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## **Religious identity choices in English secondary schools**

Daniel Moulin, University of Geneva, Switzerland<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper explores religious adolescents' reported experiences of secondary schools. Fifty-four group and single interviews were conducted in places of worship in three cities in England with Christians (n=46), Jews (n=38) and Muslims (n=15). Secondary schools were reported as sometimes not providing a suitable environment for religious observances, nor as a place to act and behave according to religious principles. Participants reported prejudice and criticism of their beliefs or religious affiliations from their peers, and sometimes from teachers. They also perceived their religious traditions to be distorted, inaccurately or unfairly represented in some lessons. The focus of this paper is the identity choices religious adolescents reported in response to these challenges. Three groups of identity choices are theorised and explored: religious identity seeking, religious identity declaration, and religious identity masking. The findings are discussed in view of religious identity construction theory, good practice for teachers, and also the potential concerns of faith communities.

**Key words:** religious identity; Christians; Jews; Muslims

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## **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that religion became of increased political, social and educational import in the new millennium. The attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 ushered in a decade of international and domestic conflicts and debates. Religion – particularly the Abrahamic religions – became prominent: further terrorist incidents within Europe and elsewhere; the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and Gaza; renewed intellectual critiques of religious belief from the ‘new atheists’; and consequently further political interest in religion in public life, including new international cooperation, research and guidance concerning religion and public education (Cooper & Lodge, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Moulin, 2012). Research shows that in England and Wales, as in other countries in this period, members of all religions reported incidents of violence, prejudice and discrimination – either as a result of geopolitical circumstances, or connected to long-standing prejudices and inequalities (Weller et al., 2001, 2008).

Historically, in the field of religion and education, scholarly debate has focused on issues surrounding diminishing religious participation and adherence in a secularising society and the schooling experiences of practising religious adolescents have been overlooked (see Francis & Kay, 1996; Moulin, 2011). More recently, however, it has been recognised that there has been limited, or insufficient, attention given to religious adherents (Streib, 2001; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012; Thanissaro, 2012). In the post-9/11 socio-political context, researchers have primarily directed attention to understanding how young Muslims may negotiate and construct their identities in Western societies and education systems (e.g. Archer, 2003; Peek, 2005; Mirza et al., 2007; Chaudhury & Miller, 2008; Hassan, 2010; Verkuyten & Yildoz, 2010). Representing a shift in the self-definition of Muslim minorities and perceptions of researchers in the new millennium, in these studies, ‘Muslim’ samples and

populations are identified by religious affiliation, rather than ethnic or national categories as in previous research (e.g. Murshid, 1990; Tomlinson, 1992; McIntyre, Bhatti & Fuller, 1993). With the exception of some research on the experiences of single religions – either Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (Nesbitt, 1998, 2001; Ipgrave, 1999; Hassan, 2010), there has been very little research conducted in England examining the schooling experiences of religious adolescents as a group comprising a number of religious traditions and denominations. There has also been little methodological innovation in this area. Streib (2001) argues that researchers have ignored students' experiences, their religious perspectives, and the impact of inter-faith education on their own religious positions. Others (Bertram-Troost et al. 2006; Thanissaro, 2012; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012) have observed there has been a focus on quantitative methodologies in studies examining attitudes towards religion among young people that may not account fully for the religion and denomination of participants in survey measures and theoretical frameworks. To explore an important area neglected in the research literature, this present paper considers the reported experiences of religious adolescents in England as a broad, heterogeneous group and considers how they negotiate the challenges of attending secondary schools in a politically charged, plural and often secular social context.

### **Challenges for religious adolescents in secondary schools**

Secondary school students who regularly attend and participate in religious activities outside of school are a minority in England (Kay & Francis, 2001). There is a small body of international research which suggests that secondary schools can present challenges to students who practise or are associated with a religion – including practising adolescents who attend a faith school of their own faith (Rymarz & Graham, 2006). The values of largely secular secondary school peer groups can clash with those of religious adolescents who have had a traditional religious upbringing (Zine 2001; Peek 2005; Ipgrave & Mckenna 2008;

Hassan 2010). Moreover, name-calling, taunts and bullying can relate to religious identity and include anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-Christian prejudice (CST, 2012; Weller et al., 2001). Negative relationships with teachers and perceptions of teachers' bias, unfairness, prejudice, and stereotyping have also featured in Muslim students' reported experiences in studies in Western countries (Zine, 2001; Hassan, 2010).

