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Religion and religious education: comparing and contrasting pupils' and teachers' views in an English school

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Religion and religious education: comparing and contrasting pupils' and teachers' views

Abstract

This publication builds on and develops the English findings of the qualitative study of European teenagers' perspectives on religion and religious education (Knauth *et al.* 2008), part of 'Religion in Education: A contribution to dialogue or a factor of conflict in transforming societies of European countries?' (REDCo) project. It uses data gathered from 27 pupils, aged 15-16, from a school in a multicultural Northern town in England and compares those findings with data gathered from ten teachers in the humanities faculty of the same school, collected during research for the Warwick REDCo Community of Practice. Comparisons are drawn between the teachers' and their pupils' attitudes and values using the same structure as the European study: personal views and experiences of religion, the social dimension of religion, and religious education in school. The discussion offers an analysis of the similarities and differences in worldviews and beliefs which emerged. These include religious commitment/observance differences between the mainly Muslim-heritage pupils and their mainly non-practising Christian-heritage teachers. The research should inform the ways in which the statutory duties to promote community cohesion and equalities can be implemented in schools. It should also facilitate intercultural and interreligious understanding between teachers and the pupils from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Keywords: Religion, religious education, pupil and teacher views, community cohesion, REDCo

Introduction

This study arose from two separate but linked research projects which were part of the REDCo Project. The first was a European-wide qualitative study of teenage perspectives on religion (Knauth *et al.* 2008) in which the English study was conducted by Ipgrave and McKenna (2008). This was carried out in four schools, one of which, 'School C', was also where the second research project was based (Miller 2009) which investigated the transferability of the interpretive approach (Jackson 1997, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2011) to teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). Thus, an opportunity was created to combine data from both projects in order to undertake a comparison between teachers' and pupils' views on religion, including its social dimensions, and religious education.

There were two main reasons for making the comparison. The first is that it could provide a detailed case study which could add further insights into the findings of the REDCo qualitative study and thus add to the evidence base on religion, dialogue and conflict in

schools. The second was to investigate further a statement from the school, contained in its self-evaluation form (SEF),¹ that ‘the community of the students is distant from the school in terms of distance and culture’. This ‘distance’ includes ethnicity, religion, language, social class and economic status. It is worth noting that the use of the singular ‘community’ could imply a homogenisation of the several minority communities in which the students’ families are based. There was a strong desire expressed by the teachers that the distance between the pupils’ families and the school should be overcome, including the lack of direct parental involvement. They wanted to ‘bridge’ the distance between them and their communities (Putnam 2000) not least because there is a statutory duty on schools to promote community cohesion. This is conducted by Ofsted² within a four-fold understanding of ‘community’, including the school as a community.

School C is set in one of the northern towns (it will be anonymised as ‘Northtown’) where riots took place in 2001 and where the minority ethnic population, mainly of Pakistani heritage, was just over 21% at the 2001 census. In 2007 the school had 1063 pupils: 76.5% were from a South Asian background with 71.4% of Pakistani heritage;³ 738 students did not have English as a first language and 37.5% of pupils were entitled to free school meals (13.1 nationally).⁴

Completed questionnaires were received from 27 pupils in the school and 10 teachers in the humanities faculty. The pupils were in Year 11 (mainly 15 year olds), 22 from a Pakistani-heritage, Muslim background and the majority (18) were boys. Of the ten teachers: one was from a Pakistani-heritage background and the rest were white. They were split equally in terms of gender; 70% were aged between 45 and 60; five self-identified as Christian, four said ‘no religion’ and one was a Muslim. All the teachers - who were spread across the school’s hierarchy - had taught RE.⁵ On average, the teachers lived 15 miles away from the school compared with the pupils’ three miles. The wards – local political districts - from which the pupils primarily come are among the 20% most deprived areas in England.

Given these considerable differences between pupils and teachers it might have been expected that the mainly Muslim-heritage, working-class pupils would hold different views from those of their mainly non-practising, Christian-heritage, middle-class teachers. Whilst

within educational literature there is research on pupil sub-cultures (Sewell 1996; Mirza 1992; Gillborn and Mirza 2000) and research which looks at their views on various topics (Francis *et al.* 2008; McKenna *et al.* 2008), most analyse the separately held views of teachers and pupils rather than comparing and contrasting them. This publication attempts to address this gap.

