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Editorial

Why a new journal on religious education?

The world of thought has found expression through multiple avenues. Among these, books have long served as a central medium in both classical and modern contexts. With modernization, journals emerged as another vital channel of intellectual life, and in Türkiye, numerous journals appeared during the late Ottoman and Republican periods. With the establishment of universities, these institutions soon became the primary centers of academic publishing.

Theology faculties, too, established their own journals, many of which continue to be published today. Yet, various structural issues within these faculties—such as their composition of several distinct disciplines and the ongoing debate over the very nature of theology—have been reflected in these publications, resulting in broad-scope, multi-topic journals. In more recent decades, with the initiatives of individual scholars and institutions, thematic journals have begun to emerge. While thematic journals are well established in international academic practice, they are only beginning to take root in Türkiye and, similarly, in other non-Western academic contexts such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

In the field of religious education, there are several well-regarded international journals—such as the British Journal of Religious Education, Religious Education, Journal of Religious Education, Journal of Beliefs and Values, and Religion & Education. However, these journals operate within a paywall system, creating significant challenges for researchers, educators, and students at institutions unable to afford subscription fees. For this reason, we believe an open-access journal dedicated to religious education is not only timely but also necessary, as it ensures that scholarly knowledge and debate in this field remain accessible to all.

In light of these considerations, we have deemed it essential to launch an open-access journal devoted exclusively to the field of religious education, one that operates within a defined thematic framework. Our hope is that this endeavor will develop into a school of thought in religious education, establish a meaningful historical trajectory, and provide a platform for analyzing the historical development, contemporary challenges, future prospects, and global as well as local dynamics of religious education.

An evaluation of the possibility of religious education in early childhood in Türkiye

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Abstract: Religious education in early childhood has not been a topic of public debate in Türkiye until recent years. Moreover, the issue of providing religious and moral education at an early age has been one of the challenging topics to deliberate in the country. There has been a strong lobby opposing early childhood religious education on the grounds that it would not be in the best interest of the child. Objections to providing religious education to children at an early age have sometimes been based on ideological stances, and at other times justified from the perspective of child development and educational science. Until 2011, children were legally restricted from receiving religious education in courses affiliated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs until they had completed primary school. In addition, religious education in formal schooling begins in the 4th grade of primary school, and this threshold remains in effect today. This article analyses three main arguments put forward against early childhood religious education in Türkiye: 1. Freedom of religion and religious education in schools, 2. Developmental psychology and religious education in early childhood, 3. The lack of scholarly research on early childhood religious education. Comprehensive evaluations of these three main arguments—taking into account both scientific perspectives and international examples—lead to the conclusion that religious and moral education in early childhood is indeed possible in Türkiye. The article also offers recommendations on how this could be implemented in practice.

Introduction

Until recent years, religious and moral education in early childhood had not been a topic that came to the forefront of public discussion in Türkiye. Debates surrounding religious education in schools have primarily focused on the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) courses offered in primary and secondary education institutions. In Türkiye, the topic of providing religious and moral education during early childhood has long been one of the difficult issues to deliberate. There has been a strong lobby opposing early childhood religious education on the grounds that it would not benefit the child. Objections to offering religious education at an early age have sometimes stemmed from ideological stances and other times from concerns about its appropriateness in terms of child development and educational science. Until 2011, children were legally restricted from receiving religious education in courses affiliated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) until they had completed primary school. In addition, religious education in formal schooling begins in the 4th grade of primary school, and this threshold remains in effect today. In other words, for many years, religious education was only offered in the fourth grade, with no presence in the first three grades of primary school. In an environment where little progress has been made regarding religious and moral education at the primary level, the possibility of discussing and taking steps toward providing such education in the preschool period has not materialized. This issue has remained largely theoretical and has only been the subject of a limited number of academic studies (see Kaymakcan, 2021b).

With the enactment of the Statutory Decree in 2011, the requirement for children to complete the 5th grade to enrol in Summer Qur'an Courses, and the 8th grade to enrol in other Qur'an courses organized by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, was lifted (Resmi Gazete (Official Journal), 2011). In this way, the age restriction for non-formal religious education was abolished. As a result of this development and the political climate, beginning in 2013, the Presidency of Religious Affairs began opening "4–6 Age Qur'an Courses." These courses offered an option for families who wished to provide religious education to their children during the preschool period, where formal education is not compulsory. Encouraged by this development, some private schools also began to design and implement models of religious and values education tailored to the preschool level. In this article, the aim is to analyse the arguments put forward against the existence of religious education in early childhood. In the context of Türkiye, these arguments can be broadly grouped under three main headings:

1.   Freedom of religion and religious education in schools
2.   Developmental psychology and religious education in early childhood
3.   The lack of scholarly research on early childhood religious education

1. Freedom of Religion and Religious Education in Schools

Within the framework of debates on secularism in Türkiye, the question of religion's proper place in society has occasionally become a matter of public debate. A significant aspect of these debates concerns how religious education should be implemented in schools. Türkiye has a rich experience in this regard (see Ayhan, 2004). Various approaches have been tried—ranging from completely excluding religious courses from the curriculum, to offering them as voluntary, and eventually making them compulsory. With Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution, the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) course became one of the compulsory subjects in primary and secondary education institutions. In addition to this compulsory course, an amendment made on April 11, 2012, to Article 25 of the Basic Law of National Education (Law No. 1739) allowed for courses such as The Holy Qur'an and The Life of the Prophet Muhammad to be offered as elective courses in middle and high schools. That same year, the Ministry of National Education's Board of Education and Discipline added Basic Religious Knowledge to the list of elective courses in the updated Weekly Course Schedule

Throughout the Republican period, the existence and nature of religious education in schools have been subjects of debate. However, the reasons behind past criticisms regarding the presence and nature of religious courses differ from those of today. When we examine earlier debates, the predominant arguments were that the presence of religious education in the schools of a secular country was incompatible with secularism, scientific understanding, and Kemalism. In contrast, although it has not been reflected strongly in Türkiye, current international debates around the RCMK course tend to revolve around themes such as human rights, freedom of religion, and pluralism (Kaymakcan, 2021a).

In the period prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it cannot be said that discourses of human rights and pluralism played a significant role in shaping the legal status of religious education in schools or the prevailing pedagogical approach. Instead, the justification for the presence of religious courses was often grounded in arguments related to the nation-state, national unity and solidarity, and the use of religion as a tool in the struggle against communism. However, following the Cold War, beginning in the early 1990s, human rights and democratic discourse emerged as dominant global paradigms. These shifts began to influence educational philosophy, pedagogical approaches, and curriculum content around the world. In this context—particularly in Western countries, and with some delay in Türkiye—the status and nature of religious education in schools began to be discussed within the framework of human rights, religious freedom, and pluralism. In former Eastern Bloc countries, including Russia, religious courses began to replace the "scientific atheism" classes that were taught during the communist era. This transformation led to an increase in the number of countries incorporating religious education into their school curricula (Kaymakcan, 2006).

In the 1990s, academic interest in the relationship between human rights, democracy, and religious education in schools gained a new dimension, particularly after September 11, 2001. International organizations and civil society groups, which had previously shown little interest in religious instruction in schools—even to criticize it—began to engage actively with the issue (Jackson,

2009). This increased interest can be attributed both to the perceived link between religion and security and to the declining influence of rigid secular policies. Religious education and instruction are now being evaluated as a right within the framework of human rights and freedom of belief. In this sense, approaches that had never previously existed at the international level are beginning to form regarding what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in school-based religious education. The year 2007 marks a significant turning point when the effects of this renewed interest in religious instruction after 9/11 began to manifest. That year, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) issued two landmark decisions that, for the first time in its history, outlined principles for how religion classes in schools should be conducted in a manner respectful of human rights. These are the Folgerø v. Norway (ECtHR, 2007a) and Zengin v. Türkiye (ECtHR, 2007b) cases. In 2014, the ECHR issued a second ruling against Türkiye regarding its RCMK course (Hendek & Fancourt, 2021; Kaymakcan & Hendek, 2022). This context also includes significant reports such as the OSCE's 2007 *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* and the Council of Europe's *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: A Reference Book for Schools*. Reviewing the reports of international organizations and academic literature, the prevailing consensus on religious education in schools can be summarized as follows: Religious education should be included in schools, but it must be consistent with human rights and democratic principles (OSCE, 2007).

An examination of the ECHR rulings—Folgerø v. Norway (2007), Zengin v. Türkiye (2007), and Yalçın v. Türkiye (2014)—shows that there was no negative assessment regarding the age or grade level at which religion classes begin in public schools. Likewise, the Toledo Guiding Principles do not include any recommendations or restrictions on which grade levels should offer religion classes. Both the ECHR rulings and OSCE reports emphasize that: Like all forms of education, religious education should not lead to indoctrination and must be pluralistic, critical, and objective (OSCE, 2007).

According to the fourth edition of *World Data on Education*, there has been an increase in the time allocated to religion classes in school curricula in recent years. On average, about 7.7% of the total curriculum time in countries that offer religious education is dedicated to such classes (Rivard & Amadio, 2003). This percentage is based on the first nine years of formal education. In Türkiye, this share is around 4%, which is lower compared to other countries. This is largely due to the absence of religion classes in the first three years of primary school. Countries that allocate the most time to religion classes in school curricula are generally Muslim-majority countries (Kaymakcan, 2021a).

Having outlined the global and Turkish context regarding religious education in schools, we now turn to the reluctance surrounding the introduction of such education at early ages. The RCMK course is explicitly mentioned in the Turkish Constitution. Article 24 states: "Religious culture and moral education shall be among the compulsory subjects in primary and secondary schools." Similarly, Article 12 of the Basic Law on National Education (Law No. 1739) reads: "Secularism (*Laiklik*) is essential in Turkish national education. Religious culture and moral education shall be among the compulsory subjects in primary and secondary education."

As seen above, neither the Constitution nor the relevant legislation specifies a grade level at which the course should begin. However, in practice, RCMK is taught from the 4th grade through the final year of high school, as outlined by the Ministry of National Education's weekly course schedule. Therefore, there is no constitutional or legal provision that prohibits offering the course starting from the 1st grade of primary school. The legal basis for initiating RCMK course from the 4th grade lies in the "Weekly Course Schedule for Primary Education Institutions (Primary and Middle Schools)" published by the Board of Education and Discipline (*Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu*) of the Ministry of National Education.[1]

This raises the question: Why has Türkiye limited religious education in schools to begin from the 4th grade for so many years? Why not from the 2nd or 3rd grade? Is there a historical, scientific, or sociological basis for this?

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[1] For example, see
https://ttkb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2025_05/16094742_4nolukararilkogretimkurumlariilkokulveortaokulhaftalikderscizelgesi.pdf

During the Republican era, following the enactment of the Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat*) on March 3, 1924, religious courses in school curricula were reorganized. According to this regulation, a course titled "Holy Qur'an and Religion Classes" was included in the weekly schedule for grades 2, 3, 4, and 5 of primary school, with two hours allocated per week. However, in later years, the course was first removed from the 2nd grade and subsequently from the 3rd grade. By 1931, when religious education was abolished in urban primary schools, the course was taught in grades 4 and 5. With the transition to the multi-party period, debates around reintroducing religion courses into the school curriculum yielded positive results, and in 1949, the state decided to offer religious education as an voluntary course in grades 4 and 5 of primary schools (Keskiner, 2018). The starting grade for religious education was thus grade 4—the last grade before it had previously been removed from the curriculum. In subsequent periods, regulations regarding religious education in schools consistently began the instruction from the 4th grade, which has continued to this day. However, no explicit justification has ever been provided in these regulations for why religious education begins specifically from the 4th grade. In fact, this precedent was not limited to formal education: until 2011, students who had not completed grade 5 of primary school were not permitted to receive religious education even in summer Qur'an courses, which are a form of non-formal religious education, despite the RCMK course being offered in the 4th and 5th grades.

In Türkiye, the strict approach toward providing religious education and instruction at early ages was first overcome through a legal amendment in 2011. Article 15 of the Decree Law published in the Official Gazette dated September 17, 2011, No. 28057, annulled Additional Article 3 —added to Law No. 633 in 1999— which had imposed a restriction on the minimum age for beginning religious education. Following this amendment, the Presidency of Religious Affairs launched the "Qur'an Courses for Ages 4–6" project in 2013 (Yağcı, 2018).

In addition to the above-mentioned developments, the 19th National Education Council, held in 2014, also made the following decision regarding the starting age for religious education: "The course of Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge should be included in grades 1, 2, and 3 of primary school, and a pluralistic approach should be incorporated into the curriculum to be prepared for these grades." The National Education Council, which is the highest scientific advisory body of the Ministry of National Education on educational matters, thus decided that the RCMK course should begin starting from the first grade of primary school (Talim Terbiye Kurulu Başkanlığı, 2014).

There is no specific regulation regarding religious and moral education in pre-school education. In Türkiye, it would be appropriate to consider the issue of pre-school religious and moral education together with the absence of the RCMK course in the first three years of primary school. Concrete steps have been taken in the area of early childhood religious education through the non-formal educational activities conducted by the Presidency of Religious Affairs. As for the formal education dimension, it would be appropriate to discuss the issue and take new steps by considering the opinions and suggestions of relevant stakeholders. In this context, the 20th National Education Council, held between 1–3 December 2021, included a resolution to incorporate religious, moral, and values education into the pre-school curriculum, taking into account the developmental level of the child (Talim Terbiye Kurulu Başkanlığı, 2021).

A development aimed at improving the qualifications of instructors who will provide religious and moral education during early childhood can be also mentioned here. To date, the Council of Higher Education has approved the launch of non-thesis master's degree programs in *Moral and Values Education in Early Childhood* at the following universities: İnönü University, 29 Mayıs University, Hitit University, Istanbul University, Uludağ University, Amasya University, Bingöl University, Fırat University, and Necmettin Erbakan University.

2. Developmental Psychology and Religious Education in Early Childhood

When the issue of religious education at an early age arises, one of the primary topics of discussion is whether such education is developmentally appropriate for children. In this context, it is important to examine the implementation of formal religious education during early childhood in terms of its

compatibility with child development. Various perspectives argue that early childhood presents numerous developmental limitations, making this period unsuitable for religious education.

In Türkiye, objections in this area generally stem from two main sources. The first is rooted in the views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a prominent figure among 18th-century philosophers and a leading proponent of Naturalist philosophy. Rousseau advocated for postponing religious education until the age of fifteen. His reasoning, however, does not stem from a disregard for religion itself, but from the belief that introducing religion during a stage when children are cognitively incapable of comprehending it risks replacing truth with falsehood. Rousseau preferred having no notion of God at all rather than acquiring false or harmful ideas about Him. Instead of providing religious education, he proposed that children be allowed to discover religion on their own through the use of reason and be given freedom in this regard. Fundamentally, Rousseau's critique targets traditional and institutionalized religion as part of his broader natural philosophy. He argued that both children and adults tend to adopt the dominant religion of their geographical context without questioning or internalizing it. He believed that allowing children to grow through experiential learning and independent observation in nature would distance them from blind imitation and foster conscious development. Rather than teaching children everything, Rousseau recommended protecting them from learning what is incorrect. Ultimately, Rousseau contended that after children are taught to think critically, use their reason, and understand nature, they should be granted the freedom to choose their religion (Bertlek, 2013). These views, emerging from a major Enlightenment thinker, were shaped in part by the abuse of institutional religion during his time. While Rousseau's arguments can certainly be evaluated from multiple angles within their historical and philosophical context, these views are not directly relevant to early childhood religious education. Most importantly, his suggestion to delay religious education until adolescence is not based on any empirical research. It is also important to note that in the 18th century, concepts such as scientific psychology, education based on developmental stages, and widespread compulsory schooling had not yet emerged. In today's world— where, despite variation by country, compulsory education typically continues until the end of secondary school and many educational responsibilities have shifted from families to schools—it remains just as difficult as in the past for a child to independently explore nature and select a religion using their own reason. Although Rousseau's ideas are worthy of philosophical discussion in the field of philosophy of religion, in practice, individuals still predominantly adhere to the religion and/or denomination of their families. Institutional religious education policies are developed with this common reality in mind. In conclusion, while Rousseau's views offer a philosophical perspective on the issue, they are not supported by scientific data from contemporary developmental theories.

The second objection is based on findings from developmental psychology, particularly cognitive developmental psychology, which reference experimental research to support the view that early childhood is not an appropriate period for religious and moral education. Let us analyse the reasons behind this view, its development, and the actual situation.

Since the mid-20th century, the outcomes of cognitive theories—dividing learning abilities into developmental stages and supporting these divisions with empirical data—have significantly influenced educational practices across all fields. Among these, Piaget's theory has been the most influential globally. Piaget's cognitive development theory has also been adapted for use in the field of religious education. Within this framework, two key studies from the 1960s continue to influence the field of religious education today, particularly in relation to the development of religious thought. These studies were conducted by David Elkind and Ronald Goldman. Drawing on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, both researchers applied its stage-based model to the development of religious thought.

Elkind, conducting empirical research based on children's conceptions of God, proposed that religious thinking evolves through four successive stages: a) The stage of searching conservation (ages 0–2), b) The stage of searching representation (ages 2–7), c) The stage of searching relations (ages 7–12), and d) The stage of searching comprehension (age 12 and above) (Elkind, 1970). Goldman, on the other hand, examined children's religious thinking using Bible stories to assess their understanding. According to him, the stages of religious thinking are as follows: a) Intuitive religious thinking (ages 0–7), b) First transitional stage (where the child attempts logical explanations), c) Concrete religious thinking (ages 7–

13), d) Second transitional stage (where the child begins to think abstractly about religious concepts), and e) Abstract religious thinking (age 13 and above) (Goldman, 1964; see also Yılmaz, 2023).

The primary impact of the aforementioned studies on religious education lies in the limitations they impose on the topics and approaches deemed suitable for instruction to children. Religious narratives, which often include abstract themes and elements such as miracles that defy scientific explanation, are likely to be interpreted concretely by young children. This concrete interpretation at an early age has the potential to hinder re-evaluation of these concepts in later developmental stages. In light of this data, Goldman recommends that rather than a scripture-centered religious education in early childhood, a thematic approach be adopted—one that gradually transitions from secular themes to religious ones. It is important to clarify a key point here: Goldman does not conclude that religious education should be withheld from children until they reach the stage of abstract religious thinking, which he places around the age of thirteen. Rather, he explores how religious education can be delivered during early childhood, childhood, and adolescence in a way that aligns with cognitive development. In conclusion, Jean Piaget—the founder of cognitive developmental theory—did not conduct any specific research or offer any proposals regarding the development of religious thought. However, studies that build upon his theoretical framework suggest that abstract concepts such as religion should be approached with caution in early childhood. These studies emphasize the need for a pedagogical approach and content that are compatible with children's developmental stages (Oruç, 2010).

Following Piaget's cognitive development theories, research on the development of religious and moral thought has been conducted based on neo-Piagetian and post-Piagetian cognitive development theories. However, it has been observed that these theories have had limited influence on religious and moral education practices worldwide (Gottlieb, 2006).

Scientific studies and everyday observations both demonstrate that, regardless of their religious affiliation, families begin to engage in discussions, reflections, and questions related to religious concepts from early childhood onward. Children live within a social environment and are influenced by family, peer groups, social media, and similar factors (see Ashton, 2000). For instance, when a preschool child asks a question about God or another religious concept in kindergarten, what should the teacher do? Would it be appropriate to advise the child to wait until they reach the stage of abstract thinking before addressing the question? Or would it be more appropriate to suggest that the family answer it instead? To what extent is it pedagogically sound or developmentally appropriate to leave children's questions about religion unanswered during a period when their curiosity—like in other domains—is especially high? While it may be possible to leave the responsibility for answering such questions to families, is this approach scientifically more appropriate than having a preschool teacher respond? After all, the preschool teacher is a professionally trained guide in the field of early childhood development and education. How many families are likely to offer more accurate, developmentally appropriate answers to such questions than a teacher trained in developmental psychology? Is it truly in the best interest of the child—and feasible for every family—if educational institutions entirely avoid engaging in religious education for children until they reach the stage of abstract thinking? These questions can be multiplied.

Gottlieb (2006) in his meta-analysis of scientific research on religious thought conducted over the past fifty years and its impact on religious education practice, poses a fundamental question: What is the purpose of religious education, including that which takes place in schools? Based on his review of the relevant literature, he identifies several common answers: to provide knowledge about religion, to support the fulfilment of religious obligations, to equip individuals with the competence to perform religious rituals, and to sustain religious experience and enthusiasm. He notes that among these, the least emphasized aim in academic contexts is the development of religious thinking. Gottlieb then raises the question: Is religious belief and practice solely concerned with the body and heart? Does it not have a cognitive dimension? His response argues that, even without being the central focus, the development of religious thinking should be included among the objectives of religious education.

This perspective can also be observed in Türkiye's Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Curriculum (for Primary and Secondary Education) from the years 2018 and 2024. Nowhere in these curricula is there an explicit reference to the development of religious thinking as an objective of the

course. Instead, the curriculum largely emphasizes the transmission of knowledge about religion, articulated in the following overarching aim: "The goal is to teach basic concepts related to religion and morality, to establish conceptual foundations for these concepts, and to foster connections among them." (MEB, 2018, p. 8).

In the UK, the pluralistic early childhood religious education model Gift to the Child, designed for secular schools, offers a different perspective on the appropriate age for introducing religious education. This approach challenges the assumption that children cannot comprehend religious concepts before reaching the stage of abstract operations. Rather than viewing children as individuals incapable of understanding such concepts, it regards them as capable of forming their own theology (Oruç, 2013a). The theoretical foundation of this model draws upon the concept of the numinous (or numen) from Rudolf Otto's influential work The Idea of the Holy. Otto, one of the key figures in the phenomenology of religion, argues that the sense of the sacred—whether rational or irrational—is a complex, a priori component of human consciousness. According to Otto, while not present at the same intensity in all individuals, every human being possesses an innate religious awareness that stems from the deepest structures of mental imagination. This awareness, he argues, does not emerge from nature but is awakened through experiences in nature. To deny that humans are naturally inclined toward religious consciousness is, for Otto, to ignore the extensive body of work in the history of religions. He maintains that this a priori religious consciousness is expressed through behaviours, values, beliefs, and attitudes. In other words, according to Otto's view, religious awareness exists inherently within the child—it does not develop later. Religious education, therefore, serves to help actualize this innate potential. From this philosophical perspective, the question of when to begin religious education in children is approached differently than in developmental psychology, offering a more ontological and phenomenological lens (Otto, 2014).

