

Teaching about Christianity in religious education: a review of research

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1. Introduction

Despite many changes in recent decades, Christianity still has a significant place in the religious education curriculum in England. It is unsurprisingly a central part of religious education within the Christian-based schools of a religious character (often called 'church schools'), but is also an important part of the curriculum in community schools. Under current legislation, religious education 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 1988). This principle underpins much governmental guidance, which singles it out for specific focus, for example:

The study of religion should...provide an appropriate balance between and within Christianity, other principal religions, and, where appropriate other religious traditions and worldviews (HMSO 2010, p23)

Official guidance also suggests that it should be studied at *every* Key Stage, the only religion to be treated in this way (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004, p12). One might assume that this greater attention meant that it would be delivered effectively, where teachers and pupils in a country with a state church would be more comfortable and confident in tackling it. It would provide opportunities for a dynamic curriculum and deepening engagement. In fact, teaching and learning about Christianity has been singled out as an issue for some time.

There have however been longstanding concerns. A recent report by Ofsted (2010) highlighted three related issues. First, while it received more attention than other religions, it was often incoherent:

Pupils' understanding of Christianity, while deeper in some respects compared with their understanding of other faiths, was often unsystematic and confused. (Ofsted 2010, p12)

The report particularly singled out pupils' understanding of Jesus' significance for Christians. The second concern was that pupils' understanding did not develop through their schooling.

Many of the primary and secondary schools visited did not pay sufficient attention to the progressive investigation of the core beliefs of Christianity. (Ofsted 2010, p6)

This had been a concern in a previous Ofsted report:

Although schools organize carefully sequenced units of work on other faiths, their approach to Christianity is often much less rigorous and more fragmented; work on specific aspects of Christianity, such as the life of Jesus or the Bible, is isolated from an investigation of the religion itself. (Ofsted, 2007, p81)

Significantly, this criticism was not that insufficient time was being spent on it, but rather that the time spent was unstructured. Finally, Christianity was presented in a stereotypical and simplistic manner, and 'insufficient attention was paid to diversity within the Christian tradition' (Ofsted 2010, p33).

It would be naive to take everything that an inspection agency said at face value, but it is not alone. A number of very different educationalists have raised concerns about the teaching of Christianity within religious education. Recently, in a government-sponsored report on religious education resources by Warwick University, a Christian reviewer commented that a particular textbook 'did not feel detailed or profound enough in historical and theological areas about Christianity' (Jackson et al. 2010, p99), and in another textbook, the concepts of God and Trinity were explored 'in a way that may leave some readers more confused than when they started' (p91) (see also Hayward and Hopkins 2010). Similarly, the Biblos project, conducted at the University of Exeter, found that pupils often struggled with gaining a theological understanding of the Bible (Copley, T. et al. 2004, p9). Why is this? Since the problem that Ofsted identify is based on classroom observations, it is sensible to investigate classroom practices further. However, what happens in classrooms is related to wider social and political factors. It is reasonably clear that the position of Christianity has shifted, but this needs sketching.

2. Historical context

These current concerns are part of a long history of changes approaches to teaching about Christianity. A common view, based on a simplistic reading of legislation, is of the codification of confessional but non-denominational religious education in 1944 followed by a switch in 1988 to a non-confessional world religions approach, in which Christianity was quantitatively but not qualitatively favoured (UK Government 1944; 1988). Historians of religious education have pointed out that this is a naive reading of more complex social, political and educational processes (Copley 1997). Indeed legislation is often needed to alleviate existing problems as much as to set out new demands; in 1939, Heawood voiced the common anxiety that:

I've the uncomfortable feeling that sometimes when we are teaching Christianity we are really teaching a general respectability and goodwill that is so flabby that it is perfectly useless. (Heawood 1939, p26)

Confessional religious education was both an important part of schooling prior to 1944, but was contested at that time; for instance, citizenship was being seriously considered as an alternative (Freathy 2008). Religious education came under particular scrutiny as more child-centred

approaches to education developed in 1960s; studies focused on pupils' approaches to their learning (e.g. Loukes 1961; Goldman 1964). This scrutiny was simultaneously bound up in wider patterns of secularisation and immigration. The move to the study of world religions started well before 1988 (Bates 1994), notably with the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus in 1975, which had also included secular worldviews (Parker and Freathy 2011). Religious education was simultaneously: (i) the recipient (or perhaps victim) of these wider social forces; (ii) a catalyst for these forces, encouraging them and embedding them; and also (iii) internally a site of contestation between them. The debate is far from over. The changes to religious education over the last decades are open to re-interpretation. Some doubt the value of the changes (e.g. Barnes 2007), and some go so far as wanting a return to a more confessional, Christian-focused curriculum (e.g. Thompson 2004). Others broadly value the changes, but want them refined (e.g. Jackson 2004); some are deeply opposed to a return to confessional Christianity (e.g. Doble 2005).

Part of the problem is that the debate about the place of Christianity is entwined with two other issues. One is the wider debate on religion and education, including church schools and the role of religious education within them (e.g. Cooling 2010). Second, what is often overlooked in this debate between traditionalists and progressives is the influence of a wider concern about the need for qualifications and an assessment-driven agenda (Bowe and Ball 1992); Grimmitt for instance felt that his pedagogical distinction between 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' had been bowdlerised by policymakers (Grimmitt 2000). Indeed, Ofsted's own major inspection role only came about as part of a wider educational concern with standards of attainment (Bowe and Ball 1992).

3. Focus of the review

Teaching and learning about Christianity is in need of particular focus, but rather than reviewing the theoretical positions (Cooling 1993; Grimmitt 2000), this paper seeks to contribute by taking stock of what existing empirical research reveals about teaching and learning in the classroom. Its aim is to diagnose what the classroom issues are, rather than critiquing policy documents and pedagogical approaches. What does research tell us are the major long term issues? What are the surprises? This is not about the development of religiosity *per se*. Much of the research in Francis, Kay and Campbell's collection (1996) focused on religiosity, and attitudes to religion, following Goldman (1964). There are also wider international reviews on pupils' religiosity and spirituality, from Hyde (1990) to Ziebertz, Kay and Riegel's studies (Ziebertz and Kay 2009a, 2009b; Ziebertz, Kay and Riegel 2009). This is a separate issue, even if they sometimes overlap.

To foreground knowledge and understanding for the review may be taken to imply a particular pedagogical position, and it is necessary therefore to say what this focus does not mean. First, it is not a call to prioritise knowledge and understanding over other elements within religious education. This is not an argument for the abolition of 'learning from religion'. Instead, it more broadly attempts to identify which elements or interpretations of 'learning from religion' contribute more successfully to 'learning about religion' (see most recently Teece 2010): how does a personal response lead to deeper understanding? Nor is it an argument for the abolition of those aspects of 'learning from religion' which *may* detract from 'learning about religion'. It is a question of seeing more clearly what is at stake, in order to decide which elements are more important. Second, it does not mean that a focus on particular religions (Jackson 1997) is to be favoured over a focus on religion as a holistic concept (Grimmitt 1989). The point is again simply to show what the issues are. Third, the same is also true for arguments about religious education in terms of spiritual development, or its contribution to social or community cohesion. It is important to see if these contribute to or detract from a thorough understanding of the complexity of Christianity; for example, Wright has argued that the instrumental aim of using religious education to encourage social cohesion led to religious truth claims being ignored (Wright 2004). Finally, since the focus is on understanding rather than religiosity, this is not directly concerned with faith development. However, it would be wrong to ignore the inter-relationship between teachers' religiosity and their approaches to pedagogy, and indeed pupils' religiosity and their learning.

4. Methodology for the review

A preliminary exploration of some significant national research and key publications was conducted to draw out key themes: the Biblos project (Copley 1997; 1998; Copley et al. 2001; Copley, C. et al. 2004; Copley, T. et al. 2004; Copley et al. 2006; Copley and Walshe 2002; Walshe 2005); Hayward's research on Christianity at Key Stage 3 (Hayward 2007); the Warwick report on classroom materials (Jackson et al. 2010; Hayward and Hopkins 2010); the 'Does RE work?' Project (Lundie 2010; Conroy et al. 2011). The relevant research was then determined in a variety of ways. The criteria were that it should be:

- About Christianity, specifically factual understanding of beliefs, traditions, and values. Classroom research which looked at more generic pedagogical issues in religious education was also included. This meant however that research that specifically focused on other religions was not included, nor research which only concerned attitudes to Christianity, nor research on the development of Christian religiosity in childhood and adolescence.
- Empirical. This included quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods, including practitioner research. There was a wide range: from a qualitative study of six teachers' life histories

(Everington 2009a) to a quantitative study comparing 13,391 pupils' attitudes to religious education with other subjects (Kay 1996). It was not possible to draw up standardised criteria, but methodological rigour and transparency was sought.

