

TEACHING ABOUT CHRISTIANITY: A CONFIGURATIVE REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN ENGLISH SCHOOLS

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ACCEPTED BY *JOURNAL OF BELIEFS AND VALUES*

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2016.1229469>

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a systematic review of empirical research on teaching about Christianity in state schools in England between 1993 and 2013. First, I explain the background to this religion's current place within English religious education. The value of a configurative review is set out, and inclusion criteria are outlined, leading to the selection of 58 publications. Then the paper's theoretical frame is explained, drawing on activity theory, and the analysis is set out under three broad organising principles: first, teachers' professional and pedagogical intentions; second, how teachers draw on different pedagogical strategies to enact these intentions, for example systematic or thematic approaches; lastly, how these intentions and strategies affect pupil learning, such as pupils' conceptions of difficult topics. The implications for research in religious education are then drawn together, notably the need to consider the pedagogical issues for different religions individually.

KEY WORDS: Christianity, Pedagogy, Religion, Teaching

Introduction

Christianity has always had significant place in the religious education curriculum in England, whether within confessional teaching or within a pluralistic, world religions approach. It was the essentially the only religion studied (excepting ‘Old Testament’ Judaism) until 1970s, when other religions began to be included in the curriculum in secular state schools. Currently in such schools, the curriculum must include the impartial study of Christianity, and local syllabuses must ‘reflect the fact that religious traditions in this country are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of other religious traditions’ (*UK Government 1988ⁱ; *Religious Education Council 2013). Despite the recent proliferation of school types that are outside the legislation – notably free schools and academies - this approach still holds sway. Unsurprisingly, Christianity may be the only religion studied in state-funded church schools, though many adopt a pluralistic approach.

Within a pluralistic approach, the representation of particular religions has been problematized (*Jackson 2004), notably Islam (*Revell 2012), Hinduism and Sikhism (*Nesbitt 2013). Different religions and beliefs raise individual pedagogical issues, but these differences are rarely addressed in policy (*Fancourt 2015b); however these differences raise questions about why and (therefore) how they should be taught. A case could be made for the investigation of any religion or belief, and this article focuses on Christianity, given its privileged statutory position and cultural weight in England. Furthermore, the re-framing of Christianity as a world religion required attention from 1970s, as it came to be treated like other religions (*Brown 1992, *2000), and the inspectorate remain concerned with its variable treatment in classrooms (*Ofsted 2007, *2010): classroom Christianity has long raised idiosyncratic issues.

Configurative review

Rather than research this topic afresh, this article reviews existing empirical research. Systematic reviews have become important within educational research, notably Black and Wiliam's (*1998) review of assessment for learning, and they differ from conventional literature reviews in systematising research rather than critiquing it. There are various approaches to systematisation (*Brown 2013; *Gough et al. 2012); here, a configurative review is adopted (*Gough et al. 2012), piecing together elements from disparate studies that used different methods - one mosaic of various assorted pieces. An alternative, aggregative approach would combine data from similarly designed, usually quantitative, studies into a re-analysis of all these data (*Evans and Benefield 2001). The research aim of this review is therefore to consider what previous research reveals about how teachers teach about Christianity.

A preliminary step in systematic reviews is to identify inclusion criteria by evaluating significant research (*Gough et al. 2012). A study of three highly cited works (*Francis et al. 1996ⁱⁱ, Copley T. 1998; Jackson et al. 2010) led to the following criteria:

- Explicitly about or referring to Christianity in religious education, including generic research which discussed examples of teaching Christianity. Excluded were: research specifically on other religions; studies focusing on attitudes to Christianity, unless they included references to religious education; generic studies that without examples from Christianity. Applying this criterion was complex since much research on religious education was generic, though implicitly about Christianity.
- Empirical. Research methodology had to be transparent, and theoretical papers were excluded (e.g. *Cooling 1994).

- Limited to classroom practice, so studies of policy or curriculum documentation were excluded (*Fancourt 2015b).
- In England, or where the English data were identifiable, such as in British or European studies (e.g. Conroy et al. 2013).
- In secular state schools, rather than church, faith or independent schools, since religious education in such schools often had different educational aims.
- Between 1993 and 2013, retrospectively covering two decades from the review's commencement.

