




ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ | RESEARCH ARTICLE

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON ADOLESCENT RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The interpretation of experiences relies heavily on an individual's religious framework and developmental characteristics. One's conception of God and the way one behaves are central. The nature and diversity of religious experiences reflect the significance that the individual attributes to religion and religious principles in their own life. This investigation presents valuable empirical evidence regarding the role of religion in the lives of young individuals amidst the prevailing trend of increasing secularism in contemporary society. The objective of this study is to gain insight into the role of religion in the lives of young people and to identify recurrent religious experiences. Through this qualitative examination encompassing young individuals in early adolescence, certain religious experiences were found to align partially with the structures associated with their religious affiliations. Additionally, some alterations corresponding to the developmental inclinations of adolescents were observed within the content of certain religious experiences. Because this period is the period in which some rapid intellectual, affective and behavioural changes are seen in the development of humanity. Therefore, it is possible to come across a number of different effects specific to adolescence. In addition, discrepancies were identified in the configuration and variety of religious encounters based on gender. Religious doubts and hesitations increase or decrease according to the degree of religious commitment of the individual. In addition, since this study was conducted immediately after the 6 February earthquake, it was seen that this traumatic event was reflected in the way young people interpreted their experiences. In this study, phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research designs, was used. The data obtained were analysed by thematic coding and content analysis method.

Key Words: Islam, Adolescence, Religious experience, Religious doubt, Earthquake, Religious narrative.

Ergenlik Dönemi Dinî Deneyimleri Üzerine Nitel bir Araştırma

Öz

Deneyimlerin yorumlanması, kişinin dini referans çerçevesine ve gelişimsel özelliklerine bağlıdır. Kişinin Tanrı tasavvuru ve davranış şekli merkezi bir konumdadır. Dinî deneyimlerinin şekli ve çeşitliliği bireyin hayatında dine ve dinî değerlere verdiği önemi ortaya koymaktadır. Giderek seküler bir hal alan günümüz dünyasında gençlerin hayatında dinin yerini öğrenmek açısından bu çalışma önemli veriler sağlamaktadır. Bu araştırma gençlerin hayatında dinin yerini ve dinî deneyimlerin içinde sıklıkla görülen deneyimlerin neler olduğunu anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Erken ergenlik dönemindeki gençler üzerinde yapılan bu nitel çalışmada kısmen bağlı olunan dinin yapısına paralel bazı dini deneyimler ifade edilmiştir. Bazı dini deneyimlerin içeriğinde ise, ergenliğin yapısındaki gelişimsel eğilimlere karşılık gelen bazı değişiklikler görülmüştür. Çünkü bu dönem insanlığın gelişiminde düşünsel, duyuşsal ve davranışsal bazı hızlı değişimlerin görüldüğü dönemdir. Dolayısıyla ergenlik dönemine özgü bir takım farklı etkilere rastlayabilmek mümkündür. Ayrıca cinsiyete bağlı olarak dini deneyimlerin yapısında ve çeşitliliğinde bazı farklılıklara rastlanmıştır. Dini şüphe ve tereddütler bireyin dini bağlılıklarının derecesine göre artmakta veya azalmaktadır. Ayrıca bu çalışma 6 Şubat depreminden hemen sonra yapıldığından bu travmatik olayın gençlerin deneyimlerini yorumlama biçimlerine yansıdığı görülmüştür. Bu çalışmada nitel araştırma desenlerinden olgu bilim (fenomenoloji) deseni kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler tematik kodlama ve içerik analizi yöntemi ile analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İslam, Ergenlik dönemi, Dinî deneyim, Dinî şüphe, Deprem, Dini anlatı.