- Focused on teaching and learning, rather than other factors which may affect pupils' attitudes to Christianity. This is distinct from much of Francis' work over many years, which has considered how other aspects of personality may impinge on pupils' religiosity (e.g. Francis et al. 2010, on belief in the paranormal).
- Based in England. It could include England in, e.g. United Kingdom, in the 'Does RE Work?' Project (Conroy et al. 2011), or in Europe, in the RedCo project (Ipgrave and McKenna 2009). Research specifically conducted elsewhere in the United Kingdom or internationally was excluded.
- Based in community schools, rather than church schools, or with another religious character, or independent schools. However, research involving pupils from different sectors was included (e.g. Copley T. et al 2004).
- Conducted between 1992 and 2012. This period of two decades includes the publication of the Model Syllabuses (SCAA 1994), and the non-statutory framework (QCA 2004). There is no overlap with the Chichester project, which focused on Christianity as a world religion, in 1980s (Brown 2000).

To identify the relevant research, a library and online searches were conducted, using key terms. Also some key journals were searched specifically. Relevant references were also followed up. In total 312 items were scrutinised, and 47 research articles and publications were finally identified and included¹. Some research projects included a number of publications; these are included individually. In collected volumes, only specific papers are identified, not whole book.

5. Analytical framework

The analysis was conducted both deductively using a broad pedagogical framework, and inductively, identifying the particular themes that emerged. The deductive framework is based in socio-cultural activity theory (Engerström 1987) and views religious education as an example of a classroom-based practice (Hedegaard 2009). It has three strands:

Teachers' intentions. In trying to understand what was happening in classrooms, it is vital to take into account what teachers thought they were trying to do:

¹ These items are asterisked in the references list.

What matters most for practitioners mediates their identities as they work in activities...and it orientates their interpretations and responses (Edwards, 2010, p7)

From the point of view of the project overall, this is essential if the needs of teachers are to be properly met. What did teachers think the value of teaching about Christianity was, and did this differ from their approaches to other religions? Teachers are themselves influenced by those wider social forces, and if there are debates amongst educationalists there may also be debates within the teaching community.

Teachers' classroom choices. Teachers will realise their intentions through a range of psychological tools. These are 'those symbolic artifacts – signs, symbols, texts, formulae, graphic-symbolic devices – that help individuals master their own "natural" psychological functions' (Kozulin 1998, p1). They can range from pedagogical choices (e.g. systematic or thematic approaches to religions), to textbooks and other resources (e.g. using religious artefacts or mainstream DVDs), and importantly speech and talk. In socio-cultural research, these are referred to as 'artefacts', as above, however this may be confused with religious artefacts, so term is avoided. The teachers' motives are mediated through these pedagogical tools. This strand will enable different choices to be reviewed, and see how they reflect teachers' intentions. Teachers' choices are clearly constrained by the legal framework within which they operate – the wider rules and community underpinning these practices (Engerström 1987). For instance, they may have to teach a certain number of religions in a particular way, and the aspects of Christianity to be taught may be set by the locally agreed syllabus (Ofsted 1997; Hayward 2006). In this paper, the focus is on the choices teachers make within these requirements.

Pupils' learning. These motives and pedagogical choices will impact on the learners. Teachers have an object in mind, but what is learnt? Pupils will have pre-conceptions about religion and religious education. As they engage in the classroom activity, they may not learn the intended lesson. The teachers' choice of strategy may have unintended consequences. The meanings that pupils take from the lessons may not be the teachers' main intentions, and also may not reflect the underlying religious meanings. The links from teachers' intentions through to pupils' development can be identified. This process however is circular, in that teachers' view of their role, and the pedagogical choices they make, will be informed by their perceptions of pupils' learning.

Finally, as a word of caution, in any review of research one must be wary of making false connections between different studies. The teachers interviewed by Copley C. et al (2004) were not those observed by Eke et al. (2005), and their pupils were not those interviewed by Moulin (2011).

These are different data from different times, in different places, with different people. The review can show some patterns, but cannot set out clear causal links.

6. Teachers' intentions

This section summarises research on teachers' views of their role in relation to Christianity. It is in three sections: teachers' personal religious beliefs and attitudes to Christianity; their expertise and experience; their general view of their role as religious education teachers. The purpose is to unpick the complex pattern of teachers' views, and the strands within this, because this will inform their actual choices in the classroom. If there is a problem with classroom teaching, as Ofsted claims, then we must explore what lies behind it.

6.1 Teachers' religiosity and beliefs

The obvious starting point in considering teachers' motives is to identify their views of Christianity. They share in wider society, and come to their profession as religious, social, political and cultural agents; they will be alive to the issues of secularisation, globalisation and immigration. More specifically, they may be Christian, from a different religion, or with no religious conviction. They may be approving or critical of church involvement in education. These positions will not necessarily fit together straightforwardly. Christians may be critical of some manifestations of their religion in education; non-Christians, whether of another religion or not, may be supportive (Brown 2000).

Firstly, how religious are religious education teachers? Some critiques of current religious education emphasise its non-confessional, secular nature (e.g. Barnes 2007). It is therefore perhaps a surprise to find that large majority of religious education teachers claim to be Christian. In the Warwick report, a survey of 326 primary coordinators found that 85% of described themselves as Christian, with 57% claiming that they attend worship weekly (Jackson et al. 2010, p32). The pattern was similar in secondary schools, with 77% out of 301 department heads claiming they are Christian, and 58% attending weekly worship (Jackson et al. 2010, p200). The authors claim that 'these data confirm the close association between responsibility for religious education...and personal faith commitment' (p200); It is possible that other teachers, especially at primary level, would be involved, however McCreery (2005) found 65% of primary ITE students identified themselves as Christian. This highlights that a personal Christian commitment underpins much current non-confessional religious education.

However, there is a complex interplay between personal religious commitment and professional identity. It does not mean that these teachers would support a return to confessional approaches, or

necessarily advocate one approach rather than another. Recent research illuminates this interrelationship, for instance Everington's work, carried out within the European REDCo project, on the inter-relationship between biography and pedagogy amongst English religious education teachers (Everington 2009a, 2009b; see also Everington and Sikes 2001). Three of the six teachers she interviewed clearly identified themselves with a religious tradition: two were Christian, of whom one was Roman Catholic and one a member of the United Reform Church; a third was Muslim. Two further interviewees said they believed in God, but did not belong to a particular tradition, and one was agnostic (Everington 2009a, p.32). In research by Miller and McKenna, Humanities teachers who taught some religious education explained the importance of their personal beliefs to their identity. A Roman Catholic teacher in research held that 'my faith... is the cornerstone of my life and provides me with my moral framework', and an Anglican colleague felt that his faith was 'a guide to life and a refuge' (Miller and McKenna 2011, p. 177; see also Hayward 2007, p53-54)).

However, being Christian did not mean that teachers wanted to be confessional. Rather, religious identity indirectly informed the values that underpinned their professional identity. Some reflected on their own experiences at school: 'Choir boy – boredom! Holier than...Forced into religion at a young age' ; several religious interviewees were concerned about classroom 'evangelization', and were not prepared to put forward their own beliefs (Miller and McKenna 2011, p178). Teachers interviewed for the Biblos project said that they became teachers of religious education precisely because of their own poor experiences of religious instruction, and were therefore very wary of confessionalism in the classroom (Copley 1998, p54; see also Everington 2009a), in Revell and Walters' research (2010) this was linked to objectivity as a value. Some non-religious teachers were wary of religions generally, as a cause of social tension, 'Religion can divide communities, and also as potentially repressive: 'people accept their lot without questions being asked. Many religions have an elitist system that only sees men as being able to be religious leaders' (Miller and McKenna 2011, p179). In Revell and Walters's research (2010), these teachers often felt they could put forward their personal beliefs. It would be wrong to assume that teachers can be divided neat categories, of committed Christians who are in favour of confessional religious education, versus non-Christians who favour neutrality: the patterns are more subtle.

