



University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): Ipgrave, J. and McKenna, U.

Article Title: Diverse experiences and common vision: English students perspectives on religion and religious education

Year of publication: 2008

Link to published article:

<http://www.waxmann.com/?id=20&cHash=1&buchnr=1972>

Publisher statement: None

**Julia Ipgrave & Ursula McKenna**

## **Diverse experiences and common vision: English students' perspectives on religion and religious education<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Religion and education in the English context**

The thoughts and reflections of the students reported in this chapter cannot be fully understood without some background knowledge of the relationship between religion and education in publicly funded schools in England<sup>2</sup>. Religion has always been a significant component in English schools, churches and religious foundations having in past centuries been the prime movers and providers of education. With the introduction of universal primary education in 1870 and in subsequent education acts, the government adopted a partnership approach with state and church working together to ensure educational provision for all the nation's children<sup>3</sup>. The new state schools were designed as an expansion of the work of the church schools rather than as a secular counter-balance to it and so the incorporation of elements of religion was not seen as contrary to the aims of schools outside the church sector. Religious education has always been part of the state school curriculum and the statutory right of all school pupils to religious education was reconfirmed in the 1944 and 1988 Education Acts. In addition to religious education lessons, schools are required to offer daily acts of collective worship (school assemblies) for their pupils. Traditionally these took the form of Christian hymns, prayers and Bible stories but today they often use material from a variety of religious and cultural traditions, deliver moral messages of general application, or become occasions for the celebration and reinforcement of the school's communal identity. In addition some schools without religious foundation see building links with local churches and faith communities as an important part of their involvement with the neighbourhood they serve.

With the inauguration of the new publicly funded schools in 1870, the principle was established of a non-denominational religious education without 'religious catechism or religious formulary'. This non-confessional principle has been influential in the development of religious education in schools that do not have a religious foundation, as well as in many that do. It has given religious education the adaptability to survive secularising trends in society by dissociating the subject from religious nurture within a faith tradition; it has made easier the incorporation of multi faith elements into religious education in response to the growing religious pluralism of English society in the latter half of the twentieth century; it has enabled children of different faiths and none to be taught religious education together in the same classes. At the same time, distancing religious education from a confessional approach with its clarity of purpose posed a challenge for educators and raised a number of difficult questions that needed to be addressed about the subject's aims and content. Attempts to answer these questions have generated discussion and debate and led to the development of the rich variety of epistemologies and pedagogies that inform and shape current practice.

---

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Gerdien Bertram-Troost for her valuable comments on previous versions of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed exposition can be found in Jackson and O'Grady's chapter in the REDCo publication 'Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates' (2007).

<sup>3</sup> This partnership was primarily one between the state and the Church of England. Jackson and O'Grady provide an introduction to the history of state-funded religious schools, including those established by churches and faith communities other than the Church of England (Jackson and O'Grady 2007 p187-9).

Non-denominational Bible-based religious education was the norm in the earlier half of the twentieth century but educationalists came to question the appropriateness of this predominantly scriptural approach for an increasingly secular and religiously plural society. The development of the discipline of religious studies was influential in the introduction of a world religions approach to religious education in schools in the 70s. This approach, based on interpretations and adaptations of Ninian Smart's phenomenological model (Smart 1968, 1973), provided a broad conceptual framework for the study of major world religions through the identification of key religious phenomena such as rites of passage, places of worship and holy scriptures<sup>4</sup>. It has had an impact not only on the content of religious education syllabuses but also on their orientation towards 'the other', promoting a combination of a phenomenological agnosticism, by which pupils temporarily suspend their judgement on the religious beliefs of others, and a structured empathy for the religious lives and beliefs of others. Its influence is evident in many of the responses of the students in this qualitative study.

Another strand used the experience of the pupil as the starting point for religious education. In the 60s Harold Loukes advocated a religious education that was existentially relevant to the young people being taught (Loukes 1961). He promoted a problem centred syllabus that focused on relationships, responsibilities, and other issues faced by the students as they approached adulthood. This approach was popular as a justification for the teaching of religious education to all pupils (as required by law), including those aged 14 and above who were not studying it as an academic subject for public examinations. In the majority of secondary schools today non-examination religious education classes have been replaced by a 'short course' religious education leading to the equivalent of half a General Certificate of Secondary Education<sup>5</sup>. Most of the students in this study are following such a course and their responses show how elements of Loukes' approach are still reflected in their learning alongside other aspects of religious education.

Members of the experientialist school of religious education, John Hammond and David Hay being prominent among them (Hammond et al. 1990; Hay 2000), sought to counter the tendency towards an over descriptive religious education in a world religions approach by focussing attention on the inner spiritual experiences of the student through a variety of meditative exercises. It was intended that such methods would open young people to the affective dimensions of religion and enable a deeper awareness of their own spiritual selves. Others were concerned that the discipline of theology might be lost between an objective, anthropological interest in other people's religion and a romantic preoccupation with the inner self. Andrew Wright has written extensively (Wright 1993, 2000, 2004) on the importance of students developing the 'religious literacy' to discuss and debate issues of religious truth. The growing popularity of philosophical methods in school, partly encouraged by the Philosophy for Children movement<sup>6</sup>, has supported the development of an enquiring approach that uses theological and philosophical argumentation to engage with questions of ultimate meaning. In

---

<sup>4</sup> Smart chaired projects designed to apply these methods in secondary schools (Schools Council, 1971) and primary schools (Schools Council 1977)

<sup>5</sup> General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) are the educational qualifications that students are expected to achieve at the end of compulsory education at age 16 and are basic requirements for many employment and further and higher education opportunities.

<sup>6</sup> Developed from the work of Matthew Lipman (Columbia University) in the 1960s and currently promoted in the UK in a slightly adapted form, through the training programmes of The Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERRE).

the sections that follow it will be possible to discern the influence of such methods on the learning experiences of students in this study.

The Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit has developed interpretive and dialogical approaches (Jackson 1997, 2004) to religious education that enable young people to make links between their studies of the religious lives of others and their own perspectives and experiences. This is effected through an ongoing process of comparison and contrast between material from religious traditions (including voices of individual followers of those traditions) and the students' own ideas. The current qualitative study likewise encourages students to reflect on this interrelationship between encounter with the religions of others and the significance of religion in their own lives both in and out of school.

These various trends of thought have informed the new national framework for religious education produced in 2004 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (DfES & QCA 2004), in consultation with faith communities and professional religious education associations. The national framework promotes a religious education that develops knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other principal religious traditions and worldviews; engages students with issues of right and wrong; offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development; poses challenging questions about the ultimate meaning of life and beliefs about God; enables pupils to develop respect for and sensitivity to others whose faith and beliefs are different from their own; encourages pupils to learn from other religions while exploring their own beliefs and meanings (p7). In England the content of the religious education syllabus is determined at a local authority level<sup>7</sup> so the framework only has non-statutory status, nevertheless by providing guidance for locally produced syllabi, it both reflects and shapes teaching and learning in religious education across the country. As such it provides valuable background for pupil understanding of the role of religion in schools.

## **2. Key Information for an empirical study in four English secondary schools**

Four schools were selected for the qualitative study in order to provide a mix of perspectives from urban and rural, mono-cultural and culturally diverse settings. The choice of a variety of settings reflected the researchers' view that students' perspectives on the role of religion in schools are not only influenced by their own religio-cultural backgrounds but also by their experience of others, thus the perspectives of white Christian heritage pupils in a culturally homogeneous school may differ significantly from those of white Christian heritage pupils in a religiously and ethnically mixed educational setting. The diversity of experiences of religion of young people within a faith tradition was recognised by the involvement of Christian heritage students with indigenous white and migrant black backgrounds. All schools had in common their state-maintained status and a comprehensive intake including boys and girls of a wide range of academic ability.

### **2.1 The selected schools<sup>8</sup>**

*School A* is a popular multi-ethnic comprehensive school in Sheffield, a sizeable city situated where the English midlands becomes the north. Although Sheffield has not had a very high profile in national debates about inter communal and inter religious relations, a 2007 local

---

<sup>7</sup> Although most publicly funded schools with religious foundations are free to teach religious education according to the founding religious tradition, the national framework explicitly states that it is intended to be of use to authorities with responsibility for schools of a religious character.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the information about these schools has come from official inspection (OFSTED) reports.

council report highlighted a rapidly growing ethnic minority population (13% of the population according to latest figures) and a concern about increasing support in some communities for far right and Islamic extremist views. In response a more proactive approach to promoting positive community relations, including inter school twinning arrangements, was recommended (Sheffield Star 5 June 2007). The proportion of ethnic minority students in School A is over a quarter of the school population and higher than the city and national average. The ethnic minority students are of predominantly Asian origin with a variety of religious affiliations with Muslims being the majority group. Only a few of the students come from homes experiencing economic hardship and teachers are able to build on the generally high levels of attainment already achieved by the pupils when they arrive at the school.

*School B* serves a small rural town and its surrounding farms and villages in the sparsely populated northern county of Cumbria. According to indicators of economic hardship (eligibility for free school meals), the socio-economic status of students at School B is broadly in line with national averages and the levels of attainment of pupils entering the school are above average. The school has very few ethnic minority pupils and very few affiliated to religions other than Christianity. Its population reflects that of the small rural town it serves in the north easterly region of Cumbria where, according to the 2001 national census (ONS 2001), 98.87% of the population is white and only 0.16% is Muslim. This demography has influenced local perspectives on issues of immigration and race. A 2004 survey of Cumbrian attitudes revealed a strong sense of regional identity and relatively high levels of prejudice towards minority groups (Cumbria County Council 2004). In 2001 nearly 75% of the population identified as Christian in 2001, though this percentage is not reflected in the numbers who regularly attend church.

*School C* is situated in village on the outskirts of the northern city of Bradford but most of the students live in that city some distance away, the majority from areas that are low in socio-economic terms, some of their households experiencing acute material deprivation. 75% of them are from ethnic minority backgrounds, most of their families having come from Pakistan at least a generation ago. School C has been designated a school in 'challenging circumstances'. The educational attainment of pupils on entry to the school is very low and attainment levels at GCSE are also well below national average, but significant improvements have been made within the school in recent years. School C has been designated as a 'specialist school' for the humanities meaning that religious education, along with geography and history, has a high status within the curriculum. The ethnic minority population of Bradford is predominantly Muslim (16% of the population in the 2001 census) and Pakistani (14.5%). Occasional instances of inter communal riots in Bradford and neighbouring towns, most notably the riots of the summer of 2001, and high profile reports on tensions within the area (Ouseley 2001, Home Office 2001a, 2001b) have given impetus to local projects to improve community relations and encourage links and partnerships that counteract the tendency towards a society segregated on ethnic and religious lines. The school has been involved in some of these projects building up links with city communities and bridging cultural divides through a twinning relationship with a school in Cumbria.

