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Giving voice to ‘the silent minority’: the experience of religious students in secondary school religious education lessons

Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of secondary school students from religious backgrounds in Religious Education (RE). 16 loosely structured, group, pair and individual interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 34 school-age members of four religious communities: one Jewish and three Christian.

The findings make a useful contribution to on-going debates concerning pedagogy and practice in secondary RE. Members of the religious communities consulted often found their tradition stereotyped and simplified in RE lessons. Respondents also found that at times they were expected to be, or felt the need to be, spokespeople or representatives of their religion. However, experiences of religious intolerance and prejudice, or the fear of it, were common. This led to some students being reluctant to reveal or discuss their religious identity in lessons.

Key words: religious education; student experience; Christianity; Judaism

Introduction

Religious educationists in the UK have long sought to find a pedagogical solution to the apparent discrepancy between the secular demands of modern society, the educational discourse of the secondary school, and religion. In *Pedagogies of Religious Education* Grimmitt notes that contemporary models of RE attempt to bring education and religion ‘into a relationship within the context of a secular educational system’ (2000:17). Rudge (1998) highlights this common project by coining the term ‘silent majority’ to indicate the mass of non-religious students that RE should seek to accommodate.

The various pedagogical approaches advocated to resolve this tension often rest upon different epistemological conceptions. For example, Wright argues that religions are social facts, available for scrutiny with the philosophical apparatus of critical realism. Erricker and Erricker on the other hand, dispute the possibility of an objective understanding of religious traditions, and opt for an anti-realist pedagogy that allows the child to construct his or her own ‘narratives’. Jackson advances an ‘ethnographic’ approach that seeks to present religions as fluid cultural entities, whose adherents have complex and changing relationships with their own traditions. A polemic exchange between these opposing conceptions has ensued, with each pedagogue criticising each other (Erricker and Erricker 2000; Erricker 2001; Jackson 2004b, 2008; Wright 2001, 2008).

RE provision in English schools has also received substantial criticism from other observers. Thompson (2004a, 2004b) argues that RE has become a form of confessional secular humanism. According to her history of RE (2004b), liberal Christian educators in the 1960s capitulated to the humanist lobby and RE became a subject that taught a form of secularised Christianity. While not advocating a return to a form of explicitly confessional RE, as Thompson does, Copley (2005) claims that RE is guilty of secular indoctrination and bias. He speculates on the possible effect of the multi-faith, religious studies approach to RE

on students' impressions of religion. He uses the analogy of visiting a museum, zoo or Jurassic park to indicate the odd picture of religion that may be presented to students. Religions in RE 'are alive, but they contain rare and unusual animals, endangered species, which we do not meet in everyday situations' (Copley, 2005:120). Others have also criticised the representation of religions in the RE curriculum on the grounds of simplification, stereotyping, distortion and misrepresentation of religions (Jackson, 2004a; Barnes, 2006; Hayward, 2006; Ofsted, 2007).

Curiously, in the discussion and debate about the different pedagogical approaches and their assumptions, little empirical research has been conducted. Grimmitt observes: 'it is quite remarkable that to date there have been no extended, independent evaluations of any of the pedagogies' (2000: 22). In addition, it seems to have been presumed, as Rudge and Grimmitt tacitly assume in their analyses, that it is predominantly the non-religious students that may not see the value of RE in today's society.

Studies have been executed in England that explore, or touch upon the experience of students in secondary school RE (Ipgrave and McKenna, 2008; Bertram-Troost and O'Grady 2008; McKenna, Neill, and Jackson, 2009; Jackson, Ipgrave, Hayward, Hopkins, Robbins, Francis and McKenna, 2010), but with the exception of Ipgrave's (1999) study of Muslim students' perspectives of RE lessons, the experience of *religious* young people in non-denominational or 'open' RE as the prime focus of investigation has been neglected. This study was therefore designed to give voice to the views of religious students from two traditions with the hope of discovering and exploring their perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the RE lessons they received in their secondary schools.

Methods

The principal methodological foundation of this exploratory study was to use a flexible, inductive paradigm which made as few assumptions about religious students and their perceptions of RE as possible. This project did not attempt to measure or define 'religious' students in any other way than using a sample of young people who regularly attended a youth group, with religious purpose, organised by a religious organisation. As this project set out to understand the experience of 'religious' students in contemporary 'non-confessional' RE, one criterion of the sampling procedure was that the young people received 'open' RE that was not based on their own tradition, i.e. they did not attend faith schools of their own faith. The project did not set out with any further preconceived notions or assumptions about the relationships between age, gender, religion, expertise of teacher, the type of schools attended and the experience of the respondents. Rather, these differences were to be investigated through a reflexive, iterative and in-depth research method.

