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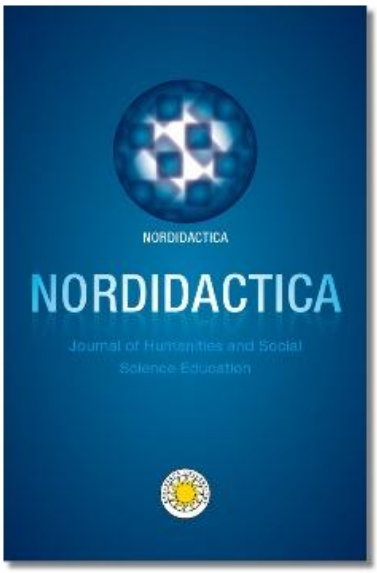

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Measuring the instrumental aspects of religious literacy of Estonian basic school graduates

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from a 2022 survey that assessed the religious literacy of Estonian basic school graduates. The goal was to explore their attitudes toward various religious phenomena and their ability to navigate situations related to religious matters. The study involved 392 participants from large urban and small rural schools across Estonia. To conduct the survey, an original instrument was developed, taking into account the Estonian religious landscape, the National Curriculum for Basic Schools, the educational model of religious literacy by Matthew Francis and Adam Dinham, the characterization of religious literacy by Diane Moore, Francis, and Dinham, and Robert Jackson's definition of religious competence. The results highlight the state of religious literacy in Estonia, one of the world's least religious countries, with minimal public education on religions and worldviews. The survey indicates that part of Estonian basic school graduates lack the competencies to operate in situations requiring religious literacy.

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS LITERACY, INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCIES, EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS, SECULAR SOCIETY

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Introduction – Measuring and Defining Religious Literacy

In the mid-20th century, sociologist Vladimir de Lissovoy developed a program to enhance religious literacy. This program aimed to improve understanding of religious phenomena and familiarize future teachers with Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, along with key sociological principles related to the study of organized religion. The sociology course aimed to train future teachers to comprehend the value system in American community life. This project aimed to provide accurate knowledge, correct misunderstandings, emphasize common ground among religions, and foster acceptance and understanding. Before the course, the students had limited knowledge of religious concepts based on their scores on the eight-question Religious Knowledge Quiz. However, by the end of the course, their knowledge had significantly improved (de Lissovoy, 1954).

Religious literacy became more urgent in multicultural societies after the 9/11 terror attacks, almost 50 years later. Prothero (2007) issued a warning, "Religious illiteracy is... dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil." He began his course by giving his students a Religious Literacy Quiz to gauge their knowledge of religion. Like Lissovoy, he found that the majority of his students did not pass the quiz. Furthermore, he aimed to bridge his students' knowledge with the reality of their society, just like Lissovoy.

The Pew Research Center administered a comprehensive religious knowledge test in 2019. Each question had four answers. The number of correct answers varied by question difficulty, content, and respondent profile in a sample of 11,000 adult respondents, enabling them draw more insightful conclusions. The majority of respondents knew the Bible, Christianity, and Islam, but not Judaism or other religions. People with numerous religious connections did well on the survey, while young adults and ethnic minorities had the lowest religious knowledge (Mitchell, 2020).

A comparative sociological study conducted by Bruno Michon as part of his 2011 PhD thesis examined the religious knowledge of French and German students. In contrast to the other surveys mentioned, his focus was on understanding adolescents' knowledge of religions. Michon (2011) studied the religious knowledge, sources, and motivations of French and German adolescents. According to Michon's study, adolescents' understanding of religions may differ from the religious references commonly emphasized in Christian societies, suggesting that they may not necessarily lack knowledge about religions (Michon, 2019).

While most surveys about religious literacy focus on its academic aspects, several comprehensive surveys explore its instrumental aspects (attitudes, dispositions and skills). The 2006-2009 REDCo project sampled attitudes of over 8000 adolescents from eight European countries, including Estonia, on personal religious experience, social dimensions of religion, and religion in school (Weisse, 2009). A follow-up study was conducted in 2012 (Kallioniemi et al., 2017). In 2014, Anuleena Kimanen and Arto Kallioniemi assessed inter-worldview dialogue skills and attitudes of 15-17-year-old Finnish students, examining their preparation for discourse, acceptance challenges,

questions for the religious/non-religious Other, and tactics for mutual understanding (Kimanen & Kallioniemi, 2018). In 2019, the Pew Research Center surveyed European public opinion on religious and other minorities (Mitchell, 2020), which is an instrumental aspect of religious literacy (Dinham & Jones, 2010).

Recognizing that survey participants fall short of expected outcomes and society's need for citizens with at least a basic grasp of religious literacy (Hannam et al., 2020), discussions focus on the societal impact, potential to strengthen social cohesion, and relationship to broader education, as well as religious literacy formulation and clarification. Critically examining religious literacy's importance illuminates the discourse. Thus, Johannes C. Wolfhart disputes the premise that religious literacy benefits individuals and society due to a lack of empirical evidence (Wolfhart, 2022).

Literacy practices reflect the fluidity and evolution of individuals and societies (Barton et al., 2000). Religious literacy is complicated by religion's dynamic nature, individual variations, contextual nature, and interconnectedness with all aspects of life (Moore, 2014). Definitions of religious literacy vary in emphasis and scope. Some scholars suggest using more precise terms to better convey its goals. David G. Robertson suggests "Religion literacy" to convey knowledge of religion, its legal, and social implications (Robertson, 2022). This term examines the effects of terms like "sacred," "ritual," and "cult" on practices, the impact of culturally specific legal structures, and the influence of communication technology on religious forms. It acknowledges that religion is just one part of an individual's identity, influenced by multiple factors, and that religious issues are complex. Martha Shaw suggests "worldview literacy" to encompass religious, non-religious, organized, and personal beliefs, embracing diverse ways of being and challenging simplistic religious views (Shaw, 2022).

Two of the most significant definitions with implications for educational policies come from the American scholar Diane Moore and British scholars Adam Dinham, Matthew Francis, and Stephen H. Jones. Moore’s definition has been adopted by the American Academy of Religion (AAR): *religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess:*

1. *A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices, and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical, and cultural contexts.*
2. *The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place.*

Religious literacy, according to Dinham and Jones (2010), is the ability to recognize religious faith as a legitimate and important area for public attention, a general knowledge of at least some religious traditions, and the ability to learn about others to avoid stereotypes and contribute to an inclusive society that respects and values diversity.

The discussion on religious literacy in general education highlights its connection to educational policies, priorities, traditions, and cultural contexts within a country. This

has sparked discourse on the role of religious literacy in general education. Kerstin von Brömssen, Heinz Ivkovits, and Graeme Nixon (2020) examined religious literacy in the religious education curricula of Austria, Sweden, and Scotland. Their analysis revealed distinct approaches in these countries' curricula, shaping content and learning goals. This indicates that religious literacy is contextually constructed rather than universally defined.

The debate over religious literacy's timing, method, and format in mainstream education refines and defines religious literacy. Patricia Hannam and colleagues (2020) state that students need two types of religious literacy: functional, to navigate a religious domain, and critical, to explore its fundamental aspects, authority, laws, and rules. This literacy spans multiple disciplines and should be a core educational goal, not just part of religious education (Hannam et al., 2020). Daniel Enstedt (2022) claims that Swedish religious education and religious studies curricula do not adhere to religious literacy principles. Religions are portrayed as empirical entities that do not exist in the real world, perpetuating incorrect or biased interpretations instead of promoting the skills to recognize and understand how religion is integrated into various contexts. He advises following AAR guidelines for religious literacy, avoiding misleading concepts like "world religion" and "religion," and not focusing on ethical models in RE lessons to avoid ambiguity between religious and moral education. He also suggests aligning RE with religious studies research to avoid "reproducing wrong, even prejudicial, understandings of religiosity" (Enstedt, 2022, p. 44).

