MDPI

*Article*

# Bible Narratives and Youth Religious Identity: An Italian Exploratory Study

Michele Caputo [1,*] and Tommaso Rompianesi [2]

[1] Department of the Arts, University of Bologna, 40123 Bologna, Italy
[2] Department of Education, University of Bergen, 5015 Bergen, Norway; tommaso.rompianesi@uib.no
[*] Correspondence: michele.caputo@unibo.it

**Abstract:** Our article analyzes data from a broader exploratory Italian study on youth imaginaries and the role of narratives in attributing meaning to the world. The research gathered responses from 872 young people (aged 18 to 23) through a digital questionnaire. The data were analyzed with quantitative methodology using descriptive statistics. Our research questions can be formulated as follows: What level of familiarity do respondents have with biblical narratives? What narrative themes and categories do they use to define those stories? In relation to these elements, what are the characteristics of the respondents' subgroups that defined themselves as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist"? The questionnaire items analyzed in this article provide an account of the respondents' familiarity with some biblical narratives and their characters (Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth), as well as their choices related to the stories' narrative themes and categories. The results from our sample open the field for further investigations, particularly in contexts characterized by different religious backgrounds (e.g., Protestant contexts), which may offer more nuanced interpretations of the educational process in relation to religious identity.

**Keywords:** Bible narratives; youth imaginary; young adults; teaching of Catholic religion (TCR); religious identity; Catholic education; religious education; sacred

## 1. Introduction

This contribution focuses on some of the findings of an Italian exploratory research project on the youth imaginary and "religious identity" (Caputo 2024). The study aimed to verify the presence and diffusion of certain fantasy narrative cycles and Bible stories from the Old Testament within the youth imaginary. Our interest in the field of the youth imaginary stemmed from the key role narratives play in the construction of reality's meaning and the formation of individual identity (Bruner 1996; Caputo 2012). The fundamental hypothesis of the study framed fantasy narratives as significant references within the youth imaginary, fulfilling, for many young people, an inherently educational function by ascribing mythical or religious meanings to both the world and themselves—at least in relation to the conflict between good and evil. A similar function may be ascribed to Bible narratives; thus, we aimed to investigate the position and role that certain Old Testament stories—previously explored by (Moscato et al. 2017)—may have assumed within the youth imaginary.

The construction of reality's meaning and individual identity represents a fundamental focus of pedagogical research and constitutes the core of educational processes. In the attribution of meaning to reality—which is closely connected to the significance of one's own I, or Self (Erikson 1968)—the dynamisms of mythopoesis and religiosity come into play (Aletti 2022). Through narratives, the meaning of both the world and the individual assumes pedagogical value, as narratives can represent frameworks for human existence, its collective dimension, its rules—or, in other words, its culture. Ricoeur highlighted the symbolic (and not only psychological) dimension of the human growth dynamism:

"How does a man emerge from his childhood, how does he become an adult? At first sight this seems to be a purely psychological question, since it is the theme of every genetic psychology and every theory of the personality. But in fact it takes on its true meaning when we begin to examine which figures, which images and symbols, guide this growth, this maturation of the individual" (Ricoeur [1969] 1989, p. 324). In these regards, pedagogical research requires a continuous hermeneutic effort to grasp the symbolic significance of the figures of the imaginary, as well as their permanence and educational relevance for new generations.

The topic of the imaginary, as Franco Cambi pointed out (Cambi 2010, pp. 130–32), has not received significant attention in the Italian pedagogical environment, except for some contributions in the historical–pedagogical sphere. Similarly, the pedagogy of narratives, despite Jerome Bruner's *Italian lessons* (Bruner 2002), has been explored by a few scholars in Italy, among whom we mention Maria Teresa Moscato (Moscato 1998, 2022a). In this regard, this exploratory research represents (to our knowledge) the first attempt in Italy to empirically investigate the contemporary youth imaginary from a pedagogical perspective.

A questionnaire was administered to over 800 young subjects forming an accidental, non-representative sample, as we shall show below. The narratives included in the questionnaire were drawn from four major fantasy narrative cycles (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, and *Star Wars*), with the addition of three Bible stories from the Old Testament—specifically, the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth[1]. In this article, we will explore respondents' familiarity with these three Bible narratives, as well as the narrative themes and categories they identified. Furthermore, we will examine the relationships between these elements and the subgroups of respondents who self-defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", or "Atheist". Our research questions are: What level of familiarity do young people have with biblical narratives? What narrative themes and categories do they use to define those stories? In relation to these elements, what are the characteristics of the respondents' subgroups that defined themselves as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist"?

As we shall show, a high attendance in teaching of Catholic religion (TCR) and Catholic religious upbringing/education characterize the sample, highlighting the features of the Italian context and making them available to an international audience. Although the results are positioned within the Italian cultural and religious context, they offer valuable insights that can stimulate further research paths, both nationally and cross-nationally, on the dynamisms of religious education from a phenomenological–comparativist perspective (Moscato 1994).

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Questionnaire and Data Analysis

The questionnaire was divided into three main sections. The first one consisted of 15 questions (items 1–15) aimed at assessing respondents' self-evaluated knowledge of the selected narrative cycles (*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*) and their general familiarity with Bible stories. These narrative cycles were chosen based on grey research materials we collected across different studies carried out in the last decade[2]. For each narrative cycle, the questionnaire comprised one multiple-choice and two open-ended questions. The multiple-choice question sought to determine whether and to what extent respondents were familiar with the movies and/or books of each narrative cycle. The following open-ended question asked respondents to name a character they liked ("Can you indicate a character of that narrative cycle that you particularly liked?"), while the third question invited them to explain if and why they liked the narrative cycle ("If you liked the narrative cycle of [title], could you tell us why?").

The second section of the questionnaire (items 16–36) was structured around seven narrative excerpts, four of which were drawn from the fantasy narrative cycles and three from Bible stories (Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth). Respondents were asked to read each excerpt and then answer 3 questions. The first question inquired about the respondents'

familiarity with the excerpt ("Did you already know this text?"). The second asked them to identify the narrative themes of the text by selecting up to two of nine available options or by using the open-ended option "Other" ("Which narrative themes do you recognize in the text?"). The third item provided nine literary genre labels, and respondents were asked to select up to two that best defined the text or suggest their own through the open-ended option "Other" ("Taking into account that the text belongs to [fantasy fiction/the Old Testament], how would you define the text you have just read?"). The section concluded with item 37, which invited respondents to write down a character or story that they considered significant in shaping their perspectives on life ("Would you like to tell us about a character and/or story that you consider as important in shaping your representation of life? Could you explain why?").

