RELIGIOUS EDUCATION'S REPRESENTATION OF 'RELIGIONS' AND 'CULTURES'[1]

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ABSTRACT: *Multicultural education (of which 'multifaith' RE in England and Wales is sometimes regarded as a subset) was attacked by antiracists in Britain in the 1980s. Although it is arguable that not all of the criticisms were valid, the debate raises questions about the efficacy of religious education in countering racism. The paper argues that a lack of analysis of the concepts 'religions' and 'cultures' in British RE has led to a representation of religious traditions which essentialises them, playing down their internal diversity, and which assumes a 'closed' view of cultures. A more flexible approach is suggested, drawing on work in ethnography and other social science disciplines, which might better combine with antiracist stances than earlier approaches. The work of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit is introduced briefly as an example of an attempt to address some of the above issues in terms of an integrated approach to theory, the study of religions in the community and the development of religious education curriculum materials.*

Keywords: religions, culture, religious education, racism, multicultural education

1. CHANGING ATTITUDES THROUGH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

When an eminent sociologist of religion sat in on a seminar of British and Norwegian religious educators in 1994, he said at the end, commenting on the passion with which we all discussed our subject, 'the most interesting thing about you people is that you assume that what you do in schools actually makes a difference'! It needs the perspective of a sociologist to make us stop and think about some of our assumptions. Hence this preamble on the limitations of religious education [RE] as a means to change attitudes.

Although I am going to argue for a flexible treatment of concepts such as 'religion', 'religions' and 'culture' which might be more

relevant to the needs of rapidly changing religiously and culturally plural societies than those generally given in the British religious education literature, I do not think that *any* approach can solve the problem of deep seated racism. However, I do think that having an understanding of the religious culture of people in our societies might be a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for reducing racial and cultural prejudice (Jackson, 1987).

2. MULTICULTURALISM AND ANTIRACISM

The complex changes taking place in Europe following the collapse of orthodox communist regimes and reflecting economic recession have exacerbated racist activity in many European countries. Racism is by no means a new phenomenon in the United Kingdom, and, of course, Britain's particular situation gets its character largely from its colonial past. Most black and Asian British citizens are descendants of colonized peoples and popular and media attitudes still tend to be conditioned and influenced by memories of a perceived cultural and racial superiority (Said, 1981). I say 'cultural' as well as 'racial' for, during the 1980s, there has been a marked increase in what some writers refer to as 'new racism' based on supposed incompatibility of cultural traditions rather than 'biological' superiority (Baker, 1981). A good example of this as far as religious education is concerned is the following statement from a member of the British House of Lords during a debate in 1988 on the Education Reform Bill. Here there is a close association of religion and 'race' through the use of a powerful metaphor, an explicitly 'closed' view of culture and religion, and an assumption of a tight relationship between citizenship of the state and a particular form of religious faith:

> If we consider religious faith and precept as the spiritual life-blood of the nation and all its citizens, then effective religious instruction can no more be administered by and to persons of different faiths than can a blood tranfusion be safely given without first ensuring blood-group compatibility . . . Indiscriminate mixing of blood can prove dangerous and so can the mixing of faiths in education (House of Lords, 3rd May 1988, col 419 quoted in Hull, 1991:17)

As far as education is concerned, it could be argued (whatever other aims RE claimed to have) that religious education in Britian led the way in trying to generate understanding of and positive attitudes towards Asian and black religious minorities. Almost a quarter of a century ago the broadly based phenomenological work of Ninian Smart provided a methodology for encouraging young people to

empathise with the religions of others (Smart, 1968; Schools Council, 1971), while religious educators in touch with the rapidly changing religious ecology of British cities were striving to find new community based approaches (e.g. Cole, 1972). The aims of these types of multi-faith religious education are consistent with what became known as 'multicultural education' and less commonly as 'multi-ethnic' education. Many religious educators saw their contribution to multicultural education in terms of aiming to change negative attitudes towards the religions and cultures of Britain's new citizens through knowledge and understanding, sometimes enhanced by personal acquaintance. Most local authority religious education syllabuses and the new national model syllabuses of 1994 (despite some ambiguous messages) maintain this 'multiculturalist' goal. The 'Bible' of multiculturalism in Britain, the massive Swann Report (Swann, 1985), perceived religious education in this way and explicitly advocated the phenomenological approach of Smart's Schools Council Project (Schools Council, 1971) as a means to impartiality in the treatment of another's religion or faith (Swann, 1985:3.19).