A copyright library (the Bodleian) was searched, as were online resources: A+ Education, British Education Index and ERIC. 351 items were short-listed, and 58 selected. They included: 22 quantitative studies (but no quasi-experimental studies); 27 qualitative studies (including 8 action research studies); 8 mixed-methods studies. They ranged from large-scale surveys of thousands of pupils to life-histories of a handful of teachers, each with its own methodological strengths and weaknesses, and this variation swayed the decision to adopt a configurative review. Each item is cited at least once, to show how it contributed to the overall mosaic. Sometimes one research project formed the basis of several studies, so the citations are not necessarily independent; for example the Biblos project (Copley T. et al. 2004) included eight individual studies.

Although the review methodology tends towards induction, a broad conceptual frame for defining teaching was required, so an activity theory view of teaching was deployed (*Leont'ev 1978; *Engeström 1987), which Afdal (*2014) has applied to religious education. Teaching is viewed as a culturally and historically purposeful activity, which teachers engage in for reasons of their own: their object-motive. In enacting their object-motives, they deploy various 'mediating tools' - both physical and psychological - to design and implement classroom activities, as the 'object of activity', which

support pupil learning, as the outcome of this activity. These elements obviously interact with each other, and so this sequence should not be read as linear: teachers choose resources on the basis of their pedagogical aims, but these aims are also shaped by the resources available.

This review therefore has three strands: first, teachers' motives, by exploring research on their intentions, religiosity and expertise. Secondly, it investigates strategies and resources, such as pedagogical choices (e.g. systematic or thematic approaches), textbooks and classroom talk. Thirdly, these motives and pedagogical choices impacted on, and were informed by, pupils' learning. Clearly these elements only provide a loose organisational structure since the studies had different theoretical frames and research questions, and do not fit neatly into these elements.

Teachers' motives

This section summarises research on teachers' views of their role in relation to Christianity, and is itself in three sections: teachers' personal religious beliefs; expertise and experience; their view of their role as religious education teachers. There was often a complex inter-relationship between personal beliefs, whether Christian or not, and professional motives and experience.

Teachers' religiosity

Much research suggested that teachers' professional motives were affected by their personal identity in relation to Christianity. Studies showed that the majority of those in charge of religious education, in both primary and secondary schools, were Christian (Jackson et al. 2010, p. 32): 'these data confirm the close association between responsibility for religious education...and personal faith

commitment’ (p. 200). However, the interplay between religious commitment and professional identity was complex. Christian teachers of religious education were never found to be evangelizing, but emphasized religious education as a dialogical space, their faith underpinning this professional value (Hayward 2007; Everington and Sikes 2001; Everington 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; Miller and McKenna 2011), and often motivated by poor experiences of their own religious education (Copley T. 1998; Everington 2009a), and valued ‘objectivity’ (Revell and Walters 2010). Some teachers lacking religious convictions were wary of religions, including Christianity (Miller and McKenna 2011), but felt free to express their personal beliefs, whereas colleagues with Christian religious convictions considered that they should not be so open (Revell and Walters 2010; though see Fancourt 2007). No research within this review explored how teachers with other religious affiliations, e.g. Muslims, viewed teaching about Christianity.

Teachers’ expertise

Studies also suggested that teachers’ conceptions of their role were informed by their knowledge of Christianity. Hayward (2007) identified 284 secondary teachers’ undergraduate qualifications, showing the ‘centrality of theology as the main approach to the study of Christianity’ (p. 45), with the commonest modules being contemporary theology and patristic theology, though other graduates have joined the profession, notably philosophers (Everington 2009a). Departments also deployed non-specialists, who were often ‘highly committed to the subject, and had clear views on resources and pedagogy’ (Jackson et al. 2010, p. 199); nevertheless, their lack of expertise affected planning and resources, as department heads planned simpler lessons for them to deliver (p. 9). In primary schools, the lack of expertise raised concerns (Revell 2005; McCreery 2005); subject coordinators were sometimes selected because of their religious commitment (Francis et al. 1999), though many undertook subject booster courses (Jackson et al. 2010, p. 186).

Length of experience was unsurprisingly variable. Copley (Copley T. 1998) reported some staff with ‘decades’ of experience (p. 14), thus from the 1970s or earlier, and Francis et al. (1999) identified a similar ‘generational gulf’ (also Everington 2009b). These older teachers often considered that they could combine confessional and newer non-confessional approaches, assimilating later developments into their existing professional schema, whereas younger colleagues were more committed to newer approaches.

