

The Meaning of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Youth: The Case of Finnish Christian School Students

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Abstract

Amongst the complex changes in youth, religious development is also particularly salient. This paper analyzes what is the meaning of religion in youth and what are the possible stress factors that one might encounter when upholding a religious worldview in today's world. The participants of this study were 41 grade 9 students (ages 15–16)

attending four different Finnish Christian schools. The results reveal that religion plays a significant role in the lives of the youth. Furthermore, personal faith functioned as a resource in multiple ways, enabling the youth to experience their life as meaningful. Moreover, according to the youth, a personal religious worldview enabled them to find hope, comfort and strength in different life situations. However, religion was also experienced as a stress factor causing challenges in life, such as being subjected to bullying and discrimination. Still, even then the youth viewed religion as an essential part of their life.

Keywords

Religion – personal religious worldview – resource – challenge – youth – experience

1 Introduction

For several years Europe in particular has been facing a trend of secularization.¹ Christianity today can be seen to be contested by new ways of thinking about the modern world, but still Evangelical Lutheranism, for example, has maintained its position in the Nordic countries.² Among other European countries, Finland has also been recognized as an increasingly secular state. In 2020, there were 3,7 million³ members of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church out of an entire population of 5,5 million residents.⁴ In comparison 60,086 Finns were members of the Orthodox church and 3,236 were Adventists.⁵ So, at some level Finns are still committed to membership of the Lutheran Church. However, it cannot be overlooked that the population of Finns belonging to

1 Josip Bozanic, "Religion and the future of Europe," in *Youth in Europe II: An international empirical study about religiosity*, ed. Hans- Georg Ziebertz and William K. Kay (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 8–10; William K. Kay and Hans-Georg Ziebertz, "Understanding Religion and the Religiosity of European Youth," in *Youth in Europe II: An international empirical study about religiosity*, ed. Hans- Georg Ziebertz and William K. Kay (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 15–32.

2 Sinnemäki Kaius et al, *On the Legacy of Lutheranism in Finland* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society /SKS, 2019), 9–10.

3 "iirx – Belonging to a religious community by age and sex, 1999–2020," Statistics Finland, accessed January 10, 2022. https://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin_vrm_vaerak/statfin_vaerak_pxt_iirx.px/.

4 "Foreign-language speakers helped maintain population increase," Statistics Finland, March 31, 2021. https://www.stat.fi/til/vaerak/2020/vaerak_2020_2021-03-31_tie_001_en.html.

5 Statistics Finland, "Belonging to a religious community."

the Lutheran Church has gradually decreased over recent decades. In 2020 the total share was 69,7 per cent but in 2010 it was as high as 80,3, and also the percentage of Finns not belonging to any registered religious organization has increased by 17,25 per cent in the past 20 years.⁶ The importance of religion in Finland has decreased especially among younger generations.⁷ In other words nowadays Finnish youth might not find personal meaning in Christianity and believing in God in their lives⁸ but rather shape their worldviews to be more open to other non-Christian views as well.⁹ But as societal hegemony has become increasingly secularized, together with youth's peer group, even the majority Lutheran youth that hold a more religious personal worldview can experience alienation and fear of bullying in their peer group.¹⁰

The noticeable change in the Finnish religious scene is reflected in the change of Finns' religious practice into a more private form¹¹, the decrease in general support for the doctrines of Christianity,¹² as well as the forgotten transmission of Christian traditions to succeeding generations.¹³ Also, it has been noted that among Finnish families in general discussion of religion and religious values has decreased, which also emphasizes the gap in the transmission of certain religious values from generation to generation.¹⁴ Overall rapid

6 Ibid.

7 Kimmo Ketola, "Religion and the Cultural Turning Point," in *Religion in Daily Life and Celebration: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*, ed. Hanna Salomäki et al. (The Church Institute: Publication 65, 2021a), 37.

8 Jenni Spännäri, Laura Kallatsa and Kati Tervo-Niemelä, "Ei oo puhuttu: Uskonnosta puhuminen ja puhumattomuus Suomalaisissa perheissä" [We haven't spoken: "Talking about religion and not talking about it in Finnish families], *Uskonto, katsomus ja kasvatus [Journal for the studies of religion, worldviews and education]* 2, no.1 (2022).

9 Anna Juntunen, "Minä uskon hyvään elämään: Nuoret ja elämäntulussa rakentuva toimijuus" [I believe in a good life: Young people and agency built in the course of life] (PhD, diss., University of Helsinki, 2019): 54.

10 Saila Poulter, Anna-Leena Riitaoja and Arniika Kuusisto, "Thinking multicultural education 'otherwise' from a secularist construction towards a plurality of epistemologies and worldviews." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 14, no.1 (2016); Maria Zackariasson, "Being Yourself: Identity and Self-presentation among Youths in Christian Youth Organizations." *Young (Stockholm, Sweden)* 22, no. 2 (2014).

11 Maarit Hytönen, Kimmo Ketola and Veli-Matti Salminen, "Everyday Religious Practice," in *Religion in Daily Life and Celebration: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*, ed. Hanna Salomäki et al. (The Church Institute: Publication 65, 2021).

12 Kimmo Ketola, "Religious Identities and Beliefs are Diversifying," in *Religion in Daily Life and Celebration: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*, ed. Hanna Salomäki et al. (The Church Institute: Publication 65, 2021b), 89.

13 Maarit Hytönen et al. "Conclusions," in *Religion in Daily Life and Celebration: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland* ed. Hanna Salomäki et al. (The Church Institute: Publication 65, 2021), 269.

