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Article

# Creative Shared Religious Education with Film-Making and History

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the development of an innovative methodology for engaging young people with issues of religious diversity and toleration, through combining engagement with historical and contemporary sources with the production of short documentary films reflecting on their own experience. We report on pilot workshops held in contrasting locations—London, Belfast, Skopje (North Macedonia), Durrës (Albania), and Amman (Jordan). In some of the workshops, participants worked directly with young people from other religious traditions; in others, participants themselves were drawn from a single religious tradition, but sought actively to engage with others, for example Orthodox Christians in North Macedonia spoke to Muslims and filmed inside a mosque; Muslims in Jordan similarly visited local Christians and their churches; Catholics and Protestants in Belfast were eager to understand and interact with the other community. In the light of overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants, the analysis applies contact theory to argue that the methodology facilitates deep learning and teambuilding, enhancing respect and understanding between different religious groups. It also demonstrates the value of religious education for enhancing young people’s understanding of other subjects, notably history and citizenship.

**Keywords:** shared education; history; film-making; contact theory; team-building; Christian; Muslim; Northern Ireland



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## 1. Introduction

A recent debate in the UK House of Lords highlighted the importance of good Religious Education for community relations. According to the Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Garden of Frognal:

There should be open, in-depth discussions of faith, so that all students, whether from faith families or not, can learn what religion means to practitioners and how important it is to be tolerant of those whose beliefs are different from one’s own. In our own communities, we see great division through religion, so it has to be good when Christian, Jewish and Muslim places of worship open their doors and welcome all to experience their forms of worship. To know is to understand and not to fear. ([Garden of Frognal, Baroness 2024](#))

Baroness Garden was here articulating a version of contact theory, which has received attention in the literature on shared education ([Williams et al. 2019](#)) and draws originally on the seminal social psychological work of Gordon Allport ([Allport 1954](#)). Allport proposed that:

Prejudice . . . may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports . . . and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups. ([Allport 1954](#), p. 281)

Over the last seventy years, this theory has generated an extensive literature that has generally supported the Allport thesis ([Paolini et al. 2021](#)), although there is awareness

that there can also be a negative aspect to intergroup contact and that on-the-ground realities, especially in physically divided societies, often fall far short of the ideal conditions identified by Allport and elaborated in subsequent research (Dixon et al. 2005, 2020).

Studies of shared education also point to the challenges as well as the opportunities inherent in promoting contact between young people from diverse backgrounds. During the last twenty years, Northern Ireland has seen numerous projects bringing together students from Catholic and Protestant schools in shared classes. Many benefits have been identified both in terms of improved community relations and also in respect of the educational development of participating young people (Hughes and Loader 2023). On the other hand, the potentialities of shared education have also been constrained by actual classroom experience. Especially where classes are large, students tend to self-segregate into their existing peer groups, and particularly in subjects of a technical or scientific nature, styles of teaching do not always lead to meaningful interactions within the group (Loader 2017). There is also awareness that children and adolescents often lack confidence in reaching out to those different from themselves, although strategies including indirect contact—discussing the positive encounters of others—and the use of books and media can be helpful in preparing them for such interactions (Turner and Cameron 2016). A survey of RE teachers nevertheless showed that the majority of them perceived contact theory as relevant to their work and had indeed embedded it in their practice. However, limited encounters such as visits to places of worship were more widespread than those that involved meaningful in-depth interactions with people from diverse religious groups (Williams et al. 2019).

The hypothesis that effective RE teaching that is consistent with contact theory can improve cross-community relations is a plausible one but has yet to be confirmed by systematic research. In the meantime, this paper offers an initial report on the development of a new methodology which involves stimulating young people to interact with diverse religious traditions through the creative process of making short documentary-style films, which we have called “docutubes”. Sometimes participants have worked together in religiously diverse small groups, but always they have been prompted to think in new ways about religious diversity, through exposure to historical and contemporary texts, images, and films, and through visits and conversations with adult practitioners. The requirement to make a film—rather than, say, write an essay—ensures that the process of reflection and analysis is fundamentally collaborative and, as one teacher participant put it, “uses a different part of your brain” from written exercises, leading to deep learning. Moreover, the process draws on content and skills of an extensive interdisciplinary nature, including history, civic education, film studies, IT, and team-working, meaning that the benefits to participants extend well beyond those specific to RE itself.

We shall first outline the project and the methodology, and then describe its application in five contrasting case studies from London, Belfast, North Macedonia, Albania, and Jordan.

## 2. The Religious Toleration and Peace Project (RETOPEA)

RETOPEA originated in an international project that ran from 2018 to 2022 and was funded by the European Commission under the Horizon 2020 programme with partners in Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, North Macedonia, Poland, Spain, and the UK. It was a response to a brief calling for “comparative and multidisciplinary research” to “examine various types and elements of co-existence of diverse religious and non-religious communities in Europe today and in the future” using “a historical and comparative perspective” to “enable European citizens to better grasp the conditions needed for religious and non-religious coexistence in Europe”. There was an emphasis on understanding the “role of religiosity, non-religiosity or other philosophical convictions” in the lives of young people and a requirement to translate the research “into innovative dissemination tools in order to be used for education purposes of any type (e.g., formal, informal) and discipline

(history, political science, civic education) and in proposals for appropriate changes in national educational systems” (European Commission 2017).

