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Review

Religion and Spiritual Development in Youth Care: A Literature Review

Jos de Kock

Department of Practical Theology, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven, Sint-Jansbergsesteenweg 97, 3001 Leuven, Belgium; jos.dekock@etf.edu

Abstract

Currently, there is a lack of sufficient research regarding spirituality in the lives of young people in youth care contexts. In this study, youth care refers to various forms of either voluntary or mandatory support and care for young people (children and teenagers) and their educators for growing-up problems, parenting problems, and psychological, psychosocial, and behavioral problems or intellectual disabilities. The available research is not systematically gathered in an overview. Against this background, this article presents a systematic literature review based on the following main research question: *What insights can be distilled from scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles published from January 2000–July 2025 regarding spiritual formation in youth care?* The results of the review study were based on 41 journal articles. Half of these articles thematize the foster care context. The other articles are spread over other youth care contexts, including psychiatric care, child and youth welfare, residential care, social work, and services for unaccompanied minors. Most of the articles presented empirical research. Three major themes can be defined that connect most articles: (a) the discussion of religion and spirituality as naturally present in the lives of children and the need or right to recognize that dimension and to facilitate continuity in it; (b) the question or the hypothesis that religion and spirituality can promote well-being, including the finding that this does not always appear unambiguous, up to and including attention to the harmful effects of religion and spirituality; and (c) the question of whether and how religion and spirituality can be used more instrumentally in youth care services to provide the best possible care to young people. The article discusses these findings, and recommendations for youth care professionals and follow-up research are presented.

Keywords: youth care; religion; spiritual development; child welfare; youth ministry; foster care

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1. Introduction

Whereas reflections on spiritual formation among young people often assume the "normal/healthy development" of youth and intact places of upbringing, it is actually more accurate to assume a much more diverse reality. It is important to also see and reflect on contexts of disturbed or fractured development. One area of "disturbed" or "fractured" development is young people growing up in youth care contexts. In this study, youth care refers to various forms of either voluntary or mandatory support and care for young people (children and teenagers) and their educators for growing-up problems, parenting problems, and psychological, psychosocial, and behavioral problems or intellectual disabilities. Children and youth growing up in contexts of youth care are, for example, estimated at 10% in the Netherlands and Belgium. These numbers seem to have increased in recent

years. For youth care professionals but also for religious leaders in faith communities, more insight into this area is important: to better understand young people, to better understand spiritual development in these contexts in particular, and to better function as a professional for and with these young people in the direction of (spiritual) maturity.

1.1. Youth Care

The current review study aims to systematically present the main insights from previous research on the role or position of spiritual development and the formation of young people in youth care. Internationally, youth care facilities appear in different forms. Each country has its own legislation and way of organizing facilities. Countries differ in their division of responsibilities over governmentally initiated measures and contributions from the private and voluntary sectors. Of course, the availability of youth care diverges enormously among parts of the world. Although it is impossible to discuss youth care in universal terms, this article tries to contribute to knowledge building about spiritual development in youth care contexts from an international perspective. Therefore, a definition of youth care is used that has its background in the regional context of the author (Flanders and The Netherlands). Nonetheless, it is still open enough to apply to several other contexts in the world.

In this study, *youth care* is defined as various forms of support and care for young people (children and teenagers) and their educators for growing-up problems, parenting problems, and psychological, psychosocial, and behavioral problems or intellectual disabilities (partly based on Naert et al. 2019). These forms of youth care can be either voluntary or mandatory. This may involve ambulatory or outpatient help and the stay of young people in foster care. However, it can also involve longer stays in healthcare institutions, thus providing inpatient help. Youth care can be directly or indirectly accessible via referrals from healthcare or other professionals.

Although included in this broad description of youth care, two areas in which youth care is offered are excluded from this review study. The first area is the context of hospitalization, including inpatient care in psychiatric clinics. The second area is particularly for facilities for children and youth with intellectual, learning, or physical disabilities. For both areas, a review study would move into the direction of specialized academic disciplines and practical contexts of specialized healthcare studies and special education studies.

1.2. Spirituality and Spiritual Development

Besides youth care, two other concepts are central to this study: spirituality and spiritual development. Following a definition that is also referred to in some of the reviewed literature, *spirituality* is defined as "the human quest for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral principles in relation to persons' and groups' deepest or most central convictions and experiences about the nature of reality" (Nelson-Becker and Canda 2008, p. 179). Spirituality as a quest is reflected in how spiritual development is conceived in this study, a quest perceived as the most integrative dimension of human development (De Kock 2023, pp. 4–5):

> "It is the spiritual dimension that is most involved in a person's effort to integrate the many aspects of development. As a core process of development involving the creation of a life narrative (in which the self is connected to larger constructs of values, tradition, space, and/or time), spiritual development cannot be reduced to merely human need or desire. The narrative-building and self-transcending tasks of spiritual development can, but do not necessarily have to, be about the divine or the sacred". (Roehlkepartain et al. 2006, p. 9)

Two other observations in the literature on the spiritual development of young people are also relevant. First, *spiritual development* can refer not only to individual development, but also to communal development. Second, *spiritual development* can refer to the development of one's own well-being or that of one's own community but also to serving the well-being of others (De Kock 2024).

1.3. Theoretical Background: Importance of the Topic

There are several reasons why it is important to gain insight into the role of spiritual development in youth care. A first reason is a fundamental consideration with an eye on the main concern of youth care. Youth care concerns the development of young people and the formation of young people. In both development and education, the philosophical dimension always plays a role, both as something individual and something in parenting communities. Some literature is available about identity development and meaning constructions in general among young people who face adverse life events and are supported in, for example, youth welfare services (see, for example, Noble-Carr and Woodman 2018). Alternatively, there is literature on how religion and spirituality play a role among young people in psychiatric treatments (see, for instance, Bryant-Davis et al. 2012) and reflections on spirituality, religion, and the work of pediatrics (Barnes et al. 2000). However, what is lacking is the very theme of the current review: an overview of studies with an exclusive focus on youth care contexts and the role of religion and spirituality development in particular. The importance of this is not restricted to religiously affiliated programs, for example, how Christianity is incorporated into professional approaches.[1] The importance is there for youth care programs in general. Despite their importance, spirituality and religion appear largely invisible in disciplinary discourse in leading social work journals (Hodge et al. 2021). If these themes do emerge, religion and spirituality are often superficially operationalized in religious attendance or religious affiliation. This occurs in many studies into the role of religion, cf. a review study of young people and mental well-being in psychiatry (Elzamzamy et al. 2024).

A second reason is a fundamental consideration of the (social psychological) process of faith or the spiritual formation of youth. When young people participate in youth care contexts, constructive relationships with adults and peers are often under pressure—sometimes being part of the problematic situation that young people are in, and sometimes (also) being a consequence of a problematic situation involving young people. These relationships are normally very important for spiritual development and impact how faith development occurs in young persons: "[W]hile faith in God cannot be taught, it is possible to help young people experience healthy, helping relationships of trust, which are a prerequisite for forming a trusting relationship with God." (Landová 2025, p. 7). This very theme of relationships with caretakers is linked to the discourse about attachment theory relative to religion and religious development.

In this discourse, there are two main hypotheses: the correspondence hypothesis and the compensation hypothesis (Kirkpatrick and Shaver 1990). The *correspondence hypothesis*

> "... posits that individuals who have developed internal working models (IWMs) flowing from secure attachments to their parents are likelier to develop a positive, secure relationship with God. Their internal working models of a trustworthy and responsive caregiver transfer to their religious beliefs, leading them to perceive God as loving, faithful, and capable". (Droege 2025, p. 10)

The *compensation hypothesis* "... posits that individuals with insecure attachment histories turn to religion as a substitute for unfulfilled relational needs. Those who experienced neglect or inconsistent caregiving may develop a heightened dependence on God as a compensatory attachment figure" (ibid.). Apart from correspondence or compensation

dynamics in attachment processes, there is, of course, also the danger of a negative or harmful role for religion: Religion can also originate problematic practices that cause a person to experience major health and/or developmental problems. In this regard, reference should be made to the impact of abuse scandals on churches or to the impact of sectarian or oppressive religious regimes on families.

A third reason concerns the theme of resilience. On the one hand, resilience is an important, common goal among various forms of youth care; on the other hand, resilience is often connected to religion in the sense of being an important outcome of engagement in faith practices or religious communities. Thus, both spiritual development and youth care contexts can be connected to this theme. "Resilience refers to positive patterns of adaptation or development manifested by individuals who have experienced a heavy burden of risky or adverse conditions" (Crawford et al. 2006, p. 356). The authors presented a preliminary list of how religion or spirituality might operate in resilience. The authors group these ways into four categories: (1) attachment relationships (e.g., with peers, family, or the divine); (2) social support (e.g., sense of community belonging, support groups, or rituals and prayers); (3) guidelines for conduct and moral values (e.g., integrity, forgiveness, or altruism); and (4) personal growth, development, and transformational opportunities (e.g., meditation, liturgy, worship music, or the reframing of trauma). Whether supporting resilience, addressing existential themes in treatments appears to match a care need in mental healthcare contexts (see De Vries et al. 2025). Adopting a self-needs perspective, Sedikides and Gebauer (2013) argue that religiosity satisfies ". . . (a) the individual self-needs for self-esteem, control, uncertainty reduction, and meaning, (b) the relational self-need for attachment, and (c) the collective self-need for social belonging" (Sedikides and Gebauer 2013, p. 58).