3. The Lack of Scholarly Research on Early Childhood Religious Education

One of the objections raised against early childhood religious education in Türkiye is the claim that there is insufficient academic knowledge in this field, and that it is difficult to find adequately qualified teachers to teach such subjects. These claims are, in fact, largely accurate—though not entirely comprehensive. Research examining early childhood religious education from various perspectives within departments of early childhood education, primary school education, and theology in Türkiye remains extremely limited. Education is an applied social science. The absence of early childhood religious education within the formal education system of a country naturally leads to a lack of academic accumulation in this field. In such a context, scholars in religious education have limited opportunities to engage in empirical research on developing curricula, educational approaches, teacher competencies, or instructional materials related to early childhood religious education. These subjects are inherently linked to the practical dimension of education. If early childhood religious education is not part of the system, there is little incentive for academics to develop relevant programs or approaches. Even if such theoretical frameworks were developed, their validity and effectiveness could only be determined within real educational settings—settings that do not currently exist in the Turkish context. In other words, because early childhood religious education is not incorporated into the formal education system in Türkiye, an adequate body of academic research in this field has not yet emerged.

It can also be argued that the academic accumulation in the field of early childhood education in Türkiye is relatively less developed compared to learning domains in primary and secondary education. This is largely because the recognition of the importance of early childhood education for child development and corresponding investments in the field are relatively recent. However, preschool education is not yet compulsory in Türkiye, and the enrolment rate for the 3–5 age group remains around 45%, placing Türkiye at the bottom among OECD countries (OECD, 2024). In other words, there is still significant progress to be made in terms of both the quantity and quality of education during the early childhood period. These challenges are also acknowledged in the Ministry of National Education's 2019–2023 Strategic Plan, particularly in the goals set for early childhood education (MEB, 2019). Within this framework, there is a clear need for an increase in both the quantity and quality of scholarly research on early childhood education and religious education, both of which are relatively new fields in the Turkish context. To make this possible, it would be beneficial for faculties of education to move beyond their

current reluctance to engage in academic work related to religious education, and to collaborate more closely with relevant disciplines within faculties of theology.

A literature review on early childhood religious education in Türkiye reveals the existence of academic studies on various related topics, including examples of preschool religious education abroad and religious education within the family (e.g. Çınar & Şener, 2016; Oruç, 2013b). Since the launch of the "4–6 Age Qur'an Course" initiative by the Presidency of Religious Affairs in 2013, a growing number of postgraduate theses—now numbering in the dozens—along with scholarly articles have examined various aspects of early childhood religious education, such as curriculum design, teacher qualifications, and practical challenges (Ecer & Çakmak, 2021). Based on implementation data and academic studies related to these courses, the curriculum of 4–6 Age Qur'an Course has been revised twice, in 2018 and 2022. This experience demonstrates that the existence of practical implementation is a fundamental precondition for both the quantitative and qualitative advancement of academic research. In summary, if early childhood religious education were integrated into the formal education system, it could be expected that scholarly work on various dimensions of this field would increase both in number and quality. Moreover, many countries around the world, particularly in Europe, already include religious and moral education at the early childhood level (Aslan, 2020). It would be beneficial for us to draw on their experiences from a scientific perspective. In this context, we will now briefly examine some early childhood education approaches that are relevant to our subject.

In the literature, four main approaches to early childhood education are commonly cited. These are the Montessori approach, the Waldorf approach, the Reggio Emilia approach, and the HighScope approach. When these approaches are examined in the context of religious and moral education, the following conclusion can be drawn: both the Montessori and Waldorf approaches not only offer distinct visions, practices, and methodologies for general early childhood education, but also include specific suggestions and perspectives on how religious education can be provided to children in this age group.

The early childhood education approach developed by Maria Montessori has been implemented in both secular and religious school settings. For those who wish to apply this approach in early childhood institutions, a religious education model was developed by Montessori herself and later refined by her followers after her death. Coming from a Catholic background, Montessori created an early childhood religious education approach known as the Children's Church. In the religious education model she developed in the 1930s, one of her main emphases was on establishing a connection between religion and science. For example, she advocated for linking biblical passages with data obtained through experimentation and observation. Her ideal teacher was described as someone who combines the devotion of scientific inquiry with the love of an apostle of Christ (Cevherli, 2023). After Montessori's death in 1952, one of her interpreters, Sofia Cavalletti, developed the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a religious education approach based on the teachings of Jesus. This approach is essentially a pedagogically and content-wise enriched version of Montessori's church-centered model. Another interpreter of this tradition, Jerome Berryman, developed the Godly Play model, which has become one of the influential approaches in contemporary early childhood religious education. This model places special emphasis on religious language and advocates for establishing a link between the development of imagination and religious understanding (Hendek, 2023; Hyde, 2011).

Another prominent early childhood education approach is the Waldorf approach, developed by Rudolf Steiner in 1919. This approach also offers a model for religious and moral education that can be implemented by schools that choose to adopt it. Steiner viewed religious and moral education as an integrated whole. Emphasizing that religious knowledge is not the same as religion itself, he argued that what truly matters is the internalization and genuine emotional experience of moral and religious feelings. His educational philosophy places strong emphasis on the development of imagination and the use of storytelling as a central method in religious education. Although Steiner also developed an early childhood religious education model in the 1920s that was not widely implemented at the time—largely due to lack of parental demand—this model, which can be described as pluralistic, is now considered applicable even within public school contexts (Altıntaş, 2023; Yıldız & Tosun, 2023).

In the United Kingdom, based on the results of two research projects conducted between 1987 and 1993, faculty members from the University of Birmingham's School of Education developed a religious education approach known as Gift to the Child, designed for children aged 3 to 11. This approach, which adopts a pluralistic perspective suitable for implementation in public schools, is built around a thematic model of religious education. It selects specific themes from five major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism—and outlines how these themes can be effectively taught to young children. Gift to the Child also includes teaching guides and specially developed instructional materials that demonstrate how these themes can be applied in the classroom setting (Hull, 2000; Oruç, 2013a).

In addition, the Iqra' Preschool Islamic Education Program was developed in 1993 by the Iqra Foundation, established by Muslims in the United States. The philosophy of this approach is based on an integrative educational model that seeks to synthesize classical madrasa education with modern pedagogical methods. Today, this program is implemented in numerous Islamic schools across Europe, the United States, and South Asia (Uzun, 2023).

In conclusion, as the examples above demonstrate, although early childhood religious and moral education is a relatively new area in Türkiye, there is a substantial body of academic work on this subject internationally. These approaches have been implemented in early childhood religious education across various regions, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Additional examples could also be cited. When developing early childhood religious education approaches and curricula in Türkiye, it is both possible and beneficial to draw upon these international models. By considering the expectations of the public as well as existing academic knowledge, it is feasible to design a high-quality, contextually appropriate model.

One of the key indicators of public interest in early childhood religious education in Türkiye is the development of the "4–6 Age Qur'an Course" project, initiated by the Presidency of Religious Affairs in 2013. Let us consider the relevant data in this context. During the 2013–2014 academic year, enrollment stood at 4,743, and by the following year, it had increased to 15,265. Interest in these courses continued to grow. Consequently, these courses were expanded across the country. By 2019, the number of children enrolled had reached 151,084. According to statistics from the Ministry of National Education, this figure represents approximately 10% of all students enrolled in public and private early childhood education institutions in Türkiye (Kaymakcan, 2022). The rapid growth in enrollment over just six years is a clear and concrete indication of the public's increasing interest in early childhood religious education.

Conclusion

The comprehensive assessments—conducted with scientific reasoning and in consideration of international practices—regarding the three primary arguments against the provision of religious and moral education in early childhood in Türkiye lead us to conclude that such education is indeed feasible during early childhood. This conclusion is also supported by the decisions made at the 19th and 20th National Education Councils, which affirm the possibility of offering religious and moral education at this stage. The issue of religious and moral education in early childhood can be approached from two dimensions. The first pertains to expanding access to religious and moral education within the primary school curriculum. The second concerns the inclusion of religious and moral education in pre-school education.

Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution mandates that the course Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge be taught throughout primary and secondary education, without specifying a particular grade level. In this context, considering early Republican period practices, findings from developmental psychology, international models, public demand, and decisions of the National Education Councils, it would be appropriate to include the RCMK course in the curriculum starting from the 1st grade, encompassing the entire primary school period. This implementation would not require amendments to any legal texts (laws, regulations, etc.). A simple revision to the "Weekly Course Schedule for Primary Education Institutions" issued by the Ministry of National Education would suffice—specifically, adding two hours per week of RCMK to the list of compulsory subjects starting from the 1st grade.

Currently, there is no formal regulation regarding the provision of religious and moral education in pre-school education. This issue remains open for discussion among scholars and relevant stakeholders. Considering its potential for implementation in Türkiye, the following proposal can be made: The Presidency of Religious Affairs' 4–6 Age Qur'an Course program—which represents Türkiye's first institutional initiative in early childhood religious education since 2013—should continue within the existing preschool education framework, with improvements made to the quality of instructors and the educational program. To ensure its sustainability, preschool education in Türkiye should remain non-compulsory—similar to the approach taken in 42 OECD countries. Nevertheless, policies should be developed to maximize access to preschool education.

It would be appropriate to explicitly incorporate moral and values education not only in the 4-6 age Quran courses but also in other preschool education programs. When addressing the moral dimension, it is essential to integrate both religious and philosophical perspectives. One of the key objectives here is to allow children to establish a connection with the sacred through moral issues or concepts that are introduced in a developmentally appropriate manner. With the provision of in-service training and appropriate teaching materials, current preschool teachers could teach such a course. Additionally, for students enrolled in early childhood education programs at the 86 Faculties of Education in Türkiye, new courses such as "Moral Education" and "Moral and Religious Development in Children" could be introduced to the undergraduate curriculum in order to enhance their competencies in this field.

Declarations

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12

Students' perspectives on the implementation of the religious culture and moral knowledge course vision

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Abstract: This study investigates high school students' insights into the realization of the 2018 Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) course vision in Türkiye. The research aims to evaluate whether the RCMK course has achieved its intended goals from the perspective of students, focusing on cognitive, emotional, national, spiritual, and moral development as well as respect for diversity. A qualitative single-case study design was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty 12th-grade students from seven high schools in Eskişehir, including Social Sciences, Science, and Anatolian High Schools. Findings indicate that students perceive the RCMK course as contributing significantly to understanding the role of religion in giving meaning to life, strengthening national and spiritual values, and fostering moral attitudes, particularly within family and close social environments. Moreover, the course is seen as promoting tolerance and respect for differences. Overall, student views demonstrate consistency with the aims of the RCMK course vision. These results provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators, highlighting the importance of aligning curriculum content and teaching methods with both the broader goals of values education and the evolving needs of students.

Introduction

Religious education in Türkiye aims to encourage individuals to understand the religious perspectives of the society they live in, to recognize the cultural elements shaped by religion, and to live harmoniously and peacefully within society. With this education, the reasons behind various beliefs and practices can be learned, and conflicts and unrest within society can be prevented (Önder, 2008; Yazıbaşı, 2020). This educational process takes a particular significance during the period of adolescence, marked by a search for meaning and security. Religious education in this period, offers young people a worldview, a safe haven, stability, and guidance for their behavior (Kaleci & Solmaz, 2019). The adolescence which includes high school period, is also called the 'age of religious awakening and development' (Gündüz, 2020). Adolescent, who experiences rapid and frequent changes in their physical and emotional states (Gürkaynak, 1987), may turn to the essence of faith during this period, but the inability to cope with sexual and aggressive impulses can also lead to a turn away from religion. Adolescence manifests itself as a period in which religious hesitations and doubts are experienced intensely (Gündüz, 2017). In this period, adolescents seek acceptance and also look for a role model whom they can identify with (Kulaksızoğlu, 1992). With the increasing importance placed on friends, and broadening in their social environment, adolescents' exposure to different ideas and beliefs may also lead

to hesitations about their beliefs. As adolescents develop mentally (Gündüz, 2017), they also begin to understand the importance of moral principles more fully. (Köylü, 2010). At the same time, in the globalizing world, society's changing values affect young people the most (Akyüz, 2014). The RCMK course is a guiding element for a young person searching for meaning (Karaca, 2016). The spiritual and emotional turmoil experienced by the adolescent subsides in the 20s, as religious beliefs and values become more stable during high school (Hökelekli, 2002). The reason for choosing 12th grades of secondary education in this study is, that the beliefs and values of the young person which becomes evident in adolescence, shapes the rest of his/her life. For the same reason, RCMK course in high school was considered important in shaping young people's attitudes toward values and belief systems and the realization status of the curriculum vision was investigated.

The curriculum emphasizes the importance of developmental stages, and adolescence is considered a critical period for identity formation. RCMK course, taught in primary and secondary schools, is also structured around these sensitivities (MEB, 2018). The curriculum particularly emphasizes the existential dimension of religion (Ulu, 2018) and its strong influence on both tangible and intangible cultural elements such as tradition, custom, literature, art and architecture. The RCMK course also serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission (Bilgin, 1988) and encourages national unity, social harmony, and the adoption of shared values. The main objectives of the course are to instill moral values in adolescence, to prepare individuals for both religious responsibilities and to live together with others, and to encourage understanding and tolerance towards differences (Önder, 2013). For an environment of individual and social trust and well-being, it is important that religion be conveyed to students accurately and effectively by qualified educators through the Religious Knowledge and Moral Knowledge course (Acar, 2018).

In order to improve the quality of education in RCMK curriculum various approaches have been taken as a guide from past to present. The curriculum was considered as catechism-centered until 2000. It was revised with the amendments made in the same year, bringing a Quran-centered perspective to Islam (Yürük, 2010) and a scientific perspective to world religions for the curriculum (Kaymakcan, 2006; Zengin 2010).

The 2018 curriculum, which forms the basis of this study, was developed with the principles of multiple intelligences and student- and skill-based learning, that supports the constructivist approach. This curriculum also presents Islam on the bases of the Quran and Sunnah. It evaluates different interpretations of Islam from a scientific and supra-sectarian perspective. A cross-religious, scientific, and factual approach is adopted in teaching other religions (MEB, 2018). The program vision emphasizes the importance of helping students making sense of life, embracing national, spiritual, and moral core values, and developing the capacity to live with diversity. With a structured and comprehensive approach, the RCMK curriculum enables high school students to explore the importance of religion in life, internalize both universal and national values, and develop ethical sensitivities. Through its content, the curriculum supports the vision of developing individuals who are respectful of diversity and able to live with differences. The curriculum also supports developing value-oriented individuals, who are aware of their social responsibilities and fulfill them.

The 2018 RCMK curriculum for grades 9-12 in secondary education systematically interweaves learning outcomes that foster reasoning through religion, embracing national, moral, and spiritual values, as well as the capacity to coexist with diversity. The curriculum is designed from a supra-sectarian and multi-faith perspective, and aims to cultivate morally responsible, culturally aware, and socially well-adjusted individuals who embrace diversity as a source of social enrichment. Each core theme is reinforced in specific grades and units, ensuring that students encounter these core values throughout their high school education. The core themes and related units in the grades 9-12 curriculum are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Classes and Units by Themes in the 2018 Curriculum*

Core Theme	Grade	Unit
Religion in Making sense of Life	9	Religion and Islam (Unit 2)
	10	The God (Allah)–Human Relationship (Unit 1)
	11	The World and the Hereafter (Unit 1)
National Values	9	Religion and Islam (Unit 2)
	11	Issues Related to Faith (Unit 4)
	12	Islam in Anatolia (Unit 2)
Spiritual Values	9	Youth and Values (Unit 4)
	11	The World and the Hereafter (Unit 1)
	12	Islam in Anatolia (Unit 2)
Moral Values	9	Knowledge and Faith (Unit 1)
	9	Islam and Worship (Unit 3)
	9	Youth and Values (Unit 4)
	10	The Prophet Muhammad and Youth (Unit 2)
	10	Religion and Life (Unit 3)
	10	Moral Attitudes and Behaviors (Unit 4)
	11	The Prophet Muhammad According to the Qur'an (Unit 2)
	12	Contemporary Religious Issues (Unit 4)
Coexistence with Diversity	11	Judaism and Christianity (Unit 5)
	12	Doctrinal, Political, and Jurisprudential Interpretations in Islamic Thought (Unit 3)
	12	Indian and Chinese Religions (Unit 5)

This study attempts to understand the status of achievement of the RCMK course's vision goals based on student opinions. The RCMK vision aims to cultivate individuals who recognize the role of religion in giving meaning to life, embrace national, spiritual, and moral values, and possess the ability to coexist with diversity. Based on the findings, it is aimed to understand the status of the RCMK course vision's achievement. This study allows us to assess the vision's alignment with educational objectives, and understand its impact on students' conceptual worlds. In fact, in line with the Turkish National Education, the conceptual foundations and relations of religious and moral knowledge are planned to be established (MEB, 2018). This study will also help determine how RCMK concepts find meaning in students' minds, and how they are related to each other. During the 18th National Education Council, the concepts of national, universal, and shared values were highlighted, and the need for values education was particularly emphasized. The council recommended that the values held by children and young people to be periodically reviewed. In addition, the importance of the RCMK for values education was mentioned, and efforts to improve the effectiveness of the course were emphasized (MEB, Board of Education and Discipline, 2010). This study, evaluates the RCMK course in terms of young people's value judgments and the ability to live with diversity. The findings will allow for the long-term outcomes of the curriculum to be assessed. The study clarifies how curriculum objectives are reflected in students' personal and educational experiences. It will also provide educators with insights into increasing students' motivation to learn the course. Evaluating the curriculum's vision through student experiences provides critical insight into both pedagogical objectives and the goal of living together and harmoniously with diversity in the society. In these respects, the study offers policymakers and educators concrete insights into the applicability and effectiveness of the RCMK curriculum.

The study's subproblems focus on the main lines of the curriculum's vision. These subproblems are:

• How is the vision of the RCMK course reflected in high school students' understanding and interpretation of life?

• How is the RCMK vision reflected in students' adoption of national, spiritual, and moral values?

• How is the RCMK vision reflected in students' attitudes toward living together with diversity?

1. Research Method

1.1. Model

A qualitative single case research method was used in the study. As Kuş and Merriam argue, the philosophical basis of qualitative research is based on the interpretive approach, which seeks to understand meaning rather than to arrive at definitive knowledge. This approach aims to grasp diverse interpretations and perceptions (Kuş, 2012; Merriam, 2013). According to Yin and Merriam, the case study method is frequently used in educational sciences, and serves as a guide for implementing changes in the field (Merriam, 1991; Yin, 2003). As a method for seeking meaning, this approach is useful for understanding phenomena in everyday life and is also considered appropriate for investigating temporary and complex phenomena (Yin, 2003). The factors explained above were effective in choosing the qualitative case research method for this study, which aims to understand the realization status of the vision goals of the RCMK 9-12th grade curriculum from the students' perspective. In accordance with the qualitative case study method, the participants' opinions were limited to 12th-grade students using purposive criterion sampling. The reason why high school seniors were chosen for the study was that they had experience with RCMK courses from previous years. According to Merriam, such studies that include all participants under a single topic are considered single case studies (Merriam, 2013). As noted by Seggie and Bayyurt, interview is a frequently used method in case studies (Seggie & Bayyurt, 2017). This method was chosen for the current study because interviews effectively reflect participants' experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Additionally, a semi-structured interview technique was used to flexibly access and understand the participants' inner worlds (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Interview data was recorded using a voice recorder and later transcribed. Merriam notes that audio recordings preserve interview details and that transcribing audio or video recordings is considered essential for data analysis (Merriam, 2013). At the same time, the necessary criteria for validity, reliability, and generalizability of the study were considered. The literature review was conducted to develop the study's theoretical framework. According to Merriam and Yin, the documents used within the theoretical framework are considered data sources in terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability (Merriam, 1991; Yin, 2003). In addition, receiving feedback from subject matter experts from research design to data analysis and writing of results is seen as a way to increase validity (Merriam, 2013; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Accordingly, the study was conducted under the supervision and approval of consultants and experts.

1.2. Implementation

Preparing interview questions for the study is a meticulous process. To ensure the study's validity criteria, the researchers first conducted a literature review on the topic, then developed draft interview questions and obtained expert opinions on the questions. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek, the opinions of expert academics should also be sought to gain insight into the accuracy of the questions prepared for the pilot interview (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). A pilot interview process was then initiated to confirm the appropriateness of the interview questions. After the questions were clarified through the pilot study, data collection was conducted with an emphasis on validity criteria. Interviews were conducted with participants from seven different high schools in Eskişehir: Anatolian, Science, and Social Sciences High Schools, ensuring student diversity. The sample consisted of 17 female and 13 male participants. Of the 30 interviews, 24 were conducted face-to-face in convenient settings such as empty classrooms, meeting rooms, or activity rooms at

the students' own schools. The remaining six interviews were conducted online via a web application (Zoom) in quiet environments and at convenient times for the participants.

1.3. Analysis

In qualitative research where the theoretical or conceptual structure of the study is clearly outlined, descriptive analysis can be used to analyze the findings. In this type of analysis, data is organized and interpreted according to predetermined themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In the analysis of the current study, descriptive analysis was preferred because subproblems were clearly defined within a theoretical framework, and explained under subheadings. This creates themes and provides guidance for the research questions and answers. For analysis, the findings obtained from student opinions were categorized and coded under relevant themes and presented in tables.

2. Findings

The findings, which aim to examine and understand the realization status of the RCMK course vision according to student views, are presented below, based on predetermined categories and themes used in the data analysis. The findings are limited to responses from 12th-grade high school students to questions prepared considering the content of the RCMK vision and the course outcomes.

2.1. Meaning in Life

One of the research questions arising from the RCMK curriculum's vision concerns whether and how students recognize the role of religion in providing meaning to life. Student responses emphasized both the cognitive dimension of faith, related to its epistemic aspects, and the emotional dimension, related to its emotional resonance. Accordingly, to understand the role of the RCMK course in providing meaning to life from the students' perspective, their responses regarding how this vision is reflected in their faith are shared below, organized under the categories of cognitive and emotional contributions, and supported by participant statements. In this context, the theme of meaning in life, according to student responses, is particularly limited to the framework of faith.

2.1.1. Cognitive Contribution to Faith

In line with RCMK's vision of raising individuals who recognize the role of religion in giving meaning to life, two questions were posed to participants. Findings indicated that the course contributed cognitively by providing information about faith and addressing students' questions and inquiries on the subject. Participants' opinions regarding the cognitive dimension of faith in the RCMK course are categorized in Chart 1, along with the participant numbers.

