

10

Ethnography as Reflective Practice

The ethnographic studies reported in chapters 1 to 9 throw up particular findings which are relevant to religious education, and other subjects, as well as beyond the curriculum. For example, knowing (from chapter 2) about periodic Hindu *vrats* (fasts) may be useful to the biology teacher or the physical education teacher and for liaising in a sensitive and informed way with a particular family at a particular time. To take another example – being reminded of the different dates on which Christian communities celebrate Easter and Christmas (chapters 3 and 4) may lead to more inclusive teaching and assemblies (acts of collective worship) on the subject of these festivals. Certainly one hope in writing this book has been that the very detail of the reporting will be helpful in just these ways.

This chapter's remit, however, is to tease out the wider range of ways in which ethnography can support the reflective practitioner. First, we look at how field studies influence the ways in which we conceptualise 'religion' and 'culture'. We examine the images which may be helpful, whilst recognising the limitations of all metaphor and analogy. Second, we look at ethnography as a record of young people's lives and we note especially the evidence of the role of schools in the perpetuation (as well as the representation) of religion and culture. We reflect on what the field studies suggest regarding young people's 'plural identity'. Third, we consider the potential value of the ethnographic process for teachers, and we conclude with a commendation of an approach in religious education (and more widely) which is interpretative and dialogic.

Images of cultures and religions

Anthropologists' imaginations have been fertile in providing images for what we mean by culture. In her essay on 'the dynamics of culture' the Swedish anthropologist Lena Gerholm (1993) cites several images of culture – the seamless fabric, the patchwork quilt and Clifford Geertz's octopus 'whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated, neurally

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

quite poorly connected with one another and with what in the octopus passes for a brain, and yet who nonetheless, manages both to get around and to preserve himself, for a while anyway, as a viable if somewhat ungainly entity' (Geertz 1973: 407–8). By choosing this image Geertz is suggesting that we do well to conceive of cultures as internally connected and externally bounded but not strongly so.

Geertz had offered this image in preference to earlier images of the spider's web and the pile of sand (the organised and internally connected and the unbounded, atomic). By pondering data reported from field studies and by attention to the social contexts of one's family, workplace and other membership groups one can consider the usefulness of images such as these and develop one's own understandings of culture. Developing an ethnographic approach, whether or not one has the opportunity to conduct intensive studies of this sort, involves becoming aware of how one visualises 'culture' and 'religion' and trying out other images.

For example, do we think of culture as what people inherit or what they create? The anthropologist Richard Fox suspected that in the past anthropologists had stereotyped 'others' as mere carriers of culture, by 'pressing them pan-cake flat under a tyranny of culture' (1985: xi). In Fox's assessment earlier anthropological 'conceptions of culture all presume that culture exists in advance of human history and action'. Instead he proposes:

Cultural stability and persistence result only from the successive reproductions of similar fields of forces, they therefore come about because of culture's continuous construction and reconstruction, not because it has stopped and remained stable. (Fox 1985: xi)

We can see this perpetual, successive creation of culture in the particular decisions that individuals make (see Nesbitt 1995b), whether in their choice of words (e.g. to use a Punjabi word or an English one in a particular sentence in a particular context), or in their decisions about the importance of caste distinctions (see chapter 7), or about the likelihood that a baby is crying as a result of *nazar* (the evil eye), or in how they will pray.

Attempts to conceptualise 'religion' raise similar questions. One authority on religious studies, John Bowker, offers a collection of definitions (1997: xv). For example, for the French sociologist Emile Durkheim 'a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices' and for Geertz a religion is 'a system of symbols'. Bowker proceeds to look at religions as systems and concludes that religions can be recognised but elude definition. Better, he suggests, to follow the eminent phenomenologist Ninian Smart's recommendation of observing religions in terms of their seven different 'dimensions'. These dimensions Smart identified as 'the practical and ritual' and the 'experiential and emotional' as well as the 'narrative or

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

mythical', the 'doctrinal and philosophical', the 'ethical and legal', the 'social and institutional' and the 'material', in which he included art, architecture and sacred places.

In the twentieth century growing awareness that there are many religions, and that they are in closer and closer proximity to each other, precipitated an abundance of images of religions' relationship to each other – favourites being the images of paths winding up a mountain (to the same summit) and as streams pouring down a mountain (from the same pure source). Tree images also flourished. Julius Lipner, among others, visualised the Hindu tradition as a tree – especially as that most bewildering of trees, a banyan (1998: 5). Sometimes the historical relationship between religions is plotted pictorially as branches from a tree (Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as branches from the Hindu tree, Christianity and Islam from the Jewish tree). John Hick's suggestion is that the world's faiths are a universe of planets circling around the sun (God) rather than around Christianity (1977). Meanwhile Lat Blaylock, Executive Officer of the Professional Council for Religious Education, has suggested that we picture religions as treasure chests (1999).