A fourth reason is what we might call a blind spot in youth ministry research. In this research tradition, healthy development and intact communities are often taken as a starting point. The current contribution is an appeal also to consider the disturbed development and the broken communities in (theological) reflections on youth ministry practices. We observe a parallel appeal regarding understandings of adolescence from majority or minority positions, for example, Conner's (2018). The author describes how normalcy or taken-for-granted visions on what constitutes healthy development or healthy adulthood should be challenged: "When considered in light of the experience of racialized or nonmajority cultures, the common-sense understandings of adolescence are exposed as being tied to privilege, middle-class values (hard work, ambition, self-discipline), financial security and resources, and a vision of the rehabilitated, fully integrated, normal emerging adult" (Conner 2018, p. 464). From my perspective, a parallel argument could be made about theologizing about religious or faith development in light of the experience of youth in youth care contexts, in addition to or even in confrontation with theologizing from a "normal" perspective, referring to young people in intact family contexts and in the absence of challenging developmental circumstances.

1.4. Research Problem

What has become clear thus far is that the theme of spiritual development in youth care contexts relates to various themes, concepts, theories, and research disciplines. Correspondingly, relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical findings are fragmented across publications in disparate academic fields. It is also the case that the attention to spiritual development in "healthy" contexts receives much more attention than in contexts of "disturbed" or "fractured" development. Consequently, apart from the fact that relevant insights are spread across academic fields, spiritual development in youth care contexts will also not be a dominant stream of research. This makes it a topic where a clear overview

of what we already know is lacking. Simultaneously, the literature contains pleas to include an awareness of and attention to spirituality in the lives of young people in youth care contexts (see for example Scott and Magnuson 2006). However, these pleas lack sufficient research underpinnings.

1.5. Current Study: Research Question and Relevance

The current review study aims to systematically present the main insights from previous research on the role or position of the spiritual development and formation of young people in youth care. As sketched above, there are a variety of reasons why it is important to address the role or position of religion in youth care; there is, however, a limited overview of what we already know about this subject. This study aims to fill this gap.

The current review study presents the results of an in-depth search of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, mapping the academic literature in the field of spiritual formation in the youth care context. The main research question is: *What insights can be distilled from existing scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles published from January 2000 to July 2025 regarding spiritual formation in the context of youth care?* The study was designed as a systematic literature review. Section 3 presents the data gathering and data analysis procedures. The "insights" in the research question should be understood very broadly. They can refer to theories, outcomes of empirical research or, for example, views on the topic expressed by scholars in certain publications.

The academic relevance of this systematic literature study is that it adds to the body of knowledge about spiritual formation in the context of youth care: Does the religious and spiritual development of children and young people receive attention in youth care, and in what way? Is it underexposed or neglected? Are there any good practices known that do justice to this dimension of young people's development? There is already a great deal of academic literature about spiritual formation on the one hand and youth care on the other. The current study seeks to fill a gap in academic engagement with the cutting-edge theme of spiritual formation in youth care contexts. Furthermore, this study has practical relevance for all those who are engaged in youth care and working with children and teenagers. On the one hand, spirituality and spiritual development in their lives are relevant to how they are approached in care. On the other hand, care environments have a potential impact on the area of spirituality and how it develops in the lives of these young people. The outcomes of this study can help professionals obtain an overview of what is known: both lessons learned and critical considerations for work contexts.

2. Research Design

2.1. Methods

This study comprised a literature review of studies about the spiritual formation of young people in the context of youth care. *Youth* here refers to the age group of 0–18, meaning that studies with an eye on (young) children will also be included. The review is based on all scholarly works in peer-reviewed journals published in English regarding the main subject published from January 2000 to July 2025. The literature review included both reports on empirical research and theoretical contributions. The review was set up broadly concerning the main concepts of spiritual development and youth care. For spiritual development, we searched for literature that addressed themes such as spiritual development, religious formation, meaning in life, faith development, *et cetera*. Regarding youth care, we sought publications that addressed themes such as youth care, child welfare, foster care, et cetera. Section 2.2 presents the complete list of keywords used in the literature review.

Although *well-being* and *mental health* are important buzzwords often used in discourses on both youth care and spiritual development, we decided not to focus the litera-

ture review on these themes because that would lead to too many off-topic results. The themes of well-being and mental health will be discussed, of course, but only in the context of publications that address the topics of the spiritual development of young people in youth care contexts. Instead, two topics were purposefully included in our search strategy: the theme of disability, because some literature on youth care uses this keyword and might be relevant for our review study. The other theme is healthcare. This is not used for finding results on hospital care, because that is off topic, but instead because some youth care contexts relate to healthcare services, for example, forms of psychiatric outpatient care.

2.2. Procedure

The search strategy of the literature review was executed in three steps, which will be described below.

2.2.1. Step 1

Some sources were reviewed to collect adequate keywords for use in the systematic literature review. Meanwhile, this review process resulted in some of the first publications to be included in a literature review. First, the recent publication *The Five Questions—an Academic Handbook in Youth Ministry Research* has been reviewed (De Kock and Norheim 2022). This was followed by a search for more keywords based on exploring publications already available for the author on the cutting edge of theology, spirituality, and youth care practices. These already available publications stem from (a) papers presented at the European Regional Conference of the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM), held in Prague, April 23–26, 2025. The main theme was Finding Resilience and Faith in Fractured Developments—How Do We Understand Fractured Development, Fragility, and Resilience in Relation to the Understanding of Youth, Youth Ministry, and Faith? The publications also include (b) work the author collected in 2024 in the initial phase of another emerging research project on theological reflections on foster care practices. This resulted in an extensive list of keywords, which is presented in Supplementary File S1.

2.2.2. Step 2

A second step of the literature search was conducting systematic literature research in four databases covering 2000–2025: Atla (a religion database); APA PsycARTICLES (database of psychological literature); Eric (database of the Educational Resources Information Centre); and Web of Science (Science Citation Index Expanded; Social Sciences Citation Index; Arts & Humanities Citation Index; social sciences and humanities). The aim was to find and select scholarly peer-reviewed articles related to the main topic under study. The literature research took place between July–August 2025 using the keywords listed in Supplementary File S1. Search commands in the databases always consisted of a combination of a keyword from List A (e.g., *faith formation*, *spiritual growth*, and *existential*) and a keyword from List B (e.g., *youth care*, *child psychiatry*, and *disability*). If the hits were thematically too broad and too numerous, the result was reduced by adding keywords from List C (*children*, *youth*, and *adolescents*). The databases Atla and ERIC were searched in one combined strategy. APA PsycARTICLES and Web of Science were searched separately.

2.2.3. Step 3

The list of journal articles that resulted from the first two steps was then screened for relevancy by reviewing the titles, abstracts, and main arguments in the text. Supplementary File S2 shows the search strategy for the literature review in Step 3.

In the first selection wave, based on the screening of titles and abstracts, the number of potentially relevant articles was brought from 2663 to 133. Many articles were off topic from the perspective of the main theme in our review study: spiritual development in the context

of youth care. This was the direct result of a search strategy using four databases and many keyword combinations. This prevented us from overlooking relevant articles; however, it also resulted in many irrelevant articles. Apart from clearly off-topic articles, articles were also excluded that were thematically linked with our central theme but had to be excluded (a) in light of our definition of youth care, as described in Section 2 or (b) because they addressed one of the two particular contexts for youth care that we excluded from this study beforehand (see also Section 2 for an explanation): contexts of hospitalization, including inpatient care in psychiatric clinics, and particular learning facilities for children and youth with intellectual, learning, or physical disabilities. Studies on outpatient psychiatric care in the context of youth care were included in the review. Additionally included are studies on foster care; excluded are studies on adoption.

During this first selection wave, the author asked his international network of youth ministry and youth care scholars for additional articles from July to August 2025. Only articles written in English were selected.

In the second wave of selection, based on screening the body of the texts, the 133 articles were brought to a final selection of 41 relevant articles for inclusion in the literature review. Important criteria that played a role in this selection wave were the centrality of one or another context of youth care, the discussion of spiritual development or one of the interlinked concepts (see the keywords in Supplementary File S1) and, of course, a focus on or relevance to youth (aged 0–18, children and teenagers). During this second selection wave, additional articles were also included based on reviewing the bibliographies of relevant articles from the database search.

This third step resulted in a final list of 41 journal articles, which formed the main source for the analytic phase of the literature review. This list of articles is included in Supplementary File S3.

2.3. Analysis and Presentation

The analysis of the literature, as listed in Supplementary File S3, focused on discovering the main insights regarding spiritual formation in the context of youth care. Section 3.1 presents a general impression of this analytic phase. The discussion of insights is best assisted by presenting the literature based on six contexts of youth care and a category of other studies representing a variety of particular contexts and themes:

- Foster care (Section 3.2);
- Outpatient psychiatric care (Section 3.3);
- Child and youth welfare (Section 3.4);
- Residential care (Section 3.5);
- Social work (Section 3.6);
- Service to unaccompanied minors (Section 3.7);
- Other studies.

3. Results

3.1. General Impression

A superficial review of 41 journal articles immediately revealed that about half the articles thematize the context of foster care. Therefore, Section 3.2 will be the most comprehensive section, in which a variety of studies on spirituality in connection with foster care are discussed. The other articles were spread across various contexts of youth care.

Another observation is that, within the 41 journal articles, the vast majority present empirical research. To justify the empirical studies and interpret the results, various theories and concepts are discussed. These theories and concepts will also be given the necessary attention in the discussion below.

Regarding content, at least three major themes connected most articles. First, the discussion of religion and spirituality as a phenomenon is naturally present in the lives of children as well as the need or right to recognize that dimension and to facilitate continuity in it. Second, seeking an answer to the question whether religion and spirituality can promote well-being includes the finding that the answer does not always appear to be unambiguous, up to and including attention to the harmful effects of religion and spirituality. Third, there is the theme of whether and how religion and spirituality can be used more instrumentally in youth care services with an eye on providing the best possible care to young people.

