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Categories in Discourse about Church of England Primary Education

Stephen Pihlaja , Dan Whisker, and Lisa Vickerage-Goddard

ABSTRACT

Urban areas in the United Kingdom with multi-religious populations can be served by Church of England schools and they can attract families from a variety of different religious backgrounds. Using focus group discussions and interviews with parents, school governors, and teachers, this article focuses on how participants understand the relationships between Christian belief and practice, and their own cultural and religious beliefs and practices. The findings show how emergent ways of talking about the interaction between different cultural practices, and between Christianity and Islam, produce reasoning wherein people understand their place in diverse communities through analogy.

KEYWORDS

Categorization; discourse; education; Christianity; Islam; Church of England


Background

Discourses about Muslims, and particularly Muslim immigrants, in the United Kingdom often focus on perceived differences in cultural practices, exemplified in religious differences. Muslims are regularly presented as a potential threat and object of suspicion, with both implicit and explicit discrimination often fueled by media narratives.¹ For Muslims in predominantly non-Muslim contexts, the experience of this reporting and suspicion can have an effect on how they view themselves within society, with a felt need to present themselves as aligned with dominant religious or national values.² With a focus on the performance of so-called British Values,³ primary schools in the United Kingdom can be important sites for the negotiation of problematic categories of belonging, particularly in superdiverse⁴ areas like Birmingham, which is poised to become a majority minority city before 2030.⁵

Although the United Kingdom is a multicultural, diverse country made up of citizens of a variety of backgrounds, prevailing ethnonational myths

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of a white, Christian identity prevail and play an important role in shaping how citizens from minority populations understand themselves and their status.⁶ Moreover, where institutions like the Church of England (CofE) still maintain important institutional roles in society and in education, where the church operates schools across the country. The teaching of “Christian values” is an important focus of the curriculum in these schools, with CofE inspections regularly evaluating the extent to which the teaching and community life of the school reflects these values. In particular neighborhoods, the best and closest primary schools may be operated by the Church and families that might not be members of the church or Christians themselves, may choose to have their children attend these schools for a variety of reasons. Although these primary schools may then be Christian in character, they can then serve populations that are predominantly non-Christian. In cities like Birmingham with communities of Southeast Asian and Eastern African immigrant populations, CofE schools may include large numbers of Muslim pupils.

Whilst teaching so-called “Christian values” is key to the CofE curriculum, the Church also recognizes the importance of diversity of belief among pupils and families. Schools do not explicitly attempt to change the religious beliefs of pupils. Instead, in the context of Religious Education, schools teach about religious beliefs and practices from an academic perspective, encouraging pupils to learn about and respect the faiths of others, regardless of their own religious beliefs and practices, or lack of religious belief. Participation in religious services is not mandatory and pupils and their parents may exercise a right to be excluded from collective worship, or other school activities that are explicitly religious in character. Despite conflict among schools and Muslim communities being a common theme in the British tabloid press, with the media extensively covering, for example, small protests by Muslim parents of sex education classes at one comprehensive (or non-religious) school in Birmingham,⁷ conflicts among people of different religions in education settings are anecdotally quite rare, and the CofE diocesan education board explicitly focuses on creating a welcoming environment for including all families and pupils. Moreover, schools continue to attract diverse pupil populations, including non-Christian families that choose CofE primary schools for the quality of education and respect for people of all faiths.

Categories of religious belief and practice are often viewed as describing stable characteristics of individuals, but religious categories often have different contextual meanings, depending on who is using the category and for what purpose.⁸ Categories of religious belief are, in a basic sense, built on whether a person attests to a particular set of religious beliefs: Christians believe in Jesus Christ as the son of God who has died for their

sins, and Muslims believe there is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is His prophet. In practicality, however, categories of religious belief and practice often encompass more than positions on theological and spiritual questions—they can come to stand in for national and political positions. This is perhaps most striking in news media reporting about terrorism and the explicit and implicit link made between Muslims, immigration, and violence,⁹ and has been particularly problematic in discourse about terrorism and counterterrorism, which has consistently positioned young Muslims as a potential threat.

