

Article

Navigating Interreligious Differences in Spiritual/Pastoral Care: An Empirical Study on Turkish Muslim and German Christian Spiritual/Pastoral Caregivers

Zuhal Ağilkaya-Şahin 

Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling, Istanbul Medeniyet University, 34682 Istanbul, Turkey; zuhal.agilkayasahin@medeniyet.edu.tr

Abstract: As an outgrowth of globalization, religious globalization has significantly transformed the religious landscape worldwide. Contemporary societies exhibit religious pluralism, posing challenges for services such as spiritual or pastoral care. This study aimed to investigate how pastoral/spiritual caregivers of divergent cultural and religious backgrounds navigate religious diversity and how their religious location influences their inter-religious relations. Data were gathered through a standardized open-ended interview protocol. The study sample consisted of German Christian pastoral caregivers and Turkish Muslim spiritual caregivers from Germany and Turkey, respectively (N = 67). Overall, the entire sample expressed a generally positive attitude towards providing spiritual/pastoral care (S/PC) to individuals of other religious affiliations. German participants emphasized a human-centered approach towards individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, whereas Turkish participants placed greater emphasis on the qualifications of the caregiver. Turkish participants exhibited less exposure to other cultures/religions compared to their German counterparts, yet both subsamples responded positively to requests for care from individuals of different faiths. Both subsamples adhered to standard procedures during S/PC visits. German participants were more inclined to incorporate elements from other religions/cultures into their S/PC work compared to Turkish participants. The majority of participants regarded their respective institutions (Church/Diyanet) as responsible for addressing the spiritual needs of others. However, the German subsample displayed greater reluctance towards the employment of pastoral caregivers from different religious backgrounds by their institution, as opposed to the Turkish subsample.

Keywords: pastoral care; pastoral counseling; spiritual care; spiritual counseling; Turkey; Germany; Muslim; Christian; Church; Diyanet



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1. Introduction

In our contemporary world, globalization has been a defining force, prompting a restructuring not only across the domains of technology, culture, society, economics, and politics (Çelik 2012), but also within the sphere of religion, leading to a transformation of the religious landscape. This phenomenon, termed “religious globalization” (Riegel and Demmrich 2021), has extended its reach to challenge and transform pastoral care significantly.

Religious multiplicity (Greider 2011), multiple worldview (Smeets 2012), transculturality (Lorberg-Fehring 2021a), religious diversity, interreligiosity/culturality, multireligiosity/culturality, multifaith, religious pluralism are differently expressed but similar characteristics of religious globalization that highlight the appeal for pastoral caregivers to engage with diversity more cultursensitively (Kayales 1999, 2004, 2015), transreligiously (Lorberg-Fehring 2021b), transculturally (Clinebell 1984; Merle 2017), transversally (Grözinger 1995), multiperspectively (Lorberg-Fehring 2021b) or diversitysensitively (Kayales 2024). Pastoral care, historically contextualized and influenced by the prevailing socio-cultural milieu, has evolved significantly over the past century. Therefore, with the 20th century, it is no

longer possible to speak of *one* pastoral care, anchored in *one* religious tradition, let alone the exclusivity of *one* brand of pastoral care. As pastoral care is a service to human beings, the transformation of societies and the religious landscape requests the consideration of demographic developments (Gestrich 1995; Erdem 2021; Fehrs 2021) that lead to theological, theoretical, practical, and structural changes in pastoral care (Riegel and Demmrich 2021; Knuth 2021). The transition from traditional kerygmatic approaches, which aim to strengthen the faith and lead the person back to his/her community, to pastoral psychological paradigms in the 1960s–70s signified a shift towards holistic individual-centered care (Winkler 1997; Klessmann 2015; Ağilkaya Şahin 2021). This evolution empowered interreligious tendencies within pastoral care, emphasizing openness to diverse worldviews and cultural backgrounds. The concept of *multiple worldview*, as elucidated by Smeets (2012), for example, advocates for an inclusive stance towards diverse perspectives, reflecting the plurality of worldviews within society. This framework acknowledges the possibility of engaging with various traditions by adopting multiple perspectives. Consequently, it shapes both the practice and identity of caregivers within spiritual/pastoral contexts. The increasing interaction and encounter with diverse worldviews in our interconnected global community prompt caregivers not only to introspectively examine their own identities, deeply rooted in cultural heritage (Pijnenburg 2010), but also to cultivate the capacity to empathetically engage with the worldviews of their care seekers.

Genuine encounters, essential for effective pastoral care, occur within the relational boundaries between individuals, fostering an awareness of the distinctions between religions and their respective worldviews (Lorenz 2024; Merle 2017). Consequently, contemporary discussions surrounding spiritual/pastoral care necessitate the consideration of factors such as multiple worldviews, religious plurality, and interreligiosity. However, the following question arises: How can spiritual/pastoral caregivers effectively respond to such multiplicities or pluralities, and how can they develop the requisite sensitivity to navigate these complex dynamics?

Interreligious/cultural sensitivity can be reached by acknowledging its multidimensional nature, transcending exclusive adherence to any single religious tradition or worldview (Kayales 1999, 2004, 2017; Lorberg-Fehring 2021a, 2022; Bidwell 2017). A *multidimensional pastoral care approach* requires multifaceted training programs that foster diverse spiritual perspectives and value diversity. In that sense, Mucherera (2006) calls for a pastoral formation of counselors in intercultural societies that has a global focus: “We need to shape the mindset of those in training for pastoral counseling to understand not only their own immediate community needs, but the needs of those in the global context (p. 108).” This call undermines the epistemological nature of the most prevalent training, i.e., clinical pastoral training, as it privileges Christian assumptions and norms (Bidwell and Marshall 2006). Therefore, the complexity of interreligious constellations requires an extension of existing formation programs and predefined pastoral care competencies. *Interreligious competencies* (Kayales 1999, 2004, 2017; Wenz 2017; Hibaoui 2017; Fincke 2021; Kunze-Harper 2021) is one of those extensions. Interreligious competence emerges as a pivotal aspect, facilitating meaningful engagement with individuals from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, characterized by cultural and religious sensitivity (Greider 2024; Fincke 2021). In their multiple worldview framework, Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven (2014) introduce the concept of *spiritual competence* as an alternative to traditional ministry. This approach emphasizes several key components, including being firmly rooted in one’s own personal spiritual or religious identity and possessing the ability to effectively mediate between the patient’s spiritual resources and their current circumstances, thereby encapsulating the essential attributes of spiritual care as a recognized profession.

The contemporary global landscape is characterized by its lack of monoculturalism (Farris 2002) and the diminishing prevalence of mono-religiosity among individuals (Greider 2010). Consequently, spiritual/pastoral care must adopt an approach that acknowledges and values the intricate religious affiliations and multiplicity present in society. As Bidwell (2017, p. 51) aptly notes, “religious diversity today is not simply—or primarily—

cultural, but also personal and existential. Individuals and communities are multi-religious too." In response to these complexities, Bidwell (2015, 2017) advocates for a *caring across traditions* approach, which transcends the theological confines of Christianity and offers practical tools such as befriending, witnessing, and hearing. These practices aim to address the isolation, distorted relationships, and existential anxiety often exacerbated by migration and complex religious bonds. The underlying ethos of Bidwell's approach is the acceptance of religious multiplicity over Christian privilege in spiritual care, religious multiplicity instead of religious singularity, and recognizing religious multiplicity as a resource rather than an obstacle. This aligns with Gestrich's (1995) *convergent approach*, which asserts that spiritual accompaniment is a universal human need, irrespective of religious background. Gestrich contrasts this with the *exclusive approach*, which may exploit the religious other for missionary purposes while the *dialogical approach* enriches one's own religious profile. Emphasizing a primary kinship in the religious human experience, Gestrich (1995) advocates for the convergent approach, rooted in the recognition of shared human needs. Similarly, Hinkle (1993) speaks to a *meta-cultural experience* characterized by an awareness of the divine beyond cultural boundaries and norms, underscoring the universal human connection in spiritual engagement.

According to Greider (2011), *religious multiplicity*, i.e., multiple religiosities within one individual, accentuates the importance of recognizing and respecting religious differences between care seekers and givers. This *religious location*, entailing that all individuals occupy a specific position relative to religion, or the resulting differences, whether interreligious (caregivers and seekers identifying with different religions), intrareligious (caregivers and seekers differ within the same religious tradition), or stemming from religious multiplicity (engaging in multiple religious traditions), can enrich clinical relationships and foster deeper understanding and connection (Greider 2024). Yet she emphasizes the need for respecting each other due to our similarities, either religious or human, because a "[f]ocus on similarities is valuable and reassuring" (Greider 2024, p. 25).

While theoretical discourse on embracing religious plurality within spiritual/pastoral care abounds, empirical research remains limited. Studies conducted by Smeets and colleagues (Smeets 2012; Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven 2014) are grounded in their *multiple worldview* concept. The findings highlight the ability of spiritual caregivers to adopt multiple perspectives in their communication approaches (Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven 2014). However, there appears to be a tendency among caregivers to underemphasize the social, institutional, and historical factors that shape their worldviews, despite acknowledging the importance of distinct traditions (Smeets 2012). Although Schweizer and Noth's (2017) study primarily explores chaplains' perspectives on spiritual care, it indirectly touches upon interreligious spiritual care, as participants characterized spiritual care as inclusive and interreligious. Nevertheless, cross-cultural studies in this domain remain scarce. In addition to Ağılkaya Şahin's (2022a) theoretical comparison of Turkish and German spiritual care, only Ünal and Yılmaz's (2023) empirical comparative study on Muslim spiritual counselors in Turkey and Germany could be identified. This study sheds light on the uniformity of spiritual counseling methods across different countries. The study reveals that the methods employed in spiritual counseling for Muslims do not significantly vary between Turkey, a Muslim-majority country, and Germany, a Muslim-minority country.

