Religion: Interrelationships and Opinions in Children and Adolescents. Interaction between Age and Beliefs

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Abstract: The current trend of secularization seems to be leading to a gradual withdrawal of religion from public spaces. However, in an increasingly internationalized world, it is becoming more and more important to study the roles of religion and religiosity and their potential in relation to dialogue and social conflicts and tensions. Education is a vital field within which to address this religious issue and create an educational dialogue in order to promote coexistence. By following a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional study, based on a quasi-experimental methodology with a social–analytical character, our aim is to assess the existing connections between religion, interrelation and opinion in Spanish children and adolescents. Special attention is paid to the interaction between age and beliefs. We carried out our study with the use of a questionnaire distributed to eleven secondary schools, with students aged between 11 and 16 years old, in three regions of southern Spain (Andalusia, Ceuta, and Melilla) characterized by high religious diversity and multiculturalism. The multivariate analysis carried out in this study identifies the effects of variance on the influence of age and religion, highlighting the interaction between the two. It is observed that the youngest students are those who express their opinions about religion the least, while those belonging to younger age groups and majority religions are those who express a greater religious coexistence, with Muslims externalizing their religious condition the most.

Keywords: religions; relationships education; values education; education studies; religious education; adolescent education; spiritual dimension of childhood

1. Introduction

In most European countries, it has long been assumed that increasing secularization would lead to a gradual withdrawal of religion from the public sphere. This trend has been reversed over the course of the last decade as religion has once again come to the public's attention. Both in Europe and internationally, we are witnessing a revitalization of religion in both the individual and public spheres, both in dialogues between people of different religions and in the context of social tension and conflict (Weisse 2011).

The influence of religion on the political and social lives of humans has a long history. If we examine how societies and their value systems have been constructed, we can see the importance of religion and how different beliefs have articulated patterns of thought and action in different eras (Rego 2017).

In an increasingly internationalized world, religion, as an identity and an element of social configuration, is an essential factor in societies where religious pluralism has been well established for a long time. As such, phenomena as old as humanity itself can be clearly detected: the so-called "supermarket of the spirit" and the individual collage of beliefs. The idea of a whole formed by a single creed and by a single religious authority has long since been a thing of the past, transforming into 'beliefs otherwise' (González-Anleo and López-

Ruiz 2018) as an explanatory teaching of reality, conditioning the learning framework with which people construct their self-concepts. The identity and sense of belonging provided by religions shape people's personalities and provide a common narrative that facilitates the understanding of social reality and channels human relationships in a community setting (Olmos-Gómez et al. 2019).

Despite the great variation between the prevailing conditions in different European countries, it seems increasingly important to study the increasingly influential roles of religion and religiosity and their potential in relation to dialogue and social conflicts and tensions across the continent. Education is a vital field within which to address this religious issue and create an educational dialogue order to promote the peaceful coexistence of people across Europe (Weisse 2010).

We can scarcely expect to understand the experiences of today's children and young people if we do not pay attention to the fact that they are the products, as well as the heirs, of a long tradition of secularization, a process that has also been accelerating for the last generational link in recent years (González-Anleo and López-Ruiz 2018).

From the perspective of personality and social psychology, the study of religiosity in childhood and youth constitutes an area of growing academic interest. In their study, Shepperd et al. (2015) suggest that the degree of religiosity is negatively associated with aggressive tendencies, and that greater religiosity would correspond with greater self-control and compassion. Along these lines, other studies argue that religiosity is linked with better self-regulation and provides protection against risky behaviors, favoring moral development and identity formation in adolescents (Hardy et al. 2012). According to Desmond et al. (2010), developmental studies emphasize the context in which religiosity develops in childhood and adolescence and the importance of relationships. Therefore, contextual factors, such as family and peers, have a strong impact on children and young people's religious development.

