

Original citation:

Francis, Leslie J., Gemma , Penny and Pyke, Alice. (2013) Young atheists' attitudes toward religious diversity : a study among 13- to 15-year-old males in the UK. Theo-web : Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik, Volume 12 (Number 1). pp. 57-78.

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Young atheists' attitudes toward religious diversity: a study among
13- to 15-year-old males in the UK

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the social phenomenon of religious diversity through the eyes of young male atheists living in the UK. The responses of 1,761 atheists are compared with the responses of 2,421 theists across nine issues relevant to religious diversity. Overall the data demonstrate that young atheists are not only less interested in the challenges and opportunities offered by life in religiously diverse societies, but also less tolerant of the life styles and expectations or rights of religious people living in these societies. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of community cohesion in which both religious diversity is becoming more visible and atheism may be increasing.

Key words: psychology, religion, adolescence, atheism, religious plurality.

Introduction

Commentators have characterised the changing religious landscape of the UK during the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century in a variety of ways. One voice gives weight to theories concerning the demise of religious belief and practice (Bruce, 2002; Brown, 2001). A second voice gives weight to the increasing public visibility of religion and the emergence of the UK as a religiously plural society (Parsons, 1993, 1994; Wolffe, 1993; Weller, 2008). A third voice gives weight to the changing face of belief and practice as religion gives way to spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005).

These different voices reflect the multi-faceted nature of religion and the particular aspects of religion that are projected to the centre of the debate. Further confusion is generated by the lack of clarity characterising the language employed in the debate. It is such lack of clarity that allows Davie (1994) to speak of the religious climate of Britain as *believing without belonging*, while Francis and Robbins (2004) speak of the same phenomenon as *belonging without believing*. In their contribution to the debate Francis and Robbins (2004) draw on the classic social scientific differentiation between measures of religious affiliation (Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim), measures of religious practice (worship attendance), and measures of religious believing (belief in God), in order to make the case that more people in Britain claim religious affiliation (belonging) than hold belief in God (believing). Adopting a different use of the same language, Davie (1994) makes the case that more people in Britain hold religious beliefs (believing) than attend worship services (belonging). Both claims are supported by multiple sources of data.

Who is religious and who is not religious?

The multi-dimensional model of religion, involving indices of affiliation, practice and belief would define who counts as not religious in different ways. According to the measure of affiliation, the irreligious are those who do not claim to identify with a faith group or

denomination (the unaffiliated). According to the measure of attendance, the irreligious are those who never attend worship services or who do so only occasionally (the non-practising). According to the measure of belief, the irreligious are those who claim not to believe in God (the atheistic).

According to this model, if religion is assessed by affiliation the proportion of religious people in the UK may seem high and the population of irreligious people may seem low. Hard evidence concerning the levels of religious affiliation was scarce in England, Scotland and Wales prior to the 2001 census which was the first census paper to include a religious question (Aspinall, 2000; Francis, 2003; Weller, 2004; Sherif, 2011). This was not, however, the case in Northern Ireland where a religious question had been included in the census since partition (Macourt, 1995). Even data provided by the census may, however, be suspect since much information is provided by the head of household on behalf of other residents.

Currently the decadal census for the UK is managed by three different government offices, one with responsibility for England *and* Wales, one with responsibility for Northern Ireland, and one with responsibility for Scotland. This situation led in 2001 to three different questions being posed about religion and the subsequent need to discuss each of the three areas within a somewhat different conceptual framework. In England and Wales, in 2001 the census paper posed the question, 'What is your religion?' and offered the following sequence of choices: None, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, and Any Other Religion. This question, unlike others in the census paper was optional. Assessed in this way, the no religion category was checked by 15%, Christian by 72%, Muslim by 3%, and Hindu by 1%; taken together Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish and Other were checked by under 2%, and 8% opted not to answer the question. While 15% of the overall population checked the no religion category, the proportion rose to 16% among 13- to 15-year-old adolescents.

