

**CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF RELIGION:
ISSUES ARISING FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC
STUDY OF 8-13 YEAR OLDS' PERSPECTIVES**

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Introduction

This paper draws on experience of a series of ethnographic studies of religion in the lives of children and young people¹ which provided the basis for a religious education curriculum project.² All focused exclusively upon eight to thirteen year olds except for one longitudinal study which involved 16 to 23 year olds.³ The children were drawn respectively from Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Sikh and Muslim communities in the British Midlands. This paper will refer to the research with young Hindus, Christians and Sikhs in Coventry between 1986 and 1996.

Children's perspectives on religion are of concern to the wider study of religion, since – as Hyde points out – it is during their childhood and adolescence that people's

traditional beliefs are learned and individual beliefs formulated, individual and group religious practices and rituals meaningfully established, feelings such as awareness, trust and awe developed, relevant religious knowledge acquired, and the individual and social effects of religious commitment worked out.
(1990:350)

However, most of the numerous psychological studies of religious experience – at least in Britain – have involved adult subjects (sometimes recalling and interpreting their childhood experiences). Children's perspectives are needed to supplement these studies (Hyde 1990:177).

Moreover, children's perspectives are of concern to religious leaders who worry that numbers of adherents will dwindle and that the spiritual life of the nation will be diminished if adequate attention is not paid to the religious nurturing of children. Hence the studies commissioned by, for example, Christian organisations (eg British Council of Churches 1984, Martin and Pluck [nd]).

Children's perspectives on religion were fundamental to the Warwick RE Project's curriculum materials for KS1, 2 and 3, with their aim of enabling pupils to engage with the experience of their peers of different faith traditions (as represented in the KS1, 2 and 3 books). The intention was that pupils learn about faith traditions through reading about young people's involvement, via their 'membership groups' such as *sampradaya* (in the context of Hindu tradition – a movement led by a succession of gurus) or Christian denomination. This

learning would entail pupils 'building bridges' between these young people's experience and their own experience and being 'edified' by this encounter and reflection (Jackson 1997:111-2).

Religion can of course mean many things and can be conceptualised in different ways. Much as Smart's model (1968:15-8) provided a basis for Gates's investigation of children's experience of religion (1976), the Warwick field studies have been underpinned by the theoretical concerns – such as western reification of the Hindu and other traditions – that are discussed by Jackson (1997). From the many identifiable aspects and constituents of religion (or faith tradition) this paper will focus on the three aspects of self-identity, behaviour or activity and 'religious experience'.

As regards self-identity my concern was to discover with what terms children identified themselves and their religious tradition (Hindu, Punjabi, Orthodox, Ukrainian and so on) and how they regarded this identity – with pride, relish, regret. Similarly with religion as activity – such as private or corporate devotion – my purpose was not only to note children's degree of involvement but also their attitude to this. 'Religious experience' refers to episodes of an intense awareness which transcends human institutions while being extremely personal. Following James (1960), Hay (1990) and others I use the term to denote dreams, visions, conversion experiences and memorable sensations understood by the individual concerned as encounters with the divine or with such agencies of a believed-in supernatural order as angels.

The questions of how children identify themselves, how they regard religious activity and their involvement in it, and how they articulate religious experience – whether their own or another's – were intrinsic to the overarching concern of the Warwick studies: how is religious culture transmitted, how are children religiously socialised? (For these processes the term we used was nurture, following Bushnell 1967 and Hull 1984.) This concern entailed alertness to religion in its widest, cultural sense and to changes and continuities in individuals' relationship with their tradition, always bearing in mind the research variables of the children's ethnicity, religious 'membership group', age and gender.

Towards an appropriate methodology: quantitative or qualitative?

Hyde provides a comprehensive, classified review of research on religion in childhood from Piaget in the 1930s, Ronald Goldman (in the 1960s), and his near contemporary David Elkind to James Fowler, Leslie Francis and Fritz Oser in the 1980s (1990). Psychology provides the disciplinary framework for most of these studies and common to them is the concept of a sequence of developmental stages from infancy to adult maturity. The research is quantitative, using such tools as attitudinal scales. In Britain, Leslie Francis and colleagues have conducted extensive studies with this approach (listed by Hyde 1990:422-424). The scale of the many survey-based studies made it possible to detect both diachronic and synchronic patterns, supporting hypotheses which correlate attitudes, levels of information and cultic practice with personality (eg extroversion, neuroticism), age, gender, social class, type of school (primary/secondary, Roman Catholic, Church of England, county), religious denomination, geographic area. The theoretical considerations in thus measuring attitudes to religion are discussed by Hyde (1990:391-396).