Teachers’ pedagogical aims

Various studies surveyed teachers’ pedagogical aims, often highlighting ‘wide and diverging outcomes’ amongst teachers (Conroy et al. 2012). Four broad categories emerged (Lundie 2010; Astley and Francis. 1997; Jackson et al. 2010): ‘systematic knowledge about religious teachings’ including learning about Christianity (Lundie 2010, p. 166; see Ipgrave and McKenna 2007); a ‘pre-defined set of moral values’, such as tolerance or liberality (Lundie 2010 p. 167); ‘Intellectual engagement...and curiosity’ (ibid); ‘challenging personal and social moralities’ (ibid). Other research showed that in both primary and secondary schools the first category was not prioritised (Jackson et al. 2010). Moreover, the two phases had different priorities, with primary schools identifying the second and fourth categories, but secondary teachers preferring the third category. These differences of intention between the two phases indicate a potential problem in cross-phase curriculum design.

Mediating tools

Here various elements which teachers use to realise their overall intentions, such as language, text, pictures, or pedagogical approaches, are considered.

Pedagogical approaches

Various studies showed how different intentions affected teachers' choice of classroom practices. Astley et al. (1997) asked 210 secondary teachers to select what they considered to be the subject's main aim and then to prioritise certain classroom methods, which were cross-referenced to their chosen aim. Thus, those who valued knowledge and understanding of religions selected visiting places of worship or visits by members of faith communities. However, those who preferred to emphasize critical thinking selected evaluating the moral values of religions or discussing challenges to religious belief (p. 175). Classroom tasks therefore differed depending on teachers' overall views of the subject.

Much research investigated a long-standing debate, between systematic approaches in which each religion is treated individually in each module and thematic approaches in which different religions are combined around a generic theme - though researchers operationalised these terms differently (Astley et al. 1997; Kay and Smith 2000; Hayward 2007; Jackson et al. 2010). Astley et al. (1997) found that teachers who focused on knowledge of Christianity and other religions preferred systematic approaches, whereas those who aimed at spiritual, moral, cultural and social development referred a thematic approach. Those favouring either critical thinking or values development were divided on the question.

Studies of classroom talk also showed how teachers' overall aims affected pedagogical strategies. Eke et al. (2005) studied whole-class interactive teaching in primary schools (see also Stern 2010), conducting discourse analysis according to two criteria: whether questions were specific to religious education or not, and whether they were teacher-centred or pupil-centred. Their analysis showed two

broad patterns of questioning: ‘puzzling questions’ and ‘understanding of the main religious traditions’. The latter tended to be slightly more focused on ‘correct’ understanding, but ranged across different religions (p. 169), while, the lessons emphasizing ‘puzzling questions’ tended to focus on Christian themes because the pupils could discuss these themes more easily.

Schemes of work

Various studies showed that Christianity generally received more attention than any other religion, though rarely more than all other religions altogether (Kay and Smith 2002; Hayward 2007; Thanissaro 2012). Module topics would clearly be influenced by teachers’ pedagogical decisions, outlined above, and Hayward (2007) found that Years 7 and 8 were similar, but for Year 9 ‘faith in action’ and social issues became popular, in preparation for GCSEs. Overall, three topics dominated: Jesus, Church and the Bible – somewhat traditional topics, not out of place in a 1970s curriculum or earlier. The popularity of modules on Jesus’ life, ministry or significance was striking, representing 23% of all systematic teaching on Christianity, though paradoxically, secondary teachers considered that teaching in primary schools was dominated by modules on Jesus, the Church, Festivals and the Bible, yet they claimed that they had to ‘start from scratch’ (Hayward, 2007, p. 15). This raises questions about pupil progression, but echoes the earlier discussions about different pedagogical intentions between primary and secondary schools.

The representation of Christianity in textbooks and other resources was another aspect of curriculum content; whilst they are selected according to teachers’ pedagogical choices, they have a voice of their own. Jackson et al. (2010) found that while many resources presented Christianity accurately, there was overall ‘a reluctance to engage with the real core of the Christian faith such as Christian belief in Jesus as God incarnate’ (p. 7; Hayward and Hopkins 2010; Copley T. 1998). Denominational differences were over-simplified (Jackson et al. 2010, p. 105); gender and race and were often badly

presented (p. 98), and many resources lacked contemporaneity, using outdated examples or images. Overall, a presumed familiarity skewed the presentation. In some textbooks it was the default religion, so that thematic issues first used Christian examples before drawing on other religions (Jackson et al. 2010, p. 108); however, this presumed familiarity also meant that textbooks were more critical of Christianity than other religions (p. 110).

