reported that their faith has become more reflective and more tolerant and their religious practice more hybrid.

From research on religious coping as well as links between religiosity and well-being, it could have been expected that in difficult and challenging situations, as refugees regularly experience, they would confirm that their faith helps them to cope with life. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents agreed on this supportive function of religion in their lives and told us moving stories of how their faith had helped them on their escape route as well as in their new host country. Apparently, such escape incidents constitute something like key experiences for some of the respondents that further deepens their faith. In their current situation, their faith helps them to cope with frustration and loneliness, gives them hope and confidence, allows them to reframe negative experiences, and supports pro-social integration attitudes. There were almost no hints of extremist or otherwise problematic religious attitudes in the interviews. This, of course, may be due to the self-selection bias that could be linked to our sampling method, which makes our sample unrepresentative. Yet, the results show that religion is, and can be, a valuable resource for young refugees—a fact that, in our opinion, deserves more attention in public discourse and in support and educational services for refugees.

However, our findings also show that religious issues may be a source of trouble and inner conflicts for young refugees as they encounter discrimination and have to tackle a religious and worldview plurality that many of them were unaware of before. On the basis of our interviews, we suggest that the impact factors that influence the young refugees' attitudes toward religious and worldview diversity can be summarized and grouped as depicted below in Table 4.

The biggest challenge for many of the young refugees in our sample was to accept and make sense of people without any religion or belief in God, apparently because in their home countries non-believers do not officially 'exist.' Nor have many of the respondents learnt about theological or secular philosophical concepts that distinguish between religion and morality, or religion and science. It was interesting to see that learning processes seem to have been going on, and are still going on, in some of our interviewees that have been triggered mainly by personal encounters with non-religious friends or in general with secular people who are friendly, nice, and helpful and may even be voluntary caregivers for

Table 4 Impact factors on attitudes toward religious diversity (*Source* own research)

Country of origin <i>past</i>	Host country <i>present</i>
Religious and worldview diversity in society	Religious and worldview diversity in society
Personal encounter with people from other religions or none	Personal encounter with people from other religions or none
Learning about other religions (in RE) at school	Learning about other religions (in RE, Ethics ...) at school
Experiences of conflict or war with religion involved	Experiences of the human right to freedom of religion and belief
	Experiences of discrimination
Theological arguments from one's own religion	
Humanistic / human rights arguments	

refugees. We found remarkable evidence of religious tolerance in the fact that almost half of the respondents (21) indicated that it is not important for them that their life partner would share the same religion, and that more than half of them (25) have non-religious friends.

As to religious communities, the major problem for the young refugees is clearly to find a suitable one. This problem is faced not only by the mostly Arabic-speaking Muslims who encounter mainly Turkish mosques, but also by the Christian-Orthodox respondents.

Education evidently plays an important role for the young refugees. Most of them have high aspirations for their future professions and are therefore highly motivated to work hard at school. Our second research question referred to possible *connections between the refugees' religiosity and educational backgrounds*. Although we found in several interviews that respondents with good cognitive and communicative abilities tended to argue more reflectively on religious issues and hold more tolerant views, we have not been able to confirm such links by correlation analyses. It should be clear, however, that this result cannot be seen as significant or representative because of the small sample.

Having heard about the ambivalence of many teachers in German integration classes towards religion, we also wanted to know how the young refugees experience their teachers in this respect. Although many of them agreed that quite a number of their teachers do not talk about religion in class at all, they testified that most of them are tolerant and fair with regard to religious issues. However, there may be discrimination because of the refugees' religion, and it comes

from some teachers as well as from their classmates. The cases that were reported indicate that this discrimination has to do with a lack of knowledge and indeed some uncertainty as well as a lack of the ability to change perspectives among the teachers and among the students. Obviously, what is needed is more information about, and open discussion of, religions in the classroom and in teacher education alike—at best with authentic (sensitive and tactful) involvement of the students. We refer to 14-year-old Sali who took the initiative and gave an informative presentation about her home country and her life story and thus overcame feelings of strangeness and hostility among her classmates.

We would like to conclude with general impressions about our respondents on the part of the second author of this contribution after having conducted about half of all the interviews of our sample:

I was often the first person with whom they had spoken to so personally and profoundly about their faith. Obviously, they really felt the need to inform me about prejudices and their religion and were very grateful that someone was ‘neutrally’ interested in them and wanted to hear their opinion. Perhaps their willingness to talk about themselves and their religion for two hours, and also their interest in my religious views, can be taken as an indication that they would like to communicate more about religion in an open, dialogical way.

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