



# Decolonising the teaching of Jesus in English primary schools

Justine Ball<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 10 October 2022 / Published online: 15 November 2022  
© The Author(s) under exclusive licence to Australian Catholic University 2022

## Abstract

This article argues that the teaching about Jesus in English primary schools urgently needs to include scholarship in Religious Education (RE) about teaching religion through the principles of Religion and Worldviews research and scholarship in Religious, Biblical and Theological Studies about decolonising the curriculum. RE teachers from the beginning of a child's first lessons should present a Jesus who is Jewish with a context which is located within Judaea two thousand years ago. In addition, the artwork and imagery used in the teaching about Jesus should be as carefully chosen as the content of lessons to avoid the dominance of Jesus being depicted as the White Western Christ of tradition. As the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is of interest to many communities, both within the Christian church and in other religions, this article shows that this is not fully reflected in the imagery and teaching about Jesus in the classroom. The research for this has been around for over thirty years in RE, but has become much more urgent with the focus on decolonising the curriculum. The teaching about Jesus needs to be at the centre of decolonisation in RE because Christianity is the one specified religion that schools must teach and it is the dominant religion in curriculum time. Presenting varied imagery from the UK and around the world and teaching about the historical Jewish person of Jesus is crucial to allow children from all backgrounds to engage with discussions and ensure all voices are heard in the classroom. This approach references anti-racist approaches to education and years of research about Jesus which are currently not reflected in all primary teaching.

**Keywords** Religious education (RE) · Jesus · Primary · Visual imagery · Colonis(ation) · Diversity · Anti-racist

## 1 Introduction

This article focuses on researching concerns with the teaching about Jesus in primary schools and considers ways to address these. The first issue is the dominant depiction of Jesus as lighter skinned and European in imagery that children see. A further issue is the lack of emphasis about Jesus as Jewish. Both of these issues can result in younger children

---

✉ Justine Ball  
Justine.Ball@hants.gov.uk

<sup>1</sup> Hampshire County Council, Winchester, UK

not understanding the historical or religious background of Jesus and confusion in the subsequent teaching about Judaism and the origins of the Christian church. A further concern is that white, European imagery is not only used when depicting Jesus but often used when showing pictures of Christians. Persona dolls, which are popular in Early Years and Key Stage 1 teaching, often present one image of a Christian child with blond hair and blue eyes, without using other dolls that might suggest there is far more diversity among Christians.

The issue of such dominance in imagery is a major concern because it is not only misleading, but it also does not allow an opportunity for all children regardless of their background to see themselves in the teaching resources used and is something which suggests that a colonised curriculum is present in RE. The imagery and diversity of views that children are exposed to matters because it is this that they will remember above any content taught in the classroom. What is shown to children therefore need careful selection because getting this wrong can lead to the stereotyping of others (such as seeing Christians as mainly European) and misconceptions about Jesus (for example, not knowing that he was Jewish, or assuming that he was white). It may lead to intolerance of others if the misconceptions lead children to believe that Christianity is only for Europeans, and other cultures or traditions are not valued. Therefore inaccurate representations of Jesus and a lack of diversity in the imagery and content about Jesus may result in RE indirectly contributing to ignorance and misrepresentations of religion to children. This article begins with a review of the literature and highlights the key issues for teaching. It goes on to outline the primary research undertaken with teachers and children following the literature review, the key findings and draws conclusions for all teachers to consider in their own teaching about Jesus.

## 2 The teaching about Christianity and Jesus

In England, church attendance has declined in every decade, from 11.7% of the population in 1979 to 4.7% in 2015 (Brierley, BRIN, 2015). In this period, Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian denominations all saw a 16% decline in membership. However, there were membership increases in Orthodox, Pentecostal (London School of Economics Blog, 2016) and new churches (Faith Survey, 2021). This overview is relevant to the teaching about Jesus because it shows a real and growing diversity within the Christian denominations, particularly among newer denominations, and a decline in the membership of the more traditional churches. However, this is not always reflected in RE teaching. While there has been a UK growth of Pentecostalism and new churches, RE syllabi do not acknowledge or reference them. This is in line with research that “Religious traditions that exhibit behaviour or beliefs that do not ‘fit’ are ignored or dismissed” (Revell, 2008, p. 230). It is a concern that has been raised in English RE for over thirty years now, particularly the dominant emphasis on the Church of England (Copley, 1994, p. 44).

There is very little research about children’s explorations of images of Jesus except in the confirmation that children see Jesus as more human than divine (Walshe, 2005, p. 66). Walshe and Copley concluded in 2001 that it is imperative...to place Jesus within his historical context, yet this is not always seen in teaching. (2001, p. 36).