Interviews were conducted at the places of worship of four religious communities: a Roman Catholic youth group; an Evangelical Anglican youth church; an Anglican youth Bible studies group, and a Jewish and Hebrew studies group at a Jewish community centre. A mixture of loosely structured group, pair and individual interviews were conducted with the aim of sensitively collecting the perspectives of the young people. Initially group interviews were carried out to set the young people at ease, and also to draw out a variety of responses and issues (Lewis, 1992; Fontana and Frey, 2000). After a rapport was established, pair and individual interviews were conducted on different occasions. These served as a way of exploring individual respondents' views further, and also became a form of respondent validation. 16 in-depth loosely structured interviews were carried out, comprising of 4 initial phase one group interviews, and 12 second phase follow-up interviews. 14 male and 20 female respondents between the ages of 12-19 took part: 8 in KS3, 16 in KS4 and 10 in KS5.

They attended a range of 14 secondary schools, including non-denominational comprehensive, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and independent schools.

Conducting the interviews at respondents' places of worship helped identify students who regularly attended a place of worship. A second advantage of this method of sampling was that the young people could be interviewed with peers they were already used to conversing with about religion in their 'naturally-occurring' religious communities. Thus the data gathered represents the views of participants of actual religious communities rather than a collection of disparate individuals grouped together by the researcher according to their stated religious affiliation.

Data analysis

As the study aimed to be exploratory, flexible and inductive, a method of data analysis based on grounded theory was used (Charmaz, 2000, 2004). The analysis was conducted in three main phases. After the initial group interview in each religious community, an analysis was made which coded significant themes in individuals' experiences. This was then used to inform the follow-up interviews which explored respondents' views further and sought to explore any disagreement or agreement with the group interviews. These interviews were analysed on their own and then compared with the primary phase interview data. Once this analysis had been conducted within each religious community, the emergent themes were compared and contrasted across the religious traditions. The third-phase cross-religions analysis was deemed appropriate due to the emerging commonality of the respondents' views, which were strikingly similar both within and across the communities, despite respondents' differences in religion, age, gender and type of institution attended. Indeed, because of the similarity of the young people's responses, regardless of the interview phase and other variables, it was considered fruitful to explore common themes prevalent in the

responses of all the respondents. The final data display, reproduced below, therefore reports key themes that emerged from these analytical cycles to render a coherent body of recurrent, heartfelt perceptions of young religious people's experiences of their RE lessons. Where appropriate, the details of respondents' religion, school year, gender and type of school are given, although, of course, all names have been changed to ensure respondents' anonymity.

Stereotyping and the [mis]representation of religions

A significant perception amongst respondents was the stereotyping of their tradition. Interviewees often felt RE lessons failed to account for the diversity within their tradition and did not represent the nuances of their own personal views. An Anglican respondent noted: *'They [teachers] make it sound like we [Christians] are all the same, like we all go to church on a Sunday and we all go home to a roast.'* Christian respondents of both denominations showed unease over the representation of Christianity in the curriculum. They were concerned that RE lessons gave the wrong impression of their faith, as intellectually untenable, odd and outmoded. As one respondent put it *'It [Christianity] is presented in such a boring way that also makes it seem ridiculous.'* A common worry was that learning about Christianity was therefore counter-productive, in the sense that it promoted ignorance and disrespect for the religion, as another respondent maintained: *'RS lessons make people lose their respect for religion, especially Christianity.'* One perceived cause of this was that respondents felt Christianity was predominantly represented as a 'set of rules'. Consider a comment by Abigail, a Year 10 student in a state comprehensive, on the 'starting point' for the study of Christianity:

Teachers always start with the boring points and always start with the rules. But you are thinking but if I were telling someone about it, I wouldn't start that way. They start in the wrong place; they start with the rules of religion.

