

Brief report on the research project

“Religion as Resource and Risk (ReReRi). Empirical studies on the religiosity of young people with a refugee background”*

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In public discourse in Germany, the religiosity of immigrants seems to be both overestimated and underestimated. It is overestimated as a fearful core characteristic (“Muslims are invading us!” – “Asylum seekers are religious extremists!”) and underestimated in its positive function of promoting life and integration. Therefore, this research project aimed at providing differentiating insights into how the religiosity of young refugees can function as a resource and a risk in their coping with life and integration.

The respondents were a random sample of 45 young refugees from the metropolitan areas of Nuremberg, Leipzig and Berlin, who were recruited in various ways through contacts with schools, asylum seekers’ homes, intercultural cafeterias and clubs, gatekeepers and via the snowball principle. We limited our search to young people aged 13 to 24 and from six major refugee countries (see Table 1). The interviews were conducted in the second half of 2018.

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 main research question, “What role does the religiosity of young refugees play in their coping with life and their integration?” can be answered well and in a differentiated way based on the results of the study. These results have confirmed the findings of various empirical studies that refugees in Germany, like most people with an immigrant background, tend to have a higher religiosity than the rest of the population. However, we were able to clarify and partially correct earlier findings and assumptions that refugees’ religiosity weakens over time once they have arrived in Germany. Rather, our findings suggest that while this may be true for some, for others, their faith becomes stronger and their religious practice becomes more significant due to the special needs of their new situation, but also due to the challenges posed by the newly experienced religious and ideological plurality. Obviously, quite a few of the refugees are stimulated by the new context of life to position themselves in a more self-determined way than they had to or were allowed to do in their home country. In addition, several respondents report that their faith has become more reflective and tolerant and their religious practice more hybrid.

General research on religious coping has shown predominantly positive correlations between religiosity and the physical-psychological well-being of the respondents. Consequently, it was also to be expected for the young refugees that they would experience their faith as helpful in difficult and

challenging situations. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents did agree with this supportive function of religion in their lives; some of them told us moving stories about how their faith had helped them both on their flight journey and in their new host country. Apparently, for some of the interviewees, such flight experiences represent something like key experiences that have further deepened their faith. In their current situation, their faith helps most of them to cope with frustration and loneliness, gives them hope and confidence, enables them to work through negative experiences, and supports a pro-social integration attitude. In the interviews, there were virtually no indications of extremist or otherwise problematic religious attitudes. This may, of course, be due to the self-selection bias that is probably associated with our sampling, which does not make our sample representative in any way. Nevertheless, the results show that religion is and can be a valuable resource for young refugees – a fact that we believe deserves more attention in public discourse as well as in support and education programs for refugees.

However, our findings also show that religious issues can be a source of difficulty and inner conflict for young refugees as they encounter discrimination and have to deal with a religious and ideological diversity that many of them did not know before. Based on our interviews, we suggest that the factors influencing young refugees' attitudes toward religious and ideological diversity can be summarized and grouped as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Factors influencing young refugees' attitudes toward religious diversity

Country of origin	Host country
<i>Past</i>	<i>Present</i>
Religious and worldview diversity in society	Religious and worldview diversity in society
Personal encounter with people belonging to other religions or none	Personal encounter with people belonging to other religions or none
Learning about other religions at school	Learning about other religions at school
Experiences with conflicts or wars with religious implications	Experiences with conflicts or wars with religious implications
Experiences with discrimination	Experiences with discrimination
Theological arguments from one's own religion	
Humanistic or human rights arguments	

The greatest challenge for many of the young refugees in our sample was to accept and understand people without any religion or belief in God. This seems to be because in their home countries, non-believers do not officially “exist” nor have many of the respondents been exposed to 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 taken place and are still taking place among some of our interviewees, which seem to have been triggered primarily by personal encounters with non-religious friends or with secular people in general who are friendly, kind, helpful, and perhaps even volunteer caregivers for refugees. We found remarkable evidence of religious tolerance in the fact that almost half of the respondents (21) said that it was not important to them that their life partner had the same religion as they, and that more than half of them (25) had non-religious friends.

As far as religious communities are concerned, the biggest problem for the young refugees is clearly finding a suitable one. This problem is faced not only by the majority Arabic-speaking Muslims, who may encounter predominantly Turkish mosques in Germany, but also by the Christian Orthodox respondents, as there are only few Christian Orthodox communities in Germany. Once a suitable religious community has been found, it can obviously be a valuable support for the refugees' coping with life and integration, depending on how actively it looks after migrants and how open it is to German society with its secular and pluralistic features.

Education obviously plays an important role for the young refugees. Most of them have high ambitions for their future profession and are therefore highly motivated to work hard in school. Our second research question related to possible connections between the refugees' religiosity and their educational background. In several interviews, we did find that respondents with good cognitive and communication skills tend to be more reflective in discussing religious issues and hold more tolerant views. However, statistically, no correlations could be demonstrated between education levels and higher religious tolerance. It should be clear, however, that this result cannot be considered significant or representative due to the small sample.

After hearing about the ambivalent and uncertain attitude of many teachers in German integration classes when it comes to the topic of religion, we also wanted to know how the young refugees experience their teachers in this regard. Although many of them agreed that quite a number of their teachers do not talk about religion at all in class, they testified that most of them are tolerant and fair about religious issues. Nevertheless, discrimination based on the religion of refugees can also occur, both by some of their teachers and by their fellow students. The cases reported suggest that this discrimination is primarily related to a lack of knowledge and, indeed, to a certain insecurity as well as to a lack of ability to empathic change in perspective among teachers and among fellow students. Obviously, there is a need for more information about and open discussion of religions in the classroom and in teacher training – preferably with authentic (sensitive and tactful) involvement of the students. The example of Sali, a 14-year-old Muslim girl from Syria, who took the initiative and, at her own request, gave an informative presentation about her home country and her life story, thus overcoming feelings of foreignness and hostility among her fellow students, was impressive.

At the end of this brief report I would like to quote a research diary entry by Julia Bradtke, who conducted nearly half of all the interviews of our project:

“I was often the first person they talked to about their faith in such a personal and profound way. Obviously, they really felt the need to inform me about prejudices and their religion and were very grateful that someone 'neutral' was interested in them and wanted to hear their opinion. Perhaps their willingness to talk about themselves and their religion for two hours, as well as their interest in my religious views, can be taken as an indication that they would like to communicate more about religion in an open, dialogic way.”

For an extended report of our research findings see: Pirner, M. L., & Bradtke, J. (2021). Religion and Education as Resources for Young Refugees. Preliminary Results from an Empirical Mixed-Methods Study. In E. Aslan & M. Hermansen (Eds.), *Religious Diversity at School. Educating for New Pluralistic Contexts* (pp. 41–61). Münster: Waxmann.

For up-to-date information on an extended longitudinal follow-up research project, funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) see: www.rereri.phil.fau.de

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