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Religion in the Lives of Unaccompanied Minors: An Available and Compelling Coping Resource

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Abstract

Anecdotal evidence suggests that religion plays an important role in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. However, little research has been conducted in this area. Drawing on the work of Pargament (1997) and on interviews undertaken with unaccompanied minors living in the Republic of Ireland, this article shows how religious coping is both a 'relatively available' and a 'relatively compelling' way for these young people to deal with the challenges that they face. Religious faith and practice served as a source of continuity in their lives, with belief in God representing something familiar within a largely unfamiliar context. In addition, the young people's relationships with God provided them with a sense of meaning and comfort and an increased sense of control. Overall, religious coping helped the young people to deal with the challenging circumstances with which they were faced. The findings suggest that the religious beliefs of asylum seeking and other social work clients need to be better understood so that these beliefs can be appropriately integrated into practice situations.

Keywords: Resilience, religious coping, unaccompanied minors, religion and spirituality

Introduction and background

The importance of including religion in the study of coping has been emphasised by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), eminent researchers in the coping field. Yet, research on coping has often ignored the potential role of religion. This is evident in relation to research with asylum seekers and refugees (Goździak and Shandy, 2002). However, in recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the strength, resilience and coping abilities of this population group (e.g. Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010; Kohli, 2006a) and some research has looked at the role played by religion.

Amongst other things, the continuity, comfort and emotional support that

faith provides to various migrant groups have been noted (McMichael, 2002; Thompson and Gurney, 2003). Nonetheless, the scarcity of research in this area remains evident. In particular, little has been written about child and teenage refugees and asylum seekers, including those who arrive in countries of asylum without parents or guardians—unaccompanied minors.

Religion has been described in various ways by different authors. While Pargament (1997) defines it as ‘a process, a search for significance in ways related to the sacred’ (Pargament, 1997, p. 32), Stirling et al. (2010, p. 607) refer to it as ‘an organised structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community related to spirituality’. The similarities and differences between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ have been highlighted elsewhere (see Roehlkepartain et al., 2006 and Holloway and Moss, 2010). For the purpose of this paper, the word ‘religion’ is used, as it was a word understood by the study’s participants. Here, ‘religion’ is referring to belief in a ‘higher power’ or ‘God’ (the latter being the term used by the study’s participants). It also refers to any practices associated with this belief, whether they are particular rituals (e.g. church services, Muslim prayer) or whether they are more individualised private practices (listening to religious music, having conversations with God, etc.).

Pargament and his colleagues have led research in the field of religious coping (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000). Religious coping involves the use of religion in efforts to cope with circumstances that are deemed to be challenging or stressful. It is described by Pargament (1997) as the introduction of the sacred in an individual’s search for significance during times of stress. Various studies have found that religious coping is an important resource that is used by many people when experiencing stress of different kinds (e.g. Sofaer et al., 2005; Fabricatore et al., 2000), including the stress associated with being a migrant worker (Nakoncz and Shik, 2009) or a refugee (McMichael, 2002).

Yet, despite the prevalence of religious coping, religion is by no means always used as a way of dealing with life’s trials and tribulations. Pargament (1997) suggests that personal, situational and contextual forces affect whether or not religious coping is used. In addition, drawing on the theory of coping, Pargament (1997) contends that religion becomes involved in coping when, first, it is a ‘relatively available’ part of a person’s orienting system and when, second, it is perceived to be a ‘relatively compelling’

way of coping (Pargament, 1997, p. 144). When religion is more available as a coping resource, it generally constitutes an important part of a person's worldview. If religion is embedded in a person's life, then the beliefs and practices associated with it are easily accessible should a person want to use them in a time of crisis. Pargament (1997) highlights the importance of viewing availability as a relative construct, suggesting that for those with 'limited means and few alternatives'—such as marginalised groups—'religion can take on even greater power as one of the few genuine resources for living' (Pargament, 1997, p. 145).