For the Warwick studies, however, ethnography was the chosen approach – through research methods which owe more to anthropology than to psychology, individual children's voices can be relayed in their social context.⁴ The percentage-based conclusions yielded by large scale surveys can be brought to life and indeed challenged by qualitative data and such

data in turn suggest hypotheses for more quantitative testing. My aim was to present the individual child by means of 'thick description', in other words to be conscious of levels of interpretation inherent in reporting complex data (Geertz 1973). This entailed not only recording individual voices at great length, but situating these in the context of the speakers' observed behaviour and interactions in their families and other membership groups. The interpretive approach involved alertness to 'experience near' concepts and not confusing these with my own 'experience distant' concepts (Geertz 1983:58) or analytic terms (Spradley 1980).

'Religion' itself provides an example of a single term, used by both fieldworker and children, and designating related but not identical concepts. When a primary school age Hindu boy mentioned having 'English religion food' in his sandwiches the gap was especially clear. Many Hindu and Sikh children used the terms 'language' and 'religion' interchangeably to refer to what I, as fieldworker, termed 'culture' or 'ethnic group'. Similarly they equated 'Hindu' and 'Sikh' (for me their 'religion') with 'Gujarati', 'Hindi' or 'Punjabi' (their community's language) (see Jackson and Nesbitt 1993:29-31).

Of course one can argue that ethnography demands a time span and degree of immersion that are problematic for the smaller scale research dictated by funding constraints. However, recognition of such limitations was, I would contend, integral to the research's ethnographic character rather than negating it (see Stringer 1999:42ff for further discussion).

Issues in Field Studies of Religion

Of the theoretical issues with methodological implications for field studies of religion in the experience of children five need to be raised. Four apply to field studies regardless of the age of the individuals being studied. These are, first, the adoption of a 'world religions' approach; second, the question whether religion is a 'sensitive topic' and third, the matter of reflexivity. One element in this is the fourth issue: the ways in which the interview situation moulds the interviewee's language. This leads into the fifth issue, namely whether and to what extent children differ from adults as subjects of ethnographic study.

The first question concerns the basis of the research in a world religions approach (selecting children on the basis of their belonging to faith traditions, conceptualised as discrete faith communities). First, this may, arguably, promote the downside (at least from an anti-racist perspective) of multiculturalism. It was important to note whether religious or ethnic stereotypes were deciding the criteria for selecting fields and case studies and, subsequently, influencing the collection and reporting of data. There was also an inherent danger that the representation of the children's experience might appear tokenistic, exoticised or sanitised (Jackson 1997:73-75). Vigilance was called for at each stage. Second, given the problematic nature of some boundaries between faiths (Hindu/Sikh, Hindu/Buddhist for example), was there sufficient empirical justification for this theoretical base?⁵ Moreover, in view of the complexity and pluralism of spirituality and allegiance in the global village, does such a basis perpetuate an anachronistic view of society and culture in Britain?⁶

Second, should religion be deemed a 'sensitive topic' and, if so, what are the consequences (Renzetti and Lee 1993)? Certainly, religion 'deals with things sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned' (1993:5-6). Consequently, the methodological implications had to be acknowledged. Children would not be prompted to answer questions which

seemed likely to cause embarrassment or pain (for instance required to give their views on death if it was known that they had recently been bereaved). Moreover, any quotations published in reports of the research would not be attributed to individuals by name, and their identity would not be given.⁷

Researching religion can also be sensitive in the further sense that some religious groups are controversial, with attendant difficulties in access, fieldwork and reporting (Ayella 1993, Barker 1983, Beckford 1985). Clearly, researching the perspectives of children – or their elders – in some new religious movements is more problematic than in less controversial, more established religious communities. However, initial criteria for selecting denominations to research had in effect precluded such groups.

If religion (in both controversial and non-controversial groupings) is conceived of as encompassing inherently sensitive areas of experience, the further question arises whether researching children's experience of religion, or at least their religious experience, calls for that empathy arising from personal experience on the part of the researcher which E.M. Forster invoked when, in *The Hill of Devi*, he wrote of the Maharajah:

His religion was the deepest thing in him. It ought to be studied neither by the psychologist nor by the mythologist but by an individual who has experienced similar promptings
(1953:175)

However, such a suggestion clouds considerations of unconscious bias and encourages over-easy equations between the field worker's and the child's experience and understandings of it.

