



Journal of Contemporary Religion

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjcr20>

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To cite this article: Céline Benoit (2021): “I’m just British—normal British”: Exploring Teachers’ and Pupils’ Conceptualisations of Religion(s) and Religious Belonging, Journal of Contemporary Religion, DOI: [10.1080/13537903.2021.1958493](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1958493)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1958493>



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Published online: 08 Sep 2021.



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“I’m just British—normal British”: Exploring Teachers’ and Pupils’ Conceptualisations of Religion(s) and Religious Belonging

Céline Benoit 

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to foreground the voices of primary school teachers and children—often silenced in research—and explore how they understand religion(s) and religious belonging. The findings draw on qualitative data investigating the narratives of teachers and pupils from five primary community schools in the West Midlands (England). The research shows that religious traditions in contemporary Religious Education classes still tend to be constructed as un-diverse, impermeable, monolithic wholes as teachers rely on the dominant World Religions Paradigm. As religions as lived tend to be ignored, children find it difficult to situate themselves within debates and conversations pertaining to religion(s) and religious diversity and consequently tend to speak about ‘others’ and imagined ‘them’. As a result, most children believe that RE is learning about the ‘Other’ and tend to construct ‘world religions’ as un-British. The article concludes that, overall, RE fails to challenge static representations of religion(s) and rigid categorisations and that the subject ought to offer alternative representations of religious beliefs and practices by foregrounding the lived realities of children and religious communities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2018
Accepted 1 September 2019

KEYWORDS

Boundary drawing; religious belonging; Religious Education; (mis)representation of religious traditions; primary education

Religion in primary education in England

Since 1944, weekly Religious Education (RE) classes and daily acts of Collective Worship have been compulsory in all types of state-funded schools, whether they are of a religious character or not (Education Act 1944; Education Reform Act 1988). Although parents have the right to withdraw their children from RE and/or Collective Worship (School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Section 71), this practice remains uncommon.

Until the 1970s, the subject remained “strongly Christian” (Louden 2010, 278). The Bible was regularly read and taught to children in all state-funded schools. While the Education Act of 1944 was partially the result of negotiations with Christian churches and reflected their historical legacies in education (ibid), the Government also endorsed the teaching of

Christianity—the glue that was to hold society together in the face of rising secular fascist ideologies at the time (Freathy 2008, 301).

A didactic shift occurred in the 1970s. Many scholars argue that a ‘revolution’ took place, whereby the twin processes of secularisation and pluralisation led to teachers rejecting Christian confessionalism in order to adopt a phenomenological approach and include non-Christian religions in their teaching (Parker and Freathy 2011, 248). As debates about the place and function of religion in state-funded schools took place, curricula were reformed to mirror the pedagogical changes, which resulted in Religious Education replacing Religious Instruction in the Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 and eventually led to today’s multi-faith approach to RE (Barnes 2008, 81, 2009, 611; Barnes and Wright 2006, 67; Jackson 2015, 15; O’Grady 2005).

However, Stephen Parker and Rob Freathy (2011, 248) suggest that this account is oversimplified and does not take into consideration all historical, structural, and contextual factors. As they examine the context in which the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education of 1975 was drafted, they argue that change in RE was not only the result of a desire to meet the needs of a diverse population, but also a political response to anxieties pertaining to “issues of immigration and ‘racial’ integration” (Parker and Freathy 2012, 383). As concerns about ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ grew, civil servants in the 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, as quoted in Parker and Freathy 2012, 7). Therefore, although “appropriate attention is [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, as quoted in Parker and Freathy 2012, 9). While the legislation required contemporary syllabi for RE specifically to “tak[e] account of the teachings and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain” (Education Act 1996, s. 375.3), Christianity had to predominate in non-confessional state-funded schools (Circular 1/94 1994, s. 35).

Nonetheless, for the past 50 years, children have been exposed to non-Christian ‘world religions’ such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. Yet, research shows that pupils still tend to have little knowledge of the different religious traditions despite a focus on learning *about* world religions in RE classes (Arweck and Nesbitt 2011, 37–38; McKenna, Ippgrave, and Jackson 2008). This is the direct consequence of the lack of adequate formation in RE in primary teacher training (Ofsted 2007, 2013; All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education 2013). Primary school teachers tend to lack not only confidence “in teaching what

can be perceived as a sensitive and challenging subject” (Whitworth 2009, 115), but also often subject knowledge.

Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw argue that RE consequently fails to represent “the real religion and belief landscape” of the UK and instead reproduces one that is imagined by the majority (Dinham and Shaw 2015, 6). In an attempt to unravel what the ‘imagined religious landscape’ might be, this article aims to explore teachers’ and pupils’ understanding of religion(s). Findings from data collected in five primary community schools across the West Midlands are presented and serve to demonstrate that religions in contemporary RE are still constructed as rigid, impermeable monolithic wholes as teachers rely on the dominant World Religions Paradigm.¹ As religions as lived tend to be ignored, children find it difficult to situate themselves within debates and conversations pertaining to religion(s) and religious diversity and consequently tend to speak about ‘others’ and imagined ‘them’. As a result, most children believe that RE is about learning about the ‘Other’ and tend to construct ‘world religions’ as un-British.

What is ‘religion’?

Definitions and interpretations of religion vary widely across contexts and there is thus not a single definition upon which everyone can agree. This reflects the fluidity of the term and the looseness of its boundaries (Asad 1993; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2000; Martin 2009; McCutcheon 1997, 2003). Rather than referring to an objective truth, the meaning of religion arises in the process of interaction between people (Blumer 1986, 10). Religion is a social construct and therefore constantly (re)constructed in new ways (Asad 1993; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2000; Martin 2009; McCutcheon 1997, 2003). Any attempt at pinning it down should be treated with caution and must be perceived as an act of discursive power.

While RE syllabi and the National Framework for RE do not attempt to define religion *per se*, they refer to it on a number of occasions (166 times in the National Framework 2004 (QCA 2004), 69 times in the Non-statutory Guidelines of 2010 (DfCSF 2010), and 188 times in the RE Review of 2013 (REC 2013). This poses the question of the construction of knowledge about religion(s) in RE. Schools, among other institutions, are state apparatuses of knowledge, which (re)produce and sustain particular truths (Apple 2004, 2013). As places for learning, schools can legitimise particular discourses and contribute to their reproduction. In fact, Reshma Sookrajh and Frank Salanjira (2009, 70) argue that RE is one of the subjects where “the impact of ideology can easily be noticed”.

More than a social construct, religion should also be understood as “processual and negotiated in the everyday context” (Page and Yip 2016, 51). 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), scholars such as David Hall (1997), Nancy Ammerman (2006), Meredith McGuire (2008), and Robert Orsi (2010) suggest to talk instead about *lived religions*. Such a model is “useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices” (McGuire 2008, 12).

However, as a result of lacking subject knowledge, teachers largely ignore religions as lived and instead rely on the dominant World Religions Paradigm (Owen 2011, 253; Cooling, Bowie, and Panjwani 2020, 20–25)—a restrictive conceptual apparatus (Hanegraaff 2015, 95). To be classified as a religion, a tradition must share a number of aspects with Christianity such as monotheism, churches and priesthood, and rituals (Dubuisson 2003, 141; Fitzgerald 2000, 5). Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1964, 38) criticises the model and argues that ‘religion’ is a Western construct that is reduced to a “system of ideas”. As they become world religions, traditions and worldviews are therefore objectified into systems of beliefs (Cox 2016, xiii).

As teachers tend to construct religions through the prism of the World Religions Paradigm, they are likely to reproduce essentialist constructions of religions, which are regularly reified and objectified (CoRE 2018, 3; Smith, Nixon, and Pearce 2018). This may result in ill-informed discussions about the place and role of religion in people’s lives and society (CoRE 2018, 3; Dinham and Shaw 2015, 4) and in discussions that may end up being fuelled by the mass media (Knott 2016, 18). Combined with the increasing level of secularity as well as growing indifference towards religion, this has led to a population “increasingly illiterate regarding religion (including Christianity)” (Davie 2015, 65). Yet, misrepresentations of faith traditions and religious communities could not be more untimely, as urgent debates about religion are re-entering public life (ibid).