Why, then, do some people not use religious coping despite the relative availability of religion in their orienting system? Pargament theorises that for religion and coping to converge, religion needs to be viewed as a 'relatively compelling' coping mechanism. Turning to religion needs to make sense and to feel right (Pargament, 1997). Again, it is a relative construct and, as such, it is more likely to be used when other ways of coping are not seen to be as effective or worthwhile. As such, religion is perceived to be more compelling by those who are aware of the limitations of being human: people who have integrated religion into the centre of their lives or who are confronted with 'issues of greatest significance' that push them 'beyond their personal and social resources' (Pargament, 1997, p. 154). These situations—such as being forced to leave one's country because of persecution or being faced with a tragic and untimely death—push people to their limits. Alternative ways of coping may seem ineffective. The deeply religious are also aware of the limitations of being human (Pargament, 1997) and therefore also view religious coping methods as 'relatively compelling'. Having integrated religion into the centre of their lives, they cope through religious methods, as doing so makes sense and feels right.

Current knowledge suggests that unaccompanied minors are confronted with issues of great significance and that religion may have been integrated into their everyday lives at home. Yet, little is known about whether religion forms an important part of life in exile or whether they cope through religious means. One study about unaccompanied minors has given detailed attention to issues of faith, describing how Sudanese unaccompanied minors gave meaning to their situations by attributing them to God's will (Goodman, 2004). Several studies have made passing references to these issues (e.g. Robins and Rylands, 2004; Wade et al., 2005). However,

more frequently than not, studies have largely neglected the roles played by religious beliefs and practices for unaccompanied minors. This article attempts to address this gap by looking at the way in which unaccompanied minors living in the Republic of Ireland (henceforth referred to as 'Ireland') use religious coping methods. The findings will be of interest to social workers and other professionals who encounter unaccompanied minors in their work. Frequently, within social work practice, the religious dimensions of clients' lives are neglected. By developing an increased understanding of the potential importance that unaccompanied minors and other individuals attach to religion, social workers will be better equipped to respond to their clients' needs and to harness their strengths and coping resources.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was utilised in this study. The study involved both participant observation in a hostel where unaccompanied minors live and semi-structured interviews. The current paper is based on the interview part of the study. Korac (2003) suggests that qualitative interviewing is an important way of learning from refugees because 'it permits fuller expression of their experiences in their own terms' (Korac, 2003, p. 53). Indeed, this method has been used frequently in research with this population group (e.g. Chase, 2010; Miller et al., 2008). The strength of the qualitative interviewing technique is its elasticity. It allows for a dynamic approach, which recognises that each individual is unique, and that the interview can be tailored to particular circumstances. Thus, when surprising or unexpected themes emerge, the lack of rigidity means that the researcher can explore these new topics, thereby allowing theory to arise inductively. The current study had not set out to research the importance of religion or of religious coping. Instead, the focus was broader, exploring the experiences of unaccompanied minors living in Ireland, beginning from a strengths perspective and focusing on their abilities and resilience. Like much previous research, the author initially neglected to ask about religion. However, the methods used allowed this theme to emerge spontaneously within broader discussions (e.g. discussions about free time, trust, friendship, etc.). The flexible approach then allowed the interviewer to follow up and explore this theme in more detail. Had alternative methods been used (e.g. structured interviews or questionnaires), it is likely that the significance

of religious faith in the lives of the participants would not have been made clear. In addition, the findings regarding religion have greater strength because of the fact that they emerged spontaneously. In total, eighteen females and fourteen males were interviewed. Consent for their participation was obtained first from the Health Service Executive (the statutory body responsible for children in the care system in Ireland) and subsequently from the young people themselves. The participants came from thirteen different countries, mainly countries in Eastern Africa (n = 14) and Western Africa (n = 13). The remaining participants came from other parts of Africa (n = 3), from Western Asia (n = 1) and from Eastern Europe (n = 1). In order to protect their anonymity, the specific countries of origin are not named here. The participants ranged in age from fourteen to nineteen years. Twenty-three were Christian and nine were Muslim. They were at different stages of the asylum process, as they had been in Ireland for varying lengths of time. Overall, a very diverse group of participants was interviewed. The interviewer (the author) was a white female who had previously worked as a social worker with unaccompanied minors and whose religious affiliation was Catholic.

