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SHH - DON'T MENTION THE CHRISTIANS! AN EXPLORATION OF THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE RE CLASSROOM.

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

A recent focus on the lack of diverse voices in children's books has cast a long-overdue spotlight on the importance of ensuring children can see themselves reflected in the books they read. The response of authors, publishers and booksellers has ensured a small, but significant, increase in the number of books available which feature diversity as a lived experience rather than as an issue. However, one area of diversity which is rarely mentioned is that of religious affiliation. Described as "fictionally invisible" (Mehmood, 2016), characters in children's books who belong to faith groups appear to be few and far between, which suggests that religion may be the last taboo in children's literature.

Positioned at a point in UK history when there are growing concerns about cultural diversity and nationalism, and in the wake of a pandemic which has seen people of faith unable to meet, worship and practice their faith in recognisable ways, this thesis asks whether there is a need for greater religious representation in children's books as a way of tackling discrimination and intolerance. The research explores the importance of teaching a lived religious experience and the potential for works of fiction to support this area of the curriculum. A broad reading of a wide variety of children's books is used to identify which genres lend themselves most easily to depictions of the lived religious experience, and a close reading of key texts from the 21st Century provides insights into how religion and religious themes are portrayed in contemporary children's fiction, and which genres appear to lend themselves best to the portrayal of faith.

The study demonstrates that fiction can offer safe places to explore the lived religious experience of others without risk of offence, and proposes a toolkit for use in the classroom. The review of primary and secondary sources leads to the development of a potential framework which uses a DIPT – Delighting, Informing, Performing, Transforming – approach to support the selection of texts to teach the lived religious experience. The toolkit also offers an analysis tool combining religious, artefactual and critical literacies to enable pupils to probe texts for religious themes and parallels. The recommended approaches aim to provide opportunities for children to explore what it might feel like to believe in something greater than oneself, whilst recognising the potential dangers of misrepresentation and indoctrination when teaching about the lived religious experience. In raising both the importance of teaching what belief and faith mean to individuals, and the potential of

contemporary fiction to offer accessible insights into a range of different faiths, the research demonstrates that there is potential to incorporate secular children's fiction into the classroom in a meaningful way, which informs – and delights.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at The University of Glasgow or any other institution.

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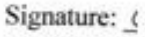
Signature: 

Introduction and Rationale

> *Since it is so likely that [children] will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage. Otherwise you are making their destiny not brighter but darker.*
>
> *Lewis, 1966*

Since I first decided that I wanted to be a teacher, my passion has been the teaching of religion and Religious Education (hereafter referred to as RE). I have always felt that as a subject, RE has huge importance, and it has been a source of great enjoyment to me throughout my career to both teach the subject to children in the primary and secondary sectors, and to provide leadership in RE for other teachers. Since 2010, I have been a headteacher in a number of schools, and whilst that has necessarily meant that I no longer have a class commitment, the leadership and promotion of RE has remained a constant feature of my professional practice.

As a school leader, with a deep interest in all things school-related, I have been keen to disrupt and contest the accepted or proscribed curricular expectations imposed by governmental departments on schools in England where these expectations have appeared to be at odds with my understanding of child development or the best interests of the pupils in my care. Being a school leader is a position of power, and it is a privilege to be able to question and challenge the requirements handed down to schools. However, the role of a school leader is not only to question, but, importantly, to support staff members to deliver those aspects of the curriculum which have a statutory or legal basis in schools in England, to ensure the best possible outcomes for pupils within the system in which they are learning. Challenging the socio-political and ideological basis of curriculum content has to be tempered with a pragmatic approach to ensuring teachers can deliver in the classroom and feel supported to do so. I believe that it is possible to hold both aspects of the role in one's mind at the same time.

In supporting teachers in their delivery of RE in the classroom, I have been aware of a number of problems which relate partly to curriculum expectations, and partly to teacher knowledge and understanding. I have worked in schools in England where RE lessons are gratefully passed to a teaching assistant to deliver in PPA sessions. I have witnessed highly

competent and exciting teachers delivering very pedestrian RE lessons directly from purchased or freely available lesson planning platforms, utilising worksheets and pre-produced PowerPoint slides. Whilst there is no reason to reinvent teaching resources and a lot of value in building on the expertise of others, it has been apparent to me, anecdotally at least, that lots of RE teaching relies heavily on pre-produced lessons and resources in a way that is less apparent in many of the other foundation subjects within the English National Curriculum.

The production of RE syllabi is the responsibility of locally defined SACRE boards, and this is explored further later in this thesis. Many of the agreed syllabi being produced are of an extremely high quality, providing strong guidance and high expectations for pupils. However, particularly in the primary sector, I have become increasingly aware of the challenges facing predominantly non-RE specialists in the delivery of some of the core concepts of the syllabi set down for them. For RE covers such an intimate and personal aspect of an individual's life that it can be overwhelming for teachers to delve into this on anything other than a cursory level, meaning that the interpretation of the syllabus can easily be reduced to an idea of religioning (Nye, 1999; Burns, 2020a), rather than an exploration of the fundamentals of religious belief and faith. The anthropological study of religion – or religion as practiced, focussing on the symbolic, ritual and liturgical aspects of organised religion - sits more neatly within the English primary curriculum, perhaps, than a theological approach. But I would argue that there is a place for examining what it *means* or *feels like* to have a religious faith which infiltrates all aspects of one's life, along with the theological basis of that faith – and it is this aspect which can be very hard to consider in the classroom.

The review of research into the teaching of RE led by Richard Kueh for Ofsted (2021) places the role of RE firmly within the sphere of multiculturalism and understanding of others:

> RE in primary and secondary schools enables pupils to take their place within a diverse multi-religious and multi-secular society. At its best, it is intellectually challenging and personally enriching. It affords pupils both the opportunity to see the religion and non-religion in the world, and the opportunity to make sense of their own place in that world (Ofsted, 2021).

In presenting the importance of understanding one's own place within the world, there is an assumption made about understanding the place of others too – and I would argue that this

incorporates more than just a fascination with outward symbols of religious faith, including, as well, the personal beliefs and convictions which help determine behaviours and actions in the name of religion. However, my professional experience is that this is a challenging expectation on teachers, particularly non-RE specialists, and perhaps more so in the primary sector. For what can I, a middle-aged, white, English woman, possibly bring to a discussion about what it means to be a Muslim, or a Sikh, or a Jew, other than through the outward expression of these faiths as organised religions?

In recognising the challenges facing teachers in delivering opportunities for children to develop an understanding of religious faith and practice as it is experienced by individuals, I set about this study with the primary intention of creating a resource or toolkit to support teachers in the teaching of the lived religious experience within the RE classroom as a direct result of the challenges I had witnessed within the classroom. In the absence of a multitude of religious adherents from the range of faiths which are included in the different syllabi available to come and talk to children about their deeply personal experiences, I recognised the need for an alternative source to help children to understand what it might feel like to have a religious faith which determines one's worldview, as well as supporting them to recognise the outward signs and symbols of organised religions. As a teacher, I had regularly relied upon works of fiction to support and enhance my teaching across multiple areas of the curriculum. Undertaking MEd studies in Children's Literature and Literacies led me to consider whether children's literature could be that elusive vehicle I was seeking. I sought, therefore, to establish whether there was enough theory to justify the use of children's literature as an aid to teaching, specifically in the realm of RE; whether sufficient numbers of texts existed in order to be used; and from there, to establish a framework for use in the classroom, arising directly from the reading of the texts available.

Children's literature is a fascinating, and potentially very powerful, thing. It can provide information about countries, people, and situations with which readers may be unfamiliar. It can offer instruction in how to do things, how to react or behave in certain situations, how to whittle an arrow, hold one's cutlery, challenge a baddie. It poses questions and allows children to ask their own. It often does not offer the answers – it leaves the 'adult' books to attempt to do that. It allows the reader to enter multiple worlds, to experience the impossible, to fight the dragon, and to comfort the downtrodden. It raises the possibilities of magic and mystery – and brings the reader crashing down to earth with depictions of others' realities. It

provides solace and no judgement; provokes curiosity, love, anger, sadness, laughter, and a strong desire that the story should never end. It holds the power to persuade and inform – and to misinform too. As a route into learning about new things, it can prove extremely valuable. And with the authority it often holds (Hunt, 1991), comes responsibility: a responsibility which potentially far outweighs that held by so-called adult literature, as a result of the positionality of its audience and the fact that books written for children are written almost exclusively by adults. Whilst children's literature undoubtedly entertains and delights, its roots are in *instruction* (Hunt, 2009), and in many cases it has not strayed far from this – even where stories have intrinsic value as *stories*, they still hold the power to instruct young minds in the author's view of right ways of behaving, social structures and norms, and what they might be able to expect of this world – and the ones beyond.

The opening quote, from C.S. Lewis, touches on some of the importance of stories for children. Life can be tough, he suggests – so let children have access to stories which give them the characters and the tools to face the dark times, and the stories which show them that such things can be overcome. That is not to say that all children's books need to be filled with dastardly horrors, overcome through bravery, skill, intelligence, slyness, fortune and knowledge. Stories can involve much more than that. But many, if not most, works of fiction for children do present situations and worlds in which the reader can explore in the safety of a book, and through safe, fictional and often fantastical plotlines, the very real fears and dangers and delights which are in the world around them (Carr and Davis, 2007). Viewing books as *windows, mirrors* and *doors* (Bishop, 1990), is a well-used framework for considering texts – a chance to look through and gaze upon another's story and experience; a chance to see oneself and one's own story reflected in words; and an opportunity to enter those worlds and experiences different to one's own.

