Views of the Young : Reflections on the Basis of European Pilot Studies

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CHAPTER 2

VIEWS OF THE YOUNG

REFLECTIONS ON THE BASIS OF EUROPEAN PILOT STUDIES

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Introduction

Although recent years have seen growing interest in views and understanding of religious diversity

in European countries, one particular demographic has received markedly less attention: the young.

This Chapter examines data from the multi-national RETOPEA project, collected between 2019 and

2020. It was intended as preparatory cross-European research for involving young people in making

short films (docutubes) which explore religious diversity, tolerance and intolerance. A unique aspect

of this data is that it concerns the perspectives of young people regarding both contemporary and

historical religious diversity. We are therefore able to consider the ways in which European young

people relate past and present in considering religious diversity. In particular, we examine the sources

of information upon which they construct their understanding and the extent to which a 'presentist'

epistemology shapes their attitudes. In what follows we will first survey the literature on young

people's attitudes towards religious diversity; then, second, we describe the methodology used by RETOPEA for gathering data on young peoples' perspectives; third, we offer analysis of this data; before, forth, we discuss its significance both in terms of our understanding of young peoples' thinking and practically, in relation to pedagogical approaches.

Existing literature of young peoples' views

Scholarly research on European young people and religious diversity is linked with a wider academic agenda to understand changing patterns of religiosity. One dimension of this is the significance of Christianity. This has been expressed by some, such as in Steve Bruce's *God is Dead: Secularization in the West,* in terms of inexorable 'secularization' (2020). Others have tended to emphasise multiple and complex patterns and dynamics at play; for example, Grace Davie (2000; 2006) has adopted terms such as 'believing without belonging' and 'vicarious religion' while also pointing towards the significance of migration for both private and public expressions of religion. Concomitant to studies on pluralisation are the expanding literatures on multiculturalism and national identity (Grever and Ribbens 2007). Here, however, our primary interest is the niche body of literature on the attitudes and experiences of young people regarding religious diversity. Larger European surveys of young peoples' attitudes, such as the European Commission's REDCo project (involving nine Universities, in England, Estonia, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Russia and Spain), the University of Münster 'Perception and Acceptance of Religious Diversity amongst the European Population' (PARD) survey, and Ziebertz and Kay's earlier project 'Religion and Life Perspectives of Youth in Europe' (2005), offer, like RETOPEA, the potential for cross-European comparison. Other studies, such as the University of Warwick's 'Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity' project have provided more detailed national and local analysis. Taken together, this literature offers three broad areas of insight.

First, young people, the qualitative and quantitative data gathered by REDCo underlines, have tended on one hand to be appreciative – at least in an abstract sense – of 'religious heterogeneity',

but on the other could also express 'a range of prejudices' (Jackson and McKenna 2016: 7-8). Age could be a factor – the youngest age group (18–24) in the PARD study of Denmark, France, Western and Eastern Germany, Netherlands and Portugal was found to be generally more positive about religious diversity; but some variation was also observable, for example this age group in Germany was comparatively more sceptical towards religious plurality than the same cohort in the other nations, and where Islam was concerned, less supportive of mosque building and more likely to support restrictions on the practice of the Muslim faith (Yendell 2016). A broader finding of REDCo was that, generally speaking, young peoples' appreciation of religious diversity was expressed in recognition of the importance of knowledge of different religious traditions, and a desire to see a range of religions taught in the classroom (Jackson and McKenna 2016: 7; see also Skeie 2009).

Second, existing literature offers insights into the multivariant factors shaping young people's attitudes towards religious diversity. Arweck and Penny described this in terms of 'concentric circles' (Arweck and Penny 2015); with family exerting the most important influence, followed by friends or school, and then faith community (Arweck 2016). It has also been suggested that where attitudes towards the 'Other' are concerned (and most clearly, it seems, attitudes towards Islam), contact, and *frequency* of contact, with those of other religions was significant in cultivating a more tolerant outlook (Arweck and Ipgrave 2016: 24-5; Yendell 2016). Regarding the role of the media, research on the young in the UK indicated that young people were 'shrewd and astute in identifying underling agendas in media reporting', for example, in stereotypes and generalisations, but were also conscious 'that repetitiveness and the ubiquity of stereotypical portrayals had an effect on them, whether they were conscious of it or not.' It has also been suggested that television was a more influential medium than the internet in the shaping of young people's views about religion (Arweck and Penny 2015).