For developing religious literacy in an educational setting, Dinham and Francis (2015) outlined a four-part sequential and interconnected framework. These stages begin with exploring religion as a categorization to grasp its framework. Students then engage with their personal inclinations to understand their unique perspectives and assumptions. Next, they learn the central content of religious topics according to the context in which knowledge is needed. Finally, all four elements of religious literacy enable people to develop the skills needed to live together peacefully in a religiously diverse world (Francis & Dinham, 2015).

Shaw (2019) refined these stages into an educational model where the four parts occur simultaneously and in parallel. She uses the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental aspects of religious education (Jackson, 2015) to support her argument. Intrinsic (academic) goals focus on how religion is "inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience" (Moore, 2014), and instrumental goals focus on each student's personal and social growth (Jackson, 2015). In this model, the academic content of religious literacy includes categories and knowledge, while the instrumental content covers dispositions and skills (Shaw, 2019).

Robert Jackson has outlined attitudes associated with religious competence by integrating the religious dimension into the triad of knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for fostering intercultural competence, detailed in the Council of Europe publication (Jackson, 2014). This integration includes respect for various viewpoints, openness to different religions and cultures, willingness to learn, suspend judgment, and tolerate ambiguity, valuing religious and cultural diversity, flexibility in behavior,

reflecting on one's beliefs, learning from others, and making balanced critiques of different religious and non-religious positions (ibid.).

According to Jackson, skills for developing the religious aspect of intercultural competence include listening to and interacting with members of other religions, collecting reliable information about other religions, mediating religious exchanges, empathy, multiperspectivity, discussion skills, evaluating different perspectives (including one's own), awareness of one's prejudices, and flexibility in cultural and communicative behavior (ibid.).

These descriptions show how interdependent and overlapping the dimensions of dispositions and skills are. Dispositions toward religion, being reflective and ongoing, make learning religious literacy a process of personal development. Students are active participants in overcoming stereotypes, forming personal attitudes, and becoming more open-minded and self-aware (Shaw, 2019). Soules and Jafralie argue that attitudes toward different worldviews and religions evolve into public expressions. Illiterate expressions in the public arena result from poor knowledge of religious matters and the inability to perceive religion in the school context. Unexamined biases and prejudices also contribute to the issue (Soules & Jafralie, 2021).

Shaw defines religious literacy as the skills of encountering across differences from a self-aware perspective, skills that are then applied to any setting, including the workplace, and brings out the integration between dispositions and skills when characterizing the specific skill connected to religious literacy—the discernment that emerges when a religiously literate person is capable of practicing discernment toward matters connected to religions and worldviews, being open minded to the potential wisdom within the subject matter after self-examining their own dispositions toward a certain religion or worldview (Shaw, 2019).

Moore emphasizes reflection on one's personal knowledge, including prejudices and assumptions (Moore, 2014). Despite varying definitions, religious literacy universally aids in effective interaction with people from other cultures (Stewart et al., 2020). Knowing about religion and people's feelings about it enhances this skill. The AAR guidelines (n.d.) define religious literacy as discerning and analyzing religion's role in personal, social, political, professional, and cultural life. It equips students with the skills and knowledge to be active citizens, work well with others in various settings, and reflect on their commitments to others and themselves.

This article focuses on two key aspects of religious literacy: attitudes toward religions and skills in this domain. Findings are drawn from a 2022 survey of Estonian basic school graduates. The study aims to describe religious literacy among Estonian teens, compare it with similar research, and provide real-world data on attitudes and skills. It offers empirical material in a context where students mostly lack religious education and do not encounter religious phenomena like peers in more multicultural settings.

Current paper is part of a broader study investigating the state of religious literacy in Estonia through formal education, including the setting and students' competencies. It follows articles on religious literacy in Estonian national curricula and findings on academic aspects of religious literacy, such as how well Estonian basic school graduates

distinguish religion as a discursive category and their knowledge of world religions and the Estonian religious landscape.

2. Estonian religious landscape and learning about religions

In the last decade, Estonia, with a population of around 1,366,500 (Statistics Estonia, 2024), has become more diverse. The number of nationalities has risen from 180 to 211, and mother tongues from 157 to 243 (Statistics Estonia, 2023). However, this diversity is not reflected in religious affiliation. Based on 2021 census data, only 29 percent of respondents identify with a religion, with the proportion dropping by more than half among youth aged 15–29 (Table 1). These results are consistent with the 2011 and 2000 censuses (Statistics Estonia 2021). The exception is the Muslim population, whose percentage of followers aged 15–29 is higher than in the overall population (0.9 percent versus 0.5 percent) and is rapidly growing. The Muslim population increased from 5,800 in the 2021 census (Statistics Estonia, 2021) to around 10,000 in 2024 (Kaitsepolitsei, 2024). In 2024, with 500-600 Muslim students in Estonia, the forecast suggests an additional 1,000 students (ibid.).

TABLE I.[1]

The Religious Composition of the Estonian Population. Source: Statistics Estonia 2022.[2]

	All age groups		Age group 15-29	
Total population of the group	1114030	%	201100	%
Feels an affiliation to a religion	321340	28.9	27840	13.9
..Lutheran	86030	7.7	4060	2
..Orthodox	181770	16.3	16000	8
..Roman Catholic	8690	0.8	980	0.5
..Other Christians	21920	2	3170	1.6
..Muslim	5800	0.5	1780	0.9
..Other religions	17140	1.6	1840	0.9
Does not feel an affiliation to any religion	650900	58.4	145450	72.3
Refused to answer	126500	11.4	23900	11.9
Religious affiliation unknown	15280	1.4	3910	1.9

[1] The final figures may differ from the total sum because they have been rounded to the nearest ten.
[2] See also Sooniste, 2024.

Religious education was reintroduced to Estonian schools after independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s but remained optional (Schihalejev, 2012). More than 30 years later, fewer than 3 percent of basic schools offer religious instruction. Estonian students also lack courses on ethics, worldview, or alternatives fulfilling religious education goals. The National Basic School Curriculum, especially its foreign languages syllabi, fosters positive attitudes towards religious topics but does not explicitly mention religion or promote religious tolerance (Sooniste & Schihalejev, 2022).

In 2022, the Estonian Education Information System listed 486 basic municipal schools. Religious education (RE) was offered in six schools during the study's initial stage, five in the second stage, and seven in the third, making up less than 3 percent of all schools (Schihalejev, 2020). Additionally, Estonia's 12 private Christian schools offer confessional RE based on their individual curricula and worldview (Eesti Kristlike Erakoolide Liit, n.d.).

3. Method

3.1 The instrument

The survey used an original tool designed to assess religious literacy in Estonia, considering its religious landscape and alignment with the National Curriculum for Basic Schools. To enable comparisons, some questions were adapted from the REDCo Project (Valk et al., 2009) and the U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz (Atske, 2020), but most were tailored to Estonia. The tool drew on Francis and Dinham's model of religious literacy, targeting categories, dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Respondents were also invited to add comments. This article examines two instrumental elements of the survey: disposition and skills related to religious literacy.

Unlike the REDCo project, the survey did not explore students' individual beliefs or religious observances but focused on their attitudes toward various life phenomena. This approach has limitations, such as not examining the origins of attitudes or experiences shaping negative perceptions. However, implementing self-examination questions was challenging, and given the low emphasis on religious education in Estonian schools, there was concern students might be hesitant to answer personal questions. The survey aimed to understand current religious thoughts, feelings, and beliefs from a social perspective, studying how people form religious beliefs in society.

The REDCo questionnaire was used for the following questions about the student's dispositions toward religion in school and the role of religious education:

Religion and school:

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Do not agree 1…2…3…4…5 Totally agree

1. school menus should consider students' religious beliefs.
2. students should have the right to wear modest religious symbols at school

(crosses, etc.).
3. students should have the right to wear more visible religious symbols at school.
4. students should have a right to miss some kind of lesson for religious reasons.
5. schools should allow students to pray or meditate if they wish.