The third section (items 38–47) focused on demographic information, namely age, gender, region or country of birth, educational background, current school or university attendance, and subject areas of education. It also collected culturally relevant data such as information about teaching of the Catholic religion (TCR) attendance, religious education or upbringing, and self-defined religious identity. These last three items were placed at the end of the questionnaire to prevent potential influences on responses to earlier sections.

The questionnaire was designed using Microsoft Forms and administered digitally in two waves (from 2021 to 2022) in various schools and universities across different regions in Italy. After data collection, responses were compiled into a comprehensive database using Microsoft Excel and analyzed though descriptive statistical methods (Cohen et al. 2018; Bryman 2012).

*2.2. Sample*

The exploratory nature of this study informed the decision to administer the questionnaire to a specific group of young people—students in their final year of secondary school and undergraduate students—who were accessible through the networks of the research team members (University of Bologna, Catholic University of Piacenza, University of Padua, University of Verona). Accordingly, we adopted a convenience/opportunistic and purposive (Cohen et al. 2018) sampling strategy, which we deemed appropriate for the research aims.

We collected 872 valid responses from the university campuses and schools we were able to access. As anticipated, the data collection sites did not necessarily correspond to the geographic origin (province or country of birth) of the respondents. The sample showed a varied distribution across the country, with a clear predominance of responses from Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, Sicily, and Tuscany. Additionally, a small but highly diverse group of students (4.1% of the sample) reported being born in countries outside Italy. These characteristics highlight the non-representative nature of the sample and the resulting non-generalizability of the findings, without diminishing their significance, as we will show later.

The following table (Table 1) presents the age and gender distribution of the sample, which was predominantly composed of female respondents (62.2% of the total):

**Table 1.** Age and gender of the respondents.

| Age | Female | | Male | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 17 | 3 | 0.3 | 2 | 0.2 | 5 | 0.6 |
| 18 | 218 | 25.0 | 140 | 16.1 | 358 | 41.1 |
| 19 | 126 | 14.4 | 73 | 8.4 | 199 | 22.8 |
| 20 | 82 | 9.4 | 59 | 6.8 | 141 | 16.2 |
| 21 | 77 | 8.8 | 34 | 3.9 | 111 | 12.7 |
| 22 | 31 | 3.6 | 14 | 1.6 | 45 | 5.2 |
| 23 | 5 | 0.6 | 8 | 0.9 | 13 | 1.5 |
| Tot. | 542 | 62.2 | 330 | 37.8 | 872 | 100.0 |

Of the sample, 60.7% were attending the final year of secondary school, while the remaining 39.3% were distributed across the three years of bachelor's degree programs.

Table 2 provides additional details about the types of secondary schools attended by the respondents, the majority of whom were enrolled in lyceums:

**Table 2.** Types of secondary education attended by respondents.

| Secondary School Type | Female | | Male | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Lyceum | 476 | 54.6 | 261 | 29.9 | 737 | 84.5 |
| Technical | 34 | 3.9 | 46 | 5.3 | 55 | 9.2 |
| Vocational | 32 | 3.7 | 23 | 2.6 | 80 | 6.3 |
| Tot. | 542 | 62.2 | 330 | 37.8 | 872 | 100.0 |

In Table 3, we show the distribution of the sample in terms of teaching of the Catholic religion (TCR)[3] attendance. A substantial majority (78.1%) attended TCR until the end of secondary education, a figure that rises to 86.0% when including those (7.9%) who discontinued IRC during secondary education.

**Table 3.** Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) attendance.

| Teaching of the Catholic Religion (TCR) Attendance | Female | | Male | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Never | 25 | 2.9 | 8 | 0.9 | 33 | 3.8 |
| Only until the end of primary school | 22 | 2.5 | 7 | 0.8 | 29 | 3.3 |
| Only until the end of lower secondary school | 38 | 4.4 | 22 | 2.5 | 60 | 6.9 |
| During upper secondary school | 37 | 4.2 | 32 | 3.7 | 69 | 7.9 |
| Until the end of upper secondary school | 420 | 48.2 | 261 | 29.9 | 681 | 78.1 |
| Tot. | 542 | 62.2 | 330 | 37.8 | 872 | 100.0 |

The predominance of the Catholic religion among the respondents is further confirmed by the data collected through item 47 (Table 4), which focused on the religious education/upbringing respondents declared to have received ("If you received a religious education/upbringing, in which tradition did it take place?"). The responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2022). The coding process led to the identification of the following categories: "Other religions", "Atheism", "Catholic", "Muslim", "None", "Orthodox", "Protestant/Evangelical", "Humanist/Laic", and "Theist", as well as "Not answered" ("N/A").

**Table 4.** The religious traditions/frameworks in which the respondents were educated.

| Religious Upbringing/Education | Female | | Male | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Catholic | 451 | 51.7 | 268 | 30.7 | 719 | 82.5 |
| N/A | 37 | 4.2 | 29 | 3.3 | 66 | 7.6 |
| None | 22 | 2.5 | 18 | 2.1 | 40 | 4.6 |
| Muslim | 9 | 1.0 | 4 | 0.5 | 13 | 1.5 |
| Humanism/Laic | 7 | 0.8 | 4 | 0.5 | 11 | 1.3 |
| Theist | 6 | 0.7 | 2 | 0.2 | 8 | 0.9 |
| Orthodox | 5 | 0.6 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0.6 |
| Atheist | 3 | 0.3 | 2 | 0.2 | 5 | 0.6 |
| Protestant/Evangelical | 1 | 0.1 | 2 | 0.2 | 3 | 0.3 |
| Other religions | 1 | 0.1 | 1 | 0.1 | 2 | 0.2 |
| Tot. | 542 | 62.2 | 330 | 37.8 | 872 | 100.0 |

## 3. Results

The first subsection of this section presents the answers given by the overall sample to items 7, 16, 22, and 28, focused on the respondents' familiarity with Bible stories. In the second subsection, we will outline the narrative themes and categories identified by the respondents concerning the Bible narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Finally, the last two subsections discuss the characteristics of three specific subgroups—namely, the respondents who defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist".

### 3.1. Familiarity with Bible Stories

Item 7 ("Do you know any Bible story?") was designed to assess respondents' self-perceived familiarity with Bible stories. The question provided seven possible responses, as well as an open-ended option, "Other". Respondents were allowed to select up to two options. Table 5 below presents the frequency of each response, along with the corresponding ratios for the total sample, females, and males.

