



Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity in Wales

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Introduction

The St Mary's Centre has been pleased to collaborate with the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit to gain access to the voices of young people in Wales on the key issue of their attitude toward life in religiously diverse contemporary society. From the inception of the Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity project, colleagues from WASACRE and NAPfRE have taken an active interest in the project, discussed the project with schools and secured interest from schools to take part in the research.

The project included both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaires) strands. The members of the research team concerned with the qualitative strand were welcomed into schools in Wales to talk with young people. It was the findings from these interviews and focus groups that helped to shape the subsequent quantitative studies. Schools across Wales have been willing to administer questionnaires to year nine and year ten pupils.

The Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project

The Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project was established in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit by Professor Robert Jackson in October 2009 within the Religion and Society Programme funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. Jackson established a mixed-methods project, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, designed to profile the attitudes of 13- to 15-year-old students across the five 'nations' of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and London. This presentation explores findings from the quantitative project within Wales.

The quantitative project led by Professor Leslie Francis set out to capture the views of at least 2,000 pupils from each of the five nations. Within each nation the target was to survey 1,000 pupils attending state-maintained schools with a religious character (mainly Anglican, Catholic or shared by these two denominations) and 1,000 pupils attending state-maintained schools without

a religious character. At the time of the present analysis 1,945 pupils had participated from Wales and the responses from pupils in two further schools were still awaiting data entry (another 500 or so). This excellent response from Wales was in no little measure due to the support of colleagues from WASACRE and NAPfRE.

Research background

The questionnaire survey provides a comprehensive profile of the views of young people in Wales on their personal religious identity, on their attitudes toward religion in general, and on their attitudes toward religious diversity in particular. This broader context was necessary in order to add depth and perspective to the specific focus on religious diversity.

Five main sources of information helped to shape the design and content of this questionnaire. The first source, and one of crucial significance, drew on the findings from the qualitative strand of the project. Here is a very good example of how a quantitative study can be set up to test and to extend the insights of qualitative research. The second source drew on research traditions established within the psychology of religion. Theories developed from this source linked attitudes toward religious diversity with the notions of self concept, empathy, and personality. The third source drew on research traditions established within empirical theology. Theories developed from this source linked attitudes toward religious diversity with the notions of God images and the theologies of religions. The fourth source drew on the experience of the Teenage Religion and Values Project that has charted the religious views of young people in the UK since the late 1970s. Theories developed from this source promoted an appreciation of the multidimensional nature of religion within the perspective of social scientific enquiry. The fifth source drew on the experience of the Outgroup Prejudice Project that has charted the attitudes of young people in the north of England toward minority groups. Theories developed from this source promoted an appreciation of the relevance of social proximity measures.

Religious context of Wales

The inclusion of a religious question (for the first time ever) in the 2001 Census for England and Wales enabled an informed profile of the pattern of self-assigned religious affiliation to be compiled at a national level (and compared with England) and at local levels (for internal comparison). The figures published by the Office for National Statistics showed the same level of self-assigned affiliation with the Christian religion in both nations: 72% in Wales and 72% in England. At the same time, the figures published by the Office for National Statistics showed a lower level of self-assigned affiliation with other religions: 2% in Wales compared with 6% in England. According to these figures, the second largest religious groups in Wales (after Christians) is the Muslim community. Just under 1% of the population of Wales (22,000 individuals) self-assigned in the 2001 Census as Muslims. The largest concentration of Muslims is in Cardiff, at 4% of the population. Elsewhere in Wales (outside Cardiff) the Muslim community is strongest in the south in Newport and Swansea.

Unlike the 2001 Census in Scotland, the 2001 Census in Wales did not invite those who checked the category 'Christian' to identify a specific denomination. This makes a discussion of diversity *within* the Christian community more complex and less certain. Within this context the most visible strands include the Roman Catholic Church, the Church in Wales, the historic Free Churches, the Orthodox Church, the classic Pentecostal Churches, and the new or community churches.

Research question

This brief presentation sets out to illustrate the rich potential of the Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project by selecting just part of the data and by focusing on just some of the issues. This presentation is reporting on male students only (since these are generally more difficult to engage in discussion about religion) and on nine themes from the survey addressing the questions: Who believes in God? What influences views about religion? What do young people think about religious education in schools? What do young people believe about science and religion? What do young people believe about life after death? Does belief in God make a difference to life? Respecting religion differences; Experiencing respect for religious differences; Allowing religious difference to flourish.

To add interest to the presentation a key comparison is offered between the views of those who believe in God and the views of those who do not believe in God. Does belief in God matter in terms of shaping attitudes toward life in religiously diverse Wales?

Who believes in God?

