# AN EXPLORATION OF PUPILS' AND TEACHERS' DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF RELIGION(S): THE CASE OF ALEXANDER PARKES PRIMARY SCHOOL

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This thesis considers questions pertaining to the discursive constructions of religion(s) as mediated through a primary school. It considers how pupils and teachers make sense of religion(s) in their institutional setting and beyond. The main research questions are: a) How is religion mediated through daily educational practices? b) How do pupils and teachers construct religion(s) at school? For this project, I adopted an ethnographic approach to a case study, and conducted fieldwork at Alexander Parkes Primary School,[1] a state-funded non-faith-based primary school in Birmingham, UK. While most research conducted in Birmingham tends to focus on faith-based schools and/or minority faith communities, this research pays attention to the "missing group" (Davie, 2012: 287), that is to say the 'middle ground' group in the religious life of England "who self-identify as Christians" (Davie, 2015: 169), but "whose way of being religious is captured by the term 'vicarious'" (Davie, 2012: 287).

This project considers the place of religion in the everyday lives of children and teachers, and how they encounter religion in mundane ways. The findings of this study shed new light on how pupils and teachers discursively construct religion in education (macro level). The concepts of religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997), and 'vicarious religion' (Davie, 2015) provide the theoretical framework to explore the dialectic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and the (perceived) role and function of religion in contemporary society (meso level). In order to investigate which discourses were (re)reproduced at Alexander Parkes, I adopted Ipgrave's analytical tools to the "different approaches to religion: *doxological*, *sacramental*, and *instrumental,* founded, respectively, on certain faith in God, on openness to the possibility of God, and on a default scepticism" (2012a: 30). These tools were useful to explore how the school managed religion (micro level). Findings show that while children's agency should not be underplayed, the school as a structure plays an important role in shaping pupils' construction of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular.

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[1] All social actors, places of worship, schools, and other named localities have been allocated a pseudonym throughout this research project.

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To my family

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## List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| AP | Alexander Parkes |
| ASC | Agreed Syllabus Conference |
| AT | Attainment Target |
| BAS | Birmingham Agreed Syllabus |
| BCC | Birmingham City Council |
| BHA | British Humanist Association |
| BSA | British Sociological Association |
| CofE | Church of England |
| CORAB | Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life |
| CoRE | Commission on Religious Education |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| ERA | Education Reform Act (1988) |
| EYFS | Early Years Foundations Stage (Reception) |
| FBVs | Fundamental British Values |
| KS1 | Key Stage 1 (Year 1 and Year 2) |
| KS2 | Key Stage 2 (Year 3 to Year 6) |
| LA | Local Authority |
| LEA | Local Educational Authority |
| NATRE | National Associate of Teachers of Religious Education |
| NRMs | New Religious Movements |
| Ofsted | Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills |
| ONS | Office for National Statistics |
| OTH | Operation Trojan Horse |
| PE | Physical Education |
| PwC | Philosophy with Children |
| QCA | Qualifications and Curriculum Authority |
| R&W | Religion and Worldviews |
| RC | Roman Catholic |
| RE | Religious Education |
| REC | Religious Education Council for England and Wales |
| RI | Religious Instruction |
| SACRE | Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education |
| SATs | Standard Attainment Tests (at the end of Year 6) |
| SCAA | School Curriculum and Assessment Authority |
| SIAS | Statutory Inspection of Anglican Schools |
| SMSC | Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (Development) |
| SORW | Study of Religion(s) and Worldview(s) |
| SRE | Sex and Relationship Education |
| VA | Voluntary-aided |
| VC | Voluntary-controlled |
| WEIRD | Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic |
| WRERU | Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit |
| WRP | World Religions Paradigm |

# *An Exploration of Pupils' and Teachers' Discursive Constructions of Religion(s): The Case of Alexander Parkes Primary School*

# Chapter 1.  Introduction

## 1.1.  Background to the Research

The aim of this thesis is to explore how religion is mediated in a state-funded non-faith-based primary school, and how pupils and teachers [1] discursively construct religion(s), and make sense of religion(s) in their institutional setting and beyond. The findings presented in this thesis emerge from an in-depth ethnographic approach to a case study: Alexander Parkes Community Primary School,[2] which was located in a white working-class area of Birmingham, UK. While most research conducted in Birmingham tends to focus on faith-based schools and/or on minority faith communities, this research pays attention to the "missing group" (Davie, 2012: 287), that is to say the 'middle ground' group in the religious life of England "who self-identify as Christians" (Davie, 2015: 169), but "whose way of being religious is [best] captured by the term 'vicarious'"

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[1] Although I use 'teachers,' the research will include other adult participants (i.e. the Headteacher, the Deputy Headteacher, and the local Reverend) who are actively involved in both RE and collective worship.

[2] All social actors, places of worship, schools, and other named localities have been allocated a pseudonym throughout this research project (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of methods and ethics).

(Davie, 2012: 287). "By vicarious is meant the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority is doing" (Davie, 2015: 6).

This project started when I arrived in England in 2008, a few years before I moved to Birmingham and formally enrolled for a part-time PhD at Aston University. I had just left Dublin, Republic of Ireland, where I worked as a French Teaching Assistant for two years, and where I completed a Masters dissertation on the rise of multi-denominational primary schools in a predominantly Catholic education sector. Being French and having grown up in a society characterised by *laïcité*, I took for granted the absence of religious symbols in government affairs and public institutions. Living in Ireland and then England challenged my ontological assumptions vis-à-vis education, as well as my hermeneutical position on *laïcité*.

Usually translated as 'secular,' this interpretation is inaccurate; republican *laïcité* in France refers to the separation of the Church and State (Loi, 1905). Rather than reflecting a process of secularisation in terms of beliefs or practices, the French republican value of *laïcité* is primarily entrenched in anticlericalism, and the protection of the nation from the Catholic Church and other religious organisations, which have been historically and socially constructed as authoritarian, oppressive, or even anti-democratic (Baubérot, 1998). This has resulted in a binary between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' where the religious is confined to the private space (Baubérot, 2010; Jennings, 2000), and the secular is the norm in the public arena. Such discursive constructions are anchored in liberalism:

> Because liberalism holds the rights of the individual, autonomy, and justice as the fundamental tenets of society, in theory, collective religious beliefs, values and institutions that could potentially threaten these individual rights and autonomy (including the right to freedom of religion) have no place in public life (Hemming, 2015: 20).

As a result, French state institutions such as public schools, must embrace the republican value of *laïcité* (Baubérot, 2010; Jennings, 2000). *Laïc* public schools are barred from including religious symbols – whether they are in the form of artefacts or clothing items (Loi, 2004) – and do not teach Religious Education (RE) or Religious Studies (RS).[3] This process of limiting and challenging the role and place of religion in

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[3] The vast majority of schools in France are *laïc* public schools that are owned and fully funded by the State. Two types of religious private schools can also be found – religious private schools 'under contract'

social welfare services such as education is known as "social differentiation" (Woodhead and Partridge, 2016: 4). Via this process, the status of religion is affected as it is transformed into a cultural force that loses political legitimacy. Religion becomes *de facto* a private affair, with no legitimate influence in the public sphere (Baubérot, 2010; Woodhead and Patridge, 2016).

Religion in England, however, has not been subject to such "shrinkage" (Woodhead and Partridge, 2016: 5). By officially endorsing the Church of England as the established Church, the State continuously acknowledges the public character of Christianity (Modood, 1994). Since the Reformation, the Church of England has been closely associated with the monarchy (Modood, 1994; CofE, 2016a; 2016b). Furthermore, by recognising and acknowledging the nation state, the Church of England has constructed itself as the defender of democracy. As a result, the functions of the Church of England in the public sphere can still be observed today (Woodhead and Partridge, 2016):

- The monarch is Supreme Governor of the Church of England;
- The monarch may not be of another religion or Christian denomination;
- The Church of England carries out the coronation, royal weddings, baptisms and funerals;
- The Church of England carries out all state functions where prayer or religious ceremony may be required (e.g. a Church of England chaplain leads the Commons in prayer every day);
- Twenty-six seats in the House of Lords are reserved for Bishops, called Lords Spiritual (who also lead the House of Lords in prayer at the start of each sitting);
- Church of England chaplains are employed for religious as well as pastoral duties (e.g. armed forces, prisons' services, hospitals[4]).

As far as education is concerned, all state-funded schools – whether they are of a religious character or not – must hold a daily act of collective worship, and must teach RE

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(with the State), and those 'without contract.' The majority of religious private schools are 'under contract' and are Roman Catholic. These schools receive funding from the Government despite teaching Religious Instruction (RI). State funding covers costs associated with the delivery of the national curriculum and teachers' salaries, but not RI. As they receive public funding, private religious schools 'under contract' cannot discriminate on religious grounds, and pupils are allowed to opt out of RI classes (Verneuil, 2014).

[4] It is important to note that there are also chaplains in these organisations form other Christian denominations, and from other faiths.

(Education Act, 1944). The State officially endorses the place of Christianity in state-funded education as acts of collective worship must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character" (ERA, 1988: 5), and RE classes must "reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (1988: 6). As a result, state-funded non-faith-based schools can have a "vaguely Christian ethos" (Ward, 2008: 319), regardless of their pupil population. While schools can apply for an exemption from Christian acts of collective worship (called 'determination') to their local Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE),[5] this procedure remains uncommon.[6] The Cowper-Temple clause, also known as the 'conscience clause,' allows parents to remove their children from RE classes and/or acts of collective worship. Although there is little literature on the conscience clause (Richardson *et al.*, 2013), withdrawal requests do not seem to be common practice (Louden, 2004; Nixon, 2018).

Leaving France made me realise that religion and state institutions did not have to be mutually exclusive, and that the concept of *laïcité* served as a state apparatus to reproduce particular power relations, and anchor 'Frenchness' in secular ideologies (Haldrup *et al.*, 2006). Analysing the English context where religion can be accommodated in public institutions quickly became an *idée fixe*. Examining how religion is mediated in a state-funded non-faith-based school, and how religion is discursively constructed by pupils and teachers became the driving force behind this research. For this project, I focus on primary education – a fundamental stage in children's development, when they learn and internalise a set of values and social attitudes (Berger, 1967; Moscovici, 2000).

While there is a small body of literature on religion and primary education (e.g. Ipgrave, 2004; 2010; 2013a; 2013b; Hemming, 2011a; 2011b; 2015; Smith, 2005b; Shillitoe, forthcoming), the vast majority of publications tend to focus on the experience of pupils in the secondary sector (e.g. Moulin, 2015; Thanissaro, 2012) or in Higher Education (e.g. Sharma and Guest, 2013; Guest *et al.*, 2013; Guest and Aune, 2017; Guest, 2015). This research project therefore contributes to the growing, yet limited, body of literature on children's encounters with religion in educational settings. In the next

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[5] Schools that have been granted a 'determination' must still provide a daily act of collective worship, but under the new terms that have been agreed by SACRE (ERA, 1988).
For a discussion of SACREs, please refer to Section 2.3.
[6] At the time of study, just over 5% of schools (n=26 out of 493) had been granted a determination in Birmingham (BCC, 2014).

sections, I reflect on the aims, scope and limitations of this research project. It is worth noting at this stage that this study focuses on England rather than Great Britain or the United Kingdom since there can be significant differences between the education systems in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and, to a lesser extent, Wales.

## 1.2.  Main Research Questions

When addressing the question of religion in state-funded education in England, scholarly attention tends to be directed towards schools with a religious character.[7] One of the main attacks on faith-based schools is that they can be socially divisive (Cush, 2003; Schagen and Schagen, 2001; Ward, 2008). Halstead and McLaughlin (2005), however, argue that non-faith-based schools can be more divisive than faith-based ones. Tinker (2009), Panjwani (2005; 2014b), Parekh (2000) and Modood *et al*. (1994) explain that non-faith-based schools are less likely to consider the needs and interests of minority religious and ethnic groups. They contend that the demand for faith-based schools from minority religious groups would not be as high if non-faith-based schools were more inclusive and more representative of religious minorities.

According to Ward (2008), education in Britain is overlaid by 'white institutional racism' – that is to say a form of 'imperial racism' whereby "hierarchies of superiority and inferiority are constructed according to the values of the majority culture" (Giddens, 2001: 495; see also Bhopal, 2018). The concept of 'white racism' "designates discriminatory practices and actions as well as the attitudes and ideologies that motivate the negative actions" towards other racial [i.e. non-white] groups (Feagin *et al*., 2001: 17). Groups that stand out from the majority (white) culture are marginalised and constructed as the 'Other.' 'White racism' therefore refers to "the *socially organized set of practices, attitudes, and ideas that deny [other racial groups] the privileges, dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards*" that are available to white people (2001: 17, emphasis in original), therefore reproducing "relations of dominance and subordinance" (Broome, 2001: 8). While the term 'white racism' is a contested one, Flemmen and

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[7] Schools with a religious character are often referred to as 'faith-based schools' in academia (Jackson, 2003b; Judge, 2001; Walford, 2008) or 'faith schools' in common parlance (Long and Bolton, 2015; Scott, 2014; YouGov, 2013). From now on, I use the term 'faith-based schools.'

Savage reflect on its contemporary significance and "its association with nationalist sentiment" in Britain (2017: 233). They argue, however, that it may be more appropriate to talk about "neo-liberal and 'performative' modes of racism which are not so easily manifested" (2017: 235):

> [T]o understand neoliberalism is to understand how neoliberal policies reproduce inequity and reinscribe privilege and power […]. Since neoliberalism is co-constitutive with race […], it reintroduces notions of white supremacy and privilege in ways that can create subtle, yet powerful, racial narratives. These narratives work to justify the continued exclusion, and exploitation of minority populations (Inwood, 2015: 420-421).

For example, by adopting an ethnocentric – or a Eurocentric – approach to the curriculum, schools tend to reproduce Western hegemonic discourses and marginalise minorities in the Arts, Geography, History, Literature, Music, and other disciplines such as Religious Education (McIntosh, Todd and Das, 2019). Although not overt, "softer" forms of racism are "no less destructive" (2015: 420), and "notions of idealised culture fill the space where 'race' could once reside unimpeded" (Carr, 2015: 2). Gillborn (2008: 35) explains structural dimensions of racial inequality as a force without agents "that saturates the everyday mundane actions and policies." The role of schools in maintaining white supremacy and in reproducing Western dominant discourses is therefore not a self-conscious one.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony recognises that there is not a single dominant class or ideology, but rather a field of dominant discourses that continuously evolve over time. Through hegemonic discourses, the dominant classes are able to impose their view of the world – their reality – as 'common sense.' Dominant classes rule through consent, and rely on the (re)production of hegemonic discourses through the media and authoritative institutions (Gramsci, 1971; Fairclough, 1995; Heywood, 1994; Storey, 2012). Any community that holds an alternative view is marginalised. Domination is not imposed from above; rather, it is negotiated and won when subordinate groups actively accept and/or subscribe to the dominant ideology. Hegemony is never final, as it is constantly facing resistances from counter-hegemonic communities who do not embrace the dominant cultural and ideological positions (Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1990; Storey, 2012).

The concept of hegemony therefore implies that a society's 'truth' is a negotiated concept, that knowledge is a social construct, and that power is constituted through

discursive practices, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1980; 1991; Fairclough, 1995). 'Organic' state apparatuses such as education, media, or organised religions hold privileged places in society (Gramsci, 1971; Storey, 2012). Institutions and persons in positions of authority – such as schools and teachers – can be important instruments of power as they give legitimacy and authority to the discourses they (re)produce (Foucault, 1980). Schools can play a significant role in (re)producing and legitimising cultural values, and hegemonic discourses. As a result, education tends to be a highly contested arena (Aldridge, 2013; Björk and Clark Lindle, 2001; Giddens, 2001).

Specifically focusing on religion, Aldridge (2013) highlights that there are many competing interests, which can lead to conflicts. For instance, Exclusive Brethren may not wish their children to study computer sciences; certain schools of Sunnis or Shiites may refuse for their offspring to take part in music lessons or mixed physical education (PE) sessions; many Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses reject theories of evolution and would like their children to be taught creationism. In fact, Hemming explains that "[a]dvocates of creationism often argue that secular schools, in embracing the teaching of evolution, are actually educating from an explicitly liberal position, rather than promoting neutrality" (2015: 2). While the Cowper-Temple clause allows parents to withdraw their children from RE and/or collective worship without stating their motivation (ERA, 1988; School Standards and Framework Act, 1998), they are not allowed to withdraw their children from any other curriculum activity. Therefore, all children must attend music lessons even if some Muslims parents might feel strongly against it; they must all attend Arts classes, even if some Jehovah's Witnesses might want to remove their children when the focus is on Christmas decorations and celebrations. Aldridge (2013) argues that the current education system has been designed to answer the needs of mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities, and ignores those of other faith groups.

Keeping religion under control and having mechanisms and apparatuses to reproduce dominant discourses can serve to reproduce and justify liberal Western ideological hegemony. Stockl (2005) even suggests that RE classes are retained by politicians as a way of maintaining control over the way religion is taught, especially in today's context of Islamophobia and fear of terrorism. Sookrajh and Salanjira further argue that RE is one of the areas in the curriculum where "the impact of ideology can easily be noticed" (2009: 70). This raises fundamental questions pertaining to the

(re)production of knowledge and power: How is religion managed in school? What knowledge, or 'truth', is legitimised? How is religion understood? Does the predominance of Christianity contribute to the reproduction of a particular racial, religious and/or cultural hegemony? In order to address these questions, it is necessary to deal with important underlying questions pertaining to discourses: What discourses are (re)produced and challenged in the educational sphere? In which discourse practices do pupils and teachers participate? Which discourses are reified, and therefore made relevant by the school? A central concern that runs throughout this research project is how knowledge about religion(s) can be caught up in relations of power (Foucault, 1991).

The primary research questions for this study are:

1. How is religion mediated through daily educational practices?
2. How do pupils and teachers discursively construct religion(s) at school?

Thus far, research focusing on pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion(s) is limited, as scholarly attention tends to be given "to the politics surrounding religion and education" (Shillitoe, 2018: 37). While religion in education and children's perspectives on religion tend to be largely ignored in education studies,[8] these themes have been the object of more attention in Religious Education, and more recently in sociology of religion. Yet, most of the work in Religious Education tends to focus on issues pertaining to RE, such as its marginalised status, its content, and its purpose. An analysis of several issues of the British Journal of Religious Education (BJRE) – one of the world's leading peer-reviewed journal for scholarship and research in RE – revealed that the vast majority of scholars who submit papers to the journal tend to focus on issues pertaining to pedagogy in RE (English *et al.*, 2003).

There is, nonetheless, a number of Religious Education specialists concerned with the experience of children and young people (e.g. Arweck, 2013; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010; Casson, 2011; Ipgrave, 2004; 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2015; 2017; Ipgrave and McKenna, Jackson and Nesbitt, 2010; McKenna, 2002; Nesbitt, 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2013; Sikes and Everington, 2001; 2004). This thesis builds on the ethnographic

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[8] When considering minorities in the primary education system, educational studies have often been concerned with questions pertaining to achievement, (in)equality, social mobility, or bullying, with a focus on 'race' and ethnicity rather than religion (Allan, 2008; Gillborn, 2001; Levisohn, 2013; Tomlinson, 2008).

foundation of such work, and aims to contribute to the existing discussions about pupils' and teachers' understandings of religion(s).

In recent years, the role and place of religion in non-faith-based schools has come under increasing public and media scrutiny (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; 2018; Dinham and Shaw, 2015; CORAB, 2015; CoRE, 2018), especially as the number of Christians in England has been steadily declining over the last decades, while the number of 'nones'[9] has been rising (Lee and Pett, 2018; Woodhead, 2016b; YouGov, 2016). Furthermore, the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City in September 2001 (9/11) represent a turning point in history, which has "altered the entire context within which we think about religion" (Davie, 2015: 37). In England, the perception of religion was particularly affected by the 2005 London bombings (7/7), the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and even more so recently by the fight against ISIS, and the many recent acts of terror in Western societies.

Religion and the integration of religious communities, and of Muslims specifically, into society have become topical debates (Carr, 2015; Davie, 2015), and new forms of racism, targeted towards religious communities, have emerged. Religious racism and Islamophobia, fuelled by ongoing events, are rising and have entered public discourses (Archer *et al.,* 2006). Through a "discursive repositioning of Muslims as terrorists" (Shain, 2003: 120), British Muslims tend to be misrepresented, and the subject of negative stereotypes. Reflecting on "the relationship between neoliberal ideology and the perpetuation of Islamophobia," Waikar explains that Islam and Muslims in the West have been constructed as "antithetical to neoliberal values" (2018: 153-154). They are "frequently cast collectively as a group who 'fail' to meet the standards of belonging in liberal societies" (Carr, 2015: 2), which adversely impacts on their lives (Archer *et al.,* 2006). In Birmingham, this was particularly evident during the Trojan Horse Affair, when "whole Muslim communities [were] pathologized as 'insufficiently British'" (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 268).

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[9] 'Nones' is a term used by Woodhead (2017) to refer to people who identify as having 'no religion.' Woodhead (2017: 250) comments on how "indistinct" the group is, as members "are  as likely to be female as male, uneducated as educated, and that they come from all social classes and every part of the country." One of their only distinguishing trait is their "relative youthfulness" (2017: 251). Lee (2015) further explains that 'nones' are not a homogeneous group, and that they do not all share the same (un)beliefs. This echoes Day's (2011) work, who demonstrated to some extent the diversity of beliefs within religious and non-religious communities.

## 1.3.    Birmingham: Beyond the Trojan Horse Affair

On 27 November 2013, the Birmingham City Council (BCC) received an anonymous letter informing its leader at the time, Sir Albert Bore, of a document that was to be known as 'Operation Trojan Horse' (OTH) (Bore, 2014; Clarke, 2014). The document leaked pieces of supposed correspondence between Muslim fundamentalists in Birmingham and Bradford. The leaked letter detailed an alleged plot to oust Headteachers from state-funded schools in Muslim areas of Birmingham in order to replace them with Muslims to promote a strict Islamic ethos and education (Clarke, 2014). In response to the letter, the Council commissioned Ian Kershaw, a former Headteacher with experience of leading independent inquiries, a) to establish whether or not "there [wa]s any substance in the allegations made in the letter," b) to consider if the Council "should take any specific steps to avoid or reverse the implementation of such a targeted takeover," and c) to make recommendations "in respect of further action or investigations which may be required" (Kershaw, 2014: 6; 11). Additionally, on 15 April 2014, Michael Gove (then Secretary of State for Education) commissioned Peter Clarke, the former chief of the counter-terrorism unit of the Metropolitan police who led the investigation into the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, to conduct an inquiry into OTH (Clarke, 2014). Gove also asked Ofsted, the school inspectorate, to carry out 21 snap inspections, therefore widening the scope of OTH by including schools in areas of Birmingham with a high proportion of Muslim residents that were not named in the letter (Ofsted, 2014; Clarke, 2014).

Both reports found clear patterns of behaviours supporting efforts to change schools and promote a conservative Islamic ethos across five non-faith-based schools in Birmingham. Yet, Clarke and Kershaw asserted that there was no evidence to support the idea of an Islamist coordinated plot to take over state-funded schools (Clarke, 2014; Kershaw, 2014). Nevertheless, OTH made the national headlines for weeks and caught the attention of politicians, educationalists and the wider community. In response to OTH, national policies, such as Fundamental British Values (FBVs) and the anti-terrorism Prevent strategy, were implemented in every school throughout the country. Prevent, a community cohesion strategy (HMSO, 2011), is part of *Contest*, the UK's counter-terrorism strategy that was first designed after the 2005 London bombings. The document, already subject to criticism because of its tendency to demonise Muslims as

potential extremists (Githens-Mazer *et al.*, 2010; Thomas and Cantle, 2014; Kulz and Rashid, 2014; Miah, 2014), generated further controversy during OTH since many felt it was inappropriate to use during school inspections (Kulz and Rashid, 2014; Miah, 2014).

Since OTH, all state-funded schools have been required to actively promote Fundamental British Values in all subjects, and especially in spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development (DfE, 2014). Although SMSC and Fundamental British Values should be promoted across the entire school curriculum, in Birmingham these fall explicitly within the remits of RE and collective worship (BCC, 2015; Whitehouse, 2015). This is because ethical virtues are taught in assemblies (Smith and Smith, 2013) and in RE, as per the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus which is organised around 24 dispositions (or values) (BCC, 207) (see Appendix B). The Fundamental British Values, which are supposed to prepare pupils for life in modern Britain, are: a) democracy, b) the rule of law, c) individual liberty, and d) mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith (Ofsted, 2015).[10] What is interesting to note is the use of the adjective 'British.' Not only does it suggest that British values and Islam conservatism are incompatible (Miah, 2014), as are Muslim values and Western modernity (Lander, 2016), but it also suggests that minorities need to assimilate into the (supposedly superior) white British culture (Grosvenor, 1997; Shain, 2013). As a result, these values have been the object of much criticism as they relate to issues "of 'race,' radicalisation, religion, securitisation and national identity" (Lander, 2016: 275). Combined with "neoliberal social and economic imperatives [this] has created a discourse of 'conditional citizenship' for Muslim communities particularly" (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 268). As van Houdt *et al.* (2011) explain, in contemporary neoliberal communitarian paradigms, citizenship is not a right but a possession that can be earned, or lost if not adequately cultivated:

> Individuals now need to earn membership of the nation-state though demonstrating understanding of and adherence to 'cultural and moral criteria', understood as core expressions of national identity. The communitarian underpinnings of 'earned citizenship' are manifest in this demand to demonstrate loyalty to dominant community values… (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 276).

Within the Fundamental British Values paradigm, British Muslim communities have been constructed as "insufficiently 'British'" – a construction "that ends up reproducing the

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[10] Fundamental British Values are the object of further discussion in Chapter 2.

very form of 'othering' it claims to want to avoid, while at the same time being silent on the material causes of social dislocation and insecurity, which [Cowden and Singh] situate in neoliberal economic policies" (2017: 271).

OTH drew attention to the fact that although religion can occupy an important place within education in England, it has to conform to specific societal ideologies and expectations. Indeed, OTH demonstrated that not all religious communities or religious ideologies can be represented in schools, nor are deemed acceptable. It thus poses the following questions: if certain strands of Islam are regarded as unacceptable in schools, which strand(s) are considered appropriate for representation in RE syllabuses? What is a 'moderate' or 'mainstream' Muslim (Arthur, 2015)? What is deemed (in)appropriate in the institutional space? Which knowledges[11] about religion(s) are legitimised and discursively (re)produced in state-funded non-faith-based education? How is religion mediated in such an educational setting? How do pupils and teachers construct religion(s)?

OTH prompted me to conduct research in Birmingham to further investigate the role and place of religion in education. I started collecting data in a state-funded non-faith-based primary school in Birmingham, a year after OTH took place. My research differs from others as it does not focus on schools located in areas that are religiously diverse or that are characterised by a large portion of minority faiths. Instead, I conducted fieldwork in a school that was located in a white working-class area of the city. As I wanted to explore which knowledges pertaining to religion(s) were constructed as (in)appropriate in the institutional space, I purposefully focused on the 'middle ground' group, and how they constructed religion(s). Findings serve to shed more light on how the majority tends to conceptually frame religion in order to be acceptable in the public arena and beyond.

My work also moves away from the narrow depiction of Birmingham as a city characterised by religious tensions, especially in the wake of the Trojan Horse Affair. Birmingham is an important location to study for many reasons. Firstly, Birmingham is the largest urban Local Authority (LA) in the UK with over 400 schools at the time of study. Secondly, Birmingham is the second biggest and most diverse city after London.

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[11] The noun is pluralised, as per Foucault's theory of knowledge.

Finally, Birmingham has adopted on several occasions novel agreed syllabuses for RE, which at times have helped shape the national landscape for RE.

With numerous Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh places of worship, all major 'world religions' are present in the city. Religious communities in Birmingham are no longer indicative of a large immigrant population but rather of a settled multi-religious population, most of whom were born and educated in the city (ONS, 2001; 2011). Birmingham is often described as a 'super-diverse' city. The notion of 'super-diversity' acknowledges that diversity is a multi-layered concept, and serves to remind us that the experiences of religious community members are not homogeneous but shaped by complex interplays. Vertovec (2007) explains that there are many factors that shape people's experiences, and that it would be too limiting to solely focus on socio-cultural axes of differentiation (such as religion and ethnicity for instance) to understand communities:

> [T]hese factors include: *country of origin* (comprising a variety of possible subset traits such as ethnicity, language[s], religious tradition, regional and local identities, cultural values and practices), *migration channel* (often related to highly gendered flows and specific social networks), *legal status* […], *migrants' human capital* […], *access to employment* […], *locality* […], *transnationalism* […] and the usually chequered *responses by local authorities, services providers and local residents* (which often tend to function by way of assumptions based on previous experiences with migrants and ethnic minorities) (2007: 1049, emphases in original).

Yet, Birmingham's multi-religious population often tends to be crudely reduced to figures and statistics, resulting in impressions of neatly compartmentalised homogeneous religious communities (see Table 1-1). Such data fails to capture the multi-layered dimension of the city's diverse population. For instance, while the broad category 'Christian' tends to be understood as 'Anglican,' Jones and Smith demonstrate that it includes other denominations such as "Orthodox Churches (Russian, Ukrainian and Ethiopian), the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Coptic Church, and various Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches" (2015: 9), as well as a myriad of different ethnicities. Even in cases where religion and ethnicity seem to correlate, one must resist essentialist constructions. Abbas (2006) takes the case of Pakistani Muslims in Birmingham to exemplify the diversity that can be found within communities:

> Pakistanis do not necessarily comprise a single homogeneous religio-ethnic group; there are Punjabis, Kashmiris, Pathans, Sindhis and Blauchis who are all Pakistani.

Religiously, Birmingham's Pakistanis are Barelvi, Tablilghi, Deobandi, Hanifi or Jamaat-e-Islami in the main, which are all variants of Sunni Islam (2006: 4).

Abbas further argues that although similarities do exist, the experiences of Muslims in Birmingham differ depending on other factors such as their age and gender, the ward in which they live, their labour market position, their educational achievements, and their health.

*Table 1—1 Population by Religion (percent), 2011 (ONS, 2012a)*

|                     | **Birmingham** | **England** |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------|
| Christian           | 46.1           | 59.4        |
| Buddhist            | 0.4            | 0.5         |
| Hindu               | 2.1            | 1.5         |
| Jewish              | 0.2            | 0.5         |
| Muslim              | 21.8           | 5.0         |
| Sikh                | 3.0            | 0.8         |
| Other religions     | 0.5            | 0.4         |
| No religion         | 19.3           | 24.7        |
| Religion not stated | 6.5            | 7.2         |

Birmingham's super-diversity is partly the result of a rise in immigration after the end of World War II (see section 2.2). As a result of its changing demographic landscape, in 1975, the LA of Birmingham was one of the first to launch a multi-religious RE syllabus, moving away from RI and Bible reading with the aim to be more representative of the City's new religious diversity (Birmingham City Council, 1975a; 1975b). Although contested for including the study of Marxism and Humanism (Freathy and Parker, 2013; Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020), the avant-gardist syllabus influenced how RE was to be delivered nationally (Hull, 1978; Parker and Freathy, 2011; Stopes-Roe, 1976), as it paved the way for a multi-religious approach to RE.[12]

At the time of study, Birmingham had once again caught the attention of the RE community because of its latest Agreed Syllabus, *Faith Makes a Difference* (BCC, 2007). The syllabus was among the first to reject the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE

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[12] The 1975 and the 2007 Birmingham Agreed Syllabuses are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

(QCA, 2004), and the thematic approach to 'world religions' that is traditionally used to teach RE. Instead the syllabus was organised around 24 'dispositions' (or values) that are common to different religious traditions (BCC, 2007) (see Appendix B). At the time of study, the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus was also the object of criticisms, as it intentionally excluded non-religious worldviews such as atheism or Humanism from its programme of study (BCC, 2007; Barnes, 2008).[13]

## 1.4.  Scope and Limitations of Research

The thesis does not claim to offer a comprehensive review of religion in primary schools or religion in Birmingham schools. Rather, it aims to offer an in-depth case study in order to understand how participants from the 'middle ground' group construct religion(s), and how religion is managed in the public institutional space. The aim is to "illuminate the general by looking at the particular" (Denscombe, 2010: 53). By analysing in detail the role and place of religion in a community school, the findings of this study shed new light on its function as a locus of power.

This project is informed by sociology of religion, where a small body of literature on religion in the primary school context is emerging (e.g. Hemming, 2015; 2018; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Shillitoe, forthcoming; Smith, 2005b; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019). At the macro level, the purpose of this thesis is to explore participants' discursive constructions of religion(s). By considering the issues of knowledge construction about religion(s), this research serves to contribute to wider debates on the role of religion in education. It builds on a growing body of literature that reflects on the sociological understandings of the 'religious' and the 'secular' in the school context (e.g. Hemming, 2015; Shillitoe, 2018). At the meso-level, the concepts of religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997) , and 'vicarious religion' (Davie, 2015), provide the theoretical framework through which I explore discursive construction of religion(s). As I problematise religion through these theoretical

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[13] It must be noted that the data was collected in 2014-2015, before the High Court ruled that non-religious worldviews must be included in RE. The syllabus at the time of study did not include non-religious worldviews. This changed after the ruling by the High Court in November 2015 (Royal Courts of Justice, 2015).

lenses, this study sheds more light on the dialectic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and the (perceived) role and place of religion in contemporary society. At the micro-level, I use Ipgrave's (2012a) analytical tools to investigate which discourses are (re)produced at Alexander Parkes Primary School, and to structure the analytical chapters of this thesis. By exploring the "different approaches to religion [as] *doxological*, *sacramental*, and *instrumental*, founded, respectively, on certain faith in God, on openness to the possibility of God, and on a default scepticism" (2012a: 30), this thesis acknowledges the various and complex ways in which religion is approached in the school. These tools are also helpful to further explore discursive constructions of religion(s), as well as the interplay between the 'religious' and the 'secular' in the public institutional space.

In this project, I aim to foreground children's and teachers' lived experiences of religion in the institutional space of the school. By exploring how religion is mediated, conceptualised, identified, represented, negotiated, and contested in the institutional, public 'secular' space, I move away from 'official religious spaces.' Rather than focusing on elite[14] discourses and attending to practices in sacred places, the project focuses on more mundane instances of religion, that is to say instances mediated through the school. This research draws on the lived religion methodology as I attended to participants' everyday lived realities, and observed their mundane encounters with religion. (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2005; 2010). Such a methodological approach enabled me to account for the diverse ways in which religion can be encountered or discursively constructed. In this thesis, I examine how religion is mediated, conceptualised, identified, represented, negotiated, and contested in the institutional, public 'secular' space.

Investigating the construction of religion in the school context "not only illuminates the potentially 'messy' and dynamic nature of religion […] in schools, but also opens up means of exploring […] the extent to which children are active-meaning makers of religion" (Shillitoe, 2018: 423). This is particularly important as children's voices are mostly absent from the literature, where adult voices are given authority. Children, rather than being completely absent from the study of religion, have tended to be constructed as passive social agents, and Sthan (2019) shows that research therefore

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[14] In the literature, a distinction is made between the religious elites (those who occupy high positions in religious organisations or institutions, i.e. those in positions of power and authority), and the non-elite (i.e. the masses).

tends to focus on 'religion transmission' or 'religious socialisation.' In this thesis, the aim is to foreground children's lived experiences, even when they disrupt adult-generated constructions of religion(s). As children's voices are foregrounded, this thesis therefore also builds on and contributes to the 'new' sociology of childhood, where an emerging body of literature recognises the child as an active and competent participant of society (see section 3.1.2).

As I adopt a sociological perspective to this project, religion is considered "as an object of social analysis with its usage in everyday social life and in institutional settings" (Beckford, 2003: 45) – the primary school being the institutional field, which Fabretti describes as "a sort of 'middle ground' between the macro features of a nation-state system […] and the micro processes happening in the classroom" (2015: 20). Adopting a sociological approach to address my main research questions enables me to focus on the social function of education, as I analyse in which discourse practices pupils and teachers participate through their local everyday practices.

## 1.5.  Thesis and Argument

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. Chapter 1 served as an introduction into the research. Chapter 2 serves to further contextualise the study as it relates it to other research literature. I engage with literature pertaining to the construction of religion, moving in stages from philosophical perspectives to classroom reality. I synthesise epistemological discussions and attempts at defining what 'religion' is, and pose social constructionism as the paradigm within which this research is grounded. I explore the discursive construction of religion through the themes of religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997), and 'vicarious religion' (Davie, 2015) which serve as the theoretical framework for this thesis. I then reflect on how religion is approached in schools, and how different paradigms and pedagogies influence pupils' and teachers' constructions of religion. I argue that the three approaches to religion in schools as identified by Ipgrave (2012a) (i.e. doxological, sacramental and instrumental) can serve as key analytical tools to analyse the data collected for this research.

Chapter 3 deals with the research design and methodology of the project. I start by reflecting on the social constructionist foundation of this research, and its impact on methodology. As notions of natural truths and objectivity are rejected, and as participants, including children, are recognised as competent and active social agents, who contribute to the co-construction of knowledge and the (re)production of discourses, I explain that an ethnographic approach to a case study is among the most appropriate methodologies to collect data. Chapter 3 then sets out the background for this study, by describing Alexander Parkes Primary School, its surrounding, and the participants. It also addresses questions pertaining to methods, ethics, reflexivity, situatedness, and objectivity in data collection and data analysis.

Chapters 4 to 6 revolve around the analysis of the data collected, and engage with the everyday practices of school life. The three chapters are organised using Ipgrave's (2012a) classifications to schools' approaches to religion: instrumental, sacramental, and doxological. The chapters explore how religion was mediated through Alexander Parkes Primary School through daily educational practices, and how different approaches influenced participants' discursive constructions of religion(s). Chapter 4 focuses on how religion is mediated through RE, and shows that the school adopted an instrumental approach to religion, whereby religions were framed through a secular lens and were used as vehicles to promote core values.

In Chapter 5, attention is given to how religion was mediated through acts of collective worship and assemblies. I demonstrate that the school adopted a sacramental approach, as time was set aside to offer pupils the opportunity to act "*as if* God existed" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 37, emphasis in original). Findings suggest that concerns about the possible indoctrination of children are misplaced. Instead, I argue that more focus ought to be paid to how the acts of collective worship contribute to children's discursive constructions of religion, religiosity, and sense of belonging and identity. In the chapter, I show how Christianity tended to be reduced to an ethno-religion (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), located in the realm of everyday morality and 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997). Findings also show how a state-funded non-faith-based school can serve to perpetuate ethno-religious power relations and structural inequalities. This chapter also highlights the importance of the embodied dimension of discursive constructions of religion(s).

Chapter 6 examines how Christianity was mediated through local Church of England (CofE) church, St Peter's, its vicar (Reverend Abi), and volunteers of the worshipping community. As the school had a close affinity with the local CofE church, and pupils regularly visited the church and met Reverend Abi, I collected data during church visits and when the reverend visited to school. In Chapter 6, I analyse how these external players shaped participants' discursive constructions of religion in general and of Christianity in particular. I demonstrate that although they adopted a doxological approach to religion, and that a majority of the church-led activities resembled religious practice, it did not lead to children wanting to convert to Christianity. However, these activities, combined with the physical presence of Reverend Abi in the public institutional space, led to children locating English culture within Christianity. Christianity, however, tended to be narrowly defined. In the case of Alexander Parkes Primary School, it was constructed along the more liberal Anglo-Catholic tradition of the Church of England, which Reverend Abi embodied. It also conformed to 'Golden Rule' Christianity, as the emphasis was put on caring for others. A vicarious approach to Christianity was adopted, as the school only turned to the church at moments of significance.

The thesis ends with a concluding chapter (Chapter 7), which engages with the main arguments developed throughout the study, and offers answers to the two main research question posed in this introductory chapter. It shows that children's discursive constructions of religion(s) are complex and multi-layered. While Christianity serves as a normative reference for other 'world religions,' Christianity tends to be narrowly conceptualised. Participants adopted a vicarious attitude towards Christianity (Davie, 2015), which they constructed as an etho-religion (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). As Englishness was constructed as entwined with Christianity, it resulted in 'othering' or marginalising minorities who could not take part in Christian rituals in school. Christianity as understood at Alexander Parkes was directly informed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity, therefore locating religion in the realm of everyday morality and ethics. 'World religions' that abide by the universal ode of moral and ethics were constructed as 'good', while those that did not were viewed as 'bad' (Orsi, 2005). Chapter 7 also highlights the need for further research in order to offer a more thorough and contemporary understanding of the 'middle ground' group's constructions of religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

# Chapter 2.   On the Construction of Religion:
# From Philosophical Perspectives
# to Classroom Reality

This chapter is divided into four sections, moving in stages from philosophical perspectives on the construction of religion to classroom reality. In the first section, I begin by defining the boundaries and exploring the limits of the concept of religion. In the second section, I focus on religion in English society, and explore the construction of religion for social and societal agenda. Such a process reveals the ontological and epistemological foundations of this research. In the third section, I reflect on the role and place religion occupies in school. I examine the way different paradigms and pedagogies in RE depend on (sometimes conflicting) constructions of religion, and how these may in turn influence pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions. In the final section, I show how a long tradition of ethnographic fieldwork in Religious Education, and more recently in sociology of religion, has influenced the present project.

## 2.1. Philosophical Perspectives on Religion as a Construction

Attempts at defining religion have always been problematic and have tended to divide scholars since the early days of sociology (Davie, 2013). In the section below, I review classical attempts at sociological definitions of religion, and examine how these have shaped contemporary understandings. This section also sets out the ontological and epistemological foundations of this research, as I argue that religion is a social construct, and that it can be used as a locus of symbolic power.

### 2.1.1. Religion as a Social Construct

Analysing the legacy of Marx, Durkheim and Weber is essential to appreciate contemporary discursive constructions of religion. Marx's critique of religion – which he labelled as the "*opium* of the people" (Marx, 1976: para. 4, emphasis in original) influenced theories of alienation and false consciousness. According to Marx, religion serves the interests of capitalism, since it creates mystification. Religion, in his view, justifies an unequal social order and legitimises bourgeois power (Marx, 1976; Surin, 2013). For Marx and Engels (1970), religion serves as a tool of social control. Marx's work tends to be more influential in understanding theories of secularisation (see section 2.2 for a discussion of secularisation theories).

Durkheim was concerned with the social aspects of religion, and he understood religion as an "eminently social" phenomenon (Durkheim, 1915: 10). A Durkheimian approach to religion constructs religion through a functionalist lens: religion is seen as binding society together, enhancing social solidary and inhibiting egoistical drives. Durkheimians focus on what religion *does* (Davie, 2013), and view religion as a social institution that enables people to make sense of their world. Religious values form the glue of society – the "collective consciousness" (1915: 9). Although Weber also acknowledges the social function of religion, in his work he pays closer attention to the individual and how religion shapes their attitudes, gives existential meaning, and serves individual aims (Weber, 1930; 1963; 2009). This substantive approach has also shaped modern understandings of what religion *is* (Davie, 2013).

Emphasising the functionalist purpose of religion, Durkheim states that "there are no religions which are false" (1915: 3). To him, all religions are comparable as they share common elements. In his work, he constructs the sacred and the profane as diametrically opposed, locating religion in the realm of the sacred:

> *A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them* (1915: 47, emphasis in original).

Durkheim's work remains influential today, and played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary understandings of the 'religious' vs. 'secular' dichotomy.

The work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber has been instrumental in shaping attempts at defining religion. Often, definitions combine both the Weberian substantive and the Durkheimian functional elements:

> [Religion is] (1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1973: 90).

Despite scholars' various attempts at pinning 'religion' down, it remains a widely contested concept (Aldridge, 2013; Woodhead and Partridge, 2016; Asad, 1993; Martin, 2009; Orsi, 2005; W.C. Smith, 1964). The lack of consensus reflects the many tensions that exist in relation to religion.

What religion means to people differs depending – among other elements – on their historical, cultural, geographical, social, and political contexts (Dubuisson, 2003; Hinnells, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2000; King, 1999; Martin, 2009; Masuzawa, 2005; McCutcheon, 2001; Orsi, 2005). Definitions and interpretations of religion may vary widely across contexts and epochs. Even Durkheim (1915: 5), despite his positivist position, recognised its ephemeral meaning and stated that "according to the men [*sic*], the environment and the circumstances, the beliefs as well as the rites are thought of in different ways." Weber also argued that religion could only be understood in its historical and cultural context, as he claimed that religion was itself a product of society (Weber, 1963; Segal, 1999).

Such an epistemological interpretation is best acknowledged withing *social constructionism,* which "demand[s] that everything be understood by being constructed" (Papert, 1991). Social constructionism is ontologically an anti-realist position (Hammersley, 1992). It rejects the essentialist view that language functions like a mirror that objectively reflects natural, objective truths (Hall, S., 1997). Social constructionism is an interpretive theory (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006), which was developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966) whose primary concern was to understand how knowledge is constructed. Social constructionists embrace an ontological position that recognises that the meaning we give to words such as 'religion' is neither natural nor fixed: it is a process, which is constantly (re)negotiated and (re)constructed by social agents interacting together (Beckford, 2003). Rather than solely focusing on cognitive development, social constructionists also consider the importance of experiences and of the social context in knowledge construction (Papert, 1991). The meaning of religion arises in the process of interaction between people (Beckford, 2003; Blumer, 1986).

Since religion is constantly being (re)constructed in new ways, attempts at pinning it down should be treated with caution (Martin, 2009; Woodhead and Partridge, 2016). As "disputes about what counts as religion, and attempts to devise new ways of controlling what is permitted under the label of religion have all increased" (Beckford, 2003: 1), such attempts should also be considered as discursive acts of power (Aldridge, 2013; Beckford, 2003; Foucault, 1980b). By adopting a social constructionist approach to religion, my aim is to "analyse the processes whereby the meaning of the category religion is, in various situations, intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted, re-cast, and so on" (Beckford, 2003: 3). The purpose of this research is to analyse which particular (re)constructions are (re)produced in the primary school context.

Adopting a social constructionist approach to religion does not equate to rejecting its existence altogether. The construction of religion as a "complex and variable category of human knowing, feeling, acting and relating" should not be altogether dismissed (Beckford, 2003: 4). As Schilbrack states, religion does exist "out there" (2012: 101); it is its symbolic nature that does not reflect one natural universal truth but rather the diversity of localised, contextualised truths:

> It makes very little sense, in my view, to think of religion as an object or a subject that could exist independently of human actors and social institutions. Religion does not 'do' anything by itself. It does not have agency. Rather, it is an interpretative category that human beings apply to a wide variety of phenomena,

most of which have to do with notions of ultimate meaning or value. […] As such, the category of religion is subject to constant negotiation and re-negotiation. Its meaning must therefore be related to the social contexts in which it is used (Beckford, 2003: 4).

Knowledge, truth claims, and discourses play a crucial role in constructing what is 'true.' In this project, I use the notion of discourse in the Foucauldian sense. Discourse therefore refers not only to language but also actions, practices, and ideas that define and produce what is considered to be the 'truth' (Foucault, 1980b; 1981). Foucault refers to this corpus of contextualised knowledge and discourses as the 'regimes of truths:'

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effect of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true (Foucault, 1980b: 131).

In order to acknowledge the looseness of the concept of religion, social constructionists have started to embrace *lived religion* as a theoretical framework, in order to "think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices" (McGuire, 2008: 4). This conceptualisation of *religion(s) as lived* challenges the narrow definitions that tend to portray religions as monolithic wholes (Nesbitt, 2004), and acknowledges the complexity of the phenomena (Ammerman, 2007; 2014; Hall, D., 1997; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010). The concept of lived religion allows scholars to acknowledge the agency of social actors as they study people's actual experiences of religion, rather than solely focus on structures (McGuire, 2008; Hall, D., 1997). In this context, structures can be defined as social institutions (e.g. churches, schools), and agency as the capacity of social agents to act independently and choose freely. If the concept of agency is central to social interactionism, structure and agency should not be viewed as disconnected from one another but as interconnected; it is a dialogical process, whereby agency and structure inform each other. Social agents may be constrained by structural rules and processes, but such rules and processes are shaped by social agents, interacting together (Blumer, 1969; Willmott, 1999). Therefore, although lived religion focuses on the micro rather than the macro, it is not merely subjective, since social agents conceptualise their religion(s) and their religious worlds as they interact together: "individual religion is, nevertheless, fundamentally social. Its building blocks are shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights" (McGuire, 2008: 12).

Traditionally, the notion of religion has tended to be informed by religious elites. As a result, belief has tended to take precedent, and overshadow rituals and practices (Orsi, 2010). Lived religion*, as a theoretical framework, serves to re-insert the importance of religious practices in individuals' lives:

> The study of lived religion includes attention to how and what people eat, how they dress, how they deal with birth and death and sexuality and nature, even how they modify hair and body through tattoos or dreadlocks. Lived religion may include the spaces people inhabit, as well—the construction of shrines in homes or in public places, for instance. And it includes the physical and artistic things people do together, such as singing, dancing, and other folk or community traditions that enact a spiritual sense of solidarity and transcendence. Some of these rituals and traditions may be widely recognized as religious and named as such, but research on lived religion also includes activities that might not immediately be seen as spiritual or religious by outsiders, but are treated as such by the people engaged in them (Ammerman, 2014: 190-191).

Lived religion thus considers the place of religion in the everyday lives of social actors, and in more mundane ways. As a result, rituals or practices that happen beyond orthodox boundaries may be considered religious:

> Because religion-as-lived is based more on such religious practices than on religious ideas and beliefs, it is not necessarily logically coherent. Rather, it requires a practical coherence: It needs to make sense in one's everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to 'work,' in the sense of accomplishing some desired end (such as healing, improving one's relationship with a loved one, or harvesting enough food to last through winter). This practical coherence explains the reasoning underlying much popular religion, which may otherwise appear to be irrational and superstitious (McGuire, 2008: 15).

This approach challenges the Durkheimian binary construction of the *sacred* (i.e. everything pertaining to the religious realm) and the *profane* (i.e. everything else, pertaining to the mundane realm) (Durkheim, 1915). Rather than constructing the sacred and the profane as two separate realms, the concept of lived religion acknowledges that religious practices can be located outside of the sacred and be part of mundane, ordinary life. Alternatively, it also acknowledges that the sacred does not have to be located within the religious realm (Ammerman, 2007; 2014; Orsi, 2010). This research borrows from lived religion as a *methodological* framework, as it allows me to explore how participants encounter religion in 'mundane ways,' and to consider the place of religion in the everyday lives of children and teachers (regardless of their own [non-]religious background (see Chapter 3). It also enables me to explore the complex dialectic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' as it acknowledges the fluidity of both categories.

In the next section, I demonstrate that 'world religions' such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or Sikhism remain informed by the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), rather than by lived religion. The voices of the religious elites are foregrounded, and 'world religions' tend to be constructed as monolithic wholes (see section 2.1.2). From a social constructionist position, such reification raises critical questions about power: Who has authority and legitimacy over knowledge (re)production? Whose interests do such constructions serve or harm? Who is included in these (re)constructions? Foucault (1980a; 1980b), whose work concentrates on the relationship between power (*pouvoir*) and knowledge (*savoir*), asserts that knowledge is power:

> Knowledge and power are integrated within one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power. […] It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (F1980a: 52).

Foucault uses the term 'genealogy' ('archaeology' in his earlier work) to talk about the constant interplay between power and knowledge, and to recognise the influence power has on knowledge, and vice versa (Foucault, 1969; 1991; 2009). Power, he argues, does not have to be understood in a negative way or in terms of repression – power can be a positive, creating, and producing force (Foucault, 1980b; 1980c). Furthermore, power should not be understood as straightforward (e.g. from the top downwards) but as multidimensional; micro-power mechanisms are exercised on many levels of daily life (Foucault, 1980c). Therefore, power is not possessed and utilised by a single group; rather, it is a phenomenon in constant circulation, which evolves over time (Foucault, 1980c; Gramsci, 1971). As power is not concentrated into the hands of one particular group but is spread in institutions and practices such as schooling, Foucault argues that although not impossible, change can be difficult to achieve (Foucault, 1969; 1980b; 2009). This correlates with the Gramscian concept of hegemony, which was introduced in Chapter 1.

According to Gramsci (1971), dominant classes are able to remain in positions of control as they impose their 'truth' as common knowledge. Foucault determines four levels of knowledges: naïve knowledge (low in the hierarchy of knowledge), popular knowledge (which pertains to the particular and local), local knowledge (which is the equivalent of common knowledge, that is to say knowledge shared by a group or a community), and scientific knowledge (which is perceived to be neutral, and reflective of

a natural truth) (Foucault, 1969; 1980c). Domination may thus be achieved when subordinate groups embrace dominant discourses of truth as either common knowledge and/or scientific knowledge.

Hegemony is maintained by the (re)production of dominant discourses. Such reproduction is facilitated by institutions and structures that Foucault calls apparatuses (*dispositifs*) (Foucault, 1980b; 1980c). Schools, among other institutions, are state apparatuses of knowledge, which (re)produce and sustain particular 'truths' (Apple, 2004; 2008; 2013; Foucault, 1980b; 1980c; Kelly, 1999; Mathewson, 2004; Sookrajh and Salanjira, 2009). As a place for learning, and as sacralising institutions, schools can legitimise particular discourses, and contribute to their reproduction. As Althusser ([1971] 2001) explains, "the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'" ([1971] 2001: 88, emphasis in original).

Since knowledge is socially constructed, it is therefore unlikely to be unbiased (Inden, 1990). Howarth affirms that "knowledge is never disinterested" (2006: 77), and that it serves certain groups of social agents to maintain and/or challenge hegemonic social representations over time, and may serve to maintain differences across different groups (e.g. religious communities) or social exclusions of certain groups (i.e. the 'Others'). The main aim of this research is to explore how pupils and teachers discursively construct religion. In this thesis, I therefore examine what symbolic meanings are (re)produced or challenged in a primary school setting. As Knott explains, the purpose of such an approach is to "reveal the hidden within the normative" (2010: 281). Such an exercise borrows from post-structuralism (McCutcheon, 1997; King, 1999). Although a movement without any definitive definition (even Foucault, often described as post-structuralist, rejected the label), Knott offers the following interpretation:

> [P]ost-structuralism to some extent develops the critique of the Enlightenment – even in its suspicion of such thinking – by extending the critical platform of knowledge to the problem of representation. It arguably rests in the longer philosophical tradition of epistemology (2010: 277).

Adopting a post-structuralist attitude to discourses and knowledges means recognising that they are co-constructed by social actors and structures, and shaped by hidden political and social assumptions (Carrette, 2001).

Before exploring pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion(s), I need to start by deconstructing the concept in order to reveal the hidden political assumptions. In the next section, I examine the underlying discourses that shape its conceptualisation in order to reveal the hidden 'order' of knowledge (Foucault, 1969). As McGuire (2008: 21) argues, the conceptualisation of religion in common and scientific knowledge is "the result of human struggles over cultural resources and power." In the section below I show that the concept of religion has been shaped by battles over its symbolic meaning and boundaries (Hanegraaf, 2015; McGuire, 2008; Smith, 1964; 1981), therefore demonstrating that religion is ideologically motivated (Fitzgerald, 1990; 2000; Masuzawa, 2005), and can be used as a locus of power.

### 2.1.2. Religion: A Modern Western (Christian) Construct

Religion is a relatively recent concept, which – as understood today – dates back to the early modern period. It is not only "grounded in ethnocentric assumptions that reflect the long hegemony of Christian theology" (Hanegraaf, 2015: 102), but also in secularisation (defined here as a major discourse that emerged with modernity, and stood in opposition to religion) (Masuzawa, 2005; Hanegraaf, 2015). In order to understand how this happened, it is necessary to engage with historical discursive constructions of religion.

Between the 4th and the 16th centuries, the Catholic Church established itself as the dominant religion, as it successfully secured socio-political hegemony over other beliefs and practices during the Roman Empire (Hanegraaf, 2015). As a result of this absolute monopoly, people were living under one single belief system, which Berger (1967) called the 'sacred canopy.' Christianity was thus constructed as the 'true' religion, which stood strongly against 'false' religions entrenched in paganism, idolatry, and superstition (Hanegraaf, 2015). Such a conceptualisation has contributed to shaping our contemporary understanding of religion, where the divine supernatural is legitimate, but where the magical does not have its place (Muir, 1997). McGuire (2008) argues that the socio-political effect of redefining the 'sacred' and the 'religious' by excluding the magical led to the consolidation and control of power: divine powers were restricted to God, not people, and only church-approved rituals, undertaken by an ordained member of the clergy, were considered legitimate and legal. Hanegraaf (2015) argues that this

hegemonic construction of 'true' religion led to a binary opposition in European societies between Christians and the Others (see Figure 2-1).

*Figure 2—1 Establishing Christianity as the 'True' Religion*
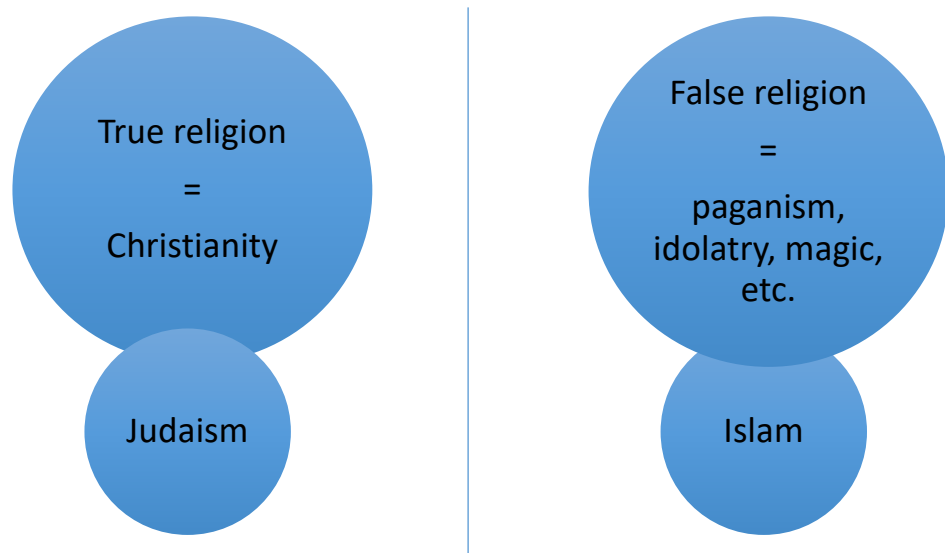
Figure 2-1 shows that although Christianity was established in Europe as the true religion (Berger, 1967), Judaism could not be ignored. If it was not associated with the Others and the 'false' religions, it was however not fully constructed as a 'true' religion either as it did not recognise the teachings of Jesus or the Bible. As for Islam, when it appeared in the 7th century, it was constructed as an opponent to Christianity, and therefore as a 'false' religion, despite its fierce rejection of paganism (Hanegraaf, 2015). This Christian hegemonic position was not fiercely challenged until the Reformation of the 16th century (Berger, 1967; McGuire, 2008).

During the period of the Long Reformation in Europe, Protestantism and other sects arose, as they broke from the Catholic Church. This led to a breach in the 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967; 1974). In England, Protestants claimed to represent 'true' Christianity, in opposition to Roman Catholics who were accused of being infected by paganism and

idolatry, and therefore of following a 'false' religion (Hanegraaf, 2015; McGuire, 2008; Wallace, 2012). Protestantism established itself as the 'true' Christianity (and by extension 'true' religion).

In England, the break from Rome took place under Henry VIII, who sought an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. As the Pope refused to annul the royal union, Henry VIII took a series of measures that eventually led to the schism with the Papacy, and to the Monarch becoming Supreme Governor of the Church of England (Act of Succession, 1534; Act of Supremacy, 1534). As Protestantism was established under the reign of Edward VI, images were removed from churches, the clergy was allowed to marry, church services were held in English rather than Latin, and the Book of Common Prayer was published (MacCulloch, 2002).

Upon Edward VI's death in 1553, his half-sister Mary ascended to the throne. During her five-year reign, Mary I – who had been raised as a Roman Catholic – restored Catholicism, repealing most of the religious legislation passed during Edward VI's reign and persecuting Protestants, which caused her to be known as 'Bloody Mary' (Duncan, 2012; Edwards, 2011). Her reign enhanced religious divisions within England, and exacerbated anti-Catholic opinions (Duncan, 2012). She was succeeded by Elizabeth I, whose first actions were to introduce a religious settlement in 1559 and re-establish Protestantism – the Act of Supremacy restored the Church of England's authority, and the Act of Uniformity re-established the Book of Common Prayer.

With the establishment of the Church of England led by the monarch, Elizabeth I aimed at unifying the Church (Duncan, 2012). Protestantism became the norm (Colley, 2005), and provided the glue for society, as it shaped common values for the nation. It also justified crusades against the Catholic 'Other.' Because Catholicism was associated with France, England's chronic enemy, this sense of unity became political and patriotic, as well as spiritual and cultural (Colley, 2005; Koditscheck, 2002). Englishness was thus strongly rooted in Protestantism (Colley, 2005; Kidd, 1996). As McGuire notes "the contested boundaries between 'us' and 'them' were […] at stake in the historical processes of defining religion" (2008: 23).

During her reign, Elizabeth I was not only faced with opposition from Catholics, but also from Puritans and Separatists (Doran, 2002). Protestants were indeed not united in their fight against Roman Catholicism, and many Protestant denominations emerged,

leading to a fragmentation of the Churches (Beckford, 1991; Berger, 1967; 1974; Hanegraaf, 2015). In England, the period between the mid 16th and late 18th centuries saw the emergence of many Protestant denominations such as Anglicanism, Methodism, Presbyterianism or Quakerism (Beckford, 1991). While the Church of England is rooted in Anglicanism, the Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian church, rooted in Calvinism. It is for this reason that I am hereby making a distinction between 'Englishness' and 'Britishness.' Although Anglo-centric, the notion of 'Britishness' was also shaped by England's relationship with Scotland, Ireland, and Wales (Kidd, 1996). Therefore, since this research project focuses specifically on England, it is more appropriate to speak about 'Englishness.'

Another consequence of the emergence of several Protestant denominations led to "a pluralisation of the traditional Other" (Hanegraaf, 2015: 93). Such plurality led to the emergence of a new dominant model for religion, which instead of being based on the dichotomy between 'true' and 'false' religions, was based on the binary opposition monotheism/paganism (see Figure 2-2). The old model, being unsustainable in the face of Protestant diversity, remained nevertheless anchored in Christianity. It is through Christianity that monotheism was constructed as 'truer' than polytheism or paganism. This eventually led to a new binary opposition: the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions, and "the rest" (Hanegraaf, 2015: 96).

*Figure 2—2 Monotheist Religions vs. Paganism*
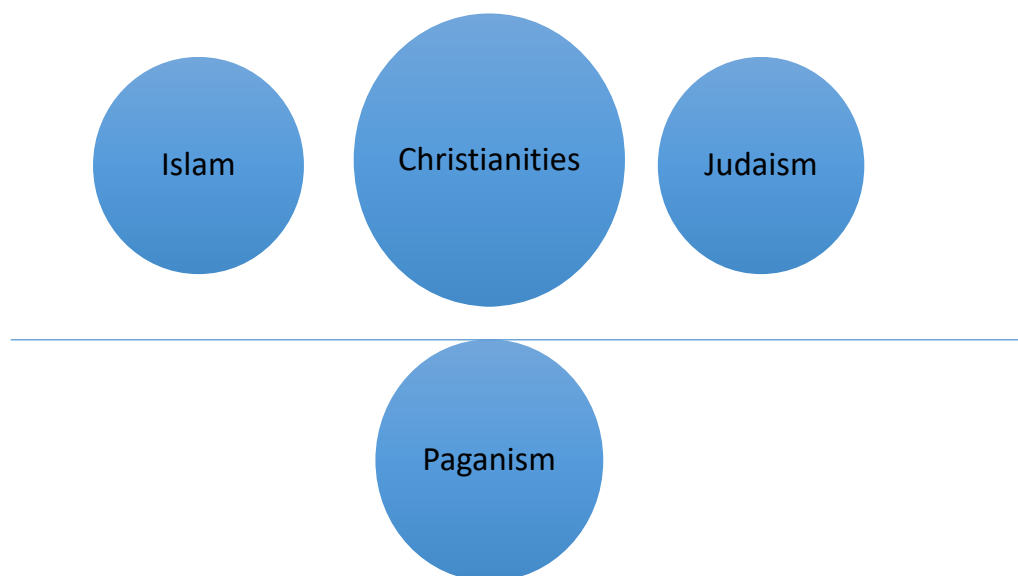


Source: Adapted from Hanegraaf, 2015: 91.

Religion was utilised as a locus of structural power, which not only served the purpose of social elites during the Reformation, but also colonial powers later on (Hanegraaf, 2015; Masuzawa, 2005). According to McGuire, "[d]efending symbolic borders of 'authentic' religion was a way of defending permeable cultural borders" (2008: 43). As ongoing religious controversies took a socio-political dimension, delimiting the symbolic boundaries of religion served as cultural, social and political demarcations between the elites (usually of Anglican denomination) and the non-elites (a heterogeneous group made up of Anglicans, dissenters, and Roman Catholics) (Muir, 1997). The pre-modern allowed elitist attitudes and behaviours to be understood as religious, in opposition to the "common folk" who could be labelled as sinful or heretical (McGuire, 2008: 44). Defining what is (not) religious is therefore entrenched in symbolic battles.

The European concept of religion was exported to the rest of the world as Western European empires emerged and started the process of colonisation (Masuzawa, 2005). Through conquests, voyages of discovery, and colonisation, Europe discovered new 'false' religions and forms of paganism. Yet, as Europeans learnt more about non-monotheistic belief systems, it became apparent that the term 'paganism' was inadequate as it not only did not reflect the vast diversity of belief systems encountered, but it also was not defensible anymore as similarities with Christianity such as scriptures, a church-like organisational structure, a belief in a divine power, and a doctrinal system were observed (Dubuisson, 2003; Hanegraaf, 2015). Non-monotheistic systems were thus elevated to the status of 'other religions.' Therefore, in the 19th century, the previous model (see Figure 2-3) gave way to a new one: the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) (see Figure 3).

*Figure 2—3 The World Religions Paradigm (Based on the Six Main Religions Studied in RE)*
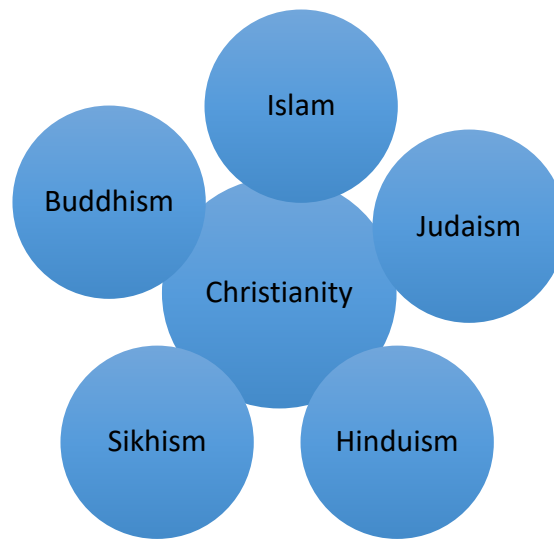


Source: Adapted from Hanegraaf, 2015: 95.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was the first contemporary critic of this model (Smith, 1964). The WRP, which still informs how people think about religion(s) today, remains highly controversial as it is entrenched in Western understandings of the world (Cox, 2016), and in Western monotheistic Christian traditions (Smith, 1964; Masuzawa, 2005). Post-colonial scholars argue that although the notion of religion as we know it today is taken as "self-evident," it is in fact rooted in "Western ethnocentrism" (Dubuisson, 2003: 52).

To be classified as a religion, a tradition must therefore share a number of aspects with Christianity (Smith, 1964; Masuzawa, 2005). Christian concepts of religion such as monotheism, churches and priesthood, and rituals continue to shape the conceptualisation of religion (Chidester, 1986; Dubuisson, 2003; King, 1999; Fitzgerald 1900; 2000; McCutcheon, 2001). Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1964: 38) also explains that, as a Western construct, religion is reduced to a "system of ideas." Traditions and worldviews, as they become 'world religions,' are objectified into systems of beliefs (Cox, 2016).

Yet, the term religion does not do justice to the complex movements and phenomena (Dubuisson, 2003; King, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2000). As Dubuisson (2003: 93) states, "[t]he West not only conceived of the idea of religion, it has constrained other

cultures to speak of their own religions by inventing them for them." As a result, religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism have been constructed through a Western lens. King (1999) explains that Hinduism is a notion that was developed in the 19th century, which "was initially constructed by Western Orientalists based upon a Judeo-Christian understanding of what might constitute a religion" (1999: 156):

> In an Asian context, the Western-influenced neo-Vedanta of Indians […] has played a seminal role in the construction of contemporary notions of Hinduism as a universal world religion. This influence is so prevalent that today what most Religious Education courses mean by 'Hinduism' is a colonially filtered and retrospective Vedanticization of Indian religion. […] In the case of neo-Vedanta, for instance, we find a largely middle-class, Western-educated élite responding to European colonial hegemony in a manner that reflects the influences of a Christian and nationalistic agenda. (1999: 69).

Although Western classifications have been imposed onto very distinct religious traditions (Roy, 2013), King (1999) warns us against the danger of representing the 'Oriental Other' as passive in the process of knowledge construction:

> [E]xclusive emphasis upon the role of Western Orientalists constitutes a failure to acknowledge the role played by key indigenous informants […] in the construction of modern notion of 'the Hindu religion.' To ignore the indigenous dimension of the invention of 'Hinduism' is to erase the colonial subject from history and perpetuate the myth of the passive Oriental (1999: 146).

The WRP, which can be restrictive as well as normative (Hanegraaf, 2015), also contributes to a hierarchical ordering of religions (Masuzawa, 2005). As certain traditions are labelled as 'cults' or are qualified as 'primitive,' they are associated with pagan movements and are not recognised as legitimate forms of religion. A 'world religion' is thus entangled with technologies of power (Cotter and Robertson, 2006).

> [A] world religion is simply a religion like ours, and that is, above all, a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers […]. All 'primitives', by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the 'minor religions,' because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible (J.Z. Smith, 1998: 280).

Movements such as New Age, new religious movements (NRMs), or Scientology therefore do not figure in RE syllabuses, and become the "invisible Others" (Cotter and Robertson, 2016: 8).

As 'world religions' have become an essentialised system of classification, Wilfred Cantwell Smith suggests that instead of talking about "religion," we should use

"faith" or "piety" (1964: 48). This, however, would fail to acknowledge that religion does exist "out there" (Schilbrack, 2012: 101). Many people across the world have assimilated the WRP. Avoiding the paradigm, or the concept of religion altogether, would fail to recognise the existence of the symbolic classification system, which social agents use to make sense of their world (Ramey, 2016). Furthermore, by suggesting alternatives such as 'faith' or 'piety,' Smith is "guilty of inserting a Protestant Christian bias into his analysis by emphasizing religion as 'personal faith' and insisting that religion is at its core a relationship to persons and to transcendence" (Cox, 2016: xvi). Rather than ignoring religion, Ramey (2016), Baldrick-Morrone, Graziano and Stoddard (2016) suggest acknowledging its existence as a discourse and adopting a critical approach in order to understand "the complex processes that are involved in the [discursive] construction and representation of group identity" (Baldrick-Morrone *et al.,*2016: 46).

### 2.1.3. On Religion, Ethnicity, and Memory

'World religions' can play an important role in the construction of individual and group identity. While issues of belonging (and believing) are discussed in greater detail in section 2.2, it is relevant to note that other conceptual tools such as socio-political, socio-cultural, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, 'race' or ethnicity also shape the construction of individual and group identity (Buell, 2008), and that categories can inform each other (Mitchell, 2006). As McLaughlin *et al*. explain, "whilst undoubtedly purely religious identities exist, religious labels may also encompass more than just religious or theological components" (2006: 599).

For this research, it is important to note the frequent overlap between religion and 'race' and/or ethnicity (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Religion and 'race'/ethnicity can act as a "powerful base of identity, and group formation […] with ethnic and religious boundaries coinciding, partially or completely, internally nested, or intersecting" (Ruane and Todd, 2010: 1). In England, "ethnicity and religion criss-cross each other in a bewildering variety of ways" (Davie, 2015*:* 9), and can become conflated. In his research in three primary schools, Smith also found complex interrelationships "between ethnicity and religious belonging and believing" (2015: 14).