Walshe and Copley’s survey further revealed that there is virtually no reference to the significance of Jesus for religious traditions outside Christianity, for example as a major

prophet in Islam (Walshe & Copley, 2001, p. 33). However, rich RE discussions and debates about the wider significance of Jesus within other traditions could be held with children, using care and sensitivity, rather than ignoring such a vital source of information.

### 3 RE in England

As RE is locally determined, it does not have the same national specification and curriculum development that other subjects have taken for granted for over thirty years. With over 150 Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) in England, this has meant a large, inconsistent range of approaches to teaching about religion across England. This background to RE is important to understand as a context for the teaching about Jesus, because there is no national standard to refer to or consistency of approach or agreement about what the teaching of Jesus should consist of. It has also meant that good practice across other subjects in the way that teachers approach the historical context or diversity of representation in a topic is less likely to be applied in RE because it is governed by a locally determined syllabus which may not focus on these at all.

Many Locally Agreed Syllabi teach RE through an emphasis on the six major world religions. This is not diverse enough to reflect the plurality of modern-day England and often leads to religions being taught separately without seeing the connections with other religions. Lynn Revell describes this as teaching “monolithic entities” (2008, p. 228). This has direct relevance for the way teachers teach about Jesus’ Jewish background, as the connections between Jesus as Jewish and the later Christian church are often not discussed in teaching. As a result, some have argued that RE has reinforced stereotypes rather than breaking down prejudice (Commission for Religious Education, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, while the teaching of Christianity has the majority of curriculum time, it is questionable in practice whether it has helped children see the diversity of opinions and imagery about Jesus that exist or whether it has resulted in stereotyping Christians as being from one community only. It has also influenced the lack of emphasis on teaching Jesus as Jewish, because the two religions are likely to have been taught separately without children seeing that Jesus was Jewish while his followers were Christian.

### 4 An approach for RE

This article argues that a religion and worldviews approach should be used as a framework for teaching because this approach includes a wider diversity within and among religious and non-religious beliefs and values and helps teachers teach with greater depth and more understanding (Commission on Religious Education, 2018, p. 6; Flanagan 2020, p. 1). It will therefore begin to address the decolonising of the teaching about Jesus in a consistent way across the primary curriculum. The shift in language from talking about religion to a worldview is helpful in avoiding the stereotyping that can happen when talking about “all Christians”, for example, and not seeing the variations of practice or belief that naturally occur within a religion. It is therefore a very useful framework to address ways to reflect greater diversity in imagery and views of Jesus and to highlight the importance of his Jewish background.

Viewing religion as one aspect of a personal worldview (Flanagan, 2020, p. 4) allows the teacher to teach that the beliefs people have come from different sources; some from the religion a person follows and some from the context in which people currently live. The artwork that children are shown about Jesus, for example, will often reflect the dominant culture in the country the artist comes from as well as Christian messages that are consistent throughout the centuries, yet this is not always seen in teaching. Using a worldviews approach will encourage teachers to discuss the cultural and historical background of the artist and look for wider examples rather than only the dominant white European examples. A worldviews framework is therefore a more inclusive approach for children, offering opportunities for children to give their views and to see a wider range of artwork and imagery in teaching. It will also help teachers address “which perspectives are being privileged and which are silenced” (Thorani, 2020, p. 20). Using the concept of worldviews as a mixture of personal and institutional helps to reject the idea that Christianity has a single authentic worldview, shared by all. It instead invites the teacher to recognise the dominance of a white European perspective in the artwork and content and seek to include a greater variety of perspectives, written and visual, in their teaching.

## 5 Decolonising RE and the teaching about Jesus

In recent years, there has been greater focus on decolonising the curriculum, especially in Religious Studies and in higher education, but there is currently very little research about this in RE. This is surprising given the connections between Christianity and colonising efforts through “Protestant missionary work which went hand in hand with the expansion of British Empire” (Gearon et al., 2021, p. 1). The research of Liam Gearon and the others above are the key voices here, but much more needs to be done to bring RE into the conversation that other subjects in the primary curriculum are already having.

This is particularly pertinent with the teaching of Christianity, because the legislation that underpins RE states that all religions that are not Christianity are the “other” (School Standards and Framework Act, 1998, p. 19). This of course puts Christianity into a privileged position which has not changed up to the present day. This is striking considering the aim of RE is to embrace the equality of teaching about all world religions. Gearon suggests that English RE is “a legacy of the British Empire’s stated integration of cultural as well as economic and political colonialism and imperialism” (Gearon et al., 2021, p. 16). It therefore makes the cultural focus of teaching about the central figure of Christianity, Jesus, an important starting point in RE, particularly the use of imagery from the dominant Western European cultural perspective.

