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The Impact of Religious Socialization on the Crisis of Faith: The Case of Young Turks in Türkiye

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of religious socialization on the crises of faith among Turkish youth in Türkiye. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 20 participants, it adopts a process-oriented approach, conceptualizing a crisis of faith not merely as an abrupt disruption but as a gradual process shaped by the complex and sometimes conflicting dynamics within religious socialization. Young individuals are not simply passive agents in the traditionally one-way transmission of faith; instead, they become more autonomous and dynamic as they encounter negative attitudes and behaviors, often leading to a crisis of faith. The analysis highlights the roles of authoritarian parenting, perceived inconsistencies in religious teachings, peer and social media influence, and gender inequalities within patriarchal contexts. The findings suggest that while religious socialization provides an initial framework for faith, it also poses challenges that prompt Turkish youth to re-evaluate or distance themselves critically from traditional religion.

Keywords: sociology of religion; crisis of faith; young Turks; religious doubt; authoritarian parenting; gender inequality

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1. Introduction

Religious socialization is a significant process for the transmission of beliefs, norms, and values from one generation to the next, traditionally focusing on the one-directional impact of parents and influential adult figures (Lövheim 2012). This model assumes a relatively stable and predictable process, in which parental authority and institutional support collectively contribute to the development of religious adherence and identification among youth (Sherkat 2003; Smith and Sikkink 2003). However, this classic model is under threat as young adults navigate a world characterized by greater autonomy, diverse social interactions, and pervasive digital influences (Armet 2009; Yapıcı 2020). Consequently, religious socialization is in flux, characterized by young people having greater authority over religion and belief (Sabe 2007). This tends to be initiated by exposure to diverse religious beliefs and practices, where received religion is brought under critical scrutiny and religion re-examined in response to the needs of contemporary society (Bartelink et al. 2024). This shift has generated trends across generations whereby conformity to conservative religious values diminishes, at times leading to faith crises through the phase of emerging adulthood (Hunsberger et al. 1993; Ton 1993). The challenges to traditional religious socialization are especially intense in cultures that are rapidly modernizing and increasingly exposed to pluralistic perspectives. This situation puts young people's experiences at the heart of important discussions in sociology about modernity and secularization. Even though contemporary analyses suggest a more detailed view of how religion is changing,

becoming more private, and sometimes even making a public resurgence (e.g., Casanova 1994; P. L. Berger 1999) the classical secularization thesis often posited a decline in religion's public influence due to rationalization and social differentiation (e.g., Wilson 1966; Bruce 2002). The process of religious socialization, therefore, becomes a key site where these large-scale societal transformations are negotiated at the individual level. This context challenges the usefulness of one-way transmission models of religious socialization (Smith and Sikkink 2003), and so it is necessary to re-examine the influence of primary and secondary agents—families, schools, and media—on the religious attitudes and beliefs of adolescents in these new contexts. Because of this, the traditional understanding of religious socialization in terms of the one-way transmission is less pertinent, and therefore, it is extremely important to examine how the primary and secondary agents influence the religious attitudes and beliefs of adolescents.

This research investigates how young Turks, navigating a unique socio-religious landscape, negotiate between societal expectations rooted in Islamic tradition and their agency (Giddens 1990; Archer 1997). This negotiation can lead to religious disaffiliation or, conversely, a reaffirmation of faith through a process of critical evaluation. While religious socialization and crises of faith have been investigated separately, their intricate interconnection—i.e., how the strict religious rules taught in the family can conflict with the different values encountered in the outside world, leading to a crisis of faith—has been overlooked. This study bridges this gap by examining how individuals undergoing Islamic religious socialization in Türkiye experience questioning, doubt, and disillusionment within religious communities' teachings and hierarchies, leading to a crisis of faith—a process of re-evaluation potentially resulting in disaffiliation. This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of young Turkish adults (aged 18–25) who have undergone religious socialization, experienced a crisis of faith, and are no longer in such a crisis. This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of individual perspectives and the complex interplay of factors contributing to faith development and questioning (Louise Barriball and While 1994).

An appreciation of the religious socialization processes in Türkiye requires an understanding of the country's unique socio-religious environment. This study will examine the roles of the family (Aydın 2003; Arslan 2006), educational institutions, broader social environments, and mass media (Haberli 2023) in the transmission and reinforcement of Islamic religious values and beliefs within the Turkish context. Focusing on Turkish youth who have undergone formal and informal Islamic religious education and a prior crisis of religion, this study aims to shed new light on the interplay between religion and identity in a rapidly modernizing but firmly rooted society with its Islamic tradition. The findings will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious change in contemporary Türkiye by examining the intersection of religious socialization, faith crises, and identity formation through a qualitative lens.

2. Religious Socialization and Crisis of Faith

Religious socialization is a dynamic, reciprocal process (Lövheim 2012) in which various social agents influence individuals' religious beliefs and understandings over their lifetimes, leading to the development and adoption of religious preferences (Sherkat 2003). This relationship between socialization and identity formation is crucial, as parenting styles aimed at instilling religious values are significantly shaped by the interconnectedness of family and religious institutions (Smith and Sikkink 2003). The mechanisms of parental socialization include intentional and explicit processes (Klingenberg and Sjö 2019) as well as modeling (Beider 2023). Although parents serve as significant predictors in the transmission of faith, studies on religious socialization have also highlighted the influence of secondary

socialization agents, such as formal and non-formal religious educational institutions, religious groups/communities, peers, and media (Martin et al. 2003; Lövheim 2012; Cohen-Malayev et al. 2014; Güngör 2015; Golo et al. 2019; Klingenberg and Sjö 2019; Costu and Kocalan 2021). The channeling theory is of the view that parents continue to impact the socialization of their children by directing them into these second-order socialization agencies that reinforce and affirm their religious beliefs and adherence to religious norms (Himmelfarb 1980; Cornwall and Thomas 1988; Martin et al. 2003; Vaidyanathan 2011).

