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Introducing the Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI): Construct validity
among 13- to 15-year-old students

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Abstract

The 'theology of religions' is concerned with the interpretation and evaluation of the divergent truth-claims and views of salvation that are asserted or implied by different religious traditions. This study proposes a new multi-choice index that distinguishes between six current positions within the theology of religions, characterised as Atheism, Agnosticism, Exclusionism, Inclusivism, Pluralism, and Interreligious perspective, with a further subdivision between two expressions of the pluralism perspective. The construct validity of this new measure is supported by the performance of the instrument in respect of a network of theories (regarding how these different positions may relate to the factors of sex, age, personal religiosity and attitude toward religious diversity) among a sample of 10,754 13- to 15-year-old students from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Keywords: empirical theology, theology of religions, construct validity, psychology of religion

Introduction

The ‘theology of religions’ is the name that is often given by Christian theologians to the interpretation and evaluation of the divergent truth-claims and views of salvation that are asserted or implied by different religious traditions. Within the discipline of the philosophy of religion, such topics are routinely referred to as issues, problems or questions of religious diversity, sometimes under the heading of ‘competing religious claims’.

The range of positions

A variety of standpoints on this subject may be found in the literature, with three main approaches being regularly distinguished (Knitter, 1985; Hick, 1985, 1995, 1989/2004, 1997; D’Costa, 1986, 1990; Byrne, 1995; Okholm & Phillips, 1996; Griffiths, 2001; Basinger, 2002).

1. *Exclusivism* is the traditional view that only one religious belief-system is true. Theological exclusivism (or ‘particularism’) holds that religious truth is ‘primarily restricted to a particular religion’ (Netland, 2007, p. 229).
2. *Inclusivism* is the view that one religion includes the key truths that are found within the other religious belief-systems; it therefore holds that this one system is pre-eminent and normative, but acknowledges that other faiths contain some truths. This has also been designated the *fulfilment* model (by Peter Phan, cited in Durka, 2012, p. 18).
3. *Pluralism*, unlike positions (1) and (2), privileges no one religious tradition, maintaining rather that all – or most – religious claims are on a par with respect to truth, especially when the religions speak of different, but non-conflicting, human conceptions of some ultimately ineffable reality (e.g. Hick, 1995, chs 1, 3; 1997, pp. 612-613). Its exponents often argue that it is the same truth that is being manifested

and recounted in different ways in these different religious traditions. This has also been called the *multireligious* model (Ziebertz, 2012, p. 167).

These three positions are often presented, somewhat indifferently, in terms of spiritual and moral value or salvific effect, as well as in terms of claims to truth. However, some scholars rightly take care to distinguish the question of religious truth from the question of salvation: that is, ‘who gets saved and how’ (Griffiths, 2001, p. 53; cf. D’Costa, 1986, p. 29; Netland, 2007). For example, Christian inclusivism has been said to separate ‘knowing the truth’ from ‘receiving salvation’, by arguing that ‘some (or all) of those who do not in this life come to know the truth may nevertheless, by divine grace, either be counted now as “anonymous Christians” or may receive Christian salvation in or beyond death’ (Hick, 1997, pp. 610-611; cf. 1985, p. 46).

Distinguishing religious truth-claims from salvific efficacy works best, however, if religious truth is limited to (a) certain metaphysical truths concerning, for example, how God is in Godself, and (b) empirical truths concerning historical events. But this distinction:

does not hold in the same way when we include other important areas of religious truth such as truths relating to spirituality, morality, and religious practice – and particularly to what we may call the subjective appropriation, or ‘human pole’, of salvation in this life. (Astley, 2012, p. 242)

Hick goes so far as to claim that ‘the real substance of salvation’ is to be found in a religion’s *effects*: the transformational change it produces in people ‘from self-centredness to Reality-centredness or God-centredness’. He argues that religion’s truthfulness does in fact ‘consist in its power to bring people to the ultimate reality we call God, and thereby . . . to produce in them the kind of fruit’ esteemed by the religions (Hick, in Okholm & Phillips, 1996, pp. 61, 78, 87, 127).

