



“What Is Unseen Is Eternal”: Undergraduate Views of Religion and Spirituality in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

In the world of young adult literature, there are increasing responses to the calls for diversity of characters and their experiences. The one area where this diversity simply does not exist in YA lit is the topic of religion. Donna Freitas refers to religion and spirituality as the last taboo in the genre. This study explores students’ perceptions of this view of religion in young adult literature.

At a private Christian university, thirty-five undergraduates in a young adult literature course were asked to respond to Freitas’s argument and weigh in with their reflections on the role of religion in young adult literature. The majority of respondents highlighted the need for religious teens to see their faith better depicted in literature, while also asserting that spirituality/religiosity is a developmental need for adolescents who would be well-served to have the option to read more on the topic.

Introduction

The options for readers of young adult literature have never been greater. Teen services librarians can choose from a vast selection of published books each year to fill their shelves. Current YA fiction has increasingly diverse characters and covers a variety of issues, causes, and viewpoints. In a 2018 *New York Times* article, Donna Freitas, a writer of nonfiction and fiction for both adults and teens, argued that most of the once-taboo topics in young adult (YA) literature were no longer taboo.¹ She argued that LGBTQ stories were more common, cursing

was acceptable, and sex, darkness, and violence were all ubiquitous; there was just one off-limits topic left: religion.

Many authors and scholars agree that religion is the last bastion, the only and final topic yet to be tackled in young adult literature without fear.² While religion is rarely addressed in young adult literature, when it is discussed, it is rarely portrayed in a positive light. In her seminal article on the taboo of religion in YA literature, Patty Campbell explains, “The majority of realistic YA fiction projects a world in which both the personal practice and the corporate practice of religion are absent, except for the worst aspects of cults or fundamentalist sects.”³ Some scholars relate the concern with religion and young adult literature to myths around the First Amendment of the Constitution, guaranteeing freedom of religious expression while also avoiding religious coercion.⁴ Young adult authors and publishers know the risks of controversy related to the First Amendment and the potential consequences of encouraging teachers and library staff to tackle novels about religion in schools. While not all libraries will experience book challenges due to their community makeup or thoughtful placement of their collections,⁵ “religious viewpoint” consistently rates among the top-ten reasons for books to be challenged.⁶ Risks range from concerns about poor book sales to facing the court of public opinion to fear of religious indoctrination by library staff, teachers, publishers, authors, and booksellers. Freitas argues that we “worry someone might be trying to convert or indoctrinate teenagers,” so “we resist preachiness about certain moral perspectives.”⁷

Further, religion tackles complex questions about morality, values, and life and death. Writing about the “powerful” force that is religion seems both enormous and overwhelming for stakeholders at every level.⁸ Addressing religion is challenging for authors of books for teens, and holding meaningful discussions with adolescents about religion and faith is hard for parents, even more so for teachers, who may feel under-equipped and unsupported to do so. Whether the concerns are related to the First Amendment, “preachiness,” or the nature of religion, “better left unsaid” rings true.⁹

In preparing an introductory young adult literature class for secondary-education English undergraduates at a private Christian university, we knew that there were more classical stories for youth by Madeleine L’Engle or C. S. Lewis that could be incorporated into the course, but it was important to us that the course focus on more contemporary novels and themes so that texts could be easily swapped out and updated to remain fresh; finding a contemporary text that

addressed religion, particularly the Christian faith, in neutral to positive terms, was a challenge. The closest our current selected texts come to addressing religion in our YA literature class is in the graphic novel *Persepolis*' main character Marjane's childhood conversations with God, who she imagines looks a lot like Karl Marx; otherwise this text and the others we selected do not really focus on religion. This dearth of discussion of religion and faith in our readings led us to want to know more about how our students felt about the depiction of religion, or lack thereof, in young adult fiction.

The majority of students enrolled in this class were pre-service English teachers in their first or second year of their degree, and so may have unique insight into and a vested interest in this glaring oversight within the literature for teens. These students came from a variety of backgrounds. Though our university is a Christian university, neither students nor teachers sign a statement of faith. While we very often enroll students who were homeschooled due to reasons of faith or who attended small private Christian high schools, we just as often teach students who are not particularly religious, are unsure of their beliefs, or have no belief in God at all; roughly half of our population comes from public schools or non-religiously affiliated high schools.