However, religious socialization does not necessarily lead to the intended outcome of unwavering commitment to traditional religious ideas. In fact, the conditions of modernity itself alter the context in which socialization occurs. In late modernity, as Anthony Giddens (1991) describes it, there is a process of "detraditionalization," in which traditions lose their inherent authority and individuals are pushed to construct reflexively their own identities. This creates a fertile ground for questioning inherited beliefs. Within this context, religious socialization attempts to transfer some religious values and norms, but it is affected by various factors that can lead to a variety of outcomes, including critical reassessment of religion. These also encompass parenting values and parenting goals (Hunt 2005; Regnerus and Uecker 2006; Armet 2009; Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi 2019; Golo et al. 2019), coercing children to conform to religious practice and belief (Dudley 1978; Mahoney 2005; Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi 2019; Barrow et al. 2020), the quality of religious socialization (Groen and Vermeer 2013; Klingenberg and Sjö 2019; Golo et al. 2019), children being misconceived as objects for socialization and not as active agents (Lövheim 2012), and the autonomy needed by young adults (Arnett and Jensen 2002; Yapıcı 2020).

Therefore, a crisis of faith can be seen not necessarily as a failure of religious socialization, but as a potential outcome of a complex interplay between individual agency and social influences. The success of religious socialization should not be solely defined by adherence to traditional beliefs but rather understood as a process that shapes and reshapes religious beliefs over time, influenced by both internal reflection and external interactions.

Furthermore, the secondary religious socialization agents possess the capacity to either bolster or model religious views and practices or undermine them in cases where the norms inherent in these agents diverge from those upheld within the familial or religious contexts of the children (Golo et al. 2019). In particular, peer influence and the media should not be underestimated, given that these agents prefer to provide alternative worldviews that contradict religious traditional perspectives (Martin et al. 2003; Cohen-Malayev et al. 2014). Consequently, these forces can facilitate critical attitudes towards religious practices and teachings and towards questioning religious transmission agents' attitudes and actions. This trajectory, fraught with tensions, can take the form of religious skepticism, faith crisis, and final disaffiliation from mainstream religion. In this context, the increasing prevalence of "religious nones" and the rise of hybrid religious forms highlight the shift in religious belonging, especially among the younger generation (Novak et al. 2024). Even those who remain affiliated with traditional religious communities must increasingly navigate between secular and religious spheres (Luckmann 1967).

A crisis of faith is defined as a profound sense of disconnection from an existential foundation, leading to disruptions in both psychological and functional aspects of individuals' lives. Individuals often grapple with doubt and engage in a profound questioning of their faith (Smith 1990; Ton 1993). The primary factor leading to a crisis of faith is religious doubt. It is a sense of uncertainty or questioning of religious teachings and faiths, and an integral part of every individual's faith (Hunsberger et al. 1993). In some cases, doubt may involve questioning or challenging specific teachings in religious traditions or sacred texts that are considered necessary and therefore unquestionable. In such instances, individuals may become disconnected from religious practices and/or communities and experience

disappointment (Adhami 2017). Alternatively, challenges such as the negative approaches, attitudes, and behaviors of agents in the process of religious transmission may be crucial in sustaining, altering, or abandoning one's belief.

3. Turkish Context

To contextualize the religious socialization of Turkish youth, it is essential to outline Türkiye's current religious landscape with quantitative data. Recent nationwide studies reveal a society that remains predominantly religious but is undergoing significant shifts in belief and practice, particularly among younger generations. A comprehensive 2023 study found that 94.3% of the population identifies as believers in God, with 85.7% expressing no doubts about their faith. However, a notable 8.6% report believing in God despite having some doubts, and 5.7% identify as atheist, agnostic, or deist. This landscape of belief does not translate uniformly into practice. While a significant majority (75%) reports regularly fasting during Ramadan, only 39% of the adult population engages in regular daily prayer (Nişancı 2023).

These general statistics mask critical generational divides that are central to this study. The proportion of individuals identifying as "pious" or "very pious" rises sharply with age, from 47% in the 18–24 age group to 80% among those aged 65 and over. Conversely, religious practice is markedly lower among the youth; only one-fifth (20%) of individuals under 25 reports praying regularly (Nişancı 2023). This trend is further corroborated by findings from a longitudinal study using a different methodology. Data from the prominent Turkish polling firm KONDA Research and Consultancy (2025) similarly points to a decline in self-identified "pious" individuals (from 55% in 2008 to 46% in 2025) alongside a notable rise in those identifying as "atheist or non-believer" (from 2% to 8%). Although overall belief rates remain high, these shifts in piety, coupled with weakening practices and a distinct generational gap, create a potential area of tension, especially for young people. While this quantitative data shows what is happening, it cannot explain how young individuals experience this complex landscape and navigate their doubts and crises of faith. This study, therefore, aims to fill this specific gap by qualitatively exploring the socialization processes that underlie the crises of faith experienced by youth.

This diverging religious landscape unfolds within Türkiye's distinctive socio-political context, where modernization and globalization have profoundly reshaped the transmission of values. Understanding how Turkish youth navigate their faith, as highlighted by the data above, requires an examination of the primary agents of socialization that operate within this interplay of tradition and modernity. Consequently, the analysis now turns to the key actors that constitute this process within the Turkish context: the family, educational institutions, the social environment, and mass media.

The family occupies a central position in religious socialization in Türkiye. As the primary agent responsible for the initial transmission of religious knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, parents ensure the conveyance of religious values, practices, and preferences (Günay 1999). Empirical studies in the Turkish context corroborate the significance of familial relationships, emotional bonds, and parental guidance in effectively transmitting religious values (Aydın 2003; Arslan 2006). Parental behaviors and attitudes serve as crucial models that shape the development of children's religious identities (Costu 2011). Extended family members, such as siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, further contribute to this process (Park and Ecklund 2007; Costu and Kocalan 2021). However, it is argued that higher levels of parental education correlate with a perception of religion as restrictive, subsequently increasing religious doubts among young people (Çayır 2014). This is particularly evident among youth raised in families that embrace modern and

secular values. Okumuş (2014) highlights that these diverse family dynamics significantly reshape religious socialization processes.

