Children's understanding of religion.

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Children's understanding of religion: Interviews with Arab-Muslim, Asian-Muslim, Christian and Hindu children aged 5-11 years.

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Children's understanding of religion: Interviews with Arab-Muslim, Asian-Muslim, Christian and Hindu children aged 5-11 years.

Abstract

Research into children's awareness of group differences has been an active area of research for some time, with work focusing on areas such as nationality, ethnicity, gender and religion. The majority of the work in these areas has taken the cognitive-constructivist framework as a background, offering a domain-general approach to all social cognition. This paper reports a qualitative study investigating children's understanding of religion and the importance of religion, broadly following an interview schedule based on Verbit's (1970) definition of religion. A semi-structured interview procedure was used with 58 Arab Muslim, Asian Muslim, Christian, Hindu children aged between 5 and 11 years living in North London. Religion appeared to be highly salient to the children interviewed and findings suggested that children's religious identity is subject to a complex pattern of influences which cannot be solely explained by either age or cognitive differences.

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A defining and consolidating feature of ethnic groups is religion. Religion can also be implicated in many violent clashes over the course of history, from the crusades and the Reformation to recent clashes in the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, Northern states of India, Sri-Lanka and the ever present disputes in the Middle East between Jews and Muslims in Israel and the West Bank. It follows, therefore, that religion is likely to be a highly emotive component of identity, if not for people of white UK origin, certainly for ethnic minorities who have their origins in countries where religious violence is common-place, and who have often arrived in the UK to escape such violence.

It is clear that children being born in the UK today are entering a society which contains a greater proportion of ethnic minorities than ever before. How children understand and evaluate religious groups and their own group membership is of vital importance and will shape the future of the UK in relation to religious group relations. However, research into the area of religious group understanding and attitudes has been somewhat sparse. The work presented in this paper provides a preliminary description of children's understanding of religion and religious groups.

Religion has been linked to mental health, with religion providing a several stress-buffering functions (Loewenthal, 1995) which can enhance self-esteem and potentially reduce the likelihood of developing depressive illness. Preliminary findings also

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indicate that religiosity in children has a positive relationship with self-esteem (Takriti, 2002).

The four main World religions are Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). These four religious groups are extensively varied, and the beliefs and practices which define them vary significantly both within and between the groups. However, it is necessary to stipulate what religious groups have in common, in order to reach a definition of religion.

A distinction can be drawn between two inter-related concepts in religion: belief in the supernatural and behaviour in relation to the supernatural. It can be seen that all religions believe in an invisible world and see the purpose of life as increasing harmony in the world through doing good and avoiding evil (Loewenthal, 1994). In the majority of religions, this invisible world is inhabited by various types of supernatural beings such as angels, djinn, devils, God(s) etc. These beings are believed to impact on the behaviour, reasoning and emotional reactions of the individual (Thouless, 1971). The behaviour which is pre-ordained through organised religion acts as a mediator between the individual and the supernatural (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). This definition of religion is, by necessity, broad and somewhat generalised, to account for the wide variety in religions.

Verbit (1970), however, specified the content of religiosity, that is what makes one individual more religious than another. He defined six dimensions of religiosity: Ritual; Doctrine; Emotion; Knowledge; Ethics; and Community. Each of these six dimensions are postulated to vary according to four components: Content; Frequency;

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Intensity and Emotion. Examining doctrine, for example, an individual with high religiosity could be seen to follow the doctrine of his or her religion, to do so frequently, to believe in the doctrine intensely and with conviction, and to feel a strong emotional reaction to the doctrine.

An overarching research approach in the development of religiosity in childhood has been characterised by stage theories. In particular, Elkind (1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1970, 1971) formulated a stage based account of development in the domain, postulated that while cognitive development does not guarantee religious development it does have a profound effect on the type and level of religious thinking that children are capable of. Elkind (1961, 1962, 1963, 1964) interviewed Jewish, Catholic and Protestant children aged between 5 and 14 about their religions using a semi-structured interview technique. Three stages of development were shown with children progressing from a global undifferentiated concept of religious identity at round 5 years, to a concrete concept at around 7 years and finally to an abstract understanding of religious identity at 11 years. Similar stage based approaches have been suggested by authors such as Goldman (1964) and Harms (1944).