Another aspect studied is how religion influences the well-being of students. Ciarrochi and Heaven (2012) investigated this through minority religions and their experiences at school, concluding that religious values and openness have important implications for personality development in adolescence and the quality of the evolutionary trajectory.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning the research that has been carried out on harassment in relation to religious diversity. Different contexts have reached contradictory results. For example, Khamis (2015) exposes the fact that religion is one of the main reasons for bullying among students in metropolitan Lebanon. Dupper et al. (2015), in their study based on the lived experiences of minority religious youth, found that these students are targeted by the dominant group (evangelical Christians) in American schools and not only by fellow students, but also by teachers.

They found that, in addition to explicit harassment, unintentional acts of microaggression can become just as problematic. Additionally, Schihalejev et al. (2019) argue that religion is carefully hidden in school and among peers as a preventive measure against bullying by other students.

However, we should not lose sight of the fact that religious values can equally serve as a basis for the peaceful coexistence of different religions and can justify respect for the human dignity of others, regardless of their convictions. They can therefore become a pillar of civility (Weisse 2010). It is time to recognize the fact that we have ignored an issue that affects the goals of education in our societies and, of course, the real feasibility of interreligious development projects within them (Rego 2017) for far too long.

Based on previous analyses, the objectives of the present study are as follows: (1) to design and validate an instrument to analyze the impact of religion on the opinions of children and adolescents, according to related intercultural factors; (2) to assess the existing connections between religion, interrelation, and opinion in Spanish children and adolescents.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Method

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, a cross-sectional descriptive quantitative study was carried out, based on a quasi-experimental methodology using analytical-empirical and social research methods (Howell 2008). A quantitative study has been used to detect regularity from a positivist approach in order to identify the underlying causes of behavior combined with the social explanation of the subject's relationship with his or her perception of reality. Since researchers cannot apply control techniques, because of the sampling used, they must be aware of the threat of differential selection and its possible influence on the study. Therefore, a general approximation to reality is provided, but not in absolute values (Howell 2008).

2.2. Participants

The questionnaire was distributed in eleven secondary schools to students between 11 and 16 years of age (from the 1st to the 4th year of secondary school), in three areas of southern Spain: Andalusia (5 schools), Ceuta (3 schools), and Melilla (3 schools). These areas are characterized by religious and multicultural diversity since more than 50% of students in Andalusian schools were from immigrant areas, while the Autonomous Cities of Ceuta and Melilla are characterized by their interculturality and the harmonious coexistence of different cultures (Briones et al. 2013). The students from these centers have religious plurality and are therefore considered worthy of study due to the great multicultural diversity observed among them.

In these centers, religious and non-denominational education is provided according to the students' choices, with Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism all being taught, as well as education in values as part of non-denominational education. In total, 796 students make up the sample of our research, selected on the basis of non-probabilistic sampling (by convenience or causal). Regarding gender, 57.1 (n = 455) were females and 42.9 (n = 341) were males. With respect to age ranges, the sample of first years (12–13 years) is n = 301 (37.8%), second years (13–14 years) is n = 238 (29.9%), third years (14–15 years) is n = 156 (19.6%), and fourth years (15–16 years) is n = 101 (12.7%). Regarding the religion variable, 51% of the participants selected Catholicism, while 39% selected Islam religion, 4% selected Judaism religion, and another 4% selected other religions. Two percent did not select any response.

2.3. Instrument

The questionnaire was carried out in paper format with a surveyor who remained on hand throughout the process to ensure its development, accompanied by the teachers, who were in the classroom when the questionnaires were filled out. It should also be noted that permission for carrying out the study was obtained from those responsible for the educational centers and from the social responsibility department of the University of Granada through code ML_03_02_19. The sample was collected during the first semester of the 2020–2021 academic year.

The instrument was subjected to the analysis of psychometric properties for its further development, so a pilot group of samples with similar characteristics of n = 263 subjects was used, where, after gathering the necessary information, the validation of the questionnaire was carried out. The first step was content validation, where nine experts in religious education of the main religions (a Catholic priest (university professor) and two Jewish and two Muslim university professors, as well as four university professors with expertise in social sciences (1) and research (3)) were consulted. For the development of content validity, the Delphi technique was used (Escobar and Cuervo 2008) and the experts were asked to evaluate the questions of the questionnaire, indicating any elements that, in their opinion, was not clear or concise. In addition, they were asked to give an evaluation from 1 to 3, with 1 being a little, 2 somewhat, and 3 very in terms of the relevance, comprehension, and adequacy of each of the questions. The final version of the questionnaire was agreed

upon after three rounds of expert judgment, where the level of consensus reached in the first meeting was between 67% and 72%, between 73% and 82% in the second meeting, and between 83% and 93% in the final meeting, reaching a concordance index of K = 93.