The Interviewer's Perceptions

This interplay, often subconscious, between researcher and researched constitutes the third issue: reflexivity. At every stage of the research it was necessary to be aware of the effect that my presence and people's perceptions of me had upon the field (eg on a supplementary class that I was observing) and on the nature of the children's replies to my questions (eg how many non-English terms they used as compared to the frequency in exchanges with parents, siblings, peers and teachers). I needed to be vigilant in examining what influence my presuppositions might have upon the questions I posed and upon how I interpreted the answers. On occasion my presence made an obvious impact, as when in a Punjabi class for young Sikhs in the *gurdwara* their teacher exhorted them 'A distinguished visitor, Eleanor Nesbitt, is studying your attitudes: show your good aspect'. This issue of reflexivity was especially important as many of the children had met me as a temporary participant in their community's acts of worship, and had formed an impression of my likely level of familiarity with activities of which they assumed 'outsiders' generally (non-Asians, non-Cypriots etc) to be ignorant. I have discussed elsewhere the particular implications (for the researcher as well as the researched) of the researcher's own religious stance or, as I would argue, spiritual journey (Nesbitt 1999c).

Fourth, language: for many of the children (all the Sikhs and Hindus and some of the Christians) English was not their only or first language. What was the effect of my actual or perceived linguistic proficiency or incompetence on both the field and during interviews? Whereas the Punjabis and Gujaratis frequently used Indic terms in speaking to me, neither the Cypriots nor the Ukrainians used mother tongue in this way. Obviously I needed to consider the fact that English provided equivalent terms for words arising in European Christian cultural contexts (such as the Orthodox church) but not for the language associated with Sikh and Hindu practice. But also to be considered was the extent to which my own –

even minimal – awareness of other languages (Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Sanskrit) affected our conversational exchanges, for example the extent to which I used words from these languages in questions and prompts. Even limited access to the child’s community language(s) also makes it possible to initiate and extend conversation, even though with few exceptions the children I interviewed used English with confidence.

Also at issue is whether speaking about religion particularly predisposes children to ‘switch codes’ (in the case of English-medium interviews, embedding elements of their mother-tongue in English sentences) (Romaine 1989). This seems likely since, as Mills and Mills have pointed out, ‘certain settings appear particularly to encourage use of mother-tongue’ (1993:64) and it is in the least ambiguously religious domains of their experience, such as corporate worship, that mother-tongue (eg Gujarati) or words from a ‘quasi-lect’, that is an older cognate language (such as the Greek of the Orthodox liturgy, Sanskrit or – to use Christopher Shackle’s useful term for the language of the Sikh scriptures [1983] – ‘the sacred language of the Sikhs’) was most likely to oust English (Glinert 1993). However, their perception of the interviewer may also be decisive in the level of code-switching. During fieldwork with (much younger) Punjabi children, Spann noted that switching occurs more between minor contacts, whereas with good friends and complete strangers they preferred to use just one language (1988).

Thus, the ways the children used English, whether as monolingual or bi- or multi-lingual speakers, raised particular questions regarding the possible influence of the interview situation. When a Baptist girl (of English background) referred to the minister as ‘vicar’ and a Sikh girl (of Punjabi background) referred to the *granthi* as ‘priest’, consideration of the reasons included considering whether the speaker was allowing her assumptions about the interviewer to decide her choice of terms. Triangulation – for example considering a child’s response, an adult’s from the same family or congregation and literature about and produced by the Christian denomination or Hindu *sampradaya* – was useful in interpreting vocabulary. Such checking revealed that while the Baptist was departing from Baptist practice in her choice of word, older Sikhs frequently used the word priest to translate ‘*granthi*’.⁸

Also related to the matter of reflexivity is the fifth question: whether children are a special case as research subjects, so calling for different methods of data gathering and interpretation. Powney and Watts state unambivalently that ‘in addition to the normal difficulties experienced by interviewers, there are extra problems when working with children’ (1987:21). The factors arising with younger children (below the age of eight) have received scholarly attention and need not be discussed here.⁹

Attention needs to be turned to the reliability of the ethnographic process. As an ethnographer, using qualitative methods, I am not employing the term reliability precisely as it is used in quantitative contexts.¹⁰ Nor am I discussing the age at which children can articulate a perspective on religion. However the possibility that a child’s response may be more strongly conditioned by the interview situation than an older person’s needs to be addressed.

Certainly, a ‘teacher-researcher’ conducting research among her own pupils, and in a school setting, has sensitively to address the inherent imbalance of power, the children’s and her own presuppositions about the relationship and factors which inhibit communication (see Powney and Watts 1987:122).¹¹ She has, moreover, to learn to speak less than she would as a teacher, ‘to let the child talk freely, without ever checking or side tracking his utterance’

(Piaget 1929:10), to prompt in a less directive way than when teaching and to avoid correcting 'wrong' answers.

