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“Heaven starts at your parents’ feet”: Adolescent bowing to parents and associated spiritual attitudes

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Introduction

Late post-modern western society is rapidly changing in its religious expectations to a point where spiritual formation can no longer assume human autonomy as its goal (Gates 2002, 109). Similarly, the boundaries of religious life seem more porous than might previously have been thought with recent research in psychology of religion showing that a child's religiosity may include many aspects of community life other than prayer (Ladd & Spilka 2002, 475) or attending a place of worship (Good & Willoughby 2006). One such practice that runs counter to western hankering after individuality but which I will argue to be intimately connected with a child's spirituality in certain religious membership groups, is bowing to parents, which seems to be a part of the religious lives of the adherents of many major religious traditions. It is a religious behaviour which deserves the attention of a wider public, which might easily dismiss bowing to authority figures as 'counter-cultural' at best or fundamentalism at worst. Furthermore, socialization of respect in the religious setting remains under-researched – possibly due to uncertainty as to whether such behaviour is religious in nature or can fairly be relegated to the status of a cultural or ethnic accretion of religion – since in keeping with Deleuze's definition, it might be seen merely as a means to bind a religious community together (Deleuze 1993) rather than being a practice believed to pave the way to personal salvation (– a feature hereafter referred to as bowing to parent's 'teleological significance'). Contrary to such stereotypes, sociological research has shown that in the classroom, respect for parents and family has been shown to play a significant role in the learning process (Chiang 2000) – enriching understanding of how children negotiate power, social control and discipline. In the home similarly, respect for parents is has been shown to be an important organizing force in parent-child interactions (Valdes 1996).

Definitions

Bowing to parents would generally take place in the privacy of a family home. It can be defined as lowering the head from the kneeling position or standing with the hands at the sides of the body and sliding the head down towards the knees or bending down to touch or kiss the feet of parents (Singh et al. 1998, 406) with the whole body rather than merely saluting, nodding respectfully in their direction or gesturing deference. The definition would also include ‘prostration’. The children would be taught such bowing by the parents themselves, by elders or by religious clergy. As an example of the context for the sort of bowing (it is assumed that) adolescents in this study are describing, it is perhaps helpful to quote the words of a London-based Thai Buddhist mother describing how her daughter bows to her. The daughter was said to bow (Thanissaro 2011, 66):

before going to bed and before going to school, or when she comes home. If I am sitting on the bed she will bow at my feet. If I am standing, she will bow at my chest. If we are sitting together on the bed, she bows at my lap.

‘Respect’, in this paper, is defined as an attitude of looking for good things to learn from in an object of respect. This meaning of respect deviates importantly from that of the ubiquitous slogan ‘Respect others so they will respect you’ – an attitude which would be more relevant to tolerating interpersonal differences rather than the filial socialization of bowing to parents.

While dealing with definitions, it is pertinent to recall the limitations highlighted by Barth of analyzing religion in terms of static labels such as ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’. Although at some times a person’s religious behaviour *may* be considered an item to be included in the ‘supermarket trolley’ of post-modern ethnic categories (Nagel 1994, 162), at other times such deference to ethnic identity provides insufficient clarity to explain why, for particular religious behaviours, there are religious differences within communities of the same ethnicity or indeed, ethnic differences within communities of

the same religion. Static labels have also been shown inadequate for explaining the ‘multiple cultural competence’ of children negotiating the borderlines between minority and mainstream cultures in a plural society or between the different cultures of mixed parentage (Arweck & Nesbitt 2010). Accordingly, rather than trying to find watertight definitions for the words ‘religion’, ‘culture’ and ethnicity’, this paper starts by analyzing previous literature concerning bowing to parents using a hermeneutic that has proved useful in interpreting religious behaviour in a plural setting – namely, Robert Jackson’s (1997, 65) three-level division of religion into Tradition, Membership Group and Individual. In this case, ‘religious tradition’ is the historical accumulation of constructions pertaining to that religion made by different insiders and outsiders, ‘membership group’ refers to denominational, sectarian, ethnic and other social categories or combinations of these – and ‘individual’ refers to the faith or religiosity of individual adherents to that religion. Having described the existing literature on bowing to parents, I proceed to describe actual statistics of bowing to parents for a sample of adolescents in the UK and the religious attitudes associated with the practice – finally concluding for which membership groups and traditions bowing to parents most affects the religious sphere of life.