The final questionnaire (Appendix A) consists of 35 questions divided into five blocks, since three items were eliminated for not being sufficiently clear. Of these five blocks, the first consists of identification questions, including sex, age, and religion (3 items). The second part is developed in four blocks, established by an exploratory semi-confirmatory factor analysis, which evaluates the construct validity (32 items). In this analysis, a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value = 0.981 was obtained. We obtained a Barlett's sphericity value = 0.000, and discovered that four factors explained 72.32% of the variance. Reliability was calculated with Cronbach's alpha = 0.92 (Elosua and Zumbo 2008). The coding of the scale was carried out based on 5 values, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree.

An analysis based on the multivariate regression coefficients of structural equation models (SEM) was then performed to confirm the semi-confirmatory factorial (González and Backhoff 2010). For this purpose, the derived data and the matrix reproduced by the model were studied, as well as the goodness-of-fit indices, whose results confirmed the fit between the factors and the observed data. The data obtained are shown in Table 1, and for greater convergence of the model, two more items were eliminated, so that the final result was a model with 90 degrees of freedom (df) and an χ^2 of 124.89. The significance value between the covariance comparison matrices (Bentler and Bonett 1980) was $p < 0.05$. All other values (see Table 1) yielded excellent results (Bentler and Bonett 1980; Hu and Bentler 1999; Bentler 2007).

Table 1. Adjustment index of the model on the basis of the Religion, Interrelationship and Opinion in Children and Adolescents Questionnaire (RIOCAQ).

SEM	χ^2/df	P	Absolute Adjustment Index			Increased Adjustment Index			
Model	CMIN		LO 90	HI 90	RMSEA	PNFI	NFI	CFI	TLI
4 Facts 32 items	819.8	0.000	0.039	0.069	0.046	0.837	0.929	0.889	0.911

Note: CMIN (Chi-square/df), RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), PNFI (Parsimonious Normed Fit Index), NFI (Norm Fit Index), CFI (Comparative Fit Index) TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index).

2.4. Data Analysis

We performed content validation by expert judgment using the Delphi technique (Escobar and Cuervo 2008). For reliability, we obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91 and we performed the criterion validation with a semi-confirmatory exploratory factor analysis using SPSS 24.0 (IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0, Chicago, IL, USA, 2016). We assessed the construct validity via structural equation modeling (SEM) for confirmatory analysis using LISREL v9.1 (Scientific Software International, Princeton, NJ, USA, 2010).

Once we obtained the appropriate psychometric parameters for reliability and validity, we proceeded to the calculation of Levene's test, which indicated the correct use of parametric tests (López-Roldán and Fachelli 2015). Therefore, we performed a multivariate analysis of variance to compare various levels of the independent variable with various levels of the dependent variable in order to evaluate the differences between different religions and age with respect to religion, interrelationships and opinions in children and adolescents.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and the effect size via eta-squared. The results obtained show us existence of significant differences and large effect sizes for the difference between different religions and age with respect to religion, interrelationships and opinions in children and adolescents.

Table 2. ANOVA and effect size (η^2) for the religion, interrelationship and opinion in children and adolescents questionnaire (RIOCAQ). (Sums of aggregated scales).