Methods: Participant Observation and Interviews

For the Warwick studies, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the context of participant observation in children's homes, schools, places of worship and supplementary classes. Observation in places of worship, usually during corporate acts of worship, plus conversation (and semi-structured interviews) with key adults preceded the interviews with the children and continued in parallel with conducting interviews. It was the initial fieldwork which provided the pool of potential interviewees, shaped criteria for selecting them and questions for the semi-structured interviews with them. It enabled deeper understanding of the children's responses than would otherwise have been possible. Photographs taken in the places of worship provided visual stimuli to children's responses. Although I had been a teacher, I had never taught these children. The fact that they had met me and spoken with me in their churches or temples or religious classes also eased the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, making me familiar but not as a figure of authority. Children know that many community activities, details of ritual practice and in-group language are unfamiliar to outsiders. My attendance, repeatedly where possible, encouraged children's confidence in speaking about these areas of their experience.

At least one interview was conducted with all the children (three with the subjects of case studies), and the interviews were semi- (not fully) structured, so allowing for both comparability and flexibility. The basis of the initial interviews for children of all the faith communities was the schedule devised by Kim Knott for use with young people in Leeds (1992: 53-56). The questions progressed from initial inquiries with brief factual answers to a question about identity and an opportunity for the interviewee to raise points which had not been covered. Questions 2 and 3 invited the young person to 'talk about what an average weekday might be like for you...from the first moment someone gets up in your house' and 'Weekends? How do they differ?'. These provided a wealth of insight into the children's lives. Such topics as private devotion and congregational worship cropped up within the context of their families' day to day experience.

In devising the question schedule attention was paid to including questions directed at all the areas I wished to explore, to framing each question unthreateningly and unambiguously, to posing open questions ('how . . .?', 'tell me about ...') rather than closed ones with yes/no answers, to sequencing the questions so that children began with easy factual questions ('What is your name?', 'How old are you?') and progressed to ones which required more thought or were likely to require a trusting relationship with the questioner ('Have you ever had any religious experience?'). Follow up questions/prompts needed to be thought of, especially for the most open questions ('Tell me what you do on an ordinary weekday').

Initial interviews took place, one to one, in the children's schools. Their homes provided the venue for follow-up interviews (with the subjects of case studies). Any marked difference between a child's readiness to speak in the first and subsequent interviews correlated with whether others were within earshot on any occasion, and not with venue *per se*. Where possible children were interviewed individually. The assumption that they would speak more readily was borne out by interviews in which another person was present. A teacher was in the same room as a 12 year old Hindu boy who gave mostly monosyllabic answers, apart from the statement that 'religion's the most private thing'. Father was present in an interview with a ten year old Sikh girl who (though forthcoming in an earlier interview on her

own) became almost mute, letting him answer the questions.¹² Whereas an 11 year old Sikh girl spoke seriously and at length in her individual interview, with her older sister present she did little other than giggle.

However, when interviewing children at home about their religion, it was important to reassure parents by allowing others to be present if they wished. As a guest in others' houses courtesy required deference to parental preference and fitting in to family life. In turn there were observable benefits for the collection of data as I noted interactions, glimpsed joint family living and heard the ways in which other relatives briefed the interviewee. Moreover discussions developed between siblings or between parents/grandparents and children which provided valuable insights (as illustrated below). While this cannot be described as a group interview, such ad hoc interviews with more than one child, or in the presence of older relatives, shared with group interviews such benefits as allowing more time for individual reflection before responding and more stimulus for ideas (Lewis 1992). Currently at the University of Warwick, Ipgrave's doctoral work draws upon her expertise as a primary school teacher to provide imaginative examples of effective techniques for facilitating children's shared exploration and articulation of theological concerns.

In the homes of all except indigenous Protestant Christian families, religious pictures (eg Hindu trade calendars featuring deities, Orthodox icons or Roman Catholic iconography) afforded visual stimuli for questions and answers. Visual images were used extensively in the course of interviewing, and linked the fieldwork with the interviews. These images were slides taken during participant observation in Coventry. The fact that they were recent and of local interest attracted children's attention and stimulated animated conversation. Slides were shown on a piece of equipment previously unfamiliar to the children but easy for them to operate, so introducing activity into a session which was otherwise interview-dominated and shifting the focus from the child to the image.

Perspectives on Self-Identity

The interview schedule included a question requiring children to indicate which, if any, of a list of terms they would use to describe themselves. For the Sikhs this was:

European, British, African, Sikh, Asian, English, Indian, Punjabi, any other.