Method

This article draws on findings from a preliminary investigation to a larger study which investigated the experiences of headteachers, teachers, and children in 17 primary schools across the West Midlands (Benoit 2020). Five of the schools were non-confessional community schools; the others were schools with a religious character (Roman Catholic, Church of England, Methodist and Church of England, Jewish, Sikh). The findings presented in this article are drawn from the data collected in the five non-confessional community primary schools, as this article focuses on non-denominational state education. The schools were located in the Local Authorities (LAs) of Sandwell and Wolverhampton and varied in terms of size, demographics, and socio-economic backgrounds. Both LAs have

adopted the national guidelines for RE (QCA 2004) and the schools follow their respective LA's agreed syllabus based on the National Framework (City of Wolverhampton Council 2018; Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council 2012). Knowledge, skills, and understanding therefore focus on learning *about* religion and learning *from* religion.

Gaining access to primary schools can be challenging. One great difficulty was to get past the receptionist and through to the headteacher, which does not seem to be a rare complication (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017, 170). If the lack of positive responses is not uncommon in research, this is even truer when the object of research is religion. Besides, as Collective Worship and RE tend to be neglected (Davie 2015, 121), some headteachers may have refused to grant access to their schools for fear of exposing their illegality. Consequently, participants were selected through the snowballing sampling method; cases were thus chosen because they allowed access. For confidentiality purposes, pseudonyms have been attributed to all participants, schools, and other named localities.

Non-participant observations of RE classes and acts of Collective Worship and semi-structured interviews (individual interviews with head/teachers and group interviews with pupils) were conducted in all five schools. A total of 9 adult participants and 37 pupils (aged 6–11) were interviewed. Verbal and written consent was sought from all adult and child participants. While every effort was made to redress power imbalances between the participants and myself, power asymmetry should not be ignored in the methodology used (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 33). Yet, as I conducted research *with* the participants, the voices of stakeholders who have traditionally tended to be excluded from conversations are nonetheless foregrounded in this paper (Einarsdóttir 2007, 199; Shillitoe 2018, 11). The group interviews with pupils lasted approximately 20 minutes, while the individual interviews with adult participants took 60 minutes on average. Interviews as well as field notes were recorded, with the permission of the participants, before being transcribed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Issues of misrepresentation

One of the main themes that emerged from the data collected during my investigation was 'misrepresentation'. As I demonstrate below, a number of children who identified with a religious tradition explained that their beliefs and practices were either misrepresented or not represented in RE classes. These findings are consistent with those that have emerged over the last three decades. Scholars such as Elisabeth Arweck and Eleanor Nesbitt (2011), Julia Ipgrave (1999), Robert Jackson (1997, 2015), and Nesbitt (1998) have demonstrated discrepancies between what was taught in

normative RE classes and pupils' lived realities. However, it is also crucial that these findings be put into perspective, as, in other instances, RE classes did allow children to engage in a dialogue where they could talk about their own lived experiences.

This was the case for Imran, a pupil in Year 5 who identified as a Muslim; he was proud to bring his prayer mat to class and talk about his experience of Islam to his peers. Similarly, Jeet, a Year 5 pupil who identified as a Sikh, thought it was 'fun' to visit a *gurdwara* with his friends instead of his family and enjoyed telling them about his own experiences and practices. Likewise, after a lesson on *gurdwaras*, a group of Year 6 pupils who identified as Sikhs were given the opportunity to share their experience of visiting *Harmandir Sahib*, the Golden Temple. Sunny reminisced about having to "clean the dishes" and Ranbir explained that he had to "bathe in the pool to wash [his] sins away, but [he] was really scared of the fish, because they were huge!" As the rest of the class listened to the different accounts, questions arose (e.g. "Is it really gold?", "Was it expensive?", "What's done in the free kitchen?"), which provided children with the opportunity to talk about their own lived experiences. By engaging with pupils' own experiences—while not asking them to become spokespeople or representatives of their faith communities—teachers were able to acknowledge religious beliefs and practices as lived, rather than solely rely on the restrictive World Religions Paradigm. For the purpose of this article, however, I focus on the issues of (mis)representation and boundary drawing, as it remains a key issue in RE. Findings from this research may therefore inform current debates about RE (CoRE 2018; Cooling, Bowie, and Panjwani 2020; Dinham and Shaw 2015).

