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Personal Worldviews, Dialogue and Tolerance – Students’ Views on Religious Education in England

1. Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene

In order to understand the context from which our sample was taken, some brief explanation of religious education (RE) and the educational system in England is necessary. When state education was introduced in England in 1870, state ‘board’ schools were provided to supplement education already provided voluntarily by Christian religious bodies. Thus there has always been a partnership of state and Church in English public education. In the 1944 Education Act, publicly funded schools were divided into fully state funded ‘county’ schools and mainly state funded ‘voluntary’ schools (the religious bodies paid a modest contribution towards buildings and maintenance in voluntary *aided* schools – schools aided by the state).¹ In 1944 voluntary aided schools were mainly Church of England and Roman Catholic, plus some others including Jewish schools. Leaving aside a description of a complex history since 1988, we can say that today what were called ‘county’ schools are now ‘community’ schools – schools with no religious affiliation and taking students from the local neighbourhood. The category of voluntary aided has been extended to include more religions – mainly Muslim, but with a few Sikh schools and one Hindu school, more Jewish schools, and other categories of Christian school.² RE in community schools is taught according to a local syllabus, written by a local conference consisting of 4 committees (Church of England, other denominations and religions, local politicians and teachers) which has to agree the syllabus content. This enables some adaptation to local religious demography. All such syllabuses must conform to the law (of 1988) which requires that all should include material from Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain. Various non-statutory documents and examination syllabuses have identified these ‘other religions’ as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. There is a withdrawal or ‘opt out’ clause so that parents can withdraw their children from RE if they wish to do so. RE in voluntary aided schools can be ‘denominational’, having nurturing aims. Whereas religious instruction was regarded as a form of nurture into a Christian way of life, RE in community schools post the 1988 legislation (and reflecting general practice since the mid 1970s) recognises that RE is concerned with developing pupils’ knowledge and understanding (‘learning about religion’ or a ‘non-confessional approach’, not aiming to nurture faith), and providing opportunities for young people to re-

1 There is a further category of voluntary controlled schools from the 1944 settlement. These are Church of England schools that pay nothing towards costs. They retain a Christian ethos, but their religious education is the same as for community schools.

2 One further category of school should be mentioned (since we have one in our sample), namely Academies. In March 2000, the Government announced its intention to develop Inner City Academies (later called ‘Academies’). Academies are ‘all-ability, state-funded schools established and managed by sponsors from a wide range of backgrounds, including high performing schools and colleges, universities, individual philanthropists, businesses, the voluntary sector, and the faith communities’, in: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/what_are_academies/?version=1 accessed 15 October 2008). Some of these are sponsored by Church related bodies.

flect on and discuss what they have learned ('learning from' religion). In 2004, a non-statutory national framework for the subject was published for use by agreed syllabus conferences (QCA, 2004). This document is being widely used and is the focus of a debate about whether RE should become centrally organised. In recent years, RE has been regarded officially as a subject that can contribute to citizenship education and to community cohesion.³

1.2 Description of sample

1.2.1 The schools

The sample for the English study was taken from a variety of school types mentioned above. In total 421 students (52% males and 47% females) attending years ten and eleven (14–16 year-olds) across sixteen secondary schools in England completed questions concerned with their experience of religion in school, their personal relationship with religion and, the role of religion in their relationships with others. The only school in the sample not following the locally agreed syllabus for RE was school 16 which used a Roman Catholic syllabus. Fourteen of the schools were co-educational and two schools (schools 5 and 6) were boys only. Likewise, fourteen of the schools were 'all ability' and two schools (schools 1 and 5) were grammar schools selecting students on the basis of their ability. Schools were drawn from a wide geographical area covering the North East and North West, South East and South West, Inner and Outer London, East Midlands, West Midlands and South Midlands.

1.2.2 Characteristics of the sample

Slightly over half (55%) of the students were 15 years of age, with more (28%) 14 than 16 (16%); slightly over half (52%) were male. Almost all (95%) were studying RE in the current year, and national legislation required them to have done so in all years since age 4. Almost all (91%) had been born in the UK and were British citizens (90%), with the remainder having been born, and holding citizenship, in a wide range of countries. This applied to an even greater extent to their mothers, of whom only 73% had been born in the UK, and to their fathers, for whom the corresponding figure was 68%. In all three cases, the largest foreign-born groups came from South Asia. A similar pattern applied to the main language/s spoken at home, which was English for 72% of students. A high proportion of students did not know their mother's (20%) and father's (33%) profession; of the remainder, European Socio-economic Classification (ESEC) category 3 was most common for mothers and categories 1, 2 and 8 for fathers. However, these categories do not match the British employment situation precisely. Only a minority of students knew what their father's religion / worldview was (41%); for mothers the figure was somewhat higher (48%), and the same figure applied to the students themselves, perhaps because they had a closer link to their mothers. For all three groups (fathers, mothers and children) a wide variety of religions / worldviews was quoted, but Islam was the commonest after the various varieties of Christianity. The following religious groups were mentioned by those students who claimed they did hold a religion / worldview: Christian (82), Muslim (49), Sikh (18), Hindu (15), Atheist (9), Agnostic (3), Jehovah's Witness (1), Jewish (1), Buddhist (1), Wiccan (1), Spiritualist (1), Deist (1), Pantheist (1). Only the first four groups were included in the comparison between adherents of different religions.

3 For more detailed accounts of the history of RE in England see Jackson and O'Grady, 2007 and Jackson, 2008. On the relationship between RE and citizenship education, see Jackson, 2003a.

1.2.3 Reflection on the sample

As the survey questionnaire was being administered in all eight countries within the REDCo Project, and because of limited resources, non-probability sampling methods, using purposive or judgmental sampling with certain criteria (gender, religious background, type of school, socio-economic background, RE model, urban and rural schools and migration background), were used. This sampling methodology was derived from the focus of the survey – to research the role that religion in education can play in the way students perceive religious diversity. The sample was constructed to reflect the diversity of young people in the 14–16 year old age group being educated within the state-maintained schools sector. Without information on the statistical population of 14–16 year olds in England we did not use ‘quota sampling’ that mirrored the English national situation. However, all of the above criteria were considered when selecting the schools to take part. The majority of secondary schools in England are co-educational, non-denominational community schools that by law have to provide non-confessional RE for all pupils throughout their schooling. England also, in certain parts of the country, has both co-educational and single sex selective grammar schools (with or without a religious foundation). There are also significant numbers of Church of England Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools and Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided schools, plus some Academies (see 1.1 for an explanation of these categories). The sample incorporated students from most of these school types and sampling was sensitive to the relative numbers to be found in each category. The aim was to reflect the diversity and heterogeneity of the national population.

1.3 Description of the general procedure

1.3.1 Data collection

Participating schools were asked to follow a standard procedure. The questionnaires were administered in normal class groups to one class of students in each school. Teachers were told they could select any mixed ability class from years nine, ten or eleven. It transpired that no year nine classes were chosen; however each age in the 14–16 age range was represented. When returning the questionnaires, teachers were asked to relay to the research team any general comments or information on any circumstances in their school that might have influenced students' answers. Two teachers provided such feedback.