This proved useful in uncovering aspects of identity (eg parents' country of origin) and provided ready comparisons between children. However, it carried limitations inherent in a questionnaire approach. The question suggested to the child terms that he or she might not otherwise have used, and provided little sense of how the children regarded the chosen labels. Insights into children's perspectives on their religious self-identification came in answer to questions which invited comparisons:

What is different/special about being a Hindu/Sikh?

If you had to live in a non-Hindu/Sikh home, what do you think you'd miss most?

These questions threw up the equation of religion and language that has already been mentioned. To quote two young Sikhs:

If they were different religion they wouldn't be the same language.

I wouldn't know the religion, because if I said something in Punjabi they'd come up to me and say, 'What?' and then I'd have to speak it in English.

Other replies that young Hindus gave to these questions, for example linking their religion with being vegetarian, provide the opening paragraphs of a curriculum book (Jackson and Nesbitt 2000). The responses below came from young Sikhs:

Like you get to eat what you want, not like Muslims, they're not allowed to eat sausages and things like that. They can't cut their hair when they get older, they can trim it but not really cut it, Muslims.¹³

We don't worship monuments, like I think it's Hindu, when they have I think it's a monkey dressed in robes ... They have statues in the house and worship them and have photos. And Muslims pray but they don't have books to pray. They don't worship people – Guru, Guru Nanak and all that. They worship, they pray Allah, but Sikhism, we worship a book in a way – Guru Granth Sahib.

Hindus can cut their hair but we can't.

Despite the inhibiting effect of having other family members present, conversations involving more than one person (siblings, older relatives) also yielded insights. One instance is this exchange between two Sikh sisters on who is or is not a Sikh.

A If you're born a Sikh, then obviously you are a Sikh aren't you? But if you want to become a Sikh, if you believe, really believe in Guru Nanak and everything ...

B If they look like Sikhs I would call them Sikhs, I reckon.

A It doesn't matter what your background is, it's what you believe now. If you become *amrit chhakiya*, then you are a Sikh. What you believe now is important, what you believe[d] then is not.

B I reckon it doesn't matter. You can be *amrit chhakiya*, or you can look like a Sikh. You can not even believe in the religion but you're still a Sikh

(Here '*amrit chhakiya*' – pronounced approximately as 'um writ shuck ear' – is the Sikh girl's term for a person who has gone through the Sikh rite of commitment which involves being initiated with holy water [*amrit*].)

Intertwined with South Asians' religious identity is their awareness of caste (*zat, jati*).¹⁴ In practice the question of caste proved to be the most delicate for the interviewer, particularly when interviewing young people from certain 'low caste' *zat-biradaris* (caste communities) – the Valmikis and Ravidasis.¹⁵ My question 'If somebody asks you what your caste is what do you say?' in several cases drew the reply 'Hindu Punjabi' that had been suggested by parents anxious to spare them the pain of name calling and stigma in school from South Asian peers. My concern not to contribute to this uneasiness at their caste being discernible deterred me from persevering with more probes. Instead I was alert to statements from both the low caste and higher caste Hindus and Sikhs which conveyed their attitude to particular castes, to the phenomenon of caste and to its relationship to religion and identity.

It was a visual cue which triggered a 12 year old Jat Sikh girl's revealing comment. When shown a picture of the *panj piare* (five practising Sikhs with traditional accoutrements) in a festival procession and asked what sort of people they must be, instead of describing them (as anticipated) as Sikhs who observed the *khalsa* (initiated Sikh) discipline, including the Five Ks (external signs of commitment), she immediately said that 'of course' they would be Jat (ie from her own, traditionally land-owning, economically dominant *zat*). The equation of being a Jat with being more distinctively and decisively Sikh than members of other castes was unmistakable.

Analysis of transcripts for recurrent phrases was necessary for children's perception of a two-tier Sikh identity to emerge as well as the terms in which this was expressed.

If you want to be a proper Sikh you're going to wear the five ks. Like real Sikh, that means you have all the things what my God's got, like weapons and all them and special clothes.

I'll be wearing a turban, I'll have the five ks on. I'd have *amrit*. I'll be a proper Sikh.

Pure Sikh means that if one member of your family has a turban, he's pure because he's got a turban ... If one person wears it the whole family is a pure Sikh.

Examining these references in relation to scholarly analysis of categories of Sikh identity (eg McLeod 1989) further illuminated the children's usage (Nesbitt 1999a).