Factors		M	SD	CI (95%)		F	*p*	η^2
				Lower Limit	Higher Limit			
Knowledge and interrelation of religion	Age	4.23	0.831	3.91	4.56	0.771	0.002	0.23
	Religion	3.89	0.798	3.61	4.25	1.132	0.002	0.21
	Age × Religions	3.98	0.789	3.64	4.19	1.132	0.000	0.16
Expression of opinions about religion	Age	3.88	0.983	3.71	4.28	0.976	0.000	0.08
	Religion	4.04	0.911	3.78	4.33	2.132	0.001	0.06
	Age × Religions	4.06	0.914	3.76	4.38	2.321	0.000	0.29
Coexistence and religion	Age	4.02	1.121	3.75	4.26	1.231	0.019	0.32
	Religion	3.99	0.898	3.69	4.19	2.213	0.001	0.29
	Age × Religions	3.89	0.901	3.61	4.25	1.876	0.000	0.19
Religion and values	Age	3.21	0.944	2.98	3.62	0.996	0.000	0.21
	Religion	3.32	0.926	3.11	3.56	2.321	0.000	0.18
	Age × Religions	3.43	0.899	3.13	3.78	1.321	0.000	0.14

Note: The critical alpha level was adjusted for multiple testing to reduce the type I error (α). Thus, the α-value was divided by the number of pair comparisons for each MANOVA. CI (confidence interval), M (mean), SD (standard deviation), F (Snedecor's F), *p* (significance), η^2 (eta-squared).

The multivariate analysis allows us to identify the variance effects between the influence of age (using four levels: 12–13 years, 13–14 years, 14–15 years, and 15–16 years) and four religious dimensions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and other religions), establishing the differences at the individual level. The results obtained show important differences and large effect sizes with respect to age, religion, and the interaction between age and religion.

The proportion of the variance that could be explained (MANOVA) and the effect size (Andréu 2011; Cohen 1988), in terms of factors related to the knowledge and interrelationships of religion, with respect to the interactions between age and religion, obtained a result of ($\eta^2 = 0.16$). This indicates that this proportion of differences can be attributed to the effect of understanding on religion and how it influences the relationships between subjects who gained this acquaintance in their daily social development, since an effect above 0.14 is considered a great effect (Badenes et al. 2018; Coe and Merino 2013), meaning that it is large enough to affect young people's connections with their peers. Regarding the major differences we found ($p = 0.000$), they illustrate that consciousness and the interlinkages of religions are more positive for the younger age group, aged between 12 and 13 years old, specifically those who are Muslim and Christian. This may be due to the internalization of the interculturality they experience in school, which means that this age range do not notice differences in their interreligious peer group. The same does not occur in the higher age range (15–16 years), where students recall greater bonds between peers of the same religion.

Significant differences are also shown in terms of the expression of opinions about religion, where students in the younger age range (12–13 years) are those who express their opinions about religion the least, while Muslims in the higher age range (15–16 years) are more opinionated with regard to religion, expressing their views more openly. This is reflected in the results ($p = 0.000$) and the high effect size of the sample ($\eta^2 = 0.29$).

The results indicate, in terms of the coexistence of each factor alongside religion, that although there are no significant differences variations with respect to the age range ($p = 0.019$)—which may be due to the internalization of such a coexistence due to the respect and multiculturalism students have developed through their experiences at school—there are substantial differences between the engagements and grand sample effects ($\eta^2 = 0.19$)

for the younger age group and for those that belong to majority religions (Christian and Muslim), as the latter manifest a greater religious coexistence.

In relation to the results obtained in the fourth factor, where perceptions about religion and values are analyzed, the results indicate that the students consider that religion and values differ according to the different religions and age groups. The results indicate that, in the interaction between age and religion, there are meaningful differences, with Christian students aged between 14 and 15 years old, those of the highest age range (between 15 and 16 years old), as well as Muslim students being those who are more opinionated with respect to religion, as well as more territorial, in agreement with the results obtained for the second factor.

4. Discussion

In the present study, the significant differences found for knowledge and the interrelations of religions in the younger age group and in Christian and Muslim students may not only be due to the internalization of coexistence based on respect and multiculturalism, but also to the fact that these age groups and religions prioritize the search for knowledge over the search for self-identity, meaning that, in the case of these students, they see no differences between their interreligious peers.

Being able to record this knowledge and these opinions throughout the pre- and post-adolescent process offers us prognostic elements of perception about the importance of religion between generations. In this way, age becomes a significant element when studying the role of religion in society.