*You will be interested to note that generally they found the exercise interesting and rewarding, and some useful conversation resulted. We are indeed a multi faith school of some 1600 students: nobody is withdrawn from RE and we even have a Jehovah's Witness electing first to do GCSE and now A level.*⁴ (school 3)

The pupils did them well, until the end – they objected to the personal details bit, and so some are less than accurate. (school 8)

The majority of students were receiving some form of RE in their current year of schooling. Students were given some background to the questionnaire, in particular its relationship to the wider European REDCo project and its aim of finding out the views of 14–16 year olds on the role religion plays or can play in Europe. Students were told they could ask for clarification if any question was unclear. Although students were given the choice not to participate, none decided not to take part in the survey. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

4 GCSE and A Level are national exams normally taken at age 16 and 18 respectively.

When answering the open question twenty students made reference to the nature and value of the questionnaire itself. Most students were positive in their feedback, and their comments are illustrated in the following responses:

This is a good questionnaire and it has given me more understanding about different religious views. I now know what I believe about religion even though I don't believe in god. (female, school 3)

Occasionally students objected to some of the information requested in the questionnaire:

There are some questions that my answers are not there and are kind of personal. (female, school 13)

Other comments were directed towards improving the questionnaire:

Questions 76 & 77 should have had an answer box that said you don't mind who you walk around with. (male, school 13)

Only two students protested that the questionnaire was a waste of their time or that they had not enjoyed completing it.

1.3.2 Data analysis

Percentages for each category are given in the text,⁵ as means could be misleading where responses fell into two separate groups. As explained in the footnote, chi-square was used to assess differences between groups; differences are marked according to normal practice, (*) to indicate 'significant' ($p < .05$), (**) to indicate 'highly significant' ($p < .01$) and (***) to indicate 'very highly significant' ($p < .001$). As there were a large number of questions, it was considered helpful to start by carrying out a factor analysis as this reduces them into a smaller number of factors, which represent questions that were answered in a similar way by the same students. The factor analysis is not presented here, but is used to structure the report, as it provided an overarching view of the underlying conceptual structure that guided students' responses. The second factor represented religious commitment and it is clear, especially for Muslim students, that the degree of religious commitment was the main influence on how students answered the questions.

5 Analysis was carried out using SPSS to produce descriptive statistics and cross tabulations. Where percentages are given these relate, unless otherwise stated, to students who answered the question; there was a small percentage (1–3%, varying between questions) of missing responses, and if these were included, some percentages would be slightly lower. Cross tabulations were analysed using chi-square as data from the Likert scales were ordinal and inspection showed that many distributions diverged from normality, for examples, the differences in religious observance, related to belief. Adjusted standardized residuals were calculated to identify the groups which were 'out of line', reflecting divergent attitudes or beliefs.

2. Presentation of results

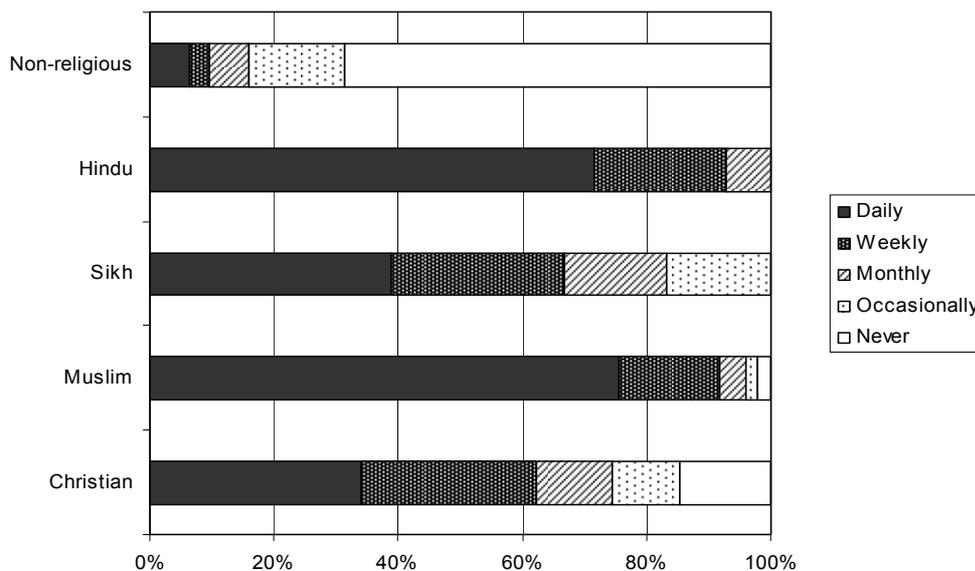
2.1 What role has religion in the students' lives and their environment?

2.1.1. Data description

Religious observance

If we look first at how often students carried out religious activities, the means give a somewhat misleading impression since the distribution varied between questions. For the two questions which got the most positive responses, about thinking about religion and about the meaning of life, there was a fairly flat distribution, with the mean reflecting the fact that many students thought about these issues daily (29% for thinking about religion and 21% for the meaning of life) or weekly (30% and 21% respectively). Muslim students⁶ were very highly significantly (***) more likely to think about religion daily than affiliates of other religions and, with Hindu students, significantly (*) more likely to think about the meaning of life on a daily basis. However, for praying and attending religious events, the distribution was strongly bimodal⁷ with about half the students never participating (44% never prayed and 52% never attended religious events), but those who did participate doing so on a daily (24% for praying, 5% for religious events) or weekly (11% and 17% respectively) basis. Muslim and Hindu students were very highly significantly (***) more likely to pray daily than adherents of other religions (Figure 1) and Muslim students were very highly significantly (***) more likely to attend religious events daily. 'Sacred texts' showed a similar bimodal pattern with 10% reading daily and 12% weekly but 61% never reading sacred texts, while internet use showed a unimodal pattern with few using the internet frequently (3% daily, 6% weekly) and most

Figure 1: How often do you pray? (Non-religious are those students who claim not have a religion/worldview)



6 Throughout students are categorised according to their answer to question 127 on the questionnaire which asked them to write down their religion or worldview.

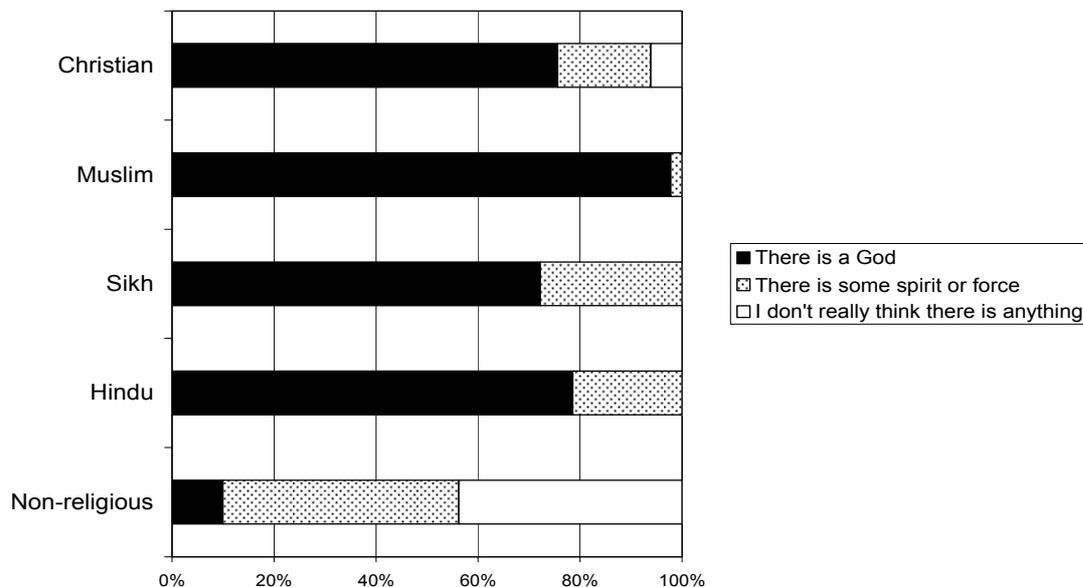
7 'Bimodal' implies a situation where most students fell into two separated groups, with few holding intermediate opinions, 'unimodal' where most students held similar opinions (which might be in the middle of the scale or at either end).