Open, axial and selective coding was used to analyse the transcribed interview data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These codes were attached to lengthy paragraphs and dialogues rather than to specific words or phrases (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This ensured that the voices of the participants were privileged. Through this process, diverse narratives were identified. These included narratives about religion and religious coping.

Religious coping: 'relatively available'

The 'relative availability' of religion at home

Pargament (1997) suggests that 'we cope with the tools that are most available to us' (p. 145). It was very evident that in their countries of origin, religion had been very available to the young people. Amidst descriptions of the 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' aspects of their home lives (Kohli, 2006b), the participants spoke about religion and about the importance attached to religious faith and practice in their home cultures. The young people depicted God and religion as central aspects of the cultures from which they had come, suggesting that religious beliefs had been embedded in their previous lives. For example, reflecting similar findings by McMichael (2002), one Muslim participant in this study referred to having been

raised in a culture where God is ‘everything’ and stated that within his culture, ‘everything they have in their life, from morning till evening, they just like praying to God’. Such sentiments suggest that in this boy’s country of origin, religion was an integral part of the orienting system and thus could be expected to take on a significant role in coping. Also, ‘extraordinary’ descriptions of life at home—descriptions of conflict, lack of opportunity and lack of resources—suggested that other coping resources may not have been as prominent or as easy to access, thus highlighting the relative availability of religion (Pargament, 1997).

Often, the participants’ narratives showed the hope that people had in God in their countries of origins, thus suggesting that religion constituted an important part of their worldview. Frequently, people attributed their good fortunes to God. One Christian girl stated:

In Africa, like, everybody is hoping in God. They just, any, like everybody almost goes to church, every Sunday. It’s not like, some people here, just say, they just go on Christmas and Easter. Where at home you just go to church because when you hear somebody testifying that ‘I got this’, ‘Oh God gave me this’, ‘Oh I got school fees for my children’, so you just, you’d be saying, ‘Oh where is that God that is giving you all that?’ So you go to church and the . . . the pastors, oohh, . . . they kind of encourage you . . . encourage you to pray. They like preach about the hope that you are going to get things.

Other participants made similar references to the commitment of people to their faith in their home cultures and the tendency to rely on God to provide, thus demonstrating how they coped through religious means. These narratives were often set within broader narratives about difficult life circumstances. In addition, attending religious services at home was depicted as an enjoyable activity that people of all ages wanted to do. In particular, the Christian participants’ descriptions of services suggested that they were vibrant events that presented opportunities not only to pray, but also to socialise. For example, one boy described the Adventist church he had attended as being ‘really a big buzz’ and emphasised that ‘everyone wanted to go to church’.

Ireland: ambivalent peers and absent parents

In contrast, the narratives of the participants suggested that the importance attached to faith in their home cultures was very different from what they perceived to be the lack of interest in faith within the Irish culture. Such perceptions developed through the participants’ interactions with their

Irish peers, particularly in school. Many of the participants were aware that their peers often attended religious services but felt that this happened because of parental pressure. They were also aware that being involved in church-related activities was not viewed as something ‘cool’ to do. Hence, it seemed that religion and religious coping might have been ‘relatively available’ to these peers but that it was not perceived to be a ‘relatively compelling’ option. For example, one participant described how his Irish friends laughed at him when he first invited them to go to his church. Another young person referred to the fact that Irish young people didn’t seem to ‘know’ God very well:

You tell them God, they say, what’s God, you know what I mean? That’s the big difference between me and them, you know. I don’t think they know God They know but because of . . . they just know because their parents say. Yeah, God. . . . But lots of international, actually not lots, most of international students, they talk about God very well. They know God very well because of the religion in their country and the way their parents talk, you know.

