

RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES IN TWO TYPES OF URBAN SECONDARY SCHOOL: A DECADE OF CHANGE?

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A Likert-type religious attitude scale was administered to 800 boys selected randomly from 4 age groups in a controlled (local education authority) and in a maintained (Catholic) secondary school in Belfast in 1969 and 1979. The results indicate that religious attitudes became significantly less favourable with age. At all age levels, and at each end of this decade, the mean scores of pupils attending the maintained school were significantly higher than those of pupils attending the controlled school. There were no overall decade effects but significant decade-by-school interaction effects were found.

The view has been expressed that psychology of religion is enjoying something of a revival (26). Certainly, it is not difficult to make an extensive listing of research dealing with the religious attitudes of children and young people (8) which has been carried out during the last forty years. Paradoxically, very little organized information about adolescent religious attitudes is available (14). There are a number of possible reasons for this. There are problems of definition and the gap between conceptual and operational levels of analysis is sometimes wide (31). Further, much of the existing work is divorced from general attitude theory and individual investigators have tended to devise their own attitude scales, so that results are often fragmentary and not infrequently contradictory. Inevitably such scales vary in quality; extravagant claims have been made for some (9) but writers who are more aware of the residual problems of structure (15) and of measurement (30) continue to suggest innovations and it is not easy to share the view that adequate instruments for research generally exist (11).

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With these reservations in mind, it is possible to summarize some relevant findings. Religion, at adolescence, is said to be neither a subject of pressing interest nor a frequent cause of worry (22) and religious education in schools has been found to occupy a low position in children's esteem (18). It has been asserted that adolescents are irreligious and this has been attributed to many causes and credited with many consequences (3). There is said to be an age-related decline on all criteria of religious activity, growing uncertainty being correlated with increasing age (27). In the research which he reviews, Francis (8) finds almost unequivocal evidence of deterioration of religious attitudes during the first three years of secondary schooling. While some investigators suggest that this is followed by stabilization (10), Francis finds a consistent and persistent decline, having its roots in the primary school and culminating in a specific movement towards more aggressively hostile attitudes among senior pupils in secondary schools.

On the other hand, it has been observed that mean scores on attitude measures often conceal distributions of some complexity (6) and that adolescence is a time of continued interest in religion (5), a period of uncertainty and choice rather than rejection (17). The questioning of childhood concepts has been positively regarded (4) and there is evidence that traditional formulae are pervasive, despite the prevalence of critical thinking (33).

It is commonly asserted that religious attitudes are negatively related to intelligence and to educational level, particularly to level of scientific education (25), but it is clear that such relationships are easily oversimplified and contrary evidence is not less strong (12, 31). Simon and Ward (27) are probably on secure ground in suggesting that the relationship between intelligence and belief is complex (7) and interactions between religious attitudes and the comprehension of religious ideas may be assumed to exist (30).

A tendency for men to show religious attitudes which are consistently less favourable than those of women has long been noted (1) and this is sometimes reflected in studies carried out with students (19) and with adolescents of school age (5). Simon and Ward (27) did not find that gender differences were significant in the religious attitudes of younger pupils in secondary school but the tendency for girls to hold firmer beliefs was clear in older groups.

A good deal of attention has been directed towards possible differential effects on religious attitudes of attendance at denominational and at local

authority schools. Though there is a large measure of overlap in beliefs and values (15), there is evidence that pupils at Catholic schools, while displaying a wide range of conviction, differ significantly from those in non-denominational schools. For example, Francis (9) regards his results as providing a good deal of encouragement for Catholic primary schools which he sees as contributing greatly to their pupils' favourable attitudes towards religion. On the other hand, various Catholic writers have been severely critical of denominational schools for their alleged pre-occupation with catechesis and have expressed doubts about their effectiveness as agencies for the religious socialization of the young (28, 29).

The picture, then, is complicated if not confused and any study of religious attitudes should at least acknowledge the conceptual and methodological problems of measurement. An obvious consideration is the nature of the relationship between attitude and belief. This relationship, less straightforward than has sometimes been supposed (7), may have particular relevance to studies involving religious attitudes and beliefs (31).

