Welcome to my church: faith-practitioners and the representation of religious traditions in secular RE

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Abstract

The paper notices that faith-practitioners' involvement, as visiting speakers or study-visit hosts, is a recommended teaching strategy in secular RE. It examines problems of authentic representation of religious traditions in secular RE and evaluates the extent to which faith-practitioners' involvement as a learning strategy can address authentic representation of religions as a learning principle. Empirical data for the paper is drawn from four qualitative interviews with faith-practitioners from different Christian denominations about their preferred representations of Christianity during secular RE study-visits to their churches. The paper finds that faith-practitioners' preferred representations can be categorised as insider-institutional (denominational) and insider-personal. Together, these types of representation can complement authenticity in the representation of religions in RE because they offer particular, rather than generalised, accounts of religious traditions.

Keywords Christianity · Learning outside the classroom · Living religion · Pedagogy · Religious education

1 Introduction

In theorising pedagogy in Religious Education (RE) Grimmitt explores relationships between 'principles' and 'strategies' (2000, pp. 16–21). Principles are 'general laws' about the aims of RE normally based on judgements about the value of pupils' formal study of religions. Strategies are teaching activities that intend to accomplish defined principles. Grimmit argues that for effective RE teachers should have explicit understanding of principles in order to devise strategies that will achieve them. Principles without strategies, and strategies unconnected to principles implies teaching and learning is not fully conceived.

In RE in England and Wales, creating opportunities for pupils to meet with faith-practitioners to learn about religious experience and practice first-hand, normally by inviting faith-practitioners into the RE classroom or by organising study-visits to places of worship hosted by a faith-practitioner, is a recommended teaching strategy. Reports concerned with high quality RE promote the educational value of pupils' interaction with faith

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representatives; for example ‘Transforming Religious Education’ (2010) published by UK’s central government regulating body for education, The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted); and ‘Voices of faith and belief in schools: Guidance and a Code of Conduct’ (2014) published by the UK’s professional association for RE teachers, the National Association for Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE). The Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC) is a non-governmental body that supports excellence in classroom RE in England and Wales (REC online). It’s recently commissioned report ‘Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A national plan for RE’ (2018) also endorses opportunities for interaction between RE pupils and faith-practitioners as a teaching strategy for good RE. Religious Studies scholars, such as Gregg and Scholefield, argue that “encountering *living* religion is a very important part of the study of religion” when managed as an “embedded pedagogy” within the curriculum (2015, p. 86, 160). Wide endorsement of pupils’ first-hand interaction with faith-practitioners as a teaching strategy for RE raises the question, what principle does this strategy address?

This paper explores pupils’ first-hand interaction with faith-practitioners as a strategy for the principle of authentic representations of religions in RE. The paper begins by examining custody of representations of religions in RE; next it problematizes the notion of authentic representations of religions in RE; then the method for the empirical strand of the paper is explained followed by the results of interviews with four Christians from different denominations about their input to secular RE. The final discussion draws on the interview data to evaluate faith-practitioners’ involvement in RE as a strategy for the principle of authentic representation of religions in RE.

The education policy context of the paper is England and Wales, though the themes raised are wider ranging (see for example, Tayob 2018). The type of RE discussed in this paper is secular, multi-faith RE that is a compulsory curriculum subject in non-faith schools in England and Wales. The term ‘faith-practitioner’ is used in this paper to denote someone who is an active adherent of their chosen religious tradition, and whose practice includes a spiritual dimension.

2 Representing religious traditions in secular RE: custody and responsibility

Historically, RE in England and Wales was concerned with religious, principally Christian, nurture (Cruickshank 1963; Copley 2008). Secular, multi-faith approaches to RE interested in teaching pupils about different religious traditions began to emerge from the 1960s onwards (Cox and Cairns 1989; Freathy and Parker 2015). The 1988 Education Reform Act made RE a compulsory curriculum subject in England and Wales. It recognised and partially endorsed multi-faith RE in non-faith schools where the RE syllabus was devised by the local authority. Section 8 (3) of the 1988 Education Reform Act states that locally agreed syllabuses shall ‘reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain’ (Education Reform Act 1988, Section 8 (3)). Since the 1988 Act, it is a normative expectation that RE in non-faith schools in England and Wales will be secular and multi-faith. The legal requirement for compulsory RE combined with the shift from religious nurture to the normative expectation that RE in non-faith schools will be multi-faith and secular, gave secular education a new, important responsibility of representing religious traditions in classroom RE; which in other geographic

contexts Tayob describes as, ‘the particular representation of religions in the public sphere [of the] classroom’ (2018, p. 146; also Thanissaro 2010).