14 Spännäri, Kallatsa and Tervo-Niemelä, "Ei oo puhuttu" [We haven't spoken], 30.

immigration and the emergence of different religious communities has made Finland increasingly multi-religious.¹⁵ For instance, the number of Muslims in Finland in 2021 was approximately 110,000–120,000.¹⁶

It is clear that some form of secularization has also landed in Finland, drawing attention to what faith and religion mean in the lives of people today. People are indeed still searching for what is meaningful in life although Christianity's answers to this can no longer be assumed to be universally shared.¹⁷ However, it can still be asked whether the modern world with its unstable character and contradictions also creates a need for religion in people's lives?¹⁸ The fact is that, despite the increasing secular values in society, church and religion especially for some Finnish youth are experienced as having a relevant place in modern society although attending church isn't particularly something all Finnish youth consider a regular part of their lives.¹⁹

While membership of the Lutheran Church in Finland has encountered a gradual decrease, in a way a growing interest in Christian schools can be detected. In 2008 there were 12 such schools²⁰ and at present in 2022 there are 17 Christian schools in Finland with a total of 2300 students in basic education and 70 students at upper secondary level.²¹ The Finnish Christian comprehensive schools consist of students from grade 1 (aged 7) through 9 (aged 15–16) and the education provided is also free of charge as in public schools.

Although Christian schools in Finland offer instruction in a school context founded on Christian values, their teaching must comply with the general rules

15 Jussi Sohlberg and Kimmo Ketola, "Religious Communities," in *Religion in daily life and celebration: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland*, ed. Hanna Salomäki et al. (The Church Institute: Publication 65, 2021), 66.

16 Johanna Konttori and Teemu Pauha, "Finland," in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, ed. Egdūnas Račius et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2021) 237–238.

17 David Voas and Laura Watt, "Numerical Change in Church Attendance: National, local and Individual Factors," The Church of England, February 2014. <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/church-growth-research-programme/findings-and-reports>.

18 Hans-Georg Ziebertz and William K. Kay, "Religiosity in Youth- a comparative analysis," in *Youth in Europe II: An international empirical study about religiosity*, ed. Hans-Georg Ziebertz and William K. Kay (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006), 239.

19 Juntunen, "Minä uskon hyvään elämään [I believe in a good life];55, Suvi-Maria Katariina Saarelainen, "Lack of Belonging as Disrupting the Formation of Meaning and Faith," *Journal of youth and theology* 17, no. 2 (2018):143.

20 Kirsti Saari, "Dialogisuus ja kohtaaminen- Tutkimus kristillisten koulujen toimintakulttuurista kasvatussuhteen näkökulmasta" [Dialogue and encountering- A study of the operating culture of Christian schools from the perspective of the educational relationship (PhD, diss., University of Helsinki, 2009), 5.

21 "Suomen kristilliset koulut," [The Christian schools of Finland], Kristillisten koulujen ja päiväkotien liitto [The Union of Christian schools and Kindergartens], accessed October 9, 2021. <https://kristillinenkoulu.fi>.

and goals set for basic education by the Finnish National Board of Education.²² Therefore, instruction in these schools is also non-confessional and non-aligned and the teaching must therefore be carried out without engaging students in a particular set of worldviews.²³ Even though the number of Christian school students among comprehensive school students in Finland is very low, obviously there are still families and youth who opt for Christians schools, possibly as a safer environment to engage in one's faith. There are still young adults in Finland who would like their children to have a Christian upbringing,²⁴ and for those families these schools may also be perceived as safe havens supporting Christian family values within the increasingly secular values in today's society.

This study examines the significance of religion and spirituality for Finnish youth attending Christian schools. More precisely it aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How does youth express the meaning of faith in their lives? And (2) What kinds of challenges or resources do the youth present to account for their personal religious worldview? There is fairly little research on this topic in Finland, whereas globally the topic has gained a wider scholarly interest. In this study personal faith refers to one's own experiences that there is a higher being in which one can trust and lean on in life, and Christianity refers to the embraced perceptions of one's life and existence through a Christian worldview based on the teachings of the Bible. Overall, youth are going through a stage of life involving complex developmental processes.²⁵ In addition to the ongoing multidimensional changes in mind and body, changes in young people's religious development are also found to be particularly salient.²⁶ Thus, religiosity and spirituality can be seen to offer

22 "Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014" [National Core Curricula for Basic Education 2014], Opetushallitus [Finnish National Agency for Education], accessed November 10, 2021. <https://www.oph.fi/fi/koulutus-ja-tutkinnot/perusopetuksen-opetussuunnitelman-perusteet>.

23 Ibid.

24 Kimmo Kääriäinen et al. "Facing Diversity: The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland from 2004 to 2007." (Tampere: The Church Research Institute, 2009).

25 Joav Merrick, Ariel Tenenbaum and Hatim A.Omar, "Adolescent Health Issues," in *School, Adolescence and Health Issues*, ed. Joav Merrick, Ariel Tenenbaum and Hatim A.Omar (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2014), 1.

26 Pamela Ebstynne. King, Casey E Clardy and Jenel Sánchez Ramos, "Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in The Lives of Diverse Youth," *Journal of adolescent research* 29, no. 2 (2014): 189; Carol A. Markstrom, "Religious Involvement and Adolescent Psychological Development." *Journal of adolescence* 22, no.2 (1999); Annette Mahoney et al. "Adolescents' Relationship with God and Internalizing Adjustment Over Time: The Moderating role of Maternal Religious Coping," *Journal of family psychology* 28, no. 6 (2014): 749.

meaning as part of youth's identity process filled with yearnings for something greater.²⁷ In regard to this, it is important to study what role religion and spirituality can play in youth, during the period when youth navigates through big life choices amongst all the changes and questions affecting modern society.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 *Religion and Spirituality in Youth*

Religion and spirituality as concepts have gained a broader interest in western culture and also in research practice; however, it is suggested that the definitions of the topics still lack consensus.²⁸ Spirituality can be defined as one's search for meaning and purpose in life²⁹ and as a process where one is creating a link between "my life" and "all life" with or without a relation to religion.³⁰ Overall, spiritual connection with or without religious beliefs has been seen to function as a resource, as such connection has been connected with feelings of hope and peace in the midst of hardships in life.³¹ Religion in this study is understood as individuals' personal religious worldview consisting of either an embraced religious or non-religious worldview.³² This study focuses especially on the youth which identify themselves as Christians and hence have a religious worldview.