6.2 Teachers' expertise

Teachers' conceptions of their role will also be informed by their expertise, both in terms of academic understanding of Christianity and subject-pedagogical knowledge. This has long been considered an issue, particularly the dependency on non-specialist teachers (e.g. Ofsted 1997). But who is a specialist? Hayward (2007) identified the qualifications relating to Christianity of 286 Key

Stage 3 teachers; this showed the 'centrality of theology as the main approach to the study of Christianity' at university (p451), with the commonest theological topics being contemporary theology (72%) and patristic theology (70%); the least common theological topics were: Christianity and science (35%) and Christian worship (52%) (p45). Further, over the last decade, graduates from a wide variety of subject areas have been welcomed into teacher training in religious education, notably from philosophy and various social sciences. Their academic perspectives contribute to religious education generally, but will probably differ from those of a graduate of theology or religious studies (Everington 2009a). This indicates the complexity in defining expertise. Beyond this group of teachers, there are non-specialists in the sense of teachers trained in other subjects. At primary school, it falls to the class teacher, where the lack of training in religious education generally is of concern (Revell 2005; McCreery 2005), and who are often drawn to it because of their own religious commitments (Francis et al. 1999). The Warwick report investigated the expertise of subject coordinators, finding that 71% of primary coordinators have some qualification, though it emphasised that therefore over a quarter do not (Jackson et al. 2010, p186); Hanlon (2000) had found that 36% of her survey of teachers on an INSET course already had a Religious Studies or Theology background. At secondary phase, 89% had a relevant qualification (p199). Clearly, a qualification is only part of the process, and they also found that non-specialists were often 'highly committed to the subject, and had clear views on resources and pedagogy' (p199). Nevertheless, this had an impact on the coordinators' or heads of department's strategies for planning and resources, as they would select resources and plan lessons that were more straightforward for non-specialists to deliver (p9). Thus, not only would non-specialists approach the task with a range of preconceptions of their own, but they will be dependent on pedagogical choices made by others, which while professionally supportive may also be constraining or confusing.

The second issue is specialists' length of experience. Copley (1998) discovered that some staff had 'decades' of experience (p14), i.e. from 1978 or earlier. Francis et al.'s survey (1999) of the influence of professional development training on teachers also pointed to a significant 'generational gulf', in that older teachers often maintained that confessional approaches could be combined with newer pedagogical approaches (p183). More recently, Jackson et al. found that 32% of secondary teachers had 21 years experience or more (2010, p. 198), i.e. from 1989 or earlier. Two of Everington's respondents had taught for over thirty years, from 1979 or before (Everington 2009b, p139; see also Hanlon 2000). This means that these teachers were working during significant shifts in religious education policy and practice, such as the introduction of the current attainment targets (SCAA 1994, QCA 2004), or the rise in philosophical approaches. They will have developed their own set of

professional values and approaches, attuned for their particular experiences in schools. This will be combined with the range in beliefs and attitudes to Christianity set out in the section above.

6.3 Teachers' pedagogical aims

What do teachers think they are trying to achieve? In this section, research covering teachers' overall vision of their roles is explored, before addressing the particular choices that they make to achieve this. Is impartial knowledge and understanding of religions, and of Christianity in particular seem as important by teachers?

In an early report from the 'Does RE Work?' project, Lundie (2010) highlights four main categories which emerged from data from a conference with stakeholders; strikingly, learning about Christianity, or indeed any religion, is strangely absent. His first category, 'systematic knowledge about religious teachings' might seem to include learning about a particular religion, but he follows it with a discussion of catechetics and religious nurture (p. 166). The second category is a 'pre-defined set of moral values', such as tolerance or liberality (p. 167). Third, he identifies 'intellectual engagement...and curiosity about religious knowledge', which might impliedly include learning about a particular religion; last, 'challenging personal and social moralities' (p. 167). It is perhaps no surprise that this project has also highlighted 'wide and diverging outcomes' amongst teachers and goes on to suggest that this divergence is has harmed the subject (Conroy et al. 2010, p.8).

If however learning about Christianity, or any religions, are not major aims, where are they ranked? The Warwick report confirms that other aims take priority, and shows how they are ranked. The highest priorities in primary schools were:

- promoting good personal values (72%)
- promoting good social values (66%)
- promoting moral living (65%)
- promoting spiritual development (66%)
- helping develop good citizens (64%)

The lowest priorities in the primary school were:

- learning from a specific religion (38%)
- learning about a specific religion (33%)
- thinking critically about religion (33%)
- understanding the influence of religion in society (32%)
- learning from the religions of the world (30%)

- learning about the religions of the world (27%) (Jackson et al. 2010, p180, emphasis added)

This makes understanding of religions the *lowest* priority amongst the primary teachers surveyed, and understanding one specific religion fared little better. This pattern is repeated at secondary school. The highest priorities were:

- reflecting on ultimate questions (77%)
- thinking critically about religion (67%)
- combating religious discrimination (62%)
- developing a positive attitude toward religion (62%).

The lowest priorities were:

- learning from a specific religion (32%).
- learning about a specific religion (28%),
- learning from the religions of the world (24%)
- learning about the religions of the world (20%) (Jackson et al. 2010 p. 191, emphasis added)

The main similarity between primary and secondary schools is that learning about religions, whether many or one, is scarcely valued as an end in itself. Put more positively, teachers consider that other some aspect of the pupils' development is their over-riding aim, whether it is intellectual, personal, moral or civic. The main difference is that primary teachers tended to value moral and spiritual development (Lundie's second and fourth aims, above), whereas their secondary colleagues favoured the development of independent critical thinking (Lundie's third aim). It is not clear from Warwick report what the causal relationship is: does teaching in a primary school tend to lead RE coordinators to focus on personal and social development, or do people who favour these outcomes tend prefer primary school teaching? However, there is a problem with both these pieces of research, because they tend to over-dichotomize the different aims. For instance, in the Warwick report, learning from religion is simply seen as an alternative to learning about religion (Jackson et al. 2010). This ignores the position that learning from religion can only happen on the basis of learning about religion; some teachers might see learning from religion as distinct from learning about religion, but others might see them as hierarchical. These views are conflated in the survey. The same is true for Lundie's typology. While these more nuanced approaches would still see understanding as less important, the aims are not seen as alternatives. Thus the research does not reveal the complexity of how teachers conceive of the inter-relationship of these aims.

The Warwick report and the 'Does RE Work?' Project included teachers from a range of schools, so a comparison between school types can be drawn. Jackson et al. found that secondary schools of a religious character were more likely to emphasize learning about a specific religion (38% compared with 14%) (Jackson et al. 2010 p192). This is not surprising; however they also highlighted the importance of critical thinking, and tended not to emphasize the need for community cohesion or good citizens, whereas for teachers in community schools this was reversed (Jackson et al. 2010, p.192). Nevertheless, simplistic claims about teachers in particular school types need to be treated with caution. The 'Does RE work?' Project compared teachers who felt they should be morally or religiously neutral or impartial, with those who believed that religious education should take an explicit stance. In doing so, they classed together religious confessionalism and a strong secular underpinning of the subject on values education. This revealed a complex interrelationship between school type and teachers' positions:

Some teachers are clear that they do not wish to impose, or uphold, any particular values or ethical or religious claim; others are equally clear that their job is to offer pupils a distinctive and concrete moral frame. Importantly, the difference here is not, as might be thought, between religiously denominating and common schools. Some teachers in religious schools are reticent to offer definitive moral, social or religious claims whereas some in common schools are very clear about the moral importance of developing particular moral and social attitudes (Conroy et al. 2010).

This highlights how many teachers in different settings prioritize the development of values over cognitive processes.

6.4 Teachers' intentions: conclusion

This section has shown the variety and complexity of teachers' intentions when approaching the task of teaching about Christianity. It may be informed by their religiosity and beliefs, their own educational experiences, their length of career, and their wider pedagogical goals. The age of pupils and the type of school also play a part in this. The two striking findings are:

- That many heads of department or coordinators are Christian and attend church regularly,
- Yet understanding of Christianity, or any religion, is almost always subordinated to some other aspect of pupils' development, whether intellectual, moral, social or spiritual.

What then are the implications for teaching about Christianity in classroom practice?