Although the phenomenon remains under-studied (Ruane and Todd, 2010), conflating religion and 'race' and/or ethnicity is not a new phenomenon. As Buell explains, a distinction has often been made "between religions viewed as ethno-racially linked (and usually geographically specific) and those that are universal (in aspiration if not in reality)" (2008: 23). Such a classification has also informed the academic study of religion, whereby "[r]ace and ethnicity have not only been used to classify and compare religions with one another in a given moment but also to assert the [socio-political] relationships among religions over time" (2008: 23). As a result, differences are made between ethno-racial religious communities such as 'Irish Catholics,' 'British-Pakistani Muslims,' 'Greek Orthodox,' 'Gujarati Hindu,' or 'Black church' for example. Such labels are also used in wider society:

> The particular attraction that operates between what is ethnic and what is religious springs from the fact that the one and the other establish a social bond on the basis of an assumed genealogy, on the one hand, a naturalized genealogy (because related to soil and blood), and a symbolized genealogy (because constituted through belief in and reference to a myth and a source), on the other. It is common knowledge that the two genealogical systems overlap closely and reinforce one another in a great many cases [sic.]. Long observation has shown the process (or the affirmation of identity) activated when it assumes both an ethnic and a religious dimension; the Jewish or Armenian examples are here ideal-typical (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 157).

In some cases, such constructs lead to essentialist shortcuts, whereby all Pakistanis are for example constructed as Muslims. Panjwani (2017) explains that the racialisation of Muslims is one of the consequences of the functionalist "religification[1] of Muslimness" (2017: 604). In this case, the twin processes of essentialism and religification act as a discourse of difference, and presumes deterministic values that are diametrically opposed to Western (Christian) values (Ahmad and Evergeti, 2010; Brubaker, 2002; Panjwani, 2007):

> [T]he symbolic heritage of the historic religions […] is also there to be recycled collectively in widely different ways, with the mobilization of denominational symbols for the purposes of identity given pride of place (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 159).

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[1] A process whereby the diversity of identity-attributes is compressed to a religious attribute (Panjwani, 2007), resulting in religious affiliation (rather than 'race' or ethnicity) becoming the core identity (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2011).

The (re)acquisition of ethnic and religious memory therefore plays an important part in the construction of the in-group and the out-groups:

> [T]hey offer the same sort of emotive response to the demand for meaning and personal recognition which the abstract nature of modern societies with their meritocratic form of government makes even more urgent; the religious and the ethnic strain compete or combine in re-establishing a sense of 'we' and of 'our' which modernity has at once fractured and created a sense of nostalgia for (2000: 157).

In section 2.1.2, I showed how Christianity has been used to assert a national (English) heritage or sense of identity. This is further discussed in section 2.2.

The construction of religions as "ethnic religions" (2000: 157), can be problematic, especially as religion and ethnicity do not always coincide. These should not be crudely understood as easily negotiated categories, even in cases where "'expected' combinations (Protestant British, Catholic Irish)" may be found (Ruane and Todd, 2010: 5). Situations where "religion and ethnicity are cross-cutting distinctions" are not rare, often resulting in individuals having to "routinely choose to prioritize between them" (2010: 3). Even in cases where religion and 'race'/ethnicity may seem to coincide in defining the same populations, they can do so in different ways, "with different prioritization of aims and different permeabilities of boundaries" (2010: 3), and intense intra-group variation may still be found. For example, in her work on working-class Protestant loyalists in Northern Ireland, Mitchell (2010) explores the tensions between religion and ethnicity, and demonstrates how individuals – while firmly identifying as Northern Irish and as Protestants – had to regularly manage contradictory and oppositional imperatives, and how neither religion or ethnicity fully dominated the other. This example demonstrates the two-way relationship between religion and ethnicity: "[e]ach can stimulate the other, rather than religion simply playing a supporting role to the ethnic centrepiece" (Mitchell, 2006: 1135).

In the case of Christianity, it is important to remember that it occupies a privileged place in the construction of religion (as discussed in section 2.1.2), and that it therefore acts as the "unmarked referent" for religion (Buell, 2008: 24). As a result, even though distinctions are made within Christianity, it is often constructed as transcending 'race:' "[t]he ways in which ethnicity and race have been defined and interpreted in relation to the development of Christianity […] have generally served to build and reinforce an understanding of Christianity as a universal religion" (2008: 25). Other religions are less

likely to be constructed as universal, and are more likely to be perceived as restricted to specific communities (2008).

Organised religions are therefore more than just belief systems. They are meaning-making systems. Religions may not only serve as markers of identity, but also as collective memory (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). In her work, Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues that religion should be understood as a "chain of memory," that is to say "a particular form of belief and one that specifically implies reference to the authority of a tradition" (2000: 4). In other words, organised religions are "wholly directed to the production, management and distribution of the particular form of believing which draws its legitimacy from reference to tradition" (Urbaniak, 2015: 2) – tradition, being understood as the authorised, official version of the religious elite (Hervieu-Léger, 2000).

Hervieu-Léger's theory relates to religious communities' continuity between the past and the present. In practice, this means that "a religious community accepts tradition and draws from it in the name of the necessary continuity between the past and the present" (Urbaniak, 2015: 2). As such, the importance and cultural meaning of religion in Western societies should not be downplayed (Silberman, 2005). Yet, Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues that a break in the chain of memory happened in modern societies,[2] and that 'ethnic religions' are the result of the loss of a collective religious memory:

> [T]he ethno-religious element (re)constitutes itself and develops in modern societies to a point at which the contradicting membership of traditional religions intersects with the various attempts to invent or reinvent an imaginative hold on continuity […]. Insofar as it has become possible to 'believe without belonging'[3] […], it has also become possible to 'belong without believing', or more precisely while believing only in the continuity of the group for which the signs preserved from the traditional religion now serve as emblems (2000: 157).

In the next section, I explore the place and function religion in general, and Christianity in particular, occupies in English society.

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[2] Hervieu-Léger (2000) makes reference to the rise of liberal modern societies, that privilege pragmatic individualism, rationalisation, and secularism – all of which have direct consequences on (institutionalised) religion, not only vis-à-vis the substance of belief but also religious practices. Theories of secularisation are discussed in section 2.2.

[3] The work of Davie is discussed in more detail in section 2.2.

## 2.2.   Religion and English Society

In this section, I introduce the concept of post-secularism, to acknowledge the complex dialectic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular.' Having established that religion (especially Christianity) can occupy an important place in English society, I use Hervieu-Léger's (2000) concept of religion as 'chain of memory,' Ammerman's (1997; 2017) concept of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, and Davie's (2015) notion of 'vicarious religion' to examine the role religion in general, and Christianity in particular, can play in English society. These concepts will provide the theoretical framework for this thesis to explore the 'middle ground' group's discursive constructions of religion, especially in the public arena.

### 2.2.1.   A 'Post-Secular' Society

The breach in the 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967), followed by the rise of secularist thinking since the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, led to a 'new' common division: the religious vs. the non-religious (i.e. the secular), where "the religious is what the West considers to be religious on the basis of its own religious experience" (Dubuisson, 2003: 10), and the non-religious is understood as science and rationality (Hanegraaf, 2015). The dichotomy, although a false one, continues to inform common assumptions about religion and its place in public life. It also serves to reinforce (post-) colonial distinctions between the modern West ('us') and the colonised 'uncivilised' rest ('them') (Dubuisson, 2003; McGuire, 2008; Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Although shaped by Christianity, the modern West tends to present itself as secular (Dubuisson, 2003; King, 1999; Masuzawa, 2005; McCutcheon 2001). In this particular context, the secular should be understood as "the arena of scientific knowledge, modern politics, civil society and individuals maximising natural self-interest" (Fitzgerald, 2000: 6).

Throughout the whole of the 20th and 21st centuries, there has been a decline in church attendance and Christian affiliation; the role of the Church of England has lost its social significance and has considerably lessened in politics (Davie, 2013). Classic

secularisation theorists explained this decline by arguing throughout the 20th century that religion and modernity were incompatible (Marx, 1844; Bruce, 1995; 2002; 2011; Wilson, 1966). Early secularisation theories were grounded in Marxist thought. It was thus believed that as rational and intellectual processes developed with modernity, and as non-religious bodies took over governmental and institutional structures, people were going to abandon 'irrational' religions and that secularisation would necessarily occur (Marx, 1844; Bruce, 1995; 2002; 2011; Wilson, 1966). This position is fundamentally at odds with Durkheim's (1915) position, who argued that societies need religion. Davie (1999; 2008; 2016), however, asserts that early secularisation theories were Eurocentric, and failed to realise that there was no incompatibility between religion and modernity. Berger famously commented that the world today is in fact "as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever" (1999: 2). Europe, however, is an exception, where the process of secularisation is more evident than elsewhere (Berger, 1999; Davie, 1999; 2008; 2016; Davie *et al.*, 2016; Stockl, 2015).

Other secularisation theorists argued that rather than religion completely disappearing from modern societies, it would lose significance in the public realm (Dawson, 2006; Taylor, 2007). In liberal theory of secularisation, religion is seen "as something that should be confined to the private sphere, through the separation of Church and State" (Hemming, 2015: 20). As such, while religion may persist in society, its role and significance are relativized – not only in the public sphere, but also in terms of religious belief and practice as these become marginal aspects of people's lives (Dawson, 2006). Bruce therefore defines secularisation as a social condition, which manifests itself in:

> (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religion practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs (Bruce, 2002: 3-4).

Such a view is opposed by Stark (1999), who argues that the secularisation paradigm is too limiting, and does not acknowledge the irreplaceable role religion plays to satisfy human needs. According to Stark (1999), the phenomenon of secularisation is cyclical; which does not reflect the demise of religion but rather the failures of religion to meet modern needs:

> Religions that become too complacent and overly accommodated to the non-religious features of the societies will fail. They fail because they have ceased to provide people with sufficiently vivid and consistent supernatural compensators. As such, secularisation is an intrinsic and limiting feature of all religious economies, guaranteeing the periodic renewal of religious institutions (Dawson, 2006: np).

Other theorists have criticised the secularisation theory. For example, Martin (2010), states that the secularisation paradigm is problematic because it is anchored in strict *discursive* binaries (i.e. public vs. private, state vs. religion), rather than in *actual* separations. Taking a lead from feminist theorists, Hemming (2015) summarises that in reality, "the boundaries between public and private sphere are constantly reconstructed and renegotiated, and very few social practices or relations are limited to only one sphere" (2015: 20).

If societies never truly became 'secular,' it is therefore inadequate to talk about 'de-secularisation' in order to make sense of the religious presence and/or 'resurgence' in England and elsewhere. Both the religious and the secular have continuously co-existed in a variety of ways, and the complexity of their interrelationship is starting to receive scholarly attention (Molendijk, 2015; Asad, 1999). In order to move past the limited and limiting narratives of secularisation, scholars have started using the term 'post-secularism.'

> The term rather refers to the idea that there is space – and more importantly, public space – for religion in our time. An allegedly 'secular' state does not imply – according to the emerging consensus of many scholars of religion – that the only location for religion is in the sphere of private individuals and their communities (Molendijk, 2015: 101).

The term – although now more and more accepted – can be contested (Beckford, 2003), especially as it can be prone to misuse as some scholars still construct the secular and the religious as strict binaries (Molendijk, 2015).[4] In this research, the term is used to reflect "the dialectic nature of the religious and the secular, and the fluid and changing boundaries between the two" (Hemming, 2015: 22). As a result, if England may be considered a Christian nation (because of its established Church, or its Christian cultural and historical legacy), it is also a secular state (because there is a significant degree of

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[4] Some scholars have used the term as a synonym to 'de-secularisation,' thereby implying that societies were religious, then with modernity became secular, and are now seeing a resurgence of religion. This simplistic approach does not account for the complex relationship between the secular and the religious, which have co-existed rather than replaced one another.

separation between politics and religion, and because it recognises the autonomy of religion) (Woodhead and Partridge, 2016).

While the co-existence of Christianity and secularism may seem paradoxical at first, in reality the two inform each other (Davie *et al.,* 2016). Weber (1930) even argued that Christianity, and in particular Protestantism, carried the seed of secularisation. By focusing on social agents, their conditions, and their relationship with God (rather than focusing on God), by encouraging the pursuit of science (in order to understand God, although Davie [2013] argues it led to the opposite effect), and by embracing the pursuit of wealth, Protestantism created favourable conditions for the erosion of religion in society, and the rise of a capitalist economy and civilisation (1930).

As mentioned throughout section 2.1, Christianity has contributed to shaping our understanding of the world. As Woodhead argues, "[t]he modern nation state, imperialism, liberalism, democracy, capitalism, science, and other forms of modern learning are all bound up with Christianity and Christian cultures" (2016: 208). Mellor (2004) also comments on the unacknowledged, yet deeply rooted, religious aspects of modern societies, and more and more scholars are now writing on "the hidden religious bases" of Western liberal societies (Hemming, 2015: 21).

As modern democracy is rooted in Christianity (Minkenberg, 2007), Christianity was able to successfully develop hand in hand with Western modernity from the 18th century onwards (Woodhead, 2016: 208), and has tended to be associated with "developed cultures" (Hanegraaf, 2015: 96). Conversely, 'other' religions have tended to be pitched as antagonistic with democracy (Djupe, 2016). Whereas the Reformation created the dissenting 'Other' and the Roman Catholic 'Other,' in contemporary society, it is non-Christians generally who now take on this role (Davie, 2015). This is particularly true of Islam, which does not always conform to liberal democracies that have been shaped by Christianity (Minkenberg, 2007).

Islam, as a 'world religion,' has been objectified and defined along the "most narrowly [European] positivist epistemologies" (Dubuisson, 2003: 91); its symbolic meaning being shaped by modern Western ideologies and Christian conceptions of religion (Smith, 1964; Masuzawa, 2005). In the West, Islam is often stereotyped and subject to sweeping generalisations, based on a one-dimensional understanding (see Chapter 1). Cowden and Singh explain that "Muslim communities and societies are seen

as an undifferentiated whole, […] that is often in thrall to fundamentalism (2017: 281). Muslims are usually (re)presented as being strictly religiously observant, and subject to rigorous rules (Panjwani and Revell, 2018), and as "insufficiently 'British', fuelling fear, suspicion and racist violence (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 281; Welply, 2018). In contrast, modern authorising discourses in Christianity are centred on "individual vocations, individual beliefs and, most recently, individual rights – all of which are indirect reflections of changes in the State, in science, in law and in philosophical notions of the individual person" (Beckford, 2003: 17), resulting in Christianity being constructed as a 'moderate' religion, compatible with contemporary hegemonic discourses (Asad, 2003; Olof, 2015; Woodhead and Partridge, 2016).

### 2.2.2. The Religious Landscape of English Society

Since the late 20th century, attitudes within Christianity have become more 'liberal.' This, to some extent, reflects changes that took place during Vatican II (1962-1965), which advocated a reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants (Catholic attendance at Protestant services became permissible, reading from a Protestant Bible in a Catholic service became possible), and Catholics and Jews (who were to be seen as brothers, not enemies) (Vatican, n.d.). Although one of the aims might have been to eliminate fundamental differences in practices and worship in order to attract and convert Protestants to Catholicism, the result was an ecumenical movement, which attempted to unify Christian Churches, and which led to improved church relationships (Carter, 1998).

According to Hervieu-Léger (2000), the rise of liberalism, combined with secularism, has led to "the dislocation of the social fabric [of modern societies] which was itself held together by religion" (2000: 25):

> From the moment that contrasting modern societies no longer asked established religion to provide a framework for social organization, religion has become fragmented across an array of specialized spheres and institutions. Individuals, in groups or on their own, hence are free to construct a universe of meaning on the basis of a chosen dimension of their experience – family, sexuality, aesthetics and so on (2000: 33).

Hervieu-Léger's argument that there has been a break in the 'chain of memory' (see section 2.1.3) also rests on the concepts of choice and individualisation, which have played an important role in the repositioning of religion. From obligation to consumption

(Davie, 2007a), religion is constructed as something with which individuals interact. As Hemming summarises:

> The concept of individual choice is now much more central to how individuals interact with religious traditions, with fluid affiliations and personal interpretation, negotiation and expression more commonplace (2015: 19).

Meanwhile, church attendance in both Protestant and Catholic churches is also declining, with the Church of England being the most affected (Davie, 2015).[5] Today, if Christianity remains the largest religion in England (Chart 2-1; ONS, 2011), it is still declining steadily (ONS, 2001; 2011). While it is difficult to measure religiosity, statistics from the last two censuses demonstrate that there has been a decrease in the proportion of people who identify as Christian (from 71.7% in 2001 to 59.3% in 2011), and an increase in those reporting to have no religion (from 14.8% to 25.1%) (2001; 2011). Other surveys seem to indicate even lower levels of religiosity (YouGov, 2016; British Social Attitudes, 2013). Woodhead (2016b) attributes the discrepancy between survey results and census results to the fact that heads of households tend to fill in census questionnaires on behalf of their families, therefore not reflecting the growth of 'nones' among young people. Surveys indicate that white British people today are more inclined to identify as having no religion,[6] a trend which is likely to continue due to the youthful age profile of people identifying as such, revealing a generational change in religious identity (Woodhead, 2016b). According to Lee and Pett (2018), school-aged children are most likely to identify as non-religious.

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[5] Not all Christian churches are affected equally. In fact, Orthodox, Pentecostal and other new churches (Evangelic and Charismatic) have experienced an increase in membership (Faith Survey, 2020).
[6] In 2016, 46% of the adult population identified as having no religion (YouGov, 2016).

*Chart 2—1 Religious Populations according to the 2011 Census*

**RELIGIOUS POPULATIONS, 2011**

Other
4%

Muslim
5%

Not stated
7%

No religion
25%

Christian
59%
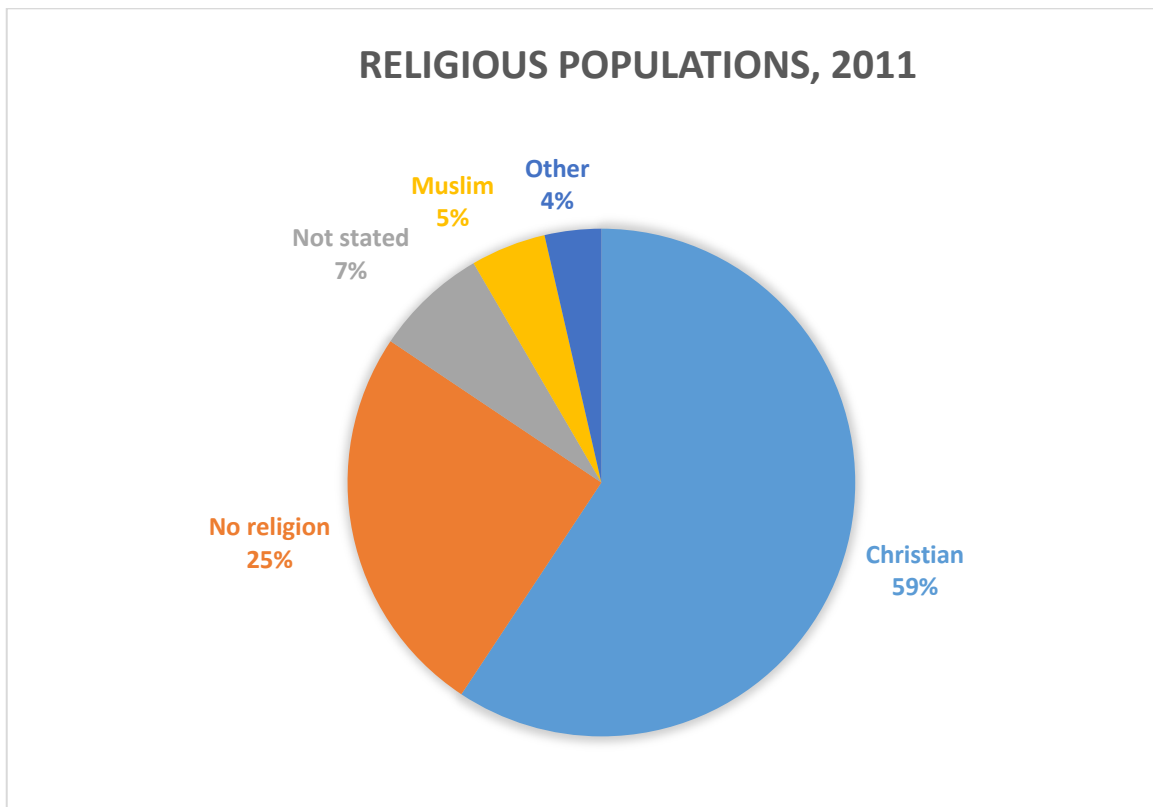
These figures, however, do not mean there is a rise in atheism, or that England is becoming more secular. Although Humanists UK seems to mobilise the no-religion voices and is gaining in visibility, the majority of 'nones' do not associate with atheism, and are not hostile to religion. The largest group among the 'nones' is constituted of 'agnostics' – an under-researched group (Lee and Pett, 2018). It is impossible to capture the complexities of non-religious 'worldviews,' and too little research has been conducted, especially outside of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic) countries (2018). Many 'nones' still believe in God or a spiritual force, and perform rituals on an individual basis (Woodhead, 2016b). This approach can be defined as religious *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Ammerman, 2007; Davidman, 2006; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Casson, 2011). Hervieu-Léger (2000) explains the individualisation and personalisation of practice and beliefs to be the results of the fragmentation of the 'chain of memory,' which in turn results in a crisis of religious transmission.

Religious institutions and traditions, however, continue to play a key role as structures inform agency. They act as "symbolic repositories of meaning" (Hervieu-Léger, 2006: 2), from which individuals make "creative and resourceful use of whatever

materials are to hand regardless of their original purpose" (Casson, 2011: 208). In modern societies, not only do many "people 'practise bricolage', but […] they also assert 'a right to bricolage'" (2011: 208).

As well as a decline in Christianity, the decades following the end of World War II were marked by a rise in immigration from the 'New' Commonwealth (i.e. countries such as Jamaica, Bangladesh, India, or Pakistan for example; as opposed to the 'Old' [white] Commonwealth made up of Australia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand). The initial influx was linked to England's need for labour as the Marshall Plan allowed for restructuration and fast expanding economies. If immigration from the 'New' Commonwealth rose and fell with the British economy and British policies on nationality, it never ceased. Today, this population is in its third or fourth generation (Davie, 2015). It is characterised by its (super)diversity in terms of countries of origin or heritage, ethnicity, and religious affiliations. Among others, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs from the Indian sub-continent, as well as distinctive Christian minorities from West Africa and the Caribbean have been settling in England (and other nations of the United Kingdom) since the end of World War II, and have contributed to diversifying England's religious landscape (see Charts 2-1 and 2-2).

*Chart 2—2 Minority Religious Groups, Census 2011*



MINORITY RELIGIOUS GROUPS, 2011

Other Religion, 5%
Buddhist, 5%
Jewish, 6%
Sikh, 9%
Muslim, 57%
Hindu, 18%
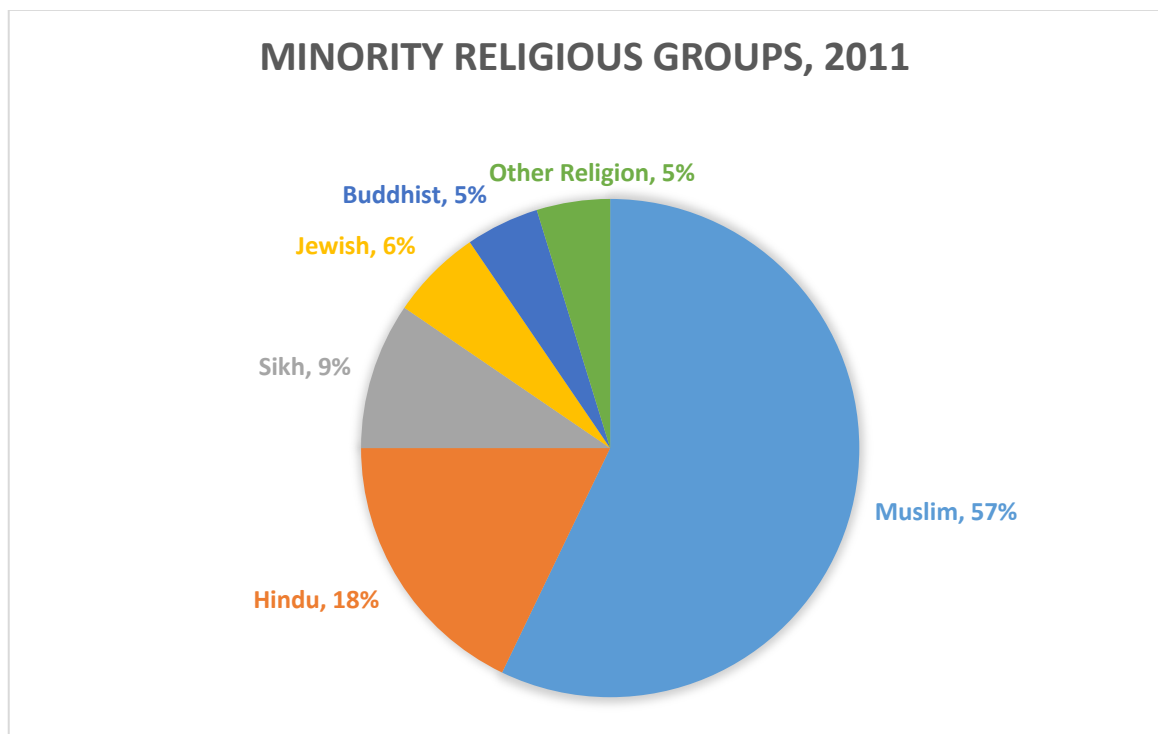
Reflecting on the highly diverse (non-)religious population of the country, Dinham and Shaw comment on the issue that current RE syllabuses are not representative of the "real religious landscape" (2015: 4), explaining that "there is a real religious and belief landscape and one imagined by the majority, and there is a growing gap between them" (2015: 4). The aim of this research is to shed light on discursive constructions of the religious landscape as imagined by the 'middle ground' group (Davie, 2012).

### 2.2.3. Christianity in England: Believing without Belonging or Belonging without Believing?

Hervieu-Léger's (2000) construction of religion as 'chain of memory' implies that religion acts as an ideological, symbolic and social device that creates an individual and collective sense of belonging. As such, organised religion can provide a framework for collective identities and social cohesion. In England, Christianity has long been constructed as the glue that was to hold society together. This can be observed in the context of compulsory education, as discussed in section 2.3. English identity has thus often been constructed as tied in with Christianity, in opposition to other 'world religions' (Voas and Bruce, 2004; Day, 2011; Storm, 2011).

In her work, Day (2011) shows that 'nominal' Christian affiliation is not only tied in with cultural heritage, but with national sentiments too. In her research, she found that while some of her respondents considered that cultural identity (including Christian heritage) is assumed at birth, others identified as Christian or took part in Christian rituals in order to reinforce social and cultural identities; "they understood 'Christian' as a term coded to colour, country, and culture" (2011: 195). The symbolic meaning is not without consequences, as it serves to exclude the Other – i.e. non- (white) Christians (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Identifying with Christianity can become a way to identify as white British, and distance oneself from minority faiths (Storm, 2011; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Day; 2011). Since the Other is not one of 'us,' they can therefore legitimately receive less resources and power (Wright, 2004). Storm (2011) explains that tying in nominal Christianity with ethnic national identity is one of the ways in which Hervieu-Léger's (2000) concept of 'ethnic religion'[7] manifests itself – "where religious identities rather

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[7] See section 2.1.3

than faith becomes symbols of national and ethnic heritage" (Storm, 2011: 837). As religious identities are constructed as intertwined with ethnicity, another consequence is that the discourse of racism in modern societies has shifted from ethnicity to religion (Davie, 2015) – the interrelation between the two remaining extremely complex (see section 2.1.3).

This led Day (2011) to conclude that institutional Christianity remains important in England, as it serves as a symbolic frame of reference for cultural and national identities: "[t]he 'institutions' of Christianity becomes more important to some people than its practices, beliefs, or canon" (2011: 9). 'Christian nominalism' – which is used to refer to the practice of identifying as a Christian, while being disconnected from the religion – can also help to explain why attendance at church is declining, despite over half of the population still identifying as Christian. The relatively widespread sense of belonging does not necessarily suggest that people are believing in Christian doctrine, but instead reflects "a way of identifying with a culture, a set of values or a family tradition" (Storm, 2011: 834). In 2011, almost 25 percent of the population believed it was important to identify with Christianity to be truly British. Interestingly, Storm showed that church-goers were "less likely to associate religion with nationality than those with a nominal Christian affiliation" (2011: 828).

The phenomenon of Christian nominalism, which Day (2012) describes as being characterised by "a lack of strong belief in a higher power, and indifference towards churches, but an (irregular) adherence to religion as a significant cultural, familial, and moral marker (2012: 439), suggests that people "belong without believing" (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 162). Hervieu-Léger's choice of words is in response to Davie (1994), who coined the phrase 'believing without belonging.' In her earlier work, Davie had argued that people in Britain still considered themselves religious, despite not attending church services. While scholars such as Day (2011), Storm (2011), or Hervieu-Léger (2000) did not altogether refute her theory,[8] they nonetheless demonstrated that the practice of identifying with Christianity when not attending church services is much more complex than simply 'believing without belonging.'

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[8] In her research on 'nones,' Woodhead (2016b) shows that it is possible to 'believe without belonging,' as some people who identified as 'not religious' believed in God. Day (2011) and Lee (2015) also found similar findings. Hervieu-Léger (2000) concludes that both phenomena can co-exist (i.e. believing without belonging *and* belonging without believing).

Davie's work, however, remains particularly helpful in order to understand the role of Christianity in English society, especially as she refined the concept of 'believing without belonging.' In her more recent work, Davie focuses more specifically on the "middle ground" group, that is to say, "those who self-identify as Christians, many of whom turn to the Christian churches for the rite of passage" (2015: 169). She argues that the 'middle ground' group views religion as a public utility:[9]

> De facto there are two religious economies which run side by side. The first is a market of active churchgoers who choose their preferred form of religious activity and join the religious organization which expresses this most effectively. […] The second retains the features of a public utility and exists, for the most part, for those who prefer not to choose, but who are nonetheless grateful for a form of religion which they can access as the need arises (2015: 135).

With the second group in mind, she developed the notion of 'vicarious religion:'

> By vicarious is meant the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority is doing. […] For example, churches and church leaders perform ritual on behalf of others (at times of a birth or a death for example). […] Church leaders and church goers are expected to embody moral codes on behalf of others, even when those codes have been abandoned by large sections of the population that they serve (2015: 6).

Davie gives the following examples of vicariousness:

- Churches and church leaders perform[ing] ritual on behalf of others;
- Church leaders and churchgoers believ[ing] on behalf of others;
- Church leaders and churchgoers embody[ing] moral codes on behalf of others;
- Churches can offer space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues in modern societies.

(Davie, 2007b: 23)

The concept of vicarious religion is particularly helpful to explain attachment to Christianity as a form of collective cultural memory. As Davie explains, vicariousness "prompts us to ask about the many ways in which populations and their religious institutions are related to each other" (2007b: 25).

Regarding possibilities for the future of vicarious religion in England, Davie reflects on the fact that younger generations are less and less exposed to Christianity and have an increasing level of choice when it comes to religion. She therefore poses the

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[9] Davie defines the church as a public utility as "an institution (or more accurately a cluster of institutions) which exists to make provision for a population living in a designated place, local or national, and which is found wanting if it fails to deliver" (2015: 82).

following questions: "will we find vicarious religion enduring into the twenty-first century, or will it gradually erode to the point of no return?" (2007b: 30). As Christianity can still have a place in the majority of primary schools, my intention is to observe if there is any evidence of vicariousness in a state-funded non-faith-based primary school setting, and to analyse how it operates.

Although Ammerman's (1997) concept of 'Golden Rule' Christianity was first used to characterise communities' attitudes towards Christianity in the United States, the notion remains helpful to shed more light on the hegemonic construction of Christianity in England. In her work, Ammerman (1997; 2017) showed that while some participants indeed talked about Christianity in doctrinal ways, many instead located it within the realm of everyday morality. While exploring the link between religion and moral life, Ammerman showed that many participants did not define Christianity "by ideology, but by practices […] of doing good and caring for others" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 3). As 'Golden Rule' Christians "measure of Christianity is right living" (1997: para. 4), they are likely to expect a certain code of conduct within society at large, emphasising "a 'good life' above any other religious distinctives" (1997: para. 13):

> What is this good life for which Golden Rule Christians aim? Most important to Golden Rule Christians is care for relationships, doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need. Their goal is neither changing another's beliefs nor changing the whole political system (1997: para. 17).

'Golden Rule' Christians may therefore identify as Christians but may not necessarily participate in church activities or attend religious services. However, the institutional structure remains important, as "[t]hose who are not involved in a religious community can nevertheless draw on culturally-available religious resources to guide their moral lives" (2017: para. 38). This echoes Day's (2011) findings, who argues that Christianity serves as an important symbolic frame of reference in England.

While 'Golden Rule' Christians are not necessarily 'unreligious,' many are characterised by their 'low-commitment' (Ammerman, 1997; 2017). By foregrounding care for the community, the church is viewed as of "service to people in need" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 5). Such a construction fits well within the theory of vicarious religion. As Davie explains, a refusal from the church to respond to community's needs, or to provide adequate pastoral care, "even in moderately secular society, […] would violate deeply held assumptions." (Davie, 2007b: 23). In England, this has been particularly true since the mid-1980s, as "[t]he Faith in the City report in 1985 led to a

re-imagining of the Church of England's mission and role in society" (Cottrell, 2020: 4). The report, although controversial at the time because of its political content (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985), heralded a move towards social action as it called the Church of England "to learn afresh what it meant to love [one's] neighbours" (Cottrell, 2020: 4). As a result, the Church of England today is *expected* to contribute to society through social action:

> Over the past decade, the contribution that the Church of England makes to society through its social action has increased, reflecting an increase in the demand and expectation for it. At the same time, church attendance in the country has continued to decline […]. This is the paradox facing the Church of England in 2020: the national church of a nation which is increasingly reliant on its social action and yet less and less spiritually connected to it (Rich, 2020: 12).

The religion of the established Church is therefore not "utterly 'private'" (Ammerman, 1997). This confirms Davie's (2015) argument that Christianity in England is often constructed as a public utility.

For the purpose of this research, it is worth noting that 'Golden Rule' Christianity is very child-centred, with families prioritising church activities that are family- or child-centred (Ammerman, 1997), such as Messy Church. [10] In this research, I draw on 'Golden Rule' Christianity to make sense of the activities the school and the local CofE church offers to children. 'Golden Rule' Christianity, together with religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), and 'vicarious religion' (Davie, 2007b; 2010; 2012) will serve as the theoretical framework as they serve to shed light on the 'middle ground' group's hegemonic discursive attitudes towards religion.

## 2.3. Religion In Education: Epistemological and Ontological Debates

While section 2.2 was devoted to analysing the place and role of religion (and in particular of Christianity) in English society, this section focuses on religion in primary education. I start by summarising the role and place religion has historically occupied in

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[10] Messy Church refers to sessions that are run by the church once a month for families with children/grand-children. These sessions are informal and are based on play, crafts, games, story-telling, songs and prayers. Messy Church has been described as a "new form of church," whereby an established parish can reach out to "de-churched and non-churched people" (Paulsen, 2012: 189).

the English primary school system before presenting contemporary ontological debates about the function of religion in school. Attention is paid to the way different paradigms and pedagogies have been shaped by particular discursive constructions of religion, and how these have in turn influenced pupils' and teachers' constructions.

### 2.3.1. The Place of Religion in the English Primary Education System

Members of the Anglican clergy have always been involved in the welfare of their local community (CofE, 2016c; Davie, 2015). This is because the Church of England not only plays a religious function, but also a civic one (Davie, 2015). England is divided into parishes, which are overseen by a priest who is entrusted with "the cure of souls" in their parish (CofE, 2016c). In 1811, the Church set up the National Society to found 'voluntary schools' to provide education for poor children in every parish, since poor families could not afford the few private schools where education for the upper classes took place (Louden, 2012). While the Church presented its commitment to education as a charitable mission, its aim was also to widen its authority and nurture the Anglican faith (Murphy, 1968; White, 2006):

> [T]he National Religion should be made the Foundation of National Education, and should be the first and chief thing taught to the Poor […]; for if the great body of the Nation be educated in other principles than those of the Established Church, the natural consequence must be to alienate the minds of the people from it, or render them indifferent to it, which may, in succeeding generations, prove fatal to the Church and to the State itself (National Society, 22nd Annual Report, 1833, pp 9–10, quoted in Louden, 2012: 13).

The learning and teaching in voluntary schools therefore evolved around Religious Instruction (RI), and the aim was to form children "through the tenets of the Gospel, to produce moral, God-fearing citizens" (2012: 4).

The Anglican content of RI, however, was not unanimously accepted. In 1811, relations between the Church of England (CofE) and non-conformist Protestants were acrimonious. Thus, if the CofE National Society was the main organisation to provide education, it was not the sole provider. Non-conformist Protestant Churches also set up their own societies in order to open schools where RI could be taught in a way that reflected their beliefs and doctrines. Such societies included, for example, the London

Missionary Society, the Baptist Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, and the British and Foreign Bible Society (Bartle, 1994).

After the Reformation, anti-Catholicism was a prominent sentiment in England. Several Acts were passed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, putting Roman Catholics under many legal restrictions, and preventing them from contributing to society equally. One of the many proscriptions included a ban on Catholic schools, until Catholic emancipation took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Haydon, 1993). Freedom of worship was granted again in 1791, and the Catholic hierarchy was re-established in England and Wales in 1850 (Paz, 1992; Catholic Education Service, 2018). After the 1829 Roman Catholic Relief Act, the Catholic Church saw most of its restrictions lifted, and the Catholic Poor School Committee was established to promote Catholic primary education. Catholic schools were (re-)established across the country, in order to provide Catholic education to Catholic families (Catholic Education Service, 2016a). In 1905, the Catholic Education Council (now the Catholic Education Service) was created as the overarching organisation responsible for Catholic education in England and Wales, on behalf of the Catholic Bishops (Catholic Education Service, 2018).

By 1851, there were more than 12,000 Christian schools across the country (CofE, 2016), and the education system was far from being uniform in composition.[11] Yet, by the time the State started providing free education and schooling was paid for through public taxation, Christian schools had a firm grounding in the country. The implementation of state schools reawakened the debate on RI, as it was to be provided outside of voluntary religious schools. A compromise was struck with the Cowper-Temple Clause, which specified that "no religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular [Christian] denomination shall be taught in the school" (Education Act, 1870). This clause is still in place today and has contributed to shaping contemporary Religious Education (Conroy, 2011; Louden, 2004).

Since 1870, religious voluntary schools and non-religious state schools,[12] have co-existed. However, towards the end of the 19th century, Churches, including the Church of England, struggled to fund their voluntary schools. In the meantime, the State was in dire need of buildings in order to open new schools to expand its provision to all areas of

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[11] Although not as numerous, Jewish schools have also been in existence since 1656 (Miller, 2001).
[12] It is important to note that the non-religious state-funded education sector was not homogeneous, and was constituted of different types of schools. This is still the case today, with, for example, community schools, foundation schools, academies, and free schools.

the country (Archbishop's Council, 2001; Louden, 2012). In 1902, as Local Educational Authorities (LEAs) were created, a partnership was formed, through which the State financed the costs of the day-to-day running of voluntary schools, while Churches remained responsible for building costs and repairs (Education Act, 1902). As a result, Churches had to surrender control over 'secular' subjects. Although originally fiercely disputed on both sides – for the Churches, the issue was losing their missionary capacity; for the opposition, the issue was the use of public funds to support religious institutions – the 1944 Education Act would later cement this 'dual' education settlement (Education Act, 1944; Louden, 2012).

While this dual settlement was partly due to the involvement of Christian Churches in education, it is also in a context marked by World War II, the fear of communism, fascism and Nazism that the 1944 Education Act made Christian Religious Instruction compulsory in all schools (Freathy, 2008). Christianity was to be the glue of society, and the countermeasure against "secularism, materialism and state worship found in totalitarian states on mainland Europe" (2008: 301). The English government, preoccupied with the rise of secular communist and fascist ideologies, also believed in a functionalist approach to education, and in creating an education system that would "create and sustain loyalties, social control and confidence in the political system" (2008: 299). The function of education, and the function of Christian RI, was therefore to reproduce a sense of English national identity opposed to secular totalitarian values. Such values were to be embedded in Christianity:

> [T]he 1944 Education Act was an instrument of Christian stewardship. It was the result of a bill advanced by a Christian minister, a measure passed by a Christian Parliament and a piece of legislation explicitly directed towards the elusive goal of creating a truly Christian population in Britain. It is important to remember that it enacted compulsory Christian education for the first time in all maintained schools, not least because this was a point fully understood by some of its most articulate contemporary opponents. […] Furthermore, it was a protestant Act. It was a piece of legislation conceived with the interests, prejudices and sensibilities of indigenous Anglicans and nonconformists – but not Roman Catholics – in mind (Green, 2011: 213-214).

RI in non-faith-based schools was to be "broadly Christian" (i.e. no denomination was to receive special treatment). Yet, such RI classes were soon deemed inappropriate, and a didactic shift occurred in the 1970s as LAs moved away from Bible readings and adopted multi-religious programmes. The move away from RI was officially endorsed in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) where the term 'Religious Instruction' was replaced by 'Religious Education.' Inclusion of other faiths became a legal requirement

in 1996 (Education Act, 1996), and non-religious traditions in 2015 (Royal Courts of Justice, 2015). While the majority of scholars argue that this 'revolution' reflected societal changes (i.e. the twin processes of secularisation and pluralism), which Green labelled as the "desacralisation of British politics" (2011: 10), Parker and Freathy (2011; 2012) suggest that this account is oversimplified. As they examine the context within which the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus – which was one of the first to adopt a multi-faith approach to RE – was drafted, they explain that the context was characterised by anxieties about immigration from the 'New' Commonwealth and the assimilation of non-Christian religious communities. As concerns around 'integration' and 'assimilation' grew, civil servants in the then Department for Education and Science (DES) and Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) agreed that "a new form of RE was needed in order to respond to the 'substantial number of children of other faiths,' and the related 'problem of immigrant areas' in some parts of the country" (DES, 1969 quoted in Parker and Freathy, 2012). Therefore, although "appropriate attention [wa]s [to be] paid to non-Christian religions," RE needed to be "primarily concerned with what may be called the Judaeo-Christian heritage" (DES, 1971: 17 quoted in Parker and Freathy, 2012). In the face of growing religious and ethnic diversity, the government gave prominence to Christianity to recognise its historical and cultural legacy (Parker and Freathy, 2012). The change from RI to RE should thus be viewed as a political response to anxieties pertaining to "issues of immigration and 'racial' integration" (Parker and Freathy, 2012: 383). Once again, Christianity was to be the glue that was to hold society together in the face of the Other – the Other being now defined as non-Christian (non-white) religious minorities, rather than Nazis, communists or fascists.

Today's diverse educational landscape is the direct result of the involvement and influence of the Churches in the provision of education (Louden, 2012). Presently, non-religious state-funded primary schools are generally known as 'community schools' and denominational voluntary schools have either become 'voluntary-aided' (VA) or 'voluntary-controlled' (VC) schools. VA schools are mostly funded by the State, but must cover 10% of the capital costs (Education Act, 1996). In exchange for their financial contribution, VA schools are free to set their own admissions criteria, as well as their own conditions for staff. They are thus allowed to select pupils and staff on religious

grounds.[13] In many cases, evidence of baptism or religious practice from a minister is required. VA schools are also allowed to teach and nurture their faith through RE classes, daily acts of collective worship, and the general school ethos (Gov.uk, 2016a; 2016b; Long and Bolton, 2015). After the 1944 Education Act, every RC school converted to VA status. RC schools follow a prescriptive RE curriculum, which is determined by the bishops. The aim of RC schools is to nurture the Catholic faith (Catholic Education, 2016b).

While a large number of CofE schools also became voluntary-aided, over half of them are voluntary-controlled (Archbishop's Council, 2001). VC schools are completely financed by the State, and therefore must adopt the same admissions criteria as community schools, which give priority to looked-after children (i.e. children who are in care or living with foster parents), siblings, and children who live nearest to the school (Gov.uk, 2016a; Birmingham City Council, 2018).[14] VC schools cannot select staff on religious grounds, and cannot use a denominational syllabus for RE; they must deliver RE according to their Local Authority (LA) Syllabus for RE (ERA, 1988). While CofE schools intend to be inclusive "to children of all faiths and none" (Dearing Report, 2001: 5), the Church also states that CofE schools are "at the centre of the mission of the Church to the nation," and share a missionary purpose (Dearing Report, 2001: 11).

Currently, around one third of state-funded schools in England are schools with a religious character (Long and Bolton, 2015). While most faith-based schools are Christian, there is a small number of minority faith VA schools. For instance, Jewish schools have been in existence since 1656 (Miller, 2001). The creation of the National Society fuelled Jewish anxieties about children losing their Jewish heritage and identity, and as a result more Jewish schools were opened across the country. However, unlike Christian Churches, Jewish communities in England did not have the financial means to sustain a school system of their own, which limited its expansion. Between the 1880s and the 1920s, around 100,000 Jews immigrated to England, fleeing persecution on the continent. As a result of this mass immigration, the existing Jewish schools could not accommodate all Jewish children. By 1894, less than half of the Jewish children in

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[13] VA schools can only discriminate against a child on the ground of the child's religion if the school is oversubscribed. If the school is not oversubscribed, the school cannot refuse allocating a place to a child on religious grounds (Long and Danechi, 2019).

[14] The local authority can grant VC schools an admissions policy that prioritises children on religious grounds should the school be oversubscribed. Only a quarter of local authority allow it (Fair Admissions Campaign, 2013a).

England attended Jewish schools, and by 1911, less than a quarter of school-aged Jewish children were in Jewish schools (2001). The demand for Jewish schooling, however, changed by the beginning of World War II and increased even more among post-war parents who strived for a "stronger sense of Jewish identification and continuity" (2001: 506). In 1971, the Jewish Educational Trust was launched, which contributed to raising the profile of Jewish education within the Jewish communities. Since then, Jewish schooling has been on the rise in England. In 2015, 63% of Jewish children attended Jewish full-time education – representing a 500% increase since the late 1950s (Rocker, 2016). Although the majority of Jewish schools converted to VA status (the rest became private schools), they did not reach the same agreement as RC schools. For instance, the State does not finance Jewish Studies. While RE is financially covered by the State, Jewish schools tend to dedicate several hours a week to Jewish Studies for which they need to seek financial support from their communities (Miller, 2001); this is not the case for Christian VA schools.

Since 1997, minority faiths other than Jewish communities have been granted the right to open their own VA schools, or to convert their independent schools to VA status. Between 1997 and 2007, Blair's New Labour Government introduced a number of policies that supported the increase in the number of faith-based schools, and that included minority faiths in the process (DfEE, 1997; School Standards and Framewok Act, 1998; DfES, 2005; DfCSF, 2007a). While Blair used these policies to demonstrate his commitment to multiculturalism (Blair, 2006), the driving force behind his support for faith-based schools lay in his commitment to the liberalisation of the education system. Continuing Thatcher's Conservative Government to promote the "marketisation and privatisation of schooling, along with a greater emphasis on 'choice and diversity'" (Walford, 2008: 689), Blair saw faith-based schools as an opportunity to offer more choice to parents, resulting in greater competition between schools, and therefore theoretically pushing up educational standards (2008).

Blair's policy of expanding the provision of faith-based schools and offering more choice to parents was continued by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, and even more so by the succeeding Conservative and Coalition governments, with the creation of free schools and academies (Academies Act, 2010; Education Act, 2011; DfE, 2016). Free schools are new schools set up on a not-for-profit basis by groups like charities, universities, independent schools, community or faith

groups, teachers, or parents. These schools are not under the control of the Local Authority, and are directly overseen by the Department for Education (DfE). Although they receive public funding, they do not have to follow the national curriculum, they can choose their own term dates, and they can set their own conditions for staff and pay (Gov.uk, 2016a). Academy status originally meant that the school worked outside of the control of the LA, as they associated with a sponsor (usually businesses, faith groups or voluntary groups) that was responsible for improving performance. Academy status has since evolved, and the government describes academies as "publicly funded independent schools" (Gov.uk, 2016a). Academies do not have to follow the national curriculum.

The liberalisation of the 'education market' has resulted in increased diversity of provision in primary education, and has led to an increase in faith-based schools across England (Dinham and Shaw, 2015). As well as Christian and Jewish VA faith-based schools, free schools or academies, there are now also a small number of state-funded faith-based schools in England (VA, free schools, or academies) that are, for example, Hindu, Seventh Day Adventist, Muslim, or Sikh (see Appendix A). Yet, only a very small number of faith-based schools are not Christian (fewer than 1% at the time of study – see Appendix A).

### 2.3.2. RE Paradigms

RE is by law the only compulsory subject to teach in all types of schools; while other subjects are taught, they are not liable to any Education Act (Education Act, 1944; ERA, 1988; Education Act, 1996). The status of RE is rendered even more unique by the fact that it is not part of the national curriculum (ERA, 1988). RE syllabuses are determined locally and implemented by the Local Authority. Since 1988, it is a statutory requirement for every LA to appoint a Standing Advisory Council for RE (SACRE), who is responsible to advise on matters connected with RE and acts of collective worship in community schools (ERA, 1988). SACRE bodies are made up of four groups of members, representing a) Christian denominations other than the Church of England, and other faith groups, b) the Church of England, c) Teachers' Associations, and d) the LA (ERA, 1988; DfCSF, 2010). Every five years, SACREs select members from each group to form an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC), whose role is to review the locally agreed syllabus for RE and update it. Co-opted members can be added to the ASC to represent other

groups (e.g. Humanists) (BCC, 2007; DfCSF, 2010). Although RE syllabuses may differ from one LA to another, there has been a process of harmonisation since the publication of national non-statutory guidelines, which promote learning *about* and learning *from* six 'world religions,' namely Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism (QCA, 2004). Voluntary-controlled, foundation and community schools, which are under the control of the Local Authority (LA), must follow the locally agreed syllabus for RE (ERA, 1988). While schools are free to decide how much time is spent on RE (DfCSF, 2010), typically agreed syllabuses specify that RE should make up 5% of curriculum time in any one academic year (i.e. 70 hours across a key stage, or typically an hour a week).

Regardless of the syllabus or strategy adopted by the LA, RE must not be designed to convert pupils, and must remain non-denominational – that is to say not distinctive of any Christian denomination in particular (Cowper-Temple clause ratified in the Education Act, 1870; Education Act, 1944; ERA, 1988). While it has been a legal requirement to include non-Christian faiths in RE since 1996, in practice 'other' 'world religions' have been included in many syllabuses since the mid-1970s. For instance, the 1970 Bath Agreed Syllabus and the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (City of Birmingham District Council Education Committee, 1975a; 1975b; Cush, 2016) were the first to include non-religious 'worldviews' and religions other than Christianity. The aim was to move away from religious nurture, and to adopt a phenomenological[15] approach to 'worldviews' (Barnes, 2008; Felderhof, 2014). While the documents were praised as they broke away from the confessional approach, they were also highly criticised for including the study of secular worldviews such as Humanism, Marxism, and Communism, and had to be amended (Barnes, 2008). Between 1975 and 1988, many more syllabuses included religions other than Christianity. Most LAs adopted a multi-religious programme in an attempt to be more representative of the religious diversity in Britain, and contribute to a better understanding of major religions and religious communities (Hull, 1982; Jackson and O'Grady, 2007). Facts about 'other' 'world religions,' such as Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam were added to RE syllabuses in order to represent newly established communities (Barnes, 2008; Jackson, 2015; Thompson, 2007).

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[15] Phenomenology is discussed in more detail below.

The didactic shift in RE coincided with intellectual developments in universities, which led to non-theological approaches to the study of religion (Jackson and O'Grady, 2007; Morgan, 2001; Sullivan, 2007), and new child-centred pedagogies. In the late 1960s, Ninian Smart set up the first Department of Religious Studies (RS) at Lancaster University, where non-Christian traditions could be studied alongside Christianity (Morgan, 2001). By deliberately treating Christianity as one of the 'world religions,' Smart's objective was to move away from confessionalism, and adopt a more inclusive pedagogy, "for in the past there has been too much of a sense that myths are what *other* men [sic.] believe, too much of a sense that the comparative study of religion has to do with *non*-Christian religions" (Smart, 1973: 7, emphases in original). Smart advocated a move towards a comparative study of religions, and an approach whereby 'world religions' would be taught 'neutrally' and 'objectively.'

Smart advocated adopting a phenomenological position (Smart, 1968), that is to say a pedagogy whereby students and pupils are invited to "share the life and thought of another person" (Schools Council, 1971: 22). Phenomenology in RS meant that "[b]y virtue of imagination and empathy, human beings are said to be able to transcend their own situations and to enter creatively into the subjectivity of others […] and experience the world through someone else's eyes" (Barnes, 2000: 321). As the aim was to inform children about religion(s), rather than nurture children in the Christian faith, some scholars viewed the move away from RI as a move away from theology, and the foregrounding of pedagogies developed in RS (Barnes, 2000; Felderhof in REF, 2014). O'Grady (2005), however, argues that phenomenology does not need to result in the divorce of RS from theology, and that questions of truth and meaning can still be addressed in phenomenological RE.

In order to study "religions as they exist in the world" (Smart, 2003: 21), Smart proposed a phenomenological approach that draws on patterns and traditions (or *dimensions*) that are common to 'world religions' (Smart, 1973; 2003). In his work, Smart argued that all religions were characterised by the following seven dimensions:

1) The practical and ritual dimensions (e.g. regular worship, preaching, praying);
2) The experiential and emotional dimension;
3) The narrative or mythic dimension (i.e. "the story side of religion," Smart, 2003: 15);
4) The doctrinal and philosophical dimension;

5) The ethical and legal dimension;

6) the social and institutional dimension (i.e. embodied dimension of religion in the form of people);

7) the material dimension (i.e. embodied dimension of religion in the form of buildings, or works of art for example) (Smart, 1973; 2003).

Smart also points out that the seven-dimensional analysis can equally be adopted in order to study "secular worldviews" (Smart, 2003: 22).

Although sometimes contested (Barnes, 2000; 2001a; 2001b), Smart's contribution to the development of RS remains indisputable (O'Grady, 2005), and his theoretical insights have led to a phenomenological approach to other religions being taught in schools across the country (Davie, 1994). In 1971, the School Councils Working Paper 36 (WP36) (produced under his direction) advocated the move away from RI, and recommended the phenomenological approach to religion be adopted in all community schools, in order to promote empathic understandings of religions, and inform children about religious diversity (Schools Council, 1971; Barnes, 2000). Such an approach was later advocated by the Swann Report, which recommended that RI became phenomenological rather than confessional (Runnymede Trust, 1985), and the move from RI to RE was enshrined in law in 1988 (ERA, 1988).

While Smart intended to move away "from a 'universalised' view of religion" (Smart, 1973: 7, cited in O'Grady, 2005: 231), the phenomenological approach to religion has often become embedded in the World Religions Paradigm. In 1994, the first model syllabuses for RE were published (SCAA, 1994a; 1994b). The two documents adopted a phenomenological approach to six 'world religions,' and encouraged a comparative study of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism – therefore tapping into "typological phenomenology" (Smart, 1973: 41). By creating "a standardised set of categories, of types of religious items, […] th[e] intention [wa]s descriptive and presentational" (1973: 41). Yet, in many cases subsequent phenomenological approaches to RE have been understood through the lens of the WRP, which led to restrictive and normative discursive constructions of 'world religions' (Nesbitt, 1995b; 2004).

"Smart pioneered a multifaith, inclusive and epistemologically open religious education" (O'Grady, 2005: 232). With phenomenology, RE specialists discovered a new 'liberal' form of RE. Hella and Wright define liberalism in this context as "any form of

religious education in which both the learners and the curriculum engage with a plurality of different worldviews" (2009: 56). Barnes (2000), however, suggests that phenomenology was flawed as it retained a form of confessionalism. He argues that Smart's phenomenology disguises 'liberal Protestant' ideologies by foregrounding personal experience over transcendence, and by espousing "the view that the different religions are equally valid expressions of the sacred and thus there is a universal theology" (2000: 326). In this context, a 'liberal Protestant' position may be understood as:

> [A] position [that] reflects common practice in the secularised West, where one refrains from taking a stand for or against specific religions, choosing the alternative strategy of interpreting them all as various versions of one and the same essential appearance: a spiritual approach where multiple expressions share common roots in humans' existential endeavour to understand a threatening and incomprehensible world (Olof, 2015: 228).

O'Grady, however, argues that Barnes "distorts" Smart's phenomenology, and that "Smart's professional values are ultimately created by his commitment to democracy" (2005: 231). Regardless of one's position in this debate, subsequent interpretations of phenomenology have often been shaped by the WRP, leading to discursive constructions of religion being shaped by Western Christian discourses. Such approaches have been criticised for their "lack of critical attention to how Westerners' ideas of religion in general and separate religions in particular have been formed" (Jackson, 1997: 49). This led to epistemological debates about alternative pedagogies to religious education, and religious literacy (Erricker and Erricker, 2000a; Erricker *et al.,* 2010; Hammond *et al.*, 1990; Hella and Wright, 2006; Jackson, 1997; Wright, 1993; 2004).

For instance, while Hay (in Hammond *et al.,* 1990) embraces the importance given to empathy in phenomenology, he also argues that the classical approach can be flawed as it tends to focus on 'world religions,' and can therefore reify complex phenomena. He argues that RE should only be experiential. His position is that religious experience cannot be learnt, but can only be interpreted. Interpretations come from faith communities, and when shared only become "secondary experiences" (Jarvis, 2008: 553):

> Fundamentally religious experiences are primary experiences and they are disjunctural because we cannot explain or give meaning to them. Nevertheless we try to give them meaning and we can teach others about the meanings that we give to our experiences and we can learn from others about their experiences – indeed, it is natural for us to learn from our experiences – for learning is an existential phenomenon (2008: 557).

One of the emphases of experiential learning is that through learning, we become changed individuals. Therefore, learning should not be limited to the cognitive domain, but should be experienced through the whole body. For Hay, the focus should be on spirituality, which should be approached from a multi-sensory approach (e.g. role-play, drama, meditation) (Hammond *et al.,* 1990). These experiences become the basis from which theological explanations are then sought/taught (Jarvis, 2008). The experiential approach draws from both phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics – or the study of interpretation – as a framework is informed by the work of several scholars, such as Habermas, Heidegger, Gadamer, or Ricœur. Interpretations and adaptation of the hermeneutical framework in religious education pedagogy is not universally accepted, and can be contested (Aldridge, 2011). In fact, a number of scholars reject the experiential approach because of its limited interpretation of the hermeneutical theory, as it tends to be anchored in Gadamer's 'descriptive' hermeneutics for whom "the learning experience consists of a conversation between an interpreter and a text which is intentionally directed beyond both, to some subject matter with which they are both concerned" (2011: 40). The issue with 'descriptive' hermeneutics is that it assumes a universality of hermeneutics: "[e]ven if text and interpreter are to disagree about this subject matter, they must come to construe or question it in the same way, from a shared horizon" (2011: 40). Most scholars have rejected such an approach, as it results in a pedagogy entrenched in the concept of universal theology (Hick, 1989). Teece argues that the approach equates to descriptive reductionism, and "fails to provide an accurate account of the subject's experience" (2010: 99). A further issue with this approach is that it ignores the contested nature of transcendent spiritual experience, and fails to take pluralism seriously (Hella and Wright, 2006). For Wright, the experiential approach to religious education is also flawed because it uses "the texts of a variety of religious traditions instrumentally as a means of recovering a lost dimension of spiritual sensibility" (1997: 207). He describes this form of hermeneutics as "motivated by an apologetic concern to legitimate religious faith within a modern context" (1997: 207).

Other scholars also wrote about the limitations of a comparative study of religions. In his work, Grimmitt (1994) proposes to move beyond "multi-faith religious education" and towards an "inter-faith religious education" (1993: 133). He argues that "a genuine depth of dialogue between pupils and religious traditions is necessary for the

establishment of genuine religious literacy" (Wright, 1998: 62). In order to distinguish between "the implicit existential reality of children and the explicit domain of religion" (Wright, 1997: 209), Grimmitt proposes a hermeneutical model that rests on a distinction between learning *about* and learning *from* religion:

> When I speak about pupils *learning about religion* I am referring to what the pupils learn about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. I am also referring to what pupils learn about the nature and demands of ultimate questions, about the nature of a 'faith' response to ultimate questions, about the normative views of the human condition and what it means to be human as expressed in and through Traditional Belief Systems or Stances for Living of a naturalistic kind. […]
>
> When I speak about *learning from religion* I am referring to what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves – about discerning ultimate questions and 'signals of transcendence' in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them. […] The process of learning from religion involves, I suggest, engaging two though different types of evaluation. Impersonal Evaluation involves being able to distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself […] Personal evaluation begins as an attempt to confront and evaluate religious beliefs and values [and] becomes a process of self-evaluation (Grimmitt, 1987: 225-6, emphases in original).

In his original proposal, Grimmitt uses learning *about* religion to refer "to students' study of the accounts of reality given by the major world religions", and learning *from* religion to refer "to learning *about* the self" (Aldridge, 2011: 38, emphasis in original). Grimmitt's objective is to ensure that pupils' voices are not ignored, and that prevalence is not given to institutional metanarratives only. This pedagogical approach aims at ensuring students examine and situate their own positions and their own self-understandings, in relation to dominant structures. In Grimmitt's (1987) work, religion is understood instrumentally: it is about informing pupils' lives. O'Grady suggests that such an approach "should be described as constructivist rather than phenomenological" (2005: 230).

The 1994 model syllabuses adapted both Grimmitt's pedagogical model and Smart's comparative framework. As a result, the syllabuses organised the teaching of RE around Christianity and five other 'world religions' (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism), and around two attainment targets (ATs): AT1 – learning *about* religions; AT2 – learning *from* religion. In 2004, the non-statutory national framework for RE (QCA, 2004) also adapted this model and set up two similar attainment targets: AT1 – learning *about* religion; AT2: learning *from* religion.[16] These two ATs remain

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[16] See Teece (2010) for a discussion of the use of religion (singular) and religions (plural). This is also the object of discussion in section 3.2.2.

important didactic tools to promote religious literacy in schools.[17] According to Hella and Wright, the 2004 non-statutory Framework for RE "still retains vestiges from confessionalism" (2009: 56), as it espouses liberalism. The Framework constructs 'world religions' as similar and as sharing a "common ground" (QCA, 2004: 14) – a set of values that some scholars locate within 'liberal Protestant' ideology (Barnes, 2000; Liljestrand, 2015).

Although the 2004 non-statutory national Framework adopts Grimmitt's model, it is worth noting that the two ATs (learning *about* and learning *from* religion) have been interpreted differently from Grimmitt. In contemporary RE, the first AT (learning *about*) tends to pertain to the description of 'world religions,' which are studied through the lens of the WRP; the second one (learning *from*) tends to be located in the realm of morality and ethics (Owen, 2011). Therefore, little room is left for pupils to engage with their own positionings and their own self-understandings of their worldviews and of religious structures. As Grimmitt's work has often been misinterpreted, the two ATs tend to cause a significant amount of confusion among practitioners (Hella and Wright, 2006; Teece, 2010).

To move away from relativism, Wright (2004) argues that a hermeneutic of critical realism should be adopted. Critical realism entails "a realism that is not naïve: reality is complex, and simply labelling its parts cannot do it justice" (Wright, 1997: 204). By seeking to foreground a wide range of "authentic accounts of the world we dwell in" (1997: 204), Wright's objective is to allow competing and contradictory viewpoints to be discussed in RE. As a result of critical realism, the current tension between epistemology (learning *about*) and ontology (learning *from*) should be reduced (Wright, 2004). By adopting critical realism, Wright argues that pupils should be able to engage with competing truth claims and become critical evaluators of different 'worldviews.' In his work with Hella, the authors argue that phenomenology should be replaced by phenomenography "in order to establish a viable pedagogic connection between learning about and learning from" (Hella and Wright, 2009: 58). They differentiate the two approaches by shifting the focus away from structures to social agents; "[w]here

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[17] The publication of the *Non-Statutory National Framework for RE* in 2004 (QCA, 2004), followed by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families' (DfCSF) guidelines to promote the use of the Framework and establish standards in the teaching of RE (DfCSF, 2010) have set the process in place for a continual harmonisation of RE across all state-funded schools in the country (Barnes, 2008). In fact, the publication of the non-statutory Framework coincided with a concerted political campaign for the centralisation of RE. While not legally binding, the National Framework had been adopted by the majority of LAs when this research was conducted (Barnes, 2008).

phenomenology seeks to describe the phenomenon of religion per se, phenomenography seeks to describe the qualitative different ways in which a group experiences religion and discerns or constitutes its meaning" (2009: 58). Together, they promote the Variation Theory of Learning (a pedagogical approach developed within the phenomenographic tradition), whereby pupils are encouraged to first learn about their own (non-)religion(s) and beliefs, before seeking to understand other ''worldviews;' "[t]he fact that they offer contested responses to such questions means that to properly understand them students must experience the critical variations between them, and in doing so learn more about their own beliefs and commitments" (2009: 60).

Erricker and Erricker (2000a) view Wright's critical realist approach as an attempt to achieve "the sustentation of Christian truth claims as absolute and objective and thus inviolable" (2000a: 47). While they agree that RE needs to move away from phenomenology and from 'descriptive' hermeneutics, they argue that a relativist position is necessary in order to acknowledge the constructed nature of religion(s). They argue that religion is a social construct, and religious knowledge is 'fiction' (since it is *constructed*, rather than *discovered*). They therefore advocate engaging in 'deconstruction' by entering in a dialogue where each participant shares their own 'fiction.' They argue that children must unlearn the strict categorisations they use to understand religion(s), and must be given the tools to (de)construct their own worldviews. The purpose is to foreground children's voices in RE, and to achieve spiritual development. The Errickers thus propose that by adopting Wilfred Cantwell Smith's concept of 'faith,' RE can "facilitate pupils in the formation of their own faith" or spiritual development (Cooling, 2002: 107). Although the Errickers wish to move away from religious pedagogies that are anchored in Christianity (2000a), as stated in section 2.1.2, there are limitations with a proposal relying on the concept of 'faith,' as it constructs religion as "a relationship to persons and to transcendence" (Cox, 2016: xvi). As a result, this approach runs the risk to remain anchored in Protestant Christianity (2016). The Errickers' approach is also criticised by scholars such as Wright (1993; 2004), because their relativist position is strongly entrenched in post-modernity, since it considers all religious, spiritual, and secular narratives to be equally valid worldviews. By reproducing the post-modern relativist discourse, Hella and Wright (2006) argue that RE fails to take religious diversity seriously.

While Jackson (1997) shares concerns about reductionism in RE, he does not advocate a move away from religion(s). In his work, Jackson (1997; 2005; 2014; 2015) warns against the danger of adopting essentialist readings of religion(s), and argues that teachers need to focus on developing children's skills of interpretation and opportunities for critical thinking and constructive criticism. He advocates that in order to foster religious literacy, an interpretive approach should be adopted, whereby pupils act as ethnographers, investigating the lives of individuals. The aim is to address a tendency in contemporary phenomenology to take religious data out of its context (1997). While the interpretive approach is explicitly anchored in hermeneutics, Jackson however makes it clear that he rejects 'descriptive' hermeneutics.

With the interpretive approach, the focus is less on structures, and more on social agents. The aim is to acknowledge the complexities of (non-)religious expressions, the differences that lie between individuals and social groups, and the permeability of (non-)religious boundaries (Jackson 1997; 2015; Jackson and O'Grady 2007). Attention is paid to how children (and the community) use religious language in order to acquire a religious understanding of the world. The aim is to adopt a more flexible way of representing religious diversity than found in the phenomenological approach to Religious Education (Jackson, 1997; 2005). As a result, Jackson proposes to study the interplay between pupils and their wider contexts, and suggests three levels of analysis: the religion (or religious traditions), the individuals, and the groups (or communities):

> Rather than asking students to leave their presuppositions to one side – as in the phenomenological approach – the method requires a comparison and contrast between the learner's concepts and those of the 'insider'. The approach employs a movement backwards and forwards between the learner's and the 'insider's' concepts and experiences. The goal is to understand the insider's use of religious language as far as an outsider can. Sensitivity on the part of the student is very important and a necessary condition for empathy. The other aspect of this hermeneutical approach lies in applying the model of representation outlined above – moving to and fro between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider religious tradition (Jackson, 2009: 3).

The intention is to provide a teaching tool that remains "epistemologically open" (Jackson and O'Grady 2007: 82). Rather than legitimising one particular construction of 'truth,' RE classes should be conducive to acknowledging tensions in truth claims and different forms of knowledge. Ipgrave (2010: 18) agrees that non-faith-based schools should aspire to be "epistemologically inclusive." This is what Stockl (2015: 2) calls the "middle-position" – a position whereby schools provide opportunities for discussions pertaining to (non-)religious 'worldviews,' facilitating discussions and dialogues between pupils

from different backgrounds, or between pupils and faith representatives invited to the classroom. The teacher, rather than an instructor who controls the delivery of RE lessons, takes on the role of a moderator (Jackson, 1997; 2015). Through this approach, RE becomes the dialogical space children need to critically engage with lived experiences and realities, and understand (non-)religious phenomena.

The interpretive approach has been influential in the RE community (see section 2.4), and has partly contributed to influencing the work of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE).[18] Their report demonstrates that despite the different RE paradigms explored in this section, RE pedagogy to this day tends to remain largely informed by phenomenology and the WRP. As a result, 'world religions' have tended to be constructed through a Christian lens as "fairly cohesive systems with texts, doctrine, places of worship, etc." (Cotter and Robertson, 2016: 254). As a result, it "has allowed the inclusion of non-Christian religions in education, [but] has also remodelled them according to liberal Western Christian values (akin to what the Church of England promotes), emphasizing theological categories" (Owen, 2011: 253), and therefore has contributed to the reproduction of narrow normative Western understandings of religion(s) and the reinforcing of existing power relations between religious communities. Consequently, contemporary RE often fails to represent the "real religion and beliefs landscape" of the UK (Dinham and Shaw, 2015: 4). Bell also argues that the WRP implies that religions that are not included in RE syllabuses are either "confined to national entities and thus do not hold the promise of generating a transnational community," or since they do not fit within the WRP, they do "not even technically qualify as religions" (2006: 34-35). As a result, a hierarchy of religions and world traditions often ensues (Masuzawa, 2005). The WRP, as a restrictive conceptual apparatus also fails to adequately represent multiple religious belonging and religious *bricolage* (Benoit, forthcoming).

The CoRE report also reflects on the fact that there is a large amount of evidence that demonstrate that many teachers are not comfortable with RE as they feel ill-equipped to teach the subject (CoRE, 2018; CORAB, 2015; Ofsted, 2013). As a result, teachers have often tended to focus solely on learning *about* religions, therefore concentrating their efforts on teaching key facts, rituals and festivals about world religions, rather than asking pupils to reflect on their own positions or to critically engage with religion(s). Consequently, pupils often only achieve a superficial understanding of religion(s) (Clarke

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[18] The CoRE report recommends moving away from the World Religions Paradigm, and proposes a new vision for RE in order to reflect children's lived experiences of (non-)religion (CoRE, 2018). One of the recommendations made is to rename the subject Religion and Worldviews.

and Woodhead, 2015; CORAB, 2015; Conroy *et al.,* 2001; Dinham and Shaw, 2015; Ofsted, 2005; 2007), and can remain religiously illiterate as they fail to acquire the knowledge and skills to navigate a "world which turns out to be full of religion, belief and non-belief" (Francis and Dinham, 2015: 268).

These issues are not inconsequential. As state apparatuses, schools can become social arenas where social categorisations of religions, and the unequal distribution of power between groups can be legitimised and reinforced. Felderhof (2004: 247) therefore concludes that RE is "seriously flawed." For Felderhof, the 2004 Framework solely encourages children to focus on the Other, and does not make any personal demands on pupils or teachers. He argues that religions are treated substantively, and that RE has become a "spectatorial exercise" (2004: 247), and suggests that "RE could do better" (Felderhof, 2007: 191). His aim is therefore to bring RE back to the domain of theology (Felderhof in REF, 2014; Barnes, 2008) – an approach adopted in the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, *Faith Makes a Difference* (BCC, 2007).