Methodology

Data collection

Using broadly the same instrument - the REDCo qualitative questionnaire (see Knauth *et al.* 2008) - two separate sets of data were collected within the school. Additionally, data were gathered during the continuing professional development (CPD) research study, using qualitative methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, written submissions (in a variety of forms) and relevant published documentation (Burgess, 1984; Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Cheetham, 2001; Nesbitt, 2001). These are used to supplement and illustrate the comparative analysis of the data gathered from the questionnaire.

Analysis of data

The first data analysed were the pupils' qualitative questionnaires. There was a reading of the responses to gain familiarity, looking for patterns, consistencies and exceptions. The categories, terms and ideas extracted from the data were those specifically referred to by the pupils. The data from the teachers' questionnaires were analysed independently in the first instance, using broadly the same processes, and again, using their responses as the basis for analysis and the creation of categories. In this way the respondents' authentic voices are heard; the analysis was 'inductive' (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995, 296). Perhaps unusually for a qualitative study, numerical analysis was also used to ascertain the proportions of respondents expressing particular views and hence how far they were representative of the total sample (Silverman 1993).

Because this publication provides comparison and contrast between pupils and teachers in one faculty in one community school in a northern English city, there is no suggestion that the conclusions will be immediately generalisable. It is recognised that this is a very small sample, from an untypical school. However, nonetheless, the evidence presented here can

shed light on issues that teachers and pupils face in their understanding of and their relationships with each other, and their wider communities. It is worth noting that the conclusions drawn from the qualitative pupil study are confirmed by the larger quantitative survey (McKenna *et al.* 2009) and while the findings reported in this publication may not be representative, they are illustrative (Scott 1996).

The reporting of the data follows the structure of the qualitative questionnaire: personal views and experiences of religion; the social dimensions of religion; and religious education in schools.

Personal views and experiences of religion

'Religion' and 'God'

The first questions asked about the words 'religion' and 'God' and what comes to mind. The commonest answers from pupils were 'belief' (35) followed by the names of religions - Islam (19) and Christianity (13). The pupils used theological words and phrases, some consistently: for example, 'Almighty' and 'merciful' were used 10 and 9 times respectively about 'God'. Other words about 'religion' included 'peace' 'Allah and life', 'judgement day', 'commitment' and '*imaan*' (sic). It could be assumed that the pupils' religious background was the key reason for this, but it should be borne in mind that they were 15 and in the second year of their full course GCSE Religious Studies examination, were studying Islam and Christianity, and so one would expect a reasonable grasp of key religious terminology.

The teachers provided 27 responses to 'religion' 19 of which were factual: 'church' (4) and 'faith' (3); or general, such as 'life'. Some (4) were positive in tone: 'good works' (2) while an equal number (4) were negative: war/conflict (2), 'inflexible' (1) and 'extremism (present in all religions)' in which the writer, though perhaps making a negative judgement, is trying not to be partisan. This can be compared to the very few pupils who gave negative answers in the whole study (10/167).

The teachers' answers to 'What comes to mind when you hear the word 'God'?' followed a similar pattern to their pupils'. Out of a total of 29 responses, 17 were words associated with belief or practice: 'faith' (3), 'power' (2) creator (2). There was also use of theological terms:

‘almighty’, ‘omnipotent’, ‘deity’ and ‘Father, Son, Holy Spirit’. There were six positive associations, including ‘compassion’ and ‘forgiveness’ and four responses that could be construed as negative. Four others were largely agnostic in tone: ‘Whose God?’ and ‘questioning’.

In this first set of answers, then, there are no major differences between the teachers and their pupils, with the exception of a number of negative responses from some of the teachers.

The importance of religion in life

The questionnaire then asked how important religion/God was in their lives to which the pupils gave a strongly affirmative response – 19 out of 24 who answered the question said ‘very important’. The only pupils who said that religion was not important to them were the two non-Muslim pupils. This is similar to other research findings (e.g. McKenna *et al.* 2009; Smith, 2005). The pupils’ answers were very different from their teachers’ - only three of whom said that religion was important in their lives. This is striking contrast.

