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Article Title: Still worlds apart: The worldviews of adolescent males attending Protestant and Catholic secondary schools in Northern Ireland

Year of publication: 2008

Link to published version:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/manup/rie/2008/00000080/00000001/art00003>

Publisher statement: None

Still worlds apart: the worldviews of adolescent males attending Protestant and Catholic secondary schools in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This study draws together two research traditions: John Greer's pioneering research among pupils in Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland and Leslie J. Francis' research concerning teenage religion and values in England and Wales. A sample of 1,585 13- to 15-year-old male pupils attending Catholic schools (N=712) and Protestant schools (N=873) completed the Teenage Religion and Values Survey. The present analyses highlight the significant differences in worldviews between the Catholic and Protestant adolescents across eight domains defined as: religious beliefs, paranormal beliefs, church-related attitudes, attitudes toward sex and family life, law-related attitudes, school-related attitudes, locality-related attitudes, and personal anxiety and depression. These data confirm that in many key ways young people growing up in these two religious communities are still living worlds apart.

INTRODUCTION

Northern Ireland has been and remains one of the most deeply divided countries in the world (Cairns and Darby, 1998). The divisions are reflected in and heightened by separate education, political parties, newspapers, leisure activities, housing and churches. From the beginning of the state in 1921, schools have been segregated into two main categories attended by Protestants or Roman Catholics (Greer, 1988). A segregated school system of this nature may serve both to reflect and to reinforce distinctive worldviews espoused by the Catholic and Protestant communities. Both qualitative and quantitative research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that these two school communities were, indeed, 'worlds apart'.

Using a qualitative research method in 1977 (participant observation), Murray (1982, 1983, 1985) set out to profile the culture and character of two neighbouring primary schools, one Catholic and one Protestant. At a curricular level the schools were found to be almost indistinguishable, apart from the content of and approach to religious instruction. However, at a more general cultural level, Murray found that the two separate systems of schooling reflected the two dominant cultures of the province. Murray highlighted the importance of these findings through the title of his book, *Worlds Apart*.

Spending two blocks of time in each school, Murray integrated with the teachers participating in all the roles in which they engaged, including teaching, taking

sports and playground duty. He studied school records, including the social-economic status of the pupils and the curriculum. He interviewed the teachers at the end of the research period using a semi-structured interview schedule. Four randomly selected parents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. No pupils were interviewed, but they were invited to write an essay on 'How my school compared with the one nearest to it' which was the other school being studied. As a consequence a large amount of information was collected from each school to enable a comparison to take place.

Although Murray does not claim that the two studies are necessarily representative, the amount of in-depth information he collected does enable an excellent insight into the differences in the ethos between the two schools. Murray observed that the ethos of the schools was quite different. For example, attitude to educational authorities in the Catholic school tended to be negative, whereas in the Protestant school they tended to be positive. Murray concluded that the different emphasis given to ritual and symbols promoted not only difference but divisiveness beyond the school gates. Not only did Murray find that the ethos of the schools was different, he found that teachers in both schools were inclined to stereotype other Protestant/Catholic schools. He also found that both schools failed to explore, with the children, issues associated with segregation. Murray concluded from his data that, as long as the segregation in schools is not explored by those within the system, it will remain and continue once the pupils have left the school.

Drawing on a very different research tradition in 1984 (quantitative self-completion questionnaire), Greer and Francis (1990) set out to profile the religious and moral attitudes of form 4, form 5 and form 6 pupils attending ten Protestant and ten Catholic secondary schools. A total of 1,177 pupils participated in this study: 606 Protestants (292 males and 314 females) and 571 Catholics (254 males and 317 females). The findings indicated significant and consistent differences in the religious and moral worldviews of the two denominational groups, but not complete contrast. This research was conducted with the twenty secondary school teachers engaged in a project called Teaching Religion in Northern Ireland (Greer and McElhinney, 1984). Ten of the teachers were based in Protestant schools and ten of the teachers were based in Catholic schools. The questionnaire included the twenty-four item Francis Scale of Attitude Toward Christianity (Kay and Francis, 1996), the Rejection of Christianity Scale (Greer and Francis, 1992; Robbins, Francis and Bradford, 2003) and a ten item scale of Christian Moral Values (Francis and Greer, 1992). Questions relating to frequency of church attendance, personal prayer, bible reading, and personal belief were also asked. Catholic pupils were found to be more religious in terms of a higher frequency of church attendance and personal prayer, but less religious in terms of frequency of bible reading. Catholic pupils expressed a more positive attitude toward Christianity and they were less likely to reject Christianity. With regard to attitude toward moral values, the Protestant and Catholic young people placed a different emphasis on what is morally acceptable

and what is not morally acceptable. For example, Protestants were more likely to condemn gambling and drinking, whereas Catholics were more likely to condemn premarital sexual intercourse, divorce and abortion. These findings build on and support the work of Murray, demonstrating the contrasting worldviews of Protestant and Catholic young people.