Perspectives on Behaviour

Clearly the children understood Sikh identity as recognisable from what people do and wear. By enquiring of young Sikhs 'Who wears the *kirpan* [the sword which is one of the Five Ks]?', I drew such replies as:

If you were a priest, he wears it. Some people do wear them if they have been blessed or something ... My cousins in Slough, their great-granddad he's got one, a *kirpan*, a small one, one that fits him. He's a priest and he only goes to the temple, and his wife, she just goes to the temple to see him.

People that live in temples all the time and people that don't really work, who stay at home, those kind of people.

At all points (despite the knowledge gained by participant observation) the innocent question was vital: the fieldworker must be both familiar and amateur (Kushner 1996:52).

From comparing children's accounts with their elders' a high degree of conformity is apparent. In this situation, any young person's difference of sentiment, such as the expression of boredom or irritation with an aspect of religious tradition viewed positively by their elders, was of especial interest. For example a 13 year old Gujarati Hindu girl's emphatic account of a conflict of interest when her mother wanted to listen to tape recordings of the celebrated preacher and singer, Morari Bapu (see Nesbitt 1999d), narrating and commenting on the Ramayana leaves no doubt as to her exasperation with these performances:

It's like at home we've got tapes of the whole thing all the way through, and that's all my mum listens to, and I have to listen to it because she doesn't let us do the TV while it's on ... I find it boring ... when the summer holiday comes we have to do the actual thing ... you get so tired and sleepy.

Similar expressions of boredom during congregational worship came from a Ukrainian and a Cypriot child: having to stand and not fully understanding the language of the liturgy being contributory factors.

By contrast, evidence for keen enjoyment of a full calendar of activities with the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba (see Jackson and Nesbitt 1993:125-6) came from one 11 year old Gujarati Hindu girl's 'diary': 'it's real good fun' (the Bal Vikas classes), 'it was a very good experience I loved it' (celebration of Baba's birthday), 'I really enjoyed myself everywhere' (carol singing with Bal Vikas). Children who were subjects of case studies were invited to keep diaries. These proved an excellent means of drawing out their feelings and impressions conveyed by what they wrote and what they said when questioned about their diary entries in a subsequent interview.

Perspectives on Religious Experience

Children did not use the term religious experience or show understanding of it without prompts (such as 'Have you ever had a sense that God was near you?'). However many described religious experiences, both their own and other people's. Perspectives varied, with a boy and a girl from two charismatic congregations speaking seriously and appreciatively of 'being filled' (with the Holy Spirit) and receiving 'prophecies' respectively, and a boy of Jewish and Evangelical Christian background speaking at length about family encounters with ghosts, whereas a Hindu girl expressed cynicism at the phenomenon of being visibly possessed by the Mata (goddess).

Children's endorsement of 'religious experience' can be illustrated by two answers to the question 'have you ever had any religious experience?' plus prompting:

I had a vision which I can't explain ... On Sunday night Sister K testified about how she had a vision of all the lights turning off ... I dreamt that I was in church and all the lights came off. And I told my mum and she said it must be a vision.

Sometimes you just get a warm glow inside you and you just feel that everybody loves you and you love everybody. It's kind of a warm glow. Sometimes when you're not doing anything else to preoccupy you, like sometimes when I'm just sitting with a best friend, and we're not talking, just sitting.

In each case the young person's perception of the interviewer as someone familiar from participation in their congregation possibly influenced the openness of the account. Prompting questions were necessary. Moreover, the interviewer's background knowledge from participant observation made it possible to contextualise these testimonies in Apostolic and Quaker experience respectively. However, any knowledge could not be allowed to limit the insights that the child might afford. Here the follow-up question was crucial: in the Apostolic boy's case 'Was it a vision or was it a dream?'

In a way it is a dream. I can't say that a vision is a dream. It's just something you picture in your head, that God's picturing in your head. That's what I see a vision as.

Some young people's accounts (among them a Baptist girl's of asking Jesus into her life at a Spring Harvest Easter gathering and a young Anglican's of experiencing 'the Holy Spirit' during a youth group visit to the diocesan retreat centre) included the preparation provided by their Christian leaders. To quote the latter:

We stood in a circle and closed our eyes and they (the leaders) went round and like saying a prayer on your head, and when anyone touched me I went all cold. They said, 'If you feel the Holy Spirit coming you might get hot, sweaty and some people might shiver.' And he said when he did it once one person fainted.

Such statements were evidence of the need for obtaining as full a picture as possible of the build-up to 'religious experience' in order to contextualise the children's perspectives in their particular experience of religious nurture. Although at one time profound religious experiences in the lives of young Christians were investigated in the hope that they would shed light on the origins of primitive religion, it has long been understood that, as in adults, these experiences are related to the religious nurturing undergone by the individual (Klingberg 1959:211).

