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Mapping Religion in Contemporary Europe: How Conceptualizations, Tensions and Conflicts Influence Religious-Based Bullying Across 15 Countries

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Abstract

Macro-level geopolitical, religious, and socio-cultural conflicts and tensions increasingly transcend state borders, cascading downwards into micro-level institutions. Within schools, these global religious-based tensions reproduce themselves in negative peer dynamics, requiring an anti-bullying approach that takes cognizance of the broader societal hierarchies, religious stigmas, and geopolitical divisions which enforce identity boundaries and secure peer status. This paper examines the landscape of macro-level religious tensions across 15 European countries and how these conflicts may manifest as classroom bullying and social exclusion at the meso and micro levels. Using Linda Woodhead's conceptual framework of five concepts of religion, the study investigates how the core dimensions of power and identity can shape peer relationships in educational settings.

This qualitative comparative study was conducted across 15 countries. Using an adapted comparative framework, data collection and reflexive thematic analysis, we focused on mapping how national religious landscapes are shaped by distinct geopolitical, historical, cultural, and demographic contexts. The analysis specifically traced the mechanisms through which these macro-level socio-religious dynamics penetrate school climates and influence micro-level student interactions across the three axes of the comparative cube.

Findings demonstrate that classroom bullying functions as an inherently socio-political practice. Students operationalize broader societal hierarchies, religious stigmas, and geopolitical divisions to enforce identity boundaries, negotiate status, and marginalize peers aligned with minoritized or contested religious identities. Global and national socio-religious conflicts directly impact classroom power structures, determining which students hold social leverage and which are rendered vulnerable.

Our results align with contemporary anti-bullying paradigms, such as UNESCO's "Whole Education Approach", confirming that peer harassment is a localized micro-manifestation of systemic, macro-level power dynamics. Anti-bullying interventions must expand beyond individual behavioral modifications to adopt a "Whole Education Approach". Educators, administrators, and policymakers must recognize schools as permeable

ecosystems, equipping teachers with tools to address structural biases, counter identity-based harassment, and cultivate inclusive environments amidst rising global polarization.

Keywords: religion, conceptualization, power, identity, religious-based bullying, comparative analysis

Mapping Religion in Contemporary Europe: How Conceptualizations, Tensions and Conflicts Influence Religious-Based Bullying Across 15 Countries

Introduction

In an increasingly globally interconnected yet polarized world, macro-level geopolitical, religious, and socio-cultural tensions do not remain confined to state borders or political arenas. Instead, they cascade downward into meso- and micro-level institutions, in particular directly shaping the daily lived experiences of young people within schools and classrooms. Drawing on a comparative study across 15 countries, we investigate how macro-level religious conflicts and tensions – analyzed through Woodhead's (2011) two concepts of religion: identity and power – reproduce themselves in the peer dynamics of educational spaces. Woodhead (2011) highlights that religion operates fundamentally as a site of both power, dictating institutional authority and socio-moral dominance, and identity, serving as a potent mechanism for group cohesion and boundary maintenance. When socio-religious tensions escalate nationally or globally, these dynamics manifest in the classroom not as abstract ideological debates, but as interpersonal aggression, social exclusion, and targeted bullying (Moulin, 2015).

This macro-to-micro transmission demands a fundamental reassessment of how educational research conceptualizes school violence. Contemporary sociological literature increasingly critiques traditional, what they call "individualized" definitions of bullying stating that peer abuse be viewed strictly through behavioral or psychological lenses (Lohmeyer & Threadgold, 2023). Scholars from sociology argue that bullying is inherently socio-political, a localized practice through which broader societal power hierarchies, religious stigmas, and identity boundary-lines are enforced by young people (Doyle & O'Brien, 2025). This development in academic thought directly mirrors recent policy shifts, most notably the adoption of the "Whole Education Approach" and alternative global definitions of school bullying championed by UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum (Kenny et al.

2023). Very recent findings, drawing on views of the international scientific community, indicate broad support for a definition similar to the traditional one (Zych & Farrington, 2026); this does not, however, contradict these frameworks that explicitly reflect and emphasize the broader community networks, structural biases, and macro-level socio-religious hierarchies that dictate who is afforded belonging and who is rendered vulnerable.

By situating classroom dynamics within this expanded, systemic view, our 15-country study aligns with the "Whole Education Approach" to bullying prevention. This approach emphasizes that schools do not operate in a vacuum, but continuously absorb and echo the cultural and geopolitical climates surrounding them. By systematically mapping religious tensions through Woodhead's (2011) dual lenses of power and identity across diverse national contexts, this study bridges the gap between global geopolitical realities and ground-level school climate. In doing so, it provides educators and policymakers with the empirical grounding required to address bullying not merely as individual misbehavior, but as a micro-manifestation of systemic, global dynamics.

Theoretical Background

The concept of religion and the associated question of what religion is (and what it is not) have been disputed throughout the centuries (e.g., Schilbrack, 2013; Woodhead, 2011). According to Magomet (2025), concepts must be distinguished from conceptions, although they are often used interchangeably. A concept is

> [a]n elementary unit of thought – an abstract idea that captures the essence of a phenomenon, object, or category. It is indivisible, autonomous, and generative: like a seed or a monad, it contains within itself the potential for infinite interpretations, yet remains unchanged in its core. (p. 2)