A focus on spirituality and salvation or liberation, and therefore to a large extent on *affect*, would seem to lead to fewer intellectual problems in the theology of religions; it is certainly more consistent with the main thrust of religious self-understanding and practice (cf. Astley, 2012, pp. 246-256; Wainwright, 1995 and 2005, pp. 234-235). Arguably, however, these dimensions are more difficult to explore through questionnaire surveys that employ opinion statements. For this reason, we concentrate in this study on the different views that people take about religious truth as it is understood in respect to the *cognitive* claims of religion: whether these are empirical and historical (that is, concerning human and historical events), or metaphysical and transcendent (that is, concerning the nature and activity of divine beings, or other supra-mundane entities).

Having adopted this cognitive emphasis, it seemed important to distinguish two other general approaches to the diversity of religions (Netland, 2007, p. 227).

4. *Atheism* implies the view that the central claims of no religion are true (with the exception of some species of nontheistic Buddhism).
5. *Agnosticism* is the view that we do not, perhaps even cannot, know which religious claims are true.

In discussions about the apparently conflicting truth-claims of the religions, it has also been common for many years to advocate an attitude that is sympathetic to finding out about different religions and entering into dialogue with them (Hick, 1974; Smart, 1960; Tillich, 1963). This emphasis has developed into a particular approach to religious diversity that prioritises a dialogical mind-set and leads to a process of interactive discussion ‘that aims for the development of insight, and maintains a concept of truth based on relations and on an assumption that humans cannot formulate the last word about truth’ (Ziebertz, 2012, p. 168). Although this approach could be combined, in principle and to some extent in practice, with either inclusivism or pluralism, Hans-Georg Ziebertz has argued that it functions as a reaction

against both the I-perspective of the former view and the neutral it-perspective of the latter (although he describes it as a position that ‘elaborates a certain pluralist understanding’). As Ziebertz treats the model conceptually as a separate ideal type and claims that is empirically distinguishable in his surveys from other theologies of religions (Ziebertz, 2012, pp. 169-180), we have added this position to our list, as (6).

6. This *interreligious* perspective expresses the view that real, complete truth in religion comes only through exploration of and dialogue between the different religions. The position is equivalent to Phan’s *mutuality* model (Durka, 2012, p. 19).

Survey data

John Hick has argued that it is likely that a majority of those within each faith ‘who live in multi-faith societies’ are at least implicit pluralists, ‘in that in practice they treat their neighbors of other faiths as equals’ (Hick, 2007, p. 224). Whatever may be inferred from their practice, however, we are concerned to discover what people *say* that they believe about other faiths. What is their ‘ordinary theology’ of religions (Astley, 2002; Astley & Francis, 2013)? Do they explicitly endorse any particular approach to the theology of religions above any others?

We have some evidence from questionnaire studies of the degree to which different views on this topic are espoused by adults within mainstream congregations in Britain. In a sample of over 400 English churchgoers spread across four denominations, the view that Christianity is the only true religion was held by 44% but rejected by 31%, with 25% undecided (Francis, 2000, p. 181). In a survey of over 5,700 English Anglican churchgoers, a similar proportion (46%) held that Christianity is the only true religion, while 12% believed that ‘all religions are of equal value’ (Francis, Robbins, & Astley, 2005, p. 52).

The theology of religions of those outside the churches has also been surveyed. Forty-seven per cent of a random sample of over 200 adults resident in one working class parish,

most of whom never attended church, said that they believed that all religions are equally true; whereas 27% held that some religions are closer to the truth than others; 16% that only one religion can be true; and 4% that all religions are false (Buckler & Astley, 1992, p. 399).