Constructing mono-faith as the norm

On several occasions, I had conversations with pupils who identified with multiple religious traditions. Religious identities that are shaped under the influence of several traditions are more and more common in today's religiously plural societies (King and Hemming 2012, 47). This was, for example, the case for Neha, a Year 4 pupil, who described herself as being both Hindu and Sikh, because her father was a Sikh and her mother a Hindu, and Ismail, another Year 4 pupil, who identified as both Christian and Muslim, as his mother was a Christian and his father a Muslim. Both pupils tried to explain their hyphenated religious identities to me. There are various degrees of understanding dual religious belonging (Cornille 2010, 128; Day 2011, 31; Keddie 2014, 89; Madge, Hemming, and Stenson 2014, 236-237; Arweck and Nesbitt 2010a, 42, 2010b, 83-84). While Neha tried to negotiate both identities by embracing as much as possible from both religious traditions, Ismail only took part in selected rituals (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010a, 48-50, 2010b, 78). Their

approaches, which is not uncommon, may be defined as religious *bricolage*. While religious traditions serve as “symbolic repositories of meaning” (Hervieu-Léger 2006, 2) and influence the construction of their personal worldviews and religious identities (Casson and Cooling 2020, 20), children’s relationships with religious traditions can be voluntary, personal, and unique (Casson 2011, 208).

As RE syllabi ignore religious *bricolage* and multiple religious belonging, some children found it difficult to make sense of their faith in the RE syllabus. In the following extract, Neha, who identified as both Hindu and Sikh, reflects on the confusion she encounters in the RE classroom when the two are taught separately:

I: What topic do you prefer in RE?

Neha: I love Hinduism. . . I love learning about the different gods.

I: Are you a Hindu?

Neha: Half and half; my mum is a Hindu and my dad is a Sikh.

I: And do you feel you’re learning about your religion in RE?

Neha: Yeah. . . We’re learning about Hindus and about Sikhs . . . but sometimes I get confused . . . like I get confused with the different gods.

(Group interview, 7 May 2010)

Neha’s confusion is understandable. Although she was happy to identify as both ‘Hindu’ and ‘Sikh’, the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging is much more complex than the mere adherence to two faiths. As Suzanne Owen (2011, 260) explains, although assumed to be mutually exclusive when constructed through the lens of the World Religions Paradigm, religious labels are in fact complex and their boundaries are blurred. Children who identify with both labels may share a number of values, beliefs, and—to some extent—rituals, but may also find that there are fundamental differences between their practices and beliefs and what is labelled ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Sikhism’.

Furthermore, children with hyphenated religious identities do not constitute a homogeneous group (Arweck and Nesbitt 2011, 42), as religious allegiance is also shaped by social relations (Keddie 2014, 87) and by individuals’ historical and cultural backgrounds (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010a, 2010b, 70). For example, Neha and her family have had to negotiate their beliefs and traditions, embracing some aspects and rejecting others. They may have even forged their own beliefs which are unique to them. Sonali, another Year 4 pupil, also identified as Hindu and Sikh, but her beliefs and practices differed from Neha’s. For instance, she did not agree with the ‘half and half’ division, explaining that she was “a Sikh. And

also a little bit Hindu too.” Neha’s approach is not unique; research has shown that mixed-faith families are likely to develop their own personal forms of religious identity and belonging, as these intersect with other factors such as culture, ethnicity, and collective memory (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010a, 2010b).

Yet, when—or rather if—multiple religious belonging was addressed in RE, the phenomenon tended to be reduced to the adherence to several distinct self-contained religious belief systems and sets of traditions. As strict boundaries between the ‘world religions’ were drawn and children’s lived experiences were ignored, dialogues that emerged from RE were restricted. This resulted in limited opportunities for pupils to explore the permeability of religious boundaries and excluded children from mixed-faith families from representation.

These findings are consistent with Arweck and Nesbitt (2011, 42–43) who argue that educational material needs to be updated urgently as the number of children whose parents are from two different religious traditions is increasing. RE syllabi are structured in order to reflect the national and local contexts (Education Reform Act 1988; Circular 1/94 1994); however, as they ignore multiple religious identities, they are neither inclusive nor representative of the religious diversity in the UK.