Both Turkey and Germany face the ramifications of religious globalization on spiritual/pastoral care, albeit to varying degrees. While Germany's interreligious/culturality is primarily shaped by migration (Fincke 2021), historically, Turkey has always been a mosaic of different cultures and religions, but it is increasingly confronted with migration. Despite these shared challenges, the discourse on interreligious pastoral care is more pronounced in Germany, reflecting its more advanced institutionalization compared to Turkey.

Pastoral care in Germany (*Seelsorge*) is a professional, institutionalized, religiously motivated, and theologically grounded offer for help and communication (Klessmann 2015; Schweizer and Noth 2017; Hibaoui 2017; Lorberg-Fehring 2022; Ünal and Yılmaz 2023) provided by the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches in Germany. The foundational

framework for pastoral care in Germany is rooted in the Bible and the Christian tradition (Klessmann 2015; Nauer 2001). Recognized as an essential societal and ecclesiastical practice, pastoral care enjoys legal protection under the German constitution (Art. 4, 140) and is institutionally embedded in various state settings such as hospitals, prisons, and the military. According to German Protestant church law (EKD § 2,1), pastoral care extends its services to every individual in need, regardless of their religious or denominational affiliation.

Since the 1990s, German pastoral care has undergone significant evolution influenced by societal developments such as pluralization, individualization, and secularization (Gestrich 1995; Kayales 1999; Weiß 2010; Fincke 2021; Riegel and Demmrich 2021). This transformation has prompted intense debate regarding intercultural and interreligious openness within pastoral care practices (Gestrich 1995; Kayales 1999, Weiß 2010; Fincke 2021; Riegel and Demmrich 2021). Presently, Christian pastoral care in Germany is a sophisticated institution characterized by the acceptance and coexistence of various pastoral care approaches, which sometimes collaborate synergistically (Nauer 2001; Klessmann 2015; Fincke 2021). However, contradictory approaches exist within the landscape of German pastoral care. For instance, pastoral psychological approaches, predominantly promoted by the German Pastoral Psychology Association (DGfP), co-occur alongside kerygmatic approaches, such as Pentecostal-oriented pastoral care.¹

In the Western Christian context, what is commonly referred to as pastoral care and counseling is known as spiritual counseling and guidance (SCG) (*manevi danışmanlık ve rehberlik*) in Turkey. Administered by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), which oversees Muslim religious services in Turkey, spiritual counseling and guidance is formally recognized and regulated by the Professional Competency Board (MYK 2019). The definition of SCG encompasses the recognition of the influence of faith on the lives of those seeking counsel, and it involves the application of both contemporary counseling techniques and religious or spiritual methodologies to address issues related to religion or spirituality. The spiritual counselor, as delineated by MYK (2019), is mandated to be a “qualified person” capable of fulfilling these tasks. Diyanet employees, theologians by profession, serve as spiritual counselors across various public settings, including religious services, healthcare facilities, correctional institutions, and social service organizations, and “do not discriminate counselees on the basis of religion, language, race, denomination, political opinion and similar issues” (MYK 2019, p. 17).

Professional and institutionalized spiritual counseling is relatively new in Turkey (for details see Ağılkaya Şahin 2022b), although its ethos aligns with Turkish Islamic culture.² Given its novelty, Turkish spiritual counseling lacks substantive debates, theoretical frameworks, or empirical studies concerning interreligious dynamics or religious plurality. Sağır (2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020) briefly touches upon this subject with regard to refugees, suggesting the importance of cultivating knowledge about and respect for intercultural differences within the practice of spiritual counseling. However, beyond Sağır’s observations, there remains a notable dearth of scholarly discourse or research specifically addressing interreligious or religious plurality within the realm of Turkish spiritual counseling.

Before delving into the empirical section of this paper, it is essential to establish clarity regarding the terminology used to delineate *spiritual* or *pastoral care* and *counseling*. In the literature, these terms are often employed interchangeably, as evidenced by the reference list of this paper (for empirical validation, refer to Greenwald et al. 2004). However, for the purpose of consistency and clarity, the following distinctions will be observed: the terms “spiritual care/caregiver” (SC) will be used to refer to the context of Turkey, whereas “pastoral care/caregiver” (PC) will be utilized in the context of Germany.

2. Present Study

Although the question of “how do (or should) spiritual/pastoral caregivers (S/PCs) approach the increasing religious plurality in their profession?” has been frequently raised in the literature (Gestrich 1995; Bidwell 2017; Wenz 2017; Erdem 2021), and various theoretical frameworks have been proposed to address it (Farris 2002; Noth et al. 2017; Snodgrass

2024), empirical research on this topic remains scarce. Despite the theoretical groundwork laid by scholars such as Greider (2024), who outlined the mentioned typology of interreligious difference, there is a notable gap in the empirical findings concerning how S/PCs navigate religious diversity within their profession. To address this gap, the present study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore how S/PCs from two distinct cultural and religious backgrounds—Turkish Muslim and German Christian—approach and navigate religious differences. Specifically, the study aims to investigate how the religious location of caregivers influences their interreligious relations and interactions.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The sample consisted of German Christian PCs and Turkish Muslim SCs from Germany and Turkey, respectively ($N = 67$). Participants who completed less than half of the interview protocol were excluded from the analysis. Subsequently, the final sample comprised $N = 61$ participants, consisting of $n = 40$ Turkish individuals ($M_{age} = 41.7$, $SD_{Age} = 7.0$, range: 28–58) and $n = 21$ Germans ($M_{age} = 59.1$, $SD_{Age} = 8.43$, range: 37–82), with the German subsample significantly older than the Turkish subsample. The Turkish subsample predominantly comprised female participants ($n = 32$), whereas the gender distribution in the German subsample was more balanced (female $n = 9$; male $n = 12$). All participants identified their religious affiliation as either Islam (Turkish subsample, with no specific denominations mentioned) or a Christian denomination (German subsample: Protestant $n = 15$; Catholic $n = 5$; Christian $n = 1$). Furthermore, the German subsample exhibited significantly more working experience in years ($M_{Exp} = 25.2$, $SD_{Exp} = 9.9$) compared to the Turkish subsample ($M_{Exp} = 3.1$; $SD_{Exp} = 2.0$). All participants volunteered to take part in the study.

3.2. Data Collection

All procedures conducted in this study received ethical approval from the Ethical Committee of the author's faculty. The standardized open-ended interview protocol was prepared in German for the German subsample and in Turkish for the Turkish subsample. To recruit participants, the interview protocol was distributed to two primary institutions closely associated with the S/PCs in both countries. Specifically, the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) facilitated recruitment in Turkey, while the German Pastoral Psychology Association (DGfP) assisted with recruitment in Germany. These institutions were requested to disseminate the interview protocol to their respective members or personnel via email. The interview protocol, provided in MS Word format, outlined the study as a comparative investigation between German Christian and Turkish Muslim S/PCs. It included the interview questions along with instructions for returning the completed protocol to a designated email address for data collection purposes.

For consultation purposes, the interview protocol was shared with three different academics in the field of psychology of religion and religious studies from Germany and Turkey. After their inputs on language and content consistency, the protocol gained its final shape. In addition to sociodemographic questions, the interview focused on seven central issues: (1) Provision of S/PC for members of other religions; (2) Form of S/PC offered to members of other religions; (3) Personal experiences with members of other religions and cultures; (4) Integrating elements from diverse religions/cultures into S/P work; (5) Assessment of the institution's responsibility regarding the spiritual needs of individuals from other religions; (6) Perspective on the institution's employment of S/PCs for individuals from other religions; and (7) Evaluation of receiving similar training alongside S/PCs from other religions. Some interviewees were contacted again for further clarification or to deepen their responses to certain questions, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the topics under investigation.

3.3. Data Analysis

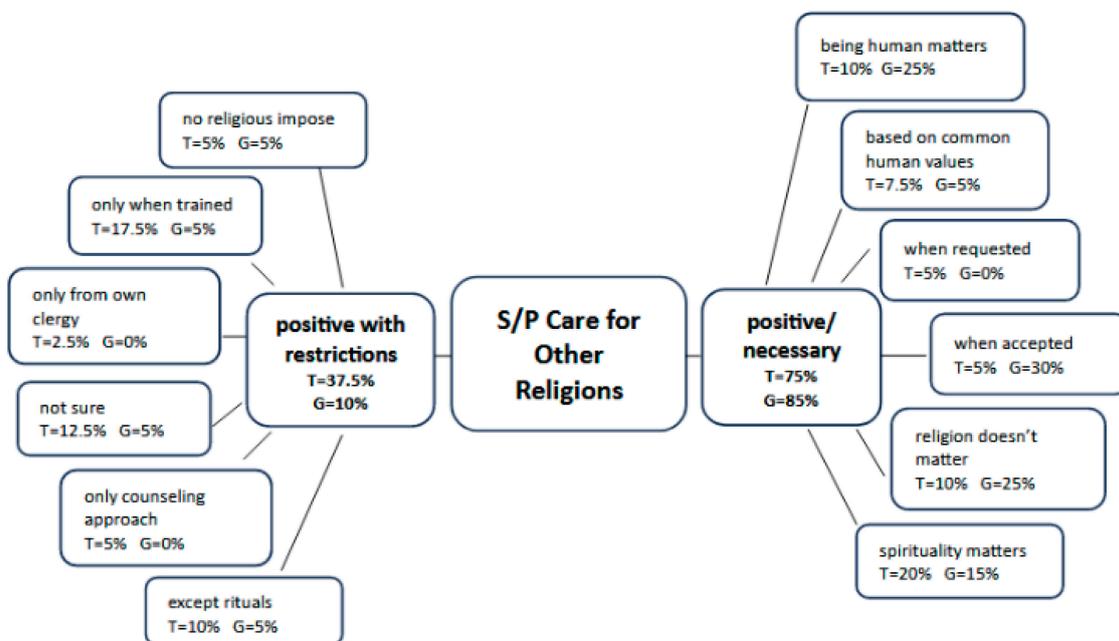
The data analysis process adhered to Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory approach, wherein themes emerged from the data themselves rather than being predefined. Participants’ written responses were manually, inductively coded, and content analysis was conducted question by question, prioritizing content and meaning over numerical data (Patton 2015). Upon reviewing the interviews multiple times to ensure a thorough comprehension of the content, categories, themes, and subthemes were identified and systematically coded, following the guidelines outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). After initial coding, connections between single codes were found and thus merged and condensed to more meaningful subthemes. This iterative process allowed for the comprehensive exploration and interpretation of the data, facilitating the emergence of key insights and patterns within the dataset.