Some empirical research on the theologies of religions held by school students has also been undertaken in Britain. In a sample of nearly 34,000 students in England and Wales aged between 13 and 15 years old (Francis, 2001, pp. 36, 73, 101, 171), 16% endorsed the exclusivist claim that Christianity is the only true religion, with 47% rejecting this view and 37% declaring themselves unsure about the matter. Exclusivism was significantly positively correlated with younger students, male students and churchgoers (37% of weekly churchgoers and 17% of occasional churchgoers endorsed this position, compared with only 11% of those who never attended church).

The Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI)

However, the data above were derived from research instruments that distinguish the views of respondents across only a limited number of positions within the theology of religions. Even Ziebertz's research, which included a sample of over a thousand 16- to 18-year-olds from the UK alongside young people from Croatia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Sweden, The Netherlands, and Turkey, only assessed their views using four theologies of religion, assessed through three- or four-item scales (Ziebertz, 2012, p. 166).

We wanted to design an instrument to express all six of the theologies of religion / interpretations of religious diversity that we have outlined, and to word this in such a way that the respondents of a range of abilities – including school students – could readily understand. In order to achieve this aim, we first drew up over ninety opinion statements, beginning with the items of the Francis Index of Theological Exclusivism (Francis and Robbins, 2012, p. 215) but extending the range of options more widely to cover statements that mapped onto exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and the interreligious perspective,

together with atheism and agnosticism. Having grouped the statements under these six options, we selected what appeared to be the best opinion statement to represent each option and presented these in a forced choice question with seven possible answers, pluralism being identified through two different statements. This is our Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI), presented in table 1 (the viewpoint corresponding to each statement is shown in the first column, but these designations were not revealed in the questionnaire).

We believe that this single multiple choice question should force a clearer decision from less theologically literate respondents than we could achieve with separate opinion statements presented independently in a questionnaire, even when related together to form scales for each theology of religion option.

- insert table 1 about here -

Varieties of pluralism

The following considerations led us to include two different opinion statements to map the pluralist position (or three, if Ziebertz's claim that the interreligious perspective is a variant of pluralism is accepted). First, we discerned that conceptual variation existed within the notion of pluralism, and wanted to find out whether such differentiation would be revealed empirically. Second, as it was thought to be likely that pluralism would be the most popular position, offering two opinion statements to distinguish options within pluralism would not particularly privilege it. The popularity of pluralism arguably reflects the dominance of postmodern thinking within advanced western society; it also chimes in with the attitude of religious tolerance, which is regarded as a key learning outcome of religious education in British schools (cf. Astley, Francis, Burton, & Wilcox, 1997).

Third, one of the conceptual and empirical insights of faith development research is the suggestion that we may differentiate between a relatively naïve, total pluralism (admittedly largely over moral issues) and a more sophisticated, qualified and thought-

through version. The more naïve view tends to be held by those designated by James Fowler as being at Stage 3, which is typical of early adolescence; whereas the more reflective and nuanced form of pluralism is more representative of the Stage 5 form of faithing, which normally develops much later. Our own empirical research has shown that even undergraduates can display a ‘rather naïve openness’ that ‘often masquerades as the more sophisticated consideration of the viewpoints of others, and recognition of the inevitable relativity of their beliefs, that is typical of subjects at Faith Stage 5. This earlier style is a less truly *critical* type of openness’ (Astley, 2000; Astley & Francis, 2002; cf. Astley & Francis, 1992, pp. 204-205, 358-364). However, Fowler’s data reveal no one entering Faith Stage 5 before their thirties (Fowler, 1981, pp. 318, 320). But Heinz Streib, in reconceptualising faith stages as styles of faith, models them as a series of overlapping curves, by contrast with Fowler’s sequence of non-overlapping stages. The curves that represent each faith style rise from a low level and ‘descend again after a culminating point’ (Streib, 2001, p. 149), as each of these styles begins to show its effect rather earlier than Fowler’s theory of stages would allow, including the equivalent of Fowler’s Stage 5 (which Streib labels the ‘dialogical religious style’). Although we are not suggesting that our own pluralist options represent these two Fowler/Streib stages/styles of faith development, there is both conceptual and empirical support here for the existence of different types of relativism.