While RE does seek to teach all religions without bias, in reality it is much harder to achieve because of the privileged place of the teaching about Christianity and the legal wording which makes all religions “other” and lesser. This makes the teaching of Christianity imperative to address. To truly address social injustice, the lack of emphasis on diverse voices and imagery within Christianity needs addressing. To embed this into teaching about Jesus requires children to hear the voices of marginalised communities, for example Black churches, non-Protestant denominations and newer churches and the reception of him by such communities. Agreeing a focus on decolonisation of the curriculum as a key aim needs to be addressed before real decolonisation in the teaching about religion can happen.

Research on decolonising the RE curriculum stresses the importance of “individuals deconstructing themselves and looking inward to the roots of their own identity” (Gearon et al., 2021, p. 11) as a starting point. It therefore fits into the framework of a worldviews approach to teaching RE because that too emphasises a personal understanding of yourself before teaching religion (Flanagan, 2020, p. 320). Applied to the teaching about Jesus, it involves considering the imagery used to teach about Jesus and recognising the dominant theme in European and American art of Jesus and others depicted as “light skinned Europeans” (Radford Ruether, 2012, p. 102) and actively seeking to use imagery from a diverse range of sources to reflect diverse Christian communities. It includes considering viewpoints for teaching about Jesus that are not dominant, such as “minority groups and rural populations” (Thorani, 2020, 20) and considering whether the teaching of RE is focused on content that is influenced by “white men of the global North” (Day, 2020, p. 46). Changing this is about “rethinking, reframing and reconstructing the current curriculum in order to make it better, and more inclusive” (Keele University, Manifesto, 2020, p. 1). In the teaching about Jesus, it involves showing artwork about Jesus and Christians from diverse communities in the UK rather than always presenting the dominant European perspective. It involves teaching about different Christian churches present locally and nationally so children see diversity. It involves teaching that Jesus belonged to a historical Jewish context and not a European one. Visiting the church next door and “tolerating” others’ opinions (Department for Education, 2014, p. 5) is not enough in a decolonised curriculum. It must provide the means to “deconstruct and reconstruct RE within the context of religion as an enduring reality in the local and global sociocultural life” (Matemba, 2021, p. 37).

This is useful in the teaching about Jesus as such an approach can be used through the study of Christian language, stories, songs, customs and experiences of believers in communion together as different churches, as well as children seeing their voices heard and experienced through the community of the classroom. It stresses the value of different ways of living within diverse churches yet highlights the uniqueness of the believer in many different contexts. It emphasises the lived experience and changes the focus so that female and minority group voices are heard as well as other ignored voices (Joy, 2001, p. 181). It places the institutional religious life of a person alongside other identities and therefore helps children to realise that being religious is not just about “prayers, festivals, doctrines and rituals” (Hannam & Panjwani, 2020, p. 5). It is about the everyday, lived experience which is a focus in embracing decolonising teaching. Decolonisation research therefore has much to add to the worldviews approach and is particularly important in decolonising the central figure of Jesus in a coloniser’s religion.

## 6 RE and anti-racism

A review of the literature around race and RE reveals that there has been “little engagement with issues of race, embodiment and whiteness” (Vince, 2020, p. 373) and even less within primary schools. This is despite the rise in hate crime in England and Wales, with 6,822 religious hate crimes recorded in the year to March 2020 (Official Statistics, 2020). The key research that is useful for the teaching about Jesus centres around anti-racism approaches in the whole school curriculum which helps make key recommendations for teaching about Jesus.

To do this involves noticing similarities and differences among groups with an emphasis on people having more similarities than differences. This involves avoiding the language of

“we” and “they” and instead using the language of “many, some, a few” for example when teaching about groups (Knowles & Ridley, 2005, p. 84). It involves moving on from simply offering multicultural activities to “reflect diversity within the local and regional communities” (Knowles & Ridley, 2005, p. 2). It therefore needs teaching to move away from studying a group of people, such as “Christians”, to actively encouraging the study of different Christian identities and cultures throughout the curriculum.

In the teaching about Jesus it does not involve just looking at similarities among Christians but actively seeking out diverse opinions in their local area rather than just contrasting a local church with other parts of the world.