Various strands of the project explored historic peace treaties as potential inspiration for present-day management of religious diversity and the role of textbooks, museums, films, and television in mediating perceptions of the past to young people. The Open University in the UK took primary responsibility for a work package that first examined the views and attitudes of young people themselves through a series of focus groups, and then innovated in the creation of the docutube methodology and piloted this in all the partner countries.

The focus groups conducted in 2018 and 2019 involved 132 young people from most of the participating countries. The purpose of the focus groups was to give us a baseline of data from which to create the docutube methodology. These conversations led by the researchers provided a safe space in which teenagers felt able to talk freely and showed themselves respectful of others’ sometimes very different views and experiences. Participants demonstrated an encouraging ability to critique and deconstruct negative portrayals of religion and particular religious groups in present-day media, but this contrasted with simplistic and often stereotyped views of the role of religious diversity in the past (Maiden et al. 2022). The team was also able to find out about the young peoples’ experience of filmmaking in order to shape the docutube approach. The subsequent piloting of our docutube methodology was delayed and disrupted by the pandemic, but by May 2022 we had held at least one workshop in each of the partner countries. The resulting films can be viewed on the project website (<https://retopea.eu/s/en/page/docutubes>, accessed on 25 October 2024). Subsequently, after the H2020-funded project came to an end in October 2022, The Open University team obtained further funding from the Culham St Gabriel’s Trust and from The Open University’s own Open Societal Challenges programme to run a further series of workshops in 2023 and 2024 both in the UK and in two Muslim-majority countries, Albania and Jordan. This article reports primarily on this later phase of work but also draws on the previous H2020-funded activity.

### 3. The Docutube Methodology

The OU team intended that what became the “docutube methodology” would bring together young people to engage creatively with issues of religious diversity past, present, and in their own experience. Between 2020 and 2024, the RETOPEA project held eighteen workshops involving a total of nearly two hundred young people. These took place in Tampere (Finland) in late 2020 and early 2021; in four schools in London (England) between March 2020 and October 2023; in Tartu (Estonia) in spring 2021; in Granada (Spain) in July 2021; in Brussels (Belgium) in summer 2021 and summer 2022; in Warsaw (Poland) in November 2021; in Mainz (Germany) in February 2022; in Skopje (North Macedonia) May 2022; in Patterdale (England) in July 2023; in two schools in Belfast (Northern Ireland) in September and December 2023; in Amman (Jordan) in September 2023; in Durrës (Albania) in October 2023; and in Cardiff (Wales) in May 2024.

The purpose of these workshops was to pilot the docutube method in order to test its suitability in a wide range of contexts. Workshops were therefore held in different countries (including majority Christian and majority Muslim); in both formal and informal educational settings (mostly schools but also, e.g., a mosque-based group in Granada, a centre for refugee young people in Brussels, and a residential week for “emerging peacebuilders” from the UK and the USA in the English Lake District); and in different school contexts, for example secular schools and religious schools. Participants in the workshops normally ranged in age between 13 and 18. An outlier, however, was the workshop in Jordan, which involved a slightly older group. The decision was made to go ahead with this workshop, at the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS), because it offered an invaluable opportunity to test the methodology in a non-European and Muslim-majority country, to work with refugee-status young people, and because of the challenges of accessing schools outside of Europe. In each of the eighteen workshops, we asked

teachers/educators to select groups of young people which were broadly representative of the demographic of the institution, for example, in terms of gender and ethnic and religious diversity.

Attendances varied between six and 20. Groups normally included both boys and girls, although two were all-female and one all-male. The filming workshops were usually run intensively over two or three days, but we have experimented with other modes of delivery, including a series of shorter sessions over several weeks, as in Tampere and Tartu, and in one of the London workshops described below. Pandemic travel and contact restrictions meant that in some of the early workshops the researchers could only be involved online.

The approach of the team was ethnographic in order to prioritise genuine interaction and create a relaxed, unthreatening space in which to engage with the young people. This usually meant deciding not to record sessions and instead to document them by writing up short reports after they had finished. All the workshops were facilitated by at least two project team members—or a project team member supported by a local teacher or youth worker. This ensured that the team had opportunities to take at least some notes during the workshop discussions and could combine and discuss their notes and observations at the end of each workshop. At the outset, participants were asked to complete anonymously a short questionnaire designed to indicate their own degree of religious commitment (or lack of it), their experience and observation of religious prejudice, and their attitude to history. The questionnaires were collected for future analysis, and participants then encouraged to share some of their initial ideas in a group discussion of attitudes to religious diversity, the representation of religion in the media, and perceptions of the role of religion in the past. The RETOPEA team led a discussion of educational material provided on the RETOPEA project website. This includes a range of curated historical and contemporary sources (so-called “clippings”) related to issues of religious diversity and accompanied by contextual information (<https://retopea.eu/s/en/page/clippings>, accessed on 25 October 2024). A small selection of clippings focused on the themes of religious toleration and peace were agreed in advance, in the light of the particular context of each group. Selections used on a number of occasions included material relating to the 17th-century founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, with his advanced ideas on freedom of religion; a short film, “Dancing in Jaffa” which showed a mixed group of Israeli and Palestinian children learning ballroom dancing; extracts from UK parliamentary debates concerned with religious toleration and diversity; and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in Northern Ireland.