Reported distortion and critique of religion in the curriculum can challenge the beliefs and attitudes of religious adolescents. Several studies conducted in England have found that students who are members of religions can be critical of the mandatory curriculum subject Religious Education, particularly in the respect that it does not recognise the perspectives of minority religious groups, or represent religious traditions accurately or fairly (Nesbitt, 1998; Ipgrave, 1999; Weller et al., 2001; Head, 2009; Jackson et al., 2010; Moulin, 2011). These criticisms resonate with the perspectives of educators who have also argued that Religious Education can present secular, inaccurate or distorted accounts of religions, or encourage its critique among students (e.g. Thompson, 2004; Copley, 2005; Hayward, 2006; Strahn, 2010). Practising a religion has been reported as problematic within secondary schools. The lack of provision of prayer spaces, limited leave of absence for religious festivals and a lack of understanding regarding fasting in European schools are of concern to Muslim students and Muslim communities (Weller et al., 2001; Østberg, 2001; Ipgrave & McKenna 2008). There is relatively little research concerning the perspectives of students affiliated with other religions. In a survey study, Kay and Francis (2001) found that on average religious adolescents did not have strong enthusiasm for collective worship or Religious Education. Smaller studies (Gill, 2004; Head, 2009) suggest that religious adolescents could be critical of the provision for prayer and worship in secondary schools.

In studies of the reported experiences of Muslim students, researchers have suggested during the transition from home to school, minority religious students have to develop 'multiple

cultural competence' as the result of socialization across conflicting contexts (Østberg, 2000, p. 100). Similar processes have been conceptualised as identity 'negotiation', 'formation' or 'maintenance' in several studies (Jacobson, 1997; Zine 2001; Peek, 2005; Hassan, 2010). Niensa et al (2013) apply a comparable conceptual framework of acculturation to a small group of religious minority students in a majority-Christian national context. The research aim of this exploratory small-scale study was to explore how religious adolescents, as a more widely-defined group, may negotiate their identities in response to the challenges presented to them by schooling. By including religiously practising adolescents affiliated to mainstream denominations of Christianity, in addition to those affiliated to, or practising, Islam and other minority religions, it thus widens research into the impact of schooling upon religious identity construction processes in plural and secular contexts.

## **Methods**

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of one year in 11 religious communities in three cities in England. Participants (males, n=47; females, n=52) between the ages of 11 and 19 were recruited in youth groups and congregations affiliated to the mainstream denominations of Sunni Islam (n=11); Orthodox (n=17) and Reform Judaism (n=15); the Catholic (n=10), Anglican (n= 5) and Baptist Churches (n=11); and the minority movements of the Church of Latter Day Saints of Jesus Christ (Mormonism) (n= 16); the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) (n=4); Ahmadiyya Islam (n=4); and, Liberal Judaism (n=6). Interviews were conducted in youth groups, community centres, and supplementary schools attached to Churches, Synagogues, and Mosques. This was in order to ensure the recruitment of practising religious adolescents according to religious denomination, and for ethical reasons. Research shows that religious prejudice and conflict takes places in secondary schools (Weller et al., 2001), and religious adolescents, particularly members of religious minorities,

may fear discussing their religious affiliations in schools due to the threat of bullying (Moulin, 2011). The number of participants at each research site varied according to the total number of attendees, and those for whom voluntary, informed participant and parental consent were obtainable (BERA, 2011).

The research sites of this study, anonymised by pseudonyms in this paper (as are participants), were chosen for religious denomination and geographical location in order to interview religious adolescents from different denominations who attended a variety of school types. As the research aim was to explore processes of religious identity negotiation and construction broadly, participants were recruited who attended independent schools, comprehensive and community schools, academies, and religiously aided and controlled schools. In England there is an unequal proportion of faith and church schools relative to the population of religious minorities (Purdam et al., 2007). Christian participants in this study attended Church or non-Church schools of different kinds; Jewish participants attended non-Jewish, Jewish or Church schools of various types; and Muslim participants only attended comprehensive, community schools and academies. Some of the implications of attending Church or Faith schools that do not match individuals' religious affiliations are included in the examples presented.