The pupils were able to give detailed explanations of why religion was important to them, referring to their lifestyle and their religious practices. For example:

Islam and God to me is very, very important. I base my whole lifestyle around Islam and try to be the best person that I can be (male, Muslim).

Of the three teachers who said their religion was important to them, one included the importance of daily prayer (from the female Muslim teacher), a male Roman Catholic (RC) who wrote: ‘My faith... is the cornerstone of my life and provides me with a moral framework’, while the third writer echoed those views:

...provides core moral values, a guide to life and a refuge...; provides the strength to cope with hard times; a reason to be (male, CE).

Some of the teachers gave evidence of religious influence in the past: ‘brought up in a family who were regular attenders’, adding: ‘living a good life more important than the trappings of

religion' (female, Methodist). Only two of the teachers gave unqualified negative responses to the importance of religion. Others added a variety of comments to their statement that religion was not important:

... other than respect for others' views

...but as I am teaching RE for the first time in several years I am very interested.

Personal connections with religion

The last question in this section on personal views and experiences of religion asked how respondents came to know about religions. Of the pupils 26 said 'family', 22 said 'school', 19 said 'place of worship' (mosque) and 13 said 'friends'. The responses from the teachers showed a similar response to 'family', slightly lower to 'school', and considerably fewer for 'places of worship' (50% as opposed to 70%) and much lower for 'friends'.

Reflections on personal views and experiences of religion

There is thus a significant difference in the importance of religion for pupils and their teachers and yet one of the themes that came through strongly in the CPD study was the teachers' desire to respect 'religion'. They were keen not to offend their pupils and their communities, they wanted to avoid charges of racism and they wanted to be able to differentiate between 'religion' and 'culture'. The teachers wanted to give primacy to religion: if a matter was religious then they would respect it, but if it was 'only cultural' then they could challenge it. This raises complex questions, including the reification of both religions and cultures and a view of both as fixed and separable when they are not (Cush 1999; Jackson 1997, 2004).

Given that only three of the ten teachers said that religion is important in their lives, their responses overall can be interpreted as respectful and open and not as different from their pupils' answers as one might anticipate. As one of the teachers wrote of 'religion':

Extraordinarily powerful influence in the world – which cannot be ignored or dismissed. Needs to be understood and respected (male, CE).

Social dimensions of religion

The first questions in this section aimed to gather data about religion as a topic of conversation: whether or not it happened, when it occurred and whether it was interesting.

Peer group

A significant proportion of pupils (18 /27) said that they talked about religion with their friends, discussed problems and moral issues, shared information on special times, were keen to compare ideas and found religious topics interesting. Their conversations appear to take place regularly, sometimes linked to RE lessons or to religious festivals, though many were also normal day-to-day interactions.

When the teachers were asked this question half of them said they did not talk about religion with their friends. However, one has to include the teachers' comments. One who wrote 'no' is a practising Catholic who explained, 'It is something personal to me'. A negative response does not necessarily equate with indifference or antipathy to religion. The content of teachers' conversations was also different from their pupils': several mentioned political issues, including Palestine, terrorism and debate about 'the news'.

Experiences of religion

The next question under the social dimension of religion asked about personal experiences of religion and asked for examples to which almost half the pupils listed good experiences but eight listed bad.

Many of the good experiences were associated with religious festivals, not only Eid but also Easter, Christmas and Diwali, reflecting the multi-faith character of Northtown:

Good experiences - celebrating Eid, enjoying the Christmas spirit, the lights in town for Diwali etc. (female, Muslim).

Good - celebrating Eid, it's a fun time when you party as a family. Easter - enjoying all those chocolate eggs (female, Muslim).

It is a cause for concern that the majority of bad experiences that were listed by pupils were linked to racism, especially Islamophobia, and perceived discrimination:

Bad experiences - other religions feel they are superior, being treated unequally, racism (male, Muslim).

Half of the teachers made positive responses to the question about their experience of religion including religious involvement in charities, the removing of injustice, community involvement, inter-faith dialogue and 'good people'. There were a small number of references to personal good experience: 'brings calmness to life' (male, CE) and enjoyment in singing hymns (male, lapsed CE/Atheist). For others, personal memories were negative:

Choir boy – boredom! Holier than... (male, Christian)
... forced into religion at a young age (female, Christian)
... mosque hours too long (female, Muslim).