A study of diverse youth found that the concept of spirituality with or without a religious context can still be seen as central to the lives of many young people.³³ Also, a strong sense of connection to something beyond, such as God or the absolute truth and experiences of God as the source of feelings concerning transcendence, has been noted among youth with diverse religious backgrounds as well in youth in Catholic schools.³⁴ However, youth has also been

27 Ibid.

28 Doug Oman, "Defining Religion and Spirituality," in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 2nd edition, ed. Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. (New York: Guilford Press, 2013), 23.

29 Ruth Tanyi, "Towards Clarification of the Meaning of Spirituality," *Journal of advanced nursing* 39, no. 5 (2002): 506.

30 Peter L. Benson, "Foreword," in *Positive Youth and Spirituality: From Theory to Research*, ed. Richard M Lerner et al. (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), viii.

31 Tanyi, "Towards Clarification," 506.

32 Poulter et al. "Thinking multicultural education"

33 King, Clardy and Ramos, "Adolescent spiritual Exemplars."

34 Kath Engebretson, "Expressions of Religiosity and Spirituality Among Australian 14 Year Olds," *International journal of children's spirituality* 7, no. 1 (2002):65; King, Clardy and Ramos, "Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars,"195.

associated with religious instability and a declining of religiosity.³⁵ Specific developmental tasks in youth, such as development of formal thought, allow youth to comprehend abstract concepts more broadly, which can lead them to have an ability to experience something beyond themselves as compared to concrete impressions of religion and spirituality in childhood.³⁶

Mental health issues and depression can have increased significance in youth due to complex life stage changes.³⁷ Smith has proposed that religion and a higher sense of God could support youth's skills and competence that promote their overall well-being and offer resources to process life's mental and emotional troubles.³⁸ Feelings of depression and loss of hope can also be the guiding forces which direct youth to seek God or something beyond themselves.³⁹ Studies have shown that higher levels of religious and spiritual well-being and a stronger connection to God in youth predicted fewer mental health problems and risks of developing internal problems.⁴⁰ Also, a positive connection between youth's participation in faith communities and fewer depressive symptoms has been noted.⁴¹ In addition, a study among 13–15-year-old adolescents indicated that conventional religiosity compared to paranormal beliefs was unrelated to young people's suicidal ideation.⁴²

35 Mark D Regnerus and Jeremy E Uecker, "Finding Faith, Losing Faith: The Prevalence and Context of Religious Transformations During Adolescence," *Review of religious research* 47, no. 3 (2006): 217.

36 King, Clardy and Ramos, "Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars," 190; Markstrom, "Religious Involvement."

37 Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, "Adolescence and Mental Health," *The Lancet* 393, no. 10185 (2019): 2030.

38 Christian Smith, "Theorizing Religious Effects Among American Adolescents," *journal for scientific study of religion* 42, no.1 (2003): 23.

39 Tick Ngee Sim and Amanda Shixian Yow, "God Attachment, Mother Attachment, and Father Attachment in Early Middle Adolescence," *journal of religion and health* 50, no.2 (2011).

40 Lee M Huuskens et al. "Is Belief in God Related to Differences in Adolescents' Psychological Functioning?" *journal for the scientific study of religion* 55, no.1 (2016); Morey et al. "Adolescents' Relationship With God," 754; Nurizan Yahaya et al. "Spiritual Well-Being and Mental Health among Malaysian adolescents," *life Science journal* 9, no.1 (2012).

41 Jason L Horowitz and Judy Garber, "Relation of Intelligence and Religiosity to Depressive Disorders in Offspring of Depressed and Nondepressed Mothers," *journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 42, no.5 (2003): 583; Jill W Sinha, Ram A Cnaan and Richard J Gelles, "Adolescent Risk Behaviours and Religion: Findings from a National Study," *journal of adolescence* 30, no.2 (2007): 233.

42 Mandy Robbin and Leslie J Francis, "The Spiritual Revolution and Suicidal Ideation: An Empirical Enquiry Among 13- to 15 -Year-Old Adolescents in England and Wales," *International journal of children's spirituality* 14, no.3 (2009): 267.

Hence, religiosity can in some ways be seen as a protective system in youth.⁴³ In fact, God-focused coping among youth has seemed to enhance life satisfaction⁴⁴ and believing in God or even occasional uncertainty of beliefs may result in better resilience among life's challenges than when not believing.⁴⁵ In fact a connection with God or a higher being in the lives of youth has been found to be the source of achieving and experiencing hope and inner peace.⁴⁶ In regard to this, studies have noticed that prayer, trust in God and willingness to share life's situations with God through prayer were higher among youth who identified themselves as both religious and spiritual.⁴⁷

Previous research shows that for some youth, feelings of self-worth in youth are linked with their experiences of connectedness to a higher power, and it is also suggested that emotional longings to experience love and guidance by a higher being who gives meaning and offers direction in life are important.⁴⁸ Although the period of youth is filled with searching and questioning, studies have also suggested that youth who embraced their spirituality with or without a religious aspect and devotion to God or a higher reality experienced strength and purpose in life.⁴⁹ Youth have also been seen to find meaning in life and in their own existence through holding perceptions of a loving and caring God.⁵⁰ So, religion can be understood as something that provides moral standards and guidance, and hence religion could act as a possible resource in shaping a life trajectory and life choices in youth.⁵¹ Also, King and colleagues found that embraced spirituality with or without religion among youth was experienced as giving a desire to act morally and as providing guidance on what is right or wrong.⁵²

43 Morey et al." Adolescents' Relationship With God,"; Smith," Theorizing"

44 Jeffrey P Bjorck et al." The Adolescent Religious Coping Scale: Development, Validation, and Cross-validation," *journal of child and family studies* 19, no.3 (2010): 355.