Findings from this research project also suggest that, by ignoring multiple religious belonging and neglecting the phenomenon of religious *bricolage*, RE syllabi contribute to establishing a standard for religion and to constructing mono-faith as the norm. Mrs Callaghan, a headteacher in a school in Wolverhampton, illustrates this position when she commented on the beliefs of Zach, a Year 3 pupil who identified as both Muslim and Christian:

So he practises his Catholic faith with his mum and he also practises with his father his Muslim faith, which seems quite confusing . . . but that child’s very happy with it; he wants to join in with Dad and wants to do what Dad does and he does what Mum does! So he sees life from different angles and, I suppose, when he becomes older he will start to . . . He already starts to question each faith . . . and then he will make his own decision, he will go to whichever is calling him, I’m sure. (Personal interview, 14 May 2010)

For Mrs Callaghan, mono-faith is the only way forward; multiple religious belonging is constructed as ‘confusing’ and impossible and Muslim and Christian beliefs and practices as incompatible.

Mrs Callaghan’s understanding of religion befits hegemonic discourses. In Western societies, multiple religious belonging is considered atypical and goes against the normative traditional understanding of religion (Cornille 2010, 17; Keddie 2014, 92). By ignoring children who come from mixed-faith families, RE syllabi and teachers may encourage children to choose between traditions and to identify with specific labels that may not reflect their beliefs and practices.

Children who identify with more than one religious tradition are thus more likely to feel alienated and be ‘Othered’ by their peers as they do not conform to dominant discourses (Nesbitt 1998, 107, 109).

Constructing religions as un-British

As the World Religions Paradigm remains predominant and as religions as lived tend to be ignored, the RE classes I observed often failed to provide pupils with alternative representations to hegemonic discourses about religion(s) and instead seemed to reinforce dominant discourses. As a result, children not only found it difficult to reject static religious boundaries, but also failed to resist rigid categorisations and polarisations. In the following example, Mr Young, a headteacher, explains that children find it difficult to grasp the concept of denominations:

Quite often Catholic children will say, “I’m not a Christian; I’m a Catholic.” And it’s up to us to say, “Yes, you are a Christian”, as all of these denominations are Christian. (Personal interview, 5 May 2010)

Children seemed largely unaware of the diversity and plurality of beliefs and practices *within* religious traditions. For instance, when asked the question “What’s a Muslim?”, children listed the “Five Pillars of Islam” (declaration of faith, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, pilgrimage) as these were understood to be central to *all* Muslims. The question “What’s a Christian?” was answered with “someone who believes in Jesus” or “someone who goes to church”. When addressing the question “What’s a Sikh?”, pupils referred to the “5Ks” of Sikhism (*Kara*—iron bracelet, *Kirpan*—iron dagger, *Kachera*—cotton underpants, *Kesh*—uncut hair, *Kangha*—wooden comb). As children’s knowledge of religion(s) was shaped by the World Religions Paradigm, faith traditions were not only constructed as belief systems that share similarities with Christianity, such as Scripture, church-like organisation, and belief in a divine power (Hanegraaff 2015, 95), but also reduced to normative categories (Nesbitt 1998, 107–108). These findings are consistent with, for example, the work of Igrave (1999), Jackson (1997), Nesbitt (1998, 2004), and Arweck and Nesbitt (2011) who demonstrate that ‘world religions’ are constructed as monolithic wholes in RE.

Such a reductionist approach remains problematic, as it essentialises religious traditions and alienates religious communities. As David Smith, Graeme Nixon, and Jo Pearce (2018) explain, “[r]eligious essentialism distorts the diverse phenomenon of religion and hampers understanding of the kaleidoscope of religious expression, evidenced across time and place”. As a result, some children, especially those from minority faith backgrounds, indicated that they did not feel represented in RE. Several shared the opinion of Rajan—a Year 6 pupil who identified as a Sikh—who felt that his teacher

was occasionally guilty of teaching his faith in the “wrong” way, since it did not always correlate with his own experiences:

I: Do you find it interesting to study your own religion?

