

Beyond the Big 6

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Introduction

Some Reasons for the Study of New and Other Minority Religions in Religious Education

Curiosity and Interest

There are numerous reasons why the study of new and minority religions should be included in RE programmes. Perhaps one of the most appealing of these reasons is that they are intrinsically interesting, opening up new worlds of possibilities. Children and adults alike tend to be fascinated by the variety of beliefs and practices that can be found in contemporary society – whether they find these attractive, alarming, incredible, stimulating and/or amusing.

But exploring new and other minority religions (including those within broader traditions) does not only improve students’ religious literacy, it can also play a significant role in increasing the understanding of key issues relating to religion more generally. For example, processes involving the origins, development and decline of religions are more easily recognised in new religious movements than in major traditions or organisations; studying new religions offers a good opportunity to examine the role of choice and change in religion; and phenomena such as extremisms are readily observable both in the new religions in the reactions to them.

The Demand

There has repeatedly been a demand for the inclusion of a greater variety of religions in RE by both teachers and students, as can be seen in a number of recent reports which have unanimously stressed the need for a more refined syllabus that better captures the reality of religion in the UK, including a move away from the ‘main nine faith traditions’ to take account of a greater diversity of religious movements, including the rise of ‘religious nones’.¹ The reports also stress the need for more critical reflection about religion including the implications of competing truth claims and the ‘negative’ aspects of religion such as links

¹ Only a small minority of people reporting they have no religion are atheists; many describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ and embrace various beliefs and practices to be found in the so-called ‘religious supermarket’.

to harm, violence and terrorism. The inclusion of new and other minority religions in the syllabus would directly address five of the nine key findings in the *RE for Real* report.² Furthermore, a more comprehensive religious literacy could reduce the social segregation identified in the Casey Review,³ the recommendations of which the Government is currently keen to implement.

Questioning the Taken-for-granted

Studying minority religions can broaden the mind and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about what is 'natural' or 'normal'. This can include looking at how religions differ on issues such as health, proselytising, abortion, dress, diet, education, the role of women, prophecy and other sources of revelation. By doing this, the study of little-known religions can foster a comparative approach, facilitating students' ability to discern not only the differences between new and more traditional religions, but also the similarities.

At the same time, students can be encouraged to challenge concepts including religion itself, to explore less familiar concepts such as charisma, and to examine various processes, such as proselytism, disaffiliation and schism.⁴

Contextualising Religion

A further advantage of studying minority religions is that it can provide an opportunity for recognising how various sectors of society (the state, legislature, economy, culture, family etc.) can interact with the religions in ways that are not always so readily observable with the more established religions, the latter often appearing to fit relatively seamlessly into the fabric of society. Reactions by, for example, relatives of converts, the media, mainstream churches, and the government can affect and be affected by minority religions in a great variety of ways. Students may thereby come to understand the importance of contextualising religion (and other aspects of society) if one wishes to have a fuller understanding of their functioning. Questions can arise about the extent to which some practices might be considered cultural rather than religious – even when it is claimed that they have a religious foundation.

Human Rights and Freedom of Religion

The study of minority religions can also encourage students to consider questions of human rights and freedom of religion. Most people in a democratic society pay at least lip service to Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights⁵ and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.⁶ However, although legislation exists in the UK and elsewhere against

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- ² 1. *Students are concerned that they hear a lot of stereotypes in the media and in some of their learning. They want to know what's real.*
2. *They think that learning about religion and belief is becoming more and more relevant because they see more of it, and what they see is more diverse.*
3. *Almost all emphasise the role of learning about religion and belief in order to engage positively with diversity.*
5. *Almost all want to learn about a wider range of religions and beliefs and are worried that many students learn about only one or two traditions.*
6. *Students really enjoy learning about real 'lived' religion, especially through thinking about religion and belief controversies.* <https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/documents-by-section/departments/research-centres-and-units/research-units/faiths-and-civil-society/REforREal-web-b.pdf>

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575975/The_Casey_Review_Executive_Summary.pdf

⁴ There are, for example, around 400 schismatic Mormon groups, Shields, S.L. 1990. *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*. Independence, MO: HeraldHouse.

⁵ *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

⁶ 1. *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.*

discrimination on the grounds of religion, this has not eliminated either implicit or overt discrimination or prejudice against religions that are new and/or confined to a relatively small number of members. Religious literacy should involve concepts of citizenship and the challenges of living with unpopular minorities.