McCutcheon (2001, 2012) has argued that academics engaged in scholarship and research in Religious Studies should be cultural ‘critics not caretakers’ because their role is to actively theorise religion/s as collections of social constructions not to mediate on behalf of religion/s. Debate stirred by McCutcheon’s argument (Omer 2011; The Religious Studies Project 2012) sparks discussion about representation, and custody of representation, of religion/s in secular education. The case of RE in compulsory education has categorical differences to academic study and research in Religious Studies in universities. Its compulsory status on the curriculum means that school pupils are legally required to study RE (notwithstanding the right to withdraw clause; Loudon 2004; Lundie and O’Siochru 2019); it’s not optional as it is for academics or university students. This means that under central government legislation religious traditions are objects of study in formal education regardless of whether faith-practitioners desire or approve it (Thanissaro 2010, p. 70 citing Backus and Cush 2008). This gives authenticity in the representation of religious traditions in RE two areas of importance; pedagogical veracity that pupils’ learning about religions is accurate, and moral obligation to the adherents of religious traditions which are objects of study because for people to whom their religion matters, it often matters very much. Compulsory RE is not a ‘caretaker’ of religions in the sense of apologetic mediation, but, arguably, is custodian of the way in which the religious traditions in its syllabuses are represented. For McCutcheon the roles of caretaker and cultural critic are mutually exclusive in Religious Studies scholarship (2012), whereas in RE the role of custodian has to align with the critical distance conventional in secular education.

Amongst many other things education is a medium of communication. It transmits representations of objects of study as information. Representation means to re-present (present again) an object; a reconstruction removed from the original object. In RE religious traditions are reconstructed, represented and transmitted through syllabus design and through teaching activities. Syllabus design is a process of curation necessary to decide which topics to include and exclude in a programme of study that inevitably shapes how religious traditions are represented in RE (Hayward 2006, p. 154). In local authority non-faith schools in England and Wales RE syllabuses are devised in each authority by an agreed syllabus conference comprised of committees with representatives from ‘(a) Christian and other religious denominations as, in the opinion of the authority, will appropriately reflect the principal religious traditions of the area, (b) the Church of England [which is not represented in committee a], (c) teachers and (d) the local authority’ (Education Reform Act 1988, section 11, (4) (a) (b)). The localisation of syllabus design means it’s hard to determine consistency on how informed committee (a) members are about the diversity of the religious traditions they represent and their the impact on the representation of religious traditions in RE beyond ratifying the combined conference decisions (Hayward 2006, p. 154; Thanissaro 2010, p. 74). The local authority has final approval of an agreed RE syllabus within its jurisdiction. Teaching activities undergo layers of filtration; from the creation and teachers’ selection of resources, teachers’ interpretation and teaching of resources, and pupils’ own interpretations of the information presented. Syllabus curation and the layers of filtration in teaching and learning makes representing religious traditions in RE an interpretive process (Thanissaro 2010, p. 73). Religious traditions are being represented, rather than representing themselves. Interpretation is hegemonic because power for meaning-making rests with the agent performing the interpretation; in this case secular education mediated through syllabus design and classroom teaching activities. However well-intended and carefully thought-out the representations of religious traditions in RE,

custody of meaning is deflected from the object of representation to the agent of representation. To have power over custody of meaning is an important responsibility. For RE, the responsibility is for accurate and authentic representations of religions.

3 Challenges to the authentic representation of religious traditions in RE

In this paper ‘authenticity’ describes representations of religious traditions that are genuine and natural, rather than manufactured. Authentic representation of religious traditions is a challenging, many would argue impossible, enterprise due in part to the contested nature of ‘religion’. Yet the discussion above explains how secular education has been manoeuvred into representing religions in the public sphere of the RE classroom and why this responsibility gives the quixotic quest for authenticity importance.

Revell (2008) discusses how numerous difficulties RE encounters in representing religious traditions are linked to the evolution of RE in education policy, which led to a narrow curriculum that typically misrepresents religions as static, monolithic and benign. She argues, along with Erricker (2001) and Tayob (2018), that representations of religions in RE are influenced by a country’s lingering dominant public representation of religion. Revell (2008) and Nesbitt (2004, p. 141) notice that ‘religion as a unified system of belief and practice dominates in religious education’. Nesbitt explains this approach is problematic because it judges people’s everyday religious beliefs and practices against internal orthodoxies to which they may not wholly conform.