The survey included the straightforward question 'I believe in God', rated on a five-point scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly. The agree strongly and the agree responses were added together to define the *theists*. The disagree strongly and disagree responses were added together to define the *atheists*. The not certain response defined the agnostics.

Within schools with a religious character, 51% of the male students were theists, 25% were agnostics, and 24% were atheists. Within community schools, 20% of the male students were theists, 31% were agnostics and 50% were atheists. The following analyses are based on drawing together the responses of students attending community schools and schools with a religious character.

What influences views about religion?

The survey invited students to assess the factors that had influenced their views about religion. Their answers showed that school was the most important influence among both atheists and theists. The 43% of the male atheists said the study of religion at school had influenced their views about religion, compared with television (22%), mother (18%), father (16%), internet (15%), and friends (14%). Among male theists, 75% said that the study of religion at school had influenced their views about religion, compared with mother (55%), television (43%), father (37%), internet (31%), and friends (31%).

These figures affirm the crucial role of RE teachers, RE advisors, and SACREs for equipping the young people of Wales for life in a religiously diverse community.

Place of religion in school

Religious education remains a statutory part of the school curriculum in Wales. Levels of support for this subject differ very sharply between theists and atheists. Thus 70% of male theists maintain that religious education should be taught in schools, compared with 29% of male atheists.

Citizenship is sometimes advanced in education as the route through which to address issues of community cohesion and religious plurality. The present data suggest the support for citizenship education is lower than support for religious education among young people. While 29% of male atheists maintained that religious education should be taught in schools, the proportion fell to 22% who maintained that citizenship education should be taught in schools. While 70% of male theists maintained that religious education should be taught in schools, the proportion fell to 44% who maintained that citizenship education should be taught in schools.

What do atheists and theists believe about science and religion?

The debate between science and religion remains a key issue in the worldview of young people and may affect the way in which young people perceive religious diversity. Particularly salient issues in this area concern scientism and theories of evolution.

In terms of scientism, high proportions of both male theists and male atheists take the view that theories in science can be proved to be definitely true: 59% of male atheists and 44% of male theists.

In terms of the debate between evolution and the biblical account of creation, 28% of male theists and 44% of male atheists believe that science disproves the biblical account of creation. At the same time, 43% of male theists and 64% of male atheists endorse the view that evolution created everything over millions of years. A quarter of male atheists (23%) and over half of male theists (56%) believe that it is possible to believe in evolution and to believe in God.

What do atheists and theists believe about life after death?

Neither belief in God nor rejection of belief in God comes today as part of a clearly defined package of religious or secular belief. For example, 21% of male atheists believe in life after death and 17% believe that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead. On the other hand, 34% of male theists do not believe in life after death.

Does belief in God make a difference to life?

Young people who believe in God find life more meaningful and worthwhile. Two thirds of male theists (66%) feel their life has a sense of purpose, compared with 39% of male atheists; 79% of male theists find life really worth living, compared with 63% of male atheists.

Respecting religious differences

Young people in Wales are growing used to living in a religiously plural context, although by no means all of them are convinced by it. Half of the male atheists argue that all religious groups should have equal rights (50%) or that we must respect all religions (48%). Among male theists the proportion rises to 66% who agree that all religious groups should have equal rights and to 79% who argue that we must respect all religions.

Experiencing respect for religious differences

Between a third and half of young people experience Wales as a place where respect is shown for religious differences. For example, 34% of male atheists and 50% of male theists say that, where they live, people respect religious differences. Similarly, 39% of male atheists and 56% of male theists say that where they live, people from different religious backgrounds get on well together.

Allowing religious difference to flourish

One of the most visible signs of religious diversity within schools is the presence of religious clothing, and in some contexts this can be controversial. The more tolerant position on religious clothing is taken by young people who themselves believe in God. Among male students the following picture emerges: the view that Christians should be allowed to wear crosses in school was supported by 42% of atheists and 67% of theists; the view that Muslims should be allowed to wear the headscarf in school was supported by 40% of atheists and 56% of theists; the view that Sikhs should be allowed to wear the turban in school was supported by 41% of atheists and 59% of theists; the view that Jews should be allowed to wear the Kippah/Yarmulke in school was supported by 40% of atheists and 54% of theists; the view that Hindus should be allowed to wear the Bindi in school was supported by 41% of atheists and 56% of theists.

Conclusion

These statistics provide some insight into how 13- to 15-year-old male students view living amid religious diversity in Wales today. Over the next months the data will be examined to gain greater insight into the patterns and trends revealed by the survey.

Future research opportunities

The St Mary's Centre is conducting on-going research concerned with religion, values, and diversity among year-nine and year-ten students. Schools and teachers in Wales and England who are interested in helping with or in participating in this research are invited to make contact with the Administrator of the St Mary's Centre:

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