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# **Inter Faith Encounter and Religious Understanding in an Inner City Primary School**

**by**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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# SUMMARY

The subject of this thesis is the influence of encounter on the religious understanding of a group of primary age children in inner city Leicester. The research focuses on a minority of non-Muslim children in a predominantly Muslim area, and is informed by small discussion groups in which the children were free to explore and share their own ideas. The study begins by presenting a view of children as active in the construction of their own lives.

The young participants' contributions to the discussions are related to other theoretical positions on children's religion and a cognitive and language-based approach is advocated. A progressive, developmental model of children's religious thinking is rejected in favour of a model that allows multi-directional movement to and fro between different faith styles in response to a number of contextual factors.

Detailed textual analysis of the transcribed conversations reveals the influences of social encounter on the children's understanding. It also recognises the creativity of the children's religious thinking when their perspectives are brought into dialogical relationship with the viewpoints of others. As they assimilate words and discourses from their wider environment, the children adapt them and employ them for their own ends. Their social context of religious plurality supplies a bank of understandings and associations. From this they select and negotiate meanings to suit the requirements of the immediate communicative context of the discussions. The outcome of the process is the children's ongoing theological engagement with questions of religious identity and belief.



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# INTRODUCTION

## *Focus*

This thesis focuses on the religious understanding of a group of children as they meet together in an inner city junior school. Within the ethnically and religiously diverse city of Leicester, the context of the research participants' lives and schooling is a predominantly Muslim area where the children themselves, as non Muslims, are a minority. Their inter faith encounter with neighbours and school friends of the Islamic faith thus involves the dynamic of minority-majority power relations. The other point of encounter is the meeting of the participants in the discussion groups that generated the project's data. To these meetings the children brought the shared experiences of their common neighbourhood and school context, and the different loyalties, beliefs, outlooks of the Christian, Hindu and Rastafarian traditions with which they identified.

The 'religious understanding' of the thesis title is both the *content* in terms of what the children understand about religion and about God, and the *process* by which they come to their understanding within the context of encounter. The research discussions are viewed as part of this creative process and the children taking part are seen to be engaged in active meaning-making. The project's close textual analysis of the recorded outcomes of these research encounters takes into account both the content and the form of the children's understanding and the relationship between the two. To provide the necessary detail for this analysis and to supply the situational context for the children's words, extensive extracts from



nine of their dialogues are included as appendices. References to these are signalled in the main body of the text with the letter representing each dialogue and the line number of the phrase.

## *Structure*

The thesis has been organised into five main sections: Method, Mind, Word, Dialogue and Meaning. Each of these sections is further divided into two chapters.

### *Method*

This first section deals with the methodology of the project and relates it to other research literature. Chapter 1.1 sets out the understandings of childhood that have influenced my approach to this research with children. It covers reflections on the relationship of research and researcher to those being researched, and on the relationship of the research event to the wider contexts of the children's lives. At this early stage in the thesis, attention is drawn to the centrality of dialogue in the overall scheme.

Chapter 1.2 moves from the gathering of data in the field to the recording, analysis and reporting of the same. During these processes the data is brought into contact with new contexts and ideas. It addresses the questions of objectivity and generalisability in data analysis and interpretation, by describing the pursuit of the former in terms of research discipline, and by suggesting a wider relevance for the outcomes of this small scale project in areas of knowledge, theory and practice.

## *Mind*

The next two chapters revolve around the theme of children's 'God talk' and recognise the strength of the combination of cognitive activity and religious language in the continuous formation of children's understanding. Chapter 2.1 brings instances of children's dialogue to the debate between experience-based and cognitive approaches to children's religion, and concludes in favour of children's active engagement with theology.

Chapter 2.2 picks up the cognitive approach to children's religion by positioning research findings in relation to Fowler's developmental model of Faith Stages. Examination of the children's contributions to the research discussions indicates that the movement of understanding is less a progressive movement up through a series of faith stages than a multi-directional movement between faith styles, adopted by speakers in response to the context of their speech.

## *Word*

The third section draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and of Lev Vygotsky to trace the influence of contexts of encounter and of the requirements of communication, on the children's words and understanding. The two chapters of this section follow the movement of word meanings through two interconnected social domains. Chapter 3.1 explores the wider domain of the children's social setting, noting their varied employment of discourses and words they have assimilated from others and made their own.



Chapter 3.2 looks in more detail at the actual exchanges of the research discussions. The children are seen in their role as speakers and listeners as they share their ideas on religious outlooks, practices and beliefs. Their words are analysed to show how they select and organise their meanings to effect communication with the researcher and their peers.

### *Dialogue*

At the centre of the project is a concept of dialogue. Chapter 4.1 uses instances of the children's verbal interchanges to explore different understandings of dialogue. A threefold model is proposed which incorporates the necessary dialogue between differences that is the children's experience, dialogue as an open response to difference, and dialogue as the kind of verbal exchange in which the children are engaged.

The second in this pair of chapters on dialogue considers religious dialogue in particular. It addresses concerns about safeguarding the integrity of a faith tradition or of an individual's religious viewpoint, during dialogical exchange. Examples are given of the children's orientation among the diverse religious languages they encounter.

### *Meaning*

The final two chapters provide particular examples of children's meaning-making dealing with the *content* of their understanding on issues prominent in their conversation. Religious identity is the first of these as the children consider the origins, significance and loyalties of their own and others' religious identities.

Chapter 5.2 continues with an exploration of the children's understandings of religion and of God. As it does so, it draws the children's contributions into a wider debate between religious studies and theology. The thesis ends with illustrations of the children's creative theology, and recognition of how that theology has evolved through their engagement with the context of religious plurality in which they live.

# METHOD

## 1.1 RELATING TO THE FIELD

### *1.1.1 Frameworks*

In the following two chapters I reflect on the underlying understandings that guided my choice of methodologies, the data gathering, analysis and theory. They respond to the notion developed by Thomas Kuhn:

Inquirers always work within a paradigm – a framework that determines the concepts that are used and that also contains exemplars, or model inquiries, which direct attention toward some problems as being key and away from other problems regarded (from that perspective) as somewhat trivial.  
(Philips 1993, 67)

In its initial conception and design this project was based on my own preliminary understandings of the children with whom I was going to work, and had its origins in the interpretive ethnographic studies of young people's religion by the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993; Jackson 1997, Nesbitt 2000). My research practice and interpretation did not remain within particular frameworks, however. As the project progressed its foundations were re-examined. The focus on children's religious understanding required the positioning of my research in relation to differing paradigms of childhood used by other schools of thought to explore children's religion, notably David Hay's work on

children's spirituality (Chapter 2.1) and James Fowler's on faith development (Chapter 2.2). The latter in particular involved some reconsideration of my initial presuppositions as I traced the children's movement between different faith styles. An increasing interest in the children's use of language during research group interviews led me to consider other frameworks of discourse and dialogue, recognising Lev Vygotsky's linking of language and understanding (Chapter 2.2), and drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism to support my interpretation of the children's context, words and meanings (Chapters 2.1, 2.2). In common with the children with whom I was researching, I found that my thinking developed through the bringing together of ideas from a variety of theoretical positions and discourses.

### *1.1.2 Collecting the Data*

The research data which form the basis for this thesis were gathered during the years 1997 to 1999 at the junior school where I had been teaching for several years, in a predominantly Muslim area of inner city Leicester. The participants of the project were thirty five boys and girls drawn from three year groups within the school. In a school population of around four hundred, these children constituted the non-Muslim minority; twenty of them identified as Hindu and (like the majority of their Muslim peers) of Gujarati origin, the rest identified as Christian (one of them as 'Rastafarian-Christian'). Of these latter, three were white, five were of African Caribbean descent and the rest dual heritage African Caribbean and white. The data collected during the course of the project showed the importance of both religious and racial identity in the children's self-understanding. The children were



aged between eight and eleven years old drawn from the school years 4, 5 and 6. Because of the small number of children in the school who were not from Muslim families all from these year groups were included in the research activities.

The data were collected as tape recordings at a series of interviews held at the school during the festivals of 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha. During 'Id the Muslim children have time off school to celebrate with their families. The few (non-Muslim) children left at school are put together in year groups and take part in activities outside the regular curriculum. This timing meant that the sessions could take place with minimum disruption to the children's schooling and to my timetable as a full time teacher. It also meant that the participants naturally fell into non-Muslim groups and did not have to be selected explicitly on these grounds from their classes, a process that might have appeared divisive. However, the fact that they were being interviewed at a time when Muslims were absent from school engaged in different activities from the rest of the school population, did mean that the difference between being a Muslim and not being a Muslim was particularly evident. The influence that this might have had on the children's understanding of religious and community differences during the course of the interviews has been taken into account in the analysis.

The children were interviewed in groups which varied in number from three to seven. The members of these groups were drawn from the same school year, often from the same class, and so knew each other well. Each group contained both Hindus and Christians so that there was an element of commonality (being a religious minority in a largely Muslim school) and religious difference in each; they

were both together discussing their relationship to an ‘other’ outside the interview group, and relating to each other’s ‘otherness’ within the group. Most of the children were interviewed twice.

The interviews were intended to last for about an hour, though the enthusiasm of the children meant that they often ran over that time. They were flexible with little direct input from myself as researcher, and with the children able to take their thoughts in different directions and explore avenues not explicitly required by the activity or question. The first interviews were organised around the focus of a series of word cards. A pile of cards was placed face down on the table around which the children sat, and they took it in turns to pick up a card and to read the word written upon it. The members of the group were asked to discuss what they understood by the word they had just heard. The words I had chosen for this activity were terms of religious belief and practice, some of a general nature (religious, God, spirit), some specifically related to the particular traditions with which they identify (Krishna, Jah, Jesus), and several which they might have heard used by their Muslim peers (haram, Ramadan, Allah, guna).

After the first round of group interviews I selected three Year 6 pupils: a practising ‘Rastafarian-Christian’, African Caribbean boy; a dual heritage (white/African Caribbean) girl who identified as Christian but had little active involvement in formal religion, and a Gujarati Hindu girl. They were asked to put together a series of questions to be used in further interviews. The three were given no guidance about the questions other than that the target audience was the same group of children still at school while their peers were away celebrating ‘Id. The questions



that emerged expressed a range of concerns covering pressures of minority status within the school, religious beliefs in a context of plurality, religious, cultural and racial difference, interreligious and racial tension and relations within the school. The process of formulating questions involved the children in wide-ranging discussion of these issues, which constituted further valuable data for the project. Subsequent interviews were conducted around the twenty six questions that emerged.

Above is the basic outline of the research methods used during the fieldwork stage of this project. The rest of this chapter explores a number of underlying issues which guided the choice of methods and possibly influenced the outcomes: the child status of the participants in the project, the purposes of the research, the relationship of myself as researcher to the child participants, the relationship of my work to other paradigms of research.

### ***1.1.3 Understanding Childhood***

#### *Perspectives on Children*

One of the underlying issues affecting the methods and outcome of my research was my position as an adult seeking to engage with the perspectives of children. The understanding of the child participants with which I began this research was born out of the ten years experience as teacher at their school. Working with children gave me certain insights into their lives and views. With these particular children my involvement had been extensive before the project began. A minority

of them had been members of my own class with all the intellectual, pastoral and disciplinary interaction that implies. All the white and black children in the school and many of the Hindus had worked together with me on school dramatic productions. Several of them I had supported in lunchtime dance groups to which they brought their own music and dance styles, the most successful being the self-styled 'Black Inspiration' with its interpretations of Jamaican pop. The school Carrom Club (practising a board game popular in the Indian subcontinent) that I ran for several years was attended by a large proportion of the black, white and Hindu children. As well as fulfilling my more formal teacher role, then, I had seen them exercising responsibility and been a witness to their team work and creativity. At the outset of the research project I had the advantage of an already established relationship with the children participants which obviated the need for a lengthy period of getting to know the field. However, my knowledge of them was derived from my particular professional role and status within the school and could be distorted by 'practitioner concerns' (Hammersley 1993, p219) if not checked against a wider picture provided by theories developed by others working in similar fields.

Others exploring children's religious understanding have worked from particular concepts of childhood among them the Piagetian cognitive development model which was applied by Ronald Goldman to children's religion in the 1960s (Goldman 1964 and 1965) and provides a basis for Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' (Fowler 1981). The socialisation model of childhood has also been influential. It is implicit in the term 'nurture' as employed by H. Bushnell in 'Christian Nurture' (1967) and latterly has been prominent in Andrew Wright's 'critical religious

education' which emphasises the sociality of the child. According to Wright the children's developing religious world view is 'adopted from the significant adults and peers in each child's life' (Wright 2000). A contrasting position which is the foundation for the 'experiential' school of RE, accords the child a 'natural knowing' and spirituality. This, it is argued, has been overlaid or even repressed by socially constructed processes as they move into adulthood (Hay with Nye 1998). Beneath these differing theories of children's religion are questions about the relation between childhood and adulthood, between the child and society, between natural growth and acculturation.

### *Variety of Childhoods*

Alison James and Alan Prout set up a 'new paradigm of childhood sociology' in opposition to the developmental model (the 'dominant framework') of children and childhood studies. Key features of this new paradigm are the deconstruction of the concept of childhood (as distinct from biological maturity) as a natural, single and universal phenomenon, and its replacement with a variety of socially, culturally constructed childhoods. Children are understood to be 'active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live.' (8) The concept of a variety of childhoods emerged from a number of studies of childhood in other times and cultures and in different social classes including an historical survey by Philippe Ariès (1962), Margaret Mead's studies of Samoan society (1928, 69), S. Hall & T. Jefferson's study of working class youth subculture (1976). On the basis of these examinations of the differing roles within the family and the economy, and their relation to adult



authority, it was argued that instead of one model of childhood there is a wide diversity of childhoods each with its own cultural and historical basis. Alongside this process of the deconstruction of a natural universal childhood is the recognition of an opposing trend both nationally and globally towards the imposition of an artificially constructed universal childhood. One of the forces behind this homogenisation of childhood in Britain, it is argued, is universal education (Hendrick 1997), and on a worldwide scale international children's rights legislation and the influence of North American and European child psychology mean that the images of childhood favoured by the industrial North have been exported to the South (Boyden 1997). James and Prout cite Foucault's 'regimes of truth' to extend the influence of these constructions of childhood from institutionalised practices to the self-understanding of the children and other participants:

Ways of thinking about childhood fuse with institutionalized practices to produce self-conscious subjects (teachers, parents, children) who think (and feel) about themselves through the terms of those ways of thinking. (James and Prout 1990, 23)

Interest in the influences of social context, of the tension between diversity and homogenisation on the children's thought is a feature of my research and has direct bearing on my methodology. The diversity in the children's lives and upbringing is the starting point in this study of cross-cultural encounter. The shared context of an English inner city and membership of a particular junior school is what unites them. There are differences in religious nurture, in ethnicity, colour, gender, family

structures and circumstance, all of which affect the children's experience of childhood. At the same time the very nature of the school institution requires a high degree of conformity to set routines and behaviour patterns. Through school another model of being a child, is presented to the children, sometimes – as with the contrasting 'rote learning' and 'independent thought' pedagogies of mosque and school - in direct conflict with those of home and community. Contrary social pressures towards diversification and homogenisation are built into the structures of the project. Variety within the wider community provides content for much of the research discourse but its immediate context is the school with its pressures towards commonality. The composition of the interview groups combines sameness and difference, with the children's shared minority status in a predominantly Muslim community and their differentiated religious identity as Hindu or Christian.

Consciousness of the determining role of culture and history on the way childhood is conceived is only one element of the 'new paradigm'. It does not counter the conventional view of socialisation as a moulding process carried out by adults, though the kind of adults that emerge at the end of the socialisation process will differ. Nor does it remove the child from the margins of society, an 'individual subject which exists separately from and prefigures society' (James and Prout 1990, 24). The debate is contained within adult understandings of childhood; the children themselves remain passive and unheard.

Studies of peer group interaction among children present a contrasting picture of children at the centre of a social world, active in the construction of their own lives and meanings. In a small scale study of discourse patterns and power relations among primary age children in “Sharing Time”, Jane Danielewicz, Dwight Rogers and George Noblit contrast the pressures towards socialisation into school culture in teacher-led sessions with the ability shown by children to develop their own ritual linguistic elements and use language to establish and maintain social relations once the sessions became child-led (Danielewicz, Rogers and Noblit 1996). On a larger scale the celebrated work of the Opies on children’s games and playground culture put together a picture of a culturally autonomous childhood with its own lore and language (Opie 1977, 84). Their work was part of a reaction to the silence of children’s voices in research and a counterbalance to the idea of children as passive in the socialisation process. In fact, the idea of a separate child culture undermines models of socialisation. Socialisation becomes cultural assimilation. Any adult-child interaction becomes cross-cultural exchange. This concept of a separate child’s world is evident in the work of such researchers as Corsaro and Mandell (cited in Alldred 1998, p151) who aim to become ‘participant in children’s culture’, to ‘interact with their perspective’, to enter ‘the child’s world’.

An objective of such peer group studies is to deconstruct the developmental idea of the child as a ‘human becoming’ rather than a human being (Alldred 1998, 150), irrational, asocial and in need of adult guidance. It is, however, difficult to reconcile the ‘child’s world’ with the cultural constructivist perspective and the



‘new paradigm’s’ deconstruction of universal childhood. Is it possible for children to create their own globally understood meanings free from cultural/historical influences or are there in fact a large number of autonomous ‘children’s worlds’ corresponding to the cultural diversity of adult’s worlds? These problems diminish when we recognise that to be ‘active in the construction and determination of their social lives’ (James and Prout 1990, 8) children do not need their own separate world. They act within the same worlds the adults occupy. Though my research is a study of children’s peer group interaction, I did not have to enter a separate ‘child’s world’ or to learn a completely new language to communicate with them.

Like most young people, the project’s child participants live out their lives within societies, structures and institutions established and regulated by adults. Adults have their meanings and purposes and the children respond to these. Other studies have examined children’s behavioural responses to adult demands and the practical strategies they develop to deal with structures imposed upon them (Fuller 1980, Sewell 1997, Kitzinger 1990). The activity that constitutes the focus of this study is children’s language use and meaning making in the context of group discussions. To their discussions the research participants brought the words of parents, teachers, and religious leaders, and discourses from an adult dominated society (for example those of the media, local politics, international affairs), yet they demonstrated that they were not just ‘receptacles of adult teaching’ (James and Prout 1990). In their talk they showed an ability to reflect critically on the meanings of adults, a freedom to adopt or reject them and an ability to adapt them to their own requirements (Chapter 3.1).

The children did not reflect upon the adults' stated meanings alone but also on their underlying purposes and motivations, and they showed an ability to relate to the adult world with understanding. Particularly telling are instances of children commenting on parents' approaches to child-rearing. Working among girls in a Muslim school Marie Parker-Jenkins reported their keen awareness of the motivations and fears of their parents as a 'disempowered' community in a strange country closing ranks and concerned to 'protect their children' (Parker Jenkins 1996). A group of eleven year olds participating in my research showed the same readiness to comment on parents' approaches to child-rearing when they discussed reasons for parents' attempts to limit their children's activities and their friendships to their own faith community. Arguing that the parents 'can just make it up, like they don't really know that you can't do that and you can't do that', they decided that their motivation was to protect the children from other religions that might change them (cf my Appendix: F142 – I shall use a capital letter in this way to refer to the recorded dialogue fragment, followed by a numeral indicating the line).

The members of both groups are not 'ideological dupes' (Skegg 1994), but understand well how parenting practices can be motivated by cultural pressures and uncertainties rather than conviction. Far from having their world defined for them by adults, the children are critical of adults' definitions and of their handling of the pressures of the society that they all share. JK criticises the laziness of the Hindu and Christian adults who let the Muslims take over prime sites in their area (F501-2), and CS declares that it is their role as children to teach the older generation how to live in harmony (G279-282). The conditions within which the children formulate their views of the world may not be of their own choosing but

they are not completely disabled or disempowered. In collaboration with their peers they have the resources to steer their course through different cultural expectations and meanings and forge new understandings. Confidence in this ability led me to adopt methods that gave scope to the children's activity through a flexible interview structure within which the participants have the opportunity to take the discussion in new and unexpected directions, and the involvement of some of the young people in the formulation of the research questions so they could highlight the issues that were of particular interest to them.

The key features of the 'new paradigm of childhood sociology' set out above, the dynamic between social construction and children's activity, conform with the tentative understanding of the children with which I embarked on the project and which was subsequently reinforced by the data collected. They can be encapsulated in the words 'agency and structure' which Anthony Giddens placed at the centre of his synthesis of competing sociologies of systems and individual actors. Though individuals are subject to processes of acculturation and socialization, they are not totally bound by them. According to Giddens' principle of action, individuals are in a position to choose their responses, to intervene in or resist those processes, to influence their direction and outcome:

It is a necessary feature of action that, at any point in time, the agent 'could have acted otherwise': either positively in terms of attempted intervention in the process of 'events in the world', or negatively in terms of forbearance. (Giddens 1979, 56)



This research project picks up agency and structure by looking at the way the children actively select from a diversity of meanings and create new understandings in response to their particular social setting and the variety of influences acting on them.

#### ***1.1.4 Empowerment Research***

##### *Partisan Research in an Unequal World*

In the previous section I have set out elements of my understanding of the child participants of my research. My involvement of these individuals in my project necessitates a degree of reflexivity about the effects of my work upon their lives. In what follows I consider both the purposes and responsibilities of my research in relation to the children, and will draw upon debates around the concept of research as ‘empowerment’ of those being researched.

In line with a large corpus of ethnographic research this study focuses on a group of individuals who, in common understanding, are of subordinate or marginalised status – doubly so, as children in an adult-dominated world and as religious and racial minorities in a predominantly Muslim community. The disadvantages they experience are a frequent subject for reflection in their discussions and they make complaints about unfair treatment they feel they have received (F429f, G366f, H181f, H325-6, I186-7). Whatever the realities of the complex situation are, I do not doubt that my research takes place in the context of an ‘unequal world’. There is debate whether and to what extent recognition of that inequality should influence

the way researchers conduct their inquiries. On one side stand advocates of partisan research such as Barry Troyna, for whom ‘the imperative guiding the development, execution and dissemination of their research is that, because they are operating in an ‘unequal world’, they must not only document what is going on but intervene and challenge any injustices which their inquiries had uncovered’ (Troyna 1995, 400-401). On the other are those termed ‘Methodological Purists’ by Troyna, among them Hammersley for whom ‘the point of research is to produce knowledge, not to transform the world, or to achieve any other practical result’ (Hammersley 1994, 340).

One model of intervention on behalf of research subjects is what Cameron calls the ‘advocacy position’ whereby the researcher speaks on their behalf and uses her skills to ‘defend subjects’ interests, getting involved in their campaigns for healthcare or education, cultural autonomy or political and land rights, and speaking on their behalf’ (Cameron *et al.* 1994, 20). This understanding of the researcher’s role was expressed by a former Hindu pupil of mine who, on learning of the focus group of my research, remarked, ‘At last someone’s sticking up for us!’ Embarking on a research project with the express intention of representing the interests of the participants implies an alignment with their cause; it is a partisan approach to the task. Another model of intervention is one that rather than ‘speaking on behalf’ of the researched, encourages them to ‘speak for themselves’. Beverley Skeggs begins her research among white working class girls at a further education college with the aim of empowering her subjects through conscientisation. She brought with her a ‘*conscious partiality* towards the

oppressed, engagement in their struggles for change and the creation of a form of research that fosters conscientization' (Mies 1983 cited by Skeggs 1994, 79).

The objection of the 'Methodological Purists' to practitioners of partisan research is that their conclusions owe more to the values and ideological convictions of the researchers than to empirical evidence:

They have serious methodological flaws and fail to provide firm evidence to support the conclusions made by their authors. (Foster 1990, 346 cited in Troyna 1995, 402)

Troyna's partisan research on racism in schools is criticised by Gomm for 'patchy' data which has been 'massaged into place' (95). Troyna dismisses such criticisms by rejecting their underlying positivism with its perspectives of detachment, impartiality and objectivity (95). All research is partisan, he claims, it needs to be made explicitly so. Objectivity as a criterion for my research will be considered in the next chapter (Chapter 1.2).

Had my project been approached in a spirit of partisan research with a view to challenging the discrimination under which my respondents laboured, it could be seen as presenting a partial (in both senses of the word), one sided picture of relations between Muslims and non Muslims for example. Only the point of view of the non Muslim minority was expressed in the interviews, and that view may have been subject to the exaggeration of a 'behind-their-backs' discourse. In the group discussions judgements were made about the motivations of Muslim peers without



the possibility of checking these conclusions with the Muslim children themselves. This imbalance, however, does not affect the validity of my data where there is honesty about the knowledge base of my conclusions and where the aim is to record and analyse the perceptions of the participants at the time of the interview rather than to make general sociological statements about tensions between different religious and cultural groups for transformation into social action.

### *Location and Exercise of Power*

There may be a degree of partisanship in my choice of this particular group to participate in the research project and to receive that focused attention, but my aim was not the empowerment of that group within wider society; my research does not fit within a partisan research framework. Indeed, the very concept of research carried out with the intention of effecting social transformation poses difficult questions. One of these is the difficulty locating where power lies. The concept of empowerment requires the identification of a group or individual in need of empowerment, and a sense of where the power is that needs redistributing. However, the relationships within and between groups are highly complex and entail a range of configurations of power so that it is not the exclusive property of the ‘dominant’ group. Both the mother and her small child have a degree of control over each others’ actions, for example, and power in some ‘challenging’ classroom situations oscillates between teacher and pupils. The ‘agency and structure’ view of children outlined earlier in the chapter recognises that children may not be disempowered subordinates in an adult world, instead it allows for the possibility

that they can exercise power and influence over their context despite their child and minority status.

Another issue is the actual power exercised by the researcher when he or she sets out to 'empower' the researched. There is a degree of condescension (an expression of power inequality) in the adoption by advocate researchers of the position of 'expert' representing the needs and interests of the researched. The role of advocate gives the researcher scope to colour their portrayal of their subjects' needs with their own values and interests. Skeggs found that as a young, idealistic feminist with conscientisation as her aim, she was reading her own assumptions into her subjects' situation when what they really needed was access to money, power and authority:

Why should we assume that the women whom we research desire or are in need of conscientization? This may stop us listening to them. (Skeggs 1994, 79).

She acknowledged that her participants' greater knowledge of their own context gave them the power to take her ideas, know where they are coming from and assess accordingly:

The information given is weighed up by the researched against their history and cultural background (after all this is how hegemony works). (82)

With my research I did not presume to cast myself in the role of empowering agent speaking for (or to) my participants about their position in society and how it could be improved; instead my prime purpose was to gain knowledge of the children's understanding and to pass that knowledge on.

### *Researcher's Contribution to Inequality*

Partisan researchers not only argue for a style of research that combats injustice but express concern about the potential of traditional 'researcher/researched' relationships to reinforce, or even to exacerbate, existing inequalities (Troyna 1995). The African-American sociologist J. A. Ladner described this relationship in strong terms when she argued that it resembled that of oppressor and oppressed 'because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research and, to some extent, the quality of interaction between him and his subjects' (Ladner 1973, 419 cited by Troyna 1995, 397). Though I do not view my methods as a form of oppression I did have a decisive influence on the research agenda and activities. Added to the power given me by my researcher and adult status was that inherent in my role as teacher at the children's school. I had easy access to my subjects and was able to make demands that they did not question upon their time and attention. I gathered them together in particular groupings and introduced the activities to them. To some extent these followed school patterns – the seating around a classroom table, the use of word cards and questions which parallel learning tasks used in curriculum delivery. They were reproductions of the frameworks within which the children operate in their day-to-day lives. The way children are influenced by and deal with these inequalities in their discourse can



throw light on the relationship between them and their context. Rather than reinforcing the status quo and imposing constraints upon their activity, I judged these research events to be structures within and upon which the children could exercise their agency:

Every act which contributes to the reproduction of a structure is also an act of production, and as such may initiate change by altering the structure at the same time as it reproduces it. (Giddens 1979, 69)

The results of my research bore out the validity of this theory as the children select and adapt the meanings with which they are presented (Chapter 3.2).

### *Value of the Research Event*

This project did not take on responsibility for the participants' position in wider society but recognised responsibilities towards them within the compass of the research activities. My duty cut two ways; towards the children with whom I am working and towards the research community which provides the other context of my study. To the latter my obligation was to supply information about, and interpretation of, the children's religious understanding. To do this I was dependent on the children who opened up their experiences and understandings to me. The ethics of the situation required a degree of reciprocity. I have not assumed an advocacy position in my research (see above) and the final product of the project, a written record directed at a different audience and in a form the participants themselves were unlikely to understand, is insufficient return for their

participation. The research event itself needed to be something from which they too could benefit. In reflections on her research methodology Kim Knott stresses the need for the research process to be rewarding and fulfilling for both parties:

Often we think of the end result as the purpose of the research process, the monograph, the bringing to the public eye through academic enterprise of a particular community, a particular viewpoint [...] But, very often, the participant community or individuals cannot recognize themselves in a final product in which the authorial voice, however self-consciously reticent or fair, has control. It is important then for the research process itself to have value. (Knott 1995, 207)

To make the research process valuable and also enjoyable I provided the flexibility for participants to speak about what they were interested in and what they viewed as important, to have some control over the topics of conversation, particularly in the formulation of questions to be used, and to take the discussion into new areas. In this way they were given a degree of power over the research activity. At the same time they seized the opportunity to exercise a form of power over their wider social setting. They brought to the research dialogues their experiences, sometimes painful ones, from their social context and reinterpreted them in the new and sympathetic environment of the interview groups. The hurts received in instances of religious and racial teasing, for example, could be reduced by sharing them with a friendly audience, and reflecting on the motivations of those who caused the upset (H251f). In the review of such cases and in reflections on the ills of society in general, on instances of discord between religious communities (G81f) and on the



hypocrisy of faith practitioners (E11-13, E129f), the children often took to themselves a moral authority. CS's comment on the children's duty to teach adults (G282) is an example of this transformation of hierarchies. The research activity was empowering then, in the degree to which the children made use of it to empower themselves.

### ***1.1.5 Contextualisation***

#### *Ethnographic Foundations*

This project's methodology has its foundations in the ethnographic tradition of the Warwick Religions and Education Unit. Emphasis on fieldwork is a strength of ethnography as it gives some account of context and the ongoing roles the subjects play within it. Another strength is the scope ethnography gives for the subjects' influence on the research processes and outcomes. It is, according to James and Prout, a methodology which 'allows children a more direct voice in the production of sociological data than is normally possible through experimental or survey styles of research' (James and Prout 1997, 8). In these ways, then, an ethnographic approach would appear to meet the needs of a study interested in the relationship between children as agents and the structures upon which they act. Within ethnography there is a variety of schools of thought, interpretive ethnography being the approach currently favoured by the Warwick school (Jackson 1997). This approach, heavily influenced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theories of cultural interpretation, is one which 'seeks to establish a coherent and inclusive account of a culture from the point of view of those being researched' (Bryman

and Burgess 1994, 6). Rooted as it is in anthropology, interpretive ethnography maintains a concept of different ‘ways of life’ and ‘life-worlds’, however complex those worlds may be, as subjects for study (Jackson 1997, 30). It makes the distinction between the ‘insiders’ who inhabit these life-worlds, and ‘outsiders’ who do not. Key issues are firstly the degree to which it is possible for the researcher as ‘outsider’ to know what Geertz boldly terms ‘the native’s point of view’, and secondly the relationship between the research subjects’ accounts and their wider cultural context, the ‘parts’ and the ‘whole’ (33).

### *‘The Native’s Point of View’*

Ethnographic work was founded on distinctions between self and other (Gitlin 1993, 193) but the confidence of ethnographers in their ability to know the ‘other’ has been shaken by developments in the sister discipline of anthropology leading to new understandings of the grounding of their knowledge. Geertz links the publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s diaries (with their revelations of the anthropologist’s negative feelings towards the subjects of his study) to the explosion of the myth of anthropological knowledge as ‘an almost preternatural capacity’ to think, feel and perceive like a ‘native’ and opens up the question:

If we are going to cling – as, in my opinion, we must – to the injunction to see things from the native’s point of view, where are we when we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects? (Geertz 1983, 56)

Consideration of the researcher's position in relation to the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the researched influenced my choice of methods and my ongoing evaluation of their effectiveness. My concerns were how the children could communicate their point of view to an 'other', and how an outsider such as myself could understand what it was like to be on the inside. Experience of interaction with my research participants, however, brought me to question the validity of the 'self/other', 'insider/outsider' distinction in my study.

Elements of my research were designed to maximise the chances of the 'insider' voices being heard; the flexible interview structure, the use of 'insider' questions, formulated by the children themselves, the informality of the group discussions in which children were conversing with each other not just with the adult teacher/researcher. The children rewarded me with enthusiasm and openness. Nevertheless my presence at these sessions undoubtedly influenced what was said and therefore the data that were collected. Not being able to know how the conversation would have proceeded had I not been there, it is difficult to gauge the extent of that influence. Whether the children were addressing me directly or engaged in interchange among themselves, their awareness of my presence may have made them more guarded in their criticisms of others or their use of language, and more expansive in their descriptions and explanations so that I too could understand. The experience of being observed generates a degree of self-consciousness. As they described their experiences and expressed their thoughts, the children were not only aware of themselves but aware also of how they might appear to the observer. Their view of the research event involved both 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives.



To remove my influence from the scene altogether and observe how the children would behave and what they would say if I were not there, would be an impossibility unless they were unaware of my presence, if I adopted a role or position that enabled me to blend unnoticed into the background. Such covert observation is a form of eavesdropping or spying. Even if this were practically feasible or ethically acceptable it would not necessarily give me as ‘outsider’ a clearer understanding of participants’ views, feelings and perceptions. Interpretation of their meanings and purposes would depend on guesswork guided only by my existing assumptions about human behaviour, and without the benefit of an ‘insider’ translating their thoughts to my understanding. With participants unaware of the need to make themselves understood by the researcher there are likely to be difficulties ‘bridging the conceptual gap’ (Chapter 3.2); some translation is needed.

In order to translate their thoughts to me as researcher, the children needed some knowledge of the person for whom they are performing this service. Their selection of appropriate information, vocabulary and meanings depended on their understandings of my purposes and of my position with regard to the subjects being discussed. One issue was my status as teacher and how open they could be in describing feelings and actions that did not fit within an official school line of mutual respect and harmony. With most of the discussions there was a preliminary ‘warming up’ period before the children tackled more controversial issues. AI, for example, started with rather guarded statements about how interesting it would be to visit a mosque (I32). It was only later, when he began to realise how much freedom he and his peers were being given, that he was more frank in his answers:

‘I will be honest ...’ (I139). Another factor for the children to consider was my particular interest in the topics under discussion. SN made it clear that he understood the religious aspect to be important to me:

I think you’re religious because you wear a cross, and your husband is a priest, and you tell us stories in assembly and you support Leicester City (C84-5).

The knowledge that I was a Christian may have encouraged the research participants in some of their criticisms of Muslim children’s exercise of majority power. Reflection on these influences on the children’s contributions has led me to the conclusion that the direction of research activity is not one way, with the ethnographer seeking to ‘know’ the subject; rather the act of communication engages researcher and researched in a process of mutual understanding.

The children’s responsiveness towards me as their audience is an instance of the general ‘orientation towards the listener’ (Bakhtin 1981, 282) that features prominently in my analysis of the group discussions (page 172). Later in this thesis I aim to demonstrate that the act of communication involves change not only in the way the children present their experiences and beliefs, but also in the meanings they ascribe to them (Chapter 3.2). In the case of my fieldwork, talking in the presence of someone associated with school ideals of tolerance and respect, whom they might expect to sympathise with the pressures they experience as religious minorities, and for whom religion is important, may influence their own views on religious identity and plurality. The need to explain their ideas and describe their

experiences before a researcher may encourage them to organise their thoughts within their own minds.

By being there at the discussions I had an inevitable influence on their course; as a researcher interested in the influences of factors other than my presence on the children's understanding, it was incumbent on me to limit my influence. What had to be avoided was a monologue in which my voice was predominant and the children's views were brought into conformity with mine. For this reason I did not put forward my own ideas on the words and questions being discussed, lest my authority as teacher and adult gave them undue weight in the discussion. The freedom with which I allowed the children to explore the issues made way for surprises that challenged my own preconceptions so that both the children's and my understandings were open to change.

Pam Alldred's concern with the imbalance between adult-researcher and child-subject leads her to write:

It is difficult to see to what extent children could, as ethnographic subjects, present 'their own' account of their worlds. (Alldred 1998, 154)

In fact, no communication can be exclusively that subject's 'own' account in the sense that he is sole author, but it may be his 'own' in the sense that it is genuinely how he perceives his world at the time of speaking. The subject's perception ('the native's point of view') can be known, therefore, but that perception will be the product of a negotiation process between the subject's understanding and the



researcher's presence. In this process the clear distinction between 'self' and 'other', 'insider' and 'outsider' break down. In their place is a more dialogical and constructive paradigm of research. James Clifford's main focus has been on ethnographic writing, but his description of ethnography as negotiation is as relevant to the fieldwork stages of research:

It becomes necessary to conceive ethnography, not as the experience and interpretation of a circumscribed "other" reality, but rather as a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects. Paradigms of experience and interpretation are yielding to paradigms of discourse, of dialogue and polyphony. (Clifford 1983, 133)

### *'Parts' and 'Wholes'*

In their discussions the participants described various experiences and outlined a number of concepts, beliefs and points of view. The relationship between these and the wider setting in which they originated is central to the analysis and interpretation of my research. In Geertz's interpretive ethnography the former are the 'parts' or 'symbols' to be related by the researcher to the 'whole', the 'culture' from which they emanate by the application of a version of Dilthey's hermeneutic circle:

Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivate

them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another. (Geertz 1983, 69)

The different ‘parts’ of the cultural scene revealed during the research events and recorded in fieldnotes and transcriptions form what Geertz sees as an ‘ensemble of texts’, transformed from individual passing events into a body of reference for the interpretation of a way of life (Geertz 1973). Geertz’s approach draws on Paul Ricoeur’s theory of ‘textualisation’ to which I shall return later in the next chapter (page ref). He borrows from Gilbert Ryle the concept of ‘thick description’ as one which integrates meaning with wider context and reveals different levels of interpretation, ‘constructions of other people’s constructions’ (Geertz 1973, 9). He describes his own work in Java, Bali and Morocco as follows:

Searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviours – in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another. (Geertz 1983, 58)

Though Geertz acknowledges the complexities and internal diversities of the worlds he researches and represents the idea of ‘a culture’ variously in his works (Jackson 1997, 80), his model of parts and wholes implies an understanding of cultures as coherent realities. Clifford is critical of such a view rejecting the idea of culture as ‘a unified corpus of symbols and meanings’ (Clifford 1986, 19). He writes:

Cultures are not scientific “objects” (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture and our views of “it” are produced historically, and are actively contested. There is no whole picture to be “filled in”, since the perception and filling of a gap lead to the awareness of other gaps (18).

An essentialist view of cultures underestimates their fluidity; ‘cultures do not hold still for their portraits’ (10). It is a view that becomes less and less tenable, according to Clifford’s thesis, with the increasing globalisation of the modern world; researched and researcher are all implicated in a dynamic interaction between a multiplicity of ways of life. With echoes of Bakhtin he argues:

There is no longer any place of overview (mountaintop) from which to map human ways of life ... Mountains are in constant motion. So are islands: for one cannot occupy, unambiguously, a bounded world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures. Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another. (22)

This project, focusing on the influence of encounter on religious thought, relies on an understanding of context closer to Clifford than to Geertz. The diversity and complexity of the worlds within and between which the children live their lives is evident in their contributions to the research discussions. It is not just the religious plurality of their environment that influences their religious thinking but a plurality of meanings drawn from a variety of sources and discourses personal, local and general; experiences of friendship (E33, F56f, F301, A269), of tension with peers (B384f, F511f, G205f), of illness and death in the family (E90-1, E95f), discourses



of race and colour (F56f, H263, A98-100, I25), of political processes (F496f, G115f), stories from books (F175, G149), scenes from films (B413f, B478, B518f, D309), news of international events (E11, E129). The meanings are so various and fluid that however 'thick' the description it would be impossible to incorporate them all into a coherent whole. I too was implicated in some of the discourses (those relating to school, to local politics, to the experience of being a non Muslim in a predominantly Muslim environment, for example) and could use my knowledge of these to identify some of the children's references. However, I was also dependent on the children telling me who said, or where they had heard the ideas and words that they repeated. The role of this dialogical interplay between many worlds in the children's understanding is explored in later chapters (Chapter 3.1, 3.2). In this chapter on research methodology the issue is the influence of this 'dialogism' on the relationship between the research activities and the wider context of the children's lives.

Recognition of the multiplicity of influences on the children's contributions to the interviews has led my research away from a correlation of data with 'parts' (or 'symbols') and cultural context with 'whole'. Rather than the research events being occasions on which the children represented their wider context to me, I understood them as opportunities for the children to select and collate disparate elements of their experience, organising them into coherent arguments and meanings. The interview was a point of assembly of experiences and views binding them in greater unity than they had in the context in which they originated. Specific examples of this syncretism are the bringing together of their knowledge of ghosts, the Mexican festival of the dead, Halloween and karate classes around the word

‘spirit’ (A154f), and the incorporation of understandings of prophets, angels, gods, Sita, Muhammad, Mary, parents and children, children and toys into a definition of Krishna (D189f). The nature of the research was such that during the course of the interviews a wealth of meanings from various discourses converged around key concepts of God, religion and plurality. The research discussions were understood to be constructive more than representative. The religious understanding that was the focus of the project was not so much being uncovered for me by the interviews as being actively created during the event. The following quote from Deborah Marks’ description of her interviews with young people about exclusion from school echoes my own experience of data collection:

I cannot say how participants *really* experienced the exclusion. However, asking about the experience of exclusion brings forth a number of productive ways of seeing the event’ (Marks 1996, cited in Alldred 1998, 156)

To relate the children’s discussions with the wider context, I drew on Derek Layder’s theory of social domains (Layder 1997). By this model the discussions (‘situated activity’) were brought into a temporal relationship with their context (‘social setting’); experiences of previous encounters (with their peers and adults of the community, with information and images from lessons, books and the media) were brought to the research event to be reworked there, the new meanings created providing resources for subsequent encounters in a chaining relationship. Acknowledgement of the temporality of the children’s thinking and the uniqueness of each research event had a significant influence on my choice of methods.