The category of “Muslim” can also be represented as being implicitly or explicitly opposed to the national categories of “American” or “British,” with concepts of religiosity and violent extremism becoming associated in securitization discourses.¹⁰ For Muslims in these contexts, a pressure is placed on them to represent their beliefs as complimentary with national values and beliefs. Particularly in contexts where new Muslim immigrants are under pressure to assimilate, analogy to Christianity, historically the religious tradition most familiar in the United States and Great Britain, can be important for helping both understand and talk about their own religious beliefs.

Understanding of how social categories are made salient in day-to-day interaction has changed over the years. The conversation analyst Sacks¹¹ work in the late-1960s and early 1970s argued that categorizations were made based on “stocks of common sense” knowledge, that are utilized to make sense of the world. Housley and Fitzgerald’s “reconsidered” model, which placed more emphasis on categories in context, and argues that categorizations are “in situ,” and citing Hester¹² state, “... irremediable indexical meaning of words lies in their use, not in any general use, but their specific display within localized practical interactional achievements.”^{13,14} Categories are not then fixed, stable common-sense collections in speakers’ minds that are utilized within interaction but are themselves emergent phenomena. What makes someone, for example, a “Muslim” in the media discourse discussed above could have little, if anything, to do with a theological position, but may be used in localized ways to index something other than religious belief, such as ethnic identity.

Research into categorization has shown that rather than being fixed, religious categories and categorizations can shift depending on contextual factors.¹⁵ So even though media discourse frequently presents Muslims as foreign and dangerous “other,” similar ethical and moral values can be found across religious, including with similar incumbent beliefs and practices. The *in situ* nature of religious categorization is particularly important in discussions among people with different religious self-categorizations, because how they come to see themselves and others in those contexts has

real-world consequences for social cohesion and community life. Categories like “British” and “Muslim” as they are used in media discourse and in interaction among people in day-to-day life have different meanings that represent much more than simple national or religious identities. Indeed, Thompson and Pihlaja¹⁶ have shown that the identity of “British” can be felt as a complex interaction of a variety of factors. How these categories are used in real conversation has the potential to provide insights into how people understand themselves in diverse contexts and in relation to people of both their own and other religious beliefs.

This article focuses on real discourse about religious belief and practice among Muslims in predominantly Christian contexts and aims to describe the ways in which categories and analogy are used to understand how people reason about differences. Through analysis of descriptions of participating in CofE primary schools, the aim is to show how discursive processes allow for people to understand themselves and their own experiences in comparison to others. Using focus group discussions and interviews with parents, school governors, and headteachers in which participants discuss Christian education and diversity from their perspective, this presentation focuses on how participants understand the relationships among school policy, so-called British values, Christian belief and practice, and their own cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

Method

The research for this project took place in the Diocese of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. Birmingham is the second-largest city in the UK and home to a diverse population with a mix of large minority black and Asian populations. The Church of England oversees 51 schools throughout the city, serving local parishes in a variety of different socio-economic contexts. To better understand how the experiences of diverse stakeholders can inform practice in Birmingham Anglican schools, we interviewed members of church school communities in the Diocese of Birmingham about the benefits they get from diversity in their schools. We interviewed parents, teachers, school leaders and clerics who may be Anglicans, other Christians, adherents of other faiths or nonreligious. By sampling across areas with different demographic, cultural and institutional characteristics, we sought to secure interviews with a broad cross section of participants, and address a wide spectrum of experiences within the Diocese. The larger project included interviews at four schools in different contexts, but for the purpose of this article, we will focus on two schools with large Muslim populations. The schools are described below, with pseudonyms:

1. St David's is the inner-city where most pupils come from minority ethnic backgrounds. Most pupils and their families identify as Muslims, including East

Africans, Yemenis and South Asians. The school also hosts Orthodox and Catholic East Europeans, children of Chinese descent, Sikhs, Hindus and long established “Birmingham Irish” communities.

2. St Cuthbert’s is an average sized inner-city school. Roughly three quarters of children are East African Muslims, from Somalia and Sudan. Many have special educational needs and disabilities, and are eligible for free school meals and many pupils, and parents, are in the early stages of learning English.