Research Questions

After examining the role of young adult literature in literacy and development over the course of a semester, this particular environment and class seemed like an excellent place to capture the student experience of how religion is and is not portrayed in young adult literature. While each student's prior exposure to young adult literature varied greatly before this class, they participated in this study at the end of the semester after being exposed both to seven in-class readings and book presentations from classmates. With these common exposures, we anticipated that students would be able to provide thoughts on how young adult literature can best address the topic of religion, particularly Christianity, within texts. As teens themselves who either identify as Christian or attend a school that is Christian, and as current consumers of young adult literature who will go on to assign texts as teachers in the future, we wanted to explore how they experience this gap in the human experience in a genre of writing that aims for diversity and pushing boundaries, as seen through the lens of Frietas's argument.

Theoretical Framework

Two related theories framed our research as we explored this group of undergraduate students' views of young adult literature and religion. Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln explain that all individuals have a set of paradigms or worldviews that explain to them how the world works and how each person fits into the world.¹⁰ These basic paradigms guide our interactions, and they also help us analyze the world. The paradigms come to formation through our family's values, religious or areligious (more secular and indifferent to religion) upbringings, cultural practices, and societal norms and pressures. We are perpetually affected by our paradigms, which call us to behave in the world in ways that line up with how we perceive the world to be.

Young adult fiction authors, like all authors, possess their own paradigms that determine the topics they feel are worth writing about and, conversely, the topics that are too taboo for them to address.¹¹ In this study, the university where the research occurred integrates the theory of "worldviews," specifically "Christian worldview," in various required courses for all students, so these participants, many of whom are studying to be pre-service secondary English teachers, are familiar with this concept and have been asked to identify their own paradigms through course assignments and discussions. As researchers, as professors, and as humans, we also come to this research bearing our own paradigms. Just as paradigms determine if and in what ways young adult authors address religion in novels, it also influenced students' perceptions of the gap in this depiction of religion, as well as our desire to research this topic more deeply.

Related to the theory of paradigms are critical literacies, or more specifically religious literacies.¹² The aim of critical literacies is to examine texts closely and determine if there are any dominant political, social, racial, or religious perspectives. Texts are never neutral, so what is given voice in young adult literature is given power. Critical literacy is a lens through which researchers, authors and their readers, teachers, and young people can explore the social construction of texts and biases or perspectives toward taboo topics like religion.

Religious literacy is a specific type of critical literacy, involving the ability to understand different theological perspectives and how these perspectives are represented in texts. Lora DeWalt argues that religious literacies work from an "understanding that representation of religion in children's books adds to (or detracts from) the social power of those religious organizations."¹³ Religious perspectives have the potential to either be enhanced (or diminished) in the public eye when they are included in young adult literature.

We acted throughout this study with the understanding that everyone has paradigms and with the knowledge that the treatment of topics in young adult texts shifts social narratives.¹⁴ We hoped this small-scale qualitative study, along with a deeper look into the literature, could start to pull back the veil, from the perspectives of teens, on why religion in young adult novels still seems like a taboo topic.

Literature Review

In some ways, religion in young adult fiction mirrors the role of religion in our society. As Janet Hilbun explains, literature in the United States “cannot be separated from its history.” She argues that historically the United States had always been a country where “religion, politics, and literature” were closely linked and where children grew up studying religious texts like the Bible to gain reading skills, character education, and knowledge.¹⁵ Reading these texts was a way for parents in Puritan America to transfer specific values to their children; young adult literature, as we know it, did not exist in Puritan America. Even more than this, the prevailing belief was that being a child or adolescent was not a unique stage of development. Children and teens were viewed as “miniature adults” who were expected to uphold the values found in the religious texts.¹⁶

As Hilbun explains, the rise of industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century and advances in technology led to great growth in children’s and young adult literature, with many texts not explicitly addressing religion. The Great Depression caused a dip in young adult literature too, and since that time, religious discussion in our culture has mostly been tied to the rise of the religious Right and greater political and religious polarization. Hilbun cites various political events as causes of the split between young adult literature and religion, such as the election between conservative Barry Goldwater and left-leaning Lyndon Johnson, who ultimately won the election and grew a strong social following. *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) and *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret* (1970) were two texts that fell outside of this rule and pushed the boundaries between religion in texts intended for adolescents, but overall this phenomenon contributed to the lack of religious topics in contemporary young adult literature. Mainstream publishers do not cite Christianity as a major theme in texts for teens, and in those texts that do address religion, the views vary but tilt toward a more negative view of religion.¹⁷