When prompted further, Abigail felt that being Christian did not begin with a belief in, or adherence to, ‘the rules’ but began with a personal understanding, or experience of Jesus. Furthermore she felt that the ‘rules’, worship practices and ethical attitudes, were inaccurate for her form of Christianity. When asked for examples, Abigail explained that communion was treated in such a way that it seemed like *‘a stupid old custom’*; that students were taken on trips to *‘really cold old churches’*; and that the ethical content of the Bible was only considered in the context of the Biblical period and not *‘modernized’*. All of these experiences, Abigail felt would *‘just put people off’* Christianity.

These views resonated with many of the respondents’ experiences, who also found that Christianity was often stereotyped and presented as ‘old-fashioned’. Consider the following response from an Anglican Year 11 student in a state comprehensive, who felt that RE lessons presented Christians as a group of people who do not do ordinary activities:

These days [Christians] are trying to break the stereotype and some RE lessons are like [parody] ‘Christians go to church on Sundays, they do this da da da da’ like it’s routine, it’s not like what we actually do, we do other stuff as well.

Jewish respondents felt that Judaism was often depicted in Orthodox and ‘religious’ forms which failed to acknowledge the diversity of the complex identities of members of the Jewish community today. As one respondent put it, *‘they were always distinct about how Jews were’*. The interviewees typically felt that this misrepresentation of Judaism misled other students in the class: *‘they [the teachers] make it sound more simple than it is’*. Consider this part of a group discussion:

David: *[...]the little that we do [of Judaism], is outdated. Everyone who is not Jewish and does not have Jewish friends ends up thinking ... [pause] well it’s not very liberal. They teach it like...*

Claire: *[interrupting] as very orthodox.*

Ruth: *Even the orthodox stuff is not very accurate, it’s like this is what all Jews do, like really religious, like black hair, big payot all of that.*

Payot are the long side-burns that Haredim Jews wear. This group were considered by the interviewees as presented as the norm for Jews in RE lessons. The respondents felt that other forms of Judaism, such as Liberal and Modern Orthodoxy were not represented in the curriculum. Respondents considered the paucity of educational resources partially to blame for this simplification: *'the unusual ideas they have about Judaism is what they have read in their textbooks'*. They also agreed that their schools often use *'really out of date videos.'*

Other issues surrounding identity and belief, such as nationality and attitude towards the state of Israel, were not perceived to be represented in any complexity despite being part of quite focused debates on the Holocaust and conflict in the Middle East. David said of the debates that took place in school during the time of the conflict with the Hezbollah in Lebanon: *'Everyone was under the impression that at that time if you were Jewish then you were some insane pro-Zionist.'*

The respondents felt that one of the consequences of these criticisms was that the representation of Judaism in RE tended to exaggerate the differences between Jews and the rest of society, without pointing out similarities: *'Well it [RE] mainly emphasises that there are strange people that are quite unlike other people. That is the message they give out.'* One example, cited by a respondent, to clarify this, was an episode about the teaching of Brit Milah.

The stuff we did do, ugh, was circumcision. They didn't say that Muslim boys are also circumcised. No similarity was mentioned by the teacher, they just showed a video of a little screaming 8 day old baby being circumcised.

Criticisms of the representation of Judaism in lessons were often based on the perceived lack of the teacher's subject knowledge. This led more than one of the Jewish respondents to suggest the subject was counter-productive, citing teacher ignorance as the main issue. One of the Jewish respondents, Josie, a KS3 student at an independent school, was less derisive and agreed with the subject's aims in principle, but still acknowledged the same problems:

I think it is important to have some RE in schools because you need to acknowledge there are differences in people's religious beliefs, although if it is badly taught it doesn't really work.

Although there was widespread concern over stereotyping, at least one respondent in every tradition articulated that a 'basic' overview of religious traditions was worthwhile and necessary for understanding others. Another Jewish respondent noted: *'I think RE has its uses in that it stops people from being ignorant.'* Some respondents considered the simplification of religion as admissible, due to the personal nature of religious belief, even if lessons were not representative of their own views. A Catholic respondent recognized the problem of representing the nuances of religion in RE lessons: *'Trying to present a religion to a class, you are going to have to generalize for an hour and for something as big as a religion an hour is not long.'* One Anglican respondent noted:

They [teachers] say something like 'most Christians believe this', 'this is why Christians believe this' and sometimes I feel that that is wrong for me personally but as a generalisation it might be quite accurate.