The Birmingham syllabus, bearing the intellectual marks of Felderhof (BCC, 2007; Parker and Freathy, 2011), deliberately adopts a different pedagogical approach than the one recommended in the 2004 Framework (BCC, 2007; QCA, 2004; REC, 2013). Instead of focusing on six (or more) world religions, the focus is on 24 moral and spiritual 'dispositions,' or values (see Appendix B for the list of dispositions), and how these are interpreted by different religious traditions. Although each school is free to decide which religious traditions to study in order to reflect their local communities,[19] the syllabus suggests including the following nine traditions: Bahá'í, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Rastafarianism, and Sikhism.[20] At the time of study, the syllabus also intentionally left non-religious communities out of the programme of study,[21] and no representatives of the then British Humanist Association or other non-religious association had been included in the drafting of the syllabus.[22] The purpose was "to gain religious understanding" (Felderhof, 2004: 246), and Felderhof argued it would

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[19] By law, Christianity has to predominate (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of the legal context).
[20] In the RE policy, Alexander Parkes only includes: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism (see policy in Appendix L).
[21] While the syllabus acknowledges that many of the dispositions are shared by people "who have no religious convictions" (BBC, 2007: 2), the syllabus does not include non-religion in its programme of study. The two attainment targets (*learning from faith* and *learning about religious traditions*) are also exclusive of non-religion.
[22] It must be noted that the data was collected in 2014-2015, before the High Court ruled that non-religious worldviews must be included in RE (Royal Courts of Justice, 2015).

be difficult to incorporate non-religion "into RE without distorting the nature of faith that RE should clarify" (Felderhof, 2012: 212). Instead, children should "personally deploy religiously informed dispositions," and "value and use religiously informed dispositions" (BCC, 2007: 5). For Felderhof, one of the goals of RE is to be free from secular discourses that already permeate the rest of the school, and focus solely on religion:

> Instead of arguing with secular humanists about whether religious realities are properly described, whether they are accurate or distorting and deceptive, true or false, deep or shallow, humanizing or de-humanizing, saving or deceiving as it should, RE ends arguing futilely whether they exist. RE must always assume the latter (existence) and debate the former (the judgements). Once the young have learned to understand it and make the relevant judgements, they are still free to walk away, and say it means nothing to them (Felderhof, 2012: 212).

By focusing on 24 'dispositions' and how these are interpreted by different faith communities (see Appendix B), Felderhof also engages in an exercise of interfaith dialogue. Anchored in pluralist theology (Barnes, 2008), the syllabus aims to foster "an appreciation of diversity [which then] breeds tolerance" (Felderhof, 2004: 246). This approach assumes that everyone in the classroom has a faith background. Recent research, however, suggests that school-aged children are more likely to identify as non-religious (Lee and Pett, 2018). Furthermore, by teaching 24 dispositions through the lens of different religions, religious traditions are constructed as variables of one common expression of the sacred, sharing a universal theology. As religions are explored through 24 common dispositions, traditions are not constructed as unique individual systems (Felderhof, 2012), but rather "are all manifestations of a singular phenomenon" (Felderhof, 2004: 246). Such an approach is rooted in post-modern relativism, which assumes that all worldviews are equally valid (Wright, 1993; 2004). The risks are that the syllabus may assume an ecumenical position and ignore the contested nature of the transcendent. It may fail to take religious pluralism seriously (Hella and Wright, 2009; Wright, 2004), and could contribute to reproduce a "universalized way of looking at beliefs" (Day, 2011: 8).

Felderhof argues that contemporary RE, with its focus on learning *about* religion, lacks "moral and attitudinal dispositions" (2004: 242). As a result, the Birmingham syllabus does not follow the national Framework's attainment targets (AT1: learning about religion, AT2: learning from religion) (QCA, 2004: 11). Instead, the 2007 Birmingham syllabus reverses the attainment targets, which reads as AT1: Learning *from* faith, and AT2: Learning *about* religious traditions (BCC, 2007: 4, emphases in original).

By replacing 'religion' by 'faith' in AT1, the syllabus reminds us of the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1964) who suggested using 'faith' (or 'piety') instead of 'religion', "inserting a Protestant Christian bias" (Cox, 2016: xvi). While there is a lack of research about the 2007 Birmingham agreed syllabus,[23] and conclusions cannot be drawn at this stage, it may be relevant to note here that Felderhof is a licentiate of the Church of Scotland (Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation, 2019).

While other agreed syllabuses for Religious Education have also moved away from the non-statutory national framework,[24] an understanding of the Birmingham syllabus is helpful here, as it exposes ideological social structures that may inform the data collected in this project as Alexander Parkes Primary School is located in Birmingham and follows the *Faith Makes a Difference* syllabus (BCC, 2007).

### 2.3.3. Collective Worship

While sections 2.3.2 highlights tensions between different RE paradigms and approaches to religious education pedagogy, this section presents debates pertaining to collective worship in schools, and shows that tensions have also been present since it was first made compulsory in 1944 (Education Act, 1944). In section 2.3.2, I demonstrated that there are many different interpretations (and sometimes conflicting) constructions of religion, religious ideology, and 'truth.' Collective worship finds itself entangled within this complex (and sometimes contradictory) context (Cheetham, 2000). While issues pertaining to religious understanding, the broadly Christian character of the acts of collective worship, their inclusive or exclusive nature, and children's rights and agency are addressed below, it must be noted that there is currently a lack of research into the actual practice of collective worship (Cheetham, 2000; Cumper and Mawhinney, 2018; Shillitoe, 2018).

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[23] Although Barnes (2008) critically appraises the Birmingham syllabus, he only provides a provisional evaluation and does not comment on how the document shapes pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion. Parker and Freathy's (2011) research is historical and compares the different syllabuses that have been published by Birmingham. They do not comment on how the document shapes pupils' and teachers' understandings of religion.
[24] Worcester Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education 2015-2020 is another example. The syllabus is based on a key question approach that are explored through different (non-)religious 'worldviews' (Pett *et al,*, 2015).

The timing and organisation of acts of collective worship can be flexible, and the content is to be determined by the Headteacher (Circular 1/94).The State and LAs provide little guidance pertaining to acts of collective worship:

> 'Worship' is not defined in the legislation and in the absence of any such definition it should be taken to have its natural and ordinary meaning. That is, it must in some sense reflect something special or separate from ordinary school activities and it should be concerned with reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power. However, worship in schools will necessarily be of a different character from worship among a group with beliefs in common. The legislation reflects this difference in referring to 'collective worship' rather than 'corporate worship' (Circular 1/94: s. 57).

In the absence of further guidance, acts of collective worship differ greatly from one school to another. Although a legal requirement, it tends to be widely ignored by schools, especially at secondary level (Davie, 2015). Pupils are more likely to be gathered for *assemblies*, during which an act of collective worship may or may not take place. As the terms got conflated, it tends to be common for schools to hold assemblies, thinking they equate to acts of collective worship. In non-faith-based schools, the content shared during assemblies may differ greatly, depending on Headteachers' and teachers' views. I summarise below the different attitudes adopted vis-à-vis assemblies and acts of collective worship.

Acts of collective worship can be controversial because of their "broadly Christian character" (ERA, 1988). Anxieties about their confessional nature, and their role in nurturing the Christian faith have led to calls for acts of collective worship to be abolished (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; Humanists UK, 2020; National Secular Society, 2017; Curtis, 2004). Fears about the possible indoctrination of children in the Christian faith usually reflect a construction of children as passive social actors, who uncritically absorb what they are exposed to. Such a view is quite common in research and in wider society, though a new sociology of childhood, whereby children are constructed as fully active social agents is gaining prominence (Prout and James, 2015; Corsaro, 2015; Kostenus, 2007; Mayall, 2000). By constructing the child as lacking competency, and as relying on adults to shape their (non-)religious beliefs (Strhan, 2019), adults are therefore concerned that children will be indoctrinated in the Christian faith. As a result, Cheetham (2000; 2004) showed that many teachers are likely to be concerned about respecting children's 'personal integrity,' and many schools choose to hold assemblies without any act of

collective worship or form of religious practice (Curtis, 2004).[25] Non-compliance with the law is common practice in schools (Davie, 2015; Shillitoe, forthcoming), and is not a new phenomenon (Durham Report, 1970; Swann Report, 1985).

Interestingly, recent research has shown that pupils can use a wide variety of tactics to resist or to reconstruct acts of collective worship (Hemming, 2015; Shillitoe, forthcoming; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020), and that therefore children's agency ought to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, even in cases whereby children's agency is acknowledged, teachers are still likely to ask for the act of collective worship to be abolished or to be replaced by a non-religious act of collective reflection,[26] as they believe that children should be freed to choose their own beliefs and practices.[27] Such a view is informed by individualistic liberalism (Cheetham, 2000). Individualistic liberalism is "bounded by three central themes – autonomy, equality and rights – the values that allow each of us to be whatever we choose. The central character of our moral drama […] is the free self" (Sacks, 1991: 7, cited in Cheetham, 2000: 75). Such an approach to acts of *collective* worship has been criticised (Sacks, 1991), as individualistic liberalism neglects to recognise "the importance of communities and tradition in the formation of the individual" (Cheetham, 2000: 76).

Research suggests that acts of collective worship can play an important role in fostering a sense of "unity," "community," "togetherness," and "belonging" (2000: 73). This is in line with a Durkheimian understanding of religion. By adopting a functionalist approach to religion, teachers however often become concerned with the exclusive nature of collective worship, whereby children from religious minority backgrounds or from non-religious backgrounds are excluded from broadly Christian practice (Cheetham, 2000; Fancourt, 2017; Hemming, 2018a; Smith, 2005b; Weller *et al.*, 2015). In order to overcome this, and to be inclusive of the whole school community, teachers tend to adopt a relativist approach as they focus on core universal values that are common between different faiths (Cheetham, 2000). Such a didactic approach raises the question about the purpose of the daily acts of collective worship. Is it about nurturing religion? Or is it about fostering children's spirituality? Or about inculcating a moral code to pupils? Due to the

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[25] Since 2004, Ofsted inspectors have also stopped enforcing acts of collective worship.
[26] While acts of collective worship can be controversial, teachers are usually in support of assemblies (i.e. school gatherings) (Smith and Smith, 2013).
[27] It is worth remembering that parents can choose to withdraw their child(ren) from RE and/or acts of collective worship (see p. 15).

current lack of coherent rationale (Cumper and Mawhinney, 2015), it is often up to Headteachers and teachers to decide (Circular 1/94; Cheetham, 2000).

Felderhof (1999) makes the case that collective worship should be about giving children the opportunity to experience religious life. He criticises Hull (1989), who argued for collective worship to be abolished, stating that Hull's argumentation is a philosophical one. His argument is that instead of excluding collective worship from schools, a case should be made for the legislation to be amended in order to allow schools to provide different types of collective worship:

> Given the current state of society, one might conclude that the government should take a more pluralistic approach through in legislation. The government is there to serve a variety of communities and interests. One might reasonably argue that if the state-school system is genuinely to serve this plural society there should be more scope for incorporating into the education system a diversity of practice (Felderhof, 1999: 219).

According to Felderhof, pupils can only understand religious life if they have been initiated into it, and as worship is an integral part of religious life, it must be included in the school curriculum (1999). Rather than being about the transmission of the Christian faith to future generations, the acts of worship should be about providing a unique opportunity for children to experience religious life.

Contrarily to Felderhof, other scholars have taken a lead from Hull (1989), and argued that alternative approaches may be more meaningful than religious worship and religious observance (Cumper and Mawhinney, 2018). One such alternative is Philosophy with Children (PwC), a pedagogy that "allows children time and opportunities to reflect on a range of issues" (Cumper and Mawhinney, 2015: 12). Instead of a religious act of collective worship, schools would introduce a time for reflection, which would contribute to the spiritual development of the child:[28]

> PwC allows children time and opportunities to reflect on a range of issues. It promotes thinking about oneself, the world and one's place in the world, and it encourages children to ask important and relevant questions, ranging from why do we exist and why do we need friends, to what is knowledge and how do we know what is right? (2015: 12).

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[28] Cumper and Mawhinney's (2015) definition of pupils' spiritual development is in line with the definition of SMSC, which can be found in the Ofsted Handbook (Ofsted, 2015). Ofsted defines pupils' spiritual development as: a) the ability to be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or non-religious); b) the sense of enjoyment or fascination when learning about themselves and others; c) the use of imagination and creativity in their learning; and d) the willingness to reflect on their own experiences.

As PwC provides pupils with the opportunities to engage with different perspectives, it can also be used to complement RE. While PwC is not necessarily adopted by schools many have introduced a time for reflection (instead of religious observance). In her research, Gill shows that some schools, for example, "choose to emphasize "a dimension which is broadly spiritual and which places an emphasis on quiet thoughtfulness" (2000: 111). The concept of spiritual development is not without controversy, especially in the absence of coherent guidelines. While 'spirituality' is constructed as compatible with secular or non-religious groups by some, others cannot accept that it exists outside religion (2000). As a result, some scholars and some practitioners advocate a different approach, based on moral education.

Smith and Smith (2013) propose another alternative, based on virtues and ethics. In their research, they found that schools tended to focus on a universal moral code during assemblies.[29] Interestingly, they showed that schools did so in unique ways. For instance, they found that while most schools promoted virtue ethics, they also promoted different virtues depending on their location and school population. They observed that while schools tended to encourage general virtues such as courage, kindness or responsibility, schools that were located in socio-economically deprived areas emphasised perseverance and resilience. According to Smith and Smith (2013), virtues "have the ability to transcend belief systems" (2013: 17):

> In many ways, [virtues] are a far better solution than moral values which can be tied to political ideologies. In other words, virtues seem to transcend the problems of pluralism and secularism in a way values cannot. They are uncontroversial whilst permitting reference to religious and secular beliefs. This makes them a good working solution for schools (2013: 17).

Smith and Smith (2013), Barnes (2008), and Felderhof (2014) therefore suggest that the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (BCC, 2007), which is based on 24 moral dispositions (see Appendix B), offers a novel solution not only in relation to RE but also to assemblies, as it teaches "ethical virtues utilising supporting religious and cultural resources" (Smith and Smith, 2013: 16). Unfortunately, pupils' and teachers' voices are missing from Smith and Smith's research, which is something I aim to address in this thesis.

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[29] Smith and Smith use the term 'assembly' instead of 'collective worship,' not only to reflect participants' language, but also because they believe the term to be more appropriate given that most schools do not comply with the legislation when it comes to collective worship.

Interestingly, while this section demonstrates that there are many tensions surrounding religious meaning and the act of collective worship in schools, no Government has addressed the place of collective worship in school, and its status has remained unchanged since the 1988 ERA. Smith and Smith (2013) suggest that this situation is the result of politicians not wanting to remove the requirement for Christian worship in order to avoid debates about English identity and its Christian heritage. Conversely, RE has been the object of much politicisation, as the next section demonstrates.

### 2.3.4. Towards a Politicisation of RE

Scholarly debates are not limited to pedagogical issues and RE paradigms, but are also concerned with the role and aims of religion in education in modern societies. While scholars tend to agree that the main aim of RE is to contribute to religious literacy, epistemological debates regarding how religious literacy should be defined remain ongoing. Another common aim associated to RE pertains to improving community relations. Teece comments that religion in contemporary RE is not studied "for its *intrinsic* worth but rather for its *instrumental* worth" (2013: 25, emphases in original). Jackson (2015) summarises theoretical discussions about the purpose of RE by making the distinction between instrumental social aims (e.g. social cohesion, countering terrorism) and instrumental personal aims (e.g. personal development). Such a distinction is useful for the purpose of this research as it can be used to expose the current discourses that are associated with RE and religion in education.

Since the 1988 ERA, there has been a "politicisation of religious education" (Robson, 1996: 13), though it may be argued that it started sooner, with the 1944 Education Act. As mentioned earlier, the 1944 Education Act made Christian RI compulsory, and Christianity was to be the glue of society against rising secular ideologies on the Continent. The 1988 ERA then re-asserted the place of Christianity in RE and acts of Collective Worship, in response to demographic changes and anxieties about immigration and the assimilation of non-Christian religious communities (Parker and Freathy, 2011; 2012; ERA, 1988). More recently, RE has been shaped by major policy initiatives pertaining to issues such as plurality, integration, and social cohesion (Jackson, 2005). Since Blair's New Labour Government, there has been a move away

from liberal multiculturalism towards "a language of 'social and community cohesion' laced with a neoliberal logic" (Cowden and Singh, 2017: 270). Neoliberal communitarian policies such as Community Cohesion, Big Society, or Fundamental British Values (FBVs) have contributed to defining the role of RE. For instance, in the aftermaths of the 2001 race riots, the Government made it a legal requirement for all schools to actively promote community cohesion (Education and Inspections Act, 2006), to remedy the erosion of community life – a central concern to communitarian approaches (2017). The 2007 guidelines on community cohesion specifically emphasise the role of RE in 'managing citizenship' by promoting a shared set of values, as well as challenging prejudice (DfCSF, 2007b). Until 2010, community cohesion was actively inspected by Ofsted (Education and Inspections Act, 2006). RE's contribution to instrumental social aims such as fostering good community relations or educating the desirable citizen[30] has therefore long been the object of research, which has shown that RE's success in promoting good community relations tends to be limited.

A reductionist approach to religion(s), and a reliance on the World Religions Paradigm can alienate minority religions (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993; Nesbitt and Jackson, 1995; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010), and can erode community relations. Scholars have since then proposed different RE paradigms, but contemporary RE remains informed by the dominant WRP. Miller proposes a more anthropological perspective, and argues that people (and their identities), should be studied in RE:

> [E]ach of us has many facets and many groups with which we identify. Nonetheless, to see others and ourselves as simply the sum of the labels that are applicable to us is to be guilty of a reductionism: we are more than this. And this is where religious education can move discussion of identity and community to a deeper level. Identity is an existential concept and by exploring it with children and young people, we can open them up to the uniqueness (and for some, the sanctity) of human beings (2014: 11).

In his research, Smith (2005a; 2005b) demonstrates that schools can in fact unknowingly erode community relations. For instance, even in cases where schools are committed to valuing diversity and use RE as a means to improving community relations, school practices or school policies can on the other hand reinforce informal segregation, and can fail to address issues marked by religious difference:

> School policy and practices can serve to promote cohesion and value diversity and in the schools we studied the children's account suggested there was much good

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[30] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of citizenship as a prized possession rather than a positive right.

> practice. However, through listening to children's accounts of their life in school we have discovered some areas, such as singing, in which particular groups of children feel their religious concerns are not being fairly dealt with and of which school staff did not appear to be aware. The implication of this is that teachers should listen extensively and carefully to what children have to say about their experience and views of religion and not only rely alone what they learn from books, religious leaders or parents (2005b: 68).

This echoes Aldridge (2013), who argues that state-funded non-faith-based schools do not answer the needs of minority faith groups (see p. 18).

Whereas a decade ago issues pertaining to integration and pluralism were framed by the community cohesion agenda, more recent debates and policies have centred on radicalisation and extremism. RE is now largely driven by anxieties about terrorism (Dinham and Shaw, 2015). Since Operation Trojan Horse, all schools are responsible for implementing *Prevent*, the counter-terrorism strategy (DfE, 2014), allowing the discourses of radicalisation and securitisation to permeate the educational sphere (Miah, 2014; Kulz and Rashid, 2014; Heath-Kelly, 2013). In its commitment to counter terrorism and fight radicalisation, the DfE also funded the Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC) to deliver the REsilience project to schools (DfE, 2014). The project offers trainings, resources and material to schools and teachers, in order to guide them should contentious issues arise (REC, n.d.).

Terrorist attacks, as reported by the media since 9/11, have redefined extremism to equate to fundamental Islamists. After OTH, extremism was further redefined to equate to Muslim cultural conservatives (Miah, 2014). One of the risks of implementing counter-terrorism policies in schools is to reproduce a narrative that demonises Muslims (Kulz and Rashid, 2014; Shain, 2013), or portrays them as "suspect communities" (Heath-Kelly, 2013: 395). Such framings legitimise the need for security practices, like the implementation of the *Prevent* strategy in schools, in order to identify which Muslims are dangerous or likely to become dangerous, and to keep the majority safe (Heath-Kelly, 2013; Shain, 2013). As Shain explains, *Prevent* plays an important role in the "construction of ethnic minorities as 'problems' to be managed or contained" (2013: 63).

Security is thus the solution proposed to reduce the risk terrorism poses. *Risk*, here, is to be understood in the Foucauldian sense. Rather than an objective threat *per se*, risk is one mechanism of governmentality, which imposes control techniques (such as security) on the population:

First, by 'governmentality' I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Second, by 'governmentality' I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power – sovereignty, discipline, and so on – of the type of power that we can call "government" and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) on the one hand, [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges (*savoirs*) (Foucault, 1978: 144).

With the concept of governmentality, Foucault explores the dialogical relation between power and knowledge (see section 2.1.1). Power can make itself manifest as it produces scientific knowledge (about religion and religious communities), while scientific knowledge is central to governing (Bialostok and Whitman, 2008). Githens-Mazer and Lambert argue that the discourse of radicalisation has become "a tool of power exercised by the [S]tate and non-Muslim communities against, and to control, Muslim communities in the twenty-first century" (2010: 901). Although this conclusion oversimplifies a highly complex reality (Heath-Kelly, 2013), this interpretation is not completely erroneous. Through the implementation of *Prevent*, schools serve as state apparatuses for managing and containing Muslim populations, who have become the unacceptable Other (Shain, 2013).

In the context of radicalisation and *Prevent*, Heath-Kelly describes "radicalisation" as a discourse, which "performs a story about terrorism, and enables the performance of security around it" (2013: 398). By reproducing security narratives (Jackson, 2009; Silke, 2009), schools reproduce discursive knowledge that benefits governmentality. By implementing *Prevent,* schools actively enforce certain types of behaviours from British Muslims and ban others (e.g. the policy as well as *Prevent* trainings for teachers and governors explicitly warns against specific behaviours, language, or change in dress code) (Needham, 2015).

The implementation of Fundamental British Values, which have also been introduced in schools after OTH (DfE, 2014), also serve as a control technique of governmentality. In Birmingham, RE and collective worship are to actively contribute to the promotion of these values (Whitehouse, 2015). Once again, RE is tasked with promoting a shared sense of national identity. Rather than celebrating difference, as per the community cohesion agenda (DfCSF, 2007), schools are asked to concentrate on values that are constructed as common to every British citizen (CORAB, 2015). It could,

therefore, be argued that the purpose of FBVs is to assimilate Muslims into British society, by making them adhere to a common conceptualisation of society and a common culture (Cowden and Singh, 2017). Heath-Kelly concludes that the radicalisation discourse should be "considered as performative security knowledge – a discourse that actually discursively produces the threats it claims to identify for the performance of governance, rather than as reacting to the existence of such risks" (2013: 408).

As well as political agendas being pushed forward, RE also tends to be combined with non-core subjects such as PSHE (Personal, Social, and Health Education), citizenship education, or even sex and relationship education (SRE):

> [W]hen one looks at the list of expectations laid upon religious education by politicians and educators alike, for very different reasons we see that religious education is not so much a subject to be studied as, itself, a social practice. And, because many politicians and head teachers alike harbour very different conceits of its purpose as a social practice the terrain is studded with pitfalls and 'foxholes.' Given the wide variety of relations within and across religious communities, this inevitably creates a very complex picture of the ways in which influence, policy and practice are transacted and performed in a polity (Conroy, 2001).

As RE gets 'contaminated' by other subjects and competing expectations, Dinham and Shaw (2015) pose the following question: Can RE live up to the challenge? Their report, *RE for Real* (2015), suggests that RE bears too much instrumental responsibility, with teachers feeling pulled in many different directions, with too little time allocated to its teaching. Besides, primary teacher training in RE is inadequate; with an average of three hours of training dedicated to RE and PSHE, primary school teachers, despite their commitment and thoughtfulness, tend to feel anxious or ill-prepared to teach RE or hold conversations about religion(s) (Revell, 2005; Conroy, 2011; Dinham and Shaw, 2015; CORAB, 2015; CoRE, 2018).

In order to make sense of the different and complex positions schools can take towards religion, Ipgrave divides schools' possible approaches to religion into three: "*doxological, sacramental*, and *instrumental,* founded, respectively, on certain faith in God, on openness to the possibility of God, and on a default scepticism" (2012a: 30, emphasis in original):

> The case studies showed how different elements are interpreted variously by schools according to their understandings of religion. I categorize these perceptions and practices under three headings: *doxological* approaches, where the life and work of the school is bound up with religious witness and praise; *sacramental* approaches, entailing the demarcation within the school of places and moments

open to religious significance; and *instrumental* approaches, employing and adapting religious content for educational and societal, rather than religious, ends. (2012a: 32, emphases in original).

Ipgrave's conceptual tools are helpful to make sense of the different pedagogical approaches to religion in RE and collective worship. These tools will structure the three analytical chapters of this thesis. In her work, Ipgrave shows how state-funded faith-based schools are more likely to adopt a doxological approach to religion, but that a sacramental approach is not incompatible with a religious ethos. Conversely, she also demonstrates how non-faith-based schools may be dominated by secular discourses, and more likely to adopt an instrumental approach to religion, while also adopting a sacramental approach at times. Ipgrave explains that different approaches to religion can be taken within the same school, depending on the attitudes adopted by the staff or depending on the situation (for example, a school may take a sacramental approach to religion during acts of collective worship, but an instrumental approach to religion in RE classes) (Ipgrave, 2012a; Hemming, 2015). Ipgrave's conceptual tools enable researchers to make sense of the role and place of religion in education, without seeking to find "uniformity on school responses to religion" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 32).

## 2.4. Empirical Studies

In this section, I assess the impact empirical studies have had on the construction of childhood, religion, and our understanding of RE. I start by reflecting on some of the work of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), with which are associated a high number of influential pieces of research. I then pay attention to the growing body of literature that foregrounds the voices of children and teachers in primary education within the field of the sociology of religion.

### 2.4.1. The Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit

While ethnographic research on religion(s) has been conducted since the 1970s, research *on* children[31] began in the 1980s as part of the Religious Education and Community Project at the University of Warwick (Jackson, 2004). For this project, most participants were children and young people (aged 8-13 years old) from British Punjabi communities (Nesbitt, 2013). The programme was soon absorbed by WRERU, which was established in 1994 under the directorship of Robert Jackson. The research centre remains to this day concerned with religious diversity in the UK (Jackson, 2019), and is one of the most influential centres when it comes to research on religious education, intercultural education, or citizenship education (WRERU, 2020). The centre is particularly known for its "well-established tradition of ethnography" (Ipgrave, 2013a: 36). Indeed, researchers such as Jackson, Nesbitt, or Arweck, to name but a few, have been paving the way for conducting ethnographic fieldwork in RE, and since the early 1990s, data collected via qualitative methodologies (and ethnography in particular) have contributed to foregrounding the voices of pupils (and in some cases their families) and teachers.

In their book *Listening to Hindus,* Jackson and Nesbitt (1990) presented data from their ethnographic fieldwork with Hindu families in England in order to present readers (including pupils of Religious Education) with lived experiences of what it means to be Hindu in Britain. By introducing readers to the lived realities of their participants, their aim was to ensure religions such as Hinduism would not be reified, or Hindu communities essentialised. Jackson was eager to make sure internal diversity within religious traditions would not be downplayed, and advocated an approach that could "combine with antiracist stances" (1995: 272). Building on existing research studies on the religious upbringing of children and young people (2004), Jackson submitted a research proposal to the Economic and Social Research Council, stating that the aims of his 'Ethnography and Religious Education' project were:

1. To increase knowledge and understanding of the transmission of religious culture to children and young people within selected families of four religious traditions in Britain by use of ethnographic research methods.
2. To develop this research material for publication in article and book form and for use on an MA course for teachers of religious education.

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[31] See section 3.1.2 for a discussion of childhood paradigms, and the move away from doing research *on* children

3. To develop a theoretical framework for translating ethnographic source material from the project into material for use in religious education.
4. To develop and publish material for use by pupils studying religious education, drawing on the project's theoretical work in religious education (Jackson, 2004: 3).

The first two aims were fulfilled, and a series of ethnographic studies on children from different religious backgrounds were published (e.g. Nesbitt and Jackson, 1995; Nesbitt, 1995a; 1995b). For example, in one research project, Nesbitt and Jackson (1995) uncovered how the usage of the word 'God' in relation to Sikh belief in RE syllabuses drastically differed from Punjabi religious practice. Through their ethnographic fieldwork, they contributed to foregrounding the voices of British Sikh children (and adults) who had largely been ignored until then, and demonstrated that that the vocabulary used in RE policies and pedagogical texts can be imbued with Western values or norms. As a result, they recommended adopting an ethnographic approach to RE itself. This led to Jackson fulfilling the third and fourth aims of his 'Ethnography and Religious Education' project as he developed the interpretive approach to religious education (which draws on ethnography)[32] to foster intercultural understanding (Jackson, 1997; 2005; 2012; 2019). His theoretical framework has been influential in the RE domain across Europe,[33] and has led to a large number of research projects, including action research into RE (e.g. Ipgrave, Jackson and O'Grady, 2009). Such projects have yielded more empirical data on RE, and have further contributed to foregrounding the voices of pupils, parents, teachers, and student teachers.

Jackson's interpretive framework has also influenced recent developments within the RE community. Within English RE, one key project was the University of Exeter's 'Big Ideas for Religious Education' (Wintersgill, 2017). The Wintersgill project identified six 'Big Ideas' to study religion(s):

1) Continuity, Change and Diversity;

2) Words and Beyond;

3) A Good Life;

4) Making Sense of Life's Experiences;

5) Influence, Community, Culture and Power;

6) The Big Picture.

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[32] See section 2.3.1 for a discussion of the interpretive approach to RE.
[33] The European Commission funded REDCo ('Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?') between 2006 and 2009.

While supportive of the Wintersgill project, Freathy and John nevertheless warn against the danger of "establishing 'Big Ideas' that apply universally across religions and worldviews without exception […], [as] it is difficult to avoid potential charges of reductionism or oversimplification to the point of essentialism" (2019: 31). Building on the existing six 'Big Ideas,' they propose adding "four Big Ideas *about* the study of religion(s) and worldview(s)' (SORW) (2019: 33, emphasis in original):

> 1) Encountering religion(s) and worldview(s): Contested definitions and contexts;
>
> 2) Encountering Oneself: Reflexivity, Reflectivity and Positionality;
>
> 3) Encountering Methodologies and Methods: Discernment and Diversity;
>
> 4) Encountering the 'Real World': Relevance and Transferability (2019: 34-36).

These ideas form the theoretical underpinning for a "'RE-searcher approach' to primary school RE" (2019: 27), which draws on ethnography (among other methodologies and methods of study) and Jackson's interpretive approach.

The extensive amount of WRERU's ethnographic research has played an important role in demonstrating that religions "are not static, singular and discrete" (Nesbitt, 2013: 17), and has influenced many ethnographers who are not associated with the centre. By showcasing data from children and their families, ethnographers such as Nesbitt (1995a; 1995b; 1997; 2004; 2013) and others have demonstrated that lived experiences of religion are complex and fluid. Their influence of such work on English RE has led to the CoRE report recommending that lived experiences be foregrounded in RE:

> It is our view that learning about a worldview[34] without reference to the lived experience of adherents, and where possible direct encounter with them is insufficient for effective learning in Religion and Worldviews. It is critical that young people explore the ways in which the reality of any one worldview as lived by individuals might differ markedly from what is stated by authorities within that tradition. […] Schools must seek to engage with those who identify with various worldviews, including those with dual or multiple identities and those who do not identify with any institutional worldview (CoRE, 2018: 76).

Ethnographers concerned with religious socialisation and cultural transmission have also demonstrated the importance to look beyond family life and to include encounters with peers, as well as formal education (Nesbitt, 2013; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010). This paved the way for qualitative research (including ethnographic fieldwork) to be conducted on Religious Education classes and collective worship (e.g. Casson and

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[34] For a discussion of 'wordview(s)', see Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe (forthcoming).

Cooling, 2019; Casson, 2011; Ipgrave, 2002; 2004; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; Ipgrave and McKenna, 2008; Everington *et al.*, 2011; McKenna, Neill and Jackson, 2009; Kay and Francis, 2001; Miller and McKenna, 2011).

For the purpose of this project, it is worth noting the work of Miller and McKenna (2011), who did fieldwork in a secondary school in a multicultural northern town in England. In their paper, the authors highlight the fact that researchers (including ethnographers) have tended to analyse the views of pupils and teachers separately, "rather than comparing and contrasting them" (2011: 175). In their attempt to address this gap, Miller and McKenna gathered data from 27 pupils (aged 15-16) and 10 teachers, and found that while pupils and teachers were open to inter-faith dialogue and tended to agree when it came to the instrumental aims of RE, they held different views when it came to religion(s). For example, teachers were more likely to construct religion as negative if it infringed on liberal ideals, with frequent criticisms of Islam or the Pakistani-heritage communities (often reproducing existing hegemonic negative discourses).

The literature that is available suggests that pupils' constructions of religion is shaped by the school they attend, and that it is important not to homogenise children's experiences. For example, Keddie (2014), Ipgrave (2012b), and Ipgrave and McKenna (2008) have shown through their ethnographic studies that pupils in multi-faith and multi-cultural schools were more likely to "express acceptance, respect and openness in relation to religion and to associate religion with socially harmonious relations (Keddie, 2014: 86) than pupils who attend schools that cater predominantly to white students, where religious acceptance can result in embarrassment or ridicule, and religion is constructed in opposition with the dominant culture. Reflecting on the influence of RE in shaping pupils' understandings of religion, Kuusisto and Kallioniemi (2014) reflect on the impact of "exclusionary practices" that can create "normative boundaries between 'us' and 'them'" (2014: 157).

While more work is needed to uncover the discursive practices that are perpetuated and/or challenged in the school context, and which shape pupils' and teachers' constructions of religion, existing work shows that pupils' understanding of religion seems to be limited as it remains anchored in the World Religions Paradigm (Jackson, 1997; 2015). Synthesising several studies, Fancourt (2007) also note the fact that children's understandings of religion(s) are shaped by pedagogical approaches, and that the more 'world religions' they study, the less accurate their knowledge is. Paying

attention to Christianity specifically, research suggests that pupils tend to hold more positive views of Christianity than any other 'world religions' (Smith and Kay, 2000). Yet, their understanding of the religion seemed limited as teachers seemed reluctant to engage in theological beliefs, and did not address the re-incarnation of Jesus or the concept of the Holy Trinity (Fancourt, 2017; Hayward and Hopkins, 2010).

The present project builds on the tradition of ethnographic fieldwork in RE, with the aim of foregrounding pupils' and teachers' voices. It also seeks to compare and contrast pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion, as mediated through the primary school – a stage of education that remains under-researched. Nowadays, research on RE and on pupils goes beyond WRERU (e.g. Dinham and Shaw, 2015; Lundie. 2017; Panjwani, 2014a; 2017; Panjwani and Revell, 2018; Tinker, 2009), and beyond the discipline of religious education. For example, in the last decade, a small body of literature on childhood, religion, and education has emerged in the field of sociology of religion (e.g. Hemming, 2015; Shillitoe, forthcoming). This project is situated within the sociology of religion (see section 2.1), and contributes to the foregrounding pupils' and teacher's voices.

## 2.4.2.   Sociology of Religion

In this section, I pay attention to work within the sociology of religion that focuses on childhood, religion and primary education. While there is a growing interest in this area, research with children in primary schools remains limited. This is partly due to concerns regarding the feasibility to conduct research (especially as access to young children can be difficult) (Cohen *et al*., 2017; Smith and Smith, 2013), and also because until recently children have been constructed as passive social agents and have not been considered reliable participants. While this is changing,[35] children's voices still remain marginalised and research on religion remains dominated by the lived experiences of adults, or adults talking about children or reflecting on their own memories of childhood (Shillitoe and Benoit, forthcoming).

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[35] See section 3.1.2 for a discussion of childhood paradigms.

Recently, however, researchers have started working *with* children. In the early 2000s, a study was carried out by a team from the University of East London in three primary schools on the North of England and London. The team conducted in-depth interviews with over 100 children (aged 9-11) in order to "ascertain children's perspectives on the role (if any) that religion plays in their own and other children's lives, in the context of religiously diverse schools and local communities" (Smith, 2005: ix). The researchers found that children's lived experiences of religion did not always match with 'world religions' as they are taught in school, and that there were differences in religious practice and religious observance in each of the various religious affiliation groups (2005). This corroborates with findings in religious education that have showed that children's religious identities are complex, and that their experiences are diverse (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010). Smith (2005) also found that children tended to feel positive towards religious pluralism; generally speaking, they welcomed the chance to mix across cultures, and religion did not seem to be a barrier to friendship. Interestingly though, the data showed that schools – although committed to promoting cohesion and celebrating diversity – contributed to excluding children from aspects of school life because of religious factors. These findings corroborate with those discussed in Chapter 1 (see pages 32-33), and show that the current school system does not serve the needs of non-mainstream Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities (Aldridge, 2013). As a result, even in instances where schools aim to enhance social relations (often through RE, among other activities), the schools' own policies and practices can be a barrier to community cohesion.

In his ethnographic fieldwork in two primary schools in an urban area in the north of England, Hemming (2015) draws similar conclusions and suggests that pupils from religious minorities may find it difficult to feel a strong sense of belonging within the school community. Interestingly, however, Hemming demonstrates that children were not passive recipients but that they acted not only as active social and moral actors, but also as independent religious and spiritual agents:

> [C]hildren […] demonstrated both constructive and destructive strategies to contest school ethos values and practices, often through embodied means. These included resistance to school expectations and requirements such as daily prayers and reflection in assembly, but also the creation of alternative prayer spaces in the toilets and in their own minds (2015: 121).

This contrasts with adults' fears over the possible indoctrination of children. In fact, Hemming (2015; 2018a) but also other scholars (Sourfield *et al.*, 2013; Shillitoe, 2018)

suggest that children's agency has traditionally been downplayed, and that children use different tactics when they engaged in religious practice. Even in rural CofE primary schools where prayers were compulsory and little was done to accommodate the needs of non-religious children, Hemming's findings suggest that there is "little evidence to suggests [that] schools in this research were indoctrinating children (2018a: 168).

In his research, Hemming shows that instrumental approaches to religion can contribute to framing religion(s) in secular terms. He also draws attention to the subtle presence of Christianity, not only in the VA Catholic school but also in the non-faith-based school he visited, as he showed that "Christianity […] acted as a hidden foundation on which to hang [children's] views and opinions" (2015: 121). Hemming draws on Davie's (2010) notion of vicarious religion in order to make sense of the continued significance given to Christianity in both schools, and to explain the role Christianity continues to play in the public sphere. The notion of vicarious religion also proved helpful to understand parents' narratives, as many expressed that they did not expect schools to be secular spaces devoid of religion, but on the contrary expected them to act as the main vehicle to teach their children about religion(s). Finally, drawing on Hervieu-Léger's (2000) concept of 'chain of memory,' Hemming also shows that Christianity – "through the form of practices such as prayers, singing, worship and other embodied rituals" (2015: 116) – helped build a sense of togetherness, and a sense of community.

Taking an immersive ethnographic approach across three primary schools in the South West of England, Shillitoe (2018; forthcoming) draws similar conclusions. Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) also draw on Hervieu-Léger's theory of religion as a 'chain of memory,' and argue it may be excessive to suggest that the chain is broken due to a lack of religious transmission. Focusing on the micro-practices of community-making, Shillitoe (2018) shows that acts of collective worship (or assemblies) can contribute to create a sense of togetherness embedded in Christianity. However, she also shows that children used a wide range of tactics through which meaning was contested or reconstructed. As a result, "this togetherness was mediated through the cultivation of religious and nonreligious habitus" (2018: 168). Shillitoe concludes that listening to children's voices is key to really understanding the role and place of religion in school. Listening to children's voices can help us further understand the complex dialectic relationship between the religious and the secular (2018; forthcoming)

Focusing on non-religion, Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) reflect on the role of school in non-religious socialisation. Interestingly, they suggest that non-religious socialisation in the home tends to be subtle, unremarked, and that it is through school (especially through RE classes and acts of collective worship) that non-religious children become aware of their non-religious identity:

> [O]ur data suggest that non-religious socialization in children's home lives is mediated in more subtle and unremarked forms, bound up with a relative absence of overt discussion about religion. RE lessons however make explicit for non-religious children what is implicit and unremarked upon in home life. Although children were not asked 'are you religious' in RE, focusing on the beliefs, practices and traditions of religious groups prompted the children to reflect on and acknowledge their own non-religious identities (2019: 1106).

This emerging body of literature suggests that latent forms of Christianity continue to exist in the public sphere.

This project builds on these findings, as it seeks to explore pupils' and teachers' constructions of religion within a state-funded non-faith-based primary school. The literature cited in this section unanimously recommends that more attention be paid to children's and teachers' voices. By foregrounding children's voices, this project also aims to move away from adult-centric assumptions about religion, its role and place in society, and its relationship with the secular.

## 2.5.  Summary

This project is informed by, and builds on, the literature reviewed in this chapter. While emerging literature on childhood and religion tends to explore issues pertaining to religious identity construction, social cohesion, or citizenship (Hemming, 2011b; 2015; 2018; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019), the aim of this research is to assess how religion is codified by the school, which discourses and practices are reproduced/challenged in the school setting, and how this affects pupils' and teachers' constructions of religion.

In order to shed new light on how pupils and teachers discursively construct religion in education (macro level), the concepts of religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997), and 'vicarious religion' (Davie, 2015) provide the theoretical framework to explore the dialectic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and the (perceived) role and function of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular, in contemporary society (meso level). In order to investigate which discourses were (re)reproduced at Alexander Parkes Primary School, I adopt Ipgrave's analytical tools to the "different approaches to religion: doxological, sacramental, and instrumental" (2012a: 30). These tools are useful to not only understand how the school managed religion, but also to explore the interplay between the 'religious' and the 'secular' in the public institutional space (micro level).

This project also builds on the long-standing tradition of ethnography in the field of religious education (WRERU, 2020; Ipgrave, 2013a). Recent work with children and teachers in primary schools have found that children's lived experiences of religion as mediated through the school needed further investigating (Shillitoe, forthcoming). By foregrounding children's voices, this project moves away from adult-centric understandings of the role and place of religion in school. As I explore how pupils and teachers construct religion, as mediated through the school, my aim is to compare and contrast children's and adults' narratives, and not study them independently from one another (Miller and McKenna, 2011; Shillitoe, 2018).

Acknowledging pupils' agency and that it is never possible to control what children get from school, this project aims to understand the influences that can shape children's symbolic meaning-making, and in this case children's discursive constructions of religion. As discussed earlier, structures and agency inform each other, and my aim is to shed more light on the dialogical process between the two by conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a primary school setting. In the next chapter, I reflect on the methodology and methods I used to collect empirical evidence.

# Chapter 3.   When Policy Meets Practice: Methodological Concerns

In this chapter, I explain the research methods used for collecting and analysing data. While "methodologies and research questions are inevitably theoretically informed" (Silverman, 2010: 103), research *methods* and research *design* tend to be used interchangeably in literature. This has led to a tendency to neglect research design, and focus on either methods or methodologies (Gorard, 2013; White, 2013). In this chapter I disaggregate these three issues – methods, design and methodology. I reflect on the foundations of this research, the frameworks within which I work, and how this has influenced my methodological stance. I reflect on how this, in turn, informed the methods chosen to undertake the research, also feeding into the research design. My purpose in this chapter is to offer a coherent research design, connecting theory and methods together. As a result, ethnographic methods are justified within the interpretive framework; observation techniques are explored within social constructionism and the lived religion paradigm; and issues of ethics are considered in connection with sociological approaches to childhood. Issues pertaining to validity, reliability, reflexivity, and vantage point are addressed throughout the chapter. Ethical considerations are not treated in isolation of the whole research design, but instead are integrated throughout the

chapter and discussed in relation to each section, and especially in relation to the methods used to collect data.

## 3.1.  An Ethnographic Approach to a Case Study

I argue that a qualitative approach is inherently suited for this project, as it is fundamentally in line with the ontological and epistemological foundations of this research. A natural science model of research, and a quantitative approach have been *ipso facto* rejected because of their inappropriateness, and an ethnographical approach to a case study was deemed a most appropriate methodology to collect data.

### 3.1.1.  Ethnography as an Interpretivist Methodology

This research is strongly grounded in social constructionism, an ontological and epistemological position rooted in interpretivism. While the constructionist approach has been more influential in sociological research since the 1980s (Brown and Langer, 2010), I disagree with Chandra's (2001) claim that essentialism is now rejected by social scientists. Indeed, it is not rare to find academic research that still adopt an essentialist view of religion or ethnicity. Research on 'Muslims' or 'Pakistanis,' who are presented as static, reified communities, is not uncommon (Brubaker, 2002). Researchers can indeed become guilty of reproducing fixed, unchangeable identities and possibly promoting stereotypes or reinforcing prejudices. In fact, in some cases it can be difficult for researchers to resist essentialism, as funding institutions and bodies tend to adopt a 'fact-file' approach to religion, which attributes core beliefs and practices within supposedly monolithic groups (Dein, 2006; Gunaratnam, 2003; Young and Sercombe, 2010). This approach, which Brubaker (2002: 164) calls "groupism," can be damaging as it fixes differences between groups, and leads to the reification of communities.

Conversely, social constructionists contend that meaning is created, negotiated, sustained and modified by social agents interacting together (Berger, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Beckford, 2003). Notions of objective, natural truths are therefore

dismissed, and knowledge is understood as being co-constructed (Foucault, 1980b; 1980c). This project therefore seeks to move beyond 'groupism' as it recognises "groupness as a variable and distinguish[es] between groups and categories, […] to attend to the dynamics of *group-making* as a social, cultural, and political object, aimed at transforming categories into groups or increasing level of groupness" (Brubaker, 2002: 170-1, emphasis in original).

Social constructionism is rooted in social interactionism, which "prompts us to focus on the level of what people actually do" (Dionysiou, 2017: 10). It would be fundamentally wrong to resort to quantitative methodologies that aim at generalising findings, and presenting the project as reflecting an objective reality. The purpose of this research is to engage with the micro-level, and study how social agents make sense of their social world. As Gergen states, "social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the process by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (1985: 266).

Social constructionism recognises the crucial role social actors play in the (re)production of social representations and knowledge construction. Consequently, they must be actively included in this study. One of the main purposes of this project is to foreground the voices of stakeholders, in order to recognise their roles as active agents, and not passive recipients (Joseph, 2006), and to provide a greater comprehension of how they discursively construct religion. In the past, researchers have tended to conduct research *on* pupils and teachers (the respondents are treated as 'objects') or *about* pupils and teachers (the respondents are treated as 'subjects'), rather than *with* them (the respondents are treated as 'participants') or *by* them (the respondents are treated as co-researchers); silencing their voices in the process (Einarsdóttir, 2007, Jarvis, 2009; Hemming, 2018b; Kostenius, 2007; Rogers and Ludhra, 2011; Shillitoe, forthcoming). While it is true that researchers and policy-makers can influence pedagogies and syllabuses, pupils' and teachers' voices should, however, not be absent from research (Joseph, 2006).

Children and teachers have often been constructed as unreliable passive social agents, whose voices were silenced in the face of powerful institutional structures. Yet, their voices contribute to reproducing the power of the structure, or challenging it:

> [A]ny power that the school context exercises, has to be reinforced by individuals in order for that power to be reconsolidated […]. A school (structure) could portray a particular norm (either negative or positive) with regard to an approach to religious freedom but it is enforced by individual RE teachers (agency). These individual RE teachers are agents of their existence and as such could possibly resist an intrinsic negativity towards other religions, or promote the same. It is individual agency that emerges from the margins of power that makes possible the disruption of and redefinition of (religiously) intolerant structures (Jarvis, 2009: 143).

Therefore, researchers should not solely study structure but agency as well. By recognising individual agency, this research thus aims to restore some power to pupils and teachers (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Jarvis, 2009; Shillitoe, forthcoming). However, it must be noted that by enabling participants' voices to be heard, research can still reproduce existing power hierarchies (see section 3.2.4).

In order to work within the social constructionist paradigm and recognise the central role of social agents, I have adopted an ethnographic approach to a case study. Ethnography posed itself as the most evident methodology to collect data, as it results in in-depth insights into "the real operating factors in group life, and the real interaction and relations between factors" (Blumer, 1969: 138). Although there is no standard definition of ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson offer a useful description of the methodology:

> [E]thnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents, and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry (2007: 3).

Prout and James (2015) argue that ethnography is the most appropriate method for studying children, as it brings the researcher into the children's everyday world and settings, and allows children to be included in the production of data. Such a mode of inquiry allows for a systematic and rigorous way of collecting data in the naturalistic setting of the primary school (Yin, 2014). As the aim is to understand how pupils and teachers in a primary school setting understand religion, ethnography offers the best tools to do so.

Ethnography also allowed me to consider religion as an object of social analysis (Beckford, 2003), and to explore what religion meant to participants, "how they ma[d]e sense of it, and how they use[d] it to make sense of their world" (Spickard and Landres, 2002: 2). As an ethnographer, I was able to recognise that knowledge is situational and

appears in different ways to social agents. This also allowed me to deepen my understanding of the role of religion(s) in education as I not only listened to participants but observed their daily practices (Nesbitt, 2013).

An ethnographic approach to a case study also builds on a long tradition of ethnographic studies in RE. Jackson, who conducted a series of ethnographic studies between 1984 and 1996 (Nesbitt, 2013), paved the way for an ethnographic movement among researchers in Religious Education in the UK.[1] A number of religious educators concerned with the experience of children and young people have since then adopted a range of ethnographic methodologies (Arweck, 2013; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010; Casson, 2011; Ipgrave, 2001; 2013a; Ipgrave and McKenna, Jackson and Nesbitt, 2010; McKenna, 2002; Nesbitt, 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2013; Sikes and Everington, 2001; 2004).[2] Listening to children's and young people's personal stories, at home and/or in school, is a central concern in all ethnographic studies in RE (Jackson, 2019). Ethnographic methodologies are also used by sociologists who work on religion in primary schools (e.g. Hemming, 2015; 2018; Shillitoe, forthcoming; Smith, 2005b). My research project follows in this tradition.

The case study, as a mode of inquiry, allowed me to enter the field of study, conduct field observation (e.g. acts of collective worship and RE classes), analyse documents (e.g. RE policy), and interview social agents evolving in the field.[3] Adopting an ethnographic approach to a case study allowed me to collect a rich amount of material about participants' perspectives, in a real life setting, and to cover different variables (Yin, 2014). I have therefore been able to rely on multiple sources of evidence (2014). This approach is particularly well suited to assessing if there is any evidence of vicarious religion in a primary school. As Davie says, "[i]n order to grasp the real nature of vicarious religion, […] different approaches are required, […] requiring diverse and flexible methodologies" (2007b: 28; 31).

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[1] It must be noted that ethnography was not only used as a methodological tool to conduct research on RE, but was also used as a pedagogical methodology to support pupils in their learning (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of the interpretive and dialogical approaches to RE).

[2] Although not all religious educators are working in association with the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) at the University of Warwick, a large proportion of ethnographers in RE are affiliated with the research centre. WRERU was established in 1994 under the directorship of Robert Jackson, and upon its creation the centre absorbed ethnographic studies conducted under the auspices of the then Religious Education and Community Project. WRERU is concerned with religious diversity in the UK (Jackson, 2019)

[3] Ethical approval was granted by Aston University prior to entering the field.

For this research project, I focused on one primary school (Alexander Parkes Primary School) in order to conduct an in-depth analysis in a real-life setting. As Travers explains, "[f]rom an interpretive perspective, there are no benefits in working with large data sets, since these encourage a positivist mentality" (2001: 11). As notions of absolute, objective truths have been eliminated, my aim is *not* to generalise findings but to "illuminate the general by looking at the particular" (Denscombe, 2010: 53). While it is beyond the remit of this thesis to engage with other structures that contribute to inform participants' construction of religion, the thesis does not claim that participants' understandings and experiences of religion are solely shaped by RE, collective worship, or the school as a structure.

### 3.1.2. Exploring Childhood Paradigms

A researcher's conception of 'childhood' and 'children' shape the research in which they engage (Harden *et al.*, 2000). If scholars have tended to ignore them, and conduct research *on* or *about* children, rather than *with* or *by* children, it is because their competency has long been doubted. Not including children in research tends to rest on assumptions that children are passive, and without agency as learners. In other words, research has tended to deny constructions of children as individuals in their own rights and singularities (Alderson, 2001; James *et al.*, 1998; Matthews, 2007). Such a conceptualisation results in the marginalisation of children, both in research but also in society at large (Qvortrup, 1991; 1999), and is at odds with the interpretivist framework that considers all individuals as active, creative social agents in their environment (Corsaro, 2015; Goh, 2013). The interpretivist approach, on the contrary, embraces the "two basic tenets of a new sociology of childhood: [c]hildren are active agents who construct their own cultures and contribute to the production of the adult world, and childhood is a structural form or part of society" (Corsaro, 2015: 4). For Corsaro, 'childhood' does not reflect an objective truth; rather it is a socially constructed period, and a structural form (i.e. a category, or a part of society, that serves to classify people, such as age, gender, class or religion). Within this discourse, children are recognised as active social agents (Qvortrup, 1999).

If childhood is a social construct, it is therefore neither a natural nor universal category (James *et al.*, 1998; Prout and James, 2015). Yet, rejecting childhood as a

classification, and rethinking it remains a difficult task (Mayall, 2000). This is because, to this day, there remains a number of theories that have influenced the way we understand children, and how they acquire knowledge and socialise, which are grounded in developmentalism. For example, Piaget's (1930) theory of child development, which remains influential with practitioners and in curriculum design (Hopkins, 2011), theorised the child as an active learner, who actively constructs knowledge. Piaget (1930) divided children's cognitive development into four distinct stages, and argued for a pupil-centred curriculum and for meaningful tasks to be set to allow children to interact with the world around them. For Piaget, children acquire knowledge not only through transmission, but also through their own exploration and experiences of the world (1930). One of the limitations of a Piagetian approach is that knowledge acquisition tends to be understood as a solitary process – however, social and cultural settings influence cognitive development too. As Mathews explains, "children in different social locations have different childhoods and […] their experience of childhood changes from one context to another" (2007: 325). Another limitation is that by seeing cognitive development as split into four distinct categories rather than as continuous, Piagetians tend to consider children as still 'developing' (Piaget, 1930). The child – or the 'becoming' adult – tends therefore to be constructed as lacking competency (Uprichard, 2008), making education *a fortiori* necessary.

A position, which is more in line with the theoretical grounding of this research, was later advocated by Vygotsky. Vygotsky ([1978] 1997) argued that children learn and develop through interaction with other social actors and with their environment (also known in educational research as the 'hidden curriculum'). For this reason, it is important to conduct field observations when collecting data, in order to assess how knowledge is co-constructed. For Vygotsky, language but also culture, values, history and context are determining factors in knowledge construction. Knowledge is thus situational, and co-constructed ([1978] 1997). This approach, however, still presents the child as developing.

Issues around development, or around 'being' and 'becoming,' remain central to the discourse on childhood (James and Prout, 2015; Uprichard, 2008). Are children human beings or human 'becomings'? How does this affect competency? Lee (2002) and Uprichard (2008) argue that the tension between 'being' and 'becoming' should not be crudely understood as 'competent' and 'incompetent.' Instead, every social actor should be perceived as both in the process of 'being' (present self) and 'becoming' (future self).

Therefore, children and adults are both competent and incompetent, and both caught up between being and becoming (Lee, 2002; Uprichard, 2008). Consequently, researchers should not be caught up in tensions between being and becoming, or in questions of (in)competency and (im)maturity. In this project I have adopted Kostenus' "empowered child perspective" (2007: 27). By doing so, children have been treated as reliable informants, whose opinions and views give valuable and useful information (Kostenius, 2007; Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Although children are increasingly recognised as competent social actors (James *et al.*, 1998; Corsaro, 2015), some educationalists argue that their competency is limited to their own 'child world' – a world which the adult researcher cannot enter (Kvale and Brickmann, 2008). This theory, however, is difficult to reconcile with the idea that childhood is a social construct (James *et al.*, 1998). Children do not need their own world to be active and capable of making their own choices (Christensen and James, 2000), and I therefore do not need to enter 'their' world in order to interact and communicate with them. Indeed, as Corsaro argues, "children do not simply imitate or internalize the world around them. They strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and to participate in it" (2015: 23). This research project thus aims to recognise the role of children as fully active social agents, who co-construct society.

Children tend to be considered as a minority group, who are unequal in terms of power (Goh, 2013; Qvortrup, 1999). The term 'minority' here should be understood as 'minor-ity' (*mineur-ité*) (Moscovici, 2001). Rather than meaning minority in the numerical sense, 'minor-ity' applies to groups that historically, culturally, and socially occupy a minority position within society in terms of influence, and access to power (e.g. women, migrants, children). As children largely tend to be excluded from formal power (Prout and James, 2015), their agency can be undermined. For this project, representing children's views became an "ethical issue in itself" (Rogers and Ludhra, 2011: 44). By articulating silenced voices, this research recognises the active role of participants, values their opinions, and empowers them to take part in the development of society (Kostenus, 2007; Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). In order to redress the imbalance in power, and to recognise the children's full agency, I argue in section 3.2.4 that children ought to be empowered to consent to research on their own terms (Matthews, 2007).

This research project therefore offers an invaluable opportunity to not only represent children's views rather than adults' views on children's lives, but also to

empower children. Within the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of this research, it would have been negligent not to include them and to consider them as passive participants, or to privilege the adults' constructions over theirs. It was therefore an ethical obligation to recognise children as social agents in the negotiations and renegotiations of social representations. In order to reposition children as active producers of knowledge about their lives (Mason and Watson, 2014), and to recognise them "as subjects rather than objects of research" (Alderson, 2001: 3), two methodologies presented themselves: research *with* children or research *by* children (rather than *on* or *about* children, as discussed above). By conducting research *by* children, children act as active researchers. They are involved in the project as soon as possible, and help formulate the research question and think of appropriate topics to cover. They are also involved when preparing interview questions and when analysing the data. The research is therefore not solely designed and conducted by one or several adult(s) who may hold assumptions about their participants (2001). However, for this research project, I had to rule out research *by* children as gatekeepers only allowed me to speak with children at the end of the school year, and towards the end of the data collection process (see Appendix E).

I therefore opted to conduct research *with* children, and included them in the data collected (see section 3.2.4 and 3.2.5). While this methodology directly involves children and addresses their "silence and exclusion" (Alderson, 2001: 3), there can be some limitations and possible pitfalls of which one needs to be aware. For example, by conducting research *with* children, this research has been designed and conducted by myself – a sole adult researcher, imbued in her own social representations. I therefore reflect on my positionality and my role as a researcher (see section 3.1.3 and 3.1.4) to highlight my own role as a co-constructor of knowledge. Alderson (2001) also warns of the danger of overcomplicating or oversimplifying questions or topics discussed with children, of infantilising children and treating them as immature, and of lacking the appropriate verbal and non-verbal tools to effectively communicate with children. In sections 3.2.4 and 3.2.5, I provide more methodological detail that directly address how I engaged with these issues.

Children do not constitute a homogeneous, united group. Representing the diversity of the participants is another ethical issue to consider. As mentioned above, children's experiences of childhood vary from context to context, and the findings

presented in this study should not be used for generalisation purposes. The narratives and experiences presented in this research should be understood as specific to Alexander Parkes Primary School. Efforts to include children from different backgrounds (e.g. religious, ethnic, gender) have been made as I collected data (see Appendix E). In the analysis (Chapters 4-6), I made sure the diversity of participants was reflected, and took into consideration the heterogeneity of the group (Rogers and Ludhra, 2011).

By investigating children's discursive constructions of religion in school, this thesis not only contributes to a growing body of literature on children's agency, but also provides an insight in children's understandings of religion – in contrast to how the elites understand religion,[4] which traditionally remains the focus of research on religion. As a result, this thesis borrows from the lived religion framework as a methodological tool. Traditionally, scholars have tended to explore understandings of religion in traditional 'sacred' spaces such as religious buildings, therefore focusing on how the elites construct religion (Ammerman, 2016; Hall, D., 1997; Orsi, 2005). The lived religion paradigm therefore sits well within ethnography as it aims to foreground the everyday, lived experiences of "ordinary' people" (Ganzevoort and Roeland, 2014: 94). In this research, I use the lived religion framework as a *research strategy* to focus on what people do, and to explore how religion is encountered in the mundane setting of the primary school. As I explore how children encounter religion in unofficial spaces (i.e. their school, or more precisely their classrooms, the great hall, their local CofE church, etc.), this research places religion in more fluid contexts. In her research, Shillitoe demonstrates that adopting such an approach enables the research to "move beyond binaries of sacred and secular spaces," as attention is paid to religion "within the wider context of everyday school life" (2018: 43-44). I argue that lived religion as a methodological tool enables me to move beyond traditional understandings of 'religion' and the 'religious.' By exploring how participants encountered religion as mediated by the school, my aim was to deconstruct the symbolic nature of religion, and uncover the discursive practices that were perpetuated and/or challenged at Alexander Parkes.

Children still tend to be overlooked within the lived religion framework, as the focus tends to remain on adults' experiences and understandings of religion (Ridgely, 2012). Research on religion still tends to reduce children as "acted on" (Shillitoe, 2018: 47), rather than as social agents who can act themselves. As a result, research has tended

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[4] Elite here means people in positions of leadership, or positions of authority.

to privilege adult understanding of religion. In fact, a large body of literature still dismisses children's views as children are constructed as lacking competency and as relying on adults to understand religion(s) (Smith and Denton, 2005; Hemming and Madge, 2012). Strhan (2019) identifies religious transmission, cognitive development, religious socialisation, and religious nurture as the dominant theoretical frameworks used to study the intersection between religion and childhood – these all suggest that the child depends on the adult to forge their religious identity and/or to understand religion. On the contrary, this thesis aims to consider children's lived experiences, even when they disrupt adult understandings of religion. By moving beyond these dominant frameworks, and adopting a more fluid approach to religion, this thesis contributes to an emerging body of literature in sociology of religion that foregrounds children's voices (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion, 2010; Hemming, 2015; Hemming and Madge, 2012; Shillitoe, forthcoming; Sillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Scourfield *et al.*, 2013; Smith, 2005b; Smith and Smith, 2013; Strhan, 2017; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019). While more Religious Educators have adopted more children-centred methodologies, they have not always engaged with lived religion as a methodological framework, and considered schools as unofficial spaces where religion is lived, experienced and constructed. In this thesis, rather than seeking a deeper understanding of children's own religiosity or non-religiosity and how this is manifested in and informed by the school as a structure, I explore how pupils encounter and discursively construct religion as a concept or category while in the state institutional space. As Hall explains, it is about uncovering how religion as a category "is shaped and experienced in the interplay […] of everyday experience" (1997: 9).

### 3.1.3. My Role as the Researcher

Adopting an ethnographic approach to a case study has enabled me to achieve an in-depth understanding of a particular community primary school, observe day-to-day activities, and focus on the narratives of social actors (see section 3.2 for more details about the school under study). By doing so, I have been in a position to determine the extent to which pupils' and teachers' narratives are shaped by dominant discourses, and thus explore the tension between agency and structure, addressing the broader questions of power relations as well as knowledge (Foucault, 1980b; 1980c). An ethnographic approach to a case study has also enabled me to take vicarious religion into consideration,

as the strong focus on observation enables me to observe the school at particular moments:

> The crucial point to grasp in terms of sociological method is the need to be attentive to episodes, whether individual or collective, in or through which the implicit becomes explicit. […] Individual families and communities regularly pause for thought at critical moments in their existence, frequently marking these with some form of liturgy (Davie, 2007b: 29).

Scepticism regarding ethnography, however, is not uncommon, especially due to the perceived lack of 'objectivity.' Such scepticism primarily emerges from (post)positivists, who believe that there are natural objective truths "out there" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 38). In this research, I reject the idea of a unique truth out there as knowledge is co-constructed. I contend that no research is neutral, and that researchers always play an integral part in the research process. Bryman (2012) talks about the *values* that influence the research, as the values of the researcher become part of the qualitative research (Smith, 1983).

Finlay and Gough (2003) argue that this 'problem' can in fact be transformed into an *opportunity*, thanks to reflexivity. A reflexive researcher must take their position (social, cultural, political, and geographical) into consideration, and be able to take a step back, and be critical about how their position can influence the planning, conduct, and writing-up of the research. As I live in a world imbued with social representations (Howarth, 2004), I must be reflexive in order to understand, and let the reader know, how I was myself a part of this research project (Bryman, 2012; Gunaratnam, 2003; Yin, 2014). As a reflexive researcher, I must construct interpretations while questioning how those interpretations arose, thus answering the "How do I know?" and "How do I know what I know?" questions (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004: 274). By recognising what influences my motivations, aims and social position, I am also acknowledging this project's limitations (Yin, 2014). Rigour is thus ensured through a reflexive approach, and with properly interrogated and contextualised analyses (Finlay, 1998; Gough, 2003).

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that reflexivity can also be used as an ethical tool. Although it has hardly been used as such, reflexivity serves to safeguard the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings. Rogers and Ludhra (2011: 57) also mention the importance of "critical reflexivity" as an ethical tool. I contend that if I had not adopted a reflexive approach throughout this project, my research would have been unethical.

Indeed, if I reject the idea of objective truth and adopt a social constructionist ontological and epistemological position, I cannot write this thesis and present the findings and analysis as objective, therefore ignoring my own subjectivity as well as the participants' (Hertz, 1997). Furthermore, if I advocate the foregrounding of silenced voices, I must reflect on how participants situated me, and how this might have influenced the data collected (Finlay, 2003; Hertz, 1997). Without reflexivity, I would run the risk of reinforcing power relations, ignoring the role of social actors in the construction of knowledge and the (re)presentation of reality (Finlay and Gough, 2003; Hertz, 1997; Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). Conversely, adopting a reflexive approach reflects "the negotiated, relative and socially constructed nature of the research experience" (Finlay, 2003: 4).

My research diary and fieldnotes will consequently be treated as data,[5] alongside data collected with participants. This will not only enable me to examine the impact of my position and perspective on this research, it will also enable the reader to scrutinise my subjectivity and integrity (Cairns, 2013; Finlay, 2002; 2003). As I made decisions about who to include or exclude from this research, which themes to select for analysis and which quotes to use to illustrate my findings, I have played an important role in the knowledge that generates from this study (Gough, 2003; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Harding, 1986; 1987; 1991).

### 3.1.4. Locating the Researcher

Like the participants who took part in this research, I am classed, raced, and gendered. I am also imbued with social representations. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent participants were affected by variables such as my nationality, sexuality, ethnicity, or 'race' (a term with which I am extremely uncomfortable,[6] and which is often contested[7]), and how these have influenced their responses (Dein, 2006). However, as I

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[5] See section 3.2.3 for a description of how fieldnotes were recorded.

[6] Although commonly used in the English language, the word 'race' is not used in French – unless the encoder's intent is to be explicitly racist and/or demeaning (Desmoulins, 2018). For instance, while 'race' is explicitly mentioned in the 2010 Equality Act, the term was recently removed from the French Constitution because of its racist connotations. While 'race' has been used with an emphasis on 'race relations' in the UK (see the Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968, 1976), this has not been the case in France.

[7] 'Race' as a category is problematised by sociologists as it is imbued with meaning (as are other categories such as gender, class, sexuality, etc.). Sociologists recognise that the term is anchored in

carried embodied distinctions that were "constitutive elements in the research process" (Woodward, 2008: 4), it is important that I engage in reflexivity and acknowledge which variables were communicated to participants, and how. My body revealed many things (Woodward, 2016): my whiteness, my age group, and my national origin (because of my French accent). Even my sexuality was exposed, as I wore an engagement ring and was asked about my partner and my wedding, which took place towards the end of the school year and during data collection. I therefore entered the norms of the white middle-class heterosexual woman in the educational field.

My 'insider' status was further reinforced by the fact that I was allowed to come and go as I pleased in the school, which I visited regularly for a period of one academic year. I was allowed on the school premises, knew the staff by name and used the staff room for lunch and morning breaks. However, my role as a non-participant researcher and my national origin also constantly reminded me of my 'outsider' status. Woodward (2008; 2016), however, argues that the insider/outsider dichotomy is a false one, and that the researcher can never be fully inside (because of their role as a researcher), and never be fully outside either (because of their involvement in the field). Therefore, there is no such thing as a dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, as it is based on the crude and unrealistic polarisation of insider/outsider status. Woodward thus recommends that researchers engage in reflexivity in order to reflect on their situatedness, their practices and experiences instead (Woodward, 2008).

As I collected data, I could not help but speak with a French accent, a constant reminder to my interlocutors of my foreignness. One of the main advantages was that participants felt the need to give me as many details as possible in order to help me situate them and understand their narratives. This resulted in enhanced "deliberate naiveté," and the collection of detailed precise accounts (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009: 28). However, difficulties occasionally arose when I asked for descriptions and specific examples. One participant, for example, assumed the reason I was asking for clarification was because of a language barrier, and resorted to using synonyms rather than giving me concrete examples, which resulted in a loss of data:

> CÉLINE                    Right, but this is not a church school, so how do you feel
> about the connection with the local church?

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colonialism and suggests symbolic boundaries between groups, and hierarchical/asymmetrical power relations (Said, 1978). The term, however, remains sociologically relevant as it is problematised.

| MR BARTLETT: | Doesn't bother me. |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | Would you be keen on having a similar connection with maybe a mosque, or a synagogue, or a temple or… |
| MR BARTLETT: | … |
| CÉLINE: | Or maybe you're not fussed? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Well, I dunno… I'd be a bit apprehensive, because… I don't know. |
| CÉLINE: | What do you mean? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Apprehensive like… unsure. |
| CÉLINE: | Can you explain why you'd feel that way? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Like when you don't know about something and so you can feel out of your comfort zone, so you're not sure. |

In this extract, instead of talking to me about why he feels comfortable with the local CofE church, but not with other religious institutions, Mr Bartlett (KS1 Teacher),[8] tries to explain his feelings, assuming I was not able to decode his message because of a language barrier. While on occasions I was able to address this by using probes, as demonstrated in the example above, on other occasions I was either not aware or not able to address the possible loss of data. For example, in the extract below, Reverend Abi explicitly states that she is carefully selecting her words when she speaks to me, to ensure I am able to decode her message correctly:

> And then Mrs Dodd said, to the two of them who didn't want to go, "well there's pancakes there and I want you to bring one back to me," so they toddled off… walked off… - 'cos you'll probably be thinking "what is she on about… 'toddled off'…" (Reverend Abi).

While Reverend Abi explicitly states that she is watching the vocabulary she uses with me, other participants may have also altered their narratives or vocabulary to ensure I could understand them.

My 'Frenchness' had other consequences on this project. As mentioned in Chapter 1, France does not allow religion in the public arena, and therefore in public schools. *Laïcité* had led me to construct religions as private and as cultural traditions, and to construct the State as secular and religiously 'neutral.' However, as I now reflect on my position, I realise this is the result of a social construct and that secularism and neutrality

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[8] Names used throughout this project are pseudonyms.

are not synonymous – secularism is not neutral; it is a political philosophy, and the secular State is a structure (Adhar, 2013). My experience as a French Teaching Assistant in Dublin (2006-2008) and Wolverhampton (2008-2010) made me aware of my situatedness and bias. I remember teaching a French Christmas carol to 14-year-old Irish pupils and being asked if I was a Christian. I felt uncomfortable and avoided answering the question, which I thought too personal, with a joke. This incident made me reflect on my perception of the world; my reaction would have certainly been different if I had not been raised in France. This is what triggered my interest in the field of study and ultimately led to this research.

To this day, I still feel uncomfortable when people ask me about my religion. Yet, for the purpose of reflexivity, I will discuss my background. My family identifies itself as not religious, although when I was young, we used to take part in a certain number of Catholic rituals such as Ash Wednesday, or Palm Sunday. My parents also used to put a crucifix above every bedroom door. As a child, and until the age of twelve, I used to attend weekly RC catechism classes outside of school hours. Classes would last one hour approximately and attendance to mass was encouraged. My mother therefore took me to Mass, occasionally. Growing up, I would not have considered myself religiously literate, as I spent most of my time chatting with friends and paid little attention to what was being taught. I was not asked if I wanted to attend these classes, and at the time it seemed common practice for children to attend catechism lessons – I remember meeting most of my school friends there. There was also an incentive for children, which kept me going: after the Holy Communion at twelve years old, it is customary to have a celebration to which all of your family comes with presents. After that, neither my friends or I chose to continue catechism, nor did I prepare for the sacraments of Confirmation.

As time passed by, the crucifixes in our house disappeared and my two youngest sisters did not have to attend Sunday school. We now solely take part in 'mainstream' cultural celebrations such as Epiphany, Easter and Christmas. We do not celebrate any of these traditions by going to church or doing anything particularly Catholic. On the contrary, we tend to embrace secular traditions for each celebration: for Epiphany we eat a *galette des rois* (a traditional frangipane cake), for Easter we exchange chocolate eggs, and for Christmas we decorate a Christmas tree and exchange presents. Our family rituals and traditions have been devoid of religion for at least the last fifteen years. When I asked

my mother why I received a fairly Catholic upbringing since we are not religious, she replied:

> Part of it was tradition… Your dad and I used to have crucifixes over our doors when we were kids and I had been sent to a private [Roman Catholic] school so… And then that was just the done thing; like baptism… everyone used to baptise their babies, well everyone used to send their children to Sunday school to do their Holy Communion (Translated from French; research diary, 6 Nov. 2013).

It may be relevant to note at this stage that my mother attended private Catholic schools run by nuns throughout her education.