7. Teachers' classroom strategies

This section considers the various elements that teachers draw upon to realise their overall intentions. In terms of activity theory, it considers the various 'tools' that teachers use, particularly

the psychological tools, such as language, text, pictures, or pedagogical approaches. There are three main sections:

- pedagogical approaches, such as whether they adopt a systematic or thematic approach;
- curriculum content, considering what image of Christianity emerges;
- engagement, considering the issue of enabling pupils' understanding of Christianity to develop both by matching their attainment but also by stretching it.

This is to some extent an artificial separation, but it allows the various perspectives on learning to be reviewed. Further, it is clear that teachers may not have a free choice; they work within a particular syllabus or view of progression, which constrains their options (Hayward 2006). Nevertheless, the ways that teachers' intentions are supported or thwarted by other factors becomes more visible.

7.1 Pedagogical approaches

How are these different motives realised in the classroom? A paper by Astley, Francis, Burton and Wilcox (1997) addressed this issue, and showed how different intentions directly affected the choice of classroom practices. They asked 210 secondary teachers to identify what they considered to be the most important of the five aims of religious education as set out in the SCAA Model Syllabuses (SCAA 1994). These were to:

- A. Acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other principal religions represented in Great Britain
- B. Develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, societies and cultures
- C. Give reasoned and informed judgements about religious and moral issues
- D. Enhance spiritual, moral, cultural and social development
- E. Develop a positive attitude towards other people, respecting their right to hold different beliefs from their own

They then asked the teachers to prioritise the classroom methods that they would use out of a list of 27, and cross-referenced these to the aims. Aim A, and to some extent Aim B, are the most relevant, since they focus on content (for all religions) more than the other aims. The highest ranked items for teachers who preferred Aim A were:

- visiting places of worship
- visits by members of faith communities
- exploring what it means to belong to a religious community (Astley et al. 1997, p174)

These were the same items, in a slightly different order, for Aim B (p174). By contrast, those who chose Aim C (developing pupils' own thinking) selected:

- evaluating the moral values of religions;
- discussing challenges to religious belief;
- evaluating the truth of religious belief (p175).

It is not hard to see how different motives are mediated through task design in lesson planning.

Astley et al.'s paper also addressed one of the long-standing debates in religious education: between a systematic approach, in which each religion is treated individually, and a thematic approach, in which different religions are combined within one module focusing on a particular topic. A thematic approach is often associated with the phenomenology of religion, organised around such topics as worship, rites of passage, or sacred texts. However, the themes could also be based on what are seen as common human experiences, such as commitment or attitudes to death, or on philosophical and ethical questions, such as the problem of evil or the ethics of war. Governmental guidance over the last two decades has often been strongly in favour of a systematic approach (e.g. SCAA 1994), but a thematic or mixed approach has not been ruled out. Thus, in 1997, Ofsted considered that the best teaching in primary schools was in a discrete unit in year 6 pulling together the different themes on Christianity which the pupils had already studied (Ofsted 1997, p. 22).

Astley et al. included in their list of items studying religions separately and studying them thematically, though they did not include mixed approaches or different forms of thematic approach. In Table 1, the percentages show how highly they were ranked within each category: the research arch design means that the totals are not 100%.

Aim	Systematic	Thematic
A: knowledge and understanding of religions	34%	28%
B: influence of beliefs, values and traditions	26%	24%
C: reasoned and informed judgments	21%	21%
D: spiritual, moral, cultural and social development	17%	24%
E: positive attitudes to others	32%	32%

Table 1: Teacher's preferences for different pedagogical aims (from Astley et al. 1997)

The table show that teachers who favoured Aim A (and, marginally, B) preferred systematic approaches, whereas those who favoured Aim D (spiritual and moral development) preferred thematic approaches. Those favouring Aims C (personal thinking) and E (tolerance and respect) were equally divided. Further, the higher figures for Aims A and E in both categories suggest that it matters more (either way) to teachers who value these Aims, in contrast to the generally low figures for Aim C, suggesting that they did not consider it a critical issue.

What does research suggest is current classroom practice? Hayward’s research on Christianity at Key Stage 3 found a wide variety in community schools:

- 34% for a systematic approach;
- 22%, for a thematic approach based on shared human experiences;
- 16%, for a thematic approach based on religions;
- 20% other approaches;
- 8% having no preference (Hayward 2007, p. 21).

While therefore systematic approaches were the most popular, overall 38% chose either of the two thematic approaches. However, it should be added that systematic approaches were dominant in Anglican schools (52%) and Roman Catholic schools (59%), though this is not overwhelmingly so (Hayward 2005, p. 21). A weakness in Hayward’s survey is that it did not allow her respondents to identify a mix of approaches. The Warwick report analysed Key Stages 1 to 4, though it did not distinguish between the two types of thematic approach. The different percentages are set out in Fig 1. These show a surprising variety across different key stages, particularly the decline in thematic approaches at Key Stage 2, but their partial recovery at Key Stage 3 and triumph at Key Stage 4 in place of mixed approaches, presumably for GCSE courses; however, this may represent a change from one kind of thematic approach to another over the Key Stages.

Key Stage	Systematic	Thematic	Mixed
1	26%	24%	50%
2	40%	9%	51%
3	34%	17%	49%
4	32%	44%	24%

Table 2: Analysis of approaches to teaching (from Jackson et al. 2010, p 179 and 190)

Coincidentally, the figure for purely systematic approaches at Key Stage 3 (34%) coincides with Hayward’s findings (2005, p21), but the different approaches in research design make the figures

difficult to compare. It is however possible to compare the Warwick Report with earlier quantitative research by Kay and Smith (Kay and Smith 2000, Smith and Kay 2000). Kay and Smith's research was based on Year 9 pupils in 22 community schools in three local authorities, and found:

- 50% of pupils were taught using purely systematic modules
- 11%, purely thematic approaches
- 39%, a mix of both approaches (Kay and Smith 2000, p87).

As this is for Year 9 alone, it is difficult to compare with Hayward's research. Unfortunately, Kay and Smith also do not separate the different types of thematic approaches, and there are discrepancies in their presentation of the data. Further, small number of local authorities in which the school were located means that this may reflect the requirements of the particular locally agreed syllabuses, so the trends can only be speculative.

Kay and Smith's research is insightful in showing how these different strategies affected pupils' learning. They were interested in the effects of pedagogical strategies, specifically the number of religions studied and the approach adopted to study them, on pupils' ability to identify individual features of the different religions and their values and attitudes. To do this, they surveyed 2,879 Year 9 pupils across the 22 schools. They found that pupils who studied one, five or six religions had less accurate knowledge than those who studied two, three or four religions. Moreover, they found that pupils who learnt using *either* a systematic approach *or* a thematic approach had more accurate knowledge than those who had a mix of both approaches, and argued that 'pupils gain a basic framework from the approach, once they have grasped what that that approach is' (Kay and Smith 2000, p89). The second part of their research (Smith and Kay 2000) considered the effect of the pedagogical strategies on pupils' attitudes to different religions. This suggests overall that positive attitudes towards all religions develop most strongly with a systematic approach; pupils are most positive towards Judaism, then Christianity, followed by Sikhism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam (almost always the least valued). This is a helpful reminder that any strategies for the development of pupils' understanding of Christianity may have consequences on their knowledge of and attitudes towards other religions. There is however a tension in the research which the authors do not consider. The most favourable *attitudes* to all religions are developed when five or six religions are studied, and indeed pupils' attitudes toward Christianity are most positive of all religions in this situation, whereas usually Judaism was viewed most positively, but the first part of the research suggested that their *knowledge* is more likely to be inaccurate if they study more than four religions. Put starkly, it seems one must choose between having pupils who are erroneously appreciative or

accurately critical. This review is more concerned with the latter, but it is important to see what is at stake.

A slightly different perspective on how teachers' overall aims affect pedagogical strategies can be seen in studies of classroom talk. Stern asked seventy-three respondents, of whom thirty-one were teachers and the rest either in higher education or advisory roles, to set out what teachers would typically say and what pupils would typically reply in a religious education lesson (Stern 2010). He then classified the responses according to two criteria: whether they were specific to religious education or not (strong or weak classification); whether they were teacher-centred or pupil-centred (strong or weak framing). Weakly framed and weakly classified responses tended to be very generic open questions about learning, with answers from the pupils' experience and without clear development of understanding. Strikingly, there were few strongly framed and strongly classified responses (subject-specific and didactic in nature) and those cited were mostly confessional in tone. The weakly framed, strongly classified group were subject-specific, but were pupil-focused. Put another way, these showed the interplay between learning about religion and learning from religion:

Teacher: you have said that you believe the pivotal point in the prodigal son to understand forgiveness is the moment of reconciliation. How have others in your group challenged this?