Religion and education:

To what extent do you agree that studying religions helps a person to:

Do not agree 1…2…3…4…5 Totally agree

1. understand others and live peacefully together.
2. understand the history of their country and the world.
3. understand contemporary events.
4. form values.
5. learn about your own worldview.

These questions were then supplemented with questions about how students feel about religious people and how they act in different settings, with an aim to cover the religions that are more familiar to the students and also more remote ones.

Dispositions toward religious people in the classroom:

How would you feel (positively, negatively, neutrally; I do not know this religion) if your new classmate were:

- A Christian
- A Jew
- A Muslim
- A Buddhist
- A Rastafari

Dispositions toward religious phenomena in society:

- How would you feel (positively, negatively, neutrally) if a Muslim family came to live in your neighborhood and wore clothing that was characteristic of their own culture?
- How would you feel (positively, negatively, or neutrally) if a Syrian Christian culture center were built in your town?
- Famous hip-hop artist Khaled Siddiq is coming to give a concert in Estonia. As many of his songs have Islamic content, several protests are being planned. How would you feel (positively, negatively, or neutrally) about the protests?
- How would you feel (positively, negatively, or neutrally) about the policy that allows young Estonians to reject military service for religious reasons and serve in another capacity instead?

Skills, a complex element of religious literacy, encompass managing real-life situations related to religious diversity, discussing religious matters, having positive dispositions toward unfamiliar religious phenomena, and basic knowledge about some traditions. These were measured with open-ended questions providing qualitative data.

The questions were designed based on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes outlined by Jackson and Moore, focusing on openness, communication with people from other religions, collecting reliable information, respecting cultural diversity, understanding religious manifestations, and interpreting religious expressions in cultural contexts. Additionally, critical inquiry and positive engagement with differences were assessed, as outlined by Shaw (2019). Consequently, responses indicating positive interactions with the subject suggest higher levels of religious literacy.

The hypothetical questions were realistic for basic school graduates who have already had experience accommodating exchange students.

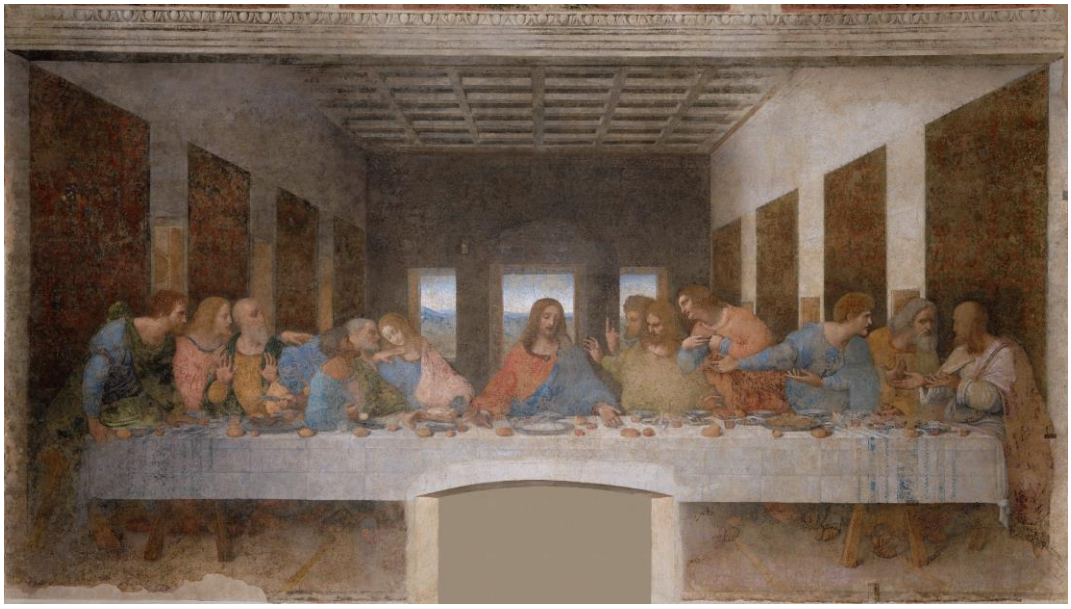
The following questions addressed students' ability to manage actual situations concerning religious traditions and diversity:

1. Exchange student Amila from Sri Lanka is coming to live with your family for a year. According to the 2012 census, 70.2 percent of Sri Lanka's population is Buddhist; 12.2 percent is Hindu; 9.7 percent is Muslim; and 7.4 percent is Christian. How would you prepare for Amila's arrival? What should you research and consider before she comes?

2. How should a Sri Lankan student prepare herself for life in Estonia, in your school, and in your family? What are the important holidays and traditions here, and how are they celebrated?

3. Amila from Sri Lanka sees a picture of this painting in your textbook and asks you to explain to her is depicted in the painting and why it is important. What would you tell her about it?

   Source: Wikipedia



4. Now Amila shows you a picture of Dambulla Temple from her hometown. What do you think is depicted in the picture? What questions would you ask about this picture to learn more about Amila's faith and culture?

Source: Wikimedia commons

3.2 Sample

The survey targeted graduates from 169 basic schools, aiming for 374 respondents to achieve a 95 percent confidence level. Twenty-nine schools across Estonia participated, contributing 392 respondents (191 male, 168 female, and 33 identifying as "other") from both urban and rural areas. With around 13,000 graduates annually, the margin of error is approximately 4.87 percent. The study focused on public schools following the Estonian National Curriculum for Basic Schools to assess its effectiveness in preparing students for a religiously diverse world. Private schools, which follow their own curricula, were excluded. Participants, aged 15–16, were basic school graduates, the minimum mandatory education level as per the Ministry of Education (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, n.d.).

Among the respondents, 56 had learned about religions in the past three years, 38 had studied religions earlier, and 298 had never studied religion. According to the Information System of Estonian Education (EEIS, 2021), only 3 percent of basic schools offer elective courses in religious education. However, 24 percent of survey respondents had received some instruction about religions, suggesting that schools offering these courses were more likely to participate in the survey, raising concerns about the 95% confidence level. The voluntary nature of the survey led to varying response numbers across question groups. In the dispositions section, the sample was 380–382, with a margin of error of 4.85 percent. The skills section had the fewest responses (357), with a margin of error of 5.12 percent.

The primary sources of religious knowledge for respondents were formal education (school) and social media, each cited by about 56 percent of respondents. Other common sources included internet sites (46 percent), travel experiences (36 percent),

and books (30 percent). Home (26 percent) and friends (21 percent) were the least frequently mentioned sources.[3]

3.3 Procedure

The survey was conducted in 2022, following approval from Tartu University's Research Ethics Committee. Invitations with research objectives and the concept of religious literacy were sent to school leaders and social studies teachers. Schools that found the survey relevant administered it during social studies lessons, where students completed it online. This setting may have influenced responses, a potential limitation. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with the option to withdraw at any time. Data was collected using LimeSurvey and analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics. This article does not analyze the comments but uses them to illustrate responses. Open-ended questions were categorized and the number of participants in each category was quantified.

4. Results

4.1 Dispositions toward religions

Dispositions toward religious education, encountering religious phenomena at school, and religious people were measured on a 5-point scale, where 1 indicated "does not agree at all" and 5 indicated "strongly agree." Results are rounded to whole numbers.

4.1.1 Dispositions toward religious phenomena at school

The first set of questions examined dispositions toward religious phenomena at school. There were 381 respondents, but 380 responded to questions about overt religious symbols and religious exemptions from some lessons. The results show that dispositions vary by question (Chart 1).