Much like modern society's relationship with religion itself, religion in young adult texts has moved from the historical roots of "edification and salvation"¹⁸ through reading the Bible, to one centered on a personal religion focused on individual relationships with God or a more general notion of spirituality. The once-popular method of using literature to instruct morals and values has been replaced with a generalized connection to something bigger. Hilbun identifies how religion in today's fiction takes on an even more negative light, as it "frequently becomes an area of conflict between the protagonist and his or her parents and/or society," or it is portrayed "as an internal conflict, as the protagonist tried to determine a belief system."¹⁹

The topic of religion in young adult literature in the United States has transformed over time, but there is also a genuine dearth of currently published books that address this topic.²⁰ Despite a growing trend of religiously unaffiliated teenagers, the majority of teens still identify themselves as "highly religious" or "somewhat religious";²¹ yet most protagonists in young adult literature do not actually identify with a specific faith, and most plots don't display a spiritual quest of any kind.²² Patty Campbell and Chris Crowe argue that this gap leads to a lack of cohesion between the actual daily life of teens and the themes found in YA literature.²³ A typical adolescent might take part in the ritual of Muslim prayer or belong to a Christian youth group or, at least, engage in conversation about religion with family and friends. Exploring faith and spirituality is a significant aspect of adolescent development.²⁴ Just as an adolescent must go through physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, they must also go through spiritual growth by wondering how we all came to be. It is not just helpful to provide texts to adolescents that address religion or spirituality—it's a "need."²⁵

Methods

This small-scale study used a qualitative descriptive design, specifically thirty-five students in one section of an introduction to young adult literature course at a large Christian university in the southwestern United States. The students were mostly from states in the Southwest and Mountain West and Pacific Northwest. The gender breakdown of the sample was eight male and twenty-seven female participants. The qualitative design aligned well with our research question because we wanted to examine and explore students' perspectives on the taboo of religion in young adult literature. While this study was just preliminary in nature, it was our hope that we would gather initial information that could help us understand how teens who identify as

Christian or attend a school that is non-denominational Christian and also consume young adult literature view this taboo.

We began by asking the class of students in an introductory young adult literature course to read Freitas's article "Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers? Maybe Just One." Then they were asked to respond in a paragraph to Freitas's argument in the article. The written reflection took place during the course of regular classroom time in a unit on realistic fiction and young adult literature. The prompt they were given was: What is your response to reading Freitas's piece and is there a section/quote that resonated with you? The students were given roughly 15–20 minutes at the end of class to respond. While these responses were collected with names for the purposes of class participation, when the responses were typed into a Word document by researchers, names were not included with responses. Thirty-five responses were collected from the class.

The researchers received site authorization, and this study was classified as exempt by the university's Institutional Review Board because the study was conducted as part of "normal educational practices" by asking students to reflect on a relevant article.

Students' responses to the research question were added into a single Word document and coded and analyzed for themes using a bi-phase open and axial coding process.²⁶ In qualitative coding, the aim is to identify links in the data. These links appear as researchers identify similar words, phrases, sentences, or topics that emerge from participants' voices. Phase 1 of the bi-phase process included reading and rereading the texts to orient ourselves with the responses without casting assumptions on themes or sharing our impressions with one another. Phase 2 involved identifying themes independently and then collapsing them into major categories. We then compared categories and points of agreement to ensure fidelity and to enhance triangulation. From this process, the categories emerged. These categories are explored further below.

Findings

In responding to Freitas's article, students overwhelmingly felt that religion was indeed a taboo subject within young adult literature, and the vast majority found this to be problematic in some way, if not for them personally then for the genre as a whole. Only three of the thirty-five respondents stated outright that religion really didn't belong in young adult literature.

A Double Standard

Several students perceived a double standard for religion in young adult literature. They noted that it was common for topics related to sex or homosexuality to be found in YA literature, but that same sympathetic portrayal was not applied to religion. Another student found this difference in treatment “confusing.” They explained this by noting, “People are hesitant to write about their beliefs because they are worried that they will receive backlash because of their views . . . [but] YA [literature] promotes freedom of speech which means religion.” Several participants echoed this idea that free discussion of religion should be acceptable alongside other topics in YA literature. Another participant concluded that “the more people understand religion and spirituality [through YA texts], the more tolerant we can be.”