Third, research underlines the importance of local context. In the UK, the breadth of coverage of 'Young People's Attitudes Towards Religious Diversity' was able to highlight the ways in which

the local religious plurality, and the attitude of individual schools towards diversity and teaching of religion, produced variation in the views of the young (Arweck and Ipgrave 2016).

What remains underexplored in current research is how young people's opinions and attitudes towards religious diversity relate to levels of historical awareness and understanding. Rarely does the existing literature address young peoples' historical reference points. It is also unclear which sources of information shape young people's perceptions of religious diversity in the past, and how they regard the representation of historic religious diversity in popular media (in terms of trustworthiness for instance). We do not know how understandings of religious diversity in past and present are interconnected and how each informs the other. *Young Peoples' Attitudes Towards Religious Diversity* (Arweck 2016) includes very little discussion about social representations of religious diversity in the past. The same applies to one large multi-national research project on European religious pluralism (Avest et al. 2009: 249-75), in which was found that young people themselves preferred to talk about present-day issues in relation to religious diversity rather than about its historical dimensions. More broadly, the major quantitative European-wide research *Youth and History: A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes Among Adolescents* (Angvik and Borries 1997), focused on young peoples' historical interests, their political attitudes, their attachment to human and civil rights, their attitudes towards migrants and ethno-cultural diversity, and their perception and appreciation of the school subject of history, but not their attitudes towards religious diversity.

However, if we step back from issues of religious diversity, the current literature does provide important insights more broadly into the ways in which young peoples' understanding of history is constructed and the interrelation between present and past, and it is very likely that some of these ways of thinking apply to religious diversity. A key finding is that young people often take a very presentist approach of the past, meaning they do not consider the past in its own right, but tend to look at it through a present-day lens (Borries 1994). They consider and understand past events through

their own, again present-day, experiences. It is not for nothing that Sam Wineburg (2001) defines historical thinking as 'an unnatural act'.

This presentist approach often leads young people to moral judgements when dealing with the past. They often judge past events based on present-day societal, moral and personal opinions, thereby completely ignoring historical contexts. The result can be an unconsciously biased understanding of the past, being somehow inferior to the present (Borries 1994). In other words, they testify to a belief in progress.

The existing literature has some insights at an epistemological and procedural level which are relevant to this research. Young people often demonstrate a naivety concerning ideas about historical knowledge and the role of sources in the construction of that knowledge. Wineburg (1991; 2001) and Nokes (2010) for instance found that students do not spontaneously approach sources as evidence – accounts of authors that need to be interpreted – but rather treat them as authorless collections of historical facts. They consider and read sources as pure bearers of information, which they accept uncritically. Students do not contextualise sources, hardly critique what they read or see, do not pay attention to the performative character of the (textual and visual) language used in the sources or to the rhetorical strategies. These findings are confirmed in many other studies (Britt and Aglinskas 2002; Hynd 1999; Nokes, Dole and Hacker 2007; Nokes 2010; Paxton 1999; Perfetti, Britt and Georgi 1995; Stahl et al. 1996).

About young people's historical reference knowledge, many studies have been conducted relating to different kinds of historical knowledge (on reference knowledge of the national past, see e.g. Van Havere et al. 2017). Often this kind of research is accompanied by lamentation concerning a decrease in historical knowledge. Wineburg (2004) firmly rejects the recurrent critiques against this (alleged) decrease in historical knowledge among young people – whose roots date even back to Classical Antiquity. These critiques seem to stem from a nostalgia for a very encyclopedic, factual dealing with the past. In his opinion, it is not a good idea to test factual knowledge of (young) people,

'only to discover - and rediscover - their "shameful" ignorance' (Wineburg 2004: 1406). He makes a plea for a different, reflective approach of the past (particularly in history education), more oriented towards fostering people's understanding of the past and fostering their historical thinking skills.

