Youth and religion is an ambiguously researched field—although some research does exist, there is a paucity of research concerning certain demographics of teenagers. Especially in America, most of the research is centered on Christianity and religion—thus leaving other religions or religious groups censured under the label "Other Religions." This gap has unfortunately led to a sort of misunderstanding about youth who follow one of these so-called "Other Religions" that can lead to disassociation or persecution that comes from simple ignorance. This proposed study seeks to answer two questions: 1) What programs do non-Christian religious youth groups in the Middle Tennessee area offer for the spiritual development of their youth and 2) How do these programs impact the daily life of youth? The outcome should lift the bias and allow for a better understanding of how youth from diverse religious traditions develop spiritually and how that in turn affects other aspects of their development. This proposed study aims to contribute to the further education of the average American on these religions.

Introduction

One study, Giordan’s (2009) “Youth and Religion in the Aosta Valley,” explicitly includes additional religions beyond the regional majority (in Giordan’s case, Catholic Christianity). However, this study did not take place in the United States but rather in Italy. While it provides some helpful comparative data, it is not directly applicable to our understanding of religion in the United States. Additionally, Giordan’s questions are directed towards a Catholic audience and include questions such as “How often do you attend mass?” This seemingly harmless question risks alienating non-Catholic participants. That being said, what is needed is a study, something that cannot be said for every study of youth and religion.

The National Study of Youth and Religion includes non-Christian religions; however, the most recent publication of this study was in 2008 (Denton, Pearce, and Smith). Needless to say, American society has changed within the last decade, making this study obsolete. This two-step study conducted in 2002 and 2003 did offer an outstanding methodology including questions that allowed for an accurate understanding of how adolescents understand their religions. However, their methodology was outdated. This proposed study aims to develop a study similar to that being conducted in Giordan’s research, that being a step study that focuses exclusively on church youth groups within American Christianity. Through her research, Snell Herzog seeks to find an understanding of the impact of socioeconomic status on youth groups and how youth ministers interact with the youth of many groups. Snell Herzog (2012) finds that youth ministers sometimes have trouble getting teens to see their participation and membership within the church as meaningful. She also states, “Results indicate that youth ministers evoke a great deal of ambiguity in understanding how to structure and implement religious youth groups” (Snell, 2012). Based on Snell Herzog’s research, this project seeks to determine how these results from Christian youth groups relate to non-Christian or immigrant Christian youth events.

Methods

This proposed study originally involved two forms of data collection: recorded interviews and an online survey. Potential participants were recipients of a survey comprised of religious leaders associated with local religious centers (temples, synagogues, mosques, churches). They were contacted via email or telephone, whichever method was available via the religious institution’s publicly posted contact information. If the leaders were available to meet, an in-person interview was conducted. Each religious leader was asked the same set of questions, regardless of religion. Audio recordings were administered and transcribed in order to compare accurate qualitative answers after the interview was completed. In addition to open-ended questions, the interview also included quantitative questions in order to more easily compare differences between religious groups.

Following the interview, the religious leaders were to be asked to complete an online survey in order to have further quantitative data that is comparable. The same online survey that religious leaders completed was also going to be distributed among college faith communities to be answered on a voluntary basis. This qualitative and quantitative data, combined with outside readings, was intended to offer a better understanding of how religion impacts non-Christian or immigrant Christian teenagers. However, there were no connections made between the primary investigator and college religious organizations despite several efforts through both student leader and staff leader contact and therefore this portion of the research was unable to be conducted.

Despite these setbacks in both more quantitative methods of analysis, five qualitative interviews were conducted with youth religious leaders from the following religions: Coptic Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and Reformed Judaism. These interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and covered several key points: “Do you think that these religions have any special importance or impact on their teens?”, “What are other sources available for your teens to develop spiritually outside of your group?”, “What are some of the other religions you deal with at your house of worship?”, “Can you describe a time when a teen had to make a decision that their religion played a role in?”, and “Please describe how at your house of worship importance is placed on the different religions in their daily life.”

Conclusions

Ultimately, this project hopes to counteract misunderstandings about youth from diverse religious backgrounds and reduce the discrimination and persecution they face in a predominantly Christian society. It was discovered that minority religious youth do feel a sort of exclusion when discussing daily life with peers both in and out of school. Being in the “Bible-Belt” leaves little room for religions other than Christianity to be mentioned on a daily basis; however, there is noteworthy solidarity within these religions as well as a desire to be involved with and share in the larger community of Middle Tennessee. Additionally, despite any difficulty in community of religion with the majority of people, youth of these religions feel they gain not only religious development but also sociocultural development as well which benefits them as a whole and allows for more understanding across cultures. This research, while not conducted as intended originally, still provides a thorough and significant amount of information to support that minority religious youth develop a camaraderie within their own religion and reaches outside of their religion in order to educate others and for meaningful relationships.

References


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