Participants were then given basic instruction in filmmaking and divided into smaller groups, usually of three or four. Each group then produced creative ideas and a script for a docutube, a three- or four-minute film to be based on the RETOPEA clippings they had been working with, and their own views and understanding of religious toleration and peace. They then pitched their plans to the leaders and the rest of the main group. They were provided with Go-Pro cameras or iPads to make their films.

The young people then filmed their docutubes, usually on the second day of the workshop. Approaches to the task varied both in the light of the particular skills and interests of the participants, and of the opportunities available to them. In some cases, time and safety constraints limited them to remaining on school premises; in others, there was the opportunity to go off-site to visit places of worship and interview members of the public. Films were then edited, either on PCs or iPads. This was a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating stage of the process, and it was important to encourage participants with reassurance that the objective was not to create a film to a professional standard, but rather to learn from the whole experience. Finally, the resulting films were viewed and discussed by the whole group, individuals filled in a further short questionnaire to provide their feedback on the process, and debriefing discussions were held with the various filming groups. Throughout the process, expectations were managed by reassuring participants that the outcomes would not be judged against unrealistic technical standards, that content mattered more than presentation, and that even though the result would inevitably be imperfect, they would learn much from the undertaking. The docutube methodology

which was the main output of the research is explained in further detail in a short course for educators on The Open University's Open Learn platform ([Open University 2022](#)).

In the evaluation of the docutube method, the RETOPEA team again adopted a mixed-methods but largely ethnographic approach in order to prioritise authentic engagement with the young people. The approach included a combination of small group interviews, participant observation, and questionnaires. The team again conducted semi-structured interviews, usually unrecorded with notes written up later, with each of the small groups that had worked together to make a docutube film, to ask them about their experience of taking part in the workshop. Participants were also asked to complete anonymous evaluation questionnaires, which included a combination of both closed and open questions. Of the 194 young people who took part in the RETOPEA workshops between March 2020 and June 2024, 148 (76%) completed these evaluation questionnaires, but our mixed-methods approach ensured that all participants fed into the evaluation in some way, given that all participants took part in interviews. Following each workshop, the workshop facilitators also wrote brief reports based on their observations and notes of the discussions held at the workshops. For three workshops (one in Belfast, one in London, and one in the Lake District), the team also arranged follow-up interviews and questionnaires four to eight months after the completion of the workshop further to explore their impact. The team also analysed the content of the docutubes themselves in order to gain insights into the ways in which participants had approached the task, engaged with the RETOPEA clippings collection, and considered notions of religious toleration and peace. These different methods, phases, and layers of the evaluation process enabled the project team to gather rich data and detailed feedback in relation to the effectiveness and further development of the docutube method. All aspects of the project and the evaluation of the docutube method were approved by the Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee. The case studies selected for discussion below comprise those most relevant to the shared education context, exploring different forms of encounter, particularly between Christians and Muslims in the diverse settings of London, Skopje, Durrës, and Amman, and between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast.

#### 4. London

Workshops were held in four London schools between March 2020 and October 2023. The first with Year 12 students (16–17 years old) in an all-female Church of England school (LondonGirls) was begun in March 2020, but then interrupted by the pandemic and only completed in July 2021, when four of the original group returned to complete making a film. Subsequent workshops were held in June 2021 with a mixed-gender group of thirteen Year 11 students (15–16) in a Church of England school (LondonMixed); in July 2023 with a mixed-gender group of twelve Year 9 students (13–14) in a Roman Catholic school (LondonCath); and in September and October 2023 with a mixed-gender group of six Year 9 and 10 students (13–15) in an independent non-denominational school (LondonInd). All four schools have ethnically and religiously diverse student bodies, including substantial Muslim minorities, which were well represented by the participants in our workshops. Between them, the four sample schools represented a diversity of age groups and also of socio-economic status, with LondonMixed located in an inner-city borough with high indices of multiple deprivation, while parents of students at LondonInd, located in the wealthier outer suburbs, need to be in a financial position to afford the high fees. LondonGirls and LondonCath are in a middle position, providing free state-funded education in relatively prosperous boroughs.

The workshops at LondonMixed and LondonCath were held in an intensive period over two and three days, respectively, whereas exceptionally at LondonGirls due to the pandemic there was a fifteen-month gap between the preparation and the filming and editing phases. At LondonInd, the workshop was delivered in a series of five weekly two-hour sessions. In the initial phases of the workshops, we experimented with different selections of clippings. Those that worked best, especially with younger participants, had

either a strong narrative or a strong visual impact. An extract from the writings of Roger Williams, developing a vivid analogy between a religiously diverse society and a sailing ship in which the crew members could have different personal beliefs provided they obeyed orders essential to the safety of the vessel, particularly captured their imagination.