(59%) not using it at all. Muslim students were very highly significantly (***) more likely to read sacred texts daily than adherents of other religions and they were also very highly significantly (***) more likely to use the internet weekly or daily. However, students who identified with a religion/worldview participated in all these '*religiously committed*' activities highly significantly (***) more often than those who did not.

Importance of religion

When answering questions about religion in relation to themselves Muslim students gave the highest ratings (a mean of 3.79 on an 0-4 scale) but Hindu students (3.43) and Sikh students (2.95) also scored above the average (2.94) for all students who held a religion or worldview: Christian students scored below (2.79). For those who did not hold a religion or worldview, the mean was 1.11. Muslim students were also significantly (*) more likely to express belief in a God (98%: overall 39% held this view, whereas 34% thought there was some sort of spirit or life force and 27% thought there was none: 4% did not answer this question – Figure 2).

Figure 2: Which of these statements comes closest to your position?



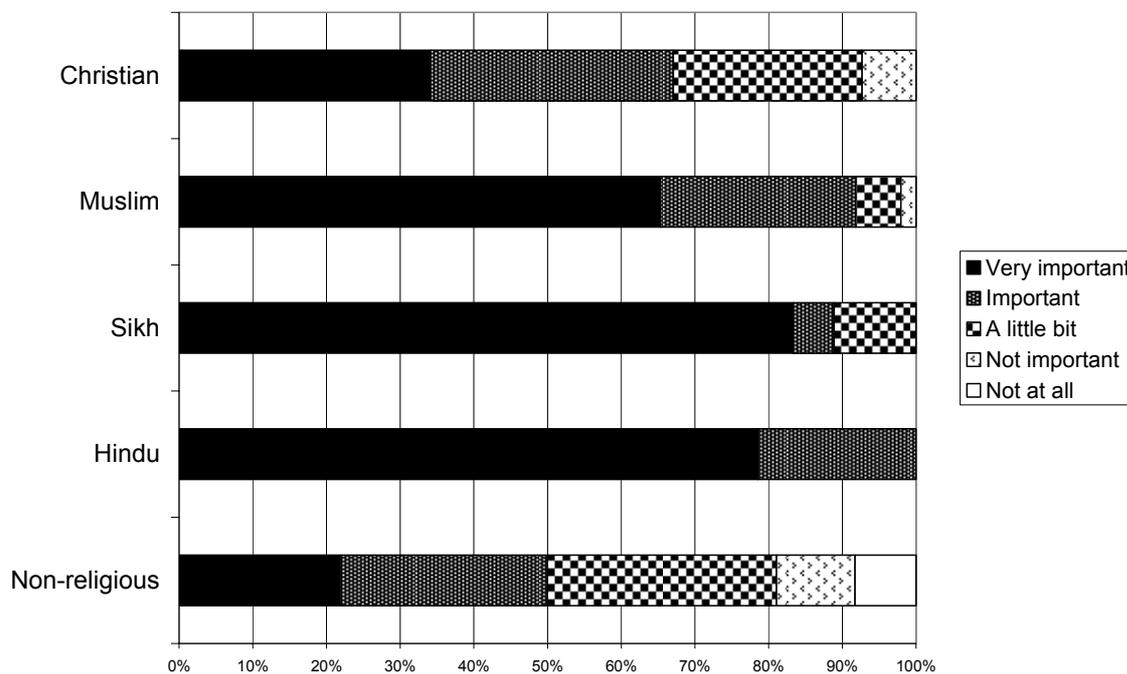
Muslim students very highly significantly (***) disagreed with both the statement expressing doubts about the existence of God (Hindus likewise disagreed with this position, but overall nearly half had doubts, with 17% strongly agreeing and 33% agreeing) and significantly (*) with the view that their beliefs might be open to change (overall more students strongly agreed [10%] or agreed [29%] that their beliefs might change than disagreed, with 33% uncertain as to whether they would or not). In terms of religious practice there was, as mentioned above, a divergence in practice across the sample.

When explaining their personal position with regard to religion (Questions 52-61) Muslim students were more inclined to agree strongly with some statements supporting the personal and cultural importance of religion: significantly (*) more for 'Religion helps me to be a better person' (overall 18% strongly agreed), and very highly significantly (***) more for 'Religion is important to me because I love God' (overall 21% strongly agreed). Overall only a minority (10%) felt 'Religion determines my whole life' but Muslim students were very highly significantly (***) more likely to do so (47% strongly agreed).

Sources of knowledge about religion

Muslim, Sikh and Hindu students saw family (Figure 3) as a very highly significantly (***) and friends as a highly significantly (**) important source of information about different religions, compared to the other religions. Overall, family was the more important; 35% of students thought family very important, as opposed to 16% respectively for friends. The school and faith community were also major sources of information, with 23% considering both very important, but there was no significant difference between religions for their perceived value. Muslim students also highly or very highly significantly saw books (***), media (***) and the internet (**) as very important sources of information. Overall 'very important' scores were 18% for books, 11% for the media, and 16% for the internet.

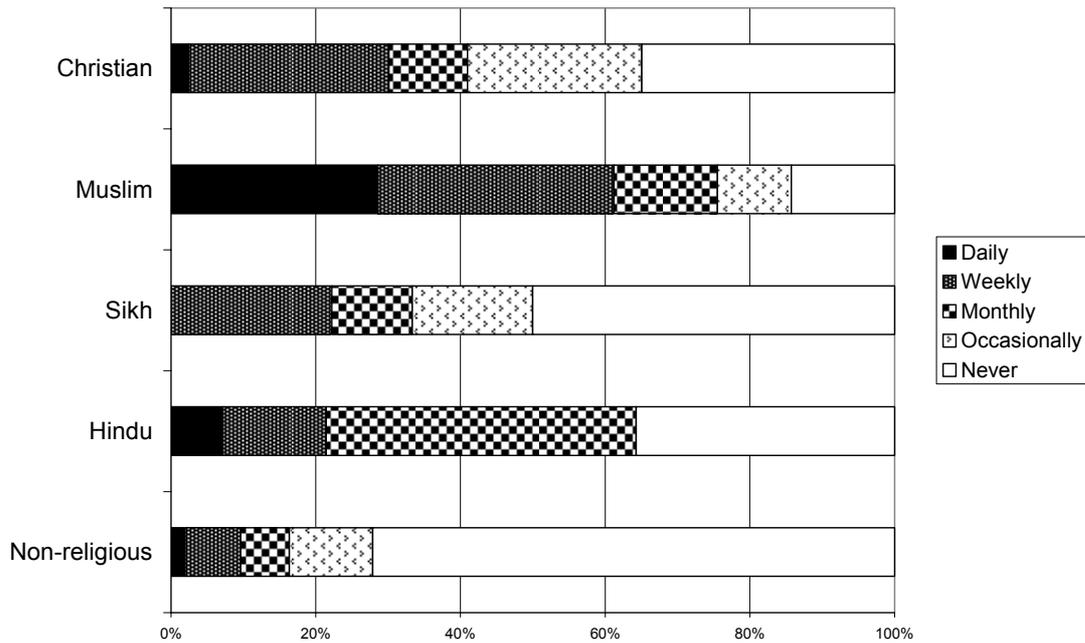
Figure 3: How important are family as a source of information?



Talking about religion

In the final section of the questionnaire students were asked questions on the role religions play in different relationships and contexts. Muslim students were very highly significantly more likely to speak with family (***), friends (***) and religious leaders (***) (Figure 4) than students from other religions. Overall, 12% of students spoke to family members every day about religion; 22% did so weekly but 29% never did so: corresponding figures for friends were 9%, 21% and 32% and for religious leaders 5%, 15% and 56%. There were no significant differences between the students of different faiths or none with regard to speaking with classmates, other students in school or teachers. Here the 'daily', 'weekly' and 'never' figures were 5%, 35% and 24% for classmates (probably reflecting weekly RE lessons), 4%, 14% and 45% for other students in school and 2%, 45% and 26% for teachers (again reflecting weekly RE lessons). Muslim and Hindu students were significantly (*) more likely, at school, to go around with other young people from different religious backgrounds (overall, 57% did, 24% did not, and 19% did not know their companions' religion).