**Table 5.** Respondents' self-assessed familiarity of Bible stories. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

| Familiarity with Bible Stories | Female | | | Male | | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | %(T) | %(tF) | N | %(T) | %(tM) | N | %(T) |
| No. None, as far as I remember | 49 | 5.6 | 9.0 | 37 | 4.2 | 11.2 | 86 | 9.9 |
| The ones I heard during mass | 272 | 31.2 | 50.2 | 140 | 16.1 | 42.4 | 412 | 47.2 |
| The ones I heard at school | 135 | 15.5 | 24.9 | 79 | 9.1 | 23.9 | 214 | 24.5 |
| The ones I heard at catechism classes | 300 | 34.4 | 55.4 | 160 | 18.3 | 48.5 | 460 | 52.8 |
| The ones I read in comic books | 5 | 0.6 | 0.9 | 8 | 0.9 | 2.4 | 13 | 1.5 |
| Some stories that were told me by my family | 69 | 7.9 | 12.7 | 30 | 3.4 | 9.1 | 99 | 11.4 |
| I know enough of them, and I have read them myself | 69 | 7.9 | 12.7 | 58 | 6.7 | 17.6 | 127 | 14.6 |
| Other | 13 | 1.5 | 2.4 | 19 | 2.2 | 5.8 | 32 | 3.7 |

The respondents primarily heard Bible stories during catechism classes (52.8%) and at mass (47.2%). Only one-quarter (24.5%) recalled encountering Bible stories at school, with even fewer—11.4%—mentioning their family environment as a source. More broadly, 9.9% of the sample reported having no familiarity with Bible stories, while only 14.6% stated they knew "enough of them" and had "read them" themselves. This result seems noteworthy, given that the vast majority of the sample attended TCR during or until the end of upper secondary school (Table 3) and received a Catholic upbringing or education (Table 4). Regarding subgroup differences, females and males generally followed similar trends. Females scored higher on the options "The ones I heard at mass" and "The ones I heard in catechism classes", as well as slightly higher in relation to stories heard within their family environments. Males, on the other hand, scored marginally higher on the option "No. None, as far as I remember", and nearly 5% higher on the option "I know enough of them, and I have read them myself".

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to read three quotes from the Bible belonging to the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Excerpts belonging to the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Jacob's and Ruth's texts were accompanied by a brief synopsis aimed at framing the excerpts within the broader stories.

| Bible Narrative | Reference | Excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| Abraham | *Genesis*<br>12: 1–5<br>13: 14–15<br>(USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002) | Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. […] and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". […] Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. […] The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever". |
| Jacob | *Genesis*<br>32: 25–32<br>(USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002) | Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking". But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me". So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob". Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed". Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name". But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Penuel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved". The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. |
| Ruth | *Ruth*<br>1: 16–18, 22<br>(USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2002) | But Ruth said, "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! for wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the Lord do so and so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you!" […] Thus it was that Naomi returned with the Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, who accompanied her back from the plateau of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. |

Items 16, 22, and 28 ("Did you already know the story of Abraham/Jacob/Ruth?") were designed to assess respondents' self-perceived knowledge of these Bible stories. Each item offered three response options: "Yes", "No", and "Perhaps, but I remember it partially", with only one option selectable per question. Table 7 (below) presents the distribution of responses to items 16 (Abraham), 22 (Jacob), and 28 (Ruth), along with their breakdown by female and male subgroups.

**Table 7.** Respondents' self-assessed knowledge of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

| Knowledge of Bible Stories | | Female | | | Male | | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | %(T) | %(tF) | N | %(T) | %(tM) | N | %(T) |
| Yes | Abraham | 293 | 33.6 | 54.1 | 190 | 21.8 | 57.6 | 483 | 55.4 |
| | Jacob | 134 | 15.4 | 24.7 | 86 | 9.9 | 26.1 | 220 | 25.2 |
| | Ruth | 33 | 3.8 | 6.1 | 22 | 2.5 | 6.7 | 55 | 6.3 |
| No | Abraham | 76 | 8.7 | 14.0 | 51 | 5.8 | 15.5 | 127 | 14.6 |
| | Jacob | 248 | 28.4 | 45.8 | 151 | 17.3 | 45.8 | 399 | 45.8 |
| | Ruth | 468 | 53.7 | 86.3 | 281 | 32.2 | 85.2 | 749 | 85.9 |
| Perhaps, but I remember it partially | Abraham | 173 | 19.8 | 31.9 | 89 | 10.2 | 27.0 | 262 | 30.0 |
| | Jacob | 160 | 18.3 | 29.5 | 93 | 10.7 | 28.2 | 253 | 29.0 |
| | Ruth | 41 | 4.7 | 7.6 | 27 | 3.1 | 8.2 | 68 | 7.8 |

The story of Abraham is the most well-known Bible story within the sample, with 55.4% of respondents stating that they were already familiar with it and 30.0% recalling it partially. Only 14.6% of the sample reported not knowing the story of Abraham after reading the excerpt. The story of Jacob was less familiar, as only 25.5% of the sample selected the option "Yes", while 29.0% indicated "Perhaps, but I remember it partially", and 45.8% stated they did not know the story at all. Lastly, the story of Ruth was known to only 6.3% of the sample, with 7.8% recalling it partially, and 85.9% being unfamiliar with it altogether. There were no significant differences between the male and female subgroups, both of which followed the trends described above.

The results align with the level of familiarity reported by the sample in item 7 (Table 5), where only 14.6% indicated that they knew Bible stories and read them directly. We hypothesize that the lower familiarity with the stories of Jacob and Ruth may perhaps be due to their being less commonly known and less frequently read during mass or catechism classes. These are the settings where approximately half of the sample reported encountering Bible stories (Table 5), but the data we collected do not allow for further insights on this matter. Given the general religious background and high TCR attendance of the sample, these findings confirm the low level of familiarity respondents have with Bible narratives.

### 3.2. Narrative Themes and Categories

Items 17, 23, and 29 asked respondents to identify the narrative themes ("Which narrative themes do you recognize in the text?") of the Bible excerpts from the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. The respondents were asked to select up to two options among the nine provided, in addition to the open-ended option "Other". The results are shown in Table 8 (below).

The sample identified "The test" (53.4%) and "The call/Vocation" (50.0%) as the most relevant narrative themes related to the story of Abraham, followed by "Faithfulness" (41.4%), "Courage" (36.5%), and "The overcoming of the test", which was selected by almost one-fifth of the respondents (18.8%). For the story of Jacob, 40.0% of respondents indicated "The overcoming of the test" as the most relevant theme, followed by "The test" (34.4%) and "Courage" (30.2%). Lastly, "Faithfulness" (52.2%) and "Loving solidarity" (52.1%) were the most frequently chosen themes for the story of Ruth, with "Courage" being the third most selected, though less popular, option (20.9%).