*School D* is a Church of England school but does not employ faith criteria for admission. Instead it operates as a neighbourhood school serving an area of considerable social disadvantage in the former docklands area of Rotherhithe, in the borough of Southwark, South London. Recent inspection reports have shown that, in spite of a low attainment level on entry, the pupils make very good progress through the school. The school population in this area of the city is ethnically mixed though with a larger proportion of white British pupils

(over 46% in 2005<sup>9</sup>) than in many other parts of the borough. The largest ethnic minority grouping is Black African (19.5%) followed by Black Caribbean (5%). The religious affiliation of the residents of Rotherhithe and neighbouring Bermondsey (from which some of School D's students come) is predominantly Christian (about two thirds for both councils). Only a few follow faiths other than Christianity, Muslims, as the largest religious minority accounting for no more than 4% of the population. Levels of religious observance among the black community are markedly higher than those of the indigenous white community. At the time of the research South London had been the focus of media reports on youth gun and knife crimes.

## **2.2 The setting and carrying out of the questioning**

Across the four schools a total of 109 pupils filled in a questionnaire for the REDCo qualitative study. In each school the religious education teacher was involved in selecting the class, their choices being influenced by school time-tabling and staffing considerations as well as by efforts to ensure a representative range of abilities and ethnicities. The participants were spread across a three year age range from 13 to 16 year olds. The youngest pupils were the Year 9 pupils (aged 13 to 14) from School B. Year 10 pupils took part from School B (age 14 to 15) and the students at Schools A and C were Year 11 (age 15 to 16). The questionnaires were delivered in a familiar classroom setting either by the teacher or by a researcher with the teacher present. The students filled in their responses independently from the teacher and each other.

As each set of questionnaires came in from the schools the responses were read to gain familiarity with them. Once all the questionnaires had been received each question was approached separately for each school. The answers to each question were then compared across the schools and tally charts and matrices drawn up systematically enabling easy reference for the analysis stage of the processing of the data. The data was examined for patterns and consistencies in responses, for contrasts and exceptions. During the course of this examination, different factors influencing the students responses were identified and different categories for comparison emerged. These categories can be observed in the analysis of the research findings in section 3 where responses are sometimes compared according to the religious allegiance of the students, sometimes according to their ethnicity, to their belief or disbelief in God, to degrees of religious practice in their families, to their opportunities for encounter with people of faith, to their experiences of religious education.

In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were carried out at the four schools with groups of pupils who had taken part in the study. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the students' school and community context in order to support the interpretation of the questionnaire data. The interviews were semi-structured group interviews led by researchers and using questions that related closely to the three foci for analysis in the qualitative study: personal experiences and views of religion; the social dimension of religion; religious education at school. A total of 31 pupils were interviewed across the four schools in groups of on average four students.

---

<sup>9</sup> Statistics are taken from the 2005 Rotherhithe Community Profile

## 2.3 The sample

Taking the sample of students as a whole, the boys outnumbered the girls 60 to 49, largely because of the significantly higher percentage of boys in the School C sample (70 to 30) reflecting a preponderance of boys generally within that school. The students who associated with a particular religion were in the majority, 67 as opposed to 42. Over a third of the sample identified as Christian and a quarter as Muslims. As Table 1 shows, the religious categories were very unevenly distributed between the schools. The students' position in relation to religious allegiance is actually more complex than the figures in the table indicate as some of the students (4 pupils) described themselves as both Christian (or belonging to some denomination of Christianity) and agnostic, others (5 pupils) claimed to be both Christian and atheist. Believing and belonging did not necessarily correspond.

**Table 1 Students' religious affiliation**

	School A	School B	School C	School D	Total
Christian	6	10	3	20	39
Muslim	2	0	22	1	25
Buddhist	0	0	0	1	1
Spiritualist	0	2	0	0	2
None given	16	15	2	9	42

The questionnaire asked the students to identify the country in which they were born (results shown in table 2). By also identifying the countries in which their parents were born, and the languages spoken in their homes, they gave some indication of their migration background (results shown in table 3). This data did not recognise those pupils who came from third generation English speaking ethnic minorities such as some of the black students at School D. Only six of the nine black students who filled in the questionnaire are identified by these criteria. The largest minority group was the Asian students (in particular the 22 of Pakistani origin) followed by West African students. Again there are marked contrasts in the data from the different schools.

**Table 2 Students born in or outside the UK**

	School A	School B	School C	School D	Total
Total size of sample	24	27	27	31	109
UK born	23	27	22	28	100
Born outside UK	1	0	5	3	9

**Table 3 Family origins of students with migrant backgrounds**

	School A	School B	School C	School D	Total
Total students with migrant origin	7	4	26	11	48
Africa	1	0	3	6	10
Pakistan/India/Bangladesh	3	0	22	1	26
Other	3	4	1	4	12

The significance of these figures is not only the information they provide about the background of the pupils in the survey, but is also what they say about the pupils' experiences of encounter on a day to day basis, within their school setting, with people of different religious, ethnic and cultural origins. Respondents from Schools B and C spent most of their

day within an ethnically homogeneous community of young people while those from Schools A and D were more accustomed to a social context of plurality.

### **3. Research findings**

#### **3.1 Personal views on and experiences with religion**

##### **3.1.1 Associations with and personal importance of ‘religion’ and ‘God’**

The students were asked to write down words that they associated with the terms ‘religion’ and ‘God’. Their responses to both terms are being considered together as many did not retain a distinction between the two fields, there being several examples where the same words were associated with both (heaven, Christianity, church, worship, Bible). Some students also used the question that followed to comment on religion in general rather than on their own personal involvement. Of the students fifty two wrote the words ‘belief’, ‘believes’ or ‘believing’, signalling that their understanding of religion related to human perspectives/ responses. This was reinforced by the use of ‘opinions’, ‘views’, ‘ideas’ as well as the more negative ‘wrong’, ‘make believe’, ‘far fetched’, ‘comfort belief’, ‘totally made up’ emphasising the subjective nature of religion and concepts of God. In keeping with this anthropocentric approach to the subject, fourteen students described religion as a way of life or lifestyle and aspects of religious practice were recorded (worship, prayer/praying, sermons, hymns, church, mosque, singing, celebrations). The use of religious denotations as identity indicators was evident in the frequency of Islam/Muslim (19), Christian/Christianity (20), Buddhist/Buddhism (6), Hinduism (6), Judaism (5), Sikhism (3). As these terms were often used by students who did not identify with the traditions recorded, their use also retains a sense of ‘otherness’. Two students used the word ‘culture’ for religion one of them linking it with ‘where you are from’, others made explicit mention of difference (‘different lifestyles’, ‘different groups of people’, ‘different beliefs and ways of doing things’, ‘different beliefs of different backgrounds’). One student was critical of such classification of people according to religious allegiance writing that ‘religion separates society by categorising people’.

The politico-sociological force of religion was recognised negatively by a minority of students in the association of religion with ‘control’, ‘structure’, ‘rules’, ‘brain washing’, ‘separation’, ‘power’, ‘fighting’, ‘war’. Strong criticisms included the views that religion was ‘made to incite fear’, that it was ‘a proven way to influence people’ to ‘start wars, control wealth and tell people what to think’, that it ‘creates war and poverty, feuds and debates, divides countries’.

Theological perspectives were also recorded, in particular in the attributes of God including atheist positions (omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, almighty, supreme, non-existent). While many of these had nominative or descriptive force, an evaluative and relational element was also present in ‘loving’, ‘kind’, ‘forgiving’. Other key beliefs recorded related to the divine creation of the world (36), and to questions of life after death, heaven and hell (33). The association of God with the forces of nature was evident not only in the frequent references to his creating role, but in the use of ‘clouds’, ‘lightning’, ‘sky’.

Though many of the words were common there were some features distinctive to the particular religious background of the pupils. The authority of Islamic tradition was evident in the words associated with God by Muslim students as the majority of them chose words from among the Ninety-nine Names of Allah (including almighty, merciful, eternal, all-knowing, forgiving, judge, generous, perfect). The responses of many Christian students reflected their



religious background with references to key elements of Christian belief and practice (church, Bible, Jesus, Holy Spirit, saviour, priest, cross, crucifix, singing). Apart from one Jehovah's Witness boy who wrote of 'conflict', it was students who declared that they did not have a religious belief who were most prepared to be outspokenly critical of religion and God. Though negative descriptors were in the minority (18 in all), there was a disproportionate number (10) from School A. Several factors may have contributed to the more outspoken negativity of this sample including the greater age of the students, their higher socio-economic status, or negative experiences of religious education recorded in group discussions at the school. Gender, too, may have been a factor as thirteen of the fifteen critics were boys.

When required to relate their views on the personal significance of religion and God to their lives, a significant majority of the students claimed that religion and God were not important to them. This lack of importance was most frequently related to lack of belief (23). Three students cited the harm done by religion in the world as a reason for denying its significance in their own lives and three others rejected God on the basis of lack of proof or evidence of his existence, some simply expressed a lack of interest ('don't really care', 'don't think about God at all'). There was not a necessary correlation between lack of belief and lack of interest in religion, however, as a number of students who did not believe in God still found religion played some part in their lives because of its importance to people with whom they regularly associated, family, friends, others in the school or neighbourhood.

*I am not religious, my family/friends are not religious, but my school has a large variety of religions within the pupils so I do take religion into account in my personal life'. (m-nr-w-4A)*<sup>10</sup>

Those for whom religion and God were important often (15) wrote about God's guidance in their lives, how religion influences their actions and enables them to distinguish right from wrong, to 'decide and make choices' (84). The language of right 'path' and 'life schedule' was used by Muslims and Christians. Examples were given of religious practice, of fasting, praying, lighting candles, going to church, attending the mosque, reading the Qur'an. Occasionally Christians and Muslims admitted to not practising as much as they used to or felt they should. Two Muslim students linked belief in God and observance of their religion to entry into paradise:

*'Religion is like a master key which will allow your spirit to enter paradise'*  
(m-mu-an-60C)

A few wrote of a strong personal and emotional relationship with religion and God ('I like to keep them in my heart', 'I love God', 'God is everything to me, my life'), and of the support God gives 'when times are rough', 'whenever I am down'. Religion was recognised as a source of safety in two of the questionnaires and the respondents in two more wrote of a God who watches over us and helps us. The comment of one boy at School D after a highly publicised wave of teenage gun and knife crime in South London, gives an indication of the dangers some of the young people face:

---

<sup>10</sup> In the codes given at the end of quotations the gender of the student is identified with 'm' (male) and 'f', (female); their religion, as stated on the questionnaire, as 'mu' (Muslim), 'ch' (Christian), 'nr' (no religion given); their ethnic origin by 'b' (black African), 'w' (indigenous white); 'an' (Asian including Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian), 'o' (other); their school as A, B, C or D. The number refers to the number code on the questionnaire returns.