Listening: Pace and Perception

Of paramount importance throughout – from first visit to the field to final analysis – is being ‘a good listener’ who is not ‘trapped by his or her own ideologies or preconceptions’ but ‘sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence’ (Yin 1994:56). Yin elaborates:

Listening includes observing and sensing more generally and is not limited to the aural modality ... A good listener hears the exact words used by the interviewee ... , captures the mood and affective components, and understands the context from which the interviewee is perceiving the world. (1994:57)

The point has been reiterated by Erricker and Ota (1997:40).

Listening was vital not only in the interview but also when reviewing the tape recordings and transcripts. Listening to the tapes confirmed that the pace of the interviews differed from, say, a radio interview. Pauses intersperse the dialogue and the field worker avoids coming in quickly on the tail of a child’s attempt to articulate something of his or her experience of religion. The interviewer’s tone is generally low and tentative, as non-threatening as possible. The children are encouraged to feel that there is time for them to think aloud. Prompts such as ‘ah’, ‘really’, ‘right’ reassure the child that the interviewer is paying attention, without steering the child with more explicit cues.

Listening carries with it the responsibility to convey the emotion of children’s statements when reporting their perspectives: an 11 year old Irish Roman Catholic boy’s sense of responsibility as a trusted server, the enthusiasm of an eleven year old Gujarati Hindu girl’s accounts of visiting Sathya Sai Baba and participating in activities organised by his followers, the reverence of some young Sikh girls for a Baba [spiritual master], the excitement of the Baptist girl at asking Jesus into her life, the anger of an eleven year old Sikh girl at hearing so much about Jesus in her primary school, the condemnation of a ten year old Jamaican boy from an Apostolic church for the practice of celebrating Christmas, a nine year old Baptist girl’s disapproval for the hurried irreverent manner in which a ‘new’ Church conducted baptisms when they borrowed her church’s facilities, the isolation which a thirteen year old Quaker felt amid peers and teachers during the Gulf War, the sense of his caste’s inferiority apparent in an eleven year old Ravidasi boy’s explanations of Sikhism, the satisfaction with their own caste of a Jat girl and a Brahmin boy.

Such listening exposes patterns of idiom (such as ‘proper Sikh’) within and between interviews. It throws up group-specific language, such as ‘being filled’ (for ‘being filled with the Holy Spirit’ as manifest in such distinctive behaviour as glossolalia) and concerns, such as (in the Orthodox and the Pentecostal congregations) the Devil. Attention to the children’s use of language provided such insights as the probable equivalence of young Sikhs’ use of the word ‘God’ to the Punjabi term ‘Baba’, an inclusive term which can refer to the scriptures as well as to spiritual masters including the ten Gurus (Nesbitt and Jackson 1995). It also revealed the similes and analogies the children used: a Hindu likening a coconut to a christingle or speaking of being a ‘bridesmaid’ and Sikhs describing their naming ceremony as ‘christening’

You know how people have themselves christened, we don’t exactly have that. We just like go to the gurdwara and we have celebrations and we read the *maharaj* and have *bhogs* and stuff like that.¹⁶

In such ways, instinctively, children were ‘building bridges’ between their faith community’s practices and those (such as christening) known to them from the wider, English speaking, Christianity-moulded society to which they assumed I belonged. This tendency to bridge was

especially interesting in view of the Warwick RE Project's emphasis upon encouraging pupils to engage in bridging their own experience with that of the individuals and communities presented in the curriculum books.

Longitudinal Study

The recent second phase of a longitudinal study of young Hindus facilitated identification of changes and continuities in the young people's perspectives upon their experience of religion and allowed them to comment upon this as well, for instance in reaction to seeing the transcript from an interview nine years previously. Data analysis revealed striking resonances – in some cases almost verbatim – between individuals' comments nine years apart. For example one young Hindu man repeated his observation that religion is private, and another repeated his belief in the power of reciting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra*.¹⁷ It also revealed change – for instance a 20 year old Gujarati man now 'knew' that humans were very unlikely to be reborn as animals (so contradicting a view he had expressed nine years earlier).

