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Attitudes to religious diversity past and present among European teenagers

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Attitudes to religious diversity past and present among European teenagers

Dr John Maiden and Dr Stefanie Sinclair, with Dr Karel van Nieuwenhuyse, Dr Paivi Salmesvuori and Professor John Wolffe.

Introduction

This report concerns research undertaken on the attitudes of young people in various European countries towards religious diversity. While there is a significant body of literature on the attitudes of the young towards contemporary religious diversity in European contexts (see e.g. Arweck 2016; Jackson 2014), there is minimal existing research concerning their attitudes towards religious diversity in the past. The purpose of this research was to gather data on attitudes to diversity in both past and present, in order to gauge knowledge, understanding and viewpoints and also investigate the potentialities of educational strategies which allow young people to relate history to their own contemporary situations. The research was carried out by the pan-European academic team of the Horizon 2020 project 'Religious Toleration and Peace' (RETOPEA), with a core work package team of Dr John Maiden (Open University), Dr Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse (KU Leuven), Päivi Salmesvuori (University of Helsinki), Dr Stefanie Sinclair (Open University) and Professor John Wolffe (Open University).

The arguments and suggestions set out in this report are to be presented and developed more fully in a book chapter by the core team: 'Views of the Young: Reflections on the Basis of European Pilot Studies' in Patrick Pasture et al., Religious Diversity in Europe: Mediating the Past to the Young (Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

Research questions

Our study was conducted within the wider context of the RETOPEA project and in preparation for 'docutube' workshops the project team is planning to run in schools, museums and youth groups across Europe. These workshops aim to engage young people (aged 13-18) with themes of religious history, toleration and peace through the production of 'docutubes', i.e. short documentary-style films produced by the teenagers themselves. This report focuses on the first preparatory phase of our research which aimed to gain indicative snapshots of young people's perceptions and experiences of religious diversity (past and present) in Europe to help us pitch the development of the materials for the docutube workshops at an appropriate level.

This research aimed to gain deeper insights into young people's perceptions, experiences and knowledge of religious diversity in the past and present. In particular, we aimed to gain a greater understanding of:

- young people's views on how religion and religious diversity (in past and present) are represented in the media
- the sources and extent of young people's knowledge of and views on religious diversity in the past
- young people's perception of religious diversity in contemporary society
- how young people's knowledge and views of religious diversity in the past and present inform each other
- differences and similarities between young people's views on these issues in different national contexts.

Participants

This research was conducted with small groups of teenagers, with a maximum of 16 participants (though most groups were smaller) per group. Some groups included a mix of young people of different ages, others consisted of students of the same age, though all participants were between 13 and 18 years old. The religious profile of students was as representative of each school as possible. Most groups were gender-balanced, though one of the four UK schools taking part was an all girls school. Given that we were aiming to gain indicative, but relatively in-depth snapshots, rather than a comprehensive, large-scale or representative overview of young people's views on these issues, we worked with a relatively small sample of young people who were invited via their school teachers to take part in this research project.

We approached and included a diverse mix of schools with and without religious affiliations, ranging from schools with very ethnically/ religiously diverse to relatively homogeneous student populations, as well as schools from a range of urban and rural socio-cultural settings. A total of 132 students participated from 12 schools in six countries. Participating schools included 4 schools in the UK (England), 3 schools in Belgium (Flanders), 2 schools in Germany and 1 school each in Finland, Estonia and Spain.. We had also planned to include groups in Poland and North Macedonia in our research, but due to the sudden imposition of social distancing restrictions and school closures linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, our planned research in these countries could unfortunately not be completed in time for the publication of this report. (While it was not possible to conduct focus groups with teenagers in schools in North Macedonia due to school closures linked to the Covid19-pandemic, a focus group was run with a group of university students. Given that this group was a few years older than participants of other groups included in our study, we decided not to include the findings of this group in this report. However, it might be worth noting that the findings were not significantly different from those of other groups with younger students.)

Participation was voluntary, and all participants (and their parents, for students younger than 16 years old) gave informed consent. In one instance, the parents of a youth group with young refugees in Belgium did not consent for their children to participate in our research. While the teenagers of this group were happy to take part, their parents were suspicious and worried that anything their children would say as part of the focus-group interviews might impact negatively on their outstanding applications for asylum or residency. Our assurances that all contributions would be anonymised did unfortunately not allay these parents' concerns, so we could therefore not include this group in our study.

Methodology

Our research combined a range of methods, including a short questionnaire and semi-structured focus group interviews with small groups of students (following the principles of Elliot et al., 2005). We began by asking each individual participant quietly to spend 5 - 10 minutes to complete a short, anonymised questionnaire. This asked the following three multiple-choice questions:

1. How important (if at all) is religion to your life? Please circle a score between 1 (not important at all) and 5 (of great importance).

2. Have you ever observed prejudice or bias against religion in the area where you live? Please circle one of the following answers: Yes - No - Not sure.

3. Have you ever experienced bias against your religious or non-religious beliefs? Please circle one of the following answers: Yes frequently - Yes sometimes - No, but hardly ever - No - Not sure.