Pupil: Many have agreed with the Frank Wesley picture that it's when the father hugs the son but others said the moment he realised he was wrong and foolish, etc, etc (Stern 2010, p140)

A similar point was made in Eke et al.'s study of whole-class interactive teaching in primary schools (Eke et al. 2005). Their discourse analysis of four lessons showed a similar pattern of weak framing and strong classification, particularly in lessons that focused on 'puzzling questions' rather than on 'understanding of the main religious traditions' which tended to be more strongly framed, in looking for 'correct' understanding (p169). However, the former lessons, emphasizing pupils' response, tended to focus on Christianity rather than other religions as pupils drew on their own experiences; pupil performance also tended to be higher than for the more didactic approaches. This issue of progression will be considered later. One final aspect of teacher talk is whether teachers should share their own beliefs with pupils. Revell and Walters (2010) recently found that Christian teachers tend to withhold their beliefs, considering that they may influence the pupils unduly, whereas agnostic or atheist teachers were more prepared to put their own views forward, often considering that this was more neutral. By contrast, Fancourt (2007) has suggested that this may be over-cautious: pupils value hearing the teacher's point of view, as long as it is presented dialogically. These studies suggest that the research addressing the systematic/thematic debate only tells part of the story: it depends on the nature of classroom talk as much as the content. Second, it suggests

that lessons which intentionally focus on delivering content on Christianity in a didactic way may be less successful at doing so than those which are both subject-specific and allow for pupils to evaluate and reflect on this for themselves.

7.2 Curriculum content

This section considers the evidence on the specific topics on Christianity that schools choose. This will clearly be influenced by the pedagogical decisions, outlined in the previous section. It will also often not be entirely the teacher's choice, but influenced by the local agreed syllabus, which may be more or less prescriptive. First, the actual amount, proportion and choice of content on Christianity is reviewed, then range and depth, and finally the inter-relationship between the presentation of Christianity and other religions.

The most direct research is Hayward's (2007) study of Christianity at Key Stage 3. Almost a third (29%) of her respondents considered that over half of their curriculum time was devoted to Christianity (including schools of a religious character). A similar proportion (31%) devoted between 41% and 50% of the curriculum time. Another 31% allocated between 21% and 40%; this left 9% spending 20% or less (Hayward, 2007, p20). There is a question about the nature of the legal requirement, as the Educational Reform Act (UK Government 1988) simply states that teaching should 'reflect the fact that the main religious traditions are Christian'. This could mean that the time allocation should be over half; an alternative reading would be that it simply mean that more time is devoted to Christianity than other religions. The research suggests that 60% of the schools were spending over 40% of their time on Christianity.

What aspects of Christianity were studied? Hayward considers both systematic and thematic approaches. The table in Appendix 1 (Hayward 2007, p24) shows the most popular systematic topics. Although generally any topic can fall in any year, there are some trends. Overall three topics dominate: Jesus, Church and the Bible; these are very traditional topics, not out of place in the 1950s or earlier (Copley 1997, p50). In particular, it shows how the Bible had not completely 'disappeared from religious education', as the Biblos project had suggested (Copley 1998, p7). Generally, Years 7 and 8 tend to be similar. Year 9 is more mixed, as 'faith in action' and social issues become more popular, and schools orientate pupils towards GCSE approaches. Hayward also points out that just because a topic is in all three Years, does not indicate continuity of content in a particular school: few schools study Jesus in every year. A further feature is the popularity of a module on Jesus' life, ministry or significance; this could be an overview, or specific, e.g. on parables, the sermon on the mount, or the resurrection. It represents nearly a quarter (23.06%) of all discrete teaching on

Christianity. This is surprising since secondary teachers felt that primary teaching was dominated by modules on:

- Jesus (53%)
- Church (12%)
- Festivals (10%)
- Bible (10%)

Yet these are almost identical to the topics covered in Key Stage 3. Secondary often teachers felt that they needed to 'start from scratch' (p15), however, this raises questions about pupil progression. Some respondents explained that they used it to develop new intellectual skills, not deeper content, which reemphasises the earlier discussion about the differences in overall pedagogical aims between primary and secondary school (p18).

The structure of thematic courses also needs to be unpicked. Hayward also presents these in a table, set out in Appendix 2 (Hayward 2007, p33). Unfortunately she does not show how many different religions were being taught in these modules, merely there were between two and six. This would have illuminated Kay and Smith's research (Kay and Smith 2000; Smith and Kay 2000). The table shows that 'common subjects tend to shape the Key Stage 3 curriculum' (Hayward 2007, p34) whether systematic or thematic approaches are adopted, for example: worship, people of faith, or sacred writings. The shift towards GCSE work in Year 9 is also evident, with the philosophical and moral issues being popular. Hayward however goes on to consider the nature of pupils' learning under this approach. For example, in one school, pupils studied:

- Year 7: Creation myths and origins; Environmental matters; prayer and worship; places of worship
- Year 8: Signs and symbols; Rites of passage
- Year 9: founders of religion; moral issues and human rights; racism; prediction and messiahs; social harmony in Britain (Hayward 2007, p36)

This smorgasbord of topics suggests a problem in ensuring progression and development, because of too little continuity of content. Ironically this is the opposite of the danger of an unrelenting focus on Jesus, the church and the bible in systematic approaches, with too much variation and variety of approach, as Kay and Smith (2000) suggest. In conclusion, Hayward urges that study should focus on:

- Central Christian beliefs, values and practices, including theology, ethics and narrative;
- The lived realities of the varieties of Christian life today, including the subtlety of diversity;

- The significance of Christianity, including its historical, cultural and political impact, and ‘shifting patterns...globally (p86).

The second aspect of curriculum content is range and depth of study. The major piece of research touching on this is the Warwick study (Jackson et al., 2010). Resources and materials are an obvious tool for teachers to use in their lessons. These resources are selected on the basis of the teachers’ pedagogical choices (p7), but have their own voice too, which the teacher implicitly adopts. Many of the resources reviewed were considered to be accurate, however, the report found overall ‘a reluctance to engage with the real core of the Christian faith such as Christian belief in Jesus as God incarnate’ (p7). Thus, in a primary school textbook on Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, there was ‘no suggestion that Jesus was anything other than a man who was put to death, prayed to God and then was resurrected’ (p103). This lack of engagement with core theological issues was also a theme of the Biblos project (Copley 1998, p45). A further example was that denominational differences were either skated over or over-simplified, so that Christianity was portrayed homogeneously (Jackson et al. 2010, p105), though one head of department noted the “risk that pupils think that [members of one religion] don’t agree on anything”. This teacher echoed Hayman’s plea for “subtlety of diversity” (p139). The report also pointed out issues of gender, race and contemporaneity in some materials (p98), particularly in images (p5).

Third, the presentation of Christianity was qualitatively different to other religions because of a presumed familiarity. On the one hand, the Warwick report highlighted that some textbooks used Christianity as the default religion for explaining others, so that thematic issues would be addressed from a Christian perspective, and subsequently the perspectives of other religions (Jackson et al. 2010, p108). Christianity was presented as the starting point for an enquiry, or books used Christian terms to explain aspects of other religions. On the other hand, this presumed familiarity meant that some textbooks were more critical of Christianity than other religions, prepared to condemn what were perceived (p110).