I do not know whether or not I believe in God. I used to identify as an agnostic, although sometimes I also identified as a Catholic. Reflecting on this, I believe that although I am not sure about God and I reject Catholic stories as true, I still identified as a Catholic because I was attached to some of the rituals I used to perform with my family, because Catholicism was part of my childhood, and because I felt familiar with it. Choosing Catholicism as a marker of identification to complement my cultural and emotional experiences of belonging is not out of the ordinary (Day, 2011). Day argues that many Christians in Britain do not believe in God or reject Christian teachings, and yet identify as Christian in order to assert their national heritage and identity, and to exclude the ethnic Other. Today, my discomfort has shifted; while I used to feel it was a violation of my privacy to ask about my religious position, I am now reluctant to situate myself for the reasons Day (2011) exposes. Furthermore, I do not believe there is a category that would fairly represent my 'worldviews,' beliefs and doubts.

While I collected data for this research project, I chose not to talk about my background to participants, as I did not wish to influence their narratives. However, participants did situate me, either as a Roman Catholic or as an atheist. Indeed, I found that atheist, agnostic and Humanist participants situated me as 'secular,' atheist, or against religion in education because of my French background:

> Today as I went to observe an RE lesson in Year 2, Miss Hart talked to me while pupils were doing their activity (putting a Buddhist story back in the right order). She told me that she picked Buddhism because it is not so much about God "and all that…," which she finds inappropriate in school. She explicitly told me that she believes religion should not be taught in school, and that she "agree[d] with France" (Fieldnotes, 9 March 2015).

*Extract taken from a conversation with Mr Holden, who expressed his concerns about daily acts of collective worship and is looking for possible alternatives;*

"[O]r have a secular assembly. Talk about community, talk about values, talk about moralities… It's possible to have all these discussions without having religion involved. There's no wholesale ownership of morals and values by religions. You know it's possible – obviously France has got a tradition of philosophy – it's possible to have these ideas without religion" (Mr Holden).

On a few occasions, however, it meant that participants were eager to 'de-demonize' RE, or wanted to reassure me about the role and place of religion in education:

| Ms Jones: | I think in France you're not allowed to speak about religion to school children? |
|---|---|
| Céline: | That's correct. |
| Ms Jones: | Well in England you are allowed to talk about those kinds of things… And I think it's important. It's not about indoctrination or anything, as we talk about all faiths… I consider it to be very important in a world where religion is often in the newspapers or on the television, that people actually understand what's going on, because generally speaking, I would say a lot of people don't understand it and therefore that's where prejudice arises and ignorance. |

On the other hand, other participants tended to situate me as Catholic, based on their assumption that France remains predominantly Catholic in terms of culture and historical legacy. As a result of this situatedness, most participants felt comfortable enough to speak about religion in education.

## 3.2. The Case Study: Alexander Parkes Primary School

While it is crucial to pay attention to my role as the researcher and as co-constructor of knowledge, I did not have sole authority over the production of discourses, narratives, and construction of the knowledge that is presented in this thesis. Participants played a crucial role in this research project, and attention now needs to be given to the field I studied, who and what I observed, and where I was allowed. The next section of this chapter is therefore dedicated to contextualising the field.

### 3.2.1. Contextualising the Data

Gaining access to a primary school was a difficult task. One of the main challenges was to get past the receptionist and through to the Headteacher, which is not a rare complication (Cohen *et al*., 2017; Smith and Smith, 2013). Besides, if a lack of positive responses is not uncommon in educational research (Bailey, 1994), this is even truer when the object of study is religion, especially since acts of collective worship and RE tend to be neglected (Davie, 2015; Shillitoe, forthcoming). Difficulties were further heightened as I contacted primary schools in Birmingham to talk about religion, shortly after the Trojan Horse Affair.

I started by spontaneously contacting primary schools that were located in wards where the population was predominantly white British. Although Birmingham is a super-diverse city, its super-diversity tends to be geographically concentrated, with many areas of the city having largely white British populations. Rather than a heterogeneous city where communities live together, neighbourhoods and wards do not tend to reflect the super-diversity of the city (BCC, 2011). Residential segregation is not uncommon in the UK (2014). Ethnic and religious minorities tend to be concentrated in various inner-city areas, which have been left by white British families, a process which is not uncommon and often referred to as 'white flight' (Abbas, 2006). While there is an abundance of research on 'multicultural' schools, 'minority' schools and religious minorities in RE (Nesbitt, 1997; 2004; Miller, 2001; Panjwani, 2005; 2014a; Valins *et al.,* 2001; Tinker, 2009), there is less literature pertaining to religion in less diverse school contexts and on schools whose pupils are predominantly from white British backgrounds as researchers tend to seek out multi-ethnic or multi-faith populations in order "to draw on a range of children from different cultural backgrounds" (Smith, 2005b: 3). This project aims to address this gap.

Similarly, much of the focus on religion in Birmingham, where the school is located, has been on religiously diverse contexts (Allen, 2014; Arthur, 2015; Miah, 2014; Ofsted, 2014; Panjwani, 2014a). As a result, little attention tends to be paid to Birmingham's less diverse wards, despite being largely representative of the city (Birmingham City Council, 2011). For this study, I therefore chose to consider questions pertaining to the construction of religion in a mainly white British school, where the

majority would self-identify as not religious or Christian. By choosing a school located in an area where the majority of residents were neither actively involved in organised religion nor opposed to it, my aim was to build on the work of Davie, who spent much of her career focusing on the "missing group" or 'middle ground' group – that it to say "those who 'believe without belonging' and those whose way of being religious is captured by the term 'vicarious'" (2012: 287). While there is a lot of research on religious minorities and minority religions in schools, or on faith-based schools, less attention is given to the "middle ground in the religious life" of England, which represents a large number of people (Davie, 2010: 261). The purpose of this thesis is to address this gap.

After thirteen unsuccessful attempts at gaining access to a school for a long-term project, I asked friends and colleagues for help. One of my colleagues, who was on friendly terms with the Deputy Headteacher at her daughter's primary school was able to put us in touch. As the school corresponded to the aforementioned criteria, I decided to approach the school. I had a phone interview with the Deputy Headteacher, who I subsequently met shortly afterwards. I talked to her about my research project, and she asked questions about the practicalities involved. After the meeting, I gave her a consent form (see Appendix C), which she kept. She contacted me shortly afterwards, telling me she had discussed my project with the Headteacher and teaching staff, and that I would be welcomed to conduct my research at the school.

For confidentiality purposes, I have attributed a pseudonym to the school – Alexander Parkes Primary School. The chosen pseudonym offers protection and anonymity, as no school in the country shares this name. Alexander Parkes was chosen as it is the name of an inventor from Birmingham, a nod to the school's location – a post-industrial working-class neighbourhood in Birmingham. Although I will not reveal the exact location of the school, I disclose below relevant information on the ward and the school, without jeopardising its anonymity, by way of contextualising the data. It must be noted that all social actors, places of worship, schools, and other named localities have been allocated a pseudonym throughout this research project, including in quotes from participants.

Alexander Parkes Primary School was a mixed community school, maintained by Birmingham Local Authority (see Appendix H). Its admissions policy was determined by the LA, and the school catered for the local community as priority was given to looked-after children, siblings of existing pupils, and children living in the catchment area. The

school was larger than most primary schools, being a two-form entry and having Reception classes. At the time of study, it catered for over 300 pupils overall. Most pupils were white British, although the school did have a small number of Irish, Other White, Black British, Black Caribbean, White and Black Caribbean, White and Asian, and Asian British pupils (as per the categorisations used for ethnic groups in censuses and in school data). The two largest ethnic minorities were 'Asian or Asian British,' and 'Black or Black British.' Immigrants did not tend to come to settle in this part of Birmingham, and over 95% of the ward population were born in England. Most pupils spoke English as their first language, and only a very small number of pupils were at the early stage of learning English as a second language (3.1% compared to 19.4% nationally).

According to the Headteacher's data, most families identified as 'Christian' or 'not religious,' but there was also a small number of Muslims, Hindus and Jehovah's Witnesses. The school population reflected the ward's, which was not very diverse; it was largely white British (81% compared to 57.9% in Birmingham) and Christian (65.2% compared to 46.1% in Birmingham). The largest minority was not religious (22.9% compared to 19.3% in Birmingham). Adopting Davie's interpretation of religion in Britain, this group can be characterised as belonging to the 'middle ground' group.

Economically, the ward has been categorised by the Office for National Statistics as being "constrained by circumstances" (UK Census Data, 2011). Almost 11% of the population was unemployed (compared to 6.4% nationally), though unemployment was not above the city average (10.3%) (BCC, 2011). The ward ranked in the upper quartile nationally in terms of deprivation, with 57% of the population being in the most deprived 20% of areas in England, and 37.3% living in poverty (BCC, 2015). Alexander Parkes was located in an economically deprived area, and this was reflected in the make-up of the school population. At the time of the investigation, over half of Alexander Parkes Primary School population was eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs), compared to 15.6% nationally and 28.8% in Birmingham (Gov.uk, 2015b).

The school was inspected by Ofsted in the early 2010s, and received an overall grade of 2 (good), an improvement compared to its previous score. The management team and governing body concentrated their efforts on improving their SATs results (i.e. English grammar, reading, writing, mathematics), and on behaviour. The Headteacher, Mr Blackburn, who had been appointed to the school just over a year ago, embraced the school's existing traditions such as the reciting of the school prayer or during assemblies,

or the partnership with the local CofE Church, which in this research project will be referred to as St Peter's.

Alexander Parkes was a non-faith-based school, and therefore had no official connection with any religious organisation. However, the school did have a strong affiliation with the local parish church, St Peter's CofE Church, and its vicar (whose name has been changed to Reverend Abi). St Peter's Church was housed in a modern listed building, with central heating and modern lighting, creating a cosy and welcoming atmosphere. The space was open to the community, and welcomed families and groups for a wide variety of activities such as Brownies, Messy Church, Rainbows, Coffee Mornings, and Mothers' Union meetings. Its theological approach seemed closely attuned to the liberal Catholic tradition of the Church of England, and an informal Eucharist approach was adopted (see Chapter 6). Family-friendly services were held one Sunday a month; these services were interactive and held in a relaxed atmosphere, and allowed children to interact with stories and sing along hymns while playing with musical instruments.

Every year, Reverend Abi was invited to attend Harvest, Christmas and Easter special assemblies at Alexander Parkes. She also led a one-hour RE lesson with each class once a year. Pupils also went to church once a year for workshops run by Reverend Abi and members of the parish, where they learnt about Christian beliefs, festivals and traditions. Finally, pupils also attended two church services every year: one for Remembrance Day, and one for Christingle. Such a partnership with the local parish church is not unusual, and Alexander Parkes was not unique in having forged a strong connection with its local CofE church. In one of its inspection reports, Ofsted noted and praised this common initiative in primary schools, arguing it effectively contributed to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

When I first made contact with Mr Blackburn, I was not aware of the longstanding partnership between Alexander Parkes and St Peter's, and I did not assume there would be one as the parish church was already affiliated with the local CofE Voluntary Aided school, St Peter's CofE Primary School. However, during my induction, Mrs Dodd, the Deputy Headteacher, informed me of the role St Peter's played in their school and of its importance. For the purpose of this study, I have therefore interviewed Reverend Abi, and I have conducted non-participant observations of her activities both in school and in church.

### 3.2.2.  The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus

As a state-funded non-faith-based school, Alexander Parkes had to follow the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education (BCC, 2007). The syllabus, which is organised around 24 dispositions (see section 2.3.1 and Appendix B), was used by the school to inform their practice. However, it must be noted that the syllabus remained flexible: teachers were free to choose which disposition to study and at which stage; they were free to choose which religious tradition they wanted to explore in relation to different dispositions; they were free to decide how long they should spend on a particular disposition or religious tradition. At Alexander Parkes, Mrs Jennings, the RE Coordinator, was the one in charge for coordinating with all teachers. With the help of the headteacher, she drafted the school's RE policy (Appendix L), which stated that teachers must ensure that all 24 dispositions were covered within a two-year rolling period. She also drafted an RE curriculum map (Appendix M), which indicated how to cover the 24 dispositions per year group.

All adults interviewed were aware of the 2007 Birmingham syllabus and its distinctive pedagogy. Most teachers praised it for its innovative format and for focusing on similarities between religions, as they believed it served to foster tolerance. Yet, most of them found it difficult to use or implement, especially due to their lack of subject knowledge, training and support:

| | |
|---|---|
| MR BARTLETT: | Well, when I was [teacher training], I went to Newman College[9] so that's… Catholic based and you did get a certain amount of RE. I think we had about 3 lectures on RE. |
| CÉLINE: | In the whole training? |
| MR BARTLETT: | In the whole 3 years I was there. |
| CÉLINE: | So… |
| MR BARTLETT: | There wasn't a lot of support in that one [area]. |

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[9] Newman College (now Newman University) is based in a suburb of Birmingham. It was established as a Catholic institution, but welcomes staff and students from any religious and non-religious background. The University is highly reputable in the West Midlands for its outstanding teacher training courses.

CÉLINE: Right, and now that you're in the school, do you get any kind of other support?

MR BARTLETT: I had an observation of me teaching an RE lesson.

CÉLINE: Right.

MR BARTLETT: But nothing other than that really…

MRS MÉSZÁNOS: But I find.... find it… quite honestly, I find it quite annoying because I have to teach myself… and I don't have the time because you're so busy as a teacher that if you know everything about all religions, you're still gonna be really busy but I don't know hardly anything about any religion.

CÉLINE: And you're expected to teach them all?

MRS MÉSZÁNOS: Yeah. And the Government doesn't teach you anything. They don't provide any resources or most of all any time for you to learn anything… And I find it extremely annoying, but that's not just RE, that's a lot of subjects [Laughs]. […] I don't feel I should be teaching about Islam because I've only learnt it perhaps half an hour before the lesson or maybe two days before the lesson if I was a really good girl. But even so, it's not like I know, it's not like I'm an experienced RE teacher […], it's the blind leading the blind. I don't really understand how Buddhism works or Muslims or Hindu, I don't really know anything.

The lack of knowledge about religion(s) and about the 24 dispositions was a common topic among participants. The following two excerpts from conversations with teachers demonstrate their discomfort with the Birmingham syllabus:

MRS MÉSZÁNOS: In this school, you look at an idea and you look at various religions, and how they look at that idea. Like if they look at forgiveness or compassion or... whereas over there, in Worcestershire (where I'm from), they look at religion. So, we did a whole half term on Islam, and we might have another half term on Christianity... And we look at various aspects of the religion, so I think each part, each county does it differently.

CÉLINE: And do you have a preference for one of the methodologies?

MRS MÉSZÁNOS: *Personally*, yeah I prefer looking at the religion, because I don't… The way it's done here you're looking at perhaps one lesson on Islam and then you're going away to Christianity again and it's very difficult to sort of... When you're looking at Islam for a whole half

term... I did, I taught Islam for a half term and I actually know something, a little bit - not much - but I know a little bit about Islam, I remember some of that and so do the children, they came away with knowing something about Islam. I've not done that with Buddhism and Hinduism because it didn't come up, so I still feel like I know nothing about those two because I've never done a whole half-term topic on it. So, I would prefer if they did it that way.

CÉLINE:  Which pedagogy do you prefer? Do you prefer teaching RE using the 24 dispositions or do you prefer spending a certain amount of time on one religion in particular and then move on to another like [you used to do when you taught] in Sandwell?

MISS NOLAN:  I think I prefer the blocked religions – six weeks on Sikhism, six weeks on Hinduism… because you can really get into a flow of… you know, 'What did we learn last week about Sikhs?' 'What are we going to learn this week?'… You know you can get a nice flow of lessons.

Only Reverend Abi felt comfortable with the syllabus, and showed a theological understanding of the dispositions:

CÉLINE:  Which type of syllabus do you prefer?

REV. ABI:  Well, for me, personally, I like the wooliness [of the 2007 Birmingham syllabus] but for teachers, it's quite hard. Because there's one in there I think 'teaching silence and the transcendence' [*looks at me, puzzled*]. Oh, let's see, there's the list of dispositions in the syllabus… Yes, cos last year what I did with them, I did 'being fair and just,' I did that with Year 3, and you've seen that with the prodigal son story, and then we had 'being temperate, exercising self-discipline and cultivating serene contentment' [*looks at me with fake horror*]. Now for a teacher, that would freak them! But for me that sounds like Lent.

While Reverend Abi found it easier than teachers to make sense of the different dispositions, she still adopted a Christian-centric approach, and did not necessarily agree with some of the interpretations that were suggested in the syllabus:

REV. ABI:     For me, I can use those [dispositions] because I've got the knowledge of the faith.

CÉLINE:       So, it's like a code that you need to crack almost?

REV. ABI:     Yeah exactly! I mean looking at this, just "Remembering Roots," now I could for example… tell the story of Abraham and Sarah or you know, looking at Jesus's family tree… But if you haven't got that knowledge… I mean [the syllabus] does give you some ideas, but you have to pay for them I think, off the screen. But you know, I looked at one, and I didn't agree with the story they were showing anyhow.

CÉLINE:       Really? Why?

REV. ABI:     It just didn't work for me. It was sort of pushing something in that didn't really support how I felt it was… So, I think this is a tough syllabus if you haven't got… if you're not practising basically.

While it is important to understand the context within which RE is taught at Alexander Parkes, as the Birmingham syllabus can contribute to shaping participants' understandings of religion, the comments above demonstrate that teachers' agency and teachers' own understanding of religion(s) also influenced how religion was mediated through the school (Jarvis, 2009; Shookrajh and Salanjira, 2009).

### 3.2.3.   Conducting Ethical Observations: A Fly on the Wall?

For this research, my intention was to examine how the meanings attached to the concept of religion are created, how social actors interpret their constructed reality, and how they act within it (Jäger and Maier, 2009):

> Social constructionism incorporates four elements: construction, maintenance, repair, and change. […] Because people are constantly displaying one or another of these steps, we can easily observe construction, maintenance, repair, and change through the study of actual behavior. However, because people are not generally aware that this is what they are doing, asking them to describe their behavior or intent is not always the best method of research (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006: 231).

Data was therefore collected through a dual process of interviews and observations. In this section, I reflect on the observation process.

Conducting observations enabled me to familiarise myself with the environment, the daily routines, the ethos of the school, and the language used (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009), and to observe participants in their natural setting. By getting to know the school well, I was therefore able to observe "moments when the normal routines of life [we]re suspended" (Davie, 2007b: 29), allowing me to assess evidence of vicariousness, and how it operated within the school setting. Wolcott (2005) makes an important distinction between 'being in the field' and 'fieldwork,' and argues that simply being in the field does not automatically lead to fieldwork. Fieldwork refers to a form of inquiry, "in which one immerses oneself personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research" (Wolcott, 2005: 58). As I conducted my observations, I was led by specific research questions, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

The aim of this research project is to analyse how religion is constructed in daily educational discourses. By conducting fieldwork in a primary school in Birmingham, my objectives were to understand in which discourse practices pupils and teachers participated, how knowledge about religion was (re)produced or challenged, and which forms of power were prevailing. I therefore decided to gather data by conducting observations in Alexander Parkes throughout 2014-15. I conducted my first observation on 17th October 2014, and my last observation on 16th July 2015. During this period, I visited the school at least one day a week. On some occasions, I visited the school during school hours (i.e. 8:45am-3:30pm), while on others I stayed longer and chatted with staff members. Occasionally, I visited the school with the only purpose to observe RE and/or collective worship/assemblies, or to interview participants. However, in order to not get trapped in the false binary between religious and secular – as per the lived religion methodological framework – on several occasions I also stayed in school for the whole day, even if there was no RE lesson and no act of collective worship/assembly. This also enabled me to get a sense of the school ethos and familiarise myself with the field under study. Overall, I spent over 200 hours in the school.

Once in the field, I made sure I introduced myself and my project clearly to members of staff, and gave them consent forms (see Appendix C). I made sure I was available if any questions emerged, and for the next few days I stayed in the staff room long after school, offering to answer any questions. No questions regarding ethics arose – most teachers were fascinated about the reasons why I would want to study religion in

a non-religious school, why I had chosen to come and study for a PhD in England, or if they could ask me for help with French (which they never did).

Between 17 October 2014 and 16 July 2015, I observed acts of collective worship/assemblies at least once a week (these usually lasted 20 minutes – unless held on a Friday, in which case they lasted 45 minutes). I also observed special assemblies and school celebrations on nine occasions: Harvest festival (KS2), Nativity and Christmas carols (KS1), Experience Christmas (KS2), Mothering Sunday assembly (KS1), Greek dancing (Year 5), Easter Productions (Year 1 and Year 5), World Religion [*sic*] assembly (whole school), end of year ' Leavers' assembly (Year 6). These usually lasted an hour, and were also attended by parents. I attended the two annual church services with the school (Remembrance Service and Christingle Service, each lasting one hour), and observed four lessons taking place in church with Reverend Abi (each lasting an hour). I also observed classes throughout World Religion Day (held on 9 March 2015) as well as RE classes when these were not cancelled (which was a recurring issue).

Every Friday between 2:15-3:00pm, there was a whole school assembly when good work, attendance, and good behaviour were celebrated, and when awards were distributed. The celebration assembly normally started with a hymn or a song, and finished with pupils and teachers reciting the school prayer (see Appendix G). Other assemblies took place at midday on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and lasted about fifteen minutes, until lunchtime. These assemblies took place in Key Stages (KS), and the topics covered can be found in Appendix F. The act of collective worship usually took place at the end of assemblies, though it was sometimes omitted. All assemblies were held in the great hall, which was also used for Physical Education (PE) and special events (e.g. end of year celebration, shows, etc). Assemblies were occasionally cancelled, though this was a rare occurrence.

Religious Education classes were more difficult to observe. Although RE lessons were supposed to be scheduled every week for 30 minutes,[10] many sessions were cancelled due to time constraints, or because children were rehearsing for special

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[10] Although many syllabuses recommend at least 5% of the curriculum time (i.e. one hour a week) to be dedicated to RE, the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus does not indicate how much time should be spent on RE each week (BCC, 2007). At Alexander Parkes, the Management Team and RE Coordinator recommend that weekly RE classes last approximately 30 minutes.

assemblies (rehearsal time counted as time towards RE lessons). This reduced the possibility of observing RE lessons and difficulties quickly started to emerge::

> I went to see Mrs Dodd again today. I've now been and observed acts of collective worship and the Harvest assembly, but still no RE classes... It's starting to worry me, especially as she's ignored my previous emails... She kindly said she'd look into it and get back to me, which is great, but I really wish I could have put a date in my diary instead (Fieldnotes, 11 Nov. 2014).

> I talked to Mrs Dodd after assembly this morning and told her I was worried I was not observing enough RE classes. She seemed surprised teachers had not been in touch with me, especially as I offered to help with French as an incentive. I'm surprised she's surprised given that I had emailed her about it! Anyway, she told me I would now have to wait until after the Easter break as she could see that RE classes were not on the timetables, and she suspected this was because of the rehearsals for the forthcoming Easter assembly (Fieldnotes, 3 March 2015).

Very few RE classes were delivered in the school in 2014-2015. Consequently, I have observed twelve lessons across all year groups, which is less than I had initially intended to do. However, these difficulties reflect the realities of RE teaching (CORAB, 2015; CoRE, 2018):

> I've seen where [RE] got squeezed out the timetable. I mean I just *know* it happens, and I understand how it happens... And it's sad, but I suppose it's just about trying to find a balance and that's why days like today, like World Religion Day, you can cover a lot, you can kind of cover a lot of RE. It doesn't mean that you should leave it for the next three months or whatever, but it means that children get a really a good, meaty, look at a religion. But I do know that it's squeezed out sometimes, and I think just by having days like this it just raises like, "Yeah, we are meant to do RE" and it kind of puts it back on the timetable again. It's a bit of a work in progress really... (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

Teachers confided in me that they found it difficult to keep RE on the timetable, or to not conflate it with other topics such as PSHE for example:

> Because you've probably heard this many times, but RE is one of those subjects that can be a little bit squeezed out of the curriculum, because there's so much to do! And so many other subjects that are levelled and are core subjects. [...] I've seen where it got squeezed out the timetable. I mean I just know it happens, and I understand how it happens... (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

Children themselves confirmed that they did not have many RE classes (see p.149/151).

As a result of teachers feeling uncomfortable in RE, and a lack of time, especially at KS2 where there is a lot of pressure to perform well against national criteria for literacy and numeracy, RE classes at Alexander Parkes tended to disappear from the timetable. To make up for lost time, Mrs Jennings organised a World Religion day on 9 March 2015, where each year group were asked to pick one of the main six world religions (i.e. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or Sikhism), and study it for a whole day.[11] Alexander Parkes Primary School is not unique in its approach. Primary schools are allowed to hold special RE days in order to meet the minimum hours of teaching required. This is a growing trend, which attests to the low status of RE (Dinham and Shaw, 2015). I included the World Religion day, and its subsequent World Religion assembly where children showcased their work, to my observation schedule.

In order to conduct my observations, I designed an observation form that specifically encouraged me to record direct observations of events separately from my fieldnotes (see Appendix D). In the first row, I made observations and recorded the physical environment. The second row was divided into two sections. In the first column I recorded direct observation of events, coded behaviour and interaction – whether deemed significant or inconsequential; in the second column I recorded my own impressions, thoughts, and engagement with the events. The aim was to ensure reflexivity (see section 3.1.3).

While I collected data, I was a non-participant in the field. I entered the space as a research student and I did not take part in collective worship, RE classes or any other event. The observations were overt (Yin, 2014); I stood out from the teaching staff and the children, sitting at the back of the classroom. While the aim was to observe participants in their natural setting, untouched by the researcher, it cannot be assumed that participants did not change their behaviour when I was present. As I visited the school weekly or biweekly over the school year, it is unlikely that participants were always preoccupied with my presence and consistently altered their behaviour. Yet, my presence may have made some participants more wary, or more cautious:

> After an interview with Mrs Mészános, I asked if I could attend an RE lesson. She said she felt like she wouldn't be able to show me a good RE lesson because she never really knew what she did in RE, and if it was right or not. I told her it didn't matter, as I didn't know anything myself either, and just wanted to have an idea of how RE was taught. She accepted. However, she told me she wouldn't want me to

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[11] Year 6 pupils only spent half a day on the topic, as the day coincided with them visiting a local secondary school in the afternoon.

come the following day as she didn't feel prepared (the interview was on a Wednesday and her RE classes are on the Thursday), but she'd prepare "something good" for the following week (Fieldnotes, 14 May 2015).

Further to my observations and fieldnotes, I also kept a research diary, to keep track of my feelings, thoughts, and the difficulties that emerged. This enabled me to ensure reflexivity – an important ethical and analytical tool (Finlay, 2003; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). I also used my diary to record anything of interest that may have been said or done while I was not conducting observations. I carried my diary with me throughout the day, and wrote down anything I judged important or significant as soon as an opportunity arose. While conducting observations, familiarising myself with the field, and having informal conversations led to the collection of valid data (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009), I also conducted formal interviews with social actors involved in the school, as well as Reverend Abi.

### 3.2.4. Conducting Ethical Interviews: Where is the Harm in Asking?

Interviews were used as a mode of inquiry, and to foreground voices of stakeholders. My aim was to uncover adults' and children's meaning-making during RE and collective worship, and how they construct and experience religion. It is through conversations that we get to understand how people experience and view their world and their lives. Interviews therefore gave a chance to participants to talk about their lived realities, and were an appropriate methodological tool for a postmodern epistemology, which emphasises the social construction of knowledge (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). In this research project, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten adult participants and twenty-nine child participants (see Appendix E). While I had an interview schedule to ensure no topic would be overlooked (see Appendices I and J), room for an informal conversation was prioritised in order to let the respondents express themselves freely, and give in-depth responses in their own time (Bell, 2009). Questions such as 'why', 'how did you feel about that', 'can you give me an example' were used as probes to elicit more data if participants' answers were under-developed (see Appendices

I and J). However, in order to respect and protect participants, I never insisted that they answer my questions. If they chose to remain vague in their answers, I did not probe any further.

Interviews should not be viewed as mere conversations between equal partners. As the researcher, I defined the topics to be discussed, led the conversation with my interview guide, and had more control over the situation than the participants. I therefore found myself in an asymmetrical power dynamic (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). In order to minimise my influence on the research, I did my utmost to avoid leading questions and relied on open-ended questions. I asked participants to give me concrete examples, when they could, to minimise my own interpretation during analysis. I also adopted an exploratory approach, which means that I started most interviews by introducing an area for discussion – religion at Alexander Parkes – and followed on answers participants gave. However, there can be consequences to this power asymmetry. For example, interviewees may choose to withhold information, talk around the subject, or give the answers they assume I want to hear (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009; Silverman, 2010). Interviews took place on the school premises during school hours, which might have influenced participants. Indeed, adult respondents may have answered my questions with their professional hats on, and their narratives might have been different if we had met on a Sunday afternoon for coffee (Silverman, 2010). The same is true with children; being in school, wearing their uniforms, they may have felt as if they were expected to give the 'correct' answer to my questions, as it is usually expected from them in the school context.

Interviews are more than recorded personal accounts. Kvale and Brickmann suggest that we look at interviews as 'inter-views', where "knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (2012: 287). Interviews should thus be regarded as a social practice, and a knowledge-producing activity. The knowledge produced throughout the semi-structured interviews pertained to participants' experiences, perceptions and opinions, that is to say to the *doxa* (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). The doxatic knowledge produced brought forth the descriptions and narratives of the participants. It must be borne in mind that the knowledge produced was co-authored by both the researcher and the participants, and also includes broader social influences. Knowledge emerging from this research must therefore be treated as contextual and situational.

As far as adult participants are concerned, seven teachers agreed to take part in formal interviews. [12] The Headteacher and the Deputy Headteacher were both interviewed, as well as the RE coordinator and Reverend Abi (see Appendix E). Interviews with teachers took place towards the end of the school year, with the vast majority occurring in June and July 2015. Most interviews with adult participants lasted around 60 minutes – the shortest one lasting 44 minutes, and the longest one lasting 93 minutes. As far as child participants are concerned, twenty-nine pupils agreed to take part in group interviews. The diversity of the participants in terms of age group, gender, ethnicity or religion is listed in Appendix E. Every interview took place after the SAT exams, between July 14th and July 16th 2015. On average, interviews with pupils lasted 75 minutes, the shortest one lasting 51 minutes and the longest one lasting 88 minutes. As children represent a 'vulnerable' category, more attention is paid to ethical concerns in the section below.

### 3.2.5. Foregrounding Children's Voices: Ethical Concerns

As I chose to include social actors in my research, ethical issues arose. By meeting people who trusted me with the data and shared their worries, hopes and other feelings with me, I entered a moral and personal relationship with them. It was therefore my responsibility to protect them from social and psychological harm (BSA, 2017). One way of doing so was to ensure that the data remained confidential. Consent forms (see Appendix C) were distributed to ensure that every adult and child participant were consenting freely to take part in the research, were aware of their rights, and understood what measures were taken to ensure their personal information would be kept confidential (Bryman, 2012; BSA, 2017).

Further issues arose as I decided to include children, as they represent in hegemonic discourses a 'vulnerable' group, since they are more likely to be unequal in power relationships than adults (Einarsdóttir, 2007). One of the main issues regarded informed consent. For this study, I undertook a DBS check, in order to show gatekeepers that I do not hold any criminal offences. I then sought the consent of gatekeepers, namely

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[12] While all teachers signed the consent form (see appendix C), I always gave participants the opportunity to refuse further interview or observation. Some teachers, while happy for me to observe them, chose not to be interviewed (for reasons that were not disclosed).

the Headteacher, the Deputy Headteacher, as well as teachers, before entering the school premises to conduct observations and interviews. After several months at the school, which allowed staff and pupils to get to know me, I sought the consent of children (after obtaining approval from the aforementioned gatekeepers in *loco parentis*), asking them if they wished to take part in interviews. Before asking for participants, I was invited in every classroom to present my work and why I was seeking participants. Teachers always summarised my project, and asked for volunteers afterwards. Teachers then selected between 3-6 pupils to attend the interview. While I had informed gatekeepers that I wanted to have a diverse sample,[13] I had little control over the selection process. In several cases, a handful of willing participants did not get the opportunity to participate in the research, and I was not able to interview them as the teacher did not select them and I was not allowed more time for interviews. This shows how children's voices can be silenced by adults, which is not a rare occurrence (Matthews, 2007).

Before each interview, and after each class presentation, verbal consent was sought. I talked to the children about my project, and asked if they had any questions. They never had any questions about ethics, but were very curious to find out that some topics were not covered in France (i.e. RE and collective worship) and wanted to know what else was different between the French and English school systems. After discussing the fact that primary schools are usually closed on Wednesdays, classes usually finish at 5pm or that most French pupils do not wear a uniform, I distributed consent forms (see Appendix C), and left them the time to answer the questions. All participants but one gave consent. The pupil who chose not to talk about his feelings about RE or religion left the interview and chose to be accompanied back to the classroom by a peer.

For this project, I did not seek parental permission to interview children. Parents were, however, made aware of my presence in the school and of my research project via a newsletter published by the school on their website in January 2015. No comment or objection was raised to the management team. Prior to entering the field, I had submitted an ethics form to the Ethics Panel of the School of Languages and Social Sciences at Aston University, detailing the reasons why not seeking parental permission in this safe context of the school would serve to empower children. This was approved before I

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[13] I did not ask teachers to take school enrolment data into consideration when selecting pupils, as the data about religious affiliation is often incomplete and is provided by proxy; it can therefore provide an inaccurate representation of individual pupils as the data (when it exists) relies on adults' perceptions of children's religiosity (Shillitoe, forthcoming; Voas and McAndrew, 2012). Similarly to census data, the statistics were however useful to provide an overall description of the school.

entered the field. Not seeking parental permission, although more common in medical studies, remains unusual practice in social sciences. However, "privileging adults' views over children's about issues related to children's lives" is firmly anchored in the 'old' sociology of childhood, which constructs the child as passive and incompetent (Matthews, 2007: 328):

> In the 'old' sociology of childhood, others have been allowed to speak for children, effectively silencing them. […] In research on children in families, for example, parents, typically mothers, routinely speak for their children about issues deemed important by adults. In research on school children, teachers assess children's personalities, abilities, and promise. Interaction among children is dismissed as merely play or as preparation for adulthood. The assumption that children cannot speak for themselves was rarely questioned because the voices of those not yet fully socialized were deemed not worth taking seriously (2007: 327-328).

Allowing parents to override the child's desire to participate in the research would have had ethical implications, as I would have had to determine which voices to hear or silence, and would have run the risk to marginalise children and reinforce discourses of incompetency (Dockett and Perry, 2011). Children's voices can already be silenced by parents/guardians when it comes to religion in school, as they can withdraw their children from collective worship and/or RE. As I conducted observations, it came to my attention that some children were possibly being removed from assemblies or RE classes against their wishes. These concerns were shared among gatekeepers and practitioners:

> [T]his was in my old school where I was still a Headteacher, it was only Midtown…[14] Before Trojan Horse I was very keen to make sure RE didn't slip off the curriculum and we organised lots of visits to mosques and places of worship, which is that 'learning about' element, and also external visits, and I'd spend a huge amount of time convincing parents that going to a mosque in Moseley was not gonna be a problem, because not all terrorists are Muslim and not all Muslims are terrorists, and it took me about three parents evenings, sessions and meetings to get just over fifty percent of the class to go and visit it. And when it was time to go to the church, the Muslim children and the Muslim parents just steadfastly refused. So how then can you, without looking hypocritical… So, I was doing the same amount of persuasion to try and get them, but they absolutely wouldn't! So, it's really difficult to get that balance there (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).


> Some children, we already know that during assemblies… Let's say we're singing a song and it's about worshipping the Lord for example, certain children in the hall will not sing the song. And you know that's because that's not their beliefs so they're not going to join in, they're not going to partake. And the children know as well that when we say a prayer at the end of the assembly – we have a school prayer – certain children will just sit respectfully but they won't be praying. And we kind of say 'Let's

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[14] Midtown is a pseudonym for an affluent town in the West Midlands, with the majority of its residents being white and identifying as Christian.

> pray to whoever you believe in.' Now, some of the parents have come in and said that's how they want it for their children, and then we've got some Jehovah's Witness children who sit out of assembly. […] It's usually the parents that have got a particular choice, or a particular concern, or query… So far we've been able to find a way around that, so that both parties are happy… (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

Not seeking parental consent (while ensuring safeguarding measures remained in place throughout the fieldwork) therefore tends to be more and more welcomed as it allows social scientists to overcome "'old' conceptualizations of children" and recognise children's competence as active social actors (Matthews, 2007: 322).

In this project, I did not want to further contribute to the silencing of children's voices, nor reinforce power asymmetries. On the contrary, I see children as social actors with a voice in their own right, separate from their parents' or caretakers' (Einarsdóttir, 2007; James and Prout, 2015; Christensen and James, 2000; Kostenius, 2007; Qvortrup, 1994, 2004; UNO, 1989). Letting children decide for themselves while in a safe space was a way to try and re-establish the power balance and recognise their role as active participants in society (Eder and Fingerson, 2002; 2003; Jarvis, 2009; Kostenius, 2007):

> Through work undertaken by student teachers, it has been found that children are able to clearly articulate their own gaps in understanding […] and will often offer alternatives that best fit with the individual child's skills and abilities. […] Presenting an image of children as sophisticated thinkers and communicators means that students are encouraged to think through processes of informed assent prior to creating a dialogue with the child, in an attempt to see observation from the child's perspective. The authors believe this has implications regarding adherence to an image of children as authentic contributors and decision makers in the process of meaningful classroom pedagogy, and the rights of children to agency in processes that form part of their direct experiences (Harcourt and Conroy, 2005: 568).

Assent, in this context, must not be interpreted as the absence of objection, but must be understood as "an explicit, affirmative agreement to participate" (Vitiello, 2003: 89). It also means not only acknowledging the children's verbal communication but also their non-verbal actions, and constantly ensuring pupils gave non-verbal consent cues (Dockett and Perry, 2011). For example, in one of the largest groups, one of the pupils was discreet and did not interact as much as the other children. I offered her a chance to speak, in case she needed support or felt shy. However, when Zahra answered my questions monosyllabically, I interpreted it as her being possibly uncomfortable with the situation.

Consequently, I did not probe her and did not ask her any more direct question during the course of the interview.

While my aim was to empower children and recognise their full competencies, I did not disregard the need to protect them from potential harm. Therefore, measures to protect the children's wellbeing and safety were taken. For instance, I followed Arksey and Knight's (1999) recommendations and made my utmost to make children feel at ease, make the interview as enjoyable as possible, ensure they were given time to think, and ensure that the language used was appropriate (BERA, 2011; BSA, 2017). I always reminded participants that there were no right answers, and that they could withdraw from the conversation at any time. I treated the interviews as a conversation, and took my cue from children's responses (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Gollop, 2000). I conducted group interviews, with members of each group being drawn from the same class, a common practice when interviewing children (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Greig and Taylor, 1999; Ipgrave, 2012a; Prout and James, 2015).

In total, twenty-nine KS2 pupils were interviewed, comprising twelve boys and seventeen girls (see Appendix E). I held eight focus groups (five groups of 3 pupils, two group of 4 pupils, and one group of 6). In this project, I will present data from seven groups (i.e. twenty-six KS2 pupils), as the last recording failed (group 8). Group interviews allowed for interaction between participants, letting them answer questions in a familiar manner. Children tended to give lengthier answers during focus groups, as their peers' answers triggered reactions and comments. A majority of the children identified as 'Christian' or 'not religious,' and a small number identified with other religious backgrounds. While the school catered for a small number of families who identified as Jehovah's Witnesses, no child participant identified as such. No children who had opted out of RE and/or collective worship volunteered to participate in the research. This is further reflected upon in the next chapters (see Chapters 4 to 6).

Appendix E shows how children negotiated religion and non-religion, and how these boundaries were imagined and constructed in permeable ways. For example, Harvey explained that he had no religion, but that he believed in God and Jesus; Jack stated that he was not Christian because he was not baptised, but that he believed in Jesus; and Rainna identified as Christian, although she did not believe in Jesus and was unsure about God. In his research, Smith observed similar findings, and explained that even in cases whereby children seemed to belong to the same 'world religions,' they all expressed

"different levels and patterns of both the social observance of their religion and the personal commitment to and understanding of faith" (2015: ix). In this research, as religious markers were often used in fluid ways, and complex patterns of identity and beliefs emerged, I decided not to include religious labels when quoting participants. While Smith acknowledges that labelling participants is "unsatisfactory in terms of sociological rigour" (2015: 15), he still included religious labels based on a complex topology. In this study, I reject this approach as it would have been at odds with the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of this research project. In order to "recognis[e] pupils as individuals, rather than just representatives of particular traditions" (Kuusisto and Kallioniemi, 2014: 163), I take the lead from sociologists of religion such as Day (2011), Shillitoe (2018), or Strhan (in Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020), who chose not to include religious labels when quoting participants. As children's patterns of religious observance or belonging could not be described by using one of the 'world religions' labels, it would have led to unethical representations of participants' (non-)religiosity, and could have been misleading for the reader.

The group interviews served to help address the power imbalance between the children and myself (Einarsdóttir, 2003; 2007; Eder and Fingerson, 2002; 2003; Kostenius, 2007; Morrow and Richards, 1996). As the interviewer, I am already placed in an asymmetrical power dynamic with the interviewee(s) (Bryman, 2012; Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Kvale and Brickmann, 2008). With children, this power relation is further reinforced by the fact that I am an adult and that children have a lower status in our society; children are told to listen and to obey adults, and adults are seen as figures of authority (Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Kostenius, 2007). Kostenius (2007) states that the researcher's status can be toned down in a group setting. As Einarsdóttir (2007) argues, children are more powerful when gathered together. The members of each group were drawn from the same class, and it can therefore be assumed that they knew each other well.

Another issue that arises when working with children is that they can feel more vulnerable in an asymmetrical power dynamic than adult participants. They might therefore feel more inclined to guess and give what they think is the 'correct' answer instead of sharing their own experiences (Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). Consequently, it was crucial to ensure that children would feel comfortable, and were not intimidated. Throughout my research, I made sure participants

did not associate me with the teaching staff; I did not help during observations, and did not lead any classes. I stood out as an outsider (Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Kvale and Brickmann, 2009), and presented myself as a university student on an assignment who needed their help, to diminish my status as figure of authority.

I told pupils that I needed to look into RE and collective worship for a university project, and that I needed their help and expertise as I found it difficult to understand these two topics since they do not exist in France. Through "deliberate naiveté" (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009: 28), I gave some power back to the pupils, as they understood I needed them more than they needed me, and more importantly as I placed them as the experts in the field (Kostenius, 2007). I did my utmost to avoid conveying to children the impression that I was expecting a 'right' answer, as the exchange below illustrates:

| BEN [*to me*] | Do you have to be christened to be a Christian? |
| CÉLINE | That's an excellent question! What do you reckon? Charlie and Daisy, do you know? |
| CHARLIE & DAISY | […] |
| CÉLINE | Mmm… That's clearly a good question! Let's try and see if we can answer it by answering another one… In your opinion what does it mean to be Christian? |

I made sure the interviews were always conducted outside of the classroom setting, which can disempower children because of its climate of obedience (Harcourt and Conroy, 2005). Interviews were conducted in a spare room by the play area, which was used for pupil council meetings, and children-led group work. Children were accustomed to the room as they used it for projects, which contributed to making them feel comfortable in the space (Eder and Fingerson, 2002; Kostenius, 2007). I always left the door open, to ensure that pupils felt safe in their environment, and to reassure gatekeepers. While this meant that staff across the corridor could see us at all times, I however also ensured that pupils could not be overheard, as it was my responsibility to ensure that a safe space was created (Rogers and Ludhra, 2011).

For this research project, I first conducted a preliminary focus group with the Pupil Council (23 April 2015), and was only allowed to formally interview children once the SATs were finished. Special attention was given to pupils between the age of 8 and 11

(Year 4 to Year 6), as I judged it important that children had a good understanding of RE and collective worship to be able to express their opinions and experiences; it was felt that KS2 pupils would be more suitable as they would have received at least three years of primary education. If I had been granted more time with the children, I would have wanted to take a lead from Hemming's (2011a; 2018) or Smith's (2005) research and explore more creative child-centred methods such as games, drawings, photo-elicitation, or drama activities. However, due to the limited time I was allocated with children, I decided to rely on interviewing methods to generate data.

### 3.2.6. Data Analysis: Adopting a Thematic Approach

All interviews conducted at Alexander Parkes Primary School were digitally recorded, with the participants' permission, and were transcribed shortly after they occurred, to ensure the utmost reliability (Kvale, 1996). These transcriptions, together with observation notes and fieldnotes, constitute the main material for analysis. Working with transcripts, however, does raise one important question: how loyal is the transcribed text to the participant's oral statement? As Kvale and Brickmann (2009) argue, the transcription of interview conversations involves two abstractions. The first abstraction takes place during the process of recording, as the digital recorder cannot record bodily and facial expressions, which are available in the face-to-face conversation. The second abstraction happens when the interview is transcribed to a written form, and results in further loss as the tone of voice, intonations and pauses disappear.

To address the possible impoverishment of data, and for ethical reasons, I transcribed all the interviews myself. I was thus able to add fieldnotes in brackets, therefore adding emotional aspects (as I decoded them) such as intonation or facial expressions to the texts. In order to remain true to the oral statements, I have transcribed each interview verbatim, and quotes used in the analysis reflect participants' answers word for word. Although this method contributes to minimising my impact on the data collected, not rewriting the oral statements into a formal written style has resulted in retaining frequent repetitions, grammatical errors and stylistic mistakes. It must however be borne in mind while reading this thesis that adult participants all spoke eloquently and coherently. Repetitions and/or grammatical mistakes should not be interpreted as meaningful, and should not be used to stigmatise participants.

The focus of the analysis rests on participants' interpretations and negotiations of their lived realities. This enabled me to break down metanarratives and explore discourses, while keeping an emphasis on the local context (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009). As I adopt a constructionist epistemology, I place the participants as the "locus of knowledge" (Gergen, 1994: x), while also acknowledging and reflecting on my role as co-constructor of knowledge throughout the data collection and analysis. Thus, while data collected during observations and interviews constitutes the main basis for my analysis, I have also included my own fieldnotes and research diary to the corpus to analyse, in order to recognise my role in influencing the field, and in interpreting the data (Cairns, 2013; Finlay, 2002; 2003).

For this research project, I have adopted a thematic analysis as it is compatible with the social constructionist paradigm:

> "[T[hematic analysis conducted within a constructionist framework cannot and does not seek to focus on motivation or individual psychologies, but instead seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 85).

A thematic document analysis of the school's RE policy, school's RE scheme of work, and school's collective worship was therefore also conducted in order to include these documents/policies in the data. The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for RE was also the object of scrutiny (BCC, 2007). The content of these documents was included in the thematic analysis in order to provide insights into participants' constructions of religion, and in order to explore to what extent (if any) policy informs practice, and structures inform individual agency.

As Braun and Clarke explain, "thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can […] provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data" (2006: 78). Being able to include rich descriptions in the project is particularly relevant when "working with participants whose views on the topic are not known" (2006: 83). Following Braun and Clarke's approach to thematic analysis, I identified themes that emerged from the data collected at Alexander Parkes. While I adopted an inductive approach, patterns of response and patterns of meaning started to emerge during data collection, and as I transcribed interviews and typed fieldnotes and observations notes. Once transcribed, all the data collected was uploaded in NVivo (a coding software) in order to provide structure to the data analysis and to identify recurring patterns of meaning. Scripts were then read on numerous occasions, in order to generate and refine

the coding and categorisation of data. Codes were then collated into potential key themes. Upon further reading, coding and refinement, key themes were then reviewed, and generated a thematic map for the analysis (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). As a result, key themes were named and defined in relation to the project's research question and theoretical underpinnings. Three main categories emerged, and are used as the structure to present the findings.

The thematic analysis (Chapters 4-6) was driven by my research question and my theoretical framework. My theoretical reading of the data influenced my interpretations of the themes and categories, as the data collected was interpreted within the conceptual and theoretical frameworks exposed in this thesis and attention was paid to participants' discursive construction of religion(s). My findings have been subject to interpretations, as well as theoretical analyses, and are exposed in the next three chapters, revealing points of consensus and conflict. The findings are therefore reported in Chapters 4-6 in the form of a "continuous interpretative text" (Kvale and Brickmann, 2009: 237), where findings are theoretically informed, and are used to engage in dialogues with the existing literature that have shaped this project (see Chapter 2).

## 3.3.   Summary

In this chapter, I reflected on my research design, methodology and methods. I demonstrated that my research design builds on a new sociology of childhood, whereby the child is constructed as a fully active social agent. My methodology was therefore influenced by the need to foreground their voices and agency. As a result, I adopted a qualitative research methodology. More precisely, I adopted an ethnographic approach to a case study. This approach is not only informed by my research design, but also builds on a long ethnographic tradition within Religious Education. Although the case was chosen because it allowed access, Alexander Parkes Primary School was a very interesting case to study due to its location, in a white working-class area of Birmingham, where the majority of residents fall into Davie's (2012) 'middle ground' group category. Non-participant observations and semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate methods to collect data, as they allowed me to focus on how religion is

constructed in a primary school setting, and provided in-depth understanding of participants' constructions of religion.

In return, my chosen methods and methodology further informed my research design. By researching religion outside the conventional settings of religious buildings, and by listening to children's and teachers' constructions of religion rather than the religious elites', this project borrows from lived religion as a methodological framework. This research project therefore provides an opportunity to enlarge our understanding of religion as it includes children's and teachers' lived experiences and their encounters with religion(s) in more mundane ways, and in the 'secular' state-funded non-faith-based context.

# Chapter 4.   Religion as Mediated through Religious Education: An Instrumental Approach

As I asked pupils and teachers to talk to me about religion at Alexander Parkes, they all spontaneously mentioned RE, acts of collective worship (or, to be more exact, assemblies), and their visits to the local CofE church. They did not mention religion in relation to any other topic of study or other school activities. In their constructions of lived reality, religion occupied a very distinctive place in the school and the rest of the curriculum and educational discourses were constructed as 'secular.' In participants' narratives, religion played different roles in RE, in collective worship, and in church. Miss Williams' (KS2 Teacher) comment below illustrates how adult participants tended to differentiate the role religion plays within their school:

CÉLINE:  What can you tell me about religion in your school?

MISS WILLIAMS:  Well in this primary school – just like any other primary school in this country – it's ... the bases have to be broadly Christian. But Religious Education is... with... we tend to cover it... We cover all aspects of Religious Education; we teach about all faiths from an information point of view. But religion also includes... you know... the worship side of it and it's broadly Christian. […] Our assemblies are broadly Christian, so we might say a prayer and sing a song, sing a hymn, or something... you know... about Christianity, although not all of our assemblies have to be about Christianity.

While all participants saw a connection between RE and collective worship (i.e. religion being the main focus, and at times commonalities between the themes explored), some teachers commented on the tension between the two. They perceived RE as educational and non-confessional, contributing to promote social cohesion. Acts of collective worship were viewed as more confessional, due to their explicit Christian character. Although children did not necessarily share these constructions (as discussed in section 5.2), they also made a distinction between RE and assemblies/collective worship. By dissociating RE from assemblies/collective worship, participants' narratives echoed the 1988 ERA and subsequent national policies, which also treat the two separately. From this point onwards, I will also treat the two separately in order to comply with participants' narratives and their constructions of lived realities. The object of this chapter is to examine how religion was constructed in RE as Alexander Parkes adopted an instrumental approach to religion. Collective worship will be the object of further scrutiny in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 will be dedicated to how religion is approached through church-led activities.

## 4.1. Framing Religion through a Secular Lens

On my first day at Alexander Parkes Primary School, Mrs Dodd (Deputy Headteacher) told me that RE lessons took place every week across all year groups. She thus assured me that it would not be a problem for me to observe classes on a regular basis. Mrs Dodd, however, could not give me any RE timetable, as teachers were free to choose when to schedule RE classes, though these could only take place in the afternoons as mornings were reserved for literacy and numeracy, when pupils' attention was at its highest. This is not unusual practice. Since recent research has shown that pupils are more attentive in class and obtain better grades in the morning, most schools tend to prioritise the core subjects that are assessed in the SATs and study them in the morning (Vollmer *et al*., 2013). However, I was soon to find out that observing RE classes was not going to be as easy as Mrs Dodd had told me. Although a weekly thirty-minute slot was supposed

to be dedicated to RE classes in every year group, most sessions were cancelled or used to rehearse for special assemblies. RE was relegated to a second-tier subject:

> But to be honest, RE, to be *really* honest, is never that really high priority so it's usually done in the afternoon and quite often the children are quite tired, so they won't normally ask anything too difficult [*Laughter*] (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

RE classes were constructed as a non-priority by teachers, and the topic was under-resourced:

> [L]ike today we had RE before French and I couldn't find a very good website but I found a BBC website telling them how Muslims are meant to care about the community and spend two point five percent – I learnt this today – two point five percent of their savings have to go to charity or helping people in some way, so we, I, we read together the website I'd found, or a little bit of it. The children were getting very tired at this point. We'd had PE beforehand; we'd been outside running around so that's understandable. So, I then gave up trying to teach them anything, I let them get the laptops out, I showed them the website and a different website, it was Islamic Relief, which is an Islamic charity, so I said read the website, find out what charities are available, where they can choose to spend this two point five percent... (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

> Too little time. Too little time because here's the funny thing – I teach science now! I'm the RE Coordinator and I do not have the time to put into RE what I'd love to. Because I'd say my passion is RE, but at the moment I'm teaching science, so… it's hard because I would love to do much more… But also, I feel in order to do more, I would like a bit of guidance as well you know… Because if I'm honest, some of it is guesswork, some of it is get-on-with-it, some of it is let's-have-a-go! (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

> I haven't got an actual copy of the policy itself, and RE has been one of these sketchy areas where we've had to try and find things ourselves to structure it. Because I don't think it's been a well-led subject. And it's one of these things where the school is improving in terms of subject leadership, but it's a long journey because traditionally subject-leadership hasn't been strong here (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

Not only were RE classes regularly cancelled, but when they did take place, they were often conflated with other topics:

> I have very little time for RE… Basically half an hour to an hour a week, at best, for RE and PSHE… (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

But quite often it'll just be reading [pupils] a story and talking about it, or it's all... what we do is we connect it with PSHE, which is Personal, Social, Health Education … (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

As discussed in section 2.3, the marginalisation of RE in English schools is not uncommon. In their research, Sikes and Everington comment on the lack of attention given to RE, a "Cinderella subject" (2004: 23). Contrary to what Mrs Dodd had told me on my first day, it was actually extremely difficult to observe RE classes while I was in the field.

Children noticed the absence of RE from their timetables. In the following exchange, pupils tried to recollect when they last had an RE class:

CÉLINE:     How often do you have RE?

AJIT:        Hmm…

OLIVER:    We haven't had it this year.

AJIT:        Yes, we have!

JACK:       Have we?

AJIT:        Yes, we had it this year!

JACK:       We've had it like once or twice this year…

AJIT:        We've had it at least six times this year.

JACK:       Six?! No! More like one or two!

OLIVER:    Yeah!

The disappearance of RE from the timetable is a recurring issue, especially at KS2 (Hemming, 2011b). Yet, the low status given to RE, and its recurring absence from the timetable are not inconsequential. Pupils do not solely learn from curricula and syllabuses. As Vygotsky ([1978] 1997; 1986) explains, children learn through interaction with other social actors. Afdal states that "RE classrooms can best be understood as social practices, rather than the sums of individual cognition. Empirically, religion is in the making in RE – in the shape of bits, pieces and processes" (2015: 256). Therefore, as teachers regularly cancelled or reduced the teaching time allocated to RE classes, children

concluded that religion was an optional, discreet aspect of life; one in which you can conveniently dip in and out, to suit you:

> No one in our school takes [religion] way too far! Because, we just basically… When we're at school we just sort of forget about our religion, you know (Lucy, KS2 Pupil).

In this excerpt, Lucy explained that religion can be left at the school gates. Religion is constructed within a liberal framework, and viewed as not occupying an important place in the public sphere. Rather, religion is constructed as a "discrete domain of human experience" (Barnes, 2011: 132). Such a position contrasts with the way fervent religious believers construct religion and its place in one's life (Asad, 1999; Barnes, 2011), and privileges liberal Western ideologies, whereby religion is accepted but relegated to the private sphere (Asad, 1999; Woodhead and Partridge, 2016). Such a construction can be particularly alienating for individuals and communities that are overtly religious. This may especially be the case for children who were withdrawn from RE classes for religious reasons, and who were having to navigate a religious tradition that was understood as illiberal, "extreme" (Mr Holden), "narrow-minded" (Miss Nolan), or intolerant (Mr Blackburn) (see section 4.3).

Lucy's construction of religion is aligned with liberal Western ideologies. In the West, religion is dominantly constructed as a tool that can be used when needed. It gives a framework within which people can navigate and take part in practices or rituals as needed. For example, Smith and Denton (2005) in their research on American youth, demonstrate how religion serves to help young individuals, who do not construct religion as an all-encompassing way of life. As Ammerman (2014) explains, the hegemonic discourse in the West is that people should not be constrained by religion. Such an interpretation is aligned with the dominant liberal framework of Western societies:

> Our moral imagination is bounded by three central themes – autonomy, equality and rights – the value that allow each of us to be whatever we choose. The central character of our moral drama […] is the free self (Sacks, 1991: 42, quoted in Cheetham, 2000: 75).

It is also aligned with Davie's theory of vicarious religion, whereby people turn to religion or religious practice at moments of significance. Religion does not inform "normal routines of life" (Davie, 2007b: 29). Religion instead is more likely to be performed on their behalf by an active minority.

Such constructions privilege a "secular *habitus*, which has emerged within a culturally Christian context since the 1960s" (Gutkowski, 2012: 88, emphasis in original), and contribute to fostering a climate of suspicion regarding religious fervour (Wright, 1993; Sikes and Everington, 2004). *Habitus* here is to be understood in the Bourdieusian sense, as "a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways" (Thompson, 1991:12). It is a productive form of symbolic power, "internalised as a second nature" (Bourdieu, 1990: 56).

Divorcing religion from the other academic subjects, and regularly cancelling RE classes, also meant that children gave it little importance, and found it more difficult to make connections between religion and their everyday school lives. Often, children came to the conclusion that RE was a topic for younger children, who have less tests and responsibilities. Children at Alexander Parkes were acutely aware of the low status attributed to RE, and of its little importance compared to other academic subjects. In the conversation below, Megan and Lucy explain that because of the preparation for the SATs, they cannot spend much time on topics like RE, which are not a priority for them:

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | And in Year 5 you don't have RE every week then? |
| MEGAN: | No, not anymore. |
| LUCY: | That's because sometimes we can't really fit it in. We can't really fit it in. We don't really have the time. |
| MEGAN: | In RE we used to play, we had a little bit more time. |
| LUCY: | Yeah, we had the fun stuff… |
| CÉLINE: | What do you think about that? Do you wish you had RE more often, like you used to, or you're happy with what you have now? |
| LUCY: | Happy with what we have. |
| MEGAN: | [*Almost at the same time*] I'm happy with what we have […]. |
| CÉLINE: | What about you Ella? |
| ELLA: | I don't know… A little bit more but… I don't know… |
| […] | |
| MEGAN: | We used to [study RE]… that was in Reception… |

To this day, there is a significant lack of research on the puerilisation of religion, and the limited literature that is available to us is unfortunately dated. However, findings here suggest that children associate religion with the early stages of primary education. These findings echo the ones Loukes published in the early 1960s about school leavers finding religious education childish and irrelevant (cited in Copley, 2008). Work from Hull

(1985) and Francis (1986; 1989a) further suggest that children become less favourable to religion from the age of eight onwards, eight being "the high-water mark of religiosity" (Hull, 1985: 8). Levitt (1995) also drew similar conclusions, and argued that divorcing religion from the everyday led to changes in children's attitudes towards religion, which indicated that religion is puerilised.

The secular framing of religion was further reinforced by the school's approach to RE, as religion played a minimal role and values were foregrounded. By viewing RE as an opportunity to promote tolerance, foster positive community relations, and equipping children with the tools to navigate a religiously diverse world, Alexander Parkes adopted an instrumental approach to religion in RE classes (Ipgrave, 2012a; Teece, 2013):

> The main objectives… I think the main ones are… to learn about different religions, different beliefs… to learn about tolerance and respect… (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

> I would say the aims of RE is for all children to know about where their friends could come from, their beliefs and family is, what makes up the wider world and our communities, and being aware of other people's religions as well (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

> I think the aims of religion in school are to teach about different religions, different cultures so that then there's more tolerance when the children grow up, and more understanding because it becomes more multicultural every day doesn't it? (Mr Bartlett, KS1 Teacher).

> I think learning to understand how other people, other children, people you work with, think and feel… or the processes behind what they're doing. So a good example today is there's a child who is fasting, and he was trying to play with the rest of the children, and it's a warm day, and his fasting includes not drinking the water, and he's now dehydrated… and they need to have understood that it's part of the fast that's a strict observance for him… that he needs to take it more easy and perhaps, 'you sit out this bit', or perhaps they can modify their game… (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

> I think it's all moving towards that - it's about having a nice peaceful community where children aren't insulting each other, they're not being unkind because of their religion or faith or sexuality or disability. It's about that acceptance really. […] In Religious Education you know we would teach aspects about all religions so really promoting... tolerance to all communities, really. We talk about all the different

faiths, all different religious festivals and tolerance and respect is really the primary agenda (Miss Williams, KS2 Teacher).

In these excerpts, teachers explicitly refer to the instrumental social aims of RE, such as fostering tolerance, respect, and community cohesion. Children shared a similar approach, as they saw RE as providing them with the necessary tools to navigate a religiously diverse world:

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | Do you think it's important to learn about different religions? |
| SAM AND SAIRA: | Yeah. |
| […] | |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, if you get older and you don't know different types of religion except your religion, you might not understand how other people feel or if you just put your feet on a box or something like that. Other people might be like, "Why are you doing that? You're hurting my feelings" and stuff like that… Then if you do stuff differently, you need to understand how other people would feel and do stuff properly, so other people don't feel like hurt inside. |

So, then you don't accidently harm people… Like you've got a friend, who's Muslim, but then you don't know that they're not allowed to eat pork and you make sausages for them, out of pork! (Lucy, KS2 Pupil).

Smith (2005) shared similar results, and demonstrated that primary school children often appreciated learning about other religions than their own, and welcomed opportunities to meet and mix with children from different religious backgrounds. However, as instrumental societal goals were foregrounded, religious content took a "secondary, responsive role" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 38).

To make up for lost time, Mrs Jennings, the RE Coordinator, organised a World Religion [*sic*] Day, where each year group was asked to select one of six main 'world religions' (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism), and study it for a whole day. Children then presented their work during a thirty-minute long special assembly, to enable a comparative approach to religion:

World Religion was a great opportunity to share about the different beliefs and cultures and to learn about specific religions and that the assembly is about sharing

that learning with everybody else (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher, addressing the pupils before the World Religion Assembly).

Such an approach remained entrenched in descriptive phenomenology, and a comparative framework. Findings suggest that even though there has been an abundance of research within academia where new paradigms have been discussed and proposed, these have not always translated into pedagogical change in schools.

Following World Religion Day and World Religion assembly, a selection of children's artwork was displayed in the school corridors:



*Picture 4—1 World Religions Board A*

*Picture 4—2 World Religions Board B*
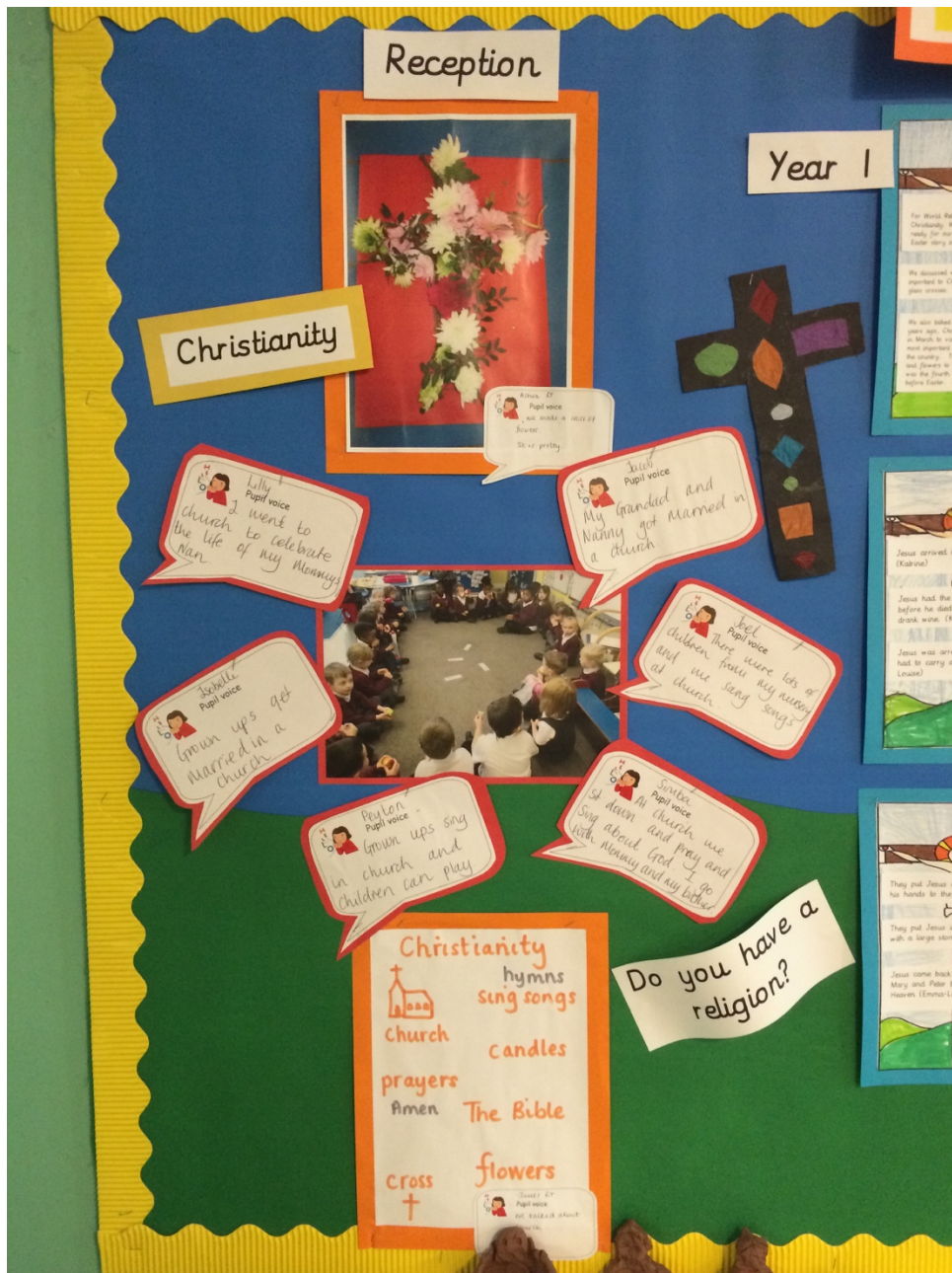
*Picture 4—3 Reception Display (Christianity)*
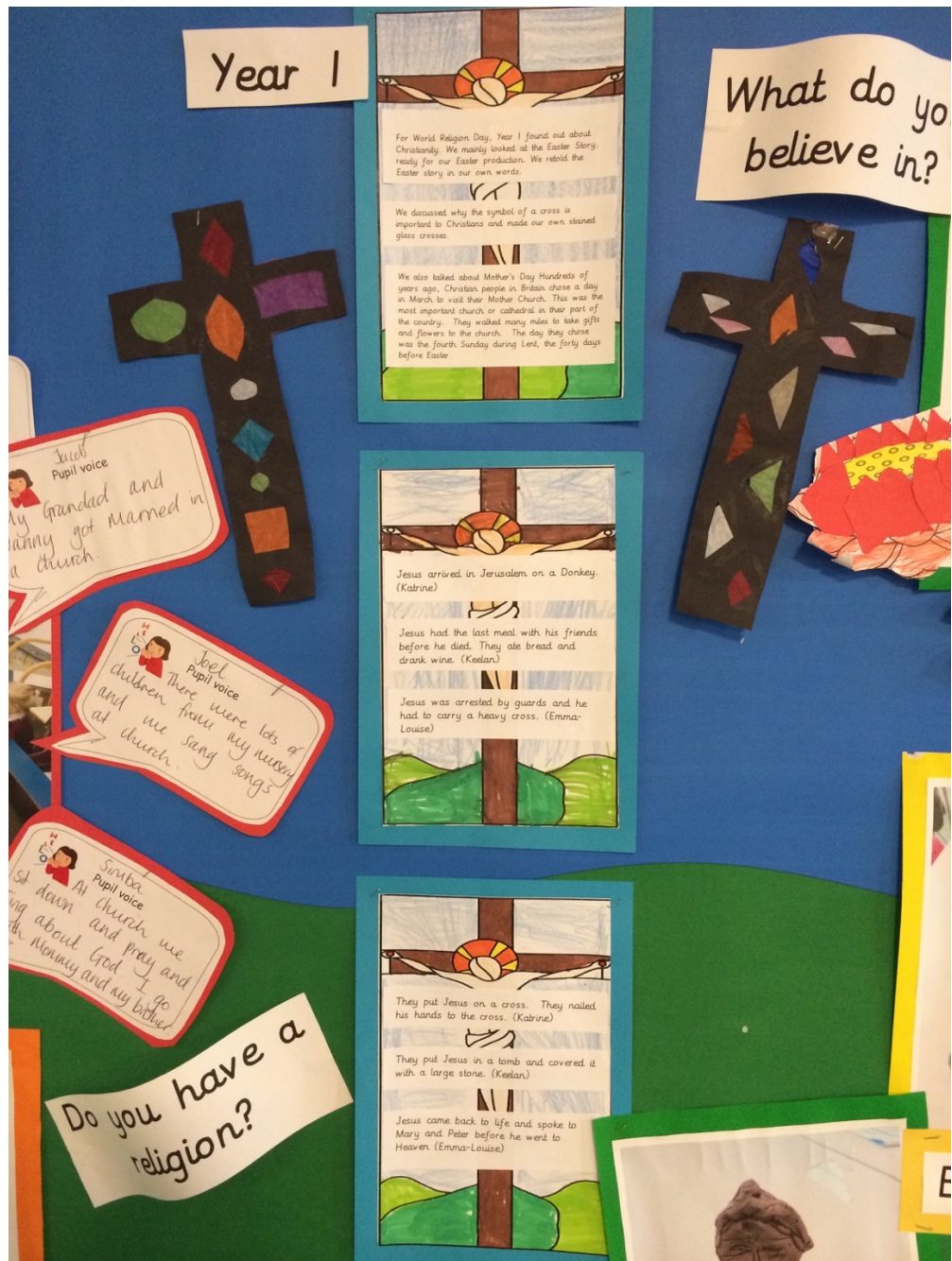
*Picture 4—4 Year 1 Display (Christianity)*

*Picture 4—5 Year 2 Display (Buddhism)*
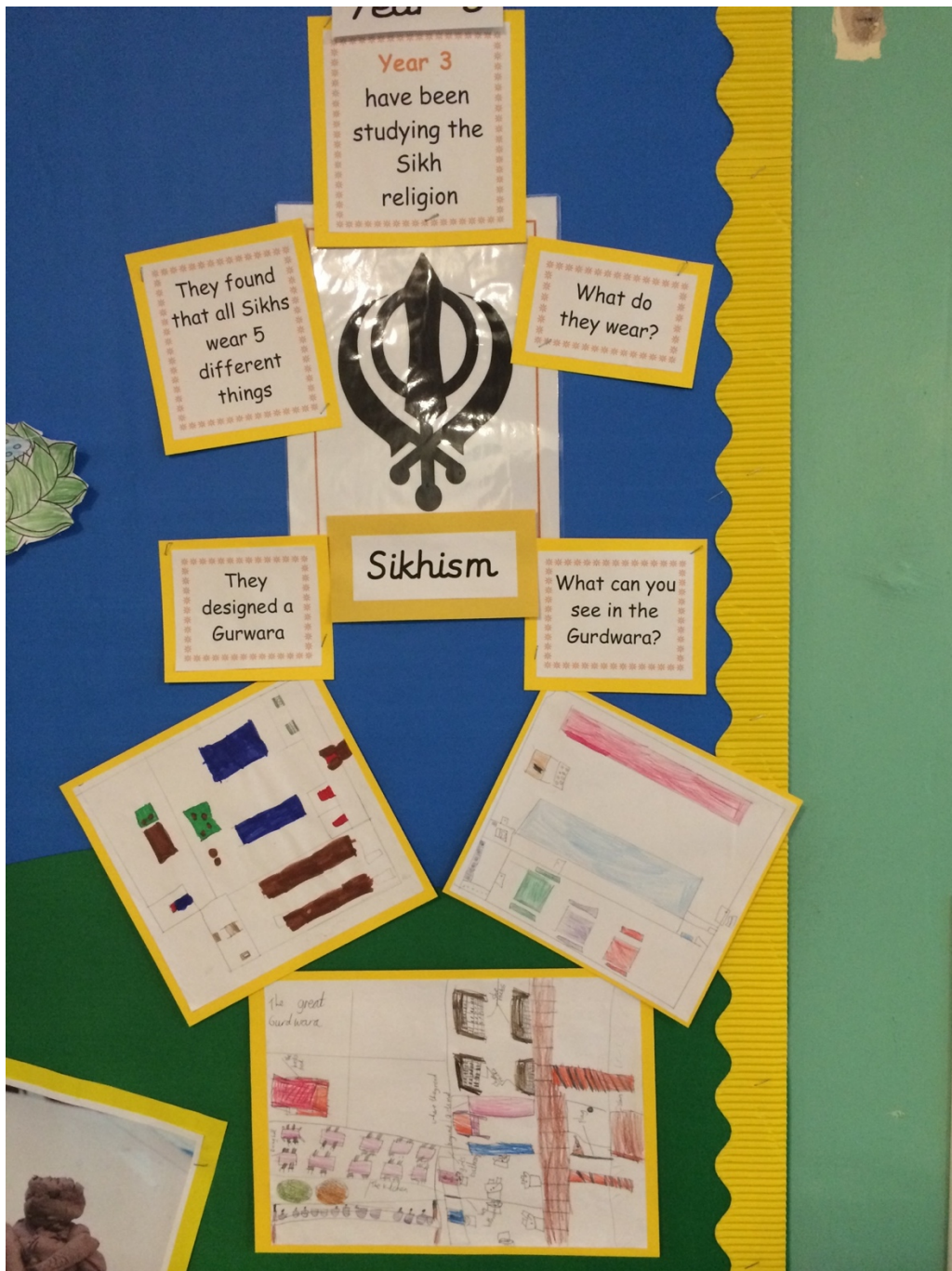
*Picture 4—6 Year 3 Display (Sikhism)*
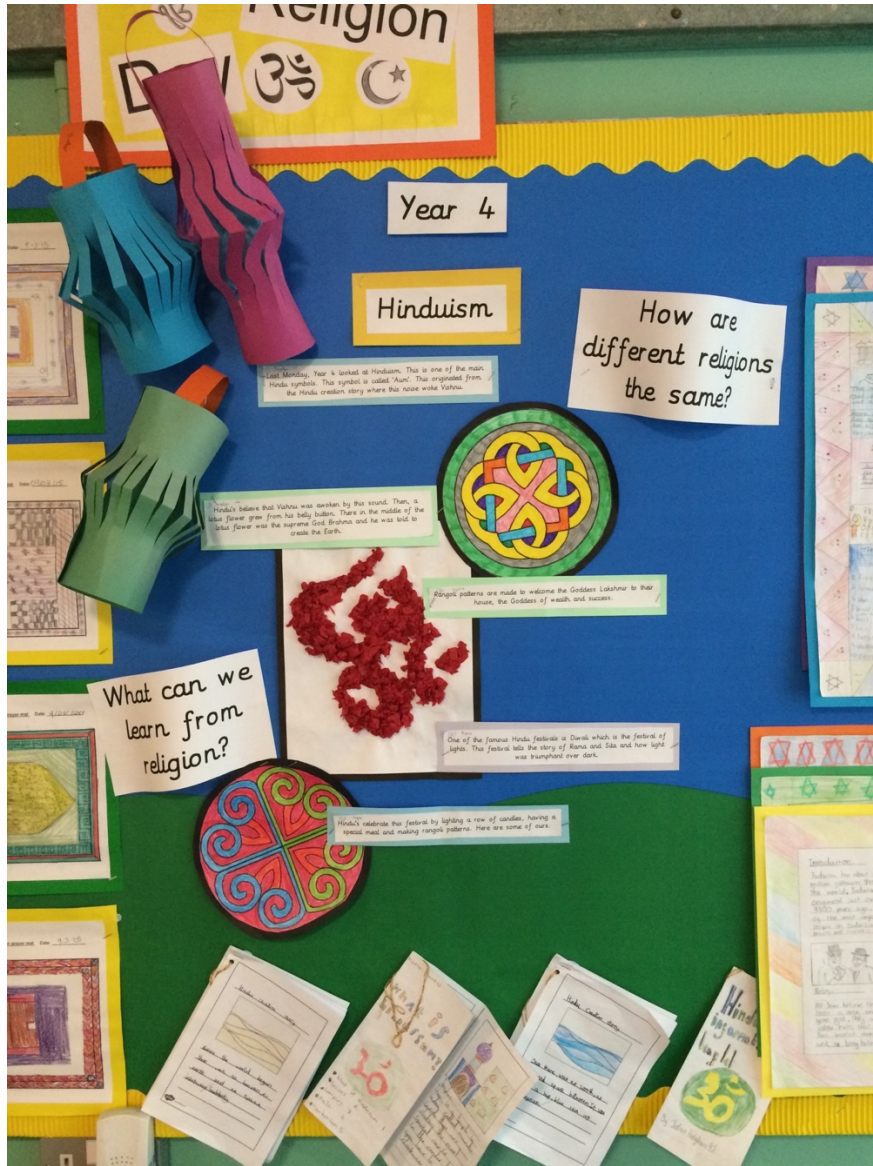
*Picture 4—7 Year 4 Display (Hinduism)*

*Picture 4—8 Year 5 Display (Islam)*
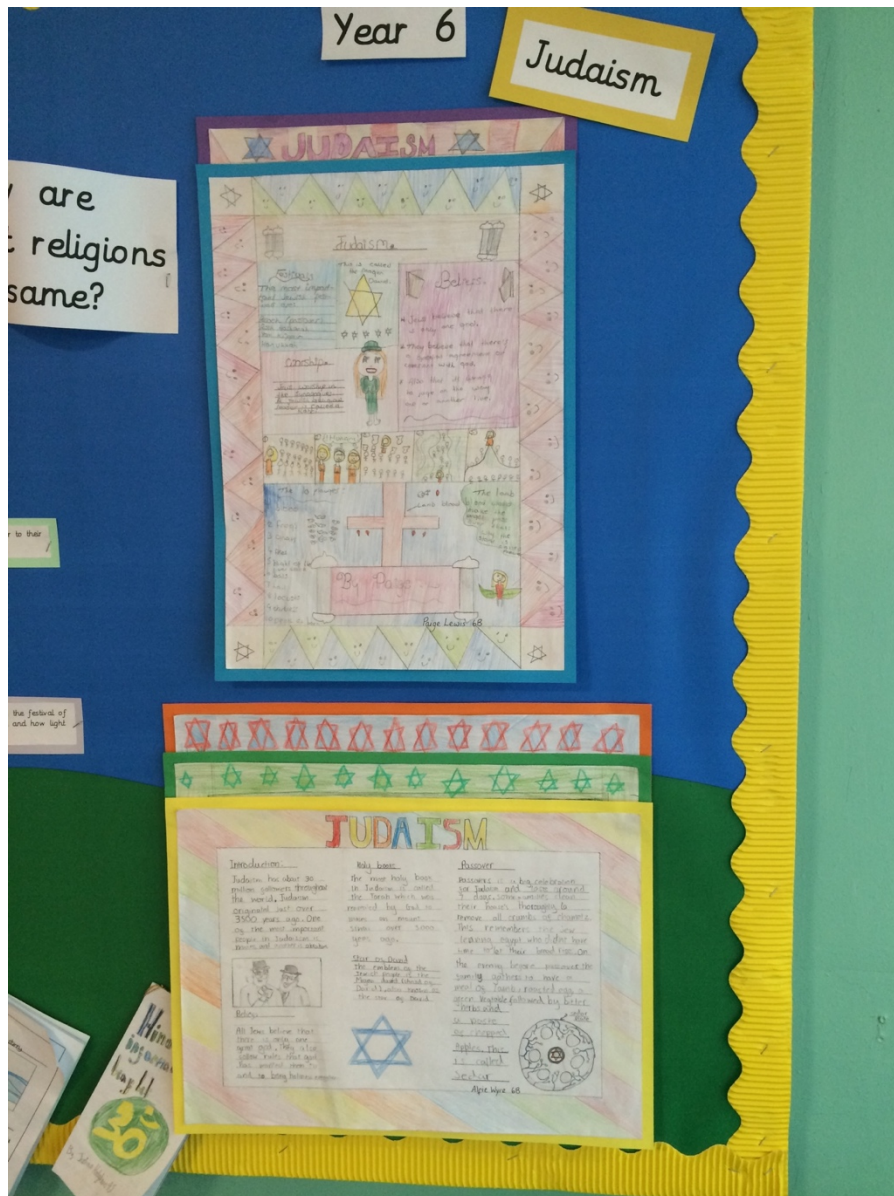
*Picture 4—9 Year 6 Display (Judaism)*

These wall displays, which were maintained by the RE Coordinator (as per the school RE policy in Appendix L), were part of the "everyday religious education" (Parker, 2017: 313). These are therefore included in the data collected and in the analysis below.