**Table 8.** Respondents' selections of narrative themes connected to the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

| | Abraham | | Jacob | | Ruth | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Narrative Themes** | **N** | **%(T)** | **N** | **%(T)** | **N** | **%(T)** |
| The test | 466 | 53.4 | 297 | 34.1 | 107 | 12.3 |
| The creation | 64 | 7.3 | 51 | 5.8 | 40 | 4.6 |
| Transgression/Rebellion | 46 | 5.3 | 214 | 24.5 | 51 | 5.8 |
| Loving solidarity | 60 | 6.9 | 56 | 6.4 | 454 | 52.1 |
| Courage | 318 | 36.5 | 263 | 30.2 | 182 | 20.9 |
| The overcoming of the test | 164 | 18.8 | 349 | 40.0 | 66 | 7.6 |
| The temptation | 68 | 7.8 | 78 | 8.9 | 38 | 4.4 |
| Faithfulness | 361 | 41.4 | 113 | 13.0 | 455 | 52.2 |
| The call/Vocation | 436 | 50.0 | 175 | 20.1 | 56 | 6.4 |
| Other | 27 | 3.1 | 26 | 3.0 | 40 | 4.6 |

In terms of narrative themes, there were no significant distinctions between the male and female subgroups, which generally followed the trends of the overall sample. However, there were two instances related to the story of Abraham and one related to the story of Ruth where the subgroups diverged. As shown in Table 9 (below), 40.8% of female respondents

selected "Courage" as a narrative theme for the story of Abraham, making it the third most selected theme in the female subgroup, while only 29.4% of male respondents chose this option. In contrast, 45.8% of males selected "Faithfulness" as the third most popular theme in their subgroup, compared to 38.7% of females. Regarding the story of Ruth, "Loving solidarity" (the second most popular choice for the overall sample) was selected by 54.1% of females and 48.8% of males. Aside from these instances, there were no notable differences between male and female respondents' selections of narrative themes across the Bible stories.

**Table 9.** Respondents' selections of narrative themes connected to the Bible stories of Abraham and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

| | Female | | | Male | | | Tot. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Narrative Themes** | **N** | **%(T)** | **%(tF)** | **N** | **%(T)** | **%(tM)** | **N** | **%(T)** |
| **Abraham** | | | | | | | | |
| Courage | 221 | 25.3 | 40.8 | 97 | 11.1 | 29.4 | 318 | 36.5 |
| Faithfulness | 210 | 24.1 | 38.7 | 151 | 17.3 | 45.8 | 361 | 41.4 |
| **Ruth** | | | | | | | | |
| Loving solidarity | 293 | 33.6 | 54.1 | 161 | 18.5 | 48.8 | 454 | 52.1 |

Items 18, 24, and 30 provided the respondents with a list of nine keywords (in addition to the open option "Other") referring to the narrative categories the Bible excerpts could belong to. The question asked the respondents to select no more than two options and was formulated as follows: "Taking into account that the text belongs to the Old Testament, how would you define the text you have just read?" Table 10 (below) shows the occurrences of each option.

**Table 10.** Respondents' selections of narrative categories connected to the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

| | Abraham | | Jacob | | Ruth | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Narrative Categories** | **N** | **%(T)** | **N** | **%(T)** | **N** | **%(T)** |
| Historical | 95 | 10.9 | 86 | 9.9 | 78 | 8.9 |
| Mythical (Religious) | 576 | 66.1 | 554 | 63.5 | 410 | 47.0 |
| Spiritual | 259 | 29.7 | 251 | 28.8 | 195 | 22.4 |
| Realistic | 11 | 1.3 | 18 | 2.1 | 114 | 13.1 |
| Magical | 23 | 2.6 | 20 | 2.3 | 28 | 3.2 |
| Metaphorical | 184 | 21.1 | 164 | 18.8 | 118 | 13.5 |
| Fantastic | 40 | 4.6 | 44 | 5.0 | 32 | 3.7 |
| Symbolic | 333 | 38.2 | 279 | 32.0 | 225 | 25.8 |
| Moral | 196 | 22.5 | 166 | 19.0 | 279 | 32.0 |
| Other | 9 | 1.0 | 15 | 1.7 | 26 | 3.0 |

The most selected option across the three excerpts was "Mythical (Religious)", chosen by 66.1% of the sample for the story of Abraham, 63.5% for the story of Jacob, and 47.0% for the story of Ruth. The dominance of this option over all others is particularly clear for the stories of Abraham and Jacob, where the second most selected option, "Symbolic", was chosen by 38.2% and 32.0% of the sample, respectively. In the case of the story of Ruth, the difference between the first and second most selected options is less pronounced, as "Moral" was selected by 32.0% of the sample, but the difference remains significant. While the respondents seemed slightly more varied in their selection of the most relevant narrative themes (Table 8), their choice of narrative categories was more straightforward, with "Mythical (Religious)" emerging as the most significant category.

In comparing responses between females and males, we did not detect any major discrepancies in the trends followed by the two subgroups. In one case related to the story of Abraham (Table 11), 26.4% of males selected the option "Metaphorical", while only 17.9% of females chose the same. Additionally, two divergences were noted regarding the story of Ruth. Among females, 34.3% selected "Moral" (the second most popular choice), and 28.4% selected "Symbolic" (the third choice), while 28.2% and 21.5% of males opted for these respective options. Aside from these cases, there were no notable differences between the choices made by females and males concerning the narrative categories of the Bible stories.

**Table 11.** Respondents' selections of narrative categories connected to the Bible stories of Abraham and Ruth. The percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

| | **Female** | | | **Male** | | | **Tot.** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Narrative Categories** | **N** | **%(T)** | **%(tF)** | **N** | **%(T)** | **%(tM)** | **N** | **%(T)** |
| **Abraham** | | | | | | | | |
| Metaphorical | 97 | 11.1 | 17.9 | 87 | 10.0 | 26.4 | 184 | 21.1 |
| **Ruth** | | | | | | | | |
| Symbolic | 154 | 17.7 | 28.4 | 71 | 8.1 | 21.5 | 225 | 25.8 |
| Moral | 186 | 21.3 | 34.3 | 93 | 10.7 | 28.2 | 279 | 32.0 |

### 3.3. Self-Defined Religious Identity: The General Sample

Item 47 aimed to capture respondents' self-assessed religious identity. The question was intentionally framed in an open-ended manner ("Do you consider yourself:") and allowed respondents to select up to two options from the six provided, as well as to offer personal responses through the open-ended option "Other". The options were designed to include commonly used labels for defining one's religious identity ("Religious", "Atheist", and "Agnostic") along with other potential personal orientations ("Curious", "Still uncertain", "Still searching"). Table 12 (below) displays the number of occurrences for each option and the distribution across the genders of respondents. We also calculated the ratio (expressed as a percentage) between the occurrences of each response and the total number of respondents (%(T)), as well as the total number of females (%(tF)) and males (%(tM)).