3.2. Foster Care

Foster care contexts are discussed relatively often in the literature in this review. Simultaneously, little scholarship has been developed around the intersection of religion and foster care: "Spirituality and religion often play instrumental roles in the lives of children in foster care. Despite the importance of these assets, a paucity of scholarship has addressed the intersection between foster care and these two constructs" (Hodge 2022, p. 1). In what follows in this section on foster care, we subsequently address the following themes that emerge from the literature: (1) religion and spirituality as a protective factor for well-being; (2) religious motivations among foster caretakers; (3) continuity of religion and spirituality in situations of foster care placements; and (4) religion and spirituality in the lives of foster children.

3.2.1. Religion and Spirituality as a Protective Factor for Well-Being

Collins and Scott (2019) analyzed historical and contemporary approaches to addressing religion and race in child welfare in the United States. In their study, the authors focused on Black youth in foster care. The analysis starts from the assumption that "[r]eligion and race are primary forces affecting both individuals' identities and social relations. Consequently, their impacts on child welfare systems, and the clients of the system, are important to understand" (ibid., p. 163). The authors added to this argument that religious identities may also be important for the well-being of youth.

After providing a historical policy review and description of contemporary policy attention to race and religion in the U.S. context, the authors draw the following main conclusions: First, "[a] historical perspective demonstrates how racial discrimination and sectarianism influenced child welfare services and practices. (. . .) Extensive data on racial disproportionality indicate contemporary challenges facing youth of color in care, especially Black youth, and their consequent need for family and community socialization" (ibid., p. 168). Furthermore, "There are limited data available about religious identity and religiosity in child welfare, but there is some concern that religious identity is not addressed regularly by child welfare systems. Because religion is often a core component of identity this is problemati" (ibid.). The authors observe that, in the existing literature, Christianity has received most of the attention and, thus, suggest broadening the scope to other religions. The same is true for broadening the scope from the U.S. only to different regional contexts. Apart from these suggestions, the authors plead for child welfare agencies to provide foster families with training on the influence of race, ethnicity, and religion on the development of youth before placing a youth. They plead for agencies to determine families' religious beliefs and ethnic–racial socialization approaches before placement.

These religious beliefs or, more generally, spirituality or religion, are discussed in the literature as a possible protective factor for well-being among foster children. An important example is the literature review on risk and protective factors affecting African American kinship caregiving by Wu et al. (2024).[2] The conclusion of the authors is that the most

common protective factor that impacts the ability of kinship caregivers to raise children is caregivers' spirituality or religion. "African American kinship caregivers may obtain support from church friends or their spiritual beliefs when they are facing various life challenges" (ibid., p. 14). Moreover, on the level of how children function, spirituality or religion come to the fore as a protective factor. This review found two examples of studies in this regard, both based on outcomes of the Child and Adolescent Need and Strengths (CANS) Assessment. In this assessment, spiritual and religious strengths are measured in terms of youth and family's involvement in spiritual or religious beliefs and activities. In Tabone et al. (2016), the authors concluded that spiritual and religious strengths are associated with a higher likelihood of youth transitioning from mental health residential care to less restrictive settings, but only among boys (Tabone et al. 2016). Summersett Williams et al. (2021) concluded that youth with improved spiritual and religious strengths had a 12% lower risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system while being in the child welfare system.

However, there are contrasting research outcomes. In particular, with an eye on resilience among older adolescents in foster care, Shpiegel (2016) found that the religious beliefs of foster youth did not appear to be a protective factor. Her study was based on 351 youths interviewed every three months from the ages of 17 to 19 in a longitudinal cohort study in the custody of the Missouri Children's Division in the United States. Resilience was measured by six domains of competence: educational attainment, the avoidance of teen pregnancy, homelessness, mental illness, substance use, and criminal involvement. The author concluded that not only religiosity but also other protective factors appeared to contribute significantly to resilience. One interesting suggestion from the author is that the resilient functioning of foster youth is probably more related to reduced risk than to increased protection.

Scott et al. (2006) studied the relationship between the religious involvement of youth in foster care on the one hand and risk behaviors on the other. The study was conducted among 383 youth (average age: 17) in the care and custody of the Missouri Children's Division in the United States. The youth in this study consisted of different groups: some resided in their biological parent(s) home after a stay in out-of-home care; some were in relative foster care; others were in non-kin family foster care; and many were in congregate (i.e., group-based residential) care. Very few were in a semi-independent living situation. Religious involvement has been assessed according to three dimensions: church or religious service attendance, religious practices, and religious beliefs. The risk behaviors in the study related to sexual behavior, marijuana use, alcohol use, and cigarette use. The outcomes of the study can be summarized as follows: "[R]eligious service attendance was associated with reduced odds of youth's engagement in sexual behavior in the past two months and current use of cigarettes. In addition, greater religious beliefs were associated with a reduction in odds of youth's use of alcohol in the past six months and current use of cigarettes" (ibid., p. 223). Hence, the authors formulate that it is important to consider religious involvement in foster care with an eye on reducing unhealthy risk behavior. This merits a more proactive assessment of the religious preferences, behaviors, and beliefs of youth and finding a good placement match to accommodate these preferences and practices.

Scott et al. (2018) made a comparable suggestion and consequence (namely, accommodating and supporting the religious or spiritual orientations of foster youth) based on a study on substance use among older youth transitioning from foster care. This longitudinal study investigated older African American and White non-Hispanic youth in foster care in the care and custody of the Missouri Children's Division in the United States (N = 312). Two hypotheses were tested in the study: (a) Higher levels of religious service attendance and (b) higher levels of belief in a spiritual force at the baseline was associated with a lower

likelihood of alcohol, illegal substances, and polysubstance use two years later. The study confirmed both hypotheses, but only for White non-Hispanic youth. For African American foster youth, no association was found.

3.2.2. Religious Motivations Among Foster Caretakers

The role of spirituality in youth care begins with religiously or spiritually rooted motivations on the side of foster caretakers.

The purpose of Brown et al. (2011) was to identify cultural values, beliefs, and traditions among foster parents associated with their caregiving behavior. The background for this study was the observation that "[c]hildren from minority cultures are overrepresented in care, and efforts have been made to promote matching foster parent skills and abilities with the particular needs of foster children" (ibid., p. 26). The authors argue that religion and spirituality are elements of value and belief systems and that more knowledge about or feeling for these kinds of elements is important for improving the matching of foster children with foster parents. In the literature, "[T]here is little attention to the content of the values, beliefs, and traditions associated with religious participation or the meaning of participation itself" (ibid., p. 34).

The study was conducted among a random sample of foster parents (N = 61) in a central Canadian province. In a telephone interview, these parents were asked to answer the following question: "What values, beliefs, and traditions were you raised with and feel are important?" In the next step, 13 participants sorted the responses into categories. This resulted in seven concepts: (1) spirituality, (2) nationality, (3) personal experience, (4) religion, (5) responsibilities, (6) respect, and (7) right and wrong. For the current review article, the concepts of spirituality and religion are particularly relevant. Responses related to the concept of spirituality concern whether informants are religious and references to religious traditions, such as Roman Catholic or Mennonite. Responses to the concept of religion refer to possession of (Christian) faith, belief in God, and attending church and prayer, as well as Thanksgiving or Mother's Day.

Thus, this study illuminates the relevance of values, beliefs, and traditions, also in the atmosphere of spirituality and religion, for the actual life and caregiving behavior of foster parents. This study, however, does not add insights to a research theme for which little research is available, either: "[T]here has not been much research regarding how these aspects of care are associated with placement outcomes, foster child well-being, or foster parent satisfaction and retention, which are all important variables in foster care research" (ibid., p. 36).

A same "thin observation" (thin: because of a very small research sample and very superficial research data) was conducted in a study on kinship foster parents' perceptions of factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering (Coakley et al. 2007). Semi-structured interviews with nine kinship foster parents in two southeastern states in the US were administered to answer the following research question: What are their perceptions regarding family factors and parenting beliefs that promote or inhibit successful fostering? The study revealed that part of these perceptions is the belief that faith and church involvement help promote the successful fostering of kin.

> "Some kinship foster parents suggested that having faith, religious, and moral values, and being a good role model were positive factors in fostering. To this end, some kinship foster parents believed that involvement in the church contributed to successful fostering. This is a strong support system that could be utilized if larger studies verify these findings". (ibid., p. 101)

3.2.3. Continuity of Religion and Spirituality in Situations of Foster Care Placement

In foster care situations, caretakers have certain religious and spiritual backgrounds and motivations; of course, the child also enters with a particular worldview. This very theme of the religious background of foster children and the importance of continuity in this regard when entering foster care placements is another important topic addressed in the literature.

In a policy-oriented paper, Hodge (2022) provided suggestions to optimize service provision in the United States with regard to religion and spirituality in foster care contexts. "As agents of the state, child welfare practitioners must balance the rights of all actors in an impartial manner that prioritizes the best interests of the child. In many situations, religious matching provides an ideal option that satisfies and protects everyone's interests" (ibid., p. 3). Here, a couple of studies are discussed regarding the topic of religious matching.

Hansen (2024) conducted an interview study among nine young people with Islamic minority backgrounds to discern what is important for them when developing their identities in majority foster homes in Norway. The youth in this study (aged 13–21 years) all had upbringings in a Muslim biological home and lived in non-Muslim foster homes. The background for the study is the desirability, as expressed in legislation, of continuity in the foster child's cultural, religious, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds when choosing a foster home. The interview study revealed that youth ". . . do not necessarily want cultural continuity in the sense of living in a culturally 'matched' foster home" (ibid., p. 600). Some of them do, but some do not. There are various reasons for that, for example, the experience of strict rules in the biological home. What many youths found important, however, was that there was continuity in some elements of the original culture in the home family, for example, certain values, religious elements or practices, or celebrations. Furthermore, the young people wanted to be considered rational and competent actors with agency. This means that for them, the active development of one's own identity is crucial: "The youth emphasize that it is important to be able to express your own opinions and make independent choices, irrespective of whether this concerns adolescent life in general or cultural continuity" (ibid., p. 609).