Bishop (2012) is unequivocal in her claim that it is vitally important that readers can see themselves in the books they access. As she argues:

> for those children who historically had been ignored…in children's books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up (p9).

Publishers have become much more aware of how important this is, and the growth in ethnic minority characters, refugee stories, disabled protagonists and stories with lgbtq+ characters is testament to a growing awareness of this. Yet there is one group who appear to be, as Tariq Mehmood referred to them in a Radio 4 *Beyond Belief* (2016) broadcast, fictionally invisible. And these are the characters with a *religious* background and a lived religious experience which permeates their stories and their experiences and which contributes to the sedimentation (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) of their lives. For many children, the religious practice of their family, the religious expectations placed upon them (and these may be the non-religious or agnostic aspects of their family lives too) are those given to them. Many have, until a certain point in their lives, little or no agency over how they are expected to act with regard to religious belief and practice. For these children, recognisable representation in the books that they read is limited, with relatively few child protagonists of faith in 21st Century children's books. Why is this? Is their absence a problem? And could there be way that schools and others could support deep learning through the medium of fiction, about how it feels to hold a religious faith?

My MEd dissertation explored how depictions of religion have changed over time in children's literature. Following this study, I was struck, as a teacher, by the potential of children's fiction to be used as a tool in the RE classroom. Numerous books written for children exist which give non-fictional accounts of religious practice, and these are well used within classrooms to enhance the delivery of the syllabus (Phelps, 2010). I was interested, however, to look specifically at fiction and how it could be used to help children understand complex ideas around personal faith and belief and how this might impact on behaviours in everyday life - as well as being exemplified through recognisable acts related to the organisation and expectations of specific religious communities. Such acts, be they ritual, liturgical, or lifestyle related, are well represented within textbooks and non-fiction books about religions. In order to explore in more detail how religious belief might *feel* for the individual, and how deep-held belief and personal religious conviction can drive behaviours, I speculated that there might be a role for fiction with religious themes.

Understanding the lived religious experience – the importance for today's pupils and the potential role of children's literature

In February 2019, *The Times* broke a story about one of the teenage 'jihadi' brides whose names and exploits had hit the press some four years earlier, when the three girls, aged only fifteen at the time, absconded from their Bethnal Green school and made their way to Syria to join the jihad called by the organisation ISIL (Lloyd, 2019). At the time, their story caused a great deal of concern in schools and communities across England and beyond. Questions were asked about the role of schools in safeguarding children both from online religious grooming and in keeping children safe in school premises. Education Secretary at the time, Nicky Morgan, wrote to the girls' school expressing her support and her belief that the school had existing good safeguarding procedures. In July 2015, schools, Early Years Childcare providers and providers of childcare for older children in England had been charged with carrying out duties under the *Prevent Strategy* (Home Office, 2021). Designated Safeguarding Leads undertook online Prevent awareness training. Guidance issued to schools stated that they must have "due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism" (Section 26 Counter-terrorism and Security Act 2015). English schools were charged to not only have regard to, but to embed the 'fundamental British Values' of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance for those of different faiths and beliefs, building resilience and resistance to radicalisation through PSHE (personal, social and health education) and citizenship lessons. Tolerance tempered with, sometimes horribly misplaced, suspicion was *de rigeur.* How, then, could these impressionable teenagers have walked so confidently from their school and straight into what was considered to be a terrorist organisation? Was this the fault of schools, and communities, or were the actions of these youngsters reflective entirely of their own free will, and therefore their responsibility? Indeed, could fifteen-year-olds really be seen to have the understanding and breadth of knowledge which could enable them to make rational decisions about allegiance to a religious group known to promote terrorist activity? Or were they the victims of grooming by older people, preying on their youth and relative innocence, and on that teenage desire to make sense of their worlds and to explore big questions about existence and the meaning of life?

When in February 2019, the heavily pregnant 19 year old Shamima Begum, the last surviving runaway bride, gave her interview to *The Times* from the holding camp in which she was being restrained, swathes of the press and social media rose up in high dudgeon at her request to return to the UK. Her two older children had died in captivity. She was concerned for her unborn child and wanted to come home. Subsequent interviews showed a somewhat belligerent, but clearly frightened teenager, unwilling or unable to show remorse for her actions or her support of a terrorist organisation, but desperate to return to her home and accepting of the fact she would have to face the music for her behaviour. The Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, began immediate action to remove her British citizenship and prevent her from ever returning to the UK.

This has relevance when it comes to children's literature and depictions of religion. In 2018 a young adult book was published, called *I Am Thunder – And I Won't Keep Quiet*. Its author, Muhammad Khan, wrote in his 'note from the author' that he had written the book in April 2015 in direct response to the story about the three girls as they ran to Syria. He had himself experienced the loss of a loved one to religious extremism and stated, of the book, that "Writing it was painful, but I needed to understand what might lead someone to make those choices." (preface, np.). Fiction, he suggested, was a way of enabling *the writer* to understand another's life choices. He went on to add:

> Once I began writing, I realized it was going to be harder than I thought. Why? Because being a Muslim – even a British one – means different things to different people. Muzna's daily life is the very real experience of some, but not all of my Muslim students. But her teenage experience is something each and every one of us can relate to, whatever our background (np).

Fiction, this suggested, could allow us to have insight into beliefs and practices and actions that readers potentially do not understand, by partnering those stories with a lived experience that can be recognised. And in recognising that each lived experience of religion is different, perhaps fiction could be a powerful tool in fostering understanding and tolerance. In giving a platform to the 'fictionally invisible' (Mehmood, 2016) perhaps fiction for children could be instrumental in opening up conversations about religion and belief and practice – and radicalisation where this is an aspect – in a safe and supportive atmosphere where judgement is reserved for a fictional character and not heaped upon a student or classmate.

Purpose and intent

The research undertaken for this thesis aimed to establish whether there is a place for contemporary children's fiction as a vehicle for teaching children about the lived religious experience of others in the RE classroom and if so, how teachers might be supported to use children's literature in the RE classroom. I wanted to provide a structure for time-poor, non-specialist RE teachers to use in the classroom, which utilised fictional text as a springboard for exploring belief and faith: a framework which could aid the selection, use and analysis of fictional texts within the RE classroom. This model emerged as the DIPT (delighting, informing, performing, and transforming) model which is elucidated later in this study.

A review of the field was undertaken to establish the historical importance of RE, and how it might retain its relevance today, and to identify some of the challenges facing teachers in the RE classroom. Alongside this aspect of literature review, I aimed to develop an understanding of the potential benefits, and challenges, of using children's fiction as a learning tool in the classroom.

The purpose of the study following the review, therefore, was to assess the potential role of children's literature in providing readers and consumers with an understanding of what it might feel like to have a religious faith, and to establish for teachers an approach to teaching pupils about the religious experiences of others, through the use of contemporary fiction, with a focus on providing support for non-specialist teachers of RE. My intention for this study was fourfold. Firstly, I wanted to establish whether fiction could be a useful teaching tool specifically in the RE classroom. Secondly, I hoped to identify, through wide reading of children's books, which genres featured the lived religious experience in the most accessible way. From this information, I planned to explore which, if any, particular genre may be best suited to exploring religious themes for children and how this could be mined for teaching approaches in the classroom. My final goal was to produce a toolkit for teachers to enable non-specialists in particular to utilise contemporary children's fiction as a useful tool for use in the classroom.

My initial 'hunch' and review of literature around the role and importance of RE in the classroom, and children's literature as a teaching aid led, then, to the formulation of the following research questions:

1. Is it important that children develop an understanding of lived religion, and if so, why?
2. How can fiction written for children support the development of understanding of others' religious faith, and which genres, if any, are particularly well placed to explore lived religion as a theme?
3. How can teachers, especially non-specialists, be supported in the teaching of lived religion and the lived religious experience through the medium of children's literature?

The relevance of this research for UK pupils and schools

A variety of viewpoints and research findings focussed on the historical and contemporary role and importance of children's literature, and religious education, are explored in the following chapters. From this review, there appears to be agreement on the role and importance of RE teaching today, springing from the historically influential role of religion on societies and the development of statutory schooling in the United Kingdom. Commentators are in general agreement, too, about the potential of children's literature to act as a vehicle for learning in the classroom, with the historical roots of children's literature in promoting desired behaviours, and providing instruction as well as delight, establishing its validity as an effective teaching tool. A number of researchers have explored the potential role of fiction written for children in helping readers to gain insights into the religious beliefs and practices of others. What seems to be missing from the literature is an exploration of *how* this could support understanding in the contemporary RE classroom, and it is this gap which is addressed in this thesis, with the rationale for, and development of, a teacher toolkit designed to address this gap practically, and add to the body of knowledge within the fields of religious education and children's literature.