Validation of my findings did not depend on stability or consistency in the children's representations of their world, and so I chose not to cross-check the information gained with different qualitative methods (such as children's diaries, documentary evidence, photographs, individual rather than group interviews). The primary sources for my study are records of group interviews; the discursive approach and emphasis on participant interaction matched the dialogue focus. The actual discussions, rather than a represented world, became the proper interest of the study.

The historicity of the children's meanings meant that these discussions were more than separate instances of discourse, however. They drew on accumulated understandings of experiences from wider contexts. Because of the overlap and similarities in the histories of the individual children, the perspectives they brought to play in the dialogues often resembled each other. The constants of the research events (the words and questions, the group nature of the interviews, the mixed composition of the groups in terms of religious and racial identity, my presence, the schoolroom setting) meant that in selecting from the meanings and perspectives available to them material that they deemed appropriate for the discussion activity, the different groups frequently explored common themes and pursued related trains of thought. It followed that when it came to analysis of the data, patterns emerged in both the dialogical processes and the meaning content.



## 1.2 BEYOND THE FIELD

### *1.2.1 Converting to Text*

The previous chapter explored the relationship between my project and the field which provided its data; in this chapter I consider how the project's findings are communicated beyond the field and related to the readership of the research community. This process is dependent on the written word. The written word has been the focus of a shift of interest in ethnographic theory (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988) from the fieldwork encounter to the text produced by the ethnographer; the point of communication between object of study and reader. Emphasis is on interpretation: the ethnographer interprets through his or her text. In this ethnographic text is inscribed my interpretation of a series of research discussions. This interpretation depends on my choice of analytical method, the subject of this section of this chapter. I wish to begin, however, further back in the process of communication between field and readership, with the initial conversion of the children's speech into a text capable of being analysed, interpreted and conveyed to an audience outside the immediate context of the initial exchange. What follows is a reflection on the significance of the transformation from spoken word to research text within my study. The influence of Ricoeur's theories of textualisation on interpretive ethnography has already been noted (page 34). In this section elements of his thinking as set out in his 1970 essay, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?' (Ricoeur 1986, 137-159), are related to the theme of dialogue that runs through my work.

In the detailed recording of the interviews my primary concern was that the memory of those words should not be lost but should be readily to hand for analysis and interpretation. Ricoeur portrays the effect of inscription as much more than a conservation of discourse; it is an event of enormous significance:

Un véritable bouleversement aussi bien des rapports entre le langage et le monde que du rapport entre le langage et les diverses subjectivités concernées, celle de l'auteur et celle du lecteur (40)

'Les rapports entre le langage et le monde' are of key interest to this project founded on a dialogical understanding of the relationship between the participants' words and the world in which they live. Dialogue is the central theme and also the method; the data have been gathered from actual dialogues carried out in group interviews. As far back as Plato's expressed preference for the spoken word (Ep. VII 341c: Bury 1929, 530) it has been said that dialogue fits uneasily with text. Ricoeur finds them incompatible. He claims that dialogue is interrupted by text (Ricoeur 1986, 141); the author and reader are not in a dialogical relationship, for whatever questions the reader may have, the writer cannot answer back. It is as though the text is posthumous, the author already dead (139). Though his view of dialogue as exchange of questions and answers is narrower than the one that informs my understanding (Chapter 4.1), there is a sense in which textualisation of the children's words is an interruption. In the text the children's explorations of God's unity and plurality, of religious identity and intercommunal relations, are frozen at a particular moment in history, cut off from continuation of that dialogue.

Ricoeur writes of the effect of inscription as a 'fixation' (138). With taped interviews that fixation takes place first of all in the actual recording. As a fixed record of what had just been said, available for consultation and a preliminary to transcription, the tape itself has the status of text. The interruption by the text noted above became evident to me when at the end of each research session I gave the participants the opportunity to review what they had just said by listening to extracts of the recorded dialogue. Though eager to hear the recording, none of the groups was interested at that point of time in picking up any of the questions that had been the meat of their discussion. Their focus had changed to the question of who was speaking at any particular time and their comments ('That's you, no it's me', 'Do I really sound like that?', 'Who said that?') indicated a distancing of themselves from the text. No longer its authors, they had become the text's first readers, making efforts to read themselves back into the discussion.

The fact that the initial dialogue had been interrupted by its recorded form does not mean that its progress has been halted outside the text, or that the chain of meaning, of which each interview is but one link, has been broken. The experience of the encounter of the research event, and the meanings negotiated together on those occasions, add to the corpus of ideas which the children can draw on and rework at future encounters. Rather as life goes on after a passing moment is frozen in a photographic image, so there is a distinction between the dynamism of the research event as part of a continuing dialogue, and the historic fixity of its record, snapshot of a particular point in time. The transcriptions of the children's exchanges included in this study have the status of historical texts: a record of what



those individuals once thought but not of what they are thinking now. The ongoing dialogue has passed beyond my research; it is with the journey of the record that this chapter as a whole is interested.

The inscribed discourse is not only separated from the dialogical flow of which it was, in its spoken form, initially a part, but it is also removed from its immediate situated context, the points of reference that make it a real event. Ricoeur contrasts spoken discourse anchored in ‘la réalité circonstancielle’ (140) with the decontextualised state of the text which is ‘en quelque sorte “en air”, hors monde ou sans monde’ (141). In spite of this break with the historical links of ongoing dialogue and situational links of spoken discourse, Ricoeur is careful not to make of the text a self-sufficient unit, closed in upon itself. He sees it as waiting upon the reader to supply its references: to link it into a context:

Le texte, en tant qu’écriture, attend et appelle une lecture; si la lecture est possible, c’est parce que le texte n’est pas fermé sur lui-même, mais ouvert sur autre chose; lire c’est, en toute hypothèse, enchaîner un discours nouveau au discours du texte. (152)

The breaking of the bonds with the situational context of speech is seen as a liberation, ‘l’affranchissement du texte à l’égard de l’oralité’ (140). The text is now open to the interpreting activity of the reader who brings it into contact and interaction with other discourses.

Readership and interpretation are closely linked in Ricoeur's model. The researcher is both reader and interpreter when engaged in the analysis of texts recorded during fieldwork. The discourses with which the separated text is linked by interpretation are not all new, for it is the researcher's role to read back into the inscription the context from which it emerged. It has been one of my tasks to trace the origins of the children's words in the diverse discourses of their social setting and to read their histories back into the account.

Reconstruction is not the only role of interpretation. New alignments are made between the text and other texts. Once this project's discussions had been removed from their original settings through recording and transcription, the separate dialogues could be placed alongside each other, their processes and meanings compared. They were also recontextualised within academic discourses and brought into a dialogical relationship with theories from the fields of ethnography, child sociology, educational development, discourse analysis and dialogue theory. This recontextualisation enabled a change of focus from an understanding of questions of religion (God, identity, plurality) in the original dialogues, to an understanding of the children's understanding in the new. In the researcher's (or reader's) mind, the focal point of a new dialogue where selected meanings from research texts and academic discourses meet, new questions are asked and new understandings negotiated. To record these evolving understandings in an ethnographic text was to engage again in the process of inscription whereby thoughts were removed from the dialogical flow, historicised and crystallised in a text to await the attention of future readership.

### *1.2.2 Analysis*

Under this heading I consider my readership of the transcribed discourse, the framework within which I interpreted the data before me. In the previous chapter I explained how the situated activity of the actual discussions rather than a represented world became the focus of this project. Within these research events the prime action is speech; the children's language use as recorded by tape and transcription therefore became the subject of my analytical attention. With this interest I am following a general trend referred to as the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences (Jaworski 1999, 4) and evident in the growth of interest in discourse analysis, in detailed exploration of linguistic structures, sequences and transactions within selected examples of situated talk. This trend is partly a result of an increasing recognition of the power of language not only to reflect but to shape social order and to shape the individual's interaction with society (3). Such a view bears resemblance to my understanding of the agency of this project's child participants, language being a tool with which they act upon the social and cultural structures around them. The 'linguistic turn' is also due to recognition of the context-dependent nature of our meaning-making (Chapters 3.1, 3.2) by which each speech event becomes unique and cannot be replicated. Again there are parallels with this project's acknowledgement of the temporality of the research event.

In common with discourse analysts I considered the children's contributions within the situational context of individual exchanges. The interactive nature of the



children's speech, and the manner in which their utterances both responded to those that preceded them and initiated those that followed, was important to my analysis (Chapter 3.2). One of the traditions of discourse analysis that has had some impact upon my methods is that of conversation analysis which is defined as 'the study of *recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction*' (19) and which places emphasis on the structures of talk which produce and reproduce patterns of social action. I make use of the work of conversation analysts Jennifer Coates and Jane Falks in a later chapter, for example, when I apply their theories of turn-taking and duetting to the children's use of language to establish relations with each other and with the researcher in the discussion events (Chapter 4.1.1). However, in my project this relationship between group members is of subsidiary interest to the participants' relationship with the content of the conversation. It is of interest in so far as it affected the participants' selection, assimilation and adaptation of that content. In this, the direction of my analysis diverges from that of conversation analysts, and from discourse analysis in general. I wish to illustrate this difference by comparing briefly my approach with an example of conversation analysis.

In the article 'Children's discourse patterns and power relations in teacher-led and child-led sharing time' Danielewicz and colleagues described an investigation into children's language use and verbal interactions during sharing time in a first grade classroom in the North Carolina. The data from these sharing time activities were investigated using 'established methods of discourse analysis' (Danielewicz 1996, 316), the study's interest in patterns of social interaction relate it to the conversation analysis school. I have chosen this study as a comparison because,

like my project, it is strongly influenced by readings of Mikhail Bakhtin (312). Behind the children's speech Danielewicz identifies Bakhtinian principles of 'addressivity' or 'orientation towards the listener' (327), and of the dependency of every utterance on the voices of others (316). These themes are important in my own analysis. There are also similarities in the activities being researched in both projects. As with my research, Danielewicz and her colleagues were focusing on 'a social and cultural event in which meanings are being produced and reproduced' (315), the subjects were children in a school setting, the medium of exchange was 'casual spoken language' (312), and the leadership of the events was given increasingly to the children as a group so that their talk became 'a collaborative dialogue' (319). Also both projects employed a card game to initiate exchanges. Significantly for the different research purposes, Danielewicz's cards marked changes of speaker while mine marked new topics of discussion.

In Danielewicz's study the researchers recognised the creativity of the children's speech observing how they used linguistic routines as 'a means of social control, as an agent for group bonding, and as expressions of care and concern' (311). The research emphasis was on relationships within the group rather than the meaning of what they were discussing – an emphasis revealed in the following statement about an exchange around the topic of nests:

Some of their talk works to exchange information about bird's nests, but much of their language establishes and maintains social relationships (319)

The children's talk, we are told, divided into two categories: information about and experiences with bird's nests, and language used to create and maintain personal relations (320). The prime interest of the study was clearly on the latter:

Our purpose in this study is to understand what happens to language and interaction patterns when these students participate in a repeated speech event over time (317).

In my project, by contrast, prime interest was on the participants' understandings of the topics under discussion. Put differently, if I used my methods to analyse Danielewicz's data, I would focus less on the children's social relations and more on their perspectives on the bird's nest: where the children's knowledge about the nest originated, how that information was understood in the discussion and how their understanding of the nest's significance (in the life of the bird, in their own experience) was changed during the communication event.

Contrasting uses of Bakhtin's theories highlight the difference of analytical approaches in the two studies. Danielewicz quotes at length from Bakhtin's 'Speech Genre' where he explains how all our speech is 'filled with others' words' and she describes how the children 'were able to "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (Bakhtin 1986) each other's words to create new meaning' (326). The assimilation and reworking that she identifies is the 'linguistic recycling' of different speech routines (such as 'I've got one like that') signaling affiliation and support. The meanings that are created are essentially *social* meanings. My study,



too, is interested in assimilation, reworking and re-accentuation of the words of others, but the emergent meanings with which I am concerned are not so much social as *intellectual*; evolving theories of God, religion, identity, plurality.

This interest in the developing meanings of the words the children use takes my analysis outside the bounds of the immediate discussion (situated activity) to trace the words' origins in a variety of discourses from the wider context of the participants' social setting. My approach recognises not only the dialogues of the individual research event but the dialogicality of the dense environment through which the words have travelled (Bakhtin 1981, 276). It combines the 'micro' focus of discourse analysis on details of linguistic exchanges with ethnographic interest in the relationship of content to a wider (and very diverse) social, cultural, historical 'macro' context.

Danielewicz and her colleagues outlined their method in discourse analysis terms:

Once we identified speech events, we analysed individual utterances and patterns of interaction between the participants. In the course of this line-by-line analysis, we recognized and traced the development of what we called linguistic routines ... We analyzed all of these routines to determine their meaning and function for the children and their teacher over time.

(316-7)

My method involved identifying the discourses and words of others on which the children were building; considering situational factors (school context, relationships within the group, demands of the activities) that influenced the participants' selection of meanings for the discussion; investigating (through detailed analysis of the children's talk) what happened to those words and meanings during the communicative event as they were affirmed, questioned, rationalised, negotiated, mystified, reconciled, assimilated; tracing the emergence of new ideas, concepts and values. As the interests of the two studies differ, so too do the methods. Recognising the roots of the term 'dialogue' in movement and meaning, I prefer to see the difference between the two approaches as a difference between *discourse* analysis and *dialogue* analysis.

### ***1.2.3 Objectivity***

The remaining sections of this chapter look forward to the reception of the ethnographic text by a critical audience and reflect on the principles according to which it might be evaluated: objectivity and generalisability. The appropriateness of applying these standards to a small-scale, qualitative study such as my own has been questioned, but in what follows I wish to argue that they are both important to my method and purpose.

The problems of objectivity in empirical research and ethnography are well documented; the conclusion often drawn from quantities of contemporary methodological or theoretical research literature is that ‘objectivity is dead’ (Phillips 1993, 57). Jackson and Nesbitt set out the reasons why this might be so in relation to their ethnographic study of Hindu children citing ‘the obvious influence created by the ethnographer’s presence’, and the influence of ‘the ethnographer’s range of concepts and thought patterns’ on the selection of data and writing of field notes. The authors were conscious of the ‘artistic’ nature of the enterprise following Geertz’s view of ethnographies as literally fictions in that they are things made (Geertz 1973). Other people, they claim, ‘might have done it differently’ (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993, 21-20). Any commonalty in the end products of such enterprises, Elliot Eisner would see as the result of the ‘artists’ using common frameworks provided by education or culture:

Indeed acculturation and education can be considered the psychosocial processes used to provide frameworks to the young so that the worlds they make for themselves will have some commonalty with those of others.  
(Eisner 1993, 54)

Though many aspects of our fieldwork are closely related, the interpretations Danielewicz and I make of our data bear little resemblance, because we employ different frameworks for understanding. If I applied my framework of dialogue to



her data, or she applied hers of discourse to mine our representations of the same research events would differ significantly. Eisner writes:

Different ways of seeing give us different worlds. Different ways of saying allow us to represent different worlds. (54)

There is, he says, ‘no single legitimate way to make sense of the world’. (54)

In arguing for the retention of a concept of objectivity, I wish to comment on the idea of different worlds and pick up the question of legitimacy. Though the plural ‘worlds’ is often used loosely to denote different discourses and perspectives on life (Jackson 97, 30), an underlying realism means that I hold to the concept of the world as one endlessly complex and evolving reality, its plurality of meanings giving rise to a diversity of interpretations. To illustrate this by returning to the comparison above; if Danielewicz’s research team and I had analysed the same research discussion working within our respective frameworks, we would have selected different meanings and produced different interpretations, but the actual event would have remained the same.

Though I reject the relativism of plural ‘worlds’, I agree that there are many legitimate ways of making sense of the real world, and, indeed, of making sense of particular research events. Some ways are more legitimate than others, however, and some have no legitimacy at all. My interpretation of the children’s contributions to the research discussions had something in common with Fowler’s

cognitive approaches to religious understanding. His model of progressive stages of faith development, however, did not fit the evidence I had before me unless substantial changes were made (Chapter 2.2). I found less legitimacy in Hay's approach with its emphasis on children's innate spirituality and corresponding downplaying of the value of cognitive, religious and social factors. A language-based, dialogical model that recognised the variety of influences on the children's understanding and allowed for movement of thought, accorded best with the data. To consider some types of enquiry better than others is to imply that they are closer to reality, that there is some regulative ideal outside our own perceptions of what is going on. Karl Popper uses the image of a mountain to portray truth as that essential regulative ideal:

The status of truth in the objective sense, as correspondence to the facts, and its role as a regulative principle, may be compared to that of a mountain peak which is permanently, or almost permanently, wrapped in clouds. The climber may not merely have difficulties getting there – he may not know when he gets there, because he may be unable to distinguish, in the clouds, between the main summit and some subsidiary peak. Yet this does not affect the objective existence of the summit. (Popper 1968, 226 cited in Philips 1993, 59-60)

Even if the existence of an objective reality is understood, the question about the possibility of objectivity remains. It is not a question about truth, now, but about limits of human capabilities; does the humanity of the researcher make objectivity

impossible? Like the climber on the mountain unsure of the summit, we may not know when we arrive at a truth, but certainty is not the same as objectivity. Objectivity does not exclude error; its opposite is not falsehood but bias. Here, too, researchers face their human weakness. As the ethnographers with whom we began noted, the subjectivities of the researcher cannot be removed entirely from the research but are there in selection and interpretation. We are given the same message about the humanity of the researcher in other fields of research. Popper writes:

We cannot rob the scientist of his partisanship without also robbing him of his humanity, and we cannot suppress or destroy his value judgements without destroying him as a human being *and as a scientist*. (Popper 1976, 97 cited in Phillips 1993, 70)

A. J. Youngson puts the historian's case:

It may be possible to imagine an investigation into the past based on extremely full information, conducted without any reference to the present, unbiased in any way and therefore, in a sense, final and conclusive; but it is not easy to believe that such an investigation could be carried out by a human being. (Youngson 1985, 30)



The position of the historian is of particular relevance to my argument for objectivity, both because I have earlier given the raw material of my analysis (the transcriptions of the children's interviews) the status of historical texts, and because it is in the field of history that there has recently been a resounding victory for objectivity in research in the Irving Judgement (2000). It was also an ethical victory, for, while Troyna saw partisan research founded on postmodern relativism as a tool for reform by leftist social scientists (Troyna 1995), the association of extreme relativism with the far-right in history has been a cause for concern, particularly when applied to revision of the history of the Third Reich (Evans 1997). German history specialist, Jane Caplan has argued:

Theories that appear to discount rationality as a mode of explanation, that resist the claims of truth, relativize and disseminate power, cannot assign responsibility clearly, and do not privilege (one) truth or morality over (multiple) interpretation. (cited in Evans 1997, 242).

This was especially the case, she continued, with recent history. For ethnographers whose subjects are living individuals and communities, the ethical arguments for objectivity are equally strong. How that objectivity might be achieved is the issue.

The trial in which Holocaust denier, David Irving, lost his case, was the occasion of rigorous re-examination of the role of the researcher in the field of history. In his

report for the trial, the historian, Richard Evans recognises the beginnings of research in the researcher's subjectivity:

[Historical researchers] bring a whole variety of ideas, theories, even preconceptions to the evidence to help them frame the questions they want to ask of it and guide their selection of what they want to consult. (Evans Report Chapter 5, 15)

Like the historian, I brought to my task initial theories and preconceptions concerning the link between religious understanding and social encounter, between language and thought, the agency of the child, a certain understanding of human nature and of the children involved as a group and as individuals. These ideas guided my research design and analysis, but the subjectivity of the beginning did not preclude any claims to objectivity in what followed. Once the historians get to work, Evans' report for the trial tells us, it is their duty, to read the evidence fully and 'fairly' and 'if it contradicts some of the assumptions they have brought to it, to jettison those assumptions'. Objectivity should be their aim. Citing Thomas Haskell, Evans says of the pursuit of history:

[It] requires of its practitioners that vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news (and) discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic. (Chapter 5, 15 also in Evans 1997)

I was influenced by the ‘range of concepts and thought patterns’ (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993, 20) with which I initially approached my study, but, to be ‘fair’ in my interpretation, I was prepared to move outside that range. As the work progressed I found myself jettisoning some assumptions and altering frameworks of interpretation to incorporate unexpected findings, contradictions in the children’s thinking and variations in their style, for example (Chapter 2.2.6). The plan of the thesis underwent several radical changes; proposed chapters and headings were abandoned and replaced, and content was reorganised to match the demands of ‘evidence and logic’. I also had to assimilate ‘bad news’, acknowledging the extent of tension between Muslim and non-Muslim children in the school, and the inadequacy of some of our education programmes to promote inter-religious harmony. The pursuit of objectivity was an exercise in self-discipline.

### *The Role of Readership*

The emphasis so far in this reflection on objectivity has been on the individual, whether on the individual’s subjectivity or the individual’s responsibility. This contrasts with Popper’s view:

It is a mistake to assume that the objectivity of a science depends on the objectivity of the scientist. (Popper 1976, 96 cited in Phillips 1993, 70)

Objectivity, in his thinking, is not the property of the individual researcher but of the research community. Following Popper, Phillips argues that the validity of an



individual's research is compromised by the personal biases and valuations noted above and so needs to be checked, tested and critically evaluated by others working in the same field. He writes that good research work 'will be objective, in the sense that it has been opened up to criticism, and the reasons and evidence offered in both cases will have withstood serious scrutiny' (70-71).

It is not the fact of being criticised by others that makes research writing objective; it might not meet the criteria for that community's endorsement. Nor is it the fact that it has withstood the test of critical scrutiny by the research community, otherwise a research report left unread could not in itself be objective. I understand objectivity to be inherent in the text even before it is viewed by others, on account of the work's 'addressivity', its orientation towards a critical audience and its responsiveness to the reader's demands for reason, internal consistency and supporting evidence. Phillips stresses the importance of responsible readership. This can be provided by the researcher himself, 'le premier lecteur' (Ricoeur 1986, 142). Evans recommends 'detachment' from oneself, seeing oneself as one object among many, as a way of achieving objectivity (251). I aimed for detachment from my text so that I moved between the position of writer of the work, with the investment of self that involves, and that of reader, viewing and evaluating it as an outsider. By this process the bonds between author and text are loosened, limits are set for the 'artist's' imagination and the text itself is objectified. Opportunity for research objectivity is given in the interval between a researcher as author of a research text and as a critical audience of the same. This dual role puts me as researcher in a position to promote within myself the discipline objectivity requires.

### ***1.2.4 Generalisability***

#### *The Problem of Generalisability*

While issues of generalisability have received much attention from researchers in quantitative research traditions, they have until recently received comparatively little attention from qualitative research schools. There are several reasons for this. One is assumptions made about the subjectivity of qualitative research and the influence of the backgrounds and viewpoints of individual researchers on research data. Another is the focus on single-case studies not meeting the statistical sampling procedures usually seen as essential for the generalising of research data to a wider population. In recent years, however, the climate has changed. There is an increasing concern with more general application of research findings, associated with a change in focus of qualitative research away from ‘exotic foreign and deviant local cultures’ to evaluation and basic research on issues in our own society, particularly in the field of education (Schofield 1993, 94). As the group I am working with is being studied in an educational setting and their lives are enmeshed in the complexities of ‘our own society’, it seems appropriate to raise the issue of the generalisability of the findings of this thesis. I do so by looking at three different areas where generalisations might be made: knowledge, theory and practice.

The first question is how the knowledge of these particular children, gained through qualitative research activities, can be of general relevance to a wider society and population. N. K. Denzin did not think that generalisation was an aim of qualitative research:

The interpretivist rejects generalization as a goal and never aims to draw randomly selected samples of human experience. For the interpretivist every instance of social interaction, if thickly described (Geertz 1973), represents a slice from the life world that is the proper subject matter for interpretive inquiry ... every topic ... must be seen as carrying its own logic, sense of order, structure and meaning. (Denzin 1983, 133-4 cited in Schofield 1993, 92)

By this view the value of the study is internal and the knowledge gained specific; if the group being studied is worthy of attention, it is so in its own right rather than as an illustration of a wider phenomenon. Like the researcher above, I set out on this project convinced of the inherent worthiness of its participants as subjects of study. I do not, however, see the proper subject matter for my inquiry as a distinct way of life. The diversity and complexity of the children's social context is such that fluid structures and multiple meanings replace the 'sense of order' Denzin's 'interpretivist' seeks. The interconnectedness of a considerable variety of discourses in the children's lives has two seemingly contradictory implications for



the generalisability of my study: it relates their experiences to a context wider than a discrete 'life world', yet at the same time makes it even more problematic to generalise from those experiences to other situations.

A multitude of factors had a bearing on the results of my search, and these factors could come together in endless combinations. As well as broader societal and cultural influences (the membership of a particular group, racial, ethnic and religious identity), there were numerous others (the viewing of a particular TV programme, the outcome of a playground football game) which could affect the participants' perspectives, and relationships. These variations make it difficult to generalise even within the community, the school or group of children with whom I was researching. Time factors also affected the findings; the time of year ('Id time) at which the data was collected, and the time in the life of a constantly changing community. Between the interviews and the production of the final text, the children's context has already undergone marked changes with the movement of Somali families into the area. One measurement used for the generalisability of research has been replicability (Schofield 1993, 93) yet the myriad elements and interconnections that made up each of the project's research events were so complicated they could not be replicated even with the same group of children.

Guba and Lincoln wrote that, 'generalizations are impossible since phenomena are neither time- nor context-free'. They qualified this statement, however, by arguing that 'working hypotheses' might be transferred from individual cases to other situations 'depending on the degree of temporal and contextual similarity' (1982,

238 cited in Schofield 1993, 96). Though exact replication of an individual case may not be achievable, qualitative researchers (Stake 1978, Guba and Lincoln 1982, Goetz and LeCompte 1984) have argued that it is possible to take findings from one study and apply them to understanding another similar situation. The greater degree of sameness between two situations the more valuable the study of one will be to the understanding of the other. To identify these similarities 'current thinking' requires of the researcher a depth of knowledge about the site in which studies are conducted and of the site to which one wishes to generalise. 'Thick descriptions' as advocated by Geertz, are seen as vital (Schofield 1993, 97).

The complexity of the children's context, however, makes reliance on thick description problematic. In trying to match two sites, judgements have to be made about which similarities are important, which differences can be discounted. There are so many variables that the thicker the descriptions of comparative sites the greater the multiplication of differences between them. As the researcher delves more deeply, the task of explicating from one situation to another becomes increasingly difficult and likenesses can become lost in a mass of qualifications. I see the points of contact between the experiences of my research subjects and those of others being not so much in the intricacies of their situation as in the broad outline. Specific, individual circumstances give my findings local colour and make them impossible to replicate or even imitate, but the 'big' themes of response to diversity, of children's agency, of the interaction between language and thought, give them general relevance as part of the collective experience of human kind.

## *Theory*

This move from the particular to the general put my study in contact with theoretical literature around the themes cited above. In this context the role of an individual qualitative research study such as my own is not to produce generalisations, but to assess the generalisability of statements that have been made by others. I related my findings to broad theories about children's religious understanding. Underlying assumptions of these theories were questioned or rejected if they did not fit the instances of religious thought I had recorded. This was the case with Hay's model of children's spirituality, for example. I gave greater credibility to those theories which did agree with my findings such as the link between acts of communication and the movement of understanding. I also proposed ways in which general theories might be adapted to incorporate the results of my research: seeing Fowler's patterns of faith as styles rather than stages, for example; finding new significance in Bakhtin's 'authoritative voice'; combining different models of dialogue. The narrow base of my study in a small number of specific instances of interaction means my contributions cannot be conclusive; they have the status of suggestions in a wider debate.

## *Practice*

In his reflection on the generalisability of qualitative research projects in educational settings, J. W. Schofield writes of the value of studies of both typical and atypical situations (Schofield 1993). The former are the common and ordinary



that can be used as indicators of what is going on in our schools; the latter provide the forward-looking educationalist with examples of what could be achieved and are designed to promote good practice. To illustrate the point we again return to the study Danielewicz and colleagues carried out with a teacher, Mrs Shriver, and her class. The researchers chose 'sharing time' as the focus of their study. One of the reasons for this choice was that sharing time 'is a representative sample of school culture' (Danielewicz *et al.* 1996, 314), 'an event familiar to almost all elementary school teachers' (312). The early stages of the study involved an evaluation of what goes on in a typical sharing time. As a result of this evaluation the format of the sharing time was changed to give more control to the children (it became atypical) and the children's interactions in the new situation were analysed. The researcher's conclusions from these case studies included recommendations to teachers:

We would like to strongly urge teachers to implement some structured speech situation in which children use language to direct, negotiate, make alliances, and build complex dialogues around content. (330)

Convinced of the value of the differently structured sharing time for the children's social and linguistic development, they were urging educationalists to apply these methods more widely than Mrs Shriver's first grade class.

This is the third form of generalisation: the practical pedagogical lessons that can be drawn from a research study conducted by a teacher, with children in a

classroom context. I did not design this project as a piece of educational research but because of my profession it was perhaps inevitable that there crept in alongside, and secondary to, the researcher's analysis, an assessment of the educational value to the children of the activity in which they were engaged, and its pedagogical possibilities. Though group work is commonplace in my classroom and school, what was atypical about the research events was the degree of freedom given to the children to take the discussion wherever it led them, the minimum level of teacher guidance and the open-ended nature of the event. These loosely structured dialogues served the purposes of my research and also engaged the children in the exercise of valuable cognitive, social and personal skills. In an occasional paper produced for Warwick Religious and Education Research Unit, I set out for a teacher readership what I perceived to be the benefits of classroom dialogue activities of this nature (Ipgrave 2001).

Progress in education ideally works through trial and evaluation. Practices tried and evaluated as successful in one setting are promoted in other settings, tried and evaluated there. They do not always transfer well from one school to another; a variety of factors, circumstantial and human, affect outcomes and successful pilots do not ensure the unqualified success of a general implementation of the same scheme. Nevertheless something that works well in one setting is worth trying in another. I suggest in the Warwick paper how a dialogical model might be applied more generally to religious education in other educational settings. In keeping with the above, though, any conclusions on the generalisability of this pedagogical method would have to wait on the results of its implementation elsewhere.

## 2.1 God Talk: Experience-based and Cognitive Approaches

The religious understanding being explored in this project takes its shape in the public domain. It is researched through group discussion and draws on a wider dialogue between the participants and their social context of encounter with various religious traditions. It emphasises the role of social interaction in children's religion. By contrast, the experientialist school of religious education and research prioritises pupils' exploration of their own 'inner space', developing their own individual responses to the spiritual dimension (Hammond, Hay *et al.* 1990, 22). The experientialists identify a need to cut away the social and cultural overlay to find the true 'spirit of the child' buried underneath. In the dialogical approach engaging the children's religious understanding is a communal activity characterised by rational discourse, for the experientialist it is a personal, inner journey based on intuitive spirituality from which it is claimed religious experience arises. Two central texts for the experientialist movement in religious education and research are *New Methods in RE Teaching: An Experiential Approach* written as a teachers' handbook by David Hay and John Hammond in 1990, and David Hay and Rebecca Nye's 1998 study, *The Spirit of the Child* which lays out the background, records and draws conclusions from their research project into children's spirituality for Nottingham University's Centre for the Study of Human Relations.



In this chapter I position my research against the method of experientialism and aim to demonstrate that findings from a cognitive approach based on public language are not of less value as representations of children's religious understanding. What follows is not a systematic critique of David Hay whose work does indicate an awareness and experience of the complexity of the issues, but it will draw on his writings and those of some of his critics to identify the premises on which his 'experience-based' approach is founded. These will be related to empirical evidence of what is actually happening in children's meaning making, employing examples from the Nottingham study and my own research projects. I shall then use the 'private language' debate to consider whether it is possible to get closer to the core of a child's religiousness through a personal 'inner journey' approach. To end, I introduce the idea that, rather than restricting a child's religious understanding, an approach using learned religious language and based on reason, could free it to move in exciting new directions.

### ***2.1.1 Contrasting Approaches to the Development of Religious Understanding***

Much of the dialogue that constitutes my research data has God as its theme. The children debate whether their god is the same as their neighbours', whether he is one or many, what he is like, how he operates, what he is thinking. They explore related concepts such as eternal life, heaven and hell, creation, incarnation, and can therefore be said to be engaged in 'God talk'. The term 'God talk' dates back to 1967 and the book of the same name in which John Macquarrie discussed the problem of language in contemporary theology. The term was adopted by John Hull to describe children's religious discourse (Hull 1991). Hay and Nye also used

it to refer to a tradition of research which examines children's grasp of religious concepts ('heaven', 'creation' and 'God') by discussing explicitly religious material with them (Nye 1996, 2-7; Hay 1998, 54). This tradition is closely linked to Piagetian models of cognitive development. Foremost among practitioners of such methods was Ronald Goldman, who related children's mental development to their ability to grasp the meaning of religious narrative, primarily Biblical stories (Goldman 1964 and 1965). He suggested that the boundaries of children's cognitive development meant that they were unable to access religious language, particularly the language of metaphor. Goldman famously questioned the readiness of young children for religion, recommending that Biblical material should only be used sparingly in schools. His theories were very influential at the time. He has been credited with responsibility for the move away from Bible-based religious education in primary schools (Ashton 1997) and continued to be cited into the 80s and 90s as providing an accurate picture of children's intellectual incapacity for understanding religion (Bastide 1987, 18-23; Miles 1996, 13-18). From his work came an impetus for creation of the stage development models of religious understanding considered in the next chapter.

While 'God talk' has its advocates in the field of religious education and in research into children's religious understanding, others see it as affording only a limited view of the subjects' religion and spirituality. Hay writes:

The difficulty with almost all research on children's spirituality up to the very recent past is that it focuses on God-talk, or, in Goldman and his descendants' case, the Piagetian development of God-talk. (Hay 1998, 44)

Hay's position is not as far from Goldman's as is implied in his words above. The latter's conviction of children's cognitive limitations led to his advocating a different approach to religious education using music, dancing, painting and creative work to help them 'fantasise' their way into religion (Goldman 1964, 233). Religion is, he wrote, 'fundamentally a pattern of belief, and not an intellectual formula ... the emotional aspect of religious thinking is of great importance'. (Goldman 1964, 31)

Nevertheless, Goldman's research bias towards cognitive development set a trend followed in the works of other developmentalists, noticeably Fritz Oser and James Fowler. Even though he has considerable admiration for these researchers, Hay finds problems with their method:

Stress on the development of intellectual and moral *reasoning* in children means they downplay the spiritual dimension. (Hay 1998, 42)

There are then two perceived difficulties with the 'God talk' approach: the limitations of children's intellectual ability, as outlined by Goldman, and secondly, Hay's criticism that an overemphasis on the intellect and religious language does not offer a true picture of children's spirituality.

In a 1996 paper for the training of social workers (Nye 1996), Hay's research colleague, Nye, distinguishes between contrasting approaches to children's religious development:



1. 'Cognitive and Religious' approaches interested in children's rational handling of traditional religious terminology and concepts;
2. 'Experience-based and Personal' approaches which engage with children's spiritual potential.

Of these, the former are used in my research. The use of religious language is explicit; questions and discussion encourage rational thought. The experience-based approaches are those adopted by Hay and Nye for their Nottingham research project. The purpose of their study was to find out 'how ordinary children talk about their spirituality' (Hay 1998, vi). They aimed to strip away layers of cultural constraints, such as religion and communal language, to find the spiritual being underneath.

### ***2.1.2 Experience-based and Personal: relational consciousness and its critics***

Underlying the experientialist approach is a belief that spiritual or religious *knowing* is not taught or learned but is received directly (Hay 1998, 52). Hay follows the zoologist Alastair Hardy's hypothesis as expounded in the Gifford Lectures (Aberdeen University, 1965), that spiritual awareness is a biological phenomenon which has evolved in the human species through the process of natural selection because it has survival value. In this understanding, spirituality is a human universal often hidden by the assimilation of culturally constructed norms. Hay argues that this spirituality is most clearly present in children before they have learnt how to suppress it (Hay 1999, 3).

The Nottingham study began without a definition of spirituality to avoid ‘prejudging areas children might experience as spiritually significant’ (Nye 1996, 2-7), but a common thread running through the children’s responses was needed to provide an object for the search. As a result of their study, Hay and Nye identify a ‘core category’ which they called *relational consciousness*. This *relational consciousness* has two components:

1. In every case where children talked about spirituality there appeared to be an unusual level of awareness or perceptiveness compared with their conversation on other matters.
2. Without exception, all spiritual talk referred to how the children related to reality: either to God, other people, themselves, or the material world. (Hay 2000, 83)

Hay’s argument is that this *relational consciousness* is not only being neglected in our times, but is in danger of being lost beneath a weight of social and cultural pressure.

The natural relational consciousness clearly richly present in young children as our research has shown, is currently being obscured, overlaid or even repressed by socially constructed processes. (Hay with Nye 1998, 151)

In *The Spirit of the Child*, these constructed processes are identified and characterised as follows:

- *religion*: In its traditional forms religion, in particular Christianity, has imposed restrictions on spiritual expression. Christian culture has experienced a value blockage at many points throughout history bringing about a narrowing of the original universalistic image.
- *language*: ‘Conventionalised’ language also narrows the vision. By contrast, relational consciousness gains value from its position outside the boundaries of language. It is an ‘all-pervasive preverbal knowingness’ which ‘because it predates the potent analytical emphasis of grammar encompasses an awareness of our indissoluble link with the seamless robe of reality.’ (145)
- *rational / scientific thought*: The ‘natural knowing’ of young children is contrasted with the intellectualism imposed on us by history (66). The rationalist, scientific tradition of the Enlightenment with its religious scepticism is responsible for a collapse of interest in the spiritual in British society. In our own time the increase in the importance of science in the primary curriculum is a cause of concern:

That children are now often receiving scientific instruction from a much younger age may have the effect of inhibiting early spirituality at an even more sensitive, vulnerable stage. (50)

It is around the role of religion, language and rational/scientific thought, that much of the argument for or against an experientialist method turns. It is also my interest in the positive role of these three in children’s religious understanding that distinguishes my methods and conclusions from those of the Nottingham Project.



The publication of Hay and Hammond's handbook, *New Methods in RE Teaching – An Experiential Approach* (Hay and Hammond 1990) was followed by a flurry of criticism, the debate being pursued through a number of articles in *The British Journal of Religious Education* (Thatcher 1991; Mott-Thornton 1996, Wright 1996). Experientialist attempts to isolate children's spirituality from a cultural and social overlay engendered concern about the 'polarisation of religious education'. Critics focussed attention on the three areas identified above and the 'new method' was criticised for its dualism, for promoting a separation of communal from individual, of public discourse from experience and of (scientific) fact from value.

Hay's theories are criticised as both mistaken and harmful. Wright argues that the separation of children's spirituality from the formative influences of religious tradition, operates on a false, ahistorical view of children's experience (Wright 1993) and 'aggravates the separation of self from society' (Wright 1996, 142). For Thatcher the emphasis on 'private interiority damages the sociality of the human person' (Thatcher 1991, 25). Wright stresses this sociality when he argues that 'experience does not constitute an autonomous realm of private meaning, but is always informed by and dependent on public discourse' (Wright 1996, 167). A more moderate position is that taken by Mott Thornton who is prepared to acknowledge the possibility of a private state of mind but sees its expression as necessarily public language (Mott Thornton 1996). The experientialists' suspicion of scientific, analytical thought is seen as detrimental to morals, reducing spiritual education to 'no more than an abstract cultivation of will and desire devoid of any criteria of meaning or truth' (Wright 1997, 14). Thatcher accuses the authors of

*The New Methods in RE Teaching* of a damaging relativity towards truth undermining public standards and giving full scope to individual prejudices (Thatcher 1991, 25).

In his contribution to Michael Grimmit's *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (Grimmit 2000), Hay defended himself against accusations of dualistic Cartesianism with claims that his and Hammond's views were misinterpreted. Nevertheless, the debate between public and private, communal and individual, rational construction of meaning and direct spiritual awareness, remains. In the following chapters of this study it will be evident that my research methods and analysis move towards a presentation of children's religion as embedded firmly in their communal, linguistic and cultural contexts. Confidence in the validity of my approach requires my engagement with the debate, and a testing of my position against empirical evidence and theoretical argument. Evidence from Hay and Nye's Nottingham study, where the researchers avoided the use of explicit religious terminology is employed, as well as examples from my own research where conventional religious language was introduced by me as stimulus for discussion.

### ***2.1.3 Religious Language and Cognitive Activity***

#### ***In the Nottingham Project***

In *The Spirit of the Child* (1998), Hay's theories and Nye's interpretation of the data produced by their Nottingham study are reported. It is to the results of this

project that we now move in order to relate them to the criticisms raised above. Was the researchers' 'experience-based and personal' (as opposed to a 'cognitive and religious') approach reflected in the attitudes of their respondents? Although Nye was careful not to introduce religious terminology herself in her fieldwork, and she and Hay observe that the children were able to express *relational consciousness* in a variety of other languages available to them, the children's readiness to discuss their spirituality within the framework of the public language of religion was marked:

Many of the children, even those who were highly secularised, resorted to religious language without prompting when referring to spiritual matters (Hay with Nye 1998, 87)

It was noticeable how readily this largely secularised sample of children introduced religious terms in the course of our conversation.

This readiness to draw on religious conceptions in the task of meaning-making, despite a background of lack of knowledge of formal religion was especially noteworthy. (103-4)

Examples are given of occasions when a child's discussion of what seemed to be an implicitly spiritual theme led into more explicit articulation using religious language (107-8). Nye explains the frequency with which her respondents used explicitly religious terminology as a defence strategy: a way of legitimising the 'illegitimate stuff of spirituality' in a climate hostile to expressions of spiritual meaning (129). Another interpretation could be that their fluency in religious



language showed the degree to which the children felt at ease with God talk; that they recognised their experiences within its framework and understood them in the light of public religious discourse.

