Challenges for religious adolescents in English secondary schools

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Introduction

It has long been asserted by the world's religious traditions that religious beliefs and practices are fundamental to character formation and moral development. Reflecting the historic settlement between Church and state regarding education in 1870, currently, English secondary schools of all types purport (and in most cases are legally bound) to promote the 'spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' of their pupils (DfE 2011, n.p.). In addition to the provision of state-funded 'Faith' schools (see DCSF 2007), for these ends, legislation stipulates the mandatory provision of 'Religious Education' (RE) (DCSF 2010) and daily acts of 'collective worship' in all state-maintained schools (DfE 1994; DfE 2012).

There is a small but growing body of research, however, which suggests English secondary schools and the secondary school curriculum can present a number of challenges to students who practise or adhere to a religion (e.g. Nesbitt 1998; Ipgrave 1999; Weller *et al*. 2001; Ipgrave & Mckenna 2008; Head 2009; Hassan 2010; Strahn 2010; Moulin 2011). In this paper I identify six general kinds of challenge to religious adolescents presented by secondary schools using the data generated by my doctoral study of religious identity among adolescent Christians, Jews and Muslims.

This present study follows the success of an earlier study (Moulin 2011) which explored the perspectives of religious students of their RE lessons specifically – now one of the most read articles in the British Journal of RE (Taylor and Francis 2012). This paper is intended to briefly present unpublished data that I am currently in the process of writing-up.

Methods

In 2010 and 2011, I conducted 28 group, 12 pair and 14 individual interviews with 100 participants between the ages of 12-19 in three English cities at eleven sites: a Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Anglican church (with a charismatic worship style); a Quaker meeting house and a Mormon chapel; a Jewish cross-community event, a Liberal and a Reform synagogue; a community centre attached to a Sunni Masjid, a community centre gym for Muslim women, and an Ahmadiyya Mosque. The participants attended a range of school types: Independent schools; Academies; Comprehensive and Community schools; Voluntary- aided and Voluntary-controlled schools and Sixth-form colleges.

Reflexivity and transparency are important in all research. This study is based upon the assumption that religious communities have the right to exist in a liberal democracy and individuals and communities have freedom of religious belief. As to my own religious position, I am a lay Roman Catholic with an interest in dialogue with other faith traditions and I currently run an inter-denominational chapel at Somerville College.

At each of the fieldwork sites I conducted one or more loosely-structured initial group interviews with volunteer adolescent attendees of the religious organisation. A series of 'main' open questions (Rubin & Rubin 1995) about experiences of different aspects of school were used as a basis for all of the group interviews. From the data generated in these

interviews, I picked out themes, and ambiguities, to inform the questions I would ask in follow-up group, pair or individual interviews with the same participants as part of a 'continuous' or 'emergent design'(Rubin and Rubin 1995; Morgan, Fellows, & Guevara 2008).

The rich data generated by this method provided an in-depth insight into the 'sensitive topic' (Lee 1993) of the experience of attending secondary school as a religious adherent. The analysis conducted for the larger study was primarily inductive but using a theoretical framework based upon the concept of religious identity (Mol 1979; Seul 1999; Schachter 2005; Peek 2005; Hemming & Madge 2011). The data presented in this paper uses a more deductive approach. Rather than giving a comprehensive analysis, I give an overview of the kinds of 'challenge' reported by participants. These are illustrated by representative examples selected because of their salience. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

Challenges to religious adolescents

I give descriptions of six kinds of challenge reported by participants. 'Challenge' denotes a concern or problem raised by participants about their experience of school as a practising member of a religious community. It is of importance that instances of each of the six kinds of challenges presented in this analysis were reported by Christians, Jews and Muslims, and by those who attended all school types. For this reason, in this analysis, the participants are treated as a whole as 'religious adolescents' (as defined by regular attendance at a place of worship) but the religious affiliation and type of school attended is noted in the examples to illustrate the congruity of perspectives across diverse religious, geographical, and educational contexts.

1) *The general climate and values of secondary school peers*

Secondary school students who regularly attend and participate in religious activities outside of school are a minority in England (Kay and Francis 2001). Belonging to this kind of minority can be an alienating experience at secondary school.

> I'm like the only Jew in the school - well, the only practising Jew in the school …
> it's weird because no-one understands anything.
> David, Jewish, Year 8, Community school. [pair interview]

Research conducted in England and comparable national contexts suggests that as minorities, the values of largely secular secondary school peer groups in Western societies can clash with those of religious adolescents who have had a traditional religious upbringing (Zine 2001; Peek 2005; Ipgrave & Mckenna 2008; Hassan 2010). While previous studies tend to focus on Muslim students, the findings of my study suggest that similar issues also exist for Christian and Jewish students. For example, Jack felt that his experience of school was completely different from that in the Quaker community.