A total of 54 group and individual interviews were conducted in accordance with an emergent design (Morgan et al., 2008) to allow the study flexibility to explore the perspectives of participants. At all the research sites, data generation began with one or more group interviews that followed the discussion of the perspectives of participants about their experiences of secondary schools. Further interviews were then conducted with smaller groups and individuals to explore the issues raised. Data were generated and interpreted at first thematically, and then also by applying concepts of identity construction used in comparable studies of the schooling experiences of minority groups.

## Conceptual Framework

The analysis presented in this paper draws upon concepts used in the research literature concerning ethnic, national and racial identity construction and negotiation among adolescent minorities in educational contexts (e.g. Jackson, 1999; Peek, 2005; Stritikus & Mguyen, 2007; Stewart, 2008; Chen, 2010; Awokoya, 2012). Identity construction is conceived as a negotiated process that is partly internal and external, determined by context and individual agency (Taylor, 1994; Hall, 1996).

Of particular importance to this paper are concepts developed from Peek's (2005) notion of 'identity ascription' and Chen's (2010) concept of 'identity choice.' The use of these concepts can be described as follows. In secondary schools, religious adolescents are ascribed identities, such as 'Muslim' or 'Catholic', by peers and teachers. Ascription may take place subtly through the representation of religions in classroom materials, the popular media, or by indirect verbal or non-verbal communication. Attached to the ascription, representation and recognition of religious identities are value-judgements, prejudices or mis-understandings. In the context of ascription, adolescents have choices about how they act and think of themselves in relation to those ascriptions. Religious identity is thus co-constructed by individuals by drawing from, endorsing, or opposing established religious traditions, their systems of representation and forms of recognition. This may include the use of symbolic boundaries to show affinity or identification, or non-affinity and dis-identification, with religious traditions or their adherents (Jacobson, 1997; Ajrouch, 2004).

This paper presents three groups of identity choices. These categories were developed inductively during cycles of data generation and interpretation, and also by applying and developing further relevant concepts. They are: *internal seeking* (Chaudhury & Miller, 2008),

*identity declaration* (Peek, 2005) and *identity masking* (Faircloth, 2012). These identity choices are explored below using salient examples drawn from the interview data.

### **Internal seeking**

In a study of American Muslims, Chaudhury & Miller (2008) found two principal ways that participants reported to respond to the challenges posed by attending schools that could clash with the religious values of their families and upbringing. They could either seek answers to problems and challenges by looking within their religious tradition – internal seeking; or they could seek solutions outside their religious tradition within the culture of their school or wider society – external seeking. As the participants in this study all regularly attended places of worship and reported strong affiliation to their religious traditions, they can be considered as having already begun a project of internal seeking. The following examples show how religious adolescents may use the resources of their religious traditions to construct religious identity and negotiate schooling, and how schooling may provoke such explorations.

Prayer and closeness to God were reported to help cope with difficult situations presented in schools. Consider Anne's experience:

*I have a way of coping with things which I think is good because at school there's a lot [...] there's an awful lot of pressure from all angles, and there's also just a lot of stress generally. And if I just have some time to God, then it's a lot better [...] Especially if you feel like alone, so like, not a lot of friends, you know. Err especially if you're kinda close with God, I guess. Umm, you've always got God to turn to, so you're never kinda really fully alone. Stops me worrying as much, again...*

**Anne, female, Year 10, Voluntary Controlled Anglican School [St Luke's Anglican Church (Charismatic worship style), group interview]**

Anne's perspective illustrates a common theme among religious adolescents from all traditions. Although being ascribed a religious identity could be the perceived cause of bullying and problems in friendship groups, prayer and faith also provided solace. In interviews, religious adolescents explained their schooling experiences in terms of the teachings of their religious traditions, showing how conflicting and challenging



circumstances could reinforce religious belief by providing explanations for their experiences. For example, Mormons, and members of other Christian denominations, could interpret schooling as a valued opportunity to be tested.