My colleague Robert Jackson at the University of Warwick developed a 'three level model' of religion. This consists of the individual, the membership group and the cumulative tradition (Jackson 1997a). His model is an adaptation and development of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's distinction between individuals' personal faith and the cumulative traditions in which the individual is involved. Smith proposed that conceptualising faiths in this way was less misleading than uncritically using the term 'religion' with its fundamentally western and Christian history and connotations (1978). As an example of his three level model Jackson described 'Anita', a young woman, whose 'tradition' is Hindu and whose membership groups included peer groups, ethnic community – her *samaj* (caste) and the wider Gujarati community – as well as a *sampradaya*, i.e. the Sathya Sai Baba movement.

To a varying degree – weaker in the case of Smith's and Jackson's cumulative tradition, stronger in the case of Blaylock's treasure chest – all these images are bounded. As noted in the Introduction, this has been emphasised in the structure of syllabuses and curricula in religious education, which are organised within a framework of distinct world religions (see, for example, SCAA 1994). While Blaylock criticises studying religions 'as if they were separate and "hermetically sealed"' he emphasises that 'the blurring of differences between religions' is to be discouraged (1999: 17). It is anthropologists of religion who protest most powerfully against imposing (or supposing that there are) firm boundaries between, for example, 'Sikhism' and 'Hinduism'. Both Roger Ballard's and Ron Geaves's fieldwork has largely concentrated on expressions of religion in the Punjab and among Punjabis in the UK, and their ethnography leaves no question of

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

the fluidity of popular devotion – evident in the iconography and clientele at pilgrimage places (see Ballard 2003; Geaves 1998b). This makes them deeply uneasy with the premises of boundedness on which so much religious studies in higher education as well as religious education in schools are based (see especially Geaves 1998a). The field studies in Coventry reported in chapters 1 to 9 rang the same alarm bells – see the discussion of ‘plural identities’ below.

Durkheim’s definition of religion as a unified system of belief and practice dominates in religious education. This division raises the question of whether beliefs are what the individual member of a faith tradition should believe (according to some central authority such as scripture) or, rather, what that individual actually believes. It also encourages a tendency to view what members of a faith do as either an expression of what they (should) believe or as an aberration from it. As such, it fosters a judgemental approach to human behaviour. The data reported in chapters 5, 6 and 7 instead support the greater usefulness of Martin Stringer’s construct of ‘situational belief’ (1999) and of Roger Ballard’s ‘kismatic’ dimension of religion (1999). In other words, rather than consciously articulating and adhering to a system of (approved) belief, individuals – and not only those with non-European backgrounds – mobilise particular beliefs in particular situations. These situations are often ones of need because of misfortune, illness and bereavement, and they impel a search for explanations and remedies. Both karma and *nazar* (the evil eye) provide explanations for misfortune, and *amrit* (empowered water) affords one remedy. Prayer variously understood affords another.

By focusing on caste, chapter 7 further problematised the relation of belief and practice. It distinguished between the Gurus’ acceptance of caste as a basis for marriages and their denunciation of it as a source of pride and superiority. At the same time it questioned portrayals of a distinction between Sikhs and Hindus in terms of caste-related belief and practice. Students and teachers need to engage with the question of whether the range of practice (e.g. of attitudes to those of lower castes) indicates a residual or persistent situational belief that is at least as evident among Sikhs as it is among Hindus in the UK.

Ethnography as record: diversity, continuity and change

Over and over again, the field studies indicate the diversity within any supposed category. Whether this be a ‘faith community’ (e.g. Christians) or a more specific group (such as eight to 13 year-old Black Pentecostal boys in north Coventry), or an activity (for example, celebrating birthdays or Easter) or daily patterns of behaviour (including the dietary choices of young Hindus), ethnographic research dispels any lingering assumptions

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

of homogeneity. The data may reveal stark contradictions within the group, and will certainly show more subtly nuanced variation in individuals' attitudes and practices and in how they articulate these.

Field studies show continuities from one generation to another, with many of the eight to 13 year olds echoing their parents' views on matters of belief and practice; they also capture some clear continuities from one period in an individual's life to another. Thus, some of the young Hindus who participated in the longitudinal study expressed the same idea in almost identical words after a nine-year interval. One example was a Gujarati Hindu who stated on each occasion that 'religion is the most private thing' and a Punjabi Hindu who testified to the power of reciting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra*. As chapter 7 demonstrated, one of these continuities is young Hindus' and Sikhs' sense of caste – internalising the connotations of certain caste designations and knowing that they themselves belong to a particular caste. Caste is an ongoing thread (stronger in some families than in others) in both the families' and individuals' sense of self.