The rationalising tendency evidenced in some of the children's spiritual utterances are played down with such phrases as, 'apparently cognitive signs in reality secondary products of spiritual stirrings' (74), and 'The term 'mental' is not used to suggest that this phenomenon is only an intellectual or cognitive quirk, but rather gathers together the psychological functions of cognition, emotion, action and sensation' (192). Nevertheless, the 'primacy of mental effort' cannot be denied in the approach of ten year old Tim (98-99) who struggles to work out answers to the questions, 'Is there a single true God?' and 'How can we cope with the mystery of infinity?', or of Harriet (also aged ten) the subject of whose 'deep pondering' include the nature of thought, the relationship between the mind and the brain, the nature of language, the origin of the universe (109). The very asking of such questions implies the existence of an answer even if the children feel, like Tim, that they can never 'get the right answer or get even near it' (97). It is very clear that Tim rates the rational higher than the experiential. When asked if children of his age could have religious experiences such as a sense of the presence of God, he replied:

I think they just look at it and think Wow! And uh ... forget about it, really ... or just um think about it, but don't think how they were made. (99)

The children's mental activity was not just a response to 'spiritual stirrings' but was also a means to create, or, as Nye expresses it, to 'maintain' (132), a sense of the spiritual. A number of deliberate strategies are outlined including mental or physical withdrawal, focus on an object, seeking communication through prayer, exploiting aesthetic and sensory experiences, 'philosophizing'. The children's skill in providing themselves with such opportunities was remarkable:

I was impressed by the children's diversity, range and level of mastery of rather complex mental processes. (130)

In some cases it caused Nye to question the general applicability of Piagetian stages of cognitive development. The children did not seem to be 'locked in' to concrete and literal forms of thought but showed ability to use analogy and metaphor in expression of their spirituality. Within the results of the Nottingham Project signs can be found of a spirituality that readily draws on both the rational faculties and the public language of religion. These provide indications that spiritual experience is not always the primal and most direct, but can be generated by mentally prepared strategies. Though Nye favoured the 'experience-based and personal' approaches to spirituality in her 1996 paper, in *The Spirit of the Child* she incorporates the 'cognitive and religious', the *religion, language* and *rational thought*, into a continuum of children's spiritual expression suggested by their responses in many different interviews. Direct experience of spirituality becomes only one form of perception:

At one end are those who perceive spiritual matters in terms of questions and principles. Then there are those who go on to make conscious or unconscious associations with the traditional spiritual language of religion in their attempt to articulate these questions and find meaningful ways of answering them. Finally at the other end of the continuum are those who have experienced their spirituality directly and personally in the form of religious insights. (110)

### *In the Children's Discussions*

Employing a 'cognitive and religious approach', my research produced data with some echoes of Nye's findings, examples of which are set out in the interview extracts below where discussion was centred round the term 'spirit'. What they are describing appears to fit within the category of spiritual experience: AY reflects on times when she feels close to God:

**AY:** Like if I've been naughty and my mum and dad are cross with me, I go to my room and I feel upset. And I feel God's spirit in me and it makes me feel better. (C23-25)

HA and JH speak of their awareness of the presence of the spirits of dead grandparents.

**HA:** Because my grandma died and I think that her spirit still lives (animated) I think she's just right next to me right now.



**JH:** (points) Just there?

**HA:** Yes! (E90-93)

JH converses with his grandfather's spirit at times of quiet after he has been reading the Bible and in the hospital when he is visiting his sick father.

**JH:** I believe that when you speak to them [spirits] you can actually hear them, but you can't hear them so, like I sit down and just like speak to my granddad and in my head I think I can hear him (E98-100)

The contexts of the experiences described are times of emotion (a quarrel with parents, remembering a dead grandparent, visiting a sick father) or times of stillness and concentration (alone in one's room; the moments after reading the Bible) and consequently times at which a heightening of awareness of the kind Hay and Nye were looking for (Nye 1996, 2-8), might be expected. The experiences are private and personal, positive and comforting: JH's granddad has much to say but his main message is 'Don't worry' (E102).

The children are relating in a significantly close way to the spiritual world, to God, to their dead relations, aware of being 'in relationship with something or someone' in a special sense (Hay 1998, 114). The conversation shows the 'shift in style' that indicated to Nye that her child respondents were expressing core spirituality (Nye 1996, 2-8): AY and JH are reflective, HA excited. The response of the other children in the group to the children as they speak, also reflects this shift. Noticeable was the quality of the attention given to the speaker, the pause

for reflection after the comment and the interested involvement in JH's 'Just there?' Certainly the children's expression is experience-based and personal. It is also cognitive and religious. The linguistic content of the children's contributions is that of conventional religious language. As with Nye's 'secular' respondent, even 'secular' AY, with no background of organised religion, uses a traditional religious expression to speak of 'God's spirit in me'. All three accounts of experience are initiated by the introduction of the term 'spirit' to the group on a flash card. Examining their responses in more detail we come across issues of the relationship between language, meaning-making and experience.

### *AY's experience*

AY's discourse is about feelings, her experience was a private one. We cannot know the exact relationship between the special feeling AY experiences and the spirit terminology she uses to describe it. It may be that she recognised or interpreted the feeling she had as God's spirit within her, being familiar with the concept already or understanding it from JN's words that preceded hers in the dialogue. It could be that at a time of upset AY comforted herself with an idea provided by encounter with the Christian tradition (God is always with you) and so felt his comforting presence. Whether it came before the experience and encouraged it, or after and interpreted it, the language acted as a spur to revisiting that experience. The fact that her experience had been couched in religious language (the terminology of spirit and God within) meant AY was able to draw on it when she wished for a moment of reflective awareness, rather than wait for that experience to happen again. It became a spiritual resource; not direct

perception, but perception with memory to reawaken the sensation. If the respondents in both Nye's project and my own had not been able to verbalise or recognise their experiences in a common language, such as that of 'spirit', they would have been unable not only to describe them to researchers, but to conjure up the memories of such experiences in the first place. They would have recognised no cue.

### *HA's experience*

By contrast HA's experience was public, her awareness of her grandmother's presence happening as she spoke. Its identification as a spiritual experience was dependent on her excitement and animation which stood out from the rest of her discourse. From her words it is possible to trace the build up to the experience. It began in shared discussion with her sister:

**HA:** I said, 'imagine if there was a spirit next to us, imagine it!' (E89)

She then constructs her experience as we speak, leading to a direct perception of a spiritual presence in the room. Once this moment has passed, she builds on it to open the way for future such experiences for the other children present:

**HA:** Imagine if there's a spirit next to all of you – yeah, it'd be so good too. (E93-4)



She is in fact setting the scene for JH's account of his communications with his grandfather's spirit. Imagination, it would seem, plays a significant role in HA's construction (the line between imagination and actual sensory perception is notoriously difficult to define) but there is also logic, the whole scene being the consequence of a particular belief that the spirit lives after death, linked with the causal connective 'because'.

### *JH's experience*

JH's story is another example of how the logical consequences of particular beliefs and understandings lead children to the kind of spiritual experience they describe. In his account he is not surprised Samuel-like by a sudden encounter from another, spiritual, dimension, but is guided by his understanding that it is possible to commune with spirits in a special way to seek out opportunities to converse with that of his grandfather. He addresses him at the end of his Bible reading and visits the hospital toilets where he can commune with him undisturbed. There are parallels here with the strategies used by Nye's respondents to support their spirituality (page77). JH uses the 'potent analytical emphasis of grammar' of which Hay is so wary (145) to make the logical connections that underlie his spiritual experience ('because, I believe ... so'). He does the same at the beginning of the exchange when he links his ideas to explain the association of God with 'spirit':

**JH:** It's like a ghost *but* you can't see *so* people call God a spirit as well *because* you can't see him *but* he's everywhere *so* you can't ... (E79-80)

In the interpretation, expression, recall, construction and preparation of spiritual experience, then, the children draw on the communal language of religious tradition and the logic of grammar. The whole exchange generated by the introduction of the religious term 'spirit' shows an intermingling of belief, reasoning and spiritual experience. To isolate a spiritual dimension in the young participants' religious expression, and downplay the 'cognitive and religious' would not do justice to this blend.

#### ***2.1.4 Religious Language: the Theory***

Empirical evidence demonstrates the impracticality of a 'polarisation' of religious understanding into the 'experience-based and personal' and 'cognitive and religious'. What follows addresses the question of its theoretical possibility. Thatcher challenges the view of the human being that underlies *New Methods of RE Teaching*, labelling it 'philosophically spurious' (Thatcher 1991, 22). He objects to talk of 'the inner self', 'inner space', 'inner me', 'the very private self', as subscribing to an 'inner/outer dualism' which, he claims, Wittgenstein has shown to be a 'grave mistake' (23). Hay responds to the accusation by using Wittgenstein to defend his position. He quotes his critique of Frazer's *Golden Bough* where similarities and differences are traced in various rites of recurring themes:

But then a part of our contemplation would still be lacking, namely what connects this picture with our own feeling and thought. This part gives the contemplation depth. (Wittgenstein cited in Hay 1992, 149)

The idea of 'contemplation' and 'depth' supports Hay's use of the language of interiority; 'inner is about depth' (145). Supplying this depth is, Hay states, the role of experiential religious education (149). Elsewhere in Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer, Hay could have found more common ground. Frazer is criticised for supposing that religious observances embody rudimentary insights, for Wittgenstein's concern (like Hay's) was to separate scientific thought from religious intuition (Hay 1998, 23). Scientific beliefs and religious beliefs are totally unlike. The latter are not hypotheses, are not based on evidence and cannot be regarded as more or less probable (Pears 1971, 174-5). Wittgenstein's view of religious belief was anthropocentric; the issue is not truth but the attitude of believers.

For Hay, spirituality is a human universal that pre-exists language; it is a 'preverbal knowingness' (Hay 1998, 145), direct, intuitive. His concern is that this spirituality should be preserved from socially constructed processes which serve to obscure it. These processes include public language. Hay removes spiritual experience as far as possible from the linguistic limitations that threaten to suppress it when he links it to direct sensation. In the fieldwork of the Nottingham Project the four qualities looked to as evidence of spirituality are all to do with 'sensing' (Nye 1996, 2-8). It is a move away from the use of 'intellectualization' as the most valid criterion for assessing religious understanding, an emphasis which Hay sees as a mistake of false philosophical categorisation:



Spiritual or religious *knowing* is very different from knowledge of factual information, or speculation about religion. It is much more like a direct sensory awareness. (Hay with Nye 1998, 52)

Here he has something in common with Wittgenstein's view of religious propositions but his resort to direct sensory awareness does not put a fence of privacy around spirituality. In fact it draws him into the 'private language' debate stimulated by the philosopher's *Philosophical Investigations*.

Wittgenstein stresses the difference between sensations and material objects. They cannot be shared in the same way, do not exist before they are felt and cannot be passed on. To this extent they are different from that experience of material objects from which our everyday language derives. While many can perceive the same object and check their perceptions against each others' when coming to a common understanding of what it is, only one person has perception of a particular sensation. The same criteria for understanding do not apply; the expression of a sensation cannot use the 'object and designation' model (*Philosophical Investigations* Sect. 293) Are then each person's sensations inaccessible to everyone else? What does this mean about an individual's perceptions of their own sensations? Are direct sensations outside language altogether?

Though Hay understands spirituality as 'primal' and 'pre-verbal', his working relationship with children's spirituality means he cannot leave it as something untouched, un-discussed, a mystical truth outside the 'boundaries of language'.

His interests and those of his colleagues are twofold: research work dependent on the respondents' ability to relate their experiences; educational theory concerned with the child's ability to build on their spiritual experiences for their personal fulfilment. The related questions are how personal spirituality can be expressed and how it can be understood by the child. Nye writes of the problems she encounters in her fieldwork with the children's limited '*memory over time* for the spiritual' and notes the difficulties children experience in 'articulating and storing this kind of event in an accessible way' (Hay and Nye 1998, 134), accessible both for the researcher and for the children themselves. In the former problem lies the experientialists' dilemma. If spirituality is researched (as in the Nottingham Project) it has to be expressed else it cannot be tracked. If it is to be encouraged (as in *New Methods in RE Teaching*) pupils need guiding in its use. How can it be expressed or guidance be given without a common language? The second problem concerns the use of their experience outside the public discourse of research and the classroom. If spiritual experience is to be of greater value to the child than a transient awareness which appears and then disappears from consciousness, that direct sensory experience needs to be translated into something that can be built on. The child has to register the experience, to make sense of it and store it in the memory so it can be retrieved when needed. Engaging in this meaning-making process requires the employment of language.

The next question is whether the child can engage in this translation process through her own private language or whether she is necessarily drawn into using a public language whose conventions will influence the interpretation of the event. Wittgenstein denies the possibility of sensations being expressed in their own

private language. Language is a tool for meaning-making and therefore it must include the possibility of checking the sense (the correctness or otherwise) of its statements. If there are no rules there is no way of determining whether something is sense or nonsense. A language must have rules. Rules can be learned and used by others to verify the individual's statements. They make a language 'teachable' and therefore public.

The question of how there can be a public language for something as private as personal spiritual experience, is answered by Wittgenstein's idea of 'teaching links'. Sensations are understood and described by 'teaching links' with other language, in particular with the language used for material objects. The idea of teaching links has direct relevance for Nye's research findings. The links with images from other language are evident in the empirical data. Language from the material world is commonly used for spiritual sensation: Tina (aged ten) describes her response to ladybirds as being 'like I just popped out of my body' (Nye 1996, 2-11); Joanna (also aged ten) describes her inner feeling through the imagery of the garden and states that, 'if life is a little brighter you see brighter things' (2-17). Nye identifies a number of languages used by her respondents to relate spiritual experience: autobiographical language, language of science and technology, language of fiction, language of play, language of philosophy / theology, religious language. She also recognises the influence these different languages have on the children's awareness of their own spirituality:

Our conversations revealed that several different languages can be used by children to give voice to their spirituality. In subtly different ways these



conditioned the forms which relational consciousness took. (Hay and Nye 1998, 129)

The argument that spirituality cannot be directly known but can only be understood by the child and related to the researcher through the use of analogous teaching links, counters claims that the 'experience-based and personal' approaches have privileged access to the 'inner self' of the child. It also means that the child's spiritual experiences have necessary links with the contexts which supply their means of expression. Their environment and experience provide them with a bank of discourses and images from which they can draw the tools of thought and communication. In chapters 3.1 and 3.2, I explore in detail the processes whereby the children select their ideas from a wealth and diversity of meanings. In his study of Wittgenstein, Pears writes of the pupil's role in the establishment of teaching links. He does not become a mere passive recipient of a language of sensations from the teacher. The very diversity of teaching links requires selection and manipulation of the linguistic tools available.

So there are several varieties of what might be called 'teaching links', and an adequate discussion of them would have to include a description of the ways in which the pupil fills in the gaps, and makes moves which go beyond his literal instructions. (Pears 1971, 149)

In particular the use of analogy requires personal choice:

Analogical descriptions provide an example of the kind of thing which only the pupil can do for himself. (149)

This understanding of the pupil's role is borne out by Nye's own work. She recognises the wealth of images available to children and is impressed by the mental activity of the children in their employment of analogy to describe the spiritual. The children are themselves agents in the process of meaning making. Nye writes of recent research which challenges Goldman's view that children have fundamental difficulties with the mental processing required to understand and use analogy:

This helps to make sense of the frequent use of an analogy-making strategy by children expressing spirituality, as a number of examples have already suggested: life's meaning as a 'jigsaw puzzle'; the soul as a 'hologram' and as 'smoke on a misty day'; God as 'eternal love', 'kindness between people' and as 'amazing places in nature' (Hay and Nye 1998, 132)

Thatcher does not just question the value of 'inner talk' but disputes the very idea of spirituality as an inner essence (like Hay's *relational consciousness*) from which other experiences and insights derive. The imperative towards public language outlined above means that the existence of such a spirituality cannot be proved or disproved by empirical research; we can only hope to monitor contextualised 'spiritual' activity. An experientialist might focus on the spiritual activity of the child making sense of personal spiritual experience in a quest for

self understanding. Another school may look for spiritual activity in the child's engagement with traditional religious discourses to explore that which is of ultimate value and ultimate truth. This latter brings us back to God talk and the two perceived problems with which the chapter began: that the emphasis on intellect and religious language does not give a true picture of children's spirituality, and the limitations of children's intellectual ability.

### ***2.1.5 Readiness for Theology***

As no language can be said to offer a true picture of children's spirituality, Hay's criticism of God talk for its failure to do so is unfair. The first reservation about God talk, the limitations of children's intellectual ability remains, and whether the children are ready for the kind of intellectual activity described above. Some trends in religious education have worked on the assumption that they are not. A Piagetian understanding of the relationship between cognitive stages and theology was basic to Goldman's hesitations about children's readiness for religion. Once a child has reached her 'cognitive boundaries' it should not be pushed further or it will become hopelessly confused. Such thinking was enshrined in the Plowden Report of 1967:

Children should not be unnecessarily involved in religious controversy.

They should not be confused by being taught to doubt before faith is established. (Plowden 1967, 207)



Add to this a liberal concern to promote tolerance for as plurality of religions by emphasising the common and avoiding the controversial, and the result is that school religious education often takes what Wright calls, 'the easy route of pre-packaging religion' ignoring complexity, ambiguity and ultimate questions (Wright 1993).

Such an approach is limiting, but research and teaching that focuses on children's intellectual capacities for religion does not have to be like this. Nye's own work has shown children leaping over cognitive boundaries set for them by Piaget and Goldman, and presents examples of a natural interest in, and faculty for, rational thought among her interviewees (Hay with Nye 1998). The religious language used in cognitive and religious approaches need not be limited to definitions of 'pre-packaged' concepts, but can become a tool for discussion and disputation. Wright advocates a religious education that develops not just religious language but 'religious literacy' so that young people are well prepared for the contemporary religious situation at the heart of which is 'not a common variously expressed, experiential dimension of human essence, but rather a set of ambiguous, competing and often overlapping narratives about the true nature of reality'. (Wright 1993, 173)

Living in a context of religious plurality, and engaging on a day-to-day basis with people of different traditions from their own, the children in my research project are well aware of these overlapping narratives, and encounter religious ambiguity face to face. There were indeed cases during the collection of data, where children appeared to be relaying received ideas with little original reflection; there were

also many instances where the tension they experienced between their existing religious ideas and the challenges to them engaged their minds in active meaning making as they tried to reconcile their differing views of God or deliberated on the possibility of bringing an end to inter religious strife through the creation of a new religion (G112f, H105-119). Rather than limiting and restricting their religious expression, it will be seen that the cognitive and religious approaches of this research gave children opportunities to employ their rational faculties in displays of purposeful creativity and individuality.

In her research, Nye noted her need to distinguish between passages which were made up of 'religious information' and those that seemed 'more personally grounded' (Hay with Nye 1998, 101). She was distinguishing instances of spiritual activity from among the 'casual chatter'. Similarly with my research, among the children's discourses there were examples of repetition of learned religious speak and others of a dialogue where different ideas were brought together in an active search for meaning. This distinction takes us back to the origins of the term God talk, in Macquarrie's writing. He observes that not all God talk is theology and identifies a need to draw more sharply 'the line between theological language and the wider phenomenon of religious language' (Macquarrie 1967, 18). He distinguishes between the two as follows:

Theological language arises out of religious language as a whole, and it does so when a religious faith becomes reflective and tries to give an account of itself in verbal statements. (19)

He later cites Barth's definition of theology for the Church as, 'the task of criticizing and revising her language about God' (Church Dogmatics cited by Macquarrie 1967, 34).

In the next chapter I employ a more inclusive definition of 'theology', but the theologians' statements provide pointers towards a key strand in this definition: theology as a creative activity. The children in my project are productively engaged in creative theology when they use language to give a reflective account of their own beliefs in dialogue with others, and revise that language in the light of encounter with different ideas. A number of features of the children's discourse indicate a cognitive capacity for such theological God talk. Indicators of this engagement of the mind include:

1. The grammatical linking of ideas through causal connectives (as in JH's response to the word 'spirit' E98-100);
2. Making choices between alternative ideas (F56-66, G67f, H105f, I70f);
3. Creating frameworks to bring together seemingly contradictory ideas (the idea of a God of many features or colours, to accommodate both polytheism and monotheism F60-6, H113-6);
4. Questioning received ideas from within or outside their own tradition (for example, JK's doubts over the raising of the dead (F204) and the questioning of Muslim strictures on what people should or should not do (G361-2);



5. Questioning the authority by which religious statements are made (the truth of the Qur'an E361-2, the motives of parents F143-5);
6. Constructing hypothetical situations to explore the logical consequences of their own beliefs and understandings (the establishment of a new universal religion G81f, imagining their reactions should their children wish to change religion G340f);
7. The use of analogy or metaphor to illustrate thinking (CS's image of the fairy's spell to illustrate the relationship between God's activity and our own G149-152).

Some of the products of this creative process will be explored in more detail in Chapters 5.1 and 5.2 of this study.

At the beginning of this chapter, I set out Nye's distinction between 'cognitive and religious' and 'experience-based and personal' approaches. Through the chapter I followed the 'experience-based and personal' thread and used it to establish, by counter argument, the basis for my understanding of children's religion as grounded in public discourse and mental activity. I now return to Nye's distinction to pick up the 'cognitive and religious' thread. In the next chapter I position my project in relation to the work of Goldman's successors and consider the appropriateness of applying Piagetian theories of cognitive development to the examples of religious children's understanding that emerged from the research discussions.

## 2.2 God-Talk and Stage Development

Having established this project's interest in a 'cognitive and religious' approach to children's religious understanding (Nye 1996), I will now relate its findings to the tradition of stage development in religion. In particular I will explore the theories of James Fowler as an example of attempts to draw the cognitive and religious together into a structured developmental model. This model, as set out in '*Stages of Faith*' (Fowler 1981) will be examined for its usefulness in the interpretation of the children's participation in dialogue.

### 2.2.1 Fowler's Model of Faith Stage Development

Fowler draws on the work of a number of developmentalists in the Piagetian psychology school. In '*Stages of Faith*', he recognises his indebtedness to Erik Erikson's work on the development of personality and realisation of identity (Erikson 1963), and to Lawrence Kohlberg's model of universal stages of moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1981, 1984). Their emphasis on a cognitive approach, the developmental dimension, and focus on structures significantly influenced Fowler's work (Nipkow, Fowler and Schweitzer 1991, 2). Coming from a theological background, Fowler brings to the Piagetian theories of these writers the outlook of theologians and historians of religion, Paul Tillich, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, H. Richard Niebuhr and Robert Bellah among others. Underlying Fowler's developmentalism is Tillich's and Smith's broad understanding of faith as a universal human concern for finding meaning in life outside dependence on the

traditions of particular religious communities (Fowler 1981, 5). His model of faith stages is influenced by structural interpretations of the history of religion such as Bellah's evolutionist model charting the progression of religion through five stages from the 'primitive' to the 'modern' (Bellah 1970, 22), while Niebuhr contributes a pattern of progression of faith in the individual with his three-fold categorisation of faith into different relations of loyalty; *henotheism*, *polytheism* and *radical monotheism* (Niebuhr 1960). Fowler's faith development theory is part of this intellectual response to the religious pluralism of the twentieth century.

Faith development theory and research have emerged as part of the late twentieth century effort to address and account for unifying patterns in the pluralism in person's appropriations of religious and ideological traditions. This work seeks to take account of the relativity of construing and constructing life-orientating meanings while avoiding the trap of falling into the shallowness of dogmatic relativism. (Fowler ed. Oser and Scarlett 1991, 42)

This combination of 'construing and constructing ... meanings' and eschewing 'dogmatic relativism' brings together Fowler's cognitive and religious concerns. The dialectic between them is that of form and content. Developmentalism is aligned with form: 'The result of the stage development approach is to substitute form for content' (Hull 1991, 214). The focus is not what people believe but the style or form of their faith; what Fowler calls the 'knowing and construing' rather than the 'known and construed' (Fowler 1992, 12). To get full value from Fowler's thought both need to be given due weight. It is often the former that is



employed in studies of people's religiousness as Fowler's stage model of faith development provides a ready tool for the interpretation of empirical data. A few examples out of many projects using Fowler's stages are studies by Kalam in South India (1981), Parks with young adults, Barnes, Doyle and Johnson with Catholics, and Green and Hoffman on people's perceptions of others (Astley 1992).

Fowler postulates six different stages of faith following an initial period of 'Primal Faith'. The stages are:

*Stage 1: intuitive-protective faith*, a fantasy-filled, imitative phase of early childhood;

*Stage 2: mythic-literal faith*, where the child takes on the beliefs, stories, observances, moral rules of his or her community with literal interpretation;

*Stage 3: synthetic-conventional faith* of adolescence and beyond where faith provides a coherent orientation in the midst of a more complex range of involvements and synthesizes values and information to provide a basis for identity and outlook;

*Stage 4: individuating-reflective faith*, a challenging stage where the late adolescent or adult faces tensions between individuality versus group definition and subjectivity versus objectivity and critical reflection;

*Stage 5: conjunctive faith*, a new reclaiming and reworking of one's past; Ricoeur's 'second naivete' in which symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meanings;

*Stage 6: universalizing faith*, attained by very few, an 'incarnation' of the imperatives of absolute love and justice, the self spends and is spent for the

‘transformation of present reality in the direction of transcendent actuality’  
(Fowler 1981, 200).

There are aspects of Fowler’s stage developmentalism which relate closely to the experience and approach to religion of children in this project. The very background of religious pluralism that has proved an impetus to Fowler’s thinking, is the context of the children’s own mental activity. The emphasis on faith as ‘construing and constructing meaning’ reflects the interest in the children’s active engagement of the mind with which the last chapter ended, and developmentalism’s principle of movement and the ‘human being actively organising his or her experiences by structurally transforming his or her cognitive-emotive deep structures’ shares this project’s understanding of children as active agents (Chapter 1.1.3). Nevertheless there are difficulties that work against a systematic application of Fowler’s model to the findings of my research. These are the underlying assumptions of a stage development model that individuals move through the stages progressively, and the loose association in Fowler’s pattern of particular stages with particular chronological ages. As will be seen in this chapter, the children taking part in the discussions show signs of styles of thinking from a variety of different stages and not just those assigned to their age group. They also demonstrate marked inconsistency in the styles they employ, individual children showing a tendency to jump around between the stages.

There are also the uncomfortable issues of normativity. The hierarchical structure of developmental models, where each successive stage is closer to an ideal, implies a value judgement on the faith styles of individuals and of communities. The

implications for valuing the faith of small children at the earlier stages is an issue (Nye 1996, 2-14), and some in the field of empirical research have argued that Fowler's model confers comparative inferiority on whole cultural groups. Vincent Murray, for example, finds that the approach to their religious tradition of Sikh young people largely fits within the Synthetic-Conventional Stage 3 showing little inclination to move to the Individuative-Reflective Stage 4 (Murray 1991). The model of faith progression raises a number of questions for my own research. Does the fact that the participants are children mean their faith necessarily immature? Does the tendency towards Mythic-Literalism demonstrated in the reported speech of the Muslim children mean that their faith is less advanced than the more reflective faith expressed by some of their peers? When the children ground their faith statements in the authority of their community, is that faith less adequate than a more autonomous consideration of life's questions? These practical and ideological reservations however, do not deny the usefulness of Fowler's work to this project. Rather they indicate a need to find different emphases in his theory, in particular to explore the relationship between content and form, and form and context.

### ***2.2.2 The Theological Content of Faith***

As has been seen, Fowler's Faith Development theory was the product of a creative alliance between two intellectual disciplines, theology and developmental psychology. As Fowler says of himself in his reflexive first chapters of 'Stages of Faith':



A citizen reared in the land of theology began to try to earn dual citizenship in the new world of the psychology of human development.’ (Fowler 1981, 38)

This union is not without its tensions. Nipkow draws attention to the problem that the structural-cognitive approach with hierarchical implications based on psychological development criteria, can lead to a theologically difficult undervaluing of the ‘firm trust in God’ or the ‘joyful feeling of belonging to God’ of the child or mentally handicapped adult (Nipkow 1991, 96). At times the balance is thrown the other way. While Stages 1 to 4 follow a familiar cognitive pattern towards autonomous and critical thought, the final stages draw back from that autonomy, affording more space to the action of God; room for a ‘transforming vision’ (Fowler 1981, 198), for ‘transcendent actuality’ (Fowler 1981, 200). In fact, *‘Stages of Faith’* ends with an acknowledgement of God’s ‘extraordinary grace’ that can break through at any stage:

There is a limit to how much one can talk about faith and development in faith without acknowledging that the question of whether there will be faith on earth is finally God’s business.’ (Fowler 1981, 302)

At issue here is the use of the term ‘faith’ which, Nipkow claims, Fowler has introduced ‘without discriminating between a psychological and theological definition’ (Nipkow 1991, 96). In order for it to be of general application across the boundaries of different religious and secular traditions, Fowler widens the scope of ‘faith’ from the strictly theological to include secular loyalties and

cognitive activity, but in so doing loses some precision in employment of the term. His writing appears to contain different discourses of 'faith'; a discourse of Piagetian cognition, a theology of covenant and loyalty, and a 'Kingdom of God' eschatology. The first of these focuses on the processes, or form, of faith but with the others the content re-emerges.

In spite of his enthusiasm for developmental psychology, Fowler wrote:

As a theologian I never lost sight of the crucial importance of the "contents" of faith - the realities, values, powers and communities on and in which persons "rest their hearts". (Fowler 1981, 273)

Following Niebuhr, who was himself influenced by the philosophy of Josiah Royce, Fowler sets out an understanding of faith as a relational enterprise involving a commitment to a centre (or centres) of value and power (Fowler 1986, 16f) and so introduces into his model an object (or objects) of loyalty. In describing the final Universalizing Stage of his model, Stage 6, Fowler puts at the end of faith's journey, the ultimate centre of power, a 'transcendent actuality' (1986, 200) and 'a power that unifies and transforms the world' (1986, 201). Faith has its objects; not only that, but these objects have different values. Though he writes of faith as a human universal, of the existence of faith without religion, and of the possibility of individuals having as their centre of value and power the secular foci of financial success, career, nation, family (1981, 16f), it is clear that Fowler holds a hierarchical view of these objects of loyalty. Loyalty can be directed towards a false object; committing oneself to finite centres of value and power is 'idolatry'

(1981, 18). The issue of normativity is not just an issue of faith style, it is also an issue of faith content. Fowler makes a comparison between the faith of a Marxist, a follower of Ayn Rand and an Orthodox Jew best described by the structural features of Individuative-Reflective faith, and relates it to that of others who share their content commitments but at the earlier Synthetic stage:

Evaluations based on the truth, ethical adequacy or humanizing power of their faiths *relative to each other* however, would have to be based on criteria that included both structural and content-structural dimensions.  
(1981, 301)

Here the dialectic is not between structure and content but between structure and the structuring power of the contents of faith for, ‘the operative contents of our faiths – whether religious or not – shape our perceptions, interpretations, priorities and passions.’ (1981, 281) For Fowler, the ‘adequacy’ of an individual’s faith, or indeed a community’s faith tradition can be evaluated on its capacity to lead through the faith stages towards the development of universalizing faith (1981, 302). Though faith as a propensity towards meaning-making may be a human universal (1981, xiii), ‘good faith’ (1981, 293.) or ‘adequate faith’ (Fowler 1992, 13) is not. The latter cannot be evaluated in stage developmental terms alone but through theological reflection:

But the overall question of adequacy and its criteria can be answered only in relation to that which is known or construed in faith – namely human



relatedness to the Transcendent. God – and man in relation to God – is the object of theological reflection. (Fowler 1992, 13-14)

As Fowler moves into Stage 6 of his model he brings us closer to a very ‘particular’ vision of what constitutes the focus of ‘good faith’ (1981, 207). Fowler recognises that his normative images owe much to Niebuhr’s descriptions of ‘radical monotheistic faith’, a faith in which ‘the reality of God – transcendent and ever exceeding our grasp – exerts transforming and redeeming tension on the structures of our common life and faith’ (Fowler 1981, 204). It is an understanding firmly rooted in the Jewish / Christian image of faith in the Kingdom of God. Fowler attempts to answer any problems readers may have with his use of specifically Judaeo-Christian imagery with what he calls the ‘Absoluteness of the Particular’ (Fowler 1981, 207). It is with this concept that he avoids ‘the shallowness of dogmatic relativism’. Fowler believes in a universal human vocation ‘to lean into God’s promised future for us and for all being’ (Fowler 1981, 210). For Jews and Christians their particular vision of the reality they call the Kingdom of God is a moment of absoluteness within their particular faith tradition to which they have a duty to witness (Fowler 1981, 209).

Through numerous works in which he holds in tension these psychological, covenantal and eschatological understandings of faith, Fowler’s own (Christian) theology emerges. From this process two points stand out of particular relevance to the interpretation of the dialogue of the children in my research project: the phenomenological anchoring of Fowler’s model in a reality of God and his Kingdom, and the recognition that this reality lies behind the varied stages or styles

of faith he characterises. This contrasts with the approach of Hay, for example, where the underlying phenomenon ‘spirituality’ is associated closely with a particular style (the characteristics of relational consciousness), and other styles are viewed as a hindrance to its expression (Hay 1998). Hay and Nye’s project seeks to isolate a particular style while the stage characterisations of Fowler can lead to a consideration of the interplay of a variety of different styles in a portrayal of children’s thinking about God.

### *2.2.3 The God Referent*

In order to make use of Fowler’s model for this task of interpretation, I wish first to relate it to insights from the biblical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur. The Bible, like Fowler’s theory, has as its underlying perspective God’s Kingdom – ‘le royaume de Dieu’ (Ricoeur 1986, 126) or ‘la réalité de possible’ (128). Ricoeur uses the sense-referent model by which the sense, or meaning, of what is written in the variety of biblical discourses has God (and his kingdom) as its background, its referent (128). This referent may be signaled by the use of ‘qualifiers’ or ‘limit-expressions’ (Klemm 1983, 113) such as the expressions ‘Kingdom of God’, ‘new being’ or indeed ‘God’.

Moving to the dialogues of this project we also find God as the referent. The discussion transcriptions are records of children’s God talk. God is the background of much of their sense or meaning-making; in the frequent use of the limit-expression ‘God’ (or ‘gods’), the reference is explicit. The religious provenance of the stimulus words given to the children, and the nature of several of the questions

formulated for their consideration, mean this is to be expected. However, the results of the research study go further to suggest that the sense of much of the children's discourse outside these discussions, has God as its referent. They relate discussions with their peers about religious issues (F58-60, F158-162, E16-18, E8-10, C9), and thinking around questions of faith that has taken place outside the confines of the research situation (A167-8, C23-5, F245-6). The children's context, living in close encounter with an observant Muslim community, means that God is the referent of much of their everyday experience. Not only do their Muslim peers 'talk a lot about God'(E236), but the sense of the dress, buildings, food shops, and many of the practices of their neighbours is to be understood in terms of relating to God. Ricoeur writes about the introduction of the extraordinary into the ordinary signaling the God/Kingdom referent in the Parables (Klemm 1983, 115). For these children much of the ordinary is given an extraordinary gloss by their peers: discussions about whether or not you watch television (D57), sing in the choir (D40), dance to music (D69), what happens to pictures on the wall at night (D73-8) and even (in one overheard conversation where a Muslim child refused to share his school equipment with a non-Muslim) with whom you share your rubber.

In contrast to Hay and Nye's concern that resort to 'conventionalised' religious language limits the expression of children's spirituality, Ricoeur sees it as having a liberating effect on thought:

Comprendre le mot "Dieu", c'est suivre la flèche de sens de ce mot. Par flèche de sens, j'entends son pouvoir double: de rassembler toutes les



significations issues des discours partiels, et d'ouvrir un horizon qui échappe à la clôture du discours. (Ricoeur 1975, 86, 129)

Likewise with the children, the fact that God is the referent keeps the dialogue open. Not only is God the referent of their (Muslim) peers' talk, he is also the referent of their response. For them he is the reality behind their encounter not just the product of another's speech. They may talk in defining terms about him but cannot encapsulate him in that definition; there is always more to say. When the Muslim children set out their ideas of God, the others respond with different understandings or understandings that take the idea of God further: the idea of a retributive God is contrasted with that of a forgiving God (B332f), the idea of a God who orders his people around with one who gives more freedom (G355f); the idea of God as strictly one, with ideas that include elements of plurality (D221f, F65-6, H113-6). Sometimes there is so much to say that he escapes definition; 'God is God, definitely' (B467), 'God's just there' (G125).

#### ***2.2.4 Religious Styles and God-Talk***

There is not only much to say about God, there are many ways of saying it. In keeping with Fowler's model of a variety of faith styles, the children bring together various understandings of God and various styles of religious speech that refer to him. There are examples of a credal style; 'here's what I believe ...' (F201), 'I feel that what they teach us at my church ...' (H7), 'we have to believe all of them...' (H111), of rational argumentation, (H113-6, G138-143, F154-5, F63-6); of empathetic speech '[God] might be getting bored' (F218); of mystery, 'I want to

know - how did God ever make? – how did it? – when did he?’ (F195); of direct experience, ‘I feel God’s spirit in me’; of moral imperative, ‘I know God taught them to be good to anyone’ (H194). Religious language is ‘une langue polyphonique’ (Ricoeur 1975, 123) and it is through this coming together of a variety of styles of discourse about God that God talk proceeds. As Ricoeur says about biblical language:

La signification de ce référent [Dieu] du discours biblique est impliquée d’une manière spéciale qu’il reste à dire dans les multiples significations solidaires des formes littéraires de la narration de la prophétie, de l’hymne, de la sagesse, etc. Le “God-Talk” – pour reprendre l’expression de McQuarrie – procède de la concurrence et de la convergence de ces discours partiels. Le référent “Dieu” est à la fois le coordinateur de ces discours divers, et le point de fuite. (Ricoeur 1975, 86, 128)

Hull takes this recognition of the variety of forms of religious speech, each with its own perspective on religious life, as the benefit to be drawn from Stage Development Theories. The imperative is to ‘prevent the colonization of the religious consciousness by one form of religious speech’ (Hull 1991, 222). To identify a particular style as the genuine expression of spirituality (Hay 1998), or, indeed, to give a particular style hierarchical status over others, would be to risk that colonisation. To free Fowler’s faith categories from their hierarchical structure so that they become styles rather than stages, is to give due recognition to the value of each of a variety of forms of religious speech and fit better the variety of expression used by the children in the project. An alternative model would be a

number of parallel (rather than sequential) styles which set side by side, jigsaw fashion, build up a fuller picture of the divine referent to which they all tend. However, adoption of such a model would downplay the value of the sense of movement and tension between stages within Fowler's scheme. Perhaps the dynamism of plate tectonics creates a more useful metaphor than the passivity of the jigsaw puzzle.

### ***2.2.5 Movement between Styles***

In the movement between Fowler's stages there is a series of confrontations between different styles of faith where one loses out to another. Individuals will plateau at various stages but for those who move there is a degree of restlessness in their faith. Though the idea of progression is not being used in the interpretation of the children's discourse, that of movement is, and here Fowler's model can be employed. In the faith stage descriptors, of particular relevance to this study is the identification of factors which lead to transition from one stage to another. These have been extracted from Fowler's model (Fowler 1981) and set out below:

#### *Factors Leading to Stage Transition*

##### *Stage 1 -> Stage 2*

Emergence of concrete operational thinking

The child's growing concern to know how things are and to clarify for him or herself the basic distinctions between what is real and what only seems to be.



### *Stage 2 -> Stage 3*

The transition to formal operational thought

The implicit clash or contradictions in stories that leads to reflection on meanings

“Cognitive conceit” leading to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings

Conflicts between authoritative stories

### *Stage 3 -> Stage 4*

Serious clashes or contradictions between valued authority sources

Encounter with experiences or perspectives that lead to critical reflection on how one's beliefs and values have formed and changed and on how 'relative' they are to one's particular background

### *Stage 4 -> Stage 5*

Restlessness with self images of Stage 4

Images and energies from a deeper self

Stories, symbols, myths, paradoxes from one's own or other traditions break in on the neatness of previous faith

Recognition of complexities and multi-levelled meaning

### *Stage 5 -> Stage 6*

Transforming vision

The call of the radical actualization of Stage 6

Elements of Piagetian cognitive development can be observed in the transitional factors in the earlier stages, 'emergence of operational thinking', 'formal operational thought', 'cognitive conceit', but of increasing importance in the movement through the stages, is the influence of encounter with external factors. The need to discriminate between real and unreal, the reflection on meanings, the critical viewing of one's own beliefs, the recognition of multi-levelled meaning, are all responses to the conflict in stories and meaning, the conflict between authorities and the complexities of the religious and cultural pluralism of contemporary society. The context within which the children live and work, that of daily encounter with these differences of ideology, narrative and lifestyle, provides impetus for movement.

With their particular experiences at a young age, it might be expected that the children would move through Fowler's stages at a faster rate than their peers living in a more homogeneous community. There are a number of instances of children's discourse bearing the signs of the reflective Stage 4 associated with late adolescence by Fowler. However, while they are factors in transition 'up' through Fowler's stages, their experiences of context and encounter can also provide motivation for not moving, or indeed for 'returning' to 'earlier' stages. Hull applies Kegan's distinction between 'stage transitionals' and 'stage resisters' to the characteristics of movement from one stage to another (Hull 1997, 10). The factors are described in terms of emotions – 'hostility, denial, rationalisation' etc – but each emotion can be a reaction to a number of experiences of life, environment, and encounter. With the children of the project, for example, the situation of being in a cultural and religious minority can lead to defensiveness, lack of confidence,

fierce loyalty to their own group or hostility towards the larger group, which in turn can affect the direction of movement between stages. The contrasting terms of ‘stage transitionals’ and ‘stage resisters’ does impose a hierarchical sense of progression or regression. For the purposes of this project I prefer to interpret the children’s employment of different forms of religious discourse in terms of multi-directional movement between styles. This movement is demonstrated in the children’s speech. Fowler’s categories will be used in an interpretation of the influence of context on the styles the children employ.

#### ***2.2.6 Applying Fowler’s Faith Styles to Children’s God-Talk***

The context of my research project is one of encounter: the children’s encounter with the religion of others; their encounter with different groups negotiating power relations; their encounter in a context of dialogue within the research discussion activity. What follows are examples of how these different encounters influence the children’s styles of religious discourse.

##### *Encounter in the Context of Plurality*

The subject of much of the children’s talk is their encounter with the faith of their Muslim peers. As a mixed group identifying themselves as Christians and Muslims respectively, they are also encountering each other’s religious perspectives. Their forms of religious speech are influenced both by their experience of religious diversity with its complexities and contradictions, and by the specific content of the dominant religious discourse in their environment. One response by the children to



a context of diversity and conflict between the authoritative stories of different traditions, is a close identification with their own religious tradition and with the god who is seen as the god of their group. This is reflected in statements that begin ‘the church I go to believes’ (E37) ‘what I’ve been brought up to believe is...’ (H134), ‘what they teach us at my church...’ (H7), ‘that’s what we mean by ...’ (B461). There is a ‘my god/your god distinction’ (F80-3, H140), and the ‘my god’ may be described in close personal terms. He is someone who has a particular interest in the child as one of his own, ‘my god made me’ (B430); he is someone to whom the child feels loyalty and on account of whom the child feels protective anger should he be denigrated by others, ‘he was cussing my god down and then I was getting so angry with this person’ (B412); he is someone in whom the child believes whatever others say, ‘he can say whatever he wants because I know my god’s good’(B417-8), and someone to whom the child can relate as having a distinctive personality different from that of other people’s gods, while the Muslim god is ‘going to be bad to them when they die...’ (B332), ‘when we get to heaven I think our god’s going to be good to us’ (B344). This use of faith as a basis for one’s identity, and the emphasis on personal relationship with God has links with Fowler’s third, Synthetic-Conventional faith stage.