Educational institutions also wield considerable influence on religious socialization through both formal and informal channels. Within the secular framework where secularism is accepted as a fundamental principle of national education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı 1973), the course "Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge" is legally compulsory in all primary and secondary education institutions. School curricula on this mandatory course and Quran courses, overseen by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), constitute a vital component of formal religious education, primarily aiming to impart elements of religious culture (Costu and Kocalan 2021). Conversely, Imam-Hatip schools and Faculties of Theology provide more intensive and specialized religious instruction, exerting a formative influence on religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Arslan 2006). Founded in the 1950s, Imam-Hatip schools are official educational institutions integrated within the state education system, providing both a general education curriculum and a distinct Islamic education curriculum. The curriculum encompasses common courses (such as Mathematics, Physics, and Social Studies) alongside vocational Islamic education courses (such as the Holy Qur'an, Arabic, and the Biography of the Prophet). Graduates of Imam-Hatip schools gain access to both the same university programs as graduates from general education high schools and unique public service opportunities, including positions within the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) as imams, muezzins, preachers, and Qur'an course instructors. (Karakaya et al. 2023) suggest that the growing prominence of Imam-Hatip schools reinforces religious identities among Turkish youth. However, some students develop a critical perspective toward religious dogmas due to the curriculum and teaching methods employed in these institutions. Informal religious education occurs in mosques and surrounding areas, where sermons, ceremonies, and services contribute to participants' religious formation. Religious organizations affiliated with diverse groups also engage in social, cultural, and educational activities that shape religious socialization (Costu 2011).

The broader social environment exerts a significant influence on religious socialization. Interactions with peers and social collectives have a formative impact on religious identity construction. Research indicates that various Turkish individuals within these social spheres—including school friends, neighborhood acquaintances, colleagues, religious instructors, clergy, and other religious figures—exert varying degrees of influence on individuals' religious attitudes and behaviors (Costu and Kocalan 2021). Yapıcı (2020) finds that peer interactions influence youth to embrace diverse forms of religiosity or, conversely, to experience religious doubt. Okumuş (2014) emphasizes that the homogeneity or heterogeneity of peer groups significantly shapes religious identity; homogeneous groups strengthen existing beliefs, whereas heterogeneous groups foster critical re-evaluation by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives.

Mass media assume an increasingly intricate role in religious socialization within the Turkish context. The widespread accessibility and use of digital technologies among young people fosters a distinct mode of socialization (Haberli 2023). Turkish society demonstrates a notable inclination toward religious publications across various media platforms (Costu 2011). However, exposure to religious content on social media may trigger religious doubts among young people, particularly concerning the physical world and the metaphysical dimension. Furthermore, religious discussions and differing interpretations on social media can lead young people to question their religious beliefs and experience crises of faith.

Thus, religious socialization in Türkiye is a multifaceted process shaped by the interplay of family, educational institutions, social environment, and mass media. Understanding the specific characteristics and dynamics of these actors in the Turkish context is essential for analyzing religious tendencies and promoting positive religious development.

Considering the prevalent feeling of being misunderstood and pressured by adults, there is a need to prioritize young people's religious experiences and to intensify efforts to understand their religious doubts and faith crises. Accordingly, listening to young people's voices and approaching their religious inquiries with greater openness and understanding is crucial (Doğanay 2023).

However, a critical review of the existing literature reveals a gap in understanding this complex interplay through the lens of religious socialization processes. An examination of existing studies reveals that research on religious beliefs and doubts among youth primarily relies on quantitative methods or literature reviews, adopting snapshot assessments (e.g., Çayır 2014; Bayrakdar et al. 2017; Karakaya et al. 2023), and is mainly conducted by religious psychologists and educators (e.g., Çayır 2014; Bayrakdar et al. 2017; Yapıcı 2020; Doğanay 2023). While these studies concentrate on identifying the psychological and pedagogical factors influencing youth's religious beliefs and doubts, they insufficiently address the dynamic impact of the religious socialization process and its societal dimensions. This study aims to fill this gap by examining religious socialization and the influence of primary and secondary actors, particularly the family, on youth's religious doubts and crises of faith through a process-oriented sociological approach. Unlike snapshot assessments that capture a single moment in time, this process-oriented framework analyzes religious socialization as a dynamic and evolving journey. It focuses on how young people interact with, negotiate, and sometimes resist the religious values transmitted by family, education, and other agents over time. Consequently, it emphasizes that young people are not passive recipients but active agents who develop reactions and construct their religious identities.

Building upon these contextual specifics, there is a clear necessity for a meticulously designed methodology to thoroughly explore the impact of religious socialization on Turkish youths' experiences with the crisis of faith. The following section will elaborate on the methodology employed in this study.

4. Methodology

This study explores the impact of religious socialization on the crisis of faith through the lived experiences of young Turks. Instead of positing hypotheses regarding how individuals might react to or cope with a crisis of faith, it is deemed most fitting to adopt a methodology conducive to the exploration of the main themes and patterns within lived experiences. Thus, this study, anchored in a qualitative research framework, comprises semi-structured in-depth interviews. The rationale behind this methodological selection stemmed from its capacity to facilitate an exhaustive examination of participants' perspectives and encounters about the intricate and delicate phenomenon of a crisis of faith, enabling a nuanced analysis and elucidation of responses (Louise Barriball and While 1994). In other words, this method allows a more profound exploration and interpretation of participants' experiences and feelings of religious socialization in the context of a crisis of faith, without imposing preconceived ideas and feelings on them.

The research adopts an ontological stance grounded in anti-foundationalism, recognizing reality as socially constructed and shaped by both individual and collective contexts (Berger and Luckmann 1991) rather than as something objectively determined (Carson et al. 2001). This perspective acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, each influenced by diverse viewpoints, underscoring the need to explore how individuals construct and interpret their experiences of faith and doubt (Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Therefore, understanding behavior or events requires recognizing the social context in which they occur, as meaning is derived from this contextual construction. From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is also seen as being constructed rather than discovered. This epistemological stance emphasizes the importance of reflexivity, where the researcher remains aware of

their positionality and influence on the research process and how knowledge is shaped (Merton 1972; R. Berger 2013; Carling et al. 2014). As a male academic specializing in the sociology of religion affiliated with a public university in Türkiye, I recognize that my positionality may have influenced the research process. My expertise provided a framework for understanding nuanced religious concepts, yet it also required constant vigilance against imposing preconceived interpretations. Throughout the interviews and analysis, I sought to prioritize participants' authentic experiences and minimize potential bias through iterative reflection.