In Scotland, in 2001 the census paper posed the question, 'What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?' and offered the following options: None, Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Other Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and Another Religion. Again this question was optional. Assessed in this way, the no religion category was checked by 28%, Church of Scotland by 42%, Roman Catholic by 16%, and Other Christian by 7%; taken together Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Other were checked by under 3%, and 5% opted not to answer the question. While 28% of the overall population checked the no religion category, the proportion rose to 32% among 13- to 15-year-old adolescents.

In Northern Ireland, in 2001 the census paper posed the question in two parts. Part one asked, 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' and offered the binary option: yes and no. Part two asked, 'If yes, what religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?' and offered the following options: Roman Catholic, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Church of Ireland, Methodist Church in Ireland, and Other. Asked in this way, 14% of the population came within the category of 'no religion or religion not stated'; 40% checked Roman Catholic, 21% Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 15% Church of Ireland, 4% Methodist Church in Ireland, and 6% Other Christian; less than 1% were classified as 'other religions or philosophies'. While 14% of the overall population were classified as 'no religion or religion not stated', the proportion fell to 12% among 13- to 15-year-old adolescents.

Religious affiliation in the UK is also routinely reported by the British Social Attitudes Survey which has been conducted almost every year since 1983. Here the question is posed in a somewhat different way by means of an interviewer asking, 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?' The data also are reported in a somewhat different way by dealing with the UK as a whole. According to Lee (2012) the proportion of

the population who did not belong to any particular religion rose from 31% in 1983 to 40% in 2000 and to 50% in 2010. Looking more closely at the age profile of those who regarded themselves as not belonging to any particular religion, the figures rose from 28% of those aged 65 or over, to 51% of those aged between 45 and 54, and to 64% of those aged between 18 and 24.

If religion is assessed not by affiliation but by worship attendance, the proportion of religious people in the UK may seem low and the proportion of irreligious people may seem high. For example, according to Brierley (2008), in 2005 total church attendance across denominations stood as a percentage of the population in Wales at 6.7%, in England at 6.3% and in Scotland at 11.0%. Northern Ireland is not included in these calculations. For Brierley these data are derived from records that count the number of people attending worship services, not from self-report.

Worship attendance in the UK is also routinely collected by the British Social Attitudes Survey on the basis of individual self-reporting. Here the question asks, 'Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?' According to Lee (2012) the proportion of the population reporting at least weekly attendance over the last twenty-years has remained quite static, with 12 % in 1990, 13% in 1995, 13% in 2000, 11% in 2005, and 14% in 2010. Lee (2012) does not provide an age profile of weekly attendance.

If religion is assessed neither by affiliation nor by worship attendance, but by belief, the proportion of religious people may seem much more middle range. For example, using the British Social Attitudes Survey for 2008, Voas and Ling (2010) reported the following proportions claiming one of six statements as coming 'closest to expressing what you believe about God': I know God really exists and that I have no doubt about it (17%); While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God (18%); I find myself believing in God some of the time,

but not at others (13%); I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind (14%); I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out (19%); I don't believe in God (18%).

Separate research traditions in the UK drawing on the British Social Attitudes Survey data have focused on mapping the personal and social correlates of religious affiliation (for example see, Hayes, 1995; Stratford & Christie, 2000; Hayes & Marangudakis, 2001; Barlow, Duncan, James, & Park, 2005; Sturgis, Cooper, Fife-Schaw, & Shepherd, 2004) and religious worship attendance (for example see, Johnson & Wood, 1985; Curtice & Gallagher, 1990; Gill, 1999; Hill & Thomson, 2000; Heath, Martin, & Elgenius, 2007). Less attention has been given to mapping the personal and social correlates of religious belief. Moreover, research that has focused on belief has tended to do so from the perspective of privileging belief rather than privileging unbelief. As a consequence there are few studies that have set out to profile the British atheist.