With the Muslims’ emphasis on one god, and the idea of God as one, expressed by Christians in the group, monotheism has a prominent place in the children’s thought. It is an example of the content-structural dimensions of which Fowler writes. An imperative towards unity in a context of diversity leads children to devise all-embracing models drawing disparate focuses of faith into a unified Godhead. They may speak of God as one with many names (G71-2, I72-3), as one

with many features (H116) or as a main god with many subsidiaries (D221). In this process of ‘construing’ and ‘constructing’, the discourse reflects critically on the traditions being brought together and, rather than choosing between them and adopting one wholesale, it uses logical reasoning to work out a creative solution to the contradictions of religious plurality. This critical theologising is closest to the fourth of Fowler’s stages, individuative and reflective faith.

Another content aspect of the Muslim faith they encounter is the emphasis on God as judge, on reward and retribution. This can have a very different affect on the faith direction the discourse takes. The ‘reliance on reciprocity’ and ‘works righteousness’ of this approach to God is incorporated by Fowler into his second, Mythic-Literal stage. It is occasionally imitated by the research participants, notably in JH’s judgement on those perpetrating violence in the name of religion in Ireland and Algeria. They are ‘going to be burnt in a Hell of fire’ (E129-130). JH’s advice to those wishing to avoid such punishment is, ‘if you do anything wrong you have to go on your own hands and knees and you’ve got to pray to God for forgiveness and you promise him you won’t do it again’ (E133).

The children are encountering different religious contents and styles. In this context they are coming across the same issue of normativity that is evident in Fowler’s work. We find them both making value judgments about the religious thinking of their neighbours, and questioning the appropriateness of so doing. The negative association of the religions of peers with animistic idol worship is found in the discourse of Christians: ‘have you ever seen a god that’s gold – that’s rock solid gold?’ (H235-6); ‘your god’s just a pure statue!’ (G308), and Muslims, ‘they say

our god's made out of stone' (B388). There are several examples of children sniggering at what are deemed to be the 'silly' beliefs of others.

**JE:** One time Ashraf told me – he said he prayed to his god and his god dropped money down.

(general laughter)

**MA:** That ain't true.

**JO:** It's so stupid! (B396-400)

The Muslim children's belief that pictures of living creatures will come to life is the occasion of mirth among both Hindu and Christian children (D73f) and though the Christian children often try to accommodate their Hindu friends' religious understandings during the course of the dialogues (H113-6), they do have difficulty with some of their ideas, particularly the figure of Ganesh with his elephant's head (A129). Occasionally a voice is raised that calls for respect for the beliefs of others; 'I think if they believe it, then I don't think it's nice to laugh.' (D87)

The creativity of several of the children's theological discussions shows a dynamic view of religion into which ideas of progression and development fit easily. The idea of progressive religious development is evident in the dialogue in which CS, JS and AK discuss the establishment of a new religion as a culmination of previous traditions and reward for religious activity (G115f, G138f). In the same conversation JS implies that a logical development for Hinduism would be a move away from polytheism to monotheism, 'Will your temple stick to one god one day, any day' (G182) Again the dominant 'one god' discourse is asserting itself.



The children's responses to encounter with different religious traditions are influenced by the power relations between the groups identifying with those traditions. The Muslim children are very much in the majority. The Christians and Hindus sometimes feel threatened by this and are therefore on the defensive in their relationship with the Muslim tradition, but supportive of each other as sharing the minority position. The clash and contradictions between the stories and authorities of the different religions initiates response; the direction the response takes is influenced by the power games in play. In the negotiation of these power relations in religious discourse, children can be observed moving to and fro across the style boundaries. An example of one child's movement across boundaries and employment of a variety of styles can be seen in different statements made by JN during the course of discussions.

- JN explains that he would not enter a mosque 'because I feel that what they teach us at my church that there's only one like religion and there's only one god - because I'm a Christian I feel I should always go to church' (H7-9).
- Speaking to a black friend about her negative encounter with a group of Muslim children he advises, 'well you should have said this -well your god must have been more black than Asian because he was brought up in one of the hottest places in the world so he must be sort of dark brown.'(H173-5)
- To a Hindu friend talking about the variety of gods, he says, 'yeah, because – they can all be the same god because God can – God can ... change – like different features. He can be in you.'(H113-6)

- His response to the word ‘Spirit’ is, ‘It’s in you. It’s God’s Spirit and it makes you do good things. It guides you. We sing a song about the Spirit in church.’ (C19-20) Sometimes, he says, he feels the spirit in him.

In these four examples (three of which come from the same discussion) JN seems to jump around from one understanding of God to another: God as one and exclusive; a different god for different groups (‘my god / your god’); God as one but inclusive; God as spirit. It is not just his understandings that vary but his styles moving from an acceptance of belief on his church’s authority (Stage 3), to a very literalistic construction of a mythical black God (Stage 2), to a more creative, reflective image of God amalgamating ideas from different traditions (Stage 4), to a personal sensing of the indwelling presence of God (Stage 3).

Each style is employed in response to a different social context characterised by power relations. JN is positioning himself within a context of religious diversity by communal identification with one group as opposed to another; responding defensively to unequal power relations in the pressure put upon black children by their majority Muslim peers; seeking mutual agreement in dialogue with a Hindu friend; engaging personally with the charismatic, spirit-based ethos of his Pentecostal church, and relating to God. JN’s God talk shows how contexts of social interaction influence the form of faith that is presented. It is not just that the children are being presented with different, often contradictory, ideas to employ their meaning-making faculties, but that these ideas are presented in different contexts which affect their thinking styles.

These experiences of encounter with different religious traditions and different groups are brought to the context of the discussion set up for the research project. The meeting together of the child participants with myself as researcher and with each other adds another dynamic to the encounter and further influences the styles of religious discourse employed. The presence of the researcher / teacher who poses questions, occasionally asks for clarification but otherwise is more an observer than participator in the discussion, provides an impetus towards 'telling'. The children are to some degree presenting themselves to the researcher; defining their identity in the form of credal statements, 'I believe ...' (F201), 'I just believe' (F242), 'because I am a Christian ...' (H7), 'the church I go to believes' (E36-7), or sharing their own life story (E199f). This focus on faith as identity and 'personal myth' fits Fowler's Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith. With the impetus towards telling comes the story-telling and sharing of tales from their own tradition; a way of holding the researcher's attention, or that of the group. Examples of this are MA's account of Hanuman swallowing the sun (B521f), and PT's eagerness to bring and show the storybooks of her religion (B285), instances of the 'rise of the narrative' in Stage 2.

The presence of other children contributing sometimes conflicting ideas to the discussion, encourages a rationalising tendency (Stage 4) as children find grounds for disagreement with those ideas, or try to synthesise them into a creative whole. Examples include the interruptions of JN and SN when AY tries to account for her belief in 'other people's gods'; 'That ain't answering the question', 'No! How can



you believe in that?', 'If you've got one god how can you believe in other gods?'(H237) The idea of one god with different names 'so we believe in all the gods' (H238) emerged from the discussion. CS's concept of a 'new religion' is produced in response to the tensions he perceives in the context of religious pluralism, but the form it takes is also a response to JS's reservations and suggestions. JS's interventions mean he has to reason his model through carefully (G122, 128, 142).

The discussion's context within the school, with its official ethos of a united community of harmony and mutual respect, brings another authoritative story to the encounter. In the tension between the separatist sense of group-belonging and defining identity of 'my god and yours' outlook, and a unifying 'God is for all' approach, the school context weighs in favour of the latter. JH's syncretic image of a God of all colours is an example of a resolution of this tension along these lines (F58f). Working in the opposite direction is the absence of Muslim children at these discussions which leads to an emphasis (perhaps an overemphasis) on them as 'the other'. Countering the movement towards syncretism are the strong criticisms of the Muslim children's religious stance. These criticisms are sometimes on the grounds of hypocrisy. The Muslim children's interest in judgment is turned around against them and their literal concern with reciprocity (Stage 2) is matched with an equally literal concern by some non Muslims to consign them to punishment for not living up to their words, 'when they're teasing us they sometimes say that you're going to hell but they're the ones teasing us so they might go to hell-they're doing bad things' (G283-5). Another approach is to doubt the authority which guides the faith of their Muslim peers, whether their parents'

authority (F140-2), the authority of their religious leaders (F154-5) and the authority of the Qur'an (G361-3), calling into question the foundations of the Muslims' Synthetic-Conventional faith.

The very experience, then, of being engaged in a school-based research project away from their Muslim peers has influenced the thinking styles of the children involved. It may have exaggerated existing trends or encouraged new directions of thought by bringing into sharper focus the complexities of the religious context in which they live.

### *The Meeting between Stages 3 and 4*

The examples above have demonstrated the children's readiness to move to and fro between styles of God talk. The final part of this chapter will focus on the point of encounter between two of those styles.

The final chapter of Fowler's 'Stages of Faith', 'Faith on Earth', brings to the fore the areas of creative tension in his scheme providing several points of departure for those wishing to explore further the implications of religious plurality for human faith. One area is that of possible links between his stage categorisations and the faith development of 'average people' in different cultural settings and eras (Fowler 81, 299). He suggests links between faith stages and different societies while acknowledging the speculative and conjectural nature of his observations.

Those relating to Stages 3 and 4 are as follows:

Synthetic-Conventional faith as a widespread cultural style could only emerge, I should think, in a social context where the uniqueness and value of each person is recognized and where the clash and competition of cultural myths has given rise to a speculative and synthetic literary tradition.

In my judgment the emergence of Individuative-Reflective faith as a relatively widespread structural style in a society could and would emerge only in a cultural setting marked by ideological pluralism, by some degree of individualism as an ideological ethos and by the spirit of critical methods of empirical enquiry. (Fowler 1981, 299)

The social contexts of both, the ‘clash and competition of cultural myths’ and ‘ideological pluralism’, are contexts of encounter with plurality. The responses to that encounter differ; in the former the reaction is a tightening of boundaries in communal identification, and in the latter a loosening of the same and emphasis on the individual’s faith journey. Both this tightening and loosening are evident in the children’s responses their context. As has been seen, they may adopt a Stage 3 sense of commitment, loyalty and belonging, holding tightly to their religious identity (through credal statements for example) and religious symbols (‘my god’) making clear the boundaries between them and other groups (‘their god’). Alternatively they may adopt a Stage 4 reflective approach questioning authorities and ideas, creating their own new syncretic frameworks. Or they may do both. Looking at the words of some of the most reflective, creative thinkers of the project, JK, JH, RA, JN, there is evidence that they are being pulled in both



directions. The thinking of CS and JS also illustrates this tension between religious styles.

CS' thinking bears the hallmarks of western individualism. This is clear in his understanding Islam:

**CS:** I think that em Muslim religion is wrong to say that they can't eat certain things and can't do certain things because everyone has the right to do what they feel is right' (G355-7).

If he had children it would be up to them to make up their own mind about their religious beliefs:

**CS:** I think if my kids sort of disagreed I'd try to reason with them but if I couldn't it would be difficult.(G340)

Together with JS, he discusses instances of conversion from Christianity to Islam and both are agreed that the use of reason guided by empirical evidence is the best way. CS's aunt was not forced to become a Muslim by her Muslim boyfriend, 'She actually done it by herself ... she was reasonable' (G251-3), and JS parallels this conversion with a case he knows of a woman who read through the whole Qur'an in the library before making up her mind to convert (G254-9). The two boys jointly create a carefully thought out model of a new religion that will answer the problems of religious rivalry (G115f). Their model is based on critical assessment of the current situation and consideration of what is or is not possible in the light of

their understanding of God's power and purposes. The result is something quite creative and new. Yet, in spite of their ideology of reasonableness and choice, both have a fierce loyalty to a religion that has been decided for them, by God in JS's case, 'I'm happy what God made me and if he made me a Muslim, whatever – whatever he makes me...I'd be proud' (G232-4), or by family history, in CS's case:

**CS:** I'm proud of who I am because really it's my ancestors that started this and I'm going to carry on for them

**JS:** Yeah, that's true

**CS:** I just feel sorry for them because they were slaves and I don't want that to happen again - people to be slaves and not this time by colour but by religion and colour – both. (G236-241)

In the contrast between the boys' styles of religious discourse is a tension between loyalty and reason, the urge to belong and the urge to think. How and whether this tension is resolved and what emerges from the encounter of the two is of significance to an understanding of the children's theology (Chapter 3). As with Ricoeur's forms of biblical language:

Non seulement chaque forme de discours suscite un style de confession de foi, mais la confrontation de ces formes de discours suscite, dans la confession de foi elle-même, des tensions, des contrastes qui sont théologiquement significatifs (Ricoeur 1976, 86, 120)

It is the fourth, Individuative-Reflective, stage, of all Fowler's stages, that comes closest to that engagement of the mind, that questioning, constructing and creating, that was identified with the children's theological God talk in the first half of this chapter (2.1.1). If we heed Macquarrie's advice that the line between 'theological language' and 'religious language' needs drawing more sharply, are we to determine that of Fowler's stages (at least of the first four), it is only the fourth that can be described as theology? If this is the case then that line is to be drawn between Stage 3 and Stage 4, the two stages in question here, with loyalty and belonging on one side of the theology line and reason and thinking on the other. Yet there is a theology in the discourse of Stage 3. When children begin 'we believe ...' or 'at our church they teach us ...' they are making theological statements. The understandings and beliefs about God that they identify with are the results of theological thinking that have been verbalised and formulated over the years in the histories of faith traditions. The difference is that the theology at Stage 3 is something the children *assent to* whereas the theology at Stage 4 is something they *do* as they reflect, criticize, revise and construct. Returning to the relationship between content and form, the distinction could be made in which Stage 3 theology is content, at Stage 4 theology is form, the referent God being the foundation of the former and the direction of the latter.

Murray's contrast between the religious questioning of a Sikh girl and that of an Anglican girl, illustrates this difference between theology as a phenomenon and theology as an activity:



Ranjit, a Sikh girl at college describes Sikhism as a cupboard inside which is stored all that she needs to know. She just has to select the appropriate shelf. "Questioning her faith" means asking questions of Sikh leaders in total confidence that they will be able to provide the answer. Not only does she not doubt the teaching authority of these leaders, she has no standpoint at the moment from which this doubt might even be envisaged. Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional Faith. Barbara, an Anglican classmate, on the other hand understands faith as the very ability to question what she has received from her religious upbringing. For her questioning inevitably involves doubting and making up her own mind, an example of Individuative-Reflective Faith. (Murray 1991, 4)

Using Fowler's model, Murray stresses the difference between accepting on outside authority and doing on one's own authority (Murray 1991, 6). There is, however, a danger of an over simplified view of the tension between Stage 3 and Stage 4 as a community/individual dialectic. Examples of children's speech in subsequent chapters will show that the creative and reflective thinking that characterises Stage 4 readily proceeds from dialogue with others in a joint activity of meaning making.

Those who advocate an experience-based and personal approach to children's religion, and followers of the Piagetian cognitive development school, have something in common. The interest of the experientialist in the child's inner consciousness and the interest of the developmentalist in the realisation of the child's inner potential, are both based on a child-centred, 'naturalised and

individualised model of childhood' (Burman 1994, p163). Fowler's Stages of Faith model of religious understanding has its roots in this model of childhood as adopted by followers of Piaget, however the analysis of his faith stages in relation to this project's research discussions has drawn attention to the action of outside influences and the contextualised nature of the children's religion. The movement of individual children's understanding from one stage to another is not simply part of a natural process of maturation. Many social, cultural and historical factors influence the diverse and changing styles of religious thinking employed. Fowler's own faith means he also recognizes the working of divine grace. Both this chapter and the previous chapter have tended in the same direction, towards the recognition of children's understanding as a social construct, molded by the contexts of their mental activity and the encounters they experience. The tool of this process of meaning making is language. A detailed consideration of the role of language in the children's religious understanding is the subject of the following two chapters.

# WORD

## 3.1 Social Setting: Words of the Other

Mikhail Bakhtin coined the word ‘heteroglossia’ (*raznorecie*) to describe way language relates to diversity and change. The concept is summarised as follows:

At any given time in any given place there will be a set of conditions – social, historical, meteorological, physiological – that will ensure that a word uttered in that place at any time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions. (Bakhtin 1981, 428)

The concept of ‘heteroglossia’ underlies the analysis of the children’s use of language in this chapter. The focus of the project is the influence of encounter on the children’s understanding. Their understanding is signified by their use of words (Chapter 2.1.5). Their use of words is researched through a series of discussions to which encounter with Muslim peers in a predominantly Muslim community, is the background. This encounter is there in memory and recall, the Muslim children not being present in the discussion activity as it happens. The project therefore involves both Bakhtin’s frames, time (‘at any given time’), and place (‘in any given place’) where place is understood as social context. The recorded utterances of the children belong to a particular time and place (discussion groups held in the school classroom during the ‘Id celebrations of 1997 and 1998), and have as their background a history of encounter in the wider community. The discussions and



their context correspond to two social domains from the ‘domain theory’ as set out by Derek Layder in *Modern Social Theory* (Layder 1997), ‘social setting’ and ‘situated activity’. While recognising the interrelationship between these two domains, for the purpose of analysis the children’s use of language will be considered under these separate headings.

At the time of writing the actual discussions of the project are historical: the particular circumstances and dynamics of the discussions are unique and cannot be reproduced, and the children have moved on to experience numerous subsequent encounters further influencing their thought and providing resources for yet more encounters. At the time when the children’s words were first uttered they had the status of ‘contemporary word’ (Bakhtin 1981, 346). The encounters that preceded them took on a ‘pastness’, both as they happened in the past and so had become part of the children’s personal histories, and because behind those encounters were traditions, identities, ‘discourses’ formed over time in the histories of the communities of Highfields. As Layder writes:

The ‘pastness’ of the inherited circumstances transmitted through reproduced relations and practices is brought into the ‘presentness’ of unfolding encounters between people. Social activity has to be understood in the context of the intermingling of these very different time frames and social processes.’ (Layder 1997, 23)

In a footnote to his *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin wrote:

One's own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated. (Bakhtin 1981, 345)

It is through tracing the acknowledgement and assimilation of the words of others in the speech of the children that we gain some idea of the influences of social encounter on their understanding. The picture cannot be a complete one as we do not have privileged access to the inner processing of others' words in the children's minds; we are looking for those words at the point of reemergence, as they appear and are used in the situated activity of research discussion. The words may be 'implicitly or explicitly admitted as someone else's' and 'are transmitted by a variety of means' (Bakhtin 1981, 354). Recognising the variety of means of transmission, this chapter will track the words of others in 'assimilated discourse', 'reported speech' and 'assimilated words'.

### ***3.1.1 Assimilated Discourses***

Bakhtin's use of the word 'discourse' (*slovo*) contains an understanding somewhere between a word and a method of using words. When he uses it in relation to particular domains of knowledge he might combine it with thought, for example religious, ethical, legal 'thought and discourse' (350, 351), to bring together the meanings and their linguistic expression. In this section, however, 'discourse' will be used as a shorthand for both ideas, speech and meaning, as they engage people in particular themes or areas of interest. It follows Layder's exposition of the concept which views 'discourses' as having developed over time being 'collective, historical emergents and residues of past activities' (Layder 1997,

127). These ‘discourses’ have their own language patterns employing particular vocabularies and rules.

The children’s contributions to the discussions reveal their degree of participation in a number of the ‘discourses’ of their social setting. The emergence of particular themes in their talk is partly guided by the stimuli used for the discussions. For the later discussions key themes have been identified for the participants by three of their number who produced the series of questions for the others to use. However, the quick recognition of most of the terms and concepts with which they are presented, and the readiness with which the children move from the vocabulary of religion to that of diversity and power, from the concept of minority status to lengthy discussions on religious, race and equality themes, indicates an established interest in these ‘discourses’. To illustrate the children’s assimilation of social ‘discourses’ I will identify examples of discourses of diversity, power and religion from the discussion in which JH, JK and RA formulated the questions to be used by their peers and so influenced the agenda of the discussions that followed (F).

### *Diversity*

In the questions produced by the three children, the recurrence of the words ‘different’, ‘same’ and ‘other’ signals the importance of diversity in their experience. Different forms of diversity are recognised in the conversation by the use of associated terminology. Different religious identities are indicated by specific vocabulary whether it distinguishes between faiths, ‘Muslims’ (F24), ‘Hindus’ (F42), ‘Sikhs’ (F3), ‘Christian’ (F467), ‘Rastafarian’ (F314); places of worship,



‘temples’ (F449), ‘mosques’ (F440), and ‘church’ (F452); or forms of dress, ‘scarves’, ‘topis’ (F7), ‘turbans’ (F8). Racial diversity is very present in the children’s thinking and evident in the use of words of colour and ethnic origin, the distinction between ‘white people’ and ‘Indians’ (F416-7), between ‘white kids and half caste kids, mixed race’ (F374), questions about the colours of Adam and Eve (F156-7) and of God (F58-69). The children show their familiarity and confidence with the language of colour in word play using colour words. Twice JH adds outlandish colours to his list of racial identities, ‘if [the school population] was balanced, Hindus, Muslims, Chinese, Black, White, Mixed Race, Pink, Blue, anything ...’ (F298-9), God is all colours, ‘black, white, Asian – pink, blue ...’ (F60), and the children are amused by the idea of a green Muslim god and a blue Hindu god (F68).

In some cases the terminology used to distinguish different groups becomes a problem:

**JH:** People think that Rastafarian is a different religion to Christian but it means Christian but it’s just a different name (F314-5)

**RA:** The way you say Chinese people! Chinese people are from China – it doesn’t mean that’s their religion though, so they might be Muslims or they might be Sikhs. (F292-4)

**RA:** Some people call Asian people ‘Indians’.

**JK:** I think they should call them their own names, or something. (F427-8)

**RA:** I don't like people calling me half-caste. I like mixed race or dual heritage (F421-2).

The vocabulary and function of language associated with diversity discourse is that of labels. The children's words reflect the search for and uncertainties about such labelling in the wider community.

### *Power*

Though it could be argued that relations of power are present in most verbal exchanges, the workings and results of these power relations are a distinct theme in the children's discussion. The degree to which they have assimilated the language of power and are confident in its use gives an idea of the impact of its exercise on their lives and thinking. The different sources of power the children recognise are identified in the variety of power words used. A sense of being at the receiving end is present in the terms 'teasing' and 'racist remarks' used for their peers treatment of them; the being 'in trouble' and 'told off' for relations with teachers, and being either 'allowed' or 'punished' for relations with parents.

The children's language reveals more than an awareness of power in action, it also demonstrates an understanding of the means by which power is acquired and exercised. The language of numbers is part of the power discourse in the school. The Muslim children have the strength of numbers; they have '*more* people' so they can 'fight back more' (F431), they have '*so many* people behind them' (F433), 'like there's one *gigantic* group of Muslims and you've got the *small*

groups of Hindus and you've got the *small* groups of Christians' (I186-8). As AN carefully explains:

**AI:** It's how *big* the group is really. If the Muslims are *bigger* than the Christians and Hindus, the Muslims will take the mick out of all of us. If we have the *same* groups [numerically] we don't argue about religion so you can't take the mick out of people because we've got the *same* people in each group (I198-202).

The scope of the children's power language is wider than the immediate school setting and shares the adult perceptions of power relations in Highfields in general. JK, JH and RA discuss at length the group dynamics of their community starting with the same language of number. Discussing communal relations in Highfields, RA talks of 'a big group of Muslim people' (F434). Larger numbers means greater financial power; they have 'more money' (F466) which can be used in what the children perceive to be a bid to take over the community through 'building', 'getting' and 'taking' prime sites in the area. The children are using language of territorial aggression with different sites in the area named or identified and the use of the verbs 'got' for those already in the Muslims' possession, and 'take' for those they believe the Muslims have their sights on next, leading to the conclusion:

**RA:** The Muslims in Highfields think that Highfields belongs to them and they can do whatever they want (F493-4).



The link between the children's use of language and a wider 'discourse' of power is evident in the following statement:

**RA:** Because there's lots of Muslim people that they can start – they can sort of like – not *rule*, but they start deciding where they want to put mosques, if they want to take other buildings down they feel they can decide themselves without having a meeting and invite everyone else as a community except for just one religion (F435-440).

Here we have the language of political organisation being used in opposition to the actions of the majority Muslim community. The word 'rule' is rejected but it is introduced into the conversation and so is part of RA's understanding of the situation. It is decision-making power that she settles on as the issue, and decisions should be taken at 'meetings' where 'everyone...as a community' can have a say. This language of political democracy is taken up again by JH:

**JH:** Yeah, have a vote. Tony Blair should stand up and say – Tony Blair should go, 'I order a vote. If you want the mosque you vote and if you don't want a mosque, you want something else you vote' – Most people want other things (F496-8).

But here the language of democracy comes against the problem of numbers:

**JK:** But actually there's more Muslims and they would vote (F499).

The children's argument starting from the greater number of Muslims, has come full circle and democratic processes do not provide an answer. They therefore resort to criticism of the minority groups for not taking an active enough role in local politics, 'I think they're lazy' (F502), and to the language of resistance, 'they should be fighting for the right to have more churches'. (F503)

This discussion of communal dynamics in Highfields reveals the extent to which the three children have assimilated the political power 'discourse' not only of their immediate community but of wider society. It also shows how that 'discourse' gives them resources to use in their argument but does not necessarily provide a solution. The excursion into politics soon breaks down after this last exchange and discussion returns to relations with Muslim friends.

### *Religion*

Discussion that starts with ideas of group identity (of which religious affiliation is a vital element) moves into a more general religious 'discourse' about belief. It has already been seen that religion is a prominent theme in the children's experiences of encounter: the Muslim children 'talk a lot about God' (E236), so the dominance of God talk is a natural product of their social setting. The verb 'believe' is used several times and is incorporated into three of the questions children formulated for the discussion groups. Religious terminology that can be applied across faith boundaries is employed, 'god' (F58), 'the devil' (F62), 'afterlife' (F200), 'everlasting life' (F203). The recurrence of the word 'real' implies a theological/philosophical concern with truth in their religious discourse: 'some of

the Muslims say our god isn't real' (F36); 'your god is not real and mine is' (F44-5); 'if you're a Muslim and you thought that Allah is real ... you might not think that other gods are important' (F230-2); 'Muslims just think about Jesus like real and don't think that Hindu gods are real' (F228-9); 'your god is a devil and he's not real' (F271).

The enormity of the God theme; the fact that it is a 'limit expression' (Chapter 2.2) that both answers and creates mystery, is acknowledged in the children's use of questions as a way of relating to it; 'How did God make this world?' (F171), 'What I want to know is after everyone dies and say God never makes anyone again, what will happen to the world and how will he feel?' (F216-7), 'how can they believe in God if they haven't seen God? (F155), 'don't [the gods] still walk on this earth?' (F170), 'There's a big question I'm going to ask God when I get there: how did he make the earth?' (F196-7). Questions about creation and life after death are to the fore, others about God's unity are incorporated into the questionnaire for the discussion groups. References to the words of Muslim peers show that these themes are prominent with them too, as they talk about Allah as the one true God (E187), and as having created everyone (B427, H156), or predict the fate that awaits those who do not believe or who disobey (G215-6, B333-4).

A closer look at JH's account of a many-coloured god, shows how he brings together the two 'discourses' of diversity and religion and 'sub-discourses' of colour and God's universality. JH tells his listeners that he replied in the following terms to the question posed by Muslim peers as to whether he believes there's only one god:



**JH:** ‘Yes, I believe there’s only one god’ and they ask me, ‘What colour do you think he is?’ And most people my colour will say he’s black but I think he’s all mixed colours, black, white, Asian – blue, pink. I think he’s every single colour in the world. I don’t just think he’s one particular colour ... God must be like everyone’s colour because to me I think he’s everyone’s god, because in my religion I think there’s only one god and he’s everyone’s god so he’s got to be everyone’s different colour. He can’t just be black and then he’s everyone’s god’ (F57-66).

The speech shows how this child has assimilated different discourses from his social setting of religious and racial diversity and from his own particular black and Christian-Rastafarian background, and is able to combine them creatively to make something individual and new. It also contains explicit references to the words of others; the words of his Muslim friends in the interchange that give the stimulus to thought and creation of his model of a many-coloured god, and the words introduced as authorities in JH’s personal history; those spoken by ‘most people my colour’ and those that are ‘in my religion’. One of these authorities is rejected with ‘but I think ...’, and the other is given as the grounds for his thought, ‘because in my religion I think ...’ This example leads us to consideration of how the children relate to the words of those who engage them in the ‘discourses’ of their social setting.

### *3.1.2 Reported Words of Others*

One obvious distinction in the forms in which the words of others are presented is that between explicit and implicit, the reported speech (direct and indirect) that is still identified as belonging to ‘others’, and the speech that has become the children’s own through adoption or adaptation. Much of the children’s talk uses reported speech. As yet relatively unprocessed, it has been brought to the discussion as raw material to be dealt with there. It is brought from ‘past’ interaction and made ‘present’ in a new context. In its ‘raw’ state the reported speech is not completely uninfluenced by the children; it has been selected by memory or choice from others’ speech and in the telling is given emphasis of tone or gesture. The significance given to the speech and its use in the discussions, gives some indication of the way the children received it and the importance they attached to it initially as hearer. The speech they report supplies them with knowledge about the worlds inhabited by ‘the other’, helps to delineate relationships and provides new ideas to incorporate into their understanding.

#### *Knowledge*

There are varying degrees of engagement with the speech reported in the discussions. In some cases the words are reported as providing information about the speakers. The absence of the Muslim children from the discussion context (and, indeed, from the school on the ‘Id days during which much of the data was collected) makes them a focus of discussion and emphasises their ‘otherness’. What the Muslim children have said is often attributed to a generalised group

persona, 'they'. In these exchanges the children in the discussion groups are detached observers with interesting knowledge about their Muslim friends' beliefs and practices to share. Several of the words presented in the word card activity are recognised as terms used exclusively by Muslims and examples are given of that use:

**Guna:**

JO: If Muslims – if they do something bad or eat something ...

JE: That you can't eat ...

JO: Yeah, they get 'guna' – that's what they say (B40-4).

HA: Oh yeah, Muslim people use it ...

JH: Mustafa always says that...like if I get fouled he goes - whoever fouled me he goes 'Guna!' like that.' (E120-3)

**Haram:**

MA: They can't eat –

MI: It means to Muslims – some Muslims say small Mars bars are haram (B145-7).

Detailed customs are explained such as the reasons for wearing a religious pendant:

JK: They say that if they're ill and if they press those necklaces inside there's Allah's name (D162).



The statements above are used to inform; they have been stored in the memory as a kind of data bank. Other statements outlining practice and belief provoke a more engaged response from the present context of the discussion group:

**JN:** People tell me that – in the Muslims if you're naughty you get whipped with a cane or something, and people showed me where they got hit and they got marks on their arms.

**LH:** That's wicked!

**AY:** That's – that's – what's it called again? ...

**SN:** You can get arrested for that – that's child abuse! (H32-9)

**AN:** Do you know in our class some people always say that – that 'Ah, you're going to get told off by Allah and that'

**BH:** 'Allah's going to put you in the fire – Allah's going to put you in the fire'.

**AN:** To someone else – I hear them.

**CA:** I don't believe them.

**CS:** I say 'Eh, what you lying for?' (A235-243)

**JE:** Like they say their god's going to be bad to them when they die – he's going – if they do something bad they're going to – they say their god's going to chuck them in the fire and make them eat some cockroaches ....

**JA:** Our god's not like that – our god's not like ...

**JH:** If you pray to him it'll just be alright – if we say sorry and all that (B332-6).

The emphasis and excitement given to the telling, support the impression that these examples are introduced to provoke a counter response of distaste and contradiction. The children listening are hearing nothing new in accounts of mosque school discipline and images of eternal punishment, but they express as much outrage as if they are hearing them for the first time. Perhaps the statements are chosen to provide an opportunity for enjoying shared righteous indignation. Likewise the listeners' scornful amusement can be predicted for the report of Ashfaq's claim to have received money dropped down by God in response to his prayer (B396-8), and of the Muslim girls' fears on a school residential that pictures of badgers would come alive at night (D75). In these instances the unity between reporter and listeners is indicated by their shared laughter. In the negativity of these responses is reflected something of the struggle for status between different groups in the school.

### *Relationships*

Another category of reported speeches is speech directed at the children themselves and perceived by them to be hostile in intent. These examples are often, though not exclusively, reported in response to the children's questions about teasing and racist remarks. In some the hostility is evident:

**CS:** And they always say that erm "Your god's shit" and all that lot, and erm, they say, "My god's going to kill your god" and everything' (G220-1).

**JK:** There's this boy in dinner time who sits next to me, his name's Hussain, he's a bit racist. He goes, "Your god is a devil and he's not real" (F270-1).

**JS:** They were saying like – er – "one day our god's like going to take over ... and all the Christians are going to Hell because they haven't got the real; – because they chose god what they want and that ain't the right god" (G210-6).

In others it is perhaps read into the Muslim children's words by their hearers:

**JE:** They say we're Allah's children! ... they say Allah made everything.

**PR:** He made us.

**PT:** He made even the Christians and children and all them.

**JE:** (indignantly) Their god made us? No! Our god made us, their god made them (B427-431).

In the reporting is the upset and anger of the teller. Sometimes it is stated; 'I felt quite insulted' (G223), 'You feel like you want just to get them and go (strangling gesture) (G225), but often it is left in the air, perhaps supported by gesture or facial expression. Several of the examples refer to situations where the child felt alone or unsupported:



**AK:** In Year 2 and Year 3 I was the only Hindu in our class and the Muslims, they used to say, ‘Our god’s better than yours’, and used to tease me. I felt bad (G200-2).

**TR:** Sometimes I feel a bit left out because some of the religions are racist and not very nice about what religion you are (H1-2).

**SH:** Some people don’t let other people play because they’re different religions (H160).

Reporting the unkind words in the new context means that on the second hearing the children are not alone but share the sympathy and indignation of a supportive audience.

When reporting what others have said to them the children occasionally record their immediate response (H155, H292-4, F80-2), but often they did not respond at the time for a number of reasons, ethical or pragmatic:

**JK:** I don’t laugh to them because they find it bad (D121).

**AK:** You feel like hitting them but the teacher said – plus there are more Muslims and I’m the only Hindu (G272-3).

**TR:** I don't think you should tease them back because you know how you felt when you were bullied – so you don't want them to go through it (H290-1).

**RA:** If you tease them back then they're more likely to carry on doing it ... or they'll go and tell the teacher and you'll be in trouble yourself. (F103-6)

**JE:** I was watching this film called *Ghost* and I was just about to say something bad to him and there are these demons in *Ghost* and I kept thinking they was going to come and get me when I did if I be bad so I just left him – to call my god whatever because I know my god's good. (B413)

By bringing others' 'mistaken' or 'hostile' speech into the discussion, the children are giving themselves a chance to respond again to the statements in a context where they have more time and freedom in the formulation of their responses. Their conversation can provide an emotional outlet, the children feeling able to show the hurt they would hide from the perpetrator. It also gives them the freedom to examine the motives of those who made the statements. In the new context they can (temporarily) reverse the hierarchy and undermine the superior status of those handing out hurtful comments by emphasising weaknesses of character that prompt them to behave in this way. These weaknesses include pride, insecurity, uncertainty, being subject to parental pressure:

**JH:** I've heard people say that their god's most important.

**RA:** They think they're most important, that's why they say that (F235-6).

**TR:** I think they're desperate. They can't get no attention or something, like they fight at home, and when they come to school, they take it out on other people (H251-2).

**JS:** I think they're jealous because they think, 'Oh, that – yeah, their god's true but I should appreciate what god I've got and I can't step back' (G244-5).

**LH:** I think their parents told them – tease someone about their religion because their god's different (H254-5).

### *Ideas*

As well as reviewing their relationship with the original speakers of the reported speech, thereby revising their understandings of themselves and their Muslim peers in the original encounter, the children are also relating to the ideas contained in the statements. Talk of the harshness of Allah leads to a description of God's personality understood by members of the discussion group to be forgiving and compassionate, followed by an exchange about Heaven and the different dimension in which it exists (B329f). In refutation of Muslim claims that Allah made even the Christians, JE expresses a plural understanding of God whereby different gods created different groups of people, and considers the idea of souls being stored in heaven before they are born (B430-1). In these cases the reported word is awakening or organising the children's own words and ideas.



Analysis of the speech reported in the discussions has so far considered examples of difference and tension between the others' word and the children's. There are also instances of reported speech being used to expand the children's thinking by introducing new ideas. The relationship between reporter and speaker in these cases is cooperative rather than confrontational. Hafsa and Zaheera are quoted not as part of the majority Muslim group (the 'they' of the children's talk), but as personal friends of the reporter. MI introduces the idea of one God with different names into the conversation with Zaheera's words; 'Zaheera says there's only one God but you call it different names' (B447). It is an idea that she has entertained but does not know whether or not she agrees. TR reports, 'Hafsa tells me you have to be scared of Allah' (C9) and initiates a discussion of God's disciplining power. JN supports TR's contribution with another quote, 'the man at our church tells us you have to be scared of what Jesus will do to you if you don't be good' (C10-11). There are other examples of adults' speech used in this way:

**MN:** My mum told me that if you be bad – yeah – and you go up to heaven you'll come back down and be borned (B363-4).

**JK:** I think – my mum says that sometimes – sometimes it's [stories about Krishna] not real you know, it's just made up and all that ... and she says that sometimes Krishna's not really, he's just made up (D210-3).

**JH:** Quite a lot of grown ups say there's too much Asians in the schools. (F276-7).

In each of these cases the statement being made has an element of controversy. MN's introduction of the idea of reincarnation is against the flow of the previous conversation based as it was on a strictly Muslim/Christian idea of heaven; JK's questioning of the reality of Krishna jars in the climate of the preceding discussion of Krishna's multi-faceted reality; being 'scared' of God is not a very comfortable idea; the comment on the Asian population of the schools does not conform to standards of political correctness. Unlike the examples above where the use of the reported statements is dependent on a confident prediction of the audience's response, how the listeners will react to these statements is uncertain and might be hostile. By introducing such statements as the words of others the children are not risking themselves in their contributions, rather they are signalling, 'these words might be worth considering, but they are not mine.' If the reception given to the words is positive the child may become more confident in their use and employ them in future unattributed, as their own.

Finally there are a few instances where the children introduce an idea from an authority that they respect in order to question or 'overturn' it gospel-fashion. It is different from the straight contradictions of some of the Muslim children's statements as there is a sense of having considered the statement and perhaps entertained the idea before finding problems with it. JK's question about creation stories she has heard is an instance of this:

**JK:** When people say that when it was a long time ago they had gods walking on this earth and then when they die ... *but I want to know how*

come they just become gods because don't they still walk on this earth?  
(F168-170).

An example of an 'overturning' comes from JH's speech about God's colour where he says, 'most people my colour will say he's black *but I think* he's all mixed colours (F59). Similarly JK describes a conversation with the mother of a friend:

**JK:** She said that if Muslims don't believe in our god why should we believe in their god? *But I said* 'No, I still believe in every god' (F245-6).

This is more a moving away from the initial statement than a reaction against it. The words reported are the ideas that have been left behind.

### *Objectification*

Reported speech has various functions in the children's discussions, but the overall effect is a distancing or 'objectifying' of the other's word. In *Discourse in the Novel* Bakhtin approaches the concept of representing another's discourse through a 'speaking person' in a novel. There is a difference between this artistic process and what happens in the discussions; the novelist is drawing on internal discourse and converting it into another's speech, the children are drawing on their memories of an exchange and reconstructing it. Nevertheless there are strong similarities for in both cases the one representing the speech is creating 'fertile soil for experimentally objectifying another's discourse' (Bakhtin 1981, 348). In this experiment with the other's word 'It is questioned, it is put in a new situation in



order to expose its weak sides, to get a feel for its boundaries, to experience it physically as an object,' and even sometimes becomes 'parodic' (348). The analysis of the children's use of reported speech above shows how that word was being subjected to all these activities, even being parodied in the statements that earned ridicule or outrage as their response.

The result of such experimentation is that the children were able to maintain their subjectivity outside these words yet still employ them for social and intellectual ends. Socially, reported speech might identify the original speakers as different and 'other', it might provoke resistance, reduce the power of the original speaker and have set against it the solidarity of the reporter and listeners. Intellectually, it might be used by the children to dismiss ideas or to introduce new ideas yet disclaim responsibility for them should their reception be hostile, or it might be presented to be overturned indicating movement away of the reporters' thought. The words of others are acknowledged in reported speech; they are employed for re-ordering relations and argument, but as yet are not integrated with the words of the children.

### ***3.1.3 Assimilated Words of Others***

Having analysed the children's use of reported speech we now turn to those words in their discussion which are 'implicitly admitted as someone else's'. Here the words are not attributed to another speaker but they have been assimilated into the children's own speech, integrated with their word. The value of Bakhtin's work to this study lies in his recognition of the numerous forces that come into play when a

word is uttered. In Bakhtin's chain of meaning no word stands alone but relates to a whole history of the already spoken, as well as to the answering word it anticipates (Bakhtin 1981, 280). This complex environment of any utterance he calls, 'dialogized heteroglossia' (272). It is the relationship of the children's words with those words already spoken within the social setting that provides the focus of this section. Bakhtin places this history between the object (or theme) and the word, and between the word and the speaker who uses it:

No living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme. (276)

The children have to draw the word from that environment and find in it something that makes sense to them.