In the 1980s, the multicultural approach, associated with a 'liberal education' philosophy, came under strong attack from some of those who identified themselves as 'antiracists' (eg Mullard, 1984). This antiracist position was associated mainly with a conflict theory/Marxist perspective. The following is a summary of some of the key criticisms of multiculturalism from the standpoint of antiracism.

1. Culture was often perceived in terms of a closed system with a fixed understanding of ethnicity.
2. Its treatment of culture was usually superficial, partly because of a well meaning attempt to celebrate diversity. The charge is expressed neatly in Barry Troyna's (1983) parody of multicultural education in practice in schools as 'saris, samosas and steelbands'. Such superficiality reinforced platitudes and stereotypes and hence helped to maintain racism intact.
3. It emphasised the exotic, the other, the different, perpetuating the approaches of early social and cultural anthropologists.
4. The superficiality of multicultural approaches resulted in a lack of attention to hierarchies of power among different centres of cultural authority. Cultural and religious groups were perceived in simplistic terms as holistic and unified communities.
5. Racism was perceived psychologically in terms of personal attitudes that could be changed through knowledge and learning the value of tolerance. Structures of power – institutions and social practices – were ignored.

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6. An emphasis on discrete cultures allowed them to be perceived as rivals to the national culture which, through its tolerance, allowed them to express themselves.

For antiracists, individual beliefs about 'race' and the content of cultural traditions are not perceived as the central issue. According to antiracism it is 'structures of power' – institutions and social practices – that produce racial oppression. Racist ideas reinforce and legitimate unequal distribution of power between different groups (e.g. Troyna and Carrington, 1990: 56). Racism, it is argued, needs to be tackled by challenging and changing these structures. Although not directed specifically at religious education, there is no doubt, especially with the benefit of hindsight, that many of these criticisms hold true of RE, especially with regard to some of its teaching materials and sometimes to its delivery in classrooms.

Yet, despite these criticisms, antiracism (especially during the 1980s) was limited in its suggestions with regard to the school curriculum. Some writers have offered ideas to promote a more critical stance with regard to awareness of 'institutional racism' and strategies to promote racial justice in the school. However, having criticized multicultural education's approaches to culture in the curriculum, antiracists have been short of ideas for dealing with the complex issues of culture, ethnicity and religion which undoubtedly exist in schools and in British society generally. Some have been naive in their suggestions, showing an inability to make conceptual distinctions that are familiar to professional religious educators in Britain – for example, the distinction between religious education and religious nurture (eg Cole, 1992: 247). Moreover, with its preoccupation with structures of power and its use of categories intended to eliminate the distinctions between groups, this form of antiracism has itself tended to 'homogenize' different communities. In attacking superficial and closed accounts of culture and ethnicity, some antiracists themselves have underestimated the importance of questions of cultural and religious representation, transmission and change. This point is recognised by writers who, in various ways, attempt to synthesise antiracist and multicultural education (e.g. Leicester, 1992) or to address issues of culture and 'race' together (Donald and Rattansi, 1992).

Thus the important issue for religious educators is not so much to question whether they *should* deal with the representation of religions and cultures, but rather to analyse how and why they have done so in the past and to look for new ways of representing and interpreting religious and cultural material which takes on board key elements of the antiracist critique.

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3. THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGIONS IN WESTERN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

The following very brief historical survey is intended to suggest that the concepts of 'religions' and 'religion' that are generally accepted uncritically by recent and contemporary religious educators (including proponents as well as opponents of 'multi-faith' or 'world religions' approaches) are relatively modern and are contestable. Their application to complex phenomena rooted in diverse cultural settings was largely a construction by more powerful outsiders.

Modern movements in religious education in Britain derive their conceptions of 'religion' and 'religions' mainly from the European post Enlightenment tradition. During the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries the Protestant Reformist idea of *religio* as personal piety (associated especially with Zwingli and Calvin) was largely displaced by a concept of religion as schematic, intellectualist and 'exterior', and which portrayed religions as belief systems (Smith, 1978). This concept reflected and stimulated religious conflict, and was used both to delineate groups within Christianity and to classify and encompass what was perceived to be equivalent material in non-Christian cultures encountered by the West. In the main these 'religions' were not yet given specific single word names, but were referred to, for example, as 'the Hindoo religion'. As well as reflecting western intellectual tendencies of the Enlightenment period (e.g. looking back to a golden age with key texts), the processes of defining 'other' religions reflected the unequal power relationship between indigenous peoples and European colonialist writers (Said, 1978).