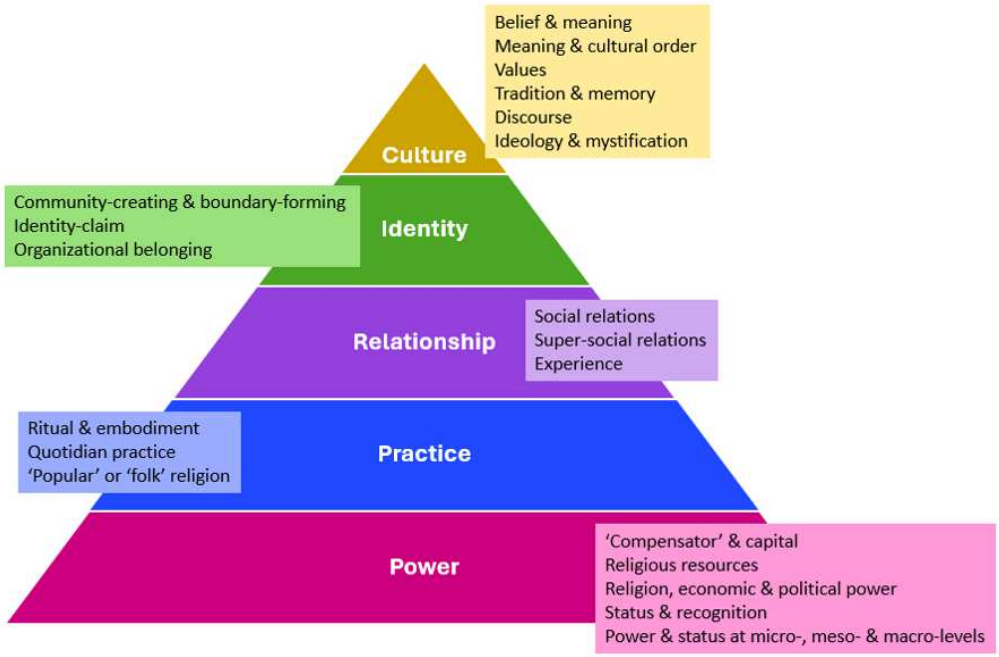
When concepts form a "system, unified by logic, purpose, or methodology" (Magomet, 2025, p. 2) they represent a conception. "It is the emergent structure – the 'universe' that arises when concepts are activated under specific contextual rules. A conception explains, designs, manages, and evolves" (Magomet, 2025, p. 2). We can thus differentiate between (a) religion as a concept representing the *core* of what religion is; and (b) conceptions of religion as expressing different ways of capturing varying, contextually bound, varying *systems of understanding* of what is seen as religion. This study focuses on core conceptualizations (i.e., concepts) of religion that have emerged over the centuries and their potential relationship with both current inter-religious (cultural, political) tensions and religious-based school bullying in 15 European countries.

The Five Concepts of Religion

Woodhead (2011) identifies five major concepts of religion based on literature across sociology, anthropology, and psychology and organizes the former into a taxonomy according to narrowness versus broadness. Moving from the narrowest to the broadest concept, she describes religion as *culture, identity, relationship, practice, and power.* Each of these concepts includes several sub-concepts, also ordered from narrowest to broadest. Figure 1 depicts this hierarchy as a pyramid, and whilst the figure of a pyramid gives a sense of hierarchy, the authors recognize that each concept nests within each other. The extent of the importance of each of these aspects depends on the context/community. The taxonomy offers a structured insight into the ways religion has been conceptualized in answer to ongoing debates about how religion should be defined. Woodhead (2011) circumvents the challenge of offering yet another definition of religion by following Beckford's proposal (2003, cited in Woodhead, 2011, p. 122) to study conceptualizations of religion as they are tied to their contexts of use. She thus proposes a moderate form of a social constructionist understanding of religion, i.e., as something being constructed constantly, to help researchers "have some critical awareness of what concept(s) of religion are in play, and to be able to justify their applicability in particular contexts of use" (p. 122). The contexts of use or wider encompassing frameworks may be theoretical, historical, empirical, methodological, normative, or a combination of (some of) them.

Figure 1

The 5 Concepts as a Pyramid Including Sub-concepts (based on Woodhead, 2011)



Note. Sub-concepts within concepts in Figure 1 are also ordered from narrowest (top) to broadest (bottom).

Woodhead's (2011) framework conceptualizes religion not as a static structure, but as a dynamic, lived phenomenon operating across five interrelated dimensions: culture, identity, relationship, practice, and power. Applied to educational settings, this model reveals the systemic nature of religious bullying, positioning culture, practice, and relationship as the immediate expressions and visible triggers of peer victimization, such as exclusionary narratives, mocked rituals, or strained social ties. However, against a backdrop of demographic shifts and post-secular political friction (Casanova, 2007; Habermas, 2006), identity and power emerge as the primary drivers of this harassment. While religion as identity explains why targeting a student's core sense of selfhood through boundary-forming "sameness" and "difference" (Woodhead, 2011, p. 129) causes deep harm, religion as power exposes how macro-level social hierarchies, structural privilege, and contested authority are reproduced in schoolyard dynamics. Prioritizing these foundational dimensions exposes the structural mechanisms that make religious bullying uniquely resistant to standard interventions, offering a more actionable framework for educational policy.

Religion as Identity

Woodhead's (2011) taxonomy conceptualizes religion as identity across three interconnected levels: in-group boundary-forming, individual identity-claims, and organizational belonging. At its narrowest, religion

establishes *communal boundaries* and reinforces social bonds, aligning with Durkheim's (2001; cited in Woodhead, 2011) view of religion as a mechanism for collective identity (Schilbrack, 2013). At a broader level, it encompasses *individual identity-claims*, how individuals define who they are in relation to sacred traditions, fulfilling a fundamental psychological need for social relatedness and self-understanding (Mol, 1976; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Broadest of all, religion as *organizational belonging* denotes formal membership in institutions endowed with varying degrees of social status and authority (Woodhead, 2011).

In multi-religious and secularizing school settings, these identity-creating mechanisms generate competing social boundaries rather than unified cohesion. When viewed through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) alongside target-visibility models of victimization (Awan & Zempi, 2020), Woodhead's framework directly illuminates the dynamics of religious bullying. Because peer victimization is largely driven by the pursuit of status, dominance, and group cohesion (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Salmivalli, 2010), religious markers serve as primary triggers for in-group favoritism and out-group marginalization (Gini, 2007; Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Target selection typically operates through two pathways: majoritarian peer groups weaponize religious or cultural heritage labels to enforce boundary control over minority or "foreign" peers (Dupper et al., 2015; Stevens et al., 2020), while secular-normative hierarchies reframe visible expressions of active faith, such as sacred attire, prayer, or dietary practices, as deviant or irrational (Schihalejev et al., 2020). In both instances, harassment targets the student's core identity-claim to enforce peer conformity.