> For me it [school] is completely detached. Most of the time I've got school here and everything else over there. When you go on the Quaker weeks in the summer, it's just completely different and then when I come back to school it's completely gone again so I don't feel there is much of a connection.
>
> Jack, Quaker, Year 11, Boys' Independent school (Anglican foundation) [group interview]

Even those in Faith schools could find the lack of observance among secondary school peers 'shocking' in comparison to family life.

In my school, although my school is officially Orthodox, I am pretty sure a large chunk of our year don't keep Kosher, or what I see as basic things of being Jewish; others don't do it at all. … and I found it quite shocking.
Jacob, Orthodox Jew, Year 9, mainstream Orthodox Jewish school [group interview]

Participants explained that being around non-religious peers could be difficult because of the difference between secular culture and religious values and norms. Blasphemy and swearing were considered offensive, challenging and pervasive at secondary school by Christians. While older participants of all religions felt teenage life as a member of a religion could be harder as their school peers would engage in violence, smoking, drinking, drugs and sex – activities (usually) outside of school in which they did not wish to be included, but often formed the basis of school friendship groups.

…because we don't drink or we don't party people exclude you from their friendship circle and they don't include you because they believe different things
Phoebe, Mormon, Year 12, Comprehensive school [pair interview]

2) *Name-calling, taunts and bullying*

Research suggests secondary school students can use name-calling and taunts relating to religious and ethnic identity (Weller *et al*. 2001; Rymarz & Graham 2006; CST 2012). Participants of all traditions in my study reported instances of name-calling based on ethnic slurs or religious stereotypes.

For Christians, name-calling followed denominational stereotypes. Ben explained that his peers would shout 'silly' things at him. When asked the nature of these comments, he explained.

Oh, just stuff like Catholics are not allowed to use condoms or giving the world Aids and stuff, or 'Ben, did you get raped by the Pope?'

Ben, Roman Catholic, Year 9, Independent Boys' school (Anglican foundation) [individual interview]

Protestant Christians on the other hand were called 'Bible-bashers.'

I've had the odd issue with a few people in Year 10 before, where they've mocked me for it [being Christian]… For example, in a classroom that my form is, where I am registered every day, is also their English classroom. So on the backs of some of the tables, they might have written some things … Bible-basher, and other things of that sort of nature.

Tobias, Anglican (charismatic), Year 11, Voluntary-aided Catholic Comprehensive school [individual interview]

Mormons reported comments associated with anti-Mormon stereotypes.

they [peers] say 'oh there is this girl in my class, oh don't talk to her she's got loads of mums'

Catherine, Mormon, Year 12, Comprehensive school [pair interview]

Jews in non-Jewish schools explained how 'Jew' was used as a derogative term for Jews (and non-Jews) similar to the way 'gay' was used as a derogative.

it ['Jew'] is used as a slang word, like: 'oh shut-up, Jew!'

Hannah, Jewish, Year 9, Comprehensive school [group interview]

Muslim participants, on the other hand, observed that racial slurs, in particular 'Paki', could be heard on a frequent basis in their schools as well as names with more religious connotations, such as describing religious-looking Muslims as 'Taliban.'

3) *The philosophical, theological and political contentions of peers*

Participants from all religions reported philosophical, theological or political questioning by peers. For Christians, peers could challenge Christian beliefs by philosophical or theological argument and questioning.

I have a particular friend who is very atheist and she'll at any opportunity challenge my religion. A conversation we were having the other day she said how it was funny that I could fall for this whole God thing and she like claims that she wishes Richard Dawkins had arrested the Pope and stuff …

Joyce, Roman Catholic, Year 10, Girls' Independent school (Anglican foundation) [group interview]

Although, less frequently reported, members of non-Christian religions also described instances of debates with atheists, which could sometimes become hostile arguments.

it's us Muslims versus the atheists all the time, because it was like half and half split atheists/Muslims. And at one point we annoyed the atheists so bad because we threw all these facts at him [an atheist] and he said 'Go waste your time in the Mosque'

Amir, Muslim, Year 11, Foundation school [group interview]

For Jewish participants, however, debates with peers were usually about the politics of the Middle East rather than theological matters. These were typically instigated by others who were critical of the actions of the state of Israel.

there is a Muslim boy in my class and he asks me about my opinion all the time because he's got a really strong opinion about it [Israel] and I don't have one and he is – sort of – bemused by the fact that I would rather not start a big debate about Israel

Rachel, Liberal Jew, Year 11, Community school [group interview]

4) *Reported distortion and critique of religion in the curriculum*

Participants of all faiths aired concern about the representation of their religion in the curriculum, particularly RE lessons. Several studies have found that students who are members of religions can be critical of RE, particularly in the respect that it does not recognise the perspectives of minority religious groups, or represent religious traditions accurately or fairly (Nesbitt 1998; Ipgrave 1999; Weller *et al* 2001; Head 2009; Jackson *et al*. 2010; Moulin 2011). Some educators have also argued that RE can present secular, inaccurate or distorted accounts of religions, or encourage its critique (Thompson 2004; Copley 2005; Hayward 2006; Strahn 2010).