In three of the four workshops it was not possible for participants to go off-site to film, but they proved highly creative in making use of the opportunities that were open to them. At LondonGirls, the group made effective use of their own hand-drawn graphics, pieces to camera, and shots of themselves wearing hijab to reflect on issues of religious discrimination as manifested in attitudes to symbols and clothing. At LondonMixed, groups reflected on the history and present-day character of their own religiously diverse school through interviews with senior staff members, artefacts in the school museum, shots of the premises, and images displayed on the walls. At LondonInd, one group similarly focused on the history of their own school, noting its transition from a Victorian Anglican foundation to its present-day diversity, welcoming students of all faiths and none. Another group, prompted initially by a clipping showing a nineteenth-century caricature of a Jew, explored religious stereotyping and how it could be addressed by questioning one's own assumptions and getting properly to know people who initially seem different from us. The group at LondonCath were taken off-site to film at a Greek Orthodox Church and a Reform synagogue, but while they made good use of these opportunities, the experience of the other three schools demonstrated that the exercise could be very successful even when visits of this nature are not feasible.

The feedback from all four schools was overwhelmingly positive, demonstrating moreover the applicability of contact theory, even when contact did not extend outside the school environment itself. Several participants highlighted what they had learnt from fellow students through the teamworking nature of the task. One participant at LondonMixed commented as part of their questionnaire response that "it was a very fun and new experience, as I am a person who hates being on camera. I actually felt more comfortable, it was a nice time being here to talk with peers and the teachers". Another appreciated learning "that in history we have had events of peace between Muslims, Christians and Jews. Furthermore, I learnt that teamwork and collaboration can lead to great work". At LondonCath, a participant "enjoyed making this film because I learnt more about people's religious beliefs" and another appreciated expanding "my knowledge of religious toleration". The sense of teamworking towards a shared goal was observed by a teacher who said: "I have never seen the children work together like this". In their questionnaire responses, workshop participants at LondonInd also highlighted the value of learning with and from each other: "Working with other people has helped me see new perspectives"; "It was extremely helpful in building a connection through co-operation and teamwork". They also felt they had learnt much about the underlying issues: "The research helped me to understand worldwide religious stereotypes, how conflict makes these worse, and elements of religious tolerance". A further feedback exercise was conducted with the participants at LondonCath in March 2024, in order to assess the lasting impact of a workshop eight months after it was held. Eight of the original group attended and were enthusiastic in their recollections of the experience. One former participant wrote in their feedback: "I would do this again and I recommend it. It's a good way to educate students about other religions".

## 5. Belfast

In Belfast, the team delivered RETOPEA workshops in two schools, BelfastCath in September 2023 and BelfastProt in December 2023.<sup>1</sup> These two workshops for Northern Ireland (NI) Year 10 students (13–14 years old) allowed comparisons between a Protestant and a Catholic school, developing the RETOPEA methodology in the context of a post-conflict environment, where religious toleration is very much part of ongoing peacebuilding between divided communities. They provided insights into the role that RE might play in promoting better community relations in NI, and other more general interdisciplinary

approaches to promoting diversity and inclusion in schools. The workshops generated new evidence regarding young people's attitudes towards religious toleration and their understanding of religious history in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. It also helped to assess how young people in NI can be impacted by engagement with the RETOPEA project itself. With students expressing their desire to work with more diverse groups and opinions, the pilot workshops have also prepared the ground for shared Protestant and Catholic school RETOPEA workshops to take place in the future.

In the context of the theorisation and implementation of shared education in Northern Ireland (Gallagher 2016), where there is "the enthusiasm for the development of new 'spaces' for religious, beliefs and values education" (Nelson and Irwin 2017, p. 3), the RETOPEA workshops provided an opportunity for students to engage creatively in discussions about religious toleration and peace, as well as about differences and ongoing tensions between different religious communities in NI. The RETOPEA workshops were also shown to support the role that RE can play as part of an interdisciplinary and creative approach to promoting religious toleration and good community relations.

At both BelfastCath and BelfastProt, partnerships with the OU and RETOPEA were formalised through RE teachers and their school Heads, keen to explore creative engagement with ideas about religious toleration and peace. The two schools, which are already partnered with each other through the NI Shared Education Initiative and Curriculum Consortium, were open to RE projects focused on toleration and peace. The workshop at BelfastCath took place over three afternoons and one full day in a single week and that at BelfastProt over two full days. They were both held on the school premises and did not include any external visits for filming, as the children's Protestant or Catholic school uniforms could be easily identified, and potentially targeted malevolently. BelfastCath has limited space in their overcrowded premises for extracurricular activities, and a room was provided for their full day workshop by BelfastProt. Overall, the content of the school workshops, resources, and materials was similar at both schools. The ways in which the information was received, debated, and discussed and the levels of enthusiasm and creativity with which the films were made were also remarkably similar despite one set of workshops taking place in a Catholic school and the other in a Protestant school.