*We're taught to resist temptation ... and that comes up at school... we need to learn to make these decisions and if we weren't at school... we wouldn't have that opportunity to be tested.*

**Jackie, female, Year 12, Comprehensive School [Southville Mormon Chapel, pair interview]**

Comparable perspectives were aired by Muslim participants who saw the challenges of being in a non-religious environment as an opportunity to build up rewards in the afterlife [hasanat] by following fasting and prayers, and encouraging their peers to do the same, despite many of their friends (with less practising Muslim affiliations) not adhering to these practices as school.

Religious adolescents reported the support of adults in faith communities outside of school as significant in choosing their approach to negotiating their identities within school – supporting the view that identification and role-models are important factors in identity construction (Good & Willoughby, 2007; Rich & Schachter, 2012). They also reported the influence of teachers of the same religious affiliation in school as important. Muslims (attending non-Muslim schools) reported the knowledge imparted by Muslim teachers in a short khutbah [sermon] given during lunchtime prayers could help their understanding of Islam. Christians also found supportive adults of the same religion were crucial resources to maintain their religious beliefs. For example, Ben explained how in his Anglican school his participation at a lunch-club run by a Catholic member of staff helped him to learn to defend his faith, and was considered a valuable exercise in the construction of a deeper personal Catholic faith and public identity in a secular society.

*I often find I need to justify the religion because otherwise I might not seem like I actually believe it, if I don't have the answers to it, if I believe things are this way.... I don't question my faith because I've been brought up with it, but at the [Catholic lunch*

*club] we get a resounding answer [to the questions posed by peers] which helps you come back with an answer ... I think it helps me live in the real world like when I leave school I will be able to voice my feelings on things...I think it helps going out into a secular country.*

**Ben, Year 9, Catholic, Anglican Boys' Independent School [St Mary's Catholic Church, individual interview]**

Some Muslim participants perceived Muslim or Asian adults to understand, and therefore help with, the problems facing Muslim students. For example, Jamal described an incident concerning leave of absence for Eid where his school had chosen one day for leave of absence which conflicted with his own affiliation.

*My family was following my grandma who follows a local Mosque and we were doing it [Eid] on Thursday and we said we are going to have Thursday off and my teacher was like, you absolutely can't have Thursday off. I don't see what the harm of it was. So I went to one of my PE teachers, [teacher's name], and he is a Muslim and he was angry with the teacher too and he was like 'take the day off, I will cover you if you get into any trouble or anything' and that was pretty good, but generally the teachers are pretty rough.*

**Jamal, male, Year 12, Sixth Form College [Westville Muslim Women's community Centre, group interview]**

Peers of the same religion (at school or in faith communities) were also described as important sources of support that could further prompt identification. Sophia explained how other Quakers at different schools had similar experiences to her, and meeting them at a Quaker summer camp had helped her not feel as unique as she did among her peers at school where she was the only Quaker.

*If you go to a Quaker group in the summer and everyone is like 'how do you explain being a Quaker [to friends in school]?' and no one can come up with the right answer and so that is quite nice because there are people like you.*

**Sophia, female, Year 11, Comprehensive School [group interview, Quaker Meeting House]**

Some Jews who attended Jewish schools considered school as contributing positively to religious identity construction. For, example, Heather believed that attending a Jewish

secondary school had strengthened her faith in God by identifying with a community of believers comprised of her peers and teachers.

*[since attending a Jewish secondary school] I feel like I've become much more believing in God and believing in everything; its being... it's being around more Jewish people that's kind of made it, because then I can discuss things more about Judaism with my friends and it's definitely going to a Jewish school has made me so much, like, I don't know, like, picking there's only 20 people in my year who are doing Jewish studies A-level and they're like the people that find it important, [...] it's definitely influenced me a lot. I still like to come here [Cheder at the Synagogue] and everything, but, it's being at school which is, because, obviously you're there all the time. It's made an impact.*

**Heather, female, Year 12, Liberal, mainstream Orthodox Jewish School [Eastville Liberal Synagogue, group interview]**

However, some Jewish participants were critical of their Jewish schools, particularly the views of their teachers, which they perceived to clash with their own, or their family's views about Judaism (as also found by Scholefield, 2004). For example, Sara explained that when confronted with two different kinds of Judaism, that of her home and that of her school, her family's values and norms were more important than those of the school.