[3] See also Sooniste, 2024

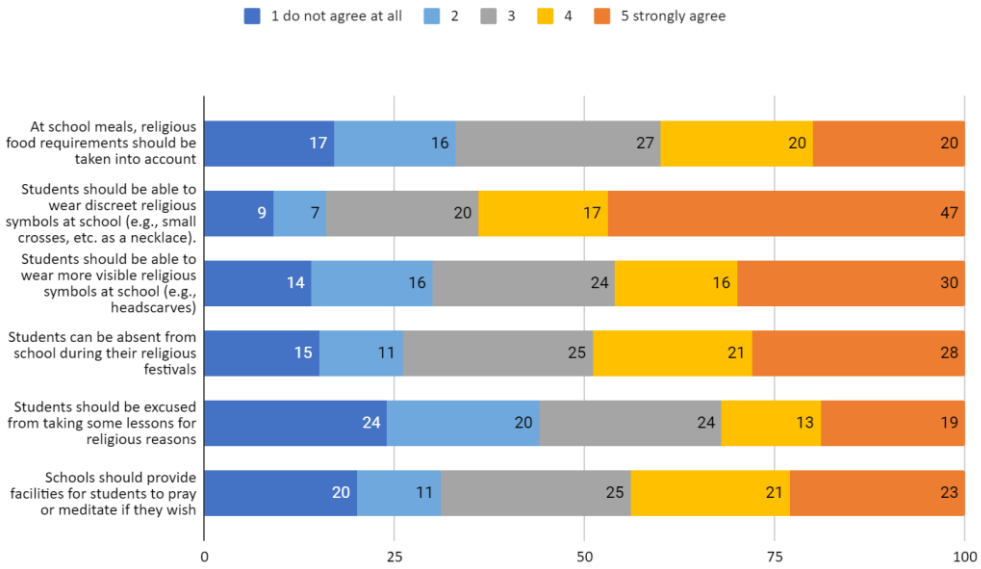


CHART I

Dispositions toward religious phenomena in school. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

As in previous research (Schihalejev, 2009), students felt strongly about the right to wear modest religious symbols at school. Sixty-four percent agreed (17 percent) or strongly agreed (47 percent), 20 percent were neutral, and 16 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. *Symbols should not be prohibited unless they symbolize the belief in the goodness of war or some other provocative subject*, was one comment.

Respondents agreed that missing school on religious holidays should be permissible, with 49 percent positive answers (28 percent strongly agree, 21 percent agree). There were 25 percent neutral responses and 26 percent negative answers (11 percent disagree, 15 percent strongly disagree). *One can have a right to have a free day, but not without an obligation to learn*, was a typical comment. Responses to the question about obvious religious symbols were similar, with 46 percent of students taking a strongly agreeing (30 percent) and agreeing (16 percent), 24 respondents taking a neutral position, and 16 percent disagreeing and 14 percent strongly disagreeing. One student added that *students who wear visible religious symbols should explain why they are wearing them. There is a threat of being bullied.*

The remaining three questions about conditions suggesting religious people deserve special treatment or privileges (e.g., being absent from some lessons) received less positive support. *Everybody should mind their own business. If someone wants to pray, then he or she does it. One can dress like she/he wants to. The school should not provide them with special conditions (everyone should do it by themselves)*, commented one student.

The statement that the school should provide facilities for the students wishing to pray or meditate if they wish was the most popular of the three, with 21 percent

agreeing, 23 percent strongly agreeing, 25 percent neutral, 11 percent disagreeing, and 20 percent strongly disagreeing. *If a student is religious and has his or her own traditions, he or she should follow them. Even if she or he is at school, he or she should have the possibility to pray or do something else that is connected to the religion,* added one respondent.

The question about religious accommodations the school menu scored 40 percent support (20 percent agree and 20 percent strongly agree), 27 percent neutral, and 33 percent (16 percent disagree and 17 percent strongly disagree). *I personally think that if a student has a strong desire to do the abovementioned things, then she or he should have a right to that. But I also think that one should not be so selective. For example, if a student refuses to eat meat or something in connection with their religion, but the school menu contains meat, then he or she should just not eat the meat, and no one should make a special meal for him or her. Or she or he should take along his or her own meal if he or she really refuses to eat the school lunch.* Estonian students were most sensitive about the hypothetical possibility of being absent from a lesson for religious reasons. This was the only question where disagreeing answers exceeded agreeing ones. Only 32 percent supported the possibility (13 percent agreed, 19 percent strongly agreed), 25 percent were neutral, and 43 percent were against it (20 percent disagreed, 23 percent strongly disagreed). *If schools really did that, I would take all the possible religions and have all kinds of free days, etc.*, commented one respondent.

4.1.2 Dispositions toward religious education

The second set of questions addressed dispositions toward religious education (n = 382, except for questions 3 and 5, where n = 381). Since there is no RE in schools, the question was hypothetical, aiming to gauge if respondents see RE as important. This hypothetical context likely led to the fewest comments (23, excluding *"I do not know," "I do not want to comment,"* etc.). Results are shown as percentages (Chart 2).

The results show that although few students in Estonia take religious education courses, basic school graduates highly value it. Sixty-eight percent agreed (26 percent) or totally agreed (42 percent) that religious education helps understand others and coexist peacefully. Almost 20 percent were neutral, and only 12 percent disagreed. *By studying others' religions, you could understand why they behave like they do. But I think that even without it, one could still live together with other religions,* was one comment. This statement received the most support from the respondents.

The second question in the section about the role of RE in understanding history received equal numbers of yes answers (68 percent) and no answers (12 percent) as the previous one. However, fewer respondents (35 percent) totally agreed with the question.

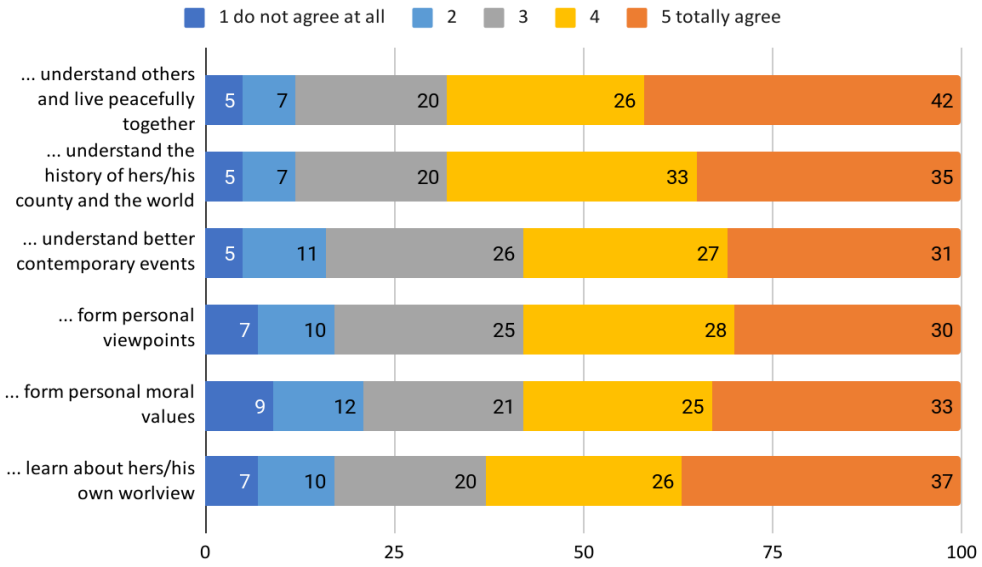


CHART II

Dispositions toward RE To what extent do you agree that studying religion helps one to

The third question, about the role of RE in understanding current events, received fewer positive answers (58 percent) and more negative responses (16 percent), indicating students generally see less connection between religious issues and the modern world. *"To understand better contemporary events, everyone understands things their own way anyway,"* remarked one respondent.

Of three questions addressing the impact of RE on personal development, the one about RE aiding in learning about one's own worldview received the most support: 63 percent agreed, 20 percent were neutral, and 17 percent disagreed. *You will learn to know better about yourself and your culture*, added a respondent. Respondents tended to agree that RE helps both to form personal viewpoints (58 percent agreeing, 25 percent neutral, 17 percent disagreeing) and moral values (58 percent agreeing, 21 percent neutral, 21 percent disagreeing). *I think that RE helps one to be good. I personally do not believe in a religious way, but I think that it (RE) is a good possibility to change people*, added one student. Some remarks addressed the whole set of questions. *My beliefs made me who I am. God gave me the reference points in this life so that I can live in peace with all the people*, answered a respondent from the viewpoint of the subject of the questions.