Fake News and ‘The Other’

The enormous complexity of a contemporary multi-faith society that one finds today in most Western countries can result in a perception of the new and/or unusual as ‘the other’ – sometimes to the extent of dehumanising ‘the other’. Both ignorance and misinformation can result in unnecessary suffering which could be avoided by a more nuanced awareness of what the minority religions are actually like. There have always been rumours and gossip about new and other minority religions. However, the arrival of the Internet and, most recently, the social media has facilitated the spread of ‘fake news’, which can result in the increasingly widespread and rapid circulation of accounts of beliefs and practices of minority religions – many of which may bear little or no resemblance to the religions’ actual beliefs and practices. Such dubious ‘information’ can result in teasing or even bullying members of ‘weird’ religions in the playground, and/or to a lack of ability to assess critically any apparently attractive approaches made by proselytising groups.

Limits to Religious Freedoms and Fundamental British Values

Just as it is helpful to be reassured that the ‘other’ is not necessarily ‘all bad’, it is equally advisable to be alerted to the fact that (like some of the older religions) it may not be ‘all good’. It is worth considering the limits to which the right to religious freedom is subject according to both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.⁷ Teachers should, furthermore, be aware of ways in which beliefs or practices of some religions are not always compatible with what have been termed Fundamental British Values.⁸

Models, Ideal Types and Definitions

Referring to a religion as a minority religion does not merely imply a statistical minority. Within the UK, Roman Catholicism and Methodism may have a smaller membership than the Church of England, yet, unless we are concerned primarily with counting members, they are not normally referred to as minority religions, a term that can suggest that they may not be such full members of society as more ‘mainstream’ religions are.

Western scholars of religion have distinguished between four ‘ideal types’ of religion.⁹ The exact emphases vary from scholar to scholar, but the model distinguishes between ‘church’ and ‘sect’, which consider their religion uniquely legitimate, compared to the ‘denomination’ and ‘cult’ which have a more pluralistic outlook. It also typifies the ‘sect’ and ‘cult’ as being (unlike the ‘church’ or ‘denomination’) in tension with society.¹⁰ The ‘sect’ is often depicted as a schismatic group that emerged from a more established religion, while the ‘cult’, is characterised as a more innovative group, frequently focused around a charismatic leader.¹¹

2. *Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.*

⁷ See Article 29 of the UDHR and clause 2 of Article 9 of the ECHR (quoted above)

⁸ Defined by Ofsted as: *democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith.*

⁹ A useful tool for comparative purposes, the Ideal Type is not ideal in an evaluative sense, but defines a phenomenon by accentuating certain aspects in ways rarely found in reality. Weber, Max. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Editors E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch. New York: Free Press.

¹⁰ McGuire, Meredith B. 2002. *Religion: The Social Context*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth, Pp. 151ff.

¹¹ Stark, R., and W.S. Bainbridge. 1996. *A Theory of Religion*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers.

Ideal Types of Religious organizations

		Group/society tension	
		<i>Positive</i>	<i>negative</i>
Self-conceived Legitimacy	<i>Unique</i>	CHURCH	SECT
	<i>Pluralistic</i>	DENOMINATION	CULT

Using these types, one might compare the Church of England as a 'church' with Methodism as a 'denomination', Jehovah's Witnesses as a 'sect', and an assortment of movements, such as Scientology, as a 'cult'. The types can serve to illuminate process whereby a sect might split away from a church, but after some time become more accommodating to and accommodated by society through a process called 'denominationalisation'. It might be noted that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) can be classified as a Church in Utah, a denomination in England and a sect in Russia.

Minority religions could, by these criteria, be classified as a denomination, sect or cult. However, in popular usage the terms cult and sect have come to mean little more than a religion the speaker does not like, and which is associated with a number of negative generalisations. To label a group a 'cult' can suggest its members believe and do things no 'normal' person could believe or do, and it has frequently been assumed members could not have converted of their own free will, but must have been subjected to 'brainwashing' or mind-control techniques.

This negative image of a cult has been exacerbated by some tragic and widely publicised occurrences, such as the suicides and murders of over 900 followers (including more than 200 children) of Jim Jones' People's Temple in the Guyana jungle in 1978. Later horror stories have included the release of deadly sarin gas in the Tokyo underground in 1995 by Aum Shinrikyo, the 9/11 bombings in 2001 of the Twin Towers by Al Qaeda and, most recently, the terrorist attacks of ISIS and other groups.