The aim of the initial research was to produce a short book for practitioners in schools—such as teachers, heads, and vicars—exploring successful responses to challenges of social diversity in church schools. We achieved this aim but wanted to explore the social dynamics expressed in the interviews, which produced a surprisingly robust descriptions of shared values and similarities between different religions.

The interview schedules were focused on staff and parental experiences of social and religious diversity within the context of the diverse faith schools where the research took place. The interview schedule was structured to follow respondents’ identities and experiences of education, through their own childhoods, and through the process of becoming a member of the school community as a teacher, governor, or parent.

The outline of this schedule was as follows:

- What was your own experience of school like?
- How would you describe your religion or spirituality?
- Can you tell the story of how you chose this school?
- What is it that you like about your children’s school?
- What is your impression of the religious and social diversity of the school?
- What do you think makes a “good” education?
- Is there anything else you’d like to say about your school or about education in Britain today?
- Are there any questions you’d like to ask us?

Each of these topic questions was supplemented by a range of other prompts such as

- How did becoming a parent affect that?
- How does this compare to your previous school?
- Can you tell me a story about a time like that?
- What kinds of strengths (and/or weaknesses) does that give?

which were used in a context-driven way to draw out themes and to improve clarity of answers. Our sample of participants was recruited

through the schools and participation was voluntary. Some parents were specifically invited, while some had responded to a general call for participants. This recruitment process almost certainly participants who were actively engaged with the life of the school and therefore likelier to present flattering accounts of their own community of practice.

Our presentation of the research and of ourselves may have possibly steered the participants in this direction, in two senses. The information sheet which accompanied our consent form framed our interest as “how these schools develop successful and inclusive learning communities,” priming the participants to tell stories of success. Similarly, we ourselves are white, two men and a woman, with Pennine or American accents. Our social backgrounds and professional interests give us a conversational comfort and familiarity with the Anglican milieu, and we work at a Catholic university. It may be that our presentational affect and the formal association of our research with the Diocesan Board of Education produced observer effects congruent with the sample effects postulated above; by presenting as quasi-official representatives of the church, we may have discouraged participants from expressing views critical of the church or the school.

However, in the context of this secondary analysis, we see the emergence of such a descriptions of belief as worthwhile information *in itself*. As our analysis shows, the creation of blended spaces within the discourse of religious diversity is a meaningful social response to the popular public framing of such diversity (especially in the context of Muslims in Birmingham schools) as socially and politically problematic. By speaking to us about the sharedness of religious practices, beliefs and values, participants create a counter-narrative of conviviality, and by doing so relationally, with their peers in the focus groups, they signal a shared public commitment to the creation of a convivial community ethos.

The analysis in this article will be based on the totality of the interviews ($n=12$) and focus groups ($n=6$) transcribed as whole words. The interviews and focus groups were between twenty-five and fifty minutes. The transcripts are presented in the article as the participants responded, often including constructions indicative of speakers for whom English is not their first language. Where clarification might be needed, we have included them in brackets within the transcripts. The research was governed by the ethics approval of the researchers' home institution with informed consent negotiated prior to the start of every interview and focus group, and the ability of any participant to withdraw at any time. The research was used to inform the production of a handbook to be shared across primary schools in the UK to share good practice and talk about the challenges and opportunities of religious diversity in the teaching of Religious Education in the schools.

All names of schools and participants are anonymized in the transcripts, and where possible, we have avoided categorizing the participants in terms of their religious belief and practice. The nature of the participants being recruited through the schools potentially led to the self-selection of participants who were more likely to speak positively about their experiences. Therefore, the focus of this article is on the discursive ways that categories are used in interaction and how categories of Muslim and Christian are understood in relation to one another in *convivial* discourse, where participants are not explicitly encouraged to argue with one another. The question schedule focused on the participants' understandings of "diversity" which was not necessarily limited to religious diversity resulting, in some cases, in lengthy discussions of national and ethnic identity.