4. Results

The subsequent sections outline the themes and subthemes within the categories, presenting data in figures that include frequencies and illustrative quotes. The quotes are identified with abbreviations indicating the participant’s nationality: TP# for Turkish Participant and GP# for German Participant, followed by their respective number. These quotes serve to provide contextual insight and support the interpretation of the findings.

4.1. Provision of S/P Care for Members of Other Religions

Participants were queried about their perspectives on providing S/PC for individuals belonging to religions different from their own. The entire sample generally expressed a somewhat positive outlook, although the subsamples highlighted distinct perspectives, as depicted in Figure 1. These perspectives were categorized into two overarching themes: a direct “positive/necessary” stance and a somewhat hesitant “positive with restrictions” notion. The former viewpoint was more prevalent among Turkish participants, while the latter was more commonly observed among Germans.



The percentage in parentheses indicate the frequencies of a theme or subtheme in each subsample (G for Germans N=21; T for Turks N=40).

Figure 1. Provision S/P care for members of other religions.

Under the theme of “positive/necessary”, the subtheme “being human” encapsulated the perspectives of German participants emphasizing their Christian faith as instilling a sense of responsibility towards all humanity. Conversely, Turkish participants underscored the relevance of the human and his/her needs. Both subsamples concurred that the care seeker’s religion holds little significance when offering S/PC, affirming that such care is for everyone, regardless of their beliefs or lack thereof. Turkish participants distinguished between religion and spirituality, asserting that spirituality encompasses broader needs such as the pursuit of meaning, peace, and values, emphasizing a spiritual counseling approach grounded in common human values or universal principles. They clarified that spiritual counseling is distinct from religious education or guidance. Additionally, while German participants emphasized the importance of mutual acceptance between the caregiver and seeker in pastoral care, Turkish participants highlighted the necessity of the seeker’s request for such care.

In the “positive with restrictions” theme, both subsamples agreed that while S/PC is possible for members of other religions, they opposed any form of religious imposition or missionary acts. Turkish participants emphasized the importance of counselors having the necessary competencies, requiring adequate training and knowledge of the care seeker’s religion, stating that the methods are the same. The more profound concerns of Turkish participants in this subtheme were expressed like this: *“This is a precious but difficult service. Being able to withdraw from individual differences and being able to unite on the basics of being human is part of this service but I think not everyone is able to do that”* (TP 19). Notably, the subtheme “only by own clergy”, probably induced by the mentioned training condition, emerged only among Turkish participants, suggesting that spiritual counseling for other religions should ideally be conducted by clergy from the seeker’s own faith tradition. Both German and Turkish participants agreed that religious rituals should be performed by the care seeker’s own clergy.

A significant number of Turkish participants expressed doubts or reservations, forming the subtheme “not sure”. They questioned the efficacy of spiritual counseling for other religions, felt inadequately qualified for such tasks, or believed such services could be limited to specific settings like hospitals or for individuals interested in Islam. While Turkish participants suggested a more counseling-oriented approach (rather than a religious/spiritual approach), Germans did not share similar sentiments. Overall, Turkish participants demonstrated more reservations regarding spiritual counseling for members of other religions.

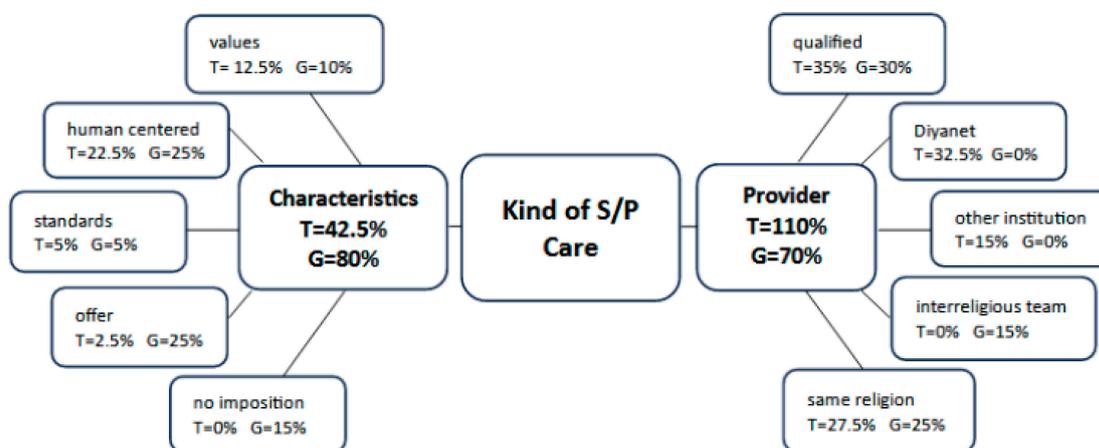
4.2. Form of S/P Care for Members of Other Religions and Cultures

The participants were asked what kind of S/PC would be suitable for individuals from diverse cultures/religions within their respective countries. The German subsample predominantly concentrated on delineating the characteristics of the service, whereas the Turkish subsample focused more on identifying the appropriate providers.

Figure 2 illustrates that the predominant characteristic attributed to S/PC for individuals from diverse cultures and religions was a “human-centered” approach, a perspective nearly equally embraced by both subsamples. Within this subtheme, synonymous with client-centeredness, participants underlined the significance of addressing the needs of care seekers and facilitating their pursuit of solace and tranquility, devoid of biases. Key elements included attentive listening, sincerity, transparency, and honoring, valuing, and respecting the person irrespective of their religious or institutional affiliations.

The subsequent prevalent subtheme, termed “offer”, was primarily articulated by the German subsample. Germans emphasized that PC should be available to all individuals regardless of their shared religious beliefs. Correspondingly, the subtheme “no imposition” highlighted the rejection of any form of religious coercion or missionary endeavors, a view particularly emphasized by Germans. Conversely, in the subtheme “values”, Turkish participants slightly surpassed Germans, pointing to the common or universal values (equality, transparency, justice, morality, openness, tolerance) according to which people

should be approached in S/PC. Lastly, the subtheme “standards” for undertaking S/PC was commonly shared by both subsamples.



The percentage in parentheses indicate the frequencies of a theme or subtheme in each subsample (G for Germans N=21; T for Turks N=40).

Figure 2. Form of S/P care for members of other religions and cultures.

Within the theme of “provider”, on the left side of Figure 2, the subtheme “qualified” emerged, with the highest and nearly equivalent frequencies across both subsamples. Participants stressed the importance of providers possessing comprehensive knowledge of diverse religions/cultures (core characteristics, values, needs, teachings, etc.), coupled with training or qualifications in S/PC: “Those who are knowledgeable in all religions, value human, are competent in spiritual counseling, and educated can provide this service” (TP 1); “There should be an offer (e.g., spiritual care), and people should be psychologically and theologically well trained” (GP 5).

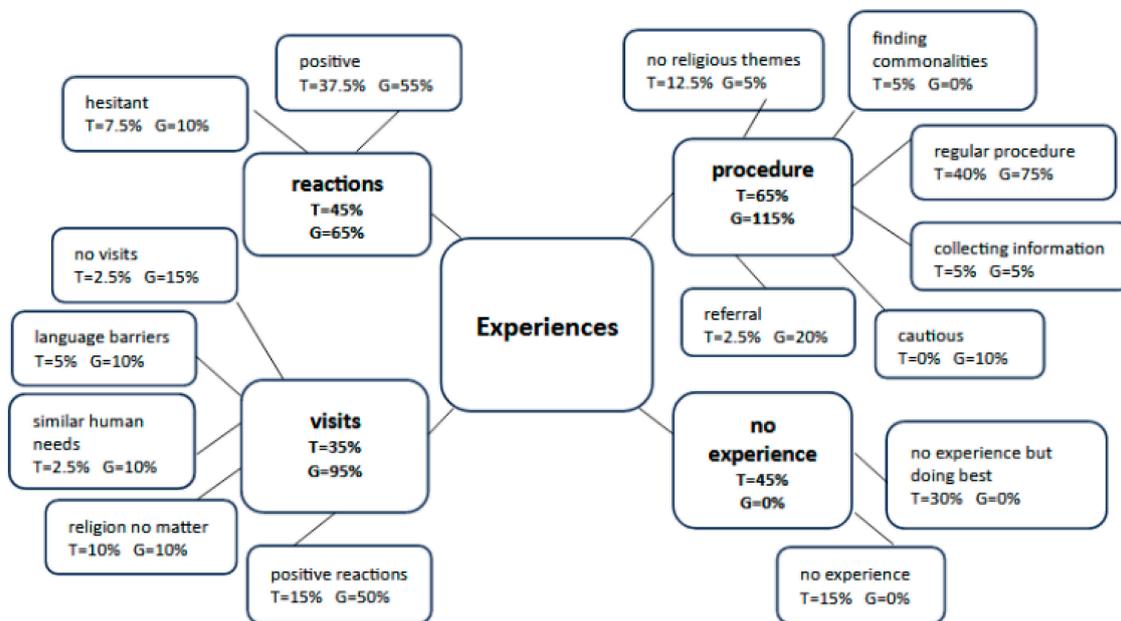
While Turkish participants viewed state institutions, particularly Diyanet, as apt providers of SC, Germans did not specifically mention any institution. Turkish participants highlighted that the Diyanet should and does provide this service, does not discriminate against people, and has trained and knowledgeable staff to serve any kind of religion; e.g., “My view is that this service should never be provided by people, who do not know the foundations and practices of religions. I think it would be better that the Diyanet provides this in our country. The reason therefore is that theologians have comprehensive knowledge on the diversity of faiths” (TP 38).