*'[I] talk about will God save me if I was gonna get shot and things along that path'*  
(m-ch-b-91D)

Student responses demonstrated that the link between belief and practice is not straightforward. Some wrote of religious practices they were, had been or would want to be involved in (baptism, attending church at festivals, getting married in church) even though they did not have a religious belief. Others expressed a belief in God or in 'someone up there' even though they did not participate at all in formal religion. Some chose to separate out the two elements God and religion in the question with statements such as: 'I believe it's possible may be a God but don't have a religion'; 'religion aint very important to me but God is important in my life'; 'I'm a Christian but I am not really religious'. One wrote that her religion was Catholic but she did not believe in God, another that she believed in Jesus but did not go to church. The following was written by one of ten students who used the question to share their doubts or hesitancy about religion and the 'seeker' status of their faith.

*'I believe that there may be something out there – I just don't know what it is. I am slowly thinking that there is nothing though, which is quite sad because I hope there was.'* (f-nr-w-8A)

This complex relationship between religious belief, practice and identity is reflected in some of the questionnaires where students described their religion as 'very light Christian', 'a bit Christian' (4) or wrote that they were Christian, Catholic or Church of England while at the same time being agnostic (3) or atheist (5). The theme of baptised non-believers raised in one response was picked up in an interview with a group of girls at School B where they questioned whether infant baptism marks someone out as a Christian for life whatever their subsequent beliefs.

Such ambiguity and the expressions of doubt are confined to returns from students who are Christian or whose families have a Christian background. They are not present in any of the returns of the Muslim pupils, no doubts are expressed and in many the close links between faith and practice, between religious identity and practice are explicitly stated: a life following the word of God as found in the Qur'an; practising the 5 Pillars that are the 'foundation' of their religion; trying to be a 'good Muslim'. One Muslim boy wrote how he based his whole lifestyle around Islam, another how religion/God determines whether or not he does something.

Comparison of the questionnaires does not reveal significant differences in responses according to the gender of the students though there do appear to be different patterns according to ethnicity and culture. Religion is described as important to the personal lives of all the Muslim students, the overwhelming majority of whom come from South Asian families (Pakistan, Bangladesh, India). Similarly, without exception the pupils of African background (all of them Christians) recognise that God and religion are important to them. At School A and School B where most of the respondents were white, the vast majority claimed that religion was unimportant in their lives. At School D where the population was more mixed, the students of African origin expressed their religious commitment, four of their white classmates shared this commitment, five were unsure and seven stated that religion did not have a significant role in their lives.

### **3.1.2 Personal Connections with Religion**

The students' were asked about the origins of their awareness of religion. The most frequently noted sources of knowledge about and contact with religion were the family (76) or the school (83), students who identified with a particular religious tradition tending to cite the family as the most significant source and those with less of a religious background the school. Places of worship were also listed as important by those from practising families (41). The media (35) and friends (31) were seen to have a role by significant minorities.

Most students wrote about their families and homes when asked to explain how they had come to know about religions. Visits to places of worship were frequently described as family practices so the influence of the family was still dominant here. They often mentioned parents and grandparents as the sources of religious knowledge. Where a specific relative was mentioned it was usually a female relative. There are eleven references to mothers and grandmothers but just two to a father or grandfather. According to the responses faith was transmitted and experienced in a variety of ways within the family. Some, Muslims and Christians alike, wrote of direct teaching from a parent or grandparent; being instructed in what is right and wrong, being taught to believe in God and how to pray, being told religious stories. Some recalled accompanying older members of the family to places of worship, others conversations with parents about religion. One student, for example, remembered her mother talking to her about God when her grandmother died. A few of the believing students, Muslims and Christians, emphasised the early age ('from birth', 'from a very young age') from which religion had been a part of their lives so that it was hard for them to identify a particular moment or experience that taught them about religion. 'I was brought up with religion around me; 'it's just a known religion in my family to believe in God'. Similar responses reveal how parents passed on a sense of a given religious identity to their children: 'my parents told me I am a Muslim'; 'my parents told me my [catholic] religion'; '[my grandfather said Azan to me in my ear] which showed I was a Muslim'. In several cases students who admit to agnosticism or no belief themselves, mention some experience of religion within their family but there are many cases in which there has been no family input, where the students recorded nothing in answer to the question, where the family and home is not cited as a source of religious knowledge.

*'In school we're taught about religions and peoples beliefs. At home we never talk about anything like that.'* (f-ch-w-46B)

Where information had been gained from school, the majority of students commented that it was here that they had learnt about different religions. Christianity, Sikhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam were all mentioned. For some this school experience included trips to the places of worship of different faith communities. Several responses (8) made explicit a distinction between learning about one's own religion at home and learning about a variety of other religions at school.

*'My family and the mosque were the ones who introduced me to my religion. Whereas I learnt about other religions through school and the media.'* (f-mu-an-75C)

The distinctions made by the students highlight a key theme that emerges from analysis of their responses, the difference between the forms of religious knowledge that the young people acquire. The student's first sentence relates to nurture, to the knowledge of a faith that comes from personal relationship and identification with that faith and that guides religious practice (the knowledge of prayer times, of liturgical customs, for example). This is the kind of knowledge many, but by no means all, of the students receive from family and faith

community. The subject of the second sentence in the quote above is the objective knowledge of factual information about faiths and school is seen as the context for this learning; it is a form of religious knowledge that all the student respondents receive through school religious education. In an interview one of the students expresses this difference:

*'School religion is like information based, like feeding information into your brain but outside school it's experience, it's practical, you're actually living in that society – you're living like a Christian or whatever religion.'* (f-ch-b-D)

Learning about other faiths proved to be more than an information gathering exercise for some, however, who recorded ways in which their views were challenged by this expansion of their knowledge. Some acknowledged this challenge. One Muslim boy recorded how he was 'intrigued' by other religious traditions and was 'surprised' to learn that some people did not believe in God. A girl student included awareness that 'everyone has different points of view' in her reasons for doubting the existence of God, while another, declaring that she believed in 'different religions' statements' created a syncretic theology of the afterlife from a mixture of ideas about spirits, reincarnation and judgement.

Another response to the questionnaire reinforced the distinction between home and school religious learning and brought in the media as another form of knowledge of religion and its socio-political significance in current public debate on community, national and international affairs.

*'My parents taught me what is right and wrong. They told me that I should do prayers etc. School taught me that there are many different religions. Media showed issues on religion.'* (f-mu-an-57C)

While all students are exposed to media coverage and all learn about religions at school, insider knowledge of a faith tradition and of what it means to belong to a religion is very unevenly distributed across the schools and the ethnic and cultural groups. The religious involvement and experience of the Muslim students, of the African Christians and the fewer practising white Christians is clearly not replicated in the lives of the white students who profess to have no belief, but there are other differences. It has already been seen that some students who at present have no belief have come from families where religion, and sometimes where religious practice, are part of their lives. At School A, where the sample is predominantly white, the figures for the lack of importance of religion in the students' personal lives is high (20) but the number who have learnt about religion from their families is also high (18). At School B, again with a high proportion of students (16) acknowledging little or no personal significance for religion, those from the whole sample who have had some family input into their religious knowledge is only eight. Of the thirty four students recording no family input no less than twenty, were from this school. There is thus a contrast between their experience of religion in rural Cumbria and that of their peers in the three urban schools. This finding would appear to agree with the assessment of the religious education teacher at School B that her pupils live in a secular environment where 'religion is dying in a formal sense'.

### **3.1.3 Summary, reflection and interpretation**

In their response to the first two questions in the questionnaire, the students have approached religion from a number of angles: as something that belongs to others from a variety of

cultures and faith traditions, as something of political import and power, as something that explores the reality or possibility of God and as something that might, or might not, be of personal significance to themselves. The varied approaches reflect the multiple ways in which they encounter and experience religion. In religious education lessons they are encouraged both to learn about the beliefs and practices of different religions in a descriptive 'religious studies' approach, as well as to participate in discussion and debate in a dialogical approach favoured by a GCSE course that engages with ethical issues and, in the case of School B, by teachers who employ a philosophical, 'community of enquiry' method. The prominence of religion in current news stories means that the media is a common source of information, and the association of religion with conflict and terrorism in a few cases seemed to counteract the generally positive image of religion presented at school. These are the shared experiences of religion. In addition a significant proportion of the students (the most sizeable groups being South Asian Muslims and African Christians) have been brought up in a religious tradition in their homes and in places of worship and instruction, most of them having adopted their family and community faith as their own and allowed it to influence their perspectives and their practice. Several of them have been able to express a deep and personal commitment to their faith. That many of the students, usually white students, and in particular those from the rural Cumbrian School B, have not shared this background of religious nurture in the home, means that there is in this respect an inequality of experience of religion across the four schools and across the cultural and ethnic groups represented in those samples.

The combination of question 1 with its focus on present perspectives on religion and God, and question 2, which directed respondents to past experiences, introduced a biographical and longitudinal element into the students' accounts of their connection with religion. It encouraged reflection on changes between past and present and on the age-related nature of some of the students' current views. The questionnaires produced some examples of young people who were brought up within a faith tradition but had recently moved away from belief or from certainty of belief. There were also examples of young people (a boy from School A and a girl from School D) who had recently found a new or revived commitment to the Christian faith. Discussions with groups of students from the participating schools have enabled further exploration of the relationship between age and religion that has informed the interpretation of the questionnaire findings.

One of the reasons given by the students in the discussion groups for changes in their attitudes to religion over the last few years was an increase in cognitive maturity, greater understanding of religion and an ability to apply their enhanced rational faculties to what it was they were learning, reading or being told, to subject their childhood assumptions to a questioning process. Some of the questionnaire comments signalled a distancing from what might be perceived as childish acceptance of religious beliefs, those that describe God as 'totally made up', a 'comfort belief' or 'a bedtime story' and the boy who describes a 'make believe' God in childish terms as 'a giant man with a big grey beard'. A rational approach was evident in comments of the students who reject God on the basis that there is no evidence, no proof, or that no one has seen him. It corresponds with claims from a discussion group of boys at School B that there was no proof in the truth of the Bible and that scientific theories disproved Biblical stories. Some of the statements of doubt and uncertainty about God's existence, or, in a couple of cases about what happens after death, might reflect this cognitive process and the individuality, objectivity and critical reflection that James Fowler, in his stage development model of faith, posits as characteristics of the adolescent transition to an *individuated-reflective faith* (Fowler 1981, p200).