Introduction

Since the time of Rousseau, scholars have engaged in discussions regarding the inherent religious inclination of the individual and the subsequent positive or negative impacts of religious traditions on this inclination. A notable example is William James, who, in his renowned work "The Varieties of Religious Experience," posited that religious life in the world is primarily based on personal religious experiences rather than the teachings of established religious institutions (James 2009). In his book, James delved into the contentious topics of conversion, repentance, mysticism, and clericalism, substantiating his thesis through an extensive analysis of personal religious experiences and providing illustrative examples. Nevertheless, there exists a significant contingent that contends that religious teachings form the foundation of religious experiences (Otto vd. 1968; Schleiermacher 1999). Regardless of whether religious experiences stem from institutional religion or individual religious orientations, they ultimately pertain to the relationship between the individual and the divine. Thus, religious experience is defined as the totality of feelings, perceptions and sensations experienced by a religious group or an actor that involve a communication, however simple, with a divine essence (i.e. God), ultimate reality, transcendent authority (Stark 1965). In this definition, it is emphasised that religious experience is based on the relationship between God and the individual. Guided by the notion that religious experience symbolizes a bond between the individual and God, Elkind asserts that this bond bears a formal resemblance to the relationship between two individuals. Consequently, the individual can progress through various occurrences such as visiting religious venues, engaging in prayer and worship, or facing specific challenges such as death and the inability to embrace prayers (Elkind ve Elkind 1962). Hence, the direction of this relationship is largely determined by the individual's experiences and the nature of their beliefs. However, discerning whether belief or the individual's religious experiences hold greater sway in this relationship often presents difficulties. In accordance with Kellenberger's assertions, the intricate relationship between religious experience and belief is subject to change. On occasion, religious experience molds belief, on

occasion, belief shapes experience, and on occasion, they exist in a state of harmony with each other (Kellenberger 2021).

This multidimensional structure of religious experience is reflected in the studies in this field and is associated with many phenomena. For example, Happold considers religious experience as a deep and multidimensional experience. According to Happold, religious experience is more than an intellectual or emotional experience; it has a transcendent, inclusive and universal dimension. According to Happold, religious experience is an experience that goes deep into the depths of human existence, transcends the boundaries of time and space, and expands the personal boundaries of the individual (Happold 1991). According to Hepburn, religious experience is an emotional and mental experience of the religious, which helps people to understand and shape their relationship with the world and their own existence. According to him, religious experience is similar to aesthetic experience and touches the spiritual depths of human beings as in aesthetic experience. Hepburn's association of religious experience with aesthetic experience shows that he emphasises the depth and intensity of these experiences (Hepburn 2019). Based on the data obtained from similar studies, Ulu identified twelve criteria to determine the characteristics of religious experience. Four of these were taken from James, three from Happold, four from Stace and one from Hökelekli. These criteria are: ineffability, realisation of the unity of all things, objectivity and a sense of reality, cognitive quality, a sense of timelessness, a deep positive character, transience, true selfhood, a sense of sanctity, passivity, unmediatedness, and paradoxicality (Ulu 2018).

During the period of adolescence, an individual's religious experiences are influenced by various factors, as is the case in every stage of life. However, there are unique influences specific to adolescence that can be identified. This is because adolescence is a time when individuals engage in the search for identity, the formation of a worldview, and the establishment of their values, all of which coincide with a period of change in every aspect of life (Boyatzis 2012). Consequently, religious experiences among young people during this period can exhibit variability. Given that adolescents are actively questioning and exploring their beliefs while constructing their own systems of belief, personal experiences hold significant sway over their religious thoughts. However, young people may have different religious beliefs, or the depth and interpretation of beliefs may differ even among young people with the same religious beliefs (Smith, 2020). There may be individual differences in terms of attendance at religious sites, or in the performance of acts of worship such as prayer, fasting and prayers. Young people's religious experiences can also be influenced by factors such as family, friends, media and cultural environment (Vikdahl, Kuusisto, ve Kallioniemi 2024). These are some of the factors that can diversify adolescents' religious experiences.

In the realm of religious experience, there exists a diverse range of depictions, which can be attributed, in part, to dissimilar religious educations or various sociocultural influences. A prime exemplification of this phenomenon can be found in Hardy's investigation (Hardy, 1979). Moreover, Hardy's study contains numerous allusions to instances of perceiving, hearing, or simply being cognizant of the presence of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. In his scholarly inquiry, Baker supplies certain empirical substantiation that the majority of Americans undergo some form of

religious experience (Baker, 2009). Nonetheless, it is crucial to underscore that there exist disparities in terms of individual and societal factors that impact these experience, and furthermore, the prevalence and cultural acceptance of the various forms of religious experiences fluctuates. According to a study conducted by Francis et al. on Catholic and Protestant pupils aged 16-18, 26% of the students engage in daily individual prayer, 51% pray occasionally, and 23% never pray. 59% of the student population regularly attend religious services, with 7% attending once a month, 26% attending on occasion, and 8% never attending. Additionally, 37% of the students expressed complete certainty in the existence of God, while 36% claimed to be moderately certain. Notably, female students demonstrated higher scores than their male counterparts in various areas such as attitudes towards Christianity, belief in God, church attendance, prayer, and religious encounters. The findings of the study also revealed that Catholic youth exhibited significantly greater church attendance, individual prayer, belief in God, and attitudes towards Christianity compared to Protestant youth, although this difference did not extend to religious experiences (Francis vd. 2006). Elkind's research with ninth grade students identified six recurring types of religious experiences, namely church-related experiences, experiences of loneliness, anxiety and fear, worries, prayer, and moral actions (Elkind & Elkind, 1962).