The review of the field suggests that teaching children about religions and religious beliefs and practices has a number of positive aspects. It gives a context for many (if not most) of the cultural, legal, political and social practices and accepted norms of our country. Green and Oldendorf, in their 2011 work, *Religious Diversity and Children's Literature*, expound on the

importance of providing children with information about how religious beliefs and traditions have impacted upon local and national practices:

> Given that religious and spiritual beliefs are powerful forces that shaped the past and the present, it is essential that children learn about religious diversity and the role of religion and spirituality in shaping human understanding, history, culture and politics. (Green and Oldendorf, 2011, pp1-2)

Understanding how religions have influenced cultural behaviours and norms is important in that it gives context for the society – and world – around us. Recognising how decisions about laws, social behaviours, commonly held rites and rituals and even the physical fabric of the world around us have been shaped and informed by others' religious beliefs, contributes to the development of an understanding of self and society, one's role within that society and how this interacts with others' roles. To an extent this constitutes an element of cultural capital as espoused by Bourdieu (Sullivan 2001; Sullivan, 2002). This is a facet of learning which has gained traction in recent times in England in particular, with organisations such as Ofsted attempting to establish the extent to which schools have contributed to increasing their pupils' cultural capital as a measure of the school's overall success.

Being literate about the opinions and practices which underpin everyday lives, even where a specific religious belief is not professed, can enhance understanding and appreciation of a range of things, including works of art, music, architecture and the rituals of others. Such appreciation can aid social mobility – the holy grail for many of the political classes – and makes for good dinner party conversation and the ability to look learned in art galleries. However, religion is so much more than this. It goes to the root of individual identity, of what is believed on an individual basis to be fundamentally true – with a god or without. It attempts to tackle questions which are hard to answer through other lenses. Who am I? What is my purpose? How did I get here? What about love? (Green and Oldendorf, 2011). Asma talks about the importance of religion as instrumental in the attempt to make sense of the invisible and internal, and of religious imagination which he describes as "a mediating facility between facts and values on the one hand and cognition and affect on the other" (Asma, 2018, p11). An understanding of religion and its impact helps to bridge the actual, seen and felt, with the more 'insubstantial' side of individual lives whether that side encompasses a god or an organised religion or not. For children, this is a fundamental part of their development, both spiritually (with or without religion at its heart) and as maturing,

conscious beings (Asad, 2003). Coles writes about his realisation, when reviewing interviews and observations with children about a huge variety of topics, that religion or spirituality was present at the heart of many of them. "The more closely I listened," he writes, "…the more evident it became that in many [children] religion and nationalism…gave constant shape to their sense of how one might (or ought not) live a life" (Coles, 1992, p xiii). Religion infiltrates so much of everyday life, whether recognised as such or not, and being able to identify how it impacts on both personal, and others', behaviours and beliefs, enables us to begin to answer some of those big questions. Coles writes of "children as seekers, as young pilgrims well aware that life is a finite journey and as anxious to make sense of it as those of us who are farther along in the time allotted to us." (p xvi).

The RE curriculum in England has at its core the provision of stimuli and opportunities to ask 'big questions'. This contributes to the overall development of children's spiritual, cultural, and social awareness. Schools are charged to provide safe spaces to explore some of these questions (Who am I? What is the point of life? Why is there suffering? What happens after I die? etc.) and traditionally the RE classroom has been the location for these. Developing a 'worldview' and the critical analysis skills which enable an interpretation of the worldviews of others, is a factor in understanding how society and culture work, and in developing empathetic responses to differing worldviews, reflected in recent developments in the teaching of RE in English schools. The literature reviewed for this thesis provides an insight into the role of RE in encouraging children to explore big questions through the lens of religion, and the role too of children's literature in presenting readers with the opportunity to explore big questions in a safe environment.

The review of the field also identified some of the issues facing teachers in the classroom. The problem with teaching RE, is that sometimes it is slippery, mercurial and hard to pin down. Children can be taught about the central beliefs of a faith, about the rites and rituals that accompany organised religions. They can be taught about what people wear to represent their faith and why, and they can explore religious texts to ascertain meaning and impact on beliefs and practices. They can investigate the tangible impact of religious beliefs on societies, cultures, ways of behaving. What cannot easily be taught is how it feels to hold a religious belief so dear that it impacts on everyday life to an extent beyond the rites and rituals which we can study. How does it feel to believe that one has access to an understanding of absolute truth, which cannot be proven in traditionally recognised ways?

Evidence of the existence of God or of a relationship with the numinous is so personal, so fundamental to one's own concept of self and others, that it cannot be taught. It has to be experienced and it is beyond the remit of schools to do that.

One of the great challenges with teaching religion at all in school, and often the reason (Nixon, 2018; Parker, 2018) given in English schools at least for parents to withdraw their children from religious instruction, is the concern that young minds will be brainwashed or coerced into believing something that their parents do not believe. When one talks about religion, it is important to consider and recognise that organised religion is often about *power*. In his introduction to his ethnographical study of the religious community and their lived religious experience in downtown New York, Orsi writes:

> Religion is one of the more effective media by which social power is realised in bodies, just as religion shapes, orients and limits the imagination, and it is pointless to study religion without reference to power (Orsi, 2010, pxl).

When someone claims, either as an individual or as part of an organised group, to have access to ultimate truths, to hold religious beliefs which they believe that they know *for certain* to be absolutely true, then they hold an element of power. In dismissing the beliefs of others, either because of one's own faith, or belief in no god at all, power is also wielded. This is, of course, problematic in the classroom (and potentially beyond), as schools are bastions of power relationships, with an expectation upon pupils that they respect the views of their teachers thus potentially placing them at risk of exposure to dogma and proselytising if this is not carefully monitored and controlled (Puskàs and Andersson, 2019). And of course, the best way to avoid an evangelising approach to religion in school is to reduce it to the facts, the learning about and learning from which renders it potentially sterile and avoids discussion of the lived experience itself. It is fraught with difficulty and the potential for abuse. The teachers who are responsible for teaching children about religion and different faiths, are also charged with ensuring those same pupils develop the critical literacy skills to enable them to question, evidence-check and establish intent behind that to which they are exposed. There is a potential conflict of interest here.

Add to this mix the high number of schools in England in particular which are religiously based – Church of England schools, Roman Catholic schools, Jewish and Islamic schools, mainstream, funded by the state and open to all children, or independent of the state and

subject to different curriculum rules. Such schools set great store by their ethos which reflects the central tenets of the faith they espouse - and they are popular with parents. Despite data which suggest that the United Kingdom is becoming more and more secular, (Sherwood, 2019), stories abound of parents who manage to 'find religion' just in time to get their children into the local, high performing, church school. There is potential tension between the role of these schools to promote religion-based approaches to learning and to life, and the actual, lived experience of religion of the school community and staff therein.

Membership of a religious community has the potential to be exclusionary, or to feel that way, even if the religion in question has outreach and inclusion as an important element. Religion and religious belief can shape rites of passage and, as Orsi writes, these rites of passage which have religious meaning assimilate people into defined communities or "send them on their way." (Orsi, 2010, p67). Organised religion has often been held responsible, sometimes justifiably, for enabling behaviours and actions which are considered unacceptable. News media presents stories of terrorists acting in accordance with their professed religious beliefs; of religious leaders abusing their positions of power over vulnerable young people; stories of discrimination against women, against lgbtq+ communities, against those of other faiths. As Shukla-Bhatt writes, "religion has remained associated with discrimination based on gender and other social distinctions." (Shukla-Bhatt, 2015, p xv). Asma speaks about how religions play on the good versus bad narrative "[giving] testosterone-fuelled revenge fantasies every opportunity to vent aggression." (Asma, 2018, p4). Whilst abuses of power are rarely justifiable according to the tenets and religious writings of the faith, it can be very hard to argue with someone who fundamentally believes a certain course of action to be true and their opinion to be validated by God. It is challenging to argue against someone's personal, firmly held, religious belief. It is easier and safer to teach children the gentle stories, the main aspects, the rites, rituals, and impact of religions, than to delve too deeply into what it means to actually really believe in the message of one's chosen, familial or revealed religious faith.

The literature reviewed in the following chapters appears to suggest that fiction is a helpful teaching aid across the curriculum. It identifies the differences between types of story – religious, sacred, spiritual and secular, which are prevalent in books with religious themes or examples of the lived religious experience – and explores the role of fiction in providing the religious and spiritual vocabularies which help the development of religious literacy. The

importance of spiritual and religious literacies both in terms of child development and in terms of their roles in promoting inclusivity is evident from the literature.

Whilst this review points towards the importance of providing examples of lived religion in children's books, and its potential as an approach in the classroom, there was little in the way of detail as to *what* types of literature might be best placed to explore religious experience, and just *how* these books could be used in the classroom, particularly for non-specialists. This could mean huge challenges in terms of both teacher knowledge, and the risks of misrepresentation, religious and cultural bias, and discomfort around exploring such personal issues as faith. Limited time spent on how to teach RE in initial teacher education in the primary sector, and a rapidly diminishing pool of specialist RE teachers available in the secondary sector (NATRE, 2022) have the potential to contribute to unrest and rising tension based on religious and cultural misunderstanding as school students move into their adult lives. The literature reviewed seems to demonstrate why an approach using fiction might be useful: I wanted to look at how such an approach might be implemented.

The DIPT approach which arose from the reading of texts, refers to the themes of *Delighting, Informing, Performing* and *Transforming*, elements which reflect commonalities between the texts explored. These elements have their roots firmly in traditional and historical approached to literature and imaginative writing.