Graph 1. *Cognitive Contribution of the RCMK Course to Faith*
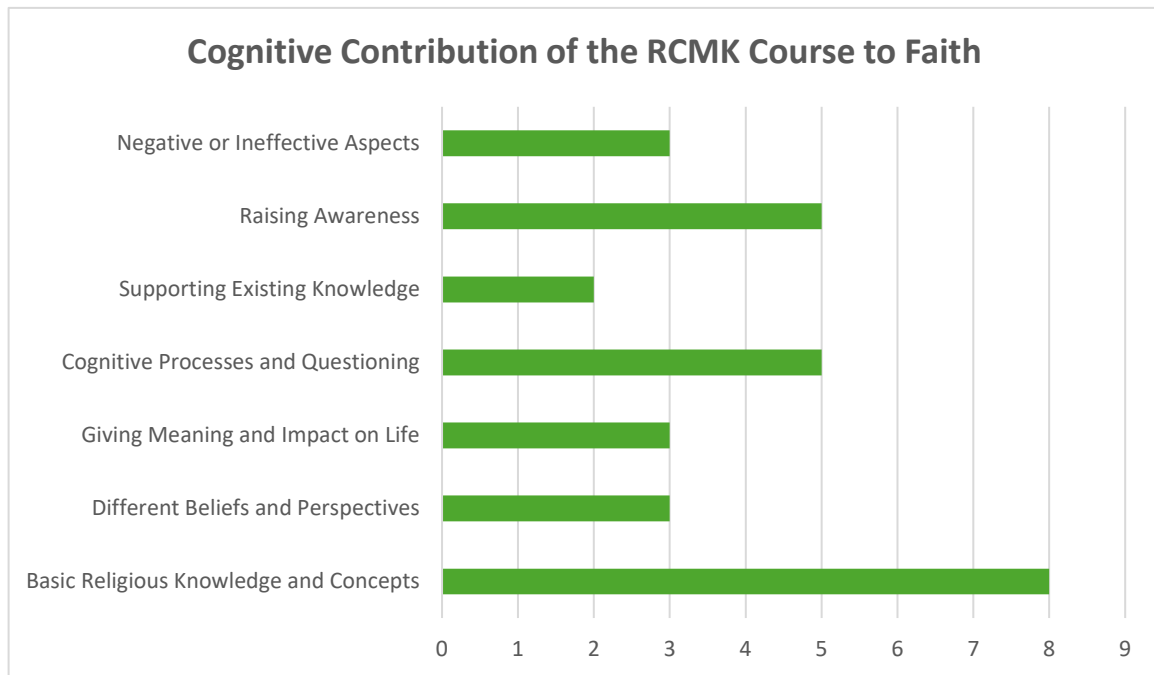
Some examples of participant opinions given in graph 1 are as follows:

Negative or Ineffective Aspects; P.19: "Actually, this happens as my own consciousness settles, that is, as I get older... as I grow older, and that consciousness settles, life becomes more conscious accordingly... So, frankly, I don't think religion class has any impact on this..."

Raising Awareness; P.3: "It makes me question more, meaning the more I think about it positively, the more it helps me interpret and gather information."

Supporting Existing Knowledge; P.6: "For example, we are all students in a class. Not everyone comes from the same environment, not everyone grows up in the same religious families. So, someone who is not religious learns that information in school, and I, as a knowledgeable person, learn it. It provides this for all of us."

Cognitive Processes and Questioning; P.10: "...I actually think about it a little because after what they say, you think about it for a while, and then after thinking, you question whether it was like this, whether it was like that."

Giving Meaning and Impact on Life; P.15: "I think about it because every time I take a religion class, I learn something new, and it changes my perspective on life, the universe, my religion... in many ways, and it makes me think more. The more I think about it, the more I try to find out what it is..."

Different Beliefs and Perspectives; P.5: "After learning about this concept in the Religious Culture class, I think I'm more comfortable expressing myself and explaining myself to myself... The knowledge I've acquired has also given me guidelines on how to live my life."

Basic Religious Knowledge and Concepts; P.25: "...ultimately, this class helps us answer these existential questions in our minds, such as where we came from and who we are. In that respect, I can say that it has positively contributed to my understanding."

Beyond this informative role, the course also fosters critical cognitive processes such as inquiry and existential exploration, supporting students as they consider issues of faith, conviction, and the meaning of life and death. Specifically, this cognitive engagement is closely linked to the course's success in helping some students address complex questions about other religious beliefs or practices. While the RCMK course is primarily valuable for this informative and cognitive dimension, it also boasts additional benefits, such as increased religious awareness and the ability to connect religious knowledge to daily life. However, a subset of students expressed concerns about the course's limited impact, perceived superficiality, and inadequate depth, suggesting room for curriculum improvement. Overall, the alignment between the RCMK curriculum's vision and implementation is most evident in the cognitive domain; it has been particularly effective in providing high school students with the conceptual foundations necessary to make sense of life through a religious lens.

2.1.2. The Emotional Dimension of Faith

The second dimension predicted by the findings concerns the contribution of the RCMK course vision to the emotional aspect of faith, as revealed by students' responses to questions exploring the role of the course in giving meaning to life. The findings indicate that the course raises awareness of the importance of faith, fosters a sense of refuge and surrender in religion that instills trust, and contributes to the overall strengthening of students' faith. Relevant student findings are detailed in the second graph, categorized by the numerical expression of participant opinions.

Graph 2. *Contribution to Emotional Dimension of Faith*
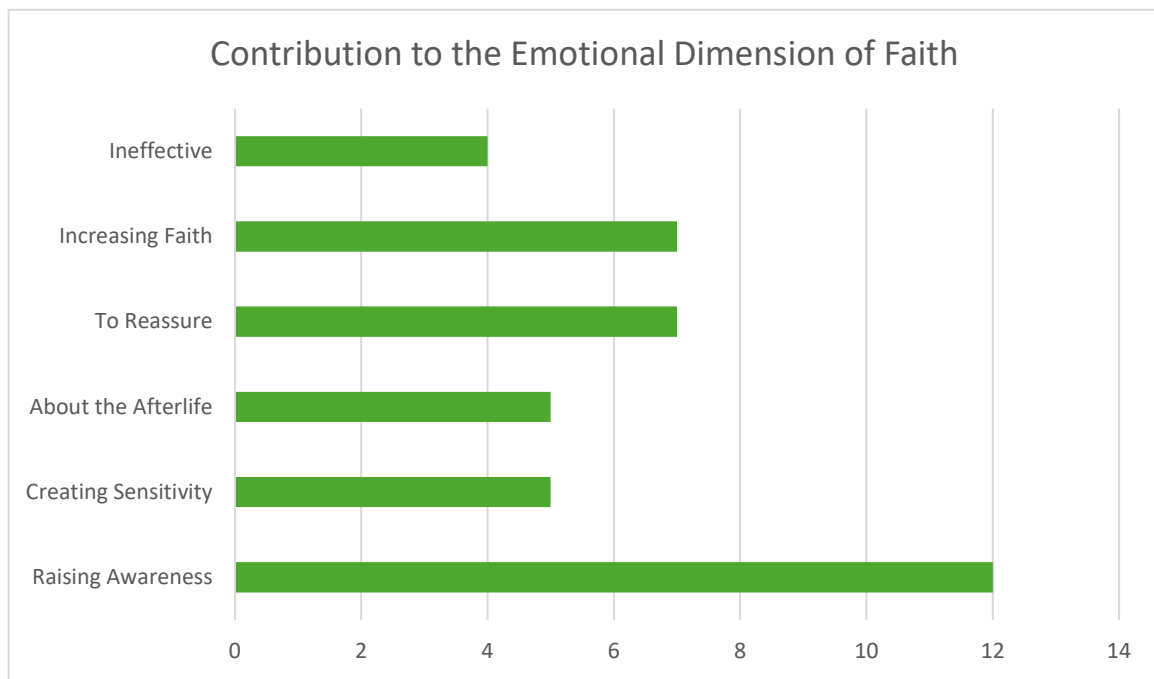
Some Statements Regarding the Emotional Dimension of Faith are listed below:

Ineffective; P.8: "...I don't think the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge course is effective in giving meaning to my life because there are so many ideas, but we only progress through Islam; it's only effective in understanding Islam... I'm a twelfth-grade student, and I don't really care about the purpose of life or anything like that right now."

Increasing Faith; P.29: " ...we saw other religions besides Islam, we saw what they were, what people believed or did not believe, how they behaved, how they worshipped in other religions... The worships they performed in other religions seemed meaningless to me, when I saw their meaninglessness, the things in our religion started to become more meaningful in my eyes, the prayers we said, the worships we performed... contributed to me in terms of making sense of them."

To Reassure; P.9: "...sometimes there are situations where one truly falls into emptiness, and in those situations where I fell into this emptiness, it really helped... The combination of the book's content and the teachers really helped... After falling into emptiness, I was truly resurrected thanks to religion... For example, I can say the verses in the Holy Quran, because there's so much talk about the verses, and when I read them, I think they don't really pertain to today's world, but when I read their commentaries or my teachers explain them, things become clearer..."

Creating Sensitivity; P.1: "I think it increases one's sense of compassion even more, because at the end of the day, considering that everyone ends up in the same place, I wouldn't say punishing anyone, but punishment is certainly necessary, but you realize that we live in a world where forgiving some people is more important."

Raising Awareness; P.22: "...at least I see my existential self. I mean, some people may not be aware of this, and this may affect their mental health in the future, but by being conscious, at least I'm not dragged along by these things. I think I can be more spiritually healthy because my life has a purpose, I don't drift from place to place, and I don't feel like I've lived in vain."

About the After Life; P.3: "...the situation of the afterlife in terms of our behavior here and there should change, that we should live in that direction, for example... I have many concerns about the afterlife."

An analysis of the RCMK course's contribution to the emotional dimension of faith revealed a multifaceted and significant impact on students' emotional and attitudinal development. The most significant outcome is the development of awareness not only of the transitory nature of life and the purpose of existence, but also of the existence of a Creator, the impact of religion on daily life, and the importance of gratitude. The course played a vital role in fostering students' self-reflection and existential inquiry, helping them approach life's uncertainties with greater awareness. Beyond simple mindfulness, the RCMK course effectively fostered religious sensitivity and conscientiousness, encouraging students to be more thoughtful and discerning in both moral reasoning and practical behavior. Developing attitudes about the afterlife, including beliefs about heaven, hell, and accountability, further motivated students to engage meaningfully with their faith and provided comfort during periods of anxiety or doubt. The course also demonstrated its potential to strengthen students' faith by clarifying ambiguities, strengthening beliefs, or instilling new perspectives through the integration of information and emotional support. While most participants agreed with the course's positive impact in fostering personal growth, responsibility, and a deeper sense of meaning, a minority found the course ineffective due to factors such as age or lack of engagement. Overall, the findings indicated that the RCMK course largely fulfilled its vision of helping students emotionally internalize faith.

2.2. Acquiring National Values

Another subheading derived from the RCMK course's vision concerns the participants' adoption of national values. The extent to which high school students embraced national values was investigated in terms of whether their experiences with the RCMK course influenced their views on elements of national unity; student perspectives were limited to this scope. In this section, students' responses regarding the adoption of national values were categorized as promoting national unity, raising awareness about national unity, strengthening national unity, or the course having no impact on promoting national unity (ineffective) and were supported by the following participant statements. Data obtained from students on this topic are presented in Chart 3.

Graph 3. *Acquiring National Values*

Graph 3. Acquiring National Values
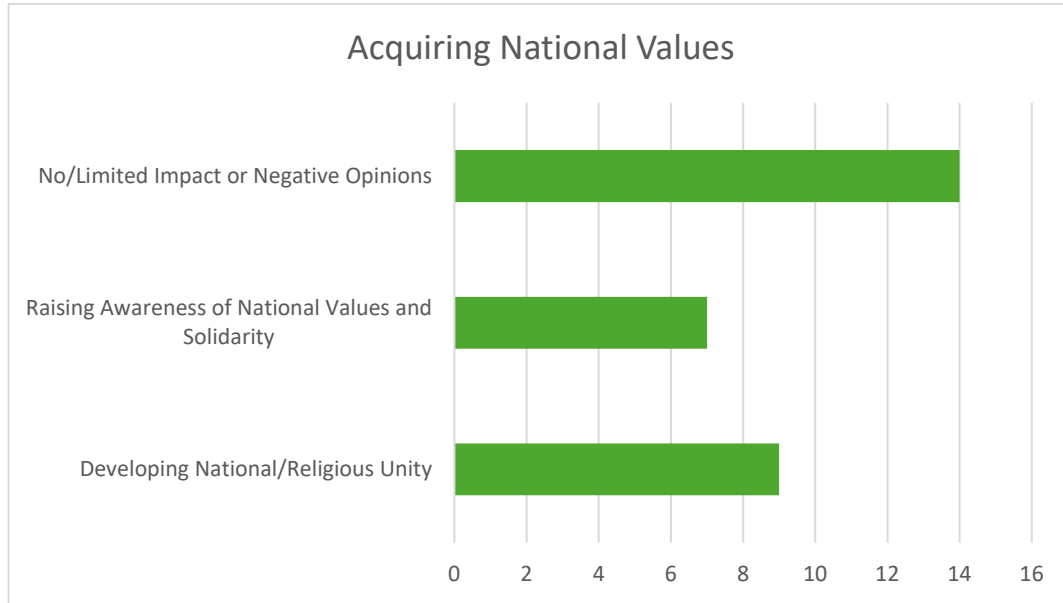
Some participant opinions regarding the acquisition of national values are presented below:

No/Limited Impact or Negative Opinions; P.23: "...in religion classes, we were taught that the unifying factor was religion, Islam. For example, when I look at my friends around me, I have non-religious friends, friends from different religions, and friends from different sects, and I haven't seen any of them love their country less just because of their religious beliefs. They all say they are Turkish, that's why they are loyal to this country. They're not loyal to this country because they are Muslim."

Raising Awareness of National Values and Solidarity; P.14: "...it could be during religious holidays, national holidays, or religious holidays, where we usually have unity and solidarity. It was helpful in understanding these things."

Developing National/Religious Unity; P.15: "...it changed. In Religious Culture classes, the Prophet Muhammad was mentioned, and his actions were discussed, and his actions regarding national unity were discussed. He talked about his companions, his behavior towards them, how they formed unity among themselves, how they stood strong together against any event. I think this creates an awareness in many people. I think it was effective in awakening a sense of national unity, a sense of national struggle, in many people."

Qualitative analysis of the RCMK course's impact on national and religious unity reveals a nuanced picture with three central themes. Specifically, a significant group of students reported no or limited impact, feeling the course lacked direct relevance or content related to national unity and identity. These students frequently cited a lack of explicit discussions of unity or simply failed to connect religious education to national consciousness. However, a significant subset of participants emphasized the course's positive role in fostering national and religious unity through examples drawn from the Prophet and his companions, congregational worship, and shared religious practices, which were seen as important in fostering a sense of belonging and collective identity. Additionally, the theme of raising awareness of national values and solidarity emerged, with several students stating that the RCMK course increased recognition of national and religious celebrations, fostered respect for diversity, and emphasized the societal importance of unity. According to Chart 3, 16 participants indicated that the course's vision contributed to their embracing of national values, supporting the idea that RCMK can effectively strengthen and promote unity awareness within national

contexts. However, it is significant that 14 participants reported that the course had no impact on their national values, highlighting that while RCMK may be effective for some, its impact is neither universal nor guaranteed. Overall, the findings suggest that the potential of the RCMK course to build national unity could be strengthened by a clearer and more integrated emphasis on shared identity and solidarity.

2.3. Acquiring of Spiritual Values

Another research question derived from the vision of the RCMK course was to understand the role the course plays in the adoption of spiritual values. In this study, the role of the RCMK course in students' internalization of spiritual values was categorized as informing, demonstrating importance, making values more meaningful, reflecting on behavior, and having no impact, based on their responses. Accordingly, the extent to which high school students embraced spiritual values as a result of their RCMK experiences was investigated through a question about whether their perspectives on religious events such as nights and days (e.g., holy nights, Eid nights, Ashura Day) had changed. Student opinions are categorized and expressed as participant numbers in Graph 4.

Graph 4. *Acquiring Spiritual Values*
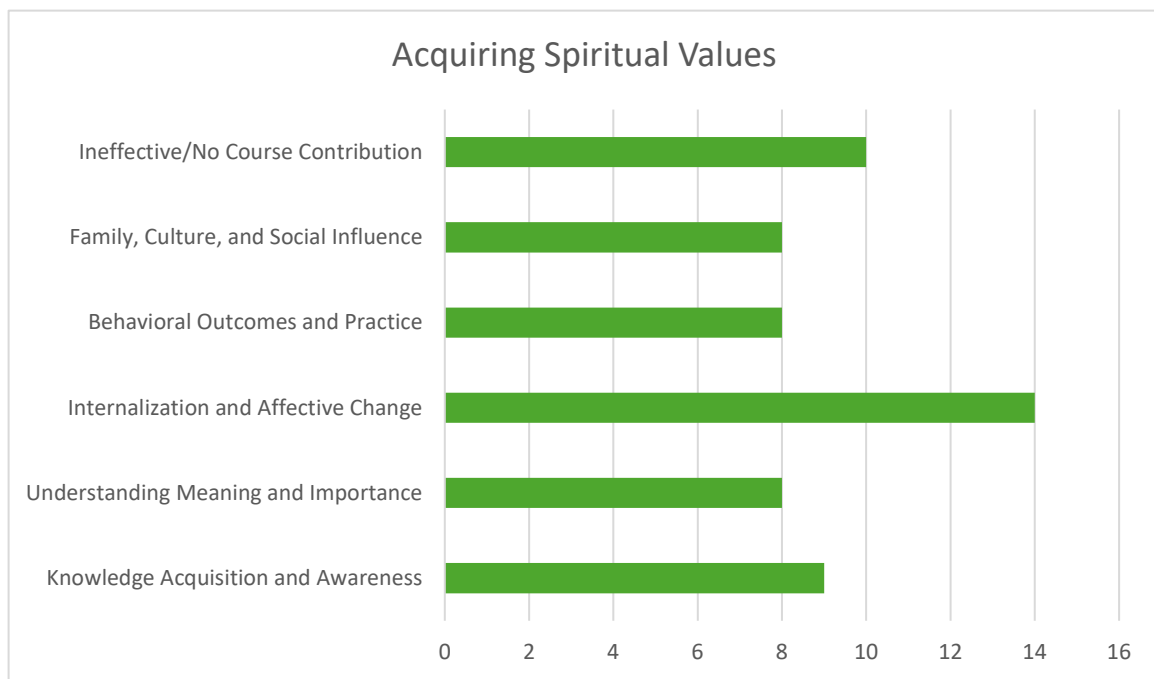
Some participant opinions about the course's ability to foster spiritual values are presented below:

Ineffective/No Course Contribution; P.18: "I think these activities are related to religion, but I think they're more related to culture. They bring people together, which is ultimately a good thing. However, for a non-believer, many things can come from outside and seem absurd. But as I said, these are cultures. That's the way it is. Maybe we should continue. If it doesn't harm anyone, I think there's no harm in it. Non-believers can also do things like distribute ashure, for example, which seems perfectly normal to me."

P.17: "...the things taught in religion classes are just book knowledge, in my opinion. I don't experience things that have a significant spiritual impact on me. I feel like these conversations are just repeating things I already know, so there wasn't any influence on me at all..."

Family, Culture, and Social Influences; P.27: "...yes, because first of all, when we don't receive any religious education and learn these things from a family growing up, I think they're just in name. For example, when we talk about Ashura Day, neighbors bring Ashura to each other, but if we don't know the reason behind it, I think it loses its religious significance. However, receiving education and actually learning the true meaning of these days, why we do these things, and the significance of these days, such as what will happen as a result, completely changes our perspective on these days. It actually helps us see the true value behind it. So, I can say that it has changed my perspective on these days quite a bit... knowing also strengthens my sense of belonging..."

Behavioral Outcomes and Practice; P.28: "...I was surprised when I learned where the kandil nights or Ashura Day actually came from because it was taught at school, I mean, on Ashura Day... When I learned where they came from, I naturally approached them from a different perspective... For example, let's say on a kandil night... before, I just sat there because I didn't know the meaning of it, but now, for example, I sit with my mother and read the Quran, pray, do the necessary things... You know, there are programs on television specifically for Mawlid nights, we watch them, I mean we listen to them..."

Internalization and Affective Change; P.14: "For example, on the Night of Ascension, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) ascension to the heavens has passed a certain date for me and it did not occur for an unknown purpose, it is a special day, so I give more importance to that day and similar days that have passed a certain date because it has something in my religion, it has a meaning for what I believe in, it is like a religious responsibility, or we celebrate the day of the birth of our Prophet because it is something very important to us, someone important to our religion, I give more importance to that day, I do whatever I have to do on that day, such as reading the Quran, praying, visiting my elders, more regularly."

Understanding Meaning and Importance; P.13: "...it affected me, I mean, I used to do these holidays that we celebrated without knowing, or the activities we did during holidays, without knowing, but after knowing, you start to look at them from a different perspective, and it created an awareness that this is the reason why we celebrate them... I realized that those activities should be done after knowing the real purpose of those holidays..."

Knowledge Acquisition and Awareness; P.11: "Frankly, yes, since I didn't go to a Quran course, I learned about the important days, the important days for our religion, in the Religious Culture class... For example, I learned that fasting is observed on the holy nights... I also learned in the classes that bad behavior and bad words should not be spoken... Our Religious Culture Teacher distributes chocolates and candies to the school on holy nights, for example, I understood the importance of this, for example, holy nights are a day of mutual support, and it set an example... I had learned about sacrifice in class, I didn't know how much of the sacrifice you should give, I didn't know any of this... and I also looked to see if we were really practicing this in the family."

Thematic analysis of participant responses indicated that the RCMK course had a multifaceted impact on the adoption of spiritual values, with the most significant impact observed in internalization and emotional change among students. Not only did students report gaining new knowledge about spiritual concepts—particularly the reasons and practices behind religious holidays and rituals—many also developed positive emotional connections to spiritual values and a deeper appreciation for these traditions. This increased awareness often led to behavioral changes, such as more active participation in religious practices and increased attention to special occasions, representing a shift from knowledge to action. Closely related to these effects, most participants indicated that the RCMK course made spiritual values more engaging and meaningful to their lives. However, this impact was not uniformly felt. A significant number of participants emphasized the dominant role of family, cultural, and social context in shaping their spiritual perspectives and behaviors. For these students, spiritual values had already been informally internalized, and the course offered little additional impact; it served more as a repetition of what they already knew or practiced.

According to the data in Chart 4, while many students benefited from the knowledge and awareness-raising functions of the RCMK course, 12 participants reported no significant impact, citing familial transmission or the perception of these values as cultural traditions rather than inherent beliefs.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while the RCMK course can play a significant role in informing, contextualizing, and sometimes deepening students' engagement with spiritual values, its impact is often intertwined with the powerful formative influence of family and culture and is often secondary. The effective adoption of moral values among high school students emerges as a complex process shaped by both formal education and the broader social environment.