Fourth, piloting our Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index has shown that Pluralism A and Pluralism B display different empirical correlates. Thus Pluralism B is more enhanced than is Pluralism A by positive changes in the variables age, religious attitude, personal prayer, worship attendance, positive attitude towards theism and belief in God. It may be argued, therefore, that Pluralism B represents a more religiously mature form of pluralism, that is more likely to be associated with older students and those who are more knowledgeable about, or have more experience of, religion; while Pluralism A represents a

more naïve or immature form that is more likely to be associated with younger, less religiously experienced and less theologically literate students. Pluralism B may also reflect a greater acceptance of difference than does Pluralism A.

Research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to test the construct validity of the Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI) drawing on a network of theories regarding the way in which the different theological positions may relate to the factors of sex, age, personal religiosity and attitude toward religious diversity.

Hypothesis one proposes (concerning sex differences) a negative association between Atheism and sex in accordance with the general finding that males are less religious than females (for recent review see Francis & Penny, 2013). The implication of this hypothesis is that there is a positive correlation between sex and the pro-religions positions, although there are at present no theoretical grounds for associating particular pro-religion positions with sex difference.

Hypothesis two (concerning age differences) proposes a negative correlation between Pluralism A and age but a positive correlation between Pluralism B and age in accordance with the suggestion that Pluralism A represents a less mature representation of the pluralism position than that represented by Pluralism B. There may also be a positive association between age and both Atheism and Agnosticism in accordance with the general finding that religiosity declines during adolescence (see Kay & Francis, 1996).

Hypothesis three (concerning personal religiosity) proposes negative correlations between measures of personal religiosity (worship attendance, personal prayer and belief in God) and both Atheism and Agnosticism; and positive correlations between personal religiosity (worship attendance, personal prayer and belief in God) and the other five positions identified by the index of theology of religions, in accordance with the established

finding of positive correlations between religious belief and religious practice (see Francis, 2009).

Hypothesis four (concerning attitude toward religious diversity) proposes negative correlations between attitude toward religious diversity and both Atheism and Agnosticism in accordance with the general finding that individuals who have no religious identity of their own tend to be less open to others who have clear religious identities (see Francis, Croft, Pyke, & Robbins, 2012). It is also hypothesised that individuals who hold the position of Exclusivism will be less positive toward religious diversity, while individuals who hold the positions of Pluralism and Interreligious perspective will be more open to religious diversity. The position of Inclusivism is clearly more open than the position of Exclusivism, but less open than the positions of Pluralism and Interreligious perspective, so on these grounds there may be neither a positive nor a negative correlation between Inclusivism and attitude toward religious diversity.

Method

Procedure

The Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project set out to obtain responses from at least 2,000 13- to 15-year-old students attending state-maintained schools in each of five parts of the UK: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales *and* London. In each nation 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 character. Within the participating schools, questionnaires were administered by religious education teachers under examination-like conditions. Students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and given the option not to participate in the project.

Measures

Theology of religions was assessed by the Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI) as proposed in the present paper. This index distinguishes between seven positions, styled: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism A, pluralism B, interreligious perspective, atheism, and agnosticism. The participants are invited to ‘tick the *one* statement that comes closest to’ their own belief. Within the environment of regression analysis, inclusiveness is taken as the base-line variable and each of the other six approaches is shaped as a dummy variable: present (1), absent (0).