Research on anti-racism shows that approaches need to be part of a whole school ethos rather than offering token lessons and then returning to the dominant culture for the rest of the curriculum. An anti-racist approach needs to avoid the negative aspects of multicultural education which can bring teachers and children to see cultural differences as a problem and views the dominant culture as a standard to compare other cultures to. This can result in stereotyping other cultures through simplification, and making the dominant culture “feel they have no culture” (Knowles & Ridley, 2005, p. 83). Applying this to the teaching about Jesus, careful consideration needs to be given to avoiding teaching about “all” Christians and instead using the language of “some” and “many”. It involves avoiding presenting Western European Christianity as the norm, showing instead imagery and examples from all cultures, especially locally and nationally, including Black majority churches, Eastern European Christians here in the UK and traveller community Christians instead of a dominance of white, Western traditions.

Effective anti-racist approaches need teachers to choose carefully what they bring into the classroom so that RE “can be brought closer to being directly anti-racist, de-colonial and anti-discriminatory” (Hannam & Panjwani, 2020, p. 7), including those from the dominant culture so that children from this culture feel included too. Displays should feature “diverse cultures, lifestyles, historic experiences and individual achievements”, so that many communities are included (Dadzie, 2000, p. 39). Children should also be able to access books that refer to Black and ethnic minority experiences and challenge stereotypes (Dadzie, 2000, p. 39). As with a decolonising and worldviews approach, day to day life should be a focus rather than simply learning about religious festivals (Knowles & Ridley, 2005, p. 83). Applying this to the teaching about Jesus highlights the importance of the focus on different individuals’ responses to him and how day to day lives reflect this. Finding such resources to help teaching is an issue, however. The work of Jackson, Igrave, Hayward, Hopkins, Fancourt, Robbins, Francis and McKenna has shown that teachers use web-based resources heavily to teach with and that a large amount of this is not produced for RE specifically (Jackson et al., 2010, p. 3). Many teachers will therefore need help in adapting such resources for RE. This should include pedagogies to help children interact with diverse stories, narratives and art to help teachers engage with diversity. This urgently needs addressing as, without this, “the absence of a sustained self-critical conversation about race creates a null curriculum in religious education” (Mercer, 2017, p. 1). This creates “unintended teaching (best described as influence or example)” in a classroom and needs as much thought as the intended teaching (Hull, 2004, p. 2). Examples here include the artwork that unintentionally reinforces a colonial narrative to children and which highlight the dominance of a European perspective, making children from other backgrounds feel less represented in the classroom.

This review of research across disciplines revealed that there is no research on the subject of using visual imagery in RE. This is a real area of concern as many stereotypes and misconceptions can be portrayed through artwork and yet there is no body of research to address this within the RE context.

## 7 Religious studies, biblical studies and black theology

Susan Docherty highlights that the two most important paradigm shifts that have affected biblical scholarship since the 1980s are the

new appreciation of the nature of first century Judaism and of the common roots of Judaism and Christianity; and the deliberate inclusion of voices other than the professional (and usually white, western and male) interpreter. (Docherty, 2018, p. 299)

She argues that including diverse perspectives on Bible stories such as those who are the marginalised may help older children appreciate that biblical texts can generate multiple meanings (Docherty, 2018, p. 304). Docherty cites the important work of E. P. Sanders in showing that Jesus was part of the world of second Temple Judaism and that his story needs to be read as a Jewish story (Docherty, 2018, p. 299; Sanders 1993, p. 2; Bond 2012, p. 19). She cites research resulting from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, which again revealed that Jesus shared some of his beliefs and approaches with other Jewish communities, including the thinking and practices of the Qumran community (Docherty, 2018, p. 299).

This literature review has shown there remains much work to do in integrating this research into primary school teaching. It requires RE advisors that can research and translate this for teachers and children, with clear examples provided that make it easier for teachers to see the benefits of such research for their teaching. It also acknowledges that RE teachers have to engage with all three disciplines of Religious Studies, Religious Education and Theology in order to be an effective teacher of RE (Cush, 1999, p. 137).