Equally striking is change, such as the divergence of a young person's outlook from her parents' outlook, and also from her own outlook when she was interviewed nine years earlier. The Gujarati psychology student in chapter 9 provides one example. Her personal faith had shifted to some extent from the unquestioning devotion to Sathya Sai Baba which she and her father had shared nine years previously. In chapter 2 the focus on young people in relation to vegetarianism illustrated changes – often changes to and fro within a few years of an individual's experience – and it exposed a range of interacting factors that were at work in these.

Schools' implication in religious socialisation

More soberingly for those of us who are involved in education, fieldwork also reveals the largely uncharted interaction between religious nurturing and young people's encounter in school with their faith traditions. Put another way, the research leaves no doubt that school can be unsettling as well as affirming in terms of individuals' faith tradition and that it contributes to young people's religious socialisation. As will be outlined below, it does this by (a) providing some of their knowledge of the faith with which they identify and ways of articulating it and (b) in some cases triggering pupils' identification of themselves with the particular faith community.

School-based encounter occurs in numerous ways. Obvious occasions of interaction are religious education lessons (including work for public examinations) and collective worship (e.g. the Christmas, Divali and Vaisakhi assemblies of chapter 4), as well as innumerable social interac-

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

tions with fellow pupils, teachers and other staff. Such interactions include affirmation of young people's faith community and tradition but also dissonances, inconsistencies and contradictions between home and school. These may be potentially hurtful cultural differences and include disjunctions between young people's experience at home and the representation of their 'religions' by teachers and in curriculum materials. To take the cultural differences first: in chapter 2, a teacher's lack of sympathy towards a young Hindu's avoidance of meat during her *vrata* (fast) was – unlike her father's disapproval – suggestive of a deeper dissonance between an aspect of religious tradition and teachers' cultural conditioning. Children's reports of teachers scolding them for attending school with their hands stained with henna after a marriage (not realising its auspicious associations or that it is not just wilful staining of their hands), and a Ukrainian Catholic parent's recollection of a Roman Catholic teacher laughing at a child who had missed school on 7 January 'because it was Christmas', exemplify this sort of gap further. Hence the importance of religious education using children's own knowledge and experience as primary resource material. In this connection, Jackson (2004b) discusses drawing on children's first-hand knowledge and experience through approaches that are interpretive and dialogical.

As regards home experience and the representation of religions in school: chapter 4 referred to teacher-led (though not deliberate) changes to the pronunciation of names and vocabulary from Indian languages. More substantively, chapters 5 and 7 have exemplified how statements about 'God' in curriculum materials on the Sikh tradition, and about castes/*varna* in the context of the Hindu tradition, fit uneasily with experience of many families within the communities concerned.

I have discussed elsewhere the discrepancy between textbook accounts of the five Ks as part and parcel of being a Sikh and young Sikhs' perception that these are markers distinguishing, not Sikh from non-Sikh, but 'proper Sikh' from 'Sikh' (Nesbitt 1999c, 2000). What the curriculum books often do not clarify is that the five Ks are required specifically of Khalsa Sikhs (those who are *amritdhari*, i.e. have been initiated by receiving *amrit* in an *amrit* ceremony), and that only a very small minority of pupils (even in secondary school) will be *amritdhari*.

Ethnography provides just the sort of awareness of a wider social context which is vital if educators are to reflect and implement change (e.g. in religious education materials or in educating pupils and colleagues in cultural sensitivity) in an informed way. Religious education teachers need to be aware of the sorts of dissonance that arise. This is not to rule out the inevitable compressions and simplifications involved in presenting complex material within the constraints of the timetable, but it is to urge caution before generalising about (all) Sikhs, (all) Hindus etc., and to help pupils to understand that individual experience varies.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Ethnography also shows how the interaction between school and an individual's 'faith' includes schools' contribution to individuals' knowledge of their tradition. This is in part because, as some young people's accounts show, school clearly enjoys a privileged status in the minds of some pupils at least, and what a teacher says is accepted as authoritative (or as more authoritative than what a parent says). Thus one Gujarati girl corrected her mother's pronunciation of Indian words and names, insisting that the teacher's (incorrect) versions were correct. A young Punjabi woman (a Ravidasi) recalled learning about the caste system and about reincarnation in her religious education lessons. She said:

When I heard it at school I believed it. It had a great effect on me because it was my own religion and I thought it was true.

Her receptiveness to the teachers' presentation of the content of her tradition set up an interaction with prior, less articulated awareness of what it meant to be Hindu.