The problem of religious knowledge

Respondents from all traditions contrasted the real nature or experience of faith, as opposed to the 'facts', or the representation of religion given in the classroom. They felt that this could be an omission of the curriculum or a deeper, more philosophical problem concerning the communicability of religious knowledge. Sandra, an Anglican Year 11 student at a comprehensive school, explained this problem concisely:

It [RE] is kind of like just the facts of our religion and why we believe and it doesn't talk about anything like... the love for God... what... it's hard to explain...what is in our hearts and why we believe, not because of the facts they teach, which kind of annoys me.

Mike, an Anglican Year 11 student felt that this incommunicability was due to the unscientific nature of religious knowledge; he explained this using the example of miracles: *'There is no way science can explain it [miracles] because God is greater than science and*

that's what many people aren't prepared to accept.' Judith, an Anglican Year 10 student felt that following a religion was a personal quest and therefore teaching about it was problematic: *It's like a really personal journey for you to become a religion, but then like there definitely needs to be a change in the way it is taught but I don't know how that would work.*' Elizabeth, an Anglican Year 12 studying Philosophy of Religion, realised that there was a potential clash with the 'academic point of view' and her lived faith. She felt, therefore, that a degree of detachment from the philosophical and theological influence of the AS Philosophy and Religion course that she was taking was necessary for her faith to flourish:

I will probably believe the outcome of the argument [for the existence of God] so the arguments are an interesting way of looking at it from an academic point of view, and if that helps then great and if it doesn't, well I'll look into it further, but I guess faith takes me further than that.

Christina, a Catholic taking A level Philosophy of Religion also found that she had to distance herself from her faith in lessons because of the philosophical challenges made on it:

I quite often find that in RS you quite often have to... well, not switch off being a Catholic, but take a step back. Because I mean, just because even though this Catholic philosopher doesn't make sense, [it could be thought] you're clearly a lunatic! And this atheist bloke has said something, and personally it's not what I believe, but it's philosophy so there are always flaws. And you really have to take a step back.

Teacher expertise: the importance of subject knowledge and fairness

Many respondents felt that the teacher was a key determining factor in their experience of RE. A Catholic respondent began an interview by saying *'I think it depends on the teacher you have, like all subjects, but especially in a subject like RE.'* When prompted, interviewees explained that good teachers should be able to handle debates and discussion fairly, as one Anglican noted:

I find I can [speak about my beliefs in lessons] now because the teacher [...] doesn't get involved, he just regulates and makes sure people aren't shouting at each other.

Another respondent commented in a different interview on his teacher's even-handedness, after hearing about another respondent's experience of teacher bias: *'In my school they don't try and say that God doesn't exist; they just try and make it very fair.'*

Interviewees typically considered teachers with confident subject knowledge as good, and teachers with poor subject knowledge as bad. They were critical of teachers who seemed lacking in knowledge of religion, or who were lacking in knowledge of the arguments presented by adherents of religions. Respondents typically felt that in situations where the teacher lacked knowledge, or failed to represent their view of their tradition, they would have to contribute that view point. Consider this comment made by an Anglican who attended an independent school:

Actually some of the teachers have quite closed minds and that is why they are boring and why your friends don't see the other side's [religious] view unless you have the debate.

Respondents felt that the representation or misrepresentation of Christianity rested on the teacher: *'It [the depiction of Christianity] depends on the teacher [...] if the teacher presents it in a prejudiced or dull way then the class will think that too.'* A common theme amongst respondents from the Christian tradition was that Christianity was often misrepresented and not shown the same respect afforded to other religions. Christian respondents felt that teachers could *'offend Christianity more than other religions'* and that they *'wouldn't do that if it was another religion.'* Other interviewees felt that teachers' own convictions had an impact on the way they taught: *'I think it depends on what the RE teacher believes themselves'*. Chris, a Year 9 student in an independent boys' school revealed, that: *'My RS teacher is really a strong atheist and when you do Christianity his whole thing is about proving how God doesn't exist by evolutionary theory.'* Rose, a Year 7 student at a comprehensive also claimed that her teacher argued from an atheistic perspective in class debates:

My teacher's an atheist [...] she said that herself: 'if I get carried away [in class debate] I can't really help it because I don't believe in God and I'm an atheist.'

The respondents were aware of the difficulties that teachers face in dealing with religion in the classroom. Abigail commented on RE for the teacher *'It's mission impossible'*, another interviewee reflected:

Teachers have to be careful because if they presented it [Christianity] in another way, like how we would, then students would think they were being [...] biased and turn against the religion because the teacher is that religion.