The fact that the topic of religious experience has gained an important place in educational and psychological research is related to the various pedagogical and epistemological assumptions attributed to it. One of the main arguments since James is the idea that the experiential aspect of religion can serve as the basis, especially the epistemic basis, of religious belief (Wettstein, 2014). Emphasizing the experiential side of religion means coming into contact with the mystical tradition and involves a move away from the spirit of rationalist theology, which has long been a defining approach to religion. This has become inevitable in today's understanding where the interpretive, contextual aspect of religion is frequently mentioned (Duke ve Stone 2013). In fact, we can say that this has dominated educational theory and practice for a long time (Jackson 2005; Özcan 2020). In the context of religious education, researchers who address the issue state that religious teachings can be taught in the dimension of knowledge, but it is not possible to teach religious experience (Jarvis, 2008). Although they have similar experiences, the way individuals interpret them is different for various reasons. The study of psychology has allowed us to learn something about how others evaluate their religious experiences. Studies in this area have also provided educational practitioners with some data on cognitive, affective and action-oriented responses to religious experiences (Greer ve Francis 1992; Johnson, Li, ve Cohen 2015). Even so, many teachers tend to neglect discussions of emotional responses, which are an important dimension of religious experience, and even limit the cognitive to the knowledge dimension, without reference to beliefs, values and attitudes (Jarvis, 2008). Data from these are needed to ground educational practice on a more scientific basis. Religious education is therefore somehow related both to the religious experience in the school environment and to the religious experience of others as a subject of education.

Although there are important studies in the West that deal with religious experience both theoretically and empirically, there are very few studies on this subject in Turkey. This research

marks the inception of comprehending the role of religion in the lives of young individuals within the context of a progressively secularized world.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to elucidate the multiplicity of recurrent religious experiences by examining the impact of religion on the spiritual experiences of individuals during their adolescent years. With the aim of comprehending the religious experiences of young individuals amidst the diversity aforementioned, this study seeks to comprehend the significance of religion in the lives of young people and the recurrent experiences within these religious experiences. Consequently, the following inquiries are to be addressed:

1. What is the position and significance of religion in the lives of adolescents?
2. What are the religious experiences encountered by adolescents?
3. What are the religious narratives or teachings that exert an influence on adolescents?
4. How do adolescents cope with religious doubt?

2. METHOD

In this study, in which religious experiences of adolescence are discussed, phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research designs, was used. The aim of this design is to understand the essence of the experiences of people who live a certain phenomenon in depth (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research entails the utilization of data collection methods such as observation, interviews, and document analysis. Through the adoption of a qualitative approach, this study aims to uncover perceptions and events within a natural setting, providing a comprehensive and realistic understanding (Yıldırım, Şimşek, 2016). Phenomenology encompasses research conducted to reveal what the nature and meaning of a phenomenon is, as well as what it is in essence.

2.1. Participants

The study group comprised 15 male and 20 female students (14 - 15 years old) enrolled in the ninth grade of a high school. The sampling method is easily accessible or convenient sampling. Accordingly, the first year students of the Social Sciences High School, which receives students with points, were taken as the sample. Given that admission to the school was based on a point system, the academic abilities of the students were fairly similar. Participants were given codes as P1, P2, P3... It should also be taken into consideration that the participants consisted of individuals affected by the 6 February Kahraman Maraş earthquake. Our study was conducted in Malatya province shortly after the earthquake. Ethics committee permission was obtained for the research with the decision numbered 2023/18 of Kilis 7 December University.

2.2. Data Collection Tool

In qualitative research, providing a thorough explanation of the data collection process is a crucial factor in ensuring the validity of the research (Yıldırım, Şimşek 2016). For this particular

study, the data was obtained by utilizing structured questions that were meticulously prepared by the researcher. The participants were given the data in a written format and were requested to provide their answers accordingly. Within a single class hour, the students were instructed to compose a paragraph for each question. The data collection tool consisted of four open-ended questions, which were as follows:

1. How would you delineate the meaning of religion to you?
2. Can you recount a time when you experienced an exceptional sense of connection with the Divine?
3. What are the narratives or teachings inherent to your religious or belief system that have left the most profound impact upon you?
4. Have you ever harbored any doubts concerning your religious convictions? If so, how did you navigate through this uncertainty?