## 4.2. Religion Constructed through the Lens of the World Religions Paradigm

The wall displays in the main corridor of Alexander Parkes Primary School show drawings, artwork, factsheets and posters made by pupils across all year groups. From March onwards, and until the end of the school year, the RE boards were covered with samples of pupils' work that had been completed during the World Religion Day (see pictures 4-1 to 4-9). Each year group studied a 'world religion.' Reception and Year 1 worked on Christianity, Year 2 on Buddhism, Year 3 on Sikhism, Year 4 on Hinduism, Year 5 on Islam, and Year 6 on Judaism. Each board therefore focused on one specific '-ism,' a construction informed by the World Religions Paradigm, and which remains the dominant paradigm in schools today (Cox and Robertson, 2013). The words 'World Religion Day' were even displayed on the RE display board (see pictures 4-1 and 4-2), and were included in the name chosen for the 'special RE day.'

On the RE display boards (see pictures 4-1 to 4-9), 'world religions' were presented as separate, fixed categories that could be studied in silos, independently from one another. During my observations, I noted that teachers tended to rely on the WRP in RE:

| | |
|---|---|
| MR DAVIES: | So, on the board I've written 'Judaism.' What do we think we know? |
| ALEX: | Do they wear turbans? |
| FELICITY: | They wear hats, like religious hats. |
| MILO: | They pray every day. |
| CHADWICK: | Was it in the war? Did Hitler use to gas them? |
| MR DAVIES: | Who's them? Judaism is a religion, so who are you talking about? |
| CHADWICK: | Jews. |
| MILO: | Jewish. |

(*Excerpt from an RE lesson in Year 6*).

On occasions, adult participants raised this as an issue during their interviews:

Are we putting children into boxes? Yeah. Well yeah, because I mean that's the problem isn't it? […] If you are just saying, "This is what a Muslim is," then are all these children going to think, "Right, this is how every Muslim is?" Or what if there's a child here who is brought up in a Muslim family, but actually doesn't want to go to mosque? Are they then thinking, "I'm not a Muslim cos I don't want to go to mosque?" Whereas it should really be about what you feel, and you know I kind of find it hard to understand that kind of feeling thing, but some people do feel it and you know, that's their choice... Is there room in the classroom to discuss this? Well, no. […] You can spend a day, you can spend a week, talking about how different children in one class feel, or what they think might happen when you die, say – just for example, and you know you'd still never get to the bottom of it, and that'd be ok. But there is no space for that in our curriculum […] (Miss Bunch, EYFS Teacher).

In this excerpt, Miss Bunch explains that she does not have enough time to acknowledge religion as lived, and that therefore she cannot avoid 'groupism' (Brubaker, 2002). One of the consequences is that these reductionist constructions of religious traditions do not conform with the messier lived realities of religious communities, nor with the diversity of beliefs and practices (Orsi, 2010; Brubaker, 2002). As a result, the complexity of religion as a phenomenon is lost (Ammerman, 2007; 2014; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010).

In her comments above, Miss Bunch explains that she is worried that by adopting an essentialist, reductionist approach, some children may start questioning whether they are practising their faith correctly or not. Her fears seemed justified, as the excerpt below suggests:

| CÉLINE: | What do we know about Muslims? |
|---|---|
| OLIVER: | It's the five pillars! |
| BILAL: | Fasting… praying… |
| AJIT: | Is it Islam or…? |
| BILAL: | Going in this place where you go around this big mosque; it's called *hajj*. |
| AJIT: | But if you can't afford it, you don't have to go. But if you can afford it you must go at least once in your life… Giving money to charity. |
| OLIVER: | Four! |
| AJIT: | What's the last one? Is it four pillars or five pillars? |
| OLIVER: | Five! […] They do Ramadan. |
| […] | |
| CÉLINE: | Do you think all the Muslims do Ramadan? |
| OLIVER: | No. |

| | |
|---|---|
| AJIT: | Yes. |
| OLIVER: | Oh, yes! Yes! |
| AJIT: | If they don't do fasting, then they are not *exactly* a Muslim… |
| CÉLINE: | And do you think they all pray? |
| AJIT & OLIVER: | Yes. |
| AJIT: | They've got to pray five times! That's the fifth pillar! Pray five times a day. |

In this exchange, children concluded that if a Muslim did not strictly follow the five pillars of Islam, then they were not "*exactly* a Muslim." Similar findings have been published for at least three decades, and show that this is an long-standing issue that needs addressing, as it can be alienating for members of faith traditions who do not recognise themselves or their family in the accounts presented by their teachers, and subsequently by their peers (e.g. Nesbitt and Jackson, 1995; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010; Ipgrave, 2004; Benoit, forthcoming).

When asked to describe religious communities, children always focused on essentialist representations, especially when describing non-Christian religions (see section 4.1.3). Pupils' responses reflected the type of knowledge to which they were exposed in the RE classroom. The picture below (4-10), for example, shows a factsheet on Hinduism, whereby Hindu communities are represented as a "homogeneous undifferentiated mass" (Panjwani, 2017: 604):
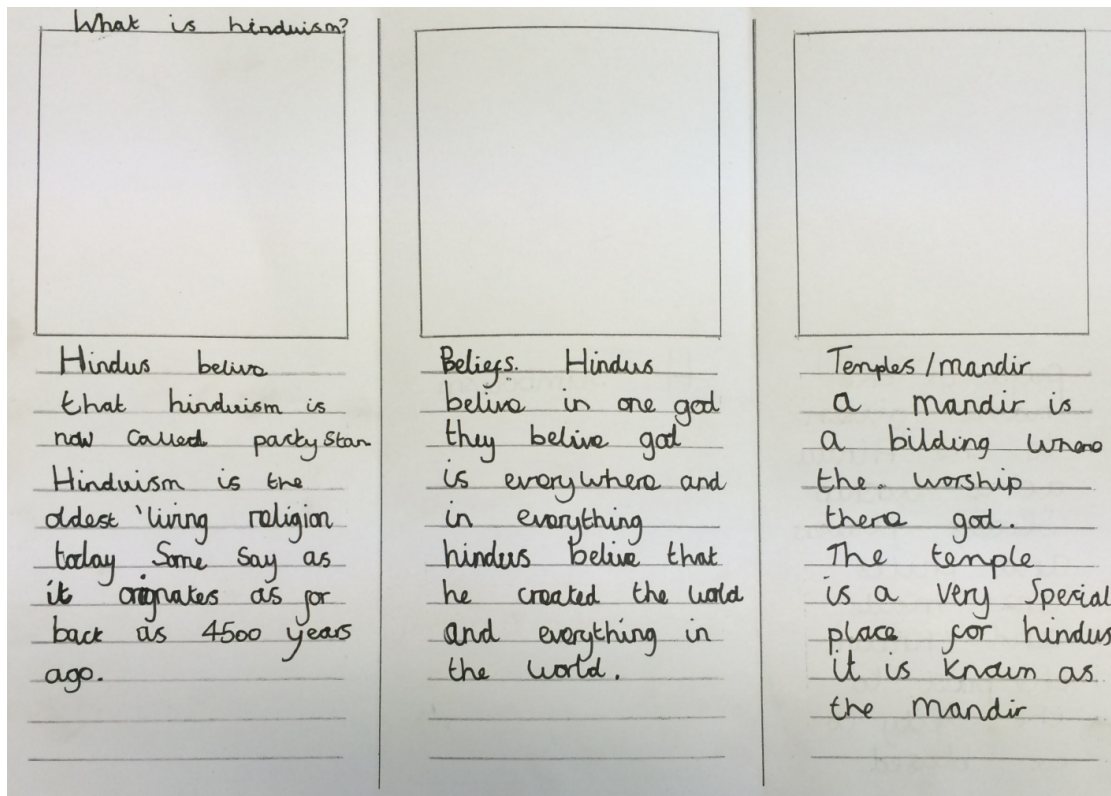
*Picture 4—10 Factsheet on Hinduism (Year 4)*

This type of exercise was very common in RE – almost all RE classes observed involved a form of factsheet, where students were asked to draw answers, fill in blanks, put a story back in the right order, cut and paste pictures, or write short answers to questions. Myatt (2018) argues that such factsheets are "proxies for busy-ness," and are not fit for purpose. Although the tasks contribute to children remembering selected some selected key facts about 'world religions,' the activities do not equip them with a deep understanding of what it means to exist religiously in the world. This pedagogical approach taps into 'typological phenomenology,' whereby categories are standardised (Smart, 1973). It ignores religion as lived, and results in descriptive reductionism. Other examples of factsheets can be found below (pictures 4-11 to 4-13):

| | 1. | | This symbol represents the fight against evil. It also represents the defending the weak or people around the world. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kirpan | | | 1 |

| | 3 | | Sikhs do not cut their hair as it is a symbol of purity and holiness. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kesh | | | 3 |

| | 2 | | This symbolises keeping the body clean, neat and tidy to please God. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kanga | | | 2 |

| | 5 | | This bracelet has no beginning and no end – just like God, and is a symbol of being close to God. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kara | | | 5 |

| | 4 | | A type of breeches (shorts) worn by Sikhs. These were first worn by Sikh warriors hundreds of years ago. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kacha | | | |

*Picture 4—11 Factsheet on Sikhism (Year 5)*

kirpan



This symbol represents the fight against evil. It also represents the defend the weak or people around the world.

*Picture 4—12 Factsheet on Sikhism (Year 5)*
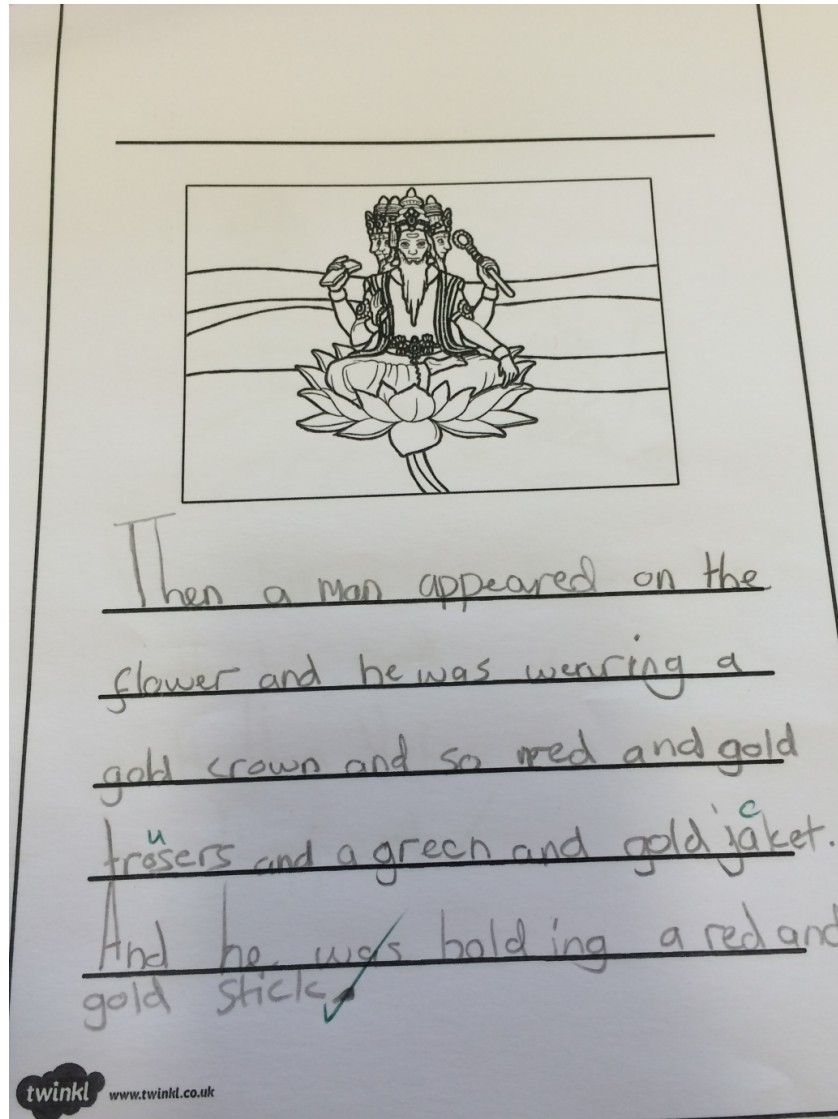
*Picture 4—13 Factsheet on Hinduism (Year 4)*

Pictures 4-11 and 4-12 show a focus on the 5Ks when teaching about Sikhism in Year 5. In children's narratives, Sikhism was also reduced to the 5Ks:

| | |
|---|---|
| SAIRA: | Yeah… We know about Sikhism! |
| CÉLINE: | What do you know about Sikhism? |
| SAIRA: | They carry this comb in their pocket and they brush their hair or something. |
| RAINNA: | They have… [*Hesitates as she touches her wrist*] |
| SAIRA: | Bangles. |
| RAINNA: | Yeah, they wear the one bracelet. |
| SAIRA: | I'm sure they carry a knife with them, but I think the children they just wear a necklace with a little knife on it… |

These findings suggest that children learnt *about* religions, in the sense that they learnt facts (albeit informed by typological phenomenology) about several 'world religions.' This in line with Birmingham syllabus AT2: 'learning about religions traditions,' which is adapted from Grimmitt's (1987) work.

As a reductionist approach to religions was used, and religion as lived tended to be ignored, children had narrow understandings of religiosity:

| CÉLINE: | Do you think every single Christian believe in Jesus and prays to one god? |
|---|---|
| ADAM: | Yeah 'cos it's… if you follow a religion… if you wanna follow a religion and be the religion, you've got to follow it properly. If you don't follow it properly, then you're not that religion. |

In this except, Adam demonstrates that he would not consider lived experiences of religion as valid expressions of religiosity if they did not conform with institutional discourses. As a result of the perceived lack of flexibility, Jack explained that he would not have time for a religion:

I don't know if I have time to have one to be fair, 'cos I'm practicing for school and [says something about playing football] I have to go today after this as well… (Jack, KS2 Pupil).

Other children adopted a similar view, and subsequently constructed non-religion to equate to "a free life:"

| CÉLINE: | [*Summarising children's contributions*] OK, so if you're Christian, you usually believe in God and Jesus; if you're Muslim you usually believe in the 5Ks and read the Koran… What do you believe in if you have no religion? |
|---|---|
| CONNOR: | You've got no religion. |
| PAIGE: | You don't have to pray. |
| ZAHRA: | You don't believe in a god. |
| PAIGE: | It's like a free life – they don't have to keep on praying and different things like that… |

Children's discursive constructions were informed by teachers', whose understandings of religion were shaped along a model similar to Smart's (2003) multi-dimensional approach:

> And I love that it explores that, you know, there could be some other sort of power, high power and considering that. I love looking at rituals and ceremonies. [...] [A]nd a whole day will be given up to that – looking at a world religion and they can look at festivals, ceremonies, rituals... they might go and visit a place of worship, they might have somebody come in and talk about their religion, they're gonna look at the rules of that particular religion, what the main beliefs are... (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

In this comment, Mrs Jennings explains that that teachers at Alexander Parkes adopt a multi-dimensional approach to comparative religion, as they study different religions' practical and ritual dimension ("festivals, rituals, ceremonies"), ethical and legal dimension ("rules"), material dimension ("place of worship"), doctrinal dimension ("beliefs"), or social dimension ("someone come in and talk about their religion). The dimensions selected for studying religion in RE directly derived from the WRP, a model anchored in Christianity that focuses on scriptures, a church-like organisational structure, a belief in a divine power, and a doctrinal system (Dubuisson, 2003; Hanegraaf, 2015).

As a result of these constructions, teachers at Alexander Parkes did not see any tension between the WRP and typological phenomenology, and the alternative pedagogy advocated by the 2007 Birmingham syllabus and its 24 dispositions.[1] This is because the dispositions were constructed as an extension of the multi-dimensional model teachers have been used to teaching in RE since the late 1970s. Furthermore, the dispositions were studied through the lens of 'world religions' (i.e. Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism), which therefore did not disrupt the dominant WRP.

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[1] See section 2.3.1 for a discussion of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education.

## 4.3. "Different but All the Same:" Locating Religion in the Realm of Everyday Morality

While 'world religions' were constructed as distinctive from one another, picture 4-7 shows an attempt at bridging discussion across religions. On the board, one piece of paper poses the question "How are different religions the same?", suggesting a view whereby "different religions" (which were neatly compartmentalised on the different posters) are constructed as fundamentally being "the same." At Alexander Parkes, teachers constructed religions as sharing the same doctrines and core values, and as being equally valid. The 2007 syllabus further consolidated this approach, as it advocated the teaching of 24 dispositions that are common to all faiths (BCC, 2007; see also Appendix B). As a result, 'true' religions were constructed as sharing the same core morals and values:

CÉLINE: Err, so you said that you had different religions like Islam and Buddhism but [RE] was predominantly Christian.

MR BARTLETT: Yeah, it's predominantly Christian.

CÉLINE: How do you feel about the fact that it's predominantly Christian?

[…]

MR BARTLETT: Well, I come from a Catholic background, so I find that… well, I say I'm non-practising Catholic, so I understand that the religion gives good morals and sets a good example for… So….but then again so do all of the other religions. They're all very similar in what they're teaching.

CÉLINE: Ok.

MR BARTLETT: So it doesn't matter to me whether it's Christianity or the other ones to be honest.

It's about identifying with one another and realising that actually the basis of most faiths when you drill down is just about being good to one another, trying to be a better person. […] I think it's important for children to get a full-rounded understanding, you know whether it's Christianity, or Islam or you know... for them to actually understand that there's lots of different faiths and we're all the same. […] I'd like [pupils] to see the common thread in all religions and that it's that all religions are based on becoming a better person. That if you look at the trimming in any religion it's about trying to be a better person (Miss Williams, KS2 Teacher).

All the religions I know teach love, and peace (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

I tend to say that a lot of religious beliefs are what I would refer to as morals. Just general morals (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

Err, yeah, we teach about half an hour a week I suppose, which I think is enough because... We spend so much time about talking about the way, the way we should treat people and behave anyway, because we have to, that I think half an hour looking more specifically about how religions teach the same thing is probably enough really (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

Madge *et al.* shared similar findings as they showed that young people tended to emphasise "how religion helps 'one to grow up to be a good person, kind and caring to others'" (2014: 125).

The findings here speak directly to Ammerman's theory of 'Golden Rule' Christianity. Participants not only located religion in the realm of morality, but their constructions of 'true' religion were directly informed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity:

[T]he Golden Rule Christianity we see today is explicitly nonideological. That is, it is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise. […] Golden Rule Christianity emphasizes relationships and caring. The good person invests heavily in care for family (especially children) and friends, tries to provide friendly help in the community, and seeks ways to make the larger world a better place (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40).

'Golden Rule' Christianity therefore served as the hidden referent against which all 'true' religions were discursively constructed:

I understand that the [Christian] religion gives a good morals and sets a good example for… So… but then again so do all of the other religions. They're all very similar in what they're teaching. […] You might have different stories, but they might have the same… Well, as I keep saying, morals, the same moral behind it… which is like, in the Buddhism, there's one about treating others as you'd like to be treated and I'm sure there's similar stories in Christianity (Mr Bartlett, KS1 Teacher).

As a result, all 'world religions' were located in the realm of everyday morality (Ammerman, 1997; 2017), and were constructed as sharing the same core values, "which all human beings tap into and express in various localised culturally relevant ways" (Cox

and Robertson, 2013). Such an approach, whereby teachers "explicitly refer to an underlying universal human function" is particularly popular in RE (Liljestrand, 2015: 244), as it enables teachers to focus on similarities between religious traditions – a position adopted by many in order to avoid dealing with fundamental differences (Everington, 2009; Everington *et al*., 2011; Liljestrand, 2015). This is also in line with 'Golden Rule' Christianity, where "the ideas of others are respected. Proselytizing is frowned upon, and tolerance is celebrated" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40).

Locating 'true' religion in the realm of everyday morality is not only anchored in 'Golden Rule' Christianity, but also assumes a universality of hermeneutics, which is itself entrenched in universal theology. Rather than 'learning from faith' (AT1 in the 2007 Birmingham syllabus) as a means to learn 'about oneself' and to examine one's positionality in relation to institutional metanarratives (Grimmitt, 1987), 'learning from' at Alexander Parkes was located within the realm of morality (Owen, 2011). As a result, the nature of RE solely became instrumental as children did not engage in religious experience, or with the transcendent (Ipgrave, 2012a). 'World religions' in RE at Alexander Parkes were used as vehicles to inculcate a moral code.

For example, before one RE lesson, Miss Hart explained to me that she used RE as a means to instil values in children. In the excerpt below, she asks children (who have been listening to her telling the Buddhist story of the Lion and the Jackal)[2] to recall the moral of the story:

| MISS HART: | And what's the big theme we're looking at? What did I say at the beginning? |
| PUPIL: | Trust. |
| MISS HART: | Yes, we all need to trust one another. Right, well done. Get back to your writing now please. |

Similarly, Mr Bartlett (KS1 Teacher) showed his pupils a video telling the Buddhist tale of the Monkey King. The story is about a Monkey King who sacrifices himself to save his tribe from the King of Humans. After the video, Mr Bartlett asked the children to

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[2] In the version told in class, a jackal escapes a hungry lion by tricking him into lifting a heavy rock. The lion, who was proud of his strength and wanted to show he could lift the rock, did not realise he was being tricked, and the jackal escaped.

think and share experiences when they had been brave. As we talked about his session after the class, he too explained that he understood religions as moral codes:

| MR BARTLETT: | What would I like them to learn about or from religions? |
| CÉLINE: | Yeah. |
| MR BARTLETT: | Err… I guess it's just a matter of right and wrong. What's the right thing to do, what's the wrong thing to do? And that's what religion is basically, isn't it? |
| CÉLINE: | OK. |
| MR BARTLETT: | How to treat each other, what's the right thing to do… that's basically what religion is, the way I see it. It's giving you a moral code to follow. |

While Hella and Wright (2009) have argued that constructing religions as universal moral codes is the product of contemporary liberalism, as beliefs are given more importance than practice, the findings in this research suggest a more nuanced picture since discursive constructions of religion were informed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity, which "is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise. Rather it is based in practice and experience. God is located in […] the everyday virtue of doing good" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40).

'Golden Rule' Christianity also informed children's constructions of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular:

Christianity is a nice religion, 'cos it doesn't purposefully do many things to like hurt physically or emotionally anyone else (Harvey, KS2 Pupil).

As teachers focused on similarities between 'world religions,' they tended to ignore the contested nature of the transcendent, or opposing religious absolutes. This relativist approach, which ignores competing claims to 'Truth' (Wright, 1997) is anchored in a "universal theology of religion" (Pickard, 1991: 143). Such a position has been criticised for being entrenched in post-modern relativism (Wright, 2004). This approach, however, is in line with the pedagogy advocated in the Birmingham syllabus (BCC, 2007). Felderhof (2004; 2012), the Drafting Secretary, himself argues that religious traditions are different manifestations of one common expression of the sacred. This approach is not unique to Birmingham; as Ipgrave explains "[a]ll too often RE […] emphasise[s] a shared core of common values or take[s] refuge in a purely descriptive approach to other traditions" (2004: 117).

During my observations, I did not record any instance whereby teachers presented or engaged in discussion about divergent religious 'truths,' or opposing or contradictory religious absolutes. Furthermore, teachers did not seem equipped to handle conversations that challenged their relativist positions. Reflecting on his teaching experience in another school, where the population was predominantly Muslim, Mr Holden (KS2 Teacher) explained that he found it difficult to engage with opposing absolutist positions:

| | |
|---|---|
| MR HOLDEN: | But it was interesting that at that particular school there was a white Caucasian girl in Year 3 who was told that… It was a cold day and she liked the idea of wearing a headscarf, because a headscarf could keep your head warm, and she asked a girl about it and she was told by a Muslim girl that she'd be burned alive if she did… That God would burn her alive… And this is Year 3 in a primary school! […] How do you handle that conversation?! |
| CÉLINE: | Did you say, "God will not burn anybody alive?" |
| MR HOLDEN: | Well, we say bluntly that these are the values of the school holds… and one of them is openness and tolerance, and that is not a tolerant view. That's what you have to come back to, which is a bit airy-fairy in the end of it. You can't… you can't tackle them on their doctrine. |

In this instance, Mr Holden referred to the school values, and highlighted the incompatibility of the morally absolutist position adopted by the child, and the school values. This approach is framed by liberalism, which constructs the public arena as secular, and which limits the religious to the private sphere. Hemming (2011; 2015) shared similar findings and argued that religious voices in community schools were likely to be less valued in the public sphere. By giving more primacy to the 'secular' school values in the public institutional space, he did not listen equally to religious voices, and relegated absolutist religious values beneath dominant Western discourses. As a result, dominant Western power relations were reproduced.

Mr Holden's inability to manage conservative and problematic theological ideas reflects a wider approach to religion within the school and beyond. As teachers constructed religion as promoting a 'good life' (Ammerman, 1997; 2017), they could not cope well when faced with "destructive spiritualities" (McGuire, 2008: 116). This shows that religion has been too narrowly (re-)defined by participants, who used "implicit boundaries" to exclude "religious and spiritual practices [they] personally f[ou]nd repulsive" (2008: 116). Even in cases where religion is constructed as complex and multi-

layered, there remains an emphasis on the positive or creative aspects of religion, often ignoring its more unsettling aspects (Page and Lowe, forthcoming):

> We need to allow for the very real possibility that just as there are creative spiritualities, there may also be destructive spiritualities. Just as some people may seek spiritual practices that bring their lives into a greater sense of harmony, beauty, peace, and compassion, others may engage in practices that develop a purer hatred of the Other and that literally, as well as figuratively, embody violence and aggression (McGuire, 2008: 116).

Mr Holden's comments therefore reflect wider concerns about the role of school in challenging children's destructive spiritualities. Such concerns were shared by the majority of the adult participants, whose construction of the religious was also framed in liberal terms. As a result, teachers were unsure of their role:

> So the fundamental question is – is it healthier to try and teach [religion] so that [pupils] have got a more consistent understanding, or do you not touch it at all, in which case they are exposed themselves somewhere else, perhaps on the Internet now, or perhaps within their own family circles… […] Or the media. If we're not teaching RE and then they go home, and they're exposed to a very rigid doctrine that says, "This is right and everything else is wrong," is that a disservice or do we need to respect the rights of the families. I don't know (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

As teachers felt uncomfortable with overt engagement with religion(s), they purposefully avoided entering into conversations or dialogues about opposing or contrasting religious absolutes. Reverend Abi, who reflected on some of the RE classes she had seen at Alexander Parkes, stated that she found this approach damaging, and worried that by not engaging in theological discussions and by ignoring ideological oppositions, teachers "water[ed] everything down to a moral." She argued that the "layers" were lost, as important theological concepts were ignored. These findings corroborate with previous research, which showed that teachers are reluctant to engage with theological concepts (Fancourt, 2017).

Reflecting on the secular framing of religion, and the instrumental approach adopted to RE, Reverend Abi also mentioned the lack of consideration given to the role of God in biblical stories, as teachers focused on the moral meanings. The same was true for other religions:

> [RE]'s all about morals and values, and how to behave well and how to empathise or sympathise or… It's more that we're talking about the ideas behind it. So today,

> I introduced the lesson by saying we're talking about empathy and we talked about what empathy meant. And *then* I explained how we're going to be looking at how different religions use empathy and today we're looking at how Muslims empathise, which led into how they have to give 2.5 percent of their savings… (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

In the excerpt above, Mrs Mészános explained how she used Islam as an example of empathy, rather than teach the concept of *Zakat*[3] in its own right. As a result, the transcendent spiritual experience was ignored (Hella and Wright, 2009). These findings corroborate with Ipgrave's who argues that when schools adopt an instrumental approach to religion, religions are consequently "framed in secular terms" rather than religiously understood, since the teachings do not focus on God but "on generalized moral messages […] seen as relevant to the children's everyday lives" (2012a: 38) (see section 4.1).

Similarly, during one RE lesson on Christianity, Mrs Mészános, who was covering the topic 'Rules from the Bible,' explained to her pupils that the school rules actually make "reference to the Bible that also says that you need to treat people the way you want to be treated." She then explained how the British judicial system derives from the Ten Commandments, before exploring each Commandment with the class. While Mrs Mészános felt comfortable with 'Golden Rule' Christianity (e.g. "treat people the way you want to be treated"), at no point in the lesson did she mention God – despite the key role God plays in the Bible in delivering the tablets to Moses. In this example, Mrs Mészános "incorporates religion into the school's other purposes" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 37), and therefore uses religion (framed through the lens of 'Golden Rule' Christianity) as a vehicle to reinforce the school values. Religion is used as a framework to communicate a more "generic spirituality and morality" (Hemming, 2011b: 1067). Such a strategy is often used in contexts where religiosity is constructed as belonging to the private sphere (2011b).

After a class where a pupil said something about being with the fairies after death, Miss Bunch (EYFS Teacher) explained that although she would have happily engaged in existential conversations about death, she did not feel comfortable engaging in topics that may invade the private realm:

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[3] *Zakat* is the third pillar of Islam, and refers to the mandatory charitable contributions Muslims must make (if they meet the criteria of wealth).

MISS BUNCH:     In my opinion, yes let's just talk about everything all the time, but there's a lot of pussyfooting around parents and kind of, you know, 'what would a parent say if…' You can't really… I'm not a parent to these children; I'm supposed to be educating them and I see it as a more holistic task in Early Years – educating and preparing them for school, preparing them to be friends with one another, you know that kind of things…

[…]

CÉLINE:     Are you ever worried that this openness means that they share too much? Are there situations where you can feel uncomfortable? Or that doesn't happen at this stage?

MISS BUNCH:     Yeah, I mean you know when they started talking the other week about funerals [*Pulls a face*]… And suddenly you're like, "Right, I know that if it was my child, I would just tell them everything about death, you know, 'people die'…" And I would tell them what I believe, and I'd say, "Some people believe you go to Heaven, some people believe that's just the end and you get eaten by the worms" kind of thing… But actually, I don't really know what I can really say, and what might devastate a child, what might devastate a parent… You know, it's quite tricky that line… And I remember [*Smiles*], when I was a very new teacher [*Smiles*], and I was teaching Year 2, I just… Someone said something about being gay, and I immediately had a circle time about what it means to be gay. And I didn't really think – and this was in a school with a majority of Muslim children – and I didn't really think of the consequences you know!! And it was fine, nothing came back, but you know… as a teacher you kind of do, well I do, sort of fear almost the consequence of having those open discussions… And as a school now, we're trying to work out how to talk about these things a bit but, you know, it's harder when it's not a whole-school approach and everyone approaches it differently and everyone's got a different opinion, you know… I mean it's tricky…

By saying "I don't really know what I can really say, and what might devastate a child, what might devastate a parent…" Miss Bunch locates religious beliefs in the private sphere (i.e. the home and the family), and does not think it appropriate for the public sphere to intervene when religious beliefs go beyond the realm of everyday morality. As the children had moved away from the instrumental aims of RE and the teaching of universal core values, Miss Bunch changed the topic of discussion and did not engage in meaningful conversations about religious and non-religious beliefs and practices regarding death.[4] As religion tends to be reduced to reinforcing the moral ethos of the school, children's opportunities to learn about/from religion(s) tended to be limited.

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[4] While it is beyond the scope of this research to analyse how pupils engage with death in primary schools, it is worth noting that the object of discussion itself may have been viewed as inappropriate to discuss in the primary school setting. More research needs to be conducted on how pupils construct death, and whether their needs are adequately met in schools. While adults may feel uncomfortable discussing death with

Miss Bunch's comments also reflect another common worry, which pertains to parents and the wider community. Teachers, especially shortly after the Trojan Horse Affair, were eager to avoid contested topics in RE:

> I think you just have some awkward conversations at times. And sometimes children want to explore things, but you can't explore them openly because you're in a sort of politically-correct environment and if something gets said out of context, and you're seen to make a comment one way or the other, for or against, it could lead you in difficult territories as a teacher, in terms of parents coming in. […] And also you're wary that the sets of parents holding those extreme views could also cause you a lot of trouble. There is self-preservation there; there are conversations you don't want to go into! You know, I know if I said the wrong thing in class, I could have the parents in the head office that night. And even worse than that – newspapers! Because the newspapers love a good story, and if they get a meaty story, they'll go with it and they'll run wild! (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

> I think [RE] gets people a little bit nervous sometimes… And with everything going on at the moment in the climate, so you know in terms of tolerance and things like that people are thinking, "I don't want to put my foot in it" (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

As a result, in cases whereby teachers were aware of the contested nature of religious knowledge, they chose not to engage with it. While this approach is flawed, since supposing there is a rational morality of universal scope is not only intellectually implausible, but also politically unachievable (Gray, 1995), it reflects teachers' fears that were rooted in reality. Shortly after my ethnographic fieldwork ended, protests over the No Outsiders project, a primary school Sex and Relationship Education programme aimed at raising children's awareness about different relationships and transgender issues, were held outside several Birmingham primary schools for several weeks as some parents (and members of the wider community) viewed it was not the role of the public school to teach about same-sex relationships and LGBT matters more broadly. As one uncle explained, their concerns regarded "having [their] children come home with material that contradicts [their] moral values" (cited in 'Birmingham LGBT teaching row', 2019). As the situation escalated, pupils were removed from classes, headteachers received threats,

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young children "for fear that it will scare them" (Olin, 2016: iii), it must be noted that the topic had been spontaneously brought up by the pupils themselves. In fact, death came up spontaneously on several occasions during the data collection, with children reflecting on their own experiences. For example, during one of the focus groups, Jasmine shared with the group that the interview was a welcomed break from her grieving her grandad who had just passed away. Similarly, Shillitoe and Strhan (2020) shared data where one child participant spoke about his baby sister dying, and how he used prayers to maintain a relationship with her.

and signs reading 'My Child My Choice' were being held outside several schools in Birmingham (2019). Therefore, while children's interests would indeed be best served "not by avoiding sensitive and controversial areas of religion, but by establishing a framework of openness and respect within which children can express their views with confidence" (Ipgrave, 2004: 114), teachers at Alexander Parkes found themselves working in a context where this was not easily achieved.

Participants further classified 'true' religions into different systems of meaning, and constructed religions as either adopting a liberal approach to 'the good life,' or as adopting a strict (or in some cases, illiberal) approach. Judeo-Christian traditions (excluding minority Christian faiths such as Jehovah's Witnesses) were more likely to be perceived as liberal, unlike other religions:

| | |
|---|---|
| OLIVER: | I think he's something that's Muslim-Hinduism-Islam-Sikh. |
| AJIT: | Yeah, they all go under one category in a way. |
| CÉLINE: | How so? |
| AJIT: | I don't know how to explain it… Like… they're different because each religion has rules like not to kill animals, say the other religions might have the same ones so it goes under the same category in a way. |
| CÉLINE: | What's that category? |
| AJIT: | Say rules in a way. Because each religion has a rule, and you have to follow that to be that religion. |
| CÉLINE: | Ok. So, can you have several religions in the same category? |
| AJIT: | Yeah. It depends what the rules are. |
| CÉLINE: | Right, so you're saying that certain religions share the same rules? |
| AJIT: | Yeah, and certain festivals as well. |
| CÉLINE: | Right, I see. |
| AJIT: | Like Jewish and Christians will go under the same category because like Christians have like Christmas and that's a festival and Jewish have festivals as well. |
| […] | |
| OLIVER: | I think it was Muslims… Well, not Muslims. It's not the word 'Muslim' and it's not the word 'Islam'; it's like 'Vasaik'… but the same cultural people… |
| CÉLINE: | What do you mean? |
| OLIVER: | Like it's like Muslims but it's a different word… |
| CÉLINE: | Right, I'm not too sure… Is it Hinduism? Or Sikhism? Or something else? |
| OLIVER: | I think it was Hinduism last year. |
| AJIT: | Yeah, that was it. |

| CÉLINE: | And Hinduism is similar to Islam? |
| AJIT: | Yeah. |

In this excerpt, a distinction is made between religions that have festivals, and those that have "rules." Children constructed 'world religions' as falling in one of two categories: (i) the Judeo-Christian liberal traditions, and (ii) the other (illiberal) religions. As a result, children tended to get confused between the different religious traditions within each category, but more significantly so in the second (i.e. the "Muslim-Hinduism-Islam-Sikh" one).

The data above correlate with Madge *et al.*'s findings, as they showed that young people tended to think that "Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are all the same kind of thing" (2014: 56). As a result, children found it difficult to make sense of the different faith traditions, or to even recall facts about them. Participants therefore organised 'world religions' according to a specific nomenclature, and religions were hierarchised along (il)liberal norms (Asad, 1993). As a result of this simplified construction, (Golden Rule) Christianity was viewed as "nice" (Jack, KS2 pupil), and other religions were viewed as constrained by "rules" (Ajit, KS2 pupil).

Such a construction is reminiscent of the 'good religion' vs. 'bad religion' dichotomy:

> There has been a long tendency […] to divide religions up into good ones, in which the self finds the resources to live a purposeful life in an orderly social world to the making of which the good religion has contributed, and bad ones, which deprive the individual of will and autonomy and self-control either by the imposition of authority or by excessive emotional stimulation (Orsi, 2005: 171).

In the case of Alexander Parkes, Judeo-Christian traditions (with the exception of 'illiberal' traditions such as Jehovah's Witnesses) were more likely to be constructed as 'good,' while others were viewed as 'bad.'

Judaism was constructed as similar to Christianity because participants tended to locate Christianity as rooted in Judaism:

| SAIRA: | Wait, do Jewish people have a certain god or a different god or is it the same as Christians? |

| | |
|---|---|
| RAINNA: | I think it might be the same… |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, I think it might the same as the Christians. 'Cos I think that's what it says in the stories of Islam and stuff… They're like enemies… Well, not enemies but… |
| RAINNA: | Oh! Yeah! I think you're right! Because Jesus was a Jew but after he died he then became Christian… |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, he was Jewish. |
| CÉLINE: | Right… |
| RAINNA: | And some Jewish people still stick to the Jewish and they still believe in God… |
| CÉLINE: | But not Jesus? |
| RAINNA: | I think they still believe in Jesus but a little bit, they mostly believe in God. |

As non-Judeo-Christian traditions were constructed as similar, this often resulted in children getting confused between religions, and their followers who were constructed as 'generalised others' (Madge *et al.*, 2014: 11).

| | |
|---|---|
| CONNOR: | Yeah, there's a religion where people wear something to cover their faces. |
| CÉLINE: | Which religion is that? |
| CONNOR: | I can't remember. |

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | […] what does it mean to be a Muslim? |
| AIMEE: | You don't eat pork. |
| HARVEY: | I don't know, 'cos I don't know if they've got more than one god… I think they do, but I don't know. |
| CÉLINE: | Right. Anything else? |
| HARVEY: | They do festivals… |
| ADAM: | Eid… |
| HARVEY: | Like they're fasting, to get closer to God. That's what they think. And there're celebrations for fasting. |
| AIMEE: | They don't celebrate Christmas. |
| HARVEY: | Birthdays! Do they celebrate birthdays? |
| AIMEE: | [Smiles] Yeah. |
| HARVEY: | No, 'cos some don't! |

[*All three look at each other, puzzled*]

[…]

| AIMEE: | And they bury their teeth in the ground. |
| HARVEY: | Whaaat? |
| AIMEE: | My next-door neighbour she's a Muslim, and she said you have to bury your teeth in the ground. |
| CÉLINE: | Once you've lost them? |
| [*Aimee nods*] | |
| HARVEY: | Oh, right! I was about to say! Imagine if you buried your teeth in the ground! [Laughs] |
| CÉLINE: | What does it mean to be Jewish? |
| AIMEE: | I haven't a clue… |
| HARVEY: | We learned about it, how do you not know? |
| AIMEE: | Is it Judaism? |
| HARVEY: | Yes!! |
| ADAM: | Yeah. Christians… |
| HARVEY: | It's basically the same thing like celebrating your holidays, praying to God… |

Aimee's comment about her neighbour burying milk teeth in the ground is worthy of attention. We do not know whether her neighbour's practice was indeed imbued with religious significance or not, but as Aimee had a reductionist approach to religion, she did not construct the practice as personal but as institutional. This shows how children found it difficult to account for lived expressions of (non-)religion.

When asked about Islam, the first thing children mentioned was a restriction/rule ("you don't eat pork"). Children often conflated Islam with other 'bad' religions (Orsi, 2005), such as Hinduism ("they've got more than one god"). Interestingly, they also conflated Muslims with Jehovah's Witnesses ("they don't celebrate birthdays"), demonstrating that non-mainstream Christian communities (i.e. non-Catholics and non-Protestants) were more likely to be viewed as 'bad' religions as well. By constructing most Judeo-Christian traditions as similar, and "Muslim-Hinduism-Islam-Sikh" traditions as a 'generalised other' (Madge *et al.,* 2014: 11), children reproduced wider discourses that framed minority religions in general, and Islam in particular, as belonging to the out-group, regardless of the fact that they may be British. This echoes Cowden and Singh's (2017) research, as they argue that British Muslims are constructed as insufficiently British. Through an 'othering' discourse, pupils constructed an 'us/them'

dualism (Waikar, 2018), "creating normative boundaries between 'us' and 'them'" (Kuusisto and Kallioniemi, 2014: 156).

Although all participants shared similar social and societal concerns, and talked about tolerance and social cohesion, the data collected suggest that while an instrumental social approach to religion was adopted in RE, it did not necessarily lead to enhanced understanding or greater respect for religious diversity:

> There're some gods… there's some religions that I just think that I don't really feel right about that one… (Jack, KS2 Pupil).

| | |
|---|---|
| RAINNA: | It's like Santa Claus, if you believe in Santa and stuff like that… In my opinion, I kinda don't believe it 'cos it's got talking animals and stuff like that… |
| SAIRA: | Yeah! |
| RAINNA: | Like I wish my pet could talk, but… |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, like they just pop on Ganesh an elephant head, on that kid… |
| RAINNA: | And then he comes alive! |
| CÉLINE: | So, you don't believe these kind of stories? |
| RAINNA: | No, we don't really believe in it, but it has good morals. |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, things to learn about. |

Most children interviewed associated Hinduism with the story of Ganesh and/or another deity. This was because teachers believed that stories from the Hindu traditions were "colourful," and easily caught children's attention:

> And if you take Hinduism for example, and you look at the different gods and goddesses I mean there's some really amazing stories and things like that… So, if you do it through a story and pictures – cos obviously they've got a lot of beautiful images of their deities, I mean they're just amazing, aren't they? Most children love that. […] They're very inquisitive. The more kind of exciting and colourful the religion… (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

As teachers uncritically told Hindu stories as sources for moral development, they isolated them from wider social and political contexts. Searle-Chatterjee (2000) argues

that this is common practice. As a result, teachers emphasised the 'colourfulness,' of the stories and of the religion, which were then perceived by children as exotic and unbelievable:

| | |
|---|---|
| HARVEY: | Because I believe in Jesus and I don't believe some stuff that they say, like some stuff just doesn't sound right. |
| CÉLINE: | Like what? |
| HARVEY: | Like the boy having an elephant head. |
| […] | |
| AIMEE: | I agree with Harvey 'cos some of the things don't sound true. […] Like the same with the elephant head because that would probably be impossible. |

Hinduism was therefore constructed as an "exotic curiosity" (Ho, 1995: 115), which contrasted with Western understandings of the world (Cox, 2016). As Miller (2018) explains, this "exotic voyeurism" is "phenomenology at its worst."

Other religious traditions, such as Sikhism, were also constructed as exotic and alien:

| | |
|---|---|
| RAINNA: | Do they wear a turban? |
| SAIRA: | Yeah! A turban! |
| RAINNA: | Yeah, they wear turbans. |
| CÉLINE: | Do all Sikhs wear a turban? |
| RAINNA: | I think most of them do… |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, they do… And the kids wear this thing [*Shows her hair*] and they put it in a ball, and they have this cloth wrapped on it… 'Cos I saw this girl yesterday in the shop and she was wearing one of them. |
| RAINNA: | 'Cos I think like, because their hair isn't long enough to wear a turban they just wear one of these little cloths. |
| […] | |
| CÉLINE: | What do you think about wearing turbans and religious stuff? |
| RAINNA: | I wouldn't wear one. |
| SAIRA: | I wouldn't wear one because I think some people actually make fun of it… I'm not saying that it's a bit stupid to wear a turban, but I don't get it why they wear a turban, that's it. |
| SAM: | I wouldn't wear one. |
| SAIRA: | I'd be a bit embarrassed by it. |

| SAM: | Yeah, I wouldn't wear one 'cos some people wear them like for days and they sweat in it and you're gonna get more sweat until you get a disease… germs… |
| --- | --- |
| SAIRA: | It might be a bit of an embarrassment to certain people because you don't see many people wearing a turban. |
| RAINNA: | I wouldn't wear one 'cos I don't really like wearing hats… And if it's a really hot summer and I was wearing one I'd be sweltering so it doesn't really help… But it's fine in their religion… |
| SAIRA: | They'd have a warm head in the winter! |

In this excerpt, children explain that visible religious symbols, such as the turban, do not conform to liberal Western expressions of religiosity, and they would therefore feel uncomfortable standing out from the in-group. Visible religious symbols were "automatically associated with 'foreigners'" (Ipgrave, 2012: 5), and tended to be ridiculed, or regarded as embarrassing.

Buddhism, which tended to be reduced to Tibetan Buddhism, was often reduced to a series of spiritual techniques to learn from for moral development (Bishop, 1993). Less 'secular' aspects of the Buddhist philosophy were understood as alien and exotic (or sometimes even comic), as is the case of reincarnation, which children in the excerpt below qualify as "creepy:"

| CÉLINE: | Ok… What does it mean to be a Buddhist? |
| --- | --- |
| HARVEY: | Oh, I know! Like… Don't hurt any animals… And they believe – is that the one where they believe when you die you come back as an animal? |
| AIMEE: | What?! |
| CÉLINE: | Reincarnation? |
| HARVEY: | Yeah. |
| AIMEE: | That's creepy! |
| HARVEY: | I know, innit?! They think when you die you come back as an animal! |
| ADAM: | And I think what it means to be a Buddhist is to find out why we die… |
| HARVEY: | Yeah! I think… I think that Buddhism is a very peaceful religion. 'Cos it's all about peace, innit? Like you can't hurt anyone… |

[*Adam nods*]

The excerpts above demonstrate that despite teachers' efforts to promote respect, tolerance and community cohesion as they adopt an instrumental approach to RE, they did not seem to succeed. Minority 'world religions' were relegated beneath the dominant culture. Through 'othering' discourses, non-Judeo-Christian traditions were more likely to be marginalised, mocked, or not taken seriously. Such constructions served to reproduce dominant Western power.

While ('Golden Rule') Christianity was the referent for 'good' religion, Islam seemed its counterpart for 'bad' religion. The construction of Islam was further complexified as it also equated to 'false' religion, especially when discursively associated with terrorism. This happened on several occasions during the interviews as these took place shortly after 38 foreign tourists (including 30 British nationals) were killed in a terrorist attack at Port El Kantaoui, Tunisia[5].

> I think especially with Islam there's a strong... particularly in the area that we live in, there's a strong awareness of 'Muslims are bad' 'Muslims are wrecking the world' or whatever the children will say to say, and it's very difficult 'cos I've got a very strict Muslim girl in my class. So when they were challenging us and said 'Oh they're just Muslims' and 'that's not nice' and 'they're trying to take over the world' and all the rest of it, we actually engaged the young girl in my classroom with the discussion and she said, 'Actually we Muslims aren't like that.' It was great that we could get the two sides of the story (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

Participants tended to construct violent manifestations of religion as not conforming with the definition of religion, or at least of 'true' religion:

> Well, I'll honestly say, I don't know a lot about [Islam]. From the way that I understand... is there's not a whole lot of difference between Islam and Christianity, it's just that some people read other things into... (Mr Bartlett, KS1 Teacher).

> And I think that unfortunately a lot of the problems that do exist in the world, people pin it onto a religion, but it's not a religion it's something you know religion can often be blamed for... terrorism and radicalisation but eventually it has nothing to do with the faith, it has nothing to do with the religion (Miss Williams, KS2 Teacher).

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[5] The attacks occurred on 26 June 2015, and interviews with children took place in July 2015 (interviews with adults took place throughout 2014-2015).

Similarly, religious members who did not share universal transcendental core values, were seen as not understanding what 'true' religion was about:

| | |
|---|---|
| MEGAN: | There are some people in the world, like the shootings in France that happened with the people – they took their religion way too far! Like way too far!! |
| ELLA: | Yep. Past the boundaries. |
| MEGAN: | And in the news, it was all that happened! It was the only thing that was on the TV! |
| CÉLINE: | Do you think these people who take their religion too far are common? |
| MEGAN: | I would say a lot of shootings happen because some people take their religion too far… like in the Islamic State. |

In the excerpt above, children talk about the Charlie Hebdo attacks that happened in Paris in January 2015. As illiberal and violent manifestations of religiosity sit uneasily within 'universal theology,' these are constructed as not conforming to 'true' religion.

As Islam tended to be associated with negative narratives, Mr Holden (KS2 Teacher) explained that no teacher wanted to teach it for World Religion Day, as most were worried about dealing with negative narratives in the classroom:

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | So, was it because people feel uncomfortable with teaching Islam? |
| MR HOLDEN: | I think so. I think it was a minefield and people didn't want to approach it. So I took the decision that Year 5 were going to have a go at Islam as a topic, just to try and overcome it. |
| CÉLINE: | How did it go? |
| MR HOLDEN: | It was good. It was good. But there were some views coming out of the children, you know potentially racist or Islamophobic views. |
| CÉLINE: | Really? |
| MR HOLDEN: | Absolutely. And this area is quite bad for it. You've got a lot of white working-class people who are quite intolerant of Islam. […] It was mostly coming from the other class, the other Year 5 class, but there were some controversial statements made and obviously the children are hearing a lot of the myths that are promulgated by the far right. So, when you try and have the conversation about Islam, you come up against a lot of ignorance and mistrust. They're basically grounded in ignorance and mistrust. |

Miss Nolan (KS2 Teacher) echoed Mr Holden's comments regarding how Muslims tended to be viewed in the local community:

MISS NOLAN: I know one of the boys in my classroom, he felt quite embarrassed because his mom had got a Muslim boyfriend and he didn't wanna tell me his name. And I was like, 'Why?' and he was like 'Cos he's a Muslim' 'But that's ok! That's no problem! What is his name?' and he said, 'I don't know. He's a Muslim.' That was horrible for me that he didn't want to talk about it or that he was embarrassed about it.

CÉLINE: Why would he be embarrassed by it?

MISS NOLAN: … There are two things… There are two reasons why I believe he didn't want to say it, or two reasons why he possibly didn't want to say it, and that was a) because he was embarrassed because of the stigmatism attached to being a Muslim and, you know, what goes on in the news and people's perceptions… But secondly it might have been coming from home, that he's not allowed to talk about it. But I don't know why.

Both Miss Nolan and Mr Holden also referred to "difficult situations" in the classroom, where negative comments about Muslims were made, in front of Muslim peers. To avoid dealing with difficult situations such as these, teachers often tended to 'control' RE classes – they selected a disposition, a story and led the activities. There was little space for dialogue, which reduced the potential for students to discuss their approaches to religion (as per the RE guidelines).

As Islam was often defined in relation to violence, some children reflected on the difficulties they had reconciling discursive constructions of Islam with their own encounters of Muslims. This was the case of Ben (KS2 Pupil), who reflected on his lived experiences and his own interactions with Muslim peers. Ben stated that Islam was not "the worst religion:"

BEN: I can't think of different religions… I only thought of one, but it might not be the religion for it, I thought Judaism… Judasm… Judeism… [*Struggles with the pronunciation*].

CHARLIE: Judaism, yeah.

CÉLINE: Yeah, that's very possible.

BEN: And then there's Muslims, but I don't think it's the worst religion, because there are people in our class that are Muslims…

In this comment, Ben reflects on the 'true'/'false' dichotomy, and shows that constructions of 'world religions' at Alexander Parkes were not solely shaped by the WRP and 'Golden Rule' Christianity, but also by wider discourses about terrorism and security.

'False' religions were not viewed as occupying a legitimate place in RE as they promoted violence and therefore did not contribute to the instrumental social aims of RE. As a result, violent manifestations of religion were not addressed in RE classes, and were only mentioned during one PSHE lesson:

> And for instance, when the… when you've got the terrorist attacks in France, we looked at that as part of our PSHE and got the Newsround clips [CBBC] that's child-friendly, developing their understanding. And I wasn't afraid to do that, but I think other teachers might be. It's like the Tunisia attacks, we watched that on Newsround and we had a little debate as to what we thought was good or bad (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

While 'true' religions found its place in RE, 'false' ones did not. Not only that, but they were also delegitimised as religions.

By saying that "some people take their religion *too far*" (emphasis added), the children referred to the symbolic boundaries of religion as a construct – within these boundaries, religious beliefs and practice is constructed as appropriate; beyond these boundaries, beliefs and practices are not viewed as religious anymore, but as misguided or misunderstood. By focusing only on positive manifestations of religion(s), and refraining from discussing negative aspects, the RE syllabus is heavily biased. Pearce (2018) argues that by ignoring negative events or controversial topics in RE, schools reinforce the false dichotomy of true/false religion.

Forms of doing religion that were not constructed as 'true' were less likely to be accepted as valid, especially in the public sphere. In the excerpts below, teachers comment on families who chose to remove their child(ren) from RE classes for religious reasons:[6]

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[6] This was the case for a small number of pupils. No pupil whose family identified as Jehovah's Witnesses attended RE, and a couple of pupils whose family identified as Muslim did not attend RE.

And for example, one of my children whose parents hold an extreme Islamic view of the world, they're trying to pick and choose what they involve the child with in the curriculum (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

So, if you do have strong views, you can withdraw your child from that learning. So that tolerance, and that mutual appreciation of what somebody believes and why they believe it and the tenets of those beliefs, you're losing out on if the families aren't committed to that broad and balanced understanding. And some religions, or *some interpretations of some religions*, as such, they don't feel that children should have that level of education (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

So you get your odd few, that don't see [RE] as important or have… possibly been subject to other people that they live with at home, possibly they don't have the same views as we do about, you know, being open and accepting everybody, and you can be met with a bit of resistance… (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

These comments epitomise tensions that emerge when other forms of doing religion are encountered. Families who chose to remove their child(ren) from RE were perceived as illiberal and intolerant, and were othered. For instance, in Miss Nolan's comment, a clear distinction is made between the (illiberal) out-group and the (liberal) in-group, as she uses the personal pronouns 'they' and 'we' (i.e. "*they* don't have the same views as *we* do," emphases added). Waikar argues that such a discursive practice results in the 'othering' of communities that are constructed "in opposition to' the allegedly superior Western values" (2018: 155).

Later on during the interview, Miss Nolan clearly located the in-group (allegedly superior culture) within ('Golden Rule') Christianity:

We appreciate everybody for being an individual… and then when we're teaching children that, and some children come along – or some parents come along and say, "Well actually no, I want my child to be different! They're not gonna learn that!" And I think it's a shame because we are trying… And that's why in society… it has a knock-on effect on society, because I think people who outside on the street and are like "Oh yeah, Muslims don't care about our country and they're gonna kill everyone" and they're gonna do this and this, they're very narrow-reminded and they don't see the real picture because they've chosen not to listen… I don't know… it's such a difficult one!! But I do find it infuriating when children go, "Oh I'm not allowed to learn about that." Why are you not allowed to learn about Christianity when you're living in an English country? When we are teaching everybody about that religion, and that religion, and that religion! Do you know what I mean? [...] And that's what infuriates me. But it goes further than just religion! It goes further than them just not taking part in a religious activity! It's getting to the point now

> where they're trying to be withdrawn from music lessons because suddenly it's not part of education; they're not allowed to take part in dancing lessons as part of PE because it's not thought of… And that's what really infuriates me (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

Miss Nolan's comments suggest that Englishness is constructed as shaped by ('Golden Rule') Christianity. This is especially clear when she says, "Why are you not allowed to learn about Christianity when you're living in an English country?" In Chapter 5, I show how Englishness was further constructed as rooted in Christianity as the school adopted a sacramental approach to religion during acts of collective worship.

## 4.4.   Summary

In this chapter, I demonstrated that typological, descriptive phenomenology informed the teaching of RE at Alexander Parkes, and that an instrumental approach to religion was adopted in RE (Ipgrave, 2012a). I showed that religions in RE were constructed through the WRP, and were thus viewed as fixed categories that could be studied in silos. Religion as lived was usually ignored, and the content of RE classes was often controlled by teachers, which left little room for personal lived experiences to be foregrounded. As a result, children tended to hold essentialist constructions of religions. While it has been shown in research that such an approach to 'learning about religious traditions'[7] can do a disservice to religious communities who may feel alienated (e.g. Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010; Benoit, forthcoming; Ipgrave, 2012a), the findings show that it in fact did a disservice to all children in the school, regardless of their (non-)religious background, since pupils did not learn about religious traditions in a manner that could help them navigate a religiously diverse world, or to build up accurate knowledge about the complexity and diversity of (non-)religious beliefs and practices. As a result, the

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[7] As stated in Attainment Target 2 in the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (BCC, 2007).

instrumental social aims of RE (such as promoting community cohesion, fostering tolerance) were not met as stereotypes about religion(s) were (re)produced.

Findings also show that discursive constructions of religion(s) were informed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity and a universal hermeneutics. Participants constructed 'true' religions as sharing the same 'truth' and values, and as promoting 'the good life' (Ammerman, 1997; 2017). Conversely, violent manifestations of religion and 'destructive spiritualities were discursively constructed as expressions of 'false' religion, since they did not conform to the Golden Rule Christian "everyday virtues of doing good" (1997: para. 40). 'True' religions were further categorised into 'good/liberal religions' (i.e. mainstream Judeo-Christian traditions), and 'bad/illiberal religions' (i.e. non-Judeo-Christian traditions and Jehovah's Witnesses). Such constructions resulted in an 'us/them' dualism, whereby the in-group was located in 'good' religion generally, and ('Golden Rule') Christianity more specifically, and the 'generalised other' was located in 'bad' religion.

As 'true' religion was anchored in 'Golden Rule' Christianity, 'world religions' were located in the realm of everyday morality, and were constructed as sharing a universal set of common values. RE became a vehicle that was used to instil a moral code into children, which explains why the topic was regularly conflated with other topics such as PSHE, which in many cases was constructed as the 'secular' equivalent to RE. By adopting a universal approach to religion, teachers believed they could transcend religious differences, and therefore remain inclusive of all pupils, regardless of their (non-)religious backgrounds. Consequently, contradictory and opposing religious absolutes at Alexander Parkes were ignored, and a universal theology of religion was adopted.

Some teachers, such as Mr Blackburn or Miss Bunch, were aware of the limitations of these frameworks, but explained that they were unsure whether it would be accepted (firstly by parents, but also by the wider community and the media) if schools were to challenge children's own epistemological and ontological forms of religious meaning. This is partly because adult participants' understandings of religion were largely framed by liberalism – they did not feel comfortable engaging with pupils' theologies as they located faith in the private realm, and therefore within the context of home and the family rather than the context of the state institutional space, which was understood as secular (Hemming, 2011b). This also reflects the realities of the context within which they teach, and the difficulties they face in ensuring parents remain satisfied.

The findings in this chapter show that the common approach whereby the 'religious' and the 'secular' are constructed as binaries did not match participants' lived experiences. While the dialectic relation between the religious and the secular is further evidenced during assemblies (see Chapter 5) and church-led activities (see Chapter 6), in this chapter, I showed that teachers allowed the secular to permeate RE classrooms. As teachers promoted 'inclusivity' and aimed to promote social cohesion, they framed religions along secular lines. This consequently led to the marginalisation of religion, particularly in the public sphere (Ipgrave, 2017). If RE is to genuinely contribute to social cohesion, teachers cannot adopt a 'descriptive' phenomenological approach to RE, but should instead provide children with an opportunity to understand what it means to exist religiously in the world, and to engage in conversations about 'truth' – even if this means listening to contrasting and opposing viewpoints:

> There are some who remind us that RE isn't just or mainly about community relations and there is truth in that but there are areas of the RE curriculum where stereotypical attitudes and prejudices will prevent open-ended, open-minded engagement with what is being studied. That is not to say that young people will not be critical of or disagree with what they are learning but the learning process should not be hampered by pre-existing biases. These have to be addressed and this may be an uncomfortable and challenging process for teachers (Miller, 2014: 11).

This, however, may feel unachievable to teachers who worry about parents' (and the wider community's) reactions if children are exposed to values that do not conform to the ones that parents wish to instil.

While secularism informed the construction of religion in RE, the religious also informed the 'secular space' of the school. For example, 'secular' school values were seen as aligned with (or even anchored within) religion. This shows some latent interrelationship between the religious and the secular, as recognised within the post-secular framework (Knott, 2005), which suggests that "the borders between public and private, religious and secular spaces are […] more fluid and permeable than previously understood" (Lytra, 2019). Following his ethnographic research on religion in two primary schools, Hemming (2011; 2015) also challenges the simplistic and reductionist binary between the public and private realms, and between religion and the non-religious. Rather, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that religion can occupy a legitimate place in the public sphere as long as it serves to promote universal morals and values. If religious practices or beliefs went beyond the realm of every day morality, this is when teachers reframed religion as belonging to the private sphere. Religion in public life was

therefore constructed as discrete – a position which contrasts with the way fervent religious believers construct religion, and which privileges Western discourses.

# Chapter 5.   Religion as Mediated through the Acts of Collective Worship: A Sacramental Approach

While I demonstrated in Chapter 4 that Alexander Parkes adopted an instrumental approach to religion in RE classes, in this chapter I reflect on how the school took a different approach to religion in acts of collective worship, during which there was an "openness to the possibility of God" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 30). Ipgrave (2102a) calls this a sacramental approach:

> A *sacramental* approach supports the relationship between ultimate and penultimate required by religious sensibilities, even when the school's life and learning is framed in predominantly secular terms, by acknowledging the possibility of something greater beyond the confines of the material and the human. Designated moments for religion, such as RE lessons and collective worship, although they may be restricted in time, are open portals to the challenges and possibilities of a greater mystery and infinite meaning that continues to exist even

when those portals are closed. There is an element of experiential learning in a *sacramental* approach as it generates more-than-cognitive responses from the students, encouraging a sense of "awe and wonder" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 44; emphases in original).

While the school seemed to codify the relationship with God along 'broadly' Christian norms, and normalised Christianity in the public space, most children interviewed demonstrated that they exercised their own authority as they reconstructed the meaning of the school prayer in order to make it their own. These findings corroborate with Hemming's (2015) and Shillitoe and Strhan's (2020), and demonstrate that fears of indoctrination may be misplaced. However, the findings presented in this chapter attest to the influence that the school as a structure can have over children's discursive constructions of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular. The chapter highlights the need to further uncover latent discourses that reproduce the in-group's cultural values as aligned with Christianity.

## 5.1. Assemblies at Alexander Parkes: Where the 'Religious' and the 'Secular' meet?

In their narratives, participants used the term 'assembly' instead of collective worship. As Mrs Jennings (RE Coordinator) explained, "Whether we call it 'assembly' or 'collective worship,' to us it's the same difference." This is common practice in most primary and secondary schools, where 'assembly' and 'collective worship' have become conflated, despite their fundamental differences in meaning and practice (Smith and Smith, 2013). However, when I explicitly asked adult participants to explain to me the difference between the two, they all clarified that collective worship usually took place *during* assemblies. The term 'collective worship' did not come up spontaneously in participants' narratives, and I did not observe any instance where it was used in the school context. With the exception of Zahra (who opted out of assemblies for religious reasons), no child participant understood what collective worship meant. From this point onwards, I use the term 'assembly' when referring to school gatherings, whether they include an act of collective worship or not, in  order to comply with participants' narratives. I will, however, also use the term 'collective worship' when explicitly referring to the act of religious practice itself.