45 Huuskes et al." Is Belief in God," 47.

46 Azam Shirinabadi Farahani et al. "Hope, the Foundation of Spiritual Health in Adolescence: A Qualitative study," *Iranian red crescent medical journal* 18, no.12 (2016): 2.

47 Arndt Büssing et al." Aspects of Spirituality in Adolescents," *International journal of children's spirituality* 15, no.1 (2010a): 36; Engebretson," Expressions of Religiosity,"65.

48 Arndt Büssing," Aspects of spirituality, God-images, and the 'self-centredness' in 17 year old adolescents attending religious education at high school," *Research On Steiner Education* 1, no.1 (2010b): 82.

49 King, Clardy and Ramos," Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars,"199; Kirsi Tirri and Brandy Quinn," Exploring the Role of Religion and Spirituality in the Development of Purpose: Case Studies of Purposeful Youth," *British journal of religious education* 32, no.3 (2010): 212.

50 Engebretson," Expressions of Religiosity," 65; King, Clardy and Ramos," Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars," 198.

51 Smith," Theorizing," 20–21.

52 King, Clardy and Ramos, "Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars," 201.

On a social note, religious and spiritual development does not happen in a vacuum but in social relations with others.⁵³ For example, families have an important role in youth's religious development and in the sustainability of religious beliefs.⁵⁴ Spirituality in a religious community setting offers a fertile and secure environment for youth to explore their identities and ask wider questions,⁵⁵ and supports value transmission in the families.⁵⁶ Tirri and Quinn, however, noted that the seeking of purpose in a spiritual and religious context does not require a religious community in order for it to be experienced, but it can offer support and transcendental understanding in the midst of this process.⁵⁷

2.2 *Youth's Religion and Spirituality: A Possible Burden Among its Benefits?*

Although, in the light of the research literature presented above, religion and spirituality in youth can be seen to have multiple positive and supporting effects, it is also important to recognize the possible reverse sides and challenges of religiosity in youth.

Recent study has highlighted that religious youth, when compared to their secular peers, might experience more pressure as they are expected to act according to specific rules and expectations set by religion, thus the questioning of religious identity and beliefs when growing up in affiliation to religious communities or family traditions might be regarded as something causing disapproval.⁵⁸ Interestingly a previous study on Finnish youth growing up affiliated to a minority Christian community found that youth specifically highlighted the openness to their own, also critical questions, as one of the factors that supported their adoption of Christian values also personally – and

53 Kati Tervo-Niemelä, "Religious Upbringing and Other Influences Among Young Adults and Changes in Faith in the Transition to Adulthood," *British journal of religious education* 43, no.4 (2021); Linda Vikdahl and Johan Liljestrand, "Conditions for Identity Development Among Religious Immigrant Youth," *Journal of beliefs and values* 4, no.3 (2021): 327.

54 Tervo-Niemelä, "Religious Upbringing." "Vikdahl and Liljestrand," "Conditions for Identity," 327; Arniika Kuusisto, "Growing up in Affiliation with a Religious Community: A Case Study of Finnish Adventist Youth," *Research of Religious and Spiritual Education*, 3(Münster: Waxmann, 2011); Arniika Kuusisto, "Feet Sturdily on the Ground but thoughts in Heaven: Religious socialisation goals for parents in families affiliated with religious minority," *Journal of Religious Education* 61, no.3 (2013).

55 Huuskas et al. "Is Belief in God," 49.

56 Kuusisto, "Growing up."

57 Tirri and Quinn, "Exploring the Role," 212–213.

58 Vered Ne'eman-Haviv, Wilchek- Aviad Yael and Lahav Chaim, "Is Religiosity a Risk or a Protective Factor? The Connection Between Religiosity and Deviance Among Religious Youths," *Israel Affairs* 26, no. 3 (2020): 419–421.

saw the contrary as risking the failure of their family value education.⁵⁹ Thus, giving youth the possibility to question their religious identity can be seen as resulting in a mature faith where the consolidation of religious beliefs comes from the youth themselves and is not dictated from outside.⁶⁰

As the embracing of religion can be a challenge in the midst of the ongoing growth of secular values, communities at societal level can also be seen to have a non-supportive effect on individuals' religious and spiritual identity. Vikdahl and Liljestrand found a connection between embraced religious beliefs in immigrant youth and experienced discrimination on the part of modern society.⁶¹ To some extent the discrimination resulted in hiding one's religious identity but, regardless of society's opinions, the youth still wanted to preserve their religious position.⁶² Also, the experience of the religious youth in the study by Dollahite and colleagues was that the sacrifices made because of their faith actually gave them a sense of meaning and purpose in life and they had a chance to connect more deeply with God or a higher power, even if it meant becoming estranged from peer relations and not being socially accepted.⁶³ Finding a personally meaningful way to solve value conflicts – whatever the practical solution for each individual may entail – seems therefore to have a key role in being satisfied with the choices and resolutions made in the everyday.⁶⁴

In view of the social exclusion taking place in the wider society because of religion, previous research has noted that youth from religious minorities in public school settings might encounter some degree of rejection from surrounding groups.⁶⁵ The youth with religious minority status had experienced

59 Kuusisto, "Growing up."

60 Ne'eman-Haviv, Yael and Chaim, "Is Religiosity a Risk," 424.

61 Vikdahl and Liljestrand, "Conditions for Identity."

62 Vikdahl and Liljestrand, "Conditions for identity"; Zackariasson, "Being Yourself"; Arniika Kuusisto, Saila Poulter and Arto Kallioniemi, "Finnish pupils' views on the place of religion in school," *Religious Education* 112, no.2 (2017).