But such examples represent only the tip of a very large iceberg. Inform holds information about over 5,000 different religious organisations, more than 1,000 of which are currently active in the UK.¹² A considerable majority of these were unknown in the West before World War II and are, therefore, sometimes referred to as new religions, although many had existed for centuries in other parts of the world.

In an attempt to research and describe minority religions from an objective perspective which did not start from an assumption that they were 'bad', scholars now prefer to use the term 'new religious movement' (NRM) to describe what others might refer to as cults or sects. There is, however, no generally agreed definition of an NRM (just as there is no generally agreed definition of 'religion'). Some refer to NRMs as religions that have appeared in the West since the mid-twentieth century; others mean a religion in tension with society, however old it might be. Another approach is to define NRMs as religions that have a predominantly first-generation membership. This has such advantages as (a) being relatively easy to identify without assuming other characteristics, (b) being applicable at any time or place (so the disciples of Jesus as described in the New Testament, were first-generation members of the NRM Christianity), and (c) highlighting the changes that take place if and when the first generation gets replaced by second and subsequent generations.

¹² Inform <<http://www.inform.ac/>> is an educational charity founded in 1988 with the support of the British government and mainstream Churches to provide up-to-date, reliable, evidence-based information about minority religions.

But however they are defined, there are three things one can say about NRMs: first, one cannot generalise – they can differ from each other in every conceivable way; secondly, they perform few, if any, actions that have not been performed by older religions; and thirdly, if one wants to understand NRMs, one cannot look at them in isolation from the rest of society.

That said, however, there are certain characteristics that one might look for in a first-generation religion. First, by definition the membership consists predominantly of converts, and converts tend to be more enthusiastic than those born into their religion. Secondly, they are disproportionately drawn from an atypical section of the population – this might be the politically oppressed, e.g. white middle-class adults (such as Unificationist converts) or young, unemployed black men (such as the Rastafarians). Thirdly, there is frequently a founder/leader who wields charismatic authority over his or her followers, and is thereby unbound by rules or tradition and likely to be unpredictable and unaccountable to anyone. Fourthly, at least some NRMs tend to have relatively dichotomous world views, with very clear boundaries being drawn between, for example, right and wrong and ‘them’ and ‘us’. Fifthly, NRMs are frequently treated with suspicion or fear. And sixthly, NRMs tend to change more rapidly and radically than older, more established religions.

Some ideas for teachers

- Invite members (or former members) of minority religions to your class
 - You should make sure that speakers will present as factual a description as possible, and not attempt either to convert students to or to prejudice them against other religions.¹³
- Ask students to give a short presentation about a minority religion
 - The student could belong to the religion or have conducted research into it.¹⁴
- Role play exploring over-simplistic solutions to complex issues.
 - For example, students A and B try to persuade students C and D respectively that their religion has the answer to the difficulties the world faces. The students then change couples, and student D and C try respectively to persuade students A and B etc.
- Questions for discussion
 - What is a religion?
 - Soka Gakkai Buddhism does not believe in a God. Does this mean it is not a ‘real’ religion?
 - Do you consider the Jedi Community is an NRM?¹⁵
 - Should all religions be treated equally?
 - When asked “Should Jehovah’s Witnesses be allowed to practise, even if they keep within the law?” 20% of British respondents said ‘no’. Do you agree? Why?
 - Why are minority religions often treated with suspicion?
 - Give examples and say whether you think the reasons are justified.
 - Why might different people have different beliefs?
 - Give examples of what might attract one person but not another.
 - What should I do if I or a friend becomes interested in joining another religion?¹⁶
 - What are some of the different ways people receive religious knowledge?
 - Give examples
 - What are some common characteristics of NRMs and how might these change?¹⁷

¹³ See RE-Online <http://www.reonline.org.uk> or contact Inform <http://www.inform.ac/> for suggestions about potential speakers.

¹⁴ Some basic information can be obtained from RE-Online <http://www.reonline.org.uk/>; the World Religions and Spirituality Project <https://wrldreels.org/>; CenSAMM <https://censamm.org/sitemap/>; www.CESNUR.org/; or by contacting <http://www.inform.ac/>

¹⁵ <https://wrldreels.org/2018/02/21/jedi-community/>; <https://psmag.com/economics/the-jedi-faithful/>

¹⁶ See <http://inform.ac/node/1598> and/or <http://www.inform.ac/node/12>

¹⁷ E. Barker “The Not-So-New Religious Movements” *Temenos* Vol. 50 No. 2 (2014), 235–56
<https://journal.fi/temenos/issue/view/3165>