Practical constraints to content coverage in formal education, such as timetabling and assessment, limit representation of the characteristic inter and intra diversity of religious traditions (Hayward 2006, p. 158, 162). People’s individual experiences of, and engagement with, religion cover a myriad of different, sometimes dissenting, beliefs and practices; what Wright describes as ‘qualitative pluralism’ (Wright in Grimmitt 2000, p. 177). Jackson (2004) and Barnes (2014) acknowledge that diversity occurs within classrooms and in wider communities, and examine challenges and RE’s potential responses to teaching about religions in the contexts of religiously plural societies. A risk of multi-faith RE is that comparative relativism can undermine the credibility of all religion for pupils (Thanissaro 2010). Hierarchy of representation is a related challenge; religious traditions included in a syllabus might be inadvertently and inaccurately assumed as more typical than those omitted. In counterpoint, aiming for diverse representation can lead to “unconscious exoticism” where ‘alternative’ religions are included in a syllabus routinely over ‘mainstream’ counterparts, or are presented as mainstream (Gregg and Scholefield 2015, p. 162). Nesbitt notes how schools’ good intentions for inclusivity ‘illustrates the way in which education is open to becoming a means of legitimization of minority practices’ (Nesbitt 2004, p. 65). Selective syllabus curation presents the unpalatable decision of whether non-benign expressions of religion have a place in an RE syllabus as much as benign ones (Smith et al. 2018). Teaching about internal diversity in religious traditions can leave an impression that religions are internally fractured. Whilst this is not necessarily a false impression, if unqualified it may lead pupils to a negative impression of religion, which is not the principle aim of RE. The boundaries of religious traditions are also difficult to define; is ‘religion’ confined to belief and practices or are history and politics, for example, also integral? Representation of religious traditions in RE is challenged pragmatically by the

diversity and complexity between and within religions because pupils need to understand that although diversity is a feature of religious traditions, it is not necessarily their defining feature.

Another challenge to the representation of religions in RE is the contested nature of the way religion is defined ontologically. Religion is sometimes defined as ‘*sui generis*’, meaning of a singular category that is unrelated to other categories (Pals 1987). In other words, a unique category of human experience. Defining religion as *sui generis* characterises it as an ineffable, ‘unique, irreducible and uncaused’ experience (McCutcheon 2014). It defines religion by a person’s feelings of transcendence; what Otto describes as ‘numinous’ (1917, in Pals 1987). Ontological descriptions of religions as *sui generis* challenge the representation of religious traditions in RE because they infer that religion is reified through personal, individual experience. There may be agreement on Otto’s intention for the term ‘numinous’, but individual conceptualisations or experiences of it are unique. This makes religion self-authenticating. Religion as personal feelings of transcendence might be described in RE through examples, analogies or narratives, but cannot be replicated. For example, in a literature class pupils may share the first-hand experience of reading the same novel; they may discuss their individual, personal responses to it, be intellectually curious about their classmates’ wide range of responses, and agree to disagree over differing opinions about the novel. Equivalent first-hand experience of religions in an RE class is neither appropriate nor possible. Interestingly, Thanissaro contradicts this position with reference to Buddhist meditation (2010, p. 78). In RE, religious traditions are normally viewed from a safe distance. Second-hand descriptions of the numinous are arguably opaque representations of experiences that are unique, personal and abstract.

Ontological definitions of religion as *sui generis* are subject to criticism. Emphasis on religion as unique, internal experience undermines the variety of ways in which religion is experienced; for example by overlooking or de-prioritising people’s experiences of religion in which external expressions such as ritual or congregational worship, and/or cultural-religious identities, are as prominent or more prominent than internal experiences. The idea that religion is a numinous experience set apart from other types of human experience is negated by interpretations of religious traditions as ‘everyday life’ (Harvey 2013) and as social constructions (McCutcheon 2014). Hand (2006) scrutinises philosophical claims that religion is a unique form of knowledge, which, as such, cannot be taught to people not already subscribed to a particular religion’s truth claims. In other words, that secular, multi-faith RE is logically impossible. Hand confronts the argument on two levels; firstly he contests the claim that propositions about supernatural features of religion are categorically different to propositions about ordinary life; secondly he shows that internal, self-authenticating religious feelings, which he describes as ‘mental propositions’ (2006, chapter 5), can be taught about (ie, represented) by analogy or comparison with similar types of feelings from ordinary life.

Yet, representing religions in RE in a way that ignores personal, internal experience is subject to critical scrutiny. Gearon (2013, chapter 5) reflects on how ‘reductive’ and ‘reductionist’ approaches to the study of religion separate ‘religion’ as an object of critical study from ‘the religious life’ (Gearon 2013, pp. 100–101). Gearon uses the term ‘the religious life’ to denote the profound importance of personal faith in someone’s life. Faith is expressed in different ways, but is internally meaningful and deeply important to many people who describe themselves as religious. His concern is that in the shift of emphasis from religious nurture to multi-faith RE influenced by analytic conventions of secular Religious Studies understanding of abstract notions of faith and feelings of living a ‘religious life’ were down-played; ‘The challenges to which the religious life has been chronically

subjected are now acutely apparent in modern, secular pedagogies of religious education' (2013, p. 143). Gearon's argument reframes the challenges of representing the ontology of religion as internalised experience. If it is acknowledged that internal faith-feelings are a critical aspect of many people's experience of religion, then this has a place in authentic representations of religions.