2.4. Acquiring of Moral Values

Another research question arising from the vision of the RCMK curriculum concerns the role of the course in the adoption of moral values. This section explores the extent to which high school students internalize moral values as a result of their RCMK experiences by examining whether their attitudes toward their parents, immediate circle, teachers, friends, or people they encounter in daily life have changed. The student perspectives in this section are limited to this specific investigation. Additionally, to gather more data on moral attitudes, a follow-up question was asked to determine whether the RCMK course experience also influenced their attitudes toward animals and the environment; however, the primary goal was to understand attitudes toward humans.

In this context, participant responses were categorized as follows: change in attitude toward parents and immediate environment, contributing to being a better person, contributing to a sense of tolerance, and having no impact. These categories and supporting participant statements are presented below in Chart 5.

Graph 5. *Acquiring Moral Values*
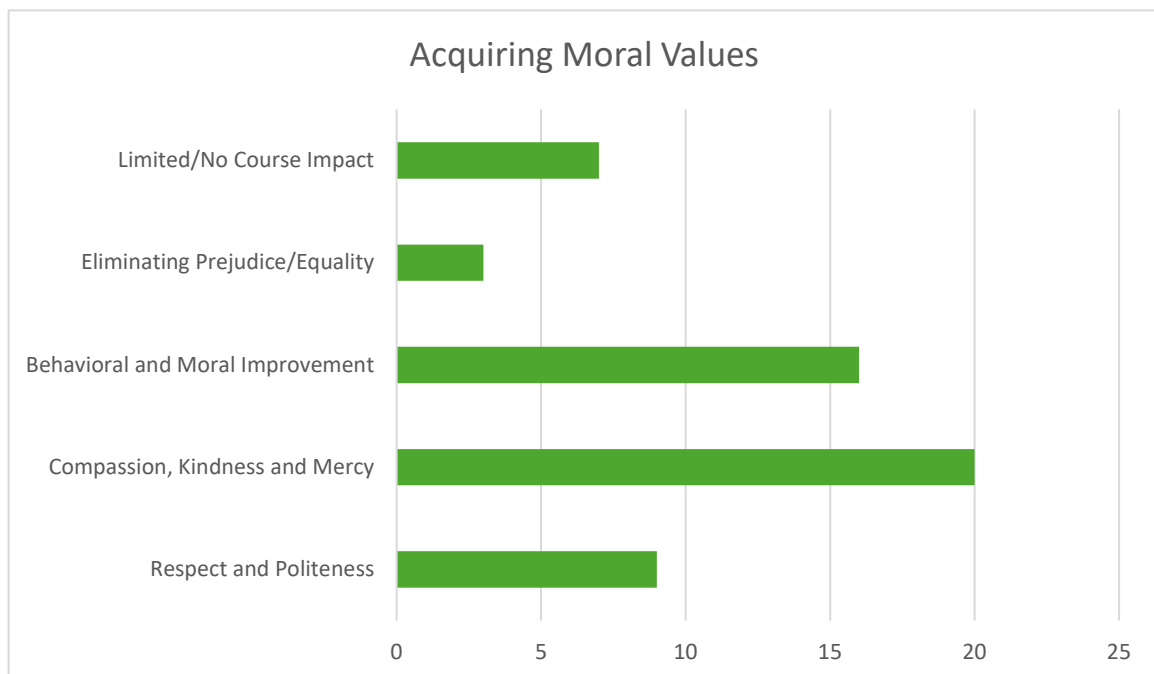
Some participant opinions regarding the course's acquisition of moral values are presented below:

Limited/No Course Impact; P.26: "Frankly, the religious culture course didn't have much of an impact. Before, I was trying to be respectful or communicate correctly when speaking and communicating with both my elders and younger ones. The Religious Culture course didn't have a significant impact."

Eliminating Prejudice/Equality; P.14: "He's changed, I've actually become more tolerant. Because his authority is the same, and mine is the same, I wasn't created higher than him, he wasn't created lower than me, everyone was created with the same values, we are equal in God's eyes, he has his own experiences, I have mine, no one sees us from within except God, no one knows what anyone else is going through, so I'm more tolerant of everyone, I'm more patient, I'm more respectful of those around me…"

Behavioral and Moral Improvement; P.10: "Well, there was a little bit about the issues, for example, something happened about backbiting, it's this, that, it's bad, etc., while dealing with people's rights, I started to get really scared of lying, etc., it's on the tip of my tongue, so I tell the truth. After that, I don't talk behind someone's back, etc. That happened after religion class, so it's a good thing…"

P.2: "…there was a certain attitude, for example, that you shouldn't stay angry during holidays… These kinds of teachings are usually given during holidays, and this teaching came to mind and made me talk to people I wouldn't want to talk to, like my relatives, for example. In other words, it had a positive impact."

P.12: "…When I hear the stories the teacher tells us about the people around us in class, it helps me a lot because it comes to mind as I learn… If I do something wrong, I really correct that action, my behavior… For example, when I could suddenly get angry and explode, I prefer to hold myself back and sit down and talk calmly…"

Compassion, Kindness, and Mercy; P.23: "…there have been minor changes, especially regarding the elderly. For example, I'm more tolerant of the elderly I see on the street… For example, I'd help an elderly person walking down the street who's in a difficult situation. It made me realize that the elderly were born and lived many years before us, and their bodies aren't in the best shape anymore. We need to help them because, well, when the time comes, I'll grow old and be in that situation, too."

P.15: "…there's a difference in how animals are treated; I've come to the conclusion that they have hearts, too, and deserve love. We should treat them as we would humans. This isn't just about animals; it's about everyone, whether they're strangers or those I know. So, that's been effective in that way."

Respect and Politeness; P.28: "Normally, I am a tough person, but since religious education instilled in me the ability to be softer, more tolerant, more compassionate, I think I am a softer and kinder person towards those around me, I mean, I get those kinds of feelings. I used to be someone who got angry more easily, but now I am calmer, I mean, I listen more carefully to the person I am talking to… I already love animals very much, and I still love them very much, I am still very kind to them, and the same goes for other people, for example, if something happens to someone on the road, I try to help them immediately, I try to make them or those around me happy, for example, this is one of them. I used to not think about my surroundings much, I mean, I didn't care much about my friends and things like that, but I don't think so anymore, I care more, I treat them better too."

Thematic analysis of participant responses indicates that the RCMK course had a broad and multifaceted impact on the adoption of social and moral values among high school students. The most prominent theme was Kindness, Kindness, and Compassion, with many students emphasizing increased empathy, a desire to help others, sensitivity to animals, constructive responses to adversity, and improved emotional regulation. This points to the course's potential to foster humanity and moral responsibility. The closely related emphasis on Respect and Courtesy reflects how the course promotes courtesy, respectful behavior, and the avoidance of harming others, thereby fostering positive daily interactions.

In acquiring moral values, 'Behavioral and Moral Development' also emerged as a significant theme, with students reporting gains in patience, honesty, tolerance, and self-awareness, suggesting that the RCMK course can foster personal moral development and encourage the adoption of positive social habits. Some participants also noted the importance of 'Eliminating Prejudice/Equality,' such as treating everyone equally and reducing prejudice against marginalized groups; this aligns with the goals of contemporary education for social justice and inclusion.

Despite these strengths of the course, the theme of "Limited/No Course Impact" is noteworthy. A significant number of students felt that their moral values were primarily formed through family influence, personal principles, or broader socialization, and that the course content was not relevant or practical enough to effect real change. According to the data in Chart 5, while most participants felt that the RCMK course helped them become better individuals (including improved relationships with parents and peers and increased tolerance), others indicated that these values were acquired outside of school or that the course was ineffective in this regard.

In summary, while the RCMK course serves as an important tool for instilling compassion, good character, and social values in many students, family environment and upbringing remain dominant factors in shaping moral development. This demonstrates that making course content more practical, engaging, and directly relevant to students' lived experiences can maximize its positive impact on moral and social values, while also highlighting its importance.

2.5. Fostering the Ability to Live with Differences

Another research question regarding the RCMK course vision is to investigate whether the course results change the attitudes of everyone toward their beliefs. Participants were specifically asked whether their attitudes toward others' beliefs had changed due to their RCMK experiences, and their responses were limited to this question. Responses regarding the distribution of the capacity to live together with the details of the RCMK vision are presented in Graph 6, supported by participant statements, under the categories of respect, tolerance, awareness, or no influence.

Graph 6. *Fostering the Ability to Live Together with Differences*
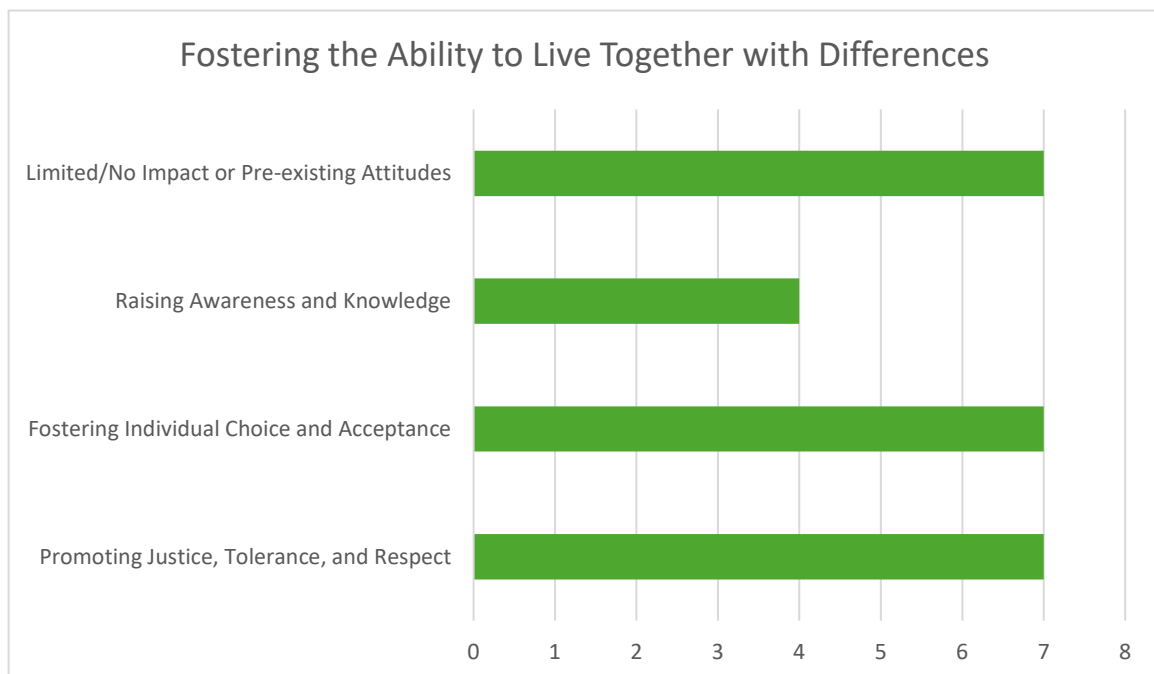
Some statements regarding fostering the ability to live with differences are presented below:

Limited/No Impact or Pre-existing Attitudes; P.23: "It hasn't changed much because I already respect other people's beliefs and behaviors, especially if they don't interfere with other people. Because everyone lives their own lives, and everyone hangs by their own legs. For example, if someone behaves badly without affecting another person, they're behaving badly themselves. But what matters in this matter is that it doesn't affect anyone else. What matters to me is their character, their behavior. Beyond that, what happens in a person's private life doesn't concern me. Because of my family, I'm already a tolerant person because, for example, in my own family, my family is Sunni, but my closest family friend is an Alevi. You know, our people don't say anything about these things; they don't maintain a stay-away-from-them approach because we always say, 'What matters is what a person does, not words.'"

P.24: "No, it hasn't changed. I'm a person who respects everyone. I don't judge or question anyone, regardless of their religion or orientation. This religious culture course hasn't changed my mind at all… I mean, there's no point in arguing about such matters; after all, it's the individual's own choice."

Raising Awareness and Knowledge; P.25: "…one difference might be this: we learn about other religions in our classes. My knowledge of other religions and understanding their cultures makes positive contributions to those I interact with. For example, I participated in a project where we explained our religions to each other. There wasn't a negative atmosphere there; on the contrary, we saw how similar we are and how much we share the same feelings. Of course, it has its effects in this respect, but I can say my attitude changes in a positive direction."

P.5: "…of course, as I learn more, I also believe that knowledge eliminates ignorance and teaches respect for one another. So, as I learned about different beliefs, I learned to respect the beliefs of others…"

Fostering Individual Choice and Acceptance; P.6: "…Because Islam is a religion of tolerance, we were taught this. As we learned the fundamentals of different faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and so on, I became aware that this is their fundamental nature. Islam says this, their religion says that, and so is their religion. We shouldn't interfere. Everyone has their own religion."

P.13: "…I also had friends with multiple faiths, and I talked to them. Along with our principle of "there is no compulsion in religion," yes, we interacted with them in a more respectful manner; they learned things from me, I learned things from them, and we interacted. I can say that my attitude towards them was a little different, that I learned to look at them more respectfully, to respect their opinions."

P.9: "Of course, it changed because, as I said from the very beginning, I was always most impressed by the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The reason I was impressed by the life of the Prophet Muhammad is because the Prophet Muhammad was always tolerant of other religions and other beliefs, you know, he was tolerant, and I have always been tolerant of other beliefs…"

Promoting Justice, Tolerance, and Respect; P.2: "…for example, I remember a teaching like this: if I remember correctly, our Prophet had a problem with justice, and it was said that he even treated Jews fairly. He also somehow teaches everyone to be tolerant, regardless of their beliefs…"

A thematic analysis of students' views on the RCMK course's contribution to the ability to live with diversity reveals a multifaceted impact. A significant number of students reported that the course played a positive role in 'Promoting Justice, Tolerance, and Respect,' often drawing on the Prophet Muhammad's example in reducing prejudice and promoting equality among people. The theme 'Promoting Individual Choice and Acceptance' suggests that the RCMK course teaches personal religious autonomy, freedom, and tolerance of others' beliefs, while also affirming coexistence without coercion within religion. Many students also highlighted the importance of 'Raising Awareness and Knowledge,' explaining that exposure to different

faiths and traditions in the course made them more knowledgeable, helped reduce ignorance, and thus promoted peaceful coexistence.

However, the analysis also highlights the reality of 'Limited/No Impact or Pre-Existing Attitudes': for a significant number of students, the course did not create new attitudes or significantly change their perspectives, because respect, tolerance, or apathy towards diversity was already ingrained, often due to family or personal beliefs. The responses in Chart 6 confirm this: while the RCMK course heavily promoted teaching respect, tolerance, and awareness, some participants argued that their attitudes towards people of different faiths or denominations remained unchanged as a result of the course.

Under this heading, the RCMK course is viewed by most participants as a meaningful tool for promoting respect, tolerance, and coexistence; however, its effectiveness is often dependent on and limited by students' prior experiences and predispositions.

3. Results and Discussion

This study explored the realization of the RCMK course's vision from the perspectives of participating students, focusing specifically on the extent to which meaning-making, national unity, spiritual and moral development, and skills for living with diversity were developed, not developed, or perceived as neutral. According to the RCMK curriculum vision, its overall goals are to cultivate individuals who recognize the role of religion in giving meaning to life, embrace national, spiritual, and moral values, and acquire the competencies to live together in a pluralistic society (MEB, 2018).

The findings of the study indicate that the RCMK course in Türkiye plays a multifaceted role in shaping students' perspectives on meaning, national and spiritual values, moral development, and living together in a diverse society. Thematic analysis of student responses reveals that the impact of the RCMK course is broad, detailed, and multifaceted in these areas:

Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions of the RCMK Course Related to the Meaning of Life: The most significant impact of the course is evident in the cognitive and emotional domains, where students frequently report gains in religious knowledge, correction of misconceptions, and increased capacity for existential reflection. Exposure to various religious traditions within the course fosters critical thinking and provides students with a broader context for questioning and making sense of life. It also fosters emotional well-being such as gratitude, hope, and resilience. Indeed, according to studies by (Toker, 2020) and Arslan (Arslan, 2018), the course answered 84.5% of high school students' questions about religion. In Arslan's (2018) quantitative study, 87.3% of the students agreed with the option "I am aware that the worldly life and my own life have a purpose and a goal, and I have determined my own goals in life", indicating that the course contributes to making sense of life. In Çakmak's research, which was conducted with a similar method in which he examined the mediating role of religiosity and responsibility between the RCMK education of high school students and the meaning of life, it was concluded that religiosity and responsibility have a mediating role in the search for meaning in achieving the general goals in the RCMK course, and the RCMK course is an effective factor in making sense of life (Çakmak, 2018). Our study also has findings that support these findings from the mentioned studies. This study also found that the course fosters a belief in an afterlife related to faith. However, there are also students who express the view that the course does not provide meaning to life. In a similar study, Zengin's study, which examined students' attitudes toward the Religious Knowledge and Moraal Knowledge (RCMK) course in primary and secondary schools in the Sakarya province using the "RCMK Course Attitude Scale," found that students who stated they had benefited from the course had higher attitudes toward the course, while those who had a negative opinion had lower attitudes (Zengin, 2013). In this study, P.8, P.19, and P.30, who shared the view that the course was insufficient to influence their thoughts, also agreed on a lack of effectiveness regarding at least four values. This suggests that, as Zengin also stated, negative thoughts about the course were reflected in the decline in participants' attitudes. In this regard, it was understood that the course, with its emotional surrender approach, reduced anxiety, while the presence of

religion provided peace and confidence, and the information acquired fostered self-confidence in terms of faith and trust in religion. At the same time, the informative aspect of the course clarified students' questions and supported their belief in the existence of a Creator.

RCMK Course's Inculcation of National Values: In terms of national values, the course is generally valued for providing positive role models and shared practices that strengthen national identity and unity, but its impact varies among participants. For some, these lessons translate strongly into a sense of solidarity, while for others, the formation of national values is experienced primarily through family and community rather than formal classroom settings. This demonstrates the importance of curriculum delivery that is both inclusive and context-sensitive.

The RCMK Course's Contribution to Spiritual Values: The RCMK course's contribution to spiritual development is generally seen in students' deeper understanding of religious practices and rituals, making cultural elements more personally meaningful to them. However, the course's impact on participants is sometimes seen as secondary to the influence of family traditions and broader culture, emphasizing the need for educational content that resonates with students' lived experiences. Participants' opinions regarding the RCMK course's instruction on spiritual values stated that they learned the reasons for celebrating events such as holy nights, holidays, and Ashura Day, what should be done on these days, and practices such as worship and pilgrimage. This suggests that the course was informative. Furthermore, it was understood that the course demonstrated the religious significance, history, and value of holy days and nights, made them more meaningful, contributed to their internalization, and increased participation in such celebrations.

Acquisition of Moral Values in the RCMK Course: In the area of moral education, the course supports the development of compassion, empathy, patience, tolerance, honesty, and respect for diversity. However, the majority of participants primarily attribute core moral values to family upbringing and informal social contexts, positioning the course as a complementary rather than a transformative force in the formation of moral values. Participants' views on this matter suggest that the course fosters positive changes in their attitudes toward parents and their immediate environment, including respect and not overstepping boundaries, avoiding upset and obeying, being polite, caring, and consciously doing good, compassion, and raising awareness of their needs. Similarly, in Toker's research on science high school students, which included the RCMK course outcomes, one of the findings was that the course was particularly effective in encouraging participants to behave well towards their parents (Toker, 2020). However, some students expressed the view that the course did not foster awareness of religiously sacred days and nights, that it was a culturally relevant or family-inherited teaching, that it did not align with their beliefs, and that it did not influence their thoughts because they were already aware of it.

The course also contributed to better human behaviors and feelings such as not being offended on holy days, avoiding backbiting, being patient and respectful, empathizing, compassionate, caring, helping, and approaching with positivity. Related to this topic, Ay has a study on "the mediating role of religiosity and moral maturity between Religious Knowledge and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) education and aggression." According to the results of his quantitative research on 12th-grade students in Erzurum province and its districts, it was understood that achieving the general objectives of the RCMK course can increase the religiosity and moral maturity of high school students, and this increase can reduce students' aggression levels (Ay, 2021). Similarly, this study also observed that the course stimulates emotions such as anger management, patience, empathy, and compassion. In a study conducted by Sayın with Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) teachers on the relationship between religious knowledge and behavior, it was stated that the course's focus on students' cognitive dimensions led to inadequate behavioral change (Sayın, 2021).

The Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Course Promotes Coexistence with Differences: Finally, students generally found the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge course effective in promoting respect for diversity and the principle of harmonious coexistence with differences, particularly through its emphasis on justice, freedom of belief, and religious tolerance. While most students reported greater awareness and

open-mindedness as a result of their course experiences, a significant number believed that these attitudes were formed before the course and reflected the preexisting influence of family and society. The findings suggest that the course's impact can be maximized when course content and pedagogy are designed to build on existing positive attitudes and utilize engaging, real-world discussions about diversity.

Overall, the study found that the RCMK course provides vital opportunities for students' cognitive, emotional, and ethical development, but its impact is far greater when it is grounded in students' lived realities and complements the formative roles of family and community. The findings highlight the importance of delivering curriculum in an inclusive and thoughtful way that aligns with students' diverse backgrounds and needs.

These findings align strongly with literature highlighting the informational, emotional, and behavioral roles of RCMK (Arslan, 2018; Toker, 2020; Çakmak, 2018), the importance of teaching approaches and inclusiveness (Kalfa, 2019), and the significant influence of family and informal contexts on value formation. The current study reaffirms that the effects of RCMK are not uniform: while raising awareness and imparting knowledge are its primary strengths, its potential to generate behavioral and attitudinal change may be much greater when the course curriculum is made engaging and practical, tailored to a variety of student experiences.

Based on student feedback and existing research, the following recommendations for further improving the RCMK program have been developed:

• Given constraints such as course time and curriculum overload, increasing elective and enrichment hours that allow for more in-depth exploration of Islamic practices, legal systems, and comparative belief systems will enhance the effectiveness of the training. Furthermore, it is recommended that the curriculum be expanded to address young people's questions about Islam and other religions.

• The emotional and practical impact of the training will be maximized when teachers are encouraged to make clear connections between knowledge, lived experience, emotional well-being, and daily behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the RCMK course continues to be a significant and generally positive force for promoting meaning-making, national values, spiritual depth, moral awareness, and respect for diversity among high school students in Türkiye. While it has emotional and behavioral effects, particularly in transferring knowledge and raising awareness, these effects generally vary depending on practical application, effective use of class time, student participation, and prior socialization. Effectively embracing RCMK's vision depends on an adaptable, student-centered approach. To achieve the course's objectives, it is crucial to understand content gaps, acknowledge student diversity, and ensure the curriculum aligns with real-world needs. This will ensure that the RCMK course develops students who are not only knowledgeable but also ethically sound, aware of diverse beliefs and practices in society, and sensitive to the relationship between religion, nation, culture, and living in unity.