Keeping quiet; standing out

Almost without exception, respondents had experiences or views about being, or the possibility of being, a representative or spokesperson of their tradition in lessons. This role was sometimes requested by the teacher or by other students. A Catholic respondent recalled a key episode: *'In our RS class, the teacher one lesson was just bored and did not know what to do and she said "why don't we just ask Susan what she believes?"'* David reflected on a similar experience: *'They [teachers] go "rites of passage - Oh David tell us about your Bar Mitzvah."'* In addition, respondents often felt that other students could be hostile to their beliefs. Some also felt frustrated with the role of being an apologist, as one Anglican respondent declared:

The thing is, every day is 'but how can you believe in God?' or 'but why would you believe in God?' but you make up an answer, you describe every single reason for what you believe and it's not really fair having to go around reasoning for what you believe the whole time.

A Catholic respondent who had similar experiences felt that she had become a 'target' because of her beliefs, whereas one Anglican tried not to represent her views in class discussions, but would if pushed: *'if they start slagging off religion, you'll fight the corner.'*

Catholic respondents typically felt their religion made them especially conspicuous both generally and amongst other Christians. As one respondent, Christina, an A level student at an independent school reflected: *‘From what I have seen, I think Catholics do get focused on more than the other denominations. The views are seen as far more radical.’* Some Catholic respondents felt that they were picked on by students and teachers in and out of lessons because of their distinctive beliefs. As Maria, another A level student from a different independent school noted:

When I [first] did RS, I kept my Catholicism a secret but now I’m not I just don’t really mind. ‘Coz there was another Catholic person in the class and she always got victimized so I kept out of that.

Maria and Christina swapped experiences of the teacher focusing on them because of their religious identity:

Christina: I think Maria has found this as well, in the A2 syllabus there is a section on arguments for the existence of God and religious experience and both of our teachers said ‘And you are Catholic, how often do you have religious experiences?’

Maria: Yeah, like ‘Have you seen the virgin Mary?’

Christina: ‘Yes, I saw her yesterday’ - I mean what do you do?

In a different interview, Susan and Christina felt that certain issues were raised in particular about the Catholic Church’s teaching on morals. Consider this extract:

Susan: Well once people find out you’re Catholic, people very much focus on you. There will be certain issues that always come up...

Christina: Abortion, suicide, every time, abortion, suicide.

Susan: Yes, abortion, suicide, sex and homosexuality and abortion.

All the Jewish respondents recalled various episodes where they had positive or negative experiences of being the *‘only Jew in the class.’* David reflected on this at length:

When I was younger it was great. You are a token Jew. I liked that. You got a lot of popularity for it....As you got older you get more aware about what you are doing and as you grow up life becomes a lot more harsh.

Rebecca, a Year 8 student in a state comprehensive recalled a key episode which revealed her identity to her peers:

The teacher knew I was Jewish and said that to the whole class [...but] there might be people there that you do not want to know. There were people in there who I didn't want to know.

Respondents from all traditions wanted to keep their identities secret or cloaked. One Anglican commented 'You can't tell people you're a Christian, they all think that it is a stupid thing.' Another reflected on her co-religionists who did not speak up in lessons: 'you've got a lot of people that aren't willing [to talk about their Christian beliefs] because it's almost best to keep your religion quiet at times.' Ruth, a Jewish student at a comprehensive, concluded of her experience of school: 'The thing that sticks out to me the most about being Jewish in school is just keep to yourself.' Josie, fearing anti-Semitism, was also cautious about her peers discovering her identity: 'I don't keep it a secret but [...] I don't tell people who might tell the whole school and cause trouble.' Susan, a Catholic in a non-Catholic independent school, was also hesitant about other students knowing her religious background, but did not want to be deliberately clandestine.

Alongside some respondents' desire not to overtly disclose their religious identities in lessons was their perception of the curiosity of other students about their religious identity, often raised by and pursued outside of RE lessons. As Nathan, a Catholic at an independent school, noted:

I'm often surprised by the fact that people are often very interested in it [Catholicism] ... I get the most surprising people coming up to me. It's quite heavy... People in school just come up and ask me quite heavy questions.