**Table 12.** Respondents' self-defined religious identity. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)), females N = 542 (%(tF)), and males N = 330 (%(tM)).

| | **Female** | | | **Male** | | | **Tot.** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Self-Defined Religious Identity** | **N** | **%(T)** | **%(tF)** | **N** | **%(T)** | **%(tM)** | **N** | **%(T)** |
| Religious | 145 | 16.6 | 26.8 | 69 | 7.9 | 20.9 | 214 | 24.5 |
| Indifferent/Agnostic | 146 | 16.7 | 26.9 | 98 | 11.2 | 29.7 | 244 | 28.0 |
| Curious | 94 | 10.8 | 17.3 | 98 | 11.2 | 29.7 | 192 | 22.0 |
| Atheist | 103 | 11.8 | 19.0 | 74 | 8.5 | 22.4 | 177 | 20.3 |
| Still uncertain | 113 | 13.0 | 20.8 | 50 | 5.7 | 15.2 | 163 | 18.7 |
| Still searching | 70 | 8.0 | 12.9 | 38 | 4.4 | 11.5 | 108 | 12.4 |
| Other | 32 | 3.7 | 5.9 | 30 | 3.4 | 9.1 | 62 | 7.1 |

The options selected by the total sample show a distribution where the most selected option was "Indifferent/Agnostic" (28.8%), and the least selected option was "Still searching", chosen by only 12.2% of respondents ("Other" was selected by 7.1% of the total sample). These two options were also the most and least selected within both the female and male subgroups, though we observed some differences in the other options chosen. Among females, 26.8% and 26.9% selected "Religious" and/or "Indifferent/Agnostic",

respectively, to define themselves, while nearly one-third of the male subgroup chose "Indifferent/Agnostic" and/or "Curious" (29.7% for both). On the one hand, we noted a high occurrence of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" option in both subgroups. On the other hand, the female subgroup showed a slightly higher preference for "Religious" and a slightly lower preference for "Curious" compared to the male subgroup, which exhibited the opposite trend.

We compared the distribution of responses for item 47 with those for items 45 and 46, which focus respectively on TCR attendance (Table 3) and religious upbringing/education (Table 4). Even though the vast majority of respondents reported having attended TCR during or until the end of upper secondary school (86.0%) and having received a Catholic upbringing/education (82.5%), their self-declared religious identities vary significantly. Only 24.5% of respondents defined themselves as "Religious", while almost one-third (28.0%) selected "Indifferent/Agnostic", and 20.3% identified as "Atheist". A portion of the sample identified as "Curious" (22.0%) and "Still uncertain" (18.7%), with a minority choosing "Still searching" (12.4%). In other words, the respondents' religious background and education do not seem to be directly reflected in how they describe their current religious identity[4].

### 3.4. The Subgroups "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist"

A high TCR attendance and a Catholic religious upbringing/education characterize the vast majority of the sample. However, the self-declared religious identities provide a more varied portrait, allowing us to identify significant subgroups. In the final subsection of the Results, we will present the characteristics of the subgroups that defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", and "Atheist". These three subgroups will be analyzed in relation to their familiarity with Bible stories, as well as their selections of narrative themes and categories.

In terms of familiarity with Bible stories, the three subgroups exhibit distinct characteristics in relation to some of the responses to item 7 (Table 13 below). The group that identified as "Religious" reported less unfamiliarity with Bible narratives (4.7%) compared to the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (13.5%) and "Atheist" (15.5%) groups. Respondents who identified as "Religious" also indicated encountering Bible stories at mass (53.3%) and through their family environment (16.4%) slightly more often than the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (43.9% and 10.7%) and "Atheist" (42.4% and 6.8%) groups.

**Table 13.** Familiarity with Bible stories of the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(R)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

| Self-Defined Religious Identity | Religious | | Indifferent/Agnostic | | Atheist | | Overall Sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Familiarity with Bible Stories** | **N** | **%(R)** | **N** | **%(I)** | **N** | **%(A)** | **N** | **%(T)** |
| No. None, as far as I remember | 10 | 4.7 | 33 | 13.5 | 27 | 15.5 | 86 | 9.9 |
| The ones I heard during mass | 114 | 53.3 | 107 | 43.9 | 75 | 42.4 | 412 | 47.2 |
| The ones I heard at school | 49 | 22.9 | 74 | 30.3 | 49 | 27.7 | 214 | 24.5 |
| The ones I heard at catechism classes | 110 | 51.4 | 126 | 51.6 | 87 | 49.2 | 460 | 52.8 |
| The ones I read in comic books | 2 | 0.9 | 8 | 3.3 | 6 | 3.4 | 13 | 1.5 |
| Some stories that were told me by my family | 35 | 16.4 | 26 | 10.7 | 12 | 6.8 | 99 | 11.4 |
| I know enough of them, and I have read them myself | 61 | 28.5 | 17 | 7.0 | 17 | 9.6 | 127 | 14.6 |
| Other | 5 | 2.3 | 7 | 2.9 | 7 | 4.0 | 32 | 3.7 |

From another perspective, less than one-third (28.5%) of respondents in the "Religious" group stated that they know enough Bible stories and have read them independently. The

familiarity with Bible narratives is even lower in the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (7.0%) and "Atheist" (9.6%) subgroups.

We also analyzed the three subgroups' knowledge of the stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth (items 16, 22, 28) (Table 14). Among the "Religious" subgroup, 72.9% declared familiarity with the story of Abraham, compared to 42.2% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup and 51.4% of the "Atheist" subgroup. Furthermore, only 28.5% of the "Religious" subgroup reported knowing the story of Jacob, and just 10.7% knew the story of Ruth. While the "Religious" subgroup appears to have greater familiarity with the story of Abraham than the other two subgroups, the differences become less pronounced for the stories of Jacob and Ruth—arguably less commonly known.