63 David C Dollahite et al. "Giving up something Good for Something Better: Sacred Sacrifices Made by Religious Youth," *Journal of adolescent research* 24, no. 6 (2009).

64 Arniika Kuusisto, "Social networks and value negotiations of religious minority youth in diverse social contexts," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 33, no.5 (2010); Silja Lamminmäki-Vartia, Saila Poulter & Arniika Kuusisto, "The learning trajectory or emerging professionalism: A Finnish student teacher negotiating world-view education and early childhood education and care superdiversity," *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 21, no. 4 (2020).

65 David R Dupper, Shandra Forrest- Bank and Autumn Lowry- Carusillo, "Experiences of Religious Minorities in Public School Settings: Findings from Focus Groups Involving Muslim, Jewish, Catholic and Unitarian Universalists Youths," *Children & schools* 37, no.1(2015); Olga Schihalejev et al. "Religion and children's' perceptions of bullying in multicultural schools in Estonia, Finland and Sweden," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 41, no.3 (2020).

several situations in which their religious identity was being discriminated against and this appeared in different forms such as being singled out from the rest and being bullied both verbally and physically because of their differing beliefs.⁶⁶

In regard to the above, it cannot be overlooked that religion and spirituality in youth may serve as both an asset and a resource, and cause challenges and compromises. Although a religious value set may provide security and direction for youth among challenges, it is also important to note that the demands of certain religious boundaries can add to experiences of social and personal pressure as well as trigger exclusion and discrimination.

3 Research Questions

In this paper we focus on whether religion and spirituality are experienced as a resource among 9th grade (15–16-year-old) students in Finnish Christian schools. Furthermore, we look into the possible challenges encountered when holding a Christian worldview. Based on this, the following research task was formed: *What is the meaning of religion in 9th grade students' life?* The research problem is approached through two research questions:

- 1 How is religion experienced as a resource among students in Finnish Christian secondary schools?
- 2 *What kind of challenges have Finnish Christian secondary school students encountered because of their religious worldview?*

4 Methods

4.1 Ethical Considerations

The study was carried out according to the principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019) throughout the project.⁶⁷ First, the schools were contacted through a cover letter which explained the purpose and the aims of the research. The parents gave written permission for the youths' participation, which was naturally completely voluntary, also for the youth themselves throughout the process. All the data was collected and

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "Responsible conduct of research and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct in Finland," Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK, accessed November 10, 2021. <https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials/RCR-Guidelines-2012>.

analyzed while maintaining participant anonymity. The background information gathered was the student's age, gender, grade, the student's own and his/her parents' religious conviction.

4.2 *Data Collection and Participants*

The data analyzed in this paper were collected as a part of a broader research project, *Encountering Diversity in Education* (EDEN) in 2017. The overall data include three age groups in the comprehensive school: 3rd, 6th and 9th grades, that is, ages 9–10, 12–13, and 15–16 (N=1301) as well as upper secondary school students (N=973). The majority of the data were from municipal public schools; however, a sub-sample from four Christians schools was also included deriving data from 7th, 8th and 9th grade students and also from students at upper secondary level. This study focuses on final grade students comprising the 15–16 age group in Christian schools at lower secondary level.

The data were collected anonymously via a paper questionnaire that was distributed to students through teachers in the classrooms and completed during lesson time. Overall, the questionnaire focused on youth's views on worldview diversity and the place of religion in educational settings from a wide range of perspectives and on students' perceptions of the place of religion and religious diversity in school, as well as on their own worldview and values. In this article, we focus, in line with the research problem presented above and its sub-questions, on the following two open-ended questions from the questionnaire:

1. Has view of life / religion served as a resource in your life? How?
2. *If religion / belief has caused difficulties in your life, what have they been like and how were they resolved?*

4.3 *Data and Sample*

Altogether 144 Christian school lower secondary level students participated in the study, 57 of which were 7th graders, 46 8th graders and 41 9th graders. In this study we focused on the answers of the 9th graders (15–16-year-olds) whose data filled nine pages. The original expressions of the informants varied from few words to few sentences. The reason for focusing on the eldest students in the data was that they have the longest experience of being a student in a Christian secondary school, and therefore can be expected to have possibly developed a deeper understanding of what kind of role religion has played in general in their lives throughout their school years. Furthermore, as we were also interested in the possible life situations or experiences where they may have encountered challenges or utilized religion as a resource, these youth would, due to their somewhat older age, have possibly had more experience

of youth conflicts and resolutions as well as social contacts with different peer groups and social contexts.

4.4 *Limitations of the Study*

The sample size is small, and although the overall population of students in Finland is similarly small with only a few Christian schools, the results presented here must be interpreted with caution, and naturally we are not even aiming for broader generalizations. However, this population is very scarcely studied, and a relatively similar situation exists in the neighboring Nordic context, for example, where society is both increasingly multi-religious and notably secular in its Lutheran cultural heritage. Our hope is that further studies will continue to explore these questions in both Finnish and international contexts as well as across denominational educational settings also in the future.

4.5 *Analytical Method*

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis and therefore analyzed qualitatively. Tuomi and Sarajärvi have pointed out that almost always the researcher's earlier knowledge impacts the observation of the data.⁶⁸ Also, in this study the data analysis preceded acquaintance with earlier research data, which also encloses the abductive nature of the analysis alongside the inductive framework. The same analysis framework was used for both of the research problems. Braun and Clarke have sought to identify the course of thematic analysis: After thorough reading of the material and coding of the expressions the aim is to form themes and evaluate them guided by the research questions and finally summarize and name them descriptively.⁶⁹ The data were first read through multiple times while notes were made of the experiences emerging from the informants. The original expressions were compressed using coding. Cohen, Manion and Morrison have outlined coding as a process where the researcher breaks down segments of the data into smaller units and continues to categorize them through further examination,⁷⁰ whereas Braun and Clarke assign codes as the building blocks for themes.⁷¹ First, the constructed codes were roughly themed, followed by a more detailed approach which resulted in the formation of the main themes and their subthemes. One experience could

68 Jouni Tuomi and Anneli Sarajärvi, "Laadullinen tutkimus ja sisällönanalyysi [Qualitative research and content analysis]," (Helsinki: Tammi, 2018).