It has been shown in previous research that children and adults express more confidence in the existence of unobservable scientific phenomena (e.g., viruses) compared to religious ones (e.g., the soul), even in a religious society (Davoodi et al. 2019). This does not run contrary to the fact that, in the present study, in the higher age range, respondents recall greater bonding and peer relationships with peers who belong to the same religion. In another study, those reporting low levels of religiosity express greater belief in the existence of scientific than religious entities, but adults reporting high levels of religiosity express equivalent levels of belief in the existence of each domain (Clegg et al. 2019).

On the other hand, measures of religious affiliation in countries such as the United Kingdom show nearly identical rates of intergenerational decline: Britons do not become more religious as they age. This perceived continued decline in religion throughout the 20th century is more generational in nature than a product of particular historical periods (Crockett and Voas 2006) because, in fact, religiosity has not disappeared as some scholars once predicted it would (Bentzen 2019).

This research shows that, in terms of the expression of opinions about religion, the youngest students (12–13 years old) are those who express their opinions about religion the least, while the group of Muslims in the older age range (15–16 years old) are more opinionated with regard to religion, expressing their views more openly. The knowledge and opinions about religion held by children and adolescents can serve as a guide to promote coexistence and the search for values that foster their socialization. Therefore, the present study not only gathers information on the perception of the research subjects, but also offers indirect information on the family environment with regard to religious matters.

Capturing the relevance of the different perceptions of religion that children and adolescents have in their families and peer environments allows us to know the effective influence of religion in today's society, contrasting the intergenerational decline of religion that follows patterns of transmission of religious status from parents to children (Crockett and Voas 2006). Studies such as those by Mahoney et al. (2001); Flor and Knapp (2001); Mahoney et al. (2003); and Mahoney (2010) show the importance of transmission variables (parental religious behavior and parental desire for their children to be religious), emphasizing the strong connection between parental religiosity and parenting behaviors, with their interaction related to the transmission of religion from parents to children (Stearns and McKinney 2019). This suggests that the transmission of religiosity from

parents to children may function as a secularization mechanism (Cragun et al. 2018), and demonstrating that, if an adolescent and his or her father do not share the same religious convictions or practices, this affects their relationship (Stokes and Regnerus 2009), as well as the fact that parental religiosity is related to the type and quality of involvement with their children, resulting in the greater involvement of religious parents only partly being explained by demographic factors and by the mediating influences of traditional attitudes and the quality of the parents' marriage (King 2003). Research such as that of Bader and Desmond (2006) shows that adolescents are more religious when their parents go to church and believe that religion is important.

Religion is often a factor that promotes positive and healthy outcomes in adolescents' lives. Religious obligation helps people improve their mental health by creating an internal commitment to certain norms (Forouhari et al. 2019) and fosters interrelationships between parents and their children's friends, parents of their children's friends, and their children's teachers (Smith 2003).

On the other hand, in this study, in terms of the coexistence and religion factor, the fact that there are no significant differences with respect to the age ranges may be due to the internalization of this coexistence thanks to the respect and multiculturalism developed by children throughout their daily lives. On the other hand, there are significant differences in the interactions and large effects of the sample, with the younger age group and the majority religions (Christianity and Islam) showing greater religious coexistence.

In this regard, the importance of a multicultural society characterized by interculturalism and the harmonious development of a coexistence in which mutual knowledge from different religions and cultures is promoted at an early age, as a substrate for interreligious coexistence, should be emphasized. In this respect, the important role of religious education in promoting religious literacy is evident (Orchard 2020).

The religion of parents, partners, and families is related to the prosocial behavior of young people, although religion can sometimes hinder child development when it becomes a source of conflict between families (Bartkowski et al. 2008).

In the present research, in terms of the religion and values factor, students consider religion and values differently according to their own religion and age range. This differentiation is necessary in a pluralistic society since, when members of one religion apply their norms to those of another, conflicts of coexistence arise. In this regard, Srinivasan et al. (2019) studied Hindu and Muslim children in India. Both groups of children more frequently stated that it was wrong for Hindus to violate Hindu norms, compared with Muslim norms, and said the opposite of Muslims. Conversely, children judged that it was wrong for both Hindus and Muslims to harm others. Thus, even in an environment marked by religious conflict, children can restrict the scope of a religion's norms to members of that religion, providing a basis for a peaceful coexistence.