### *'Internally Persuasive Word'*

The dominant object or theme of the children's discourse is God. This theme is 'entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents' (276). From a shared (communal) interest in and resort to God language emerges a series of contrasts and contradictions seeming to pull in different directions. From interaction with others the children absorb ideas of 'only one god' (H8), of 'lots of gods' (F241), 'other people's gods' (F45-6), gods that are 'real' and gods that are 'not real'; they learn of a God that punishes and is

associated with 'fire' (B332-4), of a God that is 'good to us' (B344) and 'means love' (E3), a God who 'is in heaven' (A8) and who 'walks in India' (H212), who has many identities, 'God', 'Allah', 'Jesus', 'Shiva', 'Vishnu', 'Jah', 'Sai Baba', 'Jehovah', 'Krishna', 'Omega and Alpha' (H201f, E199f, I86f) and others. The conflict of thoughts and values does not only come from differences in the language used about God, but also from the variety of speakers using it: if God is 'love' how come his name is used by people 'killing and shooting' in Ireland and Algeria (E11-3, E129-133); if God is 'good', how come his name is used by those who tease and bully (H193-6); if Hindus, Muslims and Christians all talk about God in their different ways, what does that mean about his identity? The children may reject some of the alien thoughts and values and adopt others, they may apply different meanings to different circumstances, or try to draw contrasting ideas together into a syncretic whole, but in so far as they are taking the words of others and making them their own, the children are presented with a challenge. Bakhtin writes of this process of assimilating others' word:

Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin 1981, 294)

There are several examples of the children embarking on this process. JN tries to make meanings out of the variety of names used for God:

**JN:** So I don't like say all the things that you're calling Shiva. I know like Allah as Jesus because I believe Jesus is just one god or you call Allah one god. (H137-8)



From others' words about God, JN has chosen God's unity as his organising principle. With this as his starting point he is able to accept the correspondence of the words 'Jesus' and 'Allah' for he has heard that Allah too, is one. Shiva does not yet fit into his understanding of God for he has learned from the words of Hindu friends that Shiva is one name for a plural God. Through this reasoning he has persuaded himself to acknowledge 'Allah as Jesus'. JH's account of a many coloured god (F58f) has also organised the words of others, accepting or rejecting them, around a given principle, that of God's universality. That God should be all colours is a logical conclusion of this principle. In these two passages the boys acknowledge the sources of some of their ideas, 'you're calling', 'you call', 'people my colour will say', 'in my religion', and so the process of assimilation is made clear. In other instances specific vocabulary or turns of phrase may indicate the origin of the child's speech in others' words, for example those written below in italics from CS's model for a new religion:

CS: But I think first it's going to need someone that gives a lot of *dedication to his name* before he can *come down to earth* then he can actually *take on that person's body* and he can – *his soul* – the God's soul will be in the person's body, but it will be the person's body (G138-141).

The dual foundations of CS's new religion, human effort and God's incarnation, owe their definition to words and phrases he has absorbed from others' discourse. These understandings (principles, starting points and foundations) that guide the creative assimilation process Bakhtin terms 'internally persuasive word' or 'discourse':

The internally persuasive discourse is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with “one’s own word”. In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organises masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. (Bakhtin 1981, 345)

The end of this quote returns us to Bakhtin’s time frame with which the chapter began. The ‘internally persuasive word’ is the contemporary word as the point at which all the ‘pastness’ of the word’s history converges; it is also the contemporary, as opposed to the future, word because its condition is dynamic; it will not remain the same. Essential to ‘internally persuasive discourse’ is its provisional nature. It awakens and organises words to create meaning, but that meaning will develop as it encounters new material, new conditions and ‘interanimating relationships with new contexts’ (Bakhtin 1981, 346). As noted elsewhere (Chapter 2.2.6) such flexibility is one of the characteristics of the children’s talk. We observe them acting on the content provided by their context to forge new understandings which are themselves open to further change (Chapters 5.1 and 5.2). When it is related to God language, links become apparent between the ‘internally persuasive word’ and the model of ‘Stage 4 theology’ that emerged from the application of Fowler’s theory in the previous chapter (Chapter 2.2.7). Children operating within Stage 4 employ an ‘internally persuasive theological discourse’ open to the continual activity of reflecting, criticizing, revising and constructing described there.

Opposed to the 'internally persuasive word' in Bakhtin's scheme is 'authoritative discourse or word'. Both originate with others' words, but while the former is assimilated by us through its ability to persuade us of the sense of its meaning, the latter holds its place in our mind and speech through something other than an appeal to reason as shall be seen below. The term 'authoritative discourse' is a useful descriptor for those formulaic utterances in the children's discussion where they appear to speak with an authority that is not their own but that is not explicitly attributed to others. They are advanced as fixed statements not open to question and their style often verges on the platitudinous. Examples include words of religious authority, moral authority, and also the authority of the modern discourse of choice. In the statements we hear words of parents, teachers and other adults; 'God is the one who gave us life' (B460), 'God can make peace on earth' (G146), 'he put us on this earth to be friends and love each other like brothers and sisters' (E14-5), 'violence is not the answer' (H276), 'that's wrong to hit' (E248), 'you have to ... try your best' (G160), 'everyone has the right to do what they feel is right' (G356-7), 'it's up to them...they're the one's that have got to live with it' (I156-7).

Bakhtin views 'authoritative discourse' in negative terms. This understanding was no doubt influenced by his personal history that experienced the turmoil in Russia before and after the 1917 revolution, and exile during Stalin's rule. Though he does recognise the possibility of a discourse being both authoritative and internally persuasive, he sees this as rare. It is the struggle between the two, he claims, the



freeing of one's own discourse from the authoritative word, that makes up the history of an individual ideological consciousness and an 'individual's becoming' (342). The 'authoritative word' is located in a past as 'the word of the fathers' and '*prior* discourse'. The 'authoritative word' has a fixed and formulaic style in common with the 'credal statements' cited as indicators of Stage 3 theological thinking in the previous chapter (Chapter 2.2.7), the '*prior discourse*' parallels the faith traditions which children operating at Stage 3 assent to. Where God is its theme the authoritative word can be seen as a foundation for 'Stage 3 theology'.

Bakhtin's concern that the individual should free himself from the fetters of 'authoritative discourse' shares the imperative towards autonomy found in Stage Development Theory; the move away from Stage 3 talk towards Fowler's Individuative-Reflective Stage 4 (Fowler 1981). More recently his imperative towards autonomy, (this time emotional and spiritual rather than rational) is reflected in Clive and Jane Errickers' 'narrative pedagogy' for religious education:

Young people as with all of us, recognise the difference between the authenticity of the individual voice and the rhetoric of ideological pronouncements. If we attend to the former and avoid the latter we shall gain their interest and engagement and advance their learning and development. (Erricker 2000, 204)

The rhetoric of which the authors write could well be understood as 'authoritative discourse'.

As the previous chapter questioned the hierarchical ordering that gave Stage 3 styles of faith a status inferior to those of Stage 4, so this chapter questions the devaluing of the ‘authoritative word’. ‘Authoritative discourse’ is not necessarily an obstacle to creative, developing thought. It can provide the foundations on which an argument is based or provide the knot that ties an argument together. JH wants to argue that those using God’s name to support acts of terrorism in Ireland and Algeria have no religious justification for their actions. This extract begins and ends with an authoritative statement on God’s purposes:

**JH:** *He gave us life* and that – and there’s bad people in the world killing and shooting each other and they’re saying that – they’re using God as an excuse to say that he wants everyone to kill. He never put us on this earth to kill people. *He put us on this earth to be friends and love each other like brothers and sisters.* (E11-5)

CS uses an authoritative statement of God’s power to answer JS’s hesitations about the feasibility of his model of a new religion:

**JS:** So he can say, ‘I’ve made a new religion’ – er – he can – I can’t –

**CS:** *God can make peace on Earth* (G145-6).

Most noticeably, the authority of the children’s statements about God’s unity give impetus to a range of theologies that seek to reconcile discourses of God’s plurality with this basic truth. The syncretic models of God as one with many names (I72-3), as one with many features (H113-8), as one with many colours

(F58f), as a big god with subordinate little gods emanating from him (D221-9), all depend on an authoritative incontrovertible word that says ‘there is only one God’ being spoken in a context of plurality.

Bakhtin’s description of the way ‘authoritative discourse’ is assimilated into our own word does not entirely agree with the experience of the children. He writes:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally, we encounter it with its authority already fused to it ... it is not therefore a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are equal. (342)

The ‘authoritative words’ that predominate in the discussions are words of religious authority. Even in religion the children recognise an element of choice. It is acknowledged in their consideration the possibility that they might in the future have their own children who do not wish to accept the authority of the family’s religion:

**AI:** I’d be very upset but it’s up to them (I156).

**DK:** They might not like it if we forced them to believe in what we say and things (I162).



**SC:** I'd try to persuade them but if they didn't want to I'd just leave them to go. (I157-8)

CS and JS discuss instances of conversions to Islam, one of them being CS's sister. He insists that she did not become a Muslim 'by force' (G249) and commends her for converting on the grounds of reason (G252-3). Nevertheless none of the children expressed any wish to change their religious allegiance themselves.

Given this element of choice, the word of their religion does not have its authority 'already fused to it'; the children have reasons of their own for assenting to it (see also Chapter 5.1 on religious identity). They could be reasons of conviction whereby the children were 'internally persuaded' of the rightness or reasonableness of the authoritative word, or of the authority of one discourse over another. It is the perceived 'wrongness' of elements of Islamic teaching that causes CS to reject the authoritative base of the Qur'an:

**CS:** I think that the Muslim religion is wrong to say that they can't eat certain things because everyone has the right to do what they feel is right ... [Allah's] not telling you that – it's just some person who's wrote a book and they don't even know if all these stories are true or not (G355-362).

They could also be reasons with emotional force. CS explains his commitment to Christianity in terms of pride, loyalty, and sympathy:

**CS:** I'm proud of who I am because really it's my ancestors that started this and I'm going to carry on for them ... I just feel sorry for them. (G236)

The encounter with other religious discourses also provides impetus for children to adopt the words of an authority of their own. When the children are presented with statements from Islam's 'authoritative discourse', they often answer them with the authority of their own religion:

**JA:** Our god's not like – our god's not like –

**JH:** If you pray to him it'll just be all right – if we say sorry' (B335-6).

**JE:** He can say whatever he wants because I know my god's good. (B417)

**JK:** I say that 'if your god made me then how come I believe in my god? (F80-1)

Such responses may aid the children's own religious understanding or be a form of self-defence. Encounter with the word of Islam strengthens the children's identification with their own 'authoritative word' and their commitment to the religious discourse they feel they have inherited.

The distinction between 'internally persuasive word' and 'authoritative word' is useful in the analysis of the children's employment and assimilation of others' discourse, but an association of the former with freedom and the latter with restriction it is misleading. Children's use of 'authoritative discourse' does not

signify the abdication of autonomy while there is an element of choice, nor does the ‘authoritative word’ necessarily limit their own. They may be able to recognise the ‘rhetoric of ideological pronouncements’ (Erricker 2000, 204), they also know how to use it. In their speech the ‘authoritative word’ can become another tool (complementary to the ‘internally persuasive word’) to serve their intellectual, emotional and social needs. In fact there is a danger of creating an artificial internal-external divide. When the children adopt an ‘authoritative word’ being internally persuaded of its authority (by reason or desire) and employ it for their purposes, they make that word their own.

In an article based on her research into school children’s talk, Janet Maybin comments on the prominence of the words of others in our speech:

We have no alternative but to use the words of others, but we do have some choice over whose words we appropriate, and how we reconstruct the voice of others in our speech. (Maybin 1994, 132)

Her combination of ‘no alternative’ and ‘some choice’ when applied to the children of my project, reflects the ‘agency and structure’ understanding of childhood with which this thesis began (Chapter 1.1.3). This chapter has demonstrated how the context of the children’s lives provides the range of words and discourses within which they work. At the same time it has shown their ability to make selections from that range, to appropriate chosen words into their own thinking and ally them to their own needs. The reasons for the choices made are explored in more detail in



the chapter that follows as we move from the wider context of the children's social setting to that of the actual research encounters in which the words reappear.

### 3.2 Situated Activity

Having found evidence of the assimilation of the words and discourse of their *social setting* into the children's language, we now turn our attention to the children's language in relation to the social domain of *situated activity*; the point at which new words are assimilated and previously assimilated words re-emerge. Layder writes that situated activity, involves face-to-face conduct between two or more people who are each other's "response presence" (Layder 1997, 85). This is the domain of the individual research discussions which provide the data for my project. The word 'situated' ties the activity historically to a moment in time: it represents a coalescence of a particular set of historical circumstances and of a group of personalities each bringing to the gathering an individualised understanding gained from previous encounters. As well as having these links to the past, the situated activity looks forward to the future, for agreements are reached and new shared understandings created that will in turn provide a background for further exchanges (Layder 1997, 85). This chapter will relate this continuous process of meaning-making to Bakhtin's account of the journey of the 'living word' (Bakhtin 1981, 276). A focus on the interrelationship of language and cognition also relates it to the work of Bakhtin's contemporary and fellow countryman, Lev Vygotsky. His theories as expounded and explained by James Wertsch in *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of the Mind* complement those of Bakhtin as background to the analysis of the children's verbal exchanges that follows. My concern will be not only to set out the relationship between social setting and situated activity in the creation of meaning, but also to explain the multi-directional movement of children's thought observed in Chapter 2.2.6.

### ***3.2.1 Response and Understanding***

In her article *Children's Voices: Talk, Knowledge and Identity*, Janet Maybin describes Bakhtin's 'chaining relationship' of utterance and response in the following terms:

There is a complex chaining relationship between the utterances and responses both within and across conversations. Every utterance is always also a response, implicitly or explicitly, to some previous utterance either from within the immediate conversation or from some previous occasion, and every utterance also anticipates and takes into account its own possible responses. (Graddol, Maybin and Stierer 1994, 132)

In this manner, each of the research discussions in my project draws on the assimilated words of encounters from the past and provides material for those of the future. Within each discussion a child's utterance serves the same function, responding to and initiating other utterances. In acts of response and initiation the speaker aims to understand and be understood by other members of the group. This interrelationship of response and understanding Bakhtin sees as the very nature of speech. Responsive understanding is 'a fundamental force' (Bakhtin 1981, 280). Through it the word and discourse are changed:

Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other ... Thus an active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a



new *conceptual* system, that of one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements. (282)

As communication, the utterance is directed towards the listener's understanding:

[The speaker's] orientation towards the listener is an orientation towards a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener, it introduces totally new elements into the discourse. (282)

What Bakhtin is writing about is the 'living utterance' or 'living word' which he opposes to the 'direct word'. The 'direct word' 'acknowledges only itself' and encounters no obstacle on its path towards its object (276). The 'living word' by contrast, does not have a fixed meaning and encounters numerous obstacles as it journeys through an 'elastic environment' to find its meaning (276). With the spoken word that environment through which the word travels is the 'apperceptive background' (281) or 'conceptual horizon' (282) of the listener. In this study of their language and understanding in situated activity, the children will first be considered in their role as listener. Their conceptual horizon has been developed through interaction with others in their social setting and the assimilation of other's words. Any word placed under consideration in the situated activity of the discussion comes into contact with this assimilated discourse and is open to being changed by it. Some of the children's contributions to discussion will illustrate this process.

### 3.2.2 *Privileges of Occurrence and the Assimilated Word*

Similar to a lesson situation, each of the project's group discussions is centred round a set task: responding to the stimulus of word cards, formulating questions to be answered by other children or giving answers to the same. The children are also responding to the contributions of other group members during the course of the activity. In the first of these tasks the children are being presented with each word in isolation, divorced from its lexical and discourse context. Wertsch calls these the word's '*privileges of occurrence*' (Wertsch 1985, 137) and questions the validity of assigning meanings to words without them. In the children's case, however, it will be seen that, in their consideration of each word presented to them, they themselves supply the contextual clues to the meaning from their own memory of that word's use and their perception of what is relevant to it. This memory and perception constitute the *meaning potential* of the word. The contextualisation of the word by different individuals on the basis of their own past encounters with it, gives it a personalised meaning. To use Bakhtin's light metaphor (Bakhtin 1981, 299-300), the word is 'refracted' on its way to the children's understanding by its passage through a wealth of experiences of that word.

Former encounters with a word give children an awareness of its privileges of occurrence which determine its meaning potential for them. These privileges include the grammatical. The divine identity of 'Jah', for example, is understood from its grammatical force in the optative 'Jah always be with you' (E211). The diverse grammatical status of 'God', used variously as proper noun (God),

singular noun (one god), plural noun ('lots of gods'), as attached to possessive pronouns ('my god' as distinct from 'your god') and other qualifiers ('Muslim god', 'Hindu god'), sets up dissonances and contrasts, efforts to reconcile which lead to much creative thinking on the children's part. There is also an issue of the speaking rights of various words: the significance of a word to the children depends on who they have heard using it. For MA, 'Allah' has overtones of the alien and even hostile as he understands it as a Muslim word, 'what Muslim people say' (B308), one that he, as a Hindu, is not allowed to use, 'can't say that word' (B306). For JN the significance he attaches to the word 'one' when applied to God has the authority of his church behind it:

**JN:** They teach us at my church that there's only like *one* religion and there's only *one* god (H7-8).

The physical context is also significant as individual words conjure up images of settings in which they have been encountered and the whole scene is incorporated into the word's meaning for the child. Talk of God as 'Father' brings to MA's mind the image from a film of a confessional with its secretive curtains behind which, he believes, the 'Christian's God' is hidden (B468-73). A less sombre image is the picture that comes to JE's mind with the word 'God':

**JE:** Our church – when we're talking to our God at our church I just saw this woman just jumping about with her hat coming off her head (B484-5)



The discourses in which words have played a part also colour their meaning so that ‘Allah’ can be understood in terms of teasing and unequal power relations at school (B423-431, H144-5), and ‘God’ is associated with ethics and the reprehensible behaviour of ‘bad people’ who do not follow his commands (E11-5, E129-133).

The influence of a listener’s previous experiences and own perceptions can produce a very individual representation of a word’s meaning. A clear example of this happening within the research discussions is JH’s response to the word ‘Jah’. For JH ‘because I’ve got his first name’ it initiated an autobiographical account of his early years of faith complete with dramatic details of his naming ceremony; as a ritual ‘stick’ was waved across the infant JH, ‘my mum said I was coughing like it had smoke and it was tipping over me like that [demonstrates] I had my eyes closed’; with a recitation of a Rastafarian prayer, ‘Jah always be with you ...’, and expressions of the personal importance of the event to him, ‘I always remember that’, ‘I’ll never forget it’ (E199f). In his account the occurrence of the word ‘Jah’ in a prayer and as the prefix to his name, the use of the authority of his mother and the holy man, the context of the naming ceremony and its role in his autobiographical narrative combine to give the word a deeply personal meaning different from that it had in the intention of the research exercise or would have had for any other child present.

### *3.2.3 Meaning-Referent Distinction*

Occasionally the children's understanding relates words to totally different objects. RA understands 'guru' as a piece of clothing Muslims wear (D327), while RJ associates it with a holy man (D333-9), and RA and JK associate 'Jah' with the Gujarati word used when shooing away a neighbour's cat, rather than as a name for God (D378). More often though children agree about the object a word refers to, but the language they employ in response to the word contains a variety of meanings as in the different understandings of God above.

Like Ricoeur (chapter 2.2.3), Vygotsky used Husserl's sense-referent (meaning-referent) distinction:

It is necessary to distinguish the meaning of a word or expression from its referent, that is, the objects indicated by the word or expression. There may be one meaning and different objects or, conversely, different meanings and one object. Whether we say 'the victor at Jena' or 'the loser at Waterloo' we indicate the same person (Napoleon). The meaning of the two expressions [however] is different. (cited in Wertsch 1985, 97)

In the examples above the referent of the children's utterances is the same; their words all refer to God (occasionally under the name of Allah or Jah), but the meanings given to God are different. Just as Napoleon was the victor at Jena and loser at Waterloo, so Allah is good and peaceful, respected by lots of people (D127-8), and he is the fierce judge who is going to 'put you in the fire when you

die' (A237-240); the Christian god is the rather sinister character to whom you whisper behind curtains (B468-473), and the exciting, lively spirit who makes you jump around and lose your hat (B484-6). The source of this variety of meanings is 'the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view, value judgements ... one composed of specific objects and emotional expressions' (Bakhtin 1985, 281), the assimilated discourse and individualised word which constitute the meaning potential of the word and contribute to the conceptual horizon of the listener.

In the situated activity we can trace the re-emergence of this assimilated discourse, we can also view the process by which new meanings are assimilated in turn. The distinction between referent and meaning allows for change or development in a child's understanding of a word. Vygotsky writes of the false conclusions inevitably reached by those who hold that '*the end point of development in word meaning coincides with the beginning point*, that a ready-made concept is given from the very beginning, and consequently there is no room for development'. (99) Vygotsky's interest is in *development* and the process by which children come to partake of adult understanding of the world in which they are growing up. The meaning and referent distinction provides the key to his theory of children's gradual acquisition of the elements that constitute the complete understanding of the word meaning. Though, for reasons that will become evident later, I do not hold to a linear development theory of word meaning with its teleological implications, the meaning-reference distinction helps explain the variety, the revisions and creations of meaning observable in the children's representations of the words, objects and situations under consideration.



The possibility of movement in word meaning is central to the process of assimilation of others' discourse through a series of situated activities. As children experience words in a succession of encounters these words acquire new significance and so a word first encountered in the family home, for example, may take on an additional meaning when spoken by a friend in a school context. JN begins one discussion with a statement learned from his church, of the oneness of God and the exclusive claim of Christianity to the status of a religion (H7-9). During the conversation he is confronted with Hindu friends' use of 'gods' as plural. His definition of God and implicit understanding of other religions alters when he assimilates this plurality with the 'they' and 'all' of the following sentence:

**JN:** They can all be the same god because God can ... change into different – like different features. (H113)

Here JN is not only recognising different understandings of the word 'God' but is bringing them together into a coherent whole. In this brief statement he is responding to and organising the divergent meanings he has encountered. As he does so he is directing his speech towards the other children in the group.

### ***3.2.4 Bridging the Conceptual Gap***

So far the emphasis has been upon divergent and individual understandings generated in response to a given word. The children have been considered as listeners. Now we will view their use of language in their role as speakers. In the

discussion the participants act not only to receive words into their conceptual system, but also to convey them to others. It is what Bakhtin terms ‘orientation towards listener’ (Bakhtin 1981, 280). The challenge faced by the speaker is that of communication: how to formulate utterances in such a way as to be understood by those to whom they are addressed; how to bridge the gap between their understanding of the word or situation under consideration, and that of their listener. The gap may be one of knowledge or outlook. False assumptions made about the degree to which either is shared hinder communication. To use Bakhtin’s terminology, the influences we have observed on the word which give it a variety of different meanings are *centrifugal* forces acting on that word. Acts of communication between different subjects require a certain minimum of mutual understanding and so *centripetal* forces are brought to bear, organising word meanings to create a jointly recognised medium for sharing thoughts:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. (272)

Vygotsky’s research focuses on the maturation of children’s thought: his interest was in bridging the gap between adult and child understanding, between their different definitions of objects and events. In Wertsch’s terminology, the ‘situation definition’ is ‘the way in which objects and events in a situation are represented or defined’ (Wertsch 1985, 159). Importantly for the activities in which my research participants are engaged, these ‘objects’ or ‘events’ may be ‘abstract and/or removed from the speech context’ (236). In the process of education or socialisation the onus is placed on the adult partner in adult-child

interaction to find a way to communicate with the child so that the latter can eventually come to participate in a joint understanding, that is to share ‘situation definitions’. It is the problem of establishing or maintaining *intersubjectivity*.

In the research activity the adult-child gap still presents a challenge but the concern is the reverse of that set out above. My desire as a researcher to find out about the children’s understanding means that they are the prime movers in the communication context, relaying their understanding to me. In order to draw out the speaker I also frequently assume or exaggerate a lack of knowledge so that the gap between us is my supposed ignorance. As the research takes place in discussion groups the children are addressing their peers, not just the researcher, and so face the challenge of establishing common ground and points of contact with each other.

Analysis of the children’s utterances reveals the variety of strategies with which they meet that challenge. In their efforts to mediate their message to the listener they might attempt direct translation from one language to another, from Gujarati to English (D375), from a ‘Muslim word’ to one of more general application, ‘Ramadhan’ to ‘fasting’ (E23), ‘namaz’ to ‘praying’ (B174); they might use illustrations such as examples given of food that is ‘haram’ (B147f), or actions that are ‘guna’ (E122f), or analogy as with CS’s ‘fairy’ (G148-152). They might break up the concept into a number of subsidiary ideas that contribute to the whole picture, for example explanations of what a *topi* is (D145f). All of these strategies act upon the words they describe to expand, restrict or alter their meaning in subtle ways.



### 3.2.5 Referential Perspective

In his exposition and extension of Vygotsky's ideas, Wertsch writes of the use of *referential perspective* to communicate with another's understanding. The referential perspective is 'the perspective or viewpoint utilized by the speaker in order to identify a referent' (Wertsch 1985, 168). For each referent the speaker can choose from a variety of referring expressions. At the simplest level the same object could be signified by 'the white thing', 'the round thing' or 'the round white thing'. In attempts to identify a word or expression and convey its meaning, the children have a similar variety of options and their choice often reflects their perception of the listener's understanding or viewpoint. Bound up in the referring expressions they use is not only their own perspective, the words and discourses incorporated from their own experience and personal history of encounter, but also their perception of the listener's perspective, some recognition of which is needed to communicate meaning. The perspectives of listener and speaker, to a greater or lesser extent, are both incorporated into the referential perspective of an utterance. The degree to which the referential perspective is shared by both speaker and addressee is the extent of intersubjectivity in the exchange. This orientation towards the listener can introduce new elements into the meaning of a word, bring particular elements into prominence and suppress others. This process is evidenced in the following examples where the speakers are addressing their listener's perspectives as classified into understandings, knowledge and attitudes.

YN himself identifies as ‘Hindu’, yet his representation of that word’s meaning owes much to the understanding of his non Hindu audience. YN’s family is practising, both at home and occasionally at the temple. For him the word has a wealth of associations. When trying to convey the sense of the word ‘Hindu’ to the discussion group he hesitates but finally states that ‘it is a religion with lots of gods’ (E112). Addressing a group of children and an adult from other, monotheistic, faith backgrounds he gives the word ‘Hindu’ a very specific and narrow meaning that they might be expected to understand easily. This is not to say that YN is defining the word in terms that are someone else’s and not his own, but that this is the particular perspective he adopts as relevant on this occasion from the many perspectives on God and religion that he has assimilated through a variety of encounters.

Similarly NA, HA and JH use the word ‘fasting’ to explain the word ‘Ramadan’ and the referential perspective they give it contains the ideas of hunger and empathy with the starving of Africa; worthy sentiments befitting a school setting and of general application to the non Muslims in the discussion group. Their response to the word was as follows:

**Card: Ramadan**

(general laugh)

**HA:** Fasting

**NA:** Fasting

**JH:** A Muslim word – fasting. People – Ramadan means that when people fast it means that all people in Africa – people that starve – they starve for thirty days – when they starve they’re just starving to see how it feels – see how it feels about all the people in all the different countries that starve – they want to – you know, pray for them that they get food sometime and that when they fast they want to know that how it feels to them that they don’t have food all their lives (E25-31).

It is a perspective they say they have learnt from their Muslim friends and the length and fluency with which JH discourses on the subject indicates that the ideas have captured his imagination. What is missing in this explanation is not only a specifically Muslim religious or communal perspective but also the particular perspective of the children in that group that caused them to snigger when they were first presented with the word. The perspective they initially shared with one another and that they thought appropriate to share with the adult present were different.

The importance of finding a referential perspective that includes the listener’s perspective is evident in the following interchange in which the word fails to bridge the conceptual gap between the speaker’s and listener’s consciousness. JN asked TR how Hindus direct their devotions to a plurality of gods: ‘Do you praise every one of them?’ (H120) As the word ‘praise’ is not recognised by TR, JN changes it to the word in TR’s mind, ‘pray’ and tries to make himself clearer by using the illustration of prayer to Jesus (H124). As this does not advance the communication, SN steps in with the ‘Our Father’ as an example of Christian



prayer and only confuses TR further (H128-130). By using a specifically Christian referential perspective the boys were unable to convey the meaning of their word 'praise' to the consciousness of the non Christian listener.

Occasionally a third perspective is sought which, being common to both interlocutors, will interpret the object of the speech in such a way that their different perspectives on it are brought together into a shared understanding. CS's use of a metaphor when proposing a model of a new religion to JS is an instance of this. He is trying hard to get across to JS's understanding the difficult concept of human agency in the creation of a new religion. The conceptual gap between the boys is the difference between CS's emphasis on human and JS's on divine action in the founding of a new religion. CS tries to overcome this with the shared referential perspective of the fairy tale (of Cinderella in particular):

CS: People have to do something first before – em – God gives them something back – like, if it's a fairy – a fairy's not going to put a new suit on – you're not going to just stand there and get a new suit on – like you're going to have to twirl around or something – just do a little thing until the fairy actually does something (G148-152).

That CS was right in judging this illustration to be part of JS's conceptual horizon is demonstrated by JS's later implicit reference to the Cinderella story in 'a pair of new slippers' (G156-7). By working from this particular perspective CS not only brings JS's understanding closer to his but also develops his own understanding.

He converts it into a proverbial phrase, ‘do something and you’ll get something back’ (G155) and returns to the idea later in the conversation (G184-8).

### *Perspectives of Knowledge*

A listener’s perspective varies from the speaker’s not just in understanding but also in knowledge. Their referential perspective can include the ignorance or knowledge of the addressee. JH’s personal account of his birth ceremony is a case in point: it is a very personal and individual speaker’s perspective on the word ‘Jah’ yet contains in its expression the perceived ignorance of the listeners. The other members of the group have already admitted that the word means nothing to them. This ignorance of the origin of JH’s name, his religion and personal history is answered with careful explanations of terms:

**JH:** That’s what my name is, JH, because it’s the beginning of the god that I – the religion that I come from, Rasta ... It’s not the actual god’s name ... He’s like Jahovah but we call him Jah for short. (E199-201)

Had JH been talking to his mother and meeting her perspective of knowledge, the expressions used about the referent, ‘Jah’, would not have been the same.

A contrary example, where the speaker’s perspective meets a perspective of knowledge, is also linked to the naming of the child. In the Christmas play I produced at the end of the previous term, JO had been given the role of the

prophet Malachi. In the context of a discussion on the baptism of babies, JO remarks on a coincidence:

**JO:** You know, when we were doing the Christmas play, yeah – I could have been called Malachi – there was a choice – out of JO and Malachi. But my Mum picked JO. (B248-253)

Our shared knowledge of the play, and of Malachi as the character played by JO in that play, means JO only needs to make a brief reference to the play and does not have to engage in any detail, to get his message across: ‘you know, when we were doing the Christmas play’ contains that shared knowledge and experience.

### *Perspectives of Attitude*

The perspectives the children feel free to share in the situated activity also depend on their understanding of their listeners’ attitude towards what they will hear, and on their anticipated response. They rely on much common feeling based on shared status as members of minority groups in a largely Muslim environment. This anticipation has already been observed in examples of children describing times when they have been hurt by the unkindness of those who tease them on account of their religion or race, for example, SH’s report of a time when his Muslim peers would not let him play football with them saying, ‘No, because you’re a different religion’ (H183), or AK’s account of the teasing he received in Year 3 as the only Hindu in the class (G200-3). In these cases the boys are conveying their hurt to the sympathy of their listeners. Similarly the children are eager to share with each



other examples of the corporal punishments of some mosque classes, knowing that they all share the sense of outrage, and bring up stories of their peers' 'superstition', such as Ashfaq's expectation of money raining down from heaven (B396-7), anticipating a response of amusement or ridicule .

In the research discussions the collective mood was such that conversation flowed freely, but the importance of the speaker's perceptions of the listener's likely reactions is shown in reported instances of the children not feeling free to express their thoughts in front of an audience that might be upset by what they say, 'I don't laugh to them because they find it bad' (D121), who might be unimpressed or disinterested, JN does not talk about his fasting to his Muslim friends because 'they'll think it's funny. They don't want to listen.' (C34) There are also instances of speaker's orientation towards a listener's perspective being such that they couch their speech in terms deliberately designed to provoke. Memories of teasing on the grounds of religion and race are examples of this, the teasers having enough knowledge of their listener's perspective to know how to hurt, insults directed at the gods of others (G308, F44, B395, B412) claims of the superiority of one's own god over those of others (G95, 211, 221, B393-4) interfered with the meaning making taking place around the word, God. Bakhtin recognises the negative effects orientation towards a listener's psychological perspective can have on the word's meaning:

Sometimes this orientation towards the listener interferes with the word's creative work on its referent (Bakhtin 1985, 282).

Thus the dialogism bears a more subjective, psychological and (frequently) random character, sometimes crassly accommodating, sometimes provocatively polemical. (282)

### ***3.2.6 The Role of Definitions***

In several of the above illustrations of the children's thinking, their referential perspectives were expressed in acts of word or concept definition ('Hindu', 'Ramadan', 'Jah'). The word card exercise required the children to provide definitions for the words presented to them. Definitions were also employed by the children in other research discussions when it became clear that the participants lacked a shared referential perspective and communication was difficult; examples are JN and SN's attempt to explain their use of 'prayer', and CS's use of a metaphor to define the relationship between God and humankind's activity. Agreement about the meanings of words within a particular exchange is often implicit in word use but occasionally needs to be explicitly established (or defined) to create that minimum of mutual understanding needed for effective communication. The act of definition requires a process of selecting from the many meanings the word has acquired through past encounters, and of adapting these meanings to meet the needs of the present communication context. It thus links the social setting and situated activity which form the wider and immediate contexts for the children's thoughts.

The word 'definition' carries the sense of the limits of a word; where its edges are; the boundaries of its jurisdiction. As such it provides an organising tool for both Bakhtin's and Vygotsky's models of meaning-making. For Wertsch and Vygotsky it is the gap between the situation definitions of adult and child participants in a communicative event that provides a motor for change and development. The adult is challenged to find a way to introduce 'context-informative referential perspectives' to lift the child 'up' to her own situation definition (176). The adult's situation definition is presented as normative; it is what the child needs to acquire to become 'a mature member of the culture' (176). The pressures on the children with whom I am working are more complex as they face the challenges of a confusing variety of cultures, discourses, values, beliefs and experiences. Parents, peers, the media, teachers and other adults in the community present them with a diversity of models and messages. For them Bakhtin's model, with its recognition of multi-directional forces and conflicting perspectives, has particular relevance.

Bakhtin's 'living word' has no destination in sight when it is received into our understanding but is limitless in its activity. This does not mean it cannot be defined but that when it acquires a particular interpretation (such as definition gives) in a particular context, it is not for ever bound by it. Writing of the internally persuasive word he says:



It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions it encounters. (345)

It is brought into 'interanimating relationships with new contexts' (345); the discourse's semantic structure is not 'finite' but 'open':

In each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal newer ways to mean. (346)

These interanimating relationships with new contexts include the encounter between the speaker's and the listener's perspectives on that word, described above. In any situated activity the word is dialogized by the meeting of differing conceptual horizons. As these perspectives are brought together in the referential perspective with which the speaker expresses the word, the organisation of the word's meaning takes place. In defining a word the children are representing not its full meaning potential but the particular meanings to be understood and used in a particular encounter. In new contexts of encounter the word is applied to new conditions and so newer ways to mean are revealed requiring new definitions. A definition is temporal and context bound. The definition of 'Hindu' in YN's communication to his non Hindu audience, is 'a religion that believes a lot of gods', that of 'Jah' is the personal name and whole context of the birth ceremony as described by JH. In the speaker's and listener's minds and memories there are many other perspectives on those words, other meanings (or meaning potentials) not used in this situation, but which might be organised into new definitions in

other situations of encounter. Added to these are the many more meanings that may, temporarily have slipped from the memory:

At the present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life. (Bakhtin's *Estetika* 373, cited in Holquist 1990, 39)

As a word is received into our understanding its activity may be limitless but definition imposes temporary limits on a word's meanings and regulates them in such a way that agreement on its use can be achieved. Definition reins in the limitless activity of the word and so is a centripetal force towards a unitary language countering the centrifugal forces towards diversity and mutual unintelligibility. Recalling Dostoevsky's dictum that the heart of man is a battlefield between good and evil, Bakhtin proposes that the mind of man is the theatre of war between the centripetal impulses of cognition and the centrifugal forces of the world:

I can make sense of the world only by reducing the number of its meanings. (Holquist 1990, 47)

### *Examples of the children's definitions for organising meaning*

When presented with different religious terms on word cards, the children responded with a series of composite definitions such as the examples below. In

these they explain the significance of the topi, a familiar object worn by many of their classmates, and the concept of God, a common subject of their conversation and thought:

**Card: Topi**

**RA:** It's a hat. It's religious.

**RJ:** A Muslim hat.

**JK:** Boys wear that.

**RA:** They've got patterns on them.

**RJ:** Miss, it's for they wear it when they go to mosque.

**JK:** It's religious.

**RA:** To cover their hair.

**RJ:** What!?

**RA:** No, it's the girls isn't it – sorry.

**RJ:** It's for boys, when they go to mosque.

**RA:** It's like respect – to respect.

**RJ:** It's like to protect them or something like that.

**JK:** From evil.

**NI:** Evil spirits and ghosts (D145-160).

**Card: God**

**BT:** Important person.

**AN:** It can do – it can turn into anything.

**DY:** He made you.

**AN:** It's the creator of the world.



**CS:** Very powerful.

**AN:** The creator of the world.

**CA:** He lives in heaven.

**BT:** He's kind – He can do anything (A1-9).

In response to the task they are set, the children use their previous knowledge to select and organise a variety of meanings around the two words they have been given: the topi is a hat; the topi signifies respect; the topi is something that wards off evil; God is all powerful; God is creator; God is kind.

The examples of definitions of God and topi follow a 'brain-storm' model where the group members pile up more and more aspects of the definition to provide a fuller picture. SN takes another approach to the same task of defining 'topi' and organises a selection of meanings and associations into a short story:

**SN:** Muhammad, the prophet, made an invention and it was a topi hat and he held it [holding out his hands] and said to God, 'This is a symbol of my love for God'.

**JN:** Don't laugh about it.

**SN:** I'm not (C58-9).

His lacks the detail of the earlier definition but in its directness retains an aura, a sense of mystery and symbolism. The expanded definition of the topi set out above seems rather flat in comparison and misses some of the significance of the term. If, though he denies it, SN is poking fun, his contribution says much about

how he, as someone who is not a Muslim, relates to this religious symbol worn by many of his classmates.

The definition of God given above is wide, but the breakdown of the sense of ‘God’ into a list of attributes and acts cannot contain the completeness of PR’s brief definition:

**PR:** God is God, definitely (B467).

In this statement no aspect of God’s meaning is missing. His answer is full but perhaps is not the kind of definition required by the particular task or the expectation (the perspective) of the listeners. A similar definition of God is used by CS when he and JS are working on the idea of a new religion:

**CS:** God’s just there. (G125)

In this case, the short definition is entirely appropriate to the task in which the boys are engaged. It serves as a warning in their model against ascribing too much power to humankind in the activity of making a new religion by denying the possibility of making a new God. This shared perspective on God is needed for the boys to create a model of religion acceptable to both.

The journey of the word ‘God’ illustrates the processes of meaning-making that take place in the children’s definitions. God is the referent of many different expressions; these expressions reflect different meanings ascribed to God and

assimilated into the children's understanding (their conceptual horizon) from numerous encounters with the word and concept. Certain of these meanings are organised into definitions of God by the children to suit the particular situation of encounter in which the word is being used. Each definition expresses the referential perspective that emerges from a face-to-face encounter between the different perspectives of the interlocutors. In seeking a definition that reflects these different perspectives the children are engaged in organising meanings and creating new.

This understanding brings us back to the relationship between social setting and situated activity earlier described in terms of a chain of meaning (page 162). The children's words originate in previous encounters but the element of organisation of meanings involved in the act of communication means that understandings expressed are not just cumulative, they are also selective. The children do not bring all their previous encounters with a word to the activity, but select those meanings that they perceive to be relevant to the task and to the understanding of the rest of the group with whom they are communicating. This means the children's understanding and the meaning of their word does not develop in a single linear direction but can move in a variety of directions in response to the different circumstances of encounter. It allows for the seeming contradictions in the children's expression of understandings and the movement between faith styles discussed in chapter 2.2 and exemplified in JN's differing statements about God, each understanding rooted in a different social context.



# DIALOGUE

## 4.1 Understandings of Dialogue

This project began as an exploration of the influence of a particular context on the participants' religious understanding. As it progressed the active nature of their understanding became evident as did the place of dialogue in that mental activity. This dialogue was not just in the verbal exchange between the children and their Muslim peers that constituted the background of much of the research data, it was there in the exchange of the face-to-face encounter of the research discussion where dialogical engagement acted on memories and interpretations of experience to create new meanings. Understandings of what constitutes dialogue are so varied that I shall first steer my way through various uses of the concept to find a definition that has meaning in the context of my research. The sense of dialogue will be considered below as form, principle and orientation.

### *4.1.1 Dialogue as Form*

The following are extracts from the children's discussions which will be used to explore the idea of dialogue as form.

#### *Extract V (F182-190)*

The children are sharing stories they have heard about the beginning of the world:

**JK:** I've got one. The earth was dark and God was getting bored of – you know, doing nothing and not dying people or anything, and so he decided to make some animals first and then –

**JH:** Yeah, I've heard this one.

**JK:** Some people, because then the people can eat the animals –

**JH:** And then two people make kids and their kids make kids and kids, kids, kids, kids.

**JK:** They make them out of clay –

**RA:** And then they breathe and make life into them.

*Extract W (H111-9)*

Children of Hindu and Christian backgrounds are discussing how many gods there are:

**SH:** You have to believe in all of them because all of them have got something different, like special.

**JN:** Yeah, because- look, they can all – they can all be the same god because God can - God can –

**AY:** Do lots of things.

**JN:** Change into different – like different features – like he can be in you.

**SN:** He can come into anything – he can change into anything.

**TR:** We've got like a god who you can actually see.

*Extract X (D190-202)*

The children are explaining what the word 'Krishna' means:

**RA:** A blue god.

**JK:** A Hindu god.

**RA:** He's normally blue.

**JK:** He has a –

**RA:** Flute – he has a flute – he's in stories –

**JK:** He's in stories – a lot of stories.

**RA:** He has a – is it his wife? Rama?

**JK:** No, Sita. He's a prophet.

**RA:** A bit like Mohammed.

**JK:** A messenger of God.

**RA:** A messenger – an angel- a bit like an angel, like the angel that came to tell Mary she was going to have a baby – a bit like that.

**CH:** A prophet? What? Who?

*Extract Y (G115-134)*

CS is setting out his ideas for a new religion:

**CS:** (slowly, deliberately, thinking it out) All the – em - religious – religious people get together and find different languages and everything, and actually find a language that actually says a word that's appropriate for being a religion, and



then people can get along and I think it will be much more – there won't be so much trouble in the future because they'll have more technology, but it's not just the technology, it's the – if people are getting on - so I think they've got to – get on more.