For this boy, like many of his peers, his sense of being different was highlighted by the fact that his faith in God was not shared by his Irish counterparts.

Thus, the young people faced the challenge of negotiating a very different religious context. As a result of this perceived difference, the participants often kept their religious identities separate from their Irish peers.

In essence, the religious aspects of their lives were kept ‘back stage’ (Goffman, 1959) and were not made accessible to their Irish counterparts.

A further challenge faced by the young people related to the absence of their parents. At times, participants referred to having had a lack of choice about attending religious services in their countries of origin. Culture and parents served dual roles. They created an expectation that young people would practise their faith while simultaneously supporting the young people in doing so. In Ireland, neither the expectations nor the support seemed to be present, at least not explicitly. A Muslim boy referred to the fact that his parents were no longer present to say ‘go pray right now’. A Christian girl, who had previously emphasised the importance of talking to God about her problems, acknowledged her difficulties in remaining committed to her faith without the support of her parents:

Like, if you are not strong or you don’t have people supporting you, that faith, that belief in God, it’s . . . you will know what is right, you will know you are supposed to believe in God, but our prayer for you ____ will get kind of . . . low, like. How can I put it? Like, you won’t be that strong, like

you are back at home and you go to prayers and you say prayers in your own house. But, when you are here you are on your own or . . . You don't say the prayers, you know. And, sometimes, maybe in your mind you be feeling guilty. And sometimes you may not even feel guilty. You say, it's the environment. God knows if I'm at back at home . . . You will try to make excuse. Like, if I am back I would pray, you know.

Making religion 'available' in Ireland

Yet, despite the absence of parents and the attitudes of their Irish peers, all but one of the young people continued to view religion and belief in God as important in their lives. Living away from cultural and parental expectations, the young people had a choice about whether or not to change their previous habits or continue to practise their faith. They tended to opt for continuity. Practising their faith allowed them to continue to have access to religious and other elements of their home cultures, including language, dress, music and companionship with people of the same religious and/or ethnic background. It also offered opportunities to cope with challenging experiences through religious practice and faith in God.

Essentially, religion was still available to the participants but in a less explicit way. The changed nature of this availability meant that participants faced some obstacles in choosing to continue to practise their faith. This was particularly the case for the Muslim participants. For example, attending school within a predominately Christian context posed challenges for young people wishing to attend a mosque on Fridays or wishing to pray five times a day at particular times. However, participants chose to adapt their faith to these new circumstances, such as by attending the mosque on Saturday or Sunday instead of on Friday or by adding two prayer times together instead of praying on five separate occasions. One boy described how he prayed at school in the middle of the day, but was unsure which way he should be facing during these prayers. As a result, he said that he was 'thinking of buying that thing that tells you where Saudi Arabia is'. Christian participants had to adapt their religious practice also, although not to the same extent. Often, churches of the Christian denominations that the young people had attended in their countries of origin were not available in Ireland, or, if they were available, the services were very different. In deciding which church to attend, the Christian participants seemed to consider the ways in which the churches were similar to churches at home, thus, again, suggesting the importance of continuity in their lives.

Frequently, the young people chose African-led churches instead of Irish-led churches because of the style of worship that they involved. As stated previously, church services had been lively events at home and Irish-led churches were not considered to provide this kind of service. Some participants wanted to continue to sing and dance as they had previously done, even if the Christian denomination of the church was different.

However, there were exceptions, with several participants choosing to attend Irish-led Catholic or Protestant churches. One participant, who was Catholic, talked about her experiences of attending both Irish Catholic churches and African Pentecostal churches. Although the singing and dancing at the African churches was something she loved and something that provided continuity with her experiences of religious services at home, she preferred to attend the Irish Catholic church because the style of prayer was more familiar to her:

That church [African church] is like . . . Catholic church back home. They sing and dance and . . . all . . . I don't like the way they pray and all that stuff. They just, when they praying, they screaming and so, I just go like a Catholic church you know how they pray very quiet. And in my own way I pray very quiet. . . . They're not screaming, praying.