Respondents also recalled negative experiences, some of which they perceived were fuelled by RE lessons, which had later repercussions. Ruth explained the consequences of a controversial lesson about Palestine: 'Some things that are said in RE don't have an impact

until later. Then they will bring it up and say, "Miss said that..." Other respondents felt that in their schools students were not interested in religion, as Rebecca stated of her comprehensive school: *'at my school, I don't think people care.'*

Religious intolerance

A common problem experienced by many of the respondents was intolerance of their religion by their peers. This took the form from mild hostility to the fear of violence. Rose, an Anglican at a state comprehensive felt that *'You can't talk about what you believe to other children because you will get beaten up'*. Another Anglican respondent said that he felt that his views were under attack from his peers: *'I think most students don't show an interest in my belief itself but in trying to disprove it.'* Helen, a Year 10 Anglican student at an independent school, did not reveal her faith to her friends because:

They just treat you as if you're weird. If they don't get to know you before you tell them you're a Christian, they just think you're a stereotypical Christian and "She's a Christian, she's weird and I'll steer clear of her."

Although not stressed by all the Jewish respondents, anti-Semitic incidents were frequently raised in the wider discussion about RE. Ruth said that *'there have been a few incidents when people have shouted "Jew" at me'*. David, who attends another school, re-told his experience of similar incidents, and Rebecca also recounted an issue with a craze in the common parlance of students in her school:

It wasn't aimed at anyone but people used to say rather than 'that's stupid' or '[that's] so annoying' or whatever, they would say 'oh that's so Jewish' like that.

Conclusions

The results of this study give an in-depth insight into students' experiences of RE. These are often personal, emotional testimonies that deserve examination in their own right. Yet, while

recognising the limitations of this small-scale study, it is important to recognise the contribution of such student perceptions to the on-going debates about RE.

A significant criticism of RE articulated by respondents was that their tradition was presented stereotypically, without acknowledging the diversity within it or noting the complex relationship between individual adherents and their own tradition. Jews observed Judaism was presented as essentially Zionistic and Ultra-orthodox. Christians, on the other hand, felt that their religion was depicted as simplistic, archaic and philosophically unjustifiable. These observations resonate strongly with criticisms of RE made by Jackson (2004a, 2004b), Barnes (2006) and Hayward (2006). The widespread perception amongst Christian respondents that in RE lessons Christianity is simplified also echoes concerns voiced by Ofsted (2007) which also claimed religions in the KS3 curriculum are over simplified.

The views of Christian respondents with regards to the representation of Christianity in terms of 'facts' or 'rules', and their concern with the challenge of the Philosophy of Religion to their faith, would seem to pose a perceived drawback to approaches to RE that favour a rationalist conception of inquiry into religions such as Wright's critical realism (2000, 2001, 2008). For the small group of respondents interviewed, being a member of a religion was not about adhering to a 'substantial social fact' so much as an on-going reappraisal and exploration of what their tradition meant, and could mean to them personally. It could be speculated that respondents would be more sympathetic to an approach such as Jackson's (2004b) which aims to preserve the complexities of religious adherents' identities as a priority.

Respondents also voiced criticisms similar to those made by Copley (2005) concerning the distorted treatment of religions in RE. For the interviewees, religious adherents were often portrayed in RE as out-dated like museum exhibits, or dangerous and

exotic like the inmates of Jurassic park. Evangelical Anglican students were quick to criticise RE for presenting Christianity as old fashioned, and reflected that RE was therefore likely to put students off religion. The Jewish young people felt that RE often picked upon the features of Judaism that would shock and affirm Jewish identity as out-of-the ordinary: the Brit Milah, shown in gory detail, and the payot of the Haredim. Catholics, on the other hand, felt that there was a tendency for the representation of their faith to be based on a critique of the moral teachings of the Church most in conflict with the moral values of a liberal, permissive society: homosexuality, contraception and abortion.

Almost without exception, the respondents interviewed had experienced, either at the request of the teacher or other students, the prospect of being a representative or spokesperson of their tradition. This study reveals the anguish that some students felt about being used as such. A proportion of the young people interviewed felt that being identified with their tradition made them a 'target' for prejudice or hostility amongst their peers. Some wished to keep their religious identity secret in school for fear of victimization, which many of the respondents reported as widespread and even fuelled by RE lessons. This raises an ethical dilemma for practitioners, and a major stumbling block for teaching strategies that assume students can share their own experiences and religious views in lessons. This study suggests that religious understanding and tolerance are desperately needed. Yet, paradoxically, it also would seem to suggest that the efforts to promote such understanding by the use of religious students' own contributions to lessons could prove at times to be counter-productive.

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