**JS:** Are you trying to say – are you trying to say a new name or a new god?

**CS:** No one can make a new god.

**JS:** I know but what are you trying to say, though? – a new name or something?

**CS:** People make one big religion that no one disagrees with – every –

**JS:** You can't make a new religion really, can you?

**CS:** Yeah.

**JS:** How?

**CS:** I'll explain that to you later.

**JH:** No, I'd like you to explain that now. Can you explain it now? It's very interesting?

**CS:** I've just told him!

#### *Extract Z (F56-66)*

JH is giving his views on God's colour:

**JH:** I say to [my Muslim friends], 'Do you believe about Jesus?' They go, 'No'. But when they ask me, I say, 'Yes, I believe that there's only one god'. And they ask me, 'What colour do you think he is?' And most people my colour will say he's black, but I think he's all mixed colours, black, white, Asian – blue, pink. I

think he's every colour in the world, I don't just think he's one particular colour because, miss, you can't just have – even though you can have one god – people think the devil is red which he probably is because he's burnt – but God must be like everyone's colour because to me, I think he's everyone's God, because in my religion I think there's only one God and he's everyone's God so he's got to be everyone's different colour. He can't just be black and then he's everyone's God.

**JK:** Muslims believe in a green god – green is their colour.

On one level dialogue is understood as verbal exchange between two or more parties. It is interactive, the separate utterances relating to each other sequentially and in the interdependence of initiation and response. The extracts above are all by this reckoning examples of dialogue and, having their origin in full discussions, are parts of lengthier dialogues; a plurality of voices is involved. Recorded in written form they become linguistic texts open to analysis. Dialogues of this kind constitute a primary source of data for numerous studies of teacher-pupil, pupil-pupil communication in educational research (Maybin 1994, 131). Though the area of research might be the same the focus of these researchers' interest may differ.

Exchanges such as those above have received the linguistic-based attention of discourse analysts, among them Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) who constructed a descriptive system of the organisational properties of dialogue informed by the functional rather than grammatical role of utterances. A common teacher-pupil exchange, for example, consists of 'initiation', 'response' and 'feedback'. The verbal to-and-fro between participants in

dialogue has been examined by conversation analysts Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) to produce a set of turn-taking rules by which conversationalists alternate in turn-construction units with considerable variation in the order and length of turns. The above-named analysts have advanced the understanding of the nature of structures in dialogue but other researchers of classroom dialogue have a different focus.

Analysts of classroom communication, Edwards and Mercer, use the term ‘dialogue’ for the exchanges of speech they are analysing (Edwards and Mercer 1987, 65) and ‘the substantial excerpts of situated classroom talk’ (11), similar to the extracts above, they present to illustrate their theories. However they contrast their primary interest to that of discourse analysts:

[It is] how common knowledge is established rather than how people engage in sequential dialogue (11)

We shall be looking for continuities of talk and of shared experience that transcend the moment-to-moment flow of talk, the alternation of turns at speaking and listening that are the principal object of Sinclair and Coulthard’s analysis.  
(10)

Their expressed concern is more with ‘context’, being ‘everything that the participants in a conversation know and understand’ (63), than with form (10-11). In Edwards and Mercer’s work dialogue is secondary to this understanding:



*All* of the dialogue can be said to be dependent on context for its meaning (65).

The dependence of *all* of the dialogue on current, or previously established, or implicit context is most clearly seen if we examine particular words' (65).

They are interested less in dialogue than in the underlying knowledge and understanding on which it is based, the 'mental context' (65) of 'memory and perception' (66). In the account of dialogue-based research above dialogue itself is neutral, it can be studied as a text, or mined for data but cannot be discovered or advocated.

To de-neutralise dialogue it needs to be set up against an alternative and distinguished from it. Vygotsky does this when he draws the contrast between dialogic and monologic forms of speech. Working against the early 20th century background of Russian Formalism, Vygotsky's theory of human psychology builds on an understanding of the interconnectedness of thought and speech, of language use and cognitive development. His theory thus brings together the interest in linguistic form and function of the discourse analysis school and the context of shared knowledge and understanding of which Edwards and Mercer write. In this union the concept of dialogue becomes central:

The fundamental distinction between dialogic and monologic forms of speech takes on an overriding significance for linguistics and especially for the psychology of speech (cited in Wertsch 1985, 86)

Vygotsky's interest in dialogic and monologic forms was fed by L. P. Yakubinskii's monograph, '*On Dialogic Speech*' (1923) in which he aimed to examine the proposition that 'language reveals its genuine essence only in dialogue' (cited in Holquist 1990, 56).

The two forms were distinguished as follows:

Corresponding to alternating forms of interaction that involve a relatively rapid succession of actions and reactions by the interlocutors, we have a *dialogic form* of verbal social interaction; corresponding to *protracted* or *drawn out* forms of influence in social interaction, we have a *monologic form* of verbal expression.

(cited in Wertsch 1985, 86)

Dialogue retains the sequential 'action', 'reaction' model but is not applied generally to any verbal exchange between different parties. The number of people involved does not decide which speech is dialogic and which monologic, they are both forms of social interaction, for monologue presupposes an audience or readership. Both forms may be present in classroom interchange and so the excerpts from my research discussions will later be examined to consider whether they can be viewed as dialogic or monologic.

Yakubinskii and Vygotsky identify a number of contrasting characteristics by which the two forms may be distinguished from each other. Dialogue is a rapid succession, it is often characterised by a simplified syntax, fewer words and condensed forms; monologue on the other hand is more discursive, is protracted and uses more explicit linguistic formulation. (Wertsch 1985, 86-88)

For Yakubinskii the prime distinction was still linguistic, but as he explores the relationship of form and function of language he raises Edwards and Mercer's question of underlying knowledge and understanding. The communicative function of language differs according to the degree to which knowledge is already shared; whether those addressed are being told something new or being asked to use what they already know or have before them. According to Yakubinskii, dialogue relies less on the explicit verbal representation of a message than monologue because the speaker and listener already share a significant degree of knowledge or 'apperceptual mass' (Wertsch 1985, 87), the most extreme monologue found in written form contains the most explicit linguistic representation because of the lack of a communicative context shared by writer and reader. The greater the shared knowledge and understanding the greater the ability of all parties to take an active part in the verbal interaction. In social interaction a crucial distinction between monologue and dialogue is this degree of participation:

What distinguishes the two speech forms is the degree to which both parties participate in a concrete setting to create a text. (Wertsch 1985, 86)

While Yakubinskii considers dialogue primarily in a social setting, Vygotsky further weakens the association of dialogic form with numbers of participants by recognising it as the form employed by children in egocentric, and by adults in inner speech. There is a continuum between social dialogue, egocentric speech and inner speech:



Egocentric speech ... grows out of its social foundations by means of the individual's psychological functioning. (cited in Wertsch 1985, 112)

The dialogical form is the basis of 'intelligent, purposeful action and thinking' (117), of which egocentric speech is a transitional and inner speech a developed form. The degree to which the 'apperceptual mass' is shared is evidently highest where, as in inner speech, addresser and addressee are the same.

In Yakubinskii and Vygotsky's view dialogue is a linguistic form but is of wider interest than a linguistic analysis of 'moment-to-moment flow of talk' and 'the alternation of turns at speaking and listening' (Edwards and Mercer 1987, 10). Their understanding of the differences between dialogic and monologic forms, and the relationship between form and context is applied below to the five examples of children's talk from the discussions of my research project to see whether the distinctions made can be maintained.

### *Protracted Speech*

Extract Z has elements of Yakubinskii's monologue. It is discursive, the listeners do not interrupt or make verbal contributions to the text; it is protracted as the speaker gives sources and reasons for his understanding:

**JH:** ... when they ask ... most people ... but I think ... I think ... I don't just think ... because you can't ... even though you can ... God must be... because to me I think ... because in my religion I think ...so he's got to be ... he can't just be ...

With this speaker, JH, in particular, there are several examples of such a monologic form of speech. His discourse is often autobiographical, accounts of contexts of which the listeners in the discussion groups have little or no previous knowledge (F357f, F386f, E95f, E199f). There are other voices present in JH's words nevertheless. Muslim friends, 'people my colour' and 'my religion' have been involved in the formulation of this understanding of God and so introduce elements of dialogue. An interpretation of this utterance as monologic is retained if it is conceded that these dialogical encounters were prior to the communicative act in which JH is now engaged, they have become part of his private 'apperceptual mass' and the understanding he is now relaying to his audience in monologic mode, JH has overall control of the text's creation.

The past voices in JH's speech are not the only reason for a blurring of the dialogic / monologic distinction. In *Thinking and Speech: Psychological Investigations* (1934a) Vygotsky wrote about egocentric speech:

It is in argumentation, in discussion, that the functional moments appear that will give rise to the development of reflection. In our opinion something similar happens when the child begins to converse with himself exactly as he had earlier conversed with others, when he begins to think aloud by conversing with himself when the situation calls for it. (cited in Wertsch 1985, 112-113)

JH recalls how he has previously conversed with others about God's colour, the results of his organisation of the ideas that emerged from these conversations are set out in Extract

Z. What is not clear is when this ‘conversing with himself took place’. It is possible that it did not happen prior to the exchange recorded in Z but is taking place actually during the course of the conversation. If this is so this utterance can be interpreted as having a dual function and direction; as being a monological communication of JH’s ideas to his audience requiring protracted syntax, and a thinking aloud where JH is conversing with himself using argumentation and discussion. It has been noted above that Vygotsky understands this reflective egocentric speech to be dialogical in form. Extract Z therefore contains a functional ambiguity or a functional heterogeneity which means it is at the same time monologic and dialogic. A similar categorisation difficulty can be seen in CS’s initial contribution in Extract Y where he is both setting out his own idea of a new religion at length to his listeners and, as his slow, deliberate manner indicates, working out his thoughts in his mind as he speaks. Again his speech has a dual function requiring elements of both monologue and of dialogue.

### *Speech as Rapid Succession*

Of these extracts V, W, X, and Y all display ‘the rapid succession ... by the interlocutors’ characterised as dialogue by Yakubinskii (Wertsch 1985, 86). There are a number of individuals in each, speaking in turn and participating ‘in a concrete setting to create a text’ (86). Nevertheless there are significant differences of form between the examples. The exchanges between JS and CS in Y fit most clearly into an initiative and reactive, question and answer pattern. CS’s contributions initiate JS’s questions and those questions provoke further responses. It is perhaps closest to the dialectic of Socratic dialogue. Much of the children’s talk recorded in the research discussions is not like this,



however. In V, W and X the turn-taking pattern is more complicated and the grammatical relationship of the utterances appears to be not initiation and response but continuation. Change of speaker does not take place between linguistic units in a conventional turn-taking pattern as understood by conversation analysis (e.g. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) but within phrases:

**JK:** They make them out of clay –

**RA:** And then they breathe and make life into them.

**JN:** ...God can – God can –

**AY:** Do lots of things.

**JK:** He has a –

**RA:** Flute.

There are several instances of similar patterns in the children's speech, earlier in JS and CS's exchange for example:

**CS:** ... It would be much more ...

**JS:** ... Easier for people ...

**CS:** ... Easier ...

**JS:** ... To understand ...

**CS:** ... One religion. (G82-6)

The participants can be observed supplying words and finishing each other's sentences in a 'conversational duet', a phrase coined by Jane Falk's in her study of couples talking to a third party (Falks 1980) and used by Jennifer Coates in her paper on the talk of women friends (Coates 1994). In these cases and that of the children in the project the 'duetting' reflects a closeness, a 'solidarity' between the participants:

When a speaker completes an utterance started by another speaker they are demonstrating common ground to a spectacular degree ... In order to share in the construction of utterances you need to share a common point of view/knowledge/opinions etc. (cited in Coates 1994, 186)

Vygotsky and Yakubinskii's dialogic form was seen to depend on degrees of commonality and collaboration in creation of the text. Both these factors are present in Falks' and Coates' 'duetting' where speakers demonstrate common ground and share in the construction of utterances, yet, in this common understanding and joint activity a move away from dialogue can be traced:

Where two speakers can rely on a great deal of shared knowledge as is the case of good friends then two speakers can function as a single voice. (Coates 1994, 181  
my italics)

Extract V exemplifies the 'common ground' understanding of 'duetting'. The common knowledge behind the children's talk, its communicative context, is a tale known to them

all. Once they recognise the story that JK has begun ('Yeah, I've heard this one') they join in the telling. Their talk is not the to-and-fro of initiation and response but movement in a single direction as the tale unfolds. They are not so much taking turns at speaking and listening as giving a collective presentation in which it does not seem to matter which of the three children is speaking at any time. Coates writes of the women she is studying:

It matters little, who acts as spokesperson ... it is not the individual voices which count but the joint contribution. (188).

Understood in these terms the story becomes a monologue directed at me as the listener who does not know the story and therefore shares less of the communicative context. More than a shared creation of text it is a shared representation of something the children already know. Indeed, JK could probably have finished the story without the help of the others. If the change of voices is discounted, the story telling has the discursive flavour and explicit linguistic formulation ('so he decided', 'because then', 'and then') of monologue.

Grammatically Extract W is also a 'conversational duet' the interlocutors completing each others' phrases and supplying explanations ('Yeah, because look...they can all be the same god') and illustrations ('We've got like a god you can actually see') of each others' meaning. However, unlike V, W does not start from commonality but from difference; SH and TR believe in lots of gods, SN, JN and AY in one. What the children do share is a common intention, a common purpose to find agreement. Through this



exchange the children bring together a variety of views to transcend their differences and negotiate an agreement; one god with many features. Here they are jointly engaged in a creative act; the result is something new. This collaborative creativity is one of the features of the dialogic form as set out above, yet it stems from divergent rather than shared understandings.

Such a negotiation of difference to create a 'temporarily shared social reality' lies at the heart of R. Rommetvøit's approach to communication which explores the 'question concerning in what sense and under what conditions two persons who engage in dialogue can transcend their different private worlds' (cited in Wertsch 1985, 160), and contrasts with analyses (such as Edwards and Mercer's) that begin with the understanding that interlocutors in a speech situation share a background fund of common knowledge that provides a foundation for communication. In the former a 'state of intersubjectivity' is established during the interchange as the basis of understanding on which the conversation can proceed. Difference is a spur to active organisation and creation of meaning. Again the earlier characterization of dialogic forms is in difficulty. The problems posed by the conversational duets V and W are that the exchange with the greater shared communicative context is more single-voiced and less creative, and that with the greater differences between the participants' starting points is the more creative and in that sense more dialogic.

## *Changing Forms of Speech*

The difficulties incurred in attempts to categorise the individual extracts as either monologic or dialogic form do not end there. Within the very short interactions the conversation adopts a succession of forms and functions. In Extract X, for example, the girls begin with a conventional recount of their existing knowledge about Krishna (he's a blue Hindu god with a flute who appears in lots of stories and has a wife) and then move into unorthodox territory as they bring together Muslim and Christian ideas to describe Krishna as prophet, messenger and angel; associations which CH finds surprising. The beginning of the exchange could be interpreted as a shared representation and the end a shared creation. The function of the speech has changed.

CS's speech (Extract Y) begins in a lengthy, protracted form as it is addressed to his audience, he is not making openings for the contributions of others. JS though forces an opening with his interruption and demand for clarification, 'Are you trying to say ...?' There then follows a rapid, successive, dialogical interchange between the two boys. CS appears to think that JS should, having heard his original exposition, share enough understanding of his meaning to accept the abbreviated representation of his message, 'People make one big religion that no one disagrees with..' or to need no further explanation because, 'I've just told him!' When it becomes clear that his audience (JS and myself) do not sufficiently follow his meaning CS returns to a more monologic style:

CS: But I think first it's going to need someone that gives a lot of dedication to his name before he can come down to Earth etc. (G138-9)

Throughout this exchange the linguistic form and the pattern of involvement of the different voices change.

Alternations between many voiced and single-voiced text, ambiguities about what is common knowledge and what is new, the multi-directional orientation of utterances towards different addressees (and towards self) simultaneously, and functional diversity, all contribute to the complexity of the structures of verbal exchange and make simple designations of dialogic or monologic forms impossible. The complexity of linguistic texts is something N. Fairclough advances as an issue for discourse analysis:

Texts may be heterogeneous and ambiguous, and configurations of different discourse types may be drawn upon in producing and interpreting them. (Fairclough 1993, 35).

For those interested in defining dialogue the issues raised above indicate the problems of a linguistic based distinction. The Prague school linguist J. Mukarovsky argued that the difference between monologue and dialogue does not correspond to a difference in functional language and that instead of purely dialogic or purely monologic speech, characteristics of both are almost always involved (Wertsch 1985, 235). He has more in common with Bakhtin and the view that, rather than dialogue being embedded in



linguistic form, dialogue is an underlying principle which has diverse influences on the way people speak.

#### *4.1.2 Dialogue as Context*

Bakhtin draws a distinction between the, in his view inadequate, linguistic superficial understanding of dialogue whereby ‘Dialogue is studied merely as a compositional form in the structuring of speech’ (Bakhtin 1981, 279) and the underlying principle of dialogue central to his thought, ‘the internal dialogism of the word’ (279). This dialogue is not tied to particular forms of speech or particular speech acts. The problems of the previous section relating dialogue to form dissolve when that relationship is seen as one not of dependency but of influence:

It is precisely this internal dialogism of the word which does not assume any external compositional forms of dialogue, that cannot be isolated as an independent act, separate from the word’s ability to form a concept (*koncipirovanie*) of its object – it is precisely this internal dialogism that has such enormous power to shape style. (279)

The concentration on linguistic units and turn-constructive units in discourse and conversation analysis (Fairclough 1993, 13 and 17) runs the risk Bakhtin noted in contemporary linguistics of not giving due attention to the activity around the individual word. Linguistics and philosophy of discourse, he argued, had given the word an

‘artificial and preconceived status’ (Bakhtin 1981, 279). Edwards and Mercer are moving towards recognition of the meaning significance of individual words when they write of that the relationship between dialogue and context is ‘most clearly seen if we examine particular words’ (‘pendulum’, ‘height’, ‘ground’ (Edwards and Mercer 1987, 65) though their words have a more established, less embattled character than Bakhtin’s. While Edwards and Mercer, and Yakubinskii build their theories of communication on foundations of common knowledge and shared communicative context acting towards the unitary understanding of a word, Bakhtin also stresses the centrifugal forces that pull the word’s meaning in different directions and constitute its dialogicality. The dialogical word is the ‘living word’ of the previous chapter. It passes through, and is changed by, the tension-filled environment of other thoughts, points of view, alien judgements, previously spoken words on the same theme providing a rich and varied meaning potential, and the listener’s conceptual horizon, knowledge, understanding and attitude (Bakhtin 1981, 276). Dialogue, then, is not just a way of relating to the context, the context is dialogue. Dialogue is revealed in the speaking acts which supply the data for mine and others’ research. Mukarovsky writes:

[The] essential feature of dialogue (the interpenetration and alternation of several contextures) is already contained in the mental event from which the utterance originates and ... therefore has priority over the utterance. (cited in Holquist 1990, 58)

The dialogicality of the context in which the children of the research project move and act, the dense environment through which their words have travelled, is very evident. It is an environment of explicit differences of religion, race, culture, of home, school and faith background, producing a multiplicity of thoughts, viewpoints, judgements and meanings. In the extracts analysed above the dialogue of the social setting, between Muslim, Hindu and Christian, between plurality and unity of religion or of God, between black, white and Asian are clear. To these are added the dialogue specific to the particular gatherings of the research discussions, that between speakers and audience who share to different degrees knowledge, understanding and attitude, and who may also be influenced by what is or is not deemed appropriate to the school context of the exchange. It is the dialogue of situated activity. Extract W, for example, reveals the dialogue between difference of faith background and group solidarity; extract X between CS's individual thought processes and JS's demand for clarification.

Rather than a dialogic form among other forms, we are presented with a 'dialogic imperative' (Bakhtin 1981, 426). The context of any utterance is necessarily dialogic. The word cannot help but be dialogised: dialogue is 'a necessary multiplicity in human perception' (Holquist 1990, 22). Like CS' God, dialogue is 'just there'.

#### ***4.1.3 Dialogue as Orientation***

If the word is necessarily dialogised through encounter with different uses and meanings, it would seem that it would become progressively more dialogised on its journey through



time as it encounters further alien words so that ‘only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object.’ (Bakhtin 1981, 279)

If, since our first ancestor, all words have been engaged in dialogue, the question remains whether beyond the superficial structures of linguistic analysis, monologue drops out altogether as a reality. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Bakhtin wrote:

But the monologic utterance is, after all, already an abstraction ... Any monologic utterance ... is an inseverable element of verbal communication. Any utterance – the finished, written utterance not excepted – makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances. (cited in Holquist 1990, 59)

As with the ‘direct word’ that acknowledges only itself (276), and ‘passive understanding’ of an utterance’s meaning (281), ‘monologue’ becomes a logical construct; it does not exist in absolute form. This is not to say that monologue has no influence, however. Though ‘the dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse’ (279), there can be a counter orientation pulling in another direction; a movement of degrees towards as well as away from this mythical pole.

Bakhtin provides clues for the identification of monologic tendencies that militate against dialogue in his considerations of genres, discourses, systems. In contrast to the dialogised world of the novel, that of the epic is ‘completed’ (Holquist’s translation of *zaversen* meaning ‘closed off’), transfers the world it describes to an ‘absolute past’, that is ‘monochronic’, ‘hierarchical’ and ‘walled off’ from the present (Bakhtin 1981, 15), ‘excludes any possibility of activity and change’; in contrast to the dialogised ‘internally persuasive discourse’, the ‘authoritative word’ is ‘distanced’, ‘prior’, ‘sharply demarcated’, ‘fully complete’, with ‘single meaning’ (342-343); in contrast to the ‘living word’, the ‘direct word’ ‘acknowledges only itself (that is only its own context), its own object, its own direct expression and its own unitary and singular language’ (276). A tendency towards monologism can thus be characterised as an orientation against the forces of dialogue towards closure and singularity. It may be that dialogue cannot be eliminated altogether from the communicative context but its effects can be limited. Writing as an exile in Stalin’s Russia, Bakhtin knew about the forces that worked to suppress expression of the underlying principle of dialogue and recognised the inflexibility and inertia of an authoritative word fused with ‘political power, an institution, a person’ (343). In the children’s responses to diversity, factors of resistance can also be discerned (similar to those described as ‘stage resisters’ in reference to movement between Faith Stages in Chapter 2.2.5); they include defensiveness, lack of confidence, loyalty or hostility.

The children of the project express and report varying degrees of dialogue or monologue in response to the dialogism of their context. The children’s dialogical responses in the

extracts above have already been acknowledged. They may have been encouraged by social considerations of friendship as in JN's efforts to bring together his Hindu friends' and his own understanding of God's plurality and unity (H116), or by intellectual concern for understanding as in JS's questioning of CS's ideas in order to relate them rationally to his own conception of the relationships between, religion, humanity and God (G122, G128, G142-3). Elements of monologism can also be found in their talk. In particular accusations of monologism are implicit in their criticisms of their Muslim peers. They complain of the lack of openness of some of the Muslims to learning about other beliefs, 'because Muslims only believe in their own gods' (F55), have suspicions that Muslim children are trying to impose their own beliefs on them, 'they just want more – they just want people to turn into Muslims – definitely' (G246), and claim that Muslim parents are restricting children's choices by limiting their contact with children of different faith backgrounds and so protecting them from other religions because 'They might change them' (F148). There are also signs of resistance to dialogue in the context of their own community. JK's openness to the religion of her peers contrasts with the attitude of a family friend:

**JK:** I told one of my friend's mum that I believe in every god. She said that if Muslims don't believe in your god, why should we believe in their god? (F244-6)

The reasons for resistance to other religions here relate to intercommunal power relations producing arrogance in the majority, mistrust of other's intentions, fear of the influence of other religions on one's own belief and a stubborn holding to a principle of reciprocity.



Dialogue may be ‘just there’ but response to dialogue can be dialogic to a greater or lesser degree; there is an element of human agency. Dialogue can be encouraged or denied. The degree to which participants in a verbal exchange orientate themselves towards or away from dialogue depends on a number of factors, social, emotional, rational. The merits of openness to dialogical activity and change can be weighed and our response tailored accordingly. Underlying this element of choice in response to dialogue is an understanding that dialogue is not neutral but has value. The value of dialogue will be considered in the following chapters, *Dialogue in Religion* and *Philosophical Dialogue*. First, in acknowledgement of the dialogised nature of the term ‘dialogue’ itself, I propose create a definition of dialogue that draws together the different perspectives on the word with which we have engaged in this chapter.

#### ***4.1.4 Threefold Dialogue***

In this chapter we have met diverse understandings of dialogue varying from ‘dialogic imperative’ (Bakhtin 1981, 426) to dialogic choice, from the ‘necessary multiplicity in human perception’ (Holquist 1990, 22) to the ‘compositional form in the structuring of speech’ of linguistic analysis (Bakhtin 1981, 279), from dialogue as dependent on context (Edwards and Mercer 1987, 65) to dialogue as context. The question we are faced with when seeking a definition is whether it is possible to hold the different understandings together. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that these accounts of dialogue are not referring to the same thing, nevertheless there are shared elements in the various uses of the term. Firstly there is encounter with difference, whether in the interchange between

separate individuals in conversation, the interanimation of other meanings with the Bakhtinian 'living word', or the interplay of ideas in a mind open to engagement with another's point of view. Secondly the element of commonality is introduced in considerations of dialogue as communication in particular (Vygotsky, Yakubinskii and Rommetveit). Dialogue proceeds from a common base which is understood to have existed before the communicative event or to have been negotiated as part of it. Examination of the linguistic forms has revealed an ambiguity in the relationship between sameness and difference in dialogue. The degrees of both present in dialogue are measureable as a ratio according to the principle of simultaneity, drawn out of Bakhtin's philosophy by Holquist:

Simultaneity deals with ratios of same and different in time and space. (Holquist 1990, 19)

Simultaneity always involves a question of proportion: when two things or consciousnesses are together in a simultaneous relation, how much of each is present. (135)

A third characteristic of dialogue, then, is that it is quantifiable. It is possible to be dialogic to a lesser or greater degree: it can be measured according to the '*different degrees each possesses of the other's otherness*' (51). A fourth characteristic shared by different understandings of dialogue is its creativity. Dialogical encounter and interaction produce change. As Bakhtin's word encounters ever new contexts that dialogise it, it is

able to reveal ‘ever newer ways to mean’ (Bakhtin 1981, 346): orientation towards dialogue is orientation away from the ‘prior’, ‘closed off’ ‘single meaning’ of monologue and the activity of dialogue is collaborative creation of text.

These four elements (encounter, the relation of sameness and difference, quantifiability and creativity) underlie the concept of dialogue as understood in this project. They are dialogue’s characteristics but do not on their own constitute a definition. To define the term so that it encompasses and binds together the children’s varied experiences of and responses to encounter, I propose that a threefold understanding of dialogue be used: *primary dialogue* which is the dialogical context, that necessary multiplicity of human existence; *secondary dialogue* which is a dialogical response to primary dialogue, an orientation towards openness and away from closure, and *tertiary dialogue* as the forms and structures employed in the communicative events to give full scope to dialogical activity. All three involve relating to the other and are forces of change. They can also be measured in so far as the word is more or less dialogised, the response more or less open and the activity more or less collaborative in its creativity.

This threefold understanding means that dialogue can be the background of our activity as *primary dialogue*, something for which we should aim as *secondary dialogue*, and something which we do as *tertiary dialogue*. It means dialogue as an activity is not tied to particular structures of verbal exchange but is found in a variety of forms that enable the expression of dialogue in different times and settings as with different groups and numbers of people. For those who know each other well enough and have sufficient



strength of character for a more confrontational approach (CS and JS in Extract Y, for example), *tertiary dialogue* might be a Socratic dialectic of question and answer; in other cases considerations of politeness and the desire for a show of solidarity (as with JN and friends in Extract W) might make ‘duetting’ a more appropriate dialogue form. It also has pedagogical implications. If dialogue, as I have argued elsewhere in a paper designed for teachers (Ipgrave 2001) dialogue between children is to be valued in schools, employing a threefold model of dialogue means that the plurality and diversity of the children’s experience is acknowledged, the educational ethos is responsive to the challenges of that diversity, and class activities are structured to encourage pupils to meet those challenges and discover and create new meanings.

We return to examples from the extracts with which the chapter began to observe the action of the three forms of dialogue within those exchanges. In Extract W, where children of Hindu and Christian backgrounds are discussing the plurality of God, the primary dialogue is the encounter between different traditions of belief and the multiplicity of meanings and understandings that surround the word ‘God’. The children’s concern to create a framework that includes and reconciles their differing viewpoints is the response of secondary dialogue, and tertiary dialogue is there in the way in which this is achieved through the participants’ completion of each others’ phrases and the supplying of illustrations and examples to move the model forward. In Extract Y the primary dialogue is there in the meeting of the two boys’ differing outlooks on religion. JS’s concern to relate CS’s understanding to his own is an example of secondary dialogue, and the probing questions he asks which shift CS’s thought into new directions

are a form of tertiary dialogue. JH's speech on the colour of God (Extract Z) is a response to the primary dialogue between the languages of different religions, of race and colour, of God's unity and plurality. His efforts to orientate his way through this complex environment show a commitment to secondary dialogue and the structures he employs as tertiary dialogue include the juxtaposition of his reflections and the words of others, and the causal connectives linking different ideas in rational argumentation.

## 4.2 Dialogue in Religion

The focus of the project is religious understanding and the subject matter of the children's discussions is religion, it is therefore appropriate to spend some time exploring dialogue within the context of religious thought and the particular issues that arise. In this chapter ideas of the keen advocate of dialogue between faiths, David Lochhead, will be considered to demonstrate how a religious (and specifically Christian) conviction of the value of dialogue gives new urgency to its pursuit. In contrast to this orientation towards dialogue we will uncover resistance to it as we explore his and others' concerns about the precarious balance between openness to other religious traditions and the integrity of one's own. Lochhead's model of dialogue with which he responds to these concerns will be evaluated using the characteristics of dialogue identified in the previous chapter and examples from the discussions of the children of this project.

### *Imperatives to Religious Dialogue*

The title of Lochhead's book promoting dialogue in interfaith relations, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Lochhead 1988) is reminiscent of the 'dialogic imperative' drawn out of Bakhtin's work (Bakhtin 1981, 426) and used in the last chapter. Lochhead makes no reference to Bakhtin, however, and the force of the imperative is very different. For Bakhtin it is *epistemological*. Dialogue is an inevitable condition of existence and the site of knowledge posited by Bakhtin's thought is never unitary but always involves relation to otherness. For Lochhead it is a *moral* and, in Kantian terms, a *categorical* imperative. He writes of Christian discipleship:



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The call to dialogue, to open, trusting and loving relationships with the neighbour is clear and unambiguous. Dialogue needs no justification outside itself. (Lochhead 1988, 81).

The direction of Bakhtin's argument has been towards proof of the existence of dialogue where it has not been recognised hitherto, Lochhead's has been to show that many encounters that have been loosely termed 'dialogue' do not in fact meet his criteria for 'genuine dialogue' (93). For Bakhtin dialogue is everywhere and needs recognising; for Lochhead it is all too infrequent and needs to increase:

The fact that dialogue may be possible infrequently, ambiguously and fragmentarily does not mitigate the dialogical imperative (81)

The difference between the two writer's employment of the term 'dialogue' is not a contradiction if they are understood to be describing *primary* and *secondary dialogue* respectively (Chapter 4.1.4).

These two theories of dialogue are different from each other yet both are based on a central understanding that the individual is not alone. The Bakhtinian self is necessarily in a dialogic relation with the other, and the individual with society:

Sharing existence as an event means that we are – we cannot choose *not* to be – in dialogue, not only with other human beings, but also with the natural and cultural configurations we lump together as “the world” (Holquist 1990, 29).

While Lochhead sees our very humanity as bound up with community, he also holds that we are in a position (we have free will) to deny that humanity and choose not to be in dialogue:

If to be human is to live in community with fellow human beings, then to alienate ourselves from community in monologue, is to cut ourselves off from our humanity. To choose monologue is to choose death (79).

As neighbourliness has more to do with relationships of friendship than relations of proximity, so for Lochhead dialogue is about the way we choose to relate to our fellow human beings rather than a necessary sharing of existence with them. He writes of dialogue as a relationship alongside other relationships. Monologue too is a relationship, one in which ‘the attitudes and beliefs of one party are in no way affected by a second party’ (77). We are free to choose between a dialogical relationship of living in community or a monologic alienation from others. What we are *called* to, however, is dialogue; it is ‘first and foremost, a fundamental relationship into which we are called with our neighbour’ (85). It is this sense of dialogue as the vocation to which God summons us that makes dialogue in Lochhead’s theory both an imperative and a response.

Records of the project’s discussions show both imperatives at work in the movement of the children’s religious understanding. The children of the project share their existence with peers of different religious beliefs and traditions. Their neighbours come from a variety of faith backgrounds. When they define themselves as Christian or Hindu, their religious identities set them in



necessary dialogical relation with the religious identities of others. They are in a state of primary religious dialogue. At the same time they are establishing relationships with their neighbour's religion. If they chose to ignore religious difference and not reflect on their own viewpoint in the light of that of their neighbours', they would be opting for a monological response. Their conversations, on the other hand, reveal an engagement with their neighbour's religion both during the activity of the research discussions and in earlier encounters. There are several indications in the children's speech of the openness to new ideas that characterises secondary dialogue. Openness to other's beliefs is several times correlated with belief in other gods (D135-140, F102, F245-6, H158-9). RA sees her school as a place where there is more 'toleration' and her contrast between her school and a more monocultural school shows the link in her mind between primary and secondary dialogue:

**RA:** If you go to a school where there aren't other religions so you're more likely to believe in only one god and when you're older you might not believe in other gods because you don't know much about them (F258-261).

The demands of life in community with others provide impetus towards such a relationship. This is demonstrated in microcosm in the overtures of friendship and expressions of solidarity implicit in the children's efforts to bring together their ideas with those of their friends in the context of the discussion group (H106f, G165f).

There are also indications of a moral imperative towards secondary dialogue

in children's accounts of exchanges with Muslim peers. Disapproval of the Muslims' lack of openness to other ideas appears to have a moral base, they are accused of unfairness (B310, F436-441) and 'racism' (H152-3). Their negative attitude to other religions is compared unfavourably by several children to their own positive approach (B419-422, F245-6, B384-7). In their own reactions to others' religious beliefs, dismissive attitudes or ridicule are seen to go against basic tenets of human decency:

**RA:** I think if they believe it, then I don't think it's nice to laugh (D87)

**RA:** It affects them because they believe it and people laughing at them – it's not nice (D122-4).

Expressions of negativity and disbelief about another's religion are seen as 'teasing' which for the children is not only morally wrong 'I've teased them about other things but not about their religion because that's not fair' (I137), but is punishable by God, 'I'd get punished by God' (I135, B415-6).

Behind their concern for toleration and fairness, and their criticism of those who fail to show these, is an implicit awareness of opposing forces acting on their relationships with religious difference, and of the difficulties faced if there is not equal openness on both sides. In spite of RA's comparative models of the religiously mixed and the religiously homogeneous school, a context of religious plurality does not inevitably lead to secondary dialogue. The urgency discernible in Lochhead's writing is his recognition of this. His perception is that the

choices we make when faced with religious diversity, or our limited capacity as humans to do ‘the good’, often lead us to the dangers of monologism:

A dialogical relationship does not happen easily. It is a precarious relationship, vulnerable to being converted to monologue without notice’  
(Lochhead 1988, 81)

The normal state of relationships is unstable; an oscillation between dialogue and monologue. However, it would be simplistic to see this movement purely in terms of orientation towards ‘the good’ or the bad, or to see the inability to maintain a dialogical relationship as a sign of weakness. Similarly it would be a mistake to interpret, as the children often do, their Muslim classmates lack of openness to other’s religious ideas as a sign of bad will. In their opposition to the ideas of others they may be expressing loyalty to their own. In our orientation towards or away from dialogue other factors than strength and weakness, neighbourliness and its opposite come into play.

### *Faithfulness in Religious Dialogue*

To explain the coexistence of monologic and dialogic elements in speech, Mukarovsky wrote of a ‘dynamic polarity’ with monologue and dialogue at either end (cited in Wertsch 1985, 235). However, to maintain the concept of dialogue as either relation or as relationship, it is helpful to understand it as in between two poles, self and other, individual and society, speaker and listener, utterance and response. The degrees of movement along the continuum between the two



poles are, to use Holquist's term, the '*different degrees each possesses of the other's otherness*' (Holquist 1990, 51). Rather than being at one end of the polarity, dialogue is somewhere in the middle of the continuum; there is an optimum point to pass which in either direction, towards self or other, is to risk monologism. Holquist contrasts the examples of conditions where the individual is unable to 'mediate between inner speech and the social dimension of language' (autism and schizophrenia), and totalitarian versions of official discourse in which there is 'no difference between individual and society'. These two would be situated on either end of the spectrum as a monological inability to take on any of the other's otherness, or a monological taking up and losing of the individual in society. The relationship of self to other, of individual to society, becomes a particular issue in religion and a source of contention. Religion is seen as both personal and individual, and historical and communal. As the faith of the individual relates to the faith of religious tradition concerns have been expressed about the effect of encounter on the purity or integrity of both. Likewise the relationship between different religious traditions, as they encounter one another in the context of inter faith dialogue, raises controversy. There are fears that engagement with another religious tradition might make us less faithful to our own.

### *Individual Faith meets Communal Faith*

The debate between Hay and Wright referred to in Chapter 2.1 is one between Hay's monological emphasis on an 'experience-based and personal' spirituality isolated from 'cultural overlay', on 'interiority' and 'inner talk', and Wright's

dialogical understanding of religious experience that ‘does not constitute an autonomous realm, but is always informed by and dependent on public discourse’ (Wright 1996, 167). To what degree the other’s otherness should be possessed is a contested issue. Expressed in terms of ratio and proportion, Hay fears that the proportion demanded by the ‘otherness’ of society is too great, that the scope given to the individuality of the child is limited and her natural spirituality suppressed:

The natural relational consciousness clearly richly present in young children as our research has shown is currently being obscured, overlaid or even repressed by socially constructed process (Hay with Nye 1998, 151)

In Chapter 2.1.5 it was argued that Hay’s concern to protect children’s spirituality from outside social and cultural influence was misguided not only because ‘it underplays the natural sociality of the human person (Thatcher 1991, 25) but also because any communication of this spirituality to others necessarily involves engagement with a shared language. Without this mediation the child would be in the monological state of autism.

By contrast Wright sees intelligent conversation between different religious viewpoints as the site of religious learning. He opposes views such as Hay’s by advocating ‘a critical dialogue between the horizon of the child and the horizon of religion’ (Wright 2000, 179). Wright’s pedagogy encompasses the four characteristics of dialogue identified in the previous chapter; encounter, the relation of sameness and difference, quantifiability and creativity. At the

heart of his model is encounter and interaction which will result in convergence and dissonance as some aspects of the alternative horizon appear familiar, others strange. In this dialogue a sense of proportion must be preserved:

As these two horizons interact two dangers must be avoided. The first is the colonisation of the child's horizon by any one particular religious horizon. The second is the colonisation of the horizon(s) of religion by the unchecked horizon of the child, driven by the child's untutored prejudice.  
(179)

Here Wright is recognizing both monologic poles of the continuum of which dialogue is the optimum middle point. He sees that when individual meets communal faith, dialogue between them is a delicate balancing act which, if maintained, has as its creative outcome 'the further clarifying, enriching and developing' (179) of the individual's religious beliefs.

There are many instances in the research interviews of dissonance between the child's horizon and an alternative religious horizon they encounter, often prompting new, creative ways of thinking. JE and JO find a clash between their Muslim peers' depiction of their god as a god of punishment and retribution and their own understanding of god as someone who will be forgiving and good to them (B332f). This difference in personalities is a reason for thinking Allah must be a different god from theirs (B329). TR cannot accept her Christian friends understanding that there is only one god because 'we've got so many', and so the discussion group work explore the idea of there being one god with many



features (H109f). JH finds a contradiction between his belief that God is everybody's god, and the religious view of 'most people my colour' who say that God is black, and his belief that God is 'everyone's god' (F64). In the positions taken by the children in these examples, they are influenced but not 'colonised' by encounter with a different religious horizon; they remain faithful to central tenets of their own faith (God's kindness, God's universality, God's plurality). It is not just an individual's faithfulness to himself that is represented here, for the 'own faith' that the children are bringing to encounter is already rooted in the communal; in Christian and Hindu understandings of deity. The children's religious understanding is enriched by encounters with other religious horizons while keeping faith with the traditions by which it is historically formed. When the horizon of the child meets the horizon of a religion, it is not just a question of individual meets communal, but also of tradition meets tradition.

### *Faith tradition meets faith tradition*

The debate about the effects of dialogue on religious traditions when they engage with each other can be found within Lochhead's work. Although he is a keen advocate of the meeting of religions in inter-faith dialogue, Lochhead displays a nervousness about the possible outcomes of encounter between different religions. His book presents a lucid analysis of different forms of historical encounter between faith traditions and sets out the problems of these in his search for an authentic dialogue. He recognises the fears of those who are concerned about 'the question of faithfulness' in dialogue (Lochhead 1988, 66), who worry that the integrity of one tradition might be compromised by meeting with another. He

rejects the syncretism and idiosyncratic faith stances that some have attempted in dialogue with other religions. If to engage in dialogue were to risk the integrity of one's faith in this way, then better to hold to monologue:

If there is a threat of syncretism in the search for understanding then to avoid syncretism I would have to close myself to reality, to confirm the integrity of my faith in splendid isolation from all of life. (64)

Clearly what Lochhead is describing here is not his perception of reality. As has been seen, he abhors the idea of isolation as 'death' (79). His confidence that dialogue is still the good to be sought lies in the distinction he makes between 'dialogue as negotiation' the purpose of which is agreement, and the 'dialogue of understanding'. It is when *agreement* between the dialogue partners is being sought that syncretism is a danger to dialogue:

The danger of syncretism ... arises when two parties reduce their claims to the lowest common denominator, precisely for the purpose of reaching agreement (64).