## 8 Teacher resources teaching about Jesus through artwork and imagery

The literature review found no guidelines available to teachers to advise them about how to use imagery with art in RE and the pedagogies teachers should use when teaching through art, so this is a key area for further research. All the main resources available to teachers to help them teach about Jesus using artwork need to be purchased by teachers, so those without a budget will not be able to access them. All of the resources separate artwork from key curriculum overviews about Jesus and therefore artwork appears to be an add-on part of teaching which teachers can choose to include or not. The three resources feature a very clear, diverse selection of artwork from around the world and present a vivid picture of a contemporary Christianity that is flourishing in many countries. However, none of the packs explicitly address the diverse Christian communities in the UK by providing further information on such communities. The packs also contain little information and no photos of the artists themselves, so there is an opportunity missed here to consider the diversity among artists from different cultures and communities. Teachers therefore need to look separately for artwork about Jesus as it is not featured in their main teaching materials and they lack advice about how to use such imagery effectively. The impression is also given by providing these images separately that they are not as important as the main written teaching materials about Jesus and they are an optional item for teachers.



## 9 Research with teachers and children

The literature review was followed by research with current teachers and children to find out their views about Jesus and to compare this with the research outlined earlier. This primary research used a long answer qualitative questionnaire with teachers in Hampshire and a long answer qualitative questionnaire with children to provide data. Permission for this was granted by the University of Chester Ethics Committee in February 2021.

The data gathering began in the summer term of 2020 and concluded in the summer term of 2021. A key factor to consider was the impact of Covid-19 on primary schools, particularly the three lockdowns, with teachers having to provide for home-learning as well as key-worker-learning in school, followed by a return to the classroom amid very challenging conditions. This data collection period was therefore in a very difficult time and this impacted on the choice of qualitative methods for research. Teachers were selected who were known through the primary teachers' steering group for RE and who were used to talking through the ideas for research before beginning the research. The steering group consists of serving primary teachers who are experienced in teaching RE, who receive regular training and who know the Hampshire cycle of enquiry for RE thoroughly. They meet every term to produce resources for RE and are professional in their approach to children and the subject.

As restrictions regarding visits to schools were in place for most of the research period, no visits to schools to observe teaching or to interview teachers, could be undertaken.

Questionnaires were chosen because these could be completed remotely at the school by the participants. This method gave the teacher the opportunity to decide when was the most convenient time to do the questionnaire and ensure that it was not imposed onto them.

The research was limited to three very different primary schools in different contexts and the children were from a wide range of backgrounds, educational ability and age. The differences between the schools meant that any findings common across the schools would present themes that would be useful for the research. Full information on the questionnaire to teachers and full information on the children's questionnaire were provided to teachers and parents/carers. A video call was held with each teacher prior to the questionnaire being given to the children so that any issues were foreseen and the questionnaire adapted if necessary. A copy of the questionnaire for teachers and children is provided at the end of this article.

Visual culture research was applied to the methodology to reflect the importance of the imagery associated with Jesus. This research places an importance on the visual tradition of the images used in teaching, shown earlier as an under-researched area. Visual culture research also places an importance on the artist as well as the painting as:

who the artist is – culturally, racially and socially – informs their work as much as the visual influences, ideas and professional training to which they have been exposed. (Harvey, 2011, p. 514)

This was important to help decentre the emphasis on Europe in visual culture and help to decolonise such teaching.

The answers from teachers highlighted the need for a wider range of images about Jesus that reflect different cultures and different interpretations. The teachers confirmed that images selected were not embedded within the curriculum, but chosen from books



or film clips available. The teacher questionnaire also revealed that additional resources highlighting the inner diversity within Christianity and within the UK were needed to help teachers follow anti-racist principles by embracing diversity within the local and national area rather than just contrasting with countries around the world (Knowles & Ridley, 2005, p. 1). The lack of resources that offered this was clear from the teacher's comments.

Children completed the survey in a special school, in an infant school and in the primary school. All children across the schools drew Jesus, which was optional and the background of these children was checked beforehand so that there were no children whose religious backgrounds prevented them from drawing religious figures.

The drawings themselves sometimes showed evidence of the sources used for artwork, revealing the influence of these on children's thinking. In the special school, one child drew Jesus in a very similar way to the clay figures used in the *Miracle Maker* video and confirmed that he knew Jesus looked like this from videos.

In the infant school, a 1/3 of the children said that Jesus wore white clothing, with 3/4 stating that they knew this because of a story.

In the special school, there was no consensus about what clothes Jesus wore.

In the primary school, there was consensus with 25% of the children stated that Jesus wore toga style robes and 25% that he wore white robes.

The influence of white Roman toga clothes in images of Jesus may have influenced thinking here. It is, however, historically wrong because individuals could only wear a toga if they were a citizen of Rome, which Jesus was not, and imagery such as this results in misconceptions.