Attitude toward religious diversity was assessed by the 11-item Attitude toward Religious Diversity Index (ARDI) developed by Francis, Croft, Pyke, and Robbins (2012). This instrument combines items concerned with social distance and items that embrace a wider view of an affective response to religious diversity. Two examples of social distance items are: ‘I would not like to live next door to Sikhs’ and ‘I would be happy about a close relative marrying someone from a different faith’. Two examples of wider affective items are, ‘Learning about different religions in school is interesting,’ and ‘Having people from different religious backgrounds makes my school/college an interesting place’. Francis, Croft, Pyke, and Robbins (2012) reported an alpha internal consistency reliability of .89 (Cronbach, 1951).

Sex and age were recorded as dichotomous variables: male (1) and female (2); year nine (1) and year ten (2).

Religious affiliation was recorded by a checklist of world faiths and Christian denominations in response to the question, ‘What is your religion?’ For the current analysis, all the Christian categories were collapsed into a single group and those affiliated with other world faiths were omitted, producing a dichotomous variable: no religion = 1, and Christian = 2.

Religious attendance was assessed by the question, ‘Apart from special occasions (like weddings) how often do you attend a religious worship service (e.g. at a church, mosque or synagogue)’. Responses were recorded on a seven-point scale: never (1), sometimes (2), at least once a year (3), at least six times a year (4), at least once a month (5), nearly every week (6), and several times a week (7).

Personal prayer was assessed by the question, ‘How often do you pray in your home or by yourself?’ Responses were recorded on a five-point scale: never (1), occasionally (2), and at least once a month (3), at least once a week (4), and nearly every day (5).

Belief in God was assessed by the statement ‘I believe in God’. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale: disagree strongly (1), disagree (2), not certain (3), agree (4), and agree strongly (5).

Participants

The present analyses were conducted on a sub-sample from the Young People’s Attitude to Religious Diversity Project, drawing on information provided by 10,734 students from schools in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and London who self identified as either ‘no religion’ or as Christian. In terms of sex and age, 47% were male and 53% were female; 51% were in year nine and 49% were in year ten. In terms of self-assigned religious affiliation, 64% identified as Christian and 36% as ‘no religion’.

Results and discussion

Regarding personal religiosity, the participants displayed a wide range of positions in terms of worship attendance, personal prayer, and belief in God. In terms of frequency of worship attendance, 42% reported never attending, 27% attended less than six times a year, 5% at least six times a year, 5% at least once a month, and 21% every week. In terms of frequency of personal prayer, 55% reported never praying, 22% occasionally, 4% at least once a month, 7% at least once a week, and 12% every day. In terms of belief in God, 46%

agreed or agreed strongly that they believed in God, 26% were not certain whether they believed in God, and 28% disagreed or disagreed strongly that they believed in God. The Theology of Religions Index demonstrated a distribution of participants across all seven positions: 6% agreed that only one religion is really true and all others are totally false (exclusivism); 5% agreed that only one religion is really true but at least one other is partly true (inclusivism); 12% agreed that all religions are equally true (pluralism A); 27% agreed that all religions express the same truth in different ways (pluralism B); 7% agreed that real truth comes from listening to all religions (interreligious perspective); 10% agreed that all religions are totally false (atheism); and 33% agreed that they do not know what to believe about religions (agnosticism). The Attitude toward Religious Diversity Index demonstrates a good level of internal consistency reliability with an alpha coefficient of .90 and correlations between individual items and the sum of the other ten items ranging between .41 and .75.

- insert table 2 about here -

Table 2 sets out the correlation between the seven positions identified by the Astley-Francis Theology of Religion Index and sex, age, worship attendance, personal prayer, belief in God, and attitude toward religious diversity. The following four main features emerge from these correlations.

First, in terms of sex differences, these data demonstrate a significant negative correlation between sex and Atheism. This is consistent with hypothesis one, namely that males are more likely than females to espouse atheistic positions. None of the other options identified by the index of theology of religions were significantly negatively correlated with sex.

Second, in terms of age differences, these data demonstrate a significant negative correlation between age and Pluralism A and a significant positive correlation between age and Pluralism B. This is consistent with hypothesis two, namely that Pluralism A represents a

less mature position than Pluralism B. With increasing age there is a movement away from Pluralism A and a movement toward Pluralism B. None of the other options identified by the index of theology of religions were significantly correlated with age, either positively or negatively.