Finally, research indicates that – not surprisingly – students not only acquire historical knowledge at school, but also through popular historical culture (via films, television series, news, YouTube clips etc.) and through stories in their own family and community circles. Seixas (1993), in this respect, concluded that historical family stories and experiences play an important part in how students gather knowledge and attribute significance to the past, for those stories shed light on enduring or emerging issues in history or contemporary life. Between school history and family/community history as sources of historical knowledge, discrepancies and conflicts can occur. When students from minority groups do not recognise themselves and their history in school history, they will shove it aside – even reject school history – and they will only value the historical narratives within the own group (family/community). He hence issues a plea to seek for connections between both and to address family and social groups' stories within school history.

In summary, while there is a valuable literature emerging on young peoples' attitudes towards religious diversity, there is minimal research specifically on their understanding of the religious (or non-religious) past. However, the wider literature on the ways in which young people understand the past – notably their presentist tendency – and both the pedagogical challenges and possibilities for engaging young people with the past offered important points of reference for our own research.

Research context, questions and methodology

Research context

The European teaching landscape for religious education and religious history is diverse and complex. In general, there are three broad patterns for teaching religion in European public and to some extent to private schools. First, where no teaching of religion is offered at schools operated by the state (e.g.

France, Hungary, Czech Republic), but religion can be taught if the parents or students ask for it – although not during the school time or as part of the school curriculum. Second, 'non-denominational' teaching about religion (e.g. the U.K., although in cooperation with the religious organisations and institutions). Often these are compulsory courses; although exceptions here are Estonia and Slovenia. Sometimes special attention is paid to Christianity (e.g. Denmark and the U.K.) Third, "denominational" teaching of religion – by which we mean teaching of a specific religion. This is often supported from the point of view of finance and logistics by the state (e. g. Belgium, Finland, Poland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, Romania). In some states the teaching of religion is granted only to recognised or registered religious communities and almost everywhere a minimum number of students required (Ferrari 2013: 100-1). Germany represents a very special case concerning religious education. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and reunification in 1990, religious education in schools was intensely debated, due to the fact that religion previously had such different roles in the East and West German legal and educational system. Currently, each of the sixteen German states have their own legislation which provides the framework for arranging religious education, although in addition religious education is the only subject mentioned by the German national constitution. In most states, there is denominational religious education (i.e. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and in some cases Islamic) and ethics is offered as an alternative, though in some (e.g. in Berlin), ethics is a compulsory course for students and on request students may have classes in religious instruction (Eckhardt 2019: 20-1).

Despite the existence of the three aforementioned patterns, it can be discerned that the subject matter for denominational and non-denominational teaching on religion has recently become more similar than it has been historically (although the growing religious plurality in Europe nevertheless raises the question of whether these models will adequately provide the breadth of teaching required to address the changing situation of religious diversity). Religious plurality is presented in religious education textbooks, very often the emphasis is the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). While there

is overall a moderate to high emphasis on interreligious dialogue, there is little to no attention on religious history (Štimac 2015).

What of teaching History in schools? History education has in general been held very important. The benefits of it have been described as in a recent project *Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines* (Council of Europe 2014) as follows: 'Young people are better prepared to find their place in present-day multicultural societies, to appreciate the value of cultural diversity, to communicate with those who have different cultural and religious affiliations and who speak another language.' However, recent studies show that very often such goals are dismissed and history curriculum has a narrower scope, often either nationally or eurocentrically oriented. Furthermore, while different societal domains (politics, economy, culture, social) might be addressed, there is little reference to religious diversity in the past or to local history and family history (see e.g. Van Nieuwenhuyse 2017). Overall, in both the teaching of religious education and history, little attention is paid to religious diversity and interreligious contacts in the past.