Data collection for this study took place between 5 April and 17 June 2023. The research involved 20 participants aged 18 to 25 from Istanbul and Ankara. The initial recruitment was conducted through a multi-pronged purposeful sampling strategy. To access the initial pool of participants, we utilized our professional and personal networks and posted announcements on various social media platforms and online forums popular among young adults in Türkiye. This combined approach was deliberately chosen to reach a diverse pool of individuals, ensuring they met the following criteria: having undergone religious socialization, having experienced a crisis of faith, and not currently being in such a crisis. Following this, snowball sampling was also employed. All interviews were conducted in Turkish by the researcher, lasted about an hour and was recorded with the participants' consent. Quotes presented in this paper were translated into English by the researcher. Pseudonyms[1] were assigned to maintain anonymity. The coding and thematic analysis were conducted solely by the researcher using NVivo software to uncover key patterns related to the crisis of faith (Ritchie et al. 2003; Joffe and Yardley 2004). The identified themes encapsulate the essential elements of the data pertinent to the research questions. These themes were developed through a data-driven inductive approach (Boyatzis 1998; Thomas 2006). The inductive approach facilitates the analysis of qualitative data, guided by specific evaluation objectives or questions, thereby identifying domains and topics to be investigated. Its main purpose is to allow research findings to emerge directly from the themes arising from the data, rather than being constrained by a priori theoretical expectations or models (Thomas 2006).

The process of inductive coding commenced with a thorough reading of the interview transcripts. Initial themes were developed through multiple readings of the transcripts, considering the possible meanings inherent in the data and their alignment with developing themes. In inductive coding, categories are typically created from actual phrases or meanings in specific text segments (Thomas 2006). During the analysis, specific themes were developed by capturing core messages reported by respondents. For example, the theme of "authoritarian upbringing" emerged prominently, with many participants attributing their alienation from religion to the strict, conservative values of their parents, particularly their fathers. Other initial themes included "forced religious education," "peer questioning," "media influence," "the role of religious groups," "inconsistency of religious teachers," and "gender inequality." To ensure a comprehensive reflection of the participants' views, additional inductive themes were designated and applied to the text, thereby expanding upon the initial framework (Creswell 2012).

To provide a more nuanced understanding of the participants, further details regarding their socio-demographic backgrounds and religious trajectories are pertinent. The majority of participants were university students, with others being high school graduates or having completed their university education. Among the graduates, professions included teachers, textile workers, nurses, police officers, and retail employees. In terms of religious socialization, most participants described their parents as religious individuals who practiced their faith (e.g., praying regularly, fasting). However, some participants also reported having secular parents. A common experience was that parents had sent

their children to mosques or religious communities for religious education during their childhood. Some participants specifically mentioned that their fathers were still actively involved in various religious communities.

Regarding their current religious stances, a significant portion of the participants identified as deists, while some indicated that they had experienced a crisis of faith but had since reconciled with traditional religion. In addition, a subset of participants identified as secular, agnostic, or atheist, reflecting a spectrum of perspectives ranging from detachment from organized religion to a disbelief in or uncertainty regarding the existence or nature of God. These diverse religious positions highlight the complex and varied outcomes of religious socialization and the subsequent negotiation of faith among young Turks. The study acknowledges these differences and aims to explore how these varying religious stances shape their experiences and perspectives on faith and doubt.

Given the emotionally sensitive nature of faith crises, ethical guidelines strictly adhered to safeguard participants' well-being (Wellings et al. 2000; Kong et al. 2002; Liamputtong 2007). In examining the experiences of individuals who have faced such crises, it is essential to uphold ethical standards that prioritize their well-being while minimizing their vulnerability. Before conducting interviews, participants were fully informed of their autonomy in the research process. They were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time, raise concerns, ask questions, or refuse to answer any questions that might cause discomfort. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

5. Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the crisis of faith among young Turkish participants is not a singular event, but a complex process deeply rooted in their socialization experiences. This complexity is directly reflected in the diverse trajectories of the twenty participants: thirteen identified with non-theistic labels (five deists, four atheists, four agnostics), while the remaining seven reported having reconciled with and reconstructed their religious beliefs after significant crises.

A closer look at the demographics of these two groups reveals notable patterns that inform the subsequent analysis. The non-theistic group was predominantly male (ten out of thirteen) and largely university-educated (eleven out of thirteen). In contrast, the group that reconciled with their faith had a more balanced gender distribution (four women and three men) and a higher representation of individuals from rural or conservative family backgrounds.

The following thematic sections explore key aspects of the socialization processes contributing to these diverse outcomes. These themes include (1) authoritarian upbringing within the family, (2) the influence of peers and religious inquiry, (3) ethical conflicts arising from the perceived hypocrisy of religious teachers, and (4) navigating gender inequality within patriarchal religious contexts.

5.1. Faith Under Pressure: Authoritarian Upbringing

The respondents in this study consistently expressed that their parents provided educational and directive guidance related to religious beliefs, values, and practices. However, a significant number of them credited their alienation from religion to the strict, conservative values upheld by their parents, particularly their fathers. For instance, Sema, a deist, explained that her father's authoritarian style of parenting was a major factor in her crisis of faith:

> *Instead of actually talking to me about all this religious stuff, he just laid down the law… And to be honest, he didn't even act like a real dad. It was always, "Pray! Do this! Do*

> *that!" Like I was some kind of robot or something. I mean, what was I supposed to do when someone like him told me to pray? I just went along with it and played along. But deep down? Oh, I was fuming (Sema).*

Sema's experience elucidates the inherent conflict between authoritarian parenting and effective religious socialization. Her description of feeling like a "robot" reveals a sense of dehumanization, where religious practice was stripped of its spiritual meaning and reduced to a series of mechanical commands. This process fostered a hidden but intense anger ("deep down? Oh, I was fuming"), transforming her relationship with her father and, by extension, with the faith he imposed, into one of silent opposition and emotional alienation. This individual experience, where the imposition of a religious framework by an authoritarian father figure collided with a developing personal identity, ultimately leading to its rejection, is consistent with broader empirical observations. For instance, a recent study by Bilecik (2017) and (Bozdagan et al. 2025) similarly found that non-religious individuals often reported having parents with authoritarian attitudes.