Religion as Power

Beyond identity markers, Woodhead (2011) treats religion as a dynamic medium through which power is created, negotiated, and contested. To understand how religious power operates among peers, it is necessary to contrast two distinct modes: unilateral and relational power (Loomer, 1976). Unilateral power represents a top-down capacity to exert control while remaining unyielding to reciprocal influence, establishing what Bourdieu (1991) terms a monopoly over legitimate social norms (Stoeckl, 2020). In school environments, dominant peer groups leverage this unilateral power to demand compliance, suppress dissent, and marginalize peers expressing non-normative religious identities. Here, bullying functions as an instrument of unilateral control, allowing perpetrators to exploit broader societal hierarchies to secure their own peer status (Salmivalli, 2010).

Relational power is defined as the capacity to influence and be influenced through mutually transforming relationships, operating through shared agency, dialogue, and ethical self-formation (Loomer, 1976; Mahmood,

2005). Within school dynamics, relational power manifests when victimized or minority students exercise "tactical" agency (de Certeau, 1984) to resist peer coercion. By reinterpreting sacred symbols, forming counter-hegemonic support networks, or asserting authentic identity-claims, targeted students mobilize relational power to maintain psychological integrity and push back against majoritarian dominance (McGuire, 2008). The power dynamics outlined above are also throwing light on religious-based bullying, by directing attention to the wider context of power that is at stake also in the micro-situations of individual bullying cases. Consequently, religious bullying occurs at the intersection of these two forces: where perpetrators weaponize unilateral power to enforce dominance, and targets mobilize relational power to resist marginalization.

Legal & Institutional Frameworks

These interpersonal dynamics of identity and power do not emerge in a vacuum, but are fundamentally structured by legal and institutional frameworks that define the legitimate place of religion in public life (Hirschl, 2010; Sullivan, 2018). Through legal-rational systems (Weber, 1978), state policies convert symbolic authority into recognized social power (Bourdieu, 1991), often normalizing majoritarian traditions while marginalizing minoritized groups (Smith, 1991; Ezzy et al., 2023). Rather than remaining neutral, secular legal arrangements actively prescribe the boundaries of acceptable public expression (Asad, 2015), though international human rights rulings often apply a "judicial pedagogy" disconnected from practical educational research (Fancourt, 2024). In schools, these overarching legal frameworks dictate policies on uniforms, prayer, and religious education, signaling who natively belongs (Smith, 1991). Dominant peer groups internalize and weaponize these institutional hierarchies, framing the harassment of minority peers, such as ridiculing sacred attire or dietary practices, not as prejudice, but as enforcing normative institutional standards. Ultimately, legal frameworks legitimize target selection and normalize religious bullying within the school environment.

The Functions of Religion

Moving from taxonomy to utility, the functions of religion - what religion *does* - represent the mechanisms through which identity is claimed and power is exercised. Inter-religious tensions arise because religion fulfils psychological, social, and political functions that inevitably collide with competing group interests. Operating simultaneously across micro, meso, and macro scales, religion transforms personal conviction into active public contestation.

Micro-Level Functions (Meaning & Agency): At the individual level, religion constructs a *nomos*, a meaningful cosmic order that shields individuals from chaos and offers compensators for worldly suffering (Berger, 1967; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980). In post-secular contexts, this functions as "lived religion" (McGuire, 2008), where everyday practices, sacred attire, and ethical choices provide vital coping tools. However, individual religious expression creates tension when an authentic identity-claim clashes with secular institutional norms or peer expectations.

Meso-Level Functions (Social Integration & Boundaries): At the group level, religion generates bonding social capital, offering mutual aid and emotional support (Casanova, 2007). Crucially, this integrative function depends on social boundary maintenance (Woodhead, 2011). As Brubaker (2004) notes, generating internal cohesion ("groupness") inherently requires separating the in-group from the out-group, turning shared symbols into boundary markers that can foster intergroup hostility.

Macro-Level Functions (Legitimacy & Hegemony): At the societal level, religion acts as a primary currency of power, framing temporal authority within a cosmic order (Weber, 1922). In its unilateral mode (Loomer, 1976), political elites and state hierarchies weaponize religious traditionalism to justify policy, police public morality, and enforce cultural uniformity (Stoeckl, 2020).

Rephrasing Religious Bullying through a Socio-Ecological Lens

Religious bullying in schools is not an isolated interpersonal conflict, but the contextual manifestation of these broader structural functions (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). When macro-level societal biases and media narratives filter into meso-level school environments (Chan, 2021), institutional indifference or a lack of religious literacy allows prejudicial norms to become normalized. In this context, bullying operates as an exercise of power imbalance enabled by prevailing social norms and characterized by a breakdown in care from adults and peers (O'Higgins Norman, 2020).

At the meso and micro levels, students align with in-group boundary-building to enhance their own peer status by harassing out-group members (Palmer & Abbott, 2018). Visible expressions of lived religion (e.g., sacred dress or prayer) become target suitability cues, exposing students to in-person harassment and cyberbullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008) and forcing many to conceal their identity at great cost to their psychological well-being (Ipgrave, 2012). Addressing this requires moving beyond reactive discipline toward UNESCO's "Whole Education Approach" (Cornu et al., 2023), embedding religious literacy as well as principles for how to work with prejudice

and religious-based bullying in subject teaching (Fandrem & Skeie, 2024; Thomassen et. Al., 2024) into governance and curriculum to disrupt power imbalances and safeguard diverse religious identities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, religion must be understood not as static doctrine, but as an active, relational negotiation of identity and power (Woodhead, 2011). This framework demonstrates how macro-level ideological, geopolitical, and societal tensions filter through meso-level educational institutions into micro-level classroom networks. Within these spaces, institutional norms and peer dynamics enforce power imbalances that manifest as religious bullying, exclusion, or identity concealment. Framing hostility along this socio-ecological continuum highlights that addressing school-based religious conflict requires systemic interventions that disrupt underlying power structures rather than mere individual discipline.