Notably, the subtheme “interreligious team” was exclusively mentioned by Germans, supporting the formation of interdisciplinary teams sensitive to religious, spiritual, and cultural diversity. The subtheme “same religion” garnered nearly equal mention from both subsamples, suggesting a preference for care providers sharing the same religious background or facilitating referrals to appropriate clergy when necessary: “Every religion has its own beliefs and rituals. A Muslim patient could feel disturbed when a pastor comes, like a Christian patient would feel disturbed when a Muslim spiritual counselor comes. Therefore, on demand of such patients the spiritual counselor should act as a mediator to facilitate their beliefs and rituals. If needed he/she can call the respective clergy” (TP 7). Similar explanations were made by German participants. In summary, while German perspectives accentuated a human-centered approach in S/PC for individuals from diverse backgrounds, Turkish viewpoints emphasized the significance of provider qualifications.

4.3. Experiences with Members of Other Religions and Cultures

The inquiry into participants’ encounters with individuals from varied religious/cultural backgrounds aimed to elucidate the reactions of S/PCs when called upon by individuals from diverse faiths or cultures, including whether they engage in visits and how they

proceed in their S/P work. Figure 3 presents the themes and subthemes generated from the responses.



The percentage in parentheses indicate the frequencies of a theme or subtheme in each subsample (G for Germans N=21; T for Turks N=40).

Figure 3. Experiences with members of other religions and cultures.

The theme of “reactions” encompassed two distinct subthemes, namely “hesitant” and “positive,” with the latter prevailing in both subgroups. Participants from both groups commonly expressed positive reactions when contacted by individuals from diverse religious/cultural backgrounds for S/PC. These reactions included feelings of happiness, curiosity, interest, respect, and a genuine intention to help. Nonetheless, a subset of participants in both groups also admitted to feeling somewhat “hesitant”, primarily due to a perceived lack of understanding about the cultural and religious contexts of the care seekers.

Regarding “visits”, German participants outnumbered Turkish counterparts in reporting “no visits” to individuals from other cultures or religions, often due to the absence of such individuals in their institutional settings. One German participant described such visits as “intrusive” (GP 4). Both groups encountered challenges stemming from “language barriers”, which were mitigated through the use of interpreters. The subtheme “similar human needs” emerged more frequently among Germans, highlighting the recognition of common fears and problems transcending religious/cultural differences. Additionally, both groups emphasized the insignificance of religion when conducting visits, explaining that they do not know or ask the religions of the people they visit. Participants from both subgroups reported “positive reactions” from individuals of diverse backgrounds during their visits, including expressions of happiness, respect, openness, curiosity, mutual interest, and appreciation, particularly noted among German participants.

The majority of participants outlined their procedural approaches when working with individuals from diverse backgrounds, highlighting a “regular procedure”, i.e., introductions, kindness, respect, and offering services. Germans often emphasized detailed self-introductions (their identity, where they come from, their concern), while Turkish participants stressed casual visits, building trust, maintaining a non-judgmental stance, communication rules, tolerance, no bias, and warmth. German participants focused on active listening, positive regard, attentiveness to emotions, needs, resources, interest, providing a resonating (safe) space, acceptance, and openness. All these attitudes can be summarized under a “client-centered” approach.

The subtheme “referral” emerged prominently among Germans, who were more inclined to refer individuals from different religions to their respective clergy for religious rituals or further assistance. Turkish participants were more disposed to discuss values and moral principles rather than religious topics, opting for universal knowledge instead of religious resources. This approach fostered a search for commonalities rather than religious distinctions among the Turkish subsample, whereas “collecting information” about the religious/cultural background, language, or country of the care seeker was a common concern of both subsamples. The last subtheme was addressed more frequently by German than Turkish participants. Similar to the subtheme “hesitant” in the “reactions” theme, Germans approached foreign people more “cautiously”, because of “not knowing the codes and tabus” (GP 1); they were therefore more observing and respecting.

The theme of “no experience” was unique to Turkish participants, with some expressing a lack of exposure to individuals from diverse backgrounds. However, they expressed a willingness to engage with such individuals, adding frequently that they would do their best to help, apply the same procedure, look for commonalities, not address religious issues, and serve the human being: “Taking the principle ‘love the created one due to the Creator’ and the comprehensiveness of the name of my Lord ‘The Most Merciful’ as a mission I would love to meet people far from prejudices” (TP 38); “I never had such a request. However, if there would be such a request—within a therapeutic approach I would listen to him/her making him/her feel valued and would try to help” (TP 39).

In summary, while German participants exhibited more experiences with individuals from diverse backgrounds, both groups displayed positive reactions and adhered to the established procedural norms during S/PC visits, with variations in approaches to religious discourse and referrals.

4.4. Integrating Elements from Other Religions or Cultures into S/P Work

The responses to the question “Do you or would you be willing to integrate elements from other religions or cultures into your spiritual/pastoral work? If ‘yes’, how and which ones? If ‘no’, why?” yielded four overarching themes: “yes”, “willing”, “no”, and “not willing”. The subthemes encompassed a diverse range of perspectives, making it impractical to represent them in a single figure.

The German subsample exhibited the highest proportion of responses indicating “yes” among all other themes, with a rate of 40%, which was more than twice as high as the Turkish subsample’s rate of 15% within the same theme. German participants predominantly integrated elements such as “prayer”, “meditation and music”, and “cultural elements” (e.g., hospitality, community support) into their pastoral work. They frequently cited incorporating “basic teachings” or “commonalities” in rituals and practices, highlighting similarities across various faiths: “Of course I integrate elements of other confessions, partly also other religions, especially as there are very little differences in the practice of religion (in practice: prayer and silence, fasting . . .)” (GP 21).

Turkish participants were more inclined to integrate “philosophical texts”, “ideals”, “spiritual resources”, and the “values” of the care seeker, without specifying particular elements or methods of integration. They emphasized understanding the spiritual world of the care seeker and adopting a client-centered approach: “Yes, I do. Because everybody has a spiritual world, to which he/she belongs. When helping someone to help him/herself we enable him/her to activate all of his/her present potentials. Other religions, beliefs, thoughts, ideals, enthusiasm, in short, all that provides meaning and purpose for life. We take a look at all what he/she did or can use, what can be revised” (TP 4).

The theme of “willing” was addressed nearly equally by both subgroups, with Germans at 30% and Turks at 32.5%. Participants in this theme expressed a willingness to integrate elements from other religions/cultures, although they had not yet done so. Turkish SCs cited reasons such as feeling “not competent”, but expressed openness to integrating “common beliefs” (such as belief in a Creator, the hereafter—mentioned by German subsample, too) “consistent with their values” or a “client-centered approach”, or

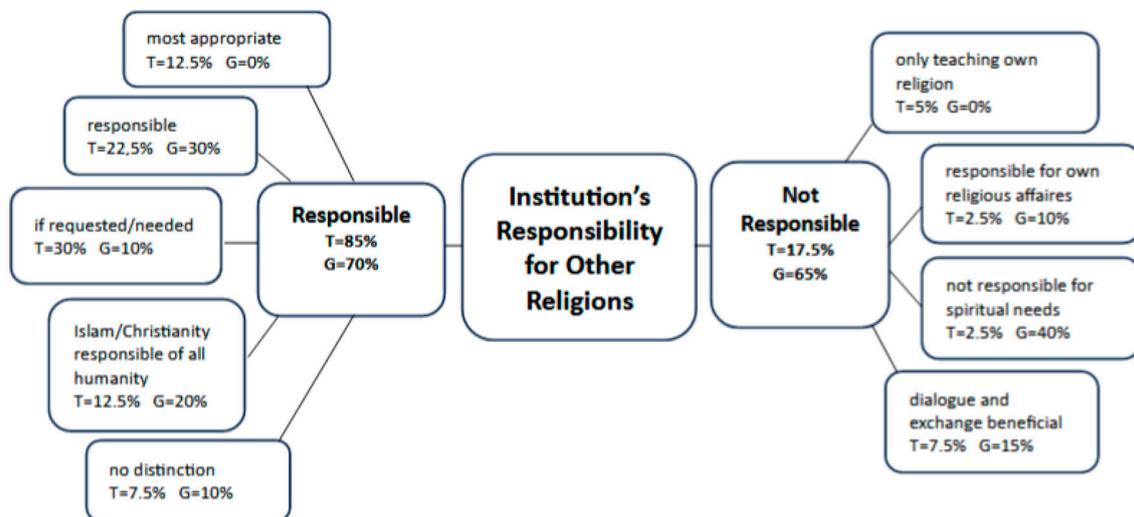
“only if the client would be from a different religion.” German participants were somewhat hesitant, emphasizing the need for “learning” and “acting authentically”. Concerns about authenticity were expressed like this: “Of course I could read someone a surah from the Qur’an, but only read, it wouldn’t be ‘prayed’ by me” (GP 9). Both subgroups were willing to integrate other elements “when asked for”.

The theme of “no” was exclusive to the Turkish subgroup, with a rate of 20%. Participants in this theme unequivocally stated “no,” with a few adding explanations such as feeling “not competent,” “not needed until yet”, or considering it “inappropriate when working with Muslims.” Conversely, the theme of “not willing” was more pronounced, with 20% of the Turkish subgroup and 30% of the German subgroup expressing reluctance to integrate elements from other religions/cultures into their work. Turkish participants cited reasons such as “socio-cultural circumstances”, “avoiding harm”, or deeming it “unnecessary for Muslim clientele.” German participants expressed concerns about “not being accepted”, “avoiding mixing practices”, preferring to “refer to the respective PC”, “respect”, or maintaining “fidelity to their own beliefs”. Notably, both groups shared a subtheme of “not necessary, my religion provides all that is needed,” with nearly equal proportions in both the German (10%) and Turkish (12.5%) subgroups.

In summary, German participants demonstrated a higher inclination (70%) towards integrating foreign elements into their work compared to Turkish participants (47.5%). However, the rates of those unwilling to integrate other elements were almost equal in both subgroups, with 35% in the German and 40% in the Turkish group.