Hence, her choice of church was based on the aspect of the service that she most valued: prayer. Thus, despite the service being very different because of the absence of dancing and a different kind of singing, it provided continuity in that similar prayer rituals were still available to her.

Thus, it is evident that the young people negotiated the challenges and barriers that were in place, thereby ensuring that religious faith and practice remained 'relatively available' to them as coping options, although in different forms. In a context in which many alternative means of coping—relying on family, for example—were relatively unavailable, the relative availability of religious faith and practice took on more significance. Linked to this point, faced with much discontinuity in their lives, religious faith and practice provided a 'sustaining thread' (McMichael, 2002, p. 25) of continuity in the participants' daily lives. This reflects several references made in the literature to the continuity that religion and faith provide for immigrants (e.g. Hirschman, 2004; Thompson and Gurney, 2003). This was particularly important given that the participants were adolescents faced with the onerous task of developing a sense of identity with continuity between their sense of self in the past, in the present and in the future. The continuity

provided by faith was evident in the choices that the participants made about religious practice and also in their more general narratives, with descriptions of how religion had been important at home and continued to be important in Ireland. For example, one female Christian participant talked about having gone to church on Sundays at home and how, in Ireland, it would 'even feel strange not to go to church on a Sunday [as] you will feel like, Sunday is meant for church'. Thus, going to church led to a sense of continuity in this girl's life.

Religious coping: 'relatively compelling'

Relationships with God

However, the young people did not choose to practice their faith simply in order to provide continuity or simply because it was a 'relatively available' method. Instead, it was evident that religious coping was viewed as a compelling way in which to deal with the multiple challenges of living in Ireland.

Although this author has argued elsewhere that religious faith facilitated a variety of coping strategies (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010), religion was also used as a way of coping in itself. Whilst Wade *et al.* (2005) suggest that membership of churches and mosques provided unaccompanied young people in the UK with 'comfort and companionship' (Wade *et al.*, 2005, p. 176), it is argued here that in the case of these participants, the comfort and companionship were provided by their faith generally, rather than specifically by their membership of religious institutions.

The participants' relationships with God were particularly significant in this regard. While there were some exceptions, in general, the participants described God as a loving and caring presence in their lives. They viewed God as playing a variety of different roles for them, many of which reflected the key functions of religion summarised by Pargament *et al.* (2000) (e.g. meaning, control, comfort/spirituality, intimacy/spirituality, and life transformation).

In particular, their relationships with God and belief in God provided the young people with a sense of meaning and understanding, a sense of comfort and companionship, and an increased sense of control.

Their narratives suggested that God acted as a friend, an advisor, a confidant, and as someone who provided for them and protected them. Participants talked about the fact that God knew them well, and this meant that God could provide guidance. Feeling that they were 'known' by God was particularly significant and comforting for the young people, given the

absence of parents and family members, and given that, frequently, they did not feel that people around them knew or understood them well. As a result and because God was viewed in such positive terms, religious coping became a 'relatively compelling' option for the participants. The young people spoke of their immense trust in God. Indeed, God was often the only one in whom they had complete trust. Within the refugee literature, frequent reference has been made to the fact that refugees often find it difficult to trust (e.g. Daniel and Knudsen, 1995; Hynes, 2009). Elsewhere, this author has discussed how unaccompanied minors may use distrust of others as a way of coping with their circumstances (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan, 2010). Hence, given their lack of trust in those around them, this trust in God was perceived to be very important and very comforting for the participants. Significantly, references to trusting God frequently emerged within general conversations about trust or about friendships and support, rather than in specific conversations about religion. This was the case with one Muslim boy who described how he always trusted God:

The only, only, only friend [laughs] I trusted all the time, that's God. . . . I don't have any more friends, I res_, I trusted more than God, I don't think so. You know because, always God knows more than everybody. And God's gonna help you all the time. . . . God always gonna help.