*I've learnt now, go with it [tolerate]; go with [tolerate] what you're taught [in school]. My family is not as religious as some families and I'm not going to be like them; I'm going to be what my family is like.*

**Sara, female, Year 9, Orthodox, strict Orthodox Jewish Girls' School [Countrywide Jewish Youth Club, group interview]**

These examples show internal seeking involves making choices that strengthen religious identities, either through the formation and application of beliefs and practices, or identification with others – either adults or other adolescents. In this way, group boundaries, affinities and identifications may be consolidated by religious adolescents in response to the challenges presented to them in secondary schools. The following sections show how such personal choices may be hidden or enacted publicly.

## **Religious identity declaration**

Religious identity declaration can be defined as the public acknowledgement and assertion of religious identity in order to counteract perceived prejudice and discrimination. Peek (2005) developed this concept in an interview study of adolescent American Muslims in the fraught social and political circumstances following the events of 9/11. This section explores how Muslims, Christians and Jews may seek to educate their peers and teachers, or pre-empt criticism to negotiate their identities in secondary schools. Taj's perspective below gives an example typical of Muslim participants that also resonates strongly with the findings of Peek's study.

*I share my beliefs sometimes when an issue comes up about my religion or background comes up, I give them a better understanding of my religion and race than is perceived in the media who I am and the people that we are. I think it is important [to explain Islam], some people still believe Muslims have big beards and extremist views and [are]disrespectful to women, you need to change their views because many of them are influenced by the media. The media perceives Muslims as terrorists really.*

**Taj, male, Year 13, Academy [Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House, group interview]**

The reported experiences of Christians and Jews also included instances of identity declaration as a choice enacted in order to justify and defend religious identity in the face of challenges presented by secondary schools. Identity declaration could rely on the resources gained from internal seeking, but interestingly, religious adolescents rarely reported identity declaration that also constituted attempted evangelisation.

Christians of all denominations described declaring religious identities in the context of the secular values and norms of their school peers. For example, Anita (Northstreet Baptist Church) described how she had tried to hide her Christian beliefs and had explored other beliefs, but she had decided to be open about her Christian identity at school. This gave her a 'sense of peace – knowing nothing's going to let me budge' (Anita, Northstreet Baptist Church). Some participants reported that declaring their Christian faith more confidently

among peers became easier as they got older. Embarrassment faded over time or among friends, but they needed ‘guts’ (Anne, St Luke’s Anglican Church) to be public about it in the first instance. For participants in Catholic schools, religious identity could be revealed and actively declared in participation in Mass, an important identity boundary for Catholics among non-practising peers, Jodie explained.

*People know I am [religious] because I help out a lot at Masses and stuff... Also people know if you’re a Catholic or not if they see you take the bread, and they assume you are.*

**Jodie, female, Year 9, Voluntary Aided Catholic Comprehensive School [group interview]**

Mormon participants explained how they publicly professed their faith at school. Some, in order to counteract non-inclusion in the Religious Education curriculum and despite being highly visible at school, they reported that they spoke up in lessons and explained the differences between orthodox Christian doctrine and practice and that of the Church of Latter Day Saints. This could be an effective strategy in negotiating religious identity and coping with school.

*I think it helps if we talk about it [Mormonism] openly and explain what we think and things...I love being a member of this church, I wouldn’t give it up for anything and I’m so blessed that I’ve been able to have the knowledge I have so I try and share the little bits I have with them.*

**Lyndall, female, Year 10, Girls’ Comprehensive School [Southville Mormon chapel, pair interview]**

Jews in non-Jewish schools described incidences of identity declaration in order to explain Jewish practices and beliefs to their peers. For example, Eliza set up a ‘J Soc’ [Jewish Society] for the purposes of educating non-Jewish peers about Judaism in her Comprehensive School.