7.3 Engagement

The third aspect of this section on pedagogical choices considers how teachers help pupils’ understanding of Christianity to progress: what aids pupils’ deepening engagement with content? One of Ofsted’s concerns was the lack of development in pupils’ understanding of Christianity, even though it received more curriculum time than other religions (2010, p6; see also Ofsted 1997). For instance, the previous section has shown how modules on Jesus in primary and secondary school are commonplace, but returning to the same content may be appropriate if learning develops: enacting a nativity play may be suitable at Key Stage 1, but for A level, an analysis of the synoptic nativity

narratives is required. This issue is however inextricably linked to teachers' attitudes to the two national attainment targets, 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' (QCA 2004). Ofsted had identified their concerns as the lack of connection between the two elements:

'Learning about' religion and belief was often linked to relatively low-level tasks, such as gathering information about key features of religions... 'Learning from' religion and belief was perceived to be about offering pupils opportunities to reflect on their own experience. But this was often disconnected from any 'learning about' religion and belief. As a result, pupils' personal reflection on their own experience was not enriched or informed by their study of religion. (Ofsted 2010, p42)

The use of the term 'low-level' reflects Bloom and Krathwohl's (1956) famous taxonomy of learning. The nature of and inter-relationship between the two attainment targets is a highly contested pedagogical debate, both between different pedagogical stances, and between pedagogy and policy (for example, Grimmitt 2000; Jackson 2004; Wright 2004; Teece 2011). There is no intention to enter the fray. The issue can be conceptualized more widely as exploring the link between pupils' everyday language and thought, and their knowledge of Christianity. This is about considering the nature of the bridges between pupils and religion rather than policy-driven attainment targets, though part of the debate, and confusion, is to what extent these distinct issues overlap. A common concern here is the lack of any common ground between the Christian 'content' and non-religious pupils; thus a primary teacher interviewed for the Warwick report observed:

Some of the things that happen in religion seem very unusual and very strange and the children's language, even though they don't mean to be offensive, can be like 'weird' or 'crackers'. (Jackson et al. 2010, p131; see also Hayward 2007, p63)

How do pupils come to grasp such concepts as: God, Trinity, communion, redemption, prayer, faith, charity, or Baptist? Further, how do they come to connect them together? Does a non-religious element help pupils to understand Christianity better, or is the Christian material an afterthought in the development of pupils' own language and ideas? The pedagogical issue is to enable pupils to appropriate and internalize these new concepts, and then connect them together. This is not to assume that no pupils have religious convictions. There is nevertheless a general issue in relating the formal content of learning to pupil's everyday lives, whether their lives are also coloured by religiosity or not.

There are four main possibilities. First, as Ofsted suggest, these two processes are seen as almost parallel streams. Ofsted object to learning about religion being understood as merely descriptive, as set of basic facts, with learning from religion being understood as pupils' expression of their own

views, without internalization of new concepts. Second, the deeper levels of understanding and engagement with Christianity were being replaced with non-religious perspectives. The Biblos project showed how teachers were presenting Biblical narratives to pupils, but were not helping them to grasp the deeper theological issues which connected them; instead pupils gave and teachers encouraged a secular interpretation of the texts (Copley 1998, p16; Copley, C. et al. 2004, p25; Copley and Walshe 2002, p29 (see also Copley et al. 2001; Copley et al. 2006; Everington 2007). Third, Christian material is simply fodder for the development of generic intellectual skills, notably thinking skills. Thus, the 'Does RE work?' Project considered that:

RE is witnessing something of a shift away from the study of substantive religious doctrines and practices to something more philosophical, which doesn't require more than minimal assent around generalised principles. (Conroy et al. 2010, p6)

While this may be effective general intellectual development, it may not result in deeper understanding of Christianity. In some of the case study schools in the Warwick Report, the development of thinking skills was considered more important than content (Jackson et al. 2010 p132), indeed whole lessons had no explicit religious content (p142).

The fourth possibility is when the balance is appropriate: learning is grounded in everyday language and experience, but this is used to deepen pupils' understanding of the content, and their ability to connect with different concepts. This was often accompanied by pupils being given the opportunity to internalize concepts for themselves in creative or critical ways. In the Biblos project, as mentioned previously, three key themes were put forward to structure pupils' understanding of biblical narrative: destiny, vulnerability and encounter (Copley 1998, p23), however 'the most powerful and "deep" material came from imaginative and creative opportunities within the work' (p52). O'Grady's action research studies have highlighted the importance of the creativity as a 'direct way to achieve depth' (2003, p222; see also 2008). In a practitioner research study, Hookway (2002) suggests using three different pedagogical metaphors, mirrors, windows and conversations, to achieve this. The point is also made O'Dell, who also shows in an action research study how male pupils came to understand diversity within Christianity through reflection on their gendered identity (O'Dell 2009). This can be achieved where teachers are well supported in embedding the syllabus and curriculum. Wedell (2010) surveyed twenty teachers in Hampshire who had implemented the 'Living Difference' agreed syllabus. The teachers now focused on 'the concept rather than the content', commenting that 'there is an RE focus to [the] activity' (p151). This suggests that pupils could get beyond the surface level of the material, and that the tasks now contributed to this process. However structuring lessons in this way is not the same thing as choosing accessible topics; in a study of Year

9 pupils, Burton found that rites of passage were often studied because it was believed that pupils had attended them, but actually pupils responded better to a comparison with more informal experiences of adolescence, such as being left home alone or in charge of siblings, or getting drunk (Burton 1995): learning had to be constructed on their *genuine* experiences. This echoes the research on classroom talk discussed earlier (Eke et al. 2005; Stern 2011), in which classroom talk that was subject-specific but also open to pupils' points of view was the most productive. It can also be seen in the use of ICT for interreligious dialogue between pupils, which encouraged pupils to enter into 'theological dialogue' with each other (McKenna et al. 2008, p92)

7.4 Teachers' classroom choices: conclusion

In this section, three dimensions have been reviewed: pedagogical strategies; curriculum content; engagement. This has shown how teachers' overall intentions are transmuted into practical choices about the organization of modules, their content, and how this content is related to the learners. It is striking that some of the initial anxieties can be traced through. Some teachers' concern with being confessional may mean that they are unwilling to present deeper theological meanings, and to start to connect elements systematically. Instead, they either put forward generic moral interpretations themselves or assume that this is the pupils' prerogative. For teachers who see their task as the development of generic intellectual skills, these supersede content. Christianity is the dead specimen for intellectual development, rather than the living organism for study in itself.

8. Pupils' learning

What is the outcome on learning? From what has been identified so far, the picture is likely to be mixed because of the variety of intentions and strategies, as the discussion of Kay and Smith's research (2000; Smith and Kay 2000) has suggested. This section will consider research into pupils' learning about Christianity as well as pupils' views on their learning. There are two background issues before delving into the studies. First is the evidence for, and assumptions about, many pupils' apathy or hostility towards Christianity. Much of the research is aimed at or predicated on pupils' attitudes to Christianity rather than their learning, notably the Teenage Religion and Values Survey in England and Wales (Robbins and Francis 2010); while it is clear that pupils will arrive with different perspectives, it seems that school has little effect on this (Swindells, Francis and Robbins 2010) Second, one major problem is the lack of any empirical studies of different strategies for teaching about Christianity that give a clear indication of pupils' progress: there is no quasi-experimental research. The combination of these two points means that there is much research on what pupils think about Christianity generally, but practically none on which strategies are successful at developing pupils' understanding of it.

8.1 Pupils' understanding of Christianity

The first main issue in this section is to consider which aspects of Christianity challenge pupils. An initial question is whether religious education is inevitably fighting a losing battle because pupils' natural intellectual development will cause them to become hostile towards any study of religion. Kay, Francis and Gibson (1996) looked at the interrelationship between pupils' intellectual development and their attitudes to Christianity. Goldman (1964) had suggested that pupils develop negative attitudes to Christianity when they become more adult thinkers: growing up means rejecting religion. This drew on Piaget's distinction between concrete operational thinking, found in childhood, and formal operational thinking, found in adults. However, Kay et al.'s research did not support the claim. For instance, higher-attaining pupils were actually more positive than others, which would be reversed if the hypothesis were true: as more mature thinker, they should have rejected it sooner. While pupils did often become negative towards Christianity, this was not due to their internal intellectual development; Kay et al. argued that it was linked to wider social influences of secularisation. They also pointed out that the change was incremental, rather than sudden, which Goldman's thesis would predict (p3).

