RELIGION, PERSONALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND TEXTUAL AUTHORITY AMONG CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

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INTRODUCTION

The connection between religion and human rights is a matter of both theoretical and practical importance of special relevance within religiously diverse societies. The international empirical survey initiated and co-ordinated by Professor Johannes A van der Ven from Radboud University Nijmegen provides an invaluable opportunity to examine the attitudes of young people to major themes of human rights and to test empirically theories regarding the connection between religion and human rights among young people growing up within religiously diverse contexts. Set within this international project the present study draws on data provided by young people in England and Wales to examine the comparative power of three factors to predict individual differences in attitudes towards human rights, namely personal factors, psychological factors, and religious factors.

The theoretical framework for this empirical enquiry is established by the consideration of four issues. The first issue concerns the conceptualisation, operationalization and measurement of attitudes toward human rights appropriate for application as the dependent variable in a study among adolescents. The second issue concerns the specification of psychological factors relevant to the exploration of individual differences in attitudes toward human rights and to the exploration of individual differences in religiosity. The third issue concerns the specification of religious factors relevant to the exploration of individual differences in attitude toward human rights. The fourth issue concerns the specification of personal factors relevant to the exploration of individual difference in attitudes toward human rights and the interaction of these factors with the measurement of psychological factors and religious factors.

A major strength of the recent study of people’s attitudes towards human rights conducted among Muslims and Christians in Palestine and Germany and reported by Webb, Ziebertz, Curran, and Reindl (in press) is precisely that the study employs three robust scales accessing human rights across the three generations. In that study generation one human rights were assessed by a four-item scale focusing on political issues; generation two human rights were assessed by an eight-item scale focusing on socio-economic issues; and generation three human rights were assessed by a four-item scale focusing on environmental issue. The psychometric properties of these three scales were established among a sample of 1,492 students, of whom 691 identified as Christians and 338 as Muslims from Germany and 150 as Christians and 313 as Muslims from Palestine. Their ages ranged between 15 and 20.

The four-item scale concerned with political rights embraced the following themes and generated an alpha coefficient of .66:

- The police should not use force against political demonstrations;
- The government should not pass a law forbidding all forms of political protest;
- The government should guarantee political refugees freedom of travel;
- The government should provide a decent standard of housing for political refugees.

The eight-item scale concerned with socio-economic rights embraced the following themes and generated an alpha coefficient of .86:

- The government should provide a job for everyone who wants one;
- The government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed;
- The government should provide health care for the sick;