Thus, it was possible to rely on God, as he was always there and would always help, thereby facilitating this young person to feel a sense of control over his life. In the absence of others whom he could trust, trusting in God and relying on him was a 'relatively compelling' coping option. As a result, this boy, like many of his peers, trusted God 'all the time'.

Seeking God's support through prayer

Arising from their relationships with God, the young people talked about seeking his support through prayer. As unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, the young people were confronted with issues that pushed them 'beyond their personal and social resources' (Pargament, 1997, p. 154). Given that praying had been an important part of their daily lives in their countries of origin, that support from parents and family members was relatively unavailable in Ireland and that they had a firm belief in God, praying represented both a 'relatively available' and a 'relatively compelling' means of coping with their situations. Praying fitted with the participants' worldviews, whilst also making sense and feeling right as a coping mechanism

(Pargament, 1997). Some of the young people prayed at church services or during prayer times at mosques. Others engaged in private independent prayer or did both.

For many of the young people, although their lives seemed to have changed considerably since coming to Ireland, there was some degree of continuity in what they prayed for. Frequently, prayers relating to 'extraordinary' situations had been offered before the young people left their countries of origin. For example, one girl had prayed that she would be able to leave prostitution. However, she had also prayed for the more 'ordinary' desire of wanting 'a normal life, a better life'. In Ireland, prayers for 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' aspects of her life were again offered. She prayed about love, jobs and her 'status' (obtaining refugee status), as well as for the Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform, and for her family in her country of origin:

I just pray for God to help me, you know? . . . Help me to . . . see the right man. . . . That will like, love me. Get married. Settle down. Have a nice job. Just to get my status. You understand? Get my status. Have a nice job. Live a nice life with my family. That is all.

Like many of the other participants, this girl's prayers reflected her existence as both an asylum seeker and an adolescent. As unaccompanied asylum seekers, the participants prayed for, amongst others things, permission to stay in Ireland, their families at home, and for the situations in their countries to improve. As adolescents, they prayed for more 'ordinary' aspects of life: for help with their exams, for example. By praying, they were provided with comfort, as they held a firm belief that God would listen and that he would answer their prayers. Also, by praying, they were making active attempts to change their situations. To some extent, this gave them an increased sense of control of their destiny: rather than just passively accepting their difficulties, they were doing something and believing in an external locus of control (God).

Descriptions of praying in relation to refugee determination procedures were particularly prevalent, perhaps reflecting the stress associated with the asylum process. The young people in this study frequently referred to the difficult nature of the process and their worry about whether or not they would get refugee status. Many of them said that, first and foremost, they prayed for 'my status'. Often, they talked about their full faith in God in relation to the asylum process. It seemed that they relinquished control to God in an effort to cope with the uncertainty of their situation, thus

again suggesting their belief in an external locus of control. Placing their difficulties in God's hands might seem to suggest that they lacked agency or showed passivity or a sense of dependency on God. However, the fact that they believed fully in God's capacity to help them, meant that in giving up control to God, they simultaneously and paradoxically gained a sense of control of their situations. In addition, their narratives suggested that they were able to accept things more easily by believing in the will and ability of God. Reflecting the findings of Nakonz and Shik (2009) in relation to Philippine migrant workers, the young people engaged in a strategy of 'religious reappraisal of hardships' (Nakonz and Shik, 2009, p. 29), whereby religious interpretations were used to see difficulties in a more positive light. Religion offered meaning to the participants. This was evident when I spoke to one girl just a few days after she received a letter informing her that her application for asylum had been rejected at the appeal stage of the process:

Yeah, so, since, since I got the letter I'm not feeling good, so good. . . . Ehm . . . so, I'm thinking, worried, and all of that, so . . . but I, I trust God, and I believe in God, and God is going to bring a smile for me. . . . I still believe in God. And I would never go back. I will still worship my God, because he's a real God, and I believe in Him So, there's nothing that can, it can happen to me that I will never forget him. . . . So, I believe that that is God's wish that I won't get the letter.