Young people's respect for teachers as authority figures meant, moreover, that teachers' endorsement of their tradition by talking about it gave them a positive feeling about themselves and their tradition. Thus, in recalling the occasion when her religious education teacher quoted from the Bhagavad Gita in assembly, a Punjabi Hindu sixth former in an independent school commented, 'You obviously feel proud when someone talks about your religion.'

What must not be forgotten is the corresponding sense of marginalisation or embarrassment when there is no acknowledgement in school of a pupil's cultural background or when this is presented (though usually not consciously) in a negative, trivial or misleading manner – especially if there are pupils present who will follow this up out of the classroom. One Gujarati girl recalled the amusement of (Punjabi) pupils in the room when her teacher played (as it happened, inappropriate) romantic Indian film songs because it was a Hindu festival. The fact that caste features in so many religious education syllabuses, and that caste is a sensitive issue – especially in the families of colleagues and pupils from historically oppressed castes – underlines the need for sensitivity and skill in handling curriculum material.

The field studies indicated too that, in addition to responding positively to hearing the content of the tradition, whether a belief or a passage of scripture, mediated by a teacher, a young person might even have initially accepted the label for his or her religious identity on a teacher's authority. Thus it was a teacher who, while almost certainly unaware of the interweaving of *sampradayas* (guru-led devotional groupings) and *zat-biradari* (caste) in the fabric of Punjabi culture, precipitated a Ravidasi girl's identification of herself with a major faith tradition (see below). The girl recalled:

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

First I used to say [my religion was] Indian, but then my teacher told me that it's not really Indian: it's Sikh. So I start sort of saying, 'It's Sikh'.

The stages by which such an identification might be reached illustrate further the interaction of home and school. In the words of a younger Hindu girl:

I just found out that I'm Hindu. Well, my mum told me because this teacher said, 'Are you a Hindu?' and I said, 'I don't know', so she said, 'Go and ask your mum and tell me.' And when I told her the other day, she said, 'OK' and she wanted to know about Divali, [saying] that you celebrate Divali if you're a Hindu.'

My field notes contain other instances of children and their parents being regarded as resources by the teacher, or at least as channels of information about what the teacher perceives to be aspects of their tradition. As the last quotation illustrates, this is particularly evident in connection with festivals during children's primary school years. As chapter 4 pointed out, in the interactive processes of religious socialisation that take place in the home and the school, the festivals – Christmas, Divali, Easter, Id, Vaisakhi etc. – present teachers with pegs for presenting particular faith traditions, and as opportunities for parents (religious nurturers) and school teachers to interact. As we have seen, schools play a part in the cultural transmission of some minority as well as majority communities.

These examples of parents and teachers reinforcing associations in children's thinking – between an individual, a faith tradition, a country (India, for example) and an annual event – set up a framework for children's understanding of cultural diversity. This must not obscure another finding of these ethnographic studies: the plurality of individuals' identity if set against the simple framework of six 'world religions'.

Plural identities

The field studies show that not only are society, and so its schools, plural in terms of its members' cultural and religious diversity, but individuals are themselves in several senses religiously and culturally plural.

Not fitting the boxes – challenging the boundaries

Chapter 7 in particular mentioned two communities, the Valmiki and Ravidasi. These are the non-disparaging titles for two hereditary (caste-specific) communities. In UK cities including Coventry, Birmingham and London the local Punjabi community includes settled populations from these castes and they have established their own places of public worship (Nesbitt 1990a and b, 1991, 1994). The ways in which young Valmiki

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

and Ravidasis applied the terms 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' to themselves made it clear that any definition of Hindu and Sikh in mutually exclusive terms left out of account families for whom each designation was equally appropriate and equally unsatisfactory. In one sense these families are both Hindu and Sikh; in another they are no more plural than other Punjabi families. This is because it can be argued that they do not span the Hindu–Sikh boundary because in practice there is no such boundary.

Similarly, the finding that some Sikhs from other castes (including Jats), venerate the Goddess, that at Divali some Ramgarhia Sikhs venerate the God Vishvakarma, or that Hindus may include a picture of Guru Nanak in their domestic shrine, need not be read as signs of cultural plurality in terms of spanning or mixing 'different faiths', but as evidence of the inappropriateness of trying to represent Sikhism and Hinduism as such distinct entities. Instead one can read such data as evidence of the continuing cultural fluidity of Punjab in the twenty-first century as well as in earlier centuries (see Oberoi 1994) and can begin to question the appropriateness of boxing individuals by supposedly distinct religious affiliation. The diagram on page 147 provides one way of conceptualising this continuum of 'belief' and 'practice'.