So far the paper has noted that involving faith-practitioners in RE is a strategy endorsed by organisations that promote RE, and has questioned if the strategy can be linked to the principle of authentic representations of religions in RE. It has argued that even though authentic representations of religions in RE is an insurmountable challenge both practically and philosophically, as custodian of such representations RE is obligated to both acknowledge the challenge and attempt to rise to it. The paper now considers Christian faith-practitioners' preferred representations of Christianity to evaluate how their involvement in RE might contribute to authentic representations of Christianity.

4 Method

Four semi-structured, systematizing expert interviews were conducted (Döringer 2020, p. 2). One each with a Catholic Priest, Church of England (CofE) vicar, Methodist Minister, and a leader of a Christian Fellowship Church. I was already known to participants because they had previously hosted study-visits in their churches for my undergraduate students. Participants were not trained teachers, but had experience of hosting educational visits to their churches for secular RE or, in the case of the Methodist Minister, Religious Studies. This meant they could discuss their opinions about hosting study-visits from their own first-hand experience, without being influenced by discourses about RE pedagogies. The sample was purposive to enhance the internal validity of the data (Cohen et al. 2011, p. 156). Participants qualified as 'experts' in this research due to their combined 'technical' and 'process' knowledge as observant Christians, community leaders and involvement in hosting study-visits for secular RE/RS (Döringer 2020, p. 2). The decision to interview only Christian participants was also purposive to enhance validity through data comparison across the four interviews. Interviews took place at each participant's own church, either in their office or in a quiet corner of the church café. Participants were each asked the same interview questions, which invited them to reflect on how they would prefer to represent Christianity during an RE study-visit to their church if they were given complete autonomy over hosting the visit, rather than following learning objectives given by a school teacher or syllabus. Interviews lasted 40–60 min, were audio recorded with the participants' permission, and then transcribed. The transcripts were analysed systematically using an inductive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Despite their busy schedules, participants were happy to participate and were open and frank in their responses to the interview questions. They welcomed the opportunity to voice their opinions about the representations of Christianity in RE. The rich interview data enables robust critical reflection about the representation of Christianity in RE from participants' perspectives. The findings explore dynamics of learning 'beyond the textbook' that are applicable to the range of religions and worldviews typically found in secular RE syllabuses and so contribute to wider academic interest in the representation of religions in RE.

BERA's (2018) research ethics guidelines were observed throughout the processes of data collection and analysis. Prior to arranging the interviews and again immediately before recording each interview, I explained to participants the nature of the

research, that it was not controversial or confrontational, that findings were likely to be disseminated in academic journals and at conferences, and that their participation was entirely voluntary. I explained that participants' identities would be anonymised, but that denominational allegiances would be disclosed in order to make discussion of the data meaningful. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the research with this in mind. Since the data collection, participants have subsequently moved to different parishes.

The interview data gives a snapshot of participants' preferences for representing Christianity during RE study-visits to their church, and offers a glimpse of their own expression of their religious life when their responses became personally reflective. During the interviews participants' responses meandered between activities they actually do during study-visits that they feel work well, and activities they would like to do, or emphasis they would like to give, if they had free-reign over representing Christianity during study-visits. Therefore, the data is not a reconstruction of real study-visits, but rather illuminates participants' own areas of priority in representing Christianity in the context of secular RE. It is a version of Christianity authentic to each participant at the time of the interview.