After the data was collected and transcribed, analysis focused on the categories of Muslim, Christian, and British within the interaction and where negotiation of these terms occurred within the answers. AntConc¹⁷ was used to identify concordance lines where categories were occurring. The original recordings and transcripts were then consulted to position the use of different terms in the trajectory of the conversation in which they were occurring, taking into account the different scales of the discourse event, from the moment-to-moment talk about the categories, to what had been said before in the conversation and what emerged as a result of the particular use of a category, to the whole discourse event.

The analysis will focus on places in the focus groups and interviews where participants spoke about their faith and identity in relation to other faith categories and how distinctions and similarities were constructed and understood, in the context of the primary school environments. Please note that the transcripts are often from speakers of English as a second or third or fourth language. We have attempted to present them as they were spoken, with needed information to clarify the contextual cues and ellipses in brackets and removed filler statements (like "you know") and vocalizations.

Analysis

Drawing distinctions

Across the participants in the two schools, the relationship between different identities was a consistent theme when discussing where a participant and/or their family came from and how this related to their own belief. This was particularly clear in discussions with immigrants who had newly arrived in the UK from St Cuthbert's. The first question asking people to describe themselves and their initial description of identity often led to a discussion of the connections between religious identity and national or ethnic identity, depending on where an individual participant had grown

up. A mother from St Cuthbert's provides a clear example of this in describing her own educational background, she also discusses her ethnic, national, and religious identity, saying:

1. Well, I was born back home, and that's Somalia. So I went to a Muslim school because obviously the country is Muslim and the school is Muslim. So the majority of the children were Somalis and yes, so it was a Muslim school.

In this response, the participant's "home" of Somalia is described as "obviously" Muslim, and the relationship between the education and the religious majority is presented as causal—the school was a Muslim school because the country was Muslim. The participant reiterates the point that because the students were Somalians, the school was Muslim, but this rationale for the school's description is based on the context and setting for the focus group within a CofE school in Britain: the interviewer and other participants might not necessarily understand the participant's assumption that because they were Somalian, they were also Muslim.

There is also a conflation of national and religious categorization in the first extract, where Somalia is described as "Muslim" and because most people are Somalians, then they are also implicitly categorized as Muslim. This conflation of categories also occurs in other places. In a response of a father at St David's, talking about how he was raised to respect "British" values and laws, as separate from his own family's religious commitments.

2. As well as that, being sort of like, you know, brought up in the British society I tend to find I follow the values and respect the laws and rules from that as well and continue with that as well. I understand who I am but, like I say, I understand that we do need to follow the laws of the country and everything as well, which is what I've always abided to. It's what my mother always told me as well, so it's... something that I've always done as well. My mum was always, you know: "Make sure you follow the English law before applying your own laws... Make sure that is always done first, you understand who you are."

In this extract, the speaker draws a comparison between "British society" and the "laws of the country" in comparison to "your own laws." Having described himself as "Gujarati, Hindu," he also conflates an ethnic and religious categorization, like the categories of Somalian and Muslim in the first extract, where the categorization of being Hindu is incumbent in being Gujarati, an Indian ethnic group. The speaker does not describe himself as "British," but rather describes himself as being brought up in "British society." Most explicitly, using the voice of his mother, he describes following "English law" before "applying your own laws," marking a difference between the two. He does not further explicate where there might be a conflict between the laws, or what an "English" law is in comparison to his own law, except for eating beef. The example of eating beef as a contrast to

“English law,” suggests that the conceptualization of “law” goes beyond simply what is legal and could include societal and cultural norms.

When asked later about his understanding of “British values” in the same interview, the participant says:

3. I think, say, when I was brought up, to “Respect British values” was something that my family constantly always told me. You’re in England, this is your home country. You need to respect everything that the British people are teaching you, and everything. And learn the laws of the country because that’s what you need to abide to. To be, to patient, to be courteous, to say please and thank-yous, to know- just the right things really. Just to teach me the right things.

Again, when discussing British values, the participant declines to self-categorize himself as British, but instead talks about being told to respect what “British people...are teaching you” and to “learn the laws of the country.” In his explication of the “laws,” he again refers to things that are not clearly “laws,” but the “values” of the society, which are taught to him explicitly by “British people.” The participant does clearly say he was told by his family that England is his “home” country, and a distinction emerges in what he says between the teaching of “my family” and that of the “British people.” England maybe his home country, but the “British people” are still spoken about as a separate category. A blending of his beliefs and practices and the beliefs and practices of the “British” does not emerge.