Harun, also a deist, echoed a similar sentiment: "...It felt like a persistent imposition of religious rules. He did not engage in dialog or solicit my opinion. Rather than rendering religion appealing, his attempts to force it upon me engendered aversion." Harun's narrative underscores the phenomenon of forced religiosity. His father's religious coercion, devoid of reciprocal dialog, exemplifies a unidirectional form of religious socialization, wherein the child is treated as an object rather than an active participant in faith development (Lövheim 2012). This coercive dynamic, which reduced him to a passive recipient, directly produced a strong feeling of aversion, demonstrating a clear causal link between the method of religious transmission and his subsequent rejection of it.

Some interviewees suggested that the oppressive and authoritarian attitudes of their father negatively affected their well-being, as well as that of other family members, thereby fostering a climate of repression and fear. Meryem, who attributed her alienation from religion and subsequent secularity to her father's attitudes and behaviors, explained this observation with especial lucidity. She described the tense atmosphere within her home:

> *My mum was really messed up and on antidepressants. Why? Because of her supposedly religious husband. She was terrified of him. The thing is, she wore a headscarf and even attended these religious classes where she learned about the Quran, how to pray, and all the Islamic morals. But you could tell she seemed much freer when my dad wasn't around. As soon as he walked through the door, though, he'd cause all sorts of conflict. Honestly! My dad's the reason I started doubting religion (Meryem).*

Meryem's account illustrates the strong emotional and psychological impacts of authoritarian religious socialization within the family context. Her assertion, "My dad's the reason I started doubting religion," highlights that her crisis of faith was not an abstract theological disagreement but a direct emotional response to lived experience. For Meryem, this dynamic engendered internal conflict, prompting her to question aspects of her inherited faith and seek understanding beyond her father's directives.

Being forced to attend an Imam Hatip school was another issue where strict parenting was evident in the participants' narratives. This unilateral decision, imposed upon them, often represented a critical moment where parental control directly conflicted with the child's developing sense of self and future aspirations. This process not only reflects the parents' effort to maintain control over their children's religious education but also shows how such actions can hinder the development of authentic religious identities. The initial responses of these participants to questions regarding their religious socialization in the family demonstrate that this situation had a significant impact on their lives. Mehmet, a theology graduate with deistic beliefs, recounted how he was forced into an Imam-Hatip

high school due to his parents' pressure and expectations, despite his different aspirations: "After completing secondary school, my parents insisted on me going to an Imam-Hatip high school, which I resisted as I had different aspirations. I was aware that completion of this school would lead to parental pressure to pursue theology at university, which subsequently occurred." He also explained that, when faced with the conflict between his wishes and his parents' expectations, he tried to gain more independence by suggesting a compromise to his mother. He said, "I resented being coerced by my parents. I negotiated with my mother, agreeing to remain at the school for one year before transferring to a school of my choosing. This agreement, however, was not honored." Bekir, a self-described agnostic, similarly emphasized the restrictive environment he experienced during his upbringing, particularly concerning family dynamics:

> *I was enrolled at Imam Hatip Secondary School. In all honesty, I did not desire to attend, but I lacked the courage to express my feelings. I felt as though I had no right to voice complaints. My elder siblings had similar experiences. My father even compelled them to study theology, while simultaneously prohibiting them from relocating to another city. Whenever discord arose within the household, silence prevailed. My father would assert his dominance through yelling and screaming, and ultimately, his will prevailed (Bekir).*

Bekir's account reflects the restrictive and authoritarian family environment he experienced, particularly concerning religious expectations. His agnostic identity suggests a rejection of the strict religious upbringing imposed upon him, indicating that rigid, authoritarian family structures can stifle open dialog and personal autonomy. Ali, an atheist, attributed his reluctance to enroll in an Imam Hatip school to the portrayal of a punitive deity instilled during religious socialization in early childhood. Nonetheless, he "had to enroll in this school" due to his authoritarian parents:

> *When I was a kid, I thought God was like an old man with a beard and a turban. To be honest, I was brought up to be very afraid—like, if you did something wrong, God would get you. I just thought of God as someone who was always punishing you. It was a fear my parents put into me. I'd always be thinking about where I could hide so God couldn't see me and punish me. Even when I was 14 or 15, I was still struggling with that fear. I thought if I didn't go to that school [Imam Hatip school], I wouldn't have to think about all this stuff so much. But I couldn't change their minds. They forced me into it. But now, though, I'm completely free from that fear of God [laughs] (Ali).*

His depiction of God as a punitive figure, specifically as "an old man with a beard and a turban," reflects a markedly anthropomorphic and culturally specific image of divinity (Barrett 2004). Such a depiction is not uncommon in traditional religious socialization, wherein God is often portrayed as a distant, authoritarian figure. Ali's account underscores how parental influence can instill a sense of fear rather than love or spiritual connection. The "a fear my parents put into me" suggests that Ali's religious education was centered on obedience and punishment. The emotional burden of living under this constant fear of divine punishment likely contributed to his crisis of faith. His declaration, "I'm completely free from that fear of God" followed by laughter, suggests a resolution—albeit perhaps cynical—of his crisis. The laughter may signify a combination of relief and bitterness at his eventual rejection of the fearful, authoritarian conception of God that had dominated his earlier life.

5.2. Faith Under Question: Peers and Religious Inquiry

Although parents are crucial figures in religious socialization, their impact is continuously linked with other socialization agents, indicating that children gather information from multiple sources. Peers are one such agent, and they can either reaffirm conventional

attitudes or lead individuals to doubt and possibly deviate from them. During the interviews, a number of the participants discussed how their friends motivated them to doubt. Kadir's development from initial doubt to further investigation, for example, indicates how religious socialization is a changing and continuous process influenced by peer impact outside of family and formal religious education.