Muslim participants were concerned with Islam being associated with 9/11 and violence – a recent trend in English RE (see Moulin 2012). For Jews, often Judaism was represented as Orthodox Judaism, which was a problem for Reform and Liberal Jews as well as less-observant Orthodox participants.

> when we learn Judaism … we won't be learning about Reform. If we are learning about Orthodox Judaism, a lot of stuff like people are taught, people assume that I am the same. So if they say Jews believe this, blah, blah, blah everyone looks at you and is 'really?' And you're like 'no.'

> Lois, Reform Jew, Year 8, Independent school [Anglican foundation]

Christians explained RE could be challenging to faith rather than representing it.

> Philosophy and religion [RE] is hard for me because it's against God rather than being for God… He [the teacher] always has all these arguments and debates throughout … I don't see how that is religion

> Anita, Baptist, Year 9, Community school [group interview]

5) *Lack of provision or inappropriate provision of facilities to perform religious practices*

The lack of provision of prayer spaces, limited leave of absence for religious festivals and a lack of understanding regarding fasting in European schools are of concern to Muslim students and Muslim communities (Weller *et al*. 2001; Østberg 2001; Ipgrave & McKenna 2008). Muslims who took part in this study held similar perspectives.

Christians in my study thought collective worship was problematic, although some explained that it did not take place in their Comprehensive and Community schools. These findings resonate with Gill (2004), who found that collective worship in English secondary schools was either entirely flouted or did not resemble acts of worship.

> It [assembly] is more 'why don't you pick up litter in the playground?', or 'you're going to get banned from the year area': it's not like really moral and deep.

> Ambrose, Roman Catholic, Year 11, Comprehensive school [group interview]

In Church schools, Christians could also be critical of the worship provided, either because of denominational difference or because of its compulsory nature.

> Yeah, they like at Mass half way during the day we'd all be sat in alphabetical order or something and when we're praying and stuff I take it really seriously and all my friends is mucking about and they're looking at me and I find it hard to concentrate.

Stacy, Roman Catholic, Year 10, Voluntary-aided Catholic Comprehensive school [group interview]

Jews reported problems with attending school and observing Jewish festivals.

Sometimes the holidays can be inconvenient so because being Jewish I would take a day off on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur like most other Jews in the school whereas everybody else would stay in school. Like I missed some drama controlled assessment because I was away and the problem was catching up.

Michael, Jewish, Year 10, Voluntary-aided Anglican school [group interview]

6) *Reported teacher bias or prejudice*

Negative relationships with teachers and perceptions of bias, unfairness, prejudice, and stereotyping have featured in Muslim students' perspectives in studies in Western countries (Weller *et al*. 2001; Zine 2001; Hassan 2010). Muslim participants also reported these concerns in my study. There was perceived racism and Islamophobia among white or 'Christian' teachers. Participants felt that religion could be more of an issue than race in terms of this prejudice. One participant even reported his science teacher calling a religious-looking Asian pupil 'Osama Bin Laden' as a joke.

Christians and Jews also claimed teachers (and schools themselves) could be biased. Some Christians explained that peers using 'Oh my God' or 'Jesus Christ' as exclamations with impunity from teachers in these schools demonstrated unfairness towards Christianity as students were continually urged to respect other religions, particularly Islam. Teachers could also seem to promote atheism.

Our teacher is always going on about if God exists, then why does he let all these things happen… and he's pretty much telling us how there mustn't be a God because of all these bad things that happen.

Anita, Baptist, Year 9, Community school [group interview]

Some Jews were disappointed in the way schools dealt (or did not deal) with anti-Semitism, while less observant Orthodox Jews, Liberal and Reform Jews in Jewish schools also felt that teachers could be biased towards Orthodox Judaism.

[The JS teacher] just tells it from what he thinks and he's, like, very passionate about it … if you wanted to say something else that is not Orthodox, they'll just be like 'this is Orthodox and you have to learn the Orthodox way'
Judy, Orthodox Jew, Year 11, mainstream Orthodox Jewish school

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a brief overview of six kinds of challenge reported by Christians, Jews and Muslims of their secondary schools and related them to some previous research. Some of these challenges are from peers, but others relate to the structure of the school, the nature of the curriculum and the practice of teachers. The challenges were often perceived by participants to create an over-all environment where religious identities, beliefs and practices were maintained and formed in spite of schooling, rather than because of it.

The reported challenges could potentially, contrary to some interpretations of present legislation and stated educational aims, inhibit religious practice, and challenge religious adolescents' religious beliefs. For adherents and representatives of religious communities, therefore, these challenges potentially threaten what could be considered legitimate (or paramount) features of spiritual, moral, or character development.

Of course, I have only selected a few representative examples from my data, and the study itself does not aim to produce generalizable results. As an exploratory study, however, it brings to the fore issues pertinent to teachers, school administrators and religious community youth workers, and not least, concerns pressing to adolescent Christians, Jews and Muslims themselves.

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