There has been a large amount of research investigating children's ability to distinguish between groups and related prejudice. This work has primarily focused on ethnic groups. Aboud (1988) proposed that the ability to distinguish between groups and subsequently any prejudice would be expected to develop in line with other cognitive developments in the child. Initially, the child is dominated by affective processes which are then overtaken by more developed cognitive processes. In addition, the child moves from being profoundly egocentric to being able to focus on

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groups and later to focusing on individuals within groups. The egocentrism of young children prevents them from accepting that individuals in other groups may think and feel differently from themselves and also from attending to within-group differentiation. So, it is proposed that pre-operational thinkers will focus on group differences and external attributes resulting in potentially high levels of prejudice (Aboud & Skerry, 1983). Concrete operational thinkers in contrast, will be more likely to consider internal psychological features of themselves and peers as important, leading to a reduction in prejudice (Damon & Hart, 1982). Evidence for Aboud's position can be taken from studies which have found that prejudice correlates negatively with cognitive development. For example, Kutner (1958) classified 7 year old children as being either high or low prejudiced on the basis of a racial attitude scale. Highly prejudiced children were found to be less capable of inductive reasoning. Similar findings were obtained by Clark, Hovecar & Dembo (1980). Later work by Doyle and Aboud (1995), however, did not find a correlation between racial attitude change and performance on generalised conservation tasks. Rather the perspective taking skills of reciprocity (the understanding that members of each ethnic group are likely to prefer their in-group), and reconciliation (the awareness that this preference for the in-group is valid) have been linked to decreases in prejudiced attitudes and also to an increase in perception of intra-group variability (Doyle et al., 1995). As such, it can be suggested that it is the acceptance of the legitimacy of an out-group member's views which influences prejudice.

The majority of the work investigating the development of religious identity can be seen to have been based to some degree on the Piagetian framework of cognitive development in children. A criticism of work in this area is the limited samples of

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children used with much of the research having focused on Jewish children and Christian children of various denominations. As such, it can be seen that children from other religious groups, for example Muslim and Hindu children, have been largely ignored in research.

An exception to this is the work by Modood (1994; Modood, Beishon & Virdee, 1994). Adolescents from a number of ethnic groups were interviewed to assess the relative importance of religion in their identities and then to assess the influence of their religion on lifestyle. The interviewees were asked to choose identities which they would mention if they had to describe themselves to someone on the telephone, and they were then asked to rank the chosen identities in order of importance to them. Adolescents from a South Asian background were significantly more likely to choose religion as a way of describing themselves and consistently gave it more importance than any of the other ethnic groups such as Caribbean, white English, African Asian or Chinese. South Asian adolescents were also more likely to claim that they had a religion, with 98% of respondents classifying themselves by religion, compared with 69% of white adolescents and 72% of Caribbean adolescents.

Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh adolescents were asked to rate the importance of religion for the way in which they led their lives on a five point Likert scale running from 'not at all important' to 'very important' (Modood, 1994). A difference associated with religious group was obtained with Muslim teenagers placing more importance on religion than any other group. In addition, all groups rated religion as more important than the Christian teenagers. Ghuman (1999) also found that religion was rated as more important by Muslims than by other religious groups.

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In summary, the majority of the research investigating religion in childhood and adolescence operationalised religion as the different levels of logical thinking applied to religion (Francis, 1979). The validity of the Piagetian stages is assumed and the stages are treated as normative (McGrady, 1983). As such, the results obtained in the majority of studies (Greenacre, 1971; Miller, 1976; Morley, 1975; Osmer & Fowler, 1985; Oser & Gründer, 1988; Scarlet & Perriello, 1994; Streeter, 1981; Webster, 1975) have been analysed by the application of stage criteria to subjects' responses to Piagetian style dilemmas modeled on Goldman's design (Slee, 1986). As such, research interest in religious understanding can be seen to have been dominated by testing the presence and nature of religious thinking in terms of Piagetian style stages. The majority of the results have shown religious thinking being determined by the development of cognitive structures developing from an intuitive, undifferentiated structure of thought to thinking bound by concrete realities and finally to abstract, reversible and logical thinking.

The domain of religious research in children has defined religious thinking as the activity of thinking directed towards religion, which implies a construction of religious development as no different from any other type of cognition. The implication of this is that all children can be expected to develop religious understanding at the same pace, progressing through the same series of stages of understanding. It seems, however, reasonable to assume that differences could exist between children according to their background, specifically, religious group membership or ethnicity.