The effect of secularisation was also a key concern in the Biblos project. Copley et al. investigated pupils' attitudes to the Bible, finding that nearly three-quarters (73.7%) had no strong opinion about it (Copley, C. et al. 2004, p43). They also considered the reactions of Key Stage 4 pupils to being told that they were going to study the Bible: 30% were not keen; 27% were uncertain; 26% were indifferent; 15% were keen; and 2% were unstated (Copley et al. 2001, p29). While it is true that the mode group were those who were not keen, the vast majority was in the neutral zones of uncertainty or indifference; it would be interesting to compare this to pupils' reactions to studying Shakespeare. Further, the project identified the problematic aspects of the Bible for pupils, which generally were in the following order:

- Containing contradictions
- Meaning
- Language
- Credibility of Miracles
- Relevance
- Format
- Credibility (Copley C. et al. 2004, p49)

Some of these concern the literary qualities of the text, and could be true of any historical document: language, format and meaning. Some concern the claim to be revelation: contradictions,

credibility, miracles, relevance. Credibility, including miracles, raises scientific and metaphysical issues (see also Fulljames 1996 on pupils' attitudes to science and religion). Interestingly though, the data on miracles are ambiguous since while superficially it might seem that there is a problem, arguably the point about miracles is that they are problematic: that is what makes them miracles. If pupils understand that they are incredible, then they have understood them

The Biblos team also conducted a study of 542 Year 8 pupils' understanding of Jesus (Copley and Walshe 2002; Walshe 2005). This showed that: girls knew more than boys; pupils in church school knew more than those in community schools; Christian pupils knew more than others (Copley and Walshe 2002, p28). Overall, pupils struggled with:

- Jesus' miracles (16.3%)
- The resurrection (15.8%)
- Jesus as Son of God (8.9%)
- why he had to die (8.9%)
- whether he existed (6.1%)
- the virgin birth (5.1%)
- why he does not appear to people now (4.8%)
- why he lets bad things happen (2.8%)(Copley and Walshe 2002, p32).

Strikingly, their research showed how pupils from different backgrounds had different concerns; pupils' religious background was influential. While Christian and non-religious pupils had similar concerns with miracles and the resurrection,

...pupils identifying with Islam did not question either Jesus' historical existence or the virgin birth, or why Jesus allows bad things to happen today. For them, not surprisingly, the biggest issues were Jesus' resurrection and why he had to die (p33; see also Igrave 1999).

By contrast,

Pupils identifying with an Eastern tradition did not question either the miracles of Jesus, or why Jesus allows bad things to happen today. For them the biggest issues were Jesus' resurrection and why he had to die... [They were] most likely to raise the virgin birth as an issue (p33).

Gender was also significant, with boys more likely to question Jesus' existence or see him as a 'con-man' than girls (p32).

This research raises some complicated issues. The first obvious point is that teaching needs to be responsive to pupils' actual concerns. The second, connected to the earlier point about the

credibility of miracles, is distinguishing between the Christian claims which pupils personally find hard to accept and their understanding of the implications of these claims for Christianity. It is one thing not to believe that Jesus performed miracles, but another not to understand why this is important for Christians. Thus, the issue for teachers is to enable pupils to see how belief in miracles is interconnected with an understanding the nature of God, and of Jesus' divinity, not to persuade pupils to believe that miracles happened.

8.2 Pupils' perceptions of learning about Christianity

This is part of a wider issue: what do pupils think of learning about Christianity? There is of course research on pupils' attitudes to religious education generally. Harris and Haydn (2006) found it was the most unpopular subject amongst 1750 key stage 3 pupils in twelve schools. Kay (1996) showed that it was generally viewed less favourably than English, Maths or Music; only assemblies were more disliked. In the Department for Children, Schools and Families' review of ethnicity and education (2005), it was the third most unpopular subject overall (after Maths and Modern languages). However it only featured in the least favourite three subjects for White British pupils, and not for any minority ethnic groups (DCSF 2005, p80).

In terms of learning about Christianity, interviewees in the Biblos project explained their frustrations, including:

- the same material being repeated often
- the material being disjointedly selected, for instance narratives showing theologically problematic episodes such as God's judgement were ignored
- unexplained content (Copley et al. 2006; p33)

These strikingly match Ofsted's complaints about incoherence and lack of development (Ofsted 2010).

However, these need to be balanced against other studies in which pupils were clearer about the wider value of the subject. In a quantitative study of 421 key Stage 4 pupils McKenna, Neill and Jackson found that '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, p61; see also Iprgrave and McKenna 2007). In terms of content,

Pupils wanted to know about the similarities and differences between religions. They wanted to learn about beliefs, why they were believed and what impact they had on people's lives. (Miller and McKenna 2011, p181)

This did not mean that pupils wanted content-driven lessons. Instead,

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 et al. 2006, p33).

Moreover, Fancourt's (2010) practitioner research on assessment suggested that Year 9 pupils understood how an understanding of content helped refine their own views: "knowing *about* Christian beliefs leads to putting a better opinion across, whether you agree with them or not" (p298). Thus, pupils seemed to value a dialogical engagement with the content, reiterating the findings of Stern (2010) and Eke et al. (2005), discussed above.

Finally, what is the interrelationship between pupils' learning and their personal beliefs? The wide research on personality and attitudes to Christianity (e.g. Robbins and Francis 2010) will not be reviewed, but rather how pupils experience the inter-relationship between their learning and their beliefs while at school. The REDCo research suggested that English pupils, whatever their religious or non-religious position, had internalised the current aims of religious education (Ipgrave and McKenna 2009; McKenna et al. 2009). Also, they generally did not think that it should be confessional. In fact, pupils with a religious conviction were more supportive of inclusive religious education (McKenna et al. 2009, p61); thus a Muslim pupil thought that students should learn about their own religion but also '[a]bout other religions, so they are not arrogant about other faiths' (Ipgrave and McKenna 2009, p138; see also Halstead 1992). There however two concerns. First, there is much research showing that some non-religious pupils are hostile to religious education because they are hostile towards Christianity and/or because they view religious education as confessional. In the Biblos project, 8.4% of 542 Year 8 pupils thought Jesus was fictional and 7.9% thought he was a con-man (Copley and Walshe 2002, p32). Second, attitudes vary in relation to the religious and ethnic diversity of school communities; pupils in rural White British communities may have different understandings of and approaches to Christianity in comparison to religiously and ethnically mixed urban areas (Ipgrave and McKenna 2009).

Recent research has also focused on the experiences of Christian pupils in religious education lessons. Thus Moulin (2011) interviewed students who often felt that Christianity or their particular denomination was misrepresented, for instance: stereotyping, "[teachers] make it sound like we...are all the same" (p316); or as intellectually untenable, "presented in such a boring way that also makes it seem ridiculous" (p316). The worst experience was being singled out as a specimen, as a Catholic pupil recounted:

In our RS class, the teacher one lesson was just bored and did not know what to do and she said “why don’t we just ask Susan what she believes?” (p321)

Such treatment led to such pupils feeling victimised. By contrast, in some settings, pupils were happy to share their experiences if teachers regulated the discussion fairly (Moulin 2011, p320). The Warwick report found that pupils who were confident in their Christian denominational convictions were interested in how this differed from other forms of Christianity (Jackson et al. 2010, p166).

8.3 Pupils’ learning: conclusion

This section suggests that pupils are often unimpressed with their religious education generally, and with the repetition of themes or topics on Christianity. They struggle with important issues such as miracles or credibility, though in different ways, often according to their religious background. They value religious education that is neither confessional nor over-didactic, preferring to engage with the content in an unpressured way which gives them space to compare Christianity with their own views, and in which their views are upheld and respected. This applied to both Christian pupils, and those of other religious or non-religious beliefs.

9. Implications

There are three major findings from this survey. The first is that teaching and learning about Christianity is caught up in the minds of teachers with the wider position of Christianity in England. This point is not at all new. However it is striking to see how it impinges on teachers’ intentions for their teaching and pupils’ attitudes to their learning. Some teachers decide to focus on non-religious themes, such as euthanasia, simply giving a religious gloss to this. Others present basic facts but give secular interpretations. Some pupils react negatively to Christianity as a topic on the basis of wider cultural perceptions; others find their beliefs and themselves misrepresented in class. This suggests that any solution needs to do more than simply provide another ‘approach’ to Christianity; it needs also to address the intentions that frame the approaches in the classroom. This is not simply better training for teachers – it means asking teachers to consider their priorities when they address Christianity in the classroom. Are they battling with their own educational baggage rather than addressing their pupils’ needs today?