At both schools, the small groups sometimes changed and merged over the course of the workshop, depending on which students could attend each day. This meant that ideas discussed on the first day in the original groups were sometimes quickly adapted for filming on subsequent days. The students then edited their films with the help of the RETOPEA team and teachers. Both school groups were distinctive in how resourceful and creative they were in terms of developing, adapting, recording, and then editing ideas. At BelfastCath, for example, the students filmed dance and theatre projects created to express the challenges of living with violence and conflict and of integrating divided communities through shared education. At BelfastProt, one group made a mature and thoughtful podcast about the Good Friday Agreement, where they debated and challenged each other about its value and some of the consequences of the settlement, such as the release of paramilitary prisoners.

Feedback from teachers included observations which demonstrated how confidence, language, attitudes, and technical skills had been gained or developed to help express opinions and religious beliefs and values. Students who had introduced themselves inaudibly progressed over the workshop period into opinionated and more articulate young people, keener to share and debate their world views. Having gained vocabulary in the classroom discussions about the RETOPEA clippings and new film-making skills, young people commented on and debated complex and sensitive issues. They expressed their interest in learning from each other as they debated local issues and after one student provided a particularly well-informed, mature, and balanced overview of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In both schools, during discussions about the relevance of the Good Friday Agreement to their lives young people noted that they did not normally experience being able to discuss and debate issues around the outcome of the Troubles, or indeed to debate issues



around negotiating diversity between Catholic and Protestant groups. The safe space that the workshops provided was particularly important for participants to discuss generational or individual hardships or trauma and also helped them to understand other groups' perspectives and allowed them to be more confident and outspoken about sensitive issues.

## 6. Skopje, North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the RETOPEA team held a docutube workshop in Skopje in May 2022 with sixteen young people (aged 16 and 17), including nine boys and seven girls. The Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation hosted and helped organise this workshop. All of the workshop participants identified as either secular or Christian Macedonians. North Macedonia is an ethnically and religiously diverse country with a relatively recent history of armed conflict between the country's Macedonian majority and its Albanian minority in 2001. The Macedonian population predominantly affiliates itself with the Macedonian Orthodox Church, while the Albanian population predominantly identifies as Muslim. While, after seven months of military conflict, a peaceful resolution was facilitated in 2001 through the Ohrid Agreement, tensions between the country's Macedonian majority and its Albanian minority continue to overshadow community relations to this day. These divisions are reflected in the urban landscape of the capital city of Skopje, with different ethnic and religious groups living in different parts of the city. The predominantly Christian Macedonian part of Skopje is separated by the river Varda from the district where the predominantly Muslim Albanian population lives. These different communities rarely interact, and children from these different groups are educated in separate schools in different languages.

Our workshop brought together young people from two different Macedonian-speaking schools in Skopje. While the armed conflict in North Macedonia took place before any of our workshop participants were born, in the workshop discussions it became apparent that they were all aware of this conflict but knew relatively little about it. However, they were curious and explicitly expressed a desire to learn more about the conflict, its resolution, and about the different ethnic and religious groups living in North Macedonia, the Albanian population and their culture and history in particular. They noted that these topics were somewhat taboo and often avoided by their teachers and relatives. The workshop participants told us, for example, that Albanian history was briefly mentioned in Macedonian school textbooks, but that their teachers tended to skip these sections.

Particularly in light of the relatively recent nature of the military conflict, we found that a good entry point to potentially sensitive discussions about religious toleration and peace were examples from a different cultural and political context, i.e., the conflict in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement. For instance, we discussed the history and current use of the Peace Walls in Belfast that were built to keep Catholic and Protestant communities apart and prevent violence between them. This prompted the group to consider whether keeping different communities physically apart to avoid interaction can really be an effective, long-lasting solution to religious and community conflict. This also inspired the young people to reflect on the physical division and lack of interaction between the different ethnic and religious groups in their own city of Skopje.

The young people taking part in the Skopje workshop split into three small groups to film their docutubes. They were all keen to include footage of both Albanian and Macedonian neighbourhoods in Skopje and conducted interviews with members of different ethnic and religious groups. We discussed ethical considerations and the importance of respectful interaction and informed consent. One group used drawings to get around the fact that their interviewees did not feel comfortable being recorded on camera. The participating young people were positively surprised by how tolerant the views of the people they interviewed were—particularly members of older generations. In their questionnaire responses, they commented, for example: "I had certain prejudice of the opinions I thought different generations would hold. I was proven wrong. In a good way of course". Others highlighted how important it was to them to hear from people from different ethnic and

religious backgrounds and from different generations, stating, for example, that “Hearing different opinions really has a great impact on the way I think”, and “Interviewing people really helped me see a different angle of this topic.”

In one of these docutubes, which was given the title “A bridge between two worlds” (<https://retopea.eu/s/en/item/14628>, accessed on 25 October 2024), the stone bridge that connects the Macedonian and Albanian parts of the city featured very prominently as a symbol of hope for peace and toleration. This group also asked for permission to film in a mosque. These young people, who came from Christian and secular backgrounds, had never been in a mosque before but felt warmly welcomed and were very excited that they had this opportunity to learn more about Muslim culture and its history in their home city.