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According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981), the process of self-categorisation, whereby the individual determines which groups they belong to, enables the individual to structure an understanding of the social world and provides a system of orientation for self-reference and defining one's position and status in society. Social identity theory would allow for a different pattern of development to occur within each religious group as the behaviour, beliefs and thoughts associated with each religious group will differ from others. Social identity theory potentially offers a more flexible account of development with differences both between and within religious groups being feasible.

It follows, therefore, that as children's understanding of religion and religious groups develops, differences relating to both age and religious group membership may be evident. Age-related changes have been identified in previous work (for example Elkind 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1970, 1971) and have been related to Piagetian stages. However, the existence of differences in understanding in relation to religious group membership has not been previously explored in depth. This paper utilized a semi-structured interview procedure with children aged from five to eleven years, from four different religious backgrounds to provide an initial description of children's understanding in this domain. The main research question was whether children's narratives could be linked to changes in age or would be related more to the religious group membership of children as would be postulated by approaches such as social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979).

Method

Participants

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All the children interviewed were from one primary school in North London. The primary school is situated in a multi-ethnic community and the school can be characterised as multi-religious with no one religious group constituting a majority. Permission for the children to participate was given by the school concerned who were acting in *loco parentis*.

All of the children were born in the United Kingdom. The children were aged between 5 years and 11 years 10 months at the time of taking part in the study and as such were in school years Reception to Year 6. 58 children were interviewed overall, being divided relatively evenly according to sex, with 28 males and 30 females participating.

For the purposes of analysis, the children were divided into three age groups as follows: Young group, from Reception and Years 1 and 2; Middle group from Years 3 and 4; and Old group from Years 5 and 6. The sample was taken from three religious groups, Christian, Hindu and Muslim. The Muslim group was then sub-divided to represent the ethnic diversity of the Muslim population, into Asian Muslim and Arab Muslim children.

Procedure

The interviewer was a female aged 23 years. The interviewer was white British and of no particular religious denomination. It is accepted, however, that the children may have assumed the interviewer to be Christian on the basis of ethnicity although no cues were given as to the religion of the interviewer. It is recognised that interviewer effects may have influenced the results of this study. Interviewer effects refer to the

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tendency for people belonging to a particular group, in this case religion, to avoid making disparaging comments concerning people of the same religion as the interviewer. It follows that, however well an interview is designed, there may be aspects of the interviewer-respondent relationship which may bias responses. However, there did not seem to be an overall pattern of responses in line with interviewer effects.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used. The questions were asked as scheduled, but the children were allowed to discuss side issues if they wished, and amplifications of questions were provided if required. The children were interviewed individually in a room close to their classroom and their responses tape-recorded. The length of the sessions varied according to the child, with, in general, more time being spent with the old children. On average, approximately 25 minutes was spent with each child.

At the beginning of the interview, the children were allowed to 'play' with the tape-recorder, recording their own voice and listening to it being played back. The children were assured that the interview was not a test and that their responses would be treated anonymously.

Interview discussion topics

Although the children were free to discuss any aspects of religion and expand on any questions asked with no constraints, there were some core topics for discussion which were selected prior to the interviewing procedure.

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In Section A the children were initially asked a number of questions, mainly aimed at deriving demographic information and establishing rapport.

In Section B, the children were asked what religion they were. The aim of this was to discover the terms for categorisation spontaneously produced by the children. The term used here, in the initial part of the interview, was then used throughout the rest of the interview when referring to the child's own religion and the in-group. If the child was not able to respond to the categorisation question, alternatives were offered e.g. Are you a Muslim, a Christian, a Hindu or something else or what? The children were also asked what determined their membership in a religious group, whether or not they believed in God and what they knew about God.

The interview then fell into 6 main parts, corresponding with Verbit's (1970) dimensions of religiosity: Ritual; Doctrine; Emotion; Knowledge; Ethics; and Community. The questions asked roughly followed the four components postulated in Verbit's work: Content, Frequency, Intensity and Emotion. Therefore, the children were asked about their own religious behaviour, beliefs held by their in-group, and whether they themselves held the same beliefs as the in-group, their emotions relating to believing in God and being a member of a religious group, whether they felt like they had a high degree of knowledge about God or not, the manner in which they would make ethical decisions, and their involvement in a religious community to the extent of the religious group memberships of their friends.

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In Section C, they were asked if they could name any other religious groups and were asked about them using the terms produced by the children. If the child did not mention Hindu, Christian or Muslim they were prompted to talk about them.

In all the items relating to emotion, a five point Likert scale was used, which was administered in the form of five faces depicting the following emotions: very sad; sad; neither happy nor sad; happy and very happy. The children were asked to point to the face which showed how they felt. This was used to reduce the task demands on the children.