Task design

This section considers how pupils' understanding of Christianity develops through task design (Fancourt 2015a), and relates to fluctuating interpretations of the two national attainment targets, 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' over this period (*Fancourt 2015b). At stake is whether pupils accurately appropriate and internalize Christian concepts, and especially whether 'learning from religion' supported this understanding. For example, the Biblos project showed how non-religious interpretations of Christian material were replacing theological interpretations: the Feeding of the Five Thousand became a message about sharing, not a Christologically significant miracle (Copley, T. 1998; Copley C. et al. 2004; Copley T. and Walshe 2002; Hayward 2007; Everington 2007). Alternatively, Christian material simply aided the development of generic intellectual skills (Conroy et al. 2013), though actually many textbooks only set mundane tasks (Newton and Newton 2006).

Sometimes strategies combined the development of pupils' ability to express themselves with their use of theological concepts (Whittall 2009; Wedell 2010; Simpson 2012; also Eke et al. 2005); O'Dell (2009) showed how boys came to understand diversity within Christianity through reflecting on their gendered identity. Several studies highlighted the importance of creativity, as a 'direct way to achieve depth' (O'Grady 2003, p. 222; see Copley T. 1998; Hookway 2002; O'Grady 2008).

However structuring lessons was not the same as choosing apparently accessible topics; Burton (1995) found that rites of passage, e.g. baptism, were selected because of the (mistaken) assumption that pupils had attended them.

Pupils' learning

Here, studies into pupils' learning about Christianity are considered, and their views of this learning, to consider if and how teachers' intentions and pedagogical decisions bear fruit.

Pupils' understanding of Christianity

Research suggested that pupil learning varied because of the range of differing intentions and strategies. Kay and Smith (2000) demonstrated that the number of religions studied and the choice between systematic and thematic approaches affected pupils' ability to identify individual features of different religions. They found that a coherent approach, whether systematic or thematic, led to more accurate knowledge than mixed approaches, as 'pupils gain a basic framework from the approach, once they have grasped what that approach is' (Kay and Smith 2000, p. 89; Hayward 2007). Smith and Kay (2000) also considered the effect of pedagogical strategies on pupils' attitudes to different religions, and found that positive attitudes towards all religions developed more strongly with a systematic approach. If five or six religions were studied, pupils' attitudes toward Christianity were the most positive, but if fewer, then pupils were most positive towards Judaism. However, the first part of their research suggested that pupils' *knowledge* will be less accurate if they studied more than four religions: there was a potential tension between being erroneously appreciative or accurately critical. Recent research showed that pupils' understanding was constrained by naïve examination

criteria, for example a ‘facile summation of a distinction between Catholicism and Anglicanism’ (Conroy et al. 2012, p. 315).

Pupils’ attitudes to studying the Bible were a focus of many studies. Copley C. et al. (2004) found that most pupils were not hostile to the Bible (see also Copley T. et al. 2001). For pupils, problematic aspects of the Bible were: contradictions, meaning, language, miracles, relevance, format, and credibility (Copley C. et al. 2004, p. 49; Ipgrave 2013a). Some of these concerned literary qualities: language, format and meaning. Others concerned the claim to be revelation: contradictions, credibility and miracles - raising scientific issues (see Fulljames 1996).

Specific studies of pupils’ understanding of Jesus (Copley T. and Walshe 2002; Walshe 2005; Aylward and Freathy 2008) found that pupils struggled with, for example, miracles (Freathy and Aylward 2010), the resurrection, the incarnation, and atonement (Copley T. and Walshe 2002, p. 32), and Astley and Francis (1996) found that A level students adopted a humanized Christology. Furthermore, Copley and Walshe (2002) showed how pupils’ concerns varied with their religious backgrounds; while Christian and non-religious pupils had concerns with miracles and the resurrection, Muslim pupils, ...did not question either Jesus’ historical existence or the virgin birth, or why Jesus allows bad things to happen today’ (p. 33; Ipgrave 1999, 2013b). Contrastingly, pupils from Eastern traditions were...‘most likely to raise the virgin birth as an issue’ (p. 33; McKenna et al. 2009). Gender was significant, with girls more knowledgeable than boys, and boys more likely to question Jesus’ existence (Copley T. and Walshe 2002, p. 32; Lewis et al. 2009).