The religious attitudes of adolescents have some additional interest in Northern Ireland, described by Beach (2) as 'a partially modernized society'. There has been some evidence that it is an area in which conventional attitudes to religion and to Christian belief are widely endorsed (13) and it would not be surprising if regional characteristics were reflected in the young. Certainly a variety of historical, social, and demographic factors suggest that the findings of research conducted elsewhere may not be entirely applicable in Northern Ireland. A further point of interest is the suggestion that the religious segregation of school provision is a contributory element in the community strife which has persisted during the decade with which the present investigation is concerned. Hence, the aim of our investigation was to find out whether there were systematic differences in religious attitudes between schools, between age levels, or over a ten-year period. For this purpose, religious attitudes were taken to refer to a readiness to respond in a fairly stable and consistent manner to conventional Christian belief and practice and a religious attitude scale was selected which had been developed in a broadly Christian context. For example, a respondent with a high religious attitude score would be more likely than not to accept the view of the existence of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or to reject a statement which denies that Jesus rose from the dead.

METHOD

Sample

Eight hundred boys took part in the study. In 1969, at the beginning of

the present civil disturbances in Northern Ireland, 200 boys were selected from each of two secondary schools in Belfast. Fifty boys were drawn at random from each of four age groups in each school: 12, 13, 14, and 15-year olds. In 1979, the same schools were revisited and a further 200 boys were selected from each, using the same sampling procedure. The schools were, and remain, typical of secondary schools in the city, both in size and in the social background of their pupils, more than 80% of pupils' fathers are in skilled or semi-skilled occupations. One is a 'controlled' school, funded and managed by the local education authority, the other is a 'maintained' school, similarly funded but under ecclesiastical management and run by a Catholic teaching order. All the boys in the maintained school were Catholics and, without exception, those in the controlled school claimed affiliation with some Protestant church, though it was evident that some were unclear about the denomination to which they belonged. Each subject in this school was asked whether he had attended church or Sunday school during the previous week and the percentage of affirmative replies, declining from 48% in the first year to 21% in the fourth year, suggests that membership was often tenuous.

As part of a wider study (30), all of the 1969 sample had been tested on the Science Research Associates' Test of Primary Mental Abilities and an analysis of variance applied to the scores showed no significant difference between schools or between age levels.

Instrument

The 25-item Likert type scale which was used is described in detail by Turner (31). It includes statements concerning the reality and omnipresence of God, the divinity of Christ, the efficacy of prayer, the existence of life after death, and the role of the Church. There are 14 favourable items, for example, 'God knows all my thoughts and movements' (item 9), 'The soul lives on after the body dies' (item 4), and 'I believe the teachings of my Church' (item 8). The remaining 11 items are unfavourable, for example, 'People only imagine that prayer helps them' (item 1) and 'There is no life after death' (item 21). For each statement, a respondent is provided with five options ('strongly agree', 'agree', 'uncertain', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree') of which he or she is asked to choose one. For statements favourable to religion, responses are scored 4, 3, 2, 1, 0 and for those unfavourable to religion the scoring is reversed, so that the possible range of total scores is from 0 to 100.

The scale was standardized on a sample of 984 secondary school pupils, aged from 11 to 17. It has high levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's co-efficient 'Alpha' = 0.92, domain validity = 0.96). When 200 subjects

were re-tested after six months, the test-retest reliability co-efficients, calculated separately for each of five age levels (from 12 to 16 years) ranged from 0.82 to 0.90. Split-half reliability co-efficients, calculated by the Spearman-Brown formula, from the scores of 40 pupils selected randomly from each of the same five age groups, in two secondary schools, ranged between 0.90 and 0.99.

Procedure

To minimize the disruption to normal school routine, the scale was administered in the ordinary classrooms to groups of subjects of similar age, ranging in size from 15 to 25. The statements were read to pupils as it was possible that some might have difficulty in reading and very simple, spoken instructions were used as these had to be comprehensible to pupils of all levels of ability, including some from backward classes. The pupils were assured that their answers would not be seen by anyone apart from the writers who conducted the testing and no teacher was present during the administration of the scale.