The workshop participants commented very positively on the fact that they were given a lot of creative freedom in how to approach the task of making a docutube. They noted that they usually had very few opportunities to get active and creative outside the formal classroom setting, but that they found this a very effective and enjoyable way to learn. In their questionnaire responses, they stated, for example, that “it was a very fun activity and a really good experience for us. We got to know and understand different things, different people” and “The process itself required a lot of thinking and putting oneself in other’s shoes, which is crucial with topics such as these.”

## 7. Durrës, Albania

In Albania, the RETOPEA team ran a workshop in October 2023 in a high school in Durrës, in cooperation with the youth and community organisation Udhëtim i Lirë. Twenty young people (aged 15–17) took part in the workshop, including eleven girls and nine boys from a mix of Muslim, Christian, and non-religious backgrounds. In the pre-workshop questionnaire, ten of these twenty participants stated that religion was of “great importance” in their lives, whilst three claimed that it was not at all important.

Though about half of its population identifies as Muslim, Albania is a country with a religiously diverse history and a secular government and education system (Instat 2023). People with different religious and non-religious identities are living together relatively harmoniously, bound together by a strong sense of national identity. The Stalinist regime that was in power between the Second World War and 1990 discriminated against religious communities and actively persecuted them from 1967 onwards. However, the current Albanian Constitution, approved by a referendum in 1998 (and amended in 2007), highlights the commitment “to build a social and democratic state based on the rule of law, and to guarantee the fundamental human rights and freedoms, with a spirit of religious coexistence and tolerance” (1998 Constitution of the Republic of Albania 2007).

The peaceful coexistence of the different religious communities was something that the young people taking part in the workshop in Durrës spoke about very proudly in the discussions and interviews we conducted with them. They stated that they celebrated each other’s festivals and lived in mixed neighbourhoods. Participants appeared quite well-informed about the history of Albania, mentioning that the Ottomans brought Islam to the country, and reflected on the impact of the post-WW2 Communist period. They appeared proud of the contrast with other post-Communist states—notably Bosnia and North Macedonia—where religious divisions are more apparent, and this pride was also reflected in the docutubes they made.

All of the young people decided to use their docutubes to illustrate how the rich and diverse religious history is reflected in the buildings of their home city of Durrës, researching their history and conducting interviews in churches and mosques. They fed back to us that they really enjoyed learning about the diverse religious history of their city. While the workshop in Skopje resulted in a Christian group visiting a mosque for the first time, the workshop in Durrës involved Muslims visiting Christian churches for the first time. As part of the interviews our team conducted at the end of the workshop, one Muslim student reflected, for instance, on the fact that they had not realised that some Christians also visited churches during the day to pray. They also commented positively on the fact

that the process of making a docutube prompted them to talk to each other about their religious backgrounds and identities, which they rarely did in school, given that religion is not part of formal education in Albanian state schools.

### 8. Amman, Jordan

The Jordan workshop, as we have seen, was an outlier in terms of its complex religious, social, and geo-political situation, the refugee status of some participants, and the age range, and therefore raises distinctive issues but also relevant points of contrast and comparison. The workshop in Amman took place in September 2023, involving eleven young people aged between 18 and 23. In the pre-workshop survey, all participants indicated religion was either important or very important to their lives. Our stakeholder organisation in Jordan, the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS), aims at “enhancing peace and stability in society, strengthening effective communications, building awareness and acceptance of differences and promoting peace, tolerance and coexistence” (Omar 2017). It has had a key role in promoting the Amman Message, which outlined the core characteristics of Islam for the sake of promoting unity between Muslims (Amman Message, Summary 2024). This context—both the wider approach to multi-religious tolerance in Jordanian civil society and the key role of RIIFS in promoting this—is important, as all the participants had been involved in activities with the Institute previously, and it was clear from our initial focus groups that they broadly accepted these emphases. In the pre-workshop survey, all except one claimed they were familiar with the term “religious toleration”.

During the workshop, the RETOPEA team worked closely with the Director of RIIFS, Renee Hattar, drawing on her expert knowledge of the Jordanian context. The pre-workshop focus group brought out various key points of discussion. First, participants tended to see the representation of Islam in Western media as problematic compared with the positive portrayal of Muslim–Christian diversity in Jordanian news media. They argued that Netflix and YouTube would often include media with, according to one student, “huge misconceptions about Islam. Even the basic stuff”.

Second, as indicated above, students tended to have a positive view of contemporary religious diversity in Jordan. Some reported having Christian friends, with one saying, “We take care of each other”. Three students described being friends with atheists and agnostics, and the different experiences of such people in Jordanian society. One Muslim woman expressed support for those whose family might abandon them for not practising their religion; but another spoke of a friend who was agnostic but did not experience any difficulties. In contrast to the generally very positive view of Muslim–Christian relations, students did not see Muslim–Jewish interactions in the same way. One student claimed there tended to be intolerance towards Judaism because of the Israel/Palestine conflict. However, some wanted to draw a distinction between being “anti-Zionist” and “anti-Jew”.