At Alexander Parkes, assemblies were usually fifteen minutes' long, and took place before lunchtime. Every assembly was supposed to end with a brief act of collective worship (usually in the form of a hymn, followed by the school prayer – see Appendix G), though I observed that on occasions the act of collective worship was cancelled if the teacher ran out of time, or if children were ready for lunch. A rota was implemented so that every teacher took it in turn to lead the assembly. On Mondays and Thursdays, children were gathered in the great hall by Key Stages. These assemblies were based on a weekly theme, which had been selected by the RE coordinator (see Appendix F). Children were usually told a story (which might or might not have been religious in character), from which a moral was usually drawn. Tuesday assemblies were supposed to take place in the classroom and be led by the class teacher, but every teacher interviewed admitted that they did not follow this requirement due to limited time, and the pressure to teach more and more subjects:

> We used to have one every day. But the idea is that we still have a class assembly, so although it's not in the hall, you still have one in your class, you have collective worship in your classroom, so it *should* still be happening… [*Smiles*] (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

No child interviewed could remember having had an assembly in class either.

Wednesday assemblies were called 'song practice,' though some participants also referred to it as "hymn practice." During my observations, all songs but two (*From the Tiny Ant* and *Power in Me*) were Christian hymns:

> On Wednesday it's hymn practice, where it's lots of songs about God… (Lucy, KS2 Pupil)

> I think most of the religious songs that we do, they're mostly about God and Jesus (Ben, KS2 Pupil).

> On a Wednesday you are singing – it's called a singing assembly. It might as well be called a praise assembly though because that's more honest, but it's called a singing assembly. For me, if it was a singing assembly there'd be non-religious songs. So, for me it's actually a praise session. It's like going to a… what do we call it… it's like attending worship at a church in that sense, in that all the songs are faith-based, there's a prayer at the end of the session so effectively it's an act of worship, like a service in a church! (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

As well as 'regular assemblies,' there were also 'celebration assemblies' during which certificates and awards were distributed – children were rewarded for their accomplishments in numeracy and literacy, good behaviour, attendance, and their personal achievements (e.g. sports competitions, music certificates, community engagement). Celebration assemblies were held every Friday afternoon, and usually lasted 45 minutes. They were led by the Headteacher or the Deputy Headteacher who also led the act of collective worship at the end – unless they ran out of time (which happened on occasions).

Children also took part in 'special assemblies' – these were usually performed in front of families and the local CofE vicar. Pupils would rehearse and perform for special occasions, such as Harvest, Christmas, Mothers' Day, Easter, or the end of the academic year (Year 6' leavers' assembly). With the exception of the leavers' assembly, all special assemblies were broadly Christian in character.

Religious practice and the transcendent did not encompass the whole school life of Alexander Parkes Primary School, and were not observed outside of specific activities, such as acts of collective worship and special assemblies. In these instances, the religious and the transcendent were allowed to enter the secular space. By inviting children to engage in religious practice through acts of collective worship and special assemblies, but not at other moments in the curriculum, Alexander Parkes adopted a sacramental approach to religion, thereby "entailing the demarcation within the school of places and moments open to religious significance" (Ipgrave, 2012: 32). Such an approach to religion is consistent with Davie's theory of vicarious religion, which constructs religious practice as only occurring "at particular moments" (2007b: 28).

While adult participants did not differentiate between assemblies and collective worship in their daily narratives, they explicitly did so in interviews when they were asked about the role and place of religion within their school. Teachers tended to construct assembly activities as non-religious, even when religious stories were told. In such case, religions were used instrumentally as vehicles to promote universal values and reinforce the school ethos. They did not disrupt liberal framings of the 'religious' and the 'secular' since religious beliefs and practices were narrated, rather than performed. On the other hand, they viewed the act of collective worship itself as religious – or more specifically,

as Christian – practice. In the excerpt below, Mr Bartlett (KS1 Teacher) compares collective worship with Christian practice, and assembly activities with 'secular' PSHE themes:

MR BARTLETT:    The way that collective worship mainly works here is hymn practice, singing Christian hymns.

CÉLINE:             Right.

MR BARTLETT:    And in assemblies, it's more PSHE based, the assemblies… are more of a gathering and it's more PSHE based.

By making a clear distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' adult participants' narratives were once again framed by liberal understandings of religion, whereby the 'religious' and the 'secular' are constructed as binaries, and religion (unless it serves as a vehicle to promote the 'good life') is confined to the private realm. As a result, some adult participants (especially those who identified as atheist or Humanist) did not construct Christian practice as having a legitimate place in the state institutional space. They believed that Christianity should only be taught in RE, where an instrumental approach to religion was adopted. As these participants did not locate religious practice as occupying a legitimate place in the public realm, several of them advocated for the abolition of acts of collective worship:[8]

> I don't want to participate in [acts of collective worship] at all, but at the same time, as a teacher I've got to try and engender the ethos of the school. Now, why, as a non-church school, we're actually enforcing collective worship, I don't know. But it must be to do… I presume it must be to do with what we have to do… in terms of government guidance… but it leaves me feeling intensely uncomfortable (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

> Well, this is a *personal* opinion. My *personal* opinion is that I agree with France, in that state schools are not the place for collective worship. They are a place for *study,* and that impartial *study* of religions, and their history, and their beliefs and what it means to be part of that culture, tradition, to be part of that religion – the study is important, but the balance should be equal, and it shouldn't have any more part in the make-up of the school (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

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[8] Teachers did not advocate for assemblies to be altogether abolished.

Both Mr Holden and Mr Blackburn explained their discomfort in relation to what they viewed as an overtly confessional approach to religion, which they believed should be limited to the private sphere. Later that day, Mr Blackburn told me that acts of collective worship in state-funded non-faith-based schools "seem[ed] at odds" with him, and was "an anachronism," therefore reproducing (post-)colonial Western discourses whereby modern societies are constructed as 'secular,' and state institutions free from the influence of religion (Dubuisson, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2000; King, 1999; McCutcheon 2001).

Other teachers shared discomfort with Christian practice in school, as they felt it invaded their own privacy:

> I don't like clasping my hands together and bowing my head because I don't do that, but then I don't know whether… in most assemblies I have to sit like a child, in order to encourage children to sit like children and so I don't know whether I'm kind of being a bit rude if I'm not doing it, or whether I'm doing the wrong thing by clasping my hands… (Miss Bunch, EYFS Teacher).

> You know, as a member of staff, I have to sit there in assemblies and we sing religious songs, we say prayers… and I don't believe in any of it. And I feel intensely uncomfortable with it, and I know a lot of other staff, they're not Christians! (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

Not all adult participants shared these views, however. Others either welcomed or were indifferent to the fact that Alexander Parkes, as a state-funded non-faith-based school, was used as a space for Christian acts of collective worship:

> Christianity seems a bit… it's represented more than the others, but […] as long as the others are mentioned I don't think it's necessarily bad that Christianity crops up more often than the others (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

| CÉLINE: | How do you feel about the fact that it's predominantly Christian? |
| MR BARTLETT: | It doesn't bother me, but I guess Britain historically is a Christian… it's got a Christian base. |

| CÉLINE: | According to the legislation, RE and collective worship have to be mainly Christian. What do you think about that? |
|---|---|
| MISS NOLAN: | [Pulls a face and sighs]… Yes I think it should, because of the country in which we live. Because originally, Christianity was *the* main religion within our country, and therefore, any other religions have come and joined us… so yes I do believe that Christianity should be the main religion […]. |

During her interview, Miss Nolan explained that it was important that acts of collective worship remained predominantly Christian, because children needed to be aware of the (historical) influence of Christianity in English culture. As Shillitoe and Strhan summarise, "Christianity remains deeply culturally embedded within public institutions such as schools against the backdrop of the country becoming both increasingly non-religious and religiously more diverse" (2020: 2).

While Mogra (2017) presented findings that showed that the majority of teachers in English primary schools tend to view collective worship in a positive light, these findings offer a more nuanced picture. Disagreements over whether broadly Christian acts of collective worship should be maintained or whether assemblies should be devoid of religious practice encapsulate the two main views that have been in conflict in education since the 1944 Education Act:

> (a) a liberalised establishmentarian view which aims to secure the influence of Christianity in English culture by ensuring the predominance of its study in state schools and the continuing practice of Christian worship, and (b) the liberal secular view which seeks to foster an empathetic, yet critical, understanding of the major world religions and secular worldviews; although Christianity is given prominence in this enterprise, it is not seen as the task of state schools to promote any particular religion or ideology or to practise worship (Bates, 1996: 85-86).

Both positions were found at Alexander Parkes. While Mr Blackburn, Mr Holden and Miss Bunch adopted a 'liberal secular' view, other teachers such as Miss Nolan adopted the 'liberalised establishmentarian' view. These findings corroborate with previous research that shows that teachers who identify as non-religious are more likely to be wary of religions, including Christianity (Miller and McKenna, 2011). In the case of Alexander Parkes, atheists and Humanists all adopted a liberal secular view. On the other hand, Christians, nominal Christians, or teachers who were "unsure" of their faith, were more likely to adopt a 'liberalised establishmentarian' view. Such a view shows that the liberal theory of secularisation, which poses religion as being confined to the private sphere is

too limiting. The post-secular paradigm is more adequate here, as it allows for non-binaries and does not necessarily locate religion in the private sphere. It better reflects the complex ways in which religion may or may not be discursively constructed as occupying a legitimate place in the public space.

By constructing Christianity as occupying an important place in English culture, Mr Bartlett's and Miss Nolan's views were aligned with Hervieu-Léger's (2000) concept of religion as a 'chain of memory.' They both saw the school as playing an important role in the transmission of religious knowledge and traditions, but also in the "continuity of the community" (2000: 160). Through the use of the possessive adjective "our" and the personal pronoun "us," Miss Nolan explicitly constructed Christianity as the in-group's religious cultural heritage, and created a clear distance with the "other religions." Mrs Mészános did something similar, as she made a distinction between "Christianity" and "the others." Such discursive practices resulted in an 'us/them' dualism (Waikar, 2018), and located the in-group within Christianity. Taira refers to this as "*stereotypical dualism* in which the object of the stereotype is split between two halves, one idealised and one demonised (2013: 33, emphasis in original), which shapes how participants constructed collective identities and regulated them.

By constructing the in-group's culture as originating from and still embedded in Christianity, teachers took part in an exercise of "ethno-denominational identification" (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 160). As a result, Christianity became an "ethnic religion" (or "ethno-religion"):

> The notion of ethno-religion here aptly describes the system of signs in the service of religious references – which retain their confessional character, thereby making reference to a civil religion questionable, in that the function of these references is to preserve a sense of community which is in danger of being trivialized […] (2000: 160).

Most children shared similar discursive constructions of Christianity. Excerpts below exemplify how they tended to locate Christianity within Englishness:

> Some teachers like Mr Conway and Mr Davies they talk about it… Like of themselves… But some [Teaching Assistants] come from a different country, and we don't know if they are [religious] or not (Sam, KS2 Pupil).

> CÉLINE:    Since you've been learning about these different religions, maybe you can help me with this... What does it mean to be a Christian? [...]

| | |
|---|---|
| CONNOR: | An English person. |

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | What about Mr Blackburn? Do you reckon he's got a religion? |
| BEN: | I'd say he's Christian as well. |
| CÉLINE: | Again, what makes you say that Ben? |
| BEN: | I think it's the same thing as all the teachers in the school. |
| DAISY: | Yes. |
| CÉLINE: | So, are all the teachers in the school Christian? |
| CHARLIE: | No, 'cos there's some from like different countries… |
| DAISY: | … Yeah, different countries. |
| BEN: | Yeah, like different continents. |
| CÉLINE: | So, if people come from a different country, they have a different religion. |
| BEN: | Yeah… |
| CHARLIE: | Yeah… No! Not always. My dad comes from Jamaica and he's a Christian. |
| CÉLINE: | Right, I see… So could there be teachers in this school who are not Christian? |
| DAISY: | [*To her friends*] The lady in Year 3? Who looks after the person in the wheelchair? |
| BEN: | Oh yeah, because she's Russian! |
| CHARLIE: | Yeah. |
| DAISY: | Yeah, she *is* Russian. |

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | What about your head teacher, if you had to guess? Do you think he has a religion? |
| ALL FOUR BOYS: | Yeah… |
| CÉLINE: | Which one? |
| OLIVER: | Christian. |
| AJIT: | Yeah! |
| CÉLINE: | What makes you say that? |
| AJIT: | It's just that… Most English people are Christian. |

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | If you had to guess, do you think your teacher's religious? If yes, which religion? |
| ZAHRA: | Christianity. |

| CÉLINE: | Why? |
|---|---|
| ZAHRA: | Because I think she's British. |
| CÉLINE: | And are British people Christian? |
| ZAHRA: | Yeah. |
| CÉLINE: | Do you all agree with that? |

[*Paige and Jessica nod along*].

According to the Headteacher, such a construction was also shared by parents:

> Yeah. As a Headteacher, I had a similar… It wasn't a complaint, but he [pupil's parent] said you know, "You go on and on and on and on about Christianity, just because you're a Christian," and I had to say, "Actually I'm not, currently I'm an atheist. Agnostic at best" (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

In the excerpts above, Christianity is clearly located in Englishness, and vice-versa. As a result of such discursive constructions, children tended to conclude that their (white) English teachers were Christian. On the other hand, they could not situate the Teaching Assistant in Year 3, as she was foreign (she was actually Polish, not Russian). This data is significant as (white) English teachers came to embody Christianity in the school.

Recent work in the sociology of religion has started to include the sociology of the body, in order to acknowledge the importance of tangible expressions of religion and religiosity, and of practices and rituals:

> This focus on embodiment is important because it is a corrective to the excessive concentration on religious belief and knowledge in much mainstream sociology of religion. Religion is not simply an assembly of beliefs and values, but obviously includes ritual practices, the use of material objects and the respect for place (Turner, 2013: 1).

In the case of Alexander Parkes Primary School, (white) English embodiment resulted in an assumed belonging to Christianity. Although not all teachers identified as Christian – some of them actually held anti-religious views – they still clasped their hands during acts of collective worship and recited prayers. As a result, teachers replicated and re-inscribed Christian forms of habitus, regardless of their (non-)religious background. Consequently, children further conflated Christianity with (white) Englishness, and were less likely to identify non-English people as Christians:

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | So you, Lucy, have no religion, and you girls are Christians, and you have a Muslim friend... and you've never seen any difference of treatment? |
| MEGAN: | No. |
| LUCY: | You do have, like... |
| MEGAN: | … mixed… |
| LUCY: | … mixed groups… |
| MEGAN: | … race… |
| LUCY: | Like you've got groups of friends and one might be Christian, not religious and one might be Muslim... |
| MEGAN: | Like different race… of people… |
| LUCY: | Yeah different race but they all get on like really well. |

| | |
|---|---|
| SAIRA: | Like some people who just don't understand, they just take the mick out of it… and do stuff… because people make up stuff about them… |
| CÉLINE: | Which religion is more likely to be picked up on? |
| SAIRA: | People who are like Paki… Who are Pakistanis… |
| RAINNA: | People who come from different countries, like India… |

Similar findings, whereby ethnicity and religion are conflated, have been presented in other research (e.g. Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Day, 2011; Benoit, forthcoming; Smith, 2005b). In their research, Madge *et al.* (2014) showed that young people tended to construct white people as Christians, and Asians as Muslims. Kuussisto and Kallioniemi also demonstrated how habitual practices can be "interpreted as processes of national building" (2014: 156), thereby constructing an idealised notion of nationhood. In the case of Alexander Parkes, it created normative boundaries between 'us' (English culture and Christian heritage) and 'them'. The data presented here reinforce the findings presented in Chapter 4, where I argued that despite its commitment to social cohesion, the school was not always successful in fostering positive community relations. As Smith (2005b) showed in his work, although primary school pupils value the opportunity to mix across cultures, religions, and races, identity issues remain.

As children located religion within the realm of everyday morality (see Chapter 4), they did not think of their white English teachers as devout Christians. Being Christian meant sharing the same culture, rather than the same religion *per se*:

| CÉLINE: | If you had to guess, what would you say your teacher's religion is? If he's got one… Maybe he doesn't? |
|---|---|
| CHARLIE: | Christian. |
| BEN: | Yeah, Christian. |
| CÉLINE: | What makes you say that? |
| BEN: | 'Cos he doesn't pray either to any religion. |
| CÉLINE: | In assemblies? |
| BEN: | Yeah. |

In the excerpt above, Ben constructs 'Christian' as a marker of cultural belonging. In the section below, I explain that children did not necessarily construct the school prayer as Christian (or even as religious practice), which is why Ben did not see any tension between his teacher not praying "to any religion," despite regularly reciting the school prayer.

Findings suggest that Christianity at Alexander Parkes was narrowly defined. By reducing Christianity to an 'ethno-religion' rather than as a metaphysical worldview in its own right, Christian communities that did not conform were likely to feel alienated. This may have been the case for children of Jehovah's Witnesses. As their voices are missing from this project, it is not possible to draw any definitive conclusion and more research on their lived experiences is needed. It was, however, the case for children such as Lucas who, although he identified as Christian, explained that he preferred not to tell his friends about going to church every Sunday, as he was worried they would "take the mick out of [him]:"

> You kinda have to keep your religion quiet, cos there's lots of people that you don't trust, and even my friend Giovanni, I don't trust him because he goes to the school where everybody goes, so I wouldn't want people from there to know so I just keep it quiet. And even if he asked me, I'd pretend not to hear him, so I don't have to get myself into... I don't have to say I'm a Christian. So, I don't tell him or anybody about it (Lucas, KS2 Pupil).

Lucas also talked about his mother getting him a Bible, and believing in biblical stories and in Jesus. As Lucas' orientation to Christianity differed from 'Golden Rule' Christianity, which the school normalised, he felt that he could not talk about deeper meanings of faith for fear of being mocked. His comment demonstrate that religious identity was not necessarily constructed as problematic, however, religious practice was.

Ipgrave (2012b) and Ipgrave and McKenna (2008) presented similar findings when investigating young people's attitudes to religious diversity in undiverse settings. In his work on secondary schools, Moulin showed that practicing Christians can become 'targets' because of their beliefs, and often prefer not to speak of their views in school (2011: 321).

Understanding Christianity as a cultural sense of belonging, once again, corroborates with Hervieu-Léger's (2000) notion of 'ethno-religion,' and echoes Day's (2011) findings, who argues that many English people are attached to Christianity because it fosters a sense of belonging, and reinforces social and cultural identities, rather than because of its manifest function as a religion. These findings suggest that assemblies, when they maintain a broadly Christian act of collective worship, served to sustain some form of religious transmission and that rather than being broken, the 'chain of memory' has been fragmented (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). While religious transmission *per se* does not happen in a confessional manner, children were nonetheless giving significance to the place of Christianity in their school, which shaped their sense of belonging (or not) within the community of the school and beyond.

## 5.2. "A Sense of Togetherness" anchored in Christianity

Most 'regular assemblies' were teacher-led, with children sitting on the floor and listening to a story. Most stories were about reflecting on a moral, and a universal code to which they should subscribe (Cheetham, 2000). While a minority of assemblies related to a specific 'world religion' (see Appendix F), most of them were theme-specific, and emphasised the common humanity and universal moral code to which all pupils should subscribe (Cheetham, 2000). The aim was for children to learn from religion(s), which were constructed as located within the realm of everyday morality and ethics (Owen, 2011; Ammerman, 1997; 2017). For example, on week 22, teachers read stories from different 'world religions' to promote respect. After each story, they explicitly referred to the religions' universal core values, with an emphasis on respect. For example, after telling children the Buddhist story of Siddhartha and the swan, where the moral of the story was about not hurting animals, one teacher asked children to "try and think about how [they] might think the same even though [their] religion is different:"

> For your next assembly, Year 5 and Year 6 think of the different religions and different beliefs and have a think of how you care for animals. Just because you're not Buddhist doesn't mean you don't care for animals (Teacher addressing KS2 assembly).

The themes covered in 'regular assemblies' were chosen by the RE Coordinator who selected themes that transcended religious and cultural differences (see Appendix F), and could act as "social cement" (Cheetham, 2000: 74). Such an approach to school assemblies is not uncommon, and is reminiscent of the instrumental approach to religion that teachers already adopted in RE classes. While the school adopted a sacramental approach to the act of collective worship itself, the purpose of assemblies was to foster a sense of unity, by emphasising the common grounds between faiths. Teachers' approaches to religion during assembly activities therefore remained instrumental.

On occasions, the emphasis was on our common humanity (Cheetham, 2000). Rather than fostering a sense of unity through religion, moral and values education, teachers framed this through citizenship education. For example, in week 16, children were invited to reflect on the passage of time, meaningful events, and to reflect on their hopes and fears for the new year (see picture 1-5).
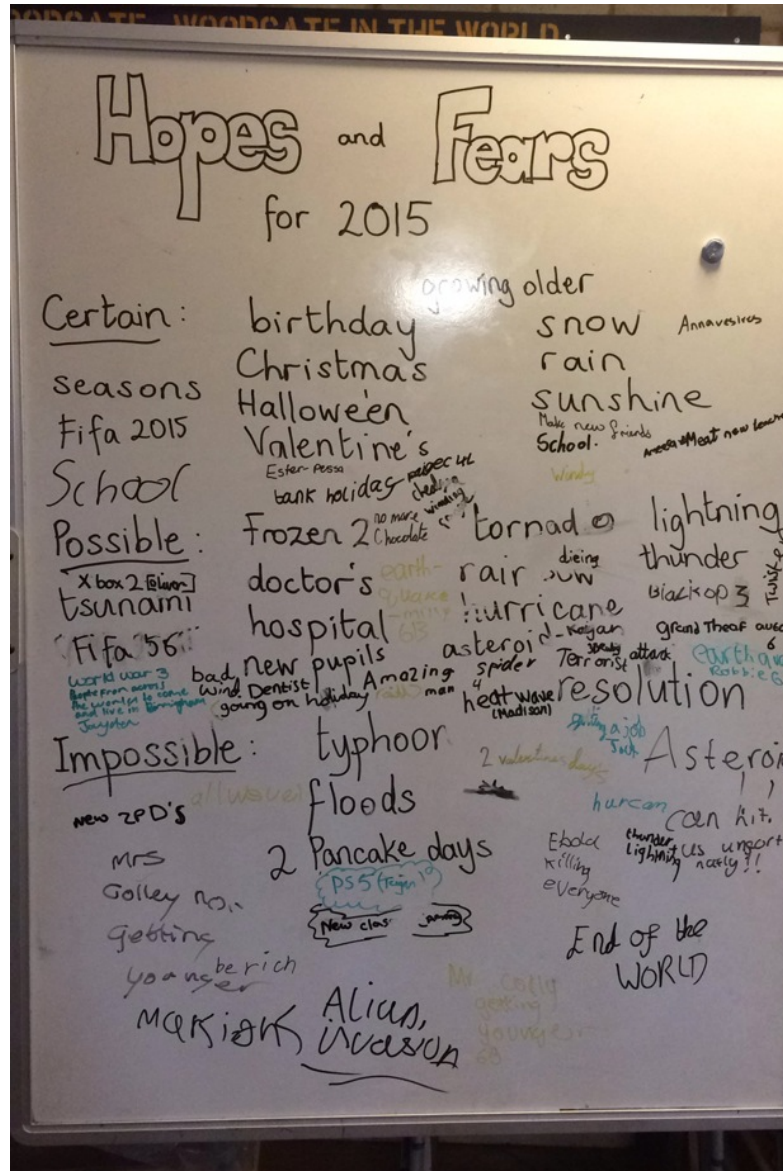
*Picture 5—1 Children's list of Hopes and Fears for the New Year*

For this activity, pupils were asked to reflect collectively on what they knew would happen in 2015 ('certain'), what they thought might happen ('possible'), and what they knew would not happen ('impossible'). The purpose was for children to work together, to realise commonalities between individuals, and to encourage pupils to look after each other.

By focusing on *universal* values, and a common *humanity*, the school fostered a sense of unity and belonging, and adopted a functionalist and instrumental approach to assemblies. During our interview, Mr Holden (KS2 Teacher) – who spoke against acts of

collective worship in state-funded schools – explained that assemblies at Alexander Parkes remained important as they fostered a "sense of togetherness." His view was shared by the majority of participants, including children:

> [Assembly]'s about being together (Bilal, KS2 Pupil).

> [Assemblies] bring everyone together… Like you can see what everybody's done this week, and what everybody's been learning about and all the songs they've learnt this week (Daisy, KS2 Pupil).

> Sometimes you get to see your little sibling (Zahra, KS2 Pupil).[9]

In participants' opinions, assemblies, and by extension acts of collective worship since they occurred during assemblies, played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of community and unity. As a result, religion, in their narratives, was constructed along Durkheimian lines. They viewed its purpose as binding the school together:

> I think collectively our children do need this guidance and support as a whole school and belonging to the family of the school. And because it's such a spread-out building and spread-out classes, we don't get that sense of oneness as a school and so the assembly, you know… in some senses it's the Church of Alexander Parkes if you like, without the religious overtones and the faith implications, but we are asking them to believe in themselves, and to belong to the school community, and be part of something, and wear a uniform which, you know, remind them that they're part of this school… So what makes that a social- and a moral- and a values-led piece of education, and what makes something else a religious piece of education? I don't know. It's a very fine philosophical argument and I don't think that anybody has really thought it through (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

> [The prayer]'s there to try and encourage inclusiveness and a sense of community (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

Through the social practices of assemblies (and the acts of collective worship), 'true' religion was constructed as binding people together, rather than dividing them.

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[9] While Zahra opts out of 'regular assemblies,' she attends the whole-school 'celebration assemblies' on Fridays.

Yet, at Alexander Parkes, a minority of pupils withdrew from assemblies and/or acts of collective worship. Children from families who identified as Jehovah's Witnesses represented the vast majority of the population who opted out of assemblies, followed by a very small number of Muslims.[10] Unfortunately, no child who identified as a Jehovah's Witness volunteered to take part in the study,[11] and their views are therefore excluded from this research project. Unfortunately, it is not possible to draw any definite conclusion regarding their lived experiences of not being able to attend assemblies and/or collective worship. However, it may be assumed that it is unlikely that they would have viewed assemblies as inclusive and fostering a sense of community since they were not able to take part. Consequently, it is likely that the school as an institution had "uneven and differential impacts" on pupils (Celermajer *et al.*, 2019: 5). This project calls for more work to be done with and/or by children of Jehovah's Witnesses in order to shed more light on their experiences of attending/opting out of assemblies.

Children who did not join in assemblies tended to stand out from the majority. Pupils who attended assemblies often explained that some religious minorities were not allowed to join in specific activities because of their non-Christian (and perceived 'illiberal') background:

| | |
|---|---|
| LUCY: | It's when we do an assembly, like Zahra now she has to stay 'cos she didn't really like getting up… Every time she thinks everyone will stare at her so then she just stays and… |
| CÉLINE: | Is she Muslim? |
| LUCY: | She's a Muslim yeah. |
| CÉLINE: | And she used to leave assemblies? |
| MEGAN: | Yeah she used to be in and out, but now she has to stay because basically in assemblies when people see people going out they stare, and they think it's a bit… you know [*Pulls a face to express discomfort, awkwardness*]. |
| ELLA: | So now she just stays but she doesn't sing. |
| MEGAN: | No, she stays out of assemblies now; she won't come it. At all. Only sometimes. If we don't do a hymn practice… If we're not doing any hymns… I don't know, but she doesn't come in anymore. She used to |

---

[10] The Headteacher never confirmed the exact number of pupils concerned, but altogether, fewer than five pupils opted out of assemblies and special assemblies, with the majority of them being in KS1.
[11] Accepting to be interviewed on the topic of religion may have been a difficult decision to make for children from Jehovah's Witnesses, who "are expected to live up to the standards that the Society believes are taught in the Bible" (Liedgren, 2018: 33). Pupils may be navigating a school system where they may feel alienated (see Chapter 4), and may not feel comfortable discussing religion. They may also be used to opting out of activities that are related to religion and therefore spontaneously assumed they could not participate in the research project.

|          |                                                                                                                     |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          | come in after the hymn… But I think it's basically because they're about God and that…                              |
| ELLA:    | Yeah.                                                                                                               |
| MEGAN:   | Even if they're like *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, that's like… it doesn't have any word on God but…           |
| ELLA:    | It's still about…                                                                                                  |
| MEGAN:   | it's still explaining about the Christians so she can't be in the assembly. She's not being disrespectful or anything. |
| ELLA:    | I know.                                                                                                            |
| MEGAN:   | It's just her religion.                                                                                            |

In the excerpt above, Lucy, Ella, and Megan explain that Zahra used to attend assemblies and leave when the act of collective worship would start. However, according to the pupils, this arrangement used to make Zahra uncomfortable. Scourfield *et al.* (2013) shared similar findings where Muslim children expressed feeling embarrassed for physically standing out and drawing attention to themselves by not participating in assemblies and/or acts of collective worship. Foucault's (1991) work on the 'gaze,' or the 'omnipresent eye,' is useful here. It suggests that Zahra felt that her peers were gazing at her when she stood up to leave assembly, and that consequently she embodied otherness. This gaze may have been constitutive of her own sense of identity and (non-)belonging. As a result, Zahra modified her behaviour, and opted out of assemblies altogether, except on Fridays, when she attended celebration assemblies.

These findings suggest that, on that occasion, the school as a social institution may have served to perpetuate dominant ethno-religious power relations as not only did Zahra change her behaviour, but by doing so she conformed to hegemonic discursive constructions of the 'other' who does not assimilate into the (supposedly superior) culture (Celermajer *et al.*, 2019; Minkenberg, 2007; Shain, 2013). In her work on emotions and their influence on the body, and on the relationship of the body with the community, Ahmed (2015) explains that people are shaped by the contact they have with others. In Zahra's case, she reacted (possibly rather than acted) to the gaze of her peers, which resulted in her physically removing her body from the school community during assemblies, therefore demonstrating the community's power of action on the body. In turn, Zahra's knowledge about her place in the school community became bodily, which according to Ahmed, will leave an impression and will continue to inform how Zahra orients herself within the majority culture even beyond the school context: "emotions […]

produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects (2015: 18).

Unfortunately, Zahra did not feel comfortable enough during the interview to share her experience of opting out of assemblies, and the data collected only reflects her peers' views. Yet, the data remains revealing as it shows how 'otherness' was associated with some bodies (such as Zahra's), and not others (such as their own). In this context, Islam was viewed as incompatible with English culture, and as restrictive/'illiberal' as it did not allow its followers the same freedom as the in-group ("it's just her religion," Megan).

Most children shared the view that some religious traditions (and Islam in particular) were restrictive, which resulted in pupils having to leave assembly:

| | |
|---|---|
| AJIT: | Some people in assembly, when we talk about Christian [sic.] they leave assembly, they have permission to leave assembly. |
| JACK: | Before we sing. |
| CÉLINE: | Why? |
| AJIT: | It's just for their religion. |
| […] | |
| JACK: | I think it's embarrassing because when you get up and like… say if you're in another school they'll think you're rude if you leave to go to the toilet, so they might think 'he's so rude!' |

In this excerpt, Jack associates the act of physically removing oneself from the school community with the emotion of embarrassment – which suggests that Zahra may not have been oversensitive to the gaze of her peers (see p. 213). By associating the act of standing out from community notions of idealised culture with embarrassment, Jack implies that children who opted out of assemblies somewhat failed to embody the collective ideal. It is therefore likely that he restricted bodily mobility to the 'other,' as he did not want to experience embarrassment himself, or have this emotion 'stuck' to his body (Ahmed, 2015). Jack further suggests that the relationship between the in-group and the 'other' could also be negatively impacted as physically removing oneself from the majority can be considered rude. Attaching negative emotions to withdrawals from acts of collective worship is not uncommon, and research suggests that it is possible that some parents did not choose to withdraw their children from assemblies/acts of collective worship to

prevent their children from being "lonely and disadvantaged" (Richardson *et al*., 2013: 244).

Adult participants viewed opting out of assemblies as children withdrawing from the school community. They made explicit distinction between the in-group and "strict" ('illiberal') out-groups – the latter being viewed as not compatible with the school's desire for unity (Cheetham, 2000), and failing to embody the collective ideal (Ahmed, 2015):

> One thing I have had is the odd parent is Jehovah's Witness and they sometimes want their children removed from assemblies, which I think… I think they have the right for that because it's a communal act of worship. I don't understand why because they're Christians, so why do they want their children removed from a Christian assembly… I don't get it! (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

> And I think that principle applies to those children who have a very strict religion. They should also be exposed to other religions as well, because by not exposing themselves, they're segregating themselves (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

In her comment, Mrs Mészános only referred to parents – since they were the ones who decided whether their children could attend assemblies/acts of collective worship or not. However, in her comments, Miss Nolan not only automatically transposes the parental religion onto the child, but also the parental decision. This can be problematic from the child's perspective as they may not necessarily embrace their parents' religion or adhere with their parents' position on assemblies/collective worship. As Liedgren explains, "[r]eligious freedom for children is a complex issue" (2018: 31). While on the one hand the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the UN Convention on Human Rights also states that parents have the right to raise children according to their own choice of religion (UN, 1989: art. 14.1; UN, 1948). Consequently, while children are free to choose their religion (or none), they cannot choose to attend assemblies once their parents have sought permission to remove them. For example, in Scourfield *et al.* (2013), one Muslim father explained his decision to remove his son from a non-faith-based school because of the importance given to Christian festivals such as Easter and Christmas, but not to Muslim ones. Children therefore may find themselves navigating complex situations: while they may not agree with their parents' choices (Liedgren, 2018), they can be marginalised by the school community for "segregating themselves," and get blamed for it. Inwood (2015)

and Carr (2015) explain that 'softer' forms of structural racism (where notions of idealised culture replace 'race') can be destructive for minority populations. By valuing assimilation over religious freedom (2018) – not even realising that the children who opted out of assemblies were in fact unlikely to enjoy religious freedom either, and that their agency was likely to be much more limited than their peers' (Scourfield *et al.*, 2013) – Miss Nolan indirectly discriminated against minority-faith children who opted out of assemblies.

Because adult participants viewed assemblies as community-making activities, they actively encouraged children to partake in assemblies, including in the act of collective worship – even when they spoke against it during interviews:

> That was some fantastic singing! So each class will get one marble! (Teacher addressing KS2 Pupils in assembly).

> Teachers join in the singing and recite the prayer. They also encourage children to participate. As a result, I too tend to think of the figures of authority as Christian, or at least of Christian heritage. For example, today, after Mrs Palmer asked children to sing "All Things Bright and Beautiful" and "Colours of the Day" (two hymns), she made the following comment: "Well done to the half of you who sang, shame on the other half who couldn't be bothered…", clearly indicating an expectation to take part in hymn singing (Fieldnotes, 2 July 2015).

> And then we're enforcing children taking part in things, you know, "You're not singing, why aren't you singing?" (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

As a result, it is possible that some children – who did not withdraw from acts of collective worship but who did not wish to take part in it – did not construct Christian practice as inclusive, or as fostering a sense of unity. Although children at Alexander Parkes were not punished for not singing, Smith (2015) argues that insensitivity to children's reasons for not taking part in hymn singing can result in informal segregation and/or in treating groups who do not wish to sing unfairly. By fostering a sense of togetherness through assemblies and acts of collective worship, the school excluded a minority of children from the in-group.

## 5.3. The Act of Collective Worship: A Religious Practice?

In section 5.1, I reflected on embodiment and showed that teachers' roles in assemblies served to inform pupils' construction of Christianity. Embodiment should not solely be understood in terms of physical representations. Another powerful manifest expression of religion resided in the regular attendance to the performative acts of collective worship, during which pupils recited the school prayer and/or sang hymns. During my observations throughout the school year, all songs sung in assemblies were Christian hymns, except on two instances.[12] The school prayer (see Appendix G) was also codified in Christian terms. By doing so, the Headteacher explained that the school was therefore compliant with the law that requires schools to have a daily act of collective worship that is "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character" (ERA 1988). Direct references to God were made in the school prayer (see Appendix G), but also in some of the stories told during assemblies, or during performances for special assemblies:

> Thank you Lord for fruits and veg,
> Thank you Lord for fish and chips,
> Thank you Lord for bags of crisps.
> (Poem read by three Year 4 Pupils during the Harvest Assembly).

> We thank God at Harvest for what we have and think about the ones who have little. Bow your head and close your eyes. […]. Amen.
> (Year 4 Pupil, reading a text for the Harvest Assembly).

> Dear God, we pray for those who can't be here to celebrate Harvest because of work…
> Amen.
> (Year 4 Pupil, Harvest Assembly).

> Dear God, thank you for Christmas.
> (KS1 Pupil, Nativity Assembly).

> Lord, thank you for my friends and family, I love them so much.
> (KS1 Pupil, Nativity Assembly).

---

[12] Although the focus here is on daily educational discourses and therefore on 'regular' assemblies, it must be noted that the 'Leavers' Assembly' for Year 6 Pupils did not contain any Christian hymn, and that children sang pop music's choruses or hit songs, such as 'Uptown Funk' (Mark Ronson ft. Bruno Mars).

Thank you Lord for all the new life we see after Easter. Help us to share with others. Amen. (KS1 Pupil, Easter Assembly).

In these examples, God is referred to as a person rather than a concept, thus mirroring religious practice, seemingly "inviting a suspension of disbelief" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 37).

Yet, the majority of children did not interpret these activities as religious practice, despite its religious language and the use of Christian embodied techniques (described below). On several occasions, pupils told me that their school was not religious, despite the fact that they regularly prayed to God or sang Christian hymns. When I asked children to clarify their positions, in many cases they explained that these were not *Christian* rituals, but *school* rituals:

CÉLINE: What kind of prayer do you have?

HARVEY: The school one.


CÉLINE: Would you say this school is religious?

BEN: No.

CÉLINE: Why not?

BEN: We do sing like songs about the Lord, and we do pray… We don't, like, 'pray pray'… We've got our school prayer.

CÉLINE: Right, so you sing songs about the Lord, and you pray, and yet it's not a religious school, why not?

BEN: …

CÉLINE: Anyone wanna help Ben?

[…]

BEN: We don't have like Bibles…

DAISY: Yeah, we don't have any Bibles.

CHARLIE: But we don't pray to a certain god or a certain religion, we just pray to like… We don't really pray to anything… We just do this sort of little prayer where we say, "God bless Alexander Parkes school blah blah blah."

The children in these excerpts talked about the school prayer, which they recited most days, at the end of assemblies. They described the prayer as being devoid of religiosity,

despite the fact that it addressed God, and ended with "Amen." One possible explanation is that children's framing was informed by liberalism, and they therefore did not construct the school prayer as religious because it was located in the public realm. However, the limitations of the liberal theory of secularisation have already been exposed, as per the post-liberal paradigm. A more plausible explanation is that children's discursive constructions of the 'religious' and the 'secular' are more fluid than adults' binary constructions (Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020). In this section, I explore how children acted in relation to the prayer, which may reflect how they acted in relation to religion (Lee, 2015; Shillitoe, 2018).

As children did not construct the school prayer as Christian, and did not interpret it as religious practice, they therefore viewed the prayer as suitable for everyone, regardless of beliefs and (non-)religious backgrounds:

| CÉLINE: | Is the prayer of a particular religion? |
|---|---|
| OLIVER: | It can be, but it can be for other religions as well. |
| AJIT: | It don't really matter. |
| CÉLINE: | Is it a Christian prayer? |
| ALL: | No! |
| AJIT: | It's something for any god that you want to pray to. |

Despite the presence of Christianity in the institutional space, the structure of the school was constructed as neutral. If pupils opted out of assemblies, children did not perceive it to be because of the Christian and possibly exclusive nature of the act of worship, but because other religious traditions, such as Islam, were constructed as restrictive and incompatible with the school's values:

| JASMINE: | Like Zahra, she had to go outside, because of her religion… [… I think she's from Iran, maybe? And when we sing songs about Jesus, she has to go out. |
|---|---|
| MIA: | Even if it's not songs about Jesus, she has to go out. |
| JASMINE: | Well, they mostly are… |
| LUCAS: | Is it because she's a Muslim or something? |

This conversation echoes findings presented earlier, when Ella and Jasmine explained that Zahra could not attend assemblies because of her religion (see pp. 211; 217). As the structure of the school was viewed as neutral, children from religious minorities who opted out of assemblies represented 'illiberal' traditions. As a result, these children's bodies (especially those of children who identified / had been identified as Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses) came to physically represent 'otherness' (Ahmed, 2015). This may further explain why they chose not to participate in focus groups, as they possibly knew that they represented difference and stood out from the collective ideal, or that they could be associated with negative emotions (Ahmed, 2015; Celermajer *et al.*, 2019; Inwood, 2015). [13] More work on emotions and how children's embodiment is experienced, imagined, and lived within the school setting is sorely needed in order to further understand children's constructions and the power relations that are at stake.

Rather than constructing the Christianised prayer as exclusive of other faiths, children concluded that other faiths were too restrictive to allow participation in the school prayer. Christianity was normalised, and taken for granted in the perceived 'neutral' daily educational discourses. Consequently, Christianity became the 'unmarked referent' for religion, especially in terms of rituals and practices (Hemming, 2011b; Shillitoe, forthcoming).

One of the key reasons why pupils did not think the school prayer was Christian was because they did not construct 'God' as the Christian God, but rather as 'god,' an intermediary noun which could be interpreted individually:

| CÉLINE: | Right. And that school prayer that you say in assemblies, is it for a particular religion or all religions? |
|---|---|
| HARVEY: | No, 'cos we say 'God bless'... Like we don't say 'Jesus' or 'Allah'... So, because we say 'God bless' it's for like all the religions. |

| CÉLINE: | Is the prayer of a particular religion? |
|---|---|
| OLIVER: | It can be, but it can be for other religions as well. |

---

[13] Although Zahra took part in the project, she did not speak during the focus group. Although peers in a different group had suggested Zahra was uncomfortable with opting out of acts of collective worship, Zahra just nodded along when the participants in her focus groups said they were fine with collective worship.

| | |
|---|---|
| AJIT: | It don't really matter. |
| CÉLINE: | Is it a Christian prayer? |
| ALL: | No! |
| AJIT: | It's something for any god that you want to pray to. |

It doesn't have to be God. It can be your Nana or something (Mia).

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | So is the prayer for the Christian god or... |
| MEGAN: | [*Interrupting*] Any god, not just God-God... that's what I call Him! |
| CÉLINE: | Who's God-God? |
| MEGAN: | Our God. That's why I call him God-God. |
| LUCY: | God-God is... Well, God for me, is like any god... like anybody's god, like it can be the Sikh god and it can be the Judaism god... |
| ELLA: | I think it's like individual people... So, for me I might... Maybe for Zahra she might have been thinking about Allah and Megan might be talking to someone else. |
| MEGAN: | [*Smiles*] God-God! |
| CÉLINE: | So that's why you think the prayer isn't a Christian prayer? |
| MEGAN: | 'Cos it's the school prayer and it's just... it doesn't matter who you're talking to... She could be talking to an angel... She could be talking to anyone she loves. If I was non-religious, I could be talking to my granddad who's dead. Ella could be talking to her nan... |

Children constructed practices as collective, but beliefs as individual. This echoes Day's (2011) findings, who demonstrated how different people may belong to the same 'world religion,' and yet hold individualised beliefs. In their research on children's attitudes to praying in schools, Shillitoe and Strhan (2020: 9) also found that children's constructions of beliefs "were rooted in the everyday worlds they inhabited and the people they knew and encountered."

By adapting the school prayer, and choosing to pray to their nan or another relative, children did not do so in defiance. On the contrary, they believed they were compliant with the social practice, since they constructed the prayer to be adaptable to reflect their own belief systems. This was in fact a position encouraged by the school. In

the attempt to be inclusive of all (non-)religious backgrounds, the Headteacher encouraged such interpretations of the school prayer, and of 'god:'

> When our school prayer starts, the two first words are 'God bless' but that could be any god of any of the religions that we discussed this morning, or any religion that we haven't discussed (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher, addressing the whole school before a Friday assembly).

The prayer could thus be directed to God, or anyone else. The recipient of their prayer was not necessarily constructed as transcendent, and children chose to communicate with whoever they felt more comfortable. Madge *et al*. (2014), Hemming (2015), Scourfield *et al.* (2013), and Shillitoe and Strhan (2020) presented similar findings, demonstrating that children's agency should not be underplayed. At Alexander Parkes, the construction of the transcendent was therefore not fixed by the school, who encouraged an individualised experience of the school prayer. Such a position is informed by individualistic liberalism (Cheetham, 2000; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020),[14] and has gained prevalence in modern societies as people assert "a right to bricolage" (Casson, 2011: 208).

Yet, while it may be tempting to conclude that children's individualised construction of the transcendent was very personal and subjective, it must be noted that such a construct is not at odds with Christianity. On the contrary, Stringer (2008: 66) argues that "for many Christians their relationship with God, or Jesus, or the saints takes a similar form to the intimate chatting to the dead described by others." The relationship with the recipient of the Christian prayer is a relationship of intimacy, which can befit Christian discourses, where Jesus is constructed as an approachable human figure, and where God is not a figure of authority to fear, but a fatherly figure (Stringer, 2015).

Mauss (2003) describes the act of praying as a social act in which individuals and groups ritualise their beliefs. This social act varies from one community to another as it is linked to social and cultural contexts. Although children did not think they regularly engaged in a Christian act of collective worship through the school prayer, Alexander Parkes actually codified the act of praying according to Christian norms, which children had assimilated and endorsed: they all knew who to talk to (God), what to celebrate (God, His love for His people), what to ask for (God's blessing and guidance), which body posture to adapt (sitting up straight, joining their hands, closing their eyes and bowing

---

[14] See section 2.3.3.

their heads), and which behaviour to adopt (silent, respectful and focused). Consequently, children understood religious practices and acts of worship in *broadly* Christian terms. Indeed, Christian practices are diverse, and the simplicity of this act of worship may not conform with Orthodox or Roman Catholic practices for instance. For example, children at Alexander Parkes did not make the sign of the cross.

The school – through embodied practices – codified social praying in Christian terms, privileging a definite Christian habitus. When Megan caught Zahra with her eyes closed, head down and hands together, she automatically assumed that Zahra was doing "her own little prayer," and did not envisage that there could be different ways of praying, or that Muslim prayers might not resemble Christian ones. Zahra never told me what she was doing at the time, if she was reflecting, waiting quietly or indeed praying. It would have been interesting to know – if she was indeed praying, Zahra was adopting Christian norms for her own act of worship.

As well as embodied practices, it is worth paying attention to the absence of embodied practices. For instance, non-Christian religions were not included in assemblies and acts of collective worship. Their absence delegitimises their role in the public arena. Conversely, 'broadly' Christian discourses were reproduced and normalised in the public sphere:

> [B]ecause like I said, I'm not of a religion. But I think that school prayer is adequate as a collective worship; I think that's nice (Miss Nolan, KS2 teacher).

In this excerpt, Miss Nolan explained that the school prayer was compatible with her values, despite identifying as non-religious. Christianity, rather than being valued for its manifest functions as a religion was instead constructed as "socially significant in latent ways" (Mitchell, 2006: 1146). It must be noted, however, that Christianity remained narrowly defined. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses were not included: not only were they not represented, but children of Jehovah's Witnesses also opted out of assemblies.

Although Mr Blackburn, the Headteacher, had the authority to abandon the school prayer while still meeting the legal requirements by holding broadly Christian assemblies, he was reluctant to do so. His reticence reflected the tension in which practitioners are caught, that is to say whether state education should serve to secure the influence of Christianity in English culture, or whether it should reflect the broader liberal, secular

context (Bates, 1996; Smith and Smith, 2013). Firstly, Mr Blackburn argued that he was wary about being accused of pushing a particular agenda, such as atheism, if he were to discontinue the practice. Throughout his career, Mr Blackburn had met reluctance from parents when planning visits to non-Christian places of worship, and was aware that religion in the public sector (especially in Birmingham since the Trojan Horse Affair) could be a vexed question, which he was not ready to raise. Secondly, Mr Blackburn also believed that as the content was mediated through a prayer, it became more meaningful and was more likely to be taken seriously:

| MR BLACKBURN: | And also, ironically, 'help us to learn together and play together so that we get to know one another' is fabulous! But if we just chanted that without the 'Dear God' at the beginning and the 'Amen' at the end, I don't think they'd say it in the same way or reflect on it in quite the same way. It's strange. |
| CÉLINE: | Oh, so you reckon pupils take it more seriously because it's a prayer? |
| MR BLACKBURN: | I think it lends some gravitas to it, yeah, I do. |

His thinking is in line with Pargament's (1977), who argues that a prayer has the power to endow everyday activities with meaning. Given that Mr Blackburn identified as an atheist, and stated that he did not think acts of collective worship should be maintained in state-funded non-faith-based schools, one may have expected him to hold 'irreligious' attitudes towards the school prayer. However, rather than rejecting or holding a hostile position towards religion in this particular context, he saw it as providing "gravitas."

When I asked pupils if they believed schools in France should also have a school prayer, they all said yes, and emphasised the importance of its message. They believed the purpose of the prayer was about reminding pupils that being together should be valued, and the school should be cared for:

I think that the school prayer is really good because it doesn't have to be 'God' because… whatever your religion you should still… you should still play, get along, play along with each other (Lucy, KS2 Pupil).

Because when what you say in the prayer, you say something good, and you say to be respectful to our friends and to be together – playing together and do nice things. That's important (Bilal, KS2 Pupil).

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Because it says to play together, and love each other - one another - it's really true, and so people know that the right thing to do is to play and love each other... Because if you were to put you in them shoes, you wouldn't like to be told off (Lucas, KS2 Pupil).

These findings echo Giordan's (2015), who wrote about his students in Padova (Italy) who used to go to the basilica on campus to light a candle or pray to a Saint, hoping to get good results, despite not believing in God. Just like Giordan's students, pupils at Alexander Parkes, regardless of their beliefs or (non-)religious backgrounds, wanted to remain open to the idea of praying, hoping it could improve their school. This contrasts with Gill's (2004) research, which showed that pupils were more likely to question the efficacy of prayer.

In the excerpts below, children's constructions of Christianity were more attuned to 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997; 2017), as it was about promoting the 'good life.' By emphasising doing "nice things," "play[ing] together, and lov[ing] each other," children once again located Christianity in "the everyday virtues of doing good" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40). If Christianity entered the public space through acts of collective worship in school, it was only allowed if it conformed to 'Golden Rule' Christianity.

As a result, the majority of participants viewed Christianity at Alexander Parkes as 'appropriate:'

CÉLINE:     I remember moving to Ireland, [...] and I was teaching in a secondary school...

MR BARTLETT: ... [Religion]'s all very much in your face there isn't it?

I've worked in Catholic schools, on placements, and I've worked in other state schools and... I think this school sits somewhere in between, d'you know what I mean? It's not on top like a Catholic school, but then there's other schools where they ignore religion completely... so I think [Alexander Parkes is] somewhere in the middle (Mr Bartlett, KS2 Teacher).

And, I think, some schools like St Peter's, they do a lot of praying; some schools like the ones I went to they hardly do any praying. I think we do like the right amount. Like one every day, I think that's good (Harvey, S2 Pupil).

Christianity was constructed as a continuum, on which the school was to find the "right balance" (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

In some instances, children explained that they chose not to join in the act of collective worship. Rather than physically opting out of assemblies/acts of collective worship, some pupils chose to not sing along and/or to not recite the school prayer:

Well I know that some people just sit there and go "blah blah blah" and just go really crazy, shouting and stuff (Jasmine, KS2 Pupil).

| SAIRA: | We don't have to say 'Amen' but if you want you can say it. |
| RAINNA: | You can say like different things at the start of the prayer as well. |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, and you can do your own prayer as well. You don't have to do it. If you want you make up your own prayer as well. |
| SAM: | Some people they just sit and listen. I don't do the prayer. I just sit and listen. |
| CÉLINE: | How come you don't do the prayer? |
| SAM: | 'Cos I've never done it in my whole life and I won't be doing it in secondary or anything. |
| CÉLINE: | 'Cos you don't want to? |
| SAM: | Yeah. |

Refusing to participate is not uncommon (Hemming, 2015; Shillitoe, 2018; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Scourfield *et al.*, 2013). Generally speaking, participants did not see non-participation as a form of non-compliance, but understood it to be the children's prerogative not to take part in the act of collective worship:

Let's say we're singing a song and it's about worshipping the Lord for example… Certain children in the hall will not sing the song. And you know that's because that's not their beliefs so they're not going to join in, they're not going to partake. And the children know as well that when we say a prayer at the end of the assembly – we have a school prayer – certain children will just sit respectfully but they won't be praying (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

But, you can't force the child to pray, so as one law is telling us you must have this act of communal worship and some teachers will insist on that, some head teachers will insist… this head teacher [Mr Blackburn] will not insist because there is another convention [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child] which says you can't force a child to pray so they're kind of in conflict a little bit. So, what most schools will do is say, you know, lower your heads or put your hands together, they won't say "let us pray," which they would say in church so they make it very vague so some children will be and some teachers will close their eyes and pray whereas others will just look to the floor. As long as they're quiet and they accept other people's right to pray then it's generally accepted (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

CÉLINE:   How do you feel about praying to God?

JESSICA:  Hmmm… I don't mind really. You don't have to do the prayer if you don't want to. You can just sit there.

HARVEY:   Yeah, 'cos it's like… You don't have to do it! It's a choice, innit! Like if you wanna do it, you can; if you don't wanna do it, you don't.

CÉLINE:   What do you think, Adam?

ADAM:     It's a choice… You don't have to do it. I'm sure the teachers will understand like… It's just something… It's a choice. As well as a value.

HARVEY:   That's what I'm saying!

These findings corroborate Shillitoe and Strhan's (2020), who drew similar conclusions from their ethnographic study, and who explained that these behaviours should not be reduced to be interpreted as 'irreligious' (i.e. as a rejection of religion, or as hostile to religion), but could simply be viewed as 'indifferent' (i.e. as adopting a dismissive stance). In other words, although some children may be dismissive of the school prayer and may reject taking part in religious practice, they may not do so "in a hostile way" but more likely because "the act is meaningless" or irrelevant to them (Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020: 10).

These findings suggest that anxieties about the possible confessional nature of collective worship may be misplaced. For example, Mr Holden shared concerns about the possible indoctrination of children in the Christian faith, and explained that he did not believe he should be forcing "religion down [pupils'] throat[s]." Yet, as argued in Chapter

3, children are not passive recipients but active social agents. Findings in this chapter demonstrate as much. Children's agency should therefore not be underestimated (Hemming, 2015; Ridgely, 2012), and their vulnerability should not be overplayed (Shillitoe, 2018; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020). As Ipgrave (2012a) explains, "[t]he *sacramental* approach combines opportunity with freedom of response. Schools can take students to the threshold and offer a glimpse of what may be beyond, but cannot take them over" (2012a: 37, emphasis in original).

The findings in this chapter reveal that children can be constrained by structures such as the school (and/or the family). In the case of children from conservative Muslim families or Jehovah's Witness, children possibly modified their behaviour in school to conform to institutional expectations. As Scourfied *et al.* explain, children's opportunities to exercise agency in primary schools may be limited, and "children in middle childhood are able to be tactical, but not strategic about their faith" (2013: 123). Unfortunately, the data does not include the voices of children who withdrew from assemblies, but the research raises important questions about children's religious freedom and agency: Are children's wishes taken into consideration when they are withdrawn from assemblies, or is their agency restricted by parents/carers? Are children comfortable with the arrangements made for them or has their voices been ignored? How do they construct their own image of the self when they are physically removed from collective worship? While pupils who opted out from assemblies/collective worship did not share their views, other children spoke on their behalf or used them as examples to embody 'otherness.' This was especially the case of Zahra, who was extensively used by her peers (even in front of her) as an example of 'otherness.' As her body was collectively othered, and peers spoke on her behalf, Zahra was rendered voiceless. By letting other children speak for her, it is possible that Zahra had internalised tacit discrimination practices, and did not know how to respond to such forms of micro-aggressions (Welply, 2018). Rather than focusing on the possible confessional nature of collective worship, social scientists, policy-makers, and practitioners need to focus on how broadly Christian assemblies/acts of collective worship can serve to reproduce unequal power relations between (non-)religious communities, and to locate Christianity within notions of idealised culture.

## 5.4.    Summary

Throughout this chapter, I demonstrated that although the school adopted a sacramental approach to religion during acts of collective worship, whereby children were invited to believe and/or to communicate with the transcendent, it did not appear to lead to religious indoctrination. For example, findings revealed that most children did not construct God as the transcendent, and that in many cases children at Alexander Parkes created their own meaning and their own practice during the act of collective worship. Christianity was often narrowly defined, and was constructed as "a culture, rather than a philosophy or worldview" (Clapp, 1996: 187). In the case of Alexander Parkes, it tended to be reduced to an ethno-religion (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), located in the realm of everyday morality and 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997).

Findings therefore suggest that concerns about acts of collective worship resulting in indoctrinating the child in the Christian faith may indeed be misplaced (Hemming, 2015; 2018a; Shillitoe, 2018; forthcoming; Ridgely, 2012). While Mr Holden worried that he was forcing "religion down [pupils'] throat[s]," there was little evidence to suggest that it was the case at Alexander Parkes. On the contrary, most children seemed to believe they had freedom of choice when it came to religion, which explains why they believed they could choose to adapt the school prayer, and could choose to participate in religious practices or not. However, religious freedom may not have seemed as achievable for other children, especially those from certain minority faith backgrounds who were withdrawn from school assemblies by parents, and whose voices were silenced in the process.

In their research on children's encounters with religion and non-religion, Strhan and Shillitoe (2019) demonstrate that primary schools are likely to be places where explicit forms of non-religious socialisation occur (unlike homes where non-religious socialisation tends to be more implicit), and that therefore concerns over potential religious indoctrination of children may be misplaced. They argue that instead of focusing on assemblies/collective worship as possible sources of religious indoctrination, more attention should be paid to how children engage with non-religion. Their work draws attention to the dialectic relationship between the religious and the secular during assemblies/acts of collective worship, and shows that children's constructions of the 'religious' and the 'secular' may be more fluid than adults' constructions. Findings in this chapter, while shedding more light on how children encounter religion rather than non-

religion, corroborate this. They also call for more attention to be paid to children's bodies and emotions, and how this can play a role in shaping their (non-)religious identity.

This project, which sheds more light on how children encounter religion in more mundane ways in the school setting, highlights the importance of the embodied dimension of discursive constructions of religion(s) – an often-neglected area in research. For example, while (white) English teachers came to embody Christianity within the school context, pupils who opted out of assemblies/collective worship (such as Zahra) embodied 'otherness.' As a result, Christianity was constructed as physically present in the public realm (unlike 'others' who needed to remove themselves, and who stood out as failing to embody collective ideals of culture). The school, as a social institution, in this case served to perpetuate ethno-religious power relations as some children from the 'out-group' adapted and modified their behaviours. In the case of Zahra, who used to stay during assemblies and leave when the acts of collective worship started, she chose to avoid her peers' gaze and not attend assemblies altogether to avoid physically standing out from the group. As a result, these children were then viewed by the 'in-group' as not belonging, and were further marginalised. Miss Nolan's comments about children opting out of assemblies and "segregating themselves" is one example of indirect discrimination towards religious minorities.

Such constructions are not only aligned with English hegemonic discourses about religion(s), but also with narratives of national identity, which have significantly grown in importance in recent years. These constructions are therefore not anodyne, as they serve to reproduce existing power relations. More attention ought to be paid to schools adopting a sacramental approach to religion in acts of collective worship in order to understand how this shapes children's discursive constructions of religion, religiosity, and their sense of belonging and identity. As Cheetham (2004) explains, collective worship is only the 'tip of the iceberg' of larger issues pertaining to the role and place of religion in society. More research is sorely needed to truly understand the role of collective worship in challenging or perpetuating structural inequalities.

# Chapter 6.  Religion as Mediated through St Peter's Church: A Doxological Approach

While the doxological approach is more likely to be found in faith-based schools,[1] the findings in this chapter demonstrate that it can also be found in state-funded non-faith-based schools. Alexander Parkes Primary School had a close relationship with the local CofE church, St Peter's, and its vicar, Reverend Abi. As a result, pupils were exposed to a doxological approach to religion through church-led activities. In this Chapter, I explore how such an approach informed participants' discursive constructions of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular.

## 6.1.  Encountering Christianity

Christianity occupied a privileged place at Alexander Parkes Primary School. In Chapter 5, I showed that the school held regular acts of collective worship that were

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[1] Faith-based schools do not always adopt a doxological approach to religion; some will prefer a sacramental and/or an instrumental approach (Fancourt, 2016).

mainly of a broadly Christian character. The school also loosely followed the Christian liturgical year, and major Christian festivals punctuated the school year. Special assemblies were held for Harvest, Christmas, Mothering Sunday, and Easter. While non-Christian festivals were the object of study in RE classes (where an instrumental approach to religion was adopted), these were not celebrated during assemblies. For instance, festivals such as Eid al-Fitr were not celebrated in the school – even though there were pupils in KS2 who fasted during Ramadan, and celebrated breaking their fast with their families and local communities – revealing a lack of engagement with diversity and 'otherness' (Welply, 2018). Parents and the local vicar, Reverend Abi, were invited to attend special assemblies. No other religious leader was invited onto the school premises.

Alexander Parkes had a close connection with Reverend Abi, and St Peter's CofE church. Reverend Abi visited Alexander Parkes to attend special assemblies, and occasionally delivered RE lessons. Four to five times a term, she would come to the school and delivered 'Godly plays.' The aim of Godly plays is to create a community who uses religious language to make meaning. Rather than focusing on knowledge itself, the purpose is to stimulate children's critical and spiritual engagement with a story from the Bible (Nye, 2018). One of the key foci is on the questions that are asked at the end of the story (Copley, 2007; Crain, 2007; Keeble, 2011; Ohler, 2013; Nye, 2018). For example, Reverend Abi told the Parable of the Prodigal Son to Year 3 pupils – a story that she chose for disposition 9 of the Birmingham syllabus, 'Being Fair and Just' (see Appendix B). As she told the story, children were sitting on the floor, around her, not only listening to her but also looking at her as she used props and artefacts to tell her story. Once she finished telling the Parable of the Prodigal Son, she asked pupils to collectively retell it. After that, she asked children what they liked best about the story, what they thought was the saddest part, and if they could relate to any of the people. The transcendent was presented as real, and the emphasis was on the moral of the story of God's love.

Reverend Abi described her connection with Alexander Parkes as "a two-way relationship," as not only did she visit the school, but pupils also regularly visited St Peter's CofE church. Every year, children were invited to attend two services: one for Remembrance Day, and one for Christingle. Pupils attended these services alongside pupils from St Peter's CofE VA School. On one occasion (for Remembrance Day, before attending the service at St Peter's), pupils also visited the local Roman Catholic Church, St Paul's. The visit I observed only lasted fifteen minutes, during which Father John

showed a video about World War I, before inviting pupils to join him in reciting the Lord's Prayer. No other visit to St Paul's was organised, and the school had no further contact with Father John during the rest of the school year. No other religious building was visited, mostly because of the school (and a large number of the families) lacked the funds to hire coaches.

As well as attending services, children also visited St Peter's church to learn about Christianity. Reverend Abi led workshops for Year 1, Year 2, Year 4, and Year 6 pupils, with the help of volunteers from the worshipping community, and of members of the Mothers' Union (an international Christian charity). Church-led workshops focused on Christian symbols and traditions (Year 1), Easter (Year 4), and Christmas (Years 2 and 6). During these workshops, several 'stations' were set up (see pictures 6-1 to 6-7), to allow small groups to observe artefacts or displays, and listen to members of the worshipping community talk about their faith. Pupils were split into small groups and would go from one station to another, listening to volunteers or to Reverend Abi.[2] All church-led activities adopted a doxological approach to Christianity: the transcendent was presented as certain, and religion was presented as all-encompassing (Ipgrave, 2012a). Children were invited to engage in religious experience.

In Year 1, one of the stations was set up near the votive candles (see picture 6-1), where Janet, a member of the worshipping community, explained how she made use of the space. She told the pupils, "I light them when I pray, when someone is sick, or when I'm poorly."

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[2] Reverend Abi provided each volunteer with a document that contained a biblical story to read out to the children, as well as follow-up activities.

*Picture 6—1 Votive Candles in St Peter's CofE Church*

By doing so, Janet did not only explain Christian practices, but allowed pupils to enter her personal faith element.

At another station, Jim, another member of the worshipping community, shared with pupils his experience of communion. Children were gathered up around a table on which laid a chalice and a plate (see picture 6-2). As Jim compared having breakfast at the family table with the act of communion, he explained that the Church was like a family to him, and that he traditionally shared a meal with them at every service. After explaining the ritual of preparing for communion, consisting of pouring wine in a chalice, and cutting bread into pieces on a plate, he asked a pupil to help him lay the table. Jim then explained to the children that every Sunday his job was to count how many people sat on the pews, in order to prepare enough pieces of bread for the act of communion: "One of the hardest things to do on the Sunday – and it's my job! – is to count how many people are here." As one of the pupils helped him prepare the bread, he then explained that the wine and bread symbolised the blood and body of Christ. He then asked pupils if it was possible to be good all the time. As a little girl shook her head, he said, "Thank you! You're like me! Me too, I'm not good all the time!" and subsequently explained that through the act of communion, "we say to God we're sorry we've not been very good, and we believe God forgives us." Jim continued the session by offering bread to pupils, saying "the body of Christ" as he did so, and by passing the chalice full of water, from which pupils took a sip.

*Picture 6—2 The Communion*

Although Jim told children that they could refuse to take part in the ritual – which two pupils did – the Teaching Assistant who accompanied the group focused on the children who had not refused to participate, and explained how they needed to put their hands together in order to receive the bread. While two children demonstrated their own agency by refusing, others may have also demonstrated their agency by complying (Mahmood, 2005). It may also be the case that some children decided (consciously or not) that since the school as a social institution accepted wider social structures such as the Church of England and prevailing cultural norms entrenched in Christianity, then they ought to do the same. Unfortunately, I was not able to speak with children after any of the church-led activities. However, when I asked children towards the end of the school year whether they thought church-led activities were designed to convert them to Christianity, they responded in the negative:

CÉLINE: What's the purpose of these activities? Is it so you can become Christian?

ELLA: No…

LUCY: [*At the same time*] No, just to understand Christianity.

Even in cases where children seemingly engage in religious practice, conversations revealed that children did not construct it as such:

MEGAN: And like, [Reverend Abi] does an activity where you do the breaking of the bread and you find out it's the body of Jesus…

LUCY: [*Interrupting*]… and then you throw it at your partner…

CÉLINE: What?!

[*All 3 girls laugh*]

MEGAN: I'd actually like that if it was a piece of hot, hot, hot chicken and then throw it at a boy!

ELLA: That would be horrible!

[*Giggles*]

This exchange, once again, demonstrates that children's agency should not be underplayed.

At another station, Mike, another member of the worshipping community, gave pupils big paper palms to hold, and asked them to walk up and down the nave, waiving their palm and shouting and singing, "Praise the Lord, Hosanna in the highest!" Children indulged in the activity, seemingly finding it funny to shout and walk at a fast pace up and down the church. After effectively taking part in the celebration of Palm Sunday (Picture 6-3), they were asked to write a prayer on paper leaves.

*Picture 6—3 Palm Sunday*

While all children took part in the activity, it did not necessarily mean that they engaged in religious practice. Once again, some of them viewed the experience as fun rather than as transcendental:

> She did an activity where we went around the church doing different… and her friend Mike we had these palm leaves and we had to sing [*stands up and pretends to wave a palm leave whilst singing loudly*] 'Halleluiah, Halleluiah!' [*Lucy and Ella giggle*]. It was funny! (Megan, KS2 Pupil).

When children attended 'Experience Christmas' at St Peter's, they visited several stations to learn more about the events leading up to Christmas, and how and why Christmas was celebrated in the Christian community. On all occasions, children were invited to engage

directly with the transcendent. For example, when attending the Preparation station (see picture 6-4), children were told that as they prepared their homes for Christmas, they also needed to prepare their hearts. Lois, a member of the worshipping community, read the instructions that Reverend Abi had left nearby and explained:

> This means saying sorry to God for what we might have said or done that has hurt others. When we do this, God completely forgives us and gives us a brand-new start. Then our hearts as well as our homes are ready to celebrate Christmas (Lois, member of the worshipping community at St Peter's CofE church).

Children were then invited to think about something they wished they had not said or done to somebody, and to say a silent prayer for that person and ask God to surround them with His love:

> It's not just about getting our homes and our church ready, it's also about getting ourselves ready. How many times have you been cross with someone? Or have your mum and dad asked you to do something and you didn't do it? It's time to say sorry and forgive. […] Sometimes friends in the schoolyard don't want to play with us and it hurts… So you know how it feels to be hurt, so let's say sorry to the people we have hurt. Think of someone you have been a bit sharp to or something you haven't done for someone, and write you're sorry (Lois, member of the worshipping community, speaking to Year 2 Pupils).

Children were subsequently asked to write on paper hearts what they were sorry for. Two pupils showed me their paper hearts before placing them on a red blanket, by candles (as shown on picture 6-4). One of them wrote he was sorry for pushing someone over; another wrote to his mum to say he was sorry he had not tidied up.

*Picture 6—4 Preparing for Christmas (Preparing our Hearts)*

After that, children moved on to a different station and listened to Janet, another member of the worshipping community, telling the shepherd's story (Luke Ch2 v8-15). Janet then asked children to reflect on the story and the message sent by the angels. She then told them that sometimes when Christians come together to worship, they greet one another with the words 'Peace be with you,' and invited the children to join the community by picking up an angel-shaped card (as shown on picture 6-5), write the name of a person they would like to send peace to for Christmas, sign underneath 'Peace on Earth this Christmas.' Most children picked their parents, one of them chose his Auntie. Janet then told the children to keep their angel to give them to whoever they wrote it for.
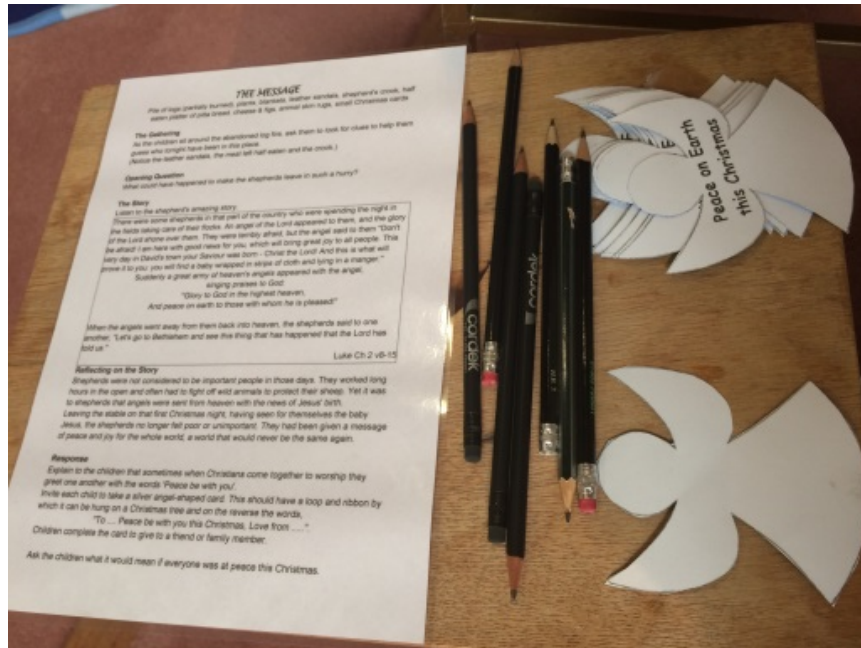
*Picture 6—5 The Message*

Similarly, after telling children the story of the crucifixion, Reverend Abi told the children, "when we suffer, or someone we know is suffering, we can pray to him." She asked them where they encountered suffering, and then told them to pick up a paper cross to write where they thought suffering was happening. They then placed their crosses on a purple cloak on the floor (as shown on pictures 6-6 and 6-7).

*Picture 6—6 The Crucifixion*



*Picture 6—7 Paper Crosses filled in by Year 4 Pupils*

After the session, and before leaving St Peter's, Vicky, one of the volunteers from the worshipping community, suggested that children could pick up their crosses to put on their coats as they walked out, to "carry it like Jesus did."

During church-led visits, a 'highly sacramental' approach was taken as the emphasis was put on rituals, celebrations and traditions. Such an approach did not disrupt the construction of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, as it "is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise. Rather, it is based in practice and experience" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40). The examples above show how on several occasions, pupils' "normal routines of life [we]re suspended" (Davie, 2007b: 29). As they attended church-led activities and services, children took part in religious practice at moments of significance, such as Easter or Christmas, and to find out more about religious rituals such as baptisms. Although Christianity was allowed to permeate the public institutional space, it remained constrained to specific moments. By only turning to the church for specific rituals, Alexander Parkes Primary School adopted a vicarious approach to Christianity (Davie, 2007b; 2015).