One student also highlighted what they felt was a “frustrating” double standard in YA texts because literature for teens is generally known to send a message that being yourself is okay. They saw that in general,

people are more supportive of LGBTQ rights, they are more open about sex, pot is becoming accepted. However, if I tell the world I am a straight Christian clean female, I am not supported or fairly represented. It is a kind of reverse prejudice. If we are going to allow representation, especially religious kinds, then a fair portrayal of Christian or even spiritual teenagers should be allowed.

Generally, students noted that in the literature for teens that they had encountered, there was, rightly, an acceptance of a diversity of people and views, but religion didn’t seem to be part of that diversity. They identified a hesitancy to address this topic within the publishing industry. For these students, this lack of acceptance and depiction was “confusing” and unfair.

People Fear Indoctrination but Shouldn't

Many students pointed out the difference between what adults want versus what young readers need. One participant stated that “religion is a touchy subject for adults while kids just secretly want to explore options.” They continued, saying that since adults control what children read (as parents, educators, and writers), they restrict “topics that could allow kids to hear other perspectives out of fear that they will stray from tradition.” Another participant offered the following view:

People are scared of the indoctrination of their young readers. This is a futile fear because any point of view can be indoctrinated. Many young people are curious about spirituality so they should read literature that brings to light more questions and perspectives.

Another student described what they saw as the silliness of parents' fear of the topic of religion, equating it to politics as a topic that people avoid so not to offend others. The student argued that adults may try to keep discussions of religion from younger generations to "try to protect or shelter them, but it just leaves them searching for more literature. The arts are a great way to overcome this barrier."

Another student dismissed the idea of indoctrination by asking if there was anything wrong with sharing information on religion. They continued: "If a person gains a deep conviction from a novel, isn't that good for them? Also just teaching about a religion will not convert them the same way teaching about LGBTQ issues will not make a person queer."

Similarly, another student shared her own story of how people's fear impacts our reading:

I find it funny that people think that when books have any religion or spirituality portrayed, it's a conversion method. I remember trying to read Harry Potter at church and my grandmother told me no because it would offend people. Being nine, I didn't get that. I said "it wasn't real, so why would it change me?"

Mainly, respondents felt like fears of indoctrination were paternalistic and that reading about religion within YA texts would provide light and exploration. To paraphrase a strong point by a respondent noted above, just as educated adults know that exploring LGBTQ themes within books promotes acceptance and not conversion to homosexuality, the same could be true of including more religious characters in YA fiction.

Exploring Religion Is Developmentally Appropriate

The majority of students responded that they did indeed see religion to be a taboo topic in young adult literature but were adamant in arguing that it shouldn't be. They did not understand why there were not more books on the topic and why there was a "stigma around religion and spirituality in YA."

Several students argued that religion depicted in YA books could be helpful to teens. One argued that "just like other topics such as the LGBTQI community and historical fiction,

literature is used for the sake of inclusion for those who need encouragement.” Religion in books should be more popular because “there are so many kids who need the support and advocacy through literature.” Another described a “craving” for books with religious or spiritual characters.

Many saw religion or spirituality inclusion in YA texts as a developmental imperative: “Religion isn’t all rules and tradition. It deals directly with the coming-of-age themes. Teens are trying to figure out their purpose and beliefs, and their thoughts on God directly impact this.” Several pointed out that YA literature is supposed to be relatable for teens and that “most teens are still trying to understand religion and spirituality,” no matter their faith tradition or lack thereof. One said that they personally would have loved a “YA text discussing theology and faith since those were big things I was exploring in high school.” One student summarized it this way: “Teens are often in transitional periods of self-discovery and are often curious about whether God exists, what life’s purpose is[,] among other things. As such, implementing religion in YA may help them on their paths to discovery.”

In addition to a developmental necessity, several respondents noted that seeing religion or spirituality in YA texts could be beneficial to those who are struggling. Many pointed out that YA literature did that for other groups but not for those struggling with faith. One student noted that the world of YA readers was missing out from the genre’s inability to “showcase religion in a more positive light” and to convey that it is “something that can bring joy and freedom and meaning to your life.”