What some teachers describe as negative experiences are, in fact, often opinions. For example:

Religion can divide communities... people accept their lot without questions being asked. Many religions have an elitist system that only see men as being able to be religious leaders (female, none given).

Religious pluralism

In both surveys, the question about whether people of different religions could live together was one of the most frequently answered. Not only did 25 pupils respond to this affirmatively - they also gave detailed reasons.

Yes I think that people from different religions can live together because it shouldn't matter what race/religion you are from. Everyone should learn to get on with each other (female, Muslim).

Some pupils added the necessary conditions for this to happen:

... they should respect each other's views and beliefs and they should be allowed to practise their religion without any interference (female, Muslim).

Pupils' answers were grounded in theology, including reference to 'God's creation' and an appeal to the authority of scripture, and they stressed the term 'equality'. For example:

Yes because, even though they are from different religions God created, both of them... In the Qur'an it says treat everyone equally and that's what you should do and it's good for both of them because they can understand each other's religion (female, Muslim).

This positive attitude to pluralism is entirely congruent with the messages given by the school, and Ofsted agreed that it is a 'racially harmonious, inclusive community'. In the (rather graphic) words of one of the pupils:

... we are a mixture of religion and we don't ever argue about which religion is alright. We stick our nose to our own business (male, Christian).

The teachers also demonstrated their affirmation of the possibility of living in a harmonious multi-faith/multi-ethnic community. One of the faculty managers wrote:

It happens all the time... in classrooms and in the wider school community. I have nothing but positive encounters with students I meet in communities outside school and on mixed faith, culture [trips] (male, CE).'

Like the pupils, the teachers added their own conditions and reservations. Five of the seven comments focused on the need for respect and toleration. There was also a recognition that living harmoniously in society made demands on all participants:

Yes of course, we should all respect each other's religion as well as culture... we live in a multicultural society and we *all* need to adapt to each other's needs [her emphasis] (female, no religion)

She also added:

However, we should all act outside our homes to comply with the law and not use religion as an excuse.

The word ‘excuse’ here is used in a pejorative sense and it reflects one of the issues that arose in the CPD study, where there was evidence of a negative critique of both the Muslim communities and of religion by some members of staff (and one of their community informants),⁶ although it sat alongside their positive commitment to equality and fairness.

Reflections on the social dimensions of religion

The evidence gathered in this section shows that the majority of pupils, who are Muslims, are much more likely to discuss religion with their peers than the teachers. Where teachers do, it is usually in the context of politics and the role of religion in conflicts. The experiences of the two groups also differ, with some pupils reporting negative ‘religious racism’ while some teachers experienced boredom in childhood. The teachers offered negative opinions when asked for experience. These comparisons will be explored further below. What emerges that is strongly positive from this section is the shared commitment to equality and the possibility of inter-community harmony. Both pupils and teachers recognise that certain conditions must be fulfilled, and none underestimates the complexity of the process, but the shared vision of society is significant, not least in its contribution to the ethos and well-being of the school community, and therefore to community cohesion. It is tempting to use the current political rhetoric of ‘shared values’ but it is important to exercise caution. Modood (2006) and Parekh (2006) warn of the dangers that lie within such terminology, and Jackson speaks in a more nuanced way of ‘overlapping values’ (Jackson 2004).

Religious education in school

General attitudes to RE

There was a strong affirmation by pupils of RE in the school curriculum. To the question ‘Should there be a place for religion at school?’ 22 of the pupils said yes and three said no. None thought that it should be an optional subject.

The teachers, like their pupils, affirmed the place of RE ‘but not to inculcate faith’ or to ‘preach one form is better than another’. Their reasons for including RE in the curriculum fell

into a number of categories: knowledge of world religions (5), respect /understanding for others (4), educate and inspire reflection (2) and one about pupils making choices. Thus there is similarity of views on this topic.