Research questions

This 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. In the preparatory phase we attempt to gather some 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 achieve a 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

The research was conducted with gender-balanced 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. 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 religious and non-religious schools, 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 in Finland, Estonia and Spain each. 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 chapter.

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 group of young refugees 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 (Eliot & Associates 2005). We began by asking each individual participant to quietly 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, especially with regard to any specific national contexts. 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 appears to have 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 (as required by the funding agency), 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.

Research findings

Young people and religious diversity in the past

Most young people showed awareness that religious diversity is not an exclusive phenomenon of the present. We noticed in all focus groups, however, that knowledge and understanding of the extent of religious diversity in the past was limited, usually based upon particular major events in their own national or regional context. In discussion in one German school for example: these included the Roman occupation, the Protestant Reformation, the Nazi regime and the arrival of migrants (particularly Turkey) in the past seventy years. Participants in Flemish focus groups discussed Roman polytheism, the Crusades and the Reformation. In the English schools, references were made to the Tudors and the Reformation, the Second World War and Holocaust, and new commonwealth migration. Some students at Catholic faith school in England did describe a more distinctive narrative of growing Catholic emancipation over the past two centuries. Overall, a number of aspects of student understanding of religious diversity in the past were striking. First, was the tendency to underestimate religious diversity in the past; in the English schools, there was only two individual mentions of non-Christian religious diversity pre-1945, that of the nineteenth century Jewish community. Second, there was a tendency to focus on larger events and almost no discussion of lived history and every day religious diversity. An exception here were the young people in Granada, who had a more sophisticated understanding, which reflected the heritage of Christian-Muslim interaction in that region. Third, historical understanding also tended to reflect students' positionality – was nationally or regionally rooted – with very few students able to draw upon examples from wider global contexts, although because it involved a wider geographical sphere, the Second World War and Holocaust were mentioned in a number of different national contexts as a example of religious intolerance.

It was evident that while students often cited media representation when discussing contemporary religious diversity, they seldom mentioned examples of this for historic diversity, and where they did so it was with reference to costume dramas such as *The Tudors* and *The Medicis*. This

may suggest, then, that it is school education which is the main factor in the formation of historical understanding. While more research is needed on different national curriculums, it seems possible that the narrowness and positionality of knowledge and understanding amongst English students, may reflect the kinds of criticisms which some scholars made of the 2014 History national curriculum for the United Kingdom as 'largely exclusionary, monochrome' and for defending 'Britishness' (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard 2017). At the same time, where young people demonstrated knowledge of new commonwealth migration in relation to religious diversity, this may point towards the ways in which teachers have been able to intervene in the spaces for creativity in the curriculum, although it is acknowledge that 'such spaces are overly reliant on the commitment of individual schools and teachers' (Alexander and Weekes-Bernard 2017).

What was generally evident where students' understanding of the past was concerned, was the lack of concrete examples of religious toleration. Our report on the focus group in Estonia, for example, observed 'It did not seem that the students who were starting the course about religion had much knowledge about the history of coexistence of different confessions at the same time in Estonian history'. Rather, there was a strong tendency across nearly all the schools (with Granada an exception) to associate religious diversity with the absence of toleration and the presence of conflict. Where the former was concerned, one English student's view of the past was that 'it was very strict', and various students in England, Germany and Finland spoke of a lack of freedom to choose religion in the past. Our report of one English school observed that students spoke of religious diversity in the past 'in almost wholly negative terms', with mention of religion in relation to 'genocide', 'holocaust', 'civil wars' and 'Christians against Muslims'. One key historical event mentioned across various national contexts was the Holocaust. Overall, the past was presented as one of intolerance, and history tended to be seen in terms of cautionary tales, such as the importance of not demonizing 'other' groups. We learn from the past so things 'won't happen again'.

Young people's views on media representation of religious diversity in the present

When asked about various kinds of media coverage of religion and religious diversity, it was notable that the participants predominantly focused on the representation of religion, rather than on that of religious diversity. The latter did emerge spontaneously in their answers. In general, young people acknowledged that religion is addressed in both television news and documentaries, and in several series, films, etc. on Netflix, television, Youtube and other channels.