4.5. Assessment of the Institution’s Responsibility for Spiritual Needs of Members of Other Religions

Figure 4 depicts the outcomes of the question concerning participants’ assessment of the responsibility of their respective institutions for addressing the spiritual needs of individuals from other religions. “Institution” refers to the Church for German participants and the Diyanet for Turkish participants. Across both subsamples, the majority of participants perceived their institutions as accountable for attending to the spiritual needs of individuals from diverse religions.



The percentage in parentheses indicate the frequencies of a theme or subtheme in each subsample (G for Germans N=21; T for Turks N=40).

Figure 4. Assessment of the institution’s responsibility for spiritual needs of members of other religions.

Under the theme of “responsibility”, Turkish participants frequently asserted that their institution would be the “most appropriate” institution to address the spiritual needs of others. By “most appropriate”, they implied that such a service should solely fall under the control of Diyanet, which they deemed responsible for everyone, as this was the intended

purpose of its establishment; for spiritual counseling, religious officials, particularly those from Diyanet, were the most appropriate personnel. Interestingly, in the German subset, expressions like “Church most appropriate” were conspicuously absent.

On the other hand, the subtheme of “responsibility” was addressed significantly in both subsamples. Germans tended to emphasize the inclusive nature of pastoral care, highlighting its availability to everyone. Turkish participants mostly provided concise responses, except for those who either questioned the qualifications required (“*Surely, this service should be provided for members of other religions, too, but do we have enough trained spiritual counselors to provide that service? For instance, I am not qualified to offer that service.*” [TP 22]) or underlined the characteristics of Islam as the “last”, “uncontaminated”, and “universal” religion. They argued that the task of Diyanet, as the representative of Islam, is to disseminate this religion. However, not all participants concluded that this entailed proselytizing: “*If we consider the universality of Islam as a starting point, then I believe dialogue is possible with everybody who is faithful*” (TP 38). Similar sentiments such as “*Christianity’s concept of God has universal implications*” (GP 13) were also expressed among Germans, albeit less frequently.

A prevalent subtheme among Turkish SCs was the emphasis on “request and need”. They suggested that as long as there is a request, this service should be available to all, similar to German PCs. They argued that if other religious authorities do not provide SC, then naturally Diyanet would be responsible, highlighting again the importance of qualification (being trained). Other points in this subtheme included a compassionate and human-centered approach and cooperation, indicating the universality of the spiritual needs that bind us together and the necessity of recognizing this connection (TP 13). One statement addressed the increasing number of individuals from other cultures and religions migrating to Turkey.

The second most significant subtheme in the German subsample focused on the “responsibility of Christians/Christianity toward humanity” (“Muslims/Islam”, respectively, for Turks). Similar sentiments were echoed in the Turkish subsample, with participants noting that Islam is concerned with the overall well-being of humanity: “*We belong to a religion that regards human beings as valuable creatures. A Muslim should strive for the happiness of all humanity, regardless of their religion*” (TP 1). Statements advocating for disregarding religious affiliations were also common in German responses, albeit with a strong emphasis on “freedom”, “autonomy”, and “no proselytization” for those who “want”, “need”, or “accept” it: “*We are responsible for all who want us and for every human in need of help. However, I do not wish to engage in proselytization. A Muslima should remain a Muslima, and an atheist doesn’t have to become a Christian*” (GP 16).

Finally, the subtheme of “no distinction” consisted of participants’ views that their institution should not discriminate when providing care and services to people, extending services beyond denominational and religious boundaries. Germans emphasized that their institution tasked them with serving all individuals: “*My Church has tasked me with providing pastoral care to and standing by people. My role is not solely for members of the Roman Catholic Church but for all individuals who seek or require pastoral care*” (GP 21); “*My institution should offer assistance in the name of humanity, focusing not on religion or spiritual differences but on individuals and their problems*” (TP 32).

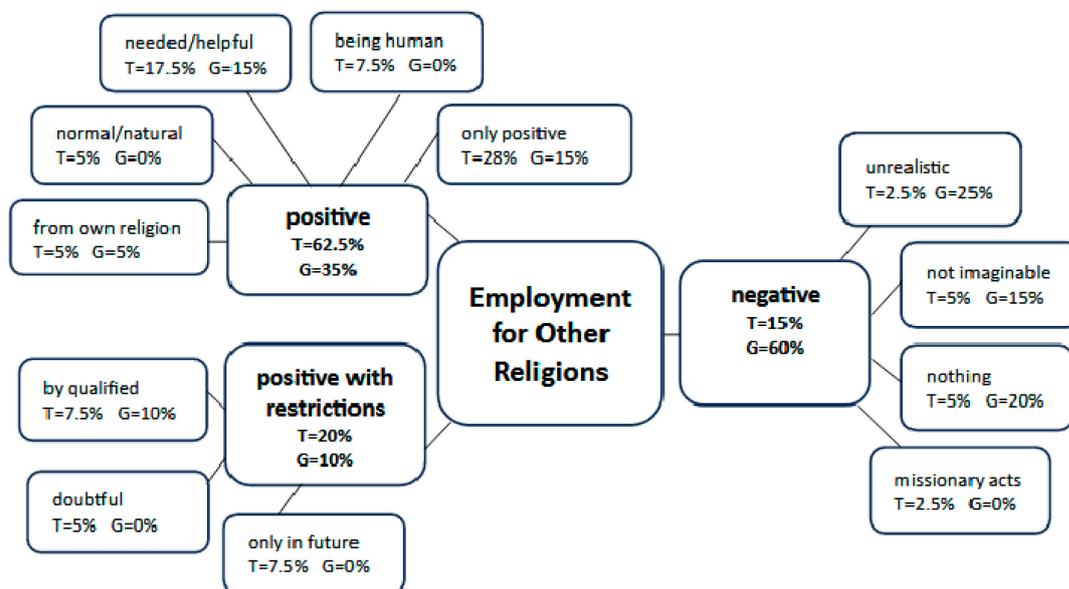
On the other side of the spectrum, the theme of “not responsible” was predominantly represented by German participants, except the subtheme of “only teaching own religion”. Turkish participants believed that their institution was only responsible for teaching or representing its own religion, Islam. Similarly, the subtheme of being “responsible for own religious affairs” reflected the subsample’s views that their institution is solely meant for the religious affairs of its own members. Many German participants commonly expressed that their institution was not responsible for the spiritual needs of members of other religions. A notable number of participants distinguished between the Church and pastoral care by stating “*the church is not responsible, but pastoral care is,*” expressing their openness to others and describing the core aspect of pastoral care as “*the care for every individual*” (GP 18) or “*a*

fundamental need of every human experiencing hardship” (GP 19). Participants who believed their institutions were not responsible for the spiritual needs of others explained this by citing the autonomy of each religion and religious community or their respect towards it.

It is noteworthy that most Germans expressed their openness and willingness to provide pastoral care to members of other religions, emphasizing that pastoral care is for everyone, regardless of whether or not they saw their institution as responsible for members of other religions. In line with this, some participants in both subsets found “dialogue”, “exchange”, and “cooperation” with other religions beneficial for fostering “human relationships”.

4.6. Perspective on Institution’s Employment of S/P Caregivers for Members of Other Religions

Figure 5 shows the results of the question “What would you think about if your institution were to employ S/PCs for members of other religions?” “Institution” refers to the Church for German participants and Diyanet for Turkish participants. While the Turkish subsample tended to be more supportive of such employment, the German subsample leaned more towards being opposed to it.



The percentage in parentheses indicate the frequencies of a theme or subtheme in each subsample (G for Germans N=21; T for Turks N=40).

Figure 5. Perspective on institution’s employment of S/P caregivers for members of other religions.

The vast majority of Turkish participants aligned with the “positive” theme, although many provided succinct responses without further elaboration. One German participant expressed a desire for a pastoral counseling team rather than segregating individuals based on their religion (GP 2). Both subsamples predominantly viewed the employment of S/PCs for members of other religions as “needed” or “helpful”. Participants highlighted the opportunity for cooperation, enhancing outreach and contributing to a trustful/peaceful environment. The subthemes “being human” and “normal/natural” were absent among German participants, while for Turkish participants, prioritizing humanity over religious boundaries was significant. Some referenced Islam, stating that “Due to the importance Islam places on humanity, I believe such a service supposed to be in any case and would support this” (TP 23). The subtheme “from own religion” conveyed the shared sentiment that individuals should have the chance to receive such services from their own religion/clergy, endorsed by both subsamples.

The representation of Turkish participants in the theme “positive with restrictions” exceeded that of Germans, with the exception of the subtheme “by qualified”. This sub-

theme stressed standardized training, impartiality, ethical considerations, boundaries, and the adherence of clergy to the rituals of their respective religions. Another Turkish-specific restriction was “doubts” regarding trust, potential for erroneous or uncontrolled practices, and respect. The most prevalent subtheme among Turks in this category was “only in the future”, suggesting that while Diyanet currently caters to the religious affairs of the majority (i.e., Islam), if a broader responsibility or need for other religions arises in the future, it would be accommodated.

Conversely, the “negative” subtheme, denoting views opposing the employment of S/PCs for members of other religions, was predominantly articulated by the German subsample. Many in this subsample found it “unrealistic” or impractical for the Church to employ PCs from religions other than Christianity. There was a consensus, shared by Turks and Germans, that the institution (Church or Diyanet) should prioritize serving its own members first. Statements concerning the lack of personnel and finances were recurrent in the German subsample. Additionally, there was a preference for “*training culture-sensitive pastoral counselors*” (GP 4). The subtheme “not imaginable”, primarily expressed by Germans, conveyed a somewhat positive view but deemed this realization by the Church or Diyanet as unimaginable: “*I would love that. This would be a huge enrichment. But I do not believe, that this will happen*” (TP 7); “*I cannot imagine that the Church/Catholic Church would do that*” (GP 3, 12); “*You mean when the Catholic Church would employ Muslim pastoral counselors? That would be strange!*” (GP 21). In contrast, the “nothing” subtheme comprised harsh rejections ranging from strict disapproval (“*I do not approve this. I would protest this*” [TP, 10]; “*Employing SCs for other religions would be meaningless because my institution is not responsible for other religions*” [TP 9]) to concerns about undermining pastoral care (“*That’s not possible, because then the own profile (namely, pastoral caregiver and not spiritual counselor for example) would dissolve itself!*” [GP 7]). The common response among Germans was varied, including assertions that existing resources were sufficient or expressing concerns about potential perceptions of intrusion or the violation of boundaries. Finally, one Turkish participant expressed concern about missionary activities. Overall, German participants exhibited stronger opposition to the employment of pastoral caregivers for other religions compared to Turkish participants.