Building on the 1984 study reported by Greer and Francis (1990), in 1998 Francis, Robbins, Barnes and Lewis (2006) administered a similar questionnaire to 1,270 sixth-form pupils attending 9 Catholic schools and 1,099 sixth-form pupils attending 7 Protestant schools. These data confirmed the findings of the earlier study that there remained significant and consistent differences in the religious and moral worldview of the two denominational groups. Francis, Robbins, Barnes and Lewis (2006) explored three key areas of religious practice within their study: church attendance (public practice); prayer (personal practice) and bible reading (personal practice). With respect to religious practice the authors demonstrated that young Catholics were significantly more likely to attend church and to participate in private prayer, while young Protestants were significantly more likely to engage in bible reading. The authors suggested that young Catholics were more likely to be shaped by images of the liturgy and sacrament while young Protestants were more likely to be shaped by scripture. The authors then moved on to explore five key areas of religious beliefs: belief in God; belief in Jesus; the inspiration of the Old Testament and New Testament; believe in the relevance of the Bible for today and belief in life after death.

Overall there was not a large difference between the percentages of Catholics and Protestants who believe in God, the incarnation of Jesus and the inspiration of the Old and New Testaments. However, Catholics and Protestants held different perspectives on life after death. The young Catholics were significantly more likely to endorse a loving image of God who rewards people after death, while young Protestants were more likely to endorse a judging image of God concerned with punishing people after death. This finding represents quite different theological perspectives on life after death.

Francis, Robbins, Barnes and Lewis (2006) then turned their attention to an exploration of twelve key areas of moral values: gambling, drunkenness, smoking, lying, stealing, sexual intercourse before marriage, capital punishment, suicide, war, use of nuclear weapons, colour prejudice, and religious discrimination. The authors found significant differences between the moral values of Catholics and Protestants. The God of young Protestants seemed to be more against gambling, drunkenness, smoking, lying, stealing, and sexual intercourse before marriage, but less against capital punishment, war, the use of nuclear weapons, colour prejudice and religious discrimination than the God of young Catholics.

Finally, Francis, Robbins, Barnes and Lewis (2006) considered the social role of the church exploring three key areas: the influence of the church in politics; the influence of the church on morality; and the involvement of the church in social

problems. They concluded that overall young Catholics were less sympathetic toward the church's influence over morals and politics and more sympathetic toward the church's involvement in social problems than young Protestants.

Overall, Francis, Robbins, Barns and Lewis concluded that this significant and consistent difference in religious and moral values reflected fundamental differences in the influences on the young people's lives. For example, young Catholics were significantly more likely to be shaped by the culture of public liturgy and sacramental worship through their significantly higher levels of church attendance, whereas young Protestants were more likely to be shaped by the authority and imagery of scripture through their significantly higher levels of bible reading.

While the two studies reported by Francis and Greer (1992) and by Francis, Robbins, Barns and Lewis (2006) provide good insight into differences and similarities between aspects of the worldviews espoused by pupils educated within the Catholic and Protestant school sectors, major limitations with these two studies concern the relatively restricted range of issues covered by the questionnaire. A much wider profile of the adolescent worldview has been provided by the series of studies reported in England and Wales using the Teenage, Religion and Values survey as reported by Francis and Kay (1995), Francis (2001) and Francis and Robbins (2005).

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to extend the pioneering work of Greer and Francis (1990) and Francis, Robbins, Barnes and Lewis (2006) by administering the Teenage Religion and Values survey to a sample of pupils attending Catholic and Protestant schools in Northern Ireland and to draw on this instrument to profile the worldviews of these two groups of pupils across eight specific domains: religious beliefs, supernatural beliefs, church-related attitudes, attitudes toward sex and family life, law-related attitudes, school related attitudes, locality related attitudes, and personal anxiety and depression.

METHOD

The sample

A total of 1,585 *Teenage Religion and Values Surveys* were completed by males attending Catholic (N=712) and Protestant (N=873) schools. The surveys were administered by class teachers during normal school time. Pupils were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and that their responses would not be viewed by staff within the school. Very few pupils declined to participate. Of the Catholic males 56% were in year nine and 44% were in year ten. Of the Protestant males 52% were in year nine and 48% were in year ten. Generally year nine pupils are aged between 13 and 14 years, and year ten pupils are aged between 14 and 15 years.

The instrument

From the data collected as part of the *Teenage Religion and Values Survey* eight domains were identified to explore and to compare the worldviews of the Catholic and Protestant adolescents: religious beliefs, paranormal beliefs, church-related attitudes, attitudes toward sex and family life, law-related attitudes, school related attitudes, locality related attitudes, and personal anxiety and depression. Each domain is explored by three items, arranged for scoring on a five-point Likert-type scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly.