Significance of bowing to parents for different religious traditions

Bowing constitutes a pervasive practice across the spectrum of organized religions (Sure 2001, 95; Young 2003), although it is often not clear whether bowing to *parents* has any teleological significance within many of those religions. Bowing to parents is less well researched than the unequivocally religious act of bowing before a higher power or prostration before a god as an act of worship (Reinder 1997, 297). In the

comparison that follows, a generalization is made between perceptions of bowing to parents in Abrahamic and Dharmic religions.

Judeo-Christian culture follows the Levitical entreaty that “Each person should revere his mother and father...” – nonetheless, there is an important distinction made between reverence of parents and their worship. In the Abrahamic religions, bowing as an act of worship to anything other than God might be considered idolatry. In the UK at least, little incidence of Christians bowing to their parents would be expected. In Islam, there is an ongoing debate¹ as to whether bowing to parents is an appropriate way to show them kindness for the great sacrifice they have made in bringing their children into the world. It is evident from the Moslem youth web-boards that bowing seems to be practised more in the Moslem community of Bangladesh than in that of Pakistan – an example of religious interpretation taking precedence over the norm of an ethnic membership group. For the Moslems who allow bowing to parents, children are encouraged by the Hadith verses “Paradise lies beneath the feet of your mother”.² In Judaism, although there is a strong scripturally supported³ tradition of gratitude to parents, Jews are careful to avoid any potentially idolatrous bowing, even to karate partners (Hirsch 2010), conforming to the Biblical stereotype of Jews being a ‘stiff-necked people’.⁴ Nonetheless, formulae for prostration to esteemed persons exist in some of the oldest Semitic texts (Hurvitz 2006, 128) and in practice Jewish religious bowing would take place at New Year, Yom Kippur and in daily prayer – although

¹ Visible from web-boards Islamic-Voice.com *Islamic Voice - Magazine*. Available online at: <http://www.islamic-voice.com/> (accessed, IslamOnline.net *Islamic News, Shari'ah, Society, Family, Culture, Science, Youth, and Health*. Available online at: <http://www.islamonline.net/English/index.shtml> (accessed, Thaindian.com *Bowing before elders un-Islamic, says Deoband edict*. Available online at: http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorized/bowing-before-elders-un-islamic-says-deoband-edict_100131722.html (accessed.

² Ahmad Nasai or Ibn Majah, Sunan, Hadith no.2771

³ Talmud *Kiddushin* 32a; Rambam Mishneh Torah, Laws of Rebels 6:7; Sefer Hahinuch 33

⁴ **Exodus 32:9, 33:3, 34:9**

actual bowing to parents is estimated never to have been part of Jewish culture (J. Tabick, pers. comm.).

In the Dharmic religions, bowing to parents is more unanimously encouraged. Understanding the expression of respect in Buddhism has often been marred by an over-generalization of the heterodox Buddhist practice of bowing unselectively to anything and everything 'because all things contain the Buddha nature'. A more orthodox picture of bowing to parents in Buddhism by contrast, must acknowledge the scriptural evidence marking the beginning of a tradition of venerating parents (Xing 2005) that has been practised for over 2,500 years since, and remains widespread in the Buddhist communities of Southeast Asia (Harvey 2000, 172). Recent ethnographic interviews with Buddhists in England revealed that amongst Buddhists, bowing to parents was daily routine for many Buddhist children – often practised before going to school or before going to bed as a form of Buddhist nurture – and was considered by parents a sign of children taking an interest in religion. If children bowed to their parents, it was thought to 'count' more than other expressions of respect and was associated with attitudes of filial piety such as wanting to care for parents in their old age (Thanissaro 2011, 66). According to the Sikh teachings, parents deserve the same respect as the God (Waheguru) – hence bowing before and touching the feet of parents is believed to properly bestow the parents' blessings upon the children (although western influence has detracted from the perceived importance of this practice). Bowing to parents in Hinduism has ancient origins witnessed in their scriptures (Hopkins 1931) and in practice Hindus are taught to bow and touch the feet of their parents from an early age (Ganeri 2006, 5). There is no real difference between the way Hindu and Sikh children bow to their parents, however some young Sikhs in the West show respect to parents merely by making a *gesture* of bowing.