**Table 14.** Knowledge of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth in relation to the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(R)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

| Self-Defined Religious Identity | | Religious | | Indifferent/Agnostic | | Atheist | | Overall Sample | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge of Bible Stories | | N | %(R) | N | %(I) | N | %(A) | N | %(T) |
| Yes | Abraham | 156 | 72.9 | 103 | 42.2 | 91 | 51.4 | 483 | 55.4 |
| | Jacob | 61 | 28.5 | 42 | 17.2 | 33 | 18.6 | 220 | 25.2 |
| | Ruth | 23 | 10.7 | 7 | 2.9 | 11 | 6.2 | 55 | 6.3 |
| No | Abraham | 17 | 7.9 | 54 | 22.1 | 35 | 19.8 | 127 | 14.6 |
| | Jacob | 70 | 32.7 | 130 | 53.3 | 96 | 54.2 | 399 | 45.8 |
| | Ruth | 165 | 77.1 | 229 | 93.9 | 152 | 85.9 | 749 | 85.9 |
| Perhaps, but I remember it partially | Abraham | 41 | 19.2 | 87 | 35.7 | 51 | 28.8 | 262 | 30.0 |
| | Jacob | 61 | 28.5 | 72 | 29.5 | 48 | 27.1 | 253 | 29.0 |
| | Ruth | 26 | 12.1 | 8 | 3.3 | 14 | 7.9 | 68 | 7.8 |

Regarding the selection of narrative themes related to the Bible stories (items 17, 23, and 29), the three subgroups distributed their choices differently in certain respects, as shown in Table 15 (below). For the story of Abraham, "The test"—the most selected option in the general sample—was the most popular choice among the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (54.1%) and "Atheist" (57.1%) subgroups, but not among the "Religious" subgroup (46.7%). An opposite trend was observed for "The call/Vocation", the second most selected option in the general sample, which was the most chosen theme among the "Religious" subgroup (56.1%) but not as dominant among the "Indifferent/Agnostic" (48.0%) and "Atheist" (47.5%) subgroups—although the preference remained high. Another noteworthy distribution was observed for "Faithfulness", selected by 43.0% of the "Religious" subgroup and 45.2% of the "Atheist" subgroup but only by 36.9% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup. Finally, "Courage" was identified as a relevant narrative theme by 44.9% of the "Religious" subgroup, 33.2% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup, and only 26.6% of the "Atheist" subgroup.

For the story of Jacob, "The overcoming of the test" was the most selected option both in the general sample (Table 8) and in the "Religious" subgroup (50.0%) (Table 15). It remained the preferred choice among the "Atheist" subgroup, though with a lower percentage (39.0%), but was not the most chosen option for the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup (31.6%). In contrast, "The test" was the second most selected option in the general sample and among the "Religious" (35.5%) and "Atheist" (28.2%) subgroups, but it emerged as the most chosen option among the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup (35.7%). "Transgression/Rebellion" was selected by 23.4% of the "Religious" subgroup, 26.6% of the "Atheist" subgroup, and 29.9% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup.

**Table 15.** Narrative themes of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth in relation to the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(R)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

| | Abraham | | | | Jacob | | | | Ruth | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Narrative Themes** | **%(R)** | **%(I)** | **%(A)** | **%(T)** | **%(R)** | **%(I)** | **%(A)** | **%(T)** | **%(R)** | **%(I)** | **%(A)** | **%(T)** |
| The test | 46.7 | 54.1 | 57.1 | 53.4 | 35.5 | 35.7 | 28.2 | 34.1 | 11.2 | 11.5 | 13.6 | 12.3 |
| The creation | 8.9 | 7.8 | 4.5 | 7.3 | 5.6 | 7.4 | 4.0 | 5.8 | 5.1 | 5.3 | 4.5 | 4.6 |
| Transgression/Rebellion | 5.6 | 6.6 | 4.5 | 5.3 | 23.4 | 29.9 | 26.6 | 24.5 | 7.5 | 7.4 | 6.8 | 5.8 |
| Loving solidarity | 9.3 | 7.8 | 4.5 | 6.9 | 7.9 | 6.1 | 4.0 | 6.4 | 56.5 | 49.2 | 51.4 | 52.1 |
| Courage | 44.9 | 33.2 | 26.6 | 36.5 | 29.4 | 29.5 | 32.2 | 30.2 | 21.5 | 15.6 | 26.0 | 20.9 |
| The overcoming of the test | 18.2 | 20.9 | 19.8 | 18.8 | 50.0 | 31.6 | 39.0 | 40.0 | 8.4 | 8.2 | 6.2 | 7.6 |
| The temptation | 7.9 | 7.8 | 10.2 | 7.8 | 7.9 | 13.1 | 7.3 | 8.9 | 3.3 | 5.3 | 3.4 | 4.4 |
| Faithfulness | 43.0 | 36.9 | 45.2 | 41.4 | 12.1 | 11.9 | 12.4 | 13.0 | 52.3 | 49.2 | 49.7 | 52.2 |
| The call/Vocation | 56.1 | 48.0 | 47.5 | 50.0 | 19.6 | 20.1 | 19.8 | 20.1 | 8.9 | 7.8 | 6.2 | 6.4 |
| Other | 3.3 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 3.1 | 2.8 | 2.9 | 2.8 | 3.0 | 3.3 | 5.3 | 2.8 | 4.6 |

For the story of Ruth, the distribution was more consistent. "Loving solidarity", the second most selected option in the general sample, was the most popular choice across all three subgroups, selected by 56.6% of the "Religious" subgroup, 49.2% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup, and 51.4% of the "Atheist" subgroup. Lastly, "Courage" was selected by one-fourth (26.0%) of the "Atheist" subgroup, one-fifth (21.5%) of the "Religious" subgroup, and 15.6% of the "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroup.

In terms of narrative categories (items 18, 24, and 30), we observed some cross-cutting trends among all three subgroups, as shown in Table 16 (below). The "Religious" subgroup tended to define the Bible stories as less "Mythical (Religious)" than the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups, the latter of which showed the highest values for this category across all three Bible stories. While the occurrences are high in all subgroups, this trend is most evident in the stories of Abraham and Jacob and less pronounced—but still significant—in the story of Ruth. Conversely, the "Religious" subgroup more frequently considered the stories of Jacob, and especially Abraham, as "Symbolic" compared to the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups. However, this trend does not extend to the story of Ruth, where the results among the three subgroups are quite similar, and the percentage of the "Atheist" subgroup is the highest (27.1%).

**Table 16.** Narrative categories of the Bible stories of Abraham, Jacob, and Ruth in relation to the subgroups of "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", "Atheist", and the overall sample. Percentages represent the ratio of occurrences (N) to the respondents' subgroups that have defined their religious identity as "Religious" N = 214 (%(R)), "Indifferent/Agnostic" N = 244 (%(I)), and "Atheist" N = 177 (%(A)), as well as to the total number of respondents N = 872 (%(T)).