Discussing their current approach to religion those students interviewed who professed to a committed faith, whether Christian or Muslim, described how cognitive activity, when applied to religion, does not necessarily lead to doubt but can lead to a greater ownership of one's faith and so to more security in belief. In her response to question 1c of the questionnaire, one girl in School D gave a brief autobiographical account of how she was a baptised, practising Christian as a young child, 'lost the way' after receiving her holy communion and has recently found her way back to church. In the group interview she explained how her faith had been strengthened by a period of questioning. Other Christian and Muslim peers interviewed also spoke of the strengthening of their belief through greater understanding of their religion (in particular of its scriptures), periods of reflection and making their own decisions about the application of their faith to their lives. Students of both faiths were critical of what they saw as the unreflecting faith of young children. Thus for these students the interviews have filled in the gap between the childhood experience of religion in question 2 and the faith position of the young person in question 1 and shown that expressions of doubt do not necessarily constitute greater maturity or autonomy of thought.

A cognitive model of faith development does not give sufficient significance to contextual influences on young people's faith. The impact of these on the students' relationship with religion will be discussed in more detail later, but some of the answers to questions 1 and 2 can be more easily understood if external influences on their religious lives are acknowledged. A number of students, in particular those from white Christian or non-faith backgrounds claimed that religion did not play an important part in their lives at present and some to whom religion was important admitted to a falling off of practice, of church going or of the observance of Muslim prayer times. In the interview discussions it became clear that many of the students found that, at this particular stage in their lives, there were a number of other pressures that competed with religion as a focus of attention and action. They spoke of increased responsibilities, of having 'a lot more on your mind'. Schoolwork and examinations were mentioned in particular. The girls from both the Muslim and Christian groups spoke of a preoccupation with forming and maintaining friendships, of a greater interest in people's personalities than in their religious allegiance. In single-sex discussion groups they spoke of a preoccupation with boys (the Muslim girls in particular found this an area of tension between natural interests and religious custom), and of having to cope with 'all your hormones and stuff'. At School D black teenagers also raised the temptations of youth criminal culture as a factor that might draw the boys in particular away from the teachings of their religion. The word 'passion' was used by a group of black students in discussion to describe both an enthusiasm for their faith and the force that could lead them astray and into crime; 'it's more like your beliefs like what you think your passion is'. It would be easier, one boy admitted, if young people were not passionate.

In an interview one of the black girl students confessed that last Sunday she missed church for the first time ever in her life. For her it was a ' " whoah" kind of thing' and a sign that 'as you're growing up ...people just corrupt your minds ...like you start to forget about your religion'. While the young people of faith might be troubled by this break in their religious observance and commitment, another theme common to students of both faiths was that the lapses in practice and loss of interest did not constitute more than an interruption in their life of faith and that as they got older, and in particular, as they had children of their own, their religious lives would pick up again reinforcing the interpretation of the questionnaire findings as representative of a particular moment in the religious biography of the respondents.

### **3.2 The social dimension of religion**

### 3.2.1 Religion and peer group

Question 3 asks the students whether and on what occasions they discussed religion with their friends, and what the points of interest in those conversations might be. Answers to this question give an indication of the role of religion in the young people's discourse. Across the four schools fifty nine of the respondents claimed that religion was not a topic discussed with friends while forty eight stated that it was. Reasons given for not discussing religion divided fairly evenly between a lack of relevance to their day-to-day exchanges ('we have other things to talk about', 'it doesn't come into conversation') and a lack of belief ('I don't believe in any of it'; 'none of my friends are strong believers if at all'). Five students gave the potential for argument and disagreement as a reason for avoiding the subject of religion. Although most students interpreted the question to be asking about informal, day-to-day conversations with friends, several of them (10) referred to religious education lessons as a forum (sometimes the only forum) for discussing religion. Discussions started in religious education lessons sometimes spilled out of the classroom and were continued after the lesson and in break times. Religious education topics for ethical debate such as marriage and family, euthanasia and abortion were mentioned.

Where religion was discussed a variety of types of conversation were reported. For some, discussions involved sharing different perspectives on, and acquiring new knowledge of, a shared faith, for others they provided an opportunity to learn about, compare and contrast a variety of religions in inter faith encounter. Some discussed the day-to-day applications of the teachings of their faith for example relating Islamic justice to a case of bullying, others tackled theological questions about death, heaven, 'god and the existence of the latter'. Some used such conversations to 'challenge and question the idea of religion' and others to witness to their own faith, to let others 'see the happiness I have', to 'recruit', to 'help them to improve their lives'.

Comparative figures for this sample of students suggested that those with a religious belief were far more likely to discuss religion than those without (38 as opposed to 10), and that conversations about religion were considerably more common among pupils at the school with the greatest proportion of believers, School C where 18 pupils discussed religion, than among pupils at the school with the smallest. Only four students at School B admitted to talking about religion to their friends. All of these were girls, but at this school it was only girls that counted themselves as believers. In the interviews some of these girls claimed that they were more ready than boys to discuss religion as they are prepared to go 'deeper' and 'show [their] feelings'. However this gender distinction does not apply across the other schools where the proportion of boys or girls that spoke about religious topics was not significantly different. The students' accounts of their discussions implied a marked contrast between the openness and naturalness of religious discourse at the predominantly Muslim School C, among both the boys ('when we're chillin with each other then sometimes we just start talking') and the girls ('when me and my friends socialise we usually have such talks') and the irrelevance and awkwardness of religion as a conversational topic in the perceptions of many of the white students at the other schools, even those who profess to some Christian faith ('it's not what most people would like to talk about', 'we feel that religion should be left for personal experiences').

A few Muslim students wrote of inter faith dialogue between them and 'multi faith' friends of different religious traditions, but from the majority of the responses to this question it appeared that the main point of interest for them in these conversations was their own faith;

there was a sense in which they were engaged in a joint project to support each other in finding out more about their own religion.

*'When talking about religion 99% of the time it concerns Islam. I find these talks very interesting due to the fact that we all share stories and knowledge amongst ourselves that others may not know.'*(m-mu-pa-71C)

They wrote of getting to know from each other the 'thoughts and beliefs' of their religion and of asking each other if they are 'unsure on any particular section of Islam'. One boy recognised the transmission of such knowledge as a religious obligation by the fulfilment of which he could 'do some good deeds'. There was both an acknowledgement of shared meaning and a growing awareness of the internal diversity of their faith; one spoke of acquiring 'a greater understanding of different viewpoints within my religion'.

A similar sense of the importance of a shared faith and shared tradition was expressed by two Pentecostal African students at School D who claimed that it was nice to know that others believe what you believe and was good to share your understandings with others who are 'interested in the same thing'. One of them cited 'different books in the Bible' as a topic of discussion. The Muslim students, however, had an added impetus in their intra-faith communications. The detailed regulations of Islam about permitted and forbidden practices encouraged questions and conversations about the application of their faith's teaching to the details of day-to-day life:

*'Talks about religion just come in general conversations like when we go out to restaurants etc. we have to find out if the food is halal or haraam. Also if we go out shopping we have to buy appropriate clothing that is allowed in Islam.'*  
(f-mu-pa-63C)

### **3.2.2 Experiences of religion**

Responses to question 4 (what are your experiences with your own religion and with the religion of others?) generally understood the term 'experiences' to mean engagement with the external manifestations of religion: visits to religious places, participation in religious practices, ceremonies and celebrations, encounters with religious people. Mention was also made of mediated experiences of religion through television news programmes linking religion to wars, terrorism and bombing. One boy recalled the bomb attacks on a Madrid train, 'I wasn't on it though I viewed it on tv'. A few of the responses interpreted the term as spiritual experience and direct encounter with God. A Muslim boy wrote of the 'phenomenal atmosphere' he sensed on a school visit to a church, a black Pentecostal girl recalled how she had 'experienced God talking to me from a religious text'. This interpretation of 'experiences' as something so personal, difficult to write about and comparatively rare might in part explain why there were so many who claimed that they had not had religious experiences (20) or who did not supply an answer (13). One boy signalled such discomfort with the question when he wrote 'That's my business not yours'. Another student put forward the lack of such direct religious experience, 'The fact that I have never had any religious experience', as a reason for not believing in God.

Celebrations and festivals (Christmas, Easter, Eid, Chinese New Year) were represented among the positive experiences, sometimes divorced from religious meaning, for example a Christmas that is 'more about gifts than about Jesus'. Students recorded positive experiences of the festivals of faith traditions other than their own with a Muslim student enjoying



chocolate eggs at Easter and another bringing together as good experiences ‘celebrating Eid, enjoying the Christmas Spirit, the lights in town for Diwali’. Generally, however, students focused more on their own or their family’s faith tradition than on those of others. Among the students of Christian background frequent mention was made of attendance at the church ceremonies and occasional offices that marked significant milestones in their own lives and those of family members and friends (baptisms, first communion, weddings, funerals). Thirteen students reported visits to churches and five to mosques outside these special events and celebrations. While the mosque visits were recorded within the context of lists of practices (alongside praying namaaz, fasting, reading the Qur’an) and fulfilment of God’s wishes, church visits were described in more evaluative terms with a variety of responses reported; visits were interesting and enjoyable, or boring, they aroused feelings of guilt and fear, or of harmony and community spirit.

*‘I attended a church when I was young. I attended this church for about two months. After going I always felt guilty. I felt like I was being watched when I was alone and I found it scary and unpleasant. I stopped attending church, but the feeling has never left me.’ (f-nr-w-9A)*

*‘I went to church there were lots of other Catholics and Christians and it was really harmonious as we were like a society that doesn’t argue.’ (m-ch-w-13A)*

The picture of religious people constituting a caring and harmonious community was shared by some other students, those who acknowledged and appreciated the generous spirit with which religious friends offered up prayers for them, the student who welcomed the support given them by the youth group and youth leaders at his/her church and recognised that there was always someone there to ask if she was unsure or if she wanted someone to pray for her.

