Submission to Religious Freedom Review: Worldviews of Australian Millennials, ARC Discovery Project DP 106002367

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We are a team of researchers with broad expertise (religious diversity; education about religions and beliefs; countering violent extremism; sociology of religion; secularism, religion and young people; sexuality education). Between us, we have a demonstrated track record of excellence in these fields, evident in our extensive amount of publications, media commentary, international collaboration and grant successes, notably a 2016-2018 Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant investigating 'Young Australians’ perspectives on religions and non-religious worldviews,' (Worldviews of Australian Millennials, WAM) in collaboration with leading global experts from the University of Warwick (UK), and participation in the 'Religion and Diversity Project,' led by the University of Ottawa (Canada). A key aim of the study is to contribute to existing international knowledge about the factors that enhance tolerance of others and social inclusion among young people.

In 2017, the WAM research team conducted focus groups with students in Years 8-10 in diverse Australian secondary schools in three Australian states. These focus groups informed the design of a national, representative telephone survey of 1200 young people aged 13-18; the survey was also conducted in 2017 (margin of error ± 2.8%). In the focus groups and the survey we focused on determining how young people learn about religion and non-religious worldviews. We asked participants about their attitudes towards religious and cultural and diversity, where they learned these attitudes, and, about their experiences of learning about religion and worldviews at school. In the survey we also asked participants about gender and sexual diversity and its place in school education. We think the following findings, based on this research, will be of interest to the current inquiry, particularly with regard to the intersections between the enjoyment of the freedom of religion and other human rights.

Focus Group Findings
The desire to learn about religion and worldviews at school

While they did learn to value cultural diversity, participants felt that there were limited opportunities for education about diverse religions and non-religious worldviews. Some felt that both teachers and students avoided the subject of religion as it was controversial. Participants noted that some faith-based schools, by contrast, do often teach about diverse religions, indigenous cultures, ethics and interreligious understanding.

Participants wanted to learn more about a wide range of diverse religions, to help them navigate their social worlds, given the diverse religious composition of Australia. They particularly wanted to learn more about religious minorities such as Muslims, and Jews to help counter negative prejudices, which many felt were widespread. Some participants also wanted to learn more about Hindus and Buddhists, as they felt that there was a general lack of understanding regarding these minorities among Australian young people. At the same time, some participants thought religion was a sensitive topic that shouldn’t be taught in secular schools, while others wanted teachers to tackle more controversial issues such as religious extremism and gender inequality. Participants also suggested a mix of pedagogical approaches. Some recommended learning from religious experts and site visits, while others preferred a social scientific method delivered in a non-biased way by teachers.
In relation to this inquiry, we would argue that freedom of religion needs to extend to the freedom to learn about diverse religions and worldviews in diverse education contexts. Education about diverse religions and worldviews is, to our minds, key to preservation of, and respect for, religious freedom.

**National Survey Findings: Religious diversity in Australia**

We asked respondents explicitly about religious diversity, respondents said that having people of many faiths makes Australia a better place to live (91.2%). This basically positive orientation to diversity including religious diversity is reflected in the following findings: Respondents said that:

- religious communities should be free to practice (88.1% agree/strongly agree)
- governments have no business banning face coverings (70.8% agree/strongly agree),
- students should be permitted to wear religious jewellery, or religious clothes to school (90% agree/strongly agree).

Respondents also believed people of different faiths experience discrimination because of their religion (81.8%). When asked whether local communities should be able to prevent the construction of mosques or temples in their area 60% of respondents 'disagreed' while 32% 'agreed'. And when asked if people with very strong religious beliefs are too intolerant of others 50% agreed and 38% disagreed. Overall, respondents displayed consensus about the value of diversity, but were concerned that very strong beliefs could promote intolerance. In terms of education about diverse religions, of the students who had received general religions education at school, 93% agreed/strongly agreed it was helpful for them in developing an understanding of other people's religions and 82% agreed/strongly agreed that it's important to study more about diverse religions and worldviews.

**Education about gender and sexuality**

In 2017, opponents and proponents of same-sex marriage championed the wellbeing of children and young people. Both expressed concern that education about gender and sexuality might contravene parents' and young people's rights related to sexual freedom and/or religious freedom. Consequently, we were very keen to gather the perspectives of young people themselves on these issues and their relationship to education provision.

Respondents, regardless of background, education and geographic location, displayed much consensus in this area. We found that only 32% of respondents had received any education about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people. 66% of respondents received no lessons about LGBTQI people. Yet our respondents overwhelmingly expressed support for the inclusion of LGBTQI issues in education, regardless of their school context. Over 85% of respondents thought that they had the right to learn about LGBTQI people at school. Over 80% thought that sexuality education provided during secondary school should include information that is relevant to LGBTQI people and over 80% expressed support for same sex marriage. Our data also concords with previous Australian research indicating that young people who are religious are demanding that their schools address issues related to gender and sexuality.

We understand the importance of balancing competing claims regarding religious freedom and sexual freedom. In the realm of education, an overwhelming majority of our participants were emphatic about their support for education that reflects their attitudes towards sexual freedom. They do not see such education as limiting their religious freedom.