69 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2 (2017).

70 Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, "Research Methods in Education: Eight Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018).

71 Braun and Clarke, "Using thematic analysis."

TABLE 1 Progression of the analysis regarding the first open-ended question

Original expression	Code	Subtheme: How the resource occurs	Main theme: What kind of resource
<i>It has served as a resource. In many ways, you will notice how religion and belief have a positive impact on life. You can trust in God in everything. (155)</i>	<i>Refuge and security</i>	<i>Provides general refuge and security in all aspects of life.</i>	<i>Provider of security</i>

simultaneously include several main themes, which emphasizes the fact that these real-life processes are often “messy”,⁷² concurrent, or derived from each other. Each main theme concerning the experienced resources and experienced stress factors causing challenges included subthemes according to how the resource or challenge was told to occur in one’s life.

Table 1 above illustrates the progression of the analysis from the original expressions to the themes with regard to the first open-ended question. The same course of analysis was also used for the second open-ended question.

5 Results

Overall, in answering the question about how the youth in Finnish Christian schools experienced their personal religious worldview as a resource in their lives, out of the 41 respondents, half wrote that religion had acted as a resource in their lives, and the remainder had either not experienced religion as a resource, expressed uncertainty about the matter, or left the question blank. As for the expressed challenges related to their personal religious worldview, nearly a third reported that they had encountered challenges, almost the same amount had not encountered any challenges, a few expressed uncertainty about whether they had faced challenges and almost a quarter did not respond to the question.

The first open-ended question (religion as a resource) formed five main themes and the second question (challenges encountered concerning personal religious worldview) formed three. Information on the frequency of themes is

⁷² Lamminmäki-Vartia, Poulter and Kuusisto, “The learning trajectory.”

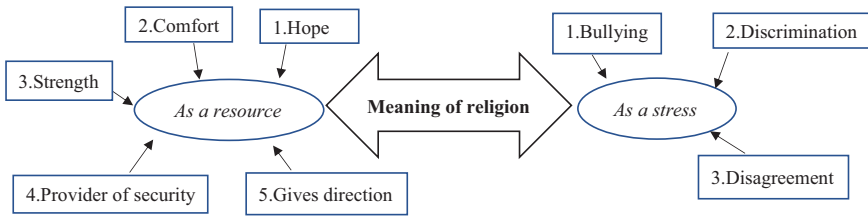


FIGURE 1 Youth's experiences of personal religious worldview: navigating between faith-based resources and challenges.

not presented due to the small sample size: the key focus was nevertheless on exploring the kind of experiences that would arise in youth's life concerning religion as either a resource for dealing with or as a cause of challenging situations. Therefore, in this regard, the main themes and their subthemes are not indicated in a particular order of importance, thus the themes in question could be seen as overlapping. The main themes formed concerning both open-ended questions are presented in figure 1 and the formed subthemes are indicated and explored more widely in the research findings below.

5.1 *Religion as a Resource*

5.1.1 Hope

Faith in God was expressed in the data as something that gives hope in life. Hope was generally mentioned as an experience of what religion produces, as one student explained: *"It has, it gives hope in life -- "* (152). In some experiences a feeling of hope was also linked to life situations where hope manifests itself, thus forming two subthemes *1a) Life's crises* and *1b) Meaning in life*.

When facing life's crises in which hope could be seen as lost, faith in God was expressed as serving as a giver of hope. Particular crises mentioned were loss of a loved one, depression and existential crises: *"Religion helps in the dark times of my life. Like depression. For example, during the death of a relative or in existentialist crises"* (15). So, in a way faith in God was experienced as something to lean on in tough and uncertain times. Hope experienced in life's crises through faith in God led to a feeling that one's life has a meaning and purpose which appeared as a desire to be and stay alive: *"One reason why I won't commit suicide"* (n). In other words, such experience of one's purpose gave a sense that one's life is valuable in God's eyes hence life is worth living. When life was experienced as meaningful it also gave a desire to do good in the world: *"It gives motivation -- to stay alive and do good in the world"* (17) and gave hope of life after death: *"-- When you live out your faith, you can get to heaven and that's the best thing in the world"*(152).

5.1.2 Comfort

Faith in God was mentioned to be the source of comfort. Comfort was experienced as an inner feeling but was also linked to situations encountered in life which formed two subthemes 2a) *Pain and illness* and 2b) *Fear*. In the midst of pain and sickness God was experienced as a companion who gave comfort and resilience: *“Yes, when I am sick or facing pain, God is with me”* (154). Also, when facing fear, faith in God was experienced as a comfort: *“ – In pain and in my fears I have been comforted. – ”* (16). In these situations, faith in a way made it possible to feel God’s presence in one’s life and therefore gave a sense that God is always near and never leaves one.

5.1.3 Strength

Faith in God as an inner feeling was experienced as giving strength in life: *“It has given strength and helped (me) to move forward – – ”* (153). Prayer and reading the Bible were mentioned as resources and tools that enable the feeling of strength in life’s situations, on the basis of which subthemes 3a) *Prayer* and 3b) *Bible reading* were formed.