Herrero-Arias and Tonheim (2025) address the same topic of cultural or religious continuity in matching foster families with children. A focus group study was conducted in Norway with 12 child welfare workers engaged in matching children with migration backgrounds and foster families. Children's religious needs were addressed in the focus groups, referring to having religious beliefs, rights, and wishes, for example, participation in religious practices, affiliation with a religious denomination, or religious exploration. An important outcome of the study is that for child welfare workers, children's religious needs comprise a category of needs juxtaposed with other categories, such as autonomy, protection, and belonging.

> "Religion was understood as part of the child's heritage, important both in the present and for the child's future, including goals like family reunification and their future identity. Therefore, religious continuity emerged as a way through which foster carers and child welfare workers could help children to re-establish connections with the past and to engage in future-oriented practices". (ibid., p. 8)

Although maintaining religious continuity was regarded as important, the study revealed that religious matching does not automatically lead to a "matched" foster situation and the well-being of children. This is due to all kinds of elements within the religious domain and outside it in which children and their foster families differ.

Although religious continuity seems important (but not necessary per se in all conditions; see Hansen (2024) above) in foster care placements, this is not always the case in practice. Religious differences in foster care situations give rise to different sorts of moral

dilemmas. This is the main theme of Van Bergen et al. (2023), in which they analyzed qualitative interviews with seven foster parent/foster child dyads and three foster parents in the Netherlands. The participants in this study were all involved in a transreligious, non-kinship, long-term foster care placement. A transreligious foster care placement means that the religious background of the foster child differs from the religious background of the foster family. The foster children were between 12 and 17 years old. The analysis of the interviews resulted in the detection of five themes of religious moral dilemmas: (1) the interplay of religious ties and pressure from foster parents and birth parents; (2) accommodation of, versus an objection to, the faith of the birth family by the foster family; (3) how adherence to the new faith of the foster family influences the foster child's relationship with their birth family; (4) religious identity searches and the need for belonging regarding ethnoreligious boundary drawing; and (5) religious birth traditions that impact bodily integrity and their negotiation by foster parents, birth parents, and foster care agencies (ibid., pp. 817–19).

Moreover, these authors produce an often heard and read recommendation to involve religious identities and practices in matching processes before placements. Furthermore, the authors argue, "Also, during placement, foster care workers should find out how the topic of religion has unfolded in the lives of all the parties involved, starting with the foster child" (ibid., p. 820). Foster parents should recognize the pressure they put on foster children's religious adherence because it may cause loyalty conflicts. Moreover, ethnoreligious minority children need assistance in navigating the development of their religious identity.

Van De Koot-Dees et al. (2023) suggested being sensitive as a foster care worker during placement in another study on worldview differences in the Netherlands. The authors translated this sensitivity into more concrete skills that are needed in the work of foster care workers. The background of this study is the right of foster children to have continuity in upbringing but also consistency in worldview, culture, and language. Consequently, there is a particular expectation from foster care workers to navigate religious or worldview distinctions in foster care placements. The authors conducted 16 in-depth interviews with experienced foster care workers in the Netherlands, aiming to describe their skills when "... supporting a foster child, birth family, and foster parents with potentially troublesome worldview differences" (ibid., p. 1194). The interview data give insight into the worldview differences encountered by foster care workers, for example, religious differences in attending worship services or prayer and the contemplation of worldview differences in food and food rituals, pets, illnesses, and medication. The data also demonstrate the importance of well-informed birth parents before a placement starts and foster parents' appropriate knowledge of identity formation. Furthermore, based on the interview data, the authors define six skills for foster care workers to support diverse worldviews: "(1) basic knowledge of worldviews and identity formation; (2) empathizing with the other; (3) inquisitiveness to discover what is essential for the other; (4) initiating worldview conversations; (5) fostering self-reflection in worldviews; and (6) maneuvering between and monitoring all interests" (ibid., p. 1191).

Another study on transreligious foster care placements in the Netherlands was published in 2024 (Bartelink et al. 2023). The study explored the ethical issues that arise from transreligious placements in the everyday religious lives of foster families and how foster parents navigate these ethical issues. An interview study was conducted with 19 foster parents, nine foster children, and two birth parents. In addition, 17 of 19 foster parents came from a Christian background, although representing a diversity in denominations, often having a conservative orientation. A first finding of this study is that integrating the foster child into the foster family often comes with predominant Christian socialization from

foster parents. Based on an ethical reflection using the expressive-collaborative framework of Walker (2007), the authors present a second finding:

> "A lack of awareness of asymmetry sometimes leads to negative judgment of the religion of birth parents by foster parents. Strong normative positions by foster parents may hinder constructive collaboration with birth families. Therefore, we argue that foster children raised in Christian foster families need loose and hybrid moral frames to explore and alter their multiple identifications and partialities as they develop. A growing ethical awareness of children's religious developmental needs should be encouraged in foster care and cultivated among foster parents". (Bartelink et al. 2023, p. 613)

Yet another study highlights the importance of religious continuity and discontinuity in young people transitioning into foster care placements: Pitcher and Jaffar's (2018) study on the experiences of young Muslims in foster care in the UK. The background for the small exploratory study comprised observations and concerns by, for example, practitioners working with young people from Muslim backgrounds in (non-kinship) foster care placements where their cultural and identity needs are not suitably matched: their faith, values, or way of life. The study administered 12 qualitative semi-structured interviews with 13 young Muslims (median age: 17). This study aimed to identify patterns in the experiences of these young people. The analysis of the interviews was enriched with two focus groups: one with social work practitioners and foster carers and one with community leaders and academics. The study revealed four leading themes: "the child's confusion surrounding separation and moving to somewhere strange, identifying the right placement, intervening in a way that offers children future choices, and the ever-present risk of discrimination" (ibid., p. 219). The authors argue that fostering practices should be sensitive to the needs and wishes of Muslim children to enhance their self-understanding and sense of social belonging.

3.2.4. Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Foster Children

What role does religion and spirituality play in the lives of foster children growing up in foster families? Several studies in this review addressed this theme.

In 2010, Jackson et al. reported on an interview study among 188 youth in foster care in the United States (14–17 years old) from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (mostly children of color) (Jackson et al. 2010). Data were drawn from the larger Casey Field Office Mental Health Study (CFOMH) conducted by Casey Family Programs. The aim of the interview study was to explore children's meanings and values of spirituality. The interview questions on spirituality were "... intended to integrate many faiths, universal concepts, culture-specific aspects of spirituality, and developmentally appropriate questions. For example, instead of referring to God, the term 'God/Creator/Higher Power' was used" (ibid., p. 115). The interview questions concerned beliefs about spirituality, coping mechanisms, spiritual problems, and spiritual goals. The results revealed that 95% of the participants reported believing in God. Furthermore, many participants derived strength and support for healing in their spiritual beliefs, practices, and communities (e.g., prayer, spending time alone, or asking a spiritual leader for advice). Most participants reported having a spiritual goal, for example, to follow God/Higher Power/Creator's plan for me, to become a better person, or to know my purpose in life. The authors conclude with the following recommendation:

> "The results signal a need for the child welfare system to broaden its purview and incorporate into policy and practice efforts that promote youth resilience by ensuring ties to their cultural heritage, sense of connection, belonging, and

> purpose. A holistic approach to serving youth addresses their social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual needs". (ibid.)

In 2021, Cheruvallil-Contractor, Halford and Boti Phiri published case study research on the salience of Islam to Muslim children's experiences with heritage in foster care (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2021). The context is the care system in England and Wales, where one of the overarching principles is to provide environments that meet all the needs of the child. The five case studies were selected from interviews with 41 social workers (prospective) adoptive and foster parents, policy makers, legal practitioners, and care leavers. Three of the cases are narratives of a young person. One case was from a foster carer, and one was from a social worker. The main research question is what the role and impact of religion is on children's journeys through foster care, in other words, how and why faith is important to Muslim children's heritage and journeys through care. The authors chose to study religion or faith as the "lived experience" of Muslim-heritage children.

The main conclusion based on the case studies is that "Islam has an enduring impact on how children perceive their identities" (ibid., p. 1). The experiences of religion and faith in children's lives appeared to differ when comparing the five narratives. The cases illustrate "... that religious identity is by no means uniform. Instead, children's positionalities in relation to religion in habit form a continuum of standpoints. This includes children who rely on faith and who draw resilience from it. Some children reject faith completely, and others maintain an ambivalent relationship with faith identity, which functions more as a cultural habit rather than stemming from any conviction" (ibid., p. 10). The study's main recommendation is to expand knowledge about Islam and Muslim culture among professionals and foster carers to help children settle faster and to enhance life outcomes because of stronger bonds of attachment with foster carers. Moreover, more research is proposed because there is limited research available on faith and children in care.

In the literature, attention to religion and spirituality in the development of young people is often connected to building resilience in young people (in need). This is an important background for Coholic's (2011) study on discussing spirituality in an arts-based group program for children and youth in foster care. The author explains that spiritually sensitive methods in foster care programs are important because "... young people may raise these issues themselves, spiritually sensitive issues may be integral to the problems they present, and/or may be intimately connected with their cultural beliefs and practices" (ibid., p. 193). In this study, spirituality is conceived as a universal aspect of human life-encompassing experiences that transcend the self, thus being related to a sense of interconnectedness and/or the ultimate purpose of existence.

The intervention under study was an arts-based group program that worked holistically with young people living in foster care in Canada. "[A]rt has served as a means for transformation and has been used to restore physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. ..." (ibid., p. 195). Throughout three years, 17 six-week groups were facilitated with 38 young people (most of them attending more than one group) aged eight to 15 years. "In general, the arts-based and mindfulness group methods aim to teach the children how to pay attention, use their imaginations, identify and explore their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and develop their strengths" (ibid., p. 198). Two research questions guided the study: How do children and youth understand and discuss spirituality and spiritually sensitive themes and issues (e.g., religious ideas, themes related to the soul or existential thoughts, or humanistic ideas and practices), and why these conversations may be important and relevant for children and youth in care. A qualitative method was used in which both youth and their foster parents were included; individual post-group interviews were used to hear examples of how the group helped the youth.