| | Abraham | | | | Jacob | | | | Ruth | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Narrative Categories** | **%(R)** | **%(I)** | **%(A)** | **%(T)** | **%(R)** | **%(I)** | **%(A)** | **%(T)** | **%(R)** | **%(I)** | **%(A)** | **%(T)** |
| Historical | 14.0 | 9.4 | 7.9 | 10.9 | 14.0 | 10.2 | 6.2 | 9.9 | 14.5 | 7.8 | 5.6 | 8.9 |
| Mythical (Religious) | 58.4 | 69.7 | 75.7 | 66.1 | 53.3 | 68.4 | 72.9 | 63.5 | 43.5 | 45.9 | 55.9 | 47.0 |
| Spiritual | 36.4 | 24.2 | 25.4 | 29.7 | 30.8 | 24.2 | 24.3 | 28.8 | 26.2 | 23.0 | 19.2 | 22.4 |
| Realistic | 2.3 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 1.3 | 1.9 | 3.3 | 1.1 | 2.1 | 16.4 | 13.1 | 9.0 | 13.1 |
| Magical | 0.9 | 3.7 | 6.8 | 2.6 | 2.8 | 2.0 | 4.5 | 2.3 | 5.1 | 2.0 | 4.0 | 3.2 |
| Metaphorical | 20.6 | 21.7 | 23.7 | 21.1 | 22.9 | 17.2 | 15.8 | 18.8 | 13.6 | 12.3 | 11.9 | 13.5 |
| Fantastic | 2.3 | 4.9 | 10.7 | 4.6 | 1.9 | 6.1 | 9.0 | 5.0 | 3.7 | 6.1 | 6.2 | 3.7 |
| Symbolic | 58.4 | 35.7 | 29.4 | 38.2 | 35.5 | 28.3 | 29.9 | 32.0 | 26.6 | 24.2 | 27.1 | 25.8 |
| Moral | 25.2 | 21.7 | 17.5 | 22.5 | 19.6 | 20.5 | 17.5 | 19.0 | 26.6 | 30.7 | 35.0 | 32.0 |
| Other | 0.0 | 1.6 | 3.4 | 1.0 | 0.9 | 2.5 | 2.8 | 1.7 | 2.8 | 3.3 | 2.3 | 3.0 |

The "Religious" subgroup also tended to view the texts as "Spiritual" more often than the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups, with this difference being more prominent in the story of Abraham and less significant for the stories of Jacob and Ruth. Finally, the Bible excerpts were consistently regarded as "Historical" by 14.0% of the "Religious" subgroup for the stories of Abraham and Jacob and by 14.5% for Ruth, whereas the "Indifferent/Agnostic" and "Atheist" subgroups reported lower percentages for this category.

**4. Discussion and Future Research Pathways**

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis (Cohen et al. 2018; Bryman 2012) offer some cautious, non-generalizable insights—though still significant, as we shall discuss—regarding the sample's familiarity with biblical stories, as well as their preferences in terms of themes and narrative categories.

As a premise, it is relevant to underline that the sample predominantly consists of participants who attended TCR in secondary school (86.0%, Table 3) and have a Catholic background (82.5%, Table 4). Nonetheless, the sample's responses to item 47 ("Do you consider yourself:") were relatively evenly distributed among the options (Table 12). The results illustrate that the overall sample encompasses a broad range of religious identity positions, with the largest group identifying as "Indifferent/Agnostic" (28.0%), followed by "Religious" (24.5%) and "Curious" (22.0%). In addition, 7.1% of respondents selected the open-ended option "Other", suggesting that the provided alternatives did not fully capture their religious identity. Gender-related differences were also observed, with females tending to identify more as "Religious" and less as "Curious" than males, who showed the opposite trend. Furthermore, females appeared to define their religious identity as "Still uncertain" more frequently than males.

These findings—while not generalizable and only related to the characteristics of this incidental sample—open avenues for further investigation into young people's self-defined religious identity and the categories they use to define it (Bichi and Bignardi 2015; Matteo 2010). The plurality of educational outcomes and individual positionings in terms of self-defined religious identity might seem surprising if it is interpreted through the lens of a transmissive pedagogical model—where the students are expected to passively absorb contents, norms, and values transmitted to them by their teachers and educators (Moscato 2013). From this perspective, if one were to assess the effectiveness of religious education and TCR based solely on respondents' self-defined religious identity, there would be many reasons to declare the failure of Catholic education in Italy. However, it seems more appropriate for us to adopt a different interpretive paradigm—one that emphasizes the subject's development and maturation processes rather than the mere transmission of religious content. In this interpretive framework, the value of religious education does not rest on the outcome of religious contents' transmission but rather on the support of subjective meaning-making processes (Aletti 2018; Moscato 2022b, 2024).

Despite the strong Catholic background of the sample, familiarity with biblical narratives was found to be relatively low. Only 14.6% of respondents indicated that they had read some Bible narratives, and 9.9% reported knowing none (Table 5). Bible narratives were most commonly encountered during mass or catechism classes. This finding is consistent with the respondents' self-assessed knowledge of biblical excerpts. Just over half of the sample was familiar with the story of Abraham, about a quarter knew the story of Jacob, and only a small percentage knew the story of Ruth (Table 7). The limited familiarity with Old Testament texts may be attributed to Catholicism's historically limited emphasis on direct engagement with Scripture, a practice only actively encouraged following the Second Vatican Council (Paul VI 1965). In this context, a similar study conducted in a Protestant setting might gather significantly different results, which highlights the potential relevance of cross-national studies.

We identified some differences among the subgroups of respondents who defined their religious identity as "Religious", "Indifferent/Agnostic", or "Atheist". Those who identified as "Religious" showed greater familiarity and lower self-reported non-familiarity

with biblical stories than the "Atheist" and "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroups (Table 13). The differences are particularly pronounced for the story of Abraham but tend to diminish for the stories of Jacob and Ruth (Table 14). "Religious" respondents often defined the story of Abraham as a narrative of "The call/Vocation" and "Courage", while the "Atheist" and "Indifferent/agnostic" subgroups emphasized the theme of "The test" (Table 15). For the story of Jacob, "Religious" respondents selected the theme of "The overcoming of the test" more frequently than the other groups.

It could be hypothesized that the "Religious" subgroup, being generally more familiar with Bible stories (particularly Abraham, as shown in Table 14), may have had the opportunity to frame the excerpt on Abraham within the broader vocational context of the story of the character. They might also have been more attuned to recognizing the theme of "The test" in Jacob's story. This hypothesis, which cannot be proven with the data we collected here, could be further explored to examine whether, and to what extent, one's self-defined religious identity can influence one's interpretation of biblical texts—and potentially other literary sources.

Finally, with regard to narrative categories, some cross-cutting characteristics emerged across the different narratives. The "Mythical (Religious)" category was the most frequently selected in all subgroups, consistent with the overall sample (Table 16). "Atheist" and "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroups defined the Bible stories as "Mythical (Religious)" more often than the "Religious" subgroup, with a peak of 75.7% among the "Atheist" subgroup for the story of Abraham. This trend is particularly evident in the stories of Abraham and Jacob, though less pronounced for Ruth. In contrast, "Religious" respondents tended to view the stories of Abraham and Jacob as "Symbolic" more often than the self-defined "Atheist" and "Indifferent/Agnostic" subgroups (for Ruth, the percentages were similar across groups). Additionally, the "Religious" subgroup identified the stories as "Spiritual" more frequently than the other ones, particularly in the case of Abraham. These findings suggest potential avenues for further research exploring how young people interpret categories such as "Religious", "Mythical", "Spiritual", and "Symbolic", examining their connotations, possible meanings, their connections to young people's religious identity, and the role they play in attributing meaning to the world and oneself.