Analysis

The data were analysed using SPSS (SPSS Inc., 1988), employing the cross tabulation routine and the chi-square significance test, to compare the item endorsement of the pupils educated within the two school systems. Endorsement has been calculated as the product of the agree strongly and agree responses compared with the product of the disagree strongly, disagree and not certain responses.

RESULTS

Religious beliefs

The three areas explored to compare the religious beliefs of Catholic and Protestant young people are: belief in God, belief in Jesus' physical resurrection, and belief in life after death. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Catholics are significantly more likely than young Protestants to hold religious beliefs across all three measures. Thus, 86% of young Catholics state that they believe

in God, compared with 72% of young Protestants. While over three-quarters (77%) of young Catholics believe that Jesus really rose from the dead, this drops to just under two-thirds (65%) of young Protestants. The difference between the two groups with regard to their belief in life after death is not as marked, but nonetheless remains significant. Thus, 65% of young Catholics believe in life after death compared with 58% of young Protestants.

Paranormal beliefs

The three areas explored to compare the paranormal beliefs of Catholic and Protestant young people are: belief in their horoscope, believe in fortune-tellers, and belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Catholics are significantly more likely to hold paranormal beliefs than their Protestant counterparts. Thus, almost a quarter (24%) of young Catholics report that they believe in their horoscope, compared with 15% of young Protestants. The findings for belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead are similar, with almost a quarter (24%) of young Catholics agreeing with this statement, compared with 19% of young Protestants. While 14% of young Catholics believe that fortune-tellers can tell the future, this drops to 11% among young Protestants, a small but nonetheless significant difference.

Church-related attitudes

The three areas explored to compare the church-related attitudes of Catholic and Protestant young people are: whether they will want their own children to be

baptised/christened in church, whether they support religious education in schools, and whether they feel that Christian ministers/vicars/priests do a good job. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Catholics hold significantly more positive church-related attitudes than their Protestant counterparts. Thus, 88% of young Catholics agree that they want their children to be baptised/christened in church compared to 69% of young Protestants. Nearly eight in ten (78%) young Catholics agree that religious education should be taught in schools compared with six in ten (61%) of young Protestants who agree that this should be the case. While nearly two-thirds (64%) of young Catholics agree that Christian ministers/vicars/priests do a good job, this falls to 56% among young Protestants.

Sex and family life

The three areas explored to compare the attitudes of Catholic and Protestant young people to sex and family life are: attitude toward contraception, attitude toward abortion, and attitude toward divorce. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Catholics hold a significantly more conservative perspective on sex and family life than their Protestant counterparts. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of young Catholics agree that abortion is wrong, compared with just over half (52%) of young Protestants. While 45% of young Catholics agree that divorce is wrong, this drops to 33% among young Protestants. A small, but nonetheless significant difference, exists with regard to the young people's attitude toward contraception, where 18% of young Catholics agree that this is wrong, compared with 14% of young Protestants.

Law-related attitudes

The three areas explored to compare the law-related attitudes of Catholic and Protestant young people are: attitude toward travelling without a ticket, attitude toward buying cigarettes under age, and attitude toward buying alcohol under age. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Protestants are significantly more likely to support all three areas of the law than young Catholics. Thus, 21% of young Protestants agree that there is nothing wrong in travelling without a ticket, compared with 28% of young Catholics. One-fifth (20%) of young Protestants agree that there is nothing wrong in buying cigarettes under the legal age, compared with a quarter (26%) of young Catholics. While a third (32%) of young Protestants agree that there is nothing wrong in buying alcohol under the legal age, this rises slightly, but nonetheless significantly, to 37% among young Catholics.

School-related attitudes

The three areas explored to compare the school-related attitudes of the Catholic and Protestant young people are: their perception of school as boring, whether they are happy at their school, and their worries about being bullied in school. The results from the three areas exploring school-related attitudes are somewhat mixed. Young Protestants are more likely to agree that school is boring (61% compared with 59%). However, young Protestants are also more likely to agree that they are happy in their school (70% compared with 57%). Almost one in

four (38%) of young Catholics are worried about being bullied in their school, compared with one in three (29%) of young Protestants.

Locality-related attitudes

The three areas explored to compare the attitudes of Catholic and Protestant young people to their locality are: their perception regarding whether drug taking is a growing problem in their area, whether drunks are a growing problem in their area, and whether unemployment is a growing problem in their area. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Protestants have a significantly more positive perception of their locality than young Catholics. Thus, a third (33%) of young Catholics agree that drug taking is a growing problem in their area, compared with one-fifth (19%) of young Protestants. While 37% of young Catholics feel that drunks are a growing problem in their area, this falls slightly to 31% among young Protestants. A quarter (25%) of young Catholics agree that unemployment is a growing problem in their area, compared with a fifth (19%) of young Protestants.