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis is a crucial component of research in the social sciences, as it involves examining data in order to address research questions or hypotheses. The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology. Generally, qualitative data analysis encompasses various stages, including data collection through different methods employing an inductive approach, organizing and categorizing the data, coding and classifying them into themes or categories, and ultimately presenting the obtained data in schemes and tables (Şahin ve Gürbüz 2018). Consequently, the students' responses to the questions were transferred to a computer platform, and after an initial review, they were imported into the Maxqda analysis program. In order to minimise the expectations and intervention of the researcher during the coding process, a code list was not created in advance, and codes were created based on the text through axis and selective coding. The data were then subjected to coding and categorized into different groups. In order to ensure coding reliability, the data were coded separately by another researcher and finalised. After coding, the students' expressions were subjected to content analysis.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings obtained from the research will be presented depending on the research questions.

3.1. The Place and Importance of Religion in the Lives of Adolescents

When the answers given by the students to the question "What is the place and importance of religion in the lives of adolescents?" are analyzed, two types of answers are found: those who attribute a positive meaning to religious values in their lives and those who do not. Three motifs come to the fore for the participants who attribute an important share to religion in their lives. These are; *lifestyle, meaning of life, and a means of coping with difficulties.*

The most repeated theme of those who stated that religion is important to them is that religion is a *lifestyle* for them. 14 of the participants consider religion as a lifestyle for themselves. Some of these answers are as follows:

"I think religion is a way of life for human beings, each person lives his/her life according to his/her religion. When a person talks about the religion they believe in, other people have certain thoughts about that person" (P9)

"I think religion is what is necessary for people to find the right path. Like water, like food, every nation has a religion that they believe in and find reliable and true" (P12).

"Religion is actually a guide for me. Since human beings have always been on a quest since they were born and we try to find the right path, religion guides us in this regard" (P14).

"Our religion, our Prophet, our God, all of these make us feel very special and peaceful. Religion is our way of life" (P19).

"Religion is the most important point in my life. I try to comply as much as I can. If there was no religion, the world would not be in a good condition. Everything would be free and there would be no such thing as good deeds and sins" (P1).

"Religion is a philosophy of life for me. It reminds me of the limits in my life and helps me to stop myself" (P13).

Another theme is that religion is *the meaning of life* for them. The statements belonging to this theme are as follows:

"Religion is actually a guide for me. Since humans have always been on a quest since birth and we try to find the right path, religion guides us in this regard" (P14).

"Having a belief in my life means that I have a reason to live. Knowing that there is a deity who created me prevents me from feeling empty" (P15).

"Religion is a door to eternity for me. It makes my life easier. Religion puts life in a certain order. Religion is a need for me. Without religion, I would feel like I have lost my way" (P20).

Apart from these, religion is for example a source of coping with difficulties; "Religion has a great meaning for me, it is a guide for me, a source of motivation that helps me to cope with the difficulties in this life" (P1). "Religion serves as a solution to my inquiries, providing a sense of contentment and trust that aids me in navigating challenging circumstances" (P12). At the same time, religion is a means of reminding people of their responsibilities; "God has given people with reason and will the power to choose good and evil, and religion reminds people that they are responsible to their creator" (P4). "For me, it means the place where I have to account for my actions after death" (P17). It symbolizes the concept of justice; "I am unable to provide a precise definition of the significance of religion to myself, however, if I were to offer an illustrative example, it would entail assisting individuals without any form of differentiation based on language or religion, while also safeguarding their entitlements" (P2). Religion can at times be

regarded as a customary practice; "It is a spiritual conviction that has been transmitted across generations from the Prophet to our forefathers, embedded within our cultural heritage" (P6).

There is a considerable proportion ($\frac{1}{4}$ of them) who state that religion is not meaningful for them. The statements of these students are important in terms of showing the main points in the thoughts of adolescents. The preeminent underlying motif herein resides in the assertion that religion is a human construct. To illustrate this notion, one participant declares, "Religion holds no meaning for me. Its conception arose to assuage individuals' inquisitiveness regarding the posthumous realm" (P11). Furthermore, another participant opines, "In my view, religion epitomizes individuals' conviction in a construct fashioned through their own ruminations, serving as a solace to counteract feelings of solitude or to engage in supplication" (P14).