Some dramatic series were cited quite frequently, such as *Riverdale* or *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*. However, the sheer – and surprising – range of references, including *Family Guy*, *Daredevil* and *Orange is the New Black,* is a strong indication of the pervasiveness of representations of religion. Somewhat paradoxically, students tended to think that religion popular culture did not have a significant role in shaping their perceptions of religion; however, the ability of some young people to freely cite examples of representations of religion, and also articulate generalisations and biases suggests that popular culture may have a greater influence than thought. Some young people were able to articulate a feeling that drama series could represent religion in ways which might emphasise either caricatures or particular negative aspects of religion. One BAME English student, for example, observed that Black people were 'always Pentecostal, singing, dancing, clapping their hands' in drama series. A white British student at the English Catholic school, in an overwhelmingly white British area, suggested that dramatic representations, such as *Citizen Khan*, could shape your views of a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) group before you even got to know someone from a particular community well. However, there was some mention of the ways in which drama could break down stereotypes: students in Finland, for example, mentioned the series *Skam*, which they believed helped viewers to understand Muslim viewpoints on different matters.

Our clearest observation is that there is a wide consensus among young people from the different countries with regard to their perception of how the news media represents religion. They all agreed that religion tends to be presented in a very simplified and superficial way. While some

differentiated between the television news and social media – claiming that television news is more accurate as journalists apply at least some standards and provide evidence for the news they offer – many others, however, questioned the news coverage of professional journalists as well as lay people all together. There was a strong feeling that media rather prefer to portray religion in a negative way. One English student argued in respect to coverage of Islam: 'bad news is good business.' In this respect, all focus groups, and not only Muslim youth, referred to the portrayal of Islam. This specific religion, they argued, is often associated with terrorism and with violence. One student in Finland even described a 'media circus' where coverage of Islamicist terrorism was concerned. When a shooting is covered, for instance, the shooter is not particularly labelled; but as soon as the shooter is a Muslim, he is called a 'terrorist', so young people claimed. They were hence perfectly capable of deconstructing media discourses in this respect, and non-Muslim young people could display significant empathy with Muslim peers. Whereas media bias concerning Islam was mentioned in most focus groups, other groups also mentioned other biases. In the UK Catholic school, and also the Finnish school, for example, various students believed that news media tended to highlight issues such as anti-abortion and child abuse, and that this could influence public perceptions of the Church. 'A lot of people I know, when they think of Catholicism they think of paedophile priests, or when they think of Muslims they think of terrorists', argued one student. In response to this representation of religion in the media, some young people held a firm plea that media should be more inclusive and nuanced. In their opinion, the common values and similarities between different religions should be stressed more, instead of solely focusing on differences (in particular between the western world and Islam).

Not all young people, however, engaged in a debate about representation of religion in the news media; and some felt that religion was hardly in the news at all. Furthermore, in all focus groups, young people stated that their beliefs and representations were not influenced primarily by television series and films, and media in general. According to them, (conversations with) family and friends,

and in some cases, documentaries found on YouTube, are much more influential in this respect. Borrowing Arweck and Penny's notion of 'concentric circles' of influence (2015), it would appear that media is not usually a central ring of influence, but can still play an important, if more peripheral role, in shaping young peoples' attitudes.

Young people's experiences of religious diversity in the present

Responses to the 'warm up' questionnaires reflected the diversity of the experiences participants had of religious diversity in the present. Participants assigned very varying degrees of importance to the role that religion played in their lives (with 18.6% of respondents arguing that religion was 'not important' to their lives and 22.7% claiming that it was 'of great importance'). 41.7% argued that they had observed prejudice or bias against religion in the area where they lived, 32.6% claimed they had not. It is also remarkable that about a quarter of participants (25.8%) were 'not sure' whether they had observed prejudice or bias against religion, which might suggest that they were unsure as to what exactly constituted such prejudice or bias. By contrast, the vast majority of participants argued that they had not (48.5%) or 'hardly ever' experienced bias against their own religious or non-religious beliefs.