As previously mentioned, the aim of the study was to investigate the children's own understanding of this domain and as such the interviews were highly flexible, with questions which were not applicable being omitted from the interview, and the children's own categorisations and terms being used as much as possible.

Results and discussion

No statistical analyses were performed on the data, as the number of participants was too small to allow for any meaningful statistical conclusions to be drawn. However, the interviews were transcribed and examined to look for any recurring themes or trends. In particular, the interviews were examined for any differences relating to age group or religious group.

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The paper reports the findings on the following: belief; ritual and doctrine; knowledge; ethics; and knowledge of/emotional reactions to other groups.

Belief in/about God

Only two children out of the entire sample said that they did not believe in God.

These children were in Reception and Year 6 respectively. No justification was given from the Hindu child in Reception. The older child was Christian and justified her answer as follows: "I don't really believe in God at all, the only thing I can think is that He is like a spirit in the atmosphere which gives me courage" (Christian, Year 6).

The remaining children reported that they believed in God. Their beliefs were expanded on in the next question which asked what they could tell the interviewer about God.

Across the entire sample there were very few age differences, with the exception that the number of children who did not answer the question decreased slightly with age. General themes can be drawn from those answers given. Hindu children, especially, had a tendency to go into details of the lives of the Gods, including details of their appearances, wars and marriages between them e.g. "I can tell you that some Gods can do more things than other Gods. I've got lots of Gods. My favourite is this little elephant one which I like the best. He has six hands, elephant head and two legs. Once they had a war against these baddie Gods. I believe in this" (Hindu, Year 1) and "There was this God and his mother was having a bath and he wanted to go in but his father said no and just cut his head off. Then when the man's wife came out of the bathroom he said 'the first animal should have its head cut off and be brought to my son'. The first animal was an elephant and so the man gave it to the son. Then the son

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didn't have a human head but an elephant's head. There was this God called Rama.

He had a wife called Sita and a brother. Sita got carried away to Lanka by this evil guy and Rama decided to call her mama and dada and they had to fight the evil one to get Sita back". There was a general tendency for the children to mention miracles, creation, prayers and practices which God likes, and the love and kindness of God.

The latter category of responses was mainly used by the Christian children. The Muslim children were more likely to mention the oneness of God and a number of the Middle and Old Muslim children mentioned Mohammad as God's prophet.

As such, there did not appear to be any age-related trends in understanding in this area. However, religious group differences were apparent. This trend would seem to suggest that a cognitive-constructivist position would not provide an adequate explanation of development, as the children displayed patterns more associated with social group membership. This suggests that the understanding of belief in God(s) would seem to be determined, at least in part, by the religious group membership of the child. This is a trend more associated with social psychological theories such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979).

Ritual & Doctrine

While almost all of the children attempted to answer this question, the answers of the Young children contained some irrelevancies such as going shopping to Woolworth's or playing. In general, there was a trend for these irrelevancies to diminish with age, with more details being offered as the children got older. The children tended to mention praying, visiting places of worship, different types of clothes and food. In particular the old Muslim and Hindu children tended to give very detailed reports of

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festivals e.g. "When it's Ramadan we have to wake up in the middle of the night and we have to eat loads of food and then when its six o'clock we're not allowed to eat and then we have to fast for about 6 hours I think until it's 9 o'clock when it goes dark and you can eat some more. Sometimes we go to the mosque in Ramadan more, when one of the prophets dies and then there is this man, he wears like a turban around his head and one is white and one is black and then he has to sit on a table and then he has to say 'La ilaha illah Allah' (The only God is Allah) and we all have to cry because the prophet has died". (Arab Muslim, Year 5). Again, there was an age trend with older children going into more detail regarding the times and places of ritual behaviour.

With the exception of two children who said that doing religious things did not make them feel either happy or sad, all of the children claimed to feel either happy or very happy about engaging in religious behaviour.