With regard to his physical appearance there was a clear consensus of opinion. A large majority of all the children described Jesus' hair as brown or black. The special school children were mixed in their opinion on the colour of Jesus' eyes but a large majority of the other children said he had blue eyes. There was a clear consensus across all children that Jesus had white or peach skin, which resonates with the research findings about the dominance of depicting Jesus as white in artwork and imagery. The children were asked about how they knew Jesus looked like this and 44% of special school children said pictures of Jesus, 22% said books and 11% said videos. In the infant school, 50% said from stories and one child said from videos. 50% of the primary children stated that they knew this because of books or descriptions of Jesus.

In summarising this section of questions based on what Jesus looked like, it is clear that the majority of children are influenced by what visual images they have seen when describing how Jesus looked. It is also evident that there is a uniformity of thinking especially among the infant and primary schools for whom the majority have an image of Jesus with brown hair, blue eyes and peach or white skin. This corroborates Rosemary Radford Ruether's analysis of the artwork of Jesus being overwhelmingly white European (2012, p. 102).

The children were asked about what religion Jesus was and the special school had a range of answers and identified Jesus as Jewish. In the infant school, the majority thought Jesus was Christian. A majority identified Jesus as Jewish in the primary school, but there were still 38% of children who said Christian. There is therefore uncertainty about this for children and this also echoes the secondary research highlighted earlier.

There was a large variety of answers about different religious perceptions about Jesus and although some children correctly stated that Jesus was regarded as a prophet in Islam, several children clearly had misconceptions about other religious views of Jesus and inferred negative opinions. Teaching Jesus in other religious traditions is not covered in the teaching about Jesus and, in its absence, some children may believe that others view Jesus negatively because they are not included in the curriculum.

The dominant opinion among the infant and primary school children was that most Christians live either in England, Europe or America. This corroborates the research highlighting the colonising of Jesus in artwork and imagery explained earlier and shows that children mistakenly think the majority of Christians live in a European context. In the special school, the answers were much more mixed, with some suggestion that children were influenced by the setting of the gospel stories in Judaea.

In summary, the comments from children across all three schools highlight important findings. They reveal that all the children took the opportunity to draw Jesus, highlighting how important visual imagery is for them. There was a consensus of opinion across the three schools that Jesus' hair was brown, his eyes were blue and his skin white. The primary school children also mainly showed Jesus in Roman clothing. Jesus as Jewish was not clearly understood by children, especially in primary and in infants. The majority of children believed that most Christians lived either in England or Europe. The special school children were the exception, who referenced the historical background of Jesus when answering this question.

These findings resonated with a lot of the research outlined earlier and call for a greater diversity in the imagery used in the teaching of Jesus and a greater emphasis on the historical Jewish roots of Jesus.

## 10 Conclusions and recommendations

The research highlights how important a historically accurate portrayal of Jesus is for teaching and how important the imagery and diverse viewpoints used in teaching are too. Without these, a colonised, European centre for teaching is present as is a curriculum that contains areas that are not taught about but are instead inferred by children and which may cause many misconceptions (Hull, 2004, p. 2).

To tolerate and respect other religious beliefs and opinions, a multicultural approach to world religions is not enough. Children need to see diversity within Christianity in the UK in the denominations, voices, faces, and communities that they see and hear, and this needs to be embedded throughout the teaching about Jesus rather than using additional lessons to show children artwork about Jesus from around the world. A worldviews framework for teaching RE that acknowledges the influence of colonisation on RE will help teachers to do this because one of its principal aims is to embrace diversity in and between religions and to see the connections between religions, rather than treating them as separate entities (Commission on Religious Education, 2018, p. 6; Flanagan 2020, p. 1). RE teaching must adopt a framework

that embraces diversity and seeks historical and contemporary accuracy and look for ways to do this in the teaching about Jesus. Training on decolonising the curriculum in initial teacher training and further training for teachers once qualified is needed so that teachers feel supported in understanding what a colonised curriculum looks like and how they can embrace diversity in their teaching. RE syllabi writers and advisors should analyse the teaching about Jesus and see what is taught about the Jewish background of Jesus and which voices the children will hear. Questions should be asked about whether their curriculum includes marginalised voices and if it includes the views of other religious groups about Jesus. They should also consider whose voices don't children hear and whether misconceptions result because of this (Thorani, 2020, p. 20). These misconceptions will not be obvious to teachers as they concern aspects that are not taught in the curriculum, but such omissions result in children not seeing the connections between religions and not seeing the many positive aspects that bind communities together.

An important area of my research highlights how dominant European imagery is in resources, practice and artwork (Radford Ruether, 2012, p. 102), and children in the research highlighted that this influenced their own thinking about Jesus. This needs to be recognised and artwork and imagery needs to be selected carefully to decentre a European presentation of Jesus and instead to show a variety of interpretations. A key recommendation is therefore the production of artwork resources that feature many diverse communities, faces and backgrounds of Christians in the UK in order to highlight how diverse Christian views on Jesus are and to show there is not one dominant view of Jesus among Christians in the UK. Such a resource should also include the photos of artists together with information about their community or background to visually show diversity and to highlight who is included in the curriculum by actually showing their faces to children. This should be accompanied by guidance for using it throughout the teaching about Jesus as an essential part of teaching rather than a stand-alone unit, so that children will not just see Christianity as European.

When teaching about diversity among different communities, the principles of anti-racist approaches to curriculum need to be embedded into teaching so that similarities and differences are studied as well as the language of many, most, some, a few, rather than “we” and “they” (Knowles & Ridley, 2005, p. 84). An emphasis on the local, lived experience of Christians must also be central, as well as learning about the world-wide church.

This article recommends that resources to help teach about Jesus should be audited by teachers, and displays and books should be sought that reflect the diversity within the UK among different communities studied (Dadzie, 2000, p. 39).

Finally, this article concludes that RE must engage with the findings of religious studies and theology to teach a historically accurate Jesus who is Jewish (Docherty, 2018, p. 299, Walshe & Copley 2001, p. 36) from the beginning of primary school so that the understanding of this and the later diversity of the Christian community can be fully understood. To fail to do this will instead perpetuate an image of Jesus who is European and divorced from his Jewish roots and present an image of Christians as mainly European when in fact this is not the case. The teaching about Jesus urgently needs to action the above recommendations and work to embed these throughout the curriculum for all children.

## Appendix A: Teacher Questions

### Decolonising the teaching about Jesus – Questions for Teachers

Teachers:

1. What resources do you use for the teaching of Jesus?
2. What artwork do you use to teach about Jesus?
3. Where does the artwork come from? (Europe, America, China, Indonesia, etc)
4. How well does this artwork reflect your local community?
5. Do your children know that Jesus was Jewish? Where is this taught in RE?
6. What do your children know about Jesus when they finish primary school?
7. What do you teach children about other religious views of Jesus (eg Muslim, Jewish, Hindu etc)?
8. Which Christian denominations do you teach children about? (eg Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, street churches, Pentecostal, etc)
9. What do your children enjoy learning the most about Jesus?
10. What areas have they found difficult?
11. What curriculum resources would be helpful for you when teaching about Jesus in future?

## Appendix B: Children's Questions

### Teaching about Jesus – Questions for children

Children:

**What did Jesus look like?** Draw him first if it helps you to think about this question:

What did he wear?

What colour was his hair?

What colour were his eyes?

What colour was his skin?

How do you know Jesus looked like this?

Do you think Jesus was a real person or an imaginary person?

**What do you know about Jesus?**

What religion was he?

What do you know about Jesus?

What do Muslims think about Jesus?

What do Jewish people think about Jesus?

What do Christians think about Jesus?

**Where in the world do most Christians live?**

**Which Christian churches have you learnt about?** Tick any that you have learnt about:

Church of England

Roman Catholic

Methodist

Baptist

Pentecostal

Orthodox

street churches

other churches

**What have you enjoyed learning the most about Jesus?**

**What have you found the most difficult?**

**What have you found the least interesting?**

**What would you like to know more about?**

**Funding** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

## References

- Barnes, L. P. (2019). *Crisis, Controversy and the future of Religious Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bond, H. (2012). *The Historical Jesus: A Guide to the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Brierley, P. (2015). *Church Attendance in Britain, 1980–2015*. Church Attendance in Britain, 1980–2015 | (brin.ac.uk).
- Christian Research. (2021). *UK Church Overview*. Faith Survey | Christianity in the UK.
- Commission on Religious Education – CoRE (2018). *Final Report, Religions and Worldviews: The Way Forward*. London: Religious Education Council. FINAL REPORT. Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE | Commission on Religious Education.
- Copley, T. (1994). *Religious Education 7–11: Developing Primary Teaching Skills*. London: Routledge.
- Copley, T. (2008). *Teaching Religion: Sixty years of religious education in England and Wales*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Cush, D. (1999). The Relationships between Religious Studies, Religious Education and Theology: Big Brother, Little Sister and the Clerical Uncle? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 21(3), 137–146.
- Dadzie, S. (2000). *Toolkit for Tackling Racism in Schools*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Day, A. (2020). Towards increasing diversity in the study of religion. *Religion*, 50/1, 46–52.
- Department for Education. (2014). *Promoting Fundamental British Values as Part of SMSC in Schools*. Advice template. (publishing.service.gov.uk).
- Docherty, S. (2018). A new dialogue between biblical scholarship and Religious Education. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40/3, 298–307.
- Faith Survey. (2021). Faith Survey | Christianity in the UK.
- Felix, M. (2019). Decolonising the IPE syllabus: Eurocentrism and the coloniality of knowledge in International Political Economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, 26/6, 1361–1378.
- Flanagan, R. (2020). Worldviews: overarching concept, discrete body of knowledge or paradigmatic tool? *Journal of Religious Education*, 68, 331–344.
- Gearon, L., Kuusisto, A., Matemba, Y., Benjamin, S., Du Preez, P., Koirikivi, K., & Simmonds, S. (2021). Decolonising the Religious Education Curriculum. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 43/1, 1–8.
- Hampshire, & Portsmouth and Southampton Councils. (2021). *Living Difference IV The agreed syllabus for Hampshire Portsmouth Southampton and the Isle of Wight*. Winchester: Hampshire County Council.
- Hannam, P., & Panjwani, F. (2020). Religious Education and the potential for mitigating xenophobia. *Journal for Religious Education*, 68, 385–396.
- Harvey, J. (2011). Visual Culture. *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (pp. 502–522). London: Routledge.
- Hull, J. M. (2004). Practical Theology and Religious Education in a Pluralist Europe. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 26/1, 7–19.
- Jackson, R., Iprgrave, J., Hayward, M., Hopkins, P., Fancourt, N., Robbins, M., Francis, L., & McKenna, U. (2010). *Materials Used to Teach about World Religions in Schools in England*. Warwick: University of Warwick.
- Joy, M. (2001). Postcolonial Reflections: Challenges for Religious Studies 1. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 13/1, 177–195.
- Keele University. (2020). *Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum*. Keele decolonising the curriculum network - Keele University.
- Knowles, E., & Ridley, W. (2005). *Another Spanner in the Works: Challenging Prejudice and Racism in Mainly White Schools*. London: Trentham Books Ltd.
- London School of Economics Blog. (2016). *Is Religion Disappearing Entirely from Great Britain? A Fresh Look at Religiosity Trends*. Is religion disappearing entirely from Great Britain? A fresh look at religiosity trends | EUROPP (lse.ac.uk).
- Matemba, Y. (2021). Decolonising Religious Education in Sub-Saharan Africa through the Prism of Anti-colonialism: a Conceptual Proposition. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 43/1, 33–45.
- Mercer, J. (2017). A Space for Hard Conversations on Race, Racism, Anti-Racism, and Religious Education. *Religious Education*, 112/1, 1–2.

- NATRE (2018). *An Analysis of the Provision for RE in Primary Schools – Autumn Term 2018*. An analysis of a Survey of teachers on GCSE change and RE in light of the EBac changes (natre.org.uk).
- Official Statistics (OS) (2020). *Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2019 to 2020*. Hate crime, England and Wales, 2019 to 2020 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).
- Ofsted (2021). *Research Review Series: Religious Education*. Research review series: religious education - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).
- Orchard, J. (2020). Does RE Still Matter? *Journal of Religious Education*, 68, 271–287.
- Pink, S. (2013). *Doing Visual Ethnography*. London: SAGE.
- Radford Ruether, R. (2012). Is Christ White?. In G. Yancy (Ed.), *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus do?* (pp. 101–113). London: Routledge.
- Revell, L. (2008). Religious education in England. *The History of Religions and Religious Education*, Numen, 55 2/3, 218–240.
- Rose, G. (2013). On the relation between visual research methods and contemporary visual culture. *The Sociological Review*, 62/1, 24–41.
- Sanders, E. (1993). *The historical figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin Books.
- School Standards and Framework Act. (1998). section 69. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/section/69>
- Thorani, A. (2020). *REC discussion papers*. The-Worldview-Project.pdf (religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk).
- Vince, M. (2020). 'Neutrality', Muslimness and the whiteness of RE professionalism. *Journal of Religious Education*, 68, 371–383.
- Walshe, K. (2005). What do young people today really think about Jesus? *British Journal of Religious Education*, 27/1, 65–78.
- Walshe, K., & Copley, T. (2001). The Jesus of Agreed Syllabuses and the Jesus of Theology and Religious Studies in KS2. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 24/1, 65–78.
- Yancy, G. (2012). *Christology and whiteness: What would Jesus do?*. London: Routledge.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.