Content of RE

Pupils' answers to the question about the content of RE were given in considerable depth. Six pupils, for example, wanted to know about the similarities and differences between religions and three emphasised the need for opportunities to ask questions and engage in discussions. They wanted to learn about beliefs, why they were believed and the impact they had on people's lives. Six thought that RE should include general life issues, such as marriage, death, bullying and crime and punishment. Evidence from the two European-wide REDCo surveys supports these findings: pupils like the 'safe forum' of RE in which respect can develop (Fancourt 2009, 206).

The teachers' ideas on content were largely similar, their answers falling into four main categories. The first was 'learning about religions', emphasising the need for a broad range of religions to be included, and providing learning experiences in places of worship. There was an affirmation of knowledge without the requirement of personal religious conviction. Another group of answers was about morality and religious teachings on questions such as war and right to life issues. A third group of answers focused on community cohesion and Britain as a 'multi-faith society', offering 'compromise where conflict exists' and comparing similarities between faiths which can promote cohesion. The final group was 'learning from religion', enabling 'reflections to fundamental religious questions' and promoting 'respect for other beliefs and non-belief'. The 'learning about and learning from' formula has its basis in the work of Michael Grimmitt (1987) (compare 'learning from religion' with Jackson's concept of edification: Jackson 1997), and has been widely adopted as the attainment targets for RE in England, in both national documentation (e.g. QCA 2004) and Northtown's local agreed syllabus. There is also evidence of adult concerns and language in the teachers' responses, such as community cohesion, but in general there is agreement between teachers and pupils.

Religiousness of teachers

The question ‘Should teachers have a religious faith?’ was given a positive answer by 21 pupils though the majority gave answers that teachers *could*, rather than *should*, have a faith and that it should not affect their right to their chosen occupation. One thought it would be helpful because they could then get the teacher’s views about religion while another added that religious faith should not affect their teaching:

... they should put this to one side and be friendly and acceptable to all religions (male, Muslim).

At first sight, the teachers’ answers would appear to be opposite to their pupils’ since seven of them said no, adding comments such as ‘it doesn’t make them a better person or teacher’ but perhaps the teachers are simply being more precise in their use of language, understanding ‘should’ as implying desirability.

RE - integration or separation

Most of the pupils thought that they should be taught RE together, a view held by 20 of the 21 who answered this question. They were able to give positive views about why this should be, saying that understanding would increase while ‘religious racism’ could be reduced.

The teachers were also convinced of the importance of integrated teaching. Seven of them gave reasons which were broadly similar to their pupils’: ‘the only chance of having insight into other faiths’, ‘encourage dialogue and mutual respect’ with one asking ‘why separate?’ Another pointed out the potential negative impact of separation which would lead to ‘misunderstanding and prejudice’.

Reflections on religious education

Despite some differences in the interpretation of the questions, the data reveal broad agreement between pupils and teachers on RE in schools, its aims, content and the role of the teacher. This is congruent with findings in both the qualitative and quantitative REDCo surveys across Europe: pupils are largely conformist in their views of RE, showing preference for the model of which they have had personal experience (Bertram-Troost and

O'Grady 2008, 350; McKenna *et al.* 2009, 61). The English and Welsh model of RE sets out to inform pupils about religious diversity and encourage them to relate their studies to their own personal development (e.g. Schools Council 1971; Grimmitt 1987; QCA 2004).

Teachers and pupils in School C demonstrated their acceptance of one of the values for RE in the non-statutory National Framework: 'the celebration of diversity in society through understanding similarities and differences' (QCA 2004, p. 8).

Reflections and conclusions on the comparative data

The first major conclusion from the data gathered from these teachers and pupils is the notable extent of agreement between them, despite their many differences, including personal religious commitment. One of the most significant is their shared commitment to pluralism and to respect for religion. In RE, pupils found a 'safe space' in which such issues could be discussed with others from different or no religious tradition. This accords with evidence from the REDCo studies that pupils with religious commitment, particularly Muslims, were more open to dialogue than others (McKenna *et al.* 2009, 64).

One of the main areas of difference between them is that teachers made some negative comments about religion and there was incidental use of pejorative terms like 'trappings of religion' and religion as an 'excuse'. In answer to the question about bad experience of religion, three gave personal examples and two expressed negative opinions about religions as dividing communities and being patriarchal, dogmatic and elitist. This is not at all surprising since a good deal of public discourse is negative, in relation to Islam. One study found that two thirds of newspaper articles published in the UK about Muslims between 2000-2008 were negative and stereotypical, showing Muslims as a 'problem' (Moore *et al.* 2008).