The young British atheist

A pioneering study in the mid-1990s that set out to profile the young British atheist was reported by Kay and Francis (1995), drawing on data provided by 16,411 year-nine (13- to 14-year-old) students and year-ten (14- to 15-year-old) students from 89 secondary schools throughout England and Wales who completed a detailed attitude inventory. Students were designated theists, atheists or agnostics on the basis of their response to the statement, 'I believe in God'. Theists agreed with the statement, agnostics were uncertain about the statement, and atheists disagreed with the statement. Of the total sample 24% were classified as atheists, 42% as theists, and 34% as agnostics. The analysis compared the responses of the atheists and the theists over 15 value domains styled: personal wellbeing, worries, counselling, school, work, religious beliefs, church and society, the supernatural, politics, social concerns, sexual morality, substance use, right and wrong, leisure, and local area. The

statistical analyses drew attention to significant differences across all 15 value domains.

These differences can be illustrated from a selection of items illustrative of each area.

In terms of personal wellbeing, atheists displayed a lower level of positive affect and a higher level of negative affect. While 69% of theists felt their life has a sense of purpose, the proportion fell to 42% among atheists. While 25% of theists had sometimes considered taking their own life, the proportion rose to 31% among atheists.

In terms of worries, atheists were less concerned and bothered about personal and social issues. While 56% of theists were worried about how they get on with other people, the proportion fell to 44% among atheists. While 36% of theists were worried about going out alone at night, the proportion fell to 21% among atheists.

In terms of counselling, atheists were less inclined to seek out conversation or advice from others. Thus, 42% of atheists found it helpful to talk about their problems with their mother, compared with 57% of theists; and 29% of atheists found it helpful to talk about their problems with their father, compared with 35% of theists.

In terms of school, atheists held a less positive attitude. While 74% of theists felt that school is preparing them for life, the proportion fell to 59% among atheists. While 53% of theists felt that teachers do a good job, the proportion fell to 32% among atheists.

In terms of work, atheists showed lower levels of ambition and commitment. While 89% of theists wanted to get to the top in their work when they get a job, the proportion fell to 82% among atheists. While 96% of theists thought it is important to work hard when they get a job, the proportion fell to 90% among atheists.

In terms of religious beliefs, atheists who report belief in God had by no means rejected all belief in the transcendent realm. Thus, a quarter of atheists (26%) believed in life after death. At the same time, by no means all theists believed in life after death (60%).

In terms of the continuing role of church in society, atheists were quite dismissive. Thus, 78% of atheists described the church as boring and 48% considered that the church seems irrelevant for life today. At the same time, by no means all theists felt positive about the church. Thus, 30% of theists described the church as boring and 16% considered that the church seems irrelevant for life today.

In terms of wider beliefs in the supernatural, atheists displayed only a slightly lower level of belief than theists. Thus, 30% of atheists and 35% of theists believed in their horoscope, and 30% of atheists and 31% of theists believed that it is possible to contact spirits of the dead.

In terms of politics, atheists were more inclined to adopt right-wing attitudes. Thus, 27% of atheists thought that there are too many black people living in this country, compared with 14% of theists; and 35% of atheists thought that immigration into Britain should be restricted, compared with 26% of theists.

In terms of social concern, atheists displayed a less positive attitude. Thus, 57% of atheists were concerned about the risk of pollution to the environment, compared with 72% of theists; and 46% of atheists were concerned about the poverty of the Third World, compared with 73% of theists.

In terms of sexual morality, atheists held more permissive attitudes. While 20% of theists considered it wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage, the proportion fell to 9% among atheists. While 25% of theists considered that divorce is wrong, the proportion fell to 17% among atheists.

In terms of substance use, atheists were more permissive. While 26% of theists considered that it is wrong to become drunk, the proportion fell to 17% among atheists. While 63% of theists considered that it is wrong to use marijuana, the proportion fell to 49% among atheists.

In terms of right and wrong, atheists took a more liberal stance towards law abiding behaviours. While 14% of theists took the view that there is nothing wrong in travelling without a ticket, the proportion rose to 27% among atheists. While 4% of theists took the view that there is nothing wrong in shop-lifting, the proportion rose to 12% among atheists.

In terms of attitudes toward leisure, atheists were less positive about their local Youth Centre and about facilities for young people in their area. Thus, 37% of atheists regarded their Youth Centre as boring, compared with 28% of theists; and 24% of atheists felt that there are lots of things to do for young people in their area, compared with 29% of theists.