There are examples of participants resisting a conceptualization of Christians and Muslims as the same, particularly when it comes to specific beliefs within different religions. One parent from St Cuthbert’s says:

4. As a Muslim person my religion is saying that is we believe in one God who create everything around us or even us or everything, every creatures. We believe in one God. So, when you see some people saying that we believe a person as a God, we think, oh you believe... Some people saying that we believe Jesus is God. He say[s], “Okay that what you believe, that[’s] what you believe, I respect [that].”

In this extract, the participant focuses on one belief with Islam, that there is one God, and compares that belief to the belief that “a person is God” and more specifically “Jesus is God.” In this case, the generic concept that “all beliefs are the same” cannot be true for this participant because of the comparison about belief in the singular nature of God and, implicitly, a belief that a person cannot be God. The participant is careful to clarify that they “respect” this belief but make clear that this is what “you believe” rather than what “we believe.”

The differences in religious belief and practices can still, however, be viewed in relation to one another. One parent, who identifies as a Muslim, discussed their experience of their daughter asking about the story of Mary

and Joseph, which the daughter had heard at school. Another participant from St Cuthbert's who identifies herself as a Muslim says, explaining the differences between Christianity and Islam,

5. [My daughter's] only five but I had to explain to her that [the story of Mary and Joseph is] the same. We believe in Jesus but we just believe in it in different ways... We just believe in it in different ways. We have the same messengers that come but we just believe in it differently. It's just making them understand and I think maybe the children that we had in the past had older parents and now the parents are younger. And that's why, I don't know, maybe it's different.

The “differences” between religious faiths can then be seen in the specific discussion of Jesus, who is also venerated in Islam as a prophet. The categorization of Jesus as a “messenger” suggests a comparison between Islam and Christianity emerging that focuses on the positioning of Jesus within Islam and seeing it as analogous to the Christian belief. Here, the difference is resolved through a comparison, one in which the presentation of Christian belief comes from an Islamic perspective rather than a Christian one. The comparison is sufficient for the parent to describe the differences between the religious faiths as emerging within a discussion of similarities and differences within religious traditions. It is a comparison produced by a Muslim to describe differences in the context of a CofE school, one that also explicitly acknowledges the dynamic nature of belief as changing over time and the validity of other faiths, while still maintaining the uniqueness of Islam.

The emergence of this explanation in this context represents both an in-the-moment reasoning about the situation of the school, but also a stable way of reasoning about Jesus which is common in Muslim discourse. The reasoning this parent produces in the moment is unique and meets the requirements of the interview context, but also draws on previous established ways of thinking and speaking about differences from a Muslim perspective. The comparison reveals how patterns can emerge across different scales of interactions and how the ways of talking about religious belief draw on knowledge about how people have talked about the topic in the past, not only theological positions on issues like religious belief.

Similarities in faiths

Despite the instances of participants making distinctions between their own self-categorizations and the category of “British,” when discussing the issue of religion, there were clearer examples of participants talking about religions as being the same. In the following extracts, two different parents, both from St David's talk about how religions are essentially the same in the following comments. In the first comment (6), the participant is responding to what another participant (Anna) has said about Christianity

being about “serving.” The second comment (7) is from a Christian, speaking about her son’s questions about Muslim practice and whether there is concern that children will become confused about their own religious belief when interacting with people of different faiths. She explains how she responds to her son’s questions about Muslim practice.