The study revealed the following insights: The arts-based program appeared to be a safe context in which youth were open to using their imaginations to figure out how they could be safe from danger, to show interest in discussing death and what happens after death, and to contemplate the nature of life and existence. The program also provided space to reflect on painful life situations. The practical relevance of the outcomes is that "... open communication and examination of the issues that are raised (...) help them improve their self-understanding and awareness. (...) Overall, if we ignore the spiritual dimension of children's lives, we may be missing an opportunity to help them construct narratives that accurately fit their experiences" (ibid., p. 207).

Makanui et al. (2019) studied data from 159 youth (8–21 years) in foster or residential care in the state of Missouri in the United States.[3] In addition, 76 participants were growing up in foster families within caregivers' homes, and 83 youth were growing up in a residential setting. The latter group of children "... tend to be older and potentially exhibit more severe emotional and behavioral concerns requiring a higher level of ongoing monitoring" (ibid., p. 205). The study tried to find out what the effects are of spirituality and youth relationships with others on internalizing, externalizing, and adaptive outcomes. Spirituality was examined with items from a larger study (SPARK [Studying Pathways to Adjustment and Resilience in Kids]): items related to any beliefs, ideas, and practices involving God or a higher power. The results of the study suggest that "... while spiritual beliefs are potentially an important factor in affecting outcomes for foster youth, the strongest effects likely occur through youths' relationships with others, social support, and coping in relation to adaptive outcomes for these youth" (ibid., p. 203). This finding means that relationships with others (referring to being nice or trusting in others) account for a larger portion of the variance in adaptive outcomes than spirituality does. "This finding was unique, suggesting that relationships with others affect not only perceptions of social support for youth exposed to maltreatment but also their level of individual coping in response to stressors they might experience" (ibid., p. 210).

In 2014, Schreiber and Culbertson observed that very few studies explore the religious socialization of youth involved in child welfare (Schreiber and Culbertson 2014).[4] Against this background, the authors conducted a survey on religious attendance and religious importance among youth whose parents were investigated for maltreatment and thus were in the child welfare system in the United States. The study's sample consisted of 889 youth (633 biological homes, 137 kinship foster homes, and 119 traditional foster homes). The data were derived from the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) in two waves: Wave 1, four months after the Child Protective Service investigation, and Wave 2, 18 months after the close of the investigation. One of the purposes of the study was to study "... the effect of the youth's placement stability on their religious attendance and importance, because instability in placement could affect the quality of the relationship with the parent needed for spiritual modeling" (ibid., p. 1210).

The study revealed that "[i]ncreases in youth attendance from Wave 1 to Wave 2 were associated with high youth religious importance at Wave 1, whereas decreases in attendance were associated with moving between home and foster placements. Increases in religious importance from Wave 1 to Wave 2 were associated with religious attendance at Wave 1 and with the youth being Black" (ibid., p. 1208). Discussing these results, the authors plead for a better understanding of the religious development of maltreated youth: This is a first step toward a child welfare system that provides holistic care, including working *with* religion. This is particularly important because the study shows that changes in religious attendance during transitions in foster care must be due to reasons other than the religiosity of the youth's new caregivers.

Gusler et al. (2020) reported on a study on 486 youth in foster care (both children and adolescents) with the aim of exploring relationships between being maltreated, internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety and depression) and spirituality. Participants came from a large Midwestern metropolitan area in the United States. The study is based on self-reported data from youths who completed questionnaires. Spirituality was measured with two subscales: relationship with God or Higher Power and relationship with others, with the latter referring to prosocial attitudes and behaviors.

> "For children, regression analyses showed that maltreatment exposure and lower scores on spiritual prosocial attitudes accounted for the majority of the 21% of the variance in internalizing symptoms. For adolescents, 28% of the variance in internalizing symptoms was accounted for by greater maltreatment exposure, lower scores on spiritual prosocial attitudes, higher scores on relationship with a God/Higher Power, and more negative appraisals of stressful life events". (ibid., p. 455)

3.3. Psychiatric Care

Negative associations between religion and spirituality and the wellbeing of young people in youth care are sometimes addressed in the literature. One example is Dew et al. (2008), in which the relationship between religion, spirituality, and depression is examined. Hence, 117 adolescents in an academic outpatient psychiatry clinic in the United States participated in a questionnaire study. The questionnaire contained a 14-subscale inventory covering various aspects of spirituality and religion: for example, daily spiritual experiences, negative religious support, and organizational religiousness. The main outcome of the study was the following: "[D]epression was related to feeling abandoned or punished by God (. . .), feeling unsupported by one's religious community (. . .), and lack of forgiveness. . . ." (ibid., p. 247). Thus, the study highlights a relationship between depression among adolescents engaged in psychiatric care and religious experience. Against this background, the authors suggest that clinicians find ways to address these religious factors in their treatments.

In 2010, Dew et al. published another study among 145 adolescents at two outpatient psychiatric clinics in North Carolina, U.S (Dew et al. 2010). The main purpose was to examine the relationships between depression and religion, controlling for substance abuse and social support. In this study, the questionnaire contained the same 14-subscale inventory covering various aspects of spirituality and religion (e.g., daily spiritual experiences, negative religious support, and organizational religiousness). After analyzing the findings, the authors conclude the following: "Several aspects of religiousness/spirituality appear to relate cross-sectionally to depressive symptoms in adolescent psychiatric patients" (ibid., p. 149). These aspects refer to daily spiritual experiences, forgiveness, positive religious coping, positive religious support, loss of faith, organizational religiousness, and self-ranking as religious or spiritual: These are inversely related to depressive symptoms. Negative religious coping, negative religious support, and a loss of faith were positively related to depressive symptoms. Furthermore, "Findings suggest that perceived social support and substance abuse account for some of these correlations, but do not explain relationships to negative religious coping, loss of faith, or forgiveness" (ibid.) "Accordingly, it appears that religion and spirituality may relate to adolescent depression both indirectly through social support and substance abuse and directly" (ibid., p. 154).

3.4. Child and Youth Welfare

In the studies on child and youth welfare contexts, we found discussions on why it is important to be aware of the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of the young

people who are served. Furthermore, reflections are found on how to (instrumentally) use the possibilities and strengths of religion and spirituality in welfare services.

Yardley (2008) presented suggestions for, among others, child welfare agencies for working with children and youths who identify as Pagans, Wiccans, and Witches. Having a basic familiarity with beliefs, practices, and terminology is important to identify Pagan youth, because they are likely to be cautious disclosing their religion to social workers in authority. Child welfare workers should also be aware that these children and youth may be concerned that their religion will be held against them. Furthermore, "Social workers may need to help Pagan or Wiccan children in foster care negotiate boundaries around religion with non-Pagan foster parents. Pagan children should not be subject to evangelism by foster parents or required to attend religious services of another faith against their wishes" (ibid., p. 332).

Using an interview study, Brown (2024) explored the perceptions of 16 public child welfare services (PCWS) staff in the US regarding (the inclusion of) spirituality and religion in their practice with African American families. The author explored whether it is conceptualized as a strength, a barrier, or an important source. Thus, the youth care context of the study is the PCWS in the US and, in particular, those workers engaged with African American children and their families who are overrepresented in the child welfare and foster care systems in the US. The research also starts with the assumption that spirituality and religion often play a central role in the parenting practices of African Americans. This is more relevant, because religious identity or spirituality is included in the most recent standards regarding cultural competence in social work of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW 2017).

The definition of *spirituality* in the study is taken from Nelson-Becker and Canda (2008, p. 179): "[T]he human quest for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral principles in relation to persons' and groups' deepest or most central convictions and experiences about the nature of reality." The definition of *religion* is also taken from the same authors: "an organized system of spiritual beliefs, values, and behaviors which is shared by a community and transmitted over time. Religion is about communal ties and practices that address the sacred" (ibid.).

The outcomes of the study can be summarized as follows. Respondents see a function for religion, spirituality, or belief in their engagement with the children and their families: Churches and faith communities can provide for community and social support and, for example, a sense of family, whereas less organized religion can provide "... a sense of strength or resilience, identity, and purpose" (Brown 2024, p. 147). The concrete services of churches can be a helpful source for children and their families during treatment. Furthermore, respondents saw it as important to engage in this sphere of life where religion and spirituality are at stake: One must know what is important for one's clients. Because of this, some respondents envisioned questions about spiritual and religious values as a part of a holistic assessment. However, some respondents saw it as inappropriate and uncomfortable to ask about spiritual and religious beliefs or values. In addition, several responses emerged about the barriers experienced: "These responses included concerns about boundaries, either personal/professional boundaries or church/state boundaries; concerns about appropriate guidelines, accountability, and administrative direction and support; concerns about worker bias; and concerns about readiness to work with community partners" (ibid.). From a policy perspective, the author concludes with a recommendation to establish clear guidelines with regard to the inclusion of questions about spirituality and religion as components of culture and culturally responsive practices in child welfare services.

The effect of religiosity on outcomes among child welfare-involved youth was the central topic of Lalayants et al. (2020). The study was conducted among 474 adolescents in

the United States with child welfare system contacts. Data were taken from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being-II (NSCAW-II). Religiosity was measured by rating the importance of religion in life and by how often one attended church, synagogue, or other religious services. The study measured the effects of religiosity on seven outcome measures: substance use disorder (SUD), positive expectations, delinquency, depression, loneliness, school disengagement, and early sexual activity. The study reveals the following: youth who reported religiosity as very important in Wave I (a) were less likely to have SUD in Wave II compared to youth who reported that religiosity was not important or only a bit important, and (b) appeared to have more positive expectations in Wave II. Religiosity did not predict any other outcomes. The same is true for attendance in faith-based organizations. Based on the outcomes, the authors suggest that child welfare workers and other professionals use resources in the community that foster religiosity and seek placements that meet the religious needs that may be there among maltreated adolescents.