> *When I was at secondary school, I had this friend who was an atheist and really into philosophy books. I was a big reader as well, but philosophy wasn't really my thing. After he finished every book, he'd somehow steer the conversation onto things like the universe and existence. At first, I just shut him down. I'd throw in answers from religion to counter his points. But he never stopped questioning me or trying to convince me he was right. That time was tough for me because I started doubting God's existence. I took my questions to my religious teachers, and they gave me answers that made sense. But every time I talked to my friend, those same doubts would creep back in (Kadir).*

This account exemplifies the profound impact that peer influence and philosophical questioning can exert on individuals' faith journeys. Given that religious socialization is a reciprocal and ongoing process (Lövheim 2012), peer influence can introduce doubts that may not be readily dispelled by traditional religious teachings. In Kadir's case, his religious education (i.e., consulting his religious teachers) served as a buffer against complete unbelief, but it was not enough to remove his persistent doubts. The conflict between his peers' persistent questioning and the responses of his religious educators shows how peer pressure can undermine confidence established by prior socialization agents, creating a state of inner turmoil for Kadir. This psychological discomfort, arising from holding inconsistent beliefs, often leads individuals to seek a resolution, like questioning their faith. Despite his peers' skepticism, Kadir later reconciled with his religious heritage. His journey suggests that peer pressure can question religious belief, yet can also, in some cases, lead to a consolidation of one's faith when paired with affirming educational systems and personal reflection. Kadir's experience powerfully shows how the persistent questioning of friends can directly challenge and undermine the religious beliefs instilled by family and religious educators.

Burak was another participant in the study who, despite being influenced by an atheist peer, ultimately achieved reconciliation with his religious tradition:

> *It all started back in secondary school. One day, a friend of mine who was an atheist brought up religion. That was when the first seeds of doubt were planted in my mind. He asked, "The religion you follow allows a man to have four wives. How can you look up to someone like the Prophet, who had multiple wives?" At that time, I didn't know enough to respond. It made me start questioning things. I began to wonder how a religion could allow that, and how a man could have four wives. So, I started reading Quranic verses and looking up tafsir books for more answers. But the more we talked, the more I looked into it. Around that time, I saw Facebook posts about atheism and why some people choose to be atheists. I began reading through them, and it made me question whether I truly understood Islam. I wasn't completely distant from religion, but I found myself in a place of doubt. And this whole process even led me to wonder if a creator existed (Burak).*

Burak's narrative illustrates the complex nature of religious socialization, where interactions with peers mix with social media exposure. His friend's criticism of Islamic teachings, particularly regarding polygamy, sparked his doubts. This shows how alternative viewpoints can prompt significant questioning. Burak's engagement with social media discussions about atheism reveals that digital platforms can provide spaces where people can examine religious beliefs often without family guidance or formal religious education.

Studies on religious socialization in Türkiye suggest that digital platforms have become critical for young people to engage with their religion and form their spiritual identities, and the accessibility of various interpretations and critiques of religious teachings online may undermine the authority of traditional religious leaders and institutions (Ayaz 2024). This accelerates a shift away from traditional structures. This happens because traditional gatekeepers of religious knowledge (like parents and religious teachers) are no longer the only ones who can explain it. Hence, someone like Burak could begin to question what he once considered unquestionable truths. This builds on Kadir's experience by demonstrating how social media can expand peer influence beyond face-to-face encounters, complicating an individual's process of religious inquiry and possible crisis of faith.

In both cases, peer influence prompts a reassessment of faith. The experiences in our study suggest that religious socialization is not a fixed process confined to the family, but is actively reshaped through external interactions. Specifically, interactions with peers and media emerge as powerful forces in this process. These interactions can introduce new worldviews, which can lead to critical attitudes toward religious teachings. This emphasizes the need to consider the broader social context that shapes how people form and maintain their religious beliefs as they navigate various influences on their spiritual journeys.

5.3. Faith Under Dissonance: Hypocrisy, Ethical Conflicts, and Religious Teachers

The perceived hypocrisy of some religious teachers emerged as a salient factor contributing to religious doubt among participants. While external influences, such as peers, can introduce initial questions and alternative perspectives, the perceived integrity and consistency of religious teachers often serve as a critical touchstone for the young individuals in this study navigating complex belief systems. This section explores how specific instances of perceived hypocrisy, ethical conflicts arising from religious discourse, and inadequate responses to theological inquiries can create a significant dissonance, ultimately undermining faith and prompting a re-evaluation of religious identity.

For instance, İbrahim, whose parents hold secular views, enrolled in Imam Hatip High School due to his interest in religious studies. He described the attitudes and discourses of his religious teachers on certain issues as lacking sincerity:

> *I never really believed my teachers were being genuine, especially one woman. I remember she was always going on about how we had to follow really strict religious rules. She'd go on about how boys and girls shouldn't even talk to each other, not even say hello, because it could lead to fitnah (temptation). I couldn't understand why just being friends with girls was considered a fitnah. When we asked her why, all she'd say was that it would lead to sin, but never really explained it, did she? What got to me, though, was that she, a woman, was teaching a class full of men. I said to her once, "You're in the same room as us, so it's wrong for you to be here. By your own logic, we should only have male teachers." She just said, "Yeah, it's a sin, but I'm here to teach you." All of it bothered me, and I ended up arguing with the teachers quite a bit. Looking back, it just felt like hypocrisy to me, didn't it? (İbrahim).*

İbrahim's account reflects a critical tension between religious teachings and the perceived inconsistencies in their application. Initially, this skepticism might focus on non-essential aspects of religious tradition, but over time, it can evolve into doubts about core religious principles, including one's perception of God. As Ibrahim recounted, his negative view of religion began with the perceived insincerity of his teachers, which extended to the religious topics discussed in class. This highlights how perceived hypocrisy or inconsistency in religious authority figures can erode their credibility, fostering religious doubt and skepticism (Cohen-Malayev et al. 2014). Specifically, İbrahim's account of his

teacher's rigid insistence on gender separation, while disregarding her actions, exemplifies this perceived hypocrisy.