Third, the focus groups revealed a lack of consensus regarding religious tolerance in history. The dominant view of history appeared to be one emphasising religious intolerance: students spoke, for example, of “thousands of wars between Muslim and Christian”; another argued that in history people had always formed groups, adding “I would say it is human nature”. There were, however, some students who cited historic examples of toleration—suggesting, for example, that the Prophet Mohammed and early Islam were accepting of other religions (including Judaism), even if these groups paid high taxes. Understandings of recent history were largely informed by stories they had been told within their families. One student, for example, said that when her family lived in Palestine before 1947, Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived alongside each other—but “occupation” changed this. Another student had been told by a grandparent that Christians used to keep their religion secret, to avoid either the risk of conflict or pressure to convert. In contrast to these differing views of history, there was a consensus amongst students that contemporary Jordanian society was more tolerant than in the past. “People our age are completely different from people before. Now our generation is very open”, said one student. Therefore, despite the variety of understandings of history, there was an

underlying tendency to make generalising and negative assumptions about inter-religious relations in the past.

The clippings selected for the Amman workshop were intended to engage students with four topics. The first two topics involved the development of bespoke clippings in collaboration with Hattar. First, we looked at images of cross-cultural clothing from the early twentieth century, specifically, images of a Christian community wearing Bedouin dress. Second, we examined cross-cultural practices in relation to St George/Al-Khadar in the Middle East. The other topics involved clippings taken from the existing RETOPEA database. These were, first, the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women in Europe, and debates about the manifestation of belief in the workplace concerning interpretation of the European Convention of Human Rights. Then, finally, we examined excerpts from the [Amman Message, Summary \(2024\)](#), described above. Additionally, the team took the students on a short trip to Al-Salt, a historic trading city close to Amman which had a reputation for mutual tolerance between its Muslim and Christian communities. This allowed students further to explore various themes encountered in the clippings. In the Catholic church, they were able to view historic photographs of priests in the Catholic church dressed in Bedouin clothing. They visited an Orthodox church, dedicated to St George/Al-Khadar, which had historically been a place of popular devotion and healing practices for Muslims as well as Christians. In the historic marketplace, they interviewed various local figures who were able to talk about the longstanding good relations between Christian and Muslim families.

The fieldtrip further highlighted—and allowed students to experience—something of the history and possibilities of everyday co-existence and interaction between religious traditions in Jordan. It also presented opportunities for filming. Two of the films emphasised aspects of lived tolerance—for example, the sharing of food between Muslims and Christians at Ramadan, shared moments of collective grief, and vignettes such as a mosque and Protestant church which used to share electricity and water. The young people selected edits of interviews in the films which spoke to this co-existence as a historic practice: for example, a local tour guide who argued “food, drink, clothing or dialect, all of this sharing we have experienced and understood over the course of more than a century of our lives”. A third video examined coexistence by picking up on the theme of clothing, specifically through discussing Fr Youssef Ghatti, the founder of the oldest Latin church in Jordan (1881), with the present priest, who explained that his predecessor had worn a robe, headscarf, and Keffiyeh over his priestly attire “because he loved the people of Salt and wanted to dress like the respected men and elders”.

This case study involved a group of Muslim students engaging in creative learning about Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity. The young people were already broadly familiar with the idea of religious toleration and approving of the religious diversity of Jordan. In one video, for example, the coexistence in Al-Salt was described as “exemplifying the nation’s commitment to respecting and embracing differences”. However, the docutubes process clearly provided them with new insights. In the post-workshop survey, all the students agreed or strongly agreed that the process had helped them “think about religious peace and toleration in new ways”, and various young people pointed towards the examples of clothing and shared spaces as helping them engage these topics in a concrete way. The creative and experiential aspects of the learning experience were important to this, with one young person commenting that “visiting the sites and knowing what to ask while having an actual purpose was very helpful”. The experiential aspect was particularly important to this example of shared learning. Nearly all the young people were enabled to visit a Roman Catholic and Orthodox church for the first time. The detailed, long edits of the interiors of these churches are an indication of the interest which the young people had in these places. However, there was a conspicuous absence of reflection on Judaism as the third prominent Abrahamic faith in the region. Finally, the learning process seems to have challenged the “presentism” evident in the thinking of some students. Two students commented specifically on how they were now more aware of the relationship with the

past, with one saying, “the connections between the past and present regarding religion was amazing”.

## 9. Conclusions

Feedback from RETOPEA workshop participants was overwhelmingly positive. 83% of the participants who completed the evaluation questionnaires agreed that the project had helped them to think of religious peace and toleration in new ways, and 86% agreed that the process of making a film had helped them learn about religious peace and toleration. 97% indicated that they had enjoyed the experience. These views were also clearly reflected in the open comments participants shared in their questionnaire responses and were corroborated by the interviews.