From the time of Plato, and his famous exclusion of poets from the republic as a result of his concerns over the derivative nature of imaginative writing (McCoy, 2020), the place of the imagination has been roundly debated and defenced. Aristotle provided an early rebuttal of Plato's stance, with regards to tragedy and its role in providing a cathartic experience for audiences (Eaglestone, 2022). The place of imaginative literature and its essential role in the development of an educated mind was then comprehensively secured in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (19BCE), forming what has become the central defence of imaginative writing and its place in education. As M. H. Abrams writes:

> In what became for later critics the focal passage of the *Ars Poetica*, Horace advised that "the poet's aim is either to profit or to please, or to blend in one the delightful and the useful"…[*P*]*rodesse* and *delectare*, to teach and to please, together with…*movere*, to move, served for centuries to collect under three heads the sum of aesthetic effects on the reader (Abrams, 1953, xvi)

Over time, Horace's three key components – to teach, to please and to move – have each influenced societal viewpoints at different levels. 'To teach' became increasingly salient as schooling and instruction came to the fore, providing vindication for the use of literature as a medium for moral education. As the historical review of children's literature and education in Chapter 1 of this thesis establishes, the specifically Christian influence on education brought the moral-instructional aspect of Horace's formula into the spotlight, culminating in the overtly didactic texts written for children in the Reformation (Smith, 1989). This focus on the moral education of children endured, even whilst the Puritan admonitory approach faded during the 19th Century, and more secularised and psychologised forms gained traction (Mills, 2014). Today, the use of imaginative literature as a tool for teaching, and the confluence of literary criticism and educational theory, endure in the planning and approached of contemporary teachers, selecting texts which reflect the moral pluralism of today's classrooms.

So the DIPT approach generated as a result of this research, sits comfortably within this historical context. Indeed, the fundamental importance of 'delight and instruction' has been harnessed by one of the leading voices in the world of children's literature scholarship, Peter Hunt (2009). Whilst the approach has been subject to criticism (Gregory et al, 2022), the focus on instruction and delight has retained its importance in the development of moral education across multiple education and democratic systems (Hart et al, 2000). And in identifying opportunities for transformation – the *movere* of Horace's defence of literature – the DIPT approach proposed within this thesis grounds itself in the ongoing practices of teachers and educators.

The review of the field highlights the confluence of religion and literature for children over time, and explores how significant societal changes in the wake of World War Two led to changing views on how religious views and practices should be presented in schools, alongside a revolution in both access to cheap publications for children, and changes in realistic content being produced for this audience. Viewing both faith and secular schools and the provision they offer, based, in England, in a government-decreed National Curriculum, within the context of historical, socio-economic and political developments, provides the opportunity to imagine new possibilities – and challenges – to the teaching of RE in the future and to situate existing practice in the experience, as well as the knowledge, of teachers

and pupils in terms of how they expand upon, and respond to, the teaching, and the literature (fictional and factual) presented to them in the classroom and beyond.

It can be difficult within the confines of a time-limited RE curriculum to do anything more than touch fleetingly upon the outward beliefs and practices of members of organised religions, let alone to explore in any depth personal aspects of faith and belief and what it feels like to the individual. Speakers, visits, assemblies and similar which aim to give pupils a flavour of what it feels like on a personal level to have a religious faith are important. But as with all things in school, the knowledge and understanding of the teacher is paramount, and it can be hard for teachers to easily portray religious experience as lived when it is not necessarily their own, and that risks reducing learning to facts about religious stories, rites, clothing and practices. The use of fictional texts, then, is presented as a way of breaching this gap in knowledge and understanding.

Approaches and methods

As I have approached this study, I have been aware that I hold a number of personal beliefs and stances that need to be recognised when developing my argument for this thesis. Those fundamental beliefs, or principles, are as follows:

1) Developing an appreciation of religious practice is important, and allows for a greater respect of other's religious practices, and some understanding of why people may behave in ways which do not reflect my own beliefs or worldviews. Equally important, then, is a critical understanding of individual faith alongside recognisable aspects of organised religious practice and creeds, and how this can influence behaviours and principles. Such understanding can contribute to social cohesion and can help to foster respect and tolerance of others, whilst situating this appreciation and understanding within a context of what is considered to be socially acceptable and lawful;

2) Religious Education (RE) has an historically important role in the development of schooling and education – and the understanding of others. As social perceptions and requirements change and flex through time, RE has a particular responsibility for

reflecting these changes. It is important to explore different ways of developing an understanding of others using the changing resources available;

3) One way of helping children to develop a respectful understanding of another's beliefs and practices, be they religious, social, or cultural, is through the use of children's literature. Fiction written for younger audiences has an important role in the classroom, particularly in the primary sector, and is frequently used to enhance the teaching and learning of a number of curriculum areas such as history and geography. By exploring historical characters' lived experience, or the lives of people in different cultures and countries, through the medium of fiction, children are given opportunities to step into another's shoes and to explore, without judgement, how other people live;

4) When using fiction written for children to help deepen their understanding of religious faith and practice, special attention is required. Personal belief is a fundamental aspect of individual lives and requires sensitive handling. The lack of specialist RE teachers with an in-depth knowledge and understanding of religion can be problematic when ensuring children have access to accurate information about belief and practice, and this is also challenging when using fiction in the RE classroom. It is essential to ensure that children are not exposed to materials which are incorrect in their depictions, inflammatory, biased or proselytising, and this requires a cautious and knowledgeable approach to selecting and using fictional texts to enhance the teaching of RE;

5) There is, therefore, a potential place for guidance for non-specialist RE teachers in selecting and using appropriate texts in a changing contemporary fiction landscape. The use of texts to explore religious belief, practice and lived experience can be enhanced through the application of selection and analysis tools which aim to support non-specialists in school and to help the establishment of respectful, tolerant and informed enquiry and curiosity within the classroom.

These positional statements have helped to inform the structure of the study and the research questions which have arisen from the review of the field. The thesis aims to explore the validity of these stances in an educational context and the research questions which have

arisen therefrom, and to explore possible responses to them from the perspective of a classroom practitioner.

Situating the research and the researcher

In considering the theoretical framework for the design of the study, whilst based firmly in traditional literary criticism approaches, and the theories of Reader Response as espoused by Rosenblatt, I have been mindful of the fact that these theoretical frameworks have, traditionally, been used with and applied to, mainstream, adult literature. Taking into account the potential for misuse meant that consideration has to be given to theories of situatedness (Frank et al, 2008; Simpson, 2002), on the part of the author, the teacher and myself, as adults working with texts for children (Nodelman, 2008).

Overend (2022) defines the concept of situatedness thus: "Situatedness refers to the interconnectedness of meaning and our sociocultural, historical and/or geographical contexts" (np). When looking at the ways in which children are taught – academically, morally, socially – it is necessary to consider the ways in which the 'teacher', be that a person, a book, or peer group, presents their own worldview, and is subject to their own set of personal experiences and contexts. As far as the teaching of religion is concerned, this seems to be particularly important. Authors writing about religious themes, or introducing characters with religious beliefs or practices, are inevitably influenced by their own experiences and preconceptions about religion. Those using fiction as a teaching tool bring to their teaching their own contextual understandings, prejudices and lived experience. And children, reading the books, or sitting in the classrooms, bring to their reception of concepts presented to them, a wide range of social, cultural and religious experiences which shape and form how they receive the text and respond to it. Recognising this, on the part of the teacher and the child, has influenced the design of this study and the development of a toolkit which arose from the reading of texts. As Simpson (2002), writes, "declaration [of situatedness] works teleologically; it says 'let me tell you where I am coming from in order that I may pursue the goal I am about to articulate'" (p19). Exploring the situatedness of the author can be particularly important when books are often seen to hold specific truths, or to have a particular kind of authority (Hunt, 1991) – Simpson, citing Burke (1957), suggests that literature itself "could perform this task of specifying situations" (op cit, p2). Thus

considering authorial intent, teacher prejudice, and pupil lived experience is all vital to ensuring that, when using children's fiction in the classroom, assumptions are not made to the detriment of participants, and that no offense is given to those of faith whose lived experience will differ from those who profess no religious affiliation. The selection and utilisation of contemporary fiction as described within this thesis is considered with these things in mind at all times. The determination of where authors, teachers, readers – and myself as researcher – are 'coming from' in terms of prior experience, personal beliefs and prejudices, and contextual influences, helps to establish as objective a view of commentary and texts as is possible, enabling the reader, or the pupil in the classroom, to review and judge the texts they are using in RE in the light of perceived and actual truths, realism and socio-cultural context.

Simpson invokes the age of the Enlightenment when exploring the theory and concept of situatedness, describing how thinkers in the 17th and 18th centuries:

> knew that to speculate about situatedness is to think about everything that is round one synchronically, even as it is supposed or pretended that only some things mattered or mattered most (climate, political structure, occupation). (Simpson, 2002, p3)

There are myriad influences at play when considering how individuals perceive their worlds, some of which are prioritised as Simpson describes, in the light of prevailing opinions and practices within a society or social sub group. Overend (2022) defines situatedness as "the ways in which we see and live in the world differently based on our past experiences and understanding of social context" (np). These experiences colour an individual's worldview and can impact on how the practices and beliefs of others are perceived (Haraway, 1988; Engelstad and Gerrard, 2005). In creating knowledge, personal experience needs to be taken into account in order to separate opinions from truths, and to validate claims made about individuals, groups, cultures and situations. Engelstad and Gerrard (op cit) explore how "knowledge involves a complex of relationships and contextualizing knowledge production involves consideration of gender, race, ethnicity, class, location etc" (p3). Situating knowledge and understanding within the domain of personal experience helps to ensure that level of objectivity which is essential to research, and, within the remit of this thesis, which reflects how recognition of individual situatedness impacts on aspects of RE teaching.