Figure 4: How often do you speak with religious leaders about religion?

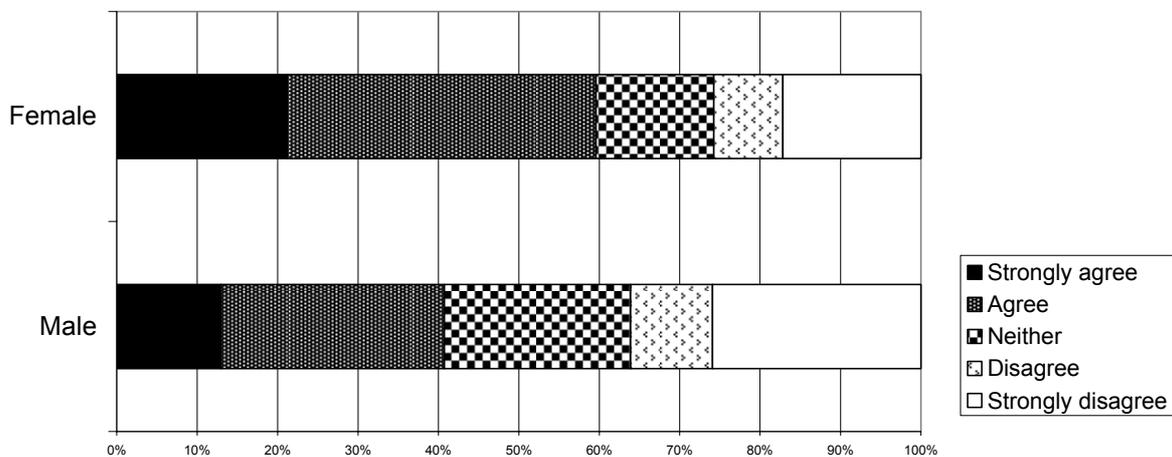


Gender

There was no significant difference between male and female students with regard to how important religion was to them, or whether they believed in God or a life force, or in most forms of religious involvement; but boys were significantly (*) more likely to pray on a weekly basis and were significantly (*) more divergent in how often they thought about religion than girls; boys were more likely to think about religion daily or not at all, girls to think about it on a weekly or monthly basis.

Boys also showed significantly (*) more divergent opinions than girls on whether religion helped them to be better people; boys were more likely to strongly agree and strongly disagree, girls to agree. Girls were highly significantly (**) more likely to doubt whether there was a God or not (Figure 5), and significantly more likely (*) to consider their feelings about religion were liable to change.

Figure 5: Sometimes I doubt whether there is a God or not

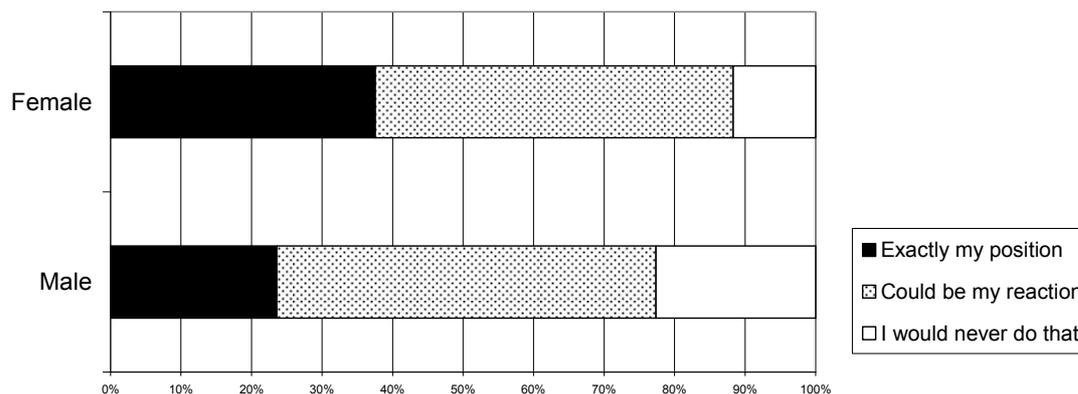


For most sources of information there were no gender differences, except for the faith community as a source, where differences were confined to those who had found it not very important. There were also no significant gender differences for most of the questions about how often students spoke to others about religion, with the exception that girls spoke to other students in school highly significantly (***) more frequently than boys.

Girls were also more likely to go round in school with others of the same religion, whereas boys were significantly (*) more likely to go round with peers of different religions, but there were no other significant gender differences for association with friends or relatives of the same or different religions.

Girls were also significantly (*) more likely to want to know what their best friend felt about religion, but students showed no other significant gender differences about expressing religious identity at school. Boys were significantly (*) more likely to feel that religion was something one inherited from one's family. Where a peer held a different religious view, boys were highly significantly (**) more likely to ignore the other, attempt to convince, or explain that their own opinions were the best, whereas girls were highly significantly (**) more likely to discuss with the other (Figure 6).

Figure 6: I would try to discuss differing religious opinions with the other



Synopsis of data – role of religion in students' lives

Family and school were easily the most important sources of information about religion. RE in schools and media coverage of current affairs where there is a religious element provide a degree of commonality in the students' experience of religion, at the same time the diverse backgrounds and upbringings of the students means there is an inequality of experience of religion at a personal and communal level. The most interesting aspects of the data were the bimodal nature of many responses, with a marked dichotomy between those who participated actively in religious practice (participation in religious events, prayer and reading the scriptures) and those who did not, with the degree of participation differing between religions, and the gender differences, with boys tending to be more militant in their attitudes and girls stressing understanding and conformity. Muslim students of South Asian origin and African Christians were more likely to have strong theistic views. Students with commitment to a religion/worldview were more positive towards learning about different religions and were more tolerant in their outlook. The students' current position in relation to religious commitment and belief was strongly influenced by factors relating to their current stage of life and its contingent pressures including school examinations, relationships, youth culture and street culture.

2.1.2 Data interpretation

The fact that Muslim and Hindu students were more likely, at school, to associate with other young people from different religious backgrounds is probably due to Muslim and Sikh students being most likely to have students in their class who belonged to different religions. Again, when asked what would help people from different religions to live together in peace, the only statement that gave rise to differences between those students holding a religion or worldview was ‘if they personally know people from different religions’. Differences between girls and boys in the degree to which they associate with people of different religions or speak with friends about religion might reflect their different patterns of socialisation – whether, for example, they spent their break times playing football in larger groups or chatting with a few friends. However, there were no questions in the survey to elicit this kind of information. Differences in religious practice, for example the frequency of prayer, were likely to be influenced by the specific expectations of different religions.

2.2 How students view religion in schools?

2.2.1 Data description

In the first group of questions, the most highly supported responses relate to elements which, when grouped together, correspond to principles and practices that characterise the dominant English inclusive model of approaching religion in school. This includes characteristics such as learning to have respect for everyone, whatever their religion (49% agreed strongly, and 42% agreed), understanding (18% / 52%) and getting knowledge about (34% / 57%) different religions, understanding others and living peacefully with them (20% / 51%), but also developing one’s own point of view (30% / 45%) and developing moral values (20% / 46%). Interestingly, there were no significant differences between adherents of different religions on these issues.

The more negative responses had low positive response rates, questions such as there not being a place for religion in school life (40% disagreed strongly and 32% disagreed) and there being no need for the subject of RE (25% disagreed strongly, 35% disagreed). Again there was no difference between adherents of different religions for these questions.