It was evident that she believed, like many of the young people, that God was instrumental in everything that happened to her. To a certain extent, her words suggested that she believed that God was in control of her life. While this perhaps suggested a lack of belief in self-determination or individual mastery, her description was evidently full of feelings of trust and hope in God, as opposed to feelings of resignation and helplessness. She engaged in a benevolent type of religious reappraisal: the stressful situation was redefined through religion as benevolent and potentially beneficial (Pargament et al., 2000, p. 522). Such an approach reflects a pattern of positive religious coping methods—methods that are associated with positive outcomes such as improved mental and physical health (e.g. Smith et al., 2000). In addition, this girl's belief that God was in control of the situation meant that her failed asylum application took on a spiritual significance, thus making it easier for her to accept (Nakonz and Shik, 2009). Similar to many of her counterparts, her faith seemed to give her comfort and emotional support during a very stressful time. Thus, religious coping was a 'relatively compelling' coping option.

However, not all of the young people had such a firm belief in God. At times, struggles with faith were evident. One young person, who had earlier talked about the importance of believing in God, said that if his asylum claim was rejected, he would kill himself. He revealed his struggle to have complete faith in God:

Fortunately I believe in God. Right? But, for the real Christians, in situations like that, they believe that God will change this for them. But me, excuse me, for me, I wouldn't have much time to wait on God. Because I'm not . . . I'm a Christian anyway, but . . . I'm not really a strong Christian. . . . I believe he could do everything. But, I wouldn't have much time to wait for him to do those things.

In addition, for a very small minority of the participants, patterns of negative religious coping were evident. For example, a female participant spoke about the disappointment she sometimes felt when she did not get what she had prayed for from God. In such instances, she sought meaning from the situation by redefining the disappointment as a punishment from God (Pargament et al., 2000).

It's hard to say but sometimes you get disappointed, you know, but . . . you get strong. Like, go back. Maybe whatever you are disappointed about is because you sinned. So you need to go back and retrace it and, you know. . . . Yeah, because whatever you, your problem you have, if you can't talk it with God, who else can you talk it? He's your creator. He knows it. But you just have to discuss it with him.

Smith et al. (2000) suggest that such patterns of coping are viewed as an expression of a less secure relationship with God and are associated with more negative outcomes, such as poorer mental and physical health: Yet, despite a minority expressing sentiments such as these and despite others who were struggling with their faith, the overwhelming majority of the participants drew hope from the belief that anything was possible through God.

Often, they alluded to the continuous companionship provided by God. They described God as someone who had helped them at home and who continued to help them in Ireland:

[God] is important, 'cos, eh . . . I have been through many things and here I am, I'm still, I'm still alive. So, he is very important in my life. Though I don't know him, but I know he is there. You know. I know he, there is somebody who is looking after me.

Thus, the young people often attributed their strength and survival to God. This was clearly articulated by one boy, who stated 'God gave me a talent to be strong, to deal with a situation, to get adapted to things quickly'.

Concluding comments

Overall, in talking about their lives and experiences, the participants spoke comparatively about religion in their home countries and religion in Ireland. These young people came from countries where most people had strong religious beliefs, and where going to the church or mosque was an intrinsic and enjoyable part of community life. They arrived in Ireland with a strong tradition of religious faith and practice, and with a worldview that held God at its centre. From their perspective, it seemed, however, that the world, and God's place within it, was viewed differently by many Irish people, and particularly by their Irish peers. Descriptions of the strong faith in their home countries were juxtaposed with descriptions of the lack of interest that their Irish peers had in God. Thus, the participants had to negotiate a very different religious culture. Despite the challenges they faced, the participants made active choices to adapt their faith to their new context and to continue to pray and engage in religious rituals.