RESULTS

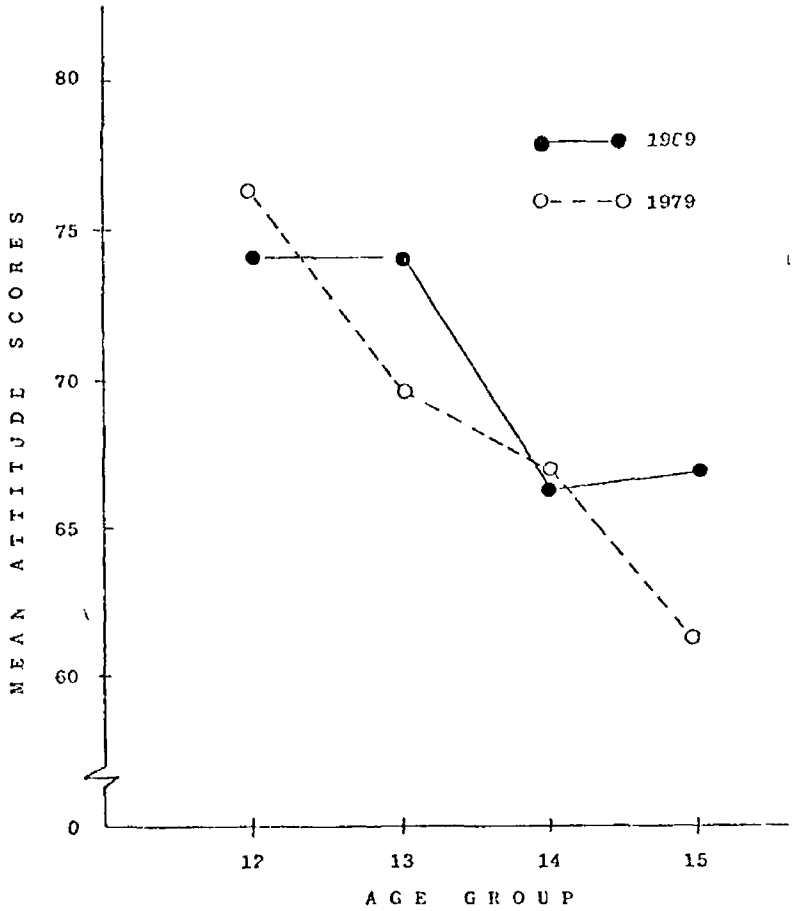
Mean scores on the religious attitude scale are given in Table 1. A $2 \times 2 \times 4$ analysis of variance was applied to the data; follow-up tests to locate significant differences were carried out using Tukey's method.

TABLE 1
MEAN SCORES ON RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE SCALE

		Age group			
		12	13	14	15
Controlled school	1969	69.94	68.62	57.34	59.88
	1979	72.58	63.96	62.92	54.18
Maintained school	1969	77.32	81.12	74.98	74.22
	1979	80.60	74.02	71.68	68.04

There was a significant difference between the controlled (local authority) and maintained (Catholic) schools ($F = 124.81$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.001$) with differences of similar magnitude emerging on each occasion. In 1969, the overall mean for the local authority pupils was 63.61 and for the Catholic

FIGURE 1

RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE SCORES
AGE-GROUP DIFFERENCES 1969 AND 1979

pupils 77.21 ($p < 0.001$). In 1979, the corresponding means were 63.75 and 73.29 ($p < 0.001$). When between-cells comparisons were carried out, the mean scores of the Catholic pupils were significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) at each age level, both in 1969 and 1979.

There was a significant difference between age groups ($F = 23.13$; $df = 3$; $p < 0.001$), accompanied by significant age-by-decade interaction effects ($F = 3.48$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.05$). Exploration of these interaction effects indicated that in 1969 there were significantly more favourable attitudes at 12 and at 13 than at 14 and at 15 years of age, whereas in 1979, score decrements were significant only between 12-year olds and each of the older age groups and between 13 and 15-year olds. These differences are illustrated in Figure 1.