The open comments participants submitted as part of the questionnaire revealed that the teenagers understood and interpreted the multiple-choice questions and notions of bias and prejudice very differently. For example, students who claimed that they had 'hardly ever' experienced bias against their religious or non-religious beliefs offered a wide range explanations in their open comments, ranging from reports of specific incidents of a relatively serious nature (including a student who explained that they had experienced verbal abuse for wearing a hijab and 'got egged' while waiting for a bus) to much broader observations (saying, for example, that 'Some were surprised that I'm Catholic, but don't go to church etc., and were disappointed.'). In the context of the focus-group interviews, some participants also noted that they would have answered the survey questions differently, had they been given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire *after* the

semi-structured interviews (rather than before), arguing that the focus-group discussions had prompted them to further reflect on the issues.

The focus-group discussions indicated that participants largely considered religious diversity as something positive. However, this stance was not unconditional and participants had different views on the practice multiculturalism. In many participants' opinion, people, regardless of what religion they adhere to, should accept a set of common values. Furthermore, they argued that religious extremism should not be tolerated. Moreover, at least some young people differentiated between religious diversity as an idea or concept, and its (visual and concrete) materialisation. Some young people in the Flemish school, claimed, for instance, that they did not dispute the idea of religious diversity as such, but considered visible symbols of that idea, such as wearing a headscarf or participating in Ramadan as problematic.

It is probably not a coincidence that those young people referred to examples stemming from Islam. Almost all participating young people in the different countries observed that in society at large, intolerance particularly against Islam and against Muslims exists. At the same time, they did not always consider this intolerance in a religious, yet rather in an ethnic-cultural perspective. Some also provided examples of intolerance against other religions than Islam. In their opinion, this occurs more among older than among young people. Many participants claimed to be more tolerant and open-minded towards religious diversity and towards other religions than older people.

Throughout the focus groups, young people showed themselves capable of deconstructing stereotypes about religion and religious diversity. Also, they succeeded in not reducing people solely to their religious identity. By contrast, they acknowledged the multi-layered character of identity, and seemed to take this into account when talking about religious diversity. This was all the more the case among those young people encountering a lot of religious diversity in their daily life. There appeared to be a connection between the extent of religious diversity which young people experienced in their living (and school) environment and their attitudes and opinions. The more diversity young people

encounter, the more they testified to an open-minded stance; the less they experience diversity themselves, the less they seemed to understand it, and the more they testified to fear about it.

With regard to the role schools can play in relation to (the appreciation of) religious diversity, young people all acknowledged the importance of knowledge and awareness of religious diversity, both in terms of getting to know each other and about world religions more generally. They also desired to see history taught in relation to their own immediate setting and context – for example, the evidence of the religious past in local building, park and street names. There was also a preference to go beyond learning historical 'facts' about religious diversity in the past, but instead relating it to religion 'as lived' in the present.

Connections between young people's reference knowledge and beliefs of religious diversity in past and present

Young people's attitudes towards religious diversity in the present is not informed by the past. The opposite is rather true. It appears that many participating young people 'back-project' their knowledge and opinions of religious diversity in the present, on to the past. They combined this with the assumption that in the past, things were 'by definition' worse. They assumed that situations, events and mentalities that exist today, existed in the past as well, yet in a worse way. As a result, they built a negative social representation of religious diversity in the past. 'Societies in the past were ten thousand times more religious than nowadays,' a teenager in Flanders stated, 'and the church forced people to believe in [the Christian] God. Nowadays, you can choose whether you want to be Christian, or Muslim, or atheist; back then, you could not.' In other countries as well, young people built very biased, one-sided and simplistic representations of religion and religious diversity in the past.