Declarations

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Between being and not being: An analysis of elective religious course curricula in republican-era Türkiye

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Abstract: Religious courses have oscillated between inclusion and exclusion since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. They were gradually removed from the curriculum and completely eliminated in 1939. After a long hiatus, they were reintroduced as elective courses in primary schools (1949), lower secondary schools (1956), and upper secondary schools (1967). These elective courses existed in various forms from 1949 until 1982, when religious education became compulsory. This study aims to provide a general evaluation of the structure and implementation of these courses, focusing specifically on the elective religious course curricula in Türkiye between 1949 and 1982. The study was conducted using a case study design, one of the qualitative research methods. Data were collected through content analysis of curricula and related studies. The findings are presented under four main headings: the process leading to the reintroduction of religious courses in 1949; the general approach of the curricula; and the aims and content of the religious courses. The study concludes with a six-point discussion framed within the context of relevant literature and the sociopolitical conditions of the period.

Introduction

Education is a phenomenon that plays a vital role in transmitting a society's epistemic, aesthetic, and moral understandings to future generations. For this reason, throughout history, every society has not only assigned a purpose to education but also defined the type of person it aims to cultivate, in line with its worldview. This process of cultural transmission has become especially important in modern times, due to the dizzying ease of access to information and the increasingly distinct and diverse needs of societies. During this period, educational boundaries have evolved into a clearly defined framework known as curriculum (Cevizci, 2010, pp. 184–185; Ertürk, 1972, pp. 7–8). Today, curriculum is designed separately for each course, extending from normative considerations about what subjects should be taught to detailed specifications of content (Cevizci, 2010, p. 182). Some general characteristics of modern curriculum can be identified. First, the curriculum reflects the value a society places on knowledge and epistemology, showing what knowledge is deemed important and the quality of the cognitive infrastructure being targeted. However, the curriculum must also be adaptable. As knowledge and technology -the foundations of education- continue to evolve rapidly, the curriculum must be flexible to remain relevant. At the same time, it plays a critical role in preserving and transmitting a society's national, historical, and cultural values. In this way, the curriculum also supports the development of citizenship (Cevizci, 2010, pp. 182–185; Tozlu, 2003, pp. 110–111). There are four basic pillars of an educational curriculum that cover all of these aspects. These are; the aims that contain the answer to why education is done, the content that determines what will be taught, the method that determines the ways of how to teach, and the evaluation that draws the limits of how much to teach (Bakırcıoğlu, 2012, pp. 693-694).

When it comes to religious education, it can be said that the curriculum-related principles mentioned above are generally applicable. In fact, religious education in Türkiye cannot be separated from general education in terms of its foundational parameters. However, it is important to emphasize that

during the Republican period, religious education and its content were shaped with particular sensitivity (Doğan, 2004, p. 628). The development of religious education curriculum in Türkiye has been influenced by several factors: the state's stance on human rights, its understanding of knowledge and religion, educational policies, the socio-religious cultural structure, its international position, and student characteristics (Tosun, 2015, p. 114). An examination of the historical trajectory of religious education, especially within formal education institutions, reveals a pattern of fluctuation. To understand the context of elective religious courses -the focus of this study- it is helpful to briefly outline the earlier developments. In 1924, the first curriculum of the Republic included a two-hour weekly course titled "Qur'an and Religious Lessons" for all grades except the first year of primary school. By 1926, religious content had been restricted to the "Knowledge of Life" course during the first three years of primary education, while separate religious courses were reduced to one hour per week in grades three through five. In 1930, religious education was offered only in the fifth grade, and by 1936, it had been removed entirely from the curriculum. It was similarly absent from the village primary school curriculum in 1939 and remained excluded from formal education for an extended period. Following public and political discussions in the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, media, and wider society, religious courses were reintroduced in 1949 as elective subjects. From that point on, they continued -subject to various modifications, additions, and removals- until they became compulsory in 1982. (For a detailed account of developments between 1924 and 1939, see: Altaş, 2002, p. 220; Tavukçuoğlu, 1996, pp. 147–153; Tosun, 2008, p. 235; Yürük, 2011b, pp. 248–249; Zengin, 2017, p. 121.)

This study focuses on the period during which religious education in Türkiye was offered as an elective course. Elective courses often held an ambiguous position within the curriculum, and religious education shared this status for nearly 30 years during the Republican era, before being made compulsory in 1982. Although no direct research has been conducted specifically on these courses -generally referred to as *Religious Knowledge* during this period- several studies on religious education and curriculum development have been published. These works provided relevant insights and commentary on the structure and nature of elective religious courses (Altaş, 2002, pp. 221–228; Ayhan, 2014, pp. 126–163; Bilgin, 1980; Doğan, 2004, pp. 620–631; Genç, 2012, pp. 573-574; Kaymakcan, 2006, p. 23; Tavukçuoğlu, 1996, pp. 154–158; Yürük, 2011a, pp. 91–131; 2011b, pp. 249–250; Zengin, 2017, pp. 124–127). The primary aim of this study is to offer a general evaluation of the functioning and curricular processes of elective religious courses in Türkiye between 1949 and 1982. The primary research questions include:

1. What historical context led to the reintroduction of religious courses after a prolonged absence?

2. How were elective religious courses defined within the curricula?

3. What objectives were these courses designed to achieve?

4. What content was included in these courses?

5. Considering the background, approach, objectives, and content, what was the role of elective religious courses in Turkey's educational policies, pedagogical structures, textbooks, teacher training/employment, and the development of compulsory religious courses?

A case study design (Creswell, 2021, pp. 97–100) -one of the qualitative research methods- was employed as the methodological framework. Data were obtained through document analysis (Karasar, 2012, p. 183) of curricula published in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1968, and 1976, and were subsequently subjected to content analysis. An initial review of the curricula was conducted to formulate relevant research questions, guided by expert opinions. Subsequently, the curricula were re-examined to identify answers to these questions, which were then coded and thematically categorized. Coding involved extracting specific information pertinent to the research questions, while theming involved grouping these codes into coherent categories. Both inductive and deductive approaches were utilized in the content analysis. To ensure the study's validity and reliability, two strategies were implemented: Firstly, comparing the findings with existing literature to contextualize and validate the results. Secondly, consulting with a field expert to review the analyses, incorporating their feedback into the final interpretation.

1. The Process of Preparing the Reintroduction of Religious Courses

In the development of religious education curricula in Türkiye, the influence of the state's sociopolitical vision and its desired citizen model is evident -that is, the type of individual the state seeks to cultivate (Tosun, 2015, p. 114). This supports the argument that state policies play a significant role in shaping the religious education process (Zengin, 2017, p. 114). Following the initial inclusion of compulsory religious courses in the early years, these were gradually reduced and ultimately removed from the curriculum entirely by 1939. Religious education remained absent from formal education for a significant period. It was not until 1949 that religious instruction reappeared in the curriculum. The 1949 announcement in the *Journal of Communiqués* that religious education would be offered as an optional subject in primary schools raises the question: what changed in the preceding decade to make this reintroduction possible?

Since 1924, efforts, reforms, decisions, and implementations had consistently aimed to embed the principles of the Republic -especially secularism- into society. The removal of religious education was initially justified within the framework of secularist reform. However, in the latter half of the 1940s, political conviction grew that Republican reforms had sufficiently taken root in society. As a result, religious life—and religious education in particular—could once again be cautiously reintroduced into public discourse (Bulut, 1997, pp. 115–116; Doğan, 2004, p. 630; Kara, 2019, p. 222). A 1946 commission tasked with studying the matter concluded that offering religious education would not contradict secularism, and this decision—along with changing societal dynamics—contributed to the shift in policy (Tavukçuoğlu, 1996, p. 158).

Other key factors also supported this shift in perspective. One was the growing recognition within the government of a societal need for religious education and services. Turkish society had a strong desire to live according to religious principles and to receive education in line with these values (Kara, 2019, p. 222; Kaymakcan, 2006, p. 23). After 1946, political leaders increasingly responded to public demands, bringing the issue to the forefront of the national agenda (Öcal, 1998, p. 245). Contributing to this awareness was a rising concern that religious education was being delivered informally by various organizations, which posed a perceived threat (Kara, 2019, p. 222). The lack of formal, state-controlled religious instruction risked driving people toward alternative sources, potentially undermining the Republic's reforms. Another crucial factor influencing the reintroduction of religious education was the political context of the time. The ruling single-party government recognized the growing momentum toward a multi-party system and the potential for political transition. After 1946, the Democrat Party gained popularity with its promises to fulfill societal expectations -particularly regarding religious services and education (Subaşı, 2017, p. 82). Additionally, the educational imperative to preserve and promote the unifying values of Turkish society (Üstel, 2016, pp. 241–242) also contributed to support for the selective inclusion of religious education in the curriculum.

As a result of the conditions of the time, a letter dated February 1, 1949 -signed by the then Minister of National Education, Tahsin Banguoğlu, and issued under the 1948 curriculum- was sent to provincial governorships, requesting that the necessary procedures be implemented. The letter stated that religious courses could be taught for two hours per week in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school, provided that parents submitted a written request (MEB, 1949, p. 153). This letter served as an official document authorizing the reinstatement of religious education after a long hiatus. A similar decision was made in 1967 for upper secondary and equivalent institutions. According to this decision, starting from the 1967–1968 academic year, religious courses were to be offered for one hour per week outside of regular class hours in the first and second grades of high schools and equivalent schools (MEB, 1967, p. 371).

2. General Approach of the Curricula

In this section, information is provided about the general approach to elective religious courses based on the explanatory sections of the curricula published in the bulletins of the Ministry of National Education. It should also be noted that the explanatory sections of the curricula contain very limited information. This title was included in the study because the curriculum explanations provide content that supports the study's purpose, scope, and discussion.

In the 1949 primary school curriculum, it was emphasized that these courses would be extracurricular and would not influence students' promotion to the next grade. It was stated that they could be taught for two hours per week in the fourth and fifth grades, at times convenient for student attendance. Parents were required to submit a written request for their children to participate in the course. Additionally, school administrations were instructed to prevent unnecessary disputes between the parents of students who opted into the course and those who did not. As for who would teach the course, the responsibility was assigned to existing teachers at each school, although no mention was made of specific pedagogical or professional qualifications. It was also noted that the book titled *Religious Lessons*, to be prepared by the Presidency of Religious Affairs and approved by a commission including its president, would be used during this period (MEB, 1949, p. 153). Two significant changes were introduced to this curriculum in 1950. First, religious courses were officially included in the curriculum. Second, instead of requiring a written request from parents who wanted their children to take the course, it was offered to all students except those whose parents explicitly opted them out (Doğan, 2004, p. 620; Yürük, 2011a, pp. 98-100; Yürük, 2011b, pp. 249–250).

The 1967 upper secondary school curriculum stated that these courses could be taught for one hour per week outside of regular class hours, similar to the approach in primary and lower secondary schools. However, for students who chose to take the course, attendance was compulsory, and the course was considered in their grade promotion. Teachers who graduated from faculties of divinity or higher Islamic institutes were to be preferred for teaching the course. In their absence, teachers from related or interested disciplines could be appointed. These teachers were expected to present the subject matter in simple, comprehensible language and to follow the curriculum's guidelines. The curriculum also included a reading list of Islamic sciences texts, which could be used during instruction. Moreover, the character-building and personality-developing aspects of Islam were to be emphasized as models in teaching, along with Islam's guiding and cautionary functions, distinguishing right from wrong (MEB, 1967, p. 371).

The 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum emphasized the importance of considering students' grade level, general cultural background, and psychological development during the teaching process (MEB, 1976, p. 338).

3. Purposes of Religious Courses

In this section of the study, the purposes of religious courses that have found their place in schools again will be analyzed around the information in the curriculum.

In the letter sent to the governorships in 1949, there is an article regarding the possibility of religious courses being taught by taking into account the need for citizens to exercise their right to provide religious information to their children based on the emphasis on freedom of conscience in the constitution (MEB, 1949, p. 153). This article reveals that one of the purposes of religious courses is to meet the need of parents who want their children to receive religious education through school. This proposed purpose also confirms the sources that state that the public had an expectation for religious education and teaching to be provided in schools during the period in question (Kara, 2019, p. 222; Kaymakcan, 2006, p. 23; Öcal, 1998, p. 245). The fact that religious courses began to be taught as electives in 1949 shows that an attempt was made to partially, if not completely, fulfill the aforementioned expectation. In the text that decided that religious courses would also be taught in high schools and equivalent schools nearly 20 years later, it was emphasized that the constitution aimed to elevate national unity and spirit in the education and training planning process, and that within this purpose, students could be provided with the information they needed in terms of religion within the framework of secularism (MEB, 1967, p. 371). In the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum, it is seen that the teaching of this course is based on the individuals' own will and the minors' legal representation (MEB, 1976, p. 338). It is striking that in the two decision texts in question, religious education is based on a right that is subject to the constitution in terms of purpose. The freedom of conscience in the constitution, which is included in the text that decided that religious courses would be taught in primary schools, is included in various articles of the 1924 constitution (Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanunu, 1924). The emphasis on national unity and spiritual exaltation in the 1967 decision to include religious courses in high schools and equivalent institutions is also reflected in the preamble of the 1961 Constitution. Similarly, the 1976 curricula's emphasis that religious education should be subject solely to the will of individuals -or, in the case of minors, their legal guardians- is echoed

in the section on freedom of thought, belief, and rights in the 1961 Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, 1961). This alignment indicates that a legal foundation was first sought to legitimize the inclusion of religious courses within formal education. Thus, the general aim of the course was established.

Direct information about the specific purpose of this course is included in the third article of the explanations section of the 1967 text, for religious knowledge courses in high schools and equivalent schools. Accordingly, the purpose of religious courses is not just to give some information to young people, but to make them understand that there is a spiritual world above matter, that existence is not only made up of matter, and to awaken the interest of souls towards spiritual values. Thus, the relations between material and spiritual existence were intended to be comprehended through this course (MEB, 1967, pp. 371-372). Thus, the inclusion of religious courses in high schools aimed to show the unseen face of the world of beings, that is, the spiritual dimension, to students who were considered to be in a suitable position in terms of mental maturity. An ambiguity is felt here. When we look at the content of the courses, it is seen that this is based on faith and morality in the same article. Spirituality was taught with belief in God, and in the reflection of this in real life, this spirituality was instilled as a moral virtue within the framework of a sense of duty.

In the continuation of the explanations, it becomes evident that the specific objectives of the course are outlined in greater detail. Articles five and six suggest that the course is primarily centered around the teachings of the Islamic religion. Indeed, it is stated that this religion is regarded as a light that illuminates the soul and conscience, and that its rational and progressive aspects will be presented through verses, hadiths, and historical examples. The following articles emphasize that these positive characteristics of Islam resonate with the soul and conscience of the Turkish people, align with their national identity, and highlight the historical role of the Turkish nation in spreading, establishing, and safeguarding Islam—points that will be stressed as needed (MEB, 1967, p. 372).

It is seen that the special purposes of the elective religious knowledge courses in the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum are given more clearly, understandably and in the form of items. These purposes are listed as follows (MEB, 1976, p. 338):

1. To teach the principles of faith, worship and morality (ilmihal) of the Islamic religion and to prepare the opportunity and ground for them to feel and live these principles,

2. To provide the sense of diligence and the longed-for national personality that the Turkish-Islamic spirit has developed and tempered throughout history in defending the homeland and in national matters,

3. To help them organize their inner worlds and adjust their relations with the world of science and civilization in society,

4. To provide them with a respectful view and attitude in accordance with science and religious matters, far from primitive beliefs and ideas that may be received from their families, their surroundings and various sources outside the school,

5. To teach the beautiful morality, lifestyle, advice, views and thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad as an exemplary person, in various areas,

6. To provide religious and national consciousness based on our national identity.

As in the 1967 curriculum, the aims of this curriculum are centered on the beliefs and teachings of the Islamic religion and the moral conduct of the Prophet. However, it is also evident that religion and religious education are employed to promote homeland defense, foster national pride and awareness, and that religious courses are based not on negative interpretations, but directly on authentic religious sources.

4. Content of Religious Courses

When the course contents in the curricula where religious courses were taught as electives during the Republic period are examined, it seems possible to collect these contents in several categories. These categories are; faith and worship, morality, living world religions, and Turks and Islam -with some topics also touching on citizenship-.

Topics related to faith and worship were included in the lower secondary curriculum prepared in 1956. According to this curriculum, love of Allah, the prophet and the conditions of Islam were included in the first grade of lower secondary school. In the second grade, belief in Allah and the prophet; and in the section that would include worship, some terms (such as farḍ, wājib, sunnah, ḥarām, makrūh) were covered (MEB, 1956, pp. 147-148). The 1967 upper secondary curriculum continued to address faith and worship -often grouped under broader "Islam and Morality" sections (MEB, 1976, pp. 371-372). When we come to the 1968 primary school curriculum, we come across topics related to faith and worship more frequently. In the 1968 primary-school curriculum, Grade 5 students encounter a unit titled "Belief" (Āmanat) alongside an expanded treatment of worship: the Five Pillars, fitrah, and zakāh and ʾudḥiyah (MEB, 1968, pp. 107-111). By 1976, the combined lower - and upper-secondary curriculum revisits the basic principles of Islam -belief (Āmanat), worship terms (farḍ, wājib, sunnah), and the conditions of Islam- across both levels (MEB, 1976, pp. 338-340).

One of the contents included in the curriculum is morality-related subjects. In the first and second grades of the 1956 lower secondary curriculum, various values were included under the title of Islamic morality. In general terms, these were family, love of the homeland and its protection, respect for the rights of others, kindness, assistance, rules of decency, protection of health, moral rules in business life, rules of speech, and the foundations of morality in Islam (MEB, 1956, pp. 147-148). In the first and second grades of the 1967 upper secondary curriculum, morality-related contents were included in a way that was intertwined with the subjects of faith and worship. In the first grade, morality-related rules that Islam values such as unity, togetherness, believing, charity, and helping each other were covered. Finally, the relationship between religion and morality was also included here. In the second grade, morality-related subjects were included as separate themes. These are moral principles, fear of God and morality, sense of duty, the relationship between belief and servitude and morality, family and social responsibilities, conscience and morality, and religion and morality (MEB, 1967, p. 372). When it comes to the 1968 primary school curriculum, it is striking that various moral virtues were included at the fourth-grade level. First of all, these are love for mother, father, sibling, family, teacher, nation, and country under the title of love. Then, moral virtues such as respect for elders, love for younger ones, mercy, goodness, truthfulness, tolerance, not harming, not being lazy, being reliable and honest are included (MEB, 1968, p. 108). In the 1976 lower secondary school curriculum, the subjects of the 1956 curriculum on the foundations of morality in Islam were contented with the subjects of the soul, chastity, self-control, perseverance, heroism, modesty, gentleness, honesty, reliability, patience, generosity, and diligence were covered under this subject. In this year's upper secondary curriculum, under the title of Islamic ethics, the fear of Allah and some moral virtues of the Prophet Muhammad were included (MEB, 1976, pp. 339-340).

It is seen that the content of the elective religious course also included topics on some world religions other than Islam. In this context, the 1956 lower secondary second-grade curriculum included a topic called "religions in our time and the place of Islam among these religions" (MEB, 1956, p. 148). Similarly, the first-grade topics of the 1967 upper secondary school curriculum included a collective look at the history of religions and the place of Islam among divine religions (MEB, 1967, pp. 371-372). Although these religions were not directly included in the 1968 primary school curriculum, respect for members of other faiths other than Islam was emphasized among moral issues (MEB, 1968, p. 109). The aforementioned topics were included in a bit more detail in the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum. The Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity, were included in the lower secondary school curriculum. Later, the place of Islam among these divine religions was mentioned. Among the subjects of the same curriculum for the third grade of upper secondary school, a collective look at the history of religions and the titles of true and false religions from the perspective of Islam were covered (MEB, 1976, pp. 338-340).

One of the themes that draw attention in the course content is the Turks, Islam and citizenship. In this context, the 1956 lower secondary, 1967 upper secondary, 1968 primary and 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curricula covered the services of Turks to Islam throughout history. Among these topics were the contributions of Turks to the spread of Islam, the struggles of Chinese, Byzantium, Crusader troops and Westerners in recent times during the spread of Islam, Turkish religious scholars, the influence of Turks on the development of Islamic art and architecture and charitable institutions such as madrasahs, fountains and bridges established by Turks throughout history (MEB, 1956, pp. 147-148, 1967, p. 372, 1968, p. 111, 1976, pp. 338-340). In addition to these issues, it was also aimed to strengthen citizenship awareness, and the subjects of love of country, protection of the country, responsibilities towards the state, and martyrdom and veteranship were included in the 1956 lower secondary and 1976 upper secondary curricula (MEB, 1956, p. 147, 1976, p. 340).

Conclusion and Discussion

The article can be concluded with a discussion of key issues, based on the literature concerning elective religious courses, which managed to remain on the agenda and in practice -albeit with various changes- from 1949 to 1982. These issues can be summarized as follows:

1. As is well known, religious education in the early years of the Republic was significantly shaped by state education policies (Zengin, 2017, p. 123). These policies generally envisioned an educational model grounded in a positivist scientific approach, emphasizing progress, rationality, and secularism (Doğan, 2004, pp. 626–627; Tosun, 2008, p. 235). This orientation was one of the reasons religious courses were partially or completely removed from the curriculum. However, after 1946, as emphasized in the first part of this study, a new understanding emerged -alongside various other factors- that the threat of reactionism had diminished, and that the reforms of the Republic had been internalized as societal gains (Bulut, 1997, pp. 115–116; Doğan, 2004, p. 630; Kara, 2019, p. 222). This perception contributed to the reintroduction of religious courses, albeit in elective form, within the framework of a progressive and rational educational model.

All the changes, innovations, developments, and restrictions introduced during this period—from the goals defined for religious courses to the development of their content—indicate that debates over their legitimacy, or at least efforts to establish it, are still ongoing. As highlighted in various studies, these discussions have hindered efforts to focus on curriculum development (Altaş, 2002, p. 229; Doğan, 2004, p. 631). The fact that religious courses remain elective rather than fully integrated into the curriculum is one of the clearest signs that their legitimacy has yet to be firmly established at the time. Some researchers also argue that the preservation of the elective status of the courses is an indication that secular practices are still continuing and that the fear of losing the gains of the Republic has not yet been completely eliminated (Zengin, 2017, p. 124). For this reason, although the courses have an elective status, they actually still carried the signs of non-existence. In order to point this out, the expression "between being and not being" was preferred in the title of this article.