4.1.3 Dispositions toward religious people

The second set of questions about dispositions toward religious people (n = 382) revealed a link between attitudes, common prejudices, and familiarity with religious affiliation, showing a dominant neutral disposition toward all religions (Chart 3).

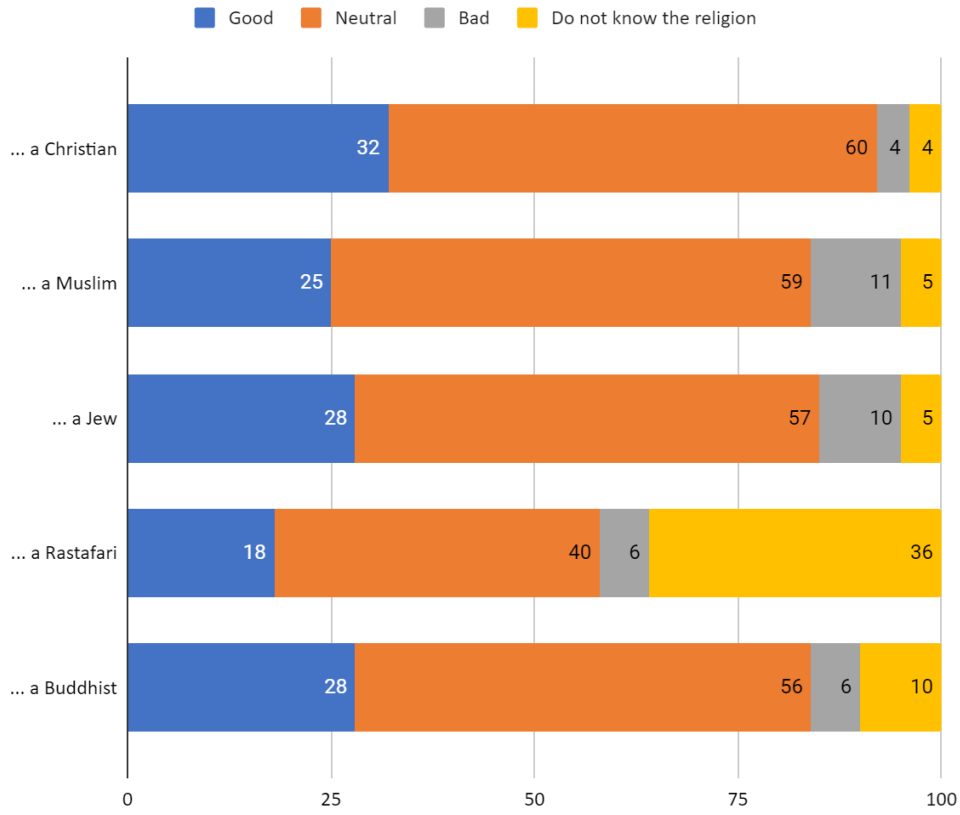


CHART III

Dispositions toward religious people How would you feel if your new classmate were

Of the respondents, 92 percent said they were open to the most common religion in Estonia, Christianity. Of those, 32 percent were positive, 60 percent were neutral, and only 4 percent were negative. The same number of people said they did not know the religion. Students from three other world religions mentioned in the survey got almost evenly accepting dispositions: a Jewish classmate got 85 percent (positive 28 percent and neutral 57 percent), a Muslim classmate scored 84 percent (positive 25 percent and neutral 59 percent), and a Buddhist classmate got 84 percent (28 percent positive and 56 percent neutral). However, biases against Jews and especially Muslims were apparent in the number of negative dispositions. Muslims scored the most negative responses—almost 11 percent—and Jews just over 10 percent. *I have very negative experiences with one Muslim family, but I am ready to give them another chance because people are differen*t, commented one respondent. *I just do not like Jews*, and *Jews would like to take my money*, were typical. Five percent of respondents claimed to know nothing about Islam, and another 5 percent were unfamiliar with Judaism. Rastafarians received the least favorable dispositions, with 58 percent either positive (18 percent) or neutral (40 percent). Although 36 percent were unfamiliar with Rastafarianism, only 6 percent held negative dispositions, fewer than for Jews and Muslims. *Although I do not know such a religion as Rastafari, it does not mean that it*

should not welcome him or her well. I think it would be great to meet a person with a different lifestyle and hear from themselves what and how they are doing, commented one respondent. The comments about religious people in general had mostly positive but also some negative connotations. *I do not understand why I should treat someone differently just because he or she has a different religion. It seems very childish somehow, but then again, some children behave more thoughtfully than most adults*, and: *I do not care what kind of student is in my class; if he/she has a good personality, I would try to befriend him/her*, were some typical.

4.1.4 Dispositions toward religion in society

Dispositions toward religion in society encounters with religious phenomena across cultural settings. The number of qualitative comments suggests that respondents were more engaged when answering questions about hypothetical situations. A prevalent neutral attitude was observed in these responses (Chart 4).

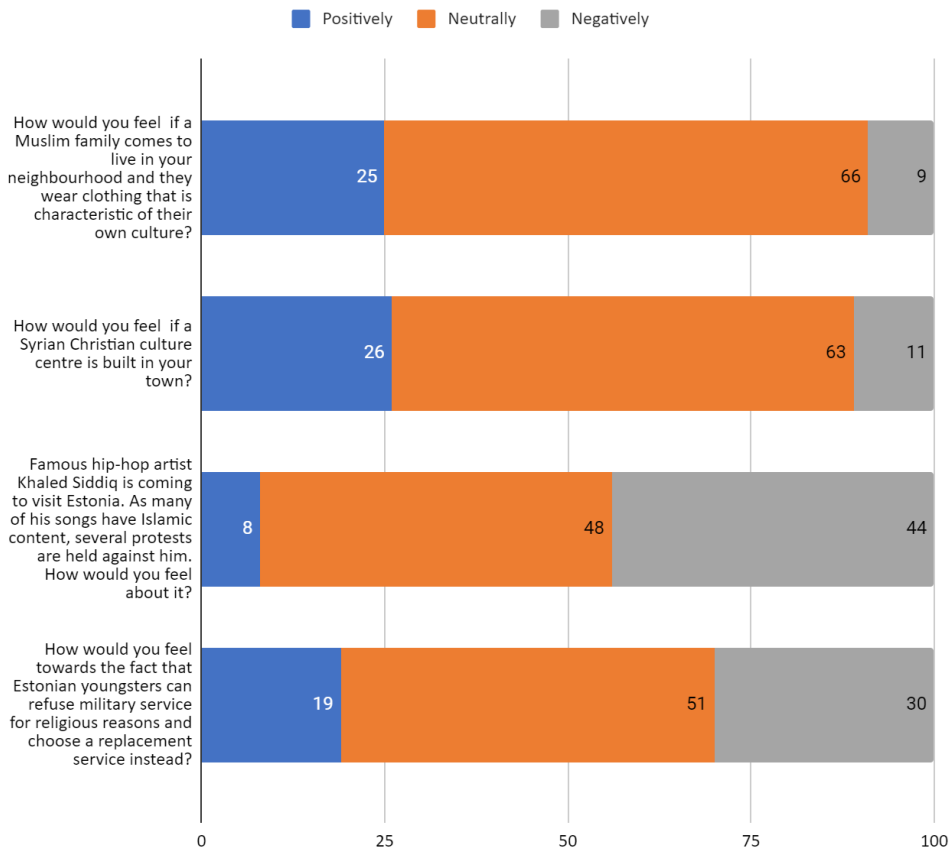


CHART IV

Dispositions toward religious phenomena in society

The question about a Muslim family moving into one's neighborhood got 66 percent neutral responses, 25 percent positive, and 9 percent negative. Fifty-two percent of the respondents added qualitative comments. *It is not my concern what they believe or what they wear, as long as nobody wants to harm them and they do not want to harm others,* was one typical neutral response. *I would accept them with interest. I would go and try to talk with them and somehow indicate that I could be their friend and helper in the neighborhood,* is a sample of positive comment. Prejudice and/or racism were the main reasons for the negative ones.