In addition to offering reasons why religion should be included and lamenting its absence, some offered a rationale for why they thought it wasn’t prevalent. One respondent thought that authors might be afraid books featuring religious themes “won’t get read or publicity” but discounted that reasoning. Another acknowledged that while maybe not all teens want to read about religion, there was still a sizable amount who did. Another pointed out that religion and politics have become so intertwined in our culture that authors are simply trying not to offend, as we live in “an ever secular society that is afraid of confrontation,” and argued that the failure to “tackle” these questions is ultimately “dangerous and unhealthy.” One concluded that religion wasn’t included in young adult literature because “kids don’t get enough credit” and that some topics are “dumbed down” for them, including religion.

One student noted that faith can be really important to a person's development and may be even "the most important part of who someone is," while acknowledging that "bringing up religion and spirituality in a YA novel is tricky." Yet they wondered why more texts didn't try to navigate the topic, referencing Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. They concluded that "there needs to be more books like that out there so teens can navigate their spiritual identity."

These students spent the semester examining teenage characters who struggled to figure out who they are and books where the main theme was identity; in their responses here, the students see that part of this quest for self is sometimes experienced by teens as a search for meaning or for greater spiritual understanding. Faith can be a key part of one's identity, and to not see that depicted within YA novels seems to be an oversight and a detriment to teens who are looking for a deeper spiritual understanding as part of their identity.

Lack of Representation

At least five students lamented that they didn't see people who looked like them in young adult books. One student stated outright, "As a young Christian girl, I would love to read about people who share my faith." Another recounted:

I remember growing up not always noticing that there was never any religion or faith in the books I was reading, but when I read a book that cussed a lot or had teenagers having sex—both of which were highly frowned upon in my family—I was shocked, confused, and wondered why there weren't books about girls like me.

Another pointed out that it can be a "real-life struggle for a teenager to make the choice to have faith and practice that," and to see that struggle depicted would be good as right now struggles with faith only seem to happen in "adult" books. They continued, saying that this lack of depiction contributed to a sense of shame that they developed related to their "faith and religious family of origin." They shared that "growing up in a [p]astor's family, it [religion] was just a part of me that I felt like I had to hide."

Several responses contended that the complete lack of religion and spirituality in YA protagonists just wasn't realistic. The point of YA lit is that it should be relatable to teens, yet "when it excludes religion, it is excluding a large portion of its audience's beliefs." This student said that they couldn't personally "completely relate to a character when a component of faith is

missing.” Another argued that having religion in a text would benefit YA literature by producing “relatable, well-rounded characters” because many “teens are spiritual to some extent and that should be represented.” Another said that by creating religious characters “would help many who do live a modern religious life [by depicting] their struggles,” concluding that there are “many who need these books.” One student summed it up this way: “The faith aspect of teenage life is, from a Christian perspective, of the utmost importance. With little framework and few writings on the subject, we are left with many on all sides of religion being uninformed and apathetic.”

A few students pointed out that religion did not need to be the main focus of a YA text. In fact, one participant felt that if religion was “the main focus of the book, it could turn many readers off.” They continued that “religion should not be above criticism nor should religion be hidden.” Another student also offered that they “would like to see a protagonist who even just mentions that they are Catholic and go[es] to mass on Sundays. It doesn’t even have to be a major element of the story. Just a mention would be nice.” Another concluded that they would be eager to read a text that “manages to portray religion as a part of someone’s life without sacrificing the story.”

One student offered an explanation for why Christianity and religion was not easy to find in young adult literature. They argued that “the YA genre is largely progressive and that is the reason for a lack of hegemonic religious representation. The lack of modern predominant religions in YA lit originates more out of fear and corporate beliefs in publishing rather than a legitimate argument or reason.”

These responses were particularly interesting because throughout our course we stressed the importance of representation and the need for teenagers to be able to read books where characters look like them. The students are not wrong to note that argument as fair game for teens who are religious as well. As one student noted above, it would be refreshing to see a book that deals with other issues and storylines but where the main character is shown to be religious or churchgoing as just part of who that character is and what their family does.