In terms of attitudes toward their local area, atheists were less positive. Thus, 70% of atheists liked living in their area, compared with 79% of theists; and 43% of atheists liked their area as a shopping centre, compared with 48% of theists.

Irrespective of the nature or directionality of the observed differences, the main conclusion to be drawn from the study reported by Francis and Kay (1995) is that knowledge about religious belief provides consistent prediction of individual differences across a wide range of personal and social attitudes. Consequently, there should be value in extending this research perspective to explore individual differences in other areas of young people's values and attitudes, including attitudes toward religious diversity. There remains, nonetheless, one problem with the way in which Kay and Francis (1995) analysed their data, namely the failure to take sex differences into account. As a consequence of the way in which males were over-represented among atheists and females were over-represented among theists, the differences reported between the responses of atheists and theists may have been attributable in part to sex differences. Future research in this tradition could avoid this problem either by concentrating specifically on one sex or by reporting on both sexes separately.

Research question

Against this background, the present study addresses the following nine research questions. Compared with young male theists, how do young male atheists: perceive the factors that have influenced their views about religion; rate their interest in finding out about religious diversity; embrace religious diversity within their social networks; see religion as having a negative influence in the world; see religion as having a positive influence in the world; feel about religious diversity in terms of social proximity; feel about the place of religion in society; evaluate the impact of religious and cultural diversity on their environment; permit religious symbols and clothing in public spaces.

Method

Procedure

The Young Peoples' Attitudes to Religious Diversity project set out to obtain responses from at least 2,000 students attending year-nine (13- to 14-year-olds) and year-ten (14- to 15-year-olds) classes within state-maintained schools across each of the four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and London (as a special case). In each area, half of the students were recruited from schools with a religious character (Anglican, Catholic, or joint Anglican and Catholic) and half from schools without a religious foundation. Within the participating schools, questionnaires were administered by the religious education teachers within examination-like conditions. Pupils were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and given the option not to participate in the project.

Instrument

The Young Peoples' Attitudes to Religious Diversity project employed a 20-page questionnaire comprising both fixed-format multiple-choice questions and items arranged for assessment on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly. For the present study nine sets of items have been extracted to address each

of the nine research questions. The individual items are presented within their conceptual groupings in the Appendix.

Participants

The present study draws on the data provided by the 5,518 male participants in the study: 2,663 from schools with a religious character and 2,855 from schools without a religious foundation; 1,205 from England, 888 from Northern Ireland, 1,016 from London, 1,285 from Scotland, and 1,124 from Wales.

Analysis

Responses to the item 'I believe in God' were employed to define three groups of students: those who agreed or agreed strongly that they believed in God were classified as 'theists'; those who reported that they were uncertain whether they believed in God or not were classified as 'agnostics'; those who disagreed or disagreed strongly that they believed in God were classified as 'atheists'. The proportions of students within these three categories varied considerably between the two types of schools: in schools with a religious character, 24% were atheists, 24% agnostics, and 53% theists; in schools without a religious foundation, 40% were atheists, 25% agnostics, and 36% theists. Taken together these two types of school provided data from 1,761 young male atheists, 1,336 young male agnostics, and 2,421 young male theists.

In order to clarify the analyses agnostics were excluded, allowing direct comparisons to be calculated between atheists and theists. The nine sets of variables identified to address the nine research questions have also been reduced to two categories; distinguishing between yes (sum of agree and agree strongly responses) and not yes (sum of disagree, disagree strongly, and uncertain responses). These recoded data generate 2 x 2 contingency tables appropriate for the classic chi square significance test.

Influences on views about religion

The young male atheists in the sample have all defined themselves as young people who reject belief in God: their worldview is not religious. By contrast, the young male theists in the sample have all defined themselves as young people who affirm belief in God: their worldview is religious. The first research question is concerned to examine the influences that young people perceive to have shaped their views about religion. The data presented in table 1 demonstrates that atheists are significantly less conscious than theists of the people and factors that have influenced their views on religion. This finding is consistent with the view that to grow up without belief in God is normal for today's young people, while those who believe in God are conscious of the influences that have drawn them away from the typical situation of unbelief. Among the young male theists the strongest perceived influences on views about religion are within the family: 64% cite mother and 51% cite father. Following family, in descending order of importance, young male theists cite television (41%), friends (33%) and internet (29%). By way of contrast, only around one in five of young male atheists cite any of these influences on their views about religion: television (22%), mother (21%), father (20%), internet (17%) and friends (13%).