Anxiety and depression

The three areas explored to compare the attitudes of Catholic and Protestant young people toward anxiety and depression are: worry about getting AIDS, feelings of depression, suicidal ideation. Overall, the data demonstrate that young Catholics exhibit greater levels of anxiety and depression than young Protestants. Half (50%) of young Catholics often feel depressed compared with 43% of young Protestants. Just over a quarter (26%) of young Catholics have

sometimes considered taking their own life, compared with a fifth (20%) of young Protestants. While 54% of young Protestants are worried about getting AIDS, this rises to 62% among young Catholics.

CONCLUSION

Pioneering research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s began to provide firm empirical evidence for the distinctive worldviews of young people educated within the two different environments of the segregated school system in Northern Ireland, in Protestant schools and in Catholic schools. Murray's analysis of the situation in 1977 based on qualitative data, was that the two communities were 'worlds apart' (Murray, 1982, 1983, 1985). Greer's analysis of the situation seven years later in 1984, based on quantitative data, supported this general view (Greer and Francis, 1990). The replication of Greer's original research, conducted 14 years later in 1998, confirmed the extent to which significant differences remained in the worldviews of the young people educated within these two school systems through to the closing years of the twentieth century (Francis, Robbins, Barnes and Lewis, 2006).

The present study set out to build on Greer's pioneering research tradition in two important ways, by reviewing the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century and by extending the scope of research, drawing on the wider map of adolescent values proposed by the *Teenage Religion and Values Survey* pioneered in England and Wales (Francis, 2001; Francis and Robbins, 2005).

These new data have generated profiles of the worldviews of 13- to 15-year old adolescent males attending Protestant and Catholic schools, across eight domains defined as: religious beliefs, paranormal beliefs, church-related attitudes, attitudes toward sex and family life, law-related attitudes, school-related attitudes, locality-related attitudes, and personal anxiety and depression. This study has demonstrated that young male Catholics and young male Protestants remain worlds apart in their worldviews, and that such differences persist even when the range of issues examined is expanded and despite the recent changes within the political climate in Northern Ireland (Hargie and Dickson, 2003).

Further research is necessary, first to explore the worldview of young Protestant and young Catholic females, second to explore how such different worldviews among the male young people impact on their life as they enter adulthood, and third to explore the worldviews of young people attending mixed schools. The worldviews of the young people of Northern Ireland will continue to have an impact on Northern Ireland in the future as they leave school and take on adult roles within that society. What the present data have done is to make it clear that Murray's analysis formulated in the 1970s persists into the twenty-first century and extends beyond the obvious discussion of religious doctrine and political ideology. The two communities remain significantly divided (worlds apart) in more subtle ways, reflected in fields like attitudes toward sex and family life, law-related attitudes, school-related attitudes, locality-related attitudes, and personal anxiety and depression. Differences in such areas may support

misunderstandings, may perpetuate inequalities, and may undermine social cohesion.

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Table 1: Religious beliefs

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
I believe in God	86	72	43.2	.001
I believe that Jesus really rose from the dead	77	65	28.0	.001
I believe in life after death	65	58	8.3	.01

Table 2: Paranormal beliefs

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
I believe in my horoscope	24	15	17.5	.001
I believe that fortune-tellers can tell the future	14	11	5.3	.05
I believe it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead	24	19	5.2	.05

Table 3: Church-related attitudes

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
I want my children to be baptised/christened in church	88	69	81.2	.001
Religious education should be taught in school	78	61	55.3	.001
Christian ministers/vicars/priests do a good job	64	56	11.8	.001

Table 4: Sex and family life

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
Contraception is wrong	18	14	6.5	.05
Abortion is wrong	71	52	53.7	.001
Divorce is wrong	45	33	23.9	.001

Table 5: Law-related attitudes

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
There is nothing wrong in travelling without a ticket	28	21	9.6	.01
There is nothing wrong in buying cigarettes under the legal age (16 years)	26	20	9.3	.01
There is nothing wrong in buying alcoholic Drinks under the legal age (18 years)	37	32	4.3	.05

Table 6: School-related attitudes

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
School is boring	59	61	12.4	.001
I am happy in my school	57	70	26.5	.001
I am worried about being bullied in school	38	29	15.2	.001

Table 7: Locality-related attitudes

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
Drug taking is a growing problem in my area	33	19	36.9	.001
Drunks are a growing problem in my area	37	31	6.4	.05
Unemployment is a growing problem in my area	25	19	7.0	.01

Table 8: Anxiety and depression

	Cath %	Prot %	χ^2	P<
I am worried about getting AIDS	62	54	9.5	.01
I often feel depressed	50	43	7.1	.01
I have sometimes considered taking my own life	26	20	10.2	.01