The Role of Progressivism

For several students, even as they acknowledged that they wanted to see Christians represented more in novels, they identified possible problems with this depiction. One stated: “Even as a very passionate Christian, talk of religion outside of its normal context made me uncomfortable

because I knew it made others uncomfortable.” Another identified with Freitas’s fear that when identifying as a Christian, other people might assume this means being intolerant or having conservative views. Several students noted that when characters were religious in YA literature, they were usually “preachy, unbelievable, and unrelatable” or “the stereotypical strictly conservative Christians, mostly a parent.” They expressed hope that if religion were more “welcomed in the . . . world of literature,” then maybe that preconception might break down. At least two students revealed that their own Christian faith was more progressive than is usually represented by depictions of Christians, with one stating, “I sometimes disassociate from the church and their views despite being a Christian.” The other student offered this: “Just because you are religious doesn’t mean you can’t be progressive. In fact, so many people nowadays are both [Christian and progressive].”

It was interesting to see that some students felt like certain depictions of Christians as conservative evangelicals might play into stereotypes and be more harmful. Some students saw their faith as more progressive than the typical portrayal and seemed to think that seeing more teenage characters who care about social justice or other progressive causes who also are religious or go to church might help to break that stereotype.

Evangelism in Literature Would Be Good

Two respondents felt that not only should religion be explored but that including more depictions of Christianity would “be giving others a chance to get to Christ.” One argued that because it is human to think about why we are here and how to live a good life, exposure to Christ’s teachings would be helpful. The other felt that there should be a greater representation of religion in YA literature but worried that the depiction might be a more progressive view of Christianity, specifically mentioning that texts depicting homosexuality in a positive light would be problematic in their view. They concluded that they wanted more Christian YA books, but expressed being “afraid that writers will show the wrong way and students will never see the real truth.”

While by no means representative, these two participants did feel that not only were more characters of faith merited in literature for teenagers, but they specifically noted the need for depictions of characters who held more religiously conservative or evangelical views of society. They stressed the importance of seeing characters finding salvation in a commitment to Jesus.

While there are certainly Christian publishers that fill this niche, for these more devout respondents, the lack of this depiction in any mainstream publications felt like a deliberate and glaring hole, as well as a missed opportunity.

Religion in Texts Could Offend or Indoctrinate

While arguing that teens who are searching for religion or faith deserve the right to see themselves, one student pointed out: “Of course, writers must be careful of how they are including religion because it shouldn’t feel forced upon the reader and shouldn’t incorporate intolerant speech or push certain morals.” Another student acknowledged that “because religion is such a personal thing,” parents who do try to raise their children with certain faiths or values might be rightfully concerned about indoctrination if the author were to make an alternate faith sound “too appealing.”

In nearly direct opposition to those who viewed young adult literature as a place to highlight faith and actually evangelize, these respondents did not think that was an appropriate role for young adult literature. These students anticipated the pushback that could come from adults who saw a strong and persuasive faith message as being seen as indoctrination.

Religion Is Not Needed in YA Literature

One student felt that most teens would not want to read books about religion, arguing that “by the time a person is in their early teens, they are set on a religion/worldview.” Two students said that if a teen wanted to read about religion, there were many non-YA books that covered the topic, so they really didn’t see it as an issue and were quite fine with religion not being included in YA literature.

Another student saw the lack of religion in young adult literature as being positive because it meant “teens have more freedom to think freely and on their own.” Recounting their own experience of being “forced” to go to church until age fourteen and making the choice after that to no longer attend informed their thinking: “I think teenagers should start to think freely when it comes to religion. They are old enough to make their own decisions and preaching at teenagers can only make things worse or make them rebel more.”

This handful of participants were essentially pushing back on Frietas’s argument, not in arguing that religion wasn’t a taboo subject, but in arguing that the lack of religion in young

adult fiction was not a cause for concern and that it was appropriately missing in the genre. It was interesting that these responses came from both participants who considered themselves no longer religious and also several who did have a strong Christian faith. In either case, they didn't foresee that a greater depiction of faith in young adult literature would be helpful in providing knowledge or changing viewpoints.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Responses

Category	Theme	Characteristic Response
YA would benefit from more religion	Double standard	YA promotes freedom of speech, which includes religion. It is a kind of reverse prejudice.
	People fear indoctrination but shouldn't	Religion is a touchy subject for adults while kid just secretly want to explore options.
	Exploring religion is developmentally appropriate and necessary	Many young people are curious about spirituality so they should read literature that brings to light more questions and perspectives. A lot of teens are spiritual to some extent and that should be represented.
	Lack of representation	As a young Christian girl I would love to read about people who share my faith. When it [YA lit] excludes religion, it is excluding a large portion of its audience's beliefs.
	Progressive values and religion	Just because you are religious doesn't mean you can't be progressive.
	Religion and evangelism should happen within texts	We should be giving others a chance to get to Christ.
Religion and YA don't go together and that's fine	Parents fear texts might indoctrinate or offend	Writers must be careful in how they are including religion because it shouldn't feel forced upon the reader.
	Religion not needed in YA	"I think teenagers should start to think freely when it comes to religion."