Apart from this, for some, religion is a tool of exploitation and social control; "The word religion or religion does not mean anything to me. I think it is used as a tool of exploitation. It is a concept invented by upper class people to distract the lower class" (P23). "I think it is a system based on conscience, created with the human mind, especially used by the rulers in order to keep the society in order and facilitate its control" (P10). According to another, religion is a sign of helplessness; "It is hiding behind the existence of the God they believe in and begging for mercy in order to reinforce people's sense of belief" (P7). Or religion should remain as a conscientious phenomenon; For myself, religion is a matter that is engaged with sentiment, manifesting it outwardly and consistently conducting oneself in accordance with it is erroneous for myself. I do not favor inflating it other than for the purpose of worship. It ought to be experienced internally, it should not be projected externally (P5).

When these student statements are considered as a whole, it can be said that religion has an important place in the lives of adolescents in general. For them, religion is a way of life, a means of coping with difficulties and an important phenomenon through which they make sense of life. However, there is also a minority group who think that religion is invented by people. Such adolescents see religion as a means of exploitation and control, a place of refuge for helpless people or a phenomenon that should be limited to conscience. These last data are informative in terms of seeing the reasons for the non-religious beliefs and attitudes that have recently become more prominent among adolescents. These results are in line with the secularisation tendencies revealed in some recent surveys (Nişancı 2023). Stating that secularisation can occur in different ways over time and space for various historical and cultural reasons, researchers argue that social transformations in Western societies such as rationalisation, improved material conditions, pluralism, individualism, and the weakening of religious authority in the public sphere have led to a general weakening of religious behaviour and identity (Thiessen ve Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). As individuals and societies give more legitimacy to assumptions associated with rationalisation, religious beliefs and practices are questioned more extensively. In support of this thesis, some data have reported different estimates, such as 23 per cent of the world's population (Gallup International) or 16 per cent, or 1.1 billion, who do not believe in any religion (Pew Research).

3.2. Forms of Religious Experience

Another important question of this research is what are the religious experiences that are frequently seen in the lives of adolescents and which they attach importance to. The students were asked the question "Can you share the moment when you felt a special closeness to God?". It is seen that the religious experiences frequently mentioned by the students are related to prayer, prayer and earthquake. Among the answers given, the most repeated religious experiences were prayer and prayer experiences. Since this study was conducted on an earthquake-affected population after the February 6 Kahraman Maraş earthquake, the most repeated religious experiences included the religious experiences caused by fear and anxiety during the earthquake. In this way, the effects of traumatic events such as earthquakes on individuals were also observed. Another religious experience is related to reading the Qur'an. To a lesser extent, religious experiences such as illness, sacrifice, dangerous situations (accidents) and dhikr were also shared. The themes and sample expressions of these experiences are given in the table.

Table 1. Themes and codes of religious experiences.

Theme	Code	Participant
Praying (Namaz)	-When I initially commenced engaging in praying, I was profoundly overwhelmed by the complexities of life. The anguish caused by life's tribulations proved to be unbearable for my heart. However, upon initiating my prays, I experienced an immense sense of gratification during my inaugural prayer. Subsequently, I comprehended that Allah extends an invitation to us to partake in worship for our own well-being.	P1
	-During moments when I engage in praying most ardently and with profound devotion, when I prostrate myself, I experience an extraordinary proximity to my Lord. This proximity brings forth immense relief and tranquility within me.	P4
	-Typically, when I engage in praying, I experience a profound closeness to Allah. This sensation fills me with immense joy.	P15
	-In my dream I woke up to someone saying that "your mother is calling you" and it was time for Fajr praying. I felt as if Allah was calling me to pray, not my mother.	P11
	-When I pray, I feel closer to Allah because I am doing what Allah has commanded me to do.	P10
Prayer	-In the realm of primary education, during the instruction of religious studies, our instructor used to assert that when one engages in prayer, Allah attentively listens. Ever since that particular juncture in time, whenever I engage in prayer regarding any subject matter, I perceive the divine presence of God beside me, creating a sense of closeness.	P12