At the end of the eighteenth century Schleiermacher revived the inward and non-intellectual meaning of religion. During the nineteenth century the term 'religion' also changed to include the history of the 'religions', and most of the modern names for religions were coined. For example, the earliest use of the term 'Hinduism' I can find is 1808 – by an English professional soldier in India (Jackson, 1993). By 1817 'Hinduism' was being used by certain 'insiders' and subsequently there have been competing representations by different Hindus of 'true' or 'false' Hinduisms (Jackson and Killingley 1988).

Under Hegelian influence, the reification of 'religion' was taken to its extreme, with the emergence of the idea that 'religion' itself has an essence. This tendency is seen clearly in Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Religion* (1851). Feuerbach, a former student of Hegel, had earlier written *The Essence of Christianity* (1841); both 'a religion' and 'religion' in general were held to embody an essence (Smith, 1978: 47).

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In 1891 Pierre Chantepie de la Saussaye's *Manual of the Science of Religion* – probably the first text to introduce the term 'phenomenology of religion' – was published, followed nine years later by Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900–1), providing some of the key concepts and philosophical influences for later phenomenologists of religion such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (e.g. 1938). Thus a methodology emerged for identifying and classifying 'essences' in particular religions and in religion generally.

4. MODERN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION'S TREATMENT OF RELIGIONS

Modern religious education in Britain is deeply influenced by the ideas described above having inherited the eighteenth century view of religions as distinct 'wholes' with similar structures and types of content as well as variants of their nineteenth century names. I will identify three different positions by way of illustration.

i. Early post 1944 Education Act agreed syllabuses were influenced by the relatively new discipline of 'comparative religion'. 'Religions', as they had been constructed by westerners, were to be compared in order to show the superiority of Christianity.

Thus, the West Riding syllabus of 1947 asserted that:

> The teacher should not only aim at describing the outstanding features of the great religions of the world but should also bear in mind that the study is to be a comparative one, i.e. resemblances and contrasts and the relations between the different religious systems should be emphasised. The pupil should be led to appreciate that while each great religion has made its contribution at some period of the world's history, either to man's knowledge of God, or to man's relation with God or to his fellow men, all these contributions are unified and on a higher plane in the Christian religion. (West Riding, 1947, p. 73)

The key point here is to note that other 'religions' are considered as separate systems or 'wholes', with similar structures and in competition with each other. The representation of religions other than Christianity is Orientalist in character; they are essentialised and evaluated negatively in comparison with the Christian religion (Said, 1978; Jackson, 1993).

ii. The 'world religions' movement in British RE, which has been especially associated with the work of Ninian Smart (Schools Council, 1971), and the formation of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education (e.g. Hinnells, 1970), has taken a very different attitude towards the 'religions' from that of the early agreed

syllabuses. Smart's approach (Smart, 1967; 1968) drew on ideas from phenomenology of religion (especially attempting to leave one's presuppositions to one side and endeavouring to empathise with those being studied). Great sensitivity was shown to the adherents of the 'religions' and their practices and beliefs. Nevertheless, the 'religions' were represented in terms governed by a powerful western intellectual tradition which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had defined them. The idea of a 'world religion' is an extension of the eighteenth century idea of a 'religion' and, arguably, still presents 'other religions' as structured on a parallel with Christianity. Although the term 'world religions' is sometimes used as a synonym for 'religions of the world', they are sometimes perceived as having a universal message and a doctrine of salvation potentially available to people in different cultural contexts (thus distinguishing them from primal religions, for example). They also have scriptures, a class of special interpreters and appeal to large numbers of people (Fitzgerald, 1990: 104). Many educational books and school resources operate with this idea of a religion (e.g. Brown, 1987; Cole, 1985).