Interest in findings out about religious diversity

The second research question is concerned to examine how young people rate their levels of interest in finding out about religious diversity. The data presented in table 2 demonstrates that atheists are significantly less interested than theists in finding out about and knowing about people whose lives are defined by religious identity. This finding is consistent with the view that young people who are themselves growing up without belief in God are less concerned with the issues raised by living within religiously diverse societies. Overall among young male theists, half are interested in finding out about Christians (53%) and around a third are interested in finding out about the other five faith groups included in the census listing: Jews (37%), Muslims (37%), Buddhists (37%), Hindus (33%), and Sikhs

(32%). Similar proportions also expressed interest in finding out about Pagans (31%), Atheists (32%), and Humanists (35%). By way of contrast, among young male atheists fewer than one in five expressed interest in finding out about Jews (17%), Hindus (15%), Muslims (15%), Sikhs (15%), Pagans (15%), and Christians (14%). Young male atheists showed slightly higher levels of interest in finding out about Atheists (25%), Humanists (21%), and Buddhists (21%).

Religious diversity and social networks

The third research question is concerned to examine how much young people embrace religious diversity within their social networks. The data presented in table 3 demonstrates that atheists are significantly less likely than theists to embrace religious diversity within their social networks. This finding is consistent with the view that young people generally feel more comfortable surrounded by and supported by friends who share their own worldview. Although generally significantly lower than young male theists, young male atheists nonetheless include quite high numbers of religious people among their friends. Among theists, 89% count Christians among their friends, 42% Muslims, 28% Hindus, 22% Jews, 19% Sikhs, 16% Buddhists, and 8% Pagans. Moreover, 53% of theists include atheists among their friends, and 11% include Humanists. By way of contrast, among atheists, 67% count Christians among their friends, 32% Muslims, 21% Jews, 20% Hindus, 13% Sikhs, 12% Buddhists, and 7% Pagans. Moreover 52% of atheists include Atheists among their friends, and 14% include Humanists.

Religion as a negative influence

The fourth research question is concerned to examine how young people rate religion as having a *negative* influence in the world. The data presented in table 4 demonstrates that overall atheists and theists hold quite similar views on the extent to which the major religious traditions have a negative influence in the world. Although there are some significant

differences between the two groups, these differences are not huge. The most striking feature to emerge from table 4 concerns the way in which both atheists and theists see Muslims in a more negative light than participants of other world faiths. This finding is consistent with the view that young people (both atheists and theists) are influenced by the media attention (and interpretation) given to the problem of terrorism being connected with religious identity.

Thus, 44% of atheists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Muslims, and so do 44% of theists; 12% of atheists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Buddhists, and so do 11% of theists; 18% of atheists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Jews, and so do 16% of theists; 14% of atheists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Pagans, and so do 14% of theists. Small differences are reflected in terms of views of Hindus, Sikhs and Christians. While 13% of theists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Hindus, the proportion rises to 16% among atheists; while 14% of theists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Sikhs, the proportion rises to 17% among atheists; while 17% of theists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Christians, the proportion rises to 23% among atheists. The picture is reversed, however, in terms of views concerning Atheists. While 20% of theists feel that a lot of harm is done in the world by Atheists, the proportion falls to 15% among atheists. The view that a lot of harm is done in the world by Humanists is endorsed by 13% of theists and 13% of atheists.