The same dynamic was also evident, at least among some young people in Flanders and in Germany, on a procedural level. During the focus group interviews, young people were asked how accurate or inaccurate, fair or unfair, they thought different television programmes, shows or series are when they portray present-day religious diversity. As mentioned above, this question yielded clear

answers with regard to young people perceiving the portrayal of religion as simplistic, biased, one-sided and often negative. Some of them, while discussing this, took the debate a step further, and back-projected their criticisms of current media to popular representations of religious diversity in the past, for example in historical movies. One focus group referred, for instance, to the very stereotypical way of representing Muslims and Christians in the Hollywood movie *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

Conclusion and discussion

In drawing and discussing conclusions, we need to take into account some limitations of this study. First, although 132 young people participated in the focus group interviews, this is far from a representative sample of young people across Europe, meaning we need to be careful in generalizing results and interpretations. Second, the 12 schools involved only included six European counties. We were hence not able to grasp all possible national peculiarities across Europe. Third, the results might have been influenced by a selection bias. As participation in the focus group interviews took place on voluntary basis, perhaps particularly those young people interested in the topic and having already given much thought to the topics at stake, decided to participate. Fourthly, our focus group approach also carried limitations. While the semi-structured interviews were meant to allow students some flexibility, still provided a structure which as a result may have meant that some important issues slipped through the net. Their duration was limited, and the groups were composed of young people knowing each other, making speech among them easier, yet perhaps at the same time setting invisible barriers in terms of inter-personal dynamics.

Nevertheless, some interesting conclusions can be drawn and discussed. The first concerns the narrow range of historical knowledge the participants testified to. When asked for concrete examples of religious diversity in the past, students could only name few major events or turning points, particularly stemming from the history of their own national or regional context. Previous research already showed that young peoples' reference knowledge with regard to various types of history is

often limited. It also raised questions about the (non)sense of testing factual knowledge among young people. As far as the knowledge of religious diversity in the past is concerned, we should add that this theme does not always receive as much attention in school education and does not feature prominently in popular historical culture. Limited historical knowledge of religious diversity, therefore, should not come as a surprise. However, conceptual knowledge was also in short supply. Throughout the conversations, a conceptual confusion arose between religious and ethno-cultural diversity, in the sense that students did not differentiate between them. Either students mixed up both or they reduced experiences of religious diversity to ethnic-cultural diversity. Experiences of prejudice or bias, for example, against Muslims were seen in ethnic-cultural terms rather than in purely religious ones. In this sense, the descriptive-quantitative results of the questionnaire prior to the focus group interviews should be addressed carefully. This also points to the need of conceptual clarification when teaching about or discussing religious diversity. Are we actually talking about religious diversity, or rather about ethnic-cultural diversity? This can help in keeping debates straight and clear.

A second finding concerns the sources of knowledge young people mention with regard to religious diversity. It becomes clear that both school history and popular historical culture (audiovisual and internet sources next to conversations with family and friends) feed young people's knowledge and social representations of religious diversity in the past. This reinforces the aforementioned plea of eminent Canadian history education scholar Peter Seixas (1993) about the necessity to build bridges between school history and family/community history as sources of historical knowledge. Students entering a history classroom are not 'blank slates'; rather, they existing knowledge and opinions which it is important to address, and dialogue with. This is necessary on two levels. With regard to the content (i.e. the knowledge and understanding of the past itself) it is necessary to seek connections, in order to make this knowledge meaningful for young people and to ensure that, regardless of their ethnic and cultural heritage, they can recognise themselves in school

history. In addition, a connection must be sought on a 'procedural' level, in terms of learning to deal critically with all representations of religious diversity they encounter, both in and outside school, and both in and outside their family and community circles. After all, young people are exposed to a variety of representations, but these may not be of equal value. Not all representations of religious diversity in the past are reliable and representative. This applies to a typical medium from school history, namely textbooks on history (see chapter 3), but it also applies to the audiovisual and internet sources that young people have at their disposal. Introducing young people to a critical approach to historical sources is necessary to enable them to deconstruct fake news and alternative facts and to reject misplaced (often absolute) truth claims (Wineburg 2018).