Some of the constructions of the children's dialogue in their attempts to reach agreement might appear syncretic or idiosyncratic to Lochhead; the image of a big god from whom many smaller gods derive, for example (D221). To understand another tradition, however, does not require agreement with its precepts. Though 'common ground' may be found as a result of the search for understanding it is not, Lochhead believes, a prerequisite without which dialogue cannot

proceed, nor should it be dialogue's goal. If partners do come to agree it will be an 'added bonus', 'a gift of grace' (64). The primary goal is understanding: 'In a dialogue I will seek to understand and to allow myself to be understood' (64).

This understanding is more than an act of cognition: genuine understanding, which Lochhead terms 'integration', has implications for our lives and practice, it is something that happens not just in our heads but 'in our guts': 'In dialogue more than just our theory is transformed' (67).

To clarify the meaning of 'understanding' and 'integration' and to distinguish this model of dialogue from that of 'agreement', Lochhead uses the Wittgensteinian concept of 'language games' and the concept of 'bilingualism' (69). The links between his theory and this terminology he sets out as 'analogous' yet the strength of his argument depends on the view of language on which he builds. This view is now explored as I consider religious dialogue as a meeting of languages.

### ***Dialogue of Religious Languages***

#### ***'Language games' to Bilingualism***

Central to Lochhead's theory of dialogue as integration rather than negotiation is his concern for the integrity of the different religions in a relationship of dialogue with each other. This integrity can be maintained if the religions are conceived of as different languages rather than different dialects of a common language:



If different religious traditions are but different dialects of a common language, then dialogue is the process by which we agree on the grammatical standards for the religious language. If, however, different religions are like different languages, then dialogue is more like the process by which one becomes bilingual (69)

To support this theory that moves against the idea of a basic common language of religion, Lochhead draws on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and the linking of word meaning to word use:

Wittgenstein argues that languages arise out of and derive meaning from their role in life, from activity. The meaning of words cannot be deduced a priori. The meaning of words needs to be understood from their role in life, from the "language games" in which they are used. (68)

According to Lochhead the differing functions of words within distinct religious traditions means that they are part of separate language games which should not be confused with each other:

Each language is considered to have its own integrity. A category of one is not applied to the other, or, if it is, it is soon recognized as a mistake. (69)

The incompatibility of the 'language games' of different religious traditions has caused some theologians to question the very possibility of a dialogue between religions (Milbank 1990, 174-190), but Lochhead is led by his 'dialogical

imperative' to find a place where religious traditions can engage in mutually beneficial interchange. For Lochhead dialogue is the process by which we become *bilingual* and able to function in both languages. We cannot expect to acquire equal facility in both languages (one of the languages remains our 'mother tongue'), but we can come to see the world 'through other eyes':

One comes to understand what their categories are, how they relate to each other, how they relate to the world. (69)

Examples Lochhead gives of words gaining their meaning from different 'language games' include the Christian concept of 'salvation' and the Buddhist concept of 'enlightenment' which may both denote the ultimate human experience of liberation but have very different connotations deriving their meaning from very different language games (69). Other examples of category errors are Christian attempts to find a quasi-deity in the Buddhist tradition, and Buddhist misconceptions of the role of 'meditation' in Christian traditions (78-9).

There are several instances of the children in my project making what Lochhead would judge to be category errors of this nature; ascribing to Krishna the status of prophet for example (D197), describing a Christian priest as 'a little god' (D299), employing western liberal ideas of individual choice as a critique of Islam (G355-7), attempting, as JN does, to fit Hindu friends views of God as plurality into monotheistic structures (H113-6), and, above all, imposing a theocentric view of religion on the course of the discussions (A251, A261-2, E226, E234, E112). As Lochhead writes:

The assumption of Western monotheism that religion is centered in the worship of God cannot be imposed a priori as the starting point of dialogue (63).

In Lochhead's terms, the children's use of religious language in these examples is mistaken. This is not dialogue as integration: their ability to see the world through other eyes is limited, or, differently expressed, they are making insufficient allowance for the *otherness of the other*.

Lochhead's warnings against syncretism and the misuse of religious languages calls into question the value much of the creative outcome of the children's discussions and the advisability of the particular form of dialogue in which they are engaged. However, examination of his theory of bilingualism exposes an element of paradox and suggests an alternative model of religious dialogue.

In his reference to Wittgenstein, Lochhead denies explicitly that word meaning can be fixed 'a priori' and stresses the dependence of word meaning on word use (68). The implication of this is that word meanings are not fixed but are open to change. It is reminiscent of the Bakhtinian 'living word'. Yet as he proceeds to outline his concept of bilingualism he begins to impose restrictions on those word meanings. Words and phrases such as 'salvation', 'enlightenment', have derived their meanings from the religious traditions, the 'very different thought worlds' in which they originated, but this word meaning-word use link has become historical. In present religious discussion there are restrictions on word use and meaning; there are different categories 'appropriate to each particular



language', the words are not transferable but 'a category of one is not applied to another' (69). Questions such as 'Do these people worship the true God?' and 'Does this religion lead people to salvation?', for example, are part of a specifically Christian language game. In fact Lochhead's religious language has something in common with Bakhtin's authoritative word:

It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is a *prior* discourse. (Bakhtin 1981, 342)

Lochhead does recognise that there may be some changes in one's own views as a result of looking at them afresh 'through the eyes of the other' (Lochhead 1988, 70), but his concern for 'faithfulness' and the 'integrity' of religious traditions and for the established historical meanings of words within those traditions imposes restrictions on change and introduces the monologic element of closure.

### *Openness to Growth*

The problems (as understood by Lochhead) of blurring the language boundaries of different religious traditions are twofold; the introduction of 'alien' categories from one tradition into another (as with the application of theistic language to Buddhism and an overemphasis on 'meditation' in Christianity (78-9), and the confusion about the real meanings of concepts (such as 'salvation' and 'enlightenment'(69)) when they are employed across religious borders. In answer to the former problem, the importance of religious tradition, of 'the fathers', could be maintained alongside an openness to further growth if Lochhead had used

Wittgenstein's city analogy for language (*PI* 18) whereby a language can be complete (have integrity) and yet be open to continual development in the 'suburbs of our language':

(And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses. (Wittgenstein 1978, 8e)

The analogy could be extended to add that the addition of new houses and streets rarely involves a break in the continuity of life in that town, a change in the town's name (its identity) or in the local loyalty of its inhabitants. A language does not disintegrate when new elements are introduced. There are other factors that hold it together. In the case of religion there are issues of faith and psychology, the ties of history, identity and loyalty (observed in the responses of CS, JS, JK for example (G236-241, G232-4, F80-2)) that bind members to a particular tradition and set of beliefs. According to this understanding dialogue between adherents of Buddhism and Christianity can develop new suburbs of theistic interest in the former and of contemplative meditation in the latter while preserving each religion's central core. JN is able to expand his faith city to include a suburb where he engages with God's plurality ('many features') and retain his city centre belief in 'one god' (H113-6). This is not the buying into selected truths of other traditions and adding them to one's own that Lochhead dismisses as a 'trading of truths' and monological in character:

If there is an economy of truth in which each tradition “possesses” a piece of it, conversation between two traditions would not be dialogue but alternating monologues. (Lochhead 1988, 75)

As concepts and words originally rooted in other traditions are drawn into one’s own they undergo change. Meanings are not exchanged but new meanings are created. Though we may remain as Lochhead hoped, ‘committed and faithful members of our own tradition’ (70) there may be a concern about the effect of such activity on the integrity of the religious words and concepts being assimilated into our own understanding in this way. It is Lochhead’s wariness of this very alteration of meaning that leads him to promote dialogue as understanding (or ‘integration’) as opposed to dialogue of negotiation. We thus come to Lochhead’s second problem with the crossing of religious language boundaries.

### *Negotiated Meaning*

Lochhead’s bilingual model uses the word-meaning/word-use link to argue for a separation of religious languages, terms have emerged and concepts have derived meaning from their ‘distinct language games’. However, if the meaning of a language depends on its use, the question that needs to be asked in relation to Lochhead’s model of religious languages is, what is the function of the religious words that derive from the distinct religious languages when they are brought into dialogical relationship with each other? For Lochhead the words’ meanings have been set by their internal function within the particular religious tradition, or



more specifically within the formulation of doctrine of that particular tradition, thus ‘enlightenment’ becomes ‘a state of freedom from the attachments of ego’, ‘liberation from karma, from the wheel of rebirth’, ‘salvation’ becomes ‘liberation from alienation’, ‘restoration of the broken relationships between God, humanity and the world’ (69). These words are the same that interlocutors will bring to interfaith dialogue. Lochhead does not see dialogue as formulation of doctrine, its primary goal is understanding (65), to understand and be understood by people whose religious conceptual horizons are not the same. The function of the words in a context of understanding is different; it involves communication across a conceptual gap. In the previous chapter examples of the children’s speech were used to support Bakhtin’s claim that on transit from one position to another a word is doubly changed by the speaker’s attempts to make the word understood, and by the listener’s reception of that word into an existing conceptual horizon (Chapter 3.2.1). This contrasts with Lochhead’s bilingualism which seems to imply that it is possible to jump from one side of the gap to the other and avoid the ‘dangerous middle ground’ altogether, rather like Bakhtin’s mythical direct word that encounters no opposition on its path to its object (Bakhtin 1981, 276). In fact it is in this very ‘middle ground’ that Lochhead’s stated primary goal of dialogue, understanding, is achieved.

Lochhead notes the assumptions made in much literature on dialogue that ‘the dialogical method involves the search for “common ground”. Without common ground ... dialogue cannot proceed’ (60), yet distances himself from this ‘negotiation’ model of dialogue with its attendant dangers of syncretism by replacing ‘agreement’ as the end of dialogue with ‘understanding’:

Whereas it is difficult, with traditions that speak in “differing languages”, to speak of “common ground”, it is not difficult in the contemporary world to speak of a mutual need to understand (64)

Yet, he gives little indication of what would actually take place within a dialogue between faiths as he conceives it, and so does not address the question of how understanding is achieved when ‘differing languages’ are used. This issue of how the interlocutors can carry on effective communication when they approach the discussion with different conceptual horizons is at the centre of Vygotsky’s studies of adult-child interaction, is the basis of the notion of *intersubjectivity* referred to earlier (Chapter 3.2.4) and of Rommetveit’s theory of human communication whereby communication transcends the ‘private’ worlds of the participants by setting up ‘states of intersubjectivity.’ (Wertsch 1985, 159) For Rommetveit acts of communication are acts of negotiation and agreement. In order to convey and gain understanding through the medium of words some agreement needs to be reached about the meanings of those words:

The linguistic basis for this enterprise ... is not a fixed repertory of shared “literal” meanings, but very general and partially negotiated drafts of contracts concerning categorization and attribution inherent in ordinary language (Rommetveit cited in Wertsch 1985, 160).

There needs to be a meeting point between languages if intercommunication is to be possible and mutual understanding achieved. CS’s use of the image of a

fairy is one instance among several given earlier (Chapter 3.2.4) of this negotiation. As a metaphor for God's action responding to humankind's activity it may have shifted the meaning of CS's original anthropocentric view of religion but helps establish a meeting point for his and JS's differing understandings of religion when communication was becoming difficult. The importance of achieving agreement on definitions of word meanings for the purposes of mutual intelligibility has also been set out previously (Chapter 3.2.6). The kind of negotiation in which the children of the project are engaged is not a hindrance to a genuine dialogue of understanding, but is necessary for the process of communication between the religious horizons of the participants of that dialogue. Through this semiotically mediated "negotiation" participants in conversation set up, in Rommetveit's words, a 'temporarily shared social reality' (160). The temporary nature of that agreement is important. The function of the negotiation is not to fix religious doctrine but to be open to difference and otherness. References of subsequent encounters are not to be determined a priori by outcomes of present exchanges.

### *'Double-voiced Discourse'*

Another weakness of the bilingualism model of dialogue is the assumption that it is possible to 'see the world through other eyes' (Lochhead 1988, 69) and, operating within 'the concepts and categories of the other tradition' (70) to speak another's language without its vision being refracted through one's own. Again he ignores the fact that when spoken by someone from a different tradition, however conscious they are of its origins, the religious word has a different function.



The word might be used as a demonstration of general knowledge to impress the audience, to show solidarity with a person to whom that word is significant, to explain another concept through analogy. Personal involvement with the word cannot be the same. With this change of function comes a change of meaning. The word 'Allah' for example, may be 'my God' for the Muslim children, the addressee of their prayers, their personal creator, guide, punisher etc. When used by others, however extensive their understanding of Islam, or deep their empathy with their Muslim peers, the meaning is different. It may take on the sense of 'your god', 'their god', or be used self consciously of God to make the point that the god we members of different faiths worship is one and the same. Similarly, though some of the children recognised and were able to use appropriately the word 'Jah', only for JH did it have the deep, personal significance that led to the autobiographical account of his naming ceremony (E199f).

In the children's conversation there are many examples of their use of words, categories and concepts from traditions other than their own; some of these words are presented to them as part of the activities used to stimulate discussion, others they bring up themselves from past encounters, sometimes acknowledged explicitly as others' through the use of reported speech. In the reporting of another's speech the reporter is often making an implicit judgement of the speaker's views and behaviour. Several examples have been given in an earlier chapter (Chapter 3.1.2) of reported cases of teasing where the indignation, outrage or hurt of the teller was evident. There is also incredulity in the account of the money fall from heaven (B296-7), and ridicule in the tale of the picture of a badger a Muslim girl feared would come to life in the middle of the night

(D91-3). An example of an extended use of words from another religious tradition outside reported speech is SN's account of the significance of the *topi* (C52-61). Here there is a degree of ambiguity about SN's use of words and concepts from the Islamic tradition of his peers. He may be showing respect for their religiosity or, as JN interprets his speech, be making fun of them. In all the instances above, to speak in the language of another religious tradition brings additional meanings to those words, for the intentions of the speaker underlie their sense. The action of the speaker on the other's word is, to adopt Bakhtin's phrase, 'to introduce into it one's own voice, to refract within it one's own fresh intention' (328). Rather than speaking of bilingualism, it might be more appropriate to think in terms of Bakhtin's theory of 'double-voicedness'. Writing of the novel he sets out this theory whereby heteroglossia is incorporated into the novel as '*another's speech in another's language*':

Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they – as it were – know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. (324)

When the words and categories of one tradition or viewpoint are employed by someone of another tradition they do not remain distinct from that second tradition but are brought into dialogical relation with it.

The organic growth of languages, the requirements of communication and the internal dialogism of discourse that uses the words of the other, all militate against a model of bilingualism for inter faith dialogue. The rejection of a bilingual model in favour of a dialogical model of language use has something in common with Bakhtin's mythical peasant who operated within several language systems, each with a particular purpose (prayer, song, communication with family or with officialdom). These languages were not dialogically coordinated but he passed from one to the other automatically: 'each was indisputedly in its own place, and the place of each was indisputable' (296):

As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur in the consciousness of our peasant, as it became clear that these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages, that the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other and in no way could live in peace and quiet with one another – then the inviolability and predetermined quality of these languages came to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them began. (296)

Just as the peasant's initial simplicity is exaggerated for the sake of argument, so the starting point of Lochhead's bilingual model contains more recognition of



inter-language relations than a straight comparison with the peasant would allow ('one comes to understand one's own language in a more profound way by experiencing it in contrast to a second language' (69)), nevertheless the 'inviolability' and 'predetermined quality' of religious languages is what the bilingual model sought to maintain, and the movement of the peasant's consciousness is away from this monologic preservation of distinct concepts and categories towards a dialogue of religious languages. It also parallels the movement of understanding with the children of the project. They too come from a number of different worlds; home, school, peer group, family religion, encounter with religions of their peers. Each has its own speech patterns, concepts and categories, its own language, and the children learn to handle the different cultures and move between them. Occasionally there is an encounter or clash between them, examples of which are reported by the children in the course of their conversation (D6-15, D 210-3, B305-8, F66, F80-2, F236-7, G355-7). The situated activity of the research discussions in particular provides the stimulus and context for a meeting of these languages. At that meeting, the children in the discussion are not learning to move between distinct language games but are drawing those languages into dialogue with each other and choosing their orientation among them. As the children bring together concepts of God's unity and plurality (H113-6), of afterlife and reincarnation (B356f), of gods, prophets and angels (D190f), the maintenance of separate languages and very different thought worlds gives way to an interplay and interanimation between them. Some of the outcomes of that interplay form the subject of the following two chapters.

# MEANING

## 5.1 Religious Identity

The exploration of children's religious understanding in previous chapters has focused on the process by which children's understandings are formed. By contrast the following two chapters deal more with the content than the formation of their understanding; with the meanings they expressed during the research discussions, the 'outcomes' of their dialogue. From the transcriptions of the children's speech I have drawn out what I understand to be key ideas and concepts that provide frameworks for their thinking on issues of religion and will set them out below under the headings 'Identity', 'Religion' and 'Theology'. Before recording any conclusions drawn from the children's words, however, some consideration needs to be given to the status of their meanings.

Earlier I have identified a Bakhtinian chain of utterance and response in the children's thought, and traced contextual influences on their understanding (Chapters 3.1 and 3.2). This understanding has been seen as subject to continual change and movement, and dependent on the choices and selections of meaning the children made for particular situated activities. The transcribed material on which these chapters are based does not then represent the children's thinking in general, but their thought at a particular moment in time under particular circumstances. Recognition of this does not reduce the value of their words which are of interest not just for their position in a continuous movement of children's understanding,

but in their own right as conclusions drawn (however provisionally) from an experience of encounter with religious plurality. As such they can be viewed as part of a wider dialogue with religious difference.

What the children have said has already been processed by me as reader and editor of their discussions. I have selected particular utterances and identified links and dissonances between words spoken by different speakers at different times. In making this selection I was not only influenced by the occurrence or prominence of certain ideas in the children's talk, but also by themes in the wider discourse of which they are a part. In this chapter the theme to be explored is that of religious identity in particular in terms of identification with established faith traditions. The focus of the chapter is the children's understanding of religious identity, on what it means to be a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and not on the children's self-presentation. Nevertheless this understanding is informed by their reflections on the origins and consequences of their own religious identity, as well as by their views on the identity of others. Before undertaking a survey of the understandings expressed and produced during the course of the research activities, I set out some of the areas of debate within recent discourse on religious identity as a new context for the meanings which emerged from the children's discussions.

### *5.1.1 Questions of Identity*

Prominent in the terminology employed by the children in their discussions were words denoting religious identity (Hindu, Christian, Rastafarian-Christian, Muslim), used for themselves or for others. Their frequent occurrence was partly



due to the demands of the research activities in which the children were engaged (some of these terms were displayed on the word cards used to stimulate discussion, for example) but they were also employed by the children in other contexts as explanations of the behaviour of their peers towards them (I177-8, I190, H320f, G200f) or as grounds for their own attitudes and viewpoints on particular issues (H7-9, A110, G261-3). With these terms the children positioned themselves in relation to others and to the big issues of religion and belief that they explore in their dialogue.

The impression given by the children was of a society (school or local community) organized into different groups along faith lines. They displayed a strong personal identification with particular faiths. This sense of belonging and self-designation as member of a faith tradition has been the starting point of many ethnographic studies of children's religion, prominent among these being studies from the Warwick Religious and Education Research Unit (e.g. Jackson and Nesbitt 1993, Nesbitt 1995, Østberg 1998). The relationship of the individual child to a community faith tradition is also central to the presentation of religion in many texts for school religious education, including those produced by the Warwick RE Project (e.g. Barratt 1994, Everington 1996).

Approaches such as the children's which position the individual firmly within a communal faith tradition, have not been without their critics, who promote 'individual agency' above 'cultural authority' (Donald and Rattansi cited in Jackson 1997, 84) and prefer to stress the individuality of each person's religion above membership of faith traditions. The Errickers, for example, express concern

that, in religious education, the ‘small narrative’ of individual children might be silenced by the power of the ‘grand narratives’ of the major recognised belief systems (Erricker 1997, 194). They write:

It is the voices of individuals that have to be heard, rather than individuals speaking as representatives of membership groups belonging to faith traditions (195)

This preference for the individual over the communal is present in both developmental and experiential models of religious understanding and has thus had a significant influence on a ‘child-centred’ religious education where the teacher’s prime task is ‘to lead their pupils to find their own religious interpretation of life’ (Erricker 1997, 4). Fowler’s Faith Stage descriptors display a keen interest in issues of identity, particularly in the movement from Stage 3 to Stage 4. Faith provides a basis for identity and outlook (Fowler 1981, 172). The lower Stage 3 is depicted as a ‘conformist’ stage which ‘does not have a sure enough grasp on its own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective’ (172-3). By contrast, the more advanced Stage 4 where ‘self (identity) and outlook (worldview) are differentiated from those of others’ (182). Coming from a different position yet also emphasizing autonomy in religion, experientialist Hammond writes in a 1988 essay on religion and identity of an ‘individual-expressive’ identity (Hammond 1988) which is chosen or achieved; ‘finding oneself’ comes before commitment to significant groups (Murray 1991). In contrast to both of these, Wright refutes the ‘liberal’ idea where ‘our identity is seen to be dependent on our self-understanding’ (171). He argues for ‘an anthropology in which identity is

formed via communal relationship rather than introspection' (172) and so fuels the debate around the comparative influence and value of communal authority and individual agency in the religion of the child (Chapter 2.1).

In his study of the religious identity of young Sikhs, Murray sees this association of religious identity with individualism and autonomy, as a western construct that does not match the understanding of the young people with whom he is working (Murray 1991). In the debate religious educationalists are participating in an established discourse on identity which follows the lead of psychologist Erik Erikson, the 'father' of identity theory in the West (Murray 1991, 2). Erikson recognized in identity relationship with self and with others. He suggests identity is social and psychological, conscious and unconscious:

It connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others. At one time it will appear to refer to a conscious sense of individual identity; at another to an unconscious striving for a continuity of personal character; at a third as a criterion for the silent doings of ego-synthesis and, finally, as a maintenance of an inner solidarity with a group's ideals and identity. (1980, p109 in Murray 1991, 2)

From Erikson's social/psychological dialectic, Murray draws out a reciprocity, bringing together the needs of individual and group within the process of identity formation:



The group confers identity on the individual often after a period of trial and by means of ritualisation. The individual must be willing to accept this conferred identity and in doing so reinforces the group's sense of its own identity. (Murray 1991, 2-3)

The discussion above has viewed identity in terms of relation between group and individual, self and others. Some of the statements recorded relate as much to cultural or ethnic identity as to religious. In efforts to understand the particular force of identification along faith lines, we need to recognize (as the children do) the influence of the individual's and the group's relationship with God. The significance of this relationship is acknowledged by Wright in his understanding of children's religion. Writing for Trinitarian Christians in criticism of the introspective spirituality of 'liberal religious education', he states:

Genuine spirituality has little to do with introspective experience, and all to do with our developing relationship with an objective deity (175)

The emphasis on relationship with God and recognition of room for development in that relationship, links Wright's thought to the Churches' position on religious identity as set out in a 2001 discussion document from the Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations (CCIFR): *'Religious Discrimination: A Christian Response'*:

As individuals travel on their journey with and to this God, their inward convictions will almost certainly change and develop. Religious identity,

therefore, must be understood in ways that take account of this development and change. (CCIFR 2001, 15)

The change can go so far as to involve ‘transfer from identification with one faith community to membership of another’ (15). The right to make this change is seen as an essential component of religious freedom and is enshrined in Human Rights legislation (European Convention on Human Rights, Article 9). The language of rights and freedom is thus brought into discourse on identity. In political debate on public policy, so, too, is the language of choice.

Parliamentary debate on the advisability of legislation outlawing religious discrimination, or making incitement to religious hatred a crime, has revealed different understandings of religious identity among those taking part. Supporters of such legislation have often drawn parallels between religious and racial or ethnic identities as in John Austin’s contribution to a House of Commons discussion in March 1998:

The argument for legislation outlawing religious discrimination is broadly the same as that for legislation outlawing racial discrimination. First a religious discrimination law would be a powerful symbol of public policy and would convey the important message that religious identities are valued and respected throughout society. (Hansard – 3<sup>rd</sup> Mar 1998, Col. 860.)

In contrast, speaking in the 2001 debate around proposals to criminalize incitement to religious hatred, Christopher Chope uses the concept of ‘choice’ to reject the

parallel positioning of race and religion and distinguish religious positions from the fixed attributes of race and colour:

Race and colour are attributes with which we are born, and over which we have no choice, whereas religious belief, or lack of it, is a matter of choice and opinion. In that sense, religious belief is similar to political belief or even, dare one say, support for a football team. (Hansard – 19<sup>th</sup> Nov 2001, Col. 69)

The argument is that while race and colour are essential aspects of our personal identity over which we have no control, our religious stand is something we have chosen for ourselves and has no more inevitability about it than many of our other life choices.

At the time of writing it is not clear whether such legislation will be passed, but underlying the whole debate is recognition that, as it stands, the existence of separate religious identities can be a source of tension between different strata in our society. Our survey of the ideas expressed by the children begins with their consideration of inter faith group relations. In what follows it will be seen how the understandings of religious identity that developed during the course of the children's discussions dealt with the other issues detailed above, contributing different perspectives on the relationship of individual religion to communal; on the respective roles of self, other and God in deciding one's religious allegiance; on links between racial and religious identity; on religious freedom and choice. The requirements of the research project meant that the participants had to engage in a



conscious reflection and public expression of their sense of religious identity and their understanding of the identity of others.

### ***5.1.2 Religious Identity and Communal Relations***

In the research activities the children were led to position themselves in relation to others. Some of the questions they formulated for use in discussions demanded this kind of reflexivity: “Do you think you are different from most children at school? How are you different? Do you like being in a smaller group?”. The introduction of religious terminology with the initial word card exercises, and the absence of Muslims from the interview groups, might also have contributed to the prominence they give to religious identity in their definition of self and of peers. Certainly they identified themselves readily with the Christian and Hindu faith traditions and their peers with Islam:

**JJ:** Is anyone here a Christian?

**AN:** Four – these two are Hindus.

**CA:** Most people in this school are Muslims. (A120-2)

**DK:** I’m the only one in my class who’s Hindu – the rest are Muslim (I6)

A sense of being different from other children in the school could be explained by difference of religious identity, with all it entails:

**CS:** I think a small group of us do feel different because it's – they've got sort of different ways of life and different times when they do things and do different things – do different things from us.

**JI:** So which people are you talking about when you say 'they'?

**CS:** Mostly the Muslims. (G6-10)

The sense of separation along religious lines came out quite sharply in the children's retelling of their experiences. Religious identity was understood to be a powerful tool for social organisation within the school. The children felt they were included in or excluded from different peer groups because of their religious identity. The role of religion in social tensions between the children was frequently remarked upon. Religious identity was seen as a common ground for teasing and for discrimination (H248-250). For the white and black children, the close association of their colour with their Christian religion meant that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between racial and religious discrimination in incidents they reported (H257-8, H160-4), but the case of the Hindu population of the school, who shared the Gujarati language and ethnicity of most of their Muslim classmates, indicated that religious identity was a major determining factor in inter group relations. There is recognition of this in the sympathetic comment made by AI (himself of African Caribbean origin) on the experiences of his Hindu friends:

**AI:** Because like you're one colour but most people are a different kind to you and you're the odd one out. (I10-11)

The Hindu children spoke of being ‘the odd one out’ or ‘left out’ because of their religious identity (H273, I12-3). SH recalls not being allowed to join in a football game by some Muslim children because he was Hindu (H182-3), and AK remembers being teased in class as the only Hindu among Muslims:

**AK:** In Year 3 – in Year 2 and Year 3 I was the only Hindu in our class and the Muslims they used to say ‘Our god is better than yours’ and used to tease me. (G200-202)

The children reported the role of religious identity in power relations between groups at school and in the wider community. SC outlined how they work in practice in the playground through the employment of ‘back up’ defined by religion:

**SC:** Like if it’s a Christian against someone like a Muslim, the Christians will help the Christians and the Muslims will go and help the Muslims. (I177-8)

The wider community served by the school is described by JH, JK and RA in terms of religious groupings with the large Muslim group exercising dominant influence over the area. They described what they understand to be a Muslim takeover of the district, and proceeded to criticize the Hindus and Christians for their laziness in allowing this to happen. Here and in the discussion of relations between children at the school, they bound the language of religious identity to that of segregation, and inter-communal tension. They gave it a significant role in social relations and made



it a public as well as a private concern. They themselves explored the idea of political regulation as a possible solution to the problems they were discussing. Another way out of the 'fights' and 'fuss' put forward by CS, is the dissolution of existing distinctions of religion and the establishment of a new universal religion. People should 'just settle your differences and all be the same' (G100-101). This very general model, however, ignores the strength of the ties that bind people to their existing religious traditions.

In more individual terms, I put it to the children that they might consider improving their own situation by changing their religious identity, themselves becoming Muslims and joining the majority so they would no longer be subject to the sort of discriminatory behaviour they had been describing (H282-3, G227-8). None of those asked would consider this option for themselves. Social inclusion could not be effected through an easy realignment of religious affiliation. For them religious identity did not just determine where they stood in relation to those of different faith traditions but seemed to have a stronger hold. The responses given to my question were affirmations of their own religious identity as an integral part of who they were:

**TR:** I'm happy the way I am (H285)

**ST:** I'm proud of what I am (H286)

**JS:** I'm happy what God made me (G232)

### ***5.1.3 Distinguishing between Religious Identities***

While there was general agreement among the children about the social significance of religious identity and its determining role in community relations, there was a greater diversity of views on the criteria by which it was possible to distinguish different faith groups from each other. They were very ready to ascribe particular religious identities to different children at school but found it harder to explain how members of different traditions could be so easily identified. A variety of criteria were put forward occasionally to be rejected as inadequate by other members of the discussion group. An example is the following exchange where the children suggested racial, cultural, linguistic, physiognomic, ideological criteria to use when distinguishing Christians from Muslims, and also found problems with some of these:

**JJ:** Could you tell if someone was a Christian or not just by looking at them?

**CA:** I couldn't

**CS:** I could – I could –

**BT:** By their face, if they're white.

**DY:** By their clothes – their clothes.

**BT:** If they're black.

**AY:** It depends – I think it depends on your ears.

**CA:** You can't – some people might be Muslims but they look like Christians.

**DY:** It depends on your clothes.

**BT:** You've got small ears – you've got small ears – yo.u've got small ears

**AY:** No sir – I can tell his ears because they're quite small ...

**CA:** The way they speak.

**CS:** It depends on their personality – how they walk, what clothes they wear, how they talk and their ideas they've got – they develop how they look.

**CA:** The way they speak ...

**CS:** No, some Christians have different languages (A95-114).

### *Race*

As has been seen, parallels and distinctions have been made between religious and racial identity in the debates around possible legislation against religious discrimination and incitement to religious hatred. The relationship between these identities is something considered by the children themselves. The correlation of religion, culture and race evident in the words of some members of the discussion group above, was also evident in other exchanges. The language of religion often merged with that of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity:

**JS:** I'm happy what God made me and if he made me Muslim, whatever – whatever he makes me – you know, whatever culture he makes me like Indian or Red Indian or African, I'd be proud of what he made me. (G232-4)



The children frequently expressed an understanding of religious identity as something with which they were indeed born. The sense of religious identity as being predetermined in the way that race is, came across strongly in several contributions. In a conversation overheard in one classroom, AY's younger sister, SP, was clear that it was dependent on parentage rather as though religious identity was passed on in the genes:

**SP:** Being a Christian is like when your Mum's white or your Mum's black or your Dad's white or your Dad's black

Some of the concepts associated with racial difference were attached to religion in the children's thought. The term 'racist' was readily applied to those who teased, criticised or discriminated against another's religion (F270-1, H152-3, F461-3). Instances of discrimination on grounds of religion, and on grounds of colour, were associated together in the discussions:

**SH:** Some people don't let other people play because they're different religions.

**AY:** I know, that's horrible.

**TR:** They don't let me play. I think that's racist.

**AY:** And they wouldn't let me play, and I say, 'Just because I'm white' (H160-4).

The concept of 'mixed race' or 'dual heritage' had its religious counterpart. From the idea of religion as something inherited it followed logically that complexities in

family life and mixed partnerships could lead to complex religious identities.

Conscious of dual heritage in race, CS and AY applied the same rules to religion:

**CS:** I'm half Muslim because my aunty's boyfriend is Muslim (classroom conversation).

**AY:** I'm only half Christian. My Dad says I'm Christian but my Mum says I'm Church of England (C90-91).

The easy paralleling of religious and racial identity had its critics among the children, however. Whether or not religious identity could be halved or quartered along the same lines as race, became an issue for debate between AY and her classmates JN and ST, who both felt that religion was more than this. For the boys either you are or you are not a Christian, there are no half measures. The genetic model does not work:

**SN:** How can you be half a Christian?

**JN:** You have to be Christian or not Christian.

**SN:** You can't be half a Christian.

**JN:** If you're half a Christian you cut your body in half and say, 'I'm half a Christian'. (H313-7)

The association of race and religion had been further weakened by children's school experience involving encounter with Muslims of different racial origin and recognition that many of the Muslims and Hindus shared the same Indian ethnicity:

**AI:** If you come to school and see all different Indians you don't know if they're Muslim or Hindu.

**S:** Miss, 'cos some people can be white and they're Muslim like Ifet [a Bosnian classmate].

**AI:** Some people can be black and they're Muslim (I23-7)

### *Practice*

In attempts to define terms of religious identification, some of the discussion groups referred to different religious and cultural practices. Dress was one of these (A99). The children quoted above stated that 'it depends on your clothes', and J\$'s account of the conversion of a woman he knew to Islam expressed clearly the link between a change of religious identity and change of dress (G258-9). For others the important differences of practice concerned attendance at places of worship and celebration of festivals:

**SH:** Muslim goes to mosque, Hindu goes to a temple, Christian goes to a church. (C5)

**B:** A Christian?

**DY:** Someone who doesn't celebrate 'Id, Diwali and –

**AN:** Ramadan.

**DY:** Ramadan. We celebrate Christmas and believe in God and –

**CS:** And celebrate Carnival and Easter (A83-7).



Even with religious practice the distinctions were not clear cut as the children recognized diversity within traditions:

**DY:** Christians have different religions – I mean they do different things at different times, like sometimes they don't kneel down to pray (A89-90).

They also relate instances of the sharing of practices and celebrations across faith groups. JK recalls Muslims joining Diwali celebrations and JH relates his surprise at the dance skills of a group of Sikhs participating in the city's African Caribbean Carnival:

**JK:** Some of my friends who are Muslim they say they go to our occasion and celebrate as well, you know, with stick dances – they even go as well (F24-25).

**JH:** I've seen quite a lot of Sikhs joining in the carnival ... Because last year Singh religion, they joined the carnival last year and they came third. But most people think that many people can't dance but when you've seen them dance they dance well – they were actually moving at the beat and that (F29-34).

### *Belief*

During the course of the dialogues the view was expressed that religious identity was more than membership of a particular group or an accident of birth, it also

entailed commitment to certain beliefs and values. JE and JO defined 'Christian' in terms very different from those used by AY. For them you could not tell a Christian from appearance:

**JJ:** Do you know what it means to be a Christian?

**JO:** Believe in Jesus.

**JJ:** So who is Jesus, then? ...

**JO:** He's our God.

**JE:** He's our God's son (B28-33).

Speaking of the Hindu religion with which he identifies, YN defined 'Hindu' in terms of 'a religion that believes in a lot of gods' (E112). That identification with a religious tradition involves conformity of individual belief to communal, is acknowledged several times in the children's words (eg.E36-37). The impression given by some of the children's statements is of religious identity as something that determines belief rather than being determined by it. Religious identity is seen as a reason for believing in the unity or plurality of God, for example:

**JN:** Because I feel like that what they teach us at my church – that there's only one god, because I'm a Christian so I feel I should always go to church, I don't really want to go to a mosque (H7-9).

From the perspective of another faith community, TR stated that she and her fellow Hindus cannot subscribe to a view of God as one, her use of the first person plural emphasising the communal nature of her belief:

**TR:** Miss, we can't actually say that because we've got so many gods (H109).

PR uses the plural to the same effect:

**PR:** We've got hundreds of gods, man! (B424)

Religious identification was also associated with a particular stand on practical ethics in a discussion of the harsh corporal punishment meted out in some mosque schools:

**JH:** That's wrong. That's wrong.

**YN:** Miss, that's wrong.

**JH:** That's wrong to hit.

**NA:** In Hindus we never do that. They treat us fairly. I think in Christian people they don't do that.

**JH:** In Christians they don't do that (E246-251).

In these statements the children were speaking from communal experience and with communal knowledge. The children's understandings of religious identity recorded above have more in common with Wright's notion of identity as socially constructed (Wright 2000, 172) than the Errickers' emphasis on the 'individual voice' (Erricker 2000, 204). Though the children's religious thought showed a marked degree of autonomy and a preparedness to move outside the faith traditions with which they identified (F58-9, F240-1, F245-6, H230-1), their use of



the terms Christian and Hindu in conjunction with issues of belief indicated that identification with a religious tradition meant acceptance of an authoritative religious canon, for the Christians belief in one God and in Jesus, for the Hindus belief in a plurality of Gods (see the discussion of the ‘authoritative word’, Chapter 3.1.3). Perhaps because of their limited knowledge of the teachings of the traditions to which they belonged, the children rarely tackle issues raised by diversity of beliefs within those traditions.

#### ***5.1.4 Reasons for different Religious Identities***

##### *Staying the same*

So far the understandings of religious identity that have been considered are descriptive, the question being how a Christian, Muslim or Hindu could be identified or defined. Other understandings that emerged from the discussions were more in the character of explanations; reasons why in the plural community in which they live, the children acknowledge a particular religious identity and not another. The degree to which people are free to choose their religious identity is a major issue here linking the children’s meanings with wider discourses of religious freedom and choice.

Explanations for holding to a particular religious identity were often offered by the children in the context of dialogical encounter with the different identity of their Muslim peers, sometimes to defend themselves against criticism of their faith, sometimes in the face of moves to convert them to Islam. JE identifies two such

attempts to embrace Christians within Islam, both of which provoke indignation on his part:

**JE:** One time my friend was telling me. He was trying to tell me the prayer of a Muslim, to turn me into a Muslim. He tried to tell me some prayer to turn me into some Muslim ... He's not turning *me* into a Muslim! I stay Christian! (B316-320)

**JE:** Yeah, they're saying Christians ... they say we're Allah's children ... they're trying to say *I'm* Allah's children! ... they say Allah made everything!

**PR:** He made us.

**PT:** He made even the Christians and children and all them (B421-9).

None of the children who discussed the possible transfer from identification with one faith community to membership of another (CCIFR 2001, 15), saw this as a likelihood for themselves. In the face of criticism of their faith, or of evangelising overtures from Muslim peers, some bound their own religious identity to their relationship with God. The Churches' discussion document quoted earlier employed a teleological 'journey towards God' formula to explain the fluidity of religious identity in developmental terms (15). In the research discussions children expressed an understanding of relationship with the divine in terms of coming from God and used causation theories to explain the unchanging nature of their identity.

One view of religious identity as being God-given retains an idea of God as one, while he is prepared to assign diverse religious identities to his creatures. This is the view expressed by JS above where he was quoted as attributing his Christian identity to God's decision when he was made (G232). God could have made him as a Christian or a Muslim; he chose to make him as a Christian. In their discussion, JE and his friends, on the other hand, countered their Muslim classmates' suggestion that they were Allah's children, with a plural understanding of God, different gods making different faith groups. It is an understanding shared by other children in separate dialogues. The impression given is that people are 'locked' into particular religious identities and the idea of changing these after the initial creative act was portrayed as absurd:

**JE:** Their god made us? – No! Our god made us, their god made them – Muslims' god made them (B430-1).

**JO:** How could [Allah] make the Hindus and Christians? What did someone go off and say 'I don't want to be Muslim', and then someone went 'I don't want to be Muslim, I want to be Christian – I don't want to be Muslim, I want to be Hindu?' (B432-35)

In these contributions, it was God who determined what religion his creatures would belong to; God's purposes for humans rather than human responses to God decided religious identity. Other understandings expressed by the children did allow for more human agency in their religious identity, for example in the



following instances when they were reporting criticism made by Muslim children of their religious choices:

**JS:** [They say] all the Christians are going to Hell because they haven't got the real – because they've chose god what they want and that ain't the right god (G215-6).

The jealousy of the Christian God imputed to the Muslims by JS, implied an element of choice but still favoured constancy over change:

**JS:** I think they're jealous because they think, 'Oh, that – yeah their god's true but I should appreciate what god I've got and I can't step back.'  
(G244-5)

In the latter quote JS combined the givenness of one's religion ('what god I've got') with a response of acceptance ('I should appreciate'); a combination he included in his account of his own religious identity, 'I'm happy what God made me ... I'd be proud what he made me' (G232-4). With choice, appreciation, happy and proud acceptance, he introduced the concept of religious allegiance into religious identity. In similar vein several of the children, Christian and Hindu describe their reactions to negative comments from Muslim children in terms of their loyalty to their own God (B412-8, F115-7).

The children's religious identity was not only decided by allegiance to their God but also by allegiance to family. When asked why he wants to stay Christian, in spite of pressure from Muslim friends to change his religion, JE replies:

**JE:** Because my family's Christian (B322).

While other children spoke of their commitment to their 'family' religion (I150f, G331f), CS's expression of such commitment was the most detailed:

**CS:** I'm proud of who I am because really it's my ancestors that started this and I'm going to carry it on for them because ... I just feel sorry for them because they were slaves and I don't want that to happen again – people to be slaves and not this time by colour but by religion and colour – both (G236-241)

There is a strong sense of inherited identity in CS's words, but not the kind of fixed, genetic inheritance, the association of religion and race, reported earlier. He was speaking in the context of an exchange that recognised the possibility of changing the religious identity received at birth, and immediately before he reported instances of people who had converted. The option to change religious identity was there in his understanding; the forces that resisted such change were those of loyalty. His relationship with his family tradition demonstrates the group solidarity of Erikson's identity model and the reciprocal relationship noted by Murray (1991, 2-3). CS's ancestors started the tradition of which he is proud, and he takes it upon himself to safeguard that tradition for them.

When the children were asked whether they would consider a change of religious allegiance, all who recognised that change was an option showed a similar conservatism as regards their own religious identity, a loyalty and pride in the tradition into which they had been born (H282-6, G227f). Religious identity was inherited but not foreclosed. It was passed down through the family but it was up to the children as individuals whether or not they would accept and continue that tradition.