Religion as a positive influence

The fifth research question, a mirror image of the fourth research question, is concerned to examine how young people rate religion as having a *positive* influence in the world. The data presented in table 5 makes it clear that the responses to this research question are far from being a mirror image of the responses to the fourth research question. While overall atheists and theists hold quite similar views on the extent to which the major religious traditions have a negative influence in the world, there are significant (and large) differences

in the ways in which the two groups rate the positive influence of religion in the world. This finding is consistent with the view that young people who take a religious worldview themselves (theists) perceive greater benefits deriving from religion, compared with young people who do not take a religious worldview themselves (atheists). The largest difference concerns views about Christians: while 69% of theists feel that a lot of good is done in the world by Christians, the proportion falls to 34% among atheists. The same trend is found in respect of other religious traditions (ordered in terms of decreasing significance): Muslims (31% theists and 16% atheists), Jews (37% theists and 22% atheists), Hindus (35% theists and 20% atheists), Sikhs (28% theists and 16% atheists), Buddhists (39% theists and 27% atheists), and Pagans (22% theists and 14% atheists). Similar levels of theists (28%) and atheists (30%) feel that a lot of good is done in the world by Atheists. A higher proportion of theists (27%) compared with atheists (22%) feel that a lot of good is done in the world by Humanists.

Religious diversity and social proximity

The sixth research question is concerned to examine how young people feel about religious diversity in terms of social proximity. The data presented in table 6 demonstrates that atheists are slightly (but significantly) more reluctant than theists to like living next door to religious people. This finding is consistent with the view that for those who do not share a religious worldview (atheists) people who identify with a religious faith may generate a sense of strangeness and a fear of the stranger. The proportions of young male theists who would not like to live next door to specific religious groups are reflected in the following statistics: Muslims (19%), Pagans (14%), Jews (13%), Buddhists (12%), Hindus (12%), Sikhs (12%), and Christians (7%). Both higher levels of endorsement and a somewhat different rank ordering emerged among young male atheists: Muslims (25%), Sikhs (17%), Jews (17%), Hindus (17%), Pagans (16%), Buddhists (15%), and Christians (11%). According to this

social proximity measure among both theists and atheists the highest level of social acceptance was extended to Christians and the lowest level of social acceptance was extended to Muslims.

Place of religion in society

The seventh research question is concerned to examine how young people feel about the place of religion in society. This question embraces two issues: the positive case for religious inclusivity and tolerance, and the negative case for the detrimental effects of religion on society. The data presented in table 7 demonstrate that atheists are less inclined than theists to support religious inclusivity and tolerance and more inclined than theists to maintain the detrimental effects of religion on society. This finding is consistent with the view that young atheists not only reject belief in God but are less tolerant of the place of religion in society. In terms of the positive case for religious inclusivity and tolerance, while 77% of theists agree that we must respect all religions, the proportion falls to 49% among atheists; while 70% of theists agree that all religious groups in Britain should have equal rights, the proportion falls to 50% among atheists; while 70% of theists agree that religious education should be taught in schools, the proportion falls to 32% among atheists. In terms of the negative case for the detrimental effect of religion on society, while 45% of theists agree that religion brings more conflict than peace, the proportion rises to 56% among atheists; while 34% of theists agree that religious people are often intolerant of others, the proportion rises to 40% among atheists; while 19% of theists agree that religion is mainly a force for bad in the world today, the proportion rises to 37% among atheists.

Religious and cultural diversity

The eighth research question is concerned to examine how young people evaluate the impact of cultural and religious diversity on their environment. This research question embraces two themes (cultural diversity and religious diversity) as experienced in two

contexts (locality and school). The data presented in table 8 demonstrate that across these themes atheists hold significantly less positive attitudes than theists. This finding is consistent with the view that young people are inclined to view religious diversity and cultural diversity through a common lens and that young atheists who are less positive about religious diversity are also less positive about cultural diversity. In terms of cultural diversity, while 48% of theists feel that people who come from different countries make where they live an interesting place, the proportion falls to 31% among atheists. While 54% of theists feel that people who come from different countries make their school or college an interesting place, the proportion falls to 32% among atheists. While 60% of theists feel that where they live people from different countries get on well together, the proportion falls to 42% among atheists. In terms of religious diversity, while 44% of theists feel that people from different religious backgrounds make where they live an interesting place, the proportion falls to 28% among atheists. While 58% of theists feel that having people from different religious backgrounds makes their school or college an interesting place, the proportion falls to 34% among atheists. While 55% of theists feel that where they live people from different religious backgrounds get on well together, the proportion falls to 38% among atheists.