6. Anna says that as a Christian. Me, as a Muslim, would believe the same thing. To me there’s no difference.

7. They are believe Allah, you believe Jesus Christ. We are the same. I told him, [I] explain. “But uh why Allah, which Allah?” He ask me a lot of things you know. But I’m happy because my boy he’s come to this school. I’m happy because, he attachment with religion ... Muslim, Christians, the same ... One Allah, One God

In contrast to the examples in the previous section, when discussing religion in the context of religious diversity, the parents were often very happy to describe different religions as the “same.” In the first case, the parent speaks directly about another mother who is in the focus group, saying that there is no difference between what a Christian or Muslim believe about “serving.” By referring to the other mother (Anna), the comment highlights the occasioned nature of the comment: it is not only a theological statement, but an interpersonal one showing affiliation between the two participants. The same thing happens in the next extract, but with a Christian mother showing her affiliation with the Muslim participants in the focus group, using a story of her child questioning the practices of Muslims and her response to him that both religions are the same. The child, in the story, is persistent in asking “why Allah, which Allah,” as the participant explains it, suggesting that the child is the one bringing up the difference. However, the mother positions herself as both being happy that her child is learning about religion and that she can reinforce the point that “Muslim, Christian, the same.”

The description of Islam and Christianity as the “same” in the physical space of the school, then, particularly when people of two or more beliefs are present suggests that parents also can accept this discourse of similarity and are able to articulate it when needed. The talk about similarities suggests a comparison of Christianity and Islam in a way that highlights shared values and a belief in the same God. The comparison also includes some statements that are theologically problematic, like when the participant says “They are believe Allah, you believe Jesus Christ. We are the same.” This comparison of belief disregards key differences between the religious traditions, instead articulating a position that allows for agreement among parents and teachers in the school.

These extracts also suggest that comparison can be primed when participants are given an opportunity to think and speak about religions in relation to one another, both from the nature of the interview questions and their own history and experience within the school. This position is also

avored in the context of CofE schools, where teachers, governors, and vicars are clear that the role of the church in education is not to proselytize and Muslim parents are regularly assured, both by staff and other parents, that there is no attempt in the school for the children's beliefs to be changed (see below). Moreover, as the context of the focus groups show, particularly when people of different beliefs are present or parents potentially perceive the school's secular discourse about all religions being equal as the preferred way of talking about their belief (as they might in a focus group held in the school). The beliefs that participants represented in their responses appeared to be amenable, at least in the public positions they took, to the school contexts wherein the discussions took place.

The space for positive comparison between religious beliefs is specifically produced by the school in their presentation of belief, with Muslim parents recognizing that there is naturally more focus on Christianity in the CofE school than on Islam. One Muslim parent from St Cuthbert's recognizes this, praising the school saying:

8. And this school is very good school actually and is close to my house as well. But when it comes to religion, the more they focus in is Christianity. Is okay. I don't have any problem... The Muslim believe this, Christian believe this, but they more are focusing on Christianity while the more of the children are Muslim. They has to tell them [what] Christian[s believe] but at the same they has to tell them Muslim as well, what they believe. So no just focusing [on] one religion.

In this extract, the participant describes how parents come to accept the context of the CofE school because of the focus on different religions. By presenting Christianity as one of many religions, "belief" is then an analogous feature of all religions. By abstracting beliefs to "this" ("The Muslim believe this, Christian believe this") opens a space for thinking about the religions as similar and comparable. The parent does acknowledge that "they are more focusing on Christianity" but follows up quickly by saying "but at the same they has to tell them Muslim as well what they believe." Again, the abstraction of belief to "Muslim" and "Christian" shows an acceptance of thinking and speaking about the two as analogous categories, which the school treats, if not equal in terms of focus, as equally valid.

The parent's point at the beginning of the answer that the school is "a very good school" and "close to my house" also provides important contextual background for the acceptance of the primary school's teaching of religion. Because St Cuthbert's serves a community with a large Somalian immigrant population, many of whom have arrived recently in the country. The CofE school is both local and highly regarded, making it an attractive school for parents, particularly as they are eager to provide the best education possible for their children. Given these circumstances, there is more incentive for

parents to work to understand the religious character of the school in a positive way, because of the many benefits the school provides.

The active teaching of religions as similar was observed regularly in teacher and head teacher responses to questions about the teaching of religion within their school. One teacher from St David's says:

9. I've never had a parent, ever, to tell me, "Why are you taking them, let's say, to the Cathedral?" And parents are proud of them. It doesn't matter whether it's an Eid, Christmas, Easter. They do understand that we are not trying to preach or favour one religion or the other. And the important thing is that... what I found with my son, I think the children feel safer. They do understand the difference that they do understand Islam, they do understand Christian and all the relig- They do understand cultural difference and they feel safer. Whereas, if you've never met anybody and the only thing you hear is what... the news say[s], I think you would get a shock at some point in your life. Whereas they know that it's- all Muslims, all Christians, all Sikhs are predominantly good people, kind. That[s] what all religions tells us.