> "By promoting religiosity (when indicated) in these ways, our findings suggest that professionals could help prevent substance use disorders and promote positive future expectations among child-welfare involved adolescents. In pursuit of these goals, our results further indicate that attending churches, temples, mosques, or other places of worship is less important than enhancing internally held beliefs in the centrality of religion in life."

In 2014, Schreiber and Culbertson observed that there are very few studies exploring the religious socialization of youth in child welfare (Schreiber and Culbertson 2014).[5] Against this background, the authors conducted a survey on religious attendance and religious importance among youth whose parents were investigated for maltreatment and thus were in the child welfare system in the United States. The study sample consisted of 889 youth (633 biological homes, 137 kinship foster homes, and 119 traditional foster homes). Data were derived from the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II) in two waves: Wave 1, four months after the child protective service investigation, and Wave 2, 18 months after the close of the investigation. One of the purposes of the research was to study "... the effect of the youth's placement stability on their religious attendance and importance, because instability in placement could affect the quality of the relationship with the parent needed for spiritual modeling" (ibid., p. 1210).

The study revealed that "[i]ncreases in youth attendance from Wave 1 to Wave 2 were associated with high youth religious importance at Wave 1, whereas decreases in attendance were associated with moving between home and foster placements. Increases in religious importance from Wave 1 to Wave 2 were associated with religious attendance at Wave 1 and with the youth being Black" (ibid., p. 1208). Discussing these results, the authors plead for a better understanding of the religious development of maltreated youth: This is a first step toward a child welfare system that provides holistic care, including working *with* religion. This is particularly important because the study shows that changes in religious attendance during transitions in foster care must be due to reasons other than the religiosity of the youth's new caregivers.

Some studies address the protective workings of spirituality. An important example is Wu et al.'s (2024) literature review on risk and protective factors affecting African American kinship caregiving.[6] The conclusion of the authors is that the most common protective factor that impacts the ability of kinship caregivers to raise children is caregivers' spirituality or religion. "African American kinship caregivers may obtain support from church friends or their spiritual beliefs when they are facing various life challenges" (ibid., p. 14). In addition, on the level of how children function, spirituality or religion come to the fore as a protective factor. This review found two examples of studies in this regard, both based on outcomes of the Child and Adolescent Need and Strengths (CANS) Assessment. In this Assessment,

spiritual and religious strengths are measured in terms of a youth and family's involvement in spiritual or religious beliefs and activities. In Tabone et al. (2016), the authors concluded that spiritual and religious strengths are associated with a higher likelihood of transition of youth from mental health residential care to less restrictive settings, but only among boys. Summersett Williams et al. (2021) concluded that youth with improved spiritual and religious strengths had a 12% lower risk of becoming justice involved in the child welfare system.

3.5. Residential Care

Several studies on residential care contexts were found in the review. These contexts are in different regions in the world: the U.S., Brasil, and Iran.

Boel-Studt et al. (2024) examined the so-called life model of residential care with 42 adolescents from four residential group homes at four campuses in the state of Florida (USA). "Generally, residential care refers to live-in placements for children and youth in out-of-home care that often provide therapeutic services and other supports" (ibid., p. 397). Thus, this study is about youth placed in residential care settings that can provide more services than normal in settings such as family foster care. The so-called life model of residential care was developed in response to observed service gaps to serve the specific group of high-needs youth. "The life model targets high-risk children in out-of-home care, ages 5–18, with serious trauma-related behavioral health problems and life skill deficits that warrant a level of care that is between family–foster care placement and intensive residential treatment" (ibid., p. 399).

The purpose of the study was to describe the implementation of the model and to determine its outcomes in terms of youths' achievement of the intended outcomes, among which are meeting physical and safety needs; improvement of behavioral health and well-being; and growth in spiritual/cultural, social, educational, physical, and vocational areas. Semi-structured interviews were completed with 12 staff members, and the Community-Oriented Programs Environment Scale (COPES; (Moos 2009)) was completed by youth and staff. In addition, outcome measures were assessed using the CANS (Lyons 2009), and the Life Assessment. The latter assessment instrument comprises five dimensions reflecting five core areas of personal development: spiritual, social, educational, physical, and vocational.

Just after the admission stage, each child must identify two goals in two of the core areas of personal development. That is, 15% of the children in the study had goals in the spiritual area: These . . . "were both faith-based but also encompassed emotional needs and emphasized children's choice in spiritual development" ("Participate in trauma-focused counseling to deal with issues of loss and separation" and "Attend church of choice on a weekly basis" (Boel-Studt et al. 2024, p. 413)). The study revealed that, overall, there was an incremental increase in the five areas of personal development over time. The largest improvements were observed in spiritual, vocational, and educational development. The study concludes that the life model is a promising program for fostering the development of life skills, including those in the spiritual area.

Carlos et al. (2013) reported on a qualitative research study among 17 adolescents who were victims of domestic violence and who were cared for institutionally in Brasil. The residential care facility is a non-governmental organization cofinanced by the prefecture of the Municipality of Campinas. The aim of this study was to understand the protective factors to which adolescents are submitted and/or have access. Focus groups with 17 adolescents were held, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of them. The study revealed that the residential care institute maintains characteristics of total institutions and asylums, with considerable numbers of rules and punishments. Simultaneously, the out-

comes of the study show that adolescents "... emphasized the interactions and humanized relationships that they established with some professionals in the institution studied, and they considered them as one of the major protective factors present in this context" (ibid., p. 583). Furthermore, in the context of trust relationships, religiosity was also mentioned as a protective factor. A meeting with a pastor three times a week was provided, and "... teenagers indicated that this was a positive factor in everyday life, showing the figure of God as, many times, the only mechanism that effectively accomplished this protection" (ibid.).

Makanui et al. (2019) studied data from 159 youth (8–21 years) in foster or residential care in the state of Missouri in the United States.[7] Moreover, 76 participants were growing up in foster families within caregivers' homes, and 83 youth were growing up in a residential setting. The latter group of children "... tend to be older and potentially exhibit more severe emotional and behavioral concerns requiring a higher level of ongoing monitoring" (ibid., p. 205). The study tried to discern what the effects are of spirituality and youth relationships with others on internalizing, externalizing, and adaptive outcomes. Spirituality was examined with items from a larger study (SPARK [Studying Pathways to Adjustment and Resilience in Kids]): items related to any beliefs, ideas, and practices involving God or a higher power. The results of the study suggest that "... while spiritual beliefs are potentially an important factor in affecting outcomes for foster youth, the strongest effects likely occur through youths' relationships with others, social support, and coping in relation to adaptive outcomes for these youth" (ibid., p. 203). This finding means that relationships with others (referring to being nice or trusting in others) account for a larger portion of the variance in adaptive outcomes than spirituality does. "This finding was unique, suggesting that relationships with others affect not only perceptions of social support for youth exposed to maltreatment but also their level of individual coping in response to stressors they might experience" (ibid., p. 210).

Nourian et al. (2016) interviewed eight adolescents living in governmental residential care facilities in Iran (Teheran). These adolescents have little or no supervision. "In Iran, when all the efforts to return unsupervised children to their original or substitute families are futile, governmental residential care facilities take them in for reasons such as the death or absence of one or both parents or their divorce. These facilities are single gendered and adopt a psychotherapeutic perspective in raising these children" (ibid., p. 3). The eight participants (aged 13–17) in this study had high levels of resilience (inclusion criterion), and the purpose of the interview study was to explain the meaning of resilience in the lived experiences of these young people in residential care.

Five themes emerged from the data: going through life's hardships, aspiring for achievement, self-protection, spirituality, and self-reliance. The theme of spirituality refers to both a relationship with oneself and others and having a special bond with God. *Relationships with others* mean having a support system that makes participants feel more peaceful and leads to more composure when facing problems in life. When it comes to the bond with God, "Participants hoped and believed in the Divine Mercy whenever they faced difficulties; through their special bond with God, they attempted to keep their calm in the face of problems and resist in the shadow of this peace" (Nourian et al. 2016).

3.6. Social Work

Social work with youth is a rather broad spectrum of practices in which youth care might also have its place. In Cheon and Canda's (2010) review article, this social work context is thematized in relationship to youth spirituality. Its main background for the article is as follows: "Spirituality is becoming recognized as an important source of strength

within social work and the positive youth development field" (ibid., p. 121). The authors start with some definitions of (youth) spirituality, religion, and positive youth development.

Positive youth development "... connotes a focus on supporting or promoting the positive developmental processes that advance the health and well-being of youths as well as the capacity of youths to make contributions to benefit family and society as they grow into adulthood (Lerner et al. 2008)" (Cheon and Canda 2010, p. 121). *Spirituality* "... refers to the human search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and morality in the context of relationships with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality. ..." (Cheon and Canda 2010, p. 122). *Religion* "... is commonly defined as a formal and organized system of values, beliefs, and behaviors related to spirituality that is organized and shared within a community and is transmitted over time (Canda and Furman 2010)" (Cheon and Canda 2010, p. 122). *Youth spirituality* "... is regarded as young people's developmental search engine for connectedness, meaning, and being in touch with what is most vital to one's life. ..." (ibid.).

The authors describe, based on the reviewed literature, that there are generally salutary effects of spiritual growth and religious participation on (positive) youth development, for example, identity formation or less risk taking. Simultaneously, there are areas of concern in this regard, for example, religiously rationalized abuse and neglect of children or forced religious conversion and discrimination. The authors also conclude that there is very little empirical research on the outcomes of spirituality-based helping practices in social youth work. The authors also observe that many social youth workers are open to addressing spirituality and religion. However, this is by no means a standard practice. "[P]ractitioners need more information about the process and outcomes of particular ways to address spirituality in practice, especially in relation to issues of youth diversity" (ibid., p. 125).