Religious symbols and clothing in public spaces

The ninth research question is concerned to examine young people's acceptance of religious symbols and clothing in public spaces. The most accessible test of this issue appertains to the presence of religious symbols and religious clothing in schools. The data presented in table 9 demonstrates that atheists are significantly less likely than theists to support the wearing of religious symbols and clothing in schools, across all five religious traditions included in the survey. This finding is consistent with the view that young people who hold a religious worldview themselves (theists) are more open to the rights of people across a range of religious traditions compared with young people who do not take a religious

worldview themselves (atheists). Thus, 46% of atheists believe that Christians should be allowed to wear crosses in schools, compared with 69% of theists; 45% of atheists believe that Jews should be allowed to wear the Star of David in school, compared with 61% of theists; 44% of atheists believe that Sikhs should be allowed to wear the turban in school, compared with 59% of theists; 42% of atheists believe that Muslims should be allowed to wear the headscarf in school, compared with 58% of theists; and 42% of atheists believe that Hindus should be allowed to wear the Bindi in schools, compared with 56% of theists.

Conclusion

Drawing on data from the Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project, the present study set out to explore the social phenomenon of religious diversity through the eyes of young male atheists living in the UK. This objective was achieved by comparing the responses of 1,761 atheists with the responses of 2,421 theists across nine issues relevant to religious diversity. The data revealed significant differences between the two groups across all nine areas concerning how young atheists and theists: perceive the factors that have influenced their views about religion; how they rate their interest in finding out about religious diversity; how they embrace religious diversity within their social networks; how they see religion as having a negative influence in the world; how they see religion as having a positive influence in the world; how they feel about religion in terms of social proximity; how they feel about the place of religion in society; how they evaluate the impact of religious and cultural diversity on their environment; and how they would permit religious symbols and clothing in public spaces.

Overall, these data demonstrate that atheists are less conscious of the people and factors that have influenced their views on religion; less interested in finding out about and knowing about people whose lives are defined by religious identity; less likely to embrace religious diversity within their social networks; less likely to perceive religion as having a

positive influence in the world, although no more likely to perceive religion as having a negative influence in the world; more reluctant to like living next door to religious people; less inclined to support religious inclusivity and tolerance and more inclined to maintain the detrimental effects of religion on society; less inclined to see benefits from cultural diversity and religious diversity in their school and locality; and less supportive of the presence of religious symbols and religious clothing in schools. In short, atheists are not only less interested in the challenges and opportunities offered by life in religiously diverse societies, but are also less tolerant of the lifestyles and expectations or rights of religious people living in these societies.

These findings concerning the attitudes of young atheists to religious diversity may have implications for future trends in community cohesion and in civil unrest in the UK. On the one hand, religious diversity is now well-embedded in the UK, and such diversity is likely to become more visible as minority groups grow in confidence. On the other hand, atheism is also now well-established in the UK, and atheism is likely to grow in strength and confidence as cultural Christianity loses further influence over educational, social and political institutions. The coincidence of these two phenomena may make the role of religious education in schools even more crucial in terms of enabling young atheists to know about and to respect religious diversity, and in terms of emphasising the community cohesion agenda within religious education.

The strength of the present analysis is that it has enabled the attitudes of young male atheists to be seen in clear profile alongside young male theists. The weakness is that it has had space neither to give similar attention to young female atheists, nor to take into account other contextual variables, including age, nationality or social class. Such insights remain locked in the database to be released by future analyses.

The present study concluded with three predictions, namely that over the next period of time religious diversity would become more visible in the UK, that atheism would increase, and that as the proportion of atheists increases among young people so there would be a decrease in tolerance toward religious diversity. These predictions are well worth checking by replicating this study throughout the UK in between five to ten years time.