Pupils’ perceptions of their learning

Pupils' attitudes to religious education, and on learning about Christianity within it, varied across different projects. One study found pupils' attitudes to religious education and Christianity correlated (Lewis and Francis 1996), and attitudes to the subject were coloured by negative attitudes to religion (Swindells et al. 2010), though pupils preferred it to assemblies (Kay 1996). However other studies found that pupils understood the subject's aims positively: 'Muslims, Christians and the non-religious alike had assimilated the multi-faith and inter-faith ethic promoted by the English model of RE' (McKenna et al. 2009, p. 61; van de Tuin 2009). Pupils described the reflexive value of understanding: "knowing *about* Christian beliefs leads to putting a better opinion across, whether you agree with them or not" (Fancourt 2010, p. 298), and as 'pupils appreciate the space for discussion and expression of personal views in RE and they commend the impartial delivery of biblical material and those teachers who listen to rebellious or anti-religious pupils' (Copley T. et al. 2006, p. 33). Pupil online dialogue was engaging, but raised the problem that pupils could put forward idiosyncratic beliefs which their peers might misunderstand as representing the wider religion or denomination, such as a Catholic pupil who believed in reincarnation (McKenna et al. 2008).

Several studies highlighted pupils' frustrations when studying Christianity: repetition of content, notably between primary and secondary; disjointed selection of topics; theologically problematic episodes such as God's judgment being ignored (Copley T. et al. 2006, p. 33). Kay and Smith (2002) and Thanissaro (2012) unsurprisingly found that pupils developed negative attitudes from mechanical and repetitive tasks, notably copying or dictation - 'such lessons can hardly be expected to engage the imagination or the mind' (Kay and Smith 2002, p.118): pupils preferred tackling genuine theological challenges, such as the resurrection or miracles, to banal activities.

Finally, the interrelationship between pupils' learning and personal beliefs was explored. Pupils with a religious conviction were often supportive of inclusive religious education, and Muslim pupils thought that students should learn about other religions, including Christianity (Ipgrave and McKenna

2007; McKenna et al. 2009). Ipgrave (2012) suggested that attitudes to pupil religiosity may vary according to the school's locality, though Moulin's (2011) research showed that Christian students felt that their religion or denomination was misrepresented, either through stereotyping, as teachers "make it sound like we...are all the same", or as intellectually untenable, "mak[ing] it seem ridiculous" (p. 316).

Conclusion

This review has explored teaching and learning about Christianity by configuring existing research reasonably impartially, to inform practice and to lay the foundations for further empirical studies. Its main findings are that the relationships between religious identity, professional identity and teaching about Christianity were not straightforward, but played out across different constructions of professional practice and of pedagogy, and across decades of work in classrooms, with approaches from the 1970s or before still influencing practice; this is unlikely to be case for other religions. Different pedagogical aims, especially across phases, led to different preferences for module structures and lesson planning, including approaches, resources and classroom discourse - the patterns were complex. Pupils' learning was affected by the interaction of teachers' professional and pedagogical choices with their prior learning, and for pupils, the least successful teaching appeared to be: repetitive and mundane; a mix of systematic and thematic approaches; uncritical of Christianity; too critical of Christianity; treating Christianity as a vehicle for intellectual skills; limited by narrow assessment requirements; unresponsive to pupils' backgrounds - especially those who were Christian.

However, these apparently straightforward findings have two implications. First, the complexity and variation in the processes of teaching and learning which that this review reveals should caution

against looking too quickly beyond the classroom in seeking explanations for its current state.

Copying and dictation are apparently still prevalent, and perhaps poor task design is as plausible an explanation of pupil dissatisfaction as secularization (Copley, T. 1998), a crisis in meaning (Conroy et al. 2013) or paradigm shifts (*Barnes 2014; *Gearon 2013). The problems - and their solutions - are perhaps more mundane. Lack of space precludes proper discussion, but there is perhaps a tendency to look for wider sociological, philosophical and non-educational explanations of the subject, thereby overlooking classroom evidence and ignoring both the wide diversity in current practice, and differences between religions.

Second, these findings might apply to other religions and beliefs, and further reviews would enable us to build an understanding of how different religions and beliefs are presented differently in classrooms; what holds for teaching about Christianity may not hold for teaching about another religion, and what benefits one may hinder another. For instance, anxieties about both Islamophobia and radicalization can affect the representation of Islam, and Judaism may still be presented as Christianity's precursor, but our understanding of how these play out in schemes of work or lesson plans with different pupils is hazy. This therefore is a strong plea for more research into how teaching about *each* religion is shaped by teachers' professional motives, the nature of the pedagogical choices which they then make, and the impact of these choices on pupils' learning.

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ⁱ The reference list is in two sections: those included in the review, and other references, which are indicated with an asterisk in the text.

ⁱⁱ Individual articles from this collection were included, but not all.