A similar pattern to the questions relating to ritual was found with some of the youngest children giving answers which were not relevant to religious beliefs, or saying that they didn't know. The older end of this age group was, however, going into more detail. This was particularly the case for the Year 2 Arab Muslim children e.g. "They (Muslims) believe about the stories he writes in the Qu'ran. A long time ago there was this man and God put him down on the floor the first man and his name was Mohammad. He was walking on a mountain and God put down a Qu'ran and he holded it. He didn't know how to read it but then God told a man to go to him and he taught him how to read Arabic and taught him" (Arab Muslim, Year 2). Despite the Young children knowing very little, where it was appropriate to ask them the follow-up questions of whether they believed the same as their religious group, the degree to

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which they believed it and also the importance of the beliefs to them, the answers were very positive. This was also true for the Middle group, who provided more information in detail and indicated that their belief system was very strong and of great importance to them. The Old group however, while still providing detailed information, began to indicate some doubt as to the truth of the beliefs. This was particularly true of the Christian children e.g. "I kind of believe it three quarters because there are some things I'm not sure about. Like it's hard to believe that no-one has ever seen Him or heard Him. Sometimes you can't really believe if the stories are true or not. Some of them seem a bit over the top. I do believe in God though" (Christian, Year 5).

The apparent age difference obtained was modified by religious group membership, with an increasing understanding with age occurring mainly for the Hindu and Muslim children. This could be suggested to be due to the Hindu and Muslim children engaging more in religious rituals than the Christian children. This point is speculative as no objective data was collected on the children's participation in religious rituals. However, the pattern obtained, suggests again that the understanding in the domain of religion is not merely due to increasing cognitive capabilities, but to the combination of cognitive and social factors.

Knowledge

The questions in this section were not designed to assess the content of the children's knowledge but rather how they assessed their own knowledge in terms of whether they thought that they knew a lot and wanted to learn more.

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Young Group (Reception & Years 1 & 2)

In this group there was no strong consensus as to the children's evaluation of their knowledge. Approximately half of the children claimed to know a lot. However, the majority of the children stated that they would like to learn more about God, and with the exception of one child, all claimed that they liked knowing about God either a little or a lot.

Middle Group (Years 3 & 4)

In comparison to the Young group the responses of the children in this group seemed to be more consensual. They tended to estimate that they knew a lot about God, that they would like to learn more and all the children in this group liked knowing about God either a little or a lot.

Old Group (Years 5 & 6)

The responses of the Old group were similar to those of the Middle group with the children answering that they knew a lot about God, would like to learn more and that they liked knowing about God. A small number of the older children in this group began to mention that their knowledge of God was not extensive. e.g. "I don't think hardly anybody knows much about God. Nobody knows what He looks like, nobody knows how old He is. Nobody really knows much about Him apart from that He moves in mysterious ways, speaks to Jesus, who is son and tells people things through dreams" (Christian, Year 6) and "I do know about God but mostly girls know more about God because boys don't stay at home, they go out to work and all that. Girls stay at home so they can stay with their grandmas who don't do anything so they can tell them things and they learn about God as well" (Hindu, Year 6).

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The answers given by the children to these questions seemed to follow an approximate age trend. Children's perception of their knowledge appeared to increase with age.

There were not any obvious religious group differences.

Ethics

The majority of the responses to the first question in this section "How do you know if something is right or wrong?" were similar across the whole sample. The children tended to mention that they would ask someone, usually an adult. The third question "If you don't know what is the right thing to do, what would you do?" also resulted in answers with a high degree of consensus, again usually asking adults. However, the answers to this question also included some references to God. This could purely be as a reaction to the intervening question "Can God tell you what is the right thing to do or not?", which may have cued the children to mention this.

It is the answers to this second question which warrant the most comment. In the Young group there did not appear to be any systematic differences between the religious groups relating to who believed that God could tell them and who didn't. However, in the Middle group, it appeared that the Muslim children, regardless of ethnicity were more likely to believe that God could tell them what to do. The methods of instruction varied from knowing in their heads to hearing through dreams. In the Old group, it was the Asian Muslim and Christian children who tended to believe that God could tell them what to do. Also in this group, the children began to mention that God could instruct them through religious books such as the Qu'ran and the Bible.

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Again, there was a trend for religious group membership to influence the responses given by children. This suggests that children's understanding here was a product of both age and social factors.

Knowledge of, and emotional reactions to other religious groups

In this section of the interview the children were firstly asked to name spontaneously some other religious groups. If they were unable to do so, they were then prompted to talk about the three main religious groups of interest (Christian, Hindu and Muslim - excluding their own in-group). There were some changes in the types of answers given by the children which appeared to be related to age.

Young group (Reception & Years 1 & 2)

Generally, the children in this group, particularly those in Reception and Year 1, did not spontaneously mention religious groups and, when prompted to talk about the religious beliefs held and the rituals practised by the groups, were not able to talk about them, and often answered irrelevantly. The majority of the Young children claimed that they did not like the out-group members. In Years 1 and 2, the children began to name out-groups although often giving the names of languages or nationalities rather than religious groups. Again, the older children in this group claimed to dislike the out-group members.