5 The Catholic Priest's interview

The Catholic Priest talked about taking a student-centred approach to study-visits; *'fundamentally I try to think about where these people are coming from in terms of their experience'*; and tailoring the interaction, *'according to who is in front of me and their reaction on their faces'*. He favoured a coherent account of Catholic history and teachings to, *'set the record straight'* and *'redress some of the balance; [...] let's start at the very beginning and explain it all. If you get it in a piece-meal fashion then it's going to be biased in some way'*. He acknowledged the negative media attention the Catholic Church sometimes receives and wanted to correct misrepresentations, *'there are reasons for this [eg, doctrine or practice] and let me try and explain them'*. He referenced the importance of the wider Catholic community, *'because buildings come alive when they're full of people'*. However, matters of faith were of primary importance; *'I know people want to know what the Stations of the Cross are, and what a Confessional looks like, and what that font over there is for, but I really want to talk about things which are fundamentally important.[...] The fact that God loves us, [...] the love of God has to be front and centre.[...] What it means to be a follower of Jesus, [...] what it means to be a member of his church, because that's the thing that brings faith'.[...] Factual knowledge was important, but insufficient on its own for a deep understanding of Christianity, 'I want to talk to them as people, who are not just getting facts because what I want to say is that faith is not just a subject to be studied, this is something to be lived and embraced and loved'. The Priest connected faith with personal journey; 'I would want to talk quite personally as well, because it is personal [...] you can't really study faith without it being personal'. He saw no tension in discussing the Catholic Church as an institution whilst also reflecting on his own personal relationship with it, 'What I want to put forward is what the [Catholic] Church teaches, and I don't really want to get in the way of that.[...] I want it to be personal without being a distraction'. The Priest explained that faith was central to his self-identity as a Christian; *'This [Catholicism] is something that I have given my life to and that I feel tremendously passionate about'*.*

6 The Christian Fellowship Leader's interview

The Christian Fellowship leader explained that Jesus held primary importance, '*in this church Jesus Christ is the centre of everything we do and without him there'd be no church*'. He wanted to show pupils that in his church the Biblical message is dynamic and relevant, '*to see a church that's based on Biblical principles, to show that actually the Bible is not outdated*'. Personal testimonies of church members was a way of illustrating this, '*people can tell their story*' of how Christianity is meaningful in their lives. He explained that Christianity, '*doesn't need to be complicated [...] we just simply show them that we want them to understand that God's alive; people have a choice whether to follow him; that Jesus wasn't a myth, he was a real man; [...] what Jesus did on the cross—died, rose again to pay for our sins and to invite us into a relationship with the Father and a relationship with one another; [...] what real baptism is—it's an expression of your faith, it's a decision that you make as an adult*'. Community was also important; '*the church is the people; [...] that element of relationship and how that is so central to real Christianity*'. He explained that denominational variance undermines the universality of Jesus' message; '*we're not a denominational church.[...] If it's in the Bible we do it, if it's not in the Bible we don't*'. The Church Leader explained that their purpose-built church building was, '*not a religious building*', by which he meant that the community, not the bricks and mortar, mattered most. Throughout the interview he was clear about the boundaries of secular education during study-visits; '*we're not trying to win converts to this church, that's not what we're trying to do*'. Being in a genuine relationship with God was paramount for this Church Leader; '*[...] it's being of one heart. It's submitting to what God says; [...] to enter into a relationship [with God] and be genuine in your faith*'.

7 The Church of England Vicar's interview

The CofE vicar reflected on using the church building and its features to inspire pupils' curiosity by inviting them to, '*look around the building, see something that interests you, ask a question*', so that he could give '*an answer in context*'. From pupils' own curiosity the vicar linked, '*doctrine and liturgy and things from previous eras [in the church] [...] that will inform lots of other things*' because, '*when [pupils] begin to ask questions they being to make the connections and understand, hopefully [...] what Christianity is about in its fullest sense*'. Sparking conversations had potential to build longer relationships with pupils as they grow up; '*to me it's about conversations with people*'. This linked to introducing pupils to the idea that the church was for the whole community, that it was open to everyone, including them, as a place of sanctuary or quiet reflection regardless of people's religious or denominational affiliations. Equally, the vicar wanted pupils to understand the sacred significance the church has for some Christians; '*[at the start of a visit] we tend to meet [pupils] outside [the church] and start off saying, [...] when you come in here it's a special place, treat it with respect because [...] it is important to other people when they come in*'. Awareness of diversity in Christianity and in the Church of England was also important, '*one of the things I start with saying is that Christianity is a spectrum.[...] the Church of England is on a spectrum that is as wide as Christianity*'. Within this context the vicar also affirmed his own denominational identity for pupils, '*I will say that some Christians believe this, some Christians believe that; and this is where I am, this is my ground at the moment [...] and this is the Church of England*'. The vicar emphasised openness,

accessibility and dialogue. An open church was a gateway to, and metaphor for, the important business of building relationships through dialogue, *'if you close a door you cannot have a conversation and if you cannot have a conversation you cannot move together or hear what each other are saying or recognise common ground, and if you can't recognise common ground [...] you're apart and separate and you can't do anything with it'*. He explained that religion interacts with other aspects of human life, *'religion is not independent; it doesn't exist in its own bubble'*, and that it makes important contributions to individuals and society.