Significance of bowing to parents for different membership groups

Adeyinka and Ndwapi have described how for the (mainly Christian) Yoruba, girls are expected to kneel out of respect when greeting their parents and boys to prostrate (2002, 20). Bowing to parents has been described in the United States at Taiwanese weddings (Hong 2006) and amongst American-Korean membership groups (Sung 1994). Bowing in the latter was found even amongst Protestant Koreans – an example of how ethnic membership group considerations may take precedence over the norms of religious tradition.

Significance of bowing to parents on individual level

Recent research suggests that whereas bowing in secular surroundings might be considered cultural, in a religious context it might take on spiritual significance on the individual level (Ozawa-de_Silva & Ozawa-de_Silva 2010, 155) since it engenders humility and reduction of pride which are seen by some religions to pave the way to salvation. That Buddhist children should recognize their indebtedness to their parents is considered an essential part of practising Right View – mentioned in many places in sayings of the Buddha from early Buddhist scriptures.⁵ Bowing to parents could be seen as a form of spiritual nurture of Right View for young Buddhists – a component of the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to salvation. It is from a typical Buddhist parent's encouragement to their child to practise bowing that the title of this paper “heaven starts at your parents' feet” derives.

Research Agenda

Against this background, the brief of the present study was to quantify the degree of practice of bowing to parents across religions in a sample of UK adolescents and examine the association between bowing to parents and attitudes to a selection of

⁵ Such as the Saleyyaka (M.i.288) and Mahacattalisaka (M.iii.72) Suttas

religious values and explore for which membership groups and traditions bowing to parents most affects the religious sphere of life.

Method

Sample

Research was undertaken upon a convenience sample of 369 young people – 237 boys and 132 girls – aged between 13 and 15 years attending London schools. Ethnically the sample consisted of 150 whites (41%), 103 blacks (30%), 58 Asians (16%), 41 of mixed race (11%) and 7 Chinese (2%). The religious composition of the sample was 149 Christians (41%), 120 of no religion (33%), 45 Moslems (12%), 17 Hindus (5%), 15 Buddhists (4%), 5 Sikhs (1%), 3 Jews (1%) and 13 of other religions (4%). In the sample, the number of Jewish pupils was insufficient to draw any valid conclusions and hence this religious category was omitted from the results. Three schools volunteered their participation in response to a circular letter from their local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education. One of the schools was co-educational and voluntary-controlled; a second was a girls' voluntary-aided Catholic school (accepting only those baptized in that tradition) and; a third was a boy's community school.

Procedure & Analysis

A multi-purpose survey (detail of the survey can be found in Thanissaro 2010, 184-191) was deployed as part of a wider research project to explore factors in adolescent attitudes toward Buddhism, Sikhism and Religious Education (RE). The survey contained biographical questions adapted from Francis's (2001) adolescent values inventory and 91 Likert five-point scale (strongly agree – agree – not certain – disagree – disagree strongly) attitude questions focussed on Religious Education, Buddhist and Sikh values adapted from previous qualitative and quantitative adolescent attitudes

research in the UK (Kay 1996; Kay & Smith 2002; Lewis & Francis 1996; Nesbitt 2000; Thanissaro 2011). As conclusions reported in this study are based on only a subsection of the question items rather than ‘factors’ (which remained inconclusive given the low number of Buddhist and Sikh respondents in the survey), the quality index used has been a Pearson Chi-squared comparison of the statistical difference of mean agreement on question items.