The claim that religious festivals are the same is explicated in the listing of festivals from the different traditions, which are implied to be treated in the same way, that one is not favored over another. The teacher then does note that there are differences, in that the festivals come from different religious traditions, and highlighting those differences to be "culture." However, the answer returns to a blended conceptualization of all believers by comparing religious believers—"all Muslims, all Christians, all Sikhs"—and asserting they are "good people."

Teaching faiths

The presence of the "same" discourse in relation to religious difference is reflected in the teaching about religion within CoFE schools. While there is regular "collective worship" (as there is within all primary schools in the UK) often led by vicars from local churches and there is also a clear presence of Christian symbology and language in schools' descriptions of their curriculum and values, Religious Education, however, as a subject is taught from a secular perspective, with no religion being favored over another. Head Teachers and Religious Education Co-ordinators in the study mentioned the focus on inclusion in the curriculum and the different ways religious traditions are introduced through the celebration and acknowledgement of different religious festivals, as well as trips to various religious centers and places of worship.

The concept of "faith" is further extended as "spirituality" in this same exchange with a self-identified Christian teacher also from St Cuthbert's saying:

10. I think it gives that spirituality, doesn't it... I think all the children come in with the level of spirituality that you can tap into for lots of reasons. For when they're doing something that's right, for sometimes when they do something that's wrong. We're talking about religion. "Is that the kind of thing that Allah would be happy with?" You can say those things. "Would the imam be happy if I told him we were doing this?" They'd soon say no. "Well, okay, come on then, if you say you're Muslim, if this is your faith, you've got to act like that in all situations." I think it's an important way of grounding them and grounding us, but it gives you a level of spirituality that you don't have to fake.

The teacher expresses the opinion that "spirituality" is the same, regardless of the specific belief, using the analogy that what is taught in a CofE school about what's "right" and "wrong" would be agreed to by an Imam, a person of authority in the Muslim community. The teacher takes on the voice of a Muslim asking rhetorically: "Would the imam be happy if I told him we were doing this?" showing how the comparison involves taking the perspective of others and simulating conversations from their perspective. Like the description of Jesus as a "messenger," the teacher can use "Allah" as analogous to a shared conception of God and "doing something right" and "doing something that's wrong" are shared across people of different faiths, and a pupil's "faith" can be used to reinforce particular behaviors, regardless of the faith that they have.

The Christian teacher's simulation of the conversation with the Imam is validated by the Muslim teacher in the same focus group who follows this statement up saying:

11. It's real, isn't it? And you have that connection. I always think that Christians—there's a lot of similarities and therefore you can.

In this exchange, talking and thinking about religious differences, between a Christian and Muslim teacher, shows how different identities as parents and teachers, and as members of particular religious beliefs, have an influence on how the group comes to talk about their experiences of diversity within the school, and the thinking and speaking about the religious beliefs in relation to one another draws on the interactional context, the individual speaker's own lived experience, and the context of the interview. In the case of this interaction, all three of these factors favor blended thinking about religious belief and practice, because it leads to harmony, in terms of their teaching people of different faiths, in their own lives, and in their moment-by-moment interaction with another member of staff, parent, or the interviewer.

The importance of "faith" and religious belief and practice being recognized in the school was an important theme with teachers. Describing their decision to send their children to a CofE school, one teacher, a self-identified Muslim who also has a child attending the school, speaking with a group of teachers from St Cuthbert's, says:

12. With my kids, I would only send them to a faith school... She comes here. I was quite happy that she got the place here. I am quite happy to have sent her to a Christian, Catholic, whatever school because I know it's a bit more grounded.