## Notes

[1] The selection of Old Testament narratives was guided by the possibility of comparisons with a previous study that examined the same stories (Gabbiadini 2017).

[2] These materials belong to various data sources and include case studies, student reports, and research activities carried out in schools for TCR teachers. The results provided insights on the fact that fantasy narrative cycles can have a high significance for adolescents and young adults, who often consider them not as mere stories but as existentially meaningful narratives.

[3] In Italian pedagogical and political culture, the topic of Catholic religious education has permeated the history of Italian schooling and has been closely intertwined with the history of Church–State relations since the Risorgimento. In the post-World War II era, teaching of Catholic religion (TCR) became a field of boundary and conflict between the dominant Catholic viewpoints and the anti-clerical secularism of the radical and Marxist cultural political forces (albeit with internal variations within each group) (see Caputo 2018). Following the revision of the *Lateran Pacts* (of 1929) in 1985, TCR gradually adopted new pedagogical characteristics, becoming more receptive to the demands of a multicultural society and its religious pluralism (Porcarelli 2022a, 2022b).

[4] From a pedagogical perspective that prioritizes the transmission of educational contents, the emergence of various self-defined religious identities among respondents with the same religious background may seem incomprehensible, or even a sort of educational failure. In contrast, a pedagogical perspective that emphasizes the inherent dynamisms of the educational process views diversity as a legitimate result of the individual's freedom to selectively interpret and filter the educational content they receive (Erikson 1964).

## References

Aletti, Mario. 2018. Psicologia, persona, religione: Una prospettiva psicodinamica. In *Oltre i "Paradigmi del Sospetto"? Religiosità e Scienze umane*. Edited by Michele Caputo. Milan: FrancoAngeli, pp. 52–82.

Aletti, Mario. 2022. La religiosità come oggetto della ricerca psicologica. In *La Religiosità Come Risorsa. Prospettive Multidisciplinari e Ricerca Pedagogica*. Edited by Michele Caputo. Milan: FrancoAngeli, pp. 83–108.

Bichi, Rita, and Paola Bignardi, eds. 2015. *Dio a Modo mio: Giovani e Fede in Italia*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2022. *Thematic Analysis. A Practical Guide*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli and Singapore: Sage.

Bruner, Jerome S. 1996. *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, Jerome S. 2002. *Making Stories. Law, Literature, Life*. London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bryman, Alan. 2012. *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cambi, Franco. 2010. La formazione dell'immaginario borghese nell'Ottocento. Dal nelodramma alla festa. Premessa per una ricerca (Incompiuta). *Studi Sulla Formazione* 13: 125–32.

Caputo, Michele. 2012. L'esperienza religiosa nella narrazione di sé. Scritture di studenti universitari. In *Crescere tra Vecchi e Nuovi dei. L'esperienza Religiosa in Prospettiva Multidisciplinare*. Edited by Maria Teresa Moscato, Rita Gatti and Michele Caputo. Rome: Armando, pp. 45–69.

Caputo, Michele. 2018. Rappresentazioni della religione e scienze umane: Una ermeneutica pedagogica. In *Oltre i "Paradigmi del Sospetto"? Religiosità e Scienze Umane*. Edited by Michele Caputo. Milan: FrancoAngeli, pp. 7–36.

Caputo, Michele. 2024. *Storie di Eroismi, di fede e di Magia Nell'immaginario Giovanile. Una Ricerca Esplorativa*. Bologna: Alma mater studiorum.

Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison. 2018. *Research Methods in Education*, 8th ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Erikson, Erik Homburger. 1964. *Insight and Responsibility*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Erikson, Erik Homburger. 1968. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Gabbiadini, Rosino. 2017. L'esperienza religiosa raccontata a partire dalla Bibbia. In *L'esperienza Religiosa. Linguaggi, Educazioni, Vissuti*. Edited by Maria Teresa Moscato, Michele Caputo, Rosino Gabbiadini, Giorgia Pinelli and Andrea Porcarelli. Milan: FrancoAngeli, pp. 110–47.

Matteo, Armando. 2010. *La Prima Generazione Incredula: Il Difficile Rapporto tra i Giovani e la Fede*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

Moscato, Maria Teresa. 1994. *Il Viaggio Come Metafora Pedagogica. Introduzione Alla Pedagogia Interculturale*. Brescia: La Scuola.

Moscato, Maria Teresa. 1998. *Il Sentiero nel Labirinto. Miti e Metafore nel Processo Educativo*. Brescia: La Scuola.

Moscato, Maria Teresa. 2013. *Preadolescenti a Scuola: Insegnare Nella Secondaria di Primo Grado*. Milan: Mondadori.

Moscato, Maria Teresa. 2022a. *I Figli di Medea. Conflitto Coniugale e Negazione Materna*. Milan: Mondadori.

Moscato, Maria Teresa. 2022b. Per una pedagogia della religione: Un itinerario. In *La Religiosità Come Risorsa. Prospettive Multidisciplinari e Ricerca Pedagogica*. Edited by Michele Caputo. Milan: FrancoAngeli, pp. 179–241.

Moscato, Maria Teresa. 2024. "Dare senso al mondo". La ragione aperta compito della scuola? *Nuova Secondaria Ricerca* 41: 171–85.

Moscato, Maria Teresa, Michele Caputo, Rosino Gabbiadini, Giorgia Pinelli, and Andrea Porcarelli, eds. 2017. *L'esperienza Religiosa. Linguaggi, Educazioni, Vissuti*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

Paul VI. 1965. *Dei Verbum*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed on 29 September 2024).

Porcarelli, Andrea. 2022a. *Religione a Scuola tra Ponti e Muri. Insegnare Religione in un Orizzonte Multiculturale*. Milan: FrancoAngeli.

Porcarelli, Andrea. 2022b. Religious teaching in a multicultural context: Some notes about the pedagogical debate in Italy. *Dirigenti Scuola* 41: 224–39.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1989. *The Conflict of Interpretation. Essays in Hermeneutics*. Edited by Don Ihde. London: The Athlone Press. First published 1969.

USCCB, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2002. *The New American Bible*. Washington, DC: USCCB. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM#fonte (accessed on 5 November 2024).