2. It is seen that the content of the elective religious courses includes the subjects of belief and worship, morality, religions other than Islam, and Turks and Islam. It is possible to make some evaluations here regarding the contents detailed above. When the content of belief and worship is examined in general, three points stand out. The first is that when we say belief and worship, the Islamic belief and worship are handled in a clear and understandable manner. In this direction, the curriculum has offered religious education within the framework of Islamic belief to the children of citizens who want it. Secondly, as time progressed, these subjects have been included more in each new curriculum. Thirdly, these two subjects have been covered less in high school curriculum and more frequently in primary and lower secondary school curricula. This content reveals traces of a denominational and religious education model. Placing the teachings of Islam at the center openly evokes the characteristics of doctrinal and religious learning approaches (For detailed information on religious education models and religious learning, see Kızılabdullah & Yürük, 2008, pp. 109-111). This assessment is also noteworthy in studies conducted on religious education before 1980. These studies have shown that religious education was based on catechism and centered on Sunni-Hanafi understanding of Islam (Altaş, 2002, pp. 224-226). In addition, studies also show that the non-denominational model could not be applied (Doğan, 2004, pp. 630-631). It is clear that this resolve has influenced religious courses in recent times (Tanyas, 2024, p. 9).

When we look at the content related to morality in elective religious courses, two basic features stand out. The first of these is that Islamic morality is explicitly covered under the title of morality. Apparently, there was an attempt to draw on the content and approach of Islam regarding morality in the moral development of children (Yürük, 2011a, p. 104). Second, moral virtues aimed to be reflected in individual and social life are included in primary and lower secondary school curricula. Although these topics are also included in upper secondary school curriculum, more advanced content that reflects moral philosophy topics such as the source of morality and the relationship between religion and morality could be included. This will indicate that the mental development levels of students are also taken into consideration in the treatment of morality-related topics (Kesgin, 2010, pp. 122-123).

Religions other than Islam were included in the religious course curriculum of the Republic period (Tosun, 2010, p. 670). When the subjects related to religions other than Islam are examined, three basic points stand out. First, only the Abrahamic religions were covered among the religions other than Islam. In addition, it was aimed to provide students with general cultural information about religions. In this respect, Indian and Chinese religions or other issues related to faith were not included. Secondly, considering the possibility of encountering people of different religions, respecting different beliefs was inculcated as a moral virtue. Thirdly, it was found that the world religions discussed were compared with Islam. In this context, emphasis was placed on Islam's position among these religions, and the comparisons were made in a way that favored Islam.

Finally, when we look at the subjects of Turks and Islam, we see that the aim is for students taking these courses to know the contributions of Turks to Islam, and that the contributions of religion and faith are used in the formation of citizenship awareness. Some sources reveal that, after 1950, religious courses were used as a tool to raise awareness and build national identity in Türkiye (Ueno, 2025, p. 9). This awareness is generally included in modern curricula, but after 1982 it has also been included in Religious Culture and Ethics courses, and has been the subject of various studies in this respect (Kaymakcan & Meydan, 2010, p. 37; Nazıroğlu, 2011, p. 80).

3. It is noteworthy that, over time, the search for curriculum content to align with specific pedagogical frameworks became more evident. Altaş (2002, p. 227) notes that the suitability of course content for students' developmental levels began to receive attention in National Education Council meetings after 1960. A clear reflection of this concern can be found in the 1976 lower secondary and upper secondary curriculum, which explicitly states:

"*Subjects should be handled in a thought-provoking and persuasive manner, taking into account the general cultural and psychological development of the students according to their grade level, without exceeding their cognitive capacity, and presented in an engaging way*" (MEB, 1976, p. 338).

4. There is a statement in the 1949 curriculum concerning the textbooks to be used in elective religious courses. According to this statement, the textbook to be taught must be approved by a special commission chaired by the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Various sources have revealed that this book was prepared by the then-President of Religious Affairs, Ahmet Hamdi Akseki (Altaş, 2002, p. 221; Kara, 2019, pp. 439-440).

As noted above, a list of books authorized for use in the 1967 curriculum was compiled. However, it appears that Akseki's books continued to be used as textbooks for an extended period. This trend was also observed in other institutions under the Ministry of National Education that provided religious education. For example, Akseki's works were used in imam-hatip schools reopened in 1951. Oral history research on the subject indicates that these works left a lasting impression on the memories of students who studied in imam-hatip schools during that era (Ecer, 2024, p. 233).

5. One of the issues that emerges from the curricula is the challenge of training teachers for religious courses, or more broadly, teachers of religious subjects. Although the 1949 curriculum suggested that classroom teachers would teach the elective religious courses in primary schools, no assessment was made regarding whether these teachers had the necessary background to teach these subjects. It is unlikely that such background was based on professional competence at that time, since it is well known that for a long period, neither teacher training programs nor formal education included courses related

to religion. Some sources even indicate that classroom teachers were already being assigned to teach these courses, and that graduates from higher religious education institutions were not given the opportunity to teach them (Bilgin, 1998, p. 94).

However, at the National Education Council meeting in 1953, discussions took place about the qualifications teachers of religious courses should have. In other words, although these courses were optional, shortly after their inclusion in the curriculum, the need for qualified teachers and for teacher training that would enable comprehension of religious courses at a cognitive level became a topic of concern (Ecer, 2023, pp. 782-783). Following these discussions, sources report that a compulsory "Religious Knowledge" course was added to the first and second grades of teacher training schools (Aydın, 2000, p. 56; Ayhan, 2014, p. 140).

A more detailed explanation about the qualifications of teachers for these courses was provided in the 1967 high school curriculum. According to this explanation, graduates of divinity faculties or higher Islamic institutes were preferred, and if such teachers were not available, teachers from related fields who showed interest could teach these courses (MEB, 1967, p. 371).

The most obvious reason for this specification is that high school courses are taught by specialized branch teachers. Indeed, graduates from the Ankara University Faculty of Divinity, established in 1949, and from Higher Islamic Institutes, which started opening in 1959, began to be employed as branch teachers. However, as implied in the curriculum, the number of such qualified teachers did not meet the demand. The provision allowing teachers from related branches to teach in the absence of divinity graduates confirms this shortage.

6. Religious courses, which continued as elective subjects with varying degrees of continuity for more than 30 years, became compulsory in 1982. Since then, they have existed under the name Religious Culture and Ethics (also known as Religious Knowledge and Moral Education) up to the present day. Various factors contributed to making these courses compulsory. Among them, it is important to highlight the undeniable influence of the experiences gained during the period when these courses were elective. Studies on the subject note that the content of the compulsory religious courses was largely shaped by the content developed during the elective period (Doğan, 2004, p. 622). Additionally, the interest in these courses, the feedback received, and the perceived need throughout this period likely played a significant role in the decision to make the religious course compulsory.

Declarations

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A study on Jesuit education based on official Jesuit documents

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Abstract: The Jesuits, a Catholic religious order, have historically employed educational activities and institutions as a principal means to fulfill their core Christian mission of evangelization. In line with their foundational goals, the Jesuits developed their own educational methods, maintaining a faith-based approach to education that has endured for centuries across the world. Through these efforts, they have gained numerous followers and attained lasting success in disseminating their beliefs globally. This study explores the educational philosophy of the Jesuits—an order with nearly five centuries of history— and the characteristics of the key stakeholders in Jesuit education: teachers, students, and parents. Using a historical research design, the study analyzes official Jesuit documents approved by the Jesuit General Congregation through document analysis. The collected data are evaluated through descriptive analysis. The aim is to compile the general principles of Jesuit educational thought and its educational stakeholders into a comprehensive text, and to contribute to the literature by offering recommendations that may inform future research.

Introduction

The verse in the Bible stating, "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'" (*Mark 16:15-16*), underscores that evangelization is regarded as a divinely mandated obligation in Christianity. This obligation is expressed through the concept of mission.

Christianity, the religion with the largest number of adherents worldwide (*Share of Global Population by Religion 2022*), has diversified into numerous denominations, orders, and congregational bodies, all of which pursue the fulfillment of this missionary mandate. This diversification has not only expanded the global reach of Christianity but also endowed it with a profound and enduring historical legacy. One of the most influential religious orders in spreading Christianity across all continents has been the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits.

The Jesuits, officially known at the time of their foundation as the Society of Jesus, were established in 1528 under the leadership of Ignatius of Loyola. Born in 1491 in Spain, Ignatius pursued a military career until an injury compelled him to abandon this path. Influenced by a book he read during his recovery, he resolved to become a "Soldier of Christ" (*2 Timothy 2:3-4*) and embraced a monastic life in the Manresa Monastery (*Montserrat Monastery and Nature Park*, 2025) between 1522 and 1523. In 1523, he made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and, upon his return, pursued formal education at various institutions, ultimately earning a Master's degree in Philosophy at the University of Paris in 1534 (Tümer, 1993). During his studies, Ignatius formed a fellowship with six companions and established a group

under the name "Society of Jesus."[1] These members took vows of poverty**,** chastity, and a commitment to immediately travel to Jerusalem to evangelize non-Christians or if this were not possible, to serve the Pope. When it became evident that traveling to Jerusalem was unfeasible, they resolved to offer their service to the Pope. As a result**,** Ignatius of Loyola was appointed the founding superior general of the Jesuit order, which was officially recognized by the Pope and the Catholic Church in 1540. Despite experiencing occasional tensions with Church authorities, the Jesuits have remained loyal to the Catholic Church and continue to exist to the present day (Tümer, 1993). Throughout this entire process, the Jesuits have played a significant role in the Catholic Church, representing it in the field (Şana, 2019, p. 1385).

The Jesuits undertook the mission (Gündüz, 2020) of spreading Christianity and pursued all their activities with the primary goal of disseminating the message of Jesus**.** This objective is clearly articulated in their foundational document, the Formula of the Institute**,** which states that the Society aims "to strive especially for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine and for the propagation of the faith by the ministry of the word, by spiritual exercises and works of charity, and specifically by the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity" (*Formula the Institute, 1540*). St. Ignatius, who asserted that Christianity should be extended to all humanity and that Christians must live their faith uncompromisingly, established stringent rules regarding admission and commitment to the order. Furthermore, he articulated the methods by which these aims should be pursued and the character formation required within the Society in three key documents: *the Formula the Institute* (St. Ignatius, 1539), *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (Jesuits, 1996) and *the Spiritual Exercises* (St. Ignatius, 1548). Although education was not initially the Jesuits' primary focus (McGucken, 2008, p. 6), they soon recognized its crucial role in maintaining order within the Society, training missionaries, and reaching people through educational means. This early realization is reflected in the foundational Jesuit documents and laid the groundwork for what would become the extensive network of Jesuit schools that continue to operate around the world today.

Between 1540 and 1773, the Jesuits established numerous schools. During this period, the Jesuits experienced their golden age in terms of education, as their schools gained considerable popularity, expanded globally, and attracted many followers (Tümer, 1993). By 1773, the number of Jesuits had reached 23,000, and the number of institutions, such as colleges and residences, had grown to 1,600. At that time, the Jesuits had become the primary educational organization of the Catholic world, employing 15,000 teachers in 800 colleges. Between 1773 and 1814, due to various conflicts with the Papacy, the activities of the Society were disrupted. However, from 1814 onward, Jesuit educational efforts intensified in Asia and the Far East—including India, China, Japan, Nepal, the Philippines, and Malaysia—as well as in African countries such as the Congo, Madagascar, and Kenya (*Interactive Map*, 2024). As of 2020, Jesuit educational institutions remain active on all seven continents, with 839 primary and secondary schools and 195 institutions of higher education. Additionally, the Jesuits operate 1,613 local educational institutions and initiatives that provide access to education for impoverished children in remote areas, along with 75 projects and organizations dedicated to the education of refugee children and youth (*Printable Map*, 2023). Thanks to their deep historical roots and accumulated experience, the Jesuits have consistently distinguished themselves through their robust educational institutions (*Best Catholic Colleges in America*, 2025; Manney, 2010; Stone, 2023).

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, missionaries entered Ottoman territories and sought to spread Christianity through schools established in various cities across Anatolia (Tozlu, 2000). The Jesuits began to expand their presence within the Ottoman Empire from 1563 onward. Under the direction of Pope Gregory XIII, Jesuit missionaries designated the Saint Benoît Church in Galata as their central base (Şişman, 1999, p. 516). In 1583, the Saint Benoît School was established, marking the first school founded jointly by the French and the Jesuits in Ottoman lands (Şana, 2019, p. 61). Thus, the Jesuits began their missionary activities in the Ottoman Empire through educational institutions (Gözübüyük, 2018, p. 639). However, due to a series of disputes, the school was handed over in 1783 to another order, the Lazarists,[2] effectively ending Jesuit control over the institution *(Dört Yüzyıllık Bir Tarih, 2022)*. In

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[1] The term 'Jesuits' is commonly preferred in the literature; therefore, this study consistently employs this designation throughout the text. The Society of Jesus also affirms the use of this term on their official website. See: https://www.jesuits.org/about-us/

[2] The Jesuits arrived in the Ottoman territories through the mediation of French envoys. However, over time, they became central figures

addition to this school, the Jesuits established several other schools between the 17th and 19th centuries in regions such as Lebanon, Syria, and Aleppo (Şana, 2019, pp. 63–67), as well as in cities of Adana (Karlangıç, 2018, p. 178), Kayseri (Tekin & Karaca, 2019, p. 514), Tokat, Amasya, and Hatay (Özkan, 2021, p. 44). Today, there are no officially recognized Jesuit schools operating in Türkiye (*Printable Map*, 2023). This is due to the Law on the Unification of Education (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*) enacted on March 3, 1924, which placed all schools—including foreign institutions—under the authority of the Ministry of National Education (Arı, 2002, pp. 189–190).

Throughout history, the various institutions and organizations founded by the Jesuits have remained committed to their mission: "to form men and women of competence, conscience, and compassion by imitating Jesus Christ" (ICAJE, 1993, p. 5). In line with this mission, Jesuit schools have educated globally renowned figures such as the French philosopher René Descartes, the Scottish philosopher David Hume, Ottoman intellectual Beşir Fuad, music producer Ahmet Ertegün, Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez, former U.S. President Bill Clinton (Ata, 2016, p. IV), and Pope Francis (*Biography Francis*, 2025).

Since its foundation in 1528, the Jesuits have drawn significant attention through their religious views, way of life, activities, schools, and various institutions. This study aims to examine the Jesuit approach to education based on official Jesuit documents. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

– To analyze the philosophical foundations of Jesuit education

– To examine the stakeholders involved in Jesuit education.

Accordingly, the study is limited to the educational activities presented in official Jesuit documents and the core texts approved by the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus. The official documents used in the study were obtained from official Jesuit websites.

The continued existence of this order, which has consistently emphasized education and yielded observable results throughout history, further underscores the significance of its educational activities. Moreover, because the Jesuits aim to spread religion and train candidates for the order within their schools, their educational model should be particularly considered within the context of modern religious education. Nevertheless, there appears to be no direct academic study in the literature that systematically examines Jesuit educational thought based on primary Jesuit documents. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the educational philosophy and practices of the Jesuit order as a religious institution and to contribute to the scholarly literature in the field of religious education.

The significance of this study is grounded in two main considerations. First, a review of the existing Turkish literature reveals a gap in academic studies that analyze Jesuit educational practices explicitly based on the official documents of the Jesuits and the official websites of institutions affiliated with the order. Although there are numerous studies in the literature addressing various aspects of Christian sects and orders—such as Essenism (Akalın, 2008), Evangelicalism (M. Aydın, 2005; Gündüz, 2006; Yamaç, 2022), Mormonism (Aktay, 2003; Işık, 2006; Kızılabdullah & Kızılabdullah, 2012), the Franciscans (Ayna, 2021; Şahin, 2020; Işık, 2005), Dominicans (Esen, 2017, 2020), Benedictines (Taşpınar & Güzeldal, 2020) and Orthodox (Çorbacı & Er, 2022)—there is a noticeable absence of work that systematically examines Jesuit education grounded in primary Jesuit sources. Additionally, it should be noted that the literature includes studies that examine the Jesuits from various perspectives (Akbaş, 2021; Ata, 2016; Birsel, 2013; Gözübüyük, 2018; Gür, 2024; İstek, 2019; Karlangıç, 2018; Kolçak, 2016; Güngör, 2001; Özturan, 2025; Şana, 2019; Şenyurt, 2019; Tekin & Karaca, 2019; Tığlıoğlu Kapıcı, 2020; Yel, 1998).

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in a number of tensions due to their involvement in political affairs as well as their inability to establish harmonious relations with other Christian communities in the region. Owing to internal turmoil in France, they were also unable to receive adequate support from their home country. As a result, the Jesuits were expelled from the Ottoman Empire in 1783. For a more detailed account, see: (Gözübüyük, 2018).

The second reason for the importance of this study lies in the global scope and sustained growth of Jesuit educational activities. Jesuit education has reached a wide international audience and continues to expand across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Understanding the underlying principles, methodologies, and pedagogical techniques that contribute to this development offers valuable insights for the field of educational pedagogy. A study of this nature not only addresses a gap in the academic understanding of Jesuit educational aims and practices but also makes a meaningful contribution to the broader literature on religious and value-based education.The introduction section should also include current literature. In this context, studies published in the last three years indexed in Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus should be taken into consideration.

1. Methodology

1.1. Research Design

Historical research seeks to answer the question "What happened in the past?" by carefully examining historical documents and, where applicable, conducting interviews with individuals who witnessed the events. The researcher aims to understand what occurred during that time as accurately as possible and to explain why it happened (Büyüköztürk et al., 2022, p. 21). This study employed a historical research design. The rationale behind selecting this design is that the analysis was based on historical documents, a method considered ideal for examining such sources. Initially, official Jesuit documents were reviewed, and those pertaining to the field of education were selected. In addition, the official websites of the Jesuits were consulted as secondary sources. The documents related to education during the establishment and expansion periods of the Jesuits were analyzed in detail, with particular attention given to educational issues. The data collected through this process were compiled to reveal the fundamental educational philosophy of the Jesuits.

1.2. Sources of the Research

This study is grounded in official Jesuit documents related to the field of education. These sources include *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (Jesuits, 1996), *Ratio Studiorum* (Farrell, 1970), *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* (Jesuit Institute, 2014), and *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach* (ICAJE, 1993). A common feature of these documents is that they were prepared and officially approved by the Jesuits for use in the field of education. All of these documents are publicly accessible in PDF format via the official websites of Jesuit educational institutions.[3]

The Constitutions (Jesuits, 1996)—approved during the First General Congregation (*The Portal to Jesuit Studies*, 2025) in 1558—represent a foundational document outlining the rules governing religious practices, missionary activities, and educational policies of the order. Several decrees adopted during subsequent General Congregations also address the field of education. For instance, Decree 28 of the 31st General Congregation and Decrees 17 and 18 of the 34th General Congregation provide insights into the educational practices of the order. The *Ratio Studiorum* (Farrell, 1970), written in 1599 by a committee chaired by Claudio Acquaviva, the Superior General, served as the official educational manual of the Jesuits until 1773. This document provides guidance on the duration of lessons, class timetables, approved reading materials, and classical authors to be taught (particularly Latin and Greek), as well as instructional methods and techniques. Additionally, *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* (Jesuit Institute, 2014), approved in 1986, aims to define the distinct identity and mission of Jesuit educational institutions. *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach* (ICAJE, 1993) was adopted in 1993, and offers practical insights into classroom management and Jesuit teaching traditions (*Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm*, 2025). Alongside these documents, other texts produced during General Congregations were also reviewed and utilized when directly relevant to the specific focus of this study

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[3] See the following for access to these documents: https://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/characteristics_en.pdf
https://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/pedagogy_en.pdf; https://www.educatemagis.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/2019/09/ratio-studiorum-1599.pdf https://www.manresa.ie/sites/default/files/2024-9/Constitutions%20and%20Norms%20SJ%20ingls.pdf

1.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data for this study were gathered through document analysis, a method commonly employed in historical research. Document analysis is a systematic qualitative research technique used to examine and interpret in depth both printed and electronic materials. This method requires deriving meaning from texts and analyzing the data to develop an understanding of the subject matter.

A preliminary literature review was conducted to identify existing studies relevant to the research topic. Subsequently, official Jesuit documents and publications were selected and analyzed. During the selection process, particular attention was given to whether the documents were authored by Jesuit founders, approved in any General Congregation for educational use, or specified for use in Jesuit schools (Kıral, 2020, p. 173). When necessary, the official websites of Jesuit organizations and schools were consulted to provide additional context or data. The information obtained during the data collection process was analyzed through descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis involves summarizing and interpreting data based on predetermined themes (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2016, p. 224). In the context of this study, official Jesuit documents were analyzed in relation to the educational philosophy of the Jesuits, the stakeholders in Jesuit education, and the nature of higher religious education within the order.

2. Jesuit Education

2.1. Philosophy of Jesuit Education

According to the foundational constitution, the ultimate aim of the Jesuits is "to serve apostolic objectives, that is, to be helpful to oneself and others with the assistance of God" (Jesuits, 1996, p. 132). The critical element here is the meaning of the expression "apostolic objectives." The term "apostle" refers to those who believed in and supported the prophets of God, particularly the twelve individuals chosen by Jesus Christ to assist in his mission of preaching and guidance (Cilacı, 1997). In Western languages, the term "apostle" is derived from the Greek word *apostolos*, meaning "one who is sent with authority to fulfill a mission." According to Christian belief, after Jesus was crucified, he rose from the dead on the third day, gathered his disciples, and instructed them, saying: "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to all creation (*Mark 16:15-16*)." Hence, he entrusted them with the mandate of evangelization, commonly referred to as "mission" in Christian theology.[4] Therefore, the concept of apostolic objectives should be understood in this context, namely, missionary vocation centered on the proclamation of the Christian faith (Ulutürk, 2005, p. 50). The Jesuit Constitutions emphasize that "since assistance is to be provided through engagement with humanistic literature in various languages, logic, natural and moral philosophy, metaphysics, scholastic and positive theology, and Sacred Scripture, these subjects must be taught in colleges and schools (Jesuits, 1996, p. 150)." Hence, education constitutes a vital instrument in realizing the Jesuits' ultimate apostolic aims.

In the *Ratio Studiorum*—the earliest document articulating the Jesuit educational framework — the purpose of education is defined as "educating students in service to God and the virtues indispensable for such sacred service" (Farrell, 1970, p. 62). Accordingly, subsequent documents, such as "*The Characteristics of Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach,*" both composed under the supervision of Jesuit leadership, intensified the pedagogical and theological articulation of educational objectives.