For this participant, the generic concept of “faith” allows them to see “Christian” and “Catholic” as acceptable places for her daughter to attend. The implication is that faith schools, even though they are based in a different faith, are “more grounded.” The position the participant takes is informed not simply by their position as a teacher, which is understood implicitly in the focus group context as it has been established that they are all teachers, but they introduce their identity as a parent to support their position. The belief in the “grounded” nature of faith-based education is one that the teacher takes for their own children. The foregrounding of their choices about their own children suggests that they are committed personally and professionally to the belief that different “faiths” can be understood as the same, at least in terms of their commitment to a “grounded” education.

The responses from these teachers who also regularly discuss their own children's experiences showed how thinking and speaking about religious difference within the institutional context of the school included people of different faith, and the discourse of similarity between religions and particularly between Christianity and Islam, was produced by parents including school policy in institutional roles. The teachers and parents were themselves producing and reinforcing comparisons, not simply repeating the institutional message. These different ways of thinking emerged in specific instances where interaction between the institution of the school, interactional context, individuals, and topic led to articulations of belief that were both unique and grounded in established ways of talking about religious differences.

Discussion

This study has shown that within diverse communities, when thinking and speaking in a shared community space with people of different beliefs, that those beliefs and practices can come to be thought and spoken about as being understood in relation to one another. Although differences can be identified between religious traditions, participants in the study consistently produced comparisons that treated all religious beliefs and practices as having many things in common. This way of thinking and speaking about religious traditions was also explicitly stated as the goal of the school leaders and teachers, and the study shows how religious education within schools in the UK can have effects on how parents come to talk about religious identity.

The study did, however, take place within the context of the school, many times in school buildings, with some parents being asked to participate by the head teachers, leading to a sample of parents that was likely more favorable about the school than might be seen from taking a randomized sample. Parents may also have felt pressure to produce what they perceived to be the “right” answers about religious diversity, particularly if they were aware of what their children had learned at school. These factors suggest that the findings are potentially only applicable to a public discussion about differences in religious belief and practice, oriented toward the institution of the school and what the perceived expectations of the teachers and school leadership might be. The private positions of the parents when speaking with their families or other members of their community could very well be different.

This potential for a disparity between public and private discourse about religious diversity does not, however, undermine the clear benefits of being able to think and speak about religious belief and practice in positive relation to one another. For schools serving diverse populations, the ability of parents and pupils to think and speak about difference in a positive way, particularly when they include emergent thinking that eliminates contentious disagreement has a positive effect on how parents report to view the school and how teachers come to view the pupils and their families. This public discourse about shared values, repeated by leadership, teachers, parents, and pupils, reduces conflict within the school and equips teachers, pupils, and parents to address differences in a way that encourages blended thinking. This does not require the rejection of meaningful differences between beliefs and cultures. As one parent notes, the belief in Jesus as God is not acceptable within their Muslim faith. However, by creating a context wherein beliefs and practices are seen in relation to one another, these genuine differences of belief can also be seen as what they are: religious positions that religious believers hold. Even when specific differences are identified, comparison allow for those differences to be understood in relation to one’s own deeply held belief, and therefore respected.

The description of beliefs as the “same” in these contexts problematizes the notion of “belief” and accounting for beliefs using only what people report about those beliefs. In the context of interacting with different people, everyone may be limited by their own experience of belief and a particular religious tradition. The extent to which the experiences of religion are similar is difficult to judge from the public discourse of people, both in contexts where conviviality might be favored over confrontation. Indeed, the findings show that when it is in everyone’s interest to find common ground, there are possible ways to think and speak about religious faiths in ways that see more similarities than differences.

Although media reporting focuses on differences in belief among minority populations in superdiverse wards in cities like Birmingham, the discourse within institutions like primary schools is less focused on differences in communities. The ability to access established, agreed patterns of talking about difference, for example, in understanding Jesus as a “messenger” from a Muslim perspective can open possibilities to challenge resistance to “differences” in religion. In the similar way, Christians could also understand Muslim holidays in analogy to Christian ones, providing more opportunities for empathy among community members. Schools offer the potential for people of different faiths to find not only common ground for working together, but incentives for foregrounding similarities over differences. The findings showed the importance of established ways of speaking about religious faith, particularly differences, when they emerge in day-to-day conversations.

Notes

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