As mentioned above, the feature of this group of questions was that, for almost all the questions, those who professed to having a religion/worldview were highly significantly (**) more positive in their ratings than those who did not. Where a question received a positive response from most students, such as ‘At school I have opportunities to discuss religious matters from different perspectives’ (overall, 30% agreed strongly) those with a religion /-worldview were highly significantly (**) more likely to agree strongly with the proposition, and those without, to agree or neither agree nor disagree. Where a question received a lower rating, such as ‘Learning about religions at school helps me make choices between right and wrong’ (35% strongly agreed or agreed, 34% neither agreed nor disagreed and 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed), those with a religion / worldview were very highly significantly (***) more likely to strongly agree or agree. This pattern of very highly significantly (***) stronger support by those who had a religion or worldview applies also to the statement ‘Learning about religions at school helps me to learn about myself’ where a majority of students overall disagreed strongly (16%), disagreed (25%), or neither agreed nor disagreed (29%). Where a question is negative in respect of the English inclusive approach, such as ‘Pupils should study religious education separately in groups according to which religion they belong’ (* – overall

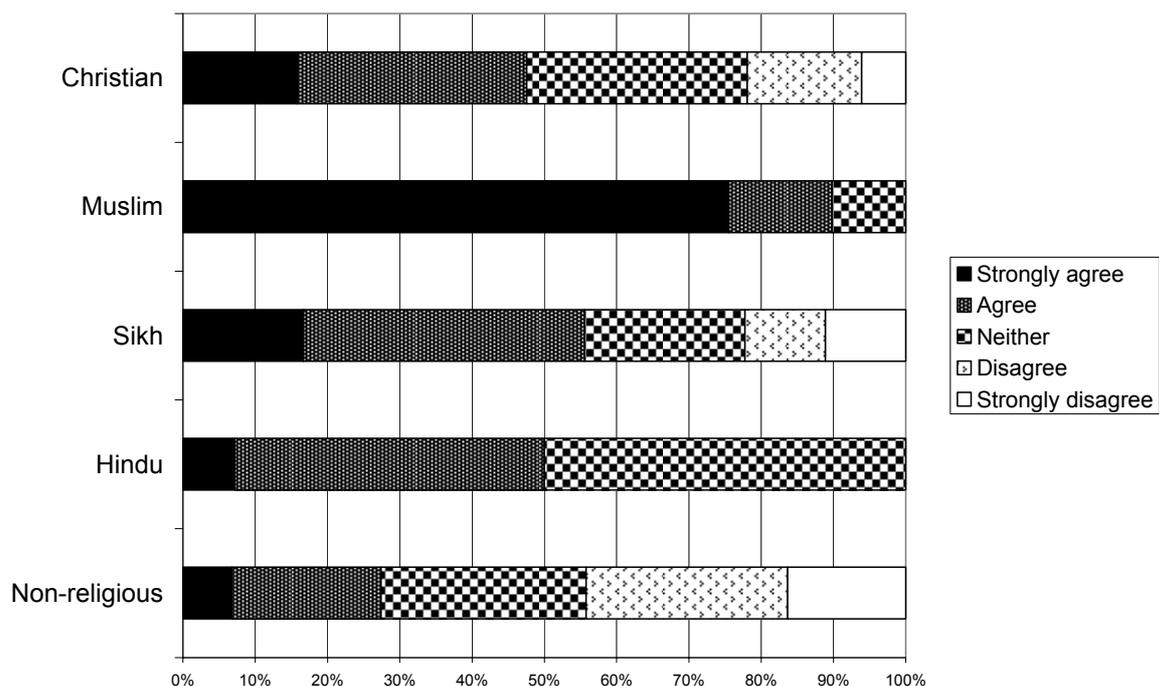
35% strongly disagreed and 34% disagreed) and 'There should be no place for religion in school life' (***) – overall 41% strongly disagreed and 32% disagreed) the pattern is reversed, with those with a religion / worldview disagreeing significantly or very highly significantly more strongly than those without.

A large majority of the students, with or without a religion / worldview, favour integrated RE. Similarly, a minority of both groups agreed with the proposition that 'Religious education should be taught sometimes together and sometimes in groups according to which religions students belong to' with no significant difference between them (overall figures were 19% agreeing or strongly agreeing, as opposed to 48% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing).

Overall this pattern applied to almost all questions in this group, and indicates that students with a religion/worldview were committed to inclusive RE; they did not display intolerance towards other religions. The exceptions to the general pattern that this group was more committed to an inclusive approach to religion in schools were that there was no significant difference between the two groups for the statements 'At school I get knowledge about different religions' and 'At school I learn to have respect for everyone, whatever their religion'.

We may also consider differences between religions / worldviews in attitudes to religion in school. When answering questions on the role of religion in school, Muslim students were highly or very highly significantly more likely to agree strongly with those statements which suggested that the outward expressions of faith groups should be accommodated within school. These included the wearing of more visible religious symbols (** – the headscarf was mentioned in the questionnaire: overall 31% of students strongly agreed that such symbols should be allowed), absence for religious festivals (***) – overall, 32% strongly agreed), being excused from some lessons for religious reasons (***) – overall 15% strongly agreed), the provision of prayer facilities (***) – overall 17% strongly agreed but in the UK prayer rooms are increasingly installed in educational establishments such as universities – Figure 7) and voluntary religious services being part of school life (** – overall 12% strongly agreed).

Figure 7: Schools should provide facilities for pupils to pray in school



Christian students were mildly in agreement with these statements. Hindu students were significantly (*) more likely to agree that at school students should be able to talk and communicate about religious issues (consistent with majority opinion – overall 24% strong agreement, 50% agreement).

As mentioned in the introduction, most schools in England are non-denominational, community schools, which by law have to provide non-confessional RE for all pupils. As denominational schools in the study, are in the minority it was decided not to divide the schools up by religious background, and a cross tabulation was carried out to compare the schools individually, since, as mentioned in the introduction, the schools varied very markedly in their social and ethnic composition.

School 14 (a rural/monocultural community school) was significantly different from the others, with more students reporting they had not participated in RE this year and fewer reporting classmates of different religions. Correspondingly, students at school 14 had more negative scores for the questions related to inclusive approaches, whereas those at other schools, such as schools 9 and 13 (both inner-city / multicultural schools) had more positive scores. Students at school 14 were significantly less likely to talk to teachers about religion or to socialise with peers with different religious backgrounds after school, compared to students from schools 9 and 13. Together with students at school 16 (the Catholic school, mentioned below) they were significantly more likely to listen to, but not be influenced by, a student from a different religious faith.

There was a different pattern for some categories, but given that all the schools except one (school 16) were following the same model of RE, no overarching significance can be attached to these differences. School 16, a Roman Catholic school, showed few significant differences from the other schools, including on such categories as ‘how important is religion to you?’ Students at this school were significantly more likely to consider ‘There is some sort of spirit or life force’ whereas a large majority of those at schools 13 (a school with many African Christian students) and 2 (a school with mainly Muslim students) considered ‘There is a God’ and were more likely to conform to religious practices, for example to read sacred texts and pray every day. However, students at this Roman Catholic school were significantly less likely to have friends who did not belong to their own religion or whose religion they did not know, and to feel that talking about religion was embarrassing. They were also neutral in their feelings about people from other religions.