## 6.2. Alexander Parkes: 'Religious' or 'Secular'?

As a result of Alexander Parkes' close connection with St Peter's CofE Church, over half of the teachers interviewed said that the school ethos was Christian (unlike children who viewed the school as 'neutral' – see Chapter 5). Although Christianity was indeed given a privileged place at Alexander Parkes, this finding may be surprising given that Christianity did not permeate the rest of the curriculum, nor the typical day-to-day structure of the school. Yet, because of the acts of collective worship and its close connection with the local church, most of the teachers felt that the school ethos was Christian:

| CÉLINE: | So, would you say it's a secular ethos? |
| MISS BUNCH: | See I don't know about that, because of the prayer at the end of assembly and because of singing hymns and stuff. […] This school is quite Christian, I think. |

| CÉLINE: | What about the school ethos? Would you say the ethos of the school is Christian or secular? |
|---|---|
| MR HOLDEN: | It's more Christian. And that's the problem. And that is every school. |

Mrs Jennings (RE Coordinator), on the other hand, reflected on the secular ethos of the school:

| CÉLINE: | So, to come back to the ethos, would you say it's more Christian or more secular? |
|---|---|
| MRS JENNINGS: | That's really hard to answer because… I think because I'm Christian, I would say it's secular. For me, it's secular. But I think for other members of staff it might feel quite Christian, I don't know. I think that would depend on… I think that might… the answer you'd get would be different according to each member of staff you asked to be honest. |

Mrs Jennings, who was a practising Christian and the daughter of a vicar and a pastor,[3] viewed the school ethos as 'secular.' She suggested that perceptions of the school ethos may be informed by participants' own beliefs. Mr Blackburn reached a similar conclusion:

> Well, I'd like to argue that it's secular, but it feels more than broadly Christian sometimes, with all the links that we've got with the church and the visits from the church. I think we go to St Peter's as much as St Peter's school. So, what's the difference?! [*Laughs*] I guess it also depends on your own perceptions. If you're Christian you might think it's secular, if you're not Christian you might think it is Christian… I don't know… (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

While Mrs Jennings and Mr Blackburn suggested that Christians were more likely to construct Alexander Parkes as 'secular,' and non-religious participants were more likely

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[3] It is interesting to note that the RE Coordinator was a practising Christian, as this corroborates existing research that shows that the majority of RE coordinators tend to be Christian (Fancourt, 2017).

to view the school as 'religious' or 'Christian,' it was not always the case. For example, some (nominal) Christian teachers did situate the school ethos within Christianity:

| MRS MÉSZÁNOS: | The whole school is very much geared towards Christianity. |
| CÉLINE: | Would you say there's a Christian ethos in this school? |
| MRS MÉSZÁNOS: | Oh God, yeah. Very much, even if it's not called a Christian school, which most of them are in Worcestershire, but even if it's not, yeah… the same Christian ethos everywhere. |

| CÉLINE: | Ok, err… I'm just trying to make sure that I've understood everything correctly… Would you say that the ethos of this school is Christian or secular? |
| MR BARTLETT: | I'd say it's more Christian than… Yeah, I'd say it's Christian. |

Even Reverend Abi described the school ethos as Christian:

| REV. ABI: | I would say this school has a very special spirituality; it's a very caring school and it's got a good Christian ethos […]. |
| CÉLINE: | You just said that this school had a "good Christian ethos." What makes you say that? |
| REV. ABI: | Well you just see that the efforts that they put into like the Harvest festival, compared to say St Peter's school, and the fact that every Key Stage 1 is doing a nativity. If you get to see the Key Stage 2 Easter production – I mean the first year I saw it… they do the full crucifixion! They don't just do… They have Easter bunnies and things like that in it, there's a balance, but there is the proper Christian story in it… I mean it was Judas… I can't remember the line about Judas that they came up with was… "Judas had told on his friends" or "he spilled the beans on his friends to the authority!" It was lovely. And they rolled away a big stone; and they had a big hoop and it rolled all across the room as they were singing "the angels rolled away the stone," or something. So, there is that there, which is probably more there than it is at St Peter's. I mean it's more natural; it's more emotional rather than doing it, if you know what I mean. |

Reverend Abi's perception, however, may reflect the fact that she was only involved in school activities that were associated with Christianity. In the excerpt above, Reverend Abi says she was pleasantly surprised to see that the Easter assembly did not revolve around secular traditions with Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs, but focused on the Christian story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, Reverend Abi may not

have realised that only church-led activities adopted a doxological approach to religion. Children were exposed to a doxological approach to Christianity though church-led activities, and a sacramental approach to Christianity through acts of collective worship (see Chapter 5) *alongside* more secular framings of religious festivals and traditions.[4] For example, for Easter children across all year groups were asked to create Easter gardens. The pictures below (see pictures 6-8 to 6-13) show Easter bunnies, chicks and chocolate eggs in a variety of settings.



*Picture 6—8 Easter Garden*

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[4] This is different from schools with a religious character which may adopt a doxological approach to religion throughout daily practices and discourses.

*Picture 6—9 Easter Park*



*Picture 6—10 Easter Football Pitch*

*Picture 6—11 Easter Gardens and Easter Bonnet*



*Picture 6—12 Easter Bunnies and Chicks Attending Church for Easter*

*Picture 6—13 Easter Bunnies, Chicks and Sheep Celebrating Easter at Church*

The pictures of children's Easter gardens, however, indicate that a clear divide between Christian and secular celebrations/rituals should not necessarily be assumed. In some cases, some Easter gardens combined 'secular' and Christian symbols, as Easter bunnies were represented attending church for Easter (see pictures 6-12 and 6-13), and as chicks made a nest in an Easter bonnet (see picture 6-11).

The complex, dialectic relation between the 'religious' and the 'secular' was also manifest during other activities. Another example includes the school inviting children to bring donations for St Peter's food bank. While the school framed the donations within a secular discourse of care and charity (both important concepts in Christian traditions) (Hemming, 2015; Salonen, 2016), the church framed them within a religious discourse of charitable assistance. Regardless of the processes or motivations, the effects remained the same. In her research on foodbanks in Finland and the role of religion, Salonen (2016) shows how the secular and the religious interact in complex ways within the social practice of charitable food assistance, and that disentangling the two is not possible.

Similarly, Reverend Abi also adapted a game designed by Christian Aid (a Christian charity), in order to teach pupils about money, profit, and debt. While the initial

aim was to raise awareness about the economic differences between the North and the South, and encourage children to donate to Christian Aid, Reverend Abi adapted the game so that it would become more relevant to pupils' socio-economic context:

> [Pupils] were making cardboard trainers and having to sell them. Different ones had different amounts of money to start off with; some got into debts. And it was in the hall. And the noise was phenomenal, but it was a buzz! And Mr Haywood was the banker and the debt collector. I gave him that role because they already had a discipline relationship – they would take it from him whereas they might not take it from me. So it was really good, and they really enjoyed it. But I realised, I mean this is a game designed by Christian Aid, the charity Christian Aid, that it's meant to… tell the affluent West about poor people in South America and the fact that we buy these trainers for 50 quid or what and I might get 2 p for it. But I realised half way through that actually, in [name of local area], it's actually teaching them about the problems of getting into debts, which is a real reality here, and the debt collectors… So it changed the emphasis on that; they still learnt about it [fair trade], but there also was another tool for them to realise what it means when people say they haven't got enough money; when their parents say they haven't got enough money, and 'we can't afford that', 'we're in debt' or whatever… it adds another angle here (Reverend Abi).

Although Reverend Abi adapted the game, the discourse of charitable assistance remained. While she framed it in Christian terms, children did not view the game as religiously significant:

| DAISY: | 'Cos [Reverend Abi] came this year and we got to do this shoemaking thing… |
|---|---|
| BEN: | Yeah, we did trainers, so basically what you had to do was like you had to make these trainers from templates and then cut it out and put the pri… the logo on them… |
| DAISY: | We had so many logos we could buy… |
| BEN: | Yeah, and then you can buy money… you can get money for them and you can buy your rent. 'Cos the rent collector came in and asked different prices. |
| CÉLINE: | Was that a religious activity? |
| DAISY: | No. |
| CHARLIE: | No, it was just fun. |
| DAISY: | Yeah, it was just like… |
| CHARLIE: | Fun. |

CÉLINE: Right, so you also like going to the church and discovering new things when you're there?

[*Harvey nods*]

CÉLINE: What about you, Adam?

ADAM: I think it's a really good idea, and she doesn't come to teach mostly about religion. Like I remember when she came one time and she talked about like… where we had to… we were given a certain amount of fake money and we had to pretend to be people like a shoemaker that would make shoes; and you'd have to be given the money to buy stuff to make the shoes and then they were trying to sell the shoes on the street… And it was to see how hard it is to sell…

HARVEY: She was preparing us for real-life things. Like you got a job… And it was real 'cos different people had different amounts of money at the start. Like, she was saying, 'this is how it works in like countries.' Some people think it was unfair, 'cos it's not… 'cos some people got more money and some people got less money, but… [*Pauses*]

CÉLINE: It was realistic?

HARVEY: Yeah!

This exchange further attests to the complex interplay between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and how they inform each other. In some cases, it became almost impossible to precisely disentangle the two, attesting to the relevance of the post-secular paradigm. In the two examples above, regardless of whether the activities were framed through a 'religious' or a 'secular' lens, they achieved the same purpose. Whether or not the children constructed the activities as religious or not, having Reverend Abi or St Peter's (two embodiments of Christianity) associated with these resulted in children constructing Christianity as compatible with the in-groups' culture, and the school ethos. Discursive constructions also remained aligned with 'Golden Rule' Christianity. As Ammerman explains, "Golden Rule Christians want their churches to be involved in serving the community," but can also be "involved in service activities beyond their churches" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 37).

## 6.3. Christianity as Collective Cultural Memory: Sustaining the 'Chain of Memory'

As participants reflected on church-led activities, most of them shared fond memories of Christingle services and other Christian rituals and/or celebrations:

RAINNA: [Christingle] is quite exciting 'cos everyone is like, 'Oh my God I'm holding a candle! It's so amazing!'

SAIRA: Yeah, it's fun because some of the kids get to go up on the stage and read stuff and give a massive [inaudible] and stuff like that, and they get their picture taken… And everyone's just smiling. And it's like really dark in there, it's really cool.

RAINNA: And the most important thing that everybody loves blowing out the candle. They all feel like it's their birthday! [*Pretends to blow a candle*] 'Yeeeaah!' [*Chuckles*] and when the moment's over everyone goes, 'Aww' [*Sounds sad/disappointed*]

SAIRA: And we get to go home early as well. And the Christingle songs are really lively. It's not a boring old 'la la la.'

PAIGE: […] I like going to the Christingle because we get to sing some of the cool hymns, and I like going to the Christingle and blow the candle out!

JESSICA: I like going to the church because sometimes we sometimes do fun activities and then we don't get to do any work.

CONNOR: No work! We've got two days left!

PAIGE: I remember in Year 4 we went to church to do an Easter bit and there were different sections about different bits of the Easter story and I like that 'cos you got to eat bread and to drink pop.

Like on Pancake Day, it was a 50-minute assembly where… it wasn't much of an assembly where you sit… Half of the room was on one team, the other was on the other team… and the teachers picked out a few people from each team and they'd have to flip a pancake a certain amount of times without it dropping on the floor. It was fun. We had to answer a few questions. Like, Chawish was asked, 'What's the real name for the thingy' and 'Why do we have it?' (Adam, KS2 Pupil).

In these comments, children expressed excitement about taking part in Christian rituals, not because of their engagement with a religious experience *per se*, but because these were viewed as fun ("it's fun," "it's really cool"). The celebrations were also associated

with some form of rest or a lighter workload ("we got to go home early," "we don't get to do any work"). Children also constructed these activities as fostering a sense of togetherness:

> Only when you know it's Christmas, everyone gets together, all the teachers are in different clothes, and everyone is just happy and the teachers just get embarrassed and stuff like that, everyone sings songs together so that's nice (Saira, KS2 Pupil).

Once again, these comments show that even in cases whereby a doxological approach to religion is adopted, fears about indoctrinating children into Christianity are likely to be misplaced. No child participant reflected on the religious dimension of the festivals, and all seemed to view church-led activities (and services in particular) as fun extracurricular activities. This echoes findings presented in section 6.1, where children explained they had fun when waving palms for Palm Sunday for example. The findings are also aligned with Smith's (2005a), who showed that children viewed religious buildings as places for leisure activities, where they can have fun.

These findings also corroborate with Scourfield *et al.*'s, who shared the experience of a Muslim father who chose to remove his son from a state-funded non-faith-based primary school to send him to a private Muslim school, as he believed that although his son did not fully comprehend what the Christian festivals were about, "he saw more festivity coming from [Easter and Christmas] than he did from the Eid" (2013: 130). This shows that even though attendance at religious services may seem harmless as these are sources of enjoyment and fun for a majority of children, and as there is little evidence to support that they result in indoctrination, church-led activities play an important role in fostering a sense of unity and of identity entrenched in Christianity. In Scourfield *et al.*'s case, the child was removed from the school altogether; in the case of Alexander Parkes, while children had not been removed from the school on religious grounds, a minority of children from conservative Muslim families and Jehovah's Witness were withdrawn from church-led services. While I could not get exact figures, more children were removed from church-led activities than from school assemblies/collective worship. For example, some Muslim children who attended RE and assemblies/collective worship were removed from activities that took place at St Peter's. This was true in the case of Bilal (KS2 Pupil):

CÉLINE:  [To Bilal] What do you think about Reverend Abi and the church?

| OLIVER AND AJIT: | He doesn't go. |
| CÉLINE : | Why don't you go? |
| OLIVER AND AJIT: | Because he's a Muslim. |
| BILAL: | Because I'm a Muslim. |
| CÉLINE: | Why don't you go? Is it because you don't want to or because your parents don't want you to? |
| BILAL: | No, it's about my religion. I do like to know about it [Christianity], but I don't want to go [to church]. |

When asked about him opting out of church-led activities, Bilal explained it was neither his choice nor his parents', but that it was because of his religion. He too constructed Islam as somewhat restrictive and did not question the reasons why he could not attend, when not all Muslim children were withdrawn from church-led activities. Unfortunately, when Bilal started talking about his experience of not attending St Peter's, the bell rang for the morning break, and the boys all showed their eagerness to go and play outside. I ended the interview without finding out how Bilal felt about being removed from church-led activities, but when he talked about it, it seemed like a natural, logical thing to do. Nonetheless, Scourfield *et al.* (2013) suggest that it may not be as straightforward for all children and that some can end up feeling left out. These findings reinforce those presented in Chapter 5.

In most cases, adult participants viewed church services as reflecting the importance of Christianity in English culture, and as fostering a sense of community:

> I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing, because you're still looking at a country that has a lot of different religions but probably seventy percent are from a Christian background, probably not church goers, but it's still predominantly a white country with a white Christian background (Mrs Mészános, KS2 Teacher).

> [I]t's very nice to go to St Peter's church and do the Christingle service at Christmas. It's beautiful. I experienced it this year. The children love it, we love it… it's a real sense of community… It's nice and lovely! (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

Mrs Mészános' comment echoes Miss Nolan's earlier comments (see p. 202), who reflected on the influence of Christianity in (white) English culture. Christian rituals and traditions played an important role in sustaining the collective cultural memory (Davie,

2010; 2015). St Peter's was therefore valued by the school community for sustaining the 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger). Rather than leading to explicit forms of religious socialisation, church-led activities resulted in forms of cultural socialisation, whereby religion, as 'a chain of memory' played a significant role in shaping children's sense of English culture.

Almost all teachers constructed Christian celebrations as community-making rituals. Christianity, rather than being valued for its manifest functions was constructed as "socially significant in latent ways" (Mitchell, 2006: 1146). Children were actively encouraged to take part in celebrations, and opting out from community-making activities was actively discouraged:

> Some will say 'I don't have anything to do with it; I'm not going to church.' We had this last year with the Lent thing. And the Lent prayer stations I did for them last year were probably done in a non-religious way… […] So [the stations] were all Christian, but [pupils] didn't have to be Christian [to take part]. I mean Gemma – you probably haven't met Gemma cos she's on maternity leave – said 'this is not Christian!' [to the boys who had been complaining] and she looked at me and said, 'I didn't mean that!' and I said, 'I know exactly what you're doing!' [*Smiles*]. […] And then Lizzie [the Deputy Head Teacher] said to the two of them who didn't want to go, 'well, there's pancakes there and I want you to bring one back to me!' So they toddled off… walked off… – cos you'll probably be thinking "what is she on about 'toddled off'…" – and came back, and they then gave Mrs Dodd these three pancakes, and they took the chocolate sauce with them, and they covered them with chocolate sauce, and she said, 'I don't like chocolate sauce' [*laughs*] but she had to eat it, didn't she?

In this excerpt, Reverend Abi explicitly states that she foregrounded community-making activities over theological ones. Children were discouraged from withdrawing from church-led activities, even if they explained that they did not want to go to church. To avoid children removing themselves from the school community and idealised notions of (English) culture, teachers and the Deputy Head Teacher used the promise of pancakes, and the wish to get a pancake brought back to them in order to convince two boys who had initially refused to go to St Peter's to change their minds. Reverend Abi did not reflect on the fact that children's voices had been ignored, and their agency not respected.

These findings show how church-led activities and Christianity played an important role in fostering a sense of togetherness in school, and that children who did not conform and did not take part were marked out as not properly belonging to the community of the school. While this Durkheimian construction of religion was shared by

the vast majority of participants, adult 'nones'[5] shared discomfort with community-making rituals being embedded in Christianity. However, they only did so in relation to non-religious beliefs, rather than minority faiths, who were the ones opting out of church-led activities:

> And you know there are things we do like lighting Christingles… in church. I was uncomfortable with that (Mr Holden, KS2 Teacher).

Later on, Mr Holden further explained his discomfort to the fact that he did not "believe in any of it." Mr Holden's construction of the public space as 'secular' and devoid of religion was challenged by the presence of a religious organisation in the state institutional space (Hemming, 2011b).

Although parents were not interviewed for this project, teachers and pupils who attended church-led activities explained that the school's close connection with St Peter's and Reverend Abi had never been the object of dispute. Focusing on children who did not withdraw from church-led activities, the data revealed that parents usually seemed indifferent to them attending religious services:

> I don't know of any parents who have had a problem with us going to the church (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

> CÉLINE:   What do your parents think of you going to church?
>
> HARVEY:  I don't go to church?
>
> CÉLINE:   I mean when you go to Saint Peter's with Reverend Abi?
>
> HARVEY:  Oh! I don't think they're really bothered to be honest.
>
> ADAM:    No, it's just…
>
> HARVEY:  Like, it doesn't matter to them 'cos it's not their religion, is it? Well, it is. But I don't mainly know what my parents believe in. I do think they believe in Jesus, but as I said, they're not baptised.

> CÉLINE:   What do your parents think about you going to church with the school?

---

[5] In the context of Alexander Parkes Primary School, adult 'nones' are narrowly defined and include those who strictly do not associate with religion (e.g. atheists, non-religious, and Humanists). For the purpose of this research, nominal Christians and agnostics are not included in this category.

BEN:     I told my mum, 'we went to visit the church today and we did fun stuff with Reverend Abi' and she says, 'Oh that's good, Ben.'

DAISY:   And then you just start talking about maths and English and then they really care…

In these excerpts, children reflected on their parents' lack of interest regarding church-led activities. Their lack of engagement, however, should not necessarily be interpreted as indifference or apathy towards Christianity. On the contrary, parents were likely to have demonstrated implicit support by complying, as well as their agency by not removing their children from such activities (Mahmood, 2005). In fact, their lack of reaction particularly contrasts with Mr Blackburn's experience of being met with reluctance when trying to organise school trips to mosques in the past:

> [B]efore Trojan Horse I was very keen to make sure RE didn't slip off the curriculum and we organised lots of visits to mosques and places of worship, which is that 'learning about' element, and also external visits, and I'd spend a huge amount of time convincing parents that going to a mosque […] was not gonna be a problem, because not all terrorists are Muslim and not all Muslims are terrorists[see full quote p. 136].

In his research, Hemming (2015) explains adults' support as being the result of parents/guardians expecting schools to teach children about religion and religious traditions:

> Many parents viewed the schools as the main vehicle for teaching their children about religion and educating them religiously. They were quite happy for the schools to do this on their behalf and did not always wish to continue this process at home (Hemming, 2015: 118).

This is aligned with the experiences that Harvey and his peers described above. However, in the context of Alexander Parkes Primary School, it is more accurate to speak about the school's role in transmitting *Christian* traditions. Davie's concept of vicarious religion is helpful to understand parents' behaviours towards Christianity in school. In his research, Hemming showed that "there were no examples of parents who expressed a desire for a more secular schooling experience for their children" (2011b: 1072). At Alexander Parkes, parents seemed to construct Christianity as appropriate in the school space, unlike other religions. By letting their children meet with the local church leader and members of the worshipping community, who shared their experiences of believing and practising,

Davie might suggest that parents "implicitly at least not only underst[oo]d, but […] approve[d] of what the [Christian] minority is doing" (2007b: 27).

Hull (1985) and Levitt (1995) further suggest that parents' implicit support towards Christianity in state-funded non-faith-based schools may be because Christian rituals and festivals have been associated with childhood memories, and a sentiment of nostalgia: "as adults and parents we socialise our children into that for which we have a fond nostalgia but can no longer take seriously ourselves" (Hull, 1985: 8). As a result, parents may have had no objection in their children partaking in Christian activities, as these were likely to be associated with childhood memories, further locating Christianity within the realm of (English) culture.

## 6.4.    Embodied Expressions of Christianity

In Chapter 5, I reflected on the importance of embodiment and demonstrated how tangible expressions of religion and religiosity, and of practices and rituals, shaped participants' understanding of religion. Embodiment is once again relevant, not only because of the embodied affinity between Alexander Parkes and St Peter's CofE church, but also because St Peter's and Reverend Abi were manifest expressions of Christianity. Paying close attention to embodied structures is important in order to reveal the impact these can have on participants' discursive constructions of religion.

### 6.4.1.  St Peter's CofE Church

While pupils attended a fifteen-minute long service at the local RC church, the experience seemed to have had little impact on children's constructions of Christianity. As a result of Alexander Parkes' lack of affinity with St Paul's and other churches, participants situated Christianity within St Peter's:

RAINNA:        […] [T]here's quite a few churches around here, with crosses and stuff…

SAM:           There's one over there…

| RAINNA: | Yeah, there's one near our school. There's one down by Somerset Lane… So there's quite a few of those. |
|---|---|
| SAM: | And there's one on Peter's Road. |
| SAIRA: | Yeah, and there's not many of those… wait… I think it's called mosque? Yeah. There's [sic.] not many mosques around here, for other people to go to. There's lots of churches though. |
| […] | |
| SAM: | And up the road! |
| CÉLINE: | What's up the road? |
| SAM: | St Paul's church. |
| CÉLINE: | The Catholic church? |
| RAINNA: | Oh yeah! |
| SAM: | There's no Catholics. |
| CÉLINE: | Why do you say that? |
| SAM: | 'Cos no one really goes there. When everyone goes to the church, they go to St Peter's. |

Children constructed St Peter's' approach to Christianity as the only valid expression of Christianity. When alternatives such as St Paul's were acknowledged, they were perceived as inoperative and futile; as Sam said, "When everyone goes to the church, they go to St Peter's." Other Christian denominations were altogether ignored, in the same way as very visible Christian traditions were also ignored by the school despite the presence of several children of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Such levels of comfort with the established Church did not seem to exist with any other faiths. The school had no connection with other faith leaders or with other places of worship:

> Well this is it – see I wish that the children could go and visit a mosque. I wish that the children could go to a gurdwara. And they would be really easily accessible. And I know that one of them for example is like in [named locality] so we'd have to take 60 children on a couple of buses… because they wouldn't be able to afford the coach fee just for that… but the children do visit a lot St Peter's, they all know it's their kind of closest church (Mrs Jennings, RE Coordinator).

The lack of embodied expressions of other faiths made them less visible to participants, and resulted in dissociating non-Christian religions from the school culture, and by extension English culture:

You see a lot more of Christian churches than other religion churches, don't ya? (Harvey, KS2 Pupil).

There are more Christians and there are less other religions, and many people talk about Christianity and they don't… not much talk about other religions (Bilal, KS2 Pupil).

I think [most English people are] Christian as well because quite a lot of churches around here are Christian churches, but most people can go to the different religions, but I think a lot of people are Christians (Paige, KS2 Pupil).

You don't have many mosques. I've only seen one really, when I went to the Saturday school to learn Chinese, but that's only one. And I've seen about two… one hundred thousand of English churches. But I'm not so sure whether they're mainly… what is it called… Protestant or… (Lucy, KS2 Pupil).

As a result of such (in)visibility, children constructed Christianity as the main religion in England. Interestingly, Lucy even added the adjective "English" in front of "churches," thereby further locating Englishness within Christianity. As Bates (1994: 5) argues, by giving a discreet yet privileged place to Christianity, Alexander Parkes contributed to reproducing the "traditional English Christian culture."

The lack of embodied expressions of other faiths also led to stereotypical or erroneous representations of the 'Other:'

| | |
|---|---|
| CHARLIE: | Because we visit the church every Christmas and Easter and then we don't, like, visit the temples on, like, Diwali… |
| CÉLINE: | Would you like to do that? |
| BEN: | It would be nice to see what it's like… |
| CHARLIE: | Yeah, inside. |
| BEN: | Yeah inside. My friends say it's really nice inside a mosque because of all the patterns and all that. |
| CHARLIE: | Yeah! I think it's like… there's loads of gold! |

I don't like dark places, and every time someone says to me "temple," I imagine a dark place with looong stairs (Lucas, KS2 Pupil).

While misrepresentations were common, the lack of any representation was also frequent. In the following excerpt, Saira and Rainna (KS2 Pupils) raised a lot of questions about different types of places of worship, and showed their lack of knowledge about Islam:

CÉLINE:    Right… And how would you feel if it was an imam and you were going to a mosque?

[…]

RAINNA:    I'd be fine with that, but it would be…

SAIRA:    Quite different. Way different to the usual English…

RAINNA:    But it could be more interesting 'cos most people who come here are from like churches and teach us about stuff that we kind of already know, but if somebody came from a mosque, I would be more intrigued…

SAIRA:    Yeah, it'd be interesting to see how they teach things. If they teach it more stricter, or if they teach it more livelier… And they can learn new things if they can actually just go to different places instead of churches and you can see how the kids read and stuff like that…

CÉLINE:    Saira, you said it'd be different from the "usual English" stuff? What do you mean?

SAIRA:    Yeah, I think they have different… I don't think that they sing songs inside the mosque, or I don't think so – I've only been there once to do stuff, but it would be very different because it is a totally different place, it might look different from the inside, they might have different stuff to do in there, they might have more fun stuff, they might have more different activities, they might not… It might be smaller, it might be bigger… It might have more children, or it might not have children in it… you can just wonder.

Interestingly, the adjective "English" is used once again, in opposition to "Islam." Not only is Islam therefore constructed as un-English, but Englishness is once again rooted in Christianity. These findings corroborate Cowden and Singh's (2017), who argue that Muslim communities have been constructed as insufficiently British.

These comments contrast with the level of comfort participants felt with St Peter's:

[Visits to St Peter's] also make the building more familiar, less alienating… Yeah. Yeah… You don't walk in, going "Ooh!" [*Spooky tone*] "What is it?" "Can I touch that?"

"Can I not do that?" […] I wouldn't feel awkward going to St Peter's and saying hello! Because they know who we are, and yeah… (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

If for some participants the lack of knowledge about other faiths and places of worship meant that they had many questions and were curious to find out more about them, in other cases it resulted in discomfort, or even distrust, towards non-Christian religions:

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | Right… And how would you feel if it was an imam and you were going to a mosque? |
| SAM: | I'd be scared. |
| […] | |
| CÉLINE: | […] Why? |
| SAM: | 'Cos I never saw one and they might be like kind of weird and they might not know us, and they might get hurtful. |
| CÉLINE: | Is it because it's a person you don't know, or is it because they have a different religion? |
| SAM: | It's a different religion. They might be strangers… There might be carrying stuff that's not allowed in the school. |
| CÉLINE: | Like what? |
| SAM: | Like their knives that they have around and all that. |
| SAIRA: | And it might be a bit scary because they obviously do things differently, and… they might talk to you in different ways and obviously if there was no other teacher from your school with ya' you'd definitely be scared. Everyone would be thinking, what happens to them if like the teacher from their school was leaving them. It'd just be strange to see a random person walking and say, "Come on, we'll take you to this place," and they could take you anywhere really. |

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE | Right, but this is not a church school, so how do you feel about the connection with the local church? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Doesn't bother me. |
| CÉLINE: | Would you be keen on having a similar connection with maybe a mosque, or a synagogue, or a temple or… |
| MR BARTLETT: | … |
| CÉLINE: | Or maybe you're not fussed? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Well, I dunno… I'd be a bit apprehensive, because… I don't know. |
| CÉLINE: | What do you mean? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Apprehensive like… unsure. |
| CÉLINE: | Can you explain why you'd feel that way? |

| | |
|---|---|
| MR BARTLETT: | Like when you don't know about something and so you can feel out of your comfort zone, so you're not sure. Because I don't know how it works in those kind of… places. |
| CÉLINE: | So, you wouldn't know what to expect? |
| MR BARTLETT: | Yeah, yeah. |
| CÉLINE: | So, you wouldn't feel comfortable necessarily taking the children or… |
| MR BARTLETT: | Not unless I'd looked into it in a lot of depth first. |

Some participants expressed discomfort or fear towards non-Christian religions. According to Ahmed (2015), these feelings result in constructing contact with the 'other' as possibly dangerous, and in affectively reorienting the 'other' away from the in-group. These feelings were relational and shaped by past histories of (lack of) contact. In this case, it seemed to result from a lack of knowledge (in the comments above, Sam for instance gets confused between Islam and Sikhism), and a lack of embodied expressions (Mr Bartlett constructed Christian spaces as safe, but other places of worship as outside his "comfort zone").

On the other hand, St Peter's was constructed as a safe space for children and the wider community:

> If children find themselves in trouble, then the church might be somewhere where they find they can go to for safety and by being… You know if you pass the church and go, "Oh, I'm not going there!" My children will be very much like, "Oh yeah we can go there, Reverend Abi is there!" and so and so and so… And that can create new opportunities for them… like a youth group maybe… that'd be nice… (Miss Nolan, KS2 Teacher).

As Alexander Parkes was located in a highly deprived area, where street violence was not uncommon (during their interviews, Jasmine and Mia talked about the presence of gangs in a nearby school, and the strong language that was used on the streets), members of senior management felt it was their duty to point families towards safe spaces. One such space was St Peter's church:

> Mrs Dodd today told me how senior management (including herself) promote the Messy Church to parents; she said it was another way Alexander Parkes supported the Church (Fieldnotes, 17 Oct. 2014).

> So, we promote the Messy Church, which is children going to church… Now the elephant in the room is so they become integrated members of that church, to keep that church alive and moving forward. That's why the church put it on. But the use to our families is that it's a place to go and interact, be social and have their children stimulated. And that's the catch 22. Our children need that, they need places to go and things to do, and experiences and stimulations. And there isn't anywhere else, apart from things like the church. And they have a separate agenda (Mr Blackburn, Headteacher).

St Peter's church was therefore viewed as more than a religious building, but also as a possible safe haven, and a place where community-making activities took place, including extra-curricular activities such as Brownies, which some children attended. Turning to church in moments of need, or for support, is further aligned with Davie's concept of vicarious religion. It also fits well with Ammerman's concept of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, whereby churches and congregations are viewed as support structures. Such constructions legitimise the place and social function of Christianity in the public sphere.

### 6.4.2. Reverend Abi

At Alexander Parkes, the church was "personified in the form of the local vicar" (Davie: 2007b: 29). Reverend Abi embodied the established Church, and acted as spokesperson for Christianity. In order to understand how children's construction of Christianity was impacted by the presence of Reverend Abi, it is important to situate the vicar theologically. Indeed, the Church of England remains theologically diverse, and both clergy and laity can identify with different church traditions. While no branch is homogeneous, broad distinctions within the Church have been made along the lines of liberal/conservative or charismatic/traditional (Fry, 2019). Fry gives the example of the Anglo-Catholic tradition, which is divided between traditional and liberal movements:

> Traditional catholics emerged as a result of the Oxford Movement[6] and are theologically more inclined to incorporate Roman Catholic theology into their own thinking […]. Liberal catholics, however, emerged in the twentieth century, and are more affirming of women's ordination, and stress the need for theological reflection on the contemporary implications of Roman Catholic teaching (2019: 5).

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[6] The Oxford Movement was a movement aiming at bringing RC thought and practice back within the Established Church, and therefore at bringing back High Church attitudes (i.e. giving a 'high' place to the importance of sacraments or church leadership for example).

The broad Church of England tradition is usually situated between the catholic and the evangelical traditions (2019). Fry describes the evangelical tradition as consisting "of those who hold the authority of the Bible, the need for personal conversion, Jesus' crucifixion, and social activism as key components of faith" (2019: 5).

Reverend Abi's own theological tradition resulted in her embodying one particular aspect of Christianity. While Reverend Abi did not speak directly about her own training or her own positionality, in this section I argue that her approach to Anglicanism was most likely aligned to the liberal Catholic tradition of the Church of England, and reflect on how this influenced children's discursive constructions of Christianity. While the 'liberal' dimension of Christianity remains under-theorised, in common knowledge the term is often used "to indicate the opposite end of a scale that is anchored by evangelicalism" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 3). Often, liberals are therefore constructed in opposition to evangelicals, and are characterised by having "rejected or reinterpreted traditional ideas about the Bible, Christ's divinity, the second coming, and the like" (1997: para. 3):

> At its core, 'liberal' meant believing in human dignity and freedom and the free exercise of the mind. Liberals thought that the search for truth was entirely compatible with the spiritual life, since God was to be worshipped in Spirit and Truth. […] Among the ranks of ordinary Anglicans, liberalism was as much a temper and way of life as a belief system […]. Whereas evangelicals set store by a small set of central beliefs which they could happily recite, and Anglo-Catholics put their faith in rituals and ceremonies, liberals were marked by the virtues they espoused, including a general niceness and concern to help others. Liberal reticence to proclaim their faith owed less to lack of conviction than to a concern not to embarrass or coerce anyone. This tendency was part and parcel of the English character (Brown and Woodhead, 2016: 18-19).

Ammerman suggests that liberals are thus "best defined not by ideology, but by practices. Their own measure of Christianity is right living more than right believing" (1997: para. 3). From her work with 'liberal' Christians, Ammerman concluded that the most important characterisation of Christianity was to "seek to do good, to make the world a better place, to live by the Golden Rule" (1997: para. 4), hence 'Golden Rule' Christianity.

Reverend Abi was a woman. Opponents to women's ordination in the Anglican Church tend to be found in either the traditional Anglo-Catholic or conservative

evangelical traditions, whereas 'affirming clergy'[7] are more likely to be found in the more liberal or charismatic evangelical tradition, or in Anglo-Catholicism (Fry, 2019):

> One effect of the battles which were fought first over women priests and then over the treatment of gay people was to introduce a new division into the Church: 'traditionalists' or 'conservatives' versus 'liberals'. Although it related to the old distinctions of high, low and broad churchmanship, which had to do with how you ran your church – the ritual, theology and ecclesiology – it was significantly different. The new division was very twentieth century. It was part of a 'culture war' which raged most intensely over issues of sex and gender, but which pitted a whole set of 'traditional' values against the alleged relativism of modern secular life (Brown and Woodhead, 2016: 72).

When Reverend Abi reflected on her role in the school and in the community more widely, she explained that she was a "cure of souls," and that it was her responsibility to look after those who lived in the parish:

> So whether it's a church school, or a community school, they're in my patch as such, they're in my area. It's like, if anyone wants to be baptised, or christened, and lives in the parish of Applewood, I have to do it. I cannot refuse a person, and I cannot refuse… someone… to get married in church. Because of the area. If they live in the parish… […] If you live in Applewood, you can get married – if it's your first marriage; if you're divorced it's get a bit complicated. But I can't stop anyone getting married. And it's the same if we had a church yard that was still opened, so still would be receiving bodies as such, I can't refuse anyone permission to be buried in the church yard if they live in Applewood. So if you see what I mean? (Reverend Abi).

In her narrative, Reverend Abi foregrounded her duty of care for the community. This influenced the types of activities that she undertook, such as calling for food donations at Alexander Parkes to set up a food bank during Harvest. By locating Christianity in the realm of care and morality, she embodied moral codes on behalf of the church. Reverend Abi's discourses therefore conformed to Golden Rule Christian discursive constructions of religiosity.

As she further reflected on her role, she did not locate herself within evangelical traditions:

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[7] Fry (2019) refers to the clergy who were happy to accept women as priests and bishops as 'affirming clergy.'

| REV. ABI: | […] I can only be who I am, to a certain extent and probably because I'm quite… restrained on how I share the faith… I go for the incarnational approach… |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | I'm not very sure what this means… |
| REV. ABI: | It's also called Missio Deo [sic.][8] – find out where God is and join in. But incarnation means God is with us, so it's being in the community, and being approachable, being with the community and for the community, and through that my faith comes out, rather than standing on a corner, shouting 'you must follow Jesus or else you'll die!' or 'go to Hell.' |

When asked about what she would like pupils to learn from Christianity, she seemed to further locate herself within 'liberalism' as she referred to "the two commandments – love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and body; and to love your neighbour as yourself. […] They are the heart of the Christian faith. And it's love that will sort the world out."

While Reverend Abi did not associate with the evangelical tradition of the Church of England, it is worth noting that she still hoped that through her actions she would be able to plant the seed of faith, and that children would contribute to spreading the messages heard in St Peter's during her activities and services. For example, before concluding the session on Christmas with Year 2 pupils, Reverend Abi asked pupils to help her spread the message of Christmas:

| REV. ABI: | Can you promise me something? You're now experts about the Christmas story, can you go home and go back to school and tell everyone about the Christmas story? |
|---|---|
| PUPILS: | Yeah! |
| REV. ABI: | Come on, let's get more excited about this, can you promise as experts of Christmas that you'll tell everyone about it? |
| PUPILS: | Yeaaaah!!! |
| REV. ABI: | Well done! And I'm hoping to come and see your Nativity Play next week. Take care and make sure you've got your angel! |

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[8] Missio Dei is usually translated as 'Mission of God,' and here refers to Reverend Abi viewing her work as being part of God's work.

However, the analysis of children's agency so far revealed that her presence and her activities were unlikely to indoctrinate or convert children into Christianity.

Reverend Abi had a 'highly sacramental' approach, as she emphasised the importance of rituals and ceremonies, thereby possibly revealing an Anglo-Catholic theological position (Brown and Woodhead: 2016). This was exemplified by the activities she chose to run, which focused on Christian symbols and traditions (Year 1) where pupils learnt about different rituals such as baptism, Easter (Year 4) where children took part in celebrations such as Palm Sunday, and Christmas (Years 2 and 6). Rituals around candles were also important, as pictures 6-1 and 6-4 show. Reverend Abi was also committed to the authorised ecclesiastical vestment. She wore her clerical shirt dog collar every day, except for services when she wore a black cassock, white surplice and chasuble or stole. In fact, during a church activity with Year 1, she presented children with the different priest robes, explaining which colour to wear during the liturgical year (see pictures 6-14 and 6-15).



*Picture 6—14 Reverend Abi's chasuble and stoles*

Purple for Advent and Lent    White for Christmas and Easter

Red for Saints and Pentecost    Green for ordinary Time

*Picture 6—15 Leaflet given to Pupils, detailing the Colours of the Church Year*

Reverend Abi's theological position directly influenced her choice of activities. As exemplified in pictures 6-14 and 6-15, Reverend Abi for example chose to spend some time with the children, discussing the symbolism of her clothes:

REV ABI:    What colour is the stole?

PUPILS:     Red!

REV. ABI:   What does red remind you of?

FINN:       Fire.

ROSIE:      Fireworks.

LEO:        The blood of Christ.

REV. ABI: Well done!! Yes, the blood of Christ… Red reminds us also of the blood of Christians who were killed because of their faith, so it helps us remember them.

Other examples included introducing children to rituals and ceremonies held in church. During her workshop on Christian symbols and traditions, one station was dedicated to the Sacrament of Baptism. Four children were invited to volunteer to stand as the father, the mother, and the godparents of a baby doll (see picture 6-16 below), whom the children named Olivia Chalice.[9]



*Picture 6—16 Preparing for the Sacrament of Baptism*

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[9] The group of pupils had just attended a station about communion, where they learnt the word 'chalice' (see section 6.1). Originally, the pupils wanted to call the baby Jesus, but Reverend Abi told them they had to pick a different name.

While I observed Reverend Abi with the children, I took the following notes:

Reverend Abi turns towards the parents and godparents to perform a baptism. By doing so she turns her back to the children on the pews (Some lose focus almost immediately). The following conversation takes place:

REV. ABI:      Parents and godparents, will you help Olivia Charlize[10] to go to church?

[*The children don't move and don't say anything*]

REV. ABI:      You have to say yes.

PUPILS:        Yes.

REV. ABI:      Nice and loud!

PUPILS:        Yes!!

REV. ABI:      Parents and godparents, will you help Olivia Charlize to pray?

[*Pupils nod and say 'yes' [not very loudly]*])

REV. ABI:      Parents and godparents, will you help Olivia Charlize to read the Bible?

[*Pupils nod and say 'yes' [not very loudly]*])

REV. ABI:      Parents and godparents, will you help Olivia Charlize to pray?'

[*Pupils nod and say 'yes' [not very loudly]*])

REV. ABI:      Ok, so you're ready to be parents and godparents… [*Turning back to now face the pupils on the pews*] Now, what's on your school jumper?' [*She points pupils' school badges*].

PUPIL 1:       A school badge.

REV. ABI:      Is it St Peter's badge?'

PUPILS:        No.

REV. ABI:.     No, it's Alexander Parkes's badge. Why is that?'

PUPILS:        …

REV. ABI:      Does it mean you go to St Peter's school?

PUPILS:        No.

---

[10] Reverend Abi did not realise the children did not intend to call the baby Olivia Charlize, but Olivia Chalice.

REV. ABI:      No, it says we belong to Alexander Parkes school. We're gonna put the sign of the cross on the baby [*Turning back towards the baby, Rev. Abi takes a bottle and pours some oil on her fingers and traces the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead*].

REV. ABI:      We use a special oil to do this [Once she's done one, she asks the parents and the godparents to do the same. No further explanation is given. Once the 'godparents' are finished, Rev. Abi takes the baby from the 'parents' and walks to the font. She then asks a child from the pews to come and help her].

REV. ABI:      What's in it? [*Pointing at the font*].

PUPIL 2:       Water.

REV. ABI:      Should we put more?

PUPIL 2:       Yeah [*Rev. Abi pours more water into the font*].

REV. ABI:      Let's baptise Olivia Charlize [*Rev. Abi pours water on the baby's head*]. Olivia Charlize I baptise you in the name of the Son, the Holy Spirit and the Father… Wow, she didn't cry! Many babies cry at this stage! Well done Olivia Charlize! [Turning to the children] Anyone had a birthday recently? [*3 children raise their hands, and one child points to one of his peers, who is standing behind the reverend, and says, 'This one!' The child replies, 'Yes, it's today! I'm 6!'*]

REV ABI:       Wow! Happy birthday! Are you going to have a cake?

PUPIL 3:       Yes.

REV. ABI:      And candles?

PUPIL 3:       Yes.

REV. ABI:      Who else has candles on their cake? [*Everyone but two children raise their hands*].

[…]

REV ABI:       Yes, it's a special celebration so we have candles. So, we're going to do the same thing and give Olivia a candle to remember this special day. [*Rev. Abi picks a candle and lights it*].

[…]

REV. ABI:      The candle is to remember Jesus is not just in church; he's everywhere.

[…]

REV. ABI:      Do you have any question?

| PUPIL 4: | What's on the candle? |
|---|---|

REV. ABI:   It's a cross.

PUPIL 5:   Why do we do a cross on the baby?

REV. ABI:   Like your badge, it's to say the baby now belongs to God.

[*Reverend Abi goes away to tell Jayne, a volunteer from the worshipping community, that the session is coming to an end. In the meantime, the little girl who played the godmother turns to the group and says, 'I'll tell you one thing – that oil stinks!'*].

These observation notes demonstrate that pupils' experience of the ceremony did not necessarily mean that children experienced the transcendent, or left the activity converted to Christianity. Rather than reflecting on the ceremony itself, or its meaning, or the fact that the baby now belonged to God, the child who played the godmother instead reflected on her sensorial experience, and commented that the "oil stinks." This, once again, demonstrates the necessity to listen to children's lived experiences of the 'religious,' and to not assume that children are always easily socialised into faith. Secondly, the findings also demonstrate that the Sacrament of Baptism was constructed as important in the Christian faith, and that Reverend Abi believed in belonging. As a result, some children did not want to identify as Christians, even if they believed in God and Jesus, because they had not been baptised:

CÉLINE:   Are you happy to tell me what your religion is?

ELLA:   I don't mind.

CÉLINE:   What is it?

ELLA:   Christian.

MEGAN:   Christianity.

CÉLINE:   Why did you choose Christianity as your religion?

[…]

ELLA:    I'm christened as well.

MEGAN:   I haven't been christianed [sic.] yet.

ELLA:    Christened.

MEGAN:   Christened. Whatever.

CÉLINE:   So Ella you're Christian because you've been christened?

ELLA:   Yeah, but if I wasn't I'd still believe in God.

| | |
|---|---|
| CÉLINE: | This question is a bit more personal, so if you don't want to answer it that's not a problem. Do you have a religion? |
| HARVEY: | I believe in Jesus, but I'm not baptised. |
| CÉLINE: | So would you say you've got no religion? Because you're not baptised? |
| HARVEY: | Yeah. |
| CÉLINE: | OK. |
| ADAM : | Well I don't really have a specific religion; it's just based on what I feel is true and false. I'm not baptised, and my parents don't have a religion either. One of them… my step-dad, he believes in… He believes that there is no god and that science created the Earth… But I believe there's Jesus and God. |
| AIMEE: | I believe in Jesus and stuff because I was baptised to go into a school when I was six. |
| CÉLINE: | What do you mean you were baptised to get into a school? |
| AIMEE: | Because it was a Catholic school and you had to be baptised to get into it. |
| CÉLINE: | Ok. |
| HARVEY: | So, if I chose a religion, I'd be Christian. |
| CÉLINE: | Why? |
| HARVEY: | Because I believe in Jesus. |

In the second abstract, children refused to identify as Christian (even if they believed in God and Jesus) because they had not been baptised, and therefore did not feel as if they could belong to the group. The act of baptism was therefore viewed as instrumental in order to identify as a Christian. Interestingly, it also led to Aimee believing that she had to accept Christian beliefs, because she had been baptised ("I believe in Jesus […] because I was baptised").

Reverend Abi's theological approach also had other effects on the school's constructions of Christianity. For example, during a workshop with Year 5 pupils, she employed loose conventions for praying to Jesus:

> I'd got lots of different pictures of Jesus – contemporary pictures of Jesus, so a Black Jesus, a white Jesus, Jesus with a beard… all sorts of pictures. And then I said, 'choose one of those, and then go and write down what you'd say to Jesus and we're going to do it in silence for ten minutes.' And they went off. And they were silent (Reverend Abi).

Her pictures contrasted with more 'traditional' or 'conservative' representations of Jesus Christ. Alexander Parkes followed in her stead, as several pupils were cast to play Jesus in the Easter production; one of whom was a girl, and one of whom was a Black pupil. Teachers, pupils and parents/guardians seemed to be either supportive or indifferent of this approach, as their reactions were never mentioned during interviews, nor did it seem to create any controversy. Once again, parents were likely to have demonstrated implicit support by complying. While these findings may not be perceived controversial in a school setting that aims to be as inclusive as possible, they do contrast with findings that emerged during an earlier research project (Benoit, forthcoming), when parents from a conservative white middle-class area in Wolverhampton complained to their local school after a teacher had told her pupils that Jesus was not white, did not speak English, and that his name was unlikely to be pronounced /ˈdʒiːzəs/ (English received pronunciation).

As well as her theological position, Reverend Abi's own qualities were likely to have influenced pupils' constructions of Christianity, as she embodied the religious tradition. Reverend Abi was at ease with children, and enjoyed working with them. Not only did she work closely with the local CofE school and Alexander Parkes, but she also held monthly family-friendly services at church aimed at children and Messy Church activities. Children found her approachable, friendly, and lively:

> RAINNA: She wasn't just a boring church person who says, 'Oh yeah, the Bible's about this' [*monotonous tone*]. She was like, 'Right then! We're gonna make trainers out of paper and it's gonna be cool!' [*upbeat tone*].
>
> SAIRA: Yeah and she understands ya'… and she connected with the kids somehow even though she looked really old and boring [*Chuckles*]. But then, 'cos our normal teacher don't actually do that, but she was lively and she picked people to do stuff and everyone gets their turn and their fair share. Last time she came here, she did group activities and it was really fun.

While Reverend Abi addressed serious topics, such as debt, or the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, she did so through games or interactive storytelling. As a result, her activities were perceived as "fun" (Ajit):

> CÉLINE: Do you like it when [Reverend Abi] comes here?
>
> BEN, DAISY, CHARLIE: Yeah.

| CÉLINE: | Why? |
|---|---|
| CHARLIE: | 'Cos we do loads of fun activities. |

> If there was something like Christingle [in any other religion], and if I was a Hindu or a Muslim, I would go because it's really good fun (Adam).

These findings contrast with Madge *et* al's (2014), who found that young people were not likely to construct Christianity as fun.

The association of Reverend Abi (and by extension Christianity) with fun should not be trivialised:

> [F]un has become the means by which permissive behavio[u]r is accepted as a major goal of modern life. […] In this context, fun becomes an essential part of the system, a part which balances the seriousness of life and contributes to a sense of cultural joie de vivre (Heddendorf, 2008: 109-110).

Christianity being constructed as fun complies with liberal Western ideologies, since it is not perceived as an all-encompassing way of life, nor as constraining people. Such a romanticised construction of Christianity befits liberal Western discourses, whereby religions ought to be moderate and unrestrictive (Ammerman, 2014; Smith and Denton, 2005), and helps legitimise the place of Christianity in the public sphere, despite dominant liberal constructions of the role of religion in public life.

Reverend Abi and her activities were also described as "really good," "interesting" and "inspiring:"

> Because she just makes the school move, like basically. She changes the whole perspective on the school because even the teachers learn something from her because Mr Blackburn… and Reverend Abi was doing something in front of the school and she was teaching everyone how you can change things and stuff like that… And when she was doing the Christingle, it was the first time that Mr Blackburn came, she did it and it was really good and Mr Blackburn just changed and made it more lively and added more stuff to it, and all other teachers were listening to her and the kids were like "I might do that one day" or "I might come to this church" or "I might come to this church everyday…" She just changes people's opinions… (Saira, KS2 Pupil).

Through her activities, children internalised positive discourses associated with Christianity, and as a result, tended to feel positive towards Christianity and people who identified as Christians. However, as mentioned before, children's agency should not be underestimated – despite her comments, Saira did not identify as a Christian but as a Muslim.

Children also viewed Reverend Abi as part of the school and of the local community:

> Within a community school… it's more about making that connection… me with the children, and then the children with the church, if you see what I mean? […] I mean it was like last Friday, I was standing by the bus stop, and a group of children, teenagers, in their football kit, were walking from I think it must have been [the local] secondary school, so they must have been 12-13… All boys, all walking up, with their teacher, and as one passed he said, "Hello Reverend Abi!" Now you see what I mean about the connection? For a boy to say that, in front of all his friends, not worry about it, not be embarrassed by it, but still make that connection… that for me is what it's all about (Reverend Abi).

The physical presence of Reverend Abi in the public space not only further legitimised the presence of Christianity in the public realm, but also attests to her role in sustaining vicarious religion. By being a visible member of the community, Reverend Abi was able to perform the function of the church leader who believes and performs rituals on behalf of others (Davie, 2007b).

## 6.5. Summary

The findings in this chapter focus on the data collected during church-led activities, when a doxological approach to religion was adopted. Findings reveal that children remained competent active social agents who were not passively socialised into the Christian faith during church-led activities. Although children were invited to experience religious life, activities did not turn into an exercise of indoctrination. However, these activities, combined with the physical presence of Reverend Abi in the public institutional space, led children to further locate English culture within Christianity. This view was reinforced by the construction that Christianity promotes community-making links and fosters a sense of togetherness. Such constructions,

however, excluded some children from the in-group, as they withdrew/were withdrawn from church-led activities. Structural inequalities were reproduced as children who did not conform were excluded from the school community.

By legitimising the place of Christianity in the public sphere, the school played an important role in challenging liberal discursive constructions of the institutional space as being 'secular,' confining religion to the private realm. These findings corroborate with Hemming's :

> Significant events […], along with positive views of religious activities in school expressed by many of the parents, combined to envisage alternative understandings of the Community school ethos. In these alternative constructions, religion was attributed a rather more significant role in state institutional space than liberal theories would dictate" (Hemming, 2011b: 1073).

By legitimising Christianity in school, Alexander Parkes, together with Reverend Abi and St Peter's, played an active role in sustaining that cultural chain of memory as they taught children about Christian rituals, celebrations, and moral codes.

In the case of Alexander Parkes Primary School, only a narrowly-defined Christianity was made a legitimate religion in the public sphere. Christianity was constructed along the more liberal Anglo-Catholic tradition of the Church of England, which Reverend Abi embodied. It also conformed to 'Golden Rule' Christianity, as the emphasis was put on caring for others. Christianity was also viewed as fun. The latter contrasts with Madge *et al.*'s findings, who reported that young people tended to view Christians as "not having much fun" (2014: 54). This attests to the fragility of discursive constructions, and of vicarious realities. In the case of Alexander Parkes, if Reverend Abi left, or if the senior management team chose to stop its partnership with St Peter's CofE church, "[t]he 'chemistry', however, may gradually alter, a mutation that is discernible in both practice and belief, not to mention the connections between them" (Davie, 2007b: 31).

# Chapter 7.   Conclusions

In this chapter, I offer a synthesis of the key findings, and their relationship to existing literature in the field. I also reflect on the thesis' contribution to methodological and theoretical knowledge. As I summarise findings, I draw conclusions about Alexander Parkes' different approaches to religion (instrumental, sacramental, and doxological) (meso level). I then examine the findings through the theoretical lenses of 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997), 'vicarious' religion (Davie, 2015), and religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) in order to shed light on participants' understandings of the role and function of religion in society (meso level). Finally, I explore how the micro and meso levels informed participants' discursive constructions of religion(s), and shed more light on the social constructedness of religion as a social and cultural signifier among the 'middle ground' group (macro level). The chapter ends with recommendations for further research.

## 7.1.    New Insights: The Methodological Contributions Offered by the Alexander Parkes Case Study

### 7.1.1.   Just Another Ethnographic Case Study?

For the purpose of this study, I focused on a state-funded non-faith-based primary school located in Birmingham, UK. Throughout this thesis, I reflected on the many ways

in which religion is mediated within Alexander Parkes Primary School, and explored the diverse and complex ways in which participants encountered religion in the state institutional space. The aim of this research was to explore pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion(s) in a primary school, a stage when children learn and internalise hegemonic values, cultural skills, attitudes, and knowledge (Margetts, 2005). This research project contributes to the growing body of literature on children's encounters with religion in educational settings.

Research on religion in education has tended to focus on faith-based schools, and/or minority faith communities. Conversely, this project presents data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in a state-funded non-faith-based school located in a white working-class area of Birmingham. While there is a large body of literature on faith-based schools, 'multicultural' schools, and religious minorities in RE in order "to draw on a range of children from different cultural backgrounds" (Smith, 2005b: 3), less literature focuses on how children encounter religion in less diverse school contexts. This research addresses this gap in the literature as it presents data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in a primary school where pupils were predominantly from white British backgrounds. By conducting fieldwork at Alexander Parkes Primary School, which was located in an area where the majority of residents were neither actively involved in organised religion nor opposed to it, my work builds on the work of Grace Davie and her research on the 'middle ground group,' or the "*missing* group" – i.e. "those [who] of 'believe without belonging' and those whose way of being religious is captured by the term 'vicarious'" (Davie, 2012: 287, emphasis added), that is to say those "who implicitly at least not only understand, but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing" (Davie, 2007a: 27).

Moving away from narratives that construct the city of Birmingham as fuelled by religious controversies, especially after Trojan Horse, and moving away from research that tends to focus on religious and ethnic minorities, this project presents another image of the city – one that tends to be overlooked. While Birmingham is often described as super-diverse, this is a policy-term which does not reflect the lived experiences of many 'Brummies[1].' Many neighbourhoods remain highly undiverse, with many areas of the city having largely white British populations, whose lived experiences of religion in education tend to be under-researched. This research offers a more nuanced picture of

[1] Name given to the residents of Birmingham.

Birmingham – one that acknowledges the existence of 'minority' schools and 'multicultural' schools, but that also accounts for schools like Alexander Parkes Primary School.

This research builds on a long tradition of ethnographic study in Religious Education. Since the 1970s especially, ethnographic research has provided a wealth of data about religious communities' lived experiences in Britain. Focusing on religious socialisation and transmission, and on identity-making and social cohesion, ethnographers have shown for several decades that communities' experiences ought not to be essentialised. Work from the WRERU centre and beyond has paid attention to the role schools (often with a focus on Religious Education) play in reproducing knowledge about religion(s). Portraying how religion, culture, and ethnicity intersect, "ethnographic research precipitates theoretical debates about the very framework within which Religious Education is conceptualised" (Nesbitt, 2002: 114).

Borrowing from Religious Education studies, this project also uses ethnography as a methodological tool to explore how religion was encountered and conceptualised in Alexander Parkes Primary School. By reflecting on the constructedness of religion, and discourse practices within which pupils and teachers participate, this study is located in the sociology of religion, where a body of literature on religion in the primary school context is emerging (e.g. Hemming, 2015; 2018; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Shillitoe, forthcoming; Smith, 2005b; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019). In order to account for the diverse forms religion can take (McGuire, 2008), and to explore how children encountered religion beyond the traditional 'sacred' realm, I also borrowed from the lived religion framework as a methodological tool. The lived religion paradigm, which is also anchored in ethnography, pays attention to the ways in which 'ordinary people' encounter and experience religion. The framework complements a discursive approach to religion well, as it allows for "a study of groupings of statements enacted within a social and cultural context" (Taira, 2013: 28). It remains, however, under-theorised (Ammerman, 2016), and "needs to be clarified, theorized, made methodologically explicit" (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020: 166). This project contributes to emerging discussions about lived religion as a *methodological* tool, and its adequacy for the study of discursive practices within a social setting.

In sociology of religion, the framework has often been used by researchers to make sense of their participants' own spiritualities, and to better understand "the

complexity and diversity of lived religions" (Murphy, 2017: 1). In other words, the framework tends to be used "to refer to the everyday, lived religion of ordinary people, as opposed to formal, institutionalized religion, thus criticizing an influential bias in the discipline" (Ganzevoort and Roeland, 2014: 94). As a result, the framework has often been used when conducting research with people who identify "as religious, spiritual or generally as going beyond common-sense understandings of the world" (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020: 166). In this research project, while children and teachers were invited to reflect on their own religious beliefs and practices if they felt it appropriate, I used lived religion as a methodological framework to move beyond the exploration of how participants live their own religion(s).

By nature, the lived religion framework does not rely on any definition of religion, and aims to refine our understanding of discursive approaches to how the category of religion is constructed and encountered (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020); it therefore does not have to be limited to the study of 'religious' communities only. In this research, I used the lived religion framework as a *research strategy* to focus on what people do, and to explore how religion is encountered in the mundane setting of the primary school. The lived religion framework has allowed me to focus on participants' encounters with religion in their daily, ordinary lives, and to explore what was commonly understood to be 'religion' or 'religious,' and how such understandings were shaped through regular practices and patterns of social life (Ammerman, 2007; 2014; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010). I was also able to move beyond traditional binaries of public and private, official and informal, 'religious' and 'secular' (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020). Limiting the lived religion paradigm as a methodological tool to solely focus on 'religious' communities would do a disservice to the framework as a conceptual apparatus, as it seeks to move beyond traditional understandings of 'religion.' By exploring how participants encountered religion as mediated by the school, I identified and deconstructed the symbolic nature of religion in a primary school setting, uncovered the discourses that were challenged and/or perpetuated in the educational field, and explored the consequences of using hegemonic discourses and whether these were limiting people's opportunities or not (Taira, 2013).

As I borrowed from the lived religion framework as a methodological tool, I was able to foreground pupils' voices without framing them as invalid. Consequently, the findings presented in this research project cannot be discarded on the grounds that

children's constructions of religion did not always conform with adult understandings of religion, prayer, or worship. Children's fluid discursive constructions of 'religion' and the 'religious,' which have been presented throughout this thesis, therefore ought to be taken seriously, rather than merely constructed as immature (non-)religious practice.

### 7.1.2. On Childhood

Ethnographic research in Religious Education has generated a wealth of qualitative data, and has contributed to foregrounding teachers', pupils' and families' voices, which usually tend to be silenced (e.g. Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010; Casson and Cooling, 2019; Casson, 2011; Ipgrave, 2002; 2004; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; Ipgrave and McKenna, 2008; Everington *et al.*, 2011; Nesbitt and Jackson, 1995; McKenna, Neill and Jackson, 2009; Kay and Francis, 2001; Nesbitt, 1995a; 1995b; 1997; 2004; 2013; Miller and McKenna, 2011). This project builds on existing ethnographic fieldwork, as it aims to further foreground children's and teachers' voices.

One of the main goals of this study was to move away from the 'old' sociology of childhood that constructs the child as incompetent and unreliable, and to recognise children's roles as active participants of society. This research has shown that children are far from passive learners. Throughout the project, pupils have demonstrated high levels of critical engagement with their social world and lived realities, and demonstrated their competence and agency on many occasions. Children, for example, explained why they chose not to take part in reciting the school prayer or in hymn singing, as they either did not want to do so, or did not feel it was relevant to them. Others engaged in debates during the focus groups. While there were instances where pupils wanted to conform to the majority (these findings echo Haun' and Tomassello's [2011]), there were many cases where children were happy to disagree with their peers.

Children who took part in acts of collective worship demonstrated that rather than being vulnerable and passive (non-)religious actors, they were in fact active and competent social agents who resorted to a variety of tactics when interpreting the prayer (i.e. either as a school ritual, as a meaningful message devoid of religiosity, as a religious act but not an act of worship, or indeed as an act of worship but not necessarily Christian). These findings support 'new' sociological approaches to childhood (e.g. Prout and James,

2015; Corsaro, 2015; Matthews, 2007), and demonstrate that children's agency and competence should not be underestimated in the school context. These findings echo those presented in previous research (e.g. Scourfield *et al.*, 2013; Hemming, 2011b; 2015; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019), and demonstrate that children's agency should not be downplayed. Findings suggest that adult concerns about indoctrinating children (such as Mr Holden) are misplaced, as there was little evidence to support the view that the school infringed on children's religious freedom.

However, this project seeks to draw attention to the fact that while the majority of children were indeed in positions to adopt tactics in RE and/or collective worship, and that as a result there was little evidence to support the view that the school infringed on children's religious freedom, this was not necessarily the case for all children. The experiences of children from certain minority groups such as conservative Muslims or Jehovah's Witnesses may have differed greatly, especially as their agency seemed more restricted than the 'middle ground' group. As a result, while the 'new' sociology of childhood and recent studies in sociology of religion have tended to present children as active social agents, and urge teachers, educationalists and policy-makers to take their voices into account, this project draws attention to possible inequalities. Not all children seemed to have equal amounts of religious freedom, and scholars ought to not minimalize the constraints they may be under – whether it is parents deciding on their behalf that they will not attend RE and/or assemblies, or whether it is the school that actively encourages children to attend church-led activities. The data also showed that in some instances children from minority faith backgrounds, such as Zahra, were rendered voiceless not only by the structures of the family and the school, but also by their peers, who spoke of their lived experiences on their behalf.

In this project, I sought to restore some power to children by not seeking parental consent.[2] While I maintain it is good practice not to privilege adults' views over children's when seeking to foreground children's voices (especially to avoid parents further withdrawing children from school activities), not seeking parental consent was not always sufficient to foreground the voices of children who withdrew/were withdrawn from RE and/or acts of collective worship. While it is to be expected that some children chose not to attend the focus groups, it is possible that others did not have the confidence

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[2] See Chapter 3 for a discussion on informed consent. For this project, I actively sought consent from gatekeepers in the school in *loco parentis*, and from pupils themselves on several occasions. Parents were also made aware of my presence and my project via the school newsletter.

to do so, or positioned themselves as 'othered' from the majority culture and therefore self-abstained from participating in the project. While Zahra volunteered to take part in the research, she remained quiet during most of the focus group, letting her peers speak on her behalf. In future research conducted in schools, attention needs to be given to strategies aiming at ensuring children from minority backgrounds do not remain voiceless. Careful consideration should be given regarding how to address power dynamics between peers and between the researcher and the research site to determine whether different methodological tools should be utilised.

## 7.2.    Empirical and Theoretical Contributions

This research project was undertaken to explore pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion(s) in a state-funded non-faith-based primary school in Birmingham. My research questions were:

1. How is religion mediated through daily educational practices?
2. How do pupils and teachers construct religion(s) at school?

Chapters 4 to 6 have shed light on how religion was encountered and mediated through educational discourses at Alexander Parkes Primary School (micro level). These chapters were framed around Ipgrave's analytical tools to the "different approaches to religion: *doxological*, *sacramental*, and *instrumental,* founded, respectively, on certain faith in God, on openness to the possibility of God, and on a default scepticism" (2012a: 30). As a discursive study of religion is too loose a theoretical framework (Taira, 2013), these tools have enabled me to explore how Alexander Parkes managed religion in the school, and how participants experienced the 'religious' and the 'secular' in the public institutional space (micro level), and findings are summarised in section 7.2.1.

In the following sections (see 7.2.2 and 7.2.3.), I reflect on the findings presented throughout this thesis. By drawing on the theoretical frameworks of religion as 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000), 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997), and 'vicarious religion' (Davie, 2015), I uncover the middle ground group's framings of

religion, and explore the (perceived) role and function of religion in contemporary society, and how it intersects with culture and ethnicity (meso level). I also reflect on what the findings reveal regarding the middle ground group's discursive constructions of religion (macro level), feeding into broader debates about the position of religion in society. By doing so, I endeavour to answer the research questions, in the context of Alexander Parkes. While the aim of this thesis is not to draw general conclusions about religion in primary education in England, the school can be viewed as a microcosm that helps us understand macro features of society: the primary school being "a sort of 'middle ground' between the macro features of a nation-state system […] and the micro processes happening in the classroom" (Fabretti, 2015: 20).

### 7.2.1. The Micro Level: Approaches to Religion at Alexander Parkes

In terms of the first research question, pertaining to how religion was mediated through daily educational practices, the thesis shows that Alexander Parkes adopted a variety of approaches to religion, which changed depending on the context (see Table 7-1). Taking a lead from Ipgrave (2012a), I used her three approaches to religion (instrumental, sacramental, and doxological) as analytical tools to assess how religion was discursively framed at Alexander Parkes. I showed that an instrumental approach dominated RE classes while a sacramental approach was more common during acts of collective worship (though not necessarily during 'regular assemblies'). Through its close connection with the local CofE church, children were also exposed to a doxological approach to religion (and Christianity in particular).

*Table 7—1 Approaches to Religion at Alexander Parkes Primary School*

| Activity | Approach to religion |
|---|---|
| Teacher-led RE classes | Instrumental |
| Teacher-led 'regular assemblies' | Instrumental |
| Acts of collective worship | Sacramental |
| 'Special assemblies' (e.g. Nativity assembly for Christmas) | Sacramental |
| Church-led RE classes | Doxological |
| Church-led activities (in school and in church) | Doxological |

Regardless of the approach adopted, I did not find any evidence of religious indoctrination. On the contrary, the data shows that regardless of the situation children found themselves in, whether it was in RE classes, praying in the great hall, or attending a church service, most of them demonstrated agency. For example, whether they willingly took part in the school prayer, constructed God as non-transcendent, or simply remained quiet, children showed that they used a variety of tactics that enabled them to feel comfortable with the school prayer. While these findings corroborate existing ones (e.g. Hemming, 2015; Shillitoe and Strhan, 2020; Scourfield *et al.*, 2013), the data collected in this research also shows that the agency of some children was more limited. This was particularly true for children who withdrew from assemblies/collective worship and/or church activities, and who had no alternative but to stand out from the in-group, with no other provision for worshipping being made available to them.

Through the instrumental approach to religion, teachers constructed 'world religions' as located within the realm of everyday morality, and "explicitly refer[red] to an underlying universal human function" (Liljestrand, 2015: 244). By constructing 'world religions' as sharing the same universal moral codes, teachers focused on similarities, and avoided dealing with opposing religious absolutes and 'destructive spiritualities' (McGuire, 2008). This resulted in religion(s) being "water[ed] down" to moral codes (as argued by Reverend Abi), especially as teachers did not engage with the transcendent or in theological discussions. When an instrumental approach to religion was adopted, children did not engage with religion in religious terms, which was consequently reduced to a "worthy banality" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 45); 'world religions' were framed along secular lines and became mere vehicles used to promote moral development.

Participants at Alexander Parkes were all in favour of the instrumental approach to religion, as they viewed it as a means to promote social cohesion. Teachers believed an instrumental approach to religion served educational and societal aims best. They believed that by focusing on similarities between religious traditions, they could help foster positive community relations, especially in an area where, according to teachers, many tended to hold anti-Muslim views. Children regarded RE as providing them with the tools to navigate a diverse (non-)religious world. As Lucy explained, thanks to RE classes she felt empowered as she knew she should not make sausages for her Muslim guests (see p. 152). Similar views, whereby an instrumental (social) approach to religion is praised for its contribution to positive community relations and to educating the

desirable citizen, are commonly held by RE teachers and policy-makers in England (see section 2.3.4).

However, the instrumental approach seemed to have its limitations at Alexander Parkes, as the data revealed tensions and an 'us/them' dualism (Waikar, 2018) – a divide "historically tinted by colonialism and embedded in a history of inequalities and oppression" (Welply, 2018: 374). If 'world religions' did not conform to the narrow definition of code of conduct and morals, then these were not viewed as valid by the 'middle ground' group. While religious belonging was constructed as acceptable, religious practice was not considered as such if it moved beyond the realm of morality. Children often tended to misunderstand what it meant to exist religiously, sometimes viewing the absence of religion in one's life as liberating ("[i]t's like a free life," Paige). Teachers often "fail[ed] to provide an accurate account of the [religious] subject's experience" (Teece, 2010: 99), and pupils' understandings of religion(s) were often "limited by the anthropocentric premises" of the instrumental approach (Ipgrave, 2012a: 46). Most children were not able to recall much about the 'world religions' they had studied throughout KS1 and KS2, and held rigid constructions of 'world religions.' As Adam summarised, "[i]f you don't follow it properly, then you're not that religion." As a result, communities who did not follow their religion "properly" were marginalised. While teachers endeavoured to promote social cohesion through RE, they often failed to do so, as children often seemed ill-equipped to understand the real (non-)religious landscape of the UK (Dinham and Shaw, 2015).

Through the instrumental approach, religion(s) were framed through a secular lens (Ipgrave, 2012a). While the 'secular' informed the 'religious' and how religion(s) was constructed, the reverse was also true. This was the case when Mrs Mészános explained that the 'secular' school rules originated from the Ten Commandments. Findings revealed a complex interrelationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and fluid boundaries between the two, as per the post-secular paradigm. Interestingly, however, some adult participants did not share such a construction, and viewed the 'religious' as confined to the private sphere, and the 'secular' as dominating the public arena. Such views, which were informed by liberal theories of secularisation, were especially shared by adult 'nones,' who believed that other approaches to religion (i.e. sacramental or doxological) were not appropriate within the state-funded non-faith-based school. This view was not shared by all teachers, as others held a 'liberalised establishmentarian' view, and saw the

place of Christianity in state-funded education as the natural result of the influence of Christianity in English culture (Bates, 1996).

While teachers disagreed regarding the appropriateness of the sacramental approach to religion, most children did not seem to share the same difficulties. The majority of pupils held more fluid constructions of the 'religious' and the 'secular,' which made it easier for them to navigate acts of collective worship, where a sacramental approach to Christianity was adopted. Generally speaking, pupils constructed the school as 'neutral,' and encountered religious practice differently to adults. For example, while all adult participants agreed that acts of collective worship were (broadly) Christian in nature, many children did not share this view. For many of them, the prayer was just a school prayer, devoid of religious meaning. God was used as an intermediary noun, which was interpreted differently depending on the particular pupil. Some, for example, chose to 'talk' to relatives instead. As 'God' was not necessarily interpreted as transcendent, children did not construct the act of praying as religious. Alternatively, if some children decided not to take part in the prayer, either for (non-)religious reasons or because they were indifferent to it, they also resorted to 'tactics' such as avoiding reciting it. As Harvey explained, "if you wanna do it, you can; if you don't wanna do it, you don't." This view is aligned with the sacramental approach, which "combines opportunity with freedom of response" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 37).