	<p>-A profound connection with the Almighty is felt when I engage in prayer before retiring for the night.</p> <p>-In particular, during moments of prayer, I experience a profound sense of Allah's presence, almost as if He stands before me. This occasion, undoubtedly, carries a distinct significance. Moreover, during periods of sorrow and discontentment, I endeavor to refrain from rebellion by recollecting the joyous moments that I owe to Him.</p> <p>-I feel close to Allah when I pray and it is answered.</p>	<p>P13</p> <p>P18</p> <p>P27</p>
Earthquake	<p>-I feel close to Allah at any time when I feel helpless. For example, I felt this closeness when I saw the rubble during the February 6 earthquake.</p> <p>-I take refuge in Allah when I experience any problem, such as during an earthquake. Such moments are special for me. I experience the same thing when something I want or an event happens any time after I pray to Allah.</p> <p>-I felt close to Allah during the chaos of the February 6 earthquake and when we needed Allah's power.</p>	<p>P2</p> <p>P19</p> <p>P6</p>
Other	<p>-I had a very dangerous surgery, and the moment I lay on the operating table I felt that Allah was with me (illness).</p> <p>-When I was trying to read the Qur'an, even though I didn't know much about it (reading the Qur'an).</p> <p>-I felt it when I had an accident and came back from the dead. I realized that everything can end in an instant, that tomorrow is not guaranteed. I felt close to Allah that day (dangerous situations).</p> <p>-I feel closer to God, especially during Ramadan (fasting).</p> <p>-When I feel that I am alone every night (loneliness).</p>	<p>P3</p> <p>P8</p> <p>P20</p> <p>P32</p> <p>P33</p>

The religious experiences that adolescents emphasise and the meaning they give to them are important for us to see around which phenomena religion is shaped for them. Based on these data, worship activities such as prayer, reading the Qur'an and fasting are important means through which adolescents establish a relationship with God. In addition, praying has an important place in terms of communicating with God and making sense of their experiences. It is understood from the student expressions that the participants' experiences and questions about religion are closely related to the earthquake phenomenon they have recently experienced.

3.3. The Effect of Religious Narratives on Adolescents

The answers to the question "What are the most influential stories or teachings of your religion or belief system?" are mostly related to the *stories of prophets* and *miracles*. Sample statements on this subject are as follows:

"Cain and Abel, one of them gave good produce as zakat and the other gave bad produce" (P2).

"It is very nice that he tells and teaches through examples or stories. Also, the fact that it appeals to all segments of society impresses me a lot" (P3).

"The event that impresses me the most is the miracle that happened when the sea split in two when Moses was going to cross the sea" (P12).

"The parable of Noah is the most special one for me. Because people who lose their identity and seek other pleasures exist today, everything is similar to today" (P26).

"The story of the Prophet Job has had the most impact on me, his teaching is patience" (P31).

Apart from this, there were also those who stated that the moral teachings of religion influenced them. For example:

"I think lying is a sin according to our religion. I don't like lying, both telling and being told. Therefore, this may be affecting me" (P6).

"For example, the principles of our religion such as not eating right, being fair, and consultation have influenced me. For example, the Prophet consulted his wife about the proposals that came to him" (P13).

"It impresses me that it shows us how we can manage our lives correctly and how we can be better in terms of morality" (P16).

These data show that the stories in the Qur'an have a significant effect on this age group of students. The fact that the messages in the parables are told in an effective language and contain miracles attracts the attention of young people. Similar results were obtained in an experimental study by Su (Su 2022a). In addition, the emphasis on the moral dimension of religion shows the importance that adolescents attach to moral principles.

3.4. Religious Doubt and Questions

The answers to the question "Have you ever had doubts about your religious beliefs? How did you cope?" provides data on adolescents' experiences of doubt about religion and ways of coping. The data on this subject indicate that adolescents who find religion meaningful for themselves generally never doubt their religious beliefs. Those who do not find religion meaningful for themselves generally move away from religious beliefs. Examples of the coping strategies of those who doubted for a certain period of time are as follows:

"There were times when I had doubts, and at such times I resolved my doubts by doing research." (P1)

"There was never a time when I doubted my religious belief, but there were issues that I wondered and researched about my religious belief." (P2)

"Usually I have always had a doubt. Because the evidence and events seemed insufficient to me. I can't say that I coped with it very well, but sometimes there were things that helped me cope with it." (P5)

"I think that just like the Bible and the Torah have changed, the Qur'an may have changed too, and that maybe the wrong belief is my belief, that I may be the one who does not question. I think that maybe they are scaring us and preventing us from finding the truth. I learn the answers to such questions and my doubts by reading." (P8)