A number of the responses refer to encounters between the students and other people (often of their own age) where religion was a factor or topic of conversation. Positive encounters were recorded when they were able ‘to mix and have friends of different religions’, to take part in discussions with people of different religions, perhaps ‘attaining a better understanding of each other’s teachings’, when ‘everyone comes together to talk about issues to do with religion’ and are ‘open to new ideas’. Though such debates were seen as ‘good’ and ‘quite positive 99.5% of the time’, differences of belief and outlook on religion were occasionally found to be sources of tension that could ‘from time to time’ lead to arguments. Instances of inter religious tension are recorded sometimes linked with racist attitudes particularly as experienced by Muslim students who recall ‘getting abused by other religions that are not fond of you’ and ‘receiving racist comments from older people of different religions’. One student offered the advice that you ‘have to watch how you communicate to other religions as they might get offended’. There are also reports of tension between those who do not have religious beliefs and those who do. A Jehovah’s Witness student found that some people mocked him on account of his religion, another student was asked ‘stupid questions’ about his religion and a student without religious belief found her friends ‘really can’t understand that I don’t believe in a god’. A number of negative comments grouped around experiences perceived as indoctrination or proselytising. There were objections to ‘being told what to think’, to attempts to ‘recruit’ them to bible study groups, to being made to feel that ‘not having a religion or believing in the same religion as people’ was wrong. One boy described religious people he met as ‘very strong willed people’, another as ‘unwilling to compromise’.

The wording of the question requiring students to seek for both good and bad experiences of religion means that it is difficult to compare the frequency of such experiences between the schools or different groupings of students, or to assess the comparative weighting of positive or negative. School B had the highest number of students not identifying experiences to share in answer to this question, but awareness of different interpretations for the word 'experience' means that it is not possible to draw conclusions from this finding. When the nature of the experiences described is considered it appears that the Muslim pupils showed a greater interest in the details of religious practice and moral strictures that need to be observed and followed if they are to lead a good life according to the guidance and rules of their religion. That these instances of practice are categorised as good experiences is indicative of the kind of satisfaction that accompanies the knowledge that they are (as one Muslim boy put it) 'fulfilling God's wish'. One student notes how hard it is to follow the strict rules of his Muslim religion but apart from this the Muslim students do not record negative views of their faith and its customs. The students who have experience of Christian worship and practices show a greater readiness to be critical expressing a wide variety of views according to their personal responses to those experiences. Though there were examples of students of Muslim, Christian and non-believing positions experiencing negative attitudes from others about their religious stances, the Muslim students were the group most likely to have experienced this negativity from people outside their circle of peers.

### **3.2.3 Religious pluralism: enrichment, peaceful coexistence or potential for conflict?**

In answer to question 5 students were required to reflect on the idea of people from different religions living together. The wording of the question led to it being interpreted differently by different groups. Some read it as a question about people of faith living together in a multi-cultural society, others understood 'living together' as indicating people sharing a household, and still others accepted a narrower interpretation and wrote about a cohabiting or married couple, possibly with children. Some students widened the scope of the question to include relations between people of faith and those without faith and, in the case of two responses from Muslim children, of divisions within faith traditions. The responses to the question were varied though the overriding view among the students was that people of different religions should be able to live together in harmony. A common approach (21) was to write that it was possible if certain conditions were met. Several students (12) took a less positive position expressing their views that people of different faiths should be able to live together in harmony but that a number of factors made it highly unlikely that they would succeed. A fourth group (a minority of 8 across the schools) stated that they did not think people from different religions could live together.

The kind of reasons given why living together should be possible varied. Some were based on experience, some on a low view of the significance of religion, some on a humanistic understanding of the unity of the human race and some on theological perspectives. Those who backed up their argument with lived examples of people getting on together used illustrations from their own families and acquaintances: a Christian mother and Muslim father; a Scottish Protestant father and an Irish Catholic mother, a Muslim aunty sharing a house with a Christian friend, university students of different faiths sharing accommodation on campus, a Christian girl with a Muslim boyfriend. The ability of people of faith and people without faith to live together was illustrated with the case of one student's family where a religious grandmother was able to live happily with her non believing relatives and where a student who was a committed and practising Christian was able to live happily with other family members who were not.

Widening the circle, others wrote of the harmonious relations between students of different faiths within their schools. Two of the students from School C also recorded that though the student population was religiously mixed they did not argue about religion. This was also the theme of two responses from School A where the multi cultural nature of the school and the harmony between members of the school community working together were seen as a matter of pride.

*'My school is multi cultural and we are proud of it because it is a community of so many different people working together.'* (f-nr-w-8A)

References were also made to wider society, to Bradford where there are 'many different religions living together in one environment', to London where there are many religious groups living side by side, and, in the case of one Muslim boy, to British society in general where, though there are many religions represented 'there is not much conflict between us'.

Several students to whom religion was not very important saw no reason why it should be allowed to get in the way of human relationships. Pupils from School B made several comments to this effect: it is 'only religion', it 'shouldn't affect people's lives in a big way', it should not 'come between relationships of any sort', it cannot 'break up love'. The ideal of a unity of human kind ('we are all humans in this world together') beyond religious differences was espoused by a number of students. Others used our common creation by God as a reason for getting on together ('all people are created by the same God'). Teaching of different religions about peace and equality between human beings are used to support the case for living together ('every religion tells to create peace and love people') and some Muslim students made direct reference to the teachings of the Qur'an and teachings about equality between Muslim, Christian and Jew.

A significant number (21) recognised the need to develop certain skills and dispositions if this ideal of living together peacefully is to be attained. Words such as 'respect', 'tolerate' and 'acceptance' were commonly stated in the students' answers. One student set out a numbered list of ground rules including respecting other religions, not trying to impose your religion upon others and avoiding religious debate. Several of the students' responses to this question were detailed and able to combine the why, the how and the vision of the future.

*'Yes they can live together because at the end of the day we're all people and we're put onto the world to live together. If people of different religions live in a house together they should respect each other's views and beliefs and they should be allowed to practice their religion without any interference. As long as this takes place I feel that people of different religions can live peacefully together without conflict.'* (f-mu-an-54C)

Those who were less hopeful recorded several reasons why inter religious relationships might fail. Some of these were interested in the practicalities of people of faith living together in the same household and possible points of tension: issues of diet and dress, restrictions on wives and husbands visiting friends without their partners, prayer times and prayer mats getting in the way, Muslims with Hindu partners not being able to accept idols into their homes, difficult decisions about the faith in which the children should be nurtured. The detailed consideration of these questions demonstrated the students' knowledge of religious practice.

Greater degrees of pessimism were expressed by those who saw conflict as inherent in religions or in human nature. War and recollections of the Holocaust were raised as proof of religion's tendencies towards violence. One student viewed religion as a 'divide line through society' that makes people argue. Another student cannot imagine Christians and Muslims ever feeling comfortable together. Recent events in the news provided the context for such views:

*'I think people from different religions should live together, but I think it is beyond human ability to be able to. In reality people are going to believe that their own religion is superior to another and naturally in a mixed religion society there will be tension created. For example, in a documentary about suicide bombers a Muslim suicide bomber stated that the only way that British suicide bombings could be stopped is if the whole country converted to Islam.'*

(m-nr-w-9A)

Analysis of the questionnaire returns reveals some differences between the student responses from different schools. The most consistently positive answers about the possibilities of living together come from the predominantly Muslim School C. They were also more likely to support their position with arguments from religious teaching; nine out of thirteen such justifications came from School C. The responses from School A and C contained more sustained discussions of the issue, but those from A were less theologically based and more grounded in views of society with references to 'social harmony', 'multi-cultural society', 'multi-faith society', 'mixed religion society' and to 'community'. The difference in language suggests different discourses with which the students are familiar, the firm grounding in religious perspectives of the Muslim students in School C and the influence of current affairs media reports and documentaries that was acknowledged by students who were interviewed at School A. A more common theme in Schools B and D was relationships and the importance of not letting differences of religious belief come between people who should be close to each other. Some of the phrases used about coming to agreements, feeling comfortable with each other, being kind to each other, being able to accept each other's differences, have the flavour of personal advice to friends.

### **3.2.4 Summary, reflection and interpretation**

The previous section (3.1.3) ended with a reflection on the students' personal views and connection with religion. This section focuses on the encounter between the students' personal religion and the religious viewpoints of others. Answers to question 3, 4 and 5 on the questionnaire have provided insights into the interplay between students' religious views and their social networks, in particular their friendship groups and the wider school community. By focusing attention on the point of encounter between the students and others, between different religious beliefs and worldview, they provide some insight into the working out of the two key themes of dialogue and conflict in the lives of these young people.

In their responses to question 5 in particular and elsewhere in the questionnaire the students were able to set out their ideals of peace and understanding between people of different faiths. There were many references to the underlying principle of multi cultural education that encounter and familiarity with each other's lives and viewpoints leads to acceptance and ultimately to inter communal harmony. It is a theme students picked up later in their reflections on the role of religious education. There were many references to the concepts of the mutual respect and open mindedness that enable people to learn from each other. Some gave examples of a shift in their own views as the result of such encounter, a discovery of

similarities between religions, for example, and a realisation that ‘not all Muslims are bad’. The ideal of a harmonious multi faith community was very evident in the questionnaire returns though the possibility of it being achieved was doubted even by some of its proponents. The questionnaire returns spoke not only of the ideal of inter faith relationships but also of some of the realities; these ideas were pursued further with some of the students in the group discussions. In this section reflection on their views is structured for comparative purposes according to the different communities with which the children identify and within which they are learning about religions and forging their own religious identity. Groups considered will be Muslims, black Christians, ‘hidden’ Christians and non-religious students.

Muslim students reported instances of sharing views with people of different faiths but it has been seen that most of their discussions about religion take place within their faith group in a learning community where students share a common framework of observation and practice, contribute their own learning to a communal body of Islamic knowledge, discuss together the practical application of Islamic teaching to their everyday lives. This image of a community of faith and scholarship is partially diluted by the comments of Muslim students in group discussions where the teenage universals of exams, boyfriends and football clearly rival religious matters as topics of conversation. Nevertheless there is evidence in the students’ responses of a readiness to talk with each other about their faith. The public nature of the Muslim students’ faith as well as being a source of communal solidarity, can also leave them exposed. Some reported negative experiences of being targeted for racist and anti Muslim comments, though, apart from some minor criticisms, those mentioned largely related to attitudes of ‘older people’ outside the school environment. Positive comments about inter faith relations within School C suggest that anti Islamic feeling is not an issue there, though the power relations in a school with such a large Muslim majority were likely to discourage expression of negative views on Islam. Non-Muslim students at School A spoke of avoiding controversy with the smaller Muslim community there by not raising religious issues in discussions.

There is evidence in the questionnaires and interviews that Muslims are seen both as the significant other and as problematic by several of the non-Muslim students. References are made to the international conflicts and terrorism in which Muslims are involved, critical mentions are made of Muslim dress codes (‘all those disturbing black clothes’) and Muslim strictness. At the same time some students recognised the importance of countering negative stereotypes of Muslims, and one expressed his concern at hearing an Islamic woman being verbally abused on account of her faith. Whatever the non-Muslims’ private views on Islam, the evidence suggests that open tension between Muslims and non-Muslims was more a wider community, than a school issue.