Prayer was presented in the data as turning to God: *“ – – And there’s always someone to turn to ”* (379) and as asking for things in one’s life through prayer: *“ – – I can always ask God for help and trust him ”* (156). Prayer was also seen as something that formed a relationship with God and thus was a way to speak to God: *“I feel able to find relief from stressful things as I pray”* (160). Praying to God enabled asking for help in any situation and gave a chance to tell about life’s worries: *“There is always someone to share your concerns with and ask for help. God gives peace to my heart and rest if I ask”* (357). It was felt that through prayer you can receive practical benefits such as rest, peace and joy: *“ – – God gives strength and positive things to my life ”* (355), and see small miracles of everyday life happen: *“ – – Small everyday miracles and other things happen when I tell God about my problems and difficulties ”* (158). Reading the Bible was understood as the word of God that gives strength to move on and face challenges: *“I have gained strength from the Bible & the words of God in difficult times”* (157). Faith in God in a way enabled the youth to have certain coping skills in situations where one’s own strength is lost and limited.

5.1.4 Provider of Security

Religion was also described by the youth as a provider of security in life. Security occurred as a feeling that one’s life is in the hands of some greater power: *“ – – You can trust God in everything ”* (155). Some expressions pointed out that specifically God was the source of security, which formed the subtheme 4a) *Refuge in God*

The feeling of security resulted in trust in God as someone who always cares: " – – *I can rely on and trust God in any situation*" (358), in which case one does not have to encounter life's situations alone: "*I live and I am in a relationship with God. I feel like I'm not alone* – – " (158). In this experience specifically, an everyday connection to God where one can sense God as a friend on whom you can rely was something that offered security in ordinary life situations. Refuge in God also gave a chance to accept things that happen in life: " – – *I have understood why things have gone the way they have*" (16). So, in a way faith in God was experienced as giving a chance to feel peace even when everything in life does not turn out the way one has thought. The feeling of security was emphasized by the fact that God was understood as a real helper who walks alongside you: "*You can always count on everything going well, like you have a sense of trust* – – " (379).

5.1.5 Gives Direction

Religion was described as something that gives direction in life. In this case faith was generally experienced as directing life at all levels: "*Yes. My life revolves around it*" (2). Some of the students also pointed out ways in which faith can be experienced as a guide in life, which formed the subtheme 5a) *Life advice*. The subtheme in question contains experiences of how religion was perceived to give clarity in life's choices as well as instructions on how one should act in life.

The life advice received through religion appeared as an understanding of grace and forgiveness in how you should treat yourself and others. As one participant elucidated: "*Forgiveness towards myself and others has improved*" (16). The Bible was also seen as a source of information when one faces questions in life that require answers: " – – *When I read the Bible, I often get answers to everyday life's moral questions.* – – " (355). Through such experience the Bible as the living word of God was experienced as relevant even in today's modern world. Religion as a guide in life was also experienced as giving the will and resources to act in accordance with social norms as if faith in God was a reason to act properly in life: "*It has! It gives motivation to act according to the rules* – – " (17). In a way such experience of faith in God gave a sense that you are responsible for your actions, which makes you want to do the right thing.

5.2 Experiences of Stress and Otherness Related to Religion

5.2.1 Bullying

Some of the students had been subjected to bullying because of their faith in God. Bullying had occurred in the school environment and in everyday human relations. In some cases, bullying was brought up in general and not connected to a specific setting: "*I have not yet faced crises because of my religion except*

maybe when I'm bullied because of it" (15). Bullying had also been encountered when one's own Christian denomination and the values adopted through it differed from others, as one Adventist student illustrated: "I was bullied in elementary school because of my vegetarianism – –" (16).

Encountered bullying had been carried out mostly as verbal bullying, on which basis the subtheme 1a) *Verbal bullying* was formed. Verbal bullying manifested itself as mockery: *"Sometimes I have been mocked a little. I've just ignored it" (153)*, and as disparaging laughter: *"I have been considered strange and been laughed at– –" (152)*. In some cases, how a solution to bullying had been found was also brought up. The solutions found were, for instance, switching from a public school to a Christian school: *"In my previous school. I switched to a Christian school" (19)* and trying to ignore what other people think and how they relate to one's own view of the world.

5.2.2 Discrimination

Because of their Christianity some students had faced discrimination in their lives. Discrimination was experienced among surrounding communities and as a universally shared experience of how Christians are treated almost as a minority. Based on these dimensions the subthemes 2a) *Surrounding communities* and 2b) *Christians as a minority* were formed.

Discrimination in surrounding communities both in religious and non-religious social networks manifested itself as a feeling of externality due to differences in denomination and values. The internal wound caused by such discrimination was however experienced as being healed through God's unconditional love: *"Because of my Adventist family values, I have experienced externality in other Christian and atheistic circles. Understanding God's deep love personally, I am no longer wounded by these facts. In his arms, people's opinions don't matter so much" (16)*. Increasing tolerance and the acceptance of diversity in the world were seen as an exception when involving Christians: *"– –Nowadays diversity is emphasized and praised, but Christians are despised. I feel that as a Christian I am not accepted, even though these are not only my own opinions" (355)*. However, such treatment was accepted as part of the pilgrimage of a Christian: *"– –It feels bad that in this world tolerance is a big deal, but believers are often discriminated against. But I guess it is just something you must endure. However, I would never give up my faith in Jesus at any cost" (152)*. It especially emerged from the students experiences that faith in God and the benefits one can have through it were experienced as something so precious that other people's contrary opinions or mockery were not considered relevant.

5.2.3 Disagreement

Encountered hardships due to differences in opinions occurred in everyday relationships and when interacting with parents. Due to this the subtheme *3a) Relationships* was formed.