Rajan: No . . . it’s not interesting . . . ‘cos I already know most of it . . .

I: Does it mean you can maybe help your teacher when she teaches about Sikhism? Or not really?

Rajan: No, I let her explain it. But sometimes she says something wrong and I correct her.

(Group interview, 7 May 2010)

Other pupils felt that the practice of their faith was ‘wrong’, since they did not partake in every ritual and practice as described in the RE syllabus. This is exemplified by Adil’s comment:

Mrs Taylor says that Muslims pray five times a day. But in my family . . . my dad says that, if I pray only once a day, it’s ok. So I’m not sure. I’d definitely say I’m a Muslim. But I don’t know if that’s the right word ‘cos I don’t pray five times a day. . . But I’d say it is. . . (Group interview, 5 May 2010)

Similarly, Mohammed and Sofian disagreed about Collective Worship: Mohammed saw Collective Worship as a school activity, devoid of spirituality, whereas Sofian, with the support of this father, said that the school prayer could count towards his five daily prayers. This led to Sofian questioning whether his father had advised him well. These findings correlate with Arweck and Nesbitt (2011, 37) who report that RE could cause confusion among pupils and with Smith, Nixon, and Pearce (2018) who suggest that learners do not trust what they are taught in RE.

These findings are concerning. Religious traditions play an important role in providing identity markers, a sense of belonging, and community attachment. By adopting a reductionist approach to religious traditions, RE makes it difficult for children to locate themselves within debates and conversations pertaining to religions and religious diversity. As a result, they tend to speak about ‘Others’ and talk about imagined ‘them’. The following extracts of a conversation with Evie, a Year 5 pupil, demonstrate to what extent religious traditions and communities are ‘Oth ered’:

I: Do you think it’s important to study RE or that you don’t really need to?

Evie: Yes, because if you go to different countries, then you have to know what religions they have and you have to know what you have to do if you go to a *gurdwara*. And you know what they believe in.

(Group interview, 21 April 2010)

The vast majority of the pupils interviewed shared Evie’s point of view. Indeed, most children argued that the most valid reason for studying RE and

different religious traditions was to learn the tools necessary to navigate a religiously plural world. Thanks to RE, they felt they could travel the world and understand it better. Alternatively, if they did not leave the country, RE would still provide them with mechanisms to understand foreigners:

I: Do you think it's important to study RE or you don't really need to?

Tom: Yeah it's important. Because, if you go to a different country and you don't know much about it.

I: And if you only stay in England, is it still important?

Tom: Yes, because it means, if they come over here, you can make them feel like they're at home.

(Group interview, 21 April 2010)

The personal pronoun 'they' in Tom's answer is not innocuous; it serves as a distancing tool (Afdal 2015, 263). Religious communities are thus kept at a distance and power dynamics are reproduced as they are perceived as the out-group. In the following exchange, Sarah also constructed religious traditions as foreign:

I: Do you like RE?

Sarah: Kind of. . .

I: Why?

Sarah: Because it's just all about different places and I want it to be about England—here.

(Group interview, 21 April 2010)

Sarah was not the only pupil who felt that belonging to a religious tradition was synonymous with being foreign. Mia explicitly stated that being (White) British means not to belong to any of the 'world religions' discussed in class:

I: Are you a Christian?

Mia: No. I'm normal.

I: What do you mean 'normal'?

Mia: I'm just British—normal British.

(Group interview, 26 March 2010)

Mia's comments show how a (non-)religious identity can be tied closely with other forms of identity, such as ethnicity. In this case, Mia constructs (White) Britishness as 'normal' and non-religious. As religious communities do not conform to the norm, they are constructed as 'Other'.

Children found it difficult to situate themselves, or even their peers, in the traditions studied in RE. As a result, many pupils tended to construct the

‘world religions’ studied not only as un-diverse, but also as foreign and un-British. These findings are concerning, especially at a time when religion is at the heart of many public debates (Davie 2015, 232) and ‘the Other’ is often defined through discourses of Islamophobia (Welply 2018, 374). As religious communities are ‘Othered’, wider hegemonic discourses and hierarchies of power often remain unchallenged.