The question about building a Syrian Christian culture center in one's town yielded results similar to the previous question but with 2 percent more negative responses, indicating increased sensitivity. 49 percent of respondents added comments. Concerns included the center attracting more immigrants, potentially changing the village's cultural identity and practical issues such as land use and costs (*I live in a small village with 2000 people, many Syrian Christians would move here. I want our village to remain an Estonian village. If there are only a few of them [Syrian Christians], it would be ok, but too many would be disturbing. They should speak Estonian*) and (*it would take more land, time, and money than it would be useful).* Some respondents did not mind the religious aspect but saw it as a threat to Estonian culture (*I do not think that it will have a good effect on Estonian culture. They have a right to support their religion, but it should not change our culture. If it is not connected to my country or its history, I do not see a reason why such a thing should be so openly expressed.*) Some respondents expressed cautious support (*it would be interesting, and I would explore more about how it differs from the regular Christian culture. If they don't destroy nature to build it, then I'm fine with it, but if a lot of forests and places are going to be cut down, then I'm not the happiest about this house [religion does not matter]).* Some comments were more supportive: *It would attract new people to the neighborhood, but that is what makes it great*.

The third question asked how respondents would feel about protests planned against a concert by hip-hop artist Khaled Siddiq in Estonia, whose songs contain Islamic content. Some respondents, focusing only on the first part about Siddiq's concert in Estonia, answered "positively," indicating a need for more careful reading of the question. Here the positive answers, which showed disagreements with the protests like *it is discrimination, other celebrities can come to perform here and he cannot* or *weardos (the protesters), the music sounds good, so why not*, were still considered to be disagreeing with the protests and therefore were counted as "negative" answers. There were 10 such answers. Conversely, there were no indications that the "negative" responses were meant to be positive, so no corrections were made there. The number of negative responses shows disagreement with the discriminatory actions in society. Also, this question had the fewest neutral answers in the section. Here again, over 48 percent of the respondents explained their choice. Only 8 percent of the respondents supported the protest, and some of them expressed support for the right to protest rather than the particular protest itself (*people are free to protest, or it is not my business, against what people are protesting. I would not protest myself)*. Some comments were clearly hostile, like *there is no need to spread Islam here* or *let him sing somewhere else*. Neutral

respondents explained their answer mostly in terms of the conflict between different rights (*religious people should be apolitical, and the church should not interfere in politics. I would not attend the protest, although I do not support the artist, but he has a right to sing about his faith like I have)* or expressed indifference. Negative responses quite strongly indicate that protesting the musician is unjust. *I myself enjoy music, and this genre is very enjoyable to listen to. I just do not understand why people discriminate against humans of another religion. My theory is that they might be jealous, and instead of really doing something similar, they just bully,* commented one student. The number of negative responses to the protests in this question suggests tolerance for a Muslim singer and indicates that responses become more empathic when discussing a real person perceived as treated unfairly. Still, the responses might include the caveat that some negative answers were considered to be positive.

The survey was conducted in spring 2022, shortly after Russia's attack on Ukraine, which may have influenced responses to a question about opting out of mandatory military service for religious reasons. This question received three times as many negative responses as the first two. Comments were divided into three similar groups, with the fewest comments (38 percent of respondents) in this section. Negative comments emphasized the importance of everyone's equal contribution to society. (*People could easily lie to get out of military service. If everyone has to go, then everyone has to go. It is not related to religious principles. It is the protection of our country!*) Neutral responses reflected a variety of reasons, from indifference to respect for the person’s choices or acknowledging the fact that the respondent does not have enough information to take a position *(as I do not know much about the topic, I have no right to take any position).*

The primary limitation of this section is its exclusion of deeply personal inquiries, preventing students from disclosing or evaluating their individual stances. The survey instead focuses on attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices, rather than on dispositions involving a self-reflective approach that emphasizes the student's own perspective, as defined by Shaw (2020).

4.2 Skills

Four questions tested skills related to religious literacy, centered on the respondents' own culture and a hypothetical exchange student, all derived from the same narrative. There were 357 respondents, though the number varied for each question. Being open-ended, responses were categorized by content and quantified.

The first two questions assessed skills related to openness, collecting reliable information about other religions, understanding cultural differences, various communication skills in religious literacy, and positive engagement with differences. The number of respondents was 352 for the first question and 338 for the second.

The first question comprised two sub-questions: *How would you prepare for Amila's arrival? What should you research and consider before she comes?* The open answers were categorized into four types based on the interaction with the exchange student:

1. Active positive or neutral expressions, where interest in the religious and/or cultural aspects was clearly shown.
2. Passive positive or neutral expressions, indicating a willingness to welcome the student without asking preparatory questions.
3. Negative expressions toward the exchange student.
4. Responses that provide no information on communication skills or openness to learning about other religions (e.g., *do not know*, does not ask questions, is not interpretable, or did not answer the first question).

Active positive attitudes towards the exchange student were expressed in 61% of responses; 10% showed neutral or positive attitudes without asking questions; another 10% were negative; and 19% of respondents gave non-informative responses such as "do not know," did not ask questions, provided uninterpretable answers, or did not answer the first question (Chart 5).

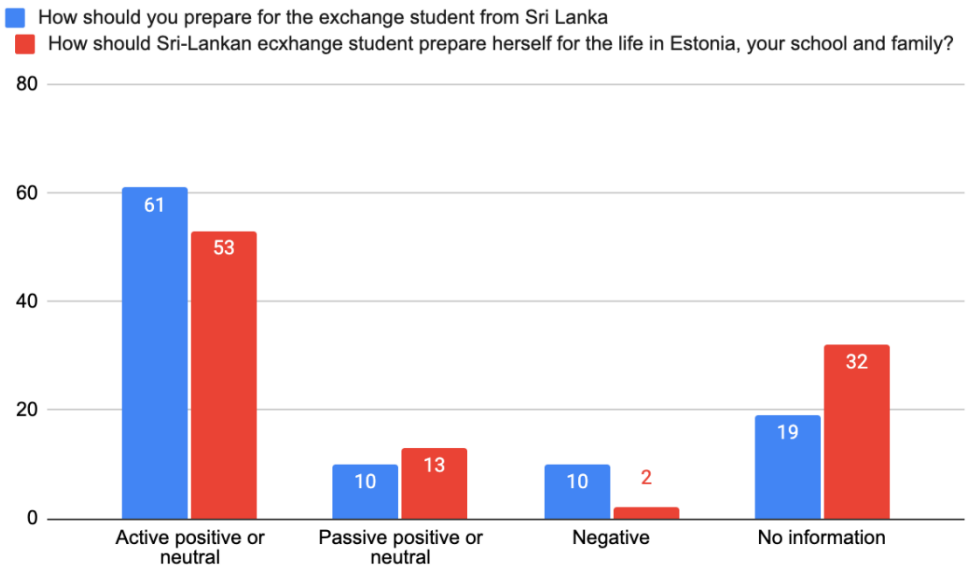


CHART V

Answers to the questions about accommodating an exchange student

Active positive expressions were divided into three subcategories based on content. Approximately 53% of respondents focused solely on the religious aspects of the hypothetical situation with a Sri Lankan exchange student, inquiring about the student's religious habits, practices, or traditions (*I would try to contact her to ask what religion she is connected to. Then she would not feel uncomfortable at my place. I would search the internet about how they are, what they could eat, and what they are against. I would maybe take down, for example, the crosses and other decorations that are connected to my religion)*. Twenty-four percent of the respondents saw the situation's religious and

cultural elements (*I would ask about her culture or religion. I would study the culture and religion, but I will not trust all these sites, for they may provide fake information. If she agrees to talk to me about her culture or religion, I will gladly listen. Likewise, I would respect her choices, culture, and religion*), and almost equally (23 percent) related the situation primarily to cultural features (*I should consider the traditions of the country and the food they eat; I should study how to communicate with them*).