Note: Thematic categories based on inductive analysis of student respondents.

Discussion

The biggest takeaway from this study is the need for more Christian characters—both those who identify as Christian where it is central to the plot and for those where religion is just a backdrop to the plot—are vitally important. While some respondents mentioned feeling personally unrepresented in the literature because of their faith, many just noted that spirituality was developmentally appropriate for teens and so the silence on the subject in YA literature simply rang false.

The vast majority of respondents wanted some depictions of religion either to see characters living with faith and encountering everyday struggles that a Christian teen might actually face or even as a backdrop to a story where faith was just one facet of who the character was. They felt like some basic acknowledgment of faith—something that many of them saw as so foundational to their own development and life choices—at least merited a mention.

Only two students advocated for an evangelical focus being important for YA literature, explicitly stating that YA texts could be used to help readers find Christ. However, several students saw that religion and spirituality more generally could help teens who are struggling. They viewed their own faith as being an important part of who they are and how they deal with problems, and they thought that a depiction of a protagonist finding joy or comfort in some kind of religion could provide help and support to readers undergoing similar suffering.

Several students called out the hypocrisy in young adult literature’s push for diversity and acceptance, where views of faith and religion did not seem to receive the same treatment. Notably, only two respondents treated the push for diverse views of teens, specifically LGBTQ teens, with any amount of animosity. The vast majority simply called out that it was great to see more kinds of teens and teen experiences depicted and pointed out that religiosity or spirituality should be among them.

Overwhelmingly, these students reinforced Margaret Auguste’s finding that it is a “need” that young people are supported in seeking spirituality or religiosity in the texts they read.²⁷ There was a surprisingly strong echo of respondents who yearned to see people of faith represented in realistic ways within YA literature, so as to connect with protagonists who were religious or spiritual.

Limitations and Next Steps

Any time a researcher is the teacher and the teacher is the researcher, there can be concerns about reactivity.²⁸ One of the researchers had a very close relationship to the course and to the students, which made this research both beneficial and challenging. To mitigate this issue, the primary researcher, who served as classroom instructor to these students, worked with an outside researcher who knew the course, the university, young adult literature, and pre-service teacher education well, but didn't personally know the students.

We also worked around the issue of reactivity by ensuring that responses were anonymous, voluntary, and not collected for a grade. Thematic analysis, then, became more systematic and trustworthy as we were able to analyze the major topics in the anonymous responses separately and then confirm findings together.²⁹ In many ways, this close relationship may have even helped us conduct a more systematic and deep analysis of students' responses. Knowing the research context and the participants, even if responses were offered anonymously, helped to "humanize" students' words and breathe life into the data, rather than reducing them to a code or number.³⁰ With this said, reactivity still remains a concern in any qualitative study designed in this way.

With any small-scale qualitative study, there is room for exploration and growth. In the future, we would like to hold focus groups as an additional data-collection measure to dive deeper into students' responses and ask follow-up questions. This would help us follow participants' patterns of thinking around the role of religion in young adult literature. It should also be noted that since these students were asked to read and respond to Freitas's article, her points in many ways shape the dialogue here. Conducting focus groups free from this influence would likely open up more organic and insightful responses. Additionally, many of these students are pre-service English teachers. Asking them to consider how they think about religion in YA texts in relation to their future classroom would provide an interesting perspective as well.

Small-scale studies are only generalizable to certain populations. Significant generalizability should not be an expected outcome of this type of research.³¹ Nevertheless, more research is needed in other or similar settings. This study explored the responses of undergraduate students who happen to attend a Christian university but may or may not explicitly identify as Christian. Research exploring certain denominations of Christianity, other types of Christian universities, and universities with other faith backgrounds would be beneficial.

While we wanted to maintain student anonymity in this study to allow students to share their thoughts openly, it is possible that future research could examine the relationship between professed religious/areligious preference and feelings toward religion in young adult literature.