Third, in terms of personal religiosity, these data demonstrate a significant negative correlation between all three measures of personal religiosity (worship attendance, personal prayer, and belief in God) and both Atheism and Agnosticism. This is consistent with hypothesis three, namely that individuals who neither practise faith nor believe may also adopt more atheistic or agnostic positions in respect of the theology of religions. All the other options identified by the index of theology of religions were significantly positively correlated with the three indices of personal religiosity, apart from Pluralism A in respect of worship attendance and personal prayer. This is consistent with the view that Pluralism A expresses a less mature view than Pluralism B and that young people who are actively engaged with the *practice* of faith tend to adopt a more mature understanding of the position of pluralism.

Fourth, in terms of attitude toward religious diversity, these data demonstrate significant negative correlations between both Atheism and Agnosticism and attitude toward religious diversity. This is consistent with hypothesis four, namely that individuals who have no religious identity of their own tend to be less open to others who have religious identities. These data also show a negative correlation between Exclusivism and attitude toward religious diversity which is fully consistent with the definition of the Exclusivism position. The positive correlations with Pluralism A, Pluralism B and Interreligious perspective is also fully consistent with the definitions of these positions that should promote greater openness to religious diversity. Finally, the fact that there is no correlation between attitude toward

religious diversity and Inclusivism is consistent with this position being more open than Exclusivism but less open than Pluralism or Interreligious perspective.

Conclusion

This study set out to define and to test the construct validity of a new measure to operationalise the notion of the variety of positions currently within the theology of religions accessible to 13- to 15-year-old students. Conceptually this model proposed six discrete positions identified as Atheism, Agnosticism, Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism, and Interreligious perspective. The pluralism position was subdivided into two expressions representing a less mature and more mature form, as Pluralism A and Pluralism B.

Drawing on data provided by 10,734 13- to 15-year-old students from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and London the construct validity of the new measure was tested drawing on a network of theories regarding the way in which the different positions may relate to the factors of sex, age, personal religiosity and attitude toward religious diversity. The data provided broad support for the construct validity of this new instrument.

On the basis of this conclusion the Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI) may be commended for further testing and scrutiny in applied research projects among 13- to 15-year-old students. The index now needs testing among other older populations to explore the wider applicability of this instrument.

Note

Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project (AHRC Reference: AH/G014035/1) was 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, took part in the study. Professor Robert Jackson was principal investigator and Professor Leslie J

Francis was co-investigator. Together they led 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 was part of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme, and ran from 2009-12.

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Table 1

The Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index

Theological position	Index statement
Exclusivism	Only one religion is really true and all others are totally false
Inclusivism	Only one religion is really true, but at least one other is partly true
Pluralism A	All religions are equally true
Pluralism B	All religions express the same truth in different ways
Interreligious Perspective	Real truth comes from listening to all religions
Atheism	All religions are totally false
Agnosticism	I do not know what to believe about religions

Table 2

Correlations with the Astley-Francis Theology of Religions Index (AFTRI)

	Sex	Age	WA	PP	BG	ARDI
Exclusivism	.05***	-.01	.20***	.25***	.20***	-.08***
Inclusivism	.04***	.01	.23***	.22***	.20***	.00
Pluralism A	.02*	-.04***	.00	.02	.11***	.07***
Pluralism B	.11***	.03***	.23***	.20***	.30***	.18***
Interreligious	.01	-.01	.04***	.03***	.07***	.11***
Atheism	-.17***	.01	-.24***	-.22***	-.44***	-.17***
Agnosticism	.02**	-.01	-.30***	-.30***	-.30***	-.11***

Note: WA = Worship attendance; PP = Personal prayer; BG = Belief in God; ARDI =
Attitude toward Religious Diversity