Passive positive or neutral responses addressed the situation as one that required no extra effort (*I would not prepare for anything. If she needed something or had certain things I should know, she would tell me. I would treat her with respect, but I would not overdo it. The point of the exchange year is to learn to know our culture*).

Negative responses either attributed negative qualities to the unknown (I would investigate if they are dangerous and how they behave; (*I would examine) if he/she is a boy or a girl because the name (Amila) does not say anything except that he/she wants to place a bomb in the center of Tartu*[4]) or showed unwillingness to host somebody at his/hers home (*I would not prepare; the last thing I want is an exchange student to live in my home*).

The second question (*How should a Sri Lankan student prepare herself for life in Estonia, in your school, and with your family? What are the important holidays and traditions here, and how are they celebrated?*) examined how respondents mediate their own cultural features (Chart 5).

Here, too, the answers were categorized and quantified as: 1) active positive or neutral (53 percent), which named local traditions and holidays or gave information for preparations; 2) passive positive or neutral responses that did not ask questions or give information for preparations but still expressed willingness to communicate with the exchange student (12 percent; 3) negative responses (2 percent); and around one-third did not give enough information for categorization. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent answered *I do not know* and 28 percent were not interpretable. Also here, there were two groups of active positive answers. The first group named different traditions and expressed support for the preparations. *Important holidays in Estonia are Christmas (Christmas tree, Santa Claus, presents, feast), New Year (fireworks, eating 12 times), Independence Day (flying the flag, feast, the presiden's speech), Jaan's Day (bonfire, traditional games, staying up late, good company*). The second group did not name the traditions and holidays but gave information on adapting to Estonia. (*She should be prepared for the fact that in Estonia many people are atheists and they do not have religious traditions*.) Here, potential discrimination was mentioned several times (*I think that she should be mindful that she might become a victim of discrimination. She should be ready for students who dislike her, but I would always be there to support her*). Negative responses again showed the reluctance to host a stranger or expressed a negative attitude. (*She is not my problem; she may do what she wants, and I do not have to consider anything.*)

[4] Presumably the respondent's hometown.

The third question asked respondents to explain da Vinci's Last Supper to an exchange student, focusing on interpreting and understanding religious expressions in familiar representations. It received 340 responses, categorized as: 1) knows and interprets the painting; 2) does not know the painting but interprets it; 3) does not know or interpret the painting, or the answer is uninterpretable; 4) expresses negativity (Chart 6).

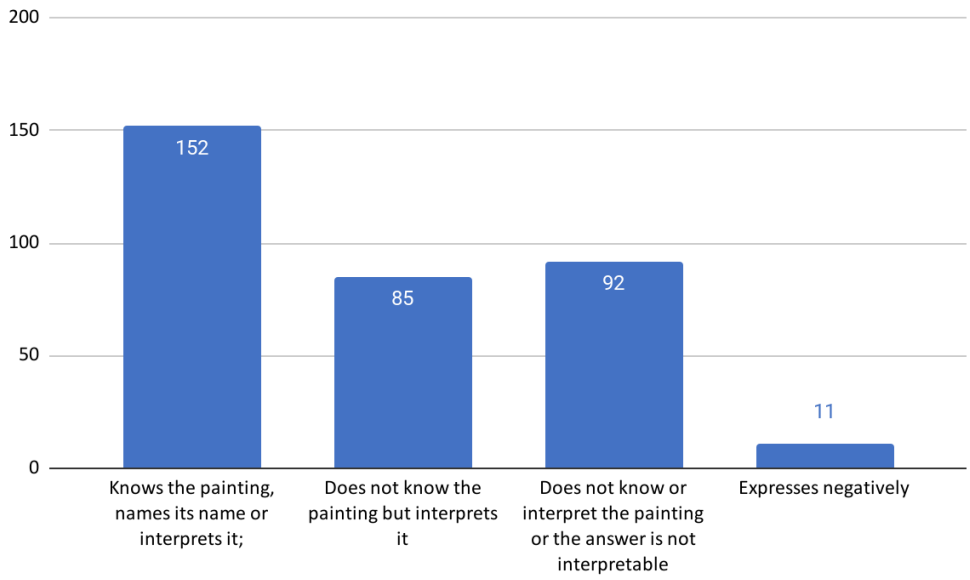


CHART VI

How would you describe the meaning of Last Supper to the exchange student from Sri Lanka?

The result shows that fewer than half of the respondents (45 percent) were familiar with the painting, while the answers varied in the level of detail (*The painting depicts the moment when Jesus reveals to the apostles that one of them will betray him. The different reactions of the apostles are given in great detail; emotions range from anger to fear/ It is the Last Supper. God shares food with others and is kind*). Twenty-five percent of the respondents did not know the painting but still interpreted it (*Jesus conjured food for all the hungry, and now everyone eats/ It is a picture from the Greek era where people celebrate their traditions together*). Negative responses 3 percent expressed hostility either toward the painting (*meeting of the crooked*) or the exchange student (*let her Google herself; she has got the hands for it)*, and the rest of the respondents (27 percent) did not interpret the painting, of which 2 respondents explained their response (*I would help Amila find information about this painting and culture because you always remember it best when you search for it yourself. If difficulties arise, I would help him out of trouble*) and 3 percent expressed negatively.

The last question assessed openness to different cultures, religions, and artistic representations, receiving 345 responses. These were categorized as: 1) positive or

neutral responses showing openness to or a willingness to learn about unknown religious and artistic representations; 2) negative reactions to unknown religious and artistic representations; and 3) responses that did not provide information for categorization (Chart 7).

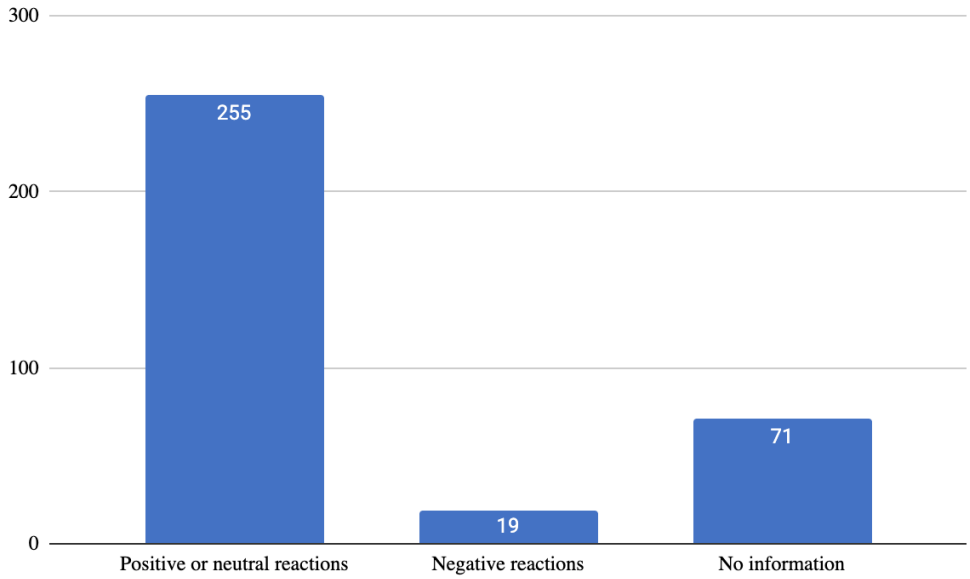


CHART VII.

What questions would you ask to understand the painting from the Dambullah Temple?