*As I said [my friends and I] have started a J Soc which is good. That is an extra input for other students to learn about our religion. Our first one was for Hanukkah. ... So every month we did something on a Judaism topic. Whenever a festival is, whichever month it’s in, we could do J Soc on that. So whoever comes, the majority are non-*

*Jewish people, so it's good we have something for them to learn about. I think that's good.*

**Eliza, female, Year 12, Orthodox, Comprehensive School [Countrywide Jewish Youth Club, group interview]**

Humour was also reported to be used to diffuse tension, or pre-empt criticism and can be considered a form of identity declaration. For example, Rachel explained how she would allow some of her non-Jewish friends to call her 'Ginger Jew' (Rachel, Eastville Liberal Synagogue) in order to distinguish her from the number of girls called 'Rachel' in her class and as an assertion of her religious identity. She explained that this was acceptable to her because they were her friends and that she had called herself this first. Sapphire reported 'banter' aimed to diffuse possible tensions with Muslim peers in a 'jokey way' recalling how she and a Muslim girl would greet each other with 'Shalom' when they passed in the corridor – a humorous episode in the school day according to Sapphire, but one that acknowledged affinity boundaries in the context of possible antagonism.

*I have little jokes with people [about being Jewish] ... Like me and this girl, she's Muslim: when we see each other in the corridors we say 'Shalom' to each other and a few other things like that. But things in a jokey way.*

**Sapphire, female, Year 10, Liberal, Community School [Eastville Liberal Synagogue, group interview]**

Muslim participants also reported using humour. For example, Adil explained that a Muslim peer in his school would refer to himself as a 'terrorist' as a joke.

*I do Urdu at school and everyone [in the optional Urdu class] is Muslim and my friend says 'I'm going to my terrorist class'*

**Aadil, male, Year 10, Comprehensive School [Southville Ahmadiyya Mission House, group interview]**

These examples illustrate how religious identity could be declared by inverting identity ascriptions ironically. This strategy was reported by Jews and Muslims in relation to visible religio-ethnic boundaries, or when less-visible affinity identities had been made public.

## **Religious identity masking**

Another choice available to religious adolescents was not to reveal their religious affiliation at school either by avoiding to acknowledge religious beliefs and practices, or by not displaying symbolic markers – a concept similar to what Faircloth describes as ‘wear[ing] a mask’ (Faircloth, 2012). For example, Zvi explained it was easier to be not too religious and not to wear a Kippah [cap] at school, despite occasional desire to follow his religion more openly.

*Sometimes I think I should be more Jewish and, like, because I don't wear the Kippah and I don't pray in the morning and evening. I think maybe I should, but If I maybe came to school one day Jewed-up, completely religious, I think people would find it hard to adjust to that.*

**Zvi, male, Year 8, Orthodox Jew, Community School [Countrywide Jewish Youth Club, pair interview]**

While some Muslims and Jews reported masking by not taking up symbolic boundary markers, Christians reported being challenged by peers on account of the irrationality of Christianity’s key beliefs and therefore masked or avoided making these public if they could. Identity masking in this respect could often follow reported attempts of being more open or declaring religious identity. Ambrose’s example serves as typical of those reported across Christian denominations.

*I used to [talk about religious views], but now I'm a bit tired of it. It's the same questions over and over again and it it's...if I try and explain, they won't have respect for what I say to them...*

**Ambrose, Year 11, Catholic, Comprehensive School [St Mary’s Catholic Church, individual interview]**

Identity masking could be directly associated with the perceived misrepresentation of religion in the curriculum. For example, for Ruth, the representation and ascription of a distorted Jewish identity in Religious Education had made her identity too difficult to manage with her peer group apart from close friends.