Selim, who reconciled with traditional religion after the crisis of faith, also pointed out the problematic nature of the Imam Hatip teachers' religious discourse. When I asked him if he could give an example for this, he mentioned a teacher who "went beyond the curriculum":

> *He said, "Child marriage is acceptable if the girl is sixteen years old." And that made me think, what sort of religion is that, then? It's what got me questioning religion in general. It wasn't just about this one thing, but religion as a whole. It felt a bit like an insult to religion. . . For me, anyone who calls themselves a Muslim should be against something like that. But sadly, some people try to justify it by hiding behind Islam, isn't that so? (Selim).*

Selim's account highlights a moral and ethical conflict sparked by a religious leader's endorsement of child marriage. The statement that "Child marriage is acceptable if the girl is sixteen years old" not only challenged Selim's perception of religious teachings but also led him to a broader critique of Islam itself. His questioning demonstrates the profound effect that such a controversial issue can have on one's faith, revealing how a specific social or religious practice can destabilize a believer's relationship with their religion. The narrative illustrates the tension between personal values and religious interpretations, particularly when sensitive issues, such as child marriage, are justified under the guise of religious doctrine. The view that "anyone who calls themselves a Muslim should be against something like that" shows his belief in a moral interpretation of Islam that contrasts with what he perceives as a manipulative use of religion to justify harmful practices. The critique underscores the importance of ethical consistency in religious practice and its impact on faith retention.

Ayşe, who considered herself a deist, highlighted the issue of receiving unsatisfactory answers to the questions she posed to her religious teacher during the period she was experiencing a crisis of faith:

> *I asked my religious teacher many times about certain things that didn't make sense to me. But he couldn't give me any satisfactory answers. Instead, he'd just say stuff like, "You just have to take a step back and say, 'God knows best.' Just believe, and you'll find peace." I'll never forget that (Ayşe).*

Ayşe's narrative reveals a significant aspect of her faith crisis: the inadequacy of responses she received from her religious teacher when she sought clarification on confusing aspects of her beliefs. Her experience reflects a broader concern that we observed among several participants undergoing similar crises of faith, where the expectation of meaningful dialog is met with dismissal or vague reassurances. The teacher's response, emphasizing faith without questioning and deferring to divine knowledge, can be seen as a common response among those who feel uncomfortable addressing the complexities of religious belief. This interaction illustrates the tension between personal inquiry and the authority of religious educators. Ayşe's insistence on seeking understanding contrasts sharply with the teacher's directive to accept beliefs uncritically. Such responses may leave individuals feeling frustrated and alienated, as they seek validation for their doubts and a deeper engagement with their beliefs. Ultimately, her experience underscores the necessity for religious educators to cultivate environments where questioning is encouraged and addressed thoughtfully, fostering a more resilient and informed faith perspective among their students.

5.4. Faith Under Gender Inequality: Navigating Religious Dynamics in a Patriarchal Context

Experiencing religious doubt due to gender roles and religious practices in society constituted another recurring theme within the data. For instance, Leyla, who reconciled with traditional religion after experiencing a crisis of faith, articulated her discontent with specific religious prescriptions perceived as discriminatory towards women, citing the disparity in ablution facilities as a tangible example of inequality:

> *L: Let me give you an example. When I was younger, I used to wonder why Muslim women are treated like second-class citizens in our society. Like, my mum loves going out and meeting up with her friends. But why isn't there a decent, comfortable place for women to do wudu? Men get these nice, clean outdoor areas for it, but women? Nothing even close, is there? It's not a small thing, you know. When I asked why, some guys were like, "Oh, women should pray at home." That's just another way of saying women shouldn't go out much. Sorry, but I don't believe Islam says anything like that.*
>
> *M: So, do you think these kinds of restrictions come from Islam itself or its followers?*
>
> *L: Honestly, it took me a while to understand that. At first, I was like, how can a religion not change the way its followers think? I mean, if we can adapt to new jobs and lifestyles, why can't religion adapt as well? But now, I think I get it: The real issue is the society we live in. It's thoroughly male-dominated, and they act like religion is something they own and control, don't they? (Leyla).*

Leyla's narrative provides valuable insights into the ways in which religious socialization, within a patriarchal societal framework, can engender crises of faith, particularly among women. Her observations regarding the inadequacy of ablution facilities[2] and the societal expectations imposed upon women highlight the restrictive dynamics inherent in certain religious contexts. Leyla's questioning of these norms reveals a deeper sense of disillusionment, as she grapples with the perceived failure of religious interpretations to adapt to contemporary societal needs and address gender-based inequalities. Her acknowledgement that "It's thoroughly male-dominated, and they act like religion is something they own and control, don't they?" underscores the intersectionality of gender and religion, suggesting that patriarchal interpretations can significantly undermine women's autonomy within their religious practices (Raday 2003). This perceived control over religious discourse and practice can lead to feelings of marginalization and disempowerment among women, contributing to a re-evaluation of their relationship with faith.

The confinement of women (mothers) to the domestic sphere, their limited participation in paid employment, and the insufficient emphasis placed on their education were also questioned by participants. Merve, identifying as a deist, recognized the power dynamics underpinning religious rules, observing how these prescriptions are often interpreted by men to serve their own interests. She stated, "'Women should stay at home,' or 'women should not work' or 'education is not good for girls' are reflections of how Muslim-appearing men keep women marginalized in the public sphere. I have heard this not only from my father but from many male friends as well." Merve's realization reflects a critical consciousness of the potential for religious narratives to be manipulated in order to perpetuate patriarchal structures, thereby restricting women's agency and autonomy. This observation aligns with feminist critiques of religion, which argue that religious texts and traditions are often interpreted through a male-centric lens, leading to the subordination of women (Mohanty 2003). Moreover, her observations highlight what she perceives as structural constraints imposed on women, reinforcing traditional gender roles that she believes limit their economic and educational opportunities in Turkish society.