Surveys were delivered to participating schools in the quantities they required and administered to pupils by Year 9 and 10 teachers under examination conditions in their regular RE classes in the period January and February 2010. In keeping with constraints of ethical approval non-consenting pupils had the option of destroying their questionnaires after completion instead of submitting them and completed surveys were kept anonymous to protect participants from having their views traced back to them. The resulting dataset was analyzed by means of the SPSS statistical package (SPSS Inc. 1988) using the frequency, cross-tabulation, correlation and partial correlation routines.

Results

How common was bowing to parents?

Mindful of potential overlap between affiliation to religious tradition and ethnic membership group – the incidence of bowing to parents was cross-correlated against both the self-assigned ethnicity (Table 1) and self-assigned religion (Table 2) of the participants.

Table 1. Percentage incidence of bowing in adolescents by ethnicity

| | Never | On special occasions | At least once a month | At least once a week | Nearly every day |
|-----------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Asian | | | | | |
| Bangladeshi | 70 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Asian Indian | 50 | 30 | 10 | 0 | 10 |
| Asian Pakistani | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Any other Asian | 41 | 51 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| Black African | 62 | 18 | 1 | 4 | 14 |
| Black Caribbean | 92 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| Chinese | 86 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 |
| Mixed | 92 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| White | 90 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Average | 78 | 12 | 1 | 2 | 7 |

Some incidence of bowing to parents was found in over a fifth (22%) of the sample. Over half (58%) of 'Any Other' Asians (by elimination the non-Chinese of East and Southeast Asia), half the Asian Indians and over a third (38%) of Black Africans indicated some sort of bowing practice, and a third of these practised on a daily basis. It was only those of Asian Pakistani ethnicity who avoided bowing to parents completely.

Table 2. Percentage incidence of bowing in adolescents by religion

| | Never | On special occasions | At least once a month | At least once a week | Nearly every day |
|-------------|-------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| No religion | 93 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Buddhist | 47 | 40 | 0 | 0 | 13 |
| Christian | 76 | 12 | 1 | 4 | 7 |
| Hindu | 31 | 62 | 0 | 0 | 6 |
| Muslim | 76 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 18 |
| Sikh | 60 | 20 | 20 | 0 | 0 |

Bowing was observed on a daily or occasional basis in half of Buddhists and over a third of Hindus (35%). Since those of no religion had the lowest incidence of bowing (7%), irrespective of ethnicity, it can be surmised that most bowing was religiously

motivated. One fourteen-year-old Moslem boy seemed glad to be asked about this aspect of his daily life and added to his survey form, “I kiss their feet as well”.

Religious attitudes associated with bowing to parents

The answers of pupils to 91 attitude questions were correlated with the degree of their bowing to parents. In this comparison, for clarity of presentation, although the survey used a five-point continuum for frequency of bowing to parents, the ‘daily’, ‘weekly’, ‘monthly’ and ‘special occasions’ bowers were reduced to the category of ‘bowing’ whereas those who didn’t bow at all were put in the ‘non-bow’ category. In the case of the majority of attitudes to RE, Buddhism and Sikhism (79 of the 91 questions asked), bowing to parents made no significant difference – and for brevity, this aspect of the findings is not described here in any more detail. The results described here pertain to the remaining 12 questions, which are summarized overall and by religion and ethnicity, above in Table 3. The overall picture for all religions and ethnicities together was that those who bowed understood more about their own religion as a result of RE but were more inclined to perceive a difference between school portrayal of their religion and what they learned at home. Those who bowed were more enthusiastic about hunting as a sport and about hearing Buddhist and Sikh stories. They were more likely to abstain completely from drinking alcohol and thought the same behaviour important for Buddhists too. They were less likely to need to be asked to look after their parents in old age. Those who bowed were more inspired by listening to Sikh scriptures. They found the Sikh festival Diwali more meaningful, and were more enthusiastic about the Sikh idea of seeing God everywhere. They were also more likely to agree that knowing the Sikh code of conduct helped them live a better life.