Alongside a consideration of situatedness, it is also important to consider positionality and how it differs from situatedness within the context of research methods which are themselves considered later in this study. Positionality, according to Massoud (2022) "is the disclosure of how an author's racial, gender, class, or other self-identifications, experiences and privileges influence research methods" (p64). Bayeck (2022) considers the personal identities of researchers and how the researcher can hold multiple identities, as outsider and insider, with regards to a piece of research, and how this positionality then impacts on how research findings are interpreted. Identifying and acknowledging researcher positionality helps to ensure that interpretations of research are framed accordingly, ensuring also that sufficient attention is paid to impartiality, whilst recognising that, as human beings, we are all impacted by our experiences and situations.

It is important, then, at this point, to situate myself within the context of this study. Pahl and Rowsell (2010) talk about the concept of 'sedimentation' and how our life experiences, values, beliefs and practices condense to influence our approaches to texts. They describe "embedded shards of everyday experiences" (p9) which contribute to how the world is experienced. In exploring the issues surrounding how children can be exposed to a lived religious experience in safe and non-partisan ways, it is essential that I recognise how my own "acquired dispositions" (p9) may influence how I approach the subject.

I have worked in the field of education for over 25 years, both as a teacher and local authority officer, focussing mostly, but not exclusively, on primary and early secondary years, RE, and English: as a class teacher and most recently as a headteacher in the primary sector. I was brought up in a religiously aware and active family, with a period of my schooling spent at a private Christian school, and a number of my formative pre-teen years as part of a fundamentalist, notionally Christian, sect, of which my father is still an active member and leader.

My first degree is in Religious Studies and Education, and I have taught in, and led, Religious Studies departments in a number of primary, secondary and private schools over the years. This sedimentation is an important part of how I come to the topic of religion in children's fiction and there can be absolutely no doubt that my experiences of a lived religious belief and practice, and the teaching of world religions with a focus on tolerance and respect of diverse religious practices and beliefs, impacts on how I approach this study. However, I

would consider myself to be a non-practising, perhaps somewhat sceptical Church of England member; formed and made, yes, by the religious experiences of my youth and early adulthood, but questioning and one step removed at this point in my life. That sedimentation process naturally filters through all aspects of who I am as a human being, as a teacher, mother, partner and student, and will, without doubt, impact too on how I both approach and respond to the findings of this study. Religious belief is at heart an intrinsically personal experience. I believe that we cannot hope to truly understand another's belief or faith, in terms of how that feels and impacts and gives meaning to their lives; only in terms of how they express that faith, through their actions, rituals, practices and what they say. I believe too that books offer us tiny glimpses into what it might mean to be someone else, to feel, believe, and live differently. They provide opportunities to explore what answers *might* be, not necessarily what they *are*, and it is in this spirit that I approach the findings of this study and the suggestions I put forward as a result of them. For it is the fundamentally personal nature of religion, the intrinsic understanding that one's religious or non-religious belief can underpin one's very being that makes the subject so exciting. As with falling in love, for example, one can share only the outward signs of what that might be like, and the physical descriptions of what it feels like. It is not until it is experienced personally that there can be a true understanding of what it means. And so with religious faith. We touch, fleetingly and lightly, what it might mean to believe something so fundamentally, through the shared experiences of those engaged with, through individual actions and the actions of others, and through the written word. It is my belief that fiction, particularly where it is aimed at children and young people, is one of the most powerful ways of exploring these experiences in a safe and meaningful way.

Approaching the study

The study which follows privileges a distinctively education-based approach, which stems from my own professional role as a teacher. To that end, I have made certain assumptions, based on my own experience, which have been explored further in the review of the field, chief of which is the conviction that works of fiction are valuable to education. Education itself can be viewed as an academic practice in its own right, separate from learning or schooling (Biesta, 2012). Education harnesses a multitude of different lenses in a consistent and robust manner – sociology, psychology and literary analysis to name but a few. It is greater than the sum of the lenses it uses. Biesta describes the teleological nature of education

as a concept, "a practice framed and constituted by purposes" (p583), and it is this purposeful nature of education which provides the scaffold for the examination of the role of fiction in the teaching of RE. Biesta goes on to make a distinction between education and learning:

> The discourse of learning only becomes an *educational* discourse when we ask questions about the context and purpose of learning – the learning 'of what' and 'for what' – and also when we ask questions about the relationships at stake in education, which is the question of the learning 'from whom' (p583).

This study is concerned with this educational discourse which focusses on developing understanding of complex issues about faith which are different from much of what is deemed necessary to be taught in the RE curriculum, focussed on organised religious practice, teachings and collectively held beliefs. In order to explore my initial 'hunch' that children's literature might be a useful tool in the RE classroom, I have used a literary analysis lens through which to view a selection of texts, in order to establish commonalities and differences and to pull together aspects which could form the basis of a toolkit for teachers. The classical task of literary criticism was considered appropriate in helping to develop an in-depth understanding of how religious belief and practice is portrayed in children's literature, and also how these texts could be used as teaching tools (de Groot, 2006; Arizpe et al, 2013). The study has focussed on the role of contemporary texts within the classroom, harnessing the identified importance of children's literacy across the curriculum, and the approaches traditionally taken within those classrooms to fiction and non-fiction texts. Traditional literary criticism approaches, which reflect those familiar to teachers in both primary and secondary sectors, allow for the exploration of texts in ways which resonate too with children. The capacity to engage in close reading of texts and critical analysis of what readers read is central to developing understanding, not only of texts themselves, but of the wider context within which those texts sit and the consideration of what is important within those texts. Grounding this approach in the theory of reader response allows for a contextualised approach to literary criticism, which can reflect the lived religious experience of readers, protagonists, authors and teachers - and which provides a basis for using fiction to explore real life experiences.

Methodological approaches including cultural studies and social science approaches were considered when exploring the theoretical and methodological basis of the study, but the central role of close reading and reader response theory would, I felt, have been diluted

through these approaches, leading to the decision to engage traditional literary analysis as a framework for the research.

A school-based research element to the study formed part of my early planning, but the pandemic and subsequent pressures on schools in its aftermath meant that, at this point, the study had to remain theoretical. It is hoped that the next stage of development for the study will include empirical, school-based research, along with testing of the toolkit produced.

Approaching the books – reader response theory, literary criticism and the development of a methodology

In developing the hypothesis that works of contemporary fiction could be used to enhance the teaching of the lived religious experience, I recognised that a power imbalance was in play, between author and reader, between teacher and student, and between those knowledgeable about particular faith practices, either through their own developed religious literacy, or through personal experience, and those with no prior knowledge or understanding of religious faith as lived experience. Considering Freire's approach to critical pedagogy and literacy ensured that I remained cognisant of the power I hold as an educator and how this can be used to portray a skewed worldview based on my own desires to legitimise my own viewpoints – and this was taken into account too when considering the intention, situatedness and experience of authors as they wrote the texts explored. In developing a toolkit, the importance of encouraging and supporting learners to be reflective and then to act upon their reflections in order to effect change was important to the process and the finished article.

Central to this aspect of development of the research was a focus on reader response theory, which has helped to provide a theoretical underpinning to the study. Louise Rosenblatt's body of work has become synonymous with approaches which explore how readers bring their own life experiences to texts, and how these experiences influence and change the ways in which the text is read and understood. Reader response theory explores how readers impose known assumptions about human nature, and their understanding of human behaviour, onto their reading of a text, in order to judge the credibility of the characters and storyline therein (Rosenblatt, 2014). Rosenblatt describes a transactional approach to the reading of texts (Allen, 1988) which takes into account the ways in which prior experience, current situation and personal beliefs and preconceptions shape the text being read, and create

it anew with each reader, and with each reading. The personal situatedness of the reader is seen as fundamental both to understanding personal responses to texts and to helping the reader develop self-understanding in its own right. Rosenblatt situates the theory firmly in the field of education and schooling, reflecting the importance and influence of school institutions in the development of this self-understanding. In exploring the role of teaching, she cites the importance of the teaching of literature not just in terms of literary merit, or "to make their students more sensitive to the art of words, to induct them into our literary heritage" (Rosenblatt, 2014, np) but to present issues which may appear to be in the domain of social sciences, or philosophy for example, in ways which resonate with learners. Literature as a vehicle for exploring the human condition is key to her ruminations, and she states that, "whatever the form…literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers" (Rosenblatt, 2014, np).

Modern literary criticism itself espouses a number of approaches, and in considering the most appropriate theoretical framework for this thesis, New Criticism was considered as well. The New Criticism approach promotes a close reading technique which can still be seen as influential in English Literature in US high schools today (Thomas, 2012; Mao, 1996), and within the National Curriculum in England (Oliver, 2021). Pie Corbett's popular Talk 4 Writing programme which operates in a large number of primary settings in England and Scotland, includes a focus on close reading as a part of its approach (www.talk4writing.com). However, Barlow (2007) raises concerns about the lack of close reading in A Level syllabi, which he believes to be problematic for those pupils in England who wish to study English at university level, citing the impact of programmes such as the International Baccalaureate who have a closer focus on close reading.