The 'world religions' movement is not tied to any particular theology, and its writers are from a range of religious and secular backgrounds. What they share is the wish to present material impartially and in the adherent's terms. What they have not done much to date, however, is to be critical of the notion of a 'religion'.

iii. The most strident critics of a 'multifaith' approach to religious education in Britain are from a more specific ideological background. This is usually an amalgam of radical right politics and 'Evangelical', exclusivist Christian theology which provides the stance of individuals and bodies such as the so called '*Christian Institute*' (e.g. Burn and Hart 1988; Coombs 1988). According to this view the religions are perceived to be entirely separate wholes, but in this case there is the perceived danger that the 'non Christian' religions pose a cultural as well as a theological threat to the Christian faith and to 'British culture'. On this standpoint, religions need to be kept in separate boxes in order to avoid the pollution of British Christian culture by foreign religious and cultural influence (see Hull, 1991 and Jackson, 1992 for responses to such views).

To sum up, all three views summarised above are different from each other, yet they have in common an uncriticized assumption of separate, distinct 'religions', having similar structures and types of content.

5. How has Religious Education Represented Culture?

The British RE literature contains little discussion specifically about the concepts of 'culture' and 'cultures', much of the literature treating religion as a subset of 'culture'. Individual cultures are generally assumed to be organic and discrete, rather close to Tylor's nineteenth century definition of culture as '... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor, 1871). Thus a multicultural society is often perceived as a society in which different, distinct cultures exist side by side.

The few discussions of culture in the RE literature tend to be set in the context of wider considerations of pluralism and multiculturalism. Thus John McIntyre (1978) and Edward Hulmes (1988; 1989), to take two examples, both discuss 'culture' and 'cultures', but with no reference to debates on the subject in cultural studies or anthropology. Though they advance different views about the nature and purpose of religious education, they both assume an organic but rather 'closed' view of cultures.

McIntyre recognises the organic nature of cultures, seeing a culture as both 'the *expression* of the fundamental concepts and values of the community ...' and the 'expressing' of them, for '... culture is an activity, an ongoing concern, and not a collection of artefacts, the externals, the observables of the culture' (1.1). Although he acknowledges a dynamic element in the culture of 'western society', the degree to which it can precipitate change is severely limited, for the authenticity of cultural expression is measured against concepts and values which are immutable. The source of these basic elements, argues McIntyre, is primarily Christian:

> There is at least an historical case for saying that in western society, it is religion, and in particular, the Christian religion, which has been the source of the values and concepts from which culture has sprung. Even where there has been a coincidence of Christian and Humanist values, the weight of priority seems to lie with the former, as the inspiration of our culture (1.6).

Cultural change in western society is thus governed by reference to a fixed core of Christian concepts and values. In McIntyre's view, 'If you change what might be called the nucleus of the culture, you change the cultural expressions derivable from it. In fact you change the culture' (1.7).

Even with this 'closed' idea of a culture, McIntyre does not countenance any possible overlap between the values of one culture

and another, cultures, according to this view, might be pictured as separate, rather than overlapping, circles. Hence McIntyre argues that Britain could only be 'multicultural' in a weak sense in which the Christian-derived values of British culture allowed and enabled subordinate cultures to exist.

> The members of society of the dominant culture have the responsibility to ensure the assimilation of the newcomers, with a delicacy which does not eliminate the cultural differences from themselves, and to see that no social inequalities are imposed. (3.5.2)

This responsibility is only sustainable, says McIntyre, if the values of the dominant culture are maintained (7.2.4). Thus he justifies teaching Christianity from a committed standpoint and with the intention of producing in pupils 'commitment to the faith' (8.1) in order to preserve those values.

I am not concerned primarily with the validity of McIntyre's arguments, though the paradox of his view that a culture can both be dynamic and based on an unchanging bedrock of concepts and values is evident, as is the oddness of advocating teaching Christianity as true apparently for instrumental reasons (see Starkings (1982) for a detailed reply to McIntyre). What is of interest in the context of the present paper is McIntyre's view of cultures as discrete wholes. The only relationship between them he envisages is one of acquiescence on the part of 'subordinate' cultures to the (supposedly) religiously based value system of the dominant culture.

One of the better discussions of culture in the religious education literature is by Edward Hulmes (1988; 1989). Hulmes' approach to the issue is different from McIntyre's and is fundamentally epistemological. Multicultural education, according to Hulmes, might *appear* to give a just and fair treatment to 'other' cultures present in society. What it actually does is to concentrate on rituals, food, the arts etc, all of which are presented through a form of education which enshrines western epistemological assumptions, some of which are alien to the cultural traditions of citizens from minority communities.