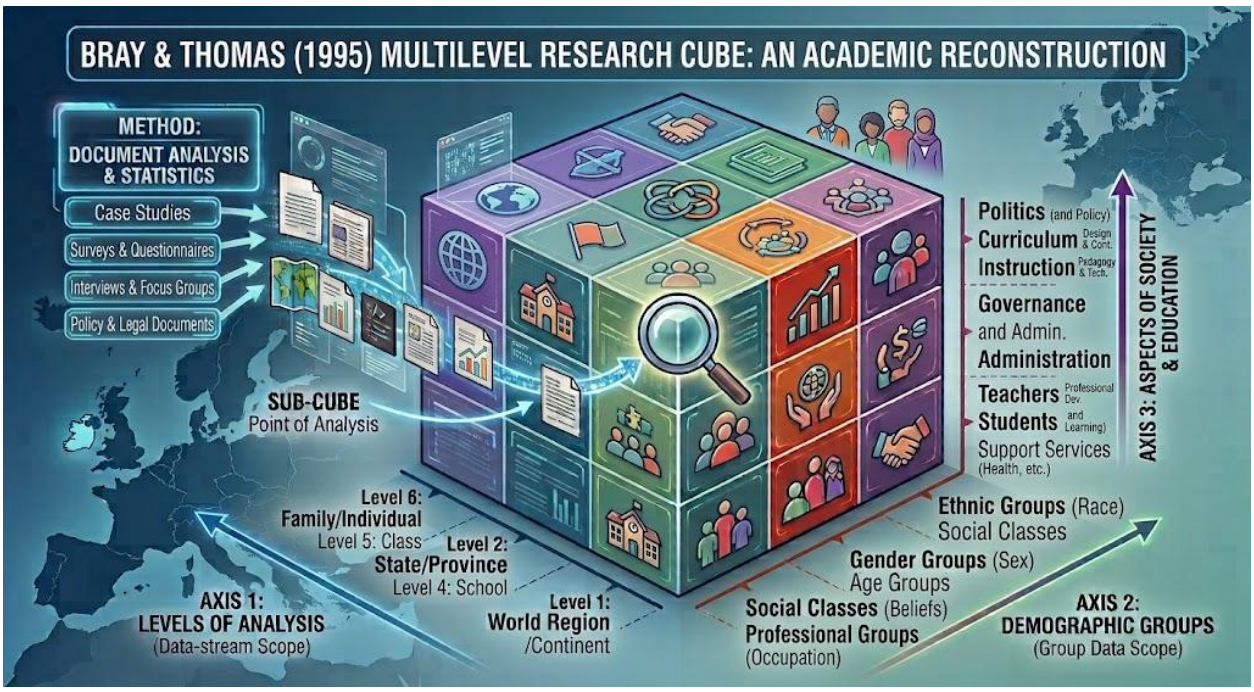
The Present Study

This study examines how religion is conceptualized in the 21st century and how this can help in understanding both current inter-religious tensions in general and religious-based school bullying in 15 countries across Europe (Albania, Cyprus, Czechia, England, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Malta, North Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland). Grounded in Woodhead's (2011) taxonomy, we focus on the identity and power-related dimensions of religion to explore how they contribute to current religious tensions and conflicts. To account for the latter's complex and multi-layered nature we resort to a *conceptual framework* from comparative education research which enables a contextualized, differentiated examination of social and societal phenomena.

Comparative education research is characterized by methodological pluralism, encompassing both large-scale quantitative assessments and qualitative, interpretive inquiries. The field offers robust frameworks for cross-national comparison. Adapting this comparative tradition to analyze conceptions of religion across 15 European countries demands a matrix capable of holding structural variations and local nuances in tension. For this purpose, we utilize the Bray and Thomas (1995) comparative cube as a multi-dimensional analytical scaffold (Figure 2). By organizing the investigation along three intersecting axes: *geographic scale, demographic specificity, and core socio-religious themes,* the framework prevents reductive readings and provides the structural rigor needed to map the complex religious tensions and conflicts emerging from our understanding of power and identity across contemporary Europe.

Figure 2

The Bray and Thomas Cube (based on Bray & Thomas, 1995)