4.7. Evaluation of Receiving the Same Training as S/P Caregivers of Other Religions

The final question of the interview protocol addressed participants’ perspectives on S/PCs of other religions receiving the same training as them, exemplified by the case of Muslim S/PCs in Germany opting for standardized trainings designed for Christians by the German Pastoral Psychology Association (DGfP). Two primary themes emerged in responses: “positive” and “negative” approaches.

The majority of both subsamples (Germans 80%; Turks 72.5%) viewed it as “beneficial” for S/PCs of other religions to undergo similar training. Turkish participants highlighted the significance of robust scientific understanding, expressing that basic, methodological, and theoretical training could be common. Additionally, by stressing the needs of clients and the importance of religious/cultural aspects, they highlighted the necessity of complementary “training on religion” (20%; encompassing understanding of one’s own faith and resources) and “socio-cultural structure” (10%; addressing clients’ needs and adaptation to religious-cultural-spiritual contexts): “*I believe that theoretical and practical training, methods and techniques can be the same for practitioners of all faiths. However, even with uniform training, individuals may not maintain a neutral standpoint devoid of their own religious perspective. Their personal religious premises, how they see life and human, their view on this world and the hereafter will be reflected in the process*” (TP 19). “. . . of course, it is essential to be equipped in the socio-cultural and spiritual structure of the place” (TG 4). Conversely, these subthemes were absent among German participants, who nonetheless expressed support for meeting pastoral psychological standards and exchanging knowledge and experience in such training. The need for “standards” in S/PC trainings was acknowledged in both subsamples (Germans 10%; Turks 5%).

The likely underrepresented “negative” theme (Germans 25%, Turks 5%) encompassed subthemes such as “conflicts” (Turks 2.5%; referring to the inner conflicts experienced by SCs regarding their own life and religion), “own community” (Germans 10%; advocating for each community to provide training opportunities for its own S/PCs, e.g., “PCs in Germany are Christians. Other religious communities can make their own training offers” [GP 10]), and “not necessary” (Turks 2.5%, Germans 15%). The “not necessary” subtheme included perspectives suggesting that while not identical, comparable or interreligious trainings could suffice (Germans), or expressing concerns about the inadequacy of local training opportunities (one Turk).

5. Discussion

5.1. Provision S/P Care for Members of Other Religions

The idea of providing S/PC to individuals of religions other than one’s own underscores an emphasis on “being human” by both subsamples. German participants perceive serving humanity as a religious duty, while Turkish participants focus on common human needs. This perspective resonates with [Gestrich’s \(1995\) convergent approach](#) and [Hinkle’s \(1993\) meta-culturalism](#), both highlighting human kinship and shared human needs (see Introduction).

The service to human beings is central in Islamic belief, mirroring the fundamental principle of PC to “care for fellow men” ([Fincke 2021](#), p. 65), transcending cultural and religious differences. Participants’ answers align with the Protestant PC principle of ministry to one another ([Ağilkaya Şahin 2016](#)). Similarly, from an Islamic perspective, Ibn’ Arabi’s “religion of love” underlines the divine origin of all creation, emphasizing love and empathy towards humanity ([Isgandarova 2024](#)). Thus, like the Christian tradition, every Muslim is obligated to provide care to all people. Participants’ responses reflect adherence to similar theological principles. However, Turkish participants’ emphasis on being “requested” and Germans’ emphasis on “mutual acceptance”, along with objections to any form of religious imposition by both subsamples, highlight the need to avoid clerical dictation ([Hibaoui 2017](#); [Ağilkaya Şahin 2021](#)).

Moreover, these principles stress the importance of core values in S/PC, such as openness, empathy, acceptance ([Nauta 2002](#); [Fincke 2021](#)), and “mutuality and interrelatedness of all life” ([Graham 2006](#), p. 88), which can be fostered through *interreligious competencies* ([Wenz 2017](#); [Hibaoui 2017](#); [Fincke 2021](#); [Kunze-Harper 2021](#)). Interreligious competency entails being aware of and bearing foreignness while oscillating between closeness and distance ([Rohr 2005](#); [Kayales 2015](#)). The Turkish participants’ emphasis on the need for training may reflect concerns about lacking such competencies. The requirement for training in rituals was emphasized by both subsamples. *Ritual competency* is regarded as a crucial skill in PC ([Ağilkaya Şahin 2021](#)). However, [Smeets \(2012\)](#) discovered that Dutch SCs viewed ritual communication about worldviews as positive but less critical. In the present study, both Turkish and German S/PCs considered involving their own clergy in rituals important. This was seen as essential for demonstrating competence and sincerity, a sentiment that also emerged in other questions. This aligns with the importance of values like sincerity, transparency, and honesty in S/PC relationships ([Ağilkaya Şahin 2021](#)). The absence of sincerity, transparency, and honesty in S/PC relationships is criticized not only by the participants, but also in the literature ([Wenz 2017](#)). Perhaps what the participants meant was *spiritual competency*, which entails adhering to one’s personal spiritual/religious identity while effectively mediating between the counselee’s spiritual resources and their specific circumstances ([Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven 2014](#)). Engaging one’s own clergy for rituals can indeed be seen as a manifestation of this mediating role, as it aligns with the same worldview. According to [Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven \(2014\)](#), similar worldviews are believed to facilitate ritual communication.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, S/PC is multidimensional, and competencies within this field are similarly multifaceted. According to [Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven \(2014\)](#), competencies are context-bound and require ongoing learning processes: “It is a

question of learning to take appropriate action in a specific situation based on knowledge and experience" (p. 117). The doubts among Turkish participants regarding their competencies and the fears of intrusiveness among Germans (see Sections 4.3 and 4.6) could be addressed through such learning processes.

The distinction between religion and spirituality by Turkish participants is noteworthy, as they perceive spirituality as integral to religiosity or lived within it, unlike in Western societies (Ağilkaya Şahin 2024). Turkish SCs seem to recognize the need for a spiritual rather than strictly religious approach in caring for people amidst increasing religious globalization or pluralism.

In summary, the Turkish subsample approached the idea of spiritual counseling for members of other religions cautiously, possibly due to the novelty of SC in Turkey and its limited experience with religious pluralism, leading to doubts about their competencies. Overcoming these doubts may require ongoing learning processes to develop context-specific competencies (Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven 2014).

5.2. Form of S/P Care for Members of Other Religions and Cultures

The question concerning the type of S/PC to be provided to individuals from other cultures and religions revealed a predominantly human-centered approach in both subsamples. This approach emphasized "human needs" and "common/universal values." This cohesion between the subsamples aligns with Greider's (2024) focus on commonalities, as discussed in the Introduction and the first question. However, German participants uniquely emphasized the nature of PC as an "offer" and the resulting principle of "not imposing one's own religious worldviews." While the idea of PC as an offer to individuals is fundamental in pastoral psychological approaches (Ağilkaya Şahin 2021), its meaning has evolved over time. Until the 1970s, German PC predominantly adhered to a kerygmatic approach (Klessmann 2015), suggesting an institutional character where the pastoral caregiver represented and believed in the institution's faith. Today, however, it has acquired a more individual character, especially in the context of religious globalization (Riegel and Demmrich 2021), which has shifted the function of religious institutions from dictating religious life to offering options that individuals can access as needed (Davie 2006). It is not clear whether the German participants had this shift in mind when expressing 'offer', but it is meaningful that this answer came up in the context of this study and this question.

Consistent with this finding, the notion of interreligious teams was exclusively mentioned by German participants. The absence of any mention of interreligious teams among Turkish participants may stem from their lack of experience with such teams, as Turkey's migration history is relatively new, and immigrants are predominantly from familiar cultures or religions (e.g., Syrians, Afghans). However, the desire for interreligious or multireligious PC teams is echoed in the German literature and practice (Kayales 2015; Hibaoui 2017; Şahinöz 2018; Kast-Streib and Şahinöz 2021), emphasizing a move towards *multiple worldview cooperation* instead of *mono-worldview spiritual care* (Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven 2014). This approach could enable S/PC by caregivers from different religious or spiritual traditions for any care seeker, fostering a richer and more inclusive counseling experience. Practically, this would mean that, for instance, a Christian PC instills hope using a Qur'anic verse or a Muslim SC consoles with a Biblical story. Theoretically, this would fit into Greider's (2024) typology of *interreligious difference*, as presented in the Introduction, or what Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven (2014) termed *multiple worldview counseling*. Such an approach would require openness, mutual knowledge, and interreligious training. This may explain why both subsamples frequently mentioned qualification and training when serving people from other religions. For Turks, this essential knowledge is possessed by members of their institution, the Diyanet. They viewed their institution, the Diyanet, as the most appropriate provider of SC for individuals from other religions/cultures, whereas no German participant mentioned their institution, i.e., the church. This finding supports the idea that German participants see themselves as "spiritual caregivers [who] are no longer advocates of a specific worldview association" (Smeets and Morice-Calkhoven 2014, p. 115),

whereas Turkish participants view themselves as representatives and advocates of their institution's faith and are thus most qualified for SC (see [Davie 2006](#); [Riegel and Demmrich 2021](#)). Similar results have been found for Christian PCs ([Hoge et al. 1988](#); [Greenwald et al. 2004](#)). In Christian terminology, this would mean that Turkish SC holds a kerygmatic approach vs. the Germans' pastoral psychological approach.

Following the qualification condition, the most frequently mentioned theme for this question was "same religion". Both subgroups, almost equally, perhaps due to their client-centered approach, favored S/PC that aligns with the care seeker's own religious tradition. In this context, the mediating role of S/PC was accentuated, referring care seekers to other persons or institutions that may better meet their needs ([Ağilkaya Şahin 2021](#)).