> ... in practice ... multi-culture education does not reflect the variety of approaches to knowledge and to the acquisition of knowledge. It continues to be an instrument of a *particular* (and presumably dominant) *western* culture. There is a paradox here. A situation appears to be developing in which an educational mechanism (multi-culture education), ostensibly designed to reduce

prejudice, is perceived to be alien to the cultural traditions of some of the groups it is intended to help most. (Hulmes, 1989: 15–16)

Although Hulmes is uncertain as to whether a multicultural society is even possible, he argues that a first step is to take seriously in education different epistemological positions embedded in other cultures which are present in our society. A necessary condition for this is agreement on some shared values across the cultures in order to provide common social objectives and a set of procedures for this activity. It might then be possible to draw on different views of the nature of knowledge (as expressed, for example, through different views of the nature of education) in order to explore and to challenge current assumptions and values that are sometimes promoted through 'secular' education. Hulmes refers to competition and the pursuit of self interest, both of which are prized in some government produced educational documents, as values that ought to be examined critically (Hulmes, 1988: 91).

Hulmes' specific discussion of the concept of culture (1989: 16–17) especially brings forward the insight that considerations of the nature of culture ought to include perceptions from non-western sources, and he refers to the work of the African scholar E. B. Idowu for example. His view of 'cultures' is associated intimately with 'religions' but, unlike McIntyre, he sees the possibility of deliberate cultural change in the interests of social cohesion. Nevertheless, the religions tend to be portrayed as communal wholes, and the complexities of their internal diversity are downplayed. Thus, in wishing to realise a goal of education for cultural diversity, he says:

> How reasonable will it turn out to be that Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Humanists and others are prepared to compromise on matters of cherished convictions in the common interest? Or will each community insist on going its separate way, so that 'society' is more akin to a federation, united by what might both literally and metaphorically be called its foreign policy? (1989: 25)

Hulmes rightly sees education as having an ideological role in reducing the adverse effects of inter-cultural misunderstandings and providing a forum for debate. However, although he does refer to the internal variety of cultural traditions, the chapters in the main body of the book deal principally with generalities abstracted from the 'religions'. For example, the chapter on 'Indian Perspectives' deals principally with key concepts and institutions from 'Hinduism' (122–144). Although capable of change, the religions and cultures are still

regarded as wholes. No more complex relationship is envisaged in Hulmes' discussion.

To sum up, although the analyses by McIntyre and Hulmes are very different from each other, the former offering a culturally absolutist view and the latter a dialogical perspective, they both perceive cultures as wholes, constantly shifting but essentially distinct from each other even though (in Hulmes' case) there is the acknowledgement of the possibility of values which might be shared by more than one 'culture'.

6. Debates about 'Cultures' in Social Anthropology

There is no reference to the literature from the social sciences, and especially to the debates in social and cultural anthropology, in the writings referred to above. Recent work in these fields gives a different perspective on the nature of cultures and reveals an on-going debate which can inform religious education theory and practice.

In social anthropology, just as the Tylorean view has been superseded, so has the cultural relativism of Franz Boas and his followers such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. Again the emphasis was on closure, but unlike Tylor, who saw different cultures as related but on different steps of an evolutionary ladder, the cultural relativists emphasised difference from other cultures and a high degree of internal uniformity. For Ruth Benedict, for example, a Digger Indian living in the modern world was perceived as the relic of a dead culture rather than an expression of cultural continuity in a new context. Benedict recounts a conversation with a 'Digger' informant about what both he and she perceived to be the decay of Digger Indian culture and remarks that '. . . he straddled two cultures whose values and ways of thought were incommensurable. It is a hard fate' (Benedict, 1935: 16). In Benedict's view, each culture is thought of discretely, by analogy with types of living organisms. One either has a culture or one does not; it either survives or it is lost; there is no possibility of the formation of new cultural expressions as a result of culture contact.

Clifford Geertz's view is more open. Cultures are seen to be distinct (Geertz's fieldwork was in locations such as Bali, Java and Morocco where it was perhaps easy to perceive them so) but internally highly variegated, though all the diverse parts would in some ways be connected. Geertz uses the octopus as a metaphor for cultural organisation, an animal:

> . . . whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated, neurally quite poorly connected with one another and with what in the

octopus passes for a brain, and yet who nonetheless manages to get around and to preserve himself, for a while anyway, as a viable, if somewhat ungainly entity (1973: 407–408).