The New Criticism approach attempts to find truth and meaning exclusively within the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the text itself. For Rosenblatt, however, this approach "tended to crowd out the ultimate questions concerning relevance or value to the reader in his ongoing life" (op cit, np). In Rosenblatt's approach to understanding texts, the central thesis that "a novel…remains merely inkspots on a page until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (op cit, np) has proven essential to my own reading and understanding of the texts selected for this study when considering them not merely as literary artefacts, but as tools for teaching. The formalist basis of the New Criticism approach has helped to inform my own close reading of texts throughout my personal education experience. However, I am

drawn to Rosenblatt's more post-structuralist methodology when considering specifically the impact and use of fiction to learn about religious beliefs. Thus my own close readings of texts have been coloured and influenced by Rosenblatt's theory, enabling me to consider the grammar, syntax and word choice of the author, alongside a recognition of what they bring to the text in terms of my own beliefs, and how this in turn impacts on the understandings which arise for the reader. In exploring aspects which surround the words on the page, the reader brings their own experiences and assumptions into play, their own understanding of how societies and humanity in general "work", and interpret the text accordingly. In this, they frame their understanding and move from a model whereby text imprints itself onto the reader to a transactional model, in which the reader forms a reciprocal relationship with the author – and with the protagonists within the book. This ensures that the book has meaning – "ultimately any literary works gains its significance from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the linguistic stimuli offered by the text." (Rosenblatt, 2014, np)

Reader response theory, then, has underpinned the methodology and interpretation of this study. In developing a methodological approach, I have taken into account this theoretical stance, combining this with the formalist approach of close reading to gain insights into the texts available for children which could have resonance within the classroom.

The writing of this thesis took place over the period including Covid lockdown, and this prevented any kind of empirical study. In designing the investigation throughout this period of time, when there was no opportunity to work directly with children, I have taken into account the role of the adult when researching literature written for children. Adults reading books for children bring to the texts significant life experience, interpretations which relate to that experience, and changing viewpoints which reflect maturity. Views on the purpose of literature written for a younger audience can prove problematic when taken from an adult perspective – is the point of a book written for children to educate, or to provide delight? Historically, children's literature had a broadly didactic and educational aim. As an adult reviewing texts written for children, it is important to recognise that the age of the reader is relevant in ways which do not apply to mainstream – or adult – literature. In her review of Nikolojeva's *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers*, Kokkola identifies some of the issues which affect the production and interpretation of children's literature:

> Aetonormative hegemony normalises the adult view of the world, thereby rendering the child deviant. The primary purpose of children's literature is to socialise the child into accepting adult norms even though certain texts may challenge such norms for at least temporary, carnivalesque inversions or subversions of aetonormative power. (Kokkola, 2010, p106)

The issue of children's literature, read through an adult's eyes, possibly being viewed only as a teaching tool was an aspect I considered whilst developing the methodology. I was conscious that the ways in which I was thinking about actually using the texts – within a classroom – had the potential to ignore their power as literary artefacts in their own right, with all the opportunities fiction provides for escapism, enjoyment, wonder, and intrigue. In selecting and proposing methods for using fiction written for children and young adults in the RE classroom I was conscious of the potential for misuse in terms of trying to mould child readers into an adult-orientated view of the world just as Kokkola cautions.

Approaches taken

Taking into account the theoretical underpinning of the study, the methodological process for this project began with the classical humanist and literary-critical task of the reading of books. Novels written for children were selected, regardless of publication date, in an attempt to bracket the different ways in which religion might be portrayed within them. In selecting texts, care was taken to ensure a range of authors was covered, along with a variety of genres and a timeline which spanned books from the 20th and 21st Centuries. This ensured that a broad spectrum of texts from which to identify common themes was considered. I chose to look at books from a wide timeline in order to establish the many different ways in which religious themes and experiences could be portrayed. This broad reading enabled me to establish quite what I meant by religious themes, tropes and symbols. To establish these it was important to cast my reading net extensively, and the broad timeline allowed me to do this. The identification of key features helped to inform the selection tool developed for the teacher toolkit which was designed to support teachers in choosing appropriate texts.

A total of 50 works of fiction written for children were consulted, covering middle-grade and young adult age groups as well as one picture book and one graphic novel (Appendix 1).
In an attempt to ensure that the list of books was not skewed by the inclusion of books designed to proselytise or to confirm a view of readers which assumed their own adherence to any religious 'truths' portrayed within the book, it was essential to read as diversely as

possible and to consider any commonalities between the books which reflected the stages of development through which children both as readers and as people of faith themselves, journey. The criteria reflects the 'lived experience' concept in the attempt to ensure that potential readers are not alienated by virtue of not belonging to a specific faith body: by allowing both readers of faith to recognise themselves in the text, and non-adherents to explore how it might feel to hold a belief which is so sedimented (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010), that it is a given of one's understanding of one's own world. Fowler's 1987 description of the stages of faith development can be applied to the criteria exemplified later in this thesis; whereby children and young adults construct their understanding of their world, in part according to how they understand and engage with faith, belief, and relationship with a deity. In enabling readers to access the texts through Bishop's 1990 windows, mirrors and doors model, the criteria selected aim to ensure that no reader is left out from the opportunity to experience faith and religious belief through the eyes of a character in a book. For Fowler (1987),

> Faith involves three important kinds of construal. (1) It involves a patterned knowing (which we sometimes call belief). (2) It involves a patterned valuing (which we sometimes call commitment or devotion). And (3) it involves patterned constructions of meaning, usually in the form of an underlying narrative or story (p56).

The inclusion of quasi-religious practice or symbolism was deemed important because this would then incorporate a number of fantasy novels involved in significant world building, where invented religion provided the platform or basis of societal development, laws and communal activities (Łaszkiewicz, 2013; Winston, 2001). Limiting inclusion only to those novels which held recognisable religious behaviours and practices identified from the major world religions would have constrained the ways in which these books could be used when I reached the synthesis, or toolkit, aspect of the overall study. Fantasy novels provide opportunities for discussion about religious practices and beliefs in safe spaces as discussed later in this thesis. They also offer alternative imaginings of traditional organised religions – as Feldt claims:

> Fantasy literature and other popular culture that represents and mediates religious expressions and phenomena actively contribute to the reconfiguration of, and communication about, religion in contemporary society and are thus of consequence for what we understand 'religion' to be in the study of religions (Feldt, 2016, p101)

The creation of a practical toolkit as a starting point for using fiction in the RE classroom arose from this broad reading. A myriad of contemporary texts exist in the world of children's literature and it can prove difficult, if not impossible, for the time-constrained teacher to have knowledge of them all. Indeed, Cremin et al's research into the reading habits of teachers and children (2014) raises concerns about the limited texts both known and used by teachers in the classroom across genres and timeframes. In reviewing the texts available which could contribute to supporting the teaching of RE, it was evident that a framework for using such texts could be a helpful aid for non-specialist teachers. Through the exploration and analysis of common features of the texts chosen, four separate features of the books were identified: *Delighting, Informing, Performing* and *Transforming*. These classifications reflected common aspects found in a high proportion of the books consulted, and formed the basis of a tool created to support teachers in the selection and use of contemporary fiction in the RE classroom. The features of this approach are further explored later in this thesis.

Following the overall reading of texts and identification of common themes and features, a close reading, broadly following the tenets of New Criticism and Reader Response approaches, and content analysis of a selection of books from the primary sources was undertaken. Book choices were made to ensure coverage of all relevant genres and, as far as possible, to provide an example from middle grade and young adult sources. Where it was not possible to do the latter, two novels from either middle grade or young adult grade were reviewed.

A total of 12 books were analysed and an example of close reading is included using McCaughrean's 2018 *Where The World Ends*. To include a similar close reading for all the books analysed is beyond the word limit of this thesis, and so I created a comparative table looking at the content of each book according to five critical analysis questions (Lawrence, 2017) adapted from the Wooldridge multicultural analysis of texts framework (2001). This can be found at Appendix 2.

This comparative analysis, alongside consideration of the five critical analysis questions, (Lawrence, 2017), helped to inform the development of a model designed for initial text analysis.

Underlying all choices of texts, of analysis techniques and of approaches to reading and using fiction, was the personal intuition that, whilst there may be relatively few texts with clear religious themes or lived experience available readily to pupils, those which were available had merit in terms of their use in the RE classroom. This latter is a position which became more nuanced the more books I read for the study. It is clear that certain books lend themselves more naturally than others to classroom use or for learning purposes. In some cases, the texts read did not bring me joy and delight. It has been incumbent on me to try to read them as though, first, I was the intended audience as opposed to an adult reading a children's book, and secondly, recognising that subject matter which does not inspire *me* might be appealing to others. Teachers, parents, librarians and gatekeepers for the books made available to children and young adults know that they may have no personal connection with a given text, and in recognising that fact, need to be open to a wide variety of reading experiences if they wish children to encounter multiple diverse texts.

The practical application of fictional text selection and analysis in the classroom was an essential element of this study, and the creation of a toolkit which demonstrates an exemplar approach for selecting and analysing texts, along with an analysis tool which focusses on the development and recognition of religio-artefactual literacy was central to the purpose of the study. The DIPT model mentioned earlier in this introduction, which stemmed from the analysis of fictional texts, aimed to provide that practical guidance.

During the course of the research, some of which took place whilst I was in post as a headteacher, it became apparent that teacher colleagues were interested in attempting to use the toolkit as they wrestled with teaching about lived religion in their own classrooms. Such experimentation did not form a formal study of the usefulness of the toolkit, and whilst anecdotal reviews of the approach were useful as I refined it, a formalised trial of the materials will be needed in the future to validate the selection and analysis tools developed. An example of the toolkit in action in this early phase of development was provided by a teacher in one of my schools, for whom the process fitted with her proposed sequence of work, and this can be found in Appendix 3.