Second, the goal of ensuring that pupils have clear understanding of Christianity is rarely prioritized; it is subsumed in or replaced by some wider educational end. This however is an argument for both elements being valued, and not one replacing the other; appendix 3 sets out some key questions for teachers. Research on pedagogical approaches, engagement and pupil learning suggests some general principles for developing pupils’ understanding of Christianity. These are that the curriculum

should aim at developing the underlying concepts by encouraging pupils to engage with them. The subject needs to avoid repetition, especially between primary and secondary school, and include:

- Central Christian beliefs, values and practices, including theology, ethics and narrative;
- The lived realities of the varieties of Christian life today, including the subtlety of diversity;
- The significance of Christianity, including its historical, cultural and political impact (Hayward 2007).

There is no evidence to show that either a more confessional approach or a more content-focused approach will achieve better understanding. The best learning *about* Christianity occurs when pupils are also encouraged to evaluate and reflect on it. Indeed, pupils themselves recognized this.

The third is that the process of pupils' learning about Christianity is relatively unexplored. Pupils' attitudes to Christianity are well investigated, and their religious or spiritual development has been studied. There is some research showing how particular approaches to religious education generally can be used effectively by teachers (Ipgrave, O'Grady and Jackson 2009). However, it is unclear what the cognitive issues are in enabling pupils to understand core concepts about Christianity, and how these concepts connect. For instance, pupils need to realize that if they find miracles incredible, then they have understood them. It is also clear that pupils from different backgrounds may find different concepts difficult.

As explained at the outset, this review focuses on teaching and learning about Christianity under the panoply of the current legal and policy framework. It is not of itself an argument to change this framework. What has not been discussed is the inter-relationship between teaching and learning about Christianity and the teaching and learning of other religions. As Christianity represents a special case because of its wider historical and cultural significance, it has particular issues that need addressing. Further, adopting a socio-cultural model of classroom activity may allow comparisons to be made with other religions. It would be instructive to consider what teachers' intentions are in relation to Islam or Judaism. Are teachers more concerned with tackling Islamophobia than representing Islam accurately and in depth? Finally, the research shows how many teachers do not prioritize the understanding of any religion. Put another way, there is no evidence that understanding of Christianity is being replaced by the understanding of other religions. Therefore, it may well be helpful generally the process of understanding any religion can be revitalised. Any plan to improve teaching and learning about Christianity needs to address all the stages between the teachers' initial intentions and the pupils' final perspectives on their learning. It is not about getting teachers to abandon everything that they do, but to take more seriously the development of pupils'

understanding of Christianity within the wider range of issues in curriculum and pedagogy, and within their own religious educational perspectives. Finally, by considering these issues, more closely, it may be possible to make more nuanced decisions about the nature and structure of the curriculum at a policy level.

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Appendix 1: Christianity in systematic approaches

Table of commonest topics in *systematic* approaches at Key Stage 3 (Hayward 2007, p24)

	YEAR 7	%		YEAR 8	%		YEAR 9	%
1	Jesus	31.86	1	Jesus	24.92	1	Jesus	12.40
2	Churches	10.36	2	Churches/history	17.13	2	Faith in action	10.74
3	Bible	7.77	3	Bible	9.66	3	Social/moral issues	9.50
4	Beliefs	6.47	4	Beliefs	8.72	4	Churches/church history	9.09
5	Worship/practice	6.21	5	Worship/practice	8.41	5	Worship/practice	9.09
6	Festivals	4.92	6	Festivals/calendar	4.36	6	God	7.44
7	God	5.44	7	Figures of faith	4.05	7	Ethics/morals	7.02
8	Key figures	3.88	8	Values	3.74	8	Beliefs	6.20
9	Values	3.88	9	God	3.74	9	Rites of passage	5.78
10	Creation	2.84	10	Being Christian	2.18	10	Questions	4.54
11	Signs and symbols	2.07	11	Signs/symbols	1.87	11	Being Christian	4.13
12	Being Christian	2.07	12	Moral issues	1.56	12	Values	2.89
13	Other	1.03		Other	2.49	13	Science and religion	2.89
	Themes	3.62				14	Other	2.89
	Christianity unit	7.51		Christianity unit	7.16		Christianity unit	5.37

Appendix 2: Christianity in thematic approaches

Table of commonest topics in *thematic* approaches at Key Stage 3 (Hayward 2007, p31)

	YEAR 7	%	YEAR 8	%	YEAR 9	%
1	Signs, symbols, story and myth	13.84	Sacred writings	13.04	Moral /social issues	15.93
2	Creation	12.15	Rites of passage	11.59	Suffering and Evil or Good and Evil	15.69
3	Worship/practice	11.86	Worship	10.51	Ethics/morals/values	11.03
4	Festivals	8.47	Values/rules/moral issues	10.14	Rites of passage	9.59
5	Sacred writings	6.50	Pilgrimages/sacred places	7.97	God	6.62
6	God	5.37	Environment/creation	5.80	Religious figures/significant people	4.90
7	Founders and other figures	5.08	Faith in action	5.80	Death/life after death	4.41
8	Places of worship	4.24	Festivals	5.07	Pilgrimage/sacred places	3.68
9	Questions	3.95	Signs/symbols	4.71	worship	3.19
10	Community	3.39	Beliefs	3.62	Philosophy/questions	2.94
11	Who am I?	3.11	God	3.26	Environment	2.94
12	Belief	2.82	Suffering/evil	3.26	Festivals/celebrations	2.70
13	People of faith/vision	2.82	Death/afterlife	2.90	Creation	2.20
14	Values	1.41	Founders	2.17	Science/religion	1.71
15	The Sacred	1.41			Belief/action	1.71
	<i>Other</i>	<i>2.54</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>5.80</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>4.66</i>
	<i>Introduction to Religion/RE</i>	<i>11.02</i>	<i>Religion unit</i>	<i>4.35</i>	<i>Religion unit</i>	<i>6.13</i>

Appendix 3: checklist of questions for teaching and learning about Christianity

TEACHERS' INTENTIONS

1. What are your beliefs in/about Christianity?
2. What aspects of Christianity have you studied?
3. What is your pedagogical view of the place of Christianity in the curriculum?
4. What are your assumptions about the attitudes of the pupils whom you teach (Irrelevant, uncool, against their beliefs, positive, wary)?

TEACHERS' CLASSROOM STRATEGIES: PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

5. What structure are your modules that include Christianity or Christian content?
Biblical/systematic/ phenomenologically thematic/themes from human experience/philosophical/ethical?
6. Taken together, are the modules one approach, or mixed?
7. Do the individual lessons in modules focus on solely on Christianity, or on a range of religious and/or non-religious beliefs?
8. What is the pedagogical purpose behind the type of models and their inter-relationship?
9. Taken together, what aspects of Christianity will pupils in your school have covered and how?

TEACHERS' CLASSROOM STRATEGIES: CURRICULUM CONTENT

10. Do you fairly and accurately portray: central Christian beliefs, values and practices; the lived reality of the varieties of Christian life today; the significance of Christianity (taken together as 'Christianity')?
11. Do your resources fairly and accurately portray Christianity?
12. Do your teaching methods support the pupils' learning about Christianity?
13. Do your teaching methods support the pupils' learning of the ways that Christianity interacts with other religions?

TEACHERS' CLASSROOM STRATEGIES: ENGAGEMENT

14. Are any of your teaching methods implicitly or explicitly drawn from the Christian educational tradition, e.g. *lectio divina*, scriptural reasoning?

15. Does anything else you do or say in the classroom imply a particular attitude or view of Christianity, e.g. support for or criticism of Christian views on particular issues?
16. Does your teaching allow for pupils to engage with Christian issues personally or is it content-driven?
17. Do you use an attainment target that *explicitly* encourages the development of pupils' understanding of Christianity?
18. Do other attainment targets *implicitly* encourage the development of pupils' understanding of Christianity? Or do they e.g. develop self-expression?

PUPILS' LEARNING

19. Does your presentation of Christianity support or undermine the religious commitment of Christian pupils in your class, whatever their denomination?
20. Do the resources you use support or undermine the religious commitment of Christian pupils in your class, whatever their denomination?
21. Do your teaching methods support or undermine the religious commitment of Christian pupils in your class?
22. Does your presentation of Christianity support or undermine the commitment of non-Christian pupils in your class?
23. Do your teaching methods on Christianity support or undermine the commitment of non-Christian pupils in your class?
24. Do the resources you use on Christianity support or undermine the commitment of non-Christian pupils in your class?

CONCLUSION

25. Will the answers to these questions change how you teach about Christianity to your pupils?

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² Asterisked entries are those included in the review.

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