5.3. Experiences with Members of Other Religions and Cultures

In terms of experiences with members of other religions and cultures, participants generally reported positive reactions when called upon to engage with individuals from different backgrounds. Aligning with the literature, encountering and recognizing otherness, interacting with different worldviews, and perceiving otherness as a gift that enriches one's own life, worldview, and encounter ([Sterkens 2001](#); [Smeets 2012](#); [Merle 2017](#); [Riegel and Demmrich 2021](#); [Lorberg-Fehring 2021a](#)) enables personal and spiritual growth. However, as discussed previously, some participants expressed hesitancy due to a lack of knowledge and other insecurities.

Both German and Turkish participants experienced positive reactions during their visits, although Turkish SCs encountered limitations due to their lack of experience in interacting with foreigners. Nevertheless, visits or S/PC were appreciated, especially in settings such as hospitals or prisons, where any form of support is valued ([Scheidler 2002](#); [Henne 2011](#); [Fincke 2021](#); [Ünal and Yılmaz 2023](#); [İnal and Gürsu 2023](#)). Muslim patients in Germany ([Gestrich 1995](#); [Fincke 2021](#)) and Syrian refugee patients in Turkey ([Sağır 2020](#)), for instance, often welcome S/PCs. In these cases, faith or cultural differences appeared less important in times of hardship, possibly due to the comforting interpretations provided by Abrahamic religions with regard to suffering. However, even non-religious persons appreciate visits by S/PCs ([Gestrich 1995](#); [Göçen and Er Özdemir 2024](#)). Therefore, showing compassion and interest, even through small gestures like a smile or kind words, can foster positive attitudes towards caregivers from diverse traditions (for empirical findings see [Sağır 2020](#)). Turkish participants emphasized such gestures that are also part of Islamic life, i.e., smiling to people or greeting one another is regarded as a charity in Islam.

Yet, knowing the particularities of the related religious tradition and the specific support needed by its members during crises would be highly beneficial. This sentiment was echoed by both Turkish and German participants and is supported by the existing literature ([Farris 2002](#); [Bidwell 2017](#); [Lorberg-Fehring 2021a](#); [Isgandarova 2024](#)). As [Gestrich \(1995\)](#) suggests, the more knowledge one has about the religion of the other, the less it appears as a threatening unknown. However, language barriers were identified as a significant obstacle in visiting people from other cultures, a finding supported by the related literature ([Hibaoui 2017](#); [Sağır 2020](#)). Navigating religious and cultural diversity also requires *language competencies*.

Another common theme was that both subsamples followed similar procedures when visiting members of other cultures/religions, aligning with ethical codes that advocate for inclusivity in pastoral accompaniment regardless of religious affiliation ([Wenz 2017](#); [Greider 2024](#)). Participants view the religion of care seekers as inconsequential. Therefore, they often do not inquire about or know the religious affiliations of those they are visiting (also see [Kunze-Harper 2021](#)). Consequently, they adopt a uniform approach, introducing themselves with kindness and respect regardless of the care seekers' religious backgrounds. Parallel to their human-centered approach, caregivers in this study prioritize the needs of care seekers, focusing on universal values rather than religious themes, and strive to find common ground. This approach accentuates their commitment to providing compassionate and inclusive care to all individuals, irrespective of their religious beliefs or cultural

backgrounds. By focusing on the universal principles of kindness, respect, and empathy, the caregivers aim to create a supportive and nurturing environment that transcends religious and cultural differences. This approach aligns with the notion of perceiving S/PC as a holistic and inclusive practice that addresses the fundamental human needs and experiences shared by all individuals.

The question of finding commonalities or differences is debated in the intercultural S/PC literature. Some advocate for a *comparative approach* that acknowledges and respects the differences in religious and spiritual meaning systems: “In order to offer care that respects and does not erase the otherness of a care seeker’s religious faith, spiritual care professionals need to pay attention to the differences between the unique religious, spiritual, and existential meaning systems” (Doehring 2024, p. 57). Such an approach would eliminate the risk of exclusivity or, in Doehring’s (2024, p. 56) words, “reduce the other to the same.” The opposite approach is to find commonalities, as religions share many common principles (Greider 2024), as shown in the theoretical part. Both approaches were represented among the sample. An alternative perspective, suggested by Lorberg-Fehring (2021a), is *transculturality*, where cultures collaborate to create something new rather than discriminating against each other.

5.4. Integrating Elements from Other Religions or Cultures into S/P Work

Integrating elements from other religions/cultures into S/PC was perhaps the most crucial question to clarify Turkish and German S/PCs’ openness to multireligious care. The responses revealed a significant willingness among both Turkish and German caregivers. However, it was predominantly the German caregivers who had already begun integrating such elements into their work. Compared to Turkey, migration in Germany is older and more widespread. As a result, German PCs are more exposed to people from different cultures and religions and are more familiar with their religious elements. This willingness was also expressed by Turkish participants, indicating a shared recognition of commonalities between religions. Despite this willingness, German caregivers often questioned the authenticity of integrating elements from other traditions into their practice. This concern stemmed from a commitment to maintaining the sincerity and genuineness of their interactions, which are fundamental characteristics of effective S/PC (Wenz 2017; Ağılkaya Şahin 2021). Many German caregivers expressed reservations about reciting religious texts or performing rituals from traditions other than their own, citing concerns about authenticity and respect. This concern appeared often also in other questions and is stressed as well in the literature (Gestrich 1995; Wenz 2017; Bidwell 2017).

Lorberg-Fehring (2021a) suggests that a *diversity approach* in S/PC involves adapting methodologies to accommodate multicultural and multireligious contexts. Rather than relying on predefined frameworks, caregivers must be prepared to adapt their practice according to the specific needs and cultural backgrounds of their care recipients. This may involve integrating elements from diverse cultural and religious traditions, drawing on the collective wisdom of humanity as a resource for spiritual care. Authors signify such a need by referring to “ethnic/racial wisdom from differing realities” (Graham 2006, p. 93) or to the “collective memory” (Lorberg-Fehring 2021a, p. 175) of humanity as a potential resource to be implemented in the S/PC relationship work. Turkish participants who expressed a willingness to integrate elements from other religions and cultures, despite lacking knowledge in this area, often referred to universal values and beliefs as potential points of integration. These universal values and beliefs transcend specific religious traditions and serve as common ground for S/PC interactions. By focusing on universal principles such as compassion, empathy, and respect for human dignity, caregivers can provide meaningful support to individuals from diverse religious/cultural backgrounds. In this way, Turkish participants recognized the importance of maintaining a human-centered approach in SC, prioritizing the needs and well-being of care seekers above religious/cultural differences. The reason for this approach might be a theological one, as Islam values human beings as the most precious of creation (Qur’an, 17:70). While they may lack specific

knowledge about other religious traditions, their willingness to integrate universal values and beliefs demonstrates an openness to multicultural/religious care. By emphasizing universal principles, Turkish caregivers can create inclusive and supportive environments that foster spiritual and emotional growth for individuals from diverse backgrounds. This approach aligns with the goal of spiritual and pastoral care to provide holistic support that addresses the spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs of care seekers, regardless of their religious/cultural affiliations.

However, some participants from both groups expressed dissent toward the integration of elements from other religions and cultures into their practice. This reluctance may stem from their religious location, i.e., their religious beliefs or affiliations, which could include attitudes of religious superiority or exclusivity (Greider 2024). Overcoming these obstacles may require self-reflection, cultural competency training, and supervision to enhance caregivers' self-awareness and sensitivity to the needs of individuals from diverse religious/cultural backgrounds.

5.5. Assessment of the Institution's Responsibility for Spiritual Needs of Members of Other Religions

The question regarding the responsibility of participants' institutions for the spiritual needs of members of other religions revealed two main opinions: "responsible" and "not responsible". The majority of both the Turkish and German subsamples expressed the view that their institutions were responsible. As discussed in the second question, Turks thought that their institution was the most appropriate institution for SC for others, but again doubts regarding qualification arose. On the other hand, German participants also acknowledged their institution's responsibility for addressing the spiritual needs of individuals from other religions, but there was a higher proportion who expressed the view that their institution was not responsible. This divergence in opinion among German participants may reflect an ongoing debate within Christian PC in Germany regarding the exclusivity of the term *Seelsorge* (pastoral care) for Christian pastoral caregivers and seekers.

In this debate,³ on the one hand, the Christian character and the Church context of pastoral care is highlighted, and it is questioned whether Christian PC should extend its services to non-Christians, particularly Muslims, or whether Muslim initiatives should develop their own terminology and services and whether the term *Seelsorge* should keep its genuine Christian character. On the other hand, some stress the universality of PC and that neither the Church, nor Christianity, should limit *Seelsorge* to denominational and religious affiliation. The present study reflects this debate. This discussion mirrors broader debates within German society about religious pluralism and the role of Christian institutions in providing care to individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. Providing care beyond religious, social, ethnic, and gender discrimination is a task that has to be fulfilled in pluralistic societies. The exclusivity of one's own religion, privileging one tradition, or, in Bidwell's words (2017, p. 53), forcing individuals "to become mono-religious" is not sustainable anymore (see GP 16 respond in Section 4.5).

In response to these challenges, some German churches have begun to employ non-Christians in churchly establishments with high rates of migrants (Wenz 2017). According to Wenz (2017), (German) PC based on Christian and humanistic beliefs has begun to widen its denominational scope and to open up to everybody. However, questions remain about the competence of Christian pastoral care to provide interreligious services and the extent of its responsibility in a pluralistic society. The observation that participants in the study reflected Wenz's (2017) statement about the challenges faced by pastoral care in a pluralistic society underscores the complexity of navigating diverse religious and cultural landscapes while ensuring inclusivity and sensitivity to individual needs. Indeed, PC practitioners encounter the dual challenge of meeting the specific needs of their own religious communities while also extending pastoral accompaniment to individuals from diverse backgrounds, irrespective of their religious affiliation. This requires a delicate balance between maintaining the integrity of one's own religious tradition and embracing the principles of openness, acceptance, and respect for religious diversity.