"There were times when I questioned. When I doubted, I found answers to my questions from verses and videos. I still have questions, but I believe that Islam will answer every question I have." (P15)

"I thought that women were put in the background in the Qur'an. This caused me to doubt, but when I thought about it according to the conditions of that period, I gave up this thought." (P20)

"No, I mean there were times when I questioned things, but they were not big things. I mean, they did not cause me to doubt my belief. For example, I don't understand sects a little bit. I mean, it seems a little illogical to me for some reason, but other than that, no." (P29)

"I had some doubt once, but when I read the Qur'anic explanation, the doubt disappeared completely." (P30)

"No, I've already eliminated things from my life that don't fit my logic, so I've never had any doubts (says he's a Deist)" (P31)

"I had doubts when I thought about space, but I thought I was sinning and I freed myself from this thought." (P33)

Adolescence is generally characterised as a search for comprehension (Elkind 1964). Accordingly, doubts and questions about religion increase in this period. In particular, it is stated that this search is more intense at the beginning of adolescence. In this period, adolescents get rid of their childhood thoughts and create a new world of thought that is made sense by themselves (Fowler & Dell, 1974). In this study, it is seen that young people sometimes ask questions about religion and question their beliefs. In order to cope with these, it is seen that they resort to ways such as researching from various sources and turning to the answers given by religion.

4. DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the place of religion in the lives of adolescents and what kind of religious experiences they have. It should be noted that while some religious experiences are related to the fulfilment of various worship and rituals preached by religion, some experiences or feelings become "religious experiences" only if a person associates them with religion and defines them as

such (Stark, 1965). The interpretation of experiences depends on one's religious frame of reference; one's conception of God and the way one behaves are central (Tamminen 1994). In this study, it is understood that adolescents associate many of their experiences with religion. However, although religion has an important place in the lives of adolescents in general, it is observed that some adolescents, including those who say that religious belief is important to them, do not share any moment in which they felt particularly close to God. This is especially true for male adolescents. In some studies, religious experiences decline from childhood to adolescence. There is a marked decline in religious experiences during adolescence (13 to 15 years) (Tamminen, 1994). It is also possible to interpret this situation as an indication that religious values are not transferred from the cognitive dimension to the affective and behavioral dimension. Or it may lead us to think about the quality of religious education. According to Hardy, religious experience is, at least in part, the product of age-related development and the religious education and training of individuals in each tradition (Hardy, 1979).

According to the research data, religion for adolescents is mostly a way of life or an important phenomenon through which they find the meaning of life. Apart from that, religion is a means of coping with difficulties and reminding people of their responsibilities. It also represents justice and tradition. These results are expected for the majority Muslim youth in Turkey and are in line with the all-encompassing nature of Islam that addresses the whole of life. In a similar study, Smith and Denton reported that about half of the adolescents (13-17 years old) in the United States showed a strong and positive orientation towards religion, belief and religious experience in their lives (Smith & Denton, 2009). When we look at the ways in which young people who do not find religion meaningful for themselves justify and express this, it is seen that they resort to some ideological justifications. Identifying the origins of young people's opinions on this issue is interesting enough to be the subject of another study. However, some findings emphasise the role of the family in shaping young people's thoughts about religion (Smith ve Denton 2009; Çayır 2012; İmamoğlu ve Ferşadoğlu 2016; Bengtson vd. 2018). Research shows that children often have a natural religious and spiritual orientation, but as they grow older, this orientation weakens due to lack of encouragement, which often leads to a denial of the religious and spiritual impulse or a rejection of this aspect of their nature as childish.(Rankin, 2005a).

One of the results of this study is that the weight points of the forms of religious experience differ based on gender. Girls are more likely to experience prayer and loneliness than boys. According to Rankin, for many people religion or spirituality is more easily experienced in solitude. Because then there is an opening beyond the daily rush of life, to silence, contemplation, and a sense of the presence of things beyond (Rankin, 2005a). It is also observed that girls share more religious experiences in situations of helplessness such as earthquakes, illnesses and accidents. This coincides with the gender roles that society attributes to boys and girls. Elkind's study presents similar data (Elkind ve Elkind 1962). The religious experiences of boys are mostly related to basic acts of worship such as prayer, fasting and sacrifice. In a study conducted with a similar age group, Smith and Denton reported that adolescent girls between the ages of 13-17, compared to adolescent boys, attended religious services more frequently; felt that religion shaped their daily lives more; were more likely to make a personal commitment to live life for

God; participated in religious youth groups more frequently; prayed alone more; and felt closer to God (Smith & Denton, 2009).