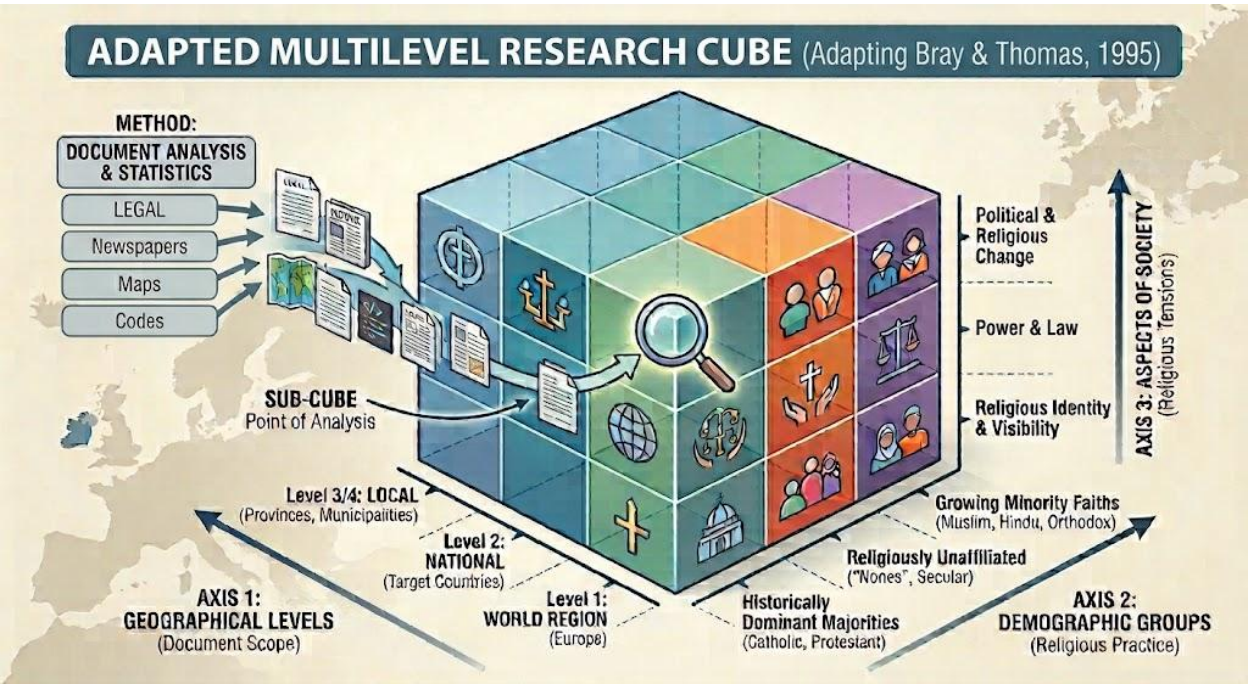


Note. The figure was drawn using Gemini version 3.6.

Adapting the Bray and Thomas (1995) Cube to the study of European religion requires re-aligning its three analytical axes with the mechanisms of power, law and identity. Figure 3 offers this new re-aligned cube.

Figure 3

Adapted Cube elucidating the conceptualization of religion across 15 countries in Europe and the emerging tensions and conflicts



Note. The figure was drawn using Gemini version 3.6

The first axis, *geographic scale*, spans macro-regional European governance (Level 1), the 15 individual nation-states (Level 2 and 3), and micro-level sites of encounter grounded in lived experience (Level 4). Our study accounts for distinct geopolitical contexts across these 15 countries, stretching from Norway to Malta and from Ireland to Georgia. It also considers their varying political and economic affiliations, as eight of these nations are members of the European Union. Together, geographic location and political alignment have profoundly shaped each country's dominant religious demographic composition and socio-religious landscape.

The second axis, *demographic specificity*, moves beyond educational cohorts to capture the diverse actor categories that construct and navigate religious life. Rather than viewing national populations as homogenous, this dimension isolates key stakeholder groups to examine how power and identity operate across different social positions. These include institutional faith leaders and ecclesiastical hierarchies of historically dominant majorities, active participants in ecumenical and synodal processes, interfaith dialogue delegates, growing minority religious communities, and increasingly prominent secular or religiously unaffiliated. Categorizing actors along this axis ensures that micro-level lived experiences and meso-level institutional voices are juxtaposed rather than flattened into a single national narrative.

The third axis focuses on *socio-religious aspects*. Our study centers on three socio-religious aspects that will assist with unpacking the complexity of religious tensions and conflicts: Religious Identity and Visibility; Power and Law; and Political and Religious Change. It evaluates identity as a multi-layered phenomenon, capturing personal faith expressions, group affiliations, and broader socio-cultural boundary-marking across diverse European contexts. It examines power across its various manifestations, from formal ecclesiastical and legal authority to diffuse, relational influence in collaborative forums. Utilizing this thematic axis enables the study to map how shifts in power directly reshape religious and secular identities, providing a structured lens to analyze tensions, paradoxes, and transformations across the 15 nations.

By synthesizing these three axes into a single heuristic matrix, the adapted framework provides the structural rigor needed to map how religious authority and self-understanding are continually redefined. What appears as institutional decline at a macro-national level (such as formal secularization) can, through this multidimensional matrix, be mapped across a far more complex terrain. In Europe, this landscape is one where religious power simultaneously fragments into collaborative meso-level spaces like interfaith dialogue, and can also consolidate into assertive, unilateral forms through far-right politics and religious nationalist movements.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative, and interpretivist research design based on systematic documentary analysis across 15 European contexts. Grounded in a social constructivist epistemology, the methodology treats documents not as neutral information repositories, but as socially situated artifacts embedded within institutional power relations, legal frameworks, and ideological systems (Prior, 2003). Documentary methods are uniquely suited for this inquiry because policy discourses, constitutional arrangements, educational mandates, and media representations constitute the structural architecture through which religious identity is legitimized, governed, and contested (Mogalakwe, 2009). Because direct micro-level empirical data (e.g., classroom observation) across 15 nations was unfeasible, this design utilizes analytical inferential modelling (Moulin, 2015). By systematically analyzing macro-level legal/policy frameworks and meso-level educational directives, the study deductively traces how institutional norms and policy silences, establish the structural conditions and power asymmetries that manifest as peer-level religious bullying in schoolyards.

Sampling, Data Collection, and the READ Framework

Data collection and analysis followed the sequential phases of the READ framework (Supplementary Material A): *Readying materials, Extracting data, Analyzing data, and Distilling findings* (Dalglish et al., 2020). To ensure systematic coverage and cross-national comparability, a standardized data collection protocol comprising 16 guiding analytical questions was established. Primary documentary sources were gathered across three main domains published between 2015 and 2025:

1. **Macro-Legal & Political Documents:** National statistics and constitutions, anti-discrimination statutes, integration policies, and official demographic/religious practice reports.
2. **Meso-Educational Policies:** National policies related to religious practice, schools related to specific religions and religious education frameworks.
3. **Public & Media Discourses:** Key media narratives regarding religious diversity, tensions, secularism, and school-based religious attire or practices.

Researchers populated a standardized analytical grid capturing historical state-religion dynamics, 10- and 20-year religious practice trends, and structural sources of tension. To address multi-language translation threats, non-English documents were analyzed by bilingual regional specialists using a standardized coding dictionary to preserve conceptual equivalence before English-language synthesis.