Conclusion

Far from being a definitive study on religion in young adult literature, this study only begins to fill in the gaps on how the under-represented topic of religion in YA literature is perceived by undergraduates, many of whom are future teachers. While the genre of young adult literature is generally seen as encouraging tolerance and embracing a diversity of experience, religion and spirituality do not seem to be part of that diversity, to the detriment of the genre and the teens exploring this aspect of life. The publishing world of late has become rightly responsive and intentional in encouraging and highlighting stories that showcase the diversity of teenage experiences, and thus more stories that show teenagers practicing a religion, navigating their faith, or struggling with belief would only add to that inclusivity. For teachers and library staff whose role it is to provide a well-rounded selection of books for teens on a diverse array of topics and human experiences, having more YA novels depicting teens as spiritual beings would be a welcome addition. We want our teens browsing library shelves stocked with depictions of a wide array of human experiences; faith must be among them.

Notes

¹ Donna Freitas, “Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers? Maybe Just One,” *New York Times*, December 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/25/books/review/religion-taboo-young-adult.html> (accessed March 4, 2021).

² Patty Campbell, “The Sand in the Oyster,” *Hornbook Magazine* 70, no. 5 (1994): 619; Patty Campbell and Chris Crowe, *Spirituality in Young Adult Literature: The Last Taboo* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Trudelle Thomas, “Crossing the Water: Spiritual Growth in *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 16, no. 3 (2001): 233.

³ Campbell, “The Sand in the Oyster,” 619.

⁴ Connie Green and Sandra B. Oldendorf, “Teaching Religious Diversity through Children’s Literature,” *Childhood Education* 81, no. 4 (2005): 209–18; Allison Skerrett, “‘Closer to God’: Following Religion Across the Lifeworlds of an Urban Youth,” *Urban Education* 51, no. 8 (2016): 964–90; Bronwyn T. Williams, “Taken on Faith: Religion and Identity in Writing Classes,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48, no. 6 (2005): 514–18.

⁵ Shannon M. Oltmann and Stephanie D. Reynolds, “When Libraries Aren’t Challenged: Librarians Discuss a Lack of Patron Challenges to Their Collections,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 11, no. 2 (2020): 1–22.

⁶ Betsy Gomez, “10 Reasons Books Are Challenged and Banned,” Banned Books Week, September 26, 2018, <https://bannedbooksweek.org/10-reasonsbooks-are-challenged-and-banned/> (accessed June 4, 2021).

⁷ Freitas, “Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers?.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, “Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 191–215.

¹¹ Freitas, “Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers?,” 2.

¹² Lora DeWalt, “An Examination of Children’s Literature Scholarship on Religion,” *Journal of Children’s Literature* 44, no. 1 (2018): 21–32; Skerrett, “‘Closer to God.’”

¹³ DeWalt, “An Examination of Children’s Literature Scholarship on Religion.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Janet Hilbun, “The Role of Protestant Christianity in Young Adult Realistic Fiction,” *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 7, nos. 3–4 (2009): 182, 181.

¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Freitas, “Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers?,” 199.

¹⁹ Hilbun, “The Role of Protestant Christianity in Young Adult Realistic Fiction,” 199.

²⁰ Campbell, “The Sand in the Oyster”; Campbell and Crowe, *Spirituality in Young Adult Literature*.

²¹ Pew Research Center, “The Demographic Characteristics of Religious Typology Groups,” August 29, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/29/the-demographic-characteristics-of-religious-typology-groups-2/> (accessed June 4, 2021).

²² Freitas, “Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers?”; Hilbun, “The Role of Protestant Christianity in Young Adult Realistic Fiction.”

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- ²³ Campbell and Crowe, *Spirituality in Young Adult Literature*.
- ²⁴ Margaret Auguste, "Those Kinds of Books: Religion and Spirituality in Young Adult Literature," *Young Adult Library Services* 11, no. 4 (2013): 37–40.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).
- ²⁷ Auguste, "Those Kinds of Books."
- ²⁸ Lisa M. Given, *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).
- ²⁹ Brigitte S. Cypress, "Rigor or Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research," *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing* 36, no. 4 (2017): 253–63, doi: 10.1097/DCC.0000000000000253 (accessed June 4, 2021).
- ³⁰ Django Paris and Maisha Winn, *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).
- ³¹ Lawrence Leung, "Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 4, no. 3 (2015): 326, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4535087/> (accessed June 4, 2021).