This is a quite different view of a culture to McIntyre's and a more flexible view than that of Hulmes. Nevertheless there are still difficulties with it. One is the easy way in which Geertz represents people in generic terms. Through his studies of individuals, he makes generalizations too readily, for example, about 'the Balinese' (Geertz, 1973: 412–453). He also tends to over-emphasise the alienness of the other's view. However, his hermeneutical methods for grasping the grammar of someone else's discourse are suggestive and we will return to them in due course (Geertz, 1983; see also Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993: chapter 2).

The cultural critic Edward Said offers a different model, shifting the emphasis from the past to the present and paying more attention than Geertz to conflict within cultures as well as between them. Said's view is that we should attempt to think of cultures, not so much as organically unified or traditionally continuous, but rather as negotiated, present processes. His concern is more with cultural reformation rather than with the past. Said is also especially concerned with the politics of representation, with how powerful outsiders construct and represent cultures (1978; 1981), a point entirely missed by McIntyre.

The issue of how 'cultures' are represented by both insiders and outsiders has especially been debated by anthropologists such as James Clifford whose work shows the influence of post structuralist literary theory. For Clifford, there can be no 'whole picture' of a culture. A culture is neither a scientific object nor a discrete and stable symbol system which can be interpreted definitively. A culture is internally diverse and is actively contested. Moreover, its representation is inevitably deeply influenced by those attempting to interpret it, whether through their intellectual presuppositions or gender or whatever. There can be no single definitive account; there can only be better and worse accounts (Clifford, 1986: 18–19). Other voices in social anthropology have, in a sense, gone further, wishing to change the emphasis from a generic idea of the 'culture' of a people to 'sociality', shifting anthropology's main focus to the study of individuals in relationships and the interactive nature of social life (Carrithers, 1992).

7. The Relevance of the Debates about Religions and Cultures to Religious Education

These debates about religions and cultures, all too briefly summarised in this paper, are highly relevant both to studies of religious traditions and to religious education, especially in pluralist situations. In Britain a preoccupation with the debate about the pros and cons of multifaith education has diverted attention from a critical examination of some of the key concepts used in the debate. The debate has been conducted largely in a fast-moving political context, with opposing parties seeking to influence legislation and policy (Palmer, 1993; 1994). In re-evaluating multifaith approaches, attention needs to be given to the deeper issues of how religious traditions and cultures are represented as well as to techniques of interpretation, both in books and resources portraying religious groups and in methods designed to help children and young people to work with religious material. These are by no means the only issues in religious education pedagogy, but they do need to be addressed.

One possible approach, as far as curriculum development is concerned, is the one we have been developing in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit at the University of Warwick. Under the umbrella title of the Religious Education and Community Project [RECP], the Unit has combined ethnographic studies of religious communities in Britain – emphasising studies of the 'transmission' of religious culture to the young – with curriculum development which draws on data from the research studies and on theory derived from cultural studies and the social sciences, especially social or cultural anthropology. Thus my colleagues and I have been particularly interested in the processes by means of which 'culture' has been reproduced (and to some extent changed), especially through the informal, semi-formal and formal religious nurture of children and through other influences on them (see Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993 which reports studies of Hindu children and Jackson 1994 which reports ESRC funded study R000232489 on Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh children). We have found the debates outlined above extremely helpful in refining our methodology, in analysing data and in theorising about our work. The Project regards the concepts of religions and religion as modern post-Enlightenment constructions and acknowledges the role of colonial power in defining the 'other' in terms of discrete religions and cultures (Jackson, 1993; 1994). Using, in addition, the work of anthropologists (e.g. Geertz, 1973; 1983) and social psychologists interested in the relationship between individuals and groups (e.g. Tajfel, 1974; 1978; 1981) we

produced a matrix showing the interplay between the religious tradition (the most generalised 'whole'), 'membership groups' of different kinds and individual persons. The 'tradition', although portrayed variously by different insiders and outsiders, is a reference point for individuals and groups. Membership groups (themselves internally diverse and including institutions; religious movements; denominations; 'ethnic' groups; peer groups etc) evolve situationally in relation to, and sometimes overlap with, one another. The individual, although deeply influenced through the membership of groups and identifiable as part of the wider tradition, is, nevertheless, unique.