Almost three-quarters of respondents showed positive or neutral attitudes, indicating a willingness to explore different religions and cultures, though the specifics of their answers varied. Short responses, like *I see colorful legs, I would ask, what meaning do they have*, etc., were the most prevalent answers. Around 10 percent of the answers were more detailed: *I think that the picture depicts legs that are covered with blood. And it seems that it shows through what and how people have gone through their lives. So to say how hard and painful have their lives been*. Twenty-one percent of the respondents did not interpret or answer *I do not know* to the question, and 6 percent expressed themselves negatively toward the picture (*such big and bloody legs*, *disgusting/ew legs*).

The limitation of this survey section is that the skills element includes all previous aspects (category, dispositions, and knowledge), making the analytical categories mostly disposition-dependent, except for the Last Supper question. The survey examines how respondents communicate and navigate religious diversity, based on Shaw's (2020) definition of skills in religious literacy as the ability to confidently and sensitively inquire about someone's religion or belief.

5. Findings and Discussion

This article reports descriptive statistics about the instrumental aspects of religious literacy (dispositions and skills) among Estonian basic school graduates. It also discusses whether the Estonian way of teaching RE adequately prepares students to handle religious aspects in various societal contexts. Some disposition questions replicate those from the REDCo study, which utilized 2006 Estonian data (Schihalejev, 2009; Schihalejev, 2010). This facilitates comparisons in an increasingly diverse world, despite minimal changes in Estonia's RE settings between the two surveys.

5.1 Dispositions

In this section, some comparisons are made with the REDCo surveys from 2006–2009 and the follow-up study in 2012. The following statements from the questionnaire for this study were part of a REDCo 2006 study and thus allow longitudinal comparisons:

1. learning about different religions helps people live peacefully together.
2. learning about different religions helps us understand history.
3. learning about religions helps us understand current events.
4. learning about different religions helps us develop moral values.
5. learning about religions helps me learn about my own worldview.

The level of religious education has not changed since the previous study, and the high expectations for RE's potential, expressed over 15 years ago (Schihalejev, 2009), remain unchanged, including its association with historical events. While direct comparisons are difficult due to differences in scale, responses from both surveys indicate that students value RE's role in developing academic and instrumental aspects of the subject.

The study shows that familiarity with a religious group correlates with more favorable attitudes towards it, a finding supported by Kimanen and Kallioniemi (2018). Christianity, as the most common religion in Estonia, received the fewest negative or "I do not know" responses. In contrast, Rastafarianism, the least familiar, had the fewest positive responses and the most "I do not know" answers, impacting the number of positive and neutral responses; only just over 6 percent were negative. The study found no significant differences in positive or neutral attitudes toward the representatives of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism. The dynamics of adverse attitudes are more informative. Although the REDCo survey did not specifically query attitudes toward different religions, comparisons with a Pew Research Center survey on European opinions about minority groups show that adverse attitudes toward Muslims and Jews among Estonian adolescents are nearly the same, at about 10-11 percent. These attitudes likely stem from stereotypical characteristics attributed to both groups. While specific data on attitudes toward religious groups for the exact age group in question is lacking, a Pew Research survey indicates that attitudes of Estonian basic school graduates toward Muslims align with those of younger respondents (18–34 years) in

France, Germany, the UK, and Sweden, where aversion rates range from 11-13 percent. However, Estonian students show greater intolerance toward Jews, with 10 percent expressing aversion, compared to 3-6 percent in the aforementioned countries (Mitchell, 2020).

The results from section 4.1.1 indicate openness to different religious expressions at school, aligning with earlier studies (Jozsa et al., 2009; Kallioniemi et al., 2017) where respondents strongly supported the right to wear discreet religious symbols—the only statement receiving over fifty percent positive responses. Similar to the 2012 findings (Kallioniemi et al., 2017), about half of the students believed religious festivals justify school absence, while other statements received less approval, setting Estonian students apart from Finnish peers. In the REDCo survey, Norwegian and French students showed little support for visible religious practices, in contrast to Estonian adolescents who were more supportive of praying or meditating than missing class for religious reasons. In Estonia, approval tends to be higher for measures perceived as rights applicable to all, like wearing modest religious symbols or missing school for religious holidays, rather than privileges for specific groups.

The final set of questions about dispositions toward religious phenomena in society indicated that hostile responses toward religious groups stood at around 10 percent, mirroring attitudes toward Muslims and Jews from earlier questions. However, attitudes were slightly more favorable, with a 2 percent decrease in negative responses, toward Muslim families dressed in culturally characteristic clothing compared to hypothetical Muslim classmates. This suggests respondents demonstrate more empathy in specific scenarios. This idea is clearer in the third question about protests against a Muslim singer. Students' familiarity with hip-hop culture and the real person in the scenario resulted in the fewest negative responses toward Muslims and the highest support for Islamic leaders in this survey. The less anonymous the context, the more engaged and tolerant students became, indicating that real-life situations and personal stories are more effective at increasing tolerance toward religious groups than generalized information.

The last question on replacing conscription with non-military service reveals a conflict between two values: national defense and religious freedom, rather than solely reflecting attitudes toward religions. Respondents' negative views on alternative service correspond with findings from a 2022 Estonian public opinion and national defense survey, which showed increased willingness to serve militarily, with 68 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds believing they must perform military service (Kaitseministeerium, 2022).

5.2. Skills

The survey on skills revealed that most Estonian respondents were open to engaging with people from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. Yet the results of the first question show that 30 percent lacked the intercultural skills described by Robert Jackson, such as interacting, listening, and gathering information about other religious groups. This group includes about 10 percent who made negative (often offensive) comments,

consistent with findings on dispositions where a similar percentage showed negative attitudes toward Jews and Muslims.

The second question examined how students introduce their own culture to outsiders. Results indicated that while there were fewer hostile comments, about one-third of students struggled to describe their culture, with only half mentioning local holidays and traditions. This lack of awareness was further highlighted in the third question regarding da Vinci's Last Supper, which less than half recognized, despite its inclusion in textbooks and the National Curriculum. This gap suggests students struggle to apply historical and cultural knowledge in broader contexts.

The final question revealed that students found it easier to discuss unfamiliar religious expressions than to explain their own Christian heritage to outsiders. This insight could inform efforts to enhance students' intercultural skills and religious literacy.

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to explore the instrumental components of religious literacy in a context where young people receive minimal formal religious education. The research provides empirical data and supports the importance of religious literacy, a concept challenged by Wolfart. While Estonian basic school graduates recognize the potential of religious education for promoting peaceful coexistence, their attitudes towards religious groups and intercultural competence do not fully align with those seen in other democratic societies. Although most students are tolerant, a minority shows significant hostility towards foreigners and religious believers, indicating that the challenge extends beyond intercultural skills to attitudes towards religious worldviews. As Estonia and the world grow more multicultural, addressing these issues in Estonian education becomes increasingly urgent.

The results confirm that students are more tolerant towards familiar subjects, highlighting an educational opportunity. It is crucial to provide content about various religious groups and address unknown or prejudiced subjects by connecting them to familiar themes and, where possible, through real-life people or situations.

The findings show that a considerable number of Estonian basic school graduates lack the competence to effectively engage in real-world cross-cultural contexts, where all elements of religious literacy are needed simultaneously. The survey on dispositions indicated that familiarity breeds tolerance, but the skills section showed that students struggled more to communicate their own cultural and religious features than to interact with representatives of other cultures. This indicates a need to reform the Estonian educational model. Education should not only equip students with the vocabulary to discuss religious and non-religious aspects but also develop dispositions for effective communication across various religious backgrounds. Moreover, students should learn basic concepts and cultural expressions of both their own culture and different world religions to competently navigate a diverse and multicultural world.

The current survey utilized an original instrument previously tested only on small sample sizes. The instrument requires further testing to address limitations encountered during the survey and to assess its validity and reliability. This paper will be followed by a more elaborate quantitative analysis of the survey results.

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