Data Analysis: Adapted Cube Heuristic and Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Comparative analysis was structured using an adapted version of the Bray and Thomas (1995) multi-level Cube heuristic, allowing cross-examination across geographic scales (macro-regions vs. nation-states) and thematic dimensions. The extracted qualitative data was analyzed using a combination of READ and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). RTA was selected for its epistemological flexibility, recognizing that themes do not passively emerge from documents but are actively generated through the researchers' critical interpretation of explicit content and latent institutional silences (Prior, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Reflexivity

Methodological rigor and trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2005) were established through four primary strategies:

- **Source & Analyst Triangulation:** Cross-verifying findings across multiple document types, country contexts, and independent researchers to mitigate single-source or regional bias.

- **Audit Trails & Memos:** Documenting analytical decisions, coding definitions, and interpretive shifts via detailed research logs and collaborative moderation meetings.
- **Iterative Verification:** Repeatedly re-testing generated themes against raw documentary evidence to ensure interpretive fidelity.
- **Positionality & Reflexivity:** Acknowledging that researchers' own religious, secular, or cultural positionalities influence qualitative analysis (Watt, 2007). The research team engaged in continuous reflexive dialogue regarding interpretive lenses, particularly concerning how "secularism" and "integration" were operationalized across diverse national traditions.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study relied exclusively on public documentary materials and required no direct human participant involvement, ethical sensitivity remained paramount. Given the politically charged nature of religious identity, migration, and nationalism, analytical care was taken to avoid essentializing religious groups or constructing reductive national stereotypes. Furthermore, in line with critical document analysis (Prior, 2003), ethical reflection focused on document *absences*, identifying whose voices, religious identities, or rights were institutionally omitted or marginalized within official state narratives.

Findings

Guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b), the findings move from a macro-level overview (zooming out) to micro-level (zooming in) lived dynamics using the Bray and Thomas (1995) cube. Broadly mapping 15 European nations across three axes leads into an in-depth examination of how legal, institutional, and secular tensions shape classroom realities. The analysis yielded five interconnected core themes: the geographical, historical, political landscape of religion across the 15 countries (Axis 1); the demographic landscape of transformation and pluralism (Axis 2); law, legislation and politics – religion as institutionalized identity and power (Axis 3); the impact on the educational landscape and religious-based bullying (Axis 3); and religious tensions and conflict arising from this landscape (Axis 3).

Zooming Out

The geographical landscape of religion in the 15 countries - Axis 1

The religious landscapes across the 15 European nations (Albania, Czechia, Cyprus, England, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Malta, North Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland) are deeply tied to

geography, history, politics, and culture (Analysts 1[1], 2[2]). Geographical location shaped these trajectories, from Mediterranean early-Christian trade routes to Reformation influence in Central Europe, and geographic isolation preserving dominant faiths in Ireland and Georgia. Across these regions, a continental socioreligious shift reveals how active theological belief has transitioned into a "heritage identity" (Analyst 1A) grounded in cultural or national belonging (Woodhead, 2011; Researcher 1, 3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14).

Historically, religion remains "*interwoven with ethnic and national identities*" (Analyst 2F) in the Balkans, Cyprus, and Kosovo, contributing to political tensions and proving how "*deeply rooted and persistent religious identities remain"* (Analysts 2F). In these regions, a close overlap exists between religion, ethnicity, nationhood, and migration (Analysts 2H). Even in secular frameworks, "*schools with a strong religious identity"* (Analysts 2H) function as vital structural sites where organizational belonging intersects with state infrastructure (Woodhead, 2011). Nine of the 15 nations feature strong religious private schools (North Macedonia, Czechia, Georgia, Latvia, Switzerland, Norway, Kosovo, Italy, & Albania), while six maintain state systems firmly linked to a specific religion (Greece, Malta, Cyprus, England, Portugal & Ireland).

In Western and Northern Europe (e.g., Norway, Ireland, England, Czechia), rapid secularization pushes religion toward strict privacy. While advocacy observatories label this "radical secularism" (Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, 2025), official data frames it as state-enforced neutrality that restricts public religious expression (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2024a, 2024b). Analysts 4[3] note:

> *"[....] religion shifts from a personal and community faith to a potent political identity, acting as a proxy for perceived threats to local ways of life, such as resistance to the LGBTQ+ community, or anxiety surrounding newcomers."*

[1] Analysts 1 are the three researchers who analyzed the first round of data together

[2] Analysts 2 are the pairs of researchers who worked on the second round of data together and each team have been given a different letter to denote the pairs e.g. Analysts 2D; 2E; 2F; 2G; 2H; 2I.

[3] Analysts 4 comprise of the three researchers who made up Analysts 1 but are working on the full data and paired data at a later stage of the analysis.

Even in Catholic strongholds like Italy, the Church's moral authority has systematically declined (Analysts 4; Marchetti & Pagiotti, 2023). Conversely, in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, secularization is defensively intertwined with national identity. In Georgia, *"[...] rapid secularization trends among younger, urban demographics stand in sharp contrast to a powerful religious establishment that views traditional faith as the ultimate vanguard against Western liberal secularism"* (Researcher 4). In Czechia, modernization rather than communism drove high atheism (Researcher 6), while in secular-Muslim Albania, faith communities navigate post-communist pluralism under delicate state neutrality.

As modern state-building decoupled governance from dogma, theological identity waned, but traditions were preserved as heritage identity (Researcher 1, 14). Researcher 11 notes that *"increasing religious diversity has not stopped the general secularization in combination with use of Christian life-rituals among the majority population."* In the Balkans (Albania, Greece, Kosovo, North Macedonia), religion was historically co-opted to define ethnic boundaries (Researcher 4, 15). Despite state atheist enforcement in communist Albania or suppression in socialist Kosovo (Researcher 14), religion re-emerged post-communism as an ethno-cultural marker (Researcher 7; Woodhead, 2011). North Macedonia illustrates this: *"North Macedonia has been a crossroads of civilizations, with its religious practices reflecting the complex interplay of cultural and political forces that have shaped the region"* (Researcher 7). Elsewhere, religious groups actively aided statehood, as seen in Latvia's independence movement (Researcher 8). In Western Catholic nations (Ireland, Italy, Portugal), institutional authority collapsed due to abuse scandals and rapid modernization (Researcher 1, 2, 3), reflected in Ireland's social referendums (1995, 2015, 2018; Researcher 1) and Italy's shift toward "diffused religion" (Researcher 4). Yet citizens retain sacraments and festivals to honor ancestral history without dogmatic adherence. Ultimately, declining Christian majorities and growing Islamic and non-affiliated cohorts do not create a neutral public sphere; instead, religious heritage becomes a key battleground in modern electoral politics and educational environments (Analysts 2D).

