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Towards ICCS 2022

Worldviews Education: Strengthening Social Inclusion

By Anna Halafoff

SYNOPSIS

Growing clashes within cultures, and the ongoing threat of terrorism, have drawn attention to the importance of educating youth about different worldviews – religious, spiritual and non-religious – as a strategy to prevent violent extremism and to create socially inclusive and peaceful societies.

COMMENTARY

EDUCATION ABOUT diverse worldviews – *religious, spiritual and non-religious* – in schools, has long been seen as a peacebuilding strategy in increasingly diverse societies. Calls for, and research on, [education programmes about worldviews](#) intensified after the July 2005 London bombings, given these were deemed as acts of 'homegrown terrorism'.

Experts argued that [education about diverse worldviews](#) could increase understanding about and respect for minority religions, and thereby [lessen feelings of alienation and the potential for radicalisation](#) of young people in these communities. Some scholars also argued that this type of education could [decrease negative stereotypes](#) of, and prejudices against, religious minorities held by young people from majority/host societies and thereby decrease the risk of growing Far-Right extremism, including [Christian Far-Right Extremism](#) (CFRE).

Importance of Religion in School Curriculum

Our [recent research](#) on the Worldviews of Generation Z Australians has demonstrated, in a nationally representative survey of 1,200 13- to 18-year-olds, that young people who had participated in education about diverse religions (mainly in Catholic schools) had more positive attitudes towards religious minorities than those who did not (mainly in government schools).

Young people wanted more education about diverse worldviews in all schools, and we recommended that this education needs to better match the lived and complex worldview diversity of Australian teens.

This includes learning about religious, spiritual and non-religious perspectives and also discussion of hot topics, such as the intersection of worldviews with human and animal rights, politics and climate change.

Australian teens also made it clear that they respected people's freedom to hold and practise diverse religions and beliefs, as long as they did not impact upon the rights and freedoms of others.

Cosmopolitan and Anti-Cosmopolitan Trends

[Debates about freedom of religion](#) have shifted in recent years from freedom from discrimination to the right to discriminate, from that of a shield to a sword. We live in a time of intensified polarisation, with competing narratives regarding social harmony and wellbeing.

These "culture wars" are typically conceived as being between the Left and Right, between progressives and conservatives. Another useful frame is to view them as a [clash between cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans](#), that has been escalating since the 1990s. Briefly, cosmopolitans value diversity and equal rights for all, while anti-cosmopolitans resist this and are often informed by exclusivist nationalist and religious ideologies.

The second half of the 20th century was a cosmopolitan period, with processes of globalisation enabling the global movement of people, goods, and ideas. [Issues of rights](#) are central to cosmopolitanism as well, and these decades saw the recognition of rights of persecuted minorities enacted in policies and laws against discrimination and for equality.

It was also a time of growing environmental awareness, where animal rights were also beginning to be widely acknowledged. This progress was intended to build more inclusive, equitable and thereby peaceful societies.

The Movement Against Diversity

By the mid-1990s, [diversities](#) in culture, religion, gender and sexuality were emerging as norms, and integrated into education systems in some societies. What many did not expect was the extent and vehemence of the backlash against them.

There are powerful religious, political and media forces who felt and continue to feel threatened by this progress, given that it decentres their privileges. The [anti-](#)

[cosmopolitan](#) turn can be seen globally in the rise of a narrow nationalism, in the Far-Right, in climate change deniers, in the Men's Rights Movement, and in denigrators of critical theory and "cancel culture".

It is also an anti-intellectual turn, where research by experts is often undermined, or selectively cited, and where a proliferation of disinformation circulates in a highly marketised, hyper-mediatised world. Anti-cosmopolitans have been extremely effective at spreading their messaging through online and social media, aided by considerable financial resources from individuals and organisations with vested interests.

The result has been a plethora of hate and harm, targeting many minorities, including Muslims, Jews, and People of Colour. In some non-Western contexts, discrimination is also widespread against Whites and Christians. The climate crisis and COVID-19 can also be linked to environmental harms, that are impacting all life.

An anti-cosmopolitan view can never lead to genuinely peaceful societies as it only seeks benefits for the chosen few, at the expense of the many. History has shown us this time and again, with the most horrific episodes being that of genocide, where there has been the deliberate murder of groups of people with the intent of destroying them completely. How can humanity risk repeats of this?

Education and Diversity

Education can be a powerful peacebuilding tool in transforming people's attitudes to one another and to diverse species. A cosmopolitan education emphasises respect for diversity, alongside a commitment to rights, and particularly with an awareness that the advancement of rights should not harm others. It is this no-harm clause that anti-cosmopolitans so often ignore in their calls for religious freedom.

As stated above, education about diverse worldviews is also a powerful strategy for combatting prejudices against religious and non-religious groups, and deep-seated tensions between them. As the Far-Right is fuelled by anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim views, these negative stereotypes can be challenged by education and through facilitated contact and relationship building between diverse religious and non-religious groups and individuals.

Multifaith engagement of this kind can be a highly effective peacebuilding activity, and educators can learn much from multifaith activists and scholars, in terms of which methods and pedagogies to employ.

Action Points

Government schools should include dedicated sections and/or subjects on different religions and beliefs across the world in their prescribed curricula. Universities should also offer units on worldviews education in their teacher training programmes, so that teachers can be equipped to facilitate what can at times be challenging conversations.

Experts also argue that youth-led programmes on diversity can be particularly powerful for young people, and that interfaith youth initiatives can also be instructive

here on developing best practices for schools and universities. Such educational programmes are vital if we wish to foster genuinely inclusive and peaceful societies.

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