Wenz's (2017) characterization of these challenges resonates with the findings of this study, wherein participants expressed a range of perspectives on the responsibility of their institutions for providing PC to members of other religions. The tension between attending to the needs of one's own religious community and extending PC to others underscores the evolving nature of PC in response to changing social dynamics and religious pluralism. Overall, the views expressed by participants in the study highlight the complex dynamics of religious pluralism and institutional responsibility within PC settings. The need to address the specific needs of religiously diverse communities while also ensuring inclusivity and respect for autonomy is a key challenge faced by PCs in pluralistic societies.

5.6. Perspective on Institution's Employment of S/P Caregivers for Members of Other Religions

The question regarding the potential employment of S/PCs from different religious backgrounds by institutions elicited disparate responses between the Turkish and German subgroups. Turkish participants exhibited greater support for such employment compared to their German counterparts. This contrast likely stems from inherent differences in their respective institutional frameworks. The Diyanet, functioning as a public institution, may exhibit a greater degree of inclusivity compared to the Church, which operates primarily within a religious sphere and is subject to more stringent legal and religious constraints, as noted by German participants. Despite these barriers, some German respondents still acknowledged the potential need and benefit of such employment. This divergence underscores the complex challenges explored in preceding discussions (see Wenz 2017).

Both Turkish and German subgroups viewed the employment of S/PCs from diverse religious backgrounds as an opportunity for collaboration, as reflected in the German literature (Hibaoui 2017; Fincke 2021; Kast-Streib and Şahinöz 2021; Lorberg-Fehring 2021a). The greater emphasis on interreligious cooperation among Germans can be attributed to the presence of a thriving interreligious landscape in Germany (summarized in Lorberg-Fehring 2022), unlike in Turkey, where predominantly Turkish Muslim SCs operate currently. However, despite this emphasis on collaboration, participants expressed again reservations regarding religious rituals, a sentiment echoed in the German literature (Wenz 2017; Fincke 2021). Most probably based on their long-term working experience (see Section 3.1.), German participants often identified rituals as a potential boundary for cooperation, expressing concerns such as intrusion or the dilution of religious boundaries. Developing *interreligious or spiritual competence*, grounded in an understanding and respect for these boundaries, could offer a pathway to strike a balance.

Notably, concerns about missionary activities—previously expressed primarily by the German subgroup—emerged among Turkish participants in this context. This reflects a broader rejection of the instrumentalization of S/PCs for religious conversion purposes, an impression mirrored in the existing literature (Müller-Lange 2011; Wenz 2017; Lorberg-Fehring 2021a, 2021b; Doehring 2024). The German subsample's sensitivity to this issue may stem from the pastoral psychological approach that is prevalent among DGfP members, contrasting with potential Pentecostal perspectives that might endorse missionary activities. Additionally, Germans may have greater exposure to and experience with intercultural and interreligious PC, prompting heightened awareness of such concerns. This raises the question of how to navigate the religious dimension of S/PC amidst increasing religious pluralism, as S/PC is a religiously motivated endeavor with a clear theological foundation, and is provided by religious institutions. Winkler's (1997, p. 267) concept of enabling individuals to express their faith in a personality-specific manner (*persönlichkeitsspezifisches credo*) offers one possible approach. However, caution is advised in relying solely on religious teachings to address people's distress, as emphasized in the literature (Nauta 2002; Hibaoui 2017; Ağılkaya Şahin 2021). As seen in the previous questions and related discussions, Turkish participants tended to approach individuals from other religions based on universal values rather than religious themes. Except when considering the integration of elements from other traditions, Turkish SCs did not emphasize their religious location. Conversely, some German participants expressed openness to other religions

while affirming their Christian religious identity, consistent with findings on Swiss PCs (Schweizer and Noth 2017). As discussed earlier, the German literature (Stiegel 1995; Gestrinch 1995; Mucherera 2006; Smeets 2012; Wenz 2017; Merle 2017; Kunze-Harper 2021) and participants alike emphasized the importance of maintaining their religious identity, as straying from this foundational basis would undermine the authenticity and sincerity of pastoral care. This difference between Turks and Germans can be theological and professional. German PCs seem to be more aware of their role as PCs and therefore more sensitive, which is perhaps based on the fact that PC is more firmly anchored theologically, historically and professionally in the German Christian context than in Turkey.

An intriguing observation from this and previous sections pertains to migrants. Turkish participants who entertained the notion of employing S/PCs from different religious communities in the future may have been influenced by the escalating rates of migration. Given Turkey's increasing acceptance of refugees from neighboring states, migration was expected to be addressed by the Turkish subsample. However, migrant considerations were relatively sparse, possibly indicating limited experience or exposure among Turkish participants.

5.7. Evaluation of Receiving the Same Training as S/P Caregivers of Other Religions

The final question of the present study focused on the receptiveness of S/PCs towards each other, particularly in the context of receiving equivalent training. This question was actually meant for the German subgroup for two main reasons. Firstly, it aligns with the ongoing discourse in Germany regarding whether non-Christian S/PCs should have access to the same Clinical Pastoral Training (CPT) as their Christian counterparts. Bidwell and Marshall (2006) have critiqued CPT for favoring Christian assumptions and norms. Secondly, the availability of PCs from diverse religious backgrounds, such as Muslims, is more prevalent in Germany compared to Turkey. While this debate is not widespread in Turkey due to the lack of non-Muslim S/PCs, in Germany, interreligious training, especially for Muslim PCs, is a topic of intense discussion in both academic and practical spheres (see Kayales 2015, 2024; Bertels 2021; Doukali 2021; Erdem 2021; Lorberg-Fehring 2021a, 2022; Fincke 2021; Kayales 2024). Overall, the study sample demonstrated a notable degree of openness towards the notion of shared training, with Turkish participants advocating for supplementary training on cultural and religious variances. While Christian and Muslim S/PCs share identical methods and objectives, their religious contexts differ in terms of content and practice, a sentiment echoed by Turkish participants and supported by the existing literature (Takim 2016; Fincke 2021).

Although the statute of the DGfP does not explicitly name a Christian reference, it locates the purpose and task of counselling and PC in the area of the churches.⁴ Nonetheless, Dayringer's (2004, p. 1) call for inclusivity within the AAPC, historically a liberal Protestant movement, can be extended to the German DGfP as well. Graham's (2006) insights on training and standards offer guidance on determining the appropriate type of S/PC training amidst religious pluralism and the entities responsible for providing such training:

In a world community that is increasingly diverse, standards of training that are limited to Western cultural superiority and paternalistic systems are ineffective and immoral. . . . The dominance/submission paradigm that pervades the social, religious and political arenas from which aspiring pastoral counselors emerge is problematic in the formation of pastoral counselors. It is impossible to escape the plurality of culture [. . .] in the counseling room. The values and norms of differing others impact educational objectives . . . The broadening of diversity [. . .] intensifies the need to challenge formation standards that are rooted in traditional Western thought and practices. In order to provide a ministry of care and healing that reflects the unity and interconnectedness of all life, it is essential that in the development of pastoral counselors we grapple with the tasks of embracing the concept of mutuality and the interrelatedness of all life. . . . From this perspective, formation ought to move the individual beyond a culturally

encapsulated worldview to a broader, expanded understanding of the human experience. (pp. 88–90)

In addition to the widespread agreement regarding the value of shared training, the recent study also underscored the necessity for standards. The need for “standards” in S/PC trainings was acknowledged in both subsamples, with a higher share on the German side. This result reflects again the differences between the sample countries, which have different experiences regarding S/PC. Germany’s deep-rooted history and professional practice in PC contributed to advanced training approaches and programs, as well as PC modalities. These developments enhanced the need for and development of standards in training. On the other side, SC in Turkey is still a new field and is just developing. This is largely the reason why standards have not yet developed in terms of theory, practice, and training. However, as reflected in the findings and often times expressed, the field of Turkish SC is aware of the need for standards. As for the scope of the present study, [Lorberg-Fehring \(2021b, p. 8\)](#) elucidated that, by “standards,” they refer to the recognition that there is not a singular, definitive training path, but rather multiple, divergent training programs, all of which aim to equip individuals to provide effective pastoral care, “regardless of their religious background.”

6. Conclusions

In light of religious globalization, which has fostered contemporary religiously pluralistic societies, spiritual/pastoral care faces challenges that necessitate a reevaluation and restructuring of its definition, objectives, tasks, and content. Instead of adhering to the exclusivity of a single religion or privileging one tradition or theology, addressing individuals’ needs in today’s changing religious landscape requires a consideration, respect, and appreciation of diversity. Interreligious sensitivity and competencies emerge as essential concepts and skills with which spiritual and pastoral caregivers should be equipped. This approach, implicitly or explicitly endorsed by the participants of the present study, assumes that religious and cultural diversity should not lead to demarcations but rather open the treasures of one’s own tradition to others.

As evidenced by the findings of this study and the existing literature, German Christian pastoral caregivers have become increasingly aware of intercultural and interreligious sensitization and openness. The social, historical and theological differences between the sample countries and their understanding of pastoral care seemed to have contributed to this finding. This inclination towards openness appears to be innate among Turkish Muslim spiritual counselors as well, albeit needing further development as religious globalization will also reach Turkish spiritual care and counseling.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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

Notes

- 1 <https://cga.de/category/seelsorge/> (accessed on 25 March 2024); <https://www.evangelischer-glaube.de/die-kirche/seelsorge/> (accessed on 25 March 2024).
- 2 For essentials of Muslim/Islamic pastoral care and counseling see (Şahinöz 2018; Hibaoui 2017; Erdem 2021; Fincke 2021; Ağılkaya Şahin 2021, 2024).
- 3 For discussions on “Muslimische Seelsorge” [Muslim pastoral care] in German literature see (Hibaoui 2017; Wenz 2017; Şahinöz 2018; Fincke 2021; Doukali 2021; Lorberg-Fehring 2022).
- 4 Satzung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Pastoralpsychologie e. V. [Statute of the German Pastoral Psychology Association] Mai 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/nccd4x5p> (accessed on 25 March 2024).

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