The demographic Landscape - Axis 2

Data analysis also focused on the religious demographic composition of populations across the 15 European countries and regions (Axis 2) to understand further the complexity of the religious landscape. While countries such as Portugal, Malta, and Italy remain predominantly Roman Catholic in religious affiliation, Greece, Cyprus, and Georgia are characterized by strong Orthodox Christian majorities. Kosovo and Albania represent

contexts where Islam remains the largest religious tradition, although Albania displays greater religious diversity and a growing proportion of non-denominational and undeclared affiliations. In contrast, countries such as Switzerland, Norway, England, Ireland, and Czechia demonstrate increasing secularization, religious pluralism, and growing numbers of individuals reporting no religious affiliation. Latvia and North Macedonia present more mixed religious landscapes, reflecting historical, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Statistical data highlights the coexistence of highly secularized societies, resilient Christian-majority countries, and Muslim-majority contexts, illustrating the complexity of co-existing contemporary religious identities in Europe. For specific mapping of each country and their religious affiliation over twenty years, please see Supplementary Material B.

Zooming In - Axis 3

Identity, Law & Power - rising tensions and conflicts

Across the 15 countries, law and legislation emerge as critical mechanisms through which religion is institutionalized, negotiated, and contested. Consistent with Woodhead's (2011) concept of religion as power, legal frameworks actively shape the relationship between religious identity, political authority, and citizenship. Our findings reveal considerable variation, ranging from constitutional recognition of dominant faith traditions to more explicit secular and pluralistic arrangements, yet in all cases religion remains deeply embedded within governance structures and public policy.

Dominant traditions retain significant constitutional weight in nations like Greece (Article 3, The constitution of Greece, "prevailing religion"), Malta (Article 2, Constitution of Malta, "Roman Catholicism as state religion"), Cyprus (Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, that recognizes the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Islamic Vakf), and Georgia (the 2002 Concordat). This symbolic privileging reflects the enduring public relevance of religion in state identity (Casanova, 1994). Conversely, countries like Portugal, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania, Czechia, and Switzerland enforce constitutional neutrality and state separation. However, neutrality does not erase religion; instead, it relocates tensions into debates over civic authority and public expression, illustrating the "post-secular" dynamic where religious actors actively engage in democratic deliberation (Habermas, 2006).

Religion increasingly functions as a symbolic marker of cultural and civilizational identity rather than a system of personal belief (Brubaker, 2015; Woodhead, 2011). In Switzerland, voter approval of the minaret

(Referendum in 2009) and face-covering (Federal Act on the Ban on Covering the Face (BFCA), 2021) bans converted anxieties surrounding Islam into binding law. Similarly, political discourse in Italy and Czechia frames Islam through the lens of migration, security, and national values. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Georgia, North Macedonia), religious authority remains bound to nation-building, directly shaping debates over minority rights, education, and social policy (Schilbrack, 2013).

Education policy clearly highlights the intersection of religion, law, and politics. While majoritarian traditions shape policies in Ireland (Admission to Schools Act 2018), Malta (constitutional Catholic instruction), Greece (confessional RE), and England (statutory RE), alternative models like Norway's "CRWE" and Switzerland's "Ethics and Religions" favor pluralistic religious literacy. These contrasting frameworks illustrate varying state responses to managing migration-driven religious pluralism (Casanova, 2007).

A central structural paradox emerges across the dataset. While personal religiosity and attendance decline, the public and political salience of religion increases (Norris & Inglehart, 2007). Countries such as Czechia, Switzerland, Norway, and England exhibit substantial secularization and declining levels of religious participation, yet religion remains highly salient within legal and political discourse. Controversies concerning hate crime legislation, religious symbols, migration policy, religious schools, and minority rights indicate that the public significance of religion does not necessarily decline alongside personal religiosity. Consequently, contemporary religious tensions appear fundamentally governance-related and less concerned with theology itself. They emerge where legal frameworks, political institutions, and competing visions of national identity intersect with changing religious landscapes. Religion continues to function as a significant source of authority, contestation, and social negotiation in twenty-first-century societies (cf. Woodhead, 2011).

Data across the 15 countries and reports from OSCE & ODIHR (2025) and FRA (2024a, 2024b) reveal a persistent rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes. Minority faith groups are increasingly weaponized as cultural scapegoats - Muslims conflated with geopolitical threats and Jewish communities targeted by resurging conspiracy theories. Consequently, societal tension has shifted from theological disagreement to a clash between liberal state frameworks and minority cultural survival.

Alongside prevalent unilateral power, a strong counternarrative of relational power emerges through interfaith dialogue across five studied nations. For example, despite Switzerland's fragmented 26 cantons, Berne's *House of Religions* institutionalizes dialogue by co-housing five faith communities and engaging several others (Researcher 9). Similarly, Kosovo has largely maintained interfaith tolerance between its Muslim majority and Christian, Jewish, and Protestant minorities over the past decade (Researcher 14). However, sustaining dialogue remains challenging. In Albania, interfaith tolerance often stems from secular detachment and the secondary importance of religious identity rather than active engagement, leaving some groups disadvantaged (Researcher 15; UNDP, 2018; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Furthermore, in North Macedonia, deep-seated Orthodox-Muslim divides frequently manifest as vandalism and political manipulation, demonstrating that government interventions alone remain insufficient without ongoing, ground-level dialogue (Researcher 5).