In addition to the provision of a selection of multiple-choice answers, participants were given the option of adding open comments or explanations, and many of them chose to do so. The questionnaires primarily served as a 'warm up' to the semi-structured focus group interviews. The idea was to introduce the topic of religious diversity, toleration and peace and give participants a moment of quiet time to activate their thoughts, reflect on the topic and start considering how it might relate to their personal views and experiences before engaging in small group discussions.

The quiet time for the completion of the questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured focus group interview that lasted about one hour. If all participants (and their parents/ guardians) consented, audio recordings were made of the focus group discussions. In cases where that was not possible, detailed notes were made by the researchers, though all reports were anonymised.

In advance of the focus group interviews, we established with teachers whether there were any sensitive issues concerning intercommunity relations the facilitators should be aware of in relation to each group that was interviewed. We also made sure that there were opportunities for participants who were in any way concerned or upset following the interview to speak to a teacher, youth worker or a member of our

project team. Before the focus group interviews, facilitators also asked participants to agree to ground rules of (a) listening (b) respecting different opinions (c) not directing criticism at individuals.

For the focus group interviews, the research team worked with the same set of questions in all localities (translated into each local language). However, we were keen to allow local and national perspectives to come through in the discussions. The topics of the questions of the semi-structured interviews were aligned with our research questions, thoroughly discussed with the project team and pilot tested. These questions focused on four themes: i.e young people's perceptions of

1. representations of religion and religious diversity in the media (including questions, such as 'How accurate or inaccurate, fair or unfair, do you think different types of media are when they discuss different religious groups?');

2. religious diversity in the past (e.g. 'Historically, how religiously diverse do you think your city/town/ country/ Europe has been? Are there any particular 'turning points' when your city/town/ country/ Europe became more or less religiously diverse?');

3. religious diversity in present-day society (e.g. 'In the present day, to what extent do you think religious diversity offers benefits or challenges to society?') '; and

4. potential connections between approaches to religious diversity in the past and present (for example 'Are there ways in which we can learn from history? ')

The interview questions were designed with the aim to trigger conversation, and facilitators were instructed to give as much agency as possible to participants to share and respond to views about their experiences and perceptions of religion and religious diversity. Facilitators were therefore asked to (a) give sufficient time for a discussion of each question (b) if there is an awkward silence to not immediately rush to the next question – but give participants time to think, and (c) if tangential discussions develop, to not always 'shut these down', as they can 'break the ice', but use their discretion as to when to return to more relevant conversation. While facilitators aimed to encourage participation, they were also advised to be careful not to put individual students 'on the spot' with any question. The aim was to facilitate a guided discussion, but not place any participant under pressure to speak and allow individuals to withdraw from the discussion at any point.

As pointed out above, our aim was to gain insights into young people's perceptions and experiences of religious diversity. In particular, we hoped to establish to what extent and how participants made connections between religious diversity in the past and present. We started our analysis from a grounded theory approach. This meant that we did not apply an existing theoretical framework from the outset of our research, but developed theory through the analysis of data. After a thorough reading of all transcripts of the semi-structured interviews, we followed a dialectical approach to data analysis. This involved an iterative process of going back and forth between themes we initially identified, and then

refined or changed after re-reading (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Peck, 2010; Weston et al., 2001). Emerging themes included the temporal dimension (Did participants talk about the past, present or connections between both?), sources of knowledge (Which sources of information did participants use and trust, and why?), a sense of value or judgement (What value did participants assign to religious diversity? Did they adopt a neutral, positive or negative view on religious diversity - and why?) and participants' awareness of the complexity and nuance of relevant issues and of their own positionality.

In light of the relatively small sample size, the research team was very aware of the limits of any general conclusions that could be drawn from the quantitative analysis of the responses to the multiple-choice questions that were part of the 'warm up' questionnaire (see Appendix 1), especially with regard to any specific national contexts. For example, the result that 33% of the Belgium youth who took part answered that religion was of 'great importance' to their life very likely indicates the limits of the representativeness of the sample. The analysis of the open comments submitted as part of the survey and the focus-group discussions was much more conclusive as this qualitative data offered much more in-depth information about participants' perceptions. Regardless of the relatively limited value of the findings of the analysis of the questionnaire responses, the process of completing the questionnaires fulfilled a very useful function in itself by setting the scene or 'warming up' participants for the focus group discussions, where the issues could be explored in much more depth, detail and nuance. Participants reported that they found the quiet time spent completing the questionnaires useful to help them focus their minds at the start of the session. Many participants also commented positively on the format and set-up of the focus group discussions, and explicitly stated that they really appreciated the opportunity to discuss their views and experiences in this context with their peers and wished that such opportunities were facilitated more frequently in their schools.

Given that all of the questionnaire and focus-group data had to be anonymised, it was not possible for the research team to establish direct connections between questionnaire answers, specific student profiles and individual students' statements made during the focus group interviews.

Findings

The analysis of the focus group interviews led us to the following conclusions:

- In general, European young people have very limited knowledge and understanding of historic religious diversity. Their historical awareness on this theme tends to relate to particular 'turning points', limited to their own national setting. They often associate that past with religious intolerance and prejudice, rather than the constructive negotiation of religious diversity in national and local contexts.