Additional cross-tabulation in terms of ethnicity and religion to analyze the membership groups contributing to the statistics measured found that it was those of

Table 3. Association of bowing to parents with spiritual attitudes (% of total respondents)

| Question Item | Ethnicity | | | | | | | | | | | Religion | | | | | | | total | χ^2 | p< |
|---|-----------|-----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|-----|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|------|-------|----------|----|
| | AB | AI | AA | BA | BC | C | M | W | N | Bu | Chr | H | I | S | | | | | | | |
| Religious Education in my school helps me understand my religion. | N-B | 75 | 50 | 56 | 52 | 70 | 20 | 50 | 27 | 13 | 83 | 65 | 33 | 53 | 67 | 41 | 11.91 | .01 | | | |
| | B | 33 | 75 | 64 | 81 | 70 | 100 | 67 | 57 | 75 | 43 | 78 | 75 | 50 | 50 | 69 | | | | | |
| What I learn about my religion in school differs from what I learned at home. | N-B | 0 | 100 | 74 | 42 | 37 | 0 | 35 | 22 | 39 | 0 | 27 | 33 | 29 | 0 | 30 | 6.62 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 67 | 33 | 43 | 62 | 37 | 100 | 50 | 28 | 25 | 28 | 28 | 22 | 0 | 100 | 50 | | | | | |
| I consider hunting to be an enjoyable sport. | N-B | 17 | 0 | 18 | 11 | 17 | 20 | 22 | 17 | 54 | 83 | 64 | 75 | 46 | 33 | 17 | 7.52 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 33 | 25 | 27 | 44 | 0 | 100 | 0 | 18 | 80 | 83 | 50 | 50 | 25 | 50 | 32 | | | | | |
| I find it inspiring to hear Buddhist stories. | N-B | 33 | 100 | 45 | 8 | 22 | 20 | 28 | 31 | 23 | 83 | 30 | 25 | 14 | 50 | 28 | 6.82 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 0 | 67 | 56 | 42 | 22 | 100 | 67 | 30 | 40 | 71 | 42 | 60 | 17 | 0 | 45 | | | | | |
| If you are a Buddhist it is important to avoid drinking alcohol. | N-B | 60 | 0 | 10 | 32 | 39 | 20 | 33 | 30 | 35 | 17 | 31 | 0 | 35 | 0 | 30 | 8.06 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 0 | 67 | 44 | 50 | 39 | 0 | 67 | 50 | 20 | 42 | 58 | 50 | 20 | 100 | 46 | | | | | |
| I would look after my parents in their old age only if they asked. | N-B | 25 | 25 | 62 | 43 | 50 | 75 | 50 | 43 | 34 | 40 | 40 | 32 | 0 | 47 | 100 | 46 | 6.42 | .05 | | |
| | B | 0 | 50 | 6 | 47 | 50 | 0 | 33 | 50 | 40 | 71 | 39 | 70 | 100 | 50 | 31 | | | | | |
| I would avoid drinking alcohol under any circumstances. | N-B | 75 | 50 | 38 | 28 | 10 | 50 | 34 | 12 | 14 | 40 | 20 | 0 | 61 | 67 | 22 | 8.50 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 67 | 67 | 60 | 27 | 10 | 0 | 25 | 20 | 40 | 78 | 60 | 100 | 0 | 40 | 40 | | | | | |
| I find listening to Sikh scriptures such as the Guru Granth Sahib inspiring. | N-B | 0 | 75 | 0 | 6 | 8 | 0 | 15 | 11 | 8 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 8 | 100 | 11 | 8.71 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 0 | 75 | 40 | 27 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 17 | 25 | 67 | 21 | 38 | 0 | 100 | 31 | | | | | |
| I like the Sikh idea of seeing God everywhere in the world. | N-B | 50 | 75 | 50 | 44 | 50 | 25 | 40 | 25 | 18 | 60 | 42 | 50 | 67 | 100 | 35 | 8.53 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 50 | 100 | 60 | 58 | 50 | 100 | 0 | 50 | 75 | 33 | 47 | 75 | 100 | 100 | 61 | | | | | |
| The Sikh festival of Diwali is very meaningful to me. | N-B | 0 | 100 | 12 | 0 | 21 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 25 | 8 | 50 | 8 | 100 | 9 | 11.20 | .01 | | | |
| | B | 0 | 100 | 50 | 9 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 25 | 50 | 8 | 62 | 0 | 100 | 31 | | | | | |
| I am fascinated to hear Sikh stories. | N-B | 40 | 80 | 27 | 13 | 5 | 0 | 17 | 15 | 11 | 17 | 18 | 25 | 13 | 100 | 17 | 7.58 | .05 | | | |
| | B | 0 | 75 | 33 | 44 | 0 | 100 | 0 | 10 | 20 | 40 | 28 | 40 | 20 | 100 | 33 | | | | | |
| Knowing the Sikh code of conduct helps me lead a better life. | N-B | 0 | 50 | 12 | 8 | 8 | 0 | 16 | 6 | 9 | 25 | 5 | 0 | 17 | 67 | 9 | 10.38 | .01 | | | |
| | B | 100 | 50 | 38 | 9 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 25 | 100 | 8 | 12 | - | 100 | 26 | | | | | |