Students at schools 2 (with mainly Muslim students) and 13 (with many African Christian students) were also significantly more likely to think about religion every day, to feel religion was important to them because they loved God, to consider religion determined their whole life, and that it made them a better person and to reject the suggestion that religion was nonsense. They also considered religion an important aspect of history and were less likely to doubt whether there was a God. However they considered that talking about religion was interesting because people had different views and felt that talking about religion helped them understand others. Students at school 9 (an inner city school with half its students from ethnic minorities) were less likely to consider religion a source of aggressiveness or that talking about it led to disagreement, and rejected talk of the stupidity of religion or that religion did not interest them at all. They also felt that talking about religion helped them to live peacefully together with people from different religions. They were also less likely to say that they did not know much about religion and therefore could not have an opinion, and to consider that talking about religious topics was boring. Conversely, they felt that talking about religion helped them to understand better what was going on in the world, and were more likely to

discuss opinions with a student of a different religious faith, rather than taking a more confrontational view. They also felt that knowing people from different religions personally, or doing something together with them, would help understanding and the ability to live together. However they rejected the idea that confining one's own religion to private life would help those from different religions to live together.

Those at schools 9 (an inner city school with half its students from ethnic minorities) and 13 (a school with many African Christian students) were significantly more likely to take the view that talking about religion helped to shape their own views and felt that respecting the views of others helped to cope with differences. Students at school 13 were significantly more likely to reject the proposition that it did not matter what their friends thought about religion. They also felt knowing about each other's religions would help people from different religions live together, an opinion they shared with the rural school 14 and the Catholic school 16.

Synopsis of data – religion in schools

Students responded to questions of the place of religion in schools, the religion of the teacher and the organisation of teaching (whether in single faith or mixed faith groups) in terms of democracy and citizenship, religious freedom and tolerance. The most striking aspects were the commitment of most students, especially those with a religion / worldview, to an inclusive approach to RE, and that differences between students related primarily to their own belief patterns. Differences between schools reflected the views of their constituent students, since almost all schools followed a similar RE approach. The majority of students were in favour of including religion in school life, holding the view that students should be able to talk and communicate about religious issues, that expressions of faith should be accommodated within school and agreeing with the need for the subject of RE. Students commonly perceived the content of such RE as multi faith and generally favoured RE taught in mixed faith classes; Muslims, Christians and non-religious alike, had assimilated the multi faith and inter faith ethic promoted by the English model of RE. Students who themselves had belief gave stronger support to the idea of an inclusive, integrated RE.

2.2.2 Data interpretation

The preference for an inclusive approach to religion in school is derived from the factor analysis of students' responses and is therefore grounded in students' views rather than being imposed by the researchers, since it draws on answers across different sections of the questionnaire. The analysis indicates that students were perceiving patterns in the questions themselves, rather than following the agenda of the questionnaire. This pattern of response also indicates that students had absorbed the approach which has been widely adopted in English state school RE since the 1970s (Copley, 1997; Jackson, 2007; Jackson & O'Grady, 2007). In this, RE is seen to encompass both 'learning about' religions and 'learning from' religions, including the opportunity for personal reflection as well as some engagement with the impact of religion upon social issues, such as aiming to improve community relations through increased knowledge and understanding. RE is seen to be concerned with the development of understanding of religious traditions, with the development of personal views of participants, and at a social level with what today we might call the promotion of tolerance and social or community cohesion (Jackson, 2005/2006a; Ofsted, 2007; OSCE, 2007). Engagement with

the religions, or with particular examples from them, opens up the possibility of learning from them (Grimmitt, 1987) or being edified by them (Jackson, 1997/2004). RE is seen both in terms of gaining knowledge and understanding of different religions, and in developing personally and socially as a result of engaging with that knowledge. What was striking was that students with a religion / worldview were more receptive to this approach, indicating that they were more receptive to teaching about religion (as opposed to teaching of religion) than those without any formulated worldview.

This inclusive religious education attitude also has high loadings for responses which indicate that RE can help deal with the problems in society through better understanding of others and other religions. A majority of students agreed with the statement that at school students should 'learn the importance of religion for dealing with problems in society'. In doing so they support the view proposed in a recent Ofsted report, *Making Sense of Religion*, which argued that the subject should be more overtly concerned with issues of social cohesion and suggested that, as part of the RE curriculum, students should learn more about the complexities of religion and its role in the modern world (Ofsted, 2007). These students also felt RE would help them communicate better with others and better understand current events. They found RE interesting, and felt it helped them to understand themselves better, develop their own views and make moral choices better. They rejected the propositions that there was no place for religion in school life or that RE should be optional, and felt school was an important source of knowledge about both other religions and to help them learn about their own. They felt respect for those who practised other religions and felt that voluntary religious services could be part of school life, that school meals should take into account religious food requirements, that pupils should be able to wear religious symbols at school, including more visible as well as discreet symbols, and that students could be absent from school at the time of their religious festivals. These students valued personal contact with pupils from other religions and doing things together, and felt what they thought about religions was open to change. In other words, this inclusive attitude sought to understand and tolerate, or even respect, a range of religious views, with the aim of increased social cohesion and harmony. It did so from a perspective where religion was seen as personally valuable, in that students felt religion helped them to be a better person and to cope with difficulties, and these, and the responses related to religious practice mentioned above, showed an overlap between this approach and the religiously committed approach mentioned in the previous section. Those with an inclusive attitude were sympathetic to religion in a diversity of forms and the needs of the religious, while those with religious commitment were not opposed to other religions - but they were opposed to anti-religious views, which their peers were agnostic about.

The other striking aspect of the analysis was that students' attitudes related to their own individual beliefs, rather than their school's approach; this reflects the situation in England, where most schools take an inclusive approach, including those which have a religious character.

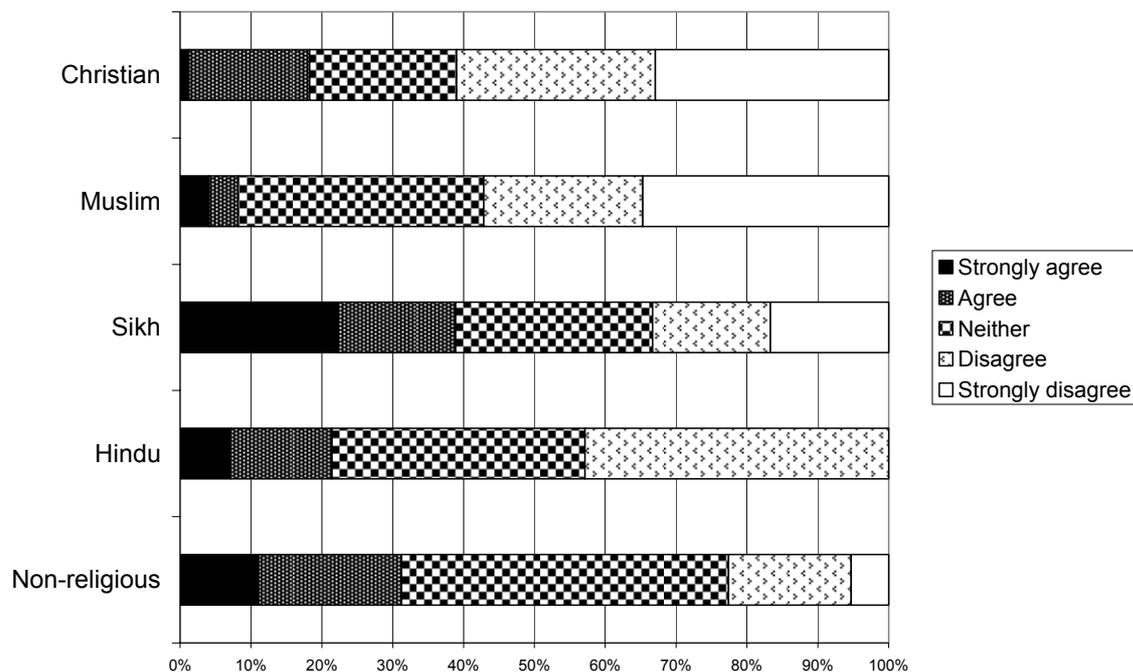
2.3 How students view the impact of religion?

2.3.1 Presentation of findings

The group of questions (103-106) on the effect of differences again stressed tolerance, with students agreeing that respect for others' religions helped them to cope with differences, while disagreement on religious issues led to conflict. Students disagreed with the two questions which suggested an intolerant response (105 and 106). Those with a religion / worldview were

significantly more likely to agree that 'Respecting the religion of others helps to cope with differences' (overall 21% strongly agreed with this statement and 44% agreed) and to disagree with 'I don't like people from other religions and do not want to live together with them' (overall 51% strongly disagreed and 26% disagreed). There was no significant difference between those with and without a religion / worldview for the other two questions, although those with a religion / worldview were more ready to reject the suggestion that 'People with strong religious views cannot live together' (overall 24% strongly disagreed and 25% disagreed, as opposed to 21% who agreed or strongly agreed).

Figure 8: Religion belongs to private life



Common interests and understanding were again stressed in the final group of questions, with personal knowledge and joint involvement also seen as important by most students (combining 'very important' and 'important' gave scores of 86% for 'If people share common interests', 85% for 'If they know about each others' religions', 79% for 'If they personally know people from different religions' and 77% for 'If they do something together'). Students with a religion/worldview considered these approaches significantly more important than those without. Strong laws about religion and keeping religion private were rejected by most students, especially those with a religion/worldview in the case of strong laws (overall, 36% thought they were not important and 27% had no view), but there was no difference for keeping religion private (47% thought this was not important and 21% had no view).

A number of questions contained statements linking religion with negative associations, for instance, 'Religion is a source of aggressiveness' (only 4% strongly agreed and 30% strongly disagreed) and 'I and my friends talk about how stupid religion is and what cruelties are carried out in its name' (4% strongly agreed and 36% strongly disagreed).

Muslim students were more likely to strongly disagree with some of these negative statements than other religions; Christian students mildly disagreed. Muslim students were significantly (*) more likely to strongly disagree with views that 'Religious people were less tolerant towards others' (overall 42% were undecided and 15% disagreed strongly; only 5% agreed strongly) and highly significantly (**) more likely to disagree that 'Religion should belong to

private life' (Figure 8 – overall 37% were undecided, and 14% disagreed strongly; 10% agreed strongly). Sikh students were significantly (* and ** respectively) more likely to agree strongly with these views. Muslim and Sikh students were significantly (*) more likely to agree with the more positive view that talking about religion helps them to live peacefully with others from different religions (overall 11% agreed strongly, but 34% had no view) and Muslim students were significantly (*) more likely to strongly agree that talking helps them to understand what is going on in the world (overall, 16% agreed strongly and 27% were non-committal).

When asked what would help people from different religions live together in peace the only statement that gave rise to differences between the religious students was 'If they personally know people from different religions'. Muslim students were significantly (*) more likely to feel this was very important, and Christian students to feel that it was not important: overall 33% thought knowing people from other religions was very important, 46% thought it was quite important and 16% that it was not important.

Synopsis of data – impact of religion

The main finding here, consistent with the issues discussed in previous sections, is that those with a religion / worldview were more tolerant towards different religions and worldviews than those without and were prepared to see common experience as a basis for understanding. The ideal of a harmonious multi faith community was very evident in the students' responses overall, though some doubt the possibility of achieving this ideal perceiving there to be conflict potential in religion. The value of inter faith dialogue was generally recognised by students from the different educational contexts. However, there were marked differences between students with different worldviews; contrary to what is often implied by some sections of the British media, Muslim students in this sample were both more committed to the value of religions and to the contribution of those with religious views and to co-existence between those of different religions. The RE lesson was the most likely place for students to engage in discussion between different religious viewpoints. The subject was seen by students as providing a safe forum for dialogue about religious and existential issues. Outside the RE lesson pupils were most likely to discuss religion with those from similar religious backgrounds to themselves. Boys were more likely to associate with friends of different religions and girls to know what their friends think about religion. The discussion of religious issues and personal belief was problematic for the indigenous white students in more rural areas in particular where they faced a climate of youth apathy and negativity towards religion. Religion was more often a topic of conversation in urban areas and among South Asian Muslims and black Christians.

2.3.2 Data interpretation

The results in this section reflect the values propagated in the inclusive approach to RE, discussed in a previous section, where those who had a belief or worldview themselves were more oriented to inter-faith encounters. In other words, those with a religion or worldview saw interpersonal encounters as the most productive way of ensuring harmony and of course school offers an arena for this. It is notable that Muslim students, despite their popular reputation to the contrary, were those most supportive of personal interfaith encounter; for some questions Sikh students were more sceptical.

3. Comparison with the results of the qualitative survey

Sample comparison

The quantitative questionnaire was designed and used in such a way that the links are very strong between it and the earlier qualitative REDCo study of young people's perspectives on religion in society and school (Knauth et al., 2008; Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008). The statements used in the quantitative questionnaire were taken from findings of the REDCo qualitative study including the English study. The interest in assessing the students' attitudes in relation to qualities of tolerance and open-mindedness reflects the use of such concepts and terminology by the young people themselves in the earlier study and the same themes are revisited (e.g. the accommodation of religious requirements in school, whether or not RE should be taught in separate groups and the degree to which religion is discussed with peers).

The qualitative study included four schools as opposed to the 16 schools which participated in the quantitative study, but these four schools, in location (rural, suburban and inner city) and student population in terms of migration and religious background reflected, within the limitations of the smaller sample, the range of student experience aimed for in the quantitative sample. The two surveys were thus devised so that they could inform each other's analysis, and provide checks, confirmation or extension of each other's findings.

Religion in students' lives

In some cases comparison was straightforward giving the same answers for the larger sample that the smaller sample had offered. Both surveys demonstrated clearly, for example, that family and school were easily the most important sources of information about religions (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008, p.123). For the analysis and interpretation of the data in both cases, the distinction between those students with belief commitment and those without was found to be useful, often more useful than a distinction between students affiliated to different religions (e.g. Christianity or Islam). Similarities between the outlook of the Muslim students with a South Asian family origin and African Christian students were noted in both studies. The qualitative report recognises the sizeable groups of these students who have been brought up in a religious tradition in their homes, places of worship and instruction, how most have adopted their family and community faith as their own and allowed it to influence their perspectives and practice (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008, p.125). In the present study it is noted that the Muslim and African Christian students are more likely than their peers to have strong theistic views ('There is a God') and conform to the religious practices of their traditions. The qualitative study suggested an 'inequality' in experience of religion among students according to whether or not they had a background of religious nurture and practice or whether within their school and local context they had opportunities to meet regularly with people of different religions. This inequality or divergence of experience is presented plainly through quantitative methods and the strongly bimodal distribution for students' participation in religious events and prayer and engagement with religious text. In the discourse of the students taking part in the qualitative study, a distinction emerged between 'believer' and 'unbeliever'; it was used by some of the young people themselves as a tool for interpreting certain attitudes and behaviours of their peers (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008, p.136) and for understanding examples they cited of the lack of mutual comprehension between those who hold theist or atheist positions. The distinction between those with a religion/worldview and those without has also proved pertinent to the analysis of the quantitative survey which has provided more data on the simi-

larities and differences of the viewpoints held by these two categories. The stronger agreement of those with a religion with '*religiously committed*' categories in the quantitative questionnaire was to be expected, but some of the most interesting findings have been the greater degree of agreement with tolerance towards those of other beliefs demonstrated by this group, and the stronger support among them for an inclusive and integrated RE with students taught together whatever their religious background.