The 1986 document "*The Characteristics of Jesuit Education,*" issued by the Jesuit Institute, outlines the essential principles that constitute the foundation of the Jesuit educational identity. This document articulated the educational mission in a systematic manner and provided a coherent framework to ensure that Jesuit schools adhered to a shared vision. According to this document, Jesuit education is an apostolic instrument that: views the student as a whole person; encourages learning through both curricular and extracurricular activities; advocates lifelong education; connects knowledge

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[4] The responsibilities assigned to the apostles are referenced in various passages of the Holy Scripture. For instance, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach..." (Mark 3:14), and "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:18–19).

with values; pursues genuine understanding; emphasizes justice and concern for the poor; nurtures individuals who act on behalf of others (Boryczka & Petrino, 2012, p. 106); highlights the humanity of Jesus Christ; supports dialogue between faith and culture; and prepares students for active participation in the Church and Jesuit communities through service to others (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 8). In light of this framework, Jesuit education aims to form a spiritually and morally integrated human person devoted to the service of God. In line with this objective, Jesuit schools provide education in all branches of knowledge (Farrell, 1970, p. 1), with particular emphasis on Christian doctrine (Županov, 2019).

The *Ratio Studiorum*, prepared in 1599 and used as the official educational document of the Jesuits until 1773, systematizes the structure and content of Jesuit education. It delineates schedules, curricula, recommended reading materials, classical Latin and Greek authors, and pedagogical strategies. Among the subjects taught in Jesuit schools, as outlined in the Ratio Studiorum, are: Scriptural studies, classical languages such as Hebrew and Greek, scholastic theology rooted in Thomistic thought, philosophy, moral philosophy, mathematics, rhetoric, the humanities, and Latin grammar. Today, prominent Jesuit schools feature a "core curriculum" (*Core Requirements*, 2024) in addition to their specialized academic programs. These core courses reflect the curriculum described in the *Ratio Studiorum* and function as pillars of Jesuit education. For example, the globally renowned Boston College is divided into eight departments, each offering specialized courses while also including shared core courses aligned with the Jesuit curriculum. Its arts department, for instance, offers theology courses in theology in addition to courses in the arts. The nursing department requires students to take one or two core courses each semester (*Connell School of Nursing*, 2025). Similarly, at Georgetown University— one of the world's most prestigious institutions — an equivalent core curriculum framework is in place (*Core Curriculum, Georgetown University*, 2025). These examples demonstrate that the *Ratio Studiorum* continues to play a central role in curriculum planning at Jesuit institutions.

The cultivation of theologically grounded and spiritually committed educators in Jesuit education is essential for achieving its educational objectives. This emphasis necessitates a focused investment in theological education. As one of the core subjects in Jesuit schools, theology serves as both a primary and indispensable medium for understanding the Jesuits' commitment to religious instruction. Theology thus emerges as the coherent intellectual framework for realizing these aims and occupies a central position in Jesuit universities (Jesuits, 1996, p. 180). Alongside theology, the humanities, natural sciences, and philosophy also form integral components of the curriculum. Humanistic texts, logic, natural and moral philosophy, metaphysics, scholastic and positive theology, and scriptural studies (Jesuits, 1996, p. 150) all contribute to a deeper understanding of theology, the cultivation of the intellect, and the strengthening of analytical capacities (Farrell, 1970, p. 40). Accordingly, from the Jesuit perspective, all other disciplines serve as auxiliary pathways to a fuller understanding of theology, ultimately guiding individuals toward knowledge and love of God.

In this sense, theology is the path to God, while all other sciences function as means to this end. The Jesuits regard theology as a field not only for the formation of clergy but also for cultivating devout individuals who are fully developed in every aspect. Since every academic program can serve as a means to discover God, the school's religious dimension places a shared responsibility upon all faculty members and disciplines. In the process of discovering God and understanding the truth of human life, theology— offered through religious and spiritual education—acts as the unifying element. Religious and spiritual formation is thus an inseparable component of Jesuit education (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 7).

In Jesuit education, moral development is considered equally important to academic achievement. Jesuits approach education from a holistic perspective, aiming to nurture students who are intellectually, emotionally, and morally developed, and who possess their own system of values (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 8). The goal is to cultivate individuals with virtues, evaluative attitudes, and the ability to fortify moral agency (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 10). The rationale behind this objective is expressed as follows: "Jesuit schools must offer students opportunities to explore human values critically and to experiment with their own value systems. Personal integrity rooted in moral and religious values that lead to action is far more important than the ability to recite others' beliefs and opinions. It is increasingly evident that individuals of the third millennium will require new technological skills. But more importantly, they will need the

ability to understand and critique all aspects of life with love in order to make better decisions—personally, socially, morally, professionally, and spiritually (ICAJE, 1993, p. 151)." Jesuit education maintains that knowledge must be united with virtue (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 11). To comprehend good and evil, moral relativity, and the factors that influence freedom, and to exercise freedom effectively, it is necessary to unite knowledge with virtue. Therefore, Jesuit education cannot be detached from a moral context (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 10). Within this moral framework, the school is seen as a place where adolescents can acquire values, education, and undergo moral and religious formation (Kainulainen, 2018, p. 532). Moral traits such as trust, respect for diverse opinions, care, forgiveness, and tolerance are developed and learned in school. According to the Jesuits, this is possible only through a trust-based and friendly teacher-student relationship (ICAJE, 1993, p. 14).

One of the core principles of Jesuit education is the emphasis on "care for the individual and integrity" (*What Is a Jesuit Education?*, 2025), which is encapsulated in the concept of *cura personalis*. This foundational idea of Jesuit pedagogy refers to "care for the whole person," encompassing the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual development of the individual (Bninski & Boyle, 2020, p. 122). *Cura personalis* signifies a holistic approach to education, whereby the individual is nurtured in both corporeal and spiritual dimensions. Importantly, *cura personalis* is not limited to the relationship between teacher and student. Rather, it permeates the curriculum and the entire life of the educational institution. Within this framework, all members of the educational community—students, teachers, support staff, Jesuit administrators, lay collaborators, alumni, and parents—are expected to demonstrate mutual care and engage in participatory learning. To foster such a learning environment, it is essential to utilize all available resources, pedagogical principles, educational strategies, methods, and techniques. Thus, every individual and element within and beyond the institution shares responsibility for the formation of the student. This comprehensive model of education serves as a vital means of preparing individuals to proclaim and embody the message of Jesus Christ throughout the world. In this context, Jesuit education may be understood as a form of religious or faith-based education—a significant and direct path toward achieving religious aims. It can therefore be argued that Jesuit education, grounded in a holistic and continually evolving pedagogical vision, has endured to the present day due to its openness to renewal and growth.

These characteristics allow us to assess Jesuit education within the framework of religious education models. Religious education models are classified based on different criteria. Broadly, they are divided into traditional and modern religious education (Kaymakcan, 2008, pp. 49–50). Within these two categories, models further differ based on their role in the education system and their specific objectives (Köylü, 2017, pp. 239–241). Other classifications also exist due to differences in approach (Kızılabdullah & Yürük, 2008, p. 108). When examining these models in relation to the purpose and methodology of Jesuit education, it can be said that Jesuit education aligns with the confessional, doctrinal, and instructional approaches found in traditional religious education models. This conclusion is supported by the exclusion of texts related to other religions or denominations, as well as the explicit focus on nurturing Jesuit members or faithful adherents of the Jesuit tradition. The doctrinal and confessional approaches emphasize a single religion or denomination, aiming to nurture believers, strengthen faith, and increase religious activity (Tosun, 2017, p. 132; Usta Doğan, 2015, p. 74). The instructional religious education model shares similar objectives and content. In all three models, the educator is expected to be a believer of the religion or denomination being taught. In Christian countries that follow this model, religious education typically falls under the Church's jurisdiction (Köylü, 2017, p. 241). Fundamental aspects of these models—such as the teacher's religious conviction, curricula aimed at internalizing faith, and encouragement of religious practice—are also found in Jesuit education (Farrell, 1970, p. 25). The integration of religious knowledge into life and the shaping of character and morality accordingly are further indicators of this alignment. Therefore, Jesuit education can be understood as being founded on the Instructional religious education approach.

2. 2. Stakeholders in Jesuit Education

2.2.1. Teachers in Jesuit Education

In a system where the content of education is determined in the utmost detail, the qualifications

sought in a teacher must be aligned with this comprehensive structure. Within Jesuit education, the teacher's primary responsibility is to inspire students to love and serve God, and to guide them in the practice of the virtues expected of them. The teacher's entire mission centers on this purpose, and both instructional time and extracurricular moments are to be viewed as opportunities for fulfilling this mission (Farrell, 1970, p. 25). Accordingly, a prerequisite for entering the teaching profession within Jesuit institutions is the willingness to devote one's entire life to serving God through the act of teaching (Farrell, 1970, p. 10). In order to ensure this commitment, teachers are expected first and foremost to demonstrate full faithful submission to both the Jesuit institution and to God. Additionally, teachers must be fully aware of the aims and objectives of Jesuit education. For this reason, Jesuit schools hold liturgical ceremonies at the beginning and end of the academic year, and a prayer is read aloud in class before each lesson to remind the teacher of the spiritual telos of education and the nature of their role (Farrell, 1970, p. 25). Teachers are also expected to be both knowledgeable in their fields and devout believers who adhere to the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas (Farrell, 1970, p. 3). These expectations reveal the Jesuits' dual emphasis on both intellectual competence and spiritual strength in their educators. Such a vision not only ensures academic effectiveness in the classroom but also shapes students into well-rounded individuals through the exemplary conduct of their teachers. The emphasis on faith among teachers highlights the religious learning dimension inherent in Jesuit education and affirms the teacher's function as a role model (Akhan & Çiçek, 2021; A. R. Aydın, 2009; Demir & Köse, 2016).

In Jesuit institutions, where the teacher is considered a model figure, they are also expected to be dynamic, formatively evolving, and committed to self-improvement. Thus, teacher education holds a central place in the Jesuit educational model (Dellebovi, 2013, p. 62). Highly qualified and field-expert educators are appointed to train teaching staff. For instance, the *Ratio Studiorum* explicitly states that groups of teachers should regularly meet—two or three times a week—for practice and review sessions in subjects such as Hebrew and Greek (Farrell, 1970, p. 15).

In summary, Jesuit education places a great deal of responsibility on teachers, requiring a broad range of qualifications. The Jesuits understand that the quality of both the teaching and the students is closely tied to the quality of the teachers. The deeply rooted nature of Jesuit education, the exceptional quality of its students, and their strong attachment to the Jesuit community can all be attributed, at least in part, to the exemplary character and conduct of Jesuit educators.

2.2.2. Students in Jesuit Education

Within the Jesuit educational framework, the student, like the teacher, serves as a witness and representative of the Order. For this reason, students must be educated in all domains and equipped to enter society as well-rounded individuals (Farrell, 1970, p. 1). The ideal graduate of a Jesuit education is described as: "a person who respects other religions and cultures; feels a sense of love and service toward the world; values solidarity; is imaginative and creative (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 6); mature intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally; proficient in communication and media literacy; practices both personal and communal worship regularly; is aware of their responsibilities and freedoms; aspires to lifelong learning driven by a love of learning developed at school; and is open to change" (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 9). Accordingly, Jesuit schools aim to prepare students for eternal life and foster their holistic development. In this context, success is not measured by academic performance alone but by the extent to which the education is reflected in the student's life (Jesuit Institute, 2014, p. 7).

For the Jesuits, education is not a finite activity confined to the boundaries of school; it is a lifelong endeavor. As a result, Jesuit institutions maintain strong connections with their alumni. This ongoing relationship reflects an awareness that the world is constantly changing, and that the individual called for by contemporary society differs significantly from those educated in the past. Keeping alumni engaged and their knowledge up to date ensures the renewal of both the graduates and the communities they serve (Jesuit Institute, 2014, pp. 23–24).

Jesuit texts emphasize this responsibility, stating that: "We must continue to engage with and offer guidance to our former students so that, imbued with Gospel values, they may take their place in society, work for their own well-being, and assist one another in their duties" (Jesuits, 1996, p. 306). This indicates

that alumni also play a role in the Jesuit apostolic mission. To fulfill this mission effectively, former students must remain in contact with both the Jesuit institutions and one another. Furthermore, Jesuit schools are viewed not only as educational institutions but also as centers of faith and culture for a broader community, including lay collaborators, students' families, and alumni. Thus, continual institutional development is necessary (Jesuits, 1996, p. 307). According to the Jesuits, the cultivation of faith and culture is effected through educational formation. Educating the lower social strata is seen as a means to foster an emergent leadership class equipped with Jesuit values.

2.2.3. Parents in Jesuit Education

From its earliest stages, Jesuit education has recognized the significant role of parents in the educational process. Jesuits have examined the familial and social conditions of students and emphasized the necessity of collaboration with families. According to Jesuit thought, the family bears the primary responsibility for education (Jesuits, 1996, p. 307). Therefore, the parent cannot be considered separate from the educational process. Notably, in contemporary educational sciences, collaboration with parents is regarded as one of the primary techniques for understanding the individual learner (Yeşilyaprak, 2006, pp. 326–327). A concrete example of this parental collaboration can be seen in the *Parent Handbook for the Academic Year 2024–2025*, published by the Jesuit Academy (Jesuit Academy, 2024). Revised annually, this handbook outlines specific expectations for parents: they are encouraged to monitor their child's homework (Jesuit Academy, 2024, p. 11), review both quarterly printed and weekly online academic reports provided by the school, attend biannual parent-teacher conferences (Jesuit Academy, 2024, p. 12) and maintain active communication in cases of absenteeism (Jesuit Academy, 2024, p. 20). In this way, the student's development is supported not only within the boundaries of school and by the teacher but also within the home and daily life, ensuring that education remains a dynamic and continuous process.

In addition to cooperation with parents, Jesuits also prioritize parent education. The "Parents in Partnership" (*Parent Education*, 2025) (PIP) program was established to serve this purpose and is committed to fostering deeper parental engagement in education. Operating within all Jesuit schools, the program organizes initiatives tailored to the specific needs of the school community. Both in-school and out-of-school social activities and volunteer programs are notable examples of its work (*Parent Experience*, 2025). Based on these indicators, it can be inferred that the Jesuit aim is to reach the wider world through the parent using the student.

Conclusion

The Jesuit order, originating from the Christian tradition, has historically utilized education as a means to fulfill its missionary purpose, frequently referenced throughout the Bible. Since its establishment in 1540, the Jesuits have conducted educational activities worldwide, developing their own pedagogical philosophy and practices. This study examines the educational philosophy of the Jesuits and the roles of key educational stakeholders within the context of official Jesuit documents.

Jesuit education presents a deep pedagogical approach that emphasizes not only the transmission of knowledge but also the holistic development of the individual. The ultimate goal of Jesuit education is to form students in the service of God and to cultivate the virtues necessary for this service. In this regard, the Jesuit curriculum supports the pursuit of knowledge in all fields, ultimately oriented toward deepening the understanding and love of Jesus Christ as both the Creator and the Redeemer. The inclusion of moral education demonstrates that Jesuit pedagogy is not limited to theoretical instruction but integrates intellectual, physical, spiritual, and moral formation. Jesuit higher religious education, which trains its own clergy and teachers while setting its educational standards, exemplifies a results-oriented and mission-driven approach.

Within Jesuit education, the teacher is not merely a transmitter of knowledge in the traditional sense. Instead, the teacher serves as a spiritual guide and role model, treating the profession as a sacred calling in the service of God. Teaching in alignment with the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas and with a deep awareness of divine service elevates the teaching profession to a sacred responsibility. The expectations of obedience, loyalty, and moral integrity among Jesuit educators reveal that teaching is

regarded not only as a professional task but also as a spiritual duty.

The ideal Jesuit student is not solely an academically competent individual, but also a person of moral depth, social responsibility, and openness to change. This perspective transforms education from a tool of personal advancement into a means of fulfilling both divine purpose and communal responsibility. The emphasis on lifelong learning reinforces the notion that education extends beyond formal schooling, requiring continuous personal development. Notably, the lasting relationship with alumni highlights that Jesuits do not confine educational influence to school years alone; alumni are also expected to contribute to the Jesuit mission. Offering spiritual guidance to graduates is a strategic effort to extend the long-term societal impact of education. This illustrates that Jesuit education is both an instrument of personal transformation and social change.

The inclusion of parents in the educational process reflects an approach parallel to that of contemporary educational theory. However, the Jesuit model goes further by supporting parental involvement through structured educational programs. Recognizing the family as an integral component of the learning process affirms that child development occurs not only within the school environment but also within the home. Programs aimed at parents institutionalize their involvement and establish a collaborative framework between students, parents, and teachers. This demonstrates that education, within the Jesuit model, addresses not only the student but the entire community surrounding them.

Taking all these factors into account, the Jesuit educational model—rooted and standardized over nearly five centuries—deserves scholarly attention. Remarkably, Jesuit education has adopted methods akin to modern education as early as 500 years ago, despite its missionary intent. Examples of such progressive approaches include collaboration with families and alumni, teacher training, interdisciplinary curricula, holistic education (Altan & Yıldırım, 2022), adapting content to changing contexts, and prioritizing love, trust, and friendship in teacher-student relationships. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that Jesuit education continues to adapt to contemporary needs and technological advancements. Despite employing traditional teacher-centered and rote-based methods of the time, the Jesuits also emphasized the importance of teacher quality, student development, and collaboration between schools and families.

In summary, Jesuit education aims to form individuals who not only achieve success but also lead meaningful and virtuous lives. The Jesuit educational system constructs a multilayered pedagogical network built around teachers, students, parents, and alumni. Its educational principles blend spiritual values, personal growth, and social responsibility. Consequently, education is seen not merely as a path to personal success but as a sacred vocation for serving God and contributing to humanity. This underscores that Jesuit pedagogy is not a superficial educational approach, but rather a transformative and profound vision for life.

Jesuit education has always stood out as an innovative model, even in comparison to the conventional practices of its era. Further research into contemporary Jesuit schools—particularly regarding the intersection of Jesuit religious education and general education—will contribute to both the fields of general pedagogy and religious education, offering valuable insights into the historical and current implementation of Jesuit educational ideals.

Declarations

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Religious education in state schools in Kosovo

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Abstract: In Kosovo, debates about the role of religious education in the education system have been ongoing since it gained independence in 2008. Since that time, debates have continued over whether religious education should be part of the school curriculum as a separate subject. Given the limited existing research on this topic, this study aims to explore the extent and nature of religious education in state schools in Kosovo through an analysis of the national curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education. Due to the secular nature of education in the country, religious education is not part of the official curriculum in state schools. Even though religious education is not part of the curriculum in state schools, there are two courses that generally address religious matters: "Society and Environment" and "Citizenship Education." These courses place greater emphasis on topics such as religious tolerance, religious groups, and different beliefs. Even though Kosovo, as a country, grants the right to learn and practice their religion to all religions freely, it seems that this right is not fully upheld within state schools. Religious education can only be conducted in such places as churches and mosques or in private schools/courses. It can be argued that the lack of religious education in public schools in Kosovo represents not only an educational gap in the religious education, but also an obstacle to the full realization of individual rights.

Introduction

Kosovo has been influenced by different cultures throughout its history. The region is generally seen as a kind of border where Muslims and Christians have encountered and clashed since the famous Battle of Kosovo (1389), fought between the Ottoman Turks and the Balkan Christian powers. Since the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, including Kosovo, Islam has had a lasting impact on it. Today, Kosovo has the highest concentration of Muslim population in the Balkan region. Although people with different ethnic and religious beliefs live in the country, generally Muslim Albanians are predominant. With no official data available, it is estimated that 96% of the population in Kosovo identifies themselves as Muslim. Although the State of Kosovo has a Muslim majority, it is a secular state where religious and state affairs are conducted separately. As outlined in Article 8 of the Constitution, every individual in Kosovo is treated equally before the law and the freedom of conscience, belief, and religion is guaranteed (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008, p. 3). The exclusion of religious education from state schools is commonly justified by reference to this specific article of the Constitution. Yet, this issue is continuously being discussed in the Parliament and has also become an important issue for the community. As per these discussions, the community is separated into two groups: the first group supports the importance of religious education in official institutions, whereas the other group opposes its introduction on the grounds that religious education contradicts secular life and freedom. Although religious education cannot be conducted in state institutions, it continues in a traditional and non-formal manner, particularly in mosques, Quran courses, churches, and other places of worship.

1. Methodology

The aim of this study is to analyze the structure and content of primary and secondary school curricula in Kosovo, with special emphasis on religious topics. It aims to explore how and to what extent religious topics are included and addressed in the general curriculum. This topic is important for understanding how religious education is incorporated in state schools in Kosovo. The lack of extensive research on this topic further highlights its significance. Official documents from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST)[1], along with the policies and regulations related to the curriculum in state schools are explored. It includes content analysis of religious topics in the general curriculum, as well as the evaluation of the methods used to address religious topics in school courses. This study is qualitative research that uses the documentary analysis to address the topic in depth.

To this end, the study is organized into six sections. The first two sections provide an overview of Kosovo's recent history, the role of religion as articulated in the Kosovo Constitution, the structure of the national education system, and the general framework of religious education. The third and fourth sections offer a more in-depth examination of religious education in both state and private schools. The fifth section focuses on the training and qualification of religious education teachers. The final section explores current debates, particularly the question of whether religious education should be integrated into the curriculum of state schools in Kosovo.

2. State, Society, and Religion

Kosovo, as the newest country in Europe, is located in the Southeast and the Balkans. It shares borders with countries such as Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, and Montenegro (Republika e Kosoves, 2020, p. 15).

According to the most recent estimate, by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (KAS) the resident population of Kosovo in 2024 was 1,585,590 inhabitants (Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2025). On a report published in 2023 by the United States Department of State, about 70% of Kosovo's population is made up of Albanians, while the remaining 30% includes other communities such as Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, Balkan Egyptians, Bosniaks, Gorani, Montenegrins, and others (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

The religious and political history of Kosovo has been deeply shaped by centuries of imperial rule, cultural shifts, and regional conflict. The Balkans were Christianized by the Western and Eastern Roman Empires before the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. From 1389 to 1912, Kosovo was part of the Muslim Ottoman Empire. In the Ottoman Empire, Kosovo was the largest of the four Albanian provinces. Its center was Skopje, the capital of present-day North Macedonia. After World War II, Kosovo was governed by the secular socialist authorities of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Kosovo Albanians have never given up their religious identity despite a century of massacres, atrocities, tortures, and genocides by the Serbs. Today, more than 96% of Kosovo's population are Muslims, most of whom are ethnic Albanians. There are also other Muslim communities, such as Turks, Bosnians, and Gorans. On February 17th, 2008, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia (Rexha, 2022). Serbia does not yet recognize Kosovo as an independent state and sees it as a part of its territory. Initially, there was no relationship between the two states, but in the following years, dialogue and cooperation between the two sides increased. The dialogue process conducted by the European Union continues, but no agreement has been reached yet. Although Kosovo declared its independence as a state, it has not been recognized by all countries in the international arena. The capital of Kosovo is Pristina, which is the cultural, social, economic, and political center of the country. The official language of Kosovo is Albanian (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008, p. 2). In some cities of Kosovo, Serbian and Turkish are also spoken as official languages. In almost every city in Kosovo, traces of the Ottoman Empire

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[1] Ministry of Education, currently known as the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, was previously called the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. For simplicity, this article refers to it as the Ministry of Education throughout.

can be found. Architectural works such as mosques, tombs, and baths have maintained their significance from the Ottoman period to the present day.

The flag of Kosovo consists of a blue background with 6 stars and a map of Kosovo below it. The flag emphasizes Kosovo as multi-ethnic country. The stars represent the country's six ethnic groups (Albanians, Bosnians, Gorani, Romani, Serbs, and Turks). Additionally, since the most of Kosovo's population is Albanian, the Albanian national flag is widely used alongside the official flag. The sense of belonging felt towards the Albanian national flag often comes to the forefront during national holidays such as November 28, Albania's Independence Day. The red and black flag has become embodied in the mentality, culture, and spirit of Albanians because it is thought that it represents all Albanians in the world.

The Constitution, adopted two months after Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, is based on the proposal of Martti Ahtisaari, who served as the UN General Secretary on that time (Instituti për Studime të Avancuara GAP, 2011, p. 1) The Constitution in several articles emphasizes that there is no official religion in Kosovo and accepts its neutrality in matters of religious belief. Article 8 of the constitution states that "The Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs" (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008, p. 3). Article 38 discusses the freedom of conscience of individuals, while Article 39 pertains to the rights of religious communities to regulate their activities. Article 38 states that:

1. *Freedom of belief, conscience, and religion is guaranteed.*
2. *Freedom of belief, conscience, and religion includes the right to accept and profess a religion, the right to express personal beliefs, and the right to belong to or reject any religious community or group.*
3. *No one shall be compelled or prevented from fulfilling their religious duties and expressing their faith and religion against their conscience.*

4. *The freedom to openly express religion, belief, and conscience may be restricted by law if necessary for the protection of state and state security, state order, or the protection of the personal rights of others* (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008, p. 12)*.*

Article 39 reads that:

1. *The Republic of Kosovo ensures and protects religious autonomy and the security of religious monuments within its borders.*

2. *Religious communities are free to independently organize their internal structure and conduct religious activities and ceremonies.*

3. *Religious communities can establish religious schools and charitable organizations in accordance with this Constitution and the laws* (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008, p. 12)*.*

According to the Ministry of Education administrative circular which is a statutory regulation on behavior rules and disciplinary penalties for primary and secondary school, students are prohibited from wearing religious attire in primary and secondary schools: "Students are prohibited from wearing religious uniforms" (Republika e Kosoves, 2014, p. 4). Some primary schools do not allow Muslim girls who wish to wear headscarves (hijabs) as a result of the implementation of this administrative circular prohibiting religious attire on school property. Moreover, this ban is not only aimed at students; it also applies to all employees working in state institutions.

The diversity of ethnic groups living in Kosovo allows for the coexistence of three religions there: Islam, Catholicism, and Orthodoxy. According to the latest census, Muslims make up 96% of the population, Catholics 2.2%, and Orthodox Christians 1.5% (Mehmeti, 2019, p. 2).

Muslims in Kosovo are associated with Albanians, Turks, Bosnians, and Goranis. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, is associated with Serbian ethnicity. Although the majority of the population is Muslim, religion has not been a major factor that destabilized the country. A famous Albanian poet, Pashko Vasa, used the following expression in his poem: "The Albanian's religion is Albania" (Vasa, 2010). Metaphorically, Albania is the "religion" that unites people; it is understood that faith is individual and Albania is collective. Kosovo Albanians define their national identity not through religion but through language, and they have a relatively relaxed approach to adhering to the forms of Islam. The vast majority of Kosovar Muslims, while not strictly religious or radical in their views, still adhere to many of the most common Islamic traditions, practices, and prohibitions, such as the more widespread Islamic holidays and the ideal of not eating pork. Even though they do not perform most of the rituals, a large majority place importance on fasting during Ramadan.

3. Education, School, and Religion

Education in Kosovo is conducted in state and private institutions. In Kosovo's primary schools, teaching is conducted in five languages: Albanian, Serbian, Bosnian, Turkish, and Croatian. The Parliamentary Education Commission is an important part of Kosovo's education system. This commission, which is in direct contact with the Ministry of Education, examines laws and decision proposals and makes recommendations for approval. In Kosovo, there is a "two-tiered education management" system implemented to achieve the desired quality of education. This system is managed by the Municipal Education Directorates through the Ministry of Education, and its regional representatives, the Regional Education Departments (Zengin & Topsakal, 2008, p. 121). The aim of education in Kosovo is to develop a quality education system that prepares the youth to build a developed and sustainable society. It supports students in developing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values compatible with the requirements of a democratic society through the following ways: the development of personal, national, state, and cultural identity; the promotion of general, cultural, and citizenship values; the development of responsibility towards oneself, others, society, and the environment; the ability to live in different social and cultural environments (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008).

The official levels of pre-university education in Kosovo are in accordance with the ISCED 2011/International Standard Classification of Education prepared by UNESCO (Ministria e Arsimit, Shkencës, Teknologjisë dhe Inovacionit & Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2023, p. 11). Compulsory education in Kosovo begins at the beginning of the school year for children who have reached the age of six, which represents the minimum age for inclusion in compulsory education. This educational process lasts until the completion of the second level according to the International Classification of Education (ISCED)(RKS, 2011, p. 10). Compulsory education is provided free of charge, guaranteeing equal access for all children. Preschool education in Kosovo is organized to provide nursery (crèche), kindergarten, and pre-primary class education and learning. The primary education level lasts for 5 years, from the first grade to the fifth grade. The middle school level extends from the sixth grade to the ninth grade. High school education (ages 15 - 18) lasts for 3 years, from the tenth grade to the twelfth grade (Ministria e Arsimit, Shkencës, Teknologjisë dhe Inovacionit & Agjencia e Statistikave të Kosovës, 2023, p. 11). The levels of university education in Kosovo are divided into three main categories, similar to the education levels in other countries: bachelor's, master's, and doctoral. First degree – Bachelor's: It is the foundation of university education and is known as the first level of higher education. Second degree – Master's (MA): The master's level is known as the second level of higher education and offers students who have completed their undergraduate studies the opportunity to advance their knowledge in a specific field. Third degree—Doctorate (Ph.D.): This is the highest category of higher studies, involving an in-depth examination of a specific field of knowledge and skills. In Kosovo, there are state and private universities that offer a wide variety of educational programs. The tuition fees of private universities are higher, and they offer specialized programs in certain fields. The universities in Kosovo are part of the Bologna system, a compatible higher education system in Europe (Zengin & Topsakal, 2008, p. 108).

In Kosovo, there is no religious education as a separate course in the form of religious classes in state schools. However, the establishment of private schools providing religious education is permitted in Kosovo.

Article 39, paragraph 3 of the Kosovo Constitution includes the following statement regarding the establishment of private schools: "Religious communities may establish religious schools and charitable organizations in accordance with this Constitution and the laws" (Zyra e Kryeministrit, 2008, p. 12).

In Kosovo, religious education is mostly provided through private schools. For Muslims, there are faculties of theology, madrasas, and Quran courses, but the faculties of theology and Quran courses are not supported or recognized by the state. Madrasas, on the other hand, have been operating under the Ministry of Education since 2000. Christians similarly receive their religious education in private schools. In 2007, a high school named "Loyola" was opened by the Catholic Church in Prizren. Additionally, the Catholic college named "Imzot Lazër Mjeda" also operates in Prizren. For the Orthodox, the Faculty of Theology was established in 1871 in Prizren and is still operational (Gashi, 2024, p. 191).

4. Religious Education in State Schools

Kosovo sees itself as a secular state and emphasizes this in its Constitution with the statement in the Article 8, "The Republic of Kosovo is a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious beliefs." Therefore, there is no place for any separate religious courses in state schools, whether mandatory, elective, optional, extracurricular, or of any other status. State schools in Kosovo prioritize scientific, artistic, and cultural subjects while adhering to the principles of secular education. The aim is to promote religious tolerance and encourage religious diversity in a secular environment. As seen in the curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education, two courses appear to address religious matters in a limited way and provide information about them. Students from first to fifth grade take the "Society and Environment" course. The "Society and Environment" book for 1st and 2nd grades, published by Dukagjini Publishing House, does not contain detailed information about a specific religion, but it provides knowledge about Kosovo's most important holidays, including Eid al-Adha, Easter, and New Year. These holidays are illustrated with accompanying images, each captioned with brief explanations indicating which religious or cultural group observes them— for instance, Muslims celebrate Eid al-Adha, while Catholics and Orthodox Christians observe Easter. Below, relevant images illustrate the content of this course.

Photo 1: *Society and Environment 1st Grade*

Photo 2: *Society and Environment 2nd Grade*

In the 3rd and 5th grade Society and Environment books, there is no topic directly related to religion. The content of these books deals with various topics related to ethnic and cultural diversity, tolerance, human rights, and their responsibilities in the society. However, the fourth-grade Society and Environment book devoted space to the issue of religious diversity in Kosovo. Two pages were reserved for this topic, where religious diversity was illustrated through two different situations and some guiding questions, in order to attract the students' attention and make the lesson more attractive, involving them in expressing their opinions on the questions: which religious communities do you know, which religious holidays do you know, why should we know different cultures, what was the best gift you received for a holiday?

In the first situation mentioned, a child is presented, who expresses his surprise when the voices coming from the minarets of the mosque and the church bells are heard simultaneously. The parents, noticing the child's surprise, took him to a city in Kosovo where the church and the mosque are located in the same yard, where it was explained to him that this is an example of religious diversity and that respecting the religious affiliation and opinions of others is necessary. Below relevant image is provided to illustrate the course content.
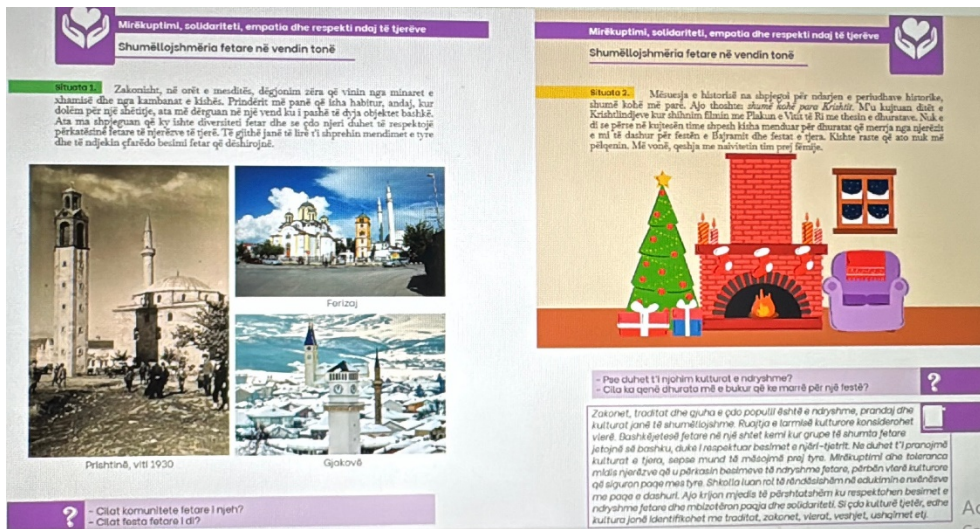

Photo 3: *Society and Environment 4th Grade*

The second situation describes a history teacher who, while explaining historical periods, remembers Christmas days, when she watched movies with Santa Claus and the gifts he gave, while her mind was reminded of the gifts she had received during the Eid holiday. Although she had not liked some of them, she later realized that joy is the most important element in any celebration.

At the end of the page, it is emphasized that, although traditions and language may change, their preservation remains of particular importance, as they are considered essential values. In this context, issues such as understanding and respect for other cultures, acceptance of differences, coexistence and tolerance, cultural values and cultural identity are also addressed. Through these points, students are offered the opportunity to understand the importance of religious and cultural diversity, as well as the need for these diversities to be respected in order to enable peaceful and harmonious coexistence. At the same time, the important role of the school, which contributes to the creation of a suitable environment where different religious beliefs are respected, is also emphasized.

From sixth grade to ninth grade, students take the "Citizenship Education" course, which offers more detailed information about religion compared to earlier grades. In the table below, there is information about the textbooks and their attainment targets related to religious education.

Table 1. Citizenship Education (Edukata Qytetare) 6th - 9th Grade Levels

Book Name/Class	Book Author	Publishing House	Year/ Volume	Number of Pages	Objectives/Learning Outcomes of Religious Topics Covered in the Section
Citizenship Education 6 (Edukata Qytetare 6)	Shemsi Krasniqi	Dukagjini			1. Explains the role and spread of beliefs in the world 2. Understands the essence of belief or religion 3. Appreciates the importance of religious tolerance 4. Defines folk beliefs
Citizenship Education 7 (Edukata Qytetare 7)	Erlehta Mato Bajram Shatri	Libri Shkollor	2013	154	1. Understands the rights of belief, the right to change religion and the right to continue one's religion 2. Defines the religious beliefs that are valid in Kosovo society 3. Makes the distinction between belief and religion 4. Demonstrates tolerance towards different religions
Citizenship Education 8 (Edukata Qytetare 8)	Adem Beha	Albas	2021	107	1. Define tolerance and religious toleration 2. Know the impact of religious tolerance during Albanian nation-building 3. Understand how Kosovo is defined in terms of religion 4. Describe the characteristics of extremist groups 5. Understand the context of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the efforts to spread Islam in Kosovo during this period 6. Describe measures to prevent extremism 7. Describe the principles of secularism
Citizenship Education 9 (Edukata Qytetare 9)	Demë Hoti Naser Zabeli	Libri Shkollor	2014	120	1.Explains the three most popular monotheistic religions 2.Identifies the characteristics and common points of the three monotheistic religions 3.Provides concrete examples of rituals from any of the three major religions 4.Explains the meaning of minor religions 5.Explains the meaning of sects and cults

Basic information, characteristics, rituals, and whether there are common features among them can be seen in the related sections regarding the religious groups. The most information about religious groups is provided in the book of Citizenship Education 9. It covers the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The book also includes information about the role of other religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Additionally, the topic of religious sects and cults is also addressed to ensure a complete understanding of religious diversity. The information provided about these religions is sometimes expressed with incorrect terms. For example, in the book "Citizenship Education 9" (Edukata Qytetare 9), where the five pillars of Islam are mentioned, the term "zakat (almsgiving)" is replaced with "sadakah."

The 6th and 7th-grade textbooks emphasize religious tolerance, understanding of religion, and belief. In the 8th-grade book published by Albas Publishing House, there are some sensitive topics that could influence students' potential prejudices about religion. In this book, religious extremism is associated with the spread of Islam in Kosovo, linking it to the September 11 attacks. This information is not well-founded as Islam was already widespread in Kosovo before these events. The use of this approach can be very dangerous, as it can affect students' perception of the Islamic religion. In the text books of the Albas Publishing House harsher language is used in the treatment of religious issues, while publisher Dukagjini uses a more objective approach in the treatment of religious issues. As seen in the table above, it is worth noting that these books are published by various publishing houses recognized by the Ministry of Education, and state schools in Kosovo can use any of these books for teaching.

In addition to the courses "Society and Environment" and "Citizenship Education," the topic of religions is also addressed in a limited manner in the "History" course. However, even there, incorrect statements can be seen which might lead to the misunderstanding of religious principles by students. For example, although the "6th Grade History Book" taught in the sixth grade provides little information about Islam it also contains inaccurate claims such as "All Muslims worship the black stone in the ''Kaaba" (Gashi, 2024, p. 194). This statement is not in accordance with the religious principles of Islam. Muslims believe in worshiping one God, while this expression, it can lead to misunderstandings that Muslims worship stones. It is also worth noting that these topics are covered in a single 45-minute lesson. In these few minutes, students should receive information on these topics from correct sources and using correct terms, without leading to any misunderstandings about these religious topics.

5. Religious Education in Religious/Private Schools

As mentioned above there is no separate religious education courses in state schools in Kosovo, and the Republic of Kosovo clearly states this in its constitution. Although religious education is not included in the curriculum of state schools, the state of Kosovo does not prohibit religious groups from opening private schools or organizing religious events.

In Kosovo, there are private schools that provide religious education. One of the important schools providing Islamic religious education in Kosovo is the Alauddin Madrasah in the capital, Prishtina. This madrasa has two branches, one in Prizren and the other in Gjilan. In this madrasa, students learn not only the words of the Quran and Islamic traditions but also other academic disciplines such as history, geography, philosophy, chemistry, mathematics, and foreign languages like English, Turkish, and Arabic, akin to Imam Hatip schools in Türkiye (Zengin & Hendek, 2023). The learning process takes place according to the curriculum approved by the Presidency of the Islamic Union of Kosovo and the Ministry of Education. The funding for this institution is provided by the Presidency of the Islamic Union of Kosovo (Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës, 2002, p. 14). Since the madrasah today is at the level of a general high school, its diploma is also equivalent to a high school diploma. In order for students to be admitted to the madrasa and continue their education, they must meet certain conditions and go through a selection process.

Another institution of Islamic religious education is the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, located in Pristina, near the Islamic Community of Kosovo. This faculty is an independent educational and research institution

that organizes undergraduate, master's, and doctoral education. Its aim is to prepare professional and scientific personnel for the needs of the Islamic Union of Kosovo and, more broadly, for the needs of Kosovo society, and to train a cadre with scientific principles and contemporary values in the field of Islam (Fakulteti i Studimeve İslame, 2012, p. 4). The faculty implements the Bologna program and offers both formal and open education programs. Student evaluation, compulsory and elective courses, seminars, and final assignments are conducted according to the ECTS credit system. Those who graduate from the faculty receive a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies (Gashi, 2024, p. 197). Those who graduate from the Faculty of Islamic Sciences have the right to work in institutions such as mosques, Quran courses, madrasas, and the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, led by the Islamic Union of Kosovo.

In addition to private Islamic schools, there are also schools belonging to other religious beliefs, such as Christian schools, in Kosovo. Founded in 2007 in Prizren, Loyola Catholic High School is a private institution that provides religious education to Christians. With 1,100 students and 70 teachers, the school has had 1,200 students graduate and earn their diplomas in its 16-year history. There is no information regarding the educational curriculum on the official website of this school (Gashi, 2024, p. 198).

6. Training and Selection of Religious Education Teachers

Since religious education is not provided in state schools, there is no situation for training religious teachers in Kosovo. However, the country's Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic theological faculties offer educational programs for religious leaders.

As previously mentioned, the aim of the Faculty of Islamic Sciences is to prepare professional and academic staff to meet the needs of the Islamic Union of Kosovo and, as a whole, the society of Kosovo. Those who graduate from this faculty can work in institutions assigned by the Islamic Union of Kosovo. Mosques, madrasas, Quran courses, etc.

In the city of Prizren, Kosovo, there is a Catholic college named "Imzot Lazër Mjeda." Religious education is provided by 24 active Catholic churches, which have 37 bishops. The media outlet "Drita" also plays an important role in Catholic education and produces periodicals aimed at Catholics in Kosovo (Gashi, 2024, p. 199). Additionally, the Orthodox Faculty, established in 1871 in the city of Prizren by the Orthodox group, is a cultural center and a religious institution. Despite being damaged in a fire in 2004, it resumed its activities in 2011 and reopened in 2015. With 12 teachers and 109 students, it is believed that the school, which works in coordination with the Belgrade-based school, uses the same curriculum as the Serbian school since there is no information about the curriculum on its official website (Gashi, 2024, p. 200).

7. Discussion

Whether or not to include religious education in state schools in Kosovo is a sensitive and controversial issue. On one hand, there are those who advocate for religious education in state schools as a way to help students' moral and spiritual development, while on the other hand, there are critics who believe this could violate the principles of state separation. In Kosovo, the constitution provides for freedom of belief and religious practice, but it also stipulates that state institutions, such as schools, must be secular and separate from any religious beliefs. Therefore, the constitution does not allow the teaching of a specific religion in state schools, and it has become the state's duty to provide an education independent of religious beliefs.

In light of several incidents that have occurred within Kosovo's schools, representatives of the Muslim community have renewed their efforts to advocate for the inclusion of religious education in the national curriculum. They argue that, now more than ever, it is essential for children to be educated in religious values to foster moral development and social cohesion. While the proposal to introduce religious education in state schools has garnered support from certain segments of the population, it remains a contentious issue. A

significant portion of the state—including many within the Muslim community—express reservations or outright opposition to the idea.

Leaders of the Muslim community have sought to emphasize the importance of this initiative through state campaigns and interfaith dialogue, calling upon representatives of other religious communities in Kosovo to support their efforts. However, these appeals have not resulted in broad consensus. The push to integrate religious education into the state school system has sparked significant debate within Kosovo's society. The issue has also been brought before the Kosovo Assembly, yet it has failed to receive the legislative attention necessary for advancement. Leaders of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, along with faculty members from the Faculty of Islamic Studies and educators from the madrasas, have made persistent efforts and numerous state appeals to institutionalize religious education in schools. Despite their continuous engagement, their proposals have not been officially acknowledged or acted upon.

One of the most debated and enduringly unresolved issues in this context has been the restriction on female students wearing headscarves. This restriction stems from the implementation of an administrative circular issued by the Ministry of Education, which prohibits religious attire within state educational institutions. Notably, this ban applies not only to students but also to all state-sector employees working in educational settings.

Conclusion

Kosovo, one of the youngest states in Europe, gained its independence in 2008 and has been working on its development as a state since then. Education is one of the main stages where the state of Kosovo strives to find the right path for the individual and moral development of its citizens in accordance with the laws it has established for a country in harmony and complete security. While many European countries include religious education in their curricula, unfortunately, Kosovo still does not include religious education in its curriculum. Although religious education is prohibited in state institutions, religious groups are free to open their own private schools. Citizens who wish to receive religious education can obtain their education from institutions such as madrasas, mosques, the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Quran courses, Catholic and Orthodox churches, and private schools. Although a large portion of the students continue their religious studies at these private religious schools, a significant number wish to receive education but are unable to do so in Kosovo's state schools due to the headscarf ban. This is primarily a very important issue that requires a solution. If everyone is free to express their rights, then these students who choose to receive an education and wear a headscarf should also be equally free. The headscarf may be a religious symbol, but it cannot be considered a right to stop these students' education.

Finally, it is worth noting that one of the institutions most interested in religious education in private schools and also making great efforts to promote the subject of religious education in state schools in Kosovo is the Islamic Community of Kosovo and its affiliated institutions. All the activities carried out by the Kosovo Islamic Union play an important role in promoting religious harmony in Kosovo, organizing various events where prominent individuals, Kosovo citizens, and sometimes members of other religions are invited. All these efforts play an important role in understanding how religion can further contribute to the development of religious harmony and peace.

Declarations

Plagiarism Statement: This article has been scanned by iThenticate.

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