*I think the problem of Jewish teaching [in Religious Education lessons] at school is that I feel really singled out and made to seem really weird and stuff, so its a bit of a*

*joke to everyone, so that's why I don't really talk to anyone about my religion in school, except to my friends who are desperate to come to my Bat Mitzvah.*

**Ruth, female, Year 8, Reform, Independent School [Eastville Reform Synagogue, group interview]**

The reported experiences of Ahmadiyya Muslims give an example of how minority Muslim identities could be masked to avoid tension with other Muslim peers. Ahmadiyya Muslims identified with ethnically defined 'Asians', 'Pakistanis' and 'Muslims' but reported instances of not-acknowledging Ahmadi affiliation with non-Ahmadi Muslim peers because of a history of persecution and possible hostility due to theological differences. Aadil explained that when 'Asians ask questions, I try to avoid them' (Aadil, Ahmadiyya Mission House). For Muhab cloaking Ahmadi identity was a dilemma that needed subtle management: 'You don't want to bring attention to yourself, but you don't want to be like you're not there' (Muhab, Ahmadiyya Mission House). The experiences of Ahmadi show the difficulties of both belonging to a visible and stigmatised Muslim minority, but also a minority within that minority.

## **Discussion**

This paper contributes to the research literature about schooling and religious identity construction in three principal ways.

Firstly, this study is methodologically innovative. It shows how the nuances of individuals' religious identities and denominational differences can be explored by conducting in-depth interviews in places of worship. As a small-scale exploratory study, however, the examples presented in this paper cannot be considered generalisable. Furthermore, while the identity choices given indicate how religious affiliation may be maintained despite the challenges presented by secondary schools, it is not inferable from the data gathered whether schooling could be a factor leading to giving up religious practice or affiliation. This is because the sample consists of adolescents who have continued to attend places of worship during their



secondary school years. In addition, it should be noted that because the interviews were conducted in places of worship, the data gathered possibly indicates the extreme-end of the criticisms and problems experienced at school. The findings as presented do, however, constitute a theoretical model that can be tested against further data.

Secondly, this paper contributes to the theory of religious identity construction. The examples given demonstrate that concepts developed to explain identity processes among adolescent Muslims in tense social and political contexts can also be used to explain data generated with Christians and Jews in English secondary schools. The theory advanced in this paper suggests that confronted with challenges to their religious beliefs and practices, adolescent Christians, Muslims and Jews make conscious choices as to how to negotiate and construct their religious identities. While contexts and circumstances are different for individuals, the reported processes involved in the construction and negotiation of identities bear some similarities across religious traditions and types of schools. The examples given above are insightful as to how schooling may influence them to construct stronger religious self-understandings, and stronger, more public, or weaker, less public religious-affinity identities. The concept of identity declaration taken from Peek's (2005) study of Muslim adolescents and developed and applied to other religions in this paper, suggests religious identities can be forged in adverse conditions in reaction to stigmatisation, critique and secularity present in a social and political context where religion has become an important identity marker (Berger, 1999; Cooper & Lodge, 2008). The concept of internal seeking explains how religious adolescents used the resources of their tradition to negotiate their way through school, such as prayer, the support of adults, and learning about suitable answers to criticisms levied at them. The interview data generated with Mormon participants in particular show how identity construction may take place among adherents of new religious movements to renew and maintain religious identities, despite little (positive) recognition in public life, lending support

to theories of the persistence of religions in secularised societies (e.g. Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Thirdly, the identity negotiations of religious adolescents considered in this paper bring to the fore issues pertinent to teachers, school administrators and religious community youth workers. For religious communities concerned about the welfare and future adherence of adolescent members, the findings of this study indicate the importance of supporting adolescent members during secondary schooling. Appreciation for support from adults of the same religion was noted by several participants across several denominations – suggesting that Christian, Jewish and Muslim youth workers may be of benefit for religious communities to help adolescent members either in or out of school. For Christians, for example, this may be equipping their adolescent members with knowledge about theodicies and counter-arguments concerning critiques of the existence of God – areas cited by some participants as popular contentions with their peers, and also presented by the Religious Education curriculum. In schools, relationships with adults – either negative or positive – were also considered important by participants, as found elsewhere (e.g. Rich & Schachter, 2012). The findings of this study suggest that, while it is important to acknowledge the religious traditions of students, educators should exercise sensitivity and not assume religious adolescents may wish to act as representatives or spokespeople for their tradition, but rather keep their religious affiliations private.

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