Conclusions

Although based on a small sample, this article highlights some key issues in RE that need addressing urgently. The research demonstrates how contemporary RE, when anchored in the World Religions Paradigm, can serve to reproduce and reinforce dominant discourses. As religions as lived are often ignored, teachers and RE syllabi tend to overlook the lived experiences of religious communities and pupils and thereby neglect their agency. Phenomena such as religious *bricolage* and multiple religious belonging are consequently ignored or misrepresented. As mono-faith is constructed as the norm, children with hyphenated religious identities are at risk of being marginalised. Furthermore, by failing to acknowledge explicitly the permeability of religious boundaries in RE, pupils may be led to believe that they need to choose one religion over the other(s) or that their religious identities are not valid.

By ignoring lived experiences, religious traditions are constructed as un-diverse monolithic wholes and religious communities as homogeneous. When the focus is solely on the religious élite, RE fails to provide children with alternative representations of religiosity and instead reproduces essentialist discourses about religion(s). This results in children, of all faiths or none, finding it difficult to relate to the content taught in RE and therefore failing to situate themselves, or their peers, within debates and conversations pertaining to religion(s) and religious diversity. Therefore, the majority of the children interviewed assumed that RE was only useful to facilitate their encounter with ‘the Other’. Religious belonging and religion as a marker of identity were constructed as foreign and un-British. The findings presented in this article are concerning; they demonstrate why (non-)religion as lived ought to be acknowledged throughout children’s schooling.

Although participants’ static constructions of religion(s) are inscribed in wider discourses and do not solely reflect the influence of school but also of the media, the community, and the family, the empirical evidence presented in this article raises key weaknesses in RE as it often fails to provide pupils with an opportunity to challenge dominant representations of religion(s). It demonstrates the necessity to move away from “monological” framings of religion(s) in educational settings (Freathy et al. 2017, 432). This article calls

for RE syllabi not only to acknowledge the contested and multi-faceted nature of religion(s), but also to offer a dialogical space which allows children to encounter a wide range of perspectives. It shows the need to engage with pupils and foreground their voices and the need to ensure that RE classes can support pupils as they construct their religious identities.

Furthermore, findings presented in this article highlight the necessity for current debates to consider issues linked to the normative World Religions Paradigm. The research therefore supports the recommendation of the Commission on Religious Education to rename the subject “Religion and Worldviews” in order to be more representative and more inclusive of the (non-)religious diversity of Britain. The change in name, however, should not constitute a mere adjustment but should demonstrate a commitment to foregrounding (non-)religions as lived, as children find it difficult to locate themselves in the current taxonomy. As structure and agency are interconnected—involving a dialogical process, whereby agency and structure inform each other (Blumer 1986, 10; Willmott 1999, 14)—by acknowledging lived religion, teachers would not simply be asked to focus on the micro-level and ignore the macro-level of society. Lived religions are not merely subjective since social agents conceptualise their beliefs, practices, and their religious worlds as they interact with one another (McGuire 2008, 12). Therefore, this article does not suggest that syllabi be updated to match pupils’ religiosity and that ‘world religions’ be ignored altogether. Indeed, not only does the World Religions Paradigm inform our understanding of the social world, but RE classes are also often the only space where children encounter institutional religions (Casson and Cooling 2020, 22). It is hoped that RE can become more relevant to pupils by critically engaging with essentialist representations of religion(s), by providing alternative understandings of (non-)religion(s), and by offering a dialogical space where a wider range of (non-)religious identities and *bricolage* can be safely discussed.

Note

1. Through the lens of the World Religions Paradigm, ‘world religions’ (e.g. Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism) are constructed as sharing a number of aspects such as scriptures, a church-like organisational structure, belief in a single divine power, and a doctrinal system. While the World Religions Paradigm has informed the teaching of RE for the last five decades, it has been criticised for being grounded in Western Christian theology (Hanegraaff 2015) and for ignoring “the complexities and diversity within traditions, as well as the permeability of their boundaries” (Benoit, Hutchings, and Shillitoe 2020, 7).

Acknowledgements

My heart-felt gratitude goes to the headteachers, teachers, and pupils of the schools I visited during my investigation. This research project would not have been possible without them. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* for insightful comments and support.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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