The fact that, for example, Sikh spokespeople present their faith with such a firm boundary needs to be balanced by the ethnographic reports and children's experiences that unsettle this – see for example Lall (1999) for a Sikh teacher's sharing of the diversity of young Sikhs' experiences of religious devotion. Reading about the history and politics of religion in the Punjab will also deepen understanding of the movements among Sikhs towards presenting a strongly separate identity (Oberoi 1994; Juergensmeyer 1982). Teachers and others need to be aware of differences of stance, to be open to different perspectives and to question statements in curriculum books and syllabuses critically.

To take another example of apparent plurality, the fact (observed in chapter 4) that Hindus may venerate the infant Jesus at Christmas can be read as an indication of the encompassing character of Hindu tradition as well as of the convergence of two religions or cultures. The identity of the worshipper as a Hindu is not changed by this catholicity in worship, although – as the young Gujarati woman from a family of Sai devotees explained – one's identity could be primarily universalist rather than (more narrowly) Hindu.

Mixed faith and dual heritage

Increasing numbers of families are plural in the sense that parents identify themselves with different ethnic, cultural or religious communities and this influences the way in which their children experience and articulate their own identities (Alibhai-Brown 2001; Ata 2003; Katz 1996;

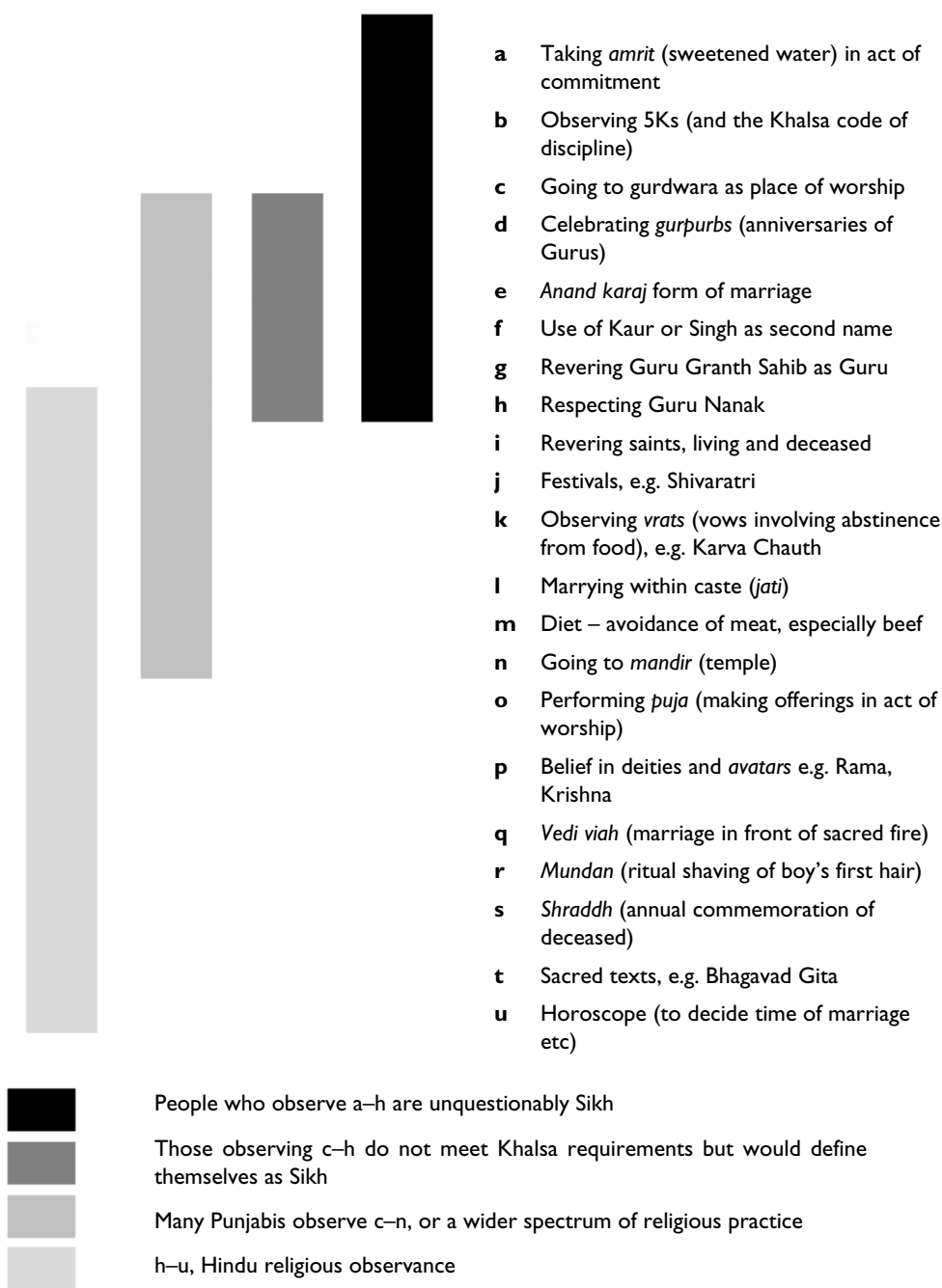


Figure 1 The Hindu–Sikh continuum of belief and practice

Note: This diagram is intended to show the approximate relationship between individuals' religious practices and whether they identify themselves as 'Hindu' or 'Sikh'. The categories should not be interpreted too rigidly.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Romain 1996). One result of the design of the field studies within a world religions paradigm was that, although mixed faith families are increasing, few of these children's mothers were in fact from different faith traditions from their fathers. The young person who declared 'My dad's Hindu, my mum's side are Sikhs' was a Valmiki (i.e. growing up in a community in which 'Sikh' and 'Hindu' indicate points on a spectrum of behaviour rather than distinct 'religions') (Nesbitt 1991). But, raising different questions with regard to religion and ethnicity, culture and belief, two children told me (as noted in chapter 3) that their fathers were Christian and their mothers were not only Christian but also Jewish. As a result they celebrated both Jewish and Christian festivals at home. Among the Christians, it was not unusual for parents to have been brought up in different countries from each other, with different religious customs at Easter and Christmas. Roman Catholic children mentioned Greece, Croatia and Spain as well as Ireland and England in this respect. As reported in chapter 2, many young people were in contact with more than one denominational expression of Christianity.