Kvarfordt and Herba (2018) explored the views and practices related to the spirituality and religion of Canadian social workers and social service workers working with children and adolescents. In Ontario, 307 social workers and social service workers working with youth participated in a questionnaire study. These participants worked for the Children's Aid Society, public schools or mentorship programs, children's hospitals, and child and family services. The main research question focused on the workers' professional attitudes, experiences, and practice behaviors regarding religion and spirituality and what factors influenced their use of spiritually derived interventions when working with children and adolescents. In the study, "[*S*]*pirituality* was defined as "the search for meaning, purpose, and connection with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality, however one understands it. This may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions." *Religion* was defined as "an organized structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality" (ibid., p. 155).

The study resulted in different insights. Participants reported generally favorable views toward the role of religion and spirituality in their practice and overall positive attitudes about the relevancy of religion and spirituality to children and adolescents. They also used a variety of spiritually derived interventions. Participants also reported somewhat frequent encounters with religious and spiritual abuse and neglect. "While findings suggest overall support for the role of religion and spirituality when working with this population, findings also suggest a recognition of the potentially harmful or negative aspects of religion and spirituality for youth development" (ibid., p. 163). Lack of knowledge/experience and concern about presenting one's own bias appeared to be important barriers to using spiritually derived interventions. "Given this, it is understandable that practitioners would be apprehensive to venture into an area in which they feel ill equipped and potentially could do harm. However, what this also suggests is that practitioners are not fully competent in understanding and addressing an important aspect of human diversity and child develop-

ment" (ibid., p. 165). The authors suggest more practice guidelines that help social workers apply spiritually sensitive practices and social work (continuing) education, including content about religious and spiritual diversity and content about spiritual development in childhood.

3.7. Service to Unaccompanied Minors

Two research reports were published on the role of religion in the lives of unaccompanied young refugees living in a hostel in Ireland. The first one, published in the *British Journal of Social Work* reports on 32 interviews to gain insight into how unaccompanied minors living in Ireland use religious coping methods (Ní Raghallaigh 2011). The study makes clear how participants speak comparatively about religion in their home countries and religion in Ireland. "From their perspective, it seemed (. . .) that the world, and God's place within it, was viewed differently by many Irish people, and particularly by their Irish peers" (ibid., p. 551). Against this background, young refugees display religious coping strategies that deal with the challenges they encounter. Faith and religious practice appeared to be sources of continuity in their lives. Their relationship with God provided a sense of meaning, comfort, and control. Religious coping helps to deal with challenges. The author suggests that social workers can benefit from these insights by integrating religion and spirituality into their professional work.

The second publication is based on the same interview study and addresses the research question of what coping strategies young refugees adopt (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010). In this article, the authors present a visualization of coping strategies. The coping strategies are as follows: "(1) Maintaining continuity in a changed context, (2) Adjusting by learning and changing, (3) Adopting a positive outlook, (4) Suppressing emotions and seeking distraction, (5) Acting independently, and (6) Distrusting" (ibid., p. 226). Furthermore, the interview data show that religious beliefs and practices form part of the strategy. For the young refugees, religion was an important element of their lives that strongly connected with how they coped with challenges in their new environment.

3.8. Other Studies

A couple of studies appeared difficult to classify; meanwhile, each was very relevant to this review study. In this last section under the umbrella of "other studies" are publications on, for example, SOS children's villages, a confirmation program, and the theme of trauma recovery.

Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022) published an interview study among 10 women (in their twenties) from Ghana and Uganda. When they were younger, these women lived in SOS children's villages in Ghana and Uganda for at least two years. At that time, they were pregnant or had a child. The average age at the time these young mothers gave birth to their first child was 18 years. The research questions were as follows: What factors lead to early pregnancies? What challenges do the young mothers encounter? What coping techniques did the young mothers use to deal with their challenges? The background of this study is that there is little awareness of pregnancy and parenting among young people in out-of-home care in Sub-Sharan Africa. This study aims to contribute to more insights in the context of SOS children's villages in Ghana and Uganda.

"Both countries have relatively similar policies and institutional frameworks relating to vulnerable children and youth in care. One of the residential facilities for children in both countries is SOS children's villages (SOS CV), a non-profit organization that helps children without parental care" (ibid., p. 684). The SOS care system revolves around children's villages with several family houses, each having six to eight children who live as siblings under the care of a professional caregiver.

> "The study's findings revealed that the young mothers had minimal sexual and reproductive health education, as well as a lack of sufficient monitoring, which predisposed them to early pregnancy. The young mothers indicated that emotional stress, financial and employment obstacles, and stigma were some challenges they had experienced. They used personal motivation and spirituality as coping mechanisms to deal with their challenges". (ibid., p. 683)

The latter outcome regarding the role of spirituality refers to respondents depending on the belief in power to intervene and change the course of their difficult lives, the involvement in faith-based activities (e.g., praying) as being helpful for handling challenges, and faith providing them a purpose to keep working.

Kaufman and Sandsmark (2015) presented research on religious learning among adolescents who engage in a confirmation program in two childcare institutions in Norway. Data consist of the participatory observation of confirmation training sessions and a confirmation service and semi-structured interviews with employees at the institutions and congregations. The study revealed the significant role of nonreligious mediating artifacts in the processes of religious learning. "Is the focus on material artifacts (. . .) more significant when working with adolescents living at childcare institutions than with other young people? As we have not compared the two different groups, we don't have evidence that such is the case" (ibid., p. 152).

Mazursky (2024) examined the sources of resilience among homeless LGBTQ+ youth in out-of-home care in Israel. A semi-structured interview was held with 31 subjects aged 16 to 32 who lived in out-of-home care and have since aged out of these services. The aim of the study was ". . . to understand the sources of resilience among LGBTQ+ youth who do not have family support" (ibid., p. 2). The study revealed that resilience sources were on individual, interpersonal, macro, and chrono levels. On the individual level in particular, faith and hope for a better future were found to be sources of resilience. "The participants who spoke about faith as a source of resilience did not specifically refer to religious belief but, instead, to holding on to various kinds of belief" (ibid., p. 4). Regarding faith, participants refer, among other things, to a connection to oneself, faith in goodness, and faith as a kind of hope for a better future.

Olstad et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study among 10 therapists at an outpatient CAMHS in Norway working with adolescents with developmental trauma. The aim of this study was to explore therapists' experiences with talking to developmentally traumatized adolescents about issues related to meaning in life (including religious meaning) and how therapists reflect on the importance of this topic. The study consisted of two focus group interviews, each with five participants. The authors define meaning in life as follows: "*Meaning in life* is empirical and can be studied as a human experience. It involves the feeling that life is meaningful, the sources that provide meaningfulness, and the importance of the experience of meaning for coping with life in particular situations" (ibid., p. 2) The study revealed that the topic of meaning in life in encounters with adolescents with developmental trauma and talking about meaning in life with them are complex and challenging. For example, from the perspective of a therapist, faith and religion can be both a resource and an inhibiting factor. At the same time, ". . . talking about meaning in life in therapy could help to explore the person's resources and opportunities" (ibid., p. 4). For the latter, more knowledge is needed about meaning in life and its implications for mental health care among adolescents.

Olstad et al. (2024) conducted another qualitative study among eight adolescents who were served by the same CAMHS in Norway. The aim of the study was to investigate how these adolescents, who displayed developmental trauma, experienced and described meaning in life. The authors describe developmental trauma as stressful situations in

which traumatic stress and poor regulatory support occur simultaneously. Meaning in life was studied along the lines of three aspects: meaningfulness, crises of meaning, and sources of meaning. The results of the study revealed several themes in the experiences of participants with meaning in life: "... relationships with others, persevering, and making progress, maintaining routines and structure in daily life, religiosity, and spirituality, and experiencing good moments and finding space free from pressure. These themes were sometimes explained separately, sometimes intertwined, and in combinations" (ibid., p. 21). Regarding the theme of religiosity and spirituality in particular, some participants had a religious background. Some expressed religiosity in terms of believing in God, and some in terms of undefined spirituality or a belief in fate. Concerning religion and faith in God, both positive and negative relationships with dealing with critical situations were observed in the data. *Positive relationships* refer to having "... something such as religion to rely on and turn to when things were difficult" (ibid., p. 25). *Negative relationships* means, for example, participants losing faith because faith no longer appeared to make sense. Moreover, a belief in fate appeared important for some participants; this refers to an element of hope and trust.

The context of a randomized controlled trial by Salmanian et al. (2020) was a reformatory in Teheran, Iran. The background for the study is that "[a]ttachment to God can compensate for insecure attachment patterns, especially among individuals with conduct disorder" (ibid., p. 269). Participants in this study were 31 adolescents with conduct disorders at a reformatory: 16 in an intervention group and 15 in a control group. The intervention group received the Spiritual Psychotherapy Package: a seven-week-long program with 14 sessions directed toward improving one's attachment to God. In earlier research published in 2017, the authors introduced the intervention in detail and presented a pilot study to evaluate the feasibility of a clinical trial (Mohammadi et al. 2017).