- Young people stated that their attitudes towards contemporary religious diversity were not influenced primarily by television series, films or news programmes, newspapers or other mainstream media. Instead, they felt they were more influenced by family and friends, and by a wide range of Internet sources. However, we found that young people were able to articulate their views of bias in representations of religious diversity in various forms of media. Their criticism of bias and misrepresentation was most acute where the news was concerned, with a particular concern about the treatment of Islam.

- Young people's views on everyday religious diversity and ideas of toleration and peace vary quite significantly. There is an overwhelming consensus that religious diversity as a reality in society is to be welcomed. However, there are a range of differing attitudes about the management of diversity (e.g. public use of religious symbols) and also some ambiguity on what actually constitutes religious intolerance, both in their own experience and in society at large. It is striking that a very low proportion of young people felt that the had personally experienced bias on account of their religious/non-religious identity, but that the descriptions of personal experience of bias in the open comments indicates that the proportion was likely higher. This would seem to underline the point that there is some uncertainty about what constitutes religious intolerance.

- Young people tend to be often 'presentist' in the way in which they approach historical and contemporary religious diversity. By this we mean they "back-project" their knowledge, opinions and experiences on to the past. This can mean that young people think issues of intolerance and prejudice in the past were greater than now – i.e. there is an assumption that the past was less "progressive" in relation to the treatment of religious diversity.

- Young peoples' presentism, however, also means that despite their limited knowledge and understanding of religious diversity in history, they have the critical resources from their own experiences of society to identify possible biases, misrepresentations and homogenizing strategies concerning the representation of religious diversity in the past.

- Many teenagers who took part in the RETOPEA focus group interviews welcomed the opportunity to talk about their views on and experiences of religious diversity and toleration and discuss them with others. They argued that they were rarely given the opportunity to do so and were able to critique aspects of their own education on these issues, for example not learning enough about other

religious groups or religion in their locality. Many were keen to participate in the focus group discussions, and surprised at how easy it was to talk to other students about these issues; although some were not sure how to talk to or about members of different religious groups.

Recommendations

On the basis of the project findings thus far, we would make the following recommendations:

- We need to address limitations in the historical knowledge and understanding of young people through educational strategies which

a) move 'beyond' the teaching of particular historical 'turning points', particularly if these imply simplistic narratives of historical progress e.g. a 'Whiggish' view of British national history in relation to religious toleration.

b) address local histories and relate these to family and migration histories. Framing the teaching of histories of religious diversity in such relevant ways increases the likelihood that some students will engage with the material. It also fosters engagement if students are able to bring their own knowledge and experiences to the study of religious diversity in history.

c) pay attention to historical scenarios outside of the immediate national context. It is necessary to broaden the horizons of students in relation to their understanding of historic religious diversity and the breadth of strategies and approaches which have been utilised in history to negotiate such diversity.

- We need to recognise the pedagogical potential of relating religious diversity in past and the present. By encourage such 'conversation' between past and present we can release the critical awareness of young people, shaped by their own contemporary experiences, while also giving young people the opportunity to 'think outside of the box'.

- We need to acknowledge that young people have the capacity to discuss sensitive topics where religious diversity is concerned so long that this takes place in 'safe' spaces. We think that reasons the focus groups were considered 'safe', and therefore opened up conversations, included these not being graded or part of the curriculum and their emphasis on 'student income', i.e. on young people bringing their own family (and perhaps migration) histories to the discussion.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire results

1) How important (if at all) is religion to your life?	1 (not important)	2	3	4	5 (of great importance)
UK (4 schools, 60 participants)	18%	12%	25%	20%	25%
Germany (2 schools, 25 participants)	12%	24%	20%	20%	24%
Finland (1 school, 13 participants)	31%	23%	39%	0%	8%
Spain (1 school, 12 participants)	8%	8%	33%	33%	17%
Estonia (1 school, 7 participants)	58%	14%	14%	0%	14%
Belgium (3 schools, 15 participants)	13%	27%	27%	0%	33%

2) Have you ever observed prejudice or bias against religion in the area where you live?	Yes	No	Not sure
UK (4 schools, 60 participants)	30%	50%	20%
Germany (2 schools, 25 participants)	52%	28%	20%
Finland (1 school, 13 participants)	62%	8%	31%
Spain (1 school, 12 participants)	58%	8%	33%
Estonia (1 school, 7 participants)	43%	14%	43%
Belgium (3 schools, 15 participants)	47%	20%	47%

3) Have you ever experienced bias against your religious or non-religious beliefs?	Yes - frequently	Yes- sometimes	Yes - but hardly ever	No	Not sure
UK (4 schools, 60 participants)	0%	13%	33%	42%	12%
Germany (2 schools, 25 participants)	8%	12%	36%	44%	0%
Finland (1 school, 13 participants)	8%	8%	23%	62%	0%
Spain (1 school, 12 participants)	0%	8%	25%	67%	0%
Estonia (1 school, 7 participants)	0%	0%	57%	43%	0%
Belgium (3 schools, 15 participants)	0%	0%	20%	60%	20%