The use of places of worship/congregations as the basis for sampling interviewees, and the fact that 'gate-keepers' played a part in identifying them, reduced the incidence of religious or denominational pluralism within the nuclear families that I studied. In the case of the Roman Catholic children the heads of the Catholic schools who were contacted insisted that I must consult the priest, who may have pointed to the most straightforwardly Catholic families. But it needs to be borne in mind that in society generally the incidence of mixed faith (e.g. Sikh-Christian or Hindu-Muslim) and of denominationally 'mixed' marriage, e.g. between people from Catholic and non-Catholic Christian backgrounds, is increasing. Moreover, parents' frequently differing perspectives and levels of commitment suggest that young people's religious identity formation is in many cases more complex than the Coventry data indicate.

Multiple influencing

Another aspect of young people's plurality – in terms of the multiple influences which they experience – did however recur more strongly as a motif in the analysis of the data. This is the 'modern plurality' discussed by Skeie (1995) and Jackson (2004b) and described evocatively by Eck (2000) as 'marbling'. Whereas 'traditional' plurality 'corresponds to the observable cultural diversity presented in many Western societies' (Jackson 2004b: 8), 'modern plurality relates to the variegated intellectual climate of late modernity or postmodernity' (2004b: 8). Chapter 3 mentioned the young Christians who had encountered ideas of reincarnation and chapter 6 introduced the young Hindus who were engaging simultaneously with

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

ideas that they met through their families, through the media and at school – for example different accounts of the creation of the universe or of what the optimum diet is, or regarding romantic love and marriage.

Elsewhere I have used the term ‘plural spirituality’ to convey something of this ‘modern plurality’ (Nesbitt 2003), as at the deepest level of questing, enquiry and experience individuals encounter images, ideals and idioms from (what are in some ways and according to dominant perceptions) different sources: Christian and Hindu, European and African, sacred and secular.

In Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s terms, more and more individuals are simultaneously orthoprax and heterodox – they remain within their cultural norms, e.g. following their religion’s rituals, while benefiting ‘in their heads’ from the myths of many cultures (1999: 344).

Plural identity

Increasingly complex patterns of individual identity result from ‘traditional’ plurality (Skeie 1995). Chapter 8 highlighted some of the various ways in which individuals – all of them ‘Hindu’ by one self-definition – may identify themselves in different contexts. They may also identify as Asian and as British, for example. As Raj (2003) shows, other identities such as Black or ‘of Indian origin’ may also come into play for these same young people. Self-identifications as Gujarati (or Punjabi, Bengali etc.) according to their ethnicity and ancestral region in India; as a Vaishnav, or as a devotee of the Mother Goddess or of Krishna (according to their *sampradaya* or devotional grouping); or as a Khatri or a Brahmin (their caste solidarity), or as coming from a Kenyan family (because their parents and grand parents had lived there before coming to the UK) surfaced strongly in certain situations (see Nesbitt 2004b).