Whilst this seemed to be partly due to the continuity that religion provided, the narratives of the participants suggested that religion also served other roles. In particular, it provided them with meaning, comfort and an increased sense of control in their new lives in Ireland. Essentially, the young people coped through their faith because religious coping was both a 'relatively available' and a 'relatively compelling' option in their circumstances.

Existing research suggests that the participants in this study are not unique in their tendency to utilise religious coping. As discussed previously, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees elsewhere have been found to cope in similar ways. Indeed, research suggests that religion and spirituality are important to many people in a range of different countries, whether they are experiencing crises or not (Carballo, 2000; Lippman and Keith, 2006). What, then, are the implications for social workers? The findings suggest important insights for social workers and other professionals working not only with unaccompanied minors, but with a range of different client groups, whether immigrant or non-immigrant, young or old. In particular, the importance attached by this study's participants to their faith lends further evidence to the already existing literature that suggests the need to integrate religion and spirituality into the client-worker dialogue (Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Holloway and Moss, 2010; Coates et al., 2007). Indeed, not doing so may lead to unethical practice (Furman et al., 2004) and to further oppression of clients. Yet, whilst professional social

work had its roots in religion, with much of early social work practice emerging from the work of charitable religious organisations (Kearney and Skehill, 2005), for many, a 'climate of discomfort' continues to surround religion in the field of social work (Sahlein, 2002, p. 381). This arises partly because of concern about proselytisation and an associated concern about social workers imposing their personal values on clients or not adhering to the principle of client self-determination. Gilligan and Furness (2006) suggest that:

. . . many practitioners equate a 'religion-blind' and 'spirituality-blind' approach with what they see as 'anti-oppressive practice'. As a result they frequently risk imposing culturally incompetent 'rationalist' and 'secular' interventions on service users, who may have very different actual needs and wishes (Gilligan and Furness, 2006, p. 634).

Social workers can begin tapping into these needs and wishes, first, by being aware of their own religious views and potential biases and, second, by asking their clients about the role of religion and spirituality in their lives. Whatever their own views and beliefs, by listening to their clients, and by showing willingness to respond to what they hear, social workers can begin to change the 'climate of discomfort'. For many, this may be a challenging and difficult thing to do. Some social workers may not believe in God or a 'higher power' and may even feel that religion is dangerous for clients. Indeed, attention needs to be paid to whether clients are engaging in patterns of positive or negative religious coping (see Pargament et al., 2003). Other social workers may themselves utilise religious coping but they may be fearful of imposing their views on their clients.

In order to adequately address the challenges of integrating religion and spirituality into social work practice, we need a greater knowledge base on which to draw. In recent years, several studies have been conducted looking at the views of social workers, social work students and social work educators in relation to the role of religion and spirituality in practice (e.g. Gilligan and Furness, 2006; Sheridan et al., 1994; Stirling et al., 2010). While the knowledge gleaned from these studies is important and needs to be built on, other avenues also need to be explored. In particular, more needs to be learnt about the significance of religion and religious coping in the lives of different social work client groups in different national contexts. While this current study has gone some way to addressing this issue in relation to a very specific client group, there is a dearth of research in this area. As a result, social workers have little knowledge about the roles played by religion

in their clients' lives. Also, while studies by Canda (2002) and by Privette et al. (1994) suggest that clients want their personal spiritual beliefs and values 'integrated into the clinical dialogue' (Hodge, 2003, p. 349), additional research needs to be undertaken and we need to learn more about how clients want this integration to take place. Given social work's emphasis on strengths (Saleeby, 2002), the resilience and coping abilities that clients glean from their religious and spiritual beliefs must be recognised and harnessed by practitioners. Otherwise, there is a risk that social workers will disregard a very important resource in their clients' lives.

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