Elif, also identifying as a deist, similarly emphasized the manipulation of religious teachings to maintain patriarchal structures, highlighting the disproportionate burdens

placed on women. She expressed that "Women have so many responsibilities, like having and taking care of kids. But when we bring it up, they [men] call us rebellious. They've created all these social rules in the name of religion and expect us to just follow them without question". Elif's critique underscores how societal interpretations of religion can perpetuate gender inequalities, leading to feelings of resentment and alienation among women. Her perspective aligns with sociological analyses of gender roles, which suggest that societies often impose greater responsibilities and expectations on women, while simultaneously limiting their opportunities for advancement (Esposito 1998). Within her narrative, it mirrors a system of social stratification based on gender, where she feels material advantages are allocated to men while severe constraints are placed on the roles and activities of women (Kramarae 1992; Makama 2013). Being labeled "rebellious" suggests that questioning the status quo is perceived as a threat to the power structures that sustain gender inequality. This dynamic reinforces the notion that women's voices are suppressed when they challenge societal norms.

Overall, these participants' concerns show their understanding that religion can be utilized as a tool for perpetuating gender inequality in the contexts they described. Their narratives explain how religious socialization, when intertwined with patriarchal norms, can lead to feelings of marginalization and disempowerment among women. By critically examining the societal interpretations of religious practices and norms, these participants advocate for a more equitable and inclusive religious environment that recognizes and addresses the unique challenges faced by women. It is possible to argue that their critiques are informed by the wider contemporary, and now global, discussions of human rights, equality, and individual autonomy. In this light, their tensions could be interpreted as a localized expression of a global phenomenon: the clash between traditional religious paradigms and modern ethical sensibilities. Questioning and reframing societal norms within religious contexts can pave the way for more equitable practices. Their emphasis on the need to address these issues underscores the importance of fostering a supportive religious environment that recognizes the unique challenges faced by women.

6. Conclusions

This study examines the dynamic relationship between religious socialization and the emergence of faith crises, based on interviews with a specific group of young people in Türkiye. A key contribution of this research is its emphasis on the process-oriented nature of faith crises as experienced by our participants. We conceptualize these crises not as mere sudden ruptures but as gradual developments shaped by the dynamic interaction of encountered doctrines, institutional practices, and social influences over time, influenced by the individual's role in actively interpreting and responding to these influences. By examining how religious identity can evolve as both commitment to and resistance to perceived dogmatism and restrictive norms, this research offers a nuanced perspective on how faith crises develop within the context of religious socialization practices among the youth in our study.

The findings show that young Turks in this study engage with and challenge their traditional religious identities proactively on their own terms in the process of religious socialization. For these participants, authoritarian parenting is one of the most critical challenges that they experience as they develop their religious identities. Parents', especially fathers', negative attitudes and behaviors towards their children significantly contribute to religious alienation in the accounts provided. Experiences of coercion to practice religion, absence of personal agency, and open discussion are linked to emotional upset and internal conflict reported by these young people and typically result in the rejection of imposed beliefs.

In addition, the participants described how, having been exposed to other viewpoints, especially through peer relationships and digital media, they reinforced their doubts, questioned existing religious structures, and challenged their religious identity more generally. The research identifies the fundamental role of religious institutions and educators in providing opportunities for open, reflective debate about faith; yet, in the experiences shared, discrepancies between religious educators' actions and teachings and a lack of response to students' doubts destroy institutional credibility and reinforce mistrust. Finally, gender inequality in religious settings demonstrates how patriarchal interpretations of religious norms sustain discrimination that particularly impacts women's religious lives and can trigger crises of faith within our sample. Accounts from participants indicate a requirement to re-examine the practice of religious socialization in order to encourage inclusive and egalitarian reactions to religious values and norms.

Ultimately, the experiences of the young people in this study reveal that religious socialization for them occurs on the contested ground between tradition and modernity. The crises of faith documented here can be seen as micro-level manifestations of macro-level processes of secularization and individualization. They are evidence not of a simple decline in faith, but rather of a complex transformation of faith toward more personal, conscious, and often hybrid forms for this particular group.

These findings resonate deeply with key theoretical frameworks in the sociology of religion. The emergence of hybrid, personalized belief systems among participants—particularly deist and reconstructed identities—vividly illustrates Grace Davie's concept of "believing without belonging," where personal faith persists despite a detachment from traditional religious institutions (Davie 1994). Furthermore, the tension our participants described between their individual agency and institutional authority reflects Thomas Luckmann's analysis of secularization as a shift towards the privatization of religion (Luckmann 1967). Our data shows that participants' active negotiation of belief, often in direct response to perceived institutional hypocrisy or rigidity, suggests that secularization in a context like Türkiye manifests not merely as religious decline, but as a critical restructuring where individual autonomy becomes central to meaning making. This study thus illustrates how macro-level secularization processes are mediated through micro-level identity work, challenging monolithic narratives of secularization while affirming its core dynamics of institutional fragmentation and the subjective relocation of the sacred.

Among the limitations of this study is the comparatively small and geographically focused sample, which could limit the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, focusing solely on individuals who have exited their crisis of faith may introduce a retrospective bias, as their narratives might emphasize resolution and distance from the turmoil, potentially obscuring the immediacy and complexity of the crisis experience itself. The study is also dependent on participants' recollections and understandings of earlier experiences at a particular stage in their lives, providing a subjective account of a complex, continuing process. Socialization is a complex process, and its influence can only be fully understood by considering multiple viewpoints and approaches.

Last but not least, this study adds to a more complex understanding of how authoritarian religious socialization, religious practice inconsistencies, peer and digital influences, and gendered religious norms intersect to shape the religious identities of the Turkish youth who participated in this research. Ultimately, the narratives of the participants suggest that models of religious socialization emphasizing autonomy, inclusivity, and open dialog may be perceived as more resonant and meaningful by some young individuals navigating their faith in contemporary Türkiye.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by Ethics Committee of the Social Sciences University of Ankara (protocol code 83064 and date of approval 26 March 2023).

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 corresponding author due to archival restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

[1] After completing the allocation of pseudonyms, their real names were expunged from all the research materials except for my field notes and consent forms—all of which were securely stored. No relationship other than that of gender was related by the real names and the given pseudonyms so as to ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality. For example, if a participant's name was Yusuf, a pseudonym starting with a different letter was assigned to maintain anonymity.

[2] These facilities are designated areas for wudu, the Islamic ritual purification required before prayer. In the context of Turkish mosques, this often refers to the "şadırvan", an architecturally distinct fountain typically located in the mosque's courtyard.

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