Changes and continuities in their perspectives required reflection upon contributory factors. In this young man's case it was necessary to examine the influence of the teaching of Sathya Sai Baba and of the Swayam Sevak Sangh to establish any link with the youth groups run under their auspices which in previous years he had attended. Noteworthy in view of earlier discussion of reflexivity, one Gujarati Hindu man commented that his involvement nine years previously in the Warwick study had aroused his continuing interest in his religious tradition. To take the example of young Hindus' attitudes to dietary restriction as integral to being Hindu (Nesbitt 1999b) the data showed, firstly, a strong continuity in the assumption that Hindus do not eat beef and may well be vegetarian totally or periodically. But, secondly, the data also revealed patterns of change towards espousing vegetarianism and abandoning it. Understanding the young Hindus' reflections upon this entailed looking at the factors which they mentioned: family tradition, purity, non-violence, older relatives' examples or exhortations, religious teachers' admonitions, school and discussion of animal rights.

To Conclude

Children volunteer some of the most illuminating insights unexpectedly, stimulated not by the question designed with that aspect of experience in mind but by a visual cue or by some other question. Qualitative research provides the opportunity for this to happen as well as allowing for a depth and detail which valuably supplement quantitative data. The Warwick studies suggest the value of a methodology in which interviewing and participant observation continuously interact. The necessarily sensitive data analysis requires of the researcher that same mode of attentive listening which encourages children to be forthcoming during interviews. Longitudinal study additionally allows for a retrospective view of change and continuity of individuals' perspectives through childhood and early adulthood. However, the young Hindus' comments of surprise, embarrassment and amusement on reading a transcript of their interview nine years before are evidence that adults' retrospective accounts of their childhood experience of religion must be distinguished carefully from what children themselves have to say.

NOTES

1. Hindu Nurture in Coventry and Punjabi Hindu Nurture were supported by the Leverhulme Trust. The Economic and Social Research Council supported Ethnography and Religious Education (award no R000232489). For reports see Jackson and Nesbitt 1993, Nesbitt 1991, Nesbitt 1993 and Nesbitt 2000. A complete list of publications is available from the author at the University of Warwick and is included in the listing at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/wie/wrerup1.htm>
2. The Warwick RE Project consists of two series: Bridges to Religions (Key Stages 1 and 2) and Interpreting Religions (Key Stage 3) edited by Judith Everington and Robert Jackson and published by Heinemann. (KS1 and 2 available from Robert Jackson at the University of Warwick and KS3 from the publisher.)
3. A Longitudinal Study of Young British Hindus' Perceptions of their Religious Tradition is funded by the Leverhulme Trust.
4. From Warwick University Bauer 1997, Davies 1997, Ipgrave 1995, Nesbitt 2000 and Ostberg 2000 are examples of this approach. Other ethnographic studies include Larson 1989, Logan 1989 and Stene 1991.
5. See Geaves 1998. Different issues are raised with different boundaries. For the issues raised by compartmentalising Hindus and Sikhs see eg Nesbitt 1990. For an example of Hindu encompassment of Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs see Prinja 1996.
6. Ward 1991 provides one Christian perspective.
7. In curriculum books, by contrast, anonymity and pseudonyms were not possible, given the decision to report real life and to use photographs as illustrations. For the parallel research on Jewish families issues of confidentiality and anonymity were especially important because of the community's experience and fear of anti-Semitism.
8. Whereas Cole and Sambhi (1990:27) advise scholars against translating Sikh terminology by English words such as 'priest', with their misleading cultural connotations, the ethnographer's duty is to capture shifts in the way that English terms are used, rather than to be prescriptive.
9. Lewis provides references for discussion of such tendencies as distractibility, readiness to be dishonest, linguistic limitations (1992:417).
10. For a definition and discussion of reliability in quantitative research see Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh: 'The reliability of a measuring instrument is the degree of consistency with which it measures whatever it is measuring' (1985:).
11. Marie Gillespie explores teacher-student relations in ethnographic research (1995:67f).
12. For a similar instance from research with Muslim children see Bauer 1997.
13. This statement is interesting, since not cutting the hair is a religious requirement for Sikhs (of both sexes) and not Muslims. However some Muslim families are more likely than some ('modern') Sikh families to follow what is traditional sub-continental practice for females.
14. For the emotive significance of caste among Sikhs see Kalsi (1992) and Nesbitt (1998).
15. For these two communities, now known as Scheduled Castes in India, in which caste (*zat*) is the congregation's common denominator, see Nesbitt 1991.
16. *Maharaj* (literally 'great king') is the honorific term by which her family refer to the Guru Granth Sahib. The *bhog* (literally 'climax') is the ceremonial ending of the complete reading of the scriptures. Family and friends attend and have a meal (*langar*) together.
17. For the *mahamantra* (great mantra) of ISKCON devotees and its power see Jackson and Nesbitt 1993:99-100.

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