Discussion with students at School C revealed another point of conflict that appears to have more influence on their thinking than inter faith rivalries, this is the intra faith division between groups of Muslims. It is a tension noted in two of the questionnaires; in one a Muslim student argued that there are bigger differences inside religions than between them. In the discussion group the boys mentioned the division between Sunni and Shia Muslims and talked, with reference to their own neighbourhood, of strong contradicting views about what is wrong and what is right in Islam leading to fights and riots. That such intra religious rivalries had a direct impact on the lives of the students was made evident by the boy who related to his classmates’ accounts of conflict by saying ‘I’ve been there’.

The black Christians have been taken as a separate group for analysis because, particularly in the South London community served by School D, their experiences of religion have more in common with those of their Muslim peers than with many of their fellow Christians. In interviews they offered descriptions of the black community at Rotherhithe where it would be hard to find neighbours in on a Sunday until mid afternoon as most people went to church, and where religious observance is spread across the age groups so that the church described has a large and thriving youth membership. Three quarters of the black Christian students said that religion was a topic of conversation with their friends outside school and religious education lessons. There was an emphasis in questionnaires and interviews on discussions about religion in times of crisis and sadness when guidance and comfort are needed.

Living out one's life in accordance with Christian moral teachings was another common theme from the black Christians; it paralleled the Muslim students' reported efforts and struggles to apply the rules of Islam to their everyday lives. In interviews this concern with Christian morality was closely related to discourse on sin and crime and the meeting of Christian teaching and criminal culture was viewed as a point of conflict and tension in an area where one student claims that 'everyone commits a crime' and sees it as a reason for boasting that he has never been in trouble with the police for 'a really big thing' or had to be locked up. Much of the discussion centred round the mismatch between younger Christians' profession of faith and attendance at church and their involvement in criminal activity. One girl traced the roots of this dilemma to the scattering of families so that instead of socialising within larger family units and carrying on the family tradition, young people go out with their friends and get into trouble.

Not all students with a religious belief felt able to discuss religion with the ready facility reported by Muslim and black Christian students, however. The results of the questionnaire revealed a discrepancy between the number of students who either described themselves as Christian or who recorded having attended a Christian place of worship, ceremony or celebration, and those who included religion in their conversations. Religion was least often a topic of conversation at the predominantly white, more rural School B. Here it became evident from the interviews that the students shared religious views so little that they could not identify which of their peers were Christians. Their estimates of the proportion of the school population with a religion varied between 50% and 3%. Someone who publicly professed a religious allegiance would, the students suggested, lay themselves open to embarrassment and ridicule and so they were likely to 'keep it quiet' and 'not shout it out'. One of the difficulties Christians might face in such an environment was that if they did acknowledge their Christian faith, assumptions would be made about the kind of Christian they were. A girls' discussion group associated Christians with 'bible bashers', with strict codes of behaviour and reluctance to join in the usual fun activities enjoyed by their peers when they go out. There was seen to be a direct conflict between Christian identity and the expectations of youth culture. The hiddenness of the Christians in this largely secular environment contrasts strongly with the position of the Muslims and black Christians in the other three schools whose religious identity is open and publicly recognised. It raises questions about the difference in the opportunities the students have to develop their religious understanding and identity within their school and peer group contexts.

This is not only an issue for the Christians but also for students of no religious allegiance who are interested in exploring existential and theological questions. Though the seven boys interviewed in School B all expressed enthusiasm for the discussions held in religious education lessons, none of them engaged in conversations about religion outside those lessons

admitting if they did they would be subjected to teasing. While the Muslim and black Christians seemed to be used to thinking through the connections between their beliefs and values and decisions, these students without the support of a religious community or tradition, lacked a forum for such discussion outside the weekly religious education lesson.

When the non-religious students find themselves in a school context where the religious identity of their peers is openly acknowledged they face another issue in their friends' inability to understand how it is they do not believe in God, and they occasionally reported receive sharp criticism for their lack of belief. Non-religious students recorded examples of their religious peers' intolerance of atheist positions, their lack of comprehension, their argument and offence. Religious people were sometimes portrayed as aggressors trying to force their beliefs on others. Distinctions and divisions between religious and non-religious were present in some of the group discussions. One student at School D described a sharply divided cohort in a religious education lesson where the 'believers' sit in one half of the room, the 'unbelievers' sit by the window distracted by the outside world and the remaining students sit down the middle. Students at School A spoke of their school as 'split half and half' between those with no religion and those who have a religion. Black students discussed the power relations between the believers and non-believers in their neighbourhood maintaining that to ensure harmony in the district it was important that the religious outnumber the non-religious. The association earlier in the same discussion of indigenous white families with unbelief and migrant black families with belief adds a racial dimension to this picture.

Exploration of issues related to the social dimension reveals the influence on the young people's religious views and identity of the faith profile of the community in which they are played out. The issues are both developmental given the inequality of the students' experiences of religion and engagement with religious questions, and social with different points of religious tension between groups within schools and communities. As institutions for education and as communities serving communities, schools are doubly involved. One of the hopeful findings to emerge from the questionnaires and interviews has been the students' commitment to a society that contains both diversity and harmony. While these have tended to be understood in terms of diversity of, and harmony between, religions (Christian, Muslim, Hinduism etc) it might now be time to encourage students to engage with other forms of diversity, (internal diversity and distinctions between religious and non-religious views) and apply to these the same interested and positive approach they have been encouraged to apply to different faiths.

### **3.3 Religious education in school**

#### **3.3.1 General attitude towards religion in school**

Question 6 in the questionnaire asked students whether there should be a place for religion at school. A large majority recognised some place for religion within the school. Reasons given for including religion were that it was important, a significant part of people's lives, or that it helped young people to learn about each other and the world. The few who said there was no place for religion at school gave various reasons: they personally disliked the subject, religion divided society, some religions would be favoured above others or that if you want religion you should go to a religious school or get it at a place of worship.

The ambiguity of the phrasing, however, meant that the respondents interpreted the phrase 'place for religion' differently as meaning recognition of students' religion in school (for example in the wearing of religious symbols), a role for religious education in the school

curriculum or the provision of a place for religious worship. This variation made it difficult to make comparisons between the different responses or find patterns across the schools, though there were some interesting themes that emerged. Of the thirty-six or more students across all schools who understood the question in terms of a place to worship all but a small minority were prepared to entertain the idea and many were favourable. In the predominantly Muslim School C, fifteen of the sixteen students who considered the option of a place of worship at school welcomed the idea. Several of their responses were couched in terms of rights and obligations. They recognised the obligation for Muslims to pray five times a day and claimed the right to practice that prayer at school. There are in fact a number of English secondary schools that do make provision for Muslim prayer on the premises. The benefits for the Muslim students are clear as such provision enables them to fulfil their obligations as Muslims without interrupting their studies. Some recognised the tension between religious duty and schoolwork.

*'Yes I think that there should be a place for religion at school for example I'm a Muslim and for a Muslim it is compulsory to pray five times a day and school causes us to miss out two prayers and missing one prayer is a sin but two a day is an even bigger sin.'* (m-mu-an-72C)

Some of the non-Muslim students identified a particular need for prayer facilities for Muslims. One acknowledged that though Christians generally pray on Sundays Muslims are obliged to pray every day of the week and so a school-based place of worship would be useful. These responses show an awareness of Muslim practice and a consideration of their religious needs. The need for a place to pray might seem particularly urgent for the Muslims, but several students from across the schools suggested provision for people from different faith traditions. Though a number of respondents wrote that they themselves would not use a set aside place for prayer, they were happy for others to do so; it would be a place 'for others benefits'. A couple of the students did notice that the logical consequence of providing different places for worship was the introduction of a degree of segregation of students along religious lines and objected to the idea on these grounds. One from School A argued that, as they already had students 'hanging around' in single faith groups, less separation rather than more was needed.

The ready acceptance of a place of worship within the school is not revolutionary in the English context as daily collective worship is a statutory requirement for English schools. As a Church of England school, School D already had a school chapel, though at the time of the questionnaire the school was awaiting the appointment of a new school chaplain. Some students at School B (one in response to question 6 and three elsewhere) expressed nostalgia for the more conscientious observance and religious nature of collective worship in their primary schools.

*'At primary school every assembly they told stories that made you think and the vicar did assemblies. Every assembly they had an orange with ribbon on it. They always lit a candle and said 'God said, "Let there be light!" Jesus said, "I am the light of the world!"' And every assembly after it we always said a thankful prayer. At high school the assembly says something like "Rugby is cancelled"'* (f-nr-w-27B)

The students who expressed this view were not practising Christians and so their enthusiasm for school worship might suggest the sense of a gap in their present experience.



### 3.3.2 Proposed contents of religious education

In the questionnaires the category of religious education content that received the most frequent mentions as something that should be taught was the beliefs and teachings of different faith traditions. Among the returns students expressed interest in exploring religions more deeply by investigating their history and the origins of their key beliefs. There was interest, too, in spreading the net more widely and covering a broader range of religions. A few students expressed a wish to include non-religious perspectives in their studies.

*'I think children/students should be taught about all religions and not just ones that rule the majority. It is also important for pupils to also learn about people who don't believe in religion and why' (f-nr-o-73C)*

Behind many of the students' answers was the assumption that religious education should cover a variety of religious traditions. In some cases they listed the faith traditions they felt should be studied. Others expressed a wish to learn about more obscure religious movements beyond the six religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism) commonly included in religious education syllabi. Students recorded some of the phenomena they thought should be studied for each religion including religious buildings, texts, beliefs and celebrations. Against this backdrop of multi faith religious education a few students made a special plea for greater focus on their own faith, for Christianity or Islam. One Muslim boy set out an uncompromising presentation of Islam that he recommended to be taught in class.

- *'That Allah definitely exists.*
  - *That Islam is the best religion in the world.*
  - *That the Day of Judgement is close by.'*
- (m-mu-an-71C)

Another Muslim student wrote that pupils should first learn about their own religion, get to know things about it that they did not know before and then learn about and acquire respect for other people's religions. Several students set out the fundamental principles that they judged should underpin religious education teaching and learning including openness to other religions and respect for other people.

*'Students should learn:*

- *Their own religion and what it expects so they are good followers of their own faith*
  - *About other religions, so they are not arrogant about other faiths*
  - *That no matter what religion someone follows they should be treated equally'*
- (m-mu-an-58C)

Some answers reflected another common element in religious education, the examination of life themes and existential questions from the perspectives of a number of religions. Focus topics of study such as marriage and the family, life and death, crime and punishment, the environment and peace were noted. Some students recorded the teaching methods that were often used to introduce these issues, the group discussions that encouraged students to 'communicate effectively' and 'express what they think'.

Variations in student responses to question 7 across the schools could be explained by their different experiences of religious education. Students interviewed at School A expressed the view that their religious education was too textbook bound, factual and limited by the

requirements of public examinations. In a multi-faith school they also objected to what they saw as a narrow focus on just Islam and Christianity. This learning context was reflected in the questionnaire in the students' emphasis on factual knowledge (beliefs, worship, teachings, origins, prayer times) and in their frequent requests for a broader coverage of religions. One requested 'a different religion every week' for study. The religious education teacher at School B on the other hand adopted a more philosophical approach to the subject using the 'community of enquiry' method to explore different ethical and existential questions with her pupils. By this method students were given a degree of freedom to formulate their own questions and pursue their own areas of enquiry. It was not surprising, therefore, that responses from this school were more vague about the content of religious education lessons than those from School A had been, and several students left the question unanswered. Marriage and religious wars were mentioned by different students as topics already covered in classroom debate. The most comprehensive school response to question 7 came from Muslim students at School C whose suggestions covered a range of faiths, different beliefs and teachings of religions and their influence on the lives of the family and of the individual, general life issues such as marriage, death, friendship, bullying, crime and punishment. They had an interest in combining knowledge of religious belief with consideration of moral practice and codes perhaps reflecting the emphasis on right action in their Islamic faith. Their comments also reflected a balance between learning about their own and other religions and an interest in making comparisons between them.

### **3.3.3 Religiousness of the teacher**

The majority of students (61 out of 93) saw no problem with teachers having a religious faith of their own. Most answers were phrased in such a way as to imply that pupils felt teachers could have a faith of their own if they wanted to, rather than that they should have such a faith. This approach was consistent with an understanding of religious education as non-confessional and multi faith. The students' responses suggested that this understanding was shared across the four schools and the different religious and ethnic groups represented by the participating students. The reasons given for affirmative answers to question 8b tended to fall into one of three categories. Thirty-two students acknowledged the right of teachers to their own beliefs, occasionally expressing this view in terms of employment rights.

*'Yes as long as they keep it to themselves and do not preach to others about it. Why should you be discriminated against in employment because of your religious beliefs?' (f-nr-w-19A)*

Twenty-four students expressed the view that while it was acceptable for teachers to have a religious faith, that faith should not influence their teaching. They stated that teachers should be accepting of all religions, be neutral in their teaching and must not try to impose their faith or religion on the pupils.

*'Yes, however, when teaching students of different religions they should put this to one side and be friendly and acceptable to all religions.'* (m-mu-an-52C)

With regard to whether teachers 'should' have a religious faith, twelve students commented that it might be helpful to the quality of teaching if the teachers did have a religious faith of their own because they would be able to see the world with a 'religious view' or because they would be a resource for the students' learning about their religion.

Those few students who argued that teachers should not have a faith of their own commented that such a faith might make them biased, that they might look down on other religions or have difficulty understanding other religious perspectives. There were fears that teachers with a faith of their own might have undue influence on the faith of their pupils.

*'No, everything they touch will be biased to the religion they follow, and without us knowing it our views might change because of what we are being told by teachers.'* (f-nr-w-96D)

Implicit in the students' responses to this question were positive and negative concepts of freedom, the freedom of the teacher to have their own religion and the freedom of the pupils not to have the teachers' religion imposed upon them.

### **3.3.4 Religious education between integration and separation**

The majority of students (78) felt that all pupils should be taught religious education together whatever their faith. Students from all schools (27) commonly recognised the knowledge about different religions that pupils receive from direct contact with members of those traditions. Others (20) noted the opportunity multi-faith classes afforded for exchanges between a variety of viewpoints. Some of them developed the idea to suggest a broadening of perspectives, an increased understanding of other people's positions and an acquisition of the skills needed for resolving religious conflict. They wrote of gaining a 'wider perspective', of being 'open minded' rather than 'narrow minded', of discussing religion 'openly' and 'respectably'.

*'I think pupils should be taught together as this will help each other to understand each other's beliefs better. It will help them to solve arguments by discussing it among themselves. This could reduce religious racism.'* (f-mu-an-57C)

Further reasons given focused not so much on the content of the mixed faith religious education lessons and the pupils' contributions, as on the social consequences of the discrimination inherent in the arrangement. Some (11) argued from concepts of equality and shared humanity that all should be given the same learning opportunities. Others (7) expressed concern at the segregation of the school community along faith lines. This concern was also a preoccupation in the discussions with students at School A.

*'There is definitely some sort of divide even if it's denied. There are a large group of Muslims who tend to walk around together and hang around together and are very rarely seen interacting with anybody from another faith.'* (f-nr-w-A)

A small minority of the students (8) endorsed the idea of separate religious education lessons. Of these some gave no reason other than to state their agreement or to describe the arrangement in more detail, one argued that this model would be easier for the teacher to work with, another thought the idea would prevent her classmates being offended by her atheist views and a third thought that separate teaching would make religious education less confusing for the pupils. In spite of these cases the size of the majority in favour of mixed faith religious education is notable as is the consistency of this view across the schools even though one of the participating school is a Church of England school and another has a sizeable majority of Muslim students.

### **3.3.5 Summary, reflection and interpretation**

While question 5 had prompted students to consider the principles on which a harmonious plural society might be based, the particular issues presented in questions 6 and 8 (a place for religion in schools, the religion of the teacher, the teaching of religious education in separate faith-based classes) encouraged them to apply those principles to the life of their school. Many of the comments generated by these questions portrayed the school community as a microcosm of a wider society. Students transferred to the school context concepts and language assimilated from discourses of liberal democracy and citizenship. Interest in arrangements for worship and in the place of the teacher's personal religion in the classroom, for example, raised issues of religious rights, freedoms and tolerance. Among those who understood question 6 in terms of worshipping space, there was an acceptance of the right of followers of different religions to manifest their faith through acts of worship in this public place, tolerance of their different religious practices and recognition that their should be no compulsion in worship.

The common student perception of the content of religious education as essentially multi faith (in answer to question 7), and the general disapproval of a segregated mode of delivery of the subject suggested that for the majority of the students their approach to religious differences moved beyond tolerance into direct and positive engagement with a variety of beliefs and with the people who hold them. Again they employed language and concepts often associated with democratic citizenship. Principles of equality and communal cohesion were evoked. Different students asked for equal representation of religious traditions, equal respect for them and equal learning opportunities for all students. In discussion one student went so far as to suggest that multi faith religious education was a human right. Another used the language of choice commending a multi faith curriculum that gave pupils the information they needed to choose between different sets of beliefs. The importance students attached to direct engagement with 'the other', not just with the other's beliefs, was evident in the general rejection of a separate faith-based model of religious education delivery. The commonality in the student responses on this issue was remarkable in view of the very different faith profiles of the school populations involved. It revealed the degree to which 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. Any idea that the interests of faith communities and inter communal harmony would be better served by educating them separately for single faith religious education was firmly rejected by all but a very few. Instead the model was described as socially divisive, 'putting divides in between people', 'putting a barrier between them', 'creating a bit of a divide'. It was seen as an unhelpful reinforcement of separate group identities leading to tension, rivalries, arguments and even fights.

In the context of the English school the views expressed by the students were largely conventional reflecting existing common practice. Multi faith religious education taught in mixed faith classes is already the norm and it may be that having experienced nothing else the students found in hard to conceive of other types of content and patterns of organisation. Although question 7 was designed to encourage creative thinking with its three wishes formula, student suggestions for religious education content tended to reproduce or extend what was already included within the curriculum; the particular emphases in each school's religious education delivery were reflected in the comments of the students within those schools. Taken together it is possible to discern within the students' conceptualisation of religious education, its content and its goals, elements of that synthesis of theories and pedagogies that constitutes the English model. Their understanding of the subject

incorporated the knowledge base of the world religions approach, the interest in key issues and ethical dilemmas of an existential approach, the justified thinking and clear expression of the philosophical approach and the open mindedness that, in the tradition of the interpretive approach, is not only interested to learn about the viewpoints of others but prepared to revise one's own. The last three questions of the qualitative study prompted the students to provide a combined description of their experiences of religion and religious education, content and organisation, in their schools, but they did more than that. The use in all these questions of the modal verb 'should' meant that the students were being asked to write about ideals and not just experienced reality. Their responses thus have a normative and not just a descriptive force. Many of them readily endorsed the official line on religious education as presented in school practices, in religious education syllabi and in national guidance.

#### **4. Religion in education: a contribution to a peaceful coexistence or potential for conflict?**

The study has been organised around three different dimensions of religion's influence on young people's lives: personal experiences, social aspects and education. By involving students from four different schools across the country, the English study has been able to explore these dimensions in contrasting contexts. The contextual variables that have affected the students' relationship to religion include the competing interests and pressures associated with the teenage years, their experience (or lack of experience) of organised religion, the attitude of their peers towards things religious. The constant factor shared across all the schools is common experience of a multi faith religious education that openly espouses the ideals of a religiously plural, harmonious society and includes dialogue between pupils as one of its teaching methods. This section brings the three dimensions together to reflect on the differentiated impact of dialogue on the students' personal religion and social relations considering in order students who work in the secular atmosphere of predominantly white schools, students who have their own strong religious commitment, students in mixed faith schools. The structure of these reflections has emerged from questionnaire findings the interpretation of which is supported by analysis of discussions held with groups of students in the four schools. The key findings that apply across the dimensions and categories are that wariness about religion in youth culture and the post 9/11 world limits opportunities for inter religious discussion in the students' everyday lives; that religious education provides a safe forum for dialogue about religious and existential issues often missing from the students' experience; that such a discussion forum is important to the personal and social development of young people's identities; that there are a number of points of conflict in young people's religious and moral lives; that dialogue in religious education lessons can provide some support for students as they face these conflicts.

Dialogical theories of religious education that have developed in a number of European states, are not only concerned with the social dimension of children's religion, they also emphasise the value of encounter with religious difference for the development of young people's personal religious self-understanding. Carl Sterkens argues that dialogue with different religious voices engages children in a continual re-examination of their lives from different angles enabling them to establish their own identity through contact with others (Sterkens 2001). The process he describes is particularly relevant to this stage of the young people's lives as they move between the world of childhood dependence into the greater independence and responsibilities of adulthood. Others (Weise 2003, Ippgrave 2001) have emphasised the decisive role of personal encounter, in particular student-to-student encounter, in this process, and have developed pedagogies where theological and existential questions are the subject of

collaborative exploration. The study has found such discussion of religious issues and personal belief to be problematic for many of the students, in particular, the indigenous white students of the rural school in Cumbria who face a climate of youth apathy and negativity towards religion. Both Christian and non-religious students who have an interest in exploring religious issues, are at a disadvantage in such an environment. They face a conflict not between religion and religion or between belief and non-belief but between interest and lack of interest.