The overall mean in 1969 was 70.41 and in 1979 it was 68.52 but, although the main decade effect was not significant, there were significant decade-by-school interaction effects ($F = 3.84$; $df = 1$; $p < 0.05$). At the beginning and end of this ten-year period, the means for the local authority pupils, with age levels combined, were virtually identical (63.61 and 63.75), but for the Catholic pupils the corresponding means differed significantly.

DISCUSSION

The difference between schools in the favourability of religious attitudes is very clear and remarkably consistent. Less dramatic, but also interesting, are the differences between the patterns of age-related changes which occur. At all age levels, and at the end of each decade, the mean scores of pupils attending the maintained (Catholic) school are significantly higher than those of their counterparts in the controlled (local authority) school. It is apparent that, in each school, religious attitudes become significantly less favourable with age but the significant interaction effects (Figure 1) highlight some interesting differences within this shared trend. Beginning with a higher level of favourability in the youngest age group, the decline in the mean scores of the Catholic pupils is less pronounced; the between-cells comparisons suggest that the age-related decline begins somewhat later and it is striking that the fourth-year mean is as high as that of the first-year pupils in the local authority school.

These clear school effects are consonant with findings of research carried out elsewhere (15); they are perhaps more remarkable in the context of a community in which religious attitudes have been said to be generally favourable (13). The reasons for these differences are matters for legitimate speculation. The suggestion that the more favourable attitudes of the

maintained school pupils may arise from a particularly effective interaction between home, school, and church receives some support from Humphreys (16), who is enthusiastic about the way in which Irish Catholic children are instructed in the beliefs and duties of their faith, not only by their schools but also by the home. Madaus and Linnan (20) have pointed out that just as the home exerts a powerful influence on the child's secular educational achievements so the *religiousity* of the home may be considered an early and powerful determinant of religious attitudes. When Neuwien (24) asked some 14,000 students at Catholic schools to rank influences on their religious development, 48.3% of 'first choices' were assigned to 'parents' example' compared to only 22.3% to 'schools' religious instruction'. However, when 'religious instruction' is considered along with 'teachers' example' (12.6%) and 'classmates' example' (5.0%), it would appear that almost 40% of these Catholic pupils rate some aspect of their schools as the primary influence on their religious development. As parents decide whether, and to what extent, a child will come into contact with the church, or attend a denominational school, it seems safe to assume that home-school influences are interactive.

It may be suggested also that a number of influences are mediated to the pupils by a denominational school, it is possible that the content of religious education within such a school is more clearly defined and its aims more clearly established, the outcome, in terms of knowledge, has been shown to be more successful (20, 30). The only aspect of these results which might be less than welcome to advocates of denominational schooling lies in the comparison between the scores from 1969 and 1979: the attitude scores of the Catholic school pupils declined significantly during this period, though they remain significantly more favourable than those of the local authority school pupils which show no decade effects.

The significant age effects are clearly in accordance with other research (17) which has found that religious attitudes become less favourable as secondary education progresses but the decline should be considered in the context of the general level of the scores. If a respondent were to endorse the 'uncertain' response for every item on the Religious Attitude Scale this (admittedly improbable) consistency of reaction would yield a score of 50. It is noteworthy that even the oldest group in the local authority school has a mean which is higher than this notional 'neutral' score. It would seem fair to say that, despite the significant age effects, many, indeed a majority of the boys involved in this study retain religious attitudes which are moderately favourable. Certainly there does not seem to be much evidence of the 'aggressively hostile' attitudes reported by Francis (9).

Whatever the validity of the 'progressive secularization' hypothesis, which has been propounded (32) and criticized (21) with equal vigour, it might be expected that the phenomena of which that hypothesis seeks to take account would manifest themselves differently in different communities. The difference between 1969 and 1979 scores in the Catholic school may give some support to the idea of gradual erosion (21) but the overall absence of decade effects is scarcely in accordance with a pattern of massive decline (32). In terms of deeply rooted social and personal values, a decade may be regarded as a very short time but it is possible to be impressed by the evidence of stability of religious attitudes during a period characterized by social and political unrest and by an intensification of endemic economic problems.

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