This connects closely to a third finding from this research, namely the challenges of 'presentism' in young peoples' thinking about religious diversity in the past. It is obviously positive that young people participating in our study were well capable of deconstructing present-day representations of current religious diversity. They almost all understood the negative framing news media testified to in portraying religion, and were able to deconstruct the bias, generalisation and even stereotypes media often displayed with regard to religion and religious diversity. In that sense, the present might form an entry to engage young people in critical thinking about historical sources stemming from and representing in specific, often biased ways (religious diversity in) the past. However, we need to be careful in making such a suggestion, as we do not aim to encourage a presentist stance among young people, meaning they consider and judge the past from a present-day perspective, through a present-day moral perspective. This is what we, in line with previous (Borries 1994; Angvik and Borries 1997), encountered throughout the focus group interviews. Young people built very biased, one-sided and simplistic representations of religion and religious diversity in the past, based on a presentist approach. This clearly shows the necessity to foster among young people the ability to think historically, to understand the past in its own logic, and to consider past events in their historical context (Wineburg 2001; Seixas and Morton 2013). On a content level, this requires

that young people are provided with a rich and nuanced historical understanding of religious diversity in the past – instead of a one-sided, negatively framed social representation focusing solely on conflict and violence. On a procedural level, as mentioned earlier, this requires the fostering of skills that enable critical analysis of historical sources.

Here, our research offers insights into approaches to teaching young people to think historically, to draw on a critical perspective on religious diversity in the past which can help them to reflect in a nuanced way on religious diversity in the present (in general and in their living environment) and on the complex relationship between past and present. It became very clear throughout the focus group interviews that the young people participating were longing to attribute meaning to – and were constructing an opinion about – religious diversity. In so doing, nevertheless, they can only benefit from a good understanding of the past as a necessary starting point to reflect on religious diversity in the present. This will enable them to reflect deeply, and to experience at the same time a meaningful bridge between school history and their private understanding of the past (Husbands 1996). During the focus group interviews, young people hinted at this themselves, by making pleas for more attention for local history and family history. In this respect, existing research indicates that this approach stirs the most interest in the past among young people (see e.g. Grever, Haydn and Ribbens 2008).

What the focus group interviews also revealed is that young people were very eager such religious diversity in a very respectful, sensitive and constructive manner. This is an important finding *in se*, for in both formal and in- and non-formal educational settings, teachers and educators are sometimes afraid to raise sensitive issues among young people. They then fear this might cause turmoil and conflict. The focus groups we organised showed the opposite. Of course, we need to stress here that participation took place on voluntary bases. However, the most important condition was the establishment of a 'safe' environment, in which young people felt confident to express their views and to discuss them with peers, who did not necessarily shared those views. It may also have

made a difference that the students were not being assessed. A clear framework of agreements among and established with the participants and an explicit explanation of the purpose of the conversation contributed to a respectful and sincere debate.

The focus group interviews, as already mentioned, were in preparation for starting a process of developing 'docutubes'. To end, it seems appropriate to elaborate briefly on this. Docutubes are historical accounts young people construct about an historical issue, in the shape of a short film similar in style to the popular Vlogging videos on YouTube. The methodology accompanying the process of making docutubes has a lot of potential in our opinion. First, before young people start to make docutubes, they are offered a number of so-called clippings: commented excerpts and examples stemming from historical and contemporary representations of religion and religious diversity (incl. historical peace treaties and arrangements). In small groups, young people read and observe those clippings. The clippings aim to provide young people with historical knowledge, and serve as sources of inspiration to think about past, present and future forms of religious diversity and religious coexistence in an informed, nuanced, empathetic way. The clippings are accompanied by questions, in which we aim to challenge their existing opinions, while also encouraging them to draw on their own knowledge and experiences, and to invite them to think critically of the representation in the clipping. That way, we encourage them to think historically, and to enter into a dialogue with peers. Subsequently, young people are invited to express their thoughts in a docutube, a short film they make, with the help of the clippings, also by making use of own film footage recorded with video cameras. Young people thus need to organise their ideas and shape them in a coherent way. In so doing, they deepen their knowledge, engage in historical and critical (instead of presentist) thinking, enter into a dialogue with peers on religious diversity, and construct a substantiated opinion they can share with others and continue to discuss.

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