Differing opinions in relationships were experienced as causing conflicts in them, such as disputes and arguments: “*Some differences of opinion that cause controversy*” (154), but also, loss of relationships: “*I’ve lost friends because of it, but they weren’t real friends*” (17). Differences of opinion were considered to be resolved by talking, which could lead to a more conscious view of the issue. In disagreements between youth and a parent the opinions presented by parents were often experienced as appealing to the Christianity of what is right or wrong: “*Parents can express their own opinions about what is right or wrong according to the Christian faith*” (379). In a way disagreements among the students were not experienced as unwelcome but as needed when forming deeper relationships with other people.

6 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the meaning of religion and, in this case, the meaning of a personal religious worldview among youth in today’s society, which can be characterized also as modern and secular. In our study of Finnish youth attending Christian schools, we found that a personal religious worldview was experienced both as a resource and also as a stress factor based on the data collected in 2017. The findings are also in line with the previous research showing that religion can be seen to play a significant role in youth⁷³ but can also bring challenges to face in life.⁷⁴ The data also included experiences of situations where religion did not act as a resource in youth’s life.

A personal religious worldview was experienced as a resource in five different aspects: Hope, Comfort, Strength, Safety and Direction in life, but also as a stress factor, i.e. being subjected to Bullying, Discrimination and having to encounter Disagreements in various relations because of differing beliefs. Religion as a resource among the youth enabled them to find meaning in life when facing life’s crises. Feelings of God’s immediate help and comfort

73 See e.g. Engebretson, “Expressions of Religiosity,”; Huuskes et al. “Is Belief in God,”; King, Clardy and Ramos, “Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars,”; Tirri and Quinn, “Exploring the Role.”

74 See e.g. Ne’man- Haviv, Yael and Chaim, “Is Religiosity a Risk,”; Vikdahl and Liljestrand, “Conditions for Identity,”; Dupper, Forrest- Bank and Lowry-Carusillo, “Experiences of Religious,”; Hemming, “No offence but.”

facilitated trust that, no matter what, God is in control, but also provided concrete tools such as prayer and reading of the Bible, which enhanced the feeling of personal religious worldview as a resource and acted as facilitators of strength, joy, peace and guidance in life. In a sense it is worth reflecting on whether the love, care and meaning in life received from God through faith in general, but also in youth's life in today's world, could provide something that perhaps the world and its earthly matters alone are not able to offer and, in a way, prevent feelings of loneliness. Previous studies have suggested that while the period of youth entails searching for self-worth, faith in God could serve as a resource for experiencing one's existence and life as meaningful through a loving God,⁷⁵ but also that a connection to God offers general hope in youth's life.⁷⁶ It is also notable that in some experiences it was rather the personal faith and formed connection to God that facilitated the feeling of a resource in the lives of youth than solely the traditions of religion itself. So, in a way it is relevant to observe that today's youth still have the longing to find personal connection to God even though the common phenomenon among Finnish youth might indicate otherwise.⁷⁷

When religion was experienced among youth in this study as a stress factor, it had occurred as bullying because of one's religious worldview,⁷⁸ which could be seen to have been derived from some degree of minority status within surrounding communities, for example being a Christian in a public school.⁷⁹ Discrimination because of one's beliefs was mentioned as one factor these young people had experienced because of their personal religious worldview as a universally shared experience, but also in their everyday relations. In a way being a Christian was perceived as being a minority in a modern world and thus not being accepted.⁸⁰ This in a way raises questions of whether, despite increasing religious diversity in societies, some forms of religion still suffer at the expense of others.⁸¹ Nevertheless, it is relevant to consider whether Christian schools as an environment could still offer a safe place for both religious and non-religious youth to explore their own beliefs, bearing in mind that both sides and views are heard and acknowledged. As Tirri and Quinn

75 See e.g. Engebretson, "Expressions of Religiosity"; King, Clardy and Ramos, "Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars."

76 See e.g. Farahani et al. "Hope."

77 See e.g. Spännäri, Kallatsa and Tervo-Niemelä, "Ei oo puhuttu" [We haven't spoken].

78 See e.g. Dupper, Forrest-Bank and Lowry- Carusillo, "Experiences if Religious"; Schihalejev et al. "Religion and Children's."

79 See e.g. Schihalejev et al. "Religion and Children's,;" Kuusisto, "Growing up."

80 See e.g. Poulter et al. "Thinking multicultural education."

81 See e.g. Huuskas et al. "Is Belief in God,;" Hemming, "No Offence but,;" Kuusisto, "Growing up."

suggested, a religious community might offer a safe environment for youth to explore existential questions⁸² as well offer the sense of belonging to a community where young people can safely test their views with others and thus offer a gateway to a sense of meaning in life and further facilitate mature and deep faith.⁸³

Despite the challenges encountered through religion, the youth in this study still regarded their personal religious worldview as essential to their lives, thus highlighting the topic of whether the benefits of religion to Christian youth can be seen as something personally meaningful and that it therefore outweighs the possible accompanying downsides. The youth in this study had also experienced loss of friends because of disagreements due to differing beliefs.

7 Conclusions and Future Directions

The present findings highlighted that personal religious worldview was experienced as an essential part of these Christian youths' everyday life and as something that is present in different areas of life. The participants bring forth their experiences of God as a concrete help to turn to, also contributing to their experiences of faith functioning as a personal resource. Thus, the results suggest that personal faith in God can have a notable impact on these youths' overall well-being. The findings also emphasized the fact that in today's secular world religion still has a place in some individuals' lives. However, referring to the increasingly secular societal setting, the youths' accounts also raised questions about the possible decrease in acceptance of religious worldviews, especially as regards their experiences of worldview-related bullying and exclusion. Future research is still needed on the meaning of faith in youth and possibly also on the long-term effects of religiosity in youth on later life. As the data also entailed experiences of religion as not being a resource and some uncertainty was felt about the matter, a more focused future research study on this is needed to gain a wider understanding of this specific phenomenon.

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82 See e.g. Tirri and Quinn, "Exploring the Role."

83 See e.g. Saarelainen, "Lack of Belonging".

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