8 The Methodist Minister's interview

The Methodist Minister's Mission works extensively with vulnerable people. It was this *'Christian social activism'* that the Minister wanted principally to focus on in study-visits; *'it's not just about the place, the Mission, it's actually about Christian town centre ministry in a much more general sense'*. The Minister imagined a scenario whereby during an organised visit to the Mission, visitors would spend a couple of hours in town centre with no money to get a taste of the lived experiences of others who are in poverty; *'That sense of being in town centre without a particular purpose, and actually using that as just a little glimpse into the reality of some people [...] who also happen to be a number of the people who we [the Mission] would be engaging with'*. The scenario is unrealistic for school age pupils, but his point is to encourage empathy with what it feels like to be vulnerable or socially excluded in order to relate to Methodism's message of social justice. He was keen for pupils to *'see who we are and what we're about'* by hosting study-visits at the Mission, but said he would prefer day-long visits so that pupils could encounter the Mission's wide-ranging support work. He also stressed the importance of explaining the history of Methodism and Wesley's engagement with marginalised people to pupils, for them to grasp how the Mission's community work links to the heritage of Methodism. The Minister's faith interlaced with his strong sense of social justice; *'I'm very happy to engage faith and the political together because I think that actually the two do go hand in hand [...] faith without politics can just be living in fantasy land, but equally policy without faith input is also potentially missing out'*. The Minister explained the importance of his denominational identity; *'for me personally the history of the tradition and what it means is actually very important [...] the heritage of the Wesleys [...] the way in which they engaged with people [...] that's been something that's been very much part of my life since I became a Methodist'*. His Christian beliefs were expressed through Methodism; *'my perspective is engaged with my understanding of what it means to be a Christian. It relates to my relationship with Christ and how I understand what the life of Jesus means to me and how that relates to the gospels. It also relates to how I understand my Christian faith through the tradition of the Methodist church and its history [...] particularly through people like the Wesleys and their engagement with people who are on the margins'*.

9 Discussion

In secular education religions need to be represented in ways that are appropriate and manageable for the practical and pedagogical boundaries of classroom RE. With reference to Christianity, Hayward (2006, p. 159) describes this type of construction as 'curriculum

Christianity' because it compounds generalisations about a religion. (Though it should be acknowledged that increasingly more nuanced teaching sources are becoming available; eg Freathy et al. (2018) 'Who is Jesus?'; and Cardiff University online 'Discovering Muslims in Britain: for Key Stage 3'). These might include 'distinctive' and 'characteristic' features. Astley (1992, p. 6, 9) describes 'distinctive' and 'characteristic' as explicit features of (in this instance) Christianity, where distinctive features are uniquely Christian (eg faith in Jesus as Christ) and characteristic features are expected normative values (eg charity), but which are not uniquely Christian. Explicit features of a religious tradition are its institutional features. Information about institutional features are in the public domain so can be curated through syllabus design and interpreted through teaching activities. The interview data for this paper indicates two further types of representation. Practitioners' representation of institutional information about their faith-tradition that is already in the public domain, and representation of their personal, interior religious life that is not in the public domain. Together this gives three types of representation; a generalised 'curriculum' representation, an insider-institutional representation, and an insider-personal representation.

9.1 Insider-institutional (denominational) representation

In the interviews participants were asked to discuss their preferred representation of Christianity during an RE study-visit to their church if they were given complete autonomy. The interview data give insight into participants' priorities in representing Christianity and also confirm their enthusiasm for making a contribution to RE.

Participants included institutional features of their traditions in their preferred representations that were typically denominationally orientated. These included denominational history and doctrine, church sanctity and artefacts, and community engagement. The Catholic Priest and Methodist Minister both referred to how denominational history was important for a contextualised understanding of their faith-traditions. For the Priest, a comprehensive account was needed to '*set the record straight*'. The Methodist Minister wanted to raise pupils' awareness of the Wesleys' legacy in the current work of his Mission. The Priest and CofE vicar interlinked history and doctrine. The Priest wanted the opportunity to give reasoned explanations for doctrinal beliefs and practices and to correct misrepresentations. The CofE vicar used church artefacts as a way of explaining church history and doctrines, and the church building as a way of introducing the concept of sanctity to give an impression of CofE Christianity '*in its fullest sense*'. The Christian Fellowship Leader wanted pupils to know about the central importance of Jesus and the Bible in his church. Community engagement was an important feature across the interviews. The Methodist Minister linked community engagement with vulnerable people with Methodist teachings about social justice. The Priest and Christian Fellowship Leader both spoke about 'church' in terms of the congregational community rather than as a physical building. The CofE vicar wanted to convey to pupils that his church was open to all. Participants' preferred representation of Christianity focused, in part, on explicit, institutional-denominational aspects of their faith-tradition that are already in the public domain, so can be described as insider-institutional (denominational) representations.

The paper discussed ontology and diversity as particular challenges to the authentic representation of religions in RE. The interview data is insufficient to comment on *sui generis* as a category of religion. Participants did not volunteer stories of their own numinous encounters, and I did not solicit them. The Christian Fellowship leader referred to Church members' personal testimonies, but was not explicit about whether or not these might

include numinous accounts. Therefore, numinous encounters were not explicitly prioritised as a distinctive or characteristic feature in participants' preferred representations of Christianity. Likewise, diversity was not prioritised across the interviews; the CofE vicar was the only participant to make a point of acknowledging diversity within Christianity and within his denomination. Instead, participants typically represented and defended their own tradition. Though the CofE vicar regarded diversity as important in his representation of Christianity, he also claimed his denominational identity; *'this is where I am, this is my ground at the moment [...] and this is the CofE'*. The Christian Fellowship church leader eschewed denominationalism altogether because it undermines the universality of Jesus' teachings, which is itself a contextualising statement. As already discussed, the Catholic Priest and Methodist Minister both explained the importance of denominational history and doctrine.

Britton and Jørgensen (2019, p. 316) argue that in RE faith-practitioners might consciously or unconsciously present their denomination as normative, or that pupils might assume a practitioner's representation to be normative of a whole tradition. The latter point relates to teaching; it is a teacher's responsibility to help pupils understand that religious diversity is a feature of religions and to explain that a practitioner's presentation is their particular version of their religion. Critical reflection about whether or not expressions of religions can be categorised, by outsiders or insiders, as 'normal' or 'not normal' is an academic discussion for the classroom about how religions are socially constructed and understood. Britton and Jørgensen's former point questions diversity of representation in faith-practitioners' involvement in RE, but this can link positively to authenticity if representations are properly contextualised for pupils. A pedagogical rationale for arranging dialogue between pupils and faith-practitioners is to give pupils exposure to lived experiences of religion. It is to be expected that a faith-practitioner will (most likely) present their version of their religion as normative because to them it is normative, and the version they can speak about in depth from experience. This is what gives a faith-practitioner's representation of their own religion authenticity over 'consensus' versions manufactured for classroom RE (Hayward 2006, p. 154). Classroom RE gives a generalised representation whereas a faith-practitioner gives a particular account. If insider-institutional representations are denominationally focused, as they are likely to be, it's the RE teacher's role to frame them within a religion's wider diversity.

Despite not addressing *sui generis* or inter/intra diversity head-on, insider-institutional and denominational representation has potential for strong authenticity because of the rich detail insider insights can introduce to pupils' learning. During their interactions with pupils faith-practitioners have in-the-moment custody over representation of the institutional features of their religious tradition, assuming an RE teacher takes a back seat. However, outside of the event an informed RE teacher might draw on information already in the public domain as supplementary teaching resources to reinterpret a faith-practitioners' representation to verify, correct, or contextualise it. In this case, custody of insider-institutional representation is partial, or shared, between the practitioner and secular education.

9.2 Insider-personal representation (presentation)

Another type of representation observed in the interview data was insider-personal representation. This happened when participants self-referenced their personal relationship with Christianity and their interior religious life. Unlike insider-institutional representation, insider-personal representation does not include information already in the public domain because its focus is on a practitioner's personal relationship with their religious tradition.

The idea that learning about Christianity extends beyond factual knowledge was dominant in the interviews. Participants wanted to represent Christianity in ways that explained why faith was important to them and how it is active and true in their lives, so pupils could understand Christianity as dynamic and relevant. The Catholic Priest talked about the '*fundamental importance*' of faith and being in a relationship with God, and explicitly prioritised this over institutional features. He wanted to draw on his personal story to engage pupils with the significance of faith in his life; '*I would want to talk quite personally as well, because it is personal [...] you can't really study faith without it being personal*'. The Christian Fellowship Church leader also spoke of the importance of being in a '*relationship with God*' and '*genuine in your faith*', and wanted to emphasise the contemporary relevance of Christianity in people's lives, '*to show that actually the Bible is not outdated*'. The CoFE vicar emphasised dialogue to build relationships as an expression of his Christianity, and stressed the important contribution religion makes to individuals and society. The Methodist Minister spoke of his '*relationship with Christ and how I understand what the life of Jesus means to me*' and the importance of acting out his Christian values by, '*engaging faith and the political together*'.