During the CPD study, evidence that emerged from other data gave further insight into the teachers' views, with quite frequent criticism of the Pakistani-heritage communities. There was a view that the 'community' (as if it were a homogeneous community) is living in a 'time warp' and that, while life in Pakistan has 'moved on', the community here remains 'traditional'. When teachers were given a free hand to write in their reflective diaries, a

number of negative comments and anxieties emerged, more so than, say, in interviews. One of the women teachers wrote:

I find it really frustrating that there is a lack of any move towards integration which I feel is at the centre of the problem – my prejudice I’m afraid! ... Hindus are more likely to integrate with and succeed in British society... I did not find it threatening as I sometimes do with aspects of Islam (female, Methodist).

The youngest member of the faculty became ‘annoyed’ and ‘sad’ about the separate sections in the mosque for women which she found ‘demeaning’:

... I am sure I am imposing my western liberal values on them, but it left me feeling angry that if we segregated by race it would cause an outcry, and yet to segregate by gender was somehow acceptable and justifiable (female, no religion).

The teachers demonstrated strongly positive attitudes towards pluralism and racial and religious tolerance in the questionnaire and in their conversation. They wanted to improve relationships and deepen their understanding of their communities (like the teachers in the *Building E-Bridges Project* (McKenna *et al.* 2008, 104)⁷ but there is some dissonance between this and the negative views that were also expressed. There was, to use Ricoeur’s terminology, both a hermeneutic of suspicion and of faith: ‘willingness to suspect, willingness to listen’ (cited in Wright 2003, 281).

Alam and Husband suggest that the Pakistani community of Northtown is often portrayed as ‘fundamentally flawed’ and in need of reform (2006, 17). There is a tendency towards pathological definitions in which the victims are blamed for their circumstances. This is further embedded in public consciousness by literature emanating from Muslims which is deeply critical of aspects of Islamic society (e.g. Manji 2005). The title of Ahmed’s book *Islam under Siege* summarises the prevailing trend (Ahmed 2003) which has been subject to critique by Said (1997).

Alam and Husband challenge this deficit model and argue that what is missing is a recognition of the strengths that exist within communities. They differentiate between social bonding and bridging (Putnam 2000) and argue that within communities there is ‘a variety of social relations and solidarity... that sustains their economic resilience and provides a foundational basis for social cohesion’ (2006, 55-6).

This is not to say that there are not issues and problems within the Pakistani-heritage communities in Northtown, for there are. But generalised, negative assumptions about whole communities, in which Muslim identity becomes ‘reified and exaggerated’ (Hussain 2008, 40), deny social and familial strengths and the rapid rate of change, and they risk pathologizing communities when the focus could be on alleviating deprivation, increasing employment and raising standards in schools. An informed critique of negative public discourse is an increasingly urgent task if teachers are to promote community cohesion.

Such a critique would also inform the debate about the perception voiced in School C’s Self Evaluation Form that the pupils are ‘distant from the school in terms of distance and culture’. This publication has shown that there are many shared perceptions and attitudes between the teachers and their pupils, despite differences in personal commitment, towards religion, RE and a plural society. On this, the school can continue to build.

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End notes

¹ Each community school in England and Wales has completed a self-evaluation form providing evidence for Ofsted inspections. Since the change of government, this is no longer required

² Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills for English schools. It inspects community cohesion under four headings: school/local/national/global

³ According to the draft document published by Ofsted in its consultation on the duty to promote community cohesion there are 63 secondary schools that have more than 50% of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) pupils, of which this school is one.

⁴ These figures are from Ofsted data, 2006.

⁵ In Religious Studies examinations (RS), the school has achieved consistently high results, out-performing predictions.

⁶ This stands in contrast to ‘constructive critique’ – one aspect of Jackson’s reflexivity within his Interpretive Approach (IA) (2008, 195). The IA was the theoretical stimulus for the REDCo project, including both research projects from which these data are drawn.

⁷ The E-Bridges project explores children’s religious understanding and inter faith encounter through email dialogue, linking children living in different parts of England, and from various religious and non-religious backgrounds.