Key: AB=Asian Bangladeshi AI=Asian Indian AA=Any other Asian BA=Black African BC=Black Caribbean C=Chinese M=Mixed Ethnicity W=White N=No Religion Bu=Buddhist Chr=Christian H=Hindu I=Muslim S=Sikh
 Significance of difference in means is between percentages for bowing and non-bowing respondents.

'Any other Asian' (i.e the non-Chinese of Southeast Asia and the Far East) and Black African membership groups and those ascribing themselves to Hindu or no religious tradition who contributed most strongly to the significance of the bowing statistics. It was the Black *Caribbean* and Asian Bangladeshi membership groups and those of Moslem religious tradition who contributed least to the significance of the bowing statistics (i.e. on a quarter or less of the questions). Thus, for example, to the hypothetical question, "for which groups of adolescents does bowing to parents positively correlate with enjoying to hear Buddhist and Sikh stories?" the answer would be "mainly 'Any other Asian', Black African, Buddhist, Christian and Hindu adolescents". It should be noted that the effect of bowing was still observed, albeit to a lesser extent, amongst White and non-religious adolescents – although as this study used exclusively quantitative methodology, the dataset does not elucidate the form of practice by the 10% of White and 7% of non-religious adolescents who bowed to their parents.

Discussion

It would appear that the UK is at least one western country, either where religious people are now bringing together the tradition of bowing to parents from spiritual traditions all over the world or possibly reviving bowing as a way to maintain religious membership group identity. It would be expected that incidence of bowing would be lower in rural areas such as Scotland or Wales as compared with the London sample described in this paper, since away from the inner cities the proportion of 'Any other Asian', Black African, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh respondents would be less. This study is the first attempt to quantify this practice. Results showed that bowing to parents is associated with religious significance on all three levels of description of Jackson's

Interpretive Approach. That bowing to parents has significance on the level of religious tradition is demonstrated by the statistic that the 7% of non-religious pupils were the only ones where no bowing was found and in Pakistani Muslims declining to bow for religious reasons in spite of the prevalence of the practice elsewhere on the Indian subcontinent. That bowing to parents has significance on the level of the membership group is demonstrated by the observation that Protestant Koreans bow in spite it generally being frowned upon in Judeo-Christian tradition and by the statistic that Black Africans have higher prevalence of bowing than Black Caribbeans although they share the same religion. That bowing to parents has significance on the level of individual faith is witnessed by the significantly more frequent use of the words ‘fascination’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘understanding’ – descriptors of individual features of religion – by adolescents who bowed to their parents.