Faith was central in participants' responses; during the interviews they spoke about the significance of their relationships with God and Jesus to their experiences of Christianity, how faith is active in their lives and how this was expressed by sharing faith with others in different types of ways. This supports Gearon's (2013) argument that the religious life is an important characteristic of religious expression, and therefore warrants inclusion in the authentic representation of religious traditions. Gregg and Scholefield (2015, p. 7) categorise educational encounters with religion as 'reported' (eg textbook accounts), 'represented' (insiders talking or writing about their own religious tradition) and 'living' (what people actually believe and do). This paper suggests 'presentation' as a fourth category of encounter linked to practitioners talking about their own tradition. In insider-institutional representations, practitioners 'represent' the distinctive features of their faith-tradition that are already in the public domain, whereas in insider-personal representations they 'present' their first-hand experience of their faith-tradition, which, being personal to them, is not in the public domain. Arguably, 'insider-personal presentation' would be a better description than insider-personal representation.

A faith practitioner has fuller custody over their first-hand personal-presentation of their own experience of their religious tradition because the information is not in the public domain so less vulnerable to reinterpretation. Insider-personal presentations make an important contribution to authenticity in the representation of religious traditions because they give particular rather than generalised accounts; the personal story of the individual rather than a general reconstruction of a religion. Astley (1992, p. 4, 6) argues that there is no 'universal' Christianity, only individual, personal experiences of Christianity. The immediacy and personal nature of first-hand autobiographical accounts indicate high authenticity (Britton and Jørgensen 2019, p. 316). Thanissaro observes that scholarship in religious studies is, 'now attempting much more earnestly to understand each religion in its own terms' (2010, p. 71). Faith-practitioners' involvement is a potential way of achieving this for RE.

10 Teaching

Participants interviewed for this paper understood the boundaries of secular education and that RE study-visits were not overt or covert opportunities to proselytize. The need to make study-visits engaging for pupils was dominant in the data. Participants were intuitive in their application of pupil-centred teaching strategies; the Catholic Priest referenced

in-the-moment adaptation of his sessions with pupils to meet their learning interests; the CofE vicar opted for a discovery-learning strategy, and the Methodist Minister preferred experiential learning. Participants sought creative ways to convey their own fundamental truths of Christianity and their importance to pupils. Where these truths centred less on 'facts' about Christianity and more on theological and ethical concepts, such as faith and community engagement, participants sought to engage pupils' affective as well as cognitive learning domains. They used resources at hand within their respective churches to achieve this; testimonies of church members for the Christian Fellowship Church leader, experience of the Mission's outreach work for the Methodist Minister, reference to his personal journey in faith for the Catholic Priest. The CofE vicar's approach was most cognitive by drawing on artefacts in his church to trigger pupils' interest. The combination of a faith-practitioner's own prioritisation of Christianity's characteristics with resources genuine to each practitioner's tradition indicates the potential for strong authenticity in the representation of (their version of) Christianity.

Concerns can be raised about biased representations, vested-interests and evangelism in faith-practitioners' involvement in RE. Britton and Jørgensen remind us that 'the teacher, not the representative, is responsible for the learning outcome of a field visit' and that a 'high level of competence from RE teachers' is needed to meet practical and pedagogical challenges for such encounters to be successful (2019, p. 311). The teacher's responsibility is to select faith-practitioners with strong, age-appropriate communication skills and with sophisticated judgment to be able to discuss personal and institutional aspects of their religious tradition without overstepping boundaries of secular education; whilst at the same time exercising trust to allow a faith-practitioner to present their religious-tradition on their own terms. To 'reliably replace 'neutrality' in protecting the aims of critical RE' Thanissaro recommends 'insider to outsider, and outsider to insider, dialogue' to open topics to enquiry and critical examination (2010, p. 73). Making faith-practitioners protagonists in such dialogue facilitates genuine rather than manufactured accounts of religious traditions. 'In this context, religious insiders have regained an important role as a source of authentic religious experience for learning activities' Thanissaro (2010, p. 71).

11 Conclusion

The paper has drawn attention to three points; (i) that involving faith-practitioners is a recommended strategy for RE, (ii) that custody of representation in RE is deflected from religious traditions to secular education, (iii) that the authentic representation of religious traditions in RE is difficult. It argued that if faith-practitioners' involvement in RE is a recommended strategy then it should be rationalised with reference to an explicit principle. The principle explored in this paper is authenticity in representation of religious traditions. The paper found that faith-practitioners' involvement may not address diversity or ontology as challenges to representation in a generalised way, but may enhance authenticity through the particular, rather than generalised, accounts of religious traditions they offer, and that custody of representation may be partially restored to faith-traditions. The paper noted three types of representation of religions in RE; generalised, composite representation for classroom RE, insider-institutional (denominational) representation, and insider-personal representation (presentation). The latter two are types of representation that can be offered by faith-practitioners suitable for the task, and have potential to complement classroom RE by enhancing authenticity in the representation of religious traditions in secular education.

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