We are also aware that the vocabulary of 'religion' and 'religions' – when using English at any rate – is part of the language of insiders from each of the traditions we studied. In each 'tradition', we found a body of symbols that exhibited detailed difference but a close family resemblance across different membership groups, sufficient to argue that it makes sense to speak in a qualified way of 'religions'. In some cases (for example the Sikh one) these overlapped with a wider range of symbols (in this case Hindu ones, especially in terms of reference to the mother goddess and living *sants* or spiritual masters) and the character of 'Sikhism' was contested between different interest groups, some (such as most teachers in formal gurdwara based classes) representing the orthodoxy of 'official' Sikh history (Nesbitt and Jackson, 1995). Many children experienced a multiplicity of such influences together with representations from school RE (the 'official' view as represented in textbooks) and a range of influences outside religious traditions.

Our position on ethnicity it to take a flexible stance in a complex debate, preferring to use the term in different ways according to context (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993: chapter 11). Unless qualified, even the situational view of ethnicity (e.g. Barth, 1969) can be made consistent with the portrayal of British young people with, say, a Pakistani Muslim or Caribbean Christian background as being 'between two cultures' or as a 'halfway generation'. The view we embrace regards the term 'ethnicity' as still connoting some sense of 'shared peoplehood', distinguishable from but often closely related to 'religion', but it also acknowledges that ethnicity can never be fixed. A sense of shared descent is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of common ethnicity. At the same time we acknowledge the internal variety of ethnic groups that the 'level' at which someone expresses some sense of shared peoplehood, or is perceived to express it, may vary situationally (e.g. a 'Gujarati' Hindu might in different situations think of an ancestral background which is Kathiawari, Gujarati, North Indian or Indian).

On the concept of culture, our research data are consistent with a flexible position which oscillates between viewing a culture as a diverse but loosely connected inherited pattern of meanings or symbol systems (Geertz, 1973), but also acknowledges cultures as negotiated and sometimes contested (Said, 1978; Clifford, 1986), and whose shifting character depends also on the interpretations of those who represent them. Our research suggests a picture different from those of either McIntyre or Hulmes. The model of separate or overlapping circles is inadequate to show change over time and especially to indicate the mobility and flexibility of *individuals* in different cultural situations. In our Hindu study, for example, we used the idea of 'multiple cultural competence'. Rather than being individuals with a fixed sense of belonging to this group or that, or feeling comfortable in only one type of cultural situation, it became clear that, in general, the Hindu children we were studying could move competently and unselfconsciously from one milieu to another (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993: chapter 11). Adults, especially 'outsider' adults such as teachers, do not always recognize this capacity.

With regard to conducting fieldwork, we developed a methodology using some concepts from Clifford Geertz (e.g. 'experience near' and 'experience distant' concepts), while taking on board some of the criticisms of Geertz's work from writers such as James Clifford (e.g. Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993: chapter 2). These techniques were also employed in developing a pedagogy of interpretation for pupils. Curriculum materials which draw on the ethnographic research and which apply our interpretive methodology (covering key stages 1–3 and called *The Warwick RE Project*), are being published in stages by Heinemann. Books for key stage one pupils and their teachers, portraying children in Britain and their families from a variety of religious and cultural situations (Barratt, 1994a, b, c, d, e; Jackson, Barratt and Everington, 1994), and one text for key stage three pupils (Robson 1995) have already appeared.

8. CONCULSION

This paper has argued that some of the criticisms of multicultural education made by antiracists in the 1980s apply also to religious education. Rather than taking the step of abandoning attempts to deal with religions and cultures in the classroom, however, it has been argued that religious educators need to be critical of their assumptions regarding the nature of 'religions' and 'cultures' and to develop new modes of representation. In the case of the former, some deconstruction of received ideas about the nature of 'religion' and 'religions' needs to

be undertaken in order to enable new models to be developed which avoid the simplistic portrayal of religions as discrete systems of belief and which also accommodate internal diversity and change. In the latter case, religious educators need to question the limited range of views about the nature of culture and cultures present in the literature of their project. Representations of cultures as closed need to be rejected in favour of portrayals which reveal their dynamism, the contestability of cultural processes and the potential capacity for individuals to be able to operate in different cultural situations. In these respects, recent debates in the literature of social and cultural anthropology are especially relevant to religious educators. It has also been suggested that a preoccupation with arguments for and against multifaith education in a political context of rapid legislative and policy change has diverted attention from the more fundamental issues of representation and interpretation. A brief account of the work of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit has been offered as an example of an attempt to address some of the above issues, integrating theory, new ethnographic studies of religious communities and curriculum development.

9. Note

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