Religion in school

Responses from School 14 in the quantitative study confirmed what students from School B in the qualitative study had indicated, that students without religious belief themselves were less likely to know about the religion of their peers (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008, p. 135). In other areas touched upon there were differences in the kind of information the different approaches were able to uncover. In relation to gender, for example, a few of the girls indicated in an interview that there was a difference in the way girls and boys responded to RE and in their readiness to talk about the 'deeper' themes of religion (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008, p. 128) but there was insufficient evidence in the rest of the data to draw any conclusions that differentiated between boys' and girls' perspectives. This contrasts with the data produced by the present study which was more definite in finding that the girls gave 'significantly more positive responses' to questions indicating greater understanding of and respect for other religions, and were 'highly significantly more likely' to discuss religion with others, while boys were 'highly significantly' more likely to either ignore the different religious viewpoint of the other or argue that their own view is the right one. In the quantitative data boys were significantly more likely to associate with friends of different religions and girls to know what their best friend thought about religion. This may reflect the different socializing patterns between the boys and girls of this age. There were no significant differences in background variables and whether or not the boys or girls had a religion.

Religion in society

The sensitivity of religion as a topic of conversation gained greater prominence as an issue with qualitative methods. While students in the quantitative survey largely disagreed that religion was embarrassing to talk about or that religion was a source of aggressiveness, students in the qualitative study shared, both in questionnaire answers, and at more length and detail in interviews, their concerns about appearing 'uncool' and being teased if they discussed religious questions out of the RE class, and a sense of a real danger that conflict could arise between different groups at school should religious questions be raised outside lesson time. This may be because the more open format of the qualitative questionnaire and interview enabled students to share and interpret particular instances of tension or discomfort in their school lives (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008, p. 135, p. 144f.).

Though degrees of support might vary among the students as a whole, whether or not they had a religion/worldview, there were few voices that signalled disagreement with an inclusive and integrated approach to RE. In this, the evidence that the quantitative survey supplies of young people's attitudes towards RE conforms very closely to the findings of the qualitative study. The students in both studies largely answered in favour of a multi faith RE taught with all students together. This preference shows that students, in the 'safe space' of the RE classroom at least, are open to engagement with religious difference and with people of different religions. In the context of English education, the quantitative survey confirms the conclusions of the qualitative report that the students' views about RE were largely conventional and

that for the most part 'Muslims, Christians and non-religious alike had assimilated the multi faith and inter faith ethic promoted by the English model of education and accepted the principle that familiarity with the other generates acceptance and respect' (Ipgrave & McKenna 2008, p. 141).

4. Conclusions

We may consider how the English students responded in relation to the following research hypotheses:

- 1.a) Religious students are less tolerant than non-religious students.
- 1.b) Religious students are less open to dialogue on religious issues than non-religious students.

As mentioned above, and further discussed below, these propositions did not apply to the English students. As evidenced in the factor analysis and in the bivariate results, students who answered positively to the belief questions also tended to answer positively to the inclusive learning questions. Intolerant students tended to be those who did not claim a religion/worldview. This finding is of interest to RE, suggesting that encouraging the affirmation of the faith or worldview of students and providing students with opportunities to explore their own beliefs may be a contributor to the development of positive relations with those of other faiths, at least in the English system. The finding also implies that there is still work to be done to encourage respect for believing positions among those who do not themselves believe. An openness to hearing the views of others and expressing personal views is consistent with an approach to RE that encourages 'learning from' as well as 'learning about' religion(s), an approach which is well established in English RE.

- 2.a) Students who have encountered religious diversity in education are more tolerant
- 2.b) Students who have encountered religious diversity in education are more open to dialogue on religious issues.
- 3.a) Students who have personally encountered religious diversity are more tolerant.
- 3.b) Students who have personally encountered religious diversity are more open to dialogue on religious issues.

For both 2 and 3, there is relatively limited evidence given that, as discussed above, the RE curriculum followed in most schools stresses religious diversity, and relatively few children in the whole population, and none in this study, learn at schools which have a strong and restrictive ethos. In this respect English schools differ from those in some other countries, (such as Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom) where substantial numbers of schools have a strong religious affiliation. Most students were in urban schools where there are usually representatives of a variety of ethnic groups. As discussed above, the attitude of students in the 'mono-cultural', rural school does give some support to these four propositions, as these students did appear less open-minded. They contrast with the students in the two multicultural schools (schools 2 and 13). It is also notable that students in the Roman Catholic school, the only one with a specific religious affiliation, shared the attitudes of their peers in the other schools.

In the responses to the questionnaire there was a majority voice and general consensus in favour of the inclusive approach to RE most commonly practised in English schools, with positive messages about the importance of learning together and learning from each other in multi faith RE lessons. Possible reasons for this are:

- Religious education in English schools is doing a good job in communicating the rationale behind this type of RE and in conveying these positive messages and attitudes.
- Students tend to be conventional; they find it hard to conceptualise any different model of RE from the one with which they are most familiar (this is also implied by the pan European findings of the qualitative study where students tended to be in favour of the model they were familiar with, even though these models were very different from each other (see Knauth et al., 2008).
- Religious education reflects the inclusive discourse prominent in society in general and students have picked up the same discourse of tolerance, respect, inclusiveness and listening to others from society (the fact that there is no significant difference between the views of the students who experience Roman Catholic confessional RE and the rest of the sample supports this view).

It is most likely that a combination of these factors influences students. The above three reasons were reflected in responses from students in all schools, with the exception of the Roman Catholic school. The fact that there were variations of degree in students' views points to the influence of other factors, one of which was religious commitment.

As already mentioned, one of the most interesting findings was the greater degree of tolerance towards those with other religions/worldviews and the stronger support for an inclusive RE with students taught together whatever their religious background among 'believers'. What are the implications of this for RE?

The difference in the religious background of young people across the country has led to different suggestions for RE.

- a) *Separate RE (understood as religious nurture) for different faith groups*: for example, own faith only RE for different religious groups whether in faith-based schools or separate RE classes (Hargreaves, 1994 [replied to in Jackson, 2003b] and NUT, 2008)
- b) *RE with a main emphasis on teaching of children's own faith but also some teaching about other faiths* (as currently found in many church schools)
- c) *Inclusive multi-faith RE* (the norm in English community schools)

The findings that those with a religion/worldview showed a high degree of tolerance and that there was support for enquiry based RE suggests that religiously committed students do not want the form of RE exemplified by model a). The findings also show it is very possible to retain firm commitment and integrity of one's own faith while learning about other faiths.

The findings imply that model b) is acceptable, as firm religious commitment of their own appears to have positive impact on the students learning about and respecting others' faith (it is the model of the inter faith movement that promotes dialogue and cooperation between different religious communities across the country). This model seems appropriate in a homogeneous religious context but direct encounter with people of different religions (a more powerful learning experience than anything second hand) would be lacking unless facilitated through strategies such as the use of visitors and visits, school twinning, exchanges and electronic communication, such as email dialogue.

Model c) is positive in promoting the inclusive learning from and about religious differences that the students asked for. However, the findings also show the value of students' own religious viewpoints being affirmed and developed, indicating that those more secure in their own positions are more able to appreciate better the views and commitments of others. The evidence could be used to support approaches that encourage students to articulate, express and exchange their own views and understandings, in addition to 'learning about' religions from teachers who draw on a variety of educational sources.

Trends in the responses from students seem consistent with the open and liberal approach to RE already operating in state community schools in England, and in some religiously based schools. RE is seen by students as potentially an arena for dialogue between those from different religious and secular backgrounds. The move towards including issues related to society, such as community cohesion, as well as issues of personal development, is consistent with this. In developing approaches that capitalise on self expression and student interaction as well as contact with people from the wider community, educators and policy makers might give more attention to recent pedagogical developments, such as those using interpretive strategies (Jackson, 1997; 2004; 2006b; 2008), experiments with young people's dialogue (Ipgrave, 2003; McKenna, Ipgrave & Jackson, 2008) and with critical approaches to the promotion of religious literacy (Wright, 1996).

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