### *Change*

While all who discussed the issue of conversion were sure of the fixity of their own religious identity, several of these same children allowed a flexibility in the identity of others. The children were aware of instances where people had taken the step of changing their religious allegiance, had made ‘a socially visible transfer from identification with one faith community to membership of another’ (CCIFR 2001, 15). Some of these were people close to them, CS’s aunt (or sister), for example. In their discussion of instances of conversion from one religion to another, CS and JS were aware of the significance of the step these people had taken. Changes of lifestyle, clothes and diet were part of the process of adopting a new religious identity:

**JS:** The lady [who converted] had a sister, and she gave all her good clothes to her sister, and she took all the Hindu clothes, and now she’s a Hindu (G258-9).



**CS:** And before my sister [aunt] actually got married she had to have a special bath and everything, and being blessed – but I think actual being a Christian is sort of better because you – you know, you can eat any food you want, any drink, can really do anything (G260-3).

In spite of their insistence that they themselves would not change religious identity, the boys did not disapprove of those who have made this step, as long as it was done for the ‘right reasons’. One acquaintance ‘turned Muslim’ as part of her involvement in the drugs scene (G264) and so her conversion is not approved of. CS was very insistent that his aunt did not ‘turn into Muslim by force’ nor just because her boyfriend was a Muslim, but it was her own independent decision based on reason and as such was a positive move:

**CS:** Some people do turn into Muslims by force.

**JS:** Like your aunty did.

**CS:** My aunty didn’t turn into Muslim by force.

**JS:** Because her boyfriend –

**CS:** She actually done it by herself ’cos she could’ve told him, ‘Oh, why don’t you become a Christian?’, but instead she just went and be a Muslim – she was *reasonable* (G247-253).

Though he showed some confusion between Islam and Hinduism, JS gave a clear description of a ‘reasonable’ change of religious identity:

**JS:** Once there was this woman. She went out with a Hindu and sort of like – the lady, she went in the library and she was a Christian and her boyfriend was a Hindu. In the library she looked [for] this Quran book and she took it up – she wanted to know how he differed from her and she read the whole book and ... now she's a Hindu (G254-9).

In both examples the fact that the convert is acting on her own initiative was stressed. Their position in the text means they serve as counter examples to the idea of forced conversions; examples of individuals acting on the universal right to change their religion and belief, that essential component of full religious freedom (Article 9 ECHR).

Freedom of religious choice for others was acknowledged elsewhere in exchanges where the children considered what their reactions would be if, at some time in the future, they should find their own children wished to change religious allegiance:

**AI:** I'd be very upset but it's up to them.

**SC:** Miss, because they're the ones that have got to live with it. I'd try to persuade them not to but if they didn't want to I'd just leave them to go.

**AI:** Yeah, 'cos it's really their choice, innit?

**DK:** You would try to stop them but if they want to it's their choice.

**SC:** It's their life.

**DK:** They might not like it if we forced them to believe in what we say and things (I156-162).

In this mixed group, Christian and Hindu children weighed the respective claims of family religious tradition and children's right to decide for their own lives, and concluded in favour of religious freedom. In their discussion on the same question, CS and JS came up with the same sense of the need to respect the choice of the individual as against family tradition.

**CS:** I think if my kids sort of disagreed I'd try to reason with them, but if I couldn't it would be difficult.

**JS:** I'd sort of like – if they didn't understand it what our family religion – our religion, yeah, and they never wanted to – what I'd do really, either discuss it with them, if they never – or I'd just take them church or something.

**CS:** Yeah, but that would probably be offensive to them if they wanted to be a different religion (G340-6).

### *Loyalty and Liberty*

In all of these instances, the real examples and hypothetical situations, the choices made entailed movement outside the inherited traditions and so contrasted strongly with the children's own allegiance to their religious origins. Though they expressed unhappiness about the choices, they approved of the way the choices were (or would have been) made. In the children's words both the principles of loyalty and of liberty were upheld. This combination of a fixed religious identity for themselves and tolerance of free choice and movement in the religious identity of others (even others from within one's own community or family) echoes the 'private certitude



and public uncertainty' duality that Ninian Smart saw as a characteristic of the modern open society (Smart 1991, 93f) where the individual can have inner conviction of the correctness of her worldview and yet accept that, because there is freedom to differ, this view cannot have certainty in the public arena.

Smart also goes some way to resolving the tensions between communal and individual, agency and authority with which this section began with a model of individual acceptance of communal authority:

It is of course hard in fact to insulate a community, and for this reason the solvents of modernity are likely to enter in, and the authority within the community becomes individualized – it is a matter of a group of individuals agreeing to recognize a given authority (Smart 1991, 93).

This compares with the principle of assent to the 'authoritative word' set out in Chapter 3.1 and relates closely to the understandings that emerged from the children's discussions of examples of transfer of religious allegiance. What the children have to add from their own experience and understanding is acknowledgement of the difficulty of such moves both for those who make them and for those who are left behind. Though religious identity has an element of choice, it does not bear glib comparison with allegiance to a football team, nor is it simply a matter of religious conviction of the rightness or otherwise of the religion one adopts. JS and CS commended moves made on the basis of reason and study, but also recognised the strong forces that ran counter to change and that held them to the religion into which they had been born; the forces of continuity, the inherited

nature of religious tradition and the sense of responsibility for the safeguarding of that tradition. The power of these forces over the children's own thinking might explain the concern they expressed over the possibility of their children not following in the family religion. The concepts 'persistence', 'continuity' and 'maintenance', used in Erikson's definition, have a place, then, in the children's understanding of religious identity as part of their historical selves.

## 5.2 Religion and Theology

The previous chapter's examination of religious identity drew attention to the children's awareness of religion as a distinguishing feature of their own and others' experience and identity. This chapter considers further the understandings of religion that emerged in the research. It sets out some of the phenomena seen by the children as integral to religions. It also explores the relationship between the children's understandings of religion and their understanding of God, thus bringing their dialogue into the context of discussions on how theological activity interacts with that study of different religious traditions that came to be termed 'comparative religion' or 'religious studies' in the educational and academic world (Lott 1987, 1). The terms of the discussions are set out briefly below before the children's contributions are explored.

### 5.2.1 *Contrasting Approaches*

#### *Religious Studies and Theology*

The historical relationship between the theological and religious studies approaches has commonly been seen as one of divergence (Lott 1987, Whaling 1985). Eric Lott, for example, traced a 'deep-seated tension in the relationship of theology to religious studies' back to the emergence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century of 'scientific' investigation of religion; 'a deliberate attempt to *disengage* from the restraints of theological commitment and to develop a discipline that would be quite distinct from theology' (7). Increasing contact with religious plurality provided impetus for the development of new methodologies in the study of religion. Prime movers in the study of religions were initially European



Christian missionaries encountering, comparing and explaining the existence of, different traditions in other parts of the world. Further impetus for the movement came as opportunities for inter religious encounter multiplied through the growth of non Christian faith communities within the United Kingdom itself. In a rapidly shrinking planet, religious studies are, according to Smart and Konstantine, a 'major mirror' of the 'global world' in which we now live (1991, 20).

The methodological implications of the religious studies movement were wide ranging. It resulted in a broadening of the scope of the study of religion to include history, phenomenology, sociology, anthropology, art history and various other methods or approaches (19). A moral grounding for religious studies was found in the promotion of empathy, 'gathering the data and mustering the imagination so that we may know what it is like to be the other' (Smart and Konstantine 1991, 30). It was strongly influenced by a pluralist ethic that demanded the principles of respect for diversity, tolerance of differing views and equity in their representation, be upheld. The study of different religious traditions was to be carried out 'without fear or favour' (19). In particular, in a postcolonial world, favour was not to be shown to Western perspectives. Smart and Konstantine wrote of 'a world language about religions and worldviews which can be used to rid the study of religions of its too Western clothing'(50).

Basic distinctions have been made between the object and methodologies of the two fields of study. While theology concentrates on God or Ultimate Reality, Religious Studies has an anthropocentric concern; in Frank Whaling's words it is concerned with

The religious phenomena of man, and man in his religious dimension ... not directly with transcendence, but with man's response to transcendence. (Whaling 1985, 207)

The meaning-concern of theology is the pursuit of truths (5). In this pursuit it is usually bound to the faith of the theologian, grounded in his faith tradition whether as affirmation, criticism or revision. As such, then, theology is usually *normative, particular* and *partial* (2). By contrast the aim of the religious studies approach is not to evaluate the truth claims of the traditions with which it works. Smart and Konstantine wrote of the distinction between the theological and religious studies methodologies when they set out the principles of what they term 'the modern study of religion':

We are often more interested in the truth of ideas rather than their power, especially in the case of religions and ideologies. But the primary emphasis of the modern study of religion is on the descriptive and historical mode of approaching the phenomena, without importing into the study normative assumptions (we hope) from any one tradition. (29)

Thus religious studies, as opposed to theology, tends towards a *descriptive* approach (Lott 87, 6), and strives to be *pluralist* and *impartial*. (Whaling 1985, cited in Lott 1987, 3).

While many, Lott asserts, 'seem content merely to assert the crucial difference between these two approaches, and leave the gap as wide as possible'(Lott 1987, 1), over the last two decades attempts have been made to bring them together (Whaling 1985, Lott 1987,

Smart and Konstantine 1991). In his 1987 book, *Vision, Tradition, Interpretation*, Lott argued for recognition of the interdependence of the two approaches while maintaining methodological distinction between them (253). He sees an overlap between the theological and the sociological / scientific understanding both because of the orientation towards God (or the transcendent) of the religious phenomena being studied:

In particular, scientific investigation must incorporate, as evocatively as possible, the integrating sacred Focus which participants in religious traditions see as of crucial significance. (Lott 1987, 254)

The scholar's accounts of the significance of the sacred object in the tradition being studied will depend to some degree on his own (theological) understandings of its reality and power. Because of this,

In the ultimate analysis scientific accounts of religious life, being necessarily interpretive of meaning, function in some ways analogous to theological interpretations ... there is in common the attempt to provide an account of the meaning of what may be seen as some 'hidden' reality of the concerned tradition(s). (255)

Studies of religions are affected by the prior theology of those being studied or doing the studying, and also set the scene for new and creative theologies. Responses to religious plurality have included movements towards universal theologies which incorporate the diversity of faith traditions into their understanding of God's being and activity. Among these theologies a distinction has been made (Ipgrave 2002) between constructions of



theologians such as John Hick (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 1989), who aim to work from a perspective that is above faith traditions, and those theologians who, like S. Mark Heim (*The Depth of the Riches*, 2001), consciously work from within a faith tradition. The work of Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine is also relevant here. Their book, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (1991), set out an ambitious model for a new Christian doctrinal scheme which draws on themes and ideas from a plurality of traditions. The authors understand religious studies to take place on two levels; the descriptive level of *worldview analysis* with its emphasis on the influence, rather than the truth, of religious ideas, and the philosophical level of *worldview construction* where critical reflection and normative judgement play a part (33). Worldview analysis is the ‘prelude’ (50); it provides the background, the content, the categories for the theological activity of world view construction.

### *Phenomenological and Theological Religious Education*

The tension between a *normative, particular, partial* approach to religion and a *descriptive, pluralist, impartial* approach has percolated through to the level of religious education. In the position of religious studies stands the ‘phenomenological’ model and a curriculum based on the study of ‘world faiths’. It is grounded in a rather truncated version of the ‘Schools Council Lancaster Secondary RE Project’ associated with Smart. Of the different types of interaction advocated by the Lancaster school the type that came to characterise the project was the first:

To study the tradition's *self understanding* in an empathetic and non-evaluative manner *bracketing* their own presuppositions and opinions (cited in Grimmit 2000, 27).

Though the Lancaster Project contained within it a dialogue between an 'implicit' RE concerned with the search for meaning, and 'explicit' RE concerned with the detailed phenomena of religion, the phenomenological approach was commonly viewed as 'narrowly descriptive and content-centred' (Grimmit 2000, 28), concentrating on information about the world's religions, often going no deeper than exterior manifestations of religious behaviour (Erricker 2000, 192). In opposition to this *world view analysis*, world view constructivist models of religious education have been developed whereby pupils work from within their personal experience (or narrative) to construct their own religious meaning (Errickers *et al* 1997) and to evaluate alternative interpretations of experience in the light of their own (Grimmit 2000).

Other models reject both the superficiality of a descriptive approach and the individualism and relativism of constructivist approaches, to advocate an explicitly theological quest for truth. Like Lott, proponents of theological models see theology at the heart of the traditions being studied and in the assumptions that scholars bring to the study. The Stapleford Project, for example, (Cooling 1994a) starts from a recognition of Christianity's 'integrating sacred Focus' (Lott 1987, 254) by giving greater attention to 'the theological concepts which are the source and meaningfulness and significance for Christians' (Cooling 2000, 153). In defence of his 'critical religious education', Andrew Wright tackles the assumptions behind studies which treat religions as embodying equally valid expressions of a common religious experience. To take this liberal stand, he

argues, is to adopt a particular theological position (Wright 2000, 172). Wright's 'critical religious education' is based on the 'emergent theology' of the pupils (Wright 2000, 181), as assimilated from significant others in their lives, and on their ability to make informed and critical responses to the various truth claims they encounter:

It is pupils' ability to take part in an informed, critical, sensitive and ideologically aware conversation about the nature of ultimate reality, of their relationships to this reality, that marks the heart of religious literacy, and the fundamental aim of the pedagogy of critical religious education (Wright 2000, 180).

In contrast to the *quantitative pluralism* by which a plurality of religious traditions are presented as related and compatible within a common phenomenological framework, Wright poses a *qualitative pluralism* which accepts the ambiguous, controversial and conflicting nature of theological truth claims (177). The contrast between the two will inform our analysis as we turn to the children's understandings of religion and theology. These understandings are formed against a background of plurality which at the same time widens the scope of the children's religious knowledge and challenges the certitudes of their inherited world-views.

### ***5.2.2 Religion: a descriptive approach***

#### *Religious response*

Alongside the meaning the children give to the word 'religion' I shall also consider their use of the adjective, 'religious', which was given as one of the prompts for their group



discussions. In their employment of both terms the children often conformed to a Religious Studies approach, with an emphasis on the description of religious phenomena, on human rather than divine activity. In some cases religiousness was portrayed as a human response of belief and obedience to God (A251, A261-2):

**JH:** [a religious person] is like a holy person. They believe in God.

**YN:** All the time.

**JH:** And don't disobey his rules (E226-8)

In others, religiousness meant response to *religions*, believing in religions (A253), doing 'what's in their religion' (E240), 'following' their religion (E237). In one exchange the idea was put forward that religiousness entailed no more than 'having' a religion. JA saw herself as religious because she was a Hindu and defined 'religious person' in these terms:

**JA:** It's a person that has a religion, like it might be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Christian ... or a Sikh. (B540-2)

Elsewhere in the discussions, however, religious identity alone did not confer 'religiousness'; membership required an active response. Within a religion members could be more or less religious according to the degree of their commitment (i.e., the extent of their practice, their knowledge, or their belief); religiousness was measurable. NI defines 'religious' as someone who 'believes a lot in own their religion' (D44-5); RA thought she was only 'a little bit' religious because she rarely attended church (D102-3) and JE saw religiousness as dependent on having a sufficient knowledge of religion. He

was not convinced by the understanding implied in JA's words, that all Muslims or all Hindus were religious:

**JE:** I don't know, because some people don't know about anything – they just know a little. (237)

### *Religious Phenomena*

This idea of a sound knowledge of religion being a basis for religiousness, was supported by another child, who viewed teachers as religious people 'because they know about everyone's religion' (A299). This time religiousness was measured by knowledge of other people's religions and not just of one's own. In another exchange, knowing about other people's religions was given priority. It was put forward as a recipe for tolerance and as the benefit to be gained from education at a school with a religious and cultural mix:

**JH:** I can learn about all of them so I know that when I grow up I know about everyone and know that their gods – who they are, and I won't be racist (F281-2).

The understanding of religion favoured by the children here is content-centred; there are things about religions that people need to know and to know just a little is not enough.

This kind of content knowledge of their own and others' religions was revealed in the children's conversations. They were aware of the external, public signs of different traditions, 'what they do' about their religion and god (E235). Their definitions of the

term ‘religious’ brought together experience and knowledge of a varied collection of rites and practices, ‘the phenomena’ of the religions in question. It was a descriptive approach. When JN described himself, and CS described his Nana, as religious, they supported their claims with examples of practice they viewed as Christian.

**JN:** I am religious because I go to church every Sunday and I pray and I read the Bible and I’m good in church (C72-3).

**CS:** My Nana’s religious. She goes to church and she sings prayers and she goes, ‘Thank the Lord’ and all that. She watches programmes about God. She watches programmes about Jesus (A256-8).

When a group of children talked about the religiousness of a Muslim girl in their school they again gave details of practices that were ‘part of her religion’:

**JJ:** Why do you think Ayesha is [religious]?

**RA:** Well, she’s not allowed to watch TV.

**JK:** Yes, because it’s part of her religion. She doesn’t watch it.

**RJ:** They’re not allowed to watch TV ....

**RA:** And she’s always wearing a headscarf (D54-65).

Their experience of religious plurality had given the children a wide knowledge of the different traditions they encountered, they were able to talk about fasting (A25f, B81f, C29f, E22f), pilgrimage (D232f), worship (A289f, B174f, D333f, I38f), celebrations (G47f, H767f, F22f), dress and dietary regulations (F3f, E65f, E308f, D349f, D146f), and



other customs (D161f, B242, A166) from a variety of religions. In this respect they showed themselves to be students of religion in the Religious Studies mode, familiar with religious ‘phenomena’ and confident in their descriptions. In these cases evaluative judgements were not made between religions but between degrees of religious observance; the ‘strictness’ (D49, D58, D101-8) with which you practice the religion that is yours.

### *Religious Pluralism*

In their context of religious diversity, the children’s words recorded above imply an understanding of a relationship between traditions akin to the *quantitative* religious pluralism that Wright detects in liberal teaching (Wright 2000, 177). Religions were related and compatible. There were examples of the children positioning religions within a common interpretative framework; each religion has its place of worship (C5), its festivals (A83-88), its scriptures (D278f); religion is about believing in God, about prayer, about religious leaders and teachers; it is the details of content, the personalities or the terminology that change from tradition to tradition:

**CA:** [religious means] like believe in lots of different things, like Allah for Muslims, and God for Christians and all that and all different gods for Hindus (A261-2).

**AN:** I know loads of religious people like the pope, mosque teacher, God, priest – because they tell you – they help you to pray and say what you’re supposed to say and they’re religious people (A253-5).

**SC:** I think there's just one god, but people from different religions call him by different names (I72-3)

Much of the children's talk was about distinct religions, but the term 'religion' itself was given the meaning of a universal category including within its scope the diversity of religious belief and practice familiar to the children. One of the questions produced by three of them for their peers was, 'Do you believe in religion?' RA wished to probe further with the supplementary question, 'or if you do believe in religion what religion do you believe in?' (F240-1), setting out a relationship of the general and the particular between the category 'religion' and the individual religious tradition. A religious person was defined in relation to the general category as someone who 'believes in religion' (A252), or who 'doesn't tease religion' (A251); similarly one of the teachers was reported as being someone who hated 'religion' (F236).

These meanings reflected a 'global city' (Smart and Konstantine 1991, 36) where the children were regularly brought into direct contact with other cultures, and a global, pluralist ethic where to learn about their fellow human beings and be in a relationship of 'informed empathy' with them was a duty (Smart and Konstantine 1991, 30). In the spirit of a pluralist ethic, the children often associated religiousness with a sympathetic interest in the religions of others (B535, B547-9). AK, a Hindu, described himself as religious on the basis of his positive attitude to the religions of others:

**AK:** Yeah, like I went on a trip in the church ... – cathedral – and I don't tease Hassan even though he's a Muslim, and he's my best friend (A267-270).

The imperative was not just one of dialogue with our neighbour, as advocated by Lochhead (1988, 81), but it was imperative to accept our neighbour's ideas, or even to 'believe' in his religion and gods (F246, F258-261, I165, I168-9). This inclusive acceptance of the beliefs of others as equally valid is far from being universally accepted by faith traditions, however. Though its intentions may be more ethical than theological, it is grounded within a particular theological frame of reference where doctrinal differences are underplayed, and so it cannot be considered entirely impartial. The children gave indications of the origins of such thinking in a particular, school-based understanding associated with teachers (A299), religious education, (A300), assemblies (A301), the educational input received at their after-school club (B547-9), and the inter religious learning viewed as a happy outcome of multi-cultural schooling (F258-261).

Muslim peers, by contrast, received criticism for not fitting into this liberal pluralism. Their problem was seen to be that 'they don't listen to other religions' (A69) or even believe in others' gods (F55, F245). Here we find the dilemma of liberal universal theology remarked upon by its critics (Wright 2000, 172) and a conflict of world views. In this and other expressions of disapproval of Muslims for not accepting the truth claims of other faiths (H158, F80, A133, D135-8, F225-9), the children were, in the context of demands for religious tolerance, making evaluative judgements on the religious stands of others.

#### ***5.2.4 Religion: an evaluative approach***

Above we have followed a descriptive, 'religious studies' thread through the children's religious understanding. As has already been hinted at, other approaches to religion were



also evident in their dialogue; approaches which recognised controversy in the encounter between different traditions and the occasional incompatibility of world views, and are prepared to reject elements of different traditions as wrong. These are the approaches of the *qualitative* pluralism advocated by Wright (1977). Elements of ambiguity in their attitudes towards different faiths arose out of two major emphases in the children's representations of religion and religiousness: belief and morality.

### *Questions of belief*

Belief in God was put forward as a requirement for religiousness. A religious person is 'a person that believes in God. (A251)', 'they believe in God (E226)', friends are deemed to be religious because 'they all believe in God (E234)'. It was also presented as the primary purpose of religions, what Lott describes as the 'integrating sacred Focus' (Lott 1987):

**JH:** Everyone has a religion so they can believe in God (E60).

The children's knowledge of a diversity of beliefs about this ultimate reality, God, raised questions about the validity of truth claims and an element of doubt about some of the views that they encountered. In the discussions there were instances of the children weighing the religious truth claims of others against the criteria of reason (G353, F56f, F154, F115-7). Occasionally religious beliefs and experiences were dismissed as 'stupid' or laughable (D75-8, B396). CS had difficulty with the idea of the elephant-headed Ganesh as a god (G309-310); JN rejects the animism implied in AY's acceptance of the

gods of others while SN views the idea that AY, a Christian, could believe in one God and many at the same time as a logical contradiction:

**AY:** I believe in their gods because people, like – they have like pictures of them, like – they have like necklaces and things and books ...

**JJ:** So do you believe those things that they have are real – really God?

**AY:** Yeah

**JN:** No! How can you believe in that? Who? – who? – Have you ever seen a god that's gold – that's rock solid gold?

**SN:** If you've got one god, how can you believe in other gods? (H230-4)

Rather than 'bracketing their own presuppositions' in a non-evaluative manner (Grimmitt 2000, 27) on questions of belief, there were several examples of the children judging other people's religious viewpoints by their own developing theology (Wright 2000, 178). JH's discourse on God's colour is one such. He opposed the claim by 'most people my colour' that God is black, with the two presuppositions that God is one and God is for everyone, and presented instead his theory of an inclusive God of many colours (F58-66). There are other examples which will be discussed later where children felt unable to accept unchanged ideas of God's oneness or his plurality because they appeared to contradict the religious teaching of their home tradition. The children were moving from a descriptive approach to other people's beliefs, to a theological approach where normative judgement and creativity have a part.

Ethical norms were also employed by the children to assess religious practice. A close association of morality and religion was understood; in a number of the children's contributions, being good was part of the definition of being religious (C73, C78, D44):

**JJ:** What does it mean to 'follow their religion'?

**JH:** Do what's in their religion and don't do bad ... and be good (E240-2).

Members of faith communities were criticised when they failed to live up to the teachings of their religion, for smoking for example (E228-9, E160-4), telling lies during Ramadan (F237), being generally naughty (D60). However, the relationship between morality and religion was recognised as more complex than a neat correlation between 'doing what's in their religion' and being 'good'. The children were aware of instances where people did things in the name of their religion that they themselves considered morally wrong, notably cases of 'teasing' (H187f), quarrelling (G99-100), corporal punishment of children, as practised in some mosque schools (H32-9), and violence in some of the world's trouble spots (E136-141):

**NA:** They [Muslim friends] taught me some things about religion; what they do. Sometimes they say that if we do something wrong in the mosque the headmaster will hit you.

**JH:** And I don't think they should do that because that's wrong. That's wrong ... that's wrong to hit (E243-8).



**JH:** He gave us life and that and there's bad people in the world killing and shooting each other and they're saying that – they're using God as an excuse to say that He said that he wants everyone to kill. He never put us on this earth to kill people, He put us on this earth to be friends and love each other like brothers and sisters (E11-15).

Much of the children's discussion of questions of morality was founded on the presupposition that God, by whatever name he is known, is necessarily good, and on fixed ideas of what that goodness amounted to:

**JJ:** What do you imagine Allah's like? Have you any idea what he's like?

**R:** Peaceful.

**JK:** He must be good.

**JJ:** Why do you think he must be peaceful?

**CH:** He's a god (D125-9).

Several expressed a sure knowledge of God's moral expectations of his people, and used this knowledge to pass judgement on the practice of others. SN, for example, knew that when Muslims teased him about his religion they were not acting in accordance with God's wishes because 'I know their god taught them to be good' (H194). In his criticism of interreligious violence above, JH spoke of God's purposes for us in terms of love and friendship towards each other, of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind (E11-15); elsewhere CS spoke of the need for 'peace on Earth' and of God's annoyance at our fighting and 'fuss' (G146, G99-100).

Divergence from ethical norms by those who claimed religious justification for their actions was interpreted variously by the children according to their own understanding of religion and religions. One theory put forward was that religion was good and so those who acted against the moral certainties on which the children's judgements were based, must be misinterpreting or disobeying their religion. In particular, those who used religion to justify violence were portrayed in this way:

**JH:** Like people that were shooting in Ireland and Algeria – slitting people's heads ... if they prayed to God they're praying to him for no reason (E129-131).

**NA:** You know those people in Algeria, those Muslims who are cutting their throats, I think that they're not being proper Muslims, they're not following their religion, I don't think (E138-141).

Another view was held by CS. Where he found a contradiction between the teaching of a religion (Islam) and what he saw as a fundamental right of humans, he was prepared to question the very foundation of that religion; to separate its teaching from what God really wants. He was not just judging practice, but passing judgement on a religious worldview.

**CS:** I think that Muslim religion is wrong to – that they can't eat certain things and can't do certain things because everyone has a right to do what they feel is right.

**JJ:** So when they say Allah tells us we must do this and we mustn't do this, do you think that is wrong?

CS: Yeah, because he's not telling you that – it's just some person who's wrote a book and they don't even know if all the stories are true or not. They're just saying that they are (G355-363)

*Religion: a human or divine creation*

CS's picture of 'Muslim religion' as being 'some person who's wrote this book' moves the discussion on from the external phenomena of religions, the practices and beliefs, to questions of their foundation. In this exchange he raised again the issue of the relationship between religions and God, and gave support to the idea of religions as human creations that was implicit in his model of a new religion (G115f). His solution to present inter-religious conflict was that people should get together and 'make one big religion that no one disagrees with' (G127). Like other children in the study (G164-6, H134, I72-3), CS saw a significant link between religious and linguistic diversity. In his account, a religion was something that could be created by people getting together and working out their terminology. It could be formulated by humans using 'appropriate' words, presumably words that would be recognised by all. Underlying the argument was the idea that harmony depended on people speaking 'the same religious language'. However, this emphasis on human activity did not exclude a divine perspective on the world. Indeed, CS's model of a new religion was predicated on an understanding of God as 'just there' (G125), above and beyond religions, looking down on humankind biblical fashion, distressed by our transgressions:



**CS:** But what I think is, God's getting quite annoyed now 'cos everyone's just making a fuss. He thinks that you should just settle your differences and all be the same (G99-101).

In answer to his friend, JS's hesitations about his model, CS was very clear that while you can create a new religion, 'no one can make a new God' (G123).

JS proposed a different view of the relationship between God and religions. He gave God greater involvement in their foundation and questioned the ability of humankind to create a religion themselves.

**JS:** You can't make a new religion really, can you? (G128)

In JS's scheme it was for God to make a new religion:

**JS:** Like say God came down to Earth today, sort of like to settle it down (G135).

If someone took God's soul into their body and became 'something like God' (G143), then (perhaps) he could say he had 'made a new religion' (G145).

From these two views of religion a new model emerged that combined human and divine activity. CS was prepared to incorporate JS's ideas into his scheme, but would not let go of his idea of the importance of human activity. The result, illustrated with a fairytale analogy, was an understanding of religion as a reciprocal relationship, not just man's response to God but God responding to man:

CS: But I think it's going to need someone that gives a lot of dedication to his name before he can come down to Earth, then he can actually take on that person's body ... People have to do something first before God gives them something back. Like it's if a fairy – a fairy's not going to start doing it for you – like say they're going to put a new suit on – you're not going to just stand there and get a new suit on – like you're going to have to twirl around or something – just do a little thing until the fairy actually does something (G138 - 152).

In their representation of religion and religious traditions the children were not disengaged from theological commitment, but their understanding of God, his nature and his purposes formed part of their interpretive framework. In their thoughts they showed themselves to be 'ideologically aware' (Wright 2000, 180), dealing directly with transcendence (Whaling 1885, 207), with an ultimate reality, to whom their evaluation of other religions was one response.

#### *5.2.4 Theology*

While Lott stressed that our response to a plurality of religions is informed by our particular theological perspective (Lott 1987, 255), Smart and Konstantine argued that the theology of their particular, Christian, tradition, must acquire a 'plural outreach', blending ideas from different worldviews, in response to the modern, religiously diverse world in which we live (Smart and Konstantine 1991, 50-51). This combination of prior belief and creative, 'constructivist' thinking, the dialogue between continuity and discontinuity, is discernable in the children's own thinking. This chapter has already demonstrated how the children's interpretation of a plurality of religions was influenced

by their prior knowledge of God. We now explore their understanding of God as it developed in this context of religious diversity. The subject of what follows is the children's theology.

### *Questions of epistemology*

In the discussions the children's arguments were markedly God-centred. For the most part they argued *from* and not *for* the existence of God. All taking part accepted the reality of God and made little attempt to give grounds for belief in his existence. Only when they were seeking arguments to defend a position against Islam, did proof of God's (or a particular god's) existence become an issue. JK put proof as a requirement for belief when she questioned the grounds for the mosque leaders' teaching about a god they had not seen (F154-5). She was not consistent in her views, however. When she wanted to prove the existence of her (Hindu) god in the face of the scepticism of her Muslim peers she used belief itself as evidence of her god's existence; because she believed in him, he must be real. JK related her responses to her critics on two separate occasions:

**JK:** I believe in my god – if your god made me then how come I believe in my god? (F81-2)

**JK:** I say, 'If the devil made me then how come – how come I've got my own god; how come I believe in my gods?' (F116-7)

In these words JK brought together two epistemologies: God being known by her as her own god, and that god's existence being inferred by others (in this case by the Muslims)



from her belief in him. This combination of the given and the inferred is present in the following exchange, where children were asked for their ideas of what Allah is like:

**RA:** Peaceful.

**JK:** He must be good.

**Jl:** Why do you think he must be peaceful?

**CH:** He's God.

**RA:** Because lots of people respect him and if he was bad I don't think they would (D126-131).

For CH, that Allah is good is given by the fact of his being God; for RA that Allah is good is inferred from other people's respect for him. This dual understanding incorporates both the certainties of one's own faith and inherited belief system and a pluralist ethic that requires openness to the beliefs, or 'gods' of others. With these two sources of knowledge of the divine, come two levels of theological knowledge. Though many of the children both demanded and displayed acceptance of the beliefs of others, the greater certainty with which they held to their own religion often left them with an uncertainty, expressed in hesitant or non committal responses, about the truth claims of different traditions.

**JE [Christian]:** I believe in loads of gods but I don't know more about them than my God (B422).

**JA[Hindu]:** We believe in Krishna but we don't believe in Jesus because we don't know if it's true or not.

**JE [Christian]:** I know for a fact. (B276-8)

**RA [Christian]:** Not only Muslims think Allah's their god, some other people think that he is.

**JJ:** Do you think he is?

**RA:** Probably (D131-134).

It was often the commitment to the beliefs of their own tradition that made the acceptance of differing views a problem (A223, H109, H111):

**SN [Christian]:** If you've got one god how can you believe in other gods?  
(H237)

**JJ:** So if a Muslim talks about Allah, do you think he's talking about the same god?

**AK [Hindu]:** I don't know because we have lots of gods (G75-9).

Loyalty to the faith with which they identified worked against the children's adoption of a relativist approach by which any belief position is equally valid; yet the force of the pluralist ethic required that this loyalty did not exclude other worldviews. The dialogue between these two standpoints generated a creative theology in the children's discussions.

The main focus of the children's religious thinking was God and their theology was stimulated by efforts to reconcile the different and multiple forms in which he is known and names by which he is described. One offshoot of this emphasis was the understanding of Jesus expressed by the Christian children. Where Jesus was mentioned he was not talked of as a moral exemplar or personal friend, but as God (A223, B29f, B310, H137-8). His divinity was stressed; he corresponded in Christian thinking to Allah in Muslim thought:

**AI:** There's one Allah, one Jesus and things like that (I77).

Reasons for this high Christology might in part be due to a general atmosphere of thought in which God is so important, and to the need of Christian children to have a distinct religious identity. 'God' was a very general term used for the Muslim god and Hindu gods. The name 'Jesus' was specific to Christianity, so for children to call God 'Jesus' marked them out as Christians. This was the name they brought to the inter faith dialogue:

**AI:** [talking to a Hindu boy] We call ours Jesus and theirs – the Muslims call theirs Allah, and what do you call yours? (I86-7)

Where Jesus was simply understood as another name for God rather than as a person of the Trinity, it was not difficult for Christians to reconcile their belief with Muslim monotheism, provided the desire for reconciliation was there. Ambiguity in approaches to



the truth claims of Islam could be traced not so much to contradictions between the central beliefs of the two traditions, as to fluctuations in the relationships between the Christians and Muslims in the school. The same children at one time rejected as false basic Muslim beliefs and at others were happy to incorporate them into their general view of God. The relationship of context and audience to the children's choice of meanings has been examined in earlier chapters (Chapters 3.1, 3.2). Under pressure from peers JS and AY reacted defensively with an attack on or denial of Allah:

**JS:** I love Jesus and I hate Allah (overheard in a classroom conversation).

**AY:** And they come round saying – we started arguing, this boy and me – and they say, ‘Allah created the world’ and I say ‘No, he didn’t’ (H154-5).

Yet both children in discussion detailed their belief that Allah and God, Allah and Jesus were the same:

**JS:** I think there's Allah, God, whatever, they're just the same thing. It's a waste of time making them different (G162-3).

**AY:** I think there's one [god] and he's called different things (H106).

### *Unity and Plurality*

A greater theological challenge was posed when the children were confronted with a choice between the unity and the plurality of God. There were two main directions in

which their meaning moved when they sought to reconcile these positions: either different religions, by relating to God in different ways, have obscured God's unity and created the impression of a plurality of gods, or God, who is himself both one and many, uses the diversity within his own being to relate to people in different ways; that is, either plurality is a phenomenon of religions that has been applied to God, or plurality is inherent in God. Both answer the puzzle posed by SN of how, if you have one god, you can believe in many. (H237)

The role of language, particularly of names, was very important to the idea of plurality created by religions. As different religions use different terms it might appear that each has a different god, but, many insisted, there is in fact only one god known by many names (H238, B447, G71-2, H106, H134-5, I72-3):

**JN:** It's one god with different names so we believe in all the gods (H238).

**CS:** It's just the same thing. Allah's just the same as God in a different language.

**JS:** Yeah, just like they speak in Gujarati, they're saying like the same thing but in a different language. Like – er – so you can say “Allah” in Gujarati?

**AK:** No.

**JS:** That means ... what's God in Gujarati?

**AK:** Bhagavan.

**JS:** That means you call Allah, Bhagavan (G164-170).

Reconciling Allah and the Christian god in this way presented few problems, but the case of Hinduism was more difficult because the children saw within this tradition belief in a multiplicity of gods:

**JN:** What I think – what I’ve been brought up to believe is, there’s one god and there’s all kinds of names.

**AY:** Yeah, like there’s ninety-nine names.

**JN:** So I don’t like say all the things you’re calling Shiva. I know, like, Allah as Jesus because I believe Jesus is just one god or you call Allah just one god.  
(H134-8)

JN was not only puzzled by the challenge of incorporating Hindu understanding into his own scheme of belief, but he also found it hard to imagine how the Hindus themselves could cope with the practicalities involved in worshipping so many deities.

**JN:** Do you praise every one of them ... Like we pray to Jesus – do you have to pray to all of them? (H120-4)

JS was fascinated by the concept of many gods and insistent in his cross-examination of his Hindu friend, but he found it hard to imagine, suggesting Hindus would eventually put aside their belief in plural gods to focus their worship on one:

**JS:** How many [gods] are there? Do you know? Have you got over - at least fifteen gods? Over –

**AK:** I only know some of them because I think there’s a lot more than I know.



**JS:** Do you think there's about over fifteen?

**AK:** Yeah. I've got some pictures in my house but I don't think I've got all.

**JS:** But one day will more ... Do you go to a temple? Will your temple stick to one god one day, any day? (G175-182)

For the Hindu children themselves plurality became a problem when they were led (often by Christian or Muslim peers) to think about the difference between having one god and having many. Some of their responses reflected this difficulty with replies of 'I don't know', 'we don't know', 'I'm not sure' (G183, G195, G79, B447-8, I76) to questions asking whether they believe in other people's gods and how many gods they believe in.

### *New theologies*

The difficulty of fitting the Hindu children's ideas of the plurality of God into a monotheistic framework, where the same one God was known by many names, was the starting point for some creative theological thinking in mixed Hindu and Christian discussion groups. A dialogue between three Christians and three Hindus began with this problem:

**AY:** I think there's one [god] and he's called different things.

**NA:** I was going to say that!

**TH:** Miss, we can't actually say that because we've got so many gods.

**AY:** Yeah, but they could be called – em –

**SH:** You have to believe in all of them because all of them have got something different, like special (H106-112).

As recorded in an earlier chapter (chapter 4.1), the children proceeded to negotiate a new understanding of God that included elements of both a monotheistic and polytheistic tradition and so could be acceptable to all of them. In this understanding, there was one God with ‘many features’ who could ‘come into anybody’ and ‘change into anything’. At the end of the exchange, TR linked this idea to the incarnate god (Sai Baba) to whom her family offer devotion. The plurality here was a plurality of God’s own making; a plurality in the way he chose to reveal himself in the world.

Another theory of a plurality inherent in God, was present in JH’s description of a god of many colours; his diversity of colours meant that he could relate to all people:

**JH:** I think there’s only one god and he’s everyone’s god so he’s got to be everyone’s different colour (F64-5).

Another way in which unity and diversity were combined was in a theological model which assigned different status to the various divinities of different religious traditions. JK and RA, a Hindu and a Christian, started from a discussion of the status of Krishna to develop this system of diminishing divinity emanating from a supreme being and embracing a multiplicity of divine beings. They began by bringing to their definition of Krishna concepts from a variety of faith traditions: prophets from Islam; angels from Christianity; messengers from both; gods from Hinduism. They then drew their ideas together in the following image:

**RA:** Like you’ve got one big god and then you’ve got lots of little gods.

**JK:** Little, little gods

**RA:** Little gods which come from him.

**JK:** Like you have a mum and all the little children and all that.

**RA:** Yes, like you've got God and he's got a little child and then another little one.

**JK:** No, and then the children's got toys.

**RA:** And then they get – and then they fly away and have their babies and you carry on.

**JK:** And then the children have toys and that's us (D221-8).

Later in the discussion RA returned to the model the two of them had created to include priests, at the lower levels of the diyine:

**RA:** [A priest] is like a little god who takes over – not takes over, he looks after a church or somewhere like that. He helps people (D299).

The children were not only working from existing theological frameworks, but were constructing new frameworks within which the God of a plural world could be understood. In this model, as in those of a God of many colours or of many features (set out above), the children were developing theologies of universal application. Their universality was grounded in the underlying realism of the children's thought. Faced with a variety of belief systems and languages about God, the children did not move into a relativist understanding, but held to the belief that what is true is true for everyone; the challenge was to find what that truth might be.



In this analysis of the children's meaning, we have observed their developing theology and have also indicated how that theology has evolved through their engagement with the context of religious plurality in which they live. Their knowledge of a variety of religious beliefs and practices was not the end of their study of religion, but rather supplied a bank of meaning and association to challenge and resource their search for religious understanding. Their own personal belief, whether in one god or many, provided a thread of continuity and an organising principle for their meaning-making. The move we have traced is the progression from *worldview analysis* to *world view construction* (Smart and Konstantine 1991, 50). In their book, Smart and Konstantine wrote of the task of the theologian who uses the analytical tools of religious studies, yet works on (and within) an evolving framework of faith and religiousness:

The Christian theologian may use tools and techniques which are the same as those of the analyst and historian. But she is still building up a system and a vision, and doing that is manifesting faith and manifesting religiousness. But because she is making religion, she is part of the data, in the long run, of the modern study of religion as worldview analysis. (33)

It is from such activity, at the same time grounded and creative, that the children's meanings emerged. Those meanings in turn, like the religion of the Christian theologian, have been the subject of my scrutiny and analysis, and so have become the material for a religious study (this chapter) that has aimed to be descriptive, yet will not have been entirely uninfluenced by the theological preconceptions of the author.

## End Note

Since the discussions that constitute the subject of this project took place, there have been many changes in the lives of the young people involved. Some of these changes I can only guess at, others I know. All the children whose words are recorded here have now left the school and moved on to secondary education and into adolescence. In the school and neighbourhood the arrival of large numbers of Somali families from Holland and Scandinavia, has added a new dynamic and introduced another model of Islam. Several key events on the international scene have also had repercussions in the young people's lives. At the time of writing, local encounters between different faith traditions have as their global backdrop, the events and consequences of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001; the escalation of conflict in the Middle East; communal violence between Hindu and Muslim groups in the Gujarati homeland of many Leicester families. New meanings have been added to the bank of resources from which the children draw their religious understanding.

The speed with which the children's environment has changed highlights the historical status of any dialogue once it has been written down, and the provisional nature of any conclusions that are made; each is 'but one link in a continuous chain' (Holquist 1990, 59). In keeping with this project's emphasis on process and movement in understanding, these changes underline the fact that what we are working with is a 'living word', open not closed, constantly in dialogue and never completed.

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