5. Conclusions

Based on the results, we can conclude that, in terms of the interaction between age and religion, there are significant differences, with the youngest Christians and the oldest Muslims expressing themselves more firmly and openly with respect to religion. Perhaps, in religious education, the study of other religions should be done at an early age, when the child is more receptive to religious diversity. We can extract from the study that the Muslim group externalize their religious condition the most, being more opinionated with regard to religion and expressing their views more openly.

The multivariate analysis of this study identifies the effects of variance on the influence of age and religion, showing significant differences and large effect sizes with respect to age, religion, and the interactions between the two. The youngest adolescents (12–13 years old) are those who express their opinions about religion the least, while Muslims externalize their religious condition and opinions the most. Finally, younger adolescents and those of majority religions (Christianity and Islam) express more religious coexistence.

An interaction between age and religion is revealed, with significant differences between the results of two of the four factors: the expression of opinions about religion (where students express their religious opinions) and the interrelation between religion and values.

To conclude, it is important to emphasize that the need for religious education can be attributed to the great effect of religious education in schools and the way it influences the life experiences of pupils (Olmos-Gómez et al. 2019). It should therefore be promoted in adolescence, fostering values and awareness of respect, not only through the curriculum but also through awareness-raising programs that improve interreligious relations.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Cooperation and Social Responsibility Department of the University of Granada.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the second author, e-mail: fruizg@ugr.es (F.R.-G.).

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Appendix A

Sex: ___ Female / ___ Male

1. How many years have you studied Religion in school?
2. Are you attending Religion classes this school year?

Table A1. Religion, interrelationship and opinion in children and adolescents (RIOCAQ) Questionnaire.

What Is Your Experience with Religion in School? To What Extent Do You Agree That:		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
At school I gain knowledge about different religions.						
At school I learn to respect everyone, regardless of their religion.						
At school I have the opportunity to speak about religious matters from different perspectives.						
Topics dealing with religion in school are interesting.						
I consider religion to be an important topic at school.						
Learning about different religions helps us to live together.						
Learning about religion in general helps me decide between good and bad.						
Learning about religion in general helps me understand the current events.						
Learning about religion in general helps me learn about myself.						
Learning about religion leads to conflicts in the classroom						
Religion can appear in school in many different ways. Imagine that you are someone who has the authority to decide about school affairs. To what extent do you agree with the following positions?						
Religious dietary demands must be taken into consideration at the school canteen.						
Students should be able to wear religious symbols in school . . .	. . . discreetly (e.g., small crosses, etc., hanging around the neck)					
	. . . more visibly (e.g., veils, etc.)					
It is acceptable for students not to attend class due to religious holidays.						
Students should be excused from attending certain classes for religious reasons.						
The school should provide spaces for students to pray.						
Voluntary religious acts (e.g., prayers) could be part of the daily life of the school.						
To what extent do you agree that learning about religion helps to:						
Understand others and live with them peacefully.						
Understand the history of my country and Europe.						
Get a better understanding of current events.						
Develop my own point of view.						
Develop moral values.						
Learn about my own religion						

Table A1. *Cont.*

What Is Your Experience with Religion in School? To What Extent Do You Agree That:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
What is your position regarding the different models of teaching religion in school?					
Religion should be optional.					
Students should study Religion separated into groups according to their religion.					
There should be no place for religion in school.					
Religion should be taught to all students together, regardless of students' religious or confessional differences.					
The subject of Religion is not necessary. All necessary topics are covered by other subjects in the school (e.g., Literature, History, etc.)					
Religion should be taught partly together and partly in groups, according to the different religions of students.					
Students should gain an objective knowledge of the religions of the world.					
Students should learn to understand what religions teach.					
Students should be able to speak and converse about religious matters.					
Students should learn about the importance of religion in solving problems in society.					
The study of religions should be oriented towards students' religious beliefs.					

Note: Questionnaire based on the instrument used in the European project Religion in Education. A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European Countries (Weisse 2009; European Commission 2011; Dietz et al. 2011).

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