> "The overall pattern of the results revealed that the 14-session intervention significantly reduced the avoidance attachment to God on the Attachment to God Inventory immediately following the intervention. The effect size tended to be larger at follow-up; however, this difference was not statistically significant. In contrast, we did not find evidence that the intervention significantly reduced the anxious attachment to God". (Salmanian et al. 2020, p. 273)

4. Conclusions

This review study originated from the observation that the theme of spiritual development in youth care contexts relates to various themes, concepts, theories, and research disciplines. Furthermore, spiritual development in healthy contexts seems to receive much more attention than in contexts of disturbed or fractured development. There is a lack of sufficient research underpinnings regarding spirituality in the lives of young people in youth care contexts, and the available research is not systematically gathered in an overview of what we already know about this subject. The current review study started with the following main research question: *What insights can be distilled from existing scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles published from January 2000 to July 2025 regarding spiritual formation in the youth care context?*

The results of the review study were based on 41 journal articles that were included. Half of the articles thematize the context of foster care. The other articles are spread over various other contexts of youth care, including psychiatric care, child and youth welfare, residential care, social work, and service to unaccompanied minors. The vast majority of the articles presented empirical research. An important observation is that the religious identity of children and youth, or religion and spirituality in the lives of young people, is by no means presented uniformly. This is both an empirical observation of young people

and their diverse ways of dealing with spiritual issues and an observation of how religion and spirituality is measured or described in research projects.

Three major themes can be defined that connect most articles: (a) the discussion of religion and spirituality as a phenomenon that is naturally present in the lives of children and the need or right to recognize that dimension and to facilitate continuity in it; (b) the question or perhaps the hypothesis that religion and spirituality can be a source for promoting well-being, including the finding that this does not always appear to be unambiguous, up to and including attention to harmful effects of religion and spirituality; and (c) the question of whether and how religion and spirituality can be used more instrumentally in youth care services to provide the best possible care to young people.

4.1. Recognizing and Facilitating Continuity in Religion and Spirituality in Youths' Lives

The reviewed literature argues that youth care practitioners should meet the rights of all actors involved (e.g., children's rights or religious rights) and prioritize the best interests of a child. This is also true for the dimension of religion and spirituality. In this regard, for example, religious matching in foster care is believed to be important. Youth care workers should be engaged in how the topic of religion unfolds in the lives of young people, and religious preferences should be an item of proactive assessment, for example, in the context of foster care, to find a good placement match to accommodate these preferences. Meanwhile, young people in foster care are more nuanced. Some prefer cultural (including religious) matching; others do not. More important for these young people seems to be approached as rational and competent actors who have agency themselves.

4.2. Religion and Spirituality: A Source for Promoting Well-Being or Harmful Effects

Indeed, the reviewed literature shows a nuanced picture. There is literature suggesting positive effects on the spiritual growth of young people and their religious participation on youth development. Simultaneously, there is literature pointing to negative impacts, for instance, the religiously rationalized abuse and neglect of children or forced religious conversion. Overall, the literature tends not to ignore the spiritual dimension of children's lives in youth care contexts. This important dimension plays a potential role in the construction of narratives.

In several studies, spirituality or religion comes to the fore as a protective factor, for instance, as a source of resilience. Religion and spirituality can provide a sense of meaning, comfort, and control. Furthermore, spirituality or religion is connected to reducing unhealthy, risky behaviors. Religious coping (e.g., faith-based practices such as praying) can help to deal with the challenges young people face. In other studies, however, religiosity did not appear to contribute significantly to resilience or other aspects of well-being. However, negative effects have been addressed in the literature. How young people perceive God, for example, experiencing being abandoned or punished by God, might lead to symptoms of depression. In foster care contexts, there might be harmful effects when the religion of foster parents is different from that of birth parents. This not only hinders constructive collaboration with birth families but can also lead to situations of discrimination and/or disturbed development of self-understanding and the social belonging of youth.

4.3. Using Religion and Spirituality to Provide the Best Possible Care to Young People

From the reviewed literature, we learn that churches and faith communities, but also less organized religions, might provide community and social support and help young people in building resilience and a sense of purpose. There is even a hypothesis that a foster family's involvement in church contributes to successful fostering. The reason for this is the potential in churches for a strong support system that could be utilized. More studies are needed to verify this hypothesis. In youth care contexts in general, the reviewed

literature points to the importance of addressing meaning in life with young people. These kinds of conversations might help to find resources and opportunities for them. For this, however, more knowledge among professionals is needed. Different studies recommend that knowledge about religion and spirituality among professionals working in youth care contexts should be enlarged, and clear standards should be developed to be better equipped to support young people and their development in life.

4.4. Discussion

The observation that religion and spirituality are conceptualized and measured in various ways in the different research projects presented in this review adds to an observation already indicated in the Introduction section. There, we stated that in these kinds of studies, religion and spirituality are often superficially operationalized in terms of religious attendance or religious affiliation. This is what we have often observed. However, we also observed a large variety of other conceptualizations, varying from finding meaning in life to sense making or to belief in a higher power. This rich variety on the one hand corresponds with how religion and spirituality exist in reality; on the other hand, it makes it quite difficult to compare studies when, on the level of conceptualization, the very theme of religion and spirituality is approached differently.

Despite this difficulty, this review study shows that the philosophical dimension of the development of young people is something to take seriously in youth care. As suggested in the Introduction, the reviewed literature depicted that in youth development, spirituality and spiritual development play a role, both as something individual and something in parenting communities. Spirituality and religion in youth care contexts should be taken seriously, not only from a human rights perspective but also from a more pedagogical perspective. That being said, the literature review shows that religion and spirituality can have both a positive impact on young people's well-being and a harmful impact concurrently. There is literature suggesting the positive effects of the spiritual growth of young people. These can be partly explained in light of the compensation and correspondence dynamics in attachment processes. However, there is also literature pointing at a negative impact: Religion can indeed be a source of problematic practices that cause a person to experience major health and/or developmental problems. Despite or because of this nuanced picture, religion and spirituality should be considered an important dimension of life that plays a potential role in the construction of young people's narratives.

Nonetheless, this nuanced picture should make professionals very careful in "instrumentalizing" religion and spirituality as a positive force in enhancing the well-being of young people in youth care contexts. We observed several publications where religion and spirituality were connected with building resilience. In the Introduction, we explained that resilience is often mentioned as an important outcome of being engaged in faith practices or religious communities. However, this is not an automatic relationship; that is what this review study reveals. The practical theological reflection by Dillen (2012) on how spirituality and resilience mutually support each other in the lives and development of children might help the reflection further in this regard.

A striking appeal often echoed in the literature is that knowledge about religion and spirituality among professionals working in youth care contexts should be enlarged to be better equipped to support young people and their development in life. Instead of religion, we suggest that spirituality be the central theme in educational programs for youth care professionals. Based on the literature review, "meaning in life" or "seeking sense in life" appears to be a central theme for young people in youth care contexts. These themes reflect a quest that comes very close to the definition of spirituality, as presented in the Introduction: "the human quest for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral principles in relation to

persons' and groups' deepest or most central convictions and experiences about the nature of reality" (Nelson-Becker and Canda 2008, p. 179). Spirituality as a quest, thus, might be a suitable concept to address in professionalization initiatives. Furthermore, it might be helpful not to focus on "meaning-making" processes but on "existential configurations" instead, a concept that "... provides space for personal agency and is open to social and cultural contexts' significance in understanding human formation" (Gustavsson 2020, p. 26). Practical tools that might be suggested to conduct a "spiritual assessment" with an eye on including the spiritual strengths of young people in youth care contexts are the so-called spiritual ecogram presented by Limb et al. (2021) or a spiritual genogram discussed by Limb and Hodge (2010).

This review study aims to contribute to the field of youth care studies and youth ministry research. The current study focused on peer-reviewed academic journal articles as the main source. One might consider adding to the discussion monographs on the topic of spiritual development in youth care contexts. Furthermore, one might consider adding to this study an in-depth analysis of the social work literature. In the current review study, studies on social work contexts are also included. However, only thus far have they produced a search strategy focused on youth care and spirituality. At the same time, there is much wisdom developed in social work reflections that might assist with further reflections on spirituality in youth care contexts in particular. Another recommendation is to delve deeper into the themes of well-being and mental health. These themes were not included in the search strategy of the current literature review but are nevertheless often used in public debates on young people's development.

4.5. Recommendations for Practitioners

The current study might give some directions or considerations for professionals and volunteers working in youth care contexts:

- Spirituality/religion in youth care contexts should be taken seriously, not only from a human rights perspective but also from a more pedagogical perspective. Thus, it is important to recognize that religion and spirituality can have both a positive impact on young people's well-being and a harmful impact concurrently.
- Youth care workers should be very careful with "instrumentalizing" religion and spirituality as a positive force for enhancing the well-being of young people in youth care contexts. Sometimes, there is no impact on well-being; sometimes, the implied "positive force" turns out to be a negative impact on well-being or resilience.
- Knowledge about religion and spirituality among youth care workers should be deepened to be better equipped to support young people and their development in life. In this regard, spirituality as a quest might be a suitable concept to address. Furthermore, it might be helpful not to focus on "meaning making" processes but on "existential configurations" in the lives of young people instead.
- Practical tools that might be suggested to conduct a "spiritual assessment" with an eye on including the spiritual strengths of young people in youth care contexts are the so-called spiritual ecogram presented by Limb et al. (2021) or a spiritual genogram discussed by Limb and Hodge (2010).

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel17050610/s1, Supplementary File S1: List of Keywords for the Literature Review; Supplementary File S2: Schematic Overview of Search Strategy for the Literature Review; Supplementary File S3: List of Journal Articles included in the Literature Review.

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Notes

1 An example is a study among adults seeking acute psychiatric hospitalization in impatient units: cf. Abernethy et al.'s (2021) "Inpatient Perspectives on the Appropriateness of Spiritually Integrated Interventions in a Christian-Affiliated Program."; another example is the psychological care provided by churches: cf. Bornsheuer et al.'s (2012) "Psychological Care Provided by the Church.".

2 This study is also discussed in Section 3.4 on child/youth welfare.

3 This study is also discussed in Section 3.5 on residential care.

4 See note 2 above.

5 This study is also discussed in Section 3.2 on foster care.

6 See note 5 above.

7 See note 5 above.

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