From the point of view of cultural analysis, the results of this research would support the interpretation of bowing to parents as a *bone fide* aspect of a child’s religiosity rather than being merely a means of imposing a social hierarchy or obedience to parents. Returning to the question of whether bowing to parents cultural or a religious phenomenon, it may be that the division between the religious, cultural and ethnic spheres are more porous than is generally assumed and that foisting rigid boundaries on the religious sphere might lead to a limited understanding of religious life, especially for the Dharmic religions. In Buddhism at least, reference is sometimes made to ‘religious culture’ – a category of habits such as cleaning and tidiness, that might ostensibly seem mundane, but yet are claimed to facilitate spiritual progress (DOU_(Dhammakaya_Open_University) 2007). Recent research has even suggested that aspects of religion might preserve certain features of ethnic identity (Min & Min 2010).

Bowing to parents and the issues it raises tends never to be mentioned in the classroom context as evidenced by the positive correlation between bowing and reported dissonance between home and school portrayal of religion. For teachers to have knowledge of the childrens' practice of bowing specifically, and respect for parents in general, across different religious traditions and ethnic membership groups, is undoubtedly beneficial since 'awareness of shared values' is one characteristic of a teacher considered by the British Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as key in developing the spiritual, moral, social and cultural aptitudes of their pupils (QCA 1998, 23). To give a possible example of classroom presentation, bowing and not bowing in Judaic tradition is found in narratives such as 'Mordechai'⁶ and the 'Seven Sons of Hannah',⁷ which would make ideal educational inroads into Middle Eastern history or the socialization of respect in general. Pupils' own bowing to parents could be usefully drawn upon as a common value in classroom dialogue to illustrate for children the interpretation of religious behaviour on different levels of description, while affirming that for many adolescents, their respect for parents is more than merely 'bowing to tradition'.

Although there appears to be an association between certain spiritual attitudes and bowing to parents, that bowing helps nurture certain attitudes cannot be assumed solely on the basis of this research – further research would be needed to ascertain the whether a higher incidence of bowing gives rise to certain attitudes or vice versa. Furthermore, it may also be the case that the *individual* aspects of bowing to parents may appear only in the adolescent age-group and bowing might remain a mere accretion of religious tradition and membership group in the eyes of *pre*-adolescent children. It would be recommended that future research investigates more deeply the motivation for bowing

⁶ **Esther 3:2**

⁷ **Apocrypha II Maccabees 6:12-17**

to parents and what the children actually mean by 'bowing' in each tradition. Investigating bowing to parents over a wider age-range would clarify possible changes in the way in which the meaning of the practice changes for the children as they grow up. It would also be revealing to compare bowing incidence in the UK with that in indigenous settings – differences would tell us more about the role of this practice on the level of the membership group.

Further research could also be devised to employ bowing to parents as a measure or even a (membership-group specific) remedial practice to boost community cohesion from the family level. It would also be instructive to conduct qualitative research such as interviews or home observations with the families of the adolescents surveyed here. This would elucidate details of the motivation to bow and how these young people are compromising between possible parental pressure to conform to conservative religious norms and a mainstream UK culture which regards any sort of bowing to authority figures with suspicion.

Abstract

In a quantitative survey of religious attitudes and practices in a multi-religious sample of 369 school pupils aged between 13 and 15 in London, the practice of bowing to parents was found widespread in 22% of adolescents spanning several religious affiliations and ethnicities – especially Buddhists, Hindus and those of Indian, African and ‘Other Asian’ ethnicity. Whether an adolescent bowed correlated significantly with spiritual attitudes such as wanting to abstain from alcohol, hearing religious stories, being inspired by religious festivals and liking the idea of seeing God in everything. Findings suggest bowing to parents can have religious significance on all three levels of Jackson’s Interpretive Approach and therefore cannot be regarded as a ‘cultural accretion’ of religion. Study of bowing to parents could form a unifying exercise in shared values for study of religion in the plural classroom and facilitate community cohesion in certain religious membership groups.

Keywords

bowing, parents, acculturation, respect, socialization, filial piety

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