Ultimately, these positive examples remain exceptions rather than the rule. What stands out most across the wider data is a striking absence of proactive initiatives aimed at building tolerance and understanding within the increasingly pluralistic societies of these 15 nations. Within the school context, this institutional inertia allows informal boundary-drawing to go unchecked. As a result, students (may) increasingly use religious identity as a tool for peer differentiation, directly driving religious discrimination and bullying against those whose faith expressions deviate from secular or majoritarian norms.

Discussion

This study investigated religious practice across 15 European nations and its connection to religious-based bullying in schools. Framing religion through Woodhead's (2011) concepts of *identity* and *power*, findings demonstrate that classroom marginalization is not an isolated interpersonal conflict; rather, schools reflect macro-level socio-cultural and political tensions (Schihalejev et al., 2020). Aligning with a "Whole Education Approach" (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022), religious bullying represents the downstream manifestation of structural societal pressures.

Analyzing the data through the Bray and Thomas (1995) comparative cube reveals how macro-level societal structures directly supply the raw material for classroom victimization. At Axis 1 (Geographical Levels) and Axis 2 (Demographic Landscape), historical border disputes, regional tensions, and shifting demographics foster an overarching "us versus them" societal climate. At Axis 3 (Aspects of Society: Power, Identity, Law), legal

frameworks and state-church arrangements grant structural legitimacy to majoritarian groups while marginalizing minorities. As documented across the 15 nations, this structural inequality fuels rising nationalism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, significantly escalating the risk of peer victimization in schools (Sapouna et al., 2023). (See Supplementary Material C).

When these macro-level dynamics filter into the educational ecosystem, they transform peer relations through a shift from traditional theological identity, rooted in faith, doctrine, and active practice, to a secularized *heritage identity*. Driven by broader European secularization, religious affiliation has been stripped of its spiritual demands and repurposed as a cultural proxy for national belonging. Consequently, religious bullying ceases to be a theological dispute over belief; instead, it becomes an ethno-nationalist mechanism for boundary maintenance and social status acquisition (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Fandrem et al., 2009; O'Higgins Norman, 2022).

In line with European research on ethnic-cultural bullying (Rodríguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019), dominant-group peers weaponize this state-sanctioned heritage identity to establish cultural hegemony (Koukounaras-Liagkis, 2015; Skrefsrud, 2023). By operationalizing heritage identity to claim dominant peer status (Schihalejev et al., 2020), majoritarian students reduce minority peers from bearers of distinct religious traditions to "ethno-national outsiders" who supposedly threaten the historic identity of the state.

Furthermore, state-sanctioned religious hegemony (Loomer, 1976) and institutional secularism (Baker, 2021) subject minority students to a double bind: harassment from nationalist peers for being "foreign" and ridicule from secular peers who view minority practices as regressive. To counter this, schools must move from unilateral "power-over" models toward relational power, the capacity to "affect and be affected" (Loomer, 1976; Woodhead, 2011). By replacing passive tolerance with active, relational interfaith dialogue, educational systems can dismantle structural hierarchies and transform classrooms from arenas of exclusion into spaces of reciprocal belonging.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious tensions across the 15 European nations examined have shifted from theological disputes to conflicts over heritage identity, national belonging, and institutional authority. Applying the Bray and Thomas (1995) comparative framework alongside READ and RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b), the research mapped macro-level geopolitical, social, and demographic dynamics before unpacking the interplay between legal

structures, state-church power, and secularization. Viewed through Woodhead's (2011) concepts of identity and power, religion in these secularizing societies serves primarily as a tool for collective boundary-drawing rather than individual faith. Persistent unilateral power within institutions inflames structural tensions, leaving relational power underutilized. Crucially, macro-level tensions filter into micro-level classroom interactions, turning schools into frontline arenas where majoritarian heritage dominance is weaponized for peer status (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Fandrem et al., 2009; Salmivalli, 2010), leading to exclusion and targeted bullying of minority youth without proactive interfaith initiatives.

Limitations of the Study

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, while adapting Bray and Thomas's (1995) comparative framework enabled a structured multi-scalar analysis across 15 European nations, empirical data collection was restricted to macro (national policy, legal, and constitutional) and meso (institutional educational) levels. Due to the study's scope, primary micro-level empirical research, such as classroom ethnographies or student interviews, was not feasible. Instead, micro-level dynamics were modeled by extrapolating macro- and meso-structural tensions to peer interactions. Although strongly supported by literature (Moulin, 2015), this analytical deduction cannot fully capture how individual educators and students locally mediate, resist, or amplify societal pressures.

Second, given the rapid evolution of European legislation, migration policies, and political discourse, these findings represent a specific temporal cross-section. Finally, reflexive thematic analysis inherently relies on researcher interpretation when operationalizing Woodhead's (2011) taxonomy across highly disparate constitutional contexts, ranging from strictly secular states to established national churches, presenting challenges for universal standardization. Future research should pair this multi-national structural framework with localized classroom ethnographies.

Contribution and Implications for Research and Practice

Theoretical Contribution: This research bridges a critical gap in anti-bullying scholarship by offering a multi-scalar framework linking macro-political and legal structures to micro-level classroom dynamics. Synthesizing the Bray and Thomas (1995) comparative model with Woodhead's (2011) taxonomy of identity and power, this study establishes that religious bullying is not an accidental peer conflict, but an institutionalized enactment of majoritarian dominance and societal boundary-drawing.

Practical & Policy Implications: These findings demonstrate that individualized anti-bullying measures are fundamentally insufficient for addressing identity-based harm. Educational leaders and policymakers must transition to a systemic "Whole-Education Approach" (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022) that integrates interfaith literacy and structural critique into governance, curricula, and teacher preparation. To combat religious hostility effectively, educational systems must move beyond reactive peer mediation to dismantle systemic prejudice (Thomassen et al., 2024), resolve subject-teaching tensions (Fandrem & Skeie, 2024), and confront majoritarian heritage dominance at its institutional roots.

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