As children viewed the school as neutral, they uncritically took for granted the Christianised habitus that the school reproduced. By providing opportunities for Christian practice, children normalised the acts of singing hymns and of reciting the school prayer, which was codified and embodied along Christian terms. For instance, children addressed God directly in their prayers (see Appendix G), lowering their heads and putting their hands together. Reverend Abi, who embodied the established Church, was also a regular presence in the school. The presence of the church, and of religious practice within the school walls, transcended "secularist understandings" (Ipgrave, 2012a: 47), and legitimised the place of Christianity in the public sphere. At Alexander Parkes, while Christian practice (through the prayer and hymn-singing) and Christian celebrations (through special assemblies) were normalised in the public arena, other religions were absent and therefore remained confined to the private sphere.

Findings also reveal that by adopting a sacramental approach to Christianity, (white) English teachers came to embody Christianity within the school context, while

pupils who opted out of assemblies/collective worship embodied 'otherness.' By paying attention to how children constructed 'otherness,' I was able to shed light on how such a construct shapes interactions among peers (Welply, 2018). For example, embodiment seemed to play an important role in shaping pupils' constructions of religion(s). Children who physically removed themselves from acts of collective worship/assemblies were viewed as being constrained by 'illiberal' religions, and excluding themselves from the school community. As children constructed the school space as neutral, they therefore did not assume that the broadly Christian act of collective worship could be exclusionary. As a result, religions such as Islam were constructed as incompatible with some aspects of the school's culture. These findings echo Flemmen and Savage (2017) and Carr (2015) who speak of neoliberal 'performative' modes of racism that reproduce inequity and power relations through notions of idealised culture. As Inwood (2015) and Cowden and Singh (2017) explain, through such 'soft' forms of racism, minority faiths in general, and Muslim communities in particular, are viewed as 'conditional citizens' and as not conforming if they 'refuse' to assimilate to the dominant culture (Shain, 2013). This was especially made clear when Zahra, who used to attend assemblies but not acts of collective worship, modified her behaviour as a result of her peers' gaze, demonstrating the community's power of action. As a result, Zahra failed to embody the collective ideal, and further 'segregated' herself from the in-group as Miss Nolan argued (see p. 215). Consequently, while a sacramental approach to religion may have resulted in a more "equitable religious-and-secular settlement" for the 'middle-ground' group (Ipgrave, 2012a: 30), as it allowed children to engage in more fluid discursive practices, it is unlikely to have been the case for religious minorities who opted out of assemblies/collective worship. This research therefore calls for more attention to be paid to the role of the sacramental approach to religion in shaping children's sense of belonging and identity, and in perpetuating notions of idealised (English) culture anchored in Christianity.

Through its close relationship with the local CofE church and its vicar, the school also exposed children to a doxological approach to Christianity, which contributed to further legitimising the place of Christianity in the public sphere, while also further locating English culture within Christianity. Such constructions, once again, excluded a minority of children who opted out or were removed by parents from church-led activities. As most participants from the 'middle-ground' group viewed church-led

activities as fostering a sense of unity and of togetherness, they effectively excluded pupils from certain minority faith backgrounds from the community.

By being exposed to the doxological approach to religion in the school context, children viewed the role of the local church within their 'secular' school as legitimate, and Reverend Abi as an important member of the community. They regarded the reverend as caring for them, and teaching them "real-life things" (Harvey), such as during the fair-trade game. Once again, findings attest to the complex interplay between the 'religious' and the 'secular.' While the reverend and volunteers from the worshipping community always adopted a doxological approach to religion, children did not always construct the activities as religious. In some cases, this led to interesting situations, where it became almost impossible to disentangle the 'religious' from the 'secular.' This was particularly true when children collected tinned food to bring to school, and which were collected by the reverend, or when Year 6 pupils took part in the fair-trade game. While Reverend Abi framed the discourse of charitable assistance along religious lines, children did not view their acts as religiously significant. Yet, it has been argued that the 'secular' discourses of care and charity have been informed by Christianity (Salonen, 2016), further attesting to the complex dialectic relationship between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and of the relevance of the post-secular paradigm.

### 7.2.2. The Meso Level: Exploring Religion Within Theoretical Frameworks

Although Alexander Parkes adopted different approaches to religion depending on the situation (see Table 7-1), these did not lead to contradictory discursive constructions of religion. On the contrary, all three approaches seem to complement each other. Through the instrumental approach, 'true' religion was located within the realm of morality and ethics. In the thesis I showed how such a construction is informed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997; 2017), which defines Christianity "by practices […] of doing good and caring for others" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 3). By extension, all 'true' 'world religions' were constructed as positive phenomena, that promoted "love" and "peace" (Mrs Jennings). Participants constructed 'true' religion as promoting a 'good life', by "doing good deeds, and looking for opportunities to provide care and comfort for people in need" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 17). As Miss Williams

explained, "the basis of most faiths when you drill down is just about being good to one another, trying to be a better person." Mr Bartlett also commented that "religion gives good morals and sets a good example."

By framing the basis of religion as "just about being good to one another" (Miss Williams), participants constructed all 'world religions' as "different but all the same" (as reflected in the RE display). Therefore, by (unconsciously) framing religion through the lens of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, participants tapped into a "universal theology of religion" (Pickard, 1991: 143). All 'world religions' were constructed as sharing the same universal values. Religions were thus constructed as sharing a universal transcendental core, "which all human beings tap into and express in various localised culturally relevant ways" (Cox and Robertson, 2013). This was directly informed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity, and its 'liberal' framework of 'universal theology:'

> ['Golden Rule' Christianity] is a set of caregiving practices that extends from family to neighborhood to larger community. They are practices based in a generalized Christian ethic that calls people to "love one another" and treat others as they would wish to be treated. Among Golden Rule Christians, these practices are explicitly nonideological (Ammerman, 1997: para. 26).

As dogmatic differences are set aside, 'true' religion was located in the realm of everyday morality and ethics. As a result, any religion that did not abide by the universal code of moral and ethics were viewed as 'false.'

Such a construction of religion was reinforced by the sacramental approach adopted for acts of collective worship. As hymns and the school prayer foregrounded messages that promoted a good life. As children explained, regardless of one's religion, everyone "should still play along with each other" (Lucy), "be respectful to our friends […] and do nice things" (Bilal), and "know the right thing to do [which] is to play and love each other" (Lucas). Other examples included bringing food donations to school during the Harvest festival to contribute to St Peter's food bank.

The discourse of 'Golden Rule' Christianity was also further reinforced through the doxological approach to religion. In the case of Alexander Parkes Primary School, it had built a close relationship with Reverend Abi – the personification of St Peter's CofE church (Davie, 2007b), and the embodiment of Christianity. Reverend Abi's own theological tradition seemed closely aligned to the liberal Catholic tradition of the Church of England. During her interview and her activities, Reverend Abi foregrounded her duty

of care for the community. This was especially apparent during the fair-trade game she led for Year 6 pupils. Reverend Abi's activities in school and in church also foregrounded morals and values over ideology. This was for example the case during Godly Plays, which foregrounded values such as 'Being Fair and Just.' By prioritising right living over right believing (Ammerman, 1997: para. 3), Reverend Abi's discursive practices conformed to 'Golden Rule' Christianity.

('Golden Rule') Christianity was often constructed as playing an important role in English culture, and was the only religion that was approached instrumentally, sacramentally, *and* doxologically. Christianity occupied a privilege position at Alexander Parkes – as long as it conformed to the 'Golden Rule' Christian framework. Indeed, findings show that while there was a small number of Jehovah's Witnesses in the school, their faith had never been mentioned in RE or in assemblies. Furthermore, as Jehovah's Witnesses withdrew/were withdrawn from RE, assemblies, and church-led activities, they were not only rendered voiceless, but were also excluded from community-making activities such as assemblies and church services, and came to embody 'otherness.'

While some adults (especially 'nones') shared their discomfort towards church-led activities at Alexander Parkes, others supported it and viewed Christian rituals and celebrations such as Christingle as further fostering a sense of community and of unity within the school. Once again, there was little evidence that children converted to Christianity as a result of the doxological approach to religion. However, by endorsing certain Christian rituals and ceremonies, the school further legitimised the role and place of Christianity (as long as it did not disrupt aforementioned discursive constructions) in the public realm.

Christianity, in this context, was constructed as compatible with the in-group's cultural norms, and as being endorsed by the state institutional space and the teachers, who not only embodied (white) Englishness, but also Christianity within the school space. As all teachers took part in acts of collective worship, and actively encouraged children to join in, children tended to believe that their teachers were Christian. Conversely, 'other' religions stood out as they remained limited to the private sphere – especially in the case of children from conservative Muslim families and Jehovah's Witnesses, who needed to remove themselves from school assemblies, and for whom alternative arrangements were never made. Children at Alexander Parkes did not visit other religious buildings, and did

not forge any link with other religious leaders. Consequently, only Christianity (as narrowly defined) was allowed in the public space.

When asked about the place of Christianity at Alexander Parkes, many teachers believed that this approach was appropriate as it reflected the fact that England was "historically a Christian" country (Mr Bartlett). By constructing the in-group's culture as embedded in Christianity, teachers took part in an exercise of "ethno-denominational identification" (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 160). Children shared similar discursive constructions, as they themselves located Christianity within Englishness. As Christianity was constructed as a marker of cultural identity, and nationhood, it transcended dogma and remained conceptually anchored in the realm of everyday morality. Rituals and ceremonies, such as special assemblies in schools and church services, served to sustain the 'chain of memory' (2000). These tended to be constructed as community-making activities, and as fun, and no participant reflected on these as moments of transcendence or of religious significance.

As a result, while Hervieu-Léger (2000) argues that the 'chain of memory' is broken as families do not transmit Christianity to their children anymore, I suggest that a more nuanced approach ought to be taken in order to acknowledge the role that Christianity (as narrowly defined) continues to play in creating a sense of community among the 'middle ground' group, and to take into consideration the active role some schools take in sustaining the 'chain of memory.' Even if children did not necessarily believe in Christian doctrine, or did not religiously engage with Christian ceremonies (especially as they did not always construct God as transcendent), some form of religious transmission still took place. Not only did most children construct Christianity as legitimate in the public space, but they also shared fond memories of church-led activities (when they attended). The emphasis on community building remained prevalent not only among teachers but also pupils. Rather than being broken, the 'chain of memory' has been altered – rather than nurturing Christian ideological and dogmatic beliefs, it is about anchoring Englishness in a narrowly-defined Christianity.

Davie's notion of vicarious religion (2015) is helpful to make sense of this 'new' form of religious transmission. Rather than nurturing the Christian faith or indoctrinating children into Christianity, the school, together with the St Peter's CofE church and Reverend Abi, contributed to reproducing vicarious attitudes to Christianity. By creating particular moments, "when the normal routines of life [was] suspended" to allow pupils

to take part in religious rituals or ceremonies (Davie, 2007b: 29), the school adopted a vicarious approach to religion. By turning to the church for Remembrance Day and Christingle, but at no other time during the year, the school framed religious services as cultural traditions. Children also constructed religious practice along vicarious lines: there were moments when it was appropriate (such as assemblies, special assemblies, and services in church for Remembrance Day and Christingle), and there were moments when religion could be left outside the school gates. As Lucy said, "[w]hen we're at school we just sort of forget about our religion." This limited understanding of religion excluded children who had a less 'liberal' approach to religion, and who consequently felt uncomfortable talking about it. Children from religious communities, whose way of living and experiencing religion did not conform to 'Golden Rule' Christianity, which "is not driven by beliefs, orthodox or otherwise" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40), were more likely to feel marginalised or judged. This was the case of Lucas who did not want to tell his peers that he read the Bible with his mother, and attended church regularly with his family. This also possibly explains why no children of Jehovah's Witnesses volunteered to take part in the study, and why Zahra, who withdrew from assemblies and therefore did not conform, barely spoke during the focus group. These findings echo Ipgrave's (2012b), as she demonstrated that committed religious believers were more likely to feel alienated or have negative experiences in schools that are located in religiously un-diverse areas, where religious practice is not the norm.

By referring parents to the local CofE church in moments of need (e.g. Messy Church, food banks), the school further framed the church as a public utility, through which pastoral care was available. By expecting the Church of England to contribute to society through social action, not only were participants adopting vicarious attitudes towards Christianity, but their construction of Christianity was once again anchored in 'Golden Rule' Christianity. Families from the middle-ground group seemed to be implicitly supportive of the Church of England and of its presence in the public sphere. By allowing their children to attend church-led activities, and not withdrawing them when Reverend Abi visited the school, parents demonstrated agency by complying (Mahmood, 2005). Not only did parents seem to construct Christianity as appropriate within the institutional space (unlike other religions), but it is possible that they expected the school to transmit religious values and traditions on their behalf vicariously (Davie, 2007b; 2015; Hemming, 2015). Hervieu-Léger's (2000) concept of religion as a 'chain of memory' is once again useful to make sense of this, as it suggests that for parents (and teachers from

the 'middle ground' group) the school played an important role in the transmission of religious knowledge and traditions, and in the "continuity of the community" (2000: 160). These findings, once again, attest to the role Alexander Parkes played in perpetuating notions of idealised (English) culture located in ('Golden Rule') Christianity.

The data presented throughout this thesis and summarised in this section suggest that Christianity at Alexander Parkes was discursively constructed as:

(i)     Conforming to 'Golden Rule' Christianity; as such, "it is not driven by beliefs" but is "based in practice and experience" (Ammerman, 1997: para. 40);

(ii)    Being located in the realm of everyday morality; as such, it is about promoting the 'good life' and right living.

(iii)   Having its church open to the public, to offer care and support to those who need it; the church therefore becomes a public utility and is not confined to the private realm (Davie, 2015);

(iv)    Sustaining a sense of community and of unity through selected rituals and ceremonies, resulting in maintaining a 'chain of [collective cultural] memory' (Hervieu-Léger, 2000);

(v)     Operating vicariously (Davie, 2015); while the local vicar and a small number of members of the worshipping communities believe and practise on behalf of others, the majority only turns to the church in moments of need or for selected rituals and ceremonies.

These findings echo Day's (2011), who argues that many English people remain attached to Christianity because it fosters a sense of belonging, and serves to reinforce social and cultural identities, rather than to Christianity as *sui generis* religion (McCutcheon, 1997). Christianity at Alexander Parkes was constructed as entwined with Englishness and playing a significant role in community-making. This was especially made clear when the Deputy Head Teacher actively discouraged two boys from withdrawing from church-led activities. Christianity was therefore viewed as a religio-cultural phenomenon, which was passed on to new generations through the school. Vicarious attitudes to religion, as transmitted by the school, show that the 'chain of memory' is not yet broken.

While these findings attest to the role a state-funded non-faith-based school can play in reproducing middle ground group's attitudes towards Christianity, they also expose the fragility of the 'chain of memory,' and of vicarious realities as they mostly rely on embodiment. This is especially the case of Reverend Abi, who personified the Church (Davie, 2007). If Reverend Abi left, or the relationship with St Peter's CofE church terminated, "[t]he 'chemistry', however, may gradually alter, a mutation that is discernible in both practice and belief, not to mention the connections between them" (Davie, 2007b: 31).

Through the framework of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, vicarious religion, and religion as chain of memory, it has been possible to deconstruct how 'Christianity' was understood by the middle-ground group at Alexander Parkes. Reverend Abi's liberal Anglo-Catholic theological position sat well within such a framework. Jehovah's Witnesses and Father John (the Catholic priest) did not. This project calls for further research to be conducted in schools in order to reveal the hidden discourses of 'Christianity.' While this research informs the under-theorised concept of 'liberal' Christianity, more data is needed in order to further contribute to theorising the discursive nature of 'liberal' Christianity.

### 7.2.3. The Macro Level: Exploring Discursive Constructions of Religion(s)

In this section, I explore how the micro and meso levels (see above) informed participants' discursive constructions of religion(s). This section sheds more light on the social constructedness of religion as a social and cultural signifier among the 'middle ground' group. Adopting a Foucauldian approach to knowledge and discourse (Foucault, 1980b; 1980c; see also Chapter 2), I argue that by sharing a common understanding of religion as grounded in 'Golden Rule' Christianity (Ammerman, 1997), and of ('Golden Rule') Christianity as an ethno-religion (Hervieu-Léger), the signifier 'religion' and associated discursive practices can serve to reproduce particular power relations.

As participants' conceptual understandings of religion(s) were framed by 'Golden Rule' Christianity, manifestations of religion that rejected "right living" were viewed as not conforming with 'true' religion, and were therefore constructed as 'false'

(Ammerman, 1997: para. 3). As Mr Bartlett explained, violent manifestations of religion were the results of "people read[ing] other things into [religion]." Mrs Mészános was even more explicit in her construction, as she stated, "it's not a religion[,] it's something you know religion can often be blamed for." Children seemed to share adults' constructions of religion, as they too rejected violent manifestations of religion as valid expressions of religiosity. This was exemplified by Ella, who spoke of symbolic boundaries of religious imaginings, when she explained that some people "take their religion way too far, […] past the boundaries." At Alexander Parkes, when associated with terrorism, Islam was the only 'world religion' that was explicitly constructed as 'false.'

These findings are in line with Orsi's interpretation of 'true' religion, which he defines as "rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic in its higher form, mystical […], unmediated and agreeable to democracy […] monotheistic […], emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter" (Orsi, 2005: 188). Participants from the 'middle ground' group viewed it "inconceivable that 'religion' would be anything but good religion in this social and intellectual setting, 'good' meaning acceptable in belief and practice to th[e] domesticated modern civic Protestantism" (Orsi, 2005: 186).

Within the category of 'true' religion, participants seemed to make a distinction between Judeo-Christian traditions and other traditions. Oliver and Ajit explained that non-Judeo-Christian religions were likely to fall into "one category" – "something that's Muslim-Hinduism-Islam-Sikh," whose followers were constructed as generalised others (Madge *et al.*, 2014: 11). They viewed this category as constrained by "rules," unlike more 'liberal' expressions of religion, such as ('Golden Rule') Christianity, which was viewed as "nice" (Harvey). These findings echo Madge *et al.*'s (2014), who also reported that young people tended to view Christianity as 'good,' and Ipgrave and McKenna's (2008) who reported that regardless of the school context, children were likely to view Christianity as promoting a good life. Children at Alexander Parkes framed religion along a 'good' vs. 'bad' religion (or 'liberal' vs. 'illiberal,' or "nice" vs. strict). As Orsi (2005) explains, 'good' religion is understood to give people "the resources to live a purposeful life in an orderly social world," whereas bad 'ones' "deprive the individual of will and autonomy and self-control" (Orsi, 2005: 171). By constructing religion as either 'good' or 'bad,' not only did children hold simplified understanding of religion(s) and religious

diversity, but they also tended to get confused between the religions within each category as they all merged into one another.

While ('Golden Rule') Christianity was the referent for 'good' religion, Islam seemed its counterpart for 'bad' religion (unless it was associated with terrorism or acts of violence, in which case it fell in the 'false' religion category). There were many instances where Islam was singled out for being 'bad.' Madge *et al.* shared similar findings, when young people provided unsolicited comments about Islam, "with young people pointing to stereotypes that emphasise *badness*, extremism and terrorism" (2014: 52, emphasis added). At Alexander Parkes, Zahra embodied 'bad' religion. By having to physically remove herself from the school community, her body was associated with the (perceived) 'illiberal' rules of Islam. As Zahra needed to 'segregate' herself from the school community during assemblies, she failed to embody the collective ideal, and notions of idealised English culture anchored in ('Golden Rule') Christianity. These findings corroborate Cowden and Singh who argue that Muslim communities tend to be constructed as 'insufficiently British' (2017: 268).

Based on this thesis' findings, and borrowing from Hanegraaf's (2015) figures (see figures 2-1 to 2-3), I propose the following figure to reflect the complex ways in which children discursively constructed religion(s):

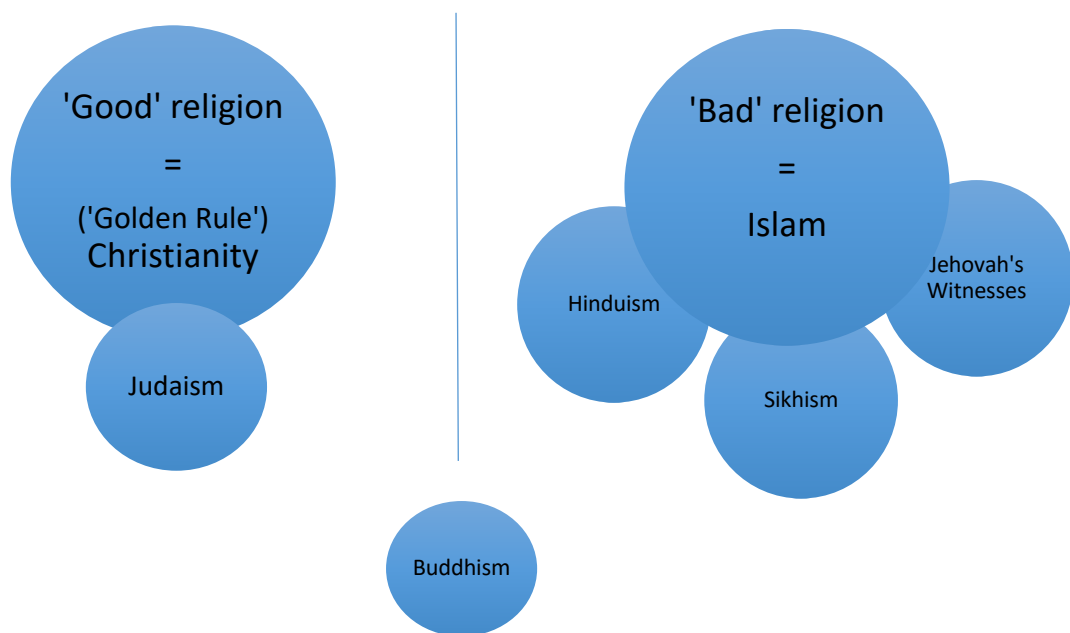*Figure 7—1 Pupils' Constructions of 'True' Religions*

Figure 7-1 shows how children at Alexander Parkes tended to organise 'world religions.' These constructions reflected their own lived realities, and other pupils in other schools may have different subcategories for 'bad' religion. Further research is needed in order to investigate whether the diagram above is representative of a small number of children, or whether such discursive constructions are more widely shared.

In the figure above (7-1), I purposefully only indicated the religions to which children spontaneously referred. Other traditions, such as Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Bahá'í, which were included in the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, but which children did not encounter at school, have not been added to the figure. As these were absent from their conceptual maps, these 'world religions' were invisible. For the children who were interviewed, these 'world religions' simply did not exist. Another interesting thing to note in this figure is the position of Buddhism, which is neither 'good' nor 'bad.' It reflects the fact that children at Alexander Parkes had a narrow understanding of (Tibetan) Buddhism. While some aspects of Buddhism were viewed as "peaceful" (Harvey), and compatible with 'Golden Rule' Christianity as they promoted a 'good life,' others were seen as "creepy" (Aimee), and were subsequently 'othered.' Furthermore, the religious tradition remained constrained by rules (Harvey). As a result, Buddhism was both 'good' and 'bad.' As 'world religions' were distorted, the 'middle ground' group lacked the knowledge to navigate a (non-)religiously diverse world. This was exemplified by Mr Holden's inability to engage with "destructive spiritualities" (McGuire, 2008: 116).

The proposed figure only accounts for discursive constructions of 'true' religions, that is to say religions that share the same core values (e.g. love, peace), and promote a 'good life.' If they did not, then participants constructed such practices and beliefs as 'false.' While Smith *et al.* (2018) state that 'bad' religions are constructed as 'false' religions, the findings in this project suggest a more nuanced picture, one whereby both 'good'/'liberal' and 'bad'/'illiberal' religions, can be constructed as 'true' religions. The difference between 'good' and 'bad' religions mainly lie in their (il)liberalness. A 'false' religion rejects the 'good life.'

While scholars have shown that children's constructions of religion(s) have traditionally been informed by the World Religions Paradigm (e.g. Jackson, 1997; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010), this research suggests that attention also ought to be paid to

'Golden Rule' Christianity, and how it informs pupils' constructions. While the WRP is "perceived to be ahistorical and universal," I have discussed the fact that it is in reality "historically and socially constituted" (Owen, 2011: 259). Post-colonial scholars have shown that the WRP has been informed by Western Christian discourses, which has resulted in 'world religions' being conceptualised against the normative referent of Christianity (Chidester, 1986; Dubuisson, 2003; King, 1999; Fitzgerald 1900; 2000; McCutcheon, 2001). The findings in this research suggests that contemporary framings of 'world religions' are shaped by a *specific* understanding of Christianity: 'Golden Rule' Christianity. While this project calls for more work to be undertaken in order to further explore the relationship between the WRP and 'Golden Rule' Christianity, the findings presented throughout this thesis suggest that the WRP is only promoted so far as 'Golden Rule' Christianity is promoted – otherwise religious traditions are constructed as 'false.' As a result, 'world religions,' whether 'good' or 'bad,' are explored in a narrow manner. Not only do participants ignore religion as lived and focus on institutional knowledge about 'world religions' (as per the WRP), but participants also only focus on aspects that serve to promote universal values and living the 'good life' (as per 'Golden Rule' Christianity).

This research has shed light on how 'true' religion in general is constructed, and how such discursive constructions in turn have informed children's conceptualisations of 'world religions' (see figure 7-1). Arguing that children's discursive constructions of religion(s) are informed by the World Religions Paradigm does not do justice to the complexity of their conceptual representations. While these have indeed been informed by the WRP, they have also been shaped by 'Golden Rule' Christianity, and have been located in the realm of everyday morality. Children's constructions were further informed by the binary between good/liberal and bad/illiberal religion. Conversely, violent manifestations of religion were constructed as 'false' religions. With the exception of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, which was legitimised in the public sphere, other religions tended to be limited to the private realm. These findings are significant as they corroborate with a call to move away from the WRP (CoRE, 2018; Cooling *et al.*, 2020). The thesis recommends that social scientists and policy-makers also engage with the influence of 'Golden Rule' Christianity on pupils' and teachers' discursive constructions of religion(s).

These findings have shed more light on discursive constructions of religion as a signifier that is "historically, socially and culturally constructed and negotiated in various situations" (Taira, 2013: 26). As Foucault (1980; 1991) explained, power is constituted through discursive practices, knowledge and 'regimes of truth.' Being in positions of authority, Alexander Parkes Primary School and its teachers played an important role in legitimising hegemonic discursive constructions of religion(s) and cultural values. In this thesis, I analysed the discursive practices that defined and (re)produced the 'truth' about religion(s), and showed how the school legitimised 'Golden Rule' Christianity in the public arena, and how it became the referent for religion(s). Findings highlight the significant role the school played in reproducing vicarious attitudes towards 'true' religion, and in sustaining some form of 'chain of memory' anchored in 'Golden Rule' Christianity. Findings also attest to the role Alexander Parkes played in perpetuating notions of idealised (English) culture located in ('Golden Rule') Christianity. As Taira summarises, "[d]iscourses can maintain power relations and challenge power relations (2013: 32). Those who did not conform to hegemonic discursive practices (such as some Muslim pupils and Jehovah's Witnesses) therefore had to remove themselves from the school community, and part of the school culture. Such constructions are not anodyne as they are not only aligned with English dominant discourses about religion(s), but also with narratives of national identity, which have grown in importance in recent years. These constructions therefore can serve to reproduce existing power relations. Although not overt, such "softer" forms of racism were "no less destructive" (Inwood, 2015: 420). The findings in this thesis echo Welply (2018) who argues that schools perpetuate ideologies of white supremacy, as well as Flemmen and Savage (2017) and Carr (2015) who speak of neoliberal 'performative' modes of 'racism' that discreetly reproduce inequity and power relations through notions of idealised culture.

## 7.3.    Scope for Further Research

In recent years, the role and place of religion in non-confessional state-funded education has come under increasing scrutiny (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015; 2018; Dinham and Shaw, 2015; CORAB, 2015; CoRE, 2018). While research on RE and collective worship is not uncommon, the issues raised in this thesis contribute to the

discussion in a novel way. For instance, Dinham and Shaw (2015: 4) recently argued that RE is failing to represent "the real religion and belief landscape" of the UK, and is instead reproducing one that is imagined by the majority. While such a position is widely accepted among academics and practitioners, there has been a significant lack of research that examines what this 'imagined religious landscape' might be. The majority of the literature tends to focus on minority faiths in mainstream education and on faith-based schools, or engages in theoretical debates pertaining to pedagogy (see Chapter 2). As a result, while there is data available about children's personal experiences of RE, and to a lesser extent their experiences of collective worship, there is little data available on knowledge construction and the (re)production of discourses. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap in the existing literature. By adopting a Foucauldian approach to knowledges and discourses, I was able to uncover how meaning was co-constructed by social agents, and how structures such as the school and the local church shaped these constructions.

The aim of this thesis was to explore how pupils and teachers discursively constructed religion as mediated through a state-funded non-faith-based primary school in Birmingham. While it was beyond the remit of this thesis to engage with other structures that contributed to inform participants' construction of religion, references to family and (social) media have been found in the data. The thesis does not claim that participants' understandings and experiences of religion were solely shaped by RE, collective worship, or the school, and calls for more research to be done in order to explore the interplay between how religion is mediated by the school, and how it is mediated in the home context. For example, Lucas' discursive construction of Christianity in the home context (where he reads the Bible with his mother) possibly differed from the one mediated by the school. How did Lucas manage both constructions? Did he make conceptual distinctions between 'home Christianity' and 'school Christianity'? Were the two constructed as completely separate from one another, or did they inform each other? How did Lucas navigate the two?

The aim of this thesis was to shed more light on the Birmingham context. However, it was beyond the remit of this study to delve deeper into the novel pedagogical approach proposed in the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for RE. The thesis calls for more research to be done in order to understand how the 24 'dispositions' are understood by participants, and how these are used in different school contexts. Are these framed through the lens of 'Golden Rule' Christianity, or not? How do they contribute to shaping

participants' discursive constructions of religion(s)? The findings in this research suggest that teachers framed the syllabus through existing frameworks, such as the WRP and 'Golden Rule' Christianity. Is Alexander Parkes unique in its approach, or are participants representative of a larger group? More research would serve to shed light as to whether the "Birmingham solution" is indeed "a far better solution" (Smith and Smith, 2013: 16), or not. Similarly, research in other Local Authorities that are adopting syllabuses that advocate a move away from the WRP ought to receive more attention. For example, the Worcester Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education is based on key questions that are explored through different (non-)religious worldviews (Pett *et al,*, 2015). Exploring whether children's constructions of religion differ (or not) depending on the syllabuses taught and their locality would serve to further contextualise the findings presented in this research. This would be particularly timely as the CoRE report (2018) advocates a new vision for RE.

While Alexander Parkes was similar to a number of schools in the country vis-à-vis its approach to RE, World Religion Day, and collective worship, it cannot be argued that the school is representative of all state-funded non-faith-based schools. For instance, the structure and themes selected for assemblies, and the school prayer were unique to Alexander Parkes. Besides, not every community school will have developed or maintained a strong relationship with their local CofE church and vicar. Throughout this study, I demonstrated that Reverend Abi played an important role in shaping pupils' discursive constructions of Christianity. These findings raise important questions pertaining to the conceptualisation of Christianity: How would children's social constructions be impacted if Reverend Abi moved onto another parish? Would the school culture be significantly altered if Alexander Parkes did not have a close connection with the local CofE church and children were not exposed to a doxological approach to Christianity? Further research contrasting findings from schools where there is no such embodied expressions of Christianity is needed to address these questions, and to assess whether the findings presented here are unique to Alexander Parkes, or if they are reflective of a larger group.

Finally, this research has also highlighted gaps in contemporary literature. For instance, more work is needed in order to understand whether religion and/or religiosity are constructed as childish. There is currently a significant lack of research on the puerilisation of religion and the sentiment of nostalgia associated with Christian rituals

in the primary school; the limited literature, which is available is unfortunately dated. As scholars and practitioners are paying more and more attention to embodiment, the concept of affect remains neglected. I suggest that addressing that gap would offer a more thorough and contemporary understanding of children's constructions of religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

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Alexander Parkes Ofsted reports are available online at http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk. The exact links cannot be disclosed as they would jeopardize the school's anonymity.

# Appendices

## Appendix A – Primary schools with a religious character at the time of study

*Types of State-Funded Primary Schools*

| Type of establishments | Number of establishments in Birmingham | Number of establishments in England |
|---|---|---|
| *No religious character* | 216 | 10,561 |
| *Church of England* | 23 | 4,392 |
| *Roman Catholic* | 54 | 1,655 |
| *Methodist* | 0 | 26 |
| *Other Christian faith* | 3 | 77 |
| *Jewish* | 1 | 36 |
| *Muslim* | 1 | 10 |
| *Sikh* | 1 | 5 |
| *Other* | 0 | 4 |

Source: Gov.uk, 2015b.

*Number of Pupils in State-Funded Primary Schools*

| Type of establishments | Number of pupils in Birmingham | Number of pupils in England |
|---|---|---|
| *No religious character* | 88,167 | 3,210,797 |
| *Church of England* | 6,776 | 836,148 |
| *Roman Catholic* | 15,175 | 425,103 |
| *Methodist* | 0 | 4,723 |
| *Other Christian faith* | 662 | 16,881 |
| *Jewish* | 236 | 10,842 |
| *Muslim* | 529 | 3,276 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Sikh* | 360 | 1,503 |
| *Other* | 0 | 1,055 |

Source: Gov.uk, 2015.

## Appendix B – The 24 Dispositions of the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus

**The 24 dispositions:**

1. Being Imaginative and Explorative
2. Appreciating beauty
3. Expressing Joy
4. Being Thankful
5. Caring for Others, Animals and the Environment
6. Sharing and Being Generous
7. Being Regardful of Suffering
8. Being Merciful and Forgiving
9. Being Fair and Just
10. Living by Rules
11. Being Accountable and Living with Integrity
12. Being Temperate, Exercising Self-Discipline and Cultivating Serene Contentment
13. Being Modest and Listening to Others
14. Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging
15. Creating Unity and Harmony
16. Participating and Willing to Lead
17. Remembering Roots
18. Being Loyal and Steadfast
19. Being Hopeful and Visionary
20. Being Courageous and Confident
21. Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge
22. Being Open, Honest and Truthful
23. Being reflective and Self-Critical
24. Being Silent and Attentive to, and Cultivating a Sense for, the Sacred and Transcendence

Source: Birmingham City Council (2007). Faith Makes a Difference. [Online]. Available from: http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/dispositions [Accessed 16 Nov. 2015].

**Cluster View of the 24 Dispositions**

| Developing Creativity (How should we imagine and express what matters? | - Being Imaginative and Explorative <br> - Appreciating Beauty <br> - Expressing Joy <br> - Being Thankful |
|---|---|
| Developing Compassion (How and why should we care?) | - Caring for Others, Animals and the Environment <br> - Sharing and Being Generous <br> - Being Regardful of Suffering <br> - Being Merciful and Forgiving |
| Developing Choice (What should we stand for?) | - Being Fair and Just <br> - Living by Rules <br> - Being Accountable and Living with Integrity <br> - Being Temperate, Exercising Self-Discipline and Cultivating Serene Contentment |
| Developing Community (How and where should we contribute and relate to others?) | - Being Modest and Listening to Others <br> - Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging <br> - Creating Unity and Harmony <br> - Participating and Willing to Lead |
| Developing Commitment (What ventures should we undertake?) | - Remembering Roots <br> - Being Loyal and Steadfast <br> - Being Hopeful and Visionary <br> - Being courageous and Confident |
| Developing Contemplation (How do we come to understand what matters?) | - Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge <br> - Being Open, Honest and Truthful <br> - Being reflective and Self-Critical <br> - Being Silent and Attentive to, and Cultivating a Sense for the Sacred and the Transcendence. |

Source: Birmingham City Council (2007). Faith Makes a Difference. [Online]. Available from: http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/dispositions/clusters [Accessed 16 Nov. 2015].

**Grid View of the 24 Dispositions**

|  | Autumn | Spring | Summer |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Year 1** | - Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging<br>- Being Thankful<br>- Being Modest and Listening to Others<br>- Expressing Joy | - Being Fair and Just<br>- Being Accountable and Living with Integrity<br>- Being Courageous and Confident<br>- Being Loyal and Steadfast | - Remembering Roots<br>- Being Hopeful and Visionary<br>- Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge<br>- Being Open, Honest and Truthful |
| **Year 2** | - Living by Rules<br>- Being Temperate, Exercising Self-Discipline and Cultivating Serene Contentment<br>- Being Regardful of Suffering<br>- Sharing and Being Generous | - Creating Unity and Harmony<br>- Participating and Willing to Lead<br>- Caring for Others, Animals and the Environment<br>- Being merciful and Forgiving | - Being Silent and Attentive to Cultivating a Sense for the Sacred and Transcendent<br>- Being reflective and Self-Critical<br>- Being Imaginative and Explorative<br>- Appreciating Beauty |
| **Year 3** | - Sharing and Being Generous<br>- Caring for Others, Animals and the Environment<br>- Creating Unity and Harmony<br>- Participating and Willing to Lead | - Being Fair and Just<br>- Being Accountable and Living with Integrity<br>- Remembering Roots<br>- Being Loyal and Steadfast | - Being Open, Honest and Truthful<br>- Being Silent and Attentive to Cultivating a Sense for the Sacred and Transcendent<br>- Being Courageous and Confident<br>- Being Hopeful and Visionary |
| **Year 4** | - Expressing Joy<br>- Being Thankful<br>- Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge<br>- Being reflective and Self-Critical | - Being Modest and Listening to Others<br>- Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging<br>- Being merciful and Forgiving<br>- Being Regardful of Suffering | - Living by Rules<br>- Being Temperate, Exercising Self-Discipline and Cultivating Serene Contentment<br>- Being Imaginative and Explorative<br>- Appreciating Beauty |
| **Year 5** | - Caring for Others, Animals and the Environment<br>- Sharing and Being Generous<br>- Being Loyal and Steadfast<br>- Being Hopeful and Visionary | - Being Open, Honest and Truthful<br>- Being Silent and Attentive to Cultivating a Sense for the Sacred and Transcendent<br>- Participating and Willing to Lead<br>- Being Modest and Listening to Others | - Being Temperate, Exercising Self-Discipline and Cultivating Serene Contentment<br>- Being Thankful<br>- Being Imaginative and Explorative |

| Year 6 | - Living by Rules<br>- Being Fair and Just<br>- Creating Unity and Harmony<br>- Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging | - Remembering Roots<br>- Being Courageous and Confident<br>- Being merciful and Forgiving<br>- Being Regardful of Suffering | - Expressing Joy<br>- Appreciating Beauty<br>- Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge<br>- Being reflective and Self-Critical |
|---|---|---|---|

Source: Birmingham City Council (2007). Faith Makes a Difference. [Online]. Available from: http://www.faithmakesadifference.co.uk/dispositions/grid [Accessed 16 Nov. 2015].

**Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (*used for adult participants*)**

**Who is the researcher?** My name is Céline Benoit and I am a PhD student in Sociology at Aston University, Birmingham. I am conducting this research for my PhD thesis. If you have <u>any</u> questions regarding this research please do not hesitate to contact me via email: c.benoit@aston.ac.uk

**What is the purpose of this study?** I am interested in understanding how RE works. Being French and having grown up in a secular education system where RE and acts of collective worship are not allowed, I want to understand how RE works, how RE aims to celebrate diversity, how teachers and pupils respond to RE. Also, my aim is to foreground the voices of Headteachers, teachers and pupils, who have often been silenced in research. To do this, I need to collect data from teachers and pupils to take their views, responses and feelings into consideration.

**What will participation involve?** This research involves having a conversation with me about your experiences of RE at school. All information will be treated with confidentiality and will be stored anonymously. No names will be linked to any data, and no names will be used in any reporting of results. You will be asked to sign a consent form if you decide to participate in this study. The consent form will have your name on it, but this will be stored separately in a locked desk drawer in my office, which is also locked.

**Who is funding this research?** No organisation or authority is contributing in any way to this research and therefore no data will be fed back to any third party or bodies such as Ofsted, the Local Authority, the Department for Education or the Governing Body of the school. The data will solely be used for the PhD thesis and academic publications. I will be the sole person who can access the data. Because the research is not funded, participants will not be paid for their participation.

**Why have you been chosen?** As a primary school teacher in a community school that follows the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus, I believe that your views, opinions, experiences of the syllabus could contribute to this research. You are free to refuse to take part in this research or to withdraw from the study at any time before, during or after it has commenced. If you wish to withdraw after the study has been completed you must contact me (c.benoit@aston.ac.uk) and your results will be removed from the analysis.

**What happens during the study?** The study will last throughout the school year. I will conduct non-participant observations of RE classrooms. I will sit quietly at the back of the room to see how RE is delivered and will not interfere during the lessons. I have ***no*** intention of judging your performance (I am not trained for that, and I have never had any RE classes) and notes will ***not*** be shared with any third party. Your colleagues and the senior management team (including the Head Teacher and Governors) will ***not*** have access to my notes. I would also like you to participate in interviews. Interviews will be recorded (dependent on permission) so that it can be transcribed later. The transcript is the data which will be used for analysis. The tape is used for transcription only and will ***not*** be heard by anyone else but me. The interviews will vary in length and will include questions that focus on:

- Your feelings about the teaching of RE to primary school children
- Your experiences of teaching RE to primary school children

- Concerns or challenges you may have faced in RE
- Your views on how diversity is celebrated in the RE curriculum

You have the right to refuse to answer any question without providing any explanation.

**Are there any risks if I take part in the study?** There are no risks involved when taking part in this study to you or to the researchers conducting it. There are no special precautions to take before or during the study.

**Will my views remain confidential?** All files collected from you will remain completely confidential as you will be allocated a pseudonym prior to the commencement of the research. You will not be asked to put your name on any document other than the consent form, which will be kept in a secure and locked desk drawer in my office. I may make use of your own words from the interviews as quotes to illustrate findings in the PhD thesis and in any academic publications; however, these quotes will be used <u>anonymously</u>.

**As an informed participant of this research study, you understand that:**

1. Your participation is voluntary, and you may cease to take part in this research study at any time and without giving a reason.
2. During this interview, notes will be taken, and the interviews recorded for later transcription to ensure reliability. The data collected will not be shared with anyone else.
3. All data will be stored anonymously (using pseudonyms and aliases) on the researcher's own computer and own personal hard drive, which are both password protected. If found, it will be impossible to trace information back to you.
4. All information appearing in the PhD thesis or any other academic publications will be anonymous. This means there will be nothing that will enable people to work out what you said.
5. Céline Benoit, the researcher, will treat your answers confidentially; anything you say in the interview  will be treated with confidentiality.
5. This research has been approved by Aston University, on behalf of the Languages and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.


I have read and understood the above, and agree to take part:

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____


I have explained the above and answered all questions asked by the participant:

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

## Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (*used for children*)

Hello! My name is Céline. I come from France and I am a student at Aston University, in Birmingham.

For my course, I have a very big piece of homework to do: I need to do some research on Religious Education.

Because Religious Education does not exist in France, I have never been to an RE class, and I do not know what it is like to be learning RE. Can you help me understand?

**Read these questions, and write YES or NO in the box next to them:**

| | |
|---|---|
| Are you happy to tell me what RE is? | |
| Are you happy to give me your opinion about RE? | |
| Are you happy to talk to me about religion? | |
| Are you happy to talk to me about your feelings about RE or religions? | |
| Are you happy to talk to me about your friends? | |

**I will _never_ tell your teacher, your friends or your parents what you have told me unless you tell me that you or another child is in danger. Your name _will not_ be included in any document. Thank you for your help!**

## Appendix D – Observation Form Template

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Event observed**:<br><br>**Date and time**:<br><br>**Classes / Staff participating:**<br><br>**Comments on the environment:** | | |
| **Time allocated** | **Direct Observation of events** | **Fieldnotes**<br><br>*(How did I react / feel? How did I interpret the events recorded?)* |
| | | |
| **General comments on the session (fieldnotes):** | | |

## Appendix E – List of Participants

### Adult Participants

| Name* | Position | Religious background, *as described by the participant* | Ethnicity** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Mr Blackburn** | Head Teacher | Atheist, after walking away from Christianity | White British |
| **Mrs Lizzie Dodd** | Deputy Head Teacher | Christian | White British |
| **Mrs Katie Jennings** | RE Coordinator Science Teacher | Christian, whose mother is a vicar and whose father is a pastor | White British |
| **Miss Bunch** | Early Years Teacher | Atheist | White British |
| **Mr Bartlett** | Key Stage 1 Teacher | Non-practising Catholic | White British |
| **Miss Hart*** | Key Stage 1 Teacher | Not religious | White British |
| **Mrs Mészános** | Key Stage 2 Teacher | Nominal Christian | White British |
| **Mr Holden** | Key Stage 2 Teacher | Humanist or Atheist (unsure), after walking away from Judaism | White British |
| **Miss Nolan** | Key Stage 2 Teacher | Unsure | White British |
| **Miss Williams** | Key Stage 2 Teacher | Catholic | White British |
| **Reverend Abi** | Local vicar (St Peter's Church) | Church of England | White British |

\* All names have been changed and replaced by pseudonyms
** For the purposes of clarification, I am using the categories used in the 2011 National Census (ONS, 2012c).
*** Miss Hart accepted to being observed during one RE lesson, but was not formally interviewed.

## Child Participants

| Name* | Year Group | Sex | Focus group | Religious background, *as described by the child* | Ethnicity, as per the 2011 census categories |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Adam** | Year 6 | M | 3 | No religion, Selects what he believes in and what he does not believe in ('bricolage') | White British |
| **Aimee** | Year 6 | F | 3 | Christian, baptised to be able to go to the local RC school before coming to Alexander Parkes | White British |
| **Ajit** | Year 5 | M | 1 | Hindu | Asian British |
| **Ben** | Year 6 | M | 4 | No religion | White British |
| **Becki**\*\* | Year 4 | F | 8 | Christian | White British |
| **Bilal** | Year 5 | M | 1 | Muslim | Asian British |
| **Charlie** | Year 5 | M | 4 | Christian | Mixed – White and Black Caribbean (Jamaican father) |
| **Connor** | Year 5 | M | 5 | Unsure, because no one told him | White British |
| **Daisy** | Year 6 | F | 4 | Christian | White British |
| **Ella** | Year 5 | F | 2 | Catholic | White Irish |
| **Evie** | Year 5 | F | 5 | Christian | White British |
| **Harvey** | Year 6 | M | 3 | No religion, but believes in God and Jesus | White British |
| **Isabella** | Year 4 | F | 7 | Christian and Church of England | White British |
| **Jack** | Year 5 | M | 1 | No religion, because he is not baptised, but he believes in God and Jesus | White British |
| **Jasmine** | Year 4 | F | 7 | Half Muslim and half 'nothing' | Other Mixed British (English mother and Algerian father) |
| **Jessica** | Year 5 | F | 5 | No religion, but believes in God | White British |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Lois\*\*** | Year 4 | F | 8 | Unsure, maybe Christian | White British |
| **Lucas** | Year 4 | M | 7 | Christian<br>(His parents go to Church every Sunday) | Black British |
| **Lucy** | Year 5 | F | 2 | No religion,<br>Buddhist family (except for parents) | Asian British (Chinese parents) |
| **Megan** | Year 5 | F | 2 | Christian | White British (French mother) |
| **Mia** | Year 4 | F | 7 | Unsure, because half her family is Christian | White British |
| **Oliver** | Year 5 | M | 1 | Sort of Jewish (grandparents are Jewish and he's "just following their tracks") but "don't do anything with that religion" | White British |
| **Owen** | Year 5 | M | 5 | Unsure | White British |
| **Paige** | Year 5 | F | 5 | No religion, puzzled by it as her brother was christened (and is therefore a Christian) | White British |
| **Rainna** | Year 6 | F | 6 | Christian,<br>but does not believe in Jesus and is unsure about God | White British |
| **Ruby\*\*** | Year 4 | F | 8 | Unsure, because her family has not told her | White British |
| **Saira** | Year 6 | F | 6 | Muslim | Asian British |
| **Sam** | Year 6 | M | 6 | Christian | White British (Indian grandfather) |
| **Zahra** | Year 5 | F | 5 | Islamic | Asian British |

*All names have been changed and replaced by pseudonyms.
** Data from group 8 is not included in this research as the recording failed.

# Appendix F – Alexander Parkes Assembly Themes

| | |
|---|---|
| Week 1 | New Beginnings |
| Week 2 | The Story of Ganesh |
| Week 3 | Being a good friend |
| Week 4 | Forgiveness |
| Week 5 | Selfishness |
| Week 6 | Anti-Bullying Week |
| Week 7 | Helping the Elderly |
| | *Half Term Holiday* |
| Week 8 | Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Safety |
| Week 9 | Remembrance |
| Week 10 | Being Positive |
| Week 11 | St Andrew's Day (Nov. 30th) |
| Week 12 | Winter |
| Week 13 | Giving |
| Week 14 | The Christmas Story |
| | *Christmas Holiday* |
| Week 15 | Resolutions |
| Week 16 | Hopes and Fears |
| Week 17 | Being Greedy |
| Week 18 | Showing Love |
| Week 19 | Chinese New Year of the Sheep (Feb. 19th) |
| Week 20 | St Valentine's Day |
| | *Half Term Holiday* |
| Week 21 | St David's Day (March 1st) |
| Week 22 | Respecting Other Beliefs / Cultures |
| Week 23 | Mother's Day (March 15th) |

| | |
|---|---|
| Week 24 | St Patrick's Day (March 17th) |
| Week 25 | The Easter Story |
| | *Easter Holiday* |
| Week 26 | Who was Jesus? |
| Week 27 | St George's Day (April 23rd) and Fundamental British Values |
| Week 28 | Heroes |
| Week 29 | Fairness |
| Week 30 | Looking after our Planet |
| Week 31 | Sharing |
| | *Half Term Holiday* |
| Week 32 | Bravery |
| Week 33 | Adventure |
| Week 34 | Father's Day / Important Men in our Lives (June 21st) |
| Week 35 | Ramadan |
| Week 36 | Respecting Beliefs |
| Week 37 | Summer Holidays |
| Week 38 | Saying Goodbye |

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God bless Alexander Parkes School,

Let us hope that by working together and playing together,

We may learn to love You and one another,

Amen.

*Chart H—1 Types of State-Funded Primary Schools, BirminghamTypes of State-Funded Primary Schools, Birmingham*



**TYPES OF STATE-FUNDED PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN BIRMINGHAM, 2015**

Academies 25%

Foundation 3%

VC 2%

Community 49%

VA 21%
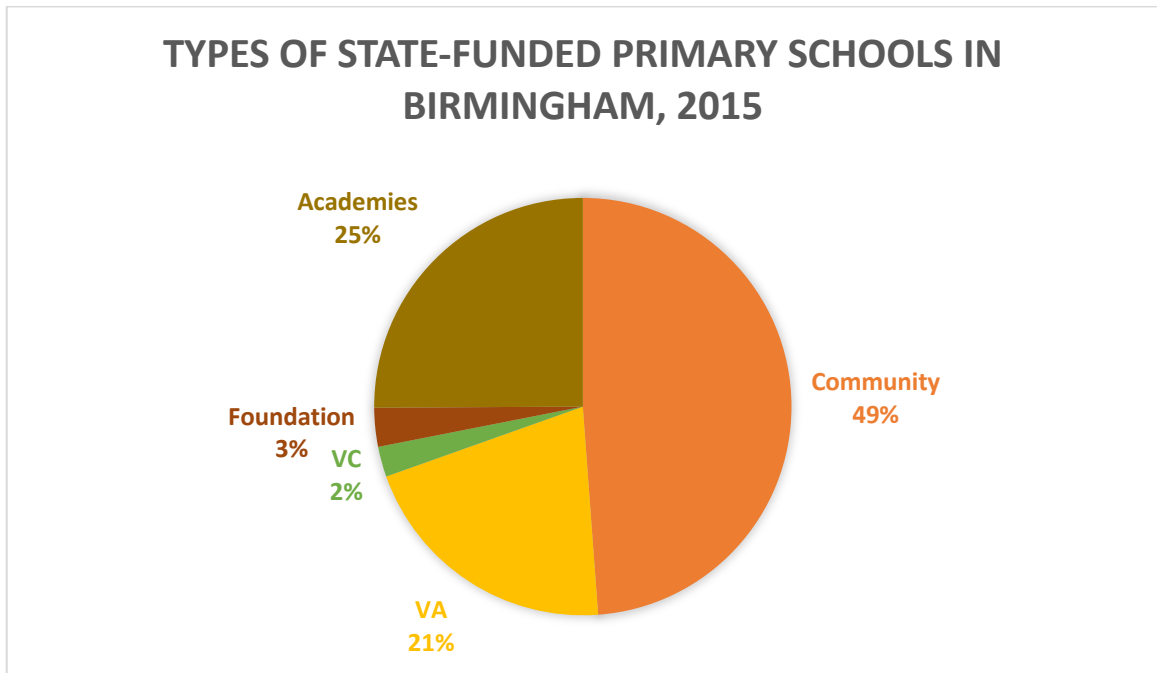
Source: Gov.uk, 2015b.

*Chart H—2 Number of Pupils in State-Funded Primary Schools, Birmingham*



**NUMBER OF PUPILS IN STATE-FUNDED PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN BIRMINGHAM, 2015**

Foundation 3%

Academies 25%

VC 2%

VA 16%

Community 54%
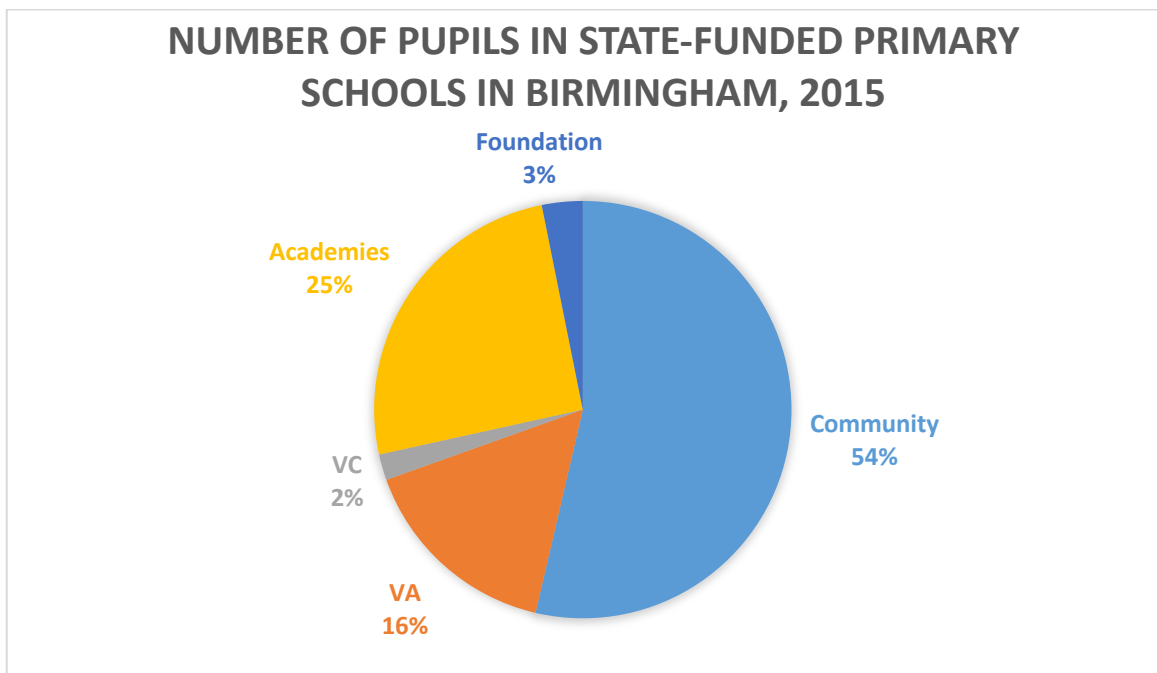
Source: Gov.uk, 2015b.

## Types of State-Funded Primary Schools

| Type of establishments | Number of establishments in Birmingham | Number of establishments in England |
|---|---|---|
| *No religious character* | 216 | 10,561 |
| *Church of England* | 23 | 4,392 |
| *Roman Catholic* | 54 | 1,655 |
| *Methodist* | 0 | 26 |
| *Other Christian faith* | 3 | 77 |
| *Jewish* | 1 | 36 |
| *Muslim* | 1 | 10 |
| *Sikh* | 1 | 5 |
| *Other* | 0 | 4 |

<u>Source</u>: Gov.uk, 2015b.

## Number of Pupils in State-Funded Primary Schools

| Type of establishments | Number of pupils in Birmingham | Number of pupils in England |
|---|---|---|
| *No religious character* | 88,167 | 3,210,797 |
| *Church of England* | 6,776 | 836,148 |
| *Roman Catholic* | 15,175 | 425,103 |
| *Methodist* | 0 | 4,723 |
| *Other Christian faith* | 662 | 16,881 |
| *Jewish* | 236 | 10,842 |
| *Muslim* | 529 | 3,276 |
| *Sikh* | 360 | 1,503 |
| *Other* | 0 | 1,055 |

<u>Source</u>: Gov.uk, 2015.

*Number of Pupils by Ethnic Group in State-Funded Primary Schools*

| Ethnicity | Number of pupils in Birmingham | Number of pupils in England |
|---|---|---|
| *White* | **32,647** | **2,692,941** |
| ***White British*** | 29,168 | 2,459,941 |
| ***Irish*** | 349 | 10,112 |
| ***Traveller of Irish Heritage*** | 22 | 3,455 |
| ***Gypsy / Roma*** | 341 | 12,936 |
| *Any Other White Background* | 2,767 | 206,093 |
| *Mixed* | **7,245** | **196,654** |
| ***White and Black Caribbean*** | 3,088 | 53,594 |
| ***White and Black African*** | 1,630 | 45,685 |
| ***Any Other Mixed Background*** | 2,000 | 70,922 |
| *Asian* | **32,251** | **377,486** |
| ***Indian*** | 4,234 | 98,934 |
| ***Pakistani*** | 22,007 | 155,071 |
| ***Bangladeshi*** | 4,898 | 60,389 |
| ***Any Other Asian Background*** | 1,112 | 63,092 |
| *Black* | **10,942** | **202,899** |
| ***Caribbean*** | 3,709 | 42,440 |
| ***African*** | 6,140 | 133,923 |
| ***Any Other Black Background*** | 1,093 | 26,536 |
| *Chinese* | **440** | **14,588** |
| ***Any Other Ethnic Group*** | 4,216 | 62,731 |

Source: Gov.uk, 2015b.

*Number of Pupils by First Language in State-Funded Primary Schools*

|  | *In Birmingham* | *In England* |
|---|---|---|
| ***Number / percentage of pupils whose first language is known or believed to be other than English*** | 38,089 (42.9%) | 693,815 (19.4%) |
| ***Number / percentage of pupils whose first language is known or believed to be other than English*** | 50,385 (56.7%) | 2,872,710 (80.4%) |

Source: Gov.uk, 2015b.

*Number of Pupils in State-Funded Primary Schools Claiming Free School Meals*

| *Type of establishments* | *Number of pupils in Birmingham* | *Number of pupils in England* |
|---|---|---|
| ***State-funded primary schools*** | 32,695 (28.8%) | 708,798 (15.6%) |

Source: Gov.uk, 2015b.

| TOPICS | EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PROBES |
|---|---|
| **SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT** | What's your school like? / How would you describe your school? |
| | How would you describe the school's ethos? |
| | What's the role and place of religion in your school? |
| | Do you/others feel safe/comfortable talking about religion here? |
| | Have you had any issues with colleagues/pupils/parents/senior management because of religion? |
| | How would you describe parents? Are they supportive/indifferent/opposed to RE/assemblies/church activities? |
| **RELIGION AT SCHOOL: RE** | Are there topics you enjoy teaching? Any you would like to avoid? |
| | What do you think of RE? |
| | What are the aims of RE? |
| | What do you usually do in RE? |
| | What are your (least) favourite activities? |
| | Do you think RE is an important topic or not so much? |
| | How do you feel about the Birmingham agreed syllabus? How do you teach it? |
| | What is meant by 'learning about' and 'learning from'? How do you implement it in your classroom? |

| | How do you teach about [insert 'religion[1]']? |
|---|---|
| | What do you think pupils think of RE? |
| | Do pupils ask challenging/uncomfortable questions? |
| | Do you think RE should be taught? |
| **RELIGION AT SCHOOL: ASSEMBLIES** | What do you think of assemblies? Special assemblies? |
| | What do you usually do in assemblies? |
| | What are your (least) favourite activities in assemblies? |
| | What do you think of the school prayer? |
| | What do you think pupils think of assemblies/prayer/hymns? |
| | Do you think assemblies should include an act of collective worship? |
| **RELIGION BEYOND THE SCHOOL (LOCALLY, NATIONALLY, GLOBALLY)** | Would you say you have a religion? |
| | Do you think the school/syllabus is representative of the religious diversity? |
| | What do you think about Christianity being more predominant than other religious traditions? |
| **REVEREND ABI AND ST PETER'S COFE CHURCH** | Do you work with/get support from Rev. Abi? |
| | How comfortable are you with Rev. Abi/church visits? |

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[1] Preferred terminology at Alexander Parkes reflect the WRP typology (i.e. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism). I therefore used the same terminology.

| | What do you think Alexander Parkes' connection with St Peter's CofE church?

Would you like to visit other places of worship?

Would you like to meet with other religious leaders? |
|---|---|

Further probes included:

- Why?
- What makes you say that?
- How do you feel about that?
- Can you explain that to me please?
- Do you have any examples?

| TOPICS | EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PROBES |
|---|---|
| **SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT** | What's your school like? / How would you describe your school? |
| | What are the school's values? |
| | What do you like / dislike about your school? |
| | Would you say your school is religious or not? |
| | Do you/other pupils feel safe/comfortable talking about religion here? |
| **SCHOOL POPULATION** | Who's in your school? |
| | Do people get on well in your school? |
| | Are people in the school religious or not? |
| **RELIGION AT SCHOOL: RE** | What topics do you enjoy studying? |
| | What do you think of RE? |
| | What do you usually do in RE? |
| | What are your (least) favourite activities? |
| | Do you think RE is an important topic or not so much? |
| | What do you know about [insert 'religion[1]']? |
| | What's a  [insert religious identity label[2]]? |

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[1] Preferred terminology at Alexander Parkes reflect the WRP typology (i.e. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism). I usually used the same terminology, unless the pupils used a different one.

[2] Preferred terminology at Alexander Parkes reflect the WRP typology (i.e. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh). I usually used the same terminology, unless the pupils used a different one (examples of variations include 'Islam people' (Ajit) or 'Islams' (Megan)). .

| | |
|---|---|
| | Would you recommend French schools started teaching RE? |
| | Do you think your teacher(s) have a religion? |
| **RELIGION AT SCHOOL: ASSEMBLIES** | What do you think of assemblies? |
| | What do you usually do in assemblies? |
| | What are your (least) favourite activities in assemblies? |
| | Do you sing songs? |
| | What's your school prayer about? |
| | What do you think of the school prayer? Should French schools start having assemblies? |
| | What do you think of special assemblies? |
| **RELIGION BEYOND THE SCHOOL (LOCALLY, NATIONALLY, GLOBALLY)** | Would you say you have a religion? Your family? |
| | What does your family think about RE? Assemblies? |
| | What do you think is the most important religion in England? |
| **REVEREND ABI AND ST PETER'S COFE CHURCH** | Who's Rev. Abi? What do you think of her? |
| | Does she have a religion? |
| | What activities do you usually do when she comes here? When you go to St Peter's? |
| | How often do you see her? |
| | What do you think of the church? What about other churches (e.g. St Paul's RC church)? |

Would you like to visit other places of worship?

Would you like to meet with other religious leaders?


Further probes included:

- Why?
- What makes you say that?
- How do you feel about that?
- Can you explain that to me please?
- Do you have any examples?

| TOPICS | EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND PROBES |
|---|---|
| **SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT** | What's Alexander Parkes like? / How would you describe the school? How similar/different is it to St Peter's VA school? How would you describe the school's ethos? |
| **PRESENCE AT ALEXANDER PARKES** | How do you see your role as a reverend in a community school? How similar/different are your activities from the ones you run for St Peter's VA school? How did the partnership with Alexander Parkes start? What was/is the purpose of establishing such a partnership? For you? For the school? Do you see your presence/role as non-confessional? |
| **RELIGION AT SCHOOL** | How do you contribute to RE classes? How do you contribute to assemblies? Special assemblies? How do you contribute to the school beyond RE/assemblies? How are your activities received by pupils/teachers/parents? What do you think of the role and place of religion in the school? What are the aims of RE and assemblies? |

| | |
|---|---|
| | How do you feel about the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus?<br><br>Do you provide support for teachers?<br><br>How do you think 'Christianity' is understood by pupils/staff?<br><br>Do you think Christianity should predominate in RE/collective worship? |
| **CHURCH ACTIVITIES** | What activities do you organise?<br><br>How are the activities received by pupils/teachers/parents?<br><br>Do you get any support from the Church of England (e.g. to prepare material or purchase equipment for godly plays)? |

Further probes included:

- Why?
- What makes you say that?
- How do you feel about that?
- Can you explain that to me please?
- Do you have any examples?

Introduction.

- This document is a statement of the aims. Principles and strategies for the teaching and learning of Religious Education at [Alexander Parkes] Primary School.
- This policy was reviewed in the Summer term 2015, with the consultation of the RE coordinator and the Headteacher and in reference to the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus and the 'Faith Makes a Difference' website. This document needs to be read in conjunction with SEN, Health and Safety, Equal Opportunity, Inclusion and ICT and SMCD policies.

Revised and rewritten in:
Agreed by governors on:
Review in Autumn 2015

Aims.
Religious Education provides opportunities for children:

- To develop their knowledge and understanding of, and an ability to respond to, Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.
- To explore issues within and between faiths to help them understand and respect different religions, beliefs, values and traditions (including ethical life stories) and understand the influence of these on individuals, societies, communities and cultures.
- To consider questions of meaning and purpose in life.
- To learn about religious and ethical teaching, enabling them to make reasoned and informed judgments on religious and moral issues.
- To develop their sense of identity and belonging, preparing them for life as citizens in a plural society.
- To develop enquiry and response skills through the use of distinctive language, listening and empathy.
- To reflect on, analyse and evaluate their beliefs, values and practices and communicate their responses.
- To learn about and reflect upon British values and to know how these may impact on our choices, behaviours and attitudes within society.

Religious Education does not seek to urge religious beliefs on children nor to compromise the integrity of their own beliefs by promoting one religion over another. **It is not the same as collective worship, which has its own place in school life.** (Taken from QCA documentation)

Subject Content and Delivery.

Religious Education is taught in termly topics using the 24 dispositions in co-ordination with the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus. Dispositions are taught in a weekly timetabled session through whole class, group and individual learning. Class teachers are responsible for teaching Religious Education to their own class, sometimes with support from a teaching assistant or the RE co-ordinator. A range of learning styles, strategies and mediums are used to teach Religious Education and learning in this area is sometimes enhanced with educational visits.

Planning.
Planning takes place weekly within year groups with reference to the RE Curriculum map and medium-term planning, which covers the 24 dispositions. Weekly lessons are evaluated by class teachers which are monitored by the RE coordinator and the leadership team.

Assessment.
Formative teacher assessment is ongoing to monitor children's progress and inform planning.

Recording and Reporting.
A written report on achievement on Religious Education is sent to parents annually in the Summer Term. There is an opportunity for discussion at the Parents' Evenings in the Autumn and Summer Terms. Parents are welcome to speak with the Headteacher or RE coordinator if they have any questions with regard to the RE syllabus.

Responsibility of the co-ordinator.
The responsibilities of the co-ordinator are to:
- Develop a scheme of work which shows learning objectives clearly and cover the 24 dispositions.
- Keep under review the quality and impact of assessment.
- Be aware of standards and expectations of Religious Education in relation to the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus.
- Monitor marking.
- Provide information about training opportunities available on assessment strategies and focus on attainment within Religious Education.
- Monitor continuity and progression of the Religious Education throughout the school.
- Maintain a subject display board within the school.
- Teach and emphasize British Values within the teaching of RE.

Responsibilities of class teachers.
The responsibilities of the class teacher are to:
- Ensure that all lessons have clear learning objectives appropriate to pupils' abilities.
- Ensure that there is full coverage of the 24 dispositions, within a 2 year rolling program.

- Make curriculum plans in light of assessment.
- Focus on the attainment of individuals.
- Keep records of pupils' attainment, particularly in designing and making skills.

Inclusion.

All children of all abilities regardless of race, gender, culture, disability, sexual orientation, intellectual or social differences have equal opportunity to develop their full potential in all areas of entitlement to participate fully in all activities offered.

The less confident and the less able are given greater support and the task may be adapted.

Parents have the right to withdraw their children from R.E. for religious reasons. Sensitivity is to be shown towards cultural and religious influences in economic and industrial value.

Resources.

Exemplar lesson plans for each dispositions are on the 'Shared Area' for all staff to access, edit and adapt for their children.

Resources for Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism include:
- Artefacts.
- Books and magazines.
- Photograph packs.
- Poster packs.
- Dvds and short films.

These are stored in the central resource area for Religious Education in the Junior corridor.

Home and school links.

On occasion homework will be set to support learning in this area. See homework policy. Partnerships and relationships are encouraged.

I.C.T.

Pupils should be given the opportunities to apply and develop their ICT capability through the use of ICT tools to support their learning in all subjects.

Pupils should be given opportunities to support their work by being taught to:
a) Find things out from a variety of sources, selecting and synthesising the information to meet their needs and developing ability to question its accuracy, bias and plausibility.
b) Develop their ideas using ICT tools to amend and refine their work and enhance its quality and accuracy

c) Exchange and share information, both directly and through electronic media

d) Review, modify and evaluate their work, reflecting critically on its quality, as it progresses.

| Year | Y1 | Y2 | Y3 | Y4 | Y5 | Y6 |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| **Summer** | Expressing Joy; Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge; Being Imaginative and Explorative; Sharing and being Generous | Being accountable and Living with Integrity; Being Silent and Attentive to, and Cultivating a sense for the Sacred and Transcendent; Being Courageous and Confident; Being Temperate, Exercising Self and Discipline and Cultivating Contentment | Being Silent and Attentive to, and Cultivating a Sense for the Sacred and Transcendent / Expressing Joy; Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging / Being Accountable and Living with Integrity / Living with Integrity; Remembering Roots; Being Open, Honest and Truthful | Being Temperate, Exercising Self and Discipline and Cultivating Serene Contentment / Being Imaginative and self-critical; Being Courageous and Confident / Living by Rules; Being Regardful of Suffering | Creating Unity and Harmony / Sharing and Being Generous; Being Silent and Attentive to, and Cultivating a Sense for the Sacred and Transcendent / Being Imaginative and Explorative; Being Temperate exercising self-discipline and serene contentment; Being Fair and Just | Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging / Belonging / Remembering Roots; Participating and Willing to Lead; Being Thankful; Being Courageous and Confident |
| **Spring** | Being Regardful of Suffering; Being Thankful; Caring for Other Animals and the Environment; Appreciating beauty | Being Loyal and Steadfast; Being Merciful and Forgiving; Being Hopeful and Visionary; Participating and Willing to Lead | Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge / Creating Unity and Harmony; Sharing and being Generous; Being Fair and Just | Being Loyal and Steadfast; Being Modest and Listening to Others; Being Merciful and Forgiving / Forgiving; Participating and Willing to Lead; Being Hopeful and Visionary | Being Open Honest and Truthful; Being Regardful of Suffering; Appreciating Beauty; Being Curious and Valuing Knowledge | Being Loyal and Steadfast; Being Merciful and Forgiving; Being Reflective and Self-Critical; Being Merciful and Forgiving |
| **Autumn** | Remembering roots; Being fair and just; Living by rules; Creating Unity and Harmony | Cultivating Inclusion, Identity and Belonging; Being reflective and self-critical; Being Modest and Listening to Others; Being Open, Honest and Truthful | Being Loyal and Steadfast; Being Merciful and Forgiving; Caring for Other Animals and the Environment / Appreciating beauty; Being thankful | Being Fair and Just; Living by Rules; Creating Unity and Harmony; Being thankful; Being reflective and Self-Critical | Being Fair and Just; Caring for Other Animals and the Environment; Being Hopeful and Visionary; Being reflective and Self-Critical | Being Reflective and Self-Critical; Expressing Joy; Living by rules |