Middle group (Years 3 & 4)

The children in this group were more likely to name groups when asked, although there was still some confusion over nationalities and languages with religion e.g.

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"Indian, Pakistan, Muslim, Sikh, Hebrew, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese and Scottish" (Hindu, Year 4). The amount of information known had increased and the children tended to mention religious practices such as praying or fasting and also places of worship. In general, in this age group, the Hindu children tended to have the most evident confusion over language and religious groups while Muslims in general were more negative in their emotional reactions to other groups.

Old group (Years 5 & 6)

The children in this group tended to give more information in more detail than the younger children. There were still examples of confusion between language, nationality and religion but these had decreased dramatically with the majority of children naming the main religions with no apparent difficulty. There were also still instances of negative emotional responses, but notably there were examples of tolerance appearing e.g. "I like them (Christians). I like all religions because I think it is important for people to socialise and learn from each other and things like that. I believe no one is different although I still believe in my God..... I don't judge people on what religion they are or what they look like" (Asian Muslim, Year 6). There was also a growing realisation of intra-group variation, that some people are nice and some are not regardless of religion.

Despite the age differences discussed above there were also individual differences with some children giving a lot of information regardless of age and some individual children were considerably negative towards the out-groups e.g. "We're going to have a war against them (Jews) and when Jesus is going to come out on the Muslim side and all the Christians are going to go on our side and then it says in the Qu'ran, it says

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one of the Jews is going to go and kill our prophet and the whole world will get destroyed and everyone will die. All the Muslims and Christians will go to heaven, but the Jews will go to Hell and so will the Sikhs and Hindus. I don't want the world to be destroyed, I just want them all to be Muslims but it won't happen" (Arab Muslim, Year 5). "Their (Hindu's) Gods are made of rocks and mud and are joined together and painted. Sometimes I look at them and think I wish I could see my God. It makes you happy when you can see your God, Indians always give their Gods food, but my God can have food all by himself because He makes all the food" (Asian Muslim, Year 2). "They (Hindus) believe in statues of an elephant. It is really disgusting I think and when they make it it takes them a month to make it and then they throw it to the sea" (Asian Muslim, Year 4). "They (Muslims) have to pray five times a day and they have to fast and they pray on a mat and they have a God called Allah and the ladies wear scarves. Some Muslims like Arabians cover themselves and they have a festival called Eid which is very important to them and they fast" (Hindu Year 3). "They (Hindus) have more than one God and they believe in religious people. I'm not really sure what Gods they have. They have different Gods for different things and each God has a story about it. They believe you should only believe in certain Gods and there are different sets of Hindus who believe in different Gods. There are some main ones like Rama and Sita who they all believe in" (Christian, Year 5).

Conclusion

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This study aimed to examine children's understanding of religion in a broad relatively unstructured manner. Although, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions due to the small number of children involved in this study, a few points are worth noting.

Firstly, it can be suggested that religion is highly salient to the children. The majority of the children correctly classified themselves according to religious group membership and stated that they believed in God(s). There was an overall willingness of the children to discuss their religion, religious beliefs and the importance of religious group membership in their lives.

Secondly, there did appear to be some confusion between language, nationality and religion. This demonstrates how intertwined language and religion are, with Arabic being the language in which the Qu'ran is written and as such Arabic being the official language of Islam. Despite this, Muslims of different nationalities speak different languages. Hindus of different nationalities are also defined by the language which they speak. Nationality and language are also intertwined and it appears that these three components of identity are related closely in the children's minds.

Although some age differences were apparent, mainly involving the amount of information given by the children, there were some individual cases where very young children were able to give a lot of information and older children were not able or willing to demonstrate much knowledge. In addition, a large number of trends were apparent which appeared to be related to religious group membership rather than age. It could be suggested that such differences in understanding link with the differing levels of socially shared information made available to children of differing ages.

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The research presented in this paper suggests that a Piagetian approach to this domain which has been taken in previous research (Elkind 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1970, 1971; Goldman, 1964; Harms, 1944) is inappropriate and that future research should look to theories allowing for the effect of religious group membership to partially account for development in this area. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979) could be a potentially useful theory in this area, although at present it does not provide an account of development of social identities. Future research is needed to extend and combine cognitive and social theories to account for development of social understanding in children.

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