When we look at the recurrent religious experiences of young people, it is seen that these experiences are usually related to praying and prayer. Praying and prayer are a means of getting closer to God for young people and such moments make them feel more peaceful. It is understood that the February 6 earthquake is associated with personal religious experiences by young people due to its recent occurrence. Considering that similar life-threatening situations (accidents, surgeries) such as earthquakes mediate religious experiences, we can say that adolescents seek refuge in God more at such times. In the study conducted by Tosun, it was revealed that the participants used 9 different coping strategies in coping with the earthquake and related stress and that they mostly referred to religious coping (Tosun 2023:52). A similar study was conducted by Kula after the earthquake in 1999. In the study, it was observed that individuals who experienced an earthquake resorted to religious coping (76%) the most among the six types of coping (Kula 2002). Tamminen found that adolescents aged 13-15 felt God's guidance and help more in escaping from external dangers, life problems and success (Tamminen, 1994).

Another result of this study is that the important stories and teachings that influence young people in their religious beliefs are similar to each other. Young people stated that they were more influenced by the aspects of their beliefs related to parables and miracles. It is understood that concrete and lived stories of religion are meaningful for this age group of students. This coincides with the data of some studies that indicate that prophet parables are useful for this age group of students as a means of effectively conducting religious education in an experimental study. (Su 2022b) In addition, it is understood that the moral teachings of religion also affect young people, and concepts such as justice, lying and injustice are important values for adolescents. In studies on adolescence, it is stated that especially in early adolescence, young people are absolutely committed to the concept of justice, especially because they have not yet met the realities of life (Köylü & Oruç, 2023).

In the structure of young people's religious experiences, there are also some expressions that are partly similar to Kohlberg's pure self-interested period. The following statements are examples of this: "When I feel that I am not really happy, I think that I am not doing something for God, so I learned that if you expect something from God, you should strive for it a little bit" (P18), or "I feel closer and more special to God when something or an event that I want happens after praying to God for a while" (P19). Fritz Oser expresses this situation in the second stage of his moral judgment theory as follows: "The individual thinks that he or she can influence God through prayers, offerings, observance of religious rules, etc. If one cares about God and fulfills the duties He gives, He will act like a trusting and loving father and you will be happy, healthy, successful, etc." The mindset of the individual at this stage implies that God is not only a powerful being, but also a being amenable to "trade-offs" (Oser 2006).

Adolescence is a period of increased religious doubt and questioning (Santrock 2015). The data in this study show that adolescents who find religion meaningful for themselves generally never doubt their religious beliefs. Those who do not find religion meaningful for themselves generally move away from religious belief. However, in some periods, adolescents experience

religious doubts and use various coping strategies. Among these, methods such as resolving doubts through research, resorting to the interpretation of religion, and using rational evidence are common. In general, it is understood that young people view religious values with skepticism, especially at this stage of life, and question them in many ways.

CONCLUSION

Religious experience is a subject that has been studied for a long time and the research on this subject provides important information about the situations in which the individual's relationship with God is shaped. We believe that this study will make a meaningful contribution to this literature. Although the results obtained are similar to the literature, it has another importance in terms of seeing how adolescents make sense of their post-earthquake experiences. Since the participants in this study were recently exposed to a devastating earthquake, it is understood that this event had a significant effect on making sense of their religious experiences. Because when it comes to issues such as religious experience, religious doubt and search for meaning, earthquake is a traumatic event that has a very high capacity to affect the feelings and thoughts of the individual. In addition, this study supports our predictions about the topics of religious doubts and questions of adolescents. It helps us to see the motives of those who define themselves as "non-religious", which has recently become more prominent especially among young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In similar studies, measurement tools should be used to provide data on the religious background that will reveal phenomena such as religious education in the family and parental religiosity in addition to the formal religious education received by individuals.
2. Studies to be conducted in different age groups may be useful to see a wider range of religious experiences.
3. Religious education should be planned taking into account the individual background of students. Some students may be quite unfamiliar with religious phenomena.
4. It is understood that young people's experiences and knowledge about religion are generally at the level of abstract knowledge. For this reason, activities that will create a wealth of religious experience should be included in the religious education of young people.

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