A central conclusion from the small group interviews, participant observation, and questionnaires is the effectiveness of the methodology in enabling meaningful but non-threatening interaction between young people with different religious identities and world-views. At the planning stage, we received feedback from ethical committees who feared that participants might feel uncomfortable discussing matters of personal belief and practice, or that they might inappropriately share sensitive or offensive material. While controlling groups of lively young people was sometimes a challenge for the researchers, we were consistently impressed by their responsible and respectful attitude to each other and to other people they encountered in the film-making process. Alongside providing instruction in basic research ethics, two factors significantly contributed to this outcome. First, the workshops highlighted the value of a respectful, open-minded approach to discussions with young people about religious toleration and peace, and the need to facilitate safe spaces for young people to come together to discuss these issues, express their own opinions, and share their experiences. Removed from their own situation in time and/or space, the clippings from the online RETOPEA collection provided a neutral initial entry point for discussion of the underlying issues before considering them in relation to their local environments. While older (16+) participants produced more intellectually and technically sophisticated films, younger ones still gained much from the experience and an appreciation of key issues. One 14-year-old commented “it helped me realise how people felt if they were being respected of their religion and how some religions have a lot in common”. Second and crucially, the shared all-absorbing process of making a film induced strong team spirit in the pursuit of a common goal. There was often recognition that in completing the task together, the differing experiences and skills of members of the group were assets to be exploited rather than problems to be negotiated.

The ultimate test of the methodology as a means of promoting effective contact and reducing religious prejudice would come in bringing together a group of young people from both communities in a divided society such as Northern Ireland or North Macedonia. Despite our best efforts, in the face of institutional and practical constraints, this has not yet been possible. However, results so far are encouraging. There have been significant forms of encounter and exploration across community divides, and the evidence from communities that are already more integrated in Albania and in England is that mutual understanding is significantly enhanced by the film-making exercise.

Allport’s (1954) contact theory highlights four features of effective contact for the reduction in intergroup prejudice: equal status, common goals, institutional support, and a perception of shared interests and common humanity. The docutube methodology, evidenced by the responses of participants, fulfils all these criteria.

We emphasised “equal status contact” by validating the experience and knowledge of every participant and maximising contributions by encouraging team members to take different roles (e.g., presenter, cameraperson, editor) which suited their own skills, preferences, and personality. We also found it valuable to have contact through the “pursuit of common goals”, a filmmaking process which at each stage—planning, filming, editing, and reflection—required articulating and listening, collective decision-making, and the overcoming of challenges. We found that “sanctioning by institutional supports” enhanced the

effectiveness of docutubes. Support from schools and other responsible organisations was crucial in terms of planning and practicalities, but also in terms of contributing knowledge of on-the-ground situations and local contacts (e.g., in Jordan, Hattar provided invaluable expertise on the local religious context and arranged access to religious sites). We found it important for these organisations to exercise their authority by creating spaces for meaningful discussion of potentially controversial topics. To do so, this required deciding to prioritise the activity within, or alongside, the curriculum and, importantly, to reject an overly risk-averse approach which allowed the young people, within appropriate parameters, greater autonomy and self-regulation. Finally, the docutube approach highlighted the importance of meaningful contact which “leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity” (Allport 1954, p. 281). Issues of diversity, historical and contemporary, are particularly meaningful when they are discussed in relation to individuals’ personal or family experiences. Although RETOPEA refers to “toleration” and often refers to historical examples of “negative peace” (Te Brake 2022, p. 6)—the absence of conflict—the docutube methodology showed potential to build the kind of *tolerance* (seeing diversity and coexistence as a genuine “good”) and “positive peace”, which comes from this meaningful interaction between people of different backgrounds. The research has also suggested a further feature of effective contact which might supplement the criteria identified by Allport, that of enjoyability. In the feedback from the young people, this was an important theme in their articulation of contact. Overall, even when the context is less than ideal (cf. Dixon et al. 2005) and opportunities for direct contact with individuals from other religious traditions and communities are lacking, the docutube experience builds confidence and aspiration for such contacts in the future (cf. Turner and Cameron 2016; Williams et al. 2019). Moreover, in making interdisciplinary links to history, film and media studies, and civic education, while giving participants valuable experience in team working, this approach to RE helps to demonstrate the importance and appeal of the subject in the overall school curriculum (cf. Cush 2007).

Podder (2022) asks what the long-term effects of altering young people’s attitudes about peace and violence might be. She suggests that to be impactful and help shift broader societal norms, the successful institutionalisation of project models (such as RETOPEA) needs to take place through the handover of the work to national organisations and government departments. Indeed, outcomes of the RETOPEA project suggest that for governments interested in establishing widespread support for peaceful behaviours and policies, engaging with projects such as RETOPEA which develop skills, attitudes, and knowledge through creative, collaborative, and participative learning, is one way forward.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Examples of completed docutubes can be accessed at <https://retopea.eu/s/en/page/docutubes> and [https://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/religious-studies/?page\\_id=1578](https://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/religious-studies/?page_id=1578). Ethical and confidentiality constraints mean that other research data is not publicly available, but the authors would welcome enquiries.

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