Note

Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project (AHRC Reference: AH/G014035/1) is a large scale mixed methods research project investigating the attitudes of 13- to 16-year-old students across the United Kingdom. Young people from a variety of socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds from different parts of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, with the addition of London as a special case, are taking part in the study. Professor Robert Jackson is principal investigator and Professor Leslie J Francis is co-investigator. Together they lead a team of qualitative and quantitative researchers based in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, within the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick. The project is part of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme, and ran from 2009-12.

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Appendix

Table 1

Influences on views about religion

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
My friends have influenced my views about religion	13	33	209.14	.001
My father has influenced my views about religion	20	51	409.0	.001
My mother has influenced my views about religion	21	64	758.72	.001
Television has influenced my views about religion	22	41	180.0	.001
The internet has influenced my views about religion	17	29	76.70	.001

Table 2

Interest in finding out about religious diversity

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
I am interested in finding out about...				
Buddhists	21	37	116.26	.001
Christians	14	53	648.50	.001
Hindus	15	33	182.67	.001
Jews	17	37	207.81	.001
Muslims	15	37	244.34	.001
Sikhs	15	32	164.35	.001
Pagans	15	31	130.91	.001
Atheists	25	32	23.21	.001
Humanists	21	35	90.30	.001

Table 3

Religious diversity and social networks

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
I have friends who are...				
Buddhists	12	16	10.87	.01
Christians	67	89	303.82	.001
Hindus	20	28	31.63	.001
Jews	21	22	.26	NS
Muslims	32	42	49.74	.001
Sikhs	13	19	30.44	.001
Pagans	7	8	3.10	NS
Atheists	52	53	.42	NS
Humanists	14	11	12.16	.001

Table 4

Religion as a negative influence

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
A lot of harm is done in the world by...				
Buddhists	12	11	2.41	NS
Christians	23	17	23.55	.001
Hindus	16	13	5.23	.05
Jews	18	16	3.72	NS
Muslims	44	44	0.17	NS
Sikhs	17	14	7.06	.01
Pagans	14	14	0.08	NS
Atheists	15	20	15.60	.001
Humanists	13	13	0.02	NS

Table 5

Religion as a positive influence

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
A lot of good is done in the world by...				
Buddhists	27	39	63.16	.001
Christians	34	69	505.0	.001
Hindus	20	35	109.60	.001
Jews	22	37	113.50	.001
Muslims	16	31	134.11	.001
Sikhs	16	28	83.73	.001
Pagans	14	22	46.71	.001
Atheists	30	28	2.05	NS
Humanists	22	27	15.97	.001

Table 6

Religious diversity and social proximity

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
I would not like to live next door to ...				
Buddhists	15	12	8.50	.01
Christians	11	7	26.01	.001
Hindus	17	12	22.40	.001
Jews	17	13	18.11	.001
Muslims	25	19	22.18	.001
Sikhs	17	12	24.22	.001
Pagans	16	14	6.40	.05

Table 7

Place of religion in society

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
All religious groups in Britain should have equal rights	50	70	157.42	.001
We must respect all religions	49	77	346.23	.001
Religious education should be taught in school	32	70	598.73	.001
Religion brings more conflict than peace	56	45	50.12	.001
Religious people are often intolerant of others	40	34	19.00	.001
Religion is mainly a force for bad in the world today	37	19	162.26	.001

Table 8

Religious and cultural diversity

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
People who come from different countries make where I live an interesting place	31	48	122.70	.001
People who come from different countries make my school/college an interesting place	32	54	189.82	.001
Where I live, people who come from different countries get on well together	42	60	125.81	.001
People from different religious backgrounds make where I live an interesting place	28	44	120.50	.001
Having people from different religious backgrounds makes my school/college an interesting place	34	58	252.31	.001
Where I live, people from different religious backgrounds get on well together	38	55	117.03	.001

Table 9

Religious symbols

	Atheist %	Theist %	χ^2 %	$p <$ %
Christians should be allowed to wear crosses in school	46	69	236.87	.001
Muslims should be allowed to wear the headscarf in school	42	58	102.22	.001
Sikhs should be allowed to wear the Turban in school	44	59	95.87	.001
Jews should be allowed to wear the Star of David in school	45	61	106.0	.001
Hindus should be allowed to wear the Bindi in school	42	56	83.00	.001