A potentially useful extension of this data analysis would have been to include an empirical study of writers, publishers and readers to establish their experiences and understanding of religious themes in popular children's literature. However, in using texts as my data set I

have been able to make some judgements about the current position of these books, and their potential use in the classroom. Where appropriate, authorial and reviewer statements (via social or mainstream media, broadcast platforms and actual texts) on the role and appropriateness of religious themes were taken into account when drawing conclusions from the sources reviewed.

Definitions and concepts

Within this thesis, I use a number of terms which bear definition and consideration at this point. The first of these is the concept of 'the lived religious experience' which I use throughout the study alongside the terms 'religion as lived', 'lived religion', and 'personal religion' (Orsi, 2010; Burns, 2020a; McGuire, 2008). McGuire defines lived religion as a term useful "for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (McGuire, 2008, p12). She goes on to explain that "lived religion is *constituted by the practices* people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live" (p98). Burns (2020a) describes "vernacular, or lived religion: the real-world practices and beliefs of individuals, not necessarily the traditional answers that might come from people in authority" (np). It is this distinction from easily recognisable religious practice, which is studied within RE syllabi, which I felt at the beginning of the study could be explored through the use of fiction. Traditionally, RE, particularly where this explores world religions, has focussed, understandably, on the extrinsic performance of religious faith. Books available to children often provide an insight into the 'doing' of religion – the rites, rituals, and communal practices of a religious group, allied to the central teachings of that organised religion. The day-to-day practice of that religion, which may well include those recognisable (and comparable) rituals and behaviours, can differ from person to person, however, as it reflects individually-held and deeply personal convictions and understandings of those guiding teachings which inform the organised expression of a religious community. McGuire looks at how deeply individual responses to faith can differ from the personal, everyday enactment of that faith when she states that "[r]eligious socialization and ongoing interactions with others may inform, but cannot determine, each individual's personal practices and beliefs (McGuire, 2008, p208). In recognising that individual beliefs, which shape behaviours and attitudes, can be expressed in ways separate, or supplementary to, the proscribed embodiment of religious

practice according to religious authority, I hoped that this study could contribute towards ways in which teachers can enable their students to develop empathy with, understanding of, and curiosity about the religious faith and practice of others.

The concept of 'lived experience' can be viewed as controversial. Individual experience has been, to a certain extent, weaponised as a concept in recent years to enable individuals to claim possession of absolute truths in relation to their personal experience (Hsiao, 2021). When considering the 'lived religious experience', I am aware that the expression of a personal experience of religion can be used to ends which are not in the best interests of others, and where the term is used throughout this thesis, it is with the understanding that exploration of others' lived experience must be handled carefully and through a critical lens.

I use the term 'religious literacy' within this study as a catch-all term for the body of knowledge which enables an individual to describe and understand accepted religious behaviours, beliefs and teachings. The importance of being religiously literate has gained traction in recent years, being defined by the American Academy of Religion as follows:

> Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess:
>
> 1. A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices, and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical, and cultural contexts.
> 2. The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place. (Harvard Divinity School, 2023).

It can be seen from the above definition that the concept of religious literacy differs from the concept of lived religion, in that it is concerned primarily with the collectively recognised and understood facets of an organised religion or religious belief (or non-belief) and how this sits in a historical, social or cultural context. Religious literacy as a model has influenced practice in the development of syllabi in the UK (Burns, 2020b; Conroy and Davis, 2008; Prothero, 2008; Hannam et al, 2020) and was explored by the All Party Parliamentary Group in 2016 as a way forward, with the report's authors claiming:

> "religious literacy" matters, and needs to be taken seriously by everyone, including those who are not religious…The APPG believes that improving religious literacy

> means equipping people with the knowledge and skills to understand and discuss religions and issues around them confidently, accurately and critically (p3)

The difference between developing *knowledge and understanding* of religious beliefs and practices, in order to be religiously literate, and exploring *religion as lived in personal practice*, is an important one to recognise. Prothero (2010) provides a Hirschian-style checklist of the "information US citizens need to make sense of their country and the world – the key stories, doctrines, practices, symbols, scriptures, people, places, phrases, group, and holidays of the world's major religions" (p185), and it can be seen that these aspects can be used to develop the knowledge aspect of school curricula as appropriate. This thesis speculates that literature for children is well placed not only to provide an insight into the substantive knowledge of religious belief and practice as outlined in lists such as Prothero's, but to explore more deeply the application and outliving of these concepts in the day to day practices and positions of individuals.

Throughout the thesis, there are references to the importance of being critically literate. It is beyond the scope of this study to explore in depth the importance and impact of developing critical literacy skills and a substantial body of knowledge exists around the subject, which has informed my own understanding of what it means to be critically literate (Comber, 1993; Luke, 2012; Morgan, 1997). Defining critical literacy, Luke writes:

> The term *literacy* refers to the reading and writing of text. The term *critical literacy* refers to use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life (Luke, 2021, p5)

In brief, the study considers critical literacy in terms of pedagogy and classroom approaches towards texts. Luke explores:

> curriculum questions about whose version of culture, history, and everyday life will count as official knowledge. They are questions about pedagogy and teaching: about which modes of information and cognitive scripts, which designs and genres, shall be deemed worth learning; what kind of tool use with reading and writing will be taught for what social and cultural purposes (Luke, 2012, p5).

This approach to literacy and the use of texts is exemplified in studies by Comber in classrooms. She identifies some approaches to critical literacy thus:

In classrooms where a critical literacy position is advocated, teachers:

1. Reposition students as researchers of language
2. Respect student resistance and explore minority culture constructions of literacy and language use
3. Problematise classroom and public texts (Comber, 1993, p75)

In identifying the power of texts and their authors to shape discourses around truth and what is accepted as knowledge, the ability to be critically literate lends itself well to the study of texts which reference religious belief and practice, especially where these exemplify personal, lived religion.

The concepts and definitions of lived religion, religious literacy and critical literacy have shaped and informed the structure and purpose of this study and the toolkit produced in response to the review of the field and close reading of texts.

Children's literature and religion: call and response?

I started this introduction talking about the powerful influence and impact of children's literature, and it is my argument that a safe and effective way of exposing children to the lived religious experience is through the medium of children's, and young adult, fiction. Reading fiction gives us the opportunity to peep through the windows; provides the mirrors; flings open the doors (Bishop, 1990) to the lived experiences of others – and their religious experience is as valid as any other. Michael Rosen, the former Children's Laureate, poet and scholar, wrote on Twitter in 2020:

> the power of reading is that it opens up the possibility of making analogies between what's in a story/poem/text and your own life. This is the first step towards abstract thought e.g. thinking of anger or hope or envy or fear across the two: story and self. (Rosen, 2020)

It is this space and opportunity provided by the act of reading (and the texts provided) to make comparisons and to develop empathy, which has the potential to make children's fiction such a potent resource for understanding the religious lives of others. That means children need access to quality texts, an understanding of the potential impact of those texts and tools to help them analyse them critically and with respect. Equally, those texts need to be approached with careful thought and awareness of their potential power. Using children's

fiction can enable the reader, I would suggest, to gain an insight into what it *feels* like to have religious faith, whilst attempting to avoid the pitfalls outlined above. But this can be fraught with huge difficulty. There are conflicting voices discussing the merits of including religion in literature. Zeece states that "literature that informs children about their own religion and introduces them to other religions encourages youngsters to understand and respect religion-based differences." (Zeece, 1998, p 245). That seems a fair point – fiction has the capacity to explore more than facts, and to provide those windows and doors (Bishop, 1990) that allow glimpses and encounters with the unknown and unexperienced. However, Miskec sounds a note of caution. There are potential problems again with the power relationship when authors include religion in their fiction: "the literature has the increased potential to be exclusionary and even when not proselytizing [sic] is open to a more intense and specific type of critique." (Miskec, 2011, p256). It is important to be aware again, not only of the issue of power relationships within religions themselves, but also the power authors hold over their readers to include or exclude, and, potentially, to misinform.

The 2016 *Beyond Belief* (R4) broadcast which piqued my interest in what is happening to religious voices in children's literature, pointed out that, whilst an apparent decline in the portrayal of lived religion in children's books leads inevitably to what Tariq Mahmood described as the 'fictionally invisible', the *writing* of such characters and storylines comes with immense difficulties. Principal amongst these is the fear of getting it wrong – and because religion and religious beliefs can raise such deep feelings, because they are so intrinsic to the human experience, those who write in the voice of, or in the experience of, the religious character open themselves to perhaps much closer scrutiny than might otherwise be the case – as Miscek writes, "when invoking a specific religion, authors hold themselves up to speculation about accuracy and fairness in ways that other fiction might not be subjected to" (2011, p257). The risk of getting it wrong, of causing offence, of accusations of appropriation may be too much for authors today when religious practice appears to be on the wane in the UK (Sherwood, 2019). In considering the structure of this thesis, the challenges facing authors, and those who promote or work with texts, are taken into account when evaluating texts which might be useful within the classroom.

Format of the thesis

In summary, this study, based in a review of the field of literature and analysis around the role of both children's literature in the classroom, and the importance of religious education in schools today, is framed within the theoretical lens of Reader Response Theory. The study utilises methods of close reading, reflected in the New Criticism approach to texts in order to establish textual commonalities, and aspects of literature written for younger audiences which could be harnessed within the classroom to enhance understanding of religious faith and practice, leading to the development of practical guidance for non-specialist teachers as a start point for further research.