Ethnographic studies disclose identity forming through successive encounters with ‘others’ (Tajfel 1981). Identity is itself processual, forming in definition and redefinition through contact with groupings that in some respects differ from one’s own and in other respects overlap with it. It involves ongoing processes of categorising, feeling affirmed and feeling excluded, e.g. through others’ racist behaviour. As chapter 8 illustrated, self-awareness is a matter of interpretation, of telling a coherent life story (Jackson 2004b discussing Meijer 1995).

One clear acknowledgement of the gap that is widening between the simple world religions categories of much religious education and the experience of many individuals comes from the eminent religious educationist, John Hull:

It is clear that religious education is moving away from the phenomenology of religion toward the phenomenology of the life-world . . . Constructs such as ‘Muslims’ and ‘Protestants’ are no longer useful unless they are presented as a

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

contribution to the formation of identity, a subjective development in which both religious diversity in the culture and implicit in the lived world of the young person will be combined. This 'living religion' of the life-world is not the same as the actual religion of the old traditions. (Hull 2003)

Ethnography as process

Ethnography, too, is better understood as processual. It is not simply the set of methods, the qualitative approach, that is employed in obtaining data through sustained academic study. Ethnography itself consists of interactive processes. As the Introduction explained, ethnography requires us to be reflexive, because the ethnographer affects, and is affected by, the field. As chapter 8 noted, the researcher's in-depth, one to one interviews with young people facilitated some young people's articulation of who they are and how they perceive themselves in relation to others. The interviews were intrinsic to this self-narration.

Involvement in the research stimulated young people's responses to their experience. From a 20 year-old Gujarati Hindu man comes evidence of how an earlier phase of our study had made an impact on his religious development:

I think I just got involved with what you were doing [i.e. the research] so that helped a lot as well. It opened up what I thought as well. I found that helped a great deal. I remember you asking me to keep a diary . . . I remember my mum helping me write down . . . I was finding I became a lot more interested in my own religion . . . I found a lot more about Hinduism.

Similarly, a young Christian and a young Hindu woman admitted that the experience of taking part in the field studies had encouraged their choice of study at university— theology and religious education respectively. Such admissions require the researcher to reflect conscientiously on the reflexive character of ethnography – the impact of the participants on the researcher as well as the influence of the research process on the participants.

It is just this sort of awareness, as well as the open curiosity and the scepticism of generalisations, that can best further the intentions of intercultural education. Through adopting ethnography as process all who are engaged in social interaction, and schools in particular, can deepen their understanding and enhance their professional skills. This is the message of Dell Hymes and Celia Roberts among others, who advocate ethnography as 'continuous with ordinary life' and as 'a general possession' (Hymes 1980: 98–9 as cited in Roberts 2002). The point is not that 'we should all strive to become professional ethnographers but rather that we should use ethnography to pursue our particular interests and careers' (Roberts 2002:

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

115). Roberts quotes Hymes' vision of a democratic society as one in which ethnography would be seen:

as a general possession, although differentially cultivated. At one pole would be a certain number of people trained in ethnography as a profession. At the other pole would be the general population, respected . . . as having a knowledge of their worlds, intricate and subtle in many ways . . . and as having come to this knowledge by a process ethnographic in character. In between would be those able to combine some disciplined understanding of ethnographic inquiry with the pursuit of their vocation whatever that might be. (Hymes 1980: 99 quoted in Roberts 2002: 115)

Such an awareness can inform pastoral care and deepen teachers' representations of religious and cultural diversity. This is in part because it involves training oneself to see, to avoid observer blindness, especially where one's own background, assumptions and behaviour are concerned. One writer on research methodology tells the story of the observer who sees each day a peasant man crossing the frontier one way between two countries. Each day the peasant is with his donkey and the observer becomes convinced that he must be engaged in smuggling. Try as he may, he cannot figure out what the contraband is – until the day when he learns that the man is smuggling donkeys.

An ethnographic alertness helps us to see the world differently – this may mean recognising the cultural assumptions embedded in taking it for granted that birthday celebrations are part of every child's entitlement if not of their experience. It may mean perceiving commonalities of experience where previously cultural difference had seemed to dominate. It may mean listening to the way in which a parent actually pronounces a child's name and recognising the importance of doing so each time one meets a child whose name is unfamiliar.

Of course the interactive, dynamic quality of ethnography may more deeply affect teachers who are able to conduct even small-scale field studies and this experience informs their teaching. As part of the MA in Religious Education course at the University of Warwick, for example, students – most of whom are teachers – engage as ethnographers in field studies of religions. The teachers concerned have the transforming experience of assuming a different role, in some cases *vis-à-vis* their own pupils (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993; Gillespie 1995: 67ff). Their understanding of faith traditions, and so of the relationship between pupils' religious nurture and the representation of their tradition in religious education, changes. For example, a Leicester secondary school teacher's study of Swadhyaya, a Hindu self-study group, brought him insight into some of his pupils' distinctive nurturing and its contribution to how they approached their studies in general and religious education in particular (Bennett 1997).

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Teachers' ethnographic insight can, especially when coupled with a long-standing association with a faith community, inform their production of curriculum materials, so narrowing the gap further. Elizabeth Wayne's ethnographic work had, together with her involvement in the local Hindu community, familiarised her with the importance of the summer festival of Raksha Bandhan. This, like Divali, is celebrated by a wide spectrum of Hindus (and by many Sikhs). However, unlike Divali, probably because it falls in the summer holidays, it receives much less attention in schools. Wayne's understanding of how the festival strengthened bonds between siblings and cousins, regardless of geographical distance, enabled her to explore this aspect confidently when she was teaching. This classroom experience, in turn, was the basis for material in a curriculum book (Wayne *et al.* 1996: 40–1).

Indeed it was the ethnographic studies reported in this book which provided an empirical basis for the interpretive approach (sometimes referred to as the Warwick approach) which Robert Jackson developed (1997a, 2000) and for the curriculum materials which it generated (e.g. Barratt 1994a, b, c; Barratt and Price 1996; Everington 1996; Robson 1995; Wayne *et al.* 1996). The relationship between fieldwork and curriculum books is discussed by Judith Everington (1993). The materials aimed to set up a dialogue between pupils and the young people of their age whom the materials presented. In this process the pupils are helped to build 'bridges' between their own experience and the experience of these young people. This involves the pupils acquiring the ethnographic skills of (a) reflecting on what they are learning about the young Hindu's or United Reformed Church child's experience and concepts in the light of their own and (b) reflecting on their own experience and concepts in the light of the young Hindu's or United Reformed Church child's. Other educationists have developed variations of the approach – see e.g. Cush (1999). Denise Cush's concern is that concepts such as reincarnation may in fact be exoticised and distanced from young people if they are presented through the experience of young people from unfamiliar religious and cultural backgrounds.

In addition to studies of communities there is also potential for concerted ethnographic study of educational initiatives. For example, a series of small-scale studies at the University of Warwick is providing insights into values education programmes that are running in some mainstream schools (see Nesbitt and Henderson 2003; Arweck and Nesbitt 2003, 2004; Nesbitt and Arweck 2003). These programmes were formulated and are promoted under the auspices of religious organisations – in two cases Hindu-related new religious movements, the Sathya Sai Organisation and the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. Some schools have adopted the programmes as part of the statutory provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). The

ETHNOGRAPHY AS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

ethnographic style of the research allows for observation of lessons and assemblies, conversation with the teachers and pupils involved and with the organisations that are promoting the programmes. The data can be collected and analysed with reference to personal, social and health education in the school and the school's ethos and provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Such research provides a context, and raises questions, to help teachers in deciding whether to adopt (or at least select from) programmes such as Sathya Sai Education in Human Values and Living Values: An Educational Program.

In conclusion

Religion and culture are at the heart of worldwide changes in a plural society and so awareness of them drives associated developments in the curriculum in the direction of a more radically intercultural education. In the UK these include the introduction of citizenship education and the requirement of cross-curricular provision for pupils SMSC development. Even so, the centrality of representing religions and cultures in religious education can obscure the need for teachers more generally and others to deepen their understanding.

Ethnography challenges us to question our assumptions about religion and culture and about particular religions and cultures. Educationists need to be on guard for tendencies to harden or soften boundaries by the ways in which they generalise or emphasise distinctions between groups. In acknowledging culture and religion, schools must beware of becoming enmeshed in a retrospective 'nostalgia for culture' (Raj 2003) which stereotypes and locks individuals into labelled boxes as 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Chinese' or 'Irish' with timeless ways of being – and celebrating.

Moves towards a more dialogic approach to religious education are one way forward. These include the initiative of Julia Ipgrave in facilitating primary school children's e-mail dialogue with peers from other backgrounds (2001; Ipgrave's work is discussed in Jackson 2004b ch. 6) and Joyce Miller's organisation of meetings between secondary school pupils of different faiths in Bradford (2003). This virtual and face to face exchange of ideas continues the 'interpretive approach'.

Field workers live with the excitement of continually learning and unlearning, formulating and reformulating pictures of how individuals and groups are connected and how identities evolve, including their own identities. Pupils' religious and cultural literacy stands to benefit from education that is imbued with this spirit of discovery.