Evidence from the Cumbrian school revealed that for most of these students religious education lessons provided the only forum for engagement with questions of religion and belief. The students admitted that in religious education they were discussing the kind of issues that they would not normally share outside these lessons and were talking about them in a way they would never normally do. The boys in one discussion group particularly appreciated the rare opportunity provided to 'show your feelings' and 'speak what you're thinking'. Boys and girls recognised the potential for personal growth through dialogue describing how involvement in classroom debate 'opens us up' and 'gives us different points of view', how they are learning when they are talking and are prepared to change their mind about the questions being discussed. They expressed positive views of the value of religious dialogue but its impact on their lives is limited by the dialogue being confined to classroom religious education for the equivalent of one lesson a week.

The issues were different for students in school contexts where pupils' faith was acknowledged and strong, in particular among the Muslim students in the Bradford school. From their responses it emerged that most of their religious talk took place with fellow members of the same community and that inter religious dialogue was not common. Reasons identified for this include both positive, the pleasure found in discussing shared experiences and interests with others from a common faith tradition, and negative, the avoidance of inter religious discussion through fear of causing offence. Nevertheless the value of inter religious dialogue was recognised in student comments on religious education and the actuality realised in religious education lessons. The practice of inter religious dialogue raises the questions as to whether members of a faith group who already talk freely about religion to each other have anything else to gain from further religious dialogue, and whether in fact they might not have something to lose through the unsettlement of their beliefs from encounter with other viewpoints. Both questions are answered by Weisse's dialogical model for religious education where he sets out clearly the distinction between a mixing of different views, which is not recommended, and the confirmation of views and strengthening of commitment that comes from comparison and contrast between one's own perspective and that of another. It is a dialogue that fosters respect for the religious commitments of others, that confirms pupils' own views and helps them to make their own commitments while at the same time monitoring those commitments critically (Weisse 2003, p.194).

This approach to classroom dialogue was reflected in some of the students' comments. Muslim students wrote of the value they found in comparing views and learning about the similarities and differences between religions. A Christian boy and Muslim girl both expressed their confidence that they had been able to benefit from dialogue with other religious perspectives and still retain their own beliefs unchanged. Others felt that critical examination of their religious views had made their faith stronger rather than weaker and given them greater ownership of their beliefs. In the group discussions some reported ways in which they had gained personally from the opportunities for religious dialogue: they had been able to put forward their own views; identify similarities between their faith and other faiths;

acknowledge the real influence people of faith have on each other; expand their horizons by exploring 'wider things'.

Bringing their own beliefs and viewpoints into dialogical relationship with those of others presented the students with more than a cognitive challenge, it also presented them with a social challenge. Many of the students' contributions recognised the promotion of social harmony as another pressing reason for inter religious encounter in the religious education class. They hoped that, by getting together and sharing different opinions, they could learn to respect each other, resolve differences, and counter 'religious racism'. Several mentions of media images of war, conflict and terrorism in the students' questionnaires and discussions, and their references to communal tensions closer to home, provided the background to this concern for mutual respect and harmony between religions. In the post 9/11 world the need for inter religious understanding is a constant refrain that has been incorporated into national guidance for religious education. The new national framework for the first time, specifically promotes inter religious dialogue and learning about relationships between religions. The framework for 14 to 19 year olds requires that pupils learn to understand the importance of dialogue between and among different religions and beliefs (QCA 2004, p.30).

Some of the comments showed that, in spite of the generally peaceful inter religious relations at their schools, many students felt the potential for conflict was there. The points of tension reported by the students were not only the meeting between religion and religion, but also between different groups within religions and between religious and non-religious students. There seems to be an inconsistency in the views of students who on the one hand argued that encounter and dialogue are the ways to reduce conflict and increase respect, and on the other admit to avoiding the subject of religion or 'skirting around' the issue with peers of different faiths or none, in order to prevent conflict. This seeming inconsistency marks out a particular role for religious education.

Religious education was seen to provide a safe structure within which religion could be discussed without the danger of it leading to open conflict. For several of the Muslim students, for example, the religious education class was described as the only place where they could talk properly about religion or have a reasonable discussion without offending the other person. Students at the culturally diverse South London school held a similar opinion. Though some of the religious education lessons were characterised by heated debates and exchanges of strong opinions, these arguments were interpreted as positive learning experiences with no danger of spiralling out of control. The students spoke of the exchanges as being under 'teaching conditions' and therefore a safe environment for airing religious views. If the teacher was not watching them, one student remarked, then anything could happen. Likewise students in the predominantly Muslim school appreciated the boundaries of the classroom that kept the discussion 'civilised', presenting as a stark contrast the conflict that might ensue were it not for this framework.

*'If you keep it civilised then it's OK to express your views and compare things and see where there's differences ...they're not drawing out guns and knives and shouting at each other, they're just talking like this, like we are.'* (m-mu-an-C)

In such a volatile environment it would seem the role of the religious education teacher is not an easy one. In one of the interviews at the Sheffield school students described religious education as 'ridiculously hard to teach' and likened the teacher's task to 'treading on egg shells' while trying not to offend religious sensibilities of the pupils. Nevertheless students at

the different schools volunteered their appreciation of how well their teachers managed to handle the different views of their pupils without imposing their own views on the class.

The results of both the questionnaires and the group discussions revealed the young people's consciousness of a link between religious difference and conflict. The wording of the questionnaire encouraged this focus but the association of religion with discord is also part of the climate of the times. Wars in the Middle East and terror campaigns inform the students' readings of religious difference in their own context even their denial of stereotypes that link Muslims with terrorism. Students at the religiously plural Sheffield school made a direct link between global religious tensions and their reluctance to bring religion into conversations with their Muslim peers.

*'Religion is not spoken about in school a lot as a lot of fights in this world happen over the differences of religion. You see it everyday, people fighting due to differences of opinion. Religion is basically one of the big causes of fighting and chaos and no one wants it to happen so we try to refrain from talking a lot about it.'* (f-nr-w-A)

The danger of this is that religious education comes to be seen as a form of therapy and the lessons as conflict resolution sessions where religious differences, as the causes of disagreement, are aired and neutralised.

The insights gained from the study into the young people's lives revealed areas of conflict other than religious difference. These were evident in the lengthy discussion among students in South London on the temptations towards crime in their neighbourhood and references in the comments of other students to arguments and fighting among their school friends. In both cases the students' Christian religion was seen not as a cause of conflict but as a resource to strengthen the believer's resolve, to counter these pressures and dissuade friends from engaging in such activities. Muslim students, too, reported how they used their religion as a guide for making moral decisions, discussing with each other how Islamic teachings might be applied to everyday realities such as bullying. The kind of religious education dialogue experienced by many of the students that brings together their religious and moral perspectives with life issues and ethical dilemmas, can encourage them to make connections between their beliefs and values, and support them in making decisions and resolving some of the conflicts they, as young people, face in their own lives. A high view of the power of religious education to change the world for the better was expressed by several of the students.

At the end of the day, however, it has to be acknowledged that religious education is not a panacea for all of society's ills, or even for all of the conflicts in the students' lives. It may be a starting point, what one Muslim student described as 'a game' that simulates reality, enables students to bring together their religion and key life issues, but the real decisions have to be made in the real world outside.

*'You know outside is like more reality. Outside is reality against the things we talk about in school. In school we just get knowing about them and outside we face them. In school they just tell us about things but when we get outside we actually do the things and have to work things out and make decisions so it's like school primary and outside secondary.'* (m-ch-b-C)



## References

- Cumbria County Council (2004) *Cumbrian Attitudes Survey* (Carlisle, Cumbria County Council)
- DfES & QCA (2004) *Religious Education: The non statutory national framework* (London, Qualifications and Curriculum authority) Available online: <http://www.qca.org.uk/6163.html>.
- Fowler, J. (1981) *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, Harper & Row)
- Hammond, J., Hay, D., Moxon, J., Netto, B., Raban, K., Straughier, G. & Williams, C. (1990) *New Methods in Religious Education: An Experiential Approach* (London, Oliver and Boyd/Longman)
- Hay, D. (2000) The religious experience and education project: Experiential learning in religious education, in: Grimmitt (ed.) *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (Great Wakering, McCrimmons) 70-87
- Home Office (2001a) *Building Cohesive Communities: A Report of the Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion* (London: Home Office)
- Home Office (2001b) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent review Team chaired by Ted Cantle* London: Home Office
- Iprgrave, J. (2001) Pupil to pupil dialogue in the classroom as a tool for religious education *Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit Occasional Papers II*, University of Warwick, Institute of Education
- Jackson, R. (1997) *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (London, Hodder and Stoughton)
- Jackson, R. (2004) *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (London, RoutledgeFalmer)
- Loukes (1961) *Teenage Religion* (London, SCM Press)
- ONS (2001) *Census of Population* (London, Office for National Statistics)
- Ouseley, H. (ed.) (2001) *Community Pride not Prejudice: Making Diversity Work in Bradford* Bradford: Bradford Vision
- Russell, M. (2007) Race relations action call in: *Sheffield Star* (Sheffield) 5 June
- Schools Council (1971) *Working Paper 36: Religion in Secondary Schools* (London, Evans/Methuen)
- Schools Council (1977) *Discovering an Approach: Religious Education in Primary Schools* (London, Macmillan education)

Smart, N. (1968) *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (London, Macmillan)

Smart, N. (1973) *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London, Macmillan)

Southwark Council (2005) *Rotherhithe Community Profile* Southwark Council

Sterkens, C. (2001) *Interreligious Learning: The Problem of Interreligious Dialogue in Primary Education* (Leiden: Brill)

Weisse, W. (2003) 'Difference without discrimination: religious education as a field of learning for social understanding' in: Jackson, R. (ed.) *International Perspectives on Citizenship, Education and Religious Diversity* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Wright, A. (1993) *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (London, David Fulton)

Wright, A. (2000) The spiritual education project: cultivating spiritual and religious literacy through a critical pedagogy of religious education, in: Grimmit (ed.) *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (Great Woking, McCrimmons) 170-87

Wright, A. (2004) *Religion, Education and Post-Modernity* (London, RoutledgeFalmer)