The thesis builds on the initial judgement that, if there is a challenge in schools when trying to teach children about lived religion in RE syllabi, then children's literature could provide a helpful vehicle for teachers in approaching the subject.

As outlined earlier in this introduction, I ask the following research questions within this thesis:

1. Is it important that children develop an understanding of lived religion, and if so, why?
2. How can fiction written for children support the development of understanding of others' religious faith, and which genres, if any, are particularly well placed to explore lived religion as a theme?
3. How can teachers, especially non-specialists, be supported in the teaching of lived religion and the lived religious experience through the medium of children's literature?

In order to explore possible answers to these questions, a review of the field is discussed in Chapter 1, situating the development of education, RE, and fiction created for children within a historical context. The review outlines the historical development of these areas from the 17th Century, with a particular focus on post WWII developments, reflecting the rapid changes in both education and children's publishing during this time.

The review of the field continues in Chapter 2 by exploring how researchers and commentators have assessed the importance of developing understanding of lived religion

within the classroom, and then reviews research and opinions on the role of children's literature in exploring challenging themes and religious points of view, as a teaching tool.

In Chapter 3, a range of primary texts are explored to identify common themes and establish ways in which religious experience is portrayed in a range of contemporary genres. The role of narrative as a vehicle to explore religious concepts and challenging ideas is considered, alongside a reflection on the importance of reflecting children's own experiences on the page in order to avoid silencing children's voices. Consideration is given too to the role of fiction in developing empathy with others. Within this chapter, the concepts of *delight, information*, *performance* and *transformation* (DIPT) are explored in terms of their application to works of fiction, foregrounding these concepts, which arise from the reading of primary sources, as the basis for the toolkit which forms the last section of the thesis.

Chapter 4 aims to identify the commonalities between selected contemporary works of fiction and the ways in which religion is depicted in different genres. A close reading of one of the texts used is included as an example of how this has been carried out in examining the books selected, reflecting a genre which is identified as being well-placed for exploring issues of personal religious faith and practice. A deeper exploration of the fantasy genre aims to establish reasons why it is well suited to depictions of faith and practice and how this could be used in the classroom.

The final section of the thesis considers a possible approach to selecting, using and analysing fictional texts in the RE classroom, using a framework, which stems from the close reading of texts – the DIPT approach. In Chapter 5, the core concepts arising from the close reading and review of the field in terms of an approach to selection and utilisation of fiction in the RE classroom are reviewed. The DIPT selection tool is proposed and exemplified, along with an examination of a possible analysis tool (RACL) which builds on existing methods for analysing works of fiction in the classroom.

Chapter 6 provides practical guidance for using the proposed DIPT and RACL tools in schools, using a range of examples drawn from one of the texts used to establish the models. In Chapter 7 the research is drawn together in conclusion, offering possible future research options to further enhance pupil understanding of others' religious faith and experience and to advance teacher expertise in this area.

Chapter 1

A review of the field

Outlining the historical development of education and the influence of religion on schooling and curriculum development, alongside a review of the growth and impact of literature written for young audiences over time, helps to ground this study in past experience, and provides a base from which to imagine possibilities for the teaching of RE in the future. The review of the field is split into two parts. In this first chapter, I explore the historical development of education, religious education, and children's literature alongside one another. I look firstly at how children's literature and religious education have developed over time, with a particular focus on advances from WWII onwards, and then consider how theories of child development have shaped both fiction for children, and policy and pedagogy in terms of their formal education. The following chapter considers the importance of RE in the classroom today, and explores views on the role of children's literature in education as a whole, and in RE in particular. By situating the research undertaken within an historical context alongside consideration of the actual and potential role of fiction written for children to support learning, it is intended that the recommendations which arise from the literature and the close reading of fictional texts have a clear evidence base and grounding in accepted positions on the importance and role of children's literature in the classroom.

The changing face of children's literature

Cultural changes in the fields of children's literature, education and RE have, over time, reflected both a developing understanding of how children learn, and perceived societal needs and pressures. The role of children's literature in both informing and shaping behaviours and views has impacted on styles and genres since the earliest time. The history of children's books has been widely studied and reflected upon, (Nikolajeva, 1995; Hunt, 2006; Grenby, 2014; Reynolds, 2011) and it is outwith the scope of this study to focus on a detailed description of its provenance. However, the impact of books published for children on the moral and religious wellbeing of its readership (Grenby, 2014) has been widely recognised.

Even before the advent of printed texts created specifically with children in mind, the tradition of oral storytelling in the United Kingdom ensured that the youngest were exposed to tales, retellings and, in particular, bible stories, with much of this output targeted specifically at a child audience (Grenby, 2014).

The earliest texts for children were predominantly concerned with saving the souls of the unshriven audience from everlasting hell. In around 1671, Janeway produced his *Token for Children: An Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children.* Janeway, a Puritan minister, was passionate about his role in saving the souls of sinful children from Hell and instructing them in the ways of salvation. In the preface to his book, he writes:

> Dost thou love to be taught good Things? Come, tell me truly, my dear Child, for I would fain do what I can possibly to keep thee from falling into Everlasting Fire. I would fain have thee one of those little Ones, which Christ will take into his Arms and Bless…Whither do you think those Children go when they die, that will not do what they are bid, but play the Truant, and Lie and speak naughty Words, and break the Sabbath? whither do such Children go, do you think? Why, I will tell you; they which Lie, must to their Father the Devil, into everlasting Burning; they which never pray, God will pour out his Wrath upon them and when they beg and pray in Hell-Fire, God will not forgive them, but there they must lye for ever. (4) And are you willing to go to Hell to be burn'd with the Devil and his Angels? Would you be in the same Condition as naughty Children? O Hell is a terrible Place, that's worse a thousand times than Whipping; God's Anger is worse than your Father's Anger; and are you willing to anger God?

Using texts written for children to provide moral instruction and shape emerging viewpoints into a religiously, and politically, acceptable form, reflected the mission of the predominant faith in Britain. Zipes places the objectives of Western, colonialist Christian society right in the centre of the debate about the purpose of children's literature at this point in history, with societal structures and management at its heart:

> the missionary zeal of the white Christian middle classes was great…the design of most children's books tended to rationalise the vested interests of bourgeois institutions in the making, and the logical narrative structure of the stories and the reading process itself were often geared to bring about obedience to the codes and structures of civil society. (Zipes, 2001, p155)

The increasing availability of printed texts encouraged publishers, of whom Newbery is perhaps the best known, to target young audiences with growing booklists, and the

commercial viability of the sector was reflected in the reductions in price of the printed word (Grenby, 2014). As Grenby reminds us, “pioneering publishers” and “the genius of avant-garde authors” (Grenby, 2014, pp 4-5) were not solely responsible for changes in the marketplace for children’s books – instead, a burgeoning middle class, and an increase in disposable income for parents who were willing, as he puts it “to invest in their children”, perhaps as a result of new ideas about childhood, contributed to the growing success of the sector.

Important too, as literature written specifically for children increased in volume, was the response of writers and publishers to changing attitudes towards the youngest. Society’s view of children, childhood and education was changing - influenced by the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), who viewed children not as young versions of adults, in need of spiritual and physical correction for the sake of their souls, but as *tabula rasa* or blank slates, moulded by their environment and observation of others. Children’s books began to reflect less the ‘hell-fire-and-brimstone’ approach of the Puritan Janeway, and more a reasoned, modelling-based approach to childhood. Locke argued in his 1728 treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* that it was the *moral* behaviour of children, and thus societies, which should be the priority of education, with a focus less on the self, and more on societal benefits. Whilst children might be naturally selfish, he argued, they were not inherently wicked, and their instruction and education should reflect this by providing good models from which to learn, and possible experiences from which to grow. His educational philosophy and discussions about empiricism, and how it related to theories of the time such as rationalism is recognisable today in the debate between educational traditionalists and progressives which plays out on a daily basis on social media.

The influence of educational theorists and changing views about both childhood and childrearing impacted on the content of books written for children, encouraging authors to present child protagonists as individuals capable of emotional responses, flights of independent imagination and a desire for the fantastic. The early English texts which had at their heart the spiritual and moral welfare of their consumers, whose potential early demise and encounter with their Maker was an expected and accepted part of childhood, were instrumental in providing access to “skills, concepts, and cultural norms” (Botelho and Rudman, 2009, p18) for those families able to both purchase and read them; for others,

storytelling at their mother's knee provided insights into the religious and moral priorities of the times.

The evolution of child development theories began to move from a religiously instructional focus towards stories reflecting a growing understanding of the importance of childhood and imagination to the emergence of flourishing adult individuals. During this time of rapid development in the exploration of childhood, formal schooling where this was available, retained its religious roots and instructional purpose. Formal education was provided for sons of clergy, and schools and universities set up by the Church and associated monasteries, comprised of instruction in Classics, ancient languages and emerging approaches to philosophies as well as religious education, divinity and scriptural studies underpinning it all (Stone, 1964).

Fundamental change in education came about with the establishment of state education for all in 1870. The bedrock of religious education – or instruction – remained absolute. The formation in 1888 of the National Education Association attempted to put into practice resolutions regarding the establishment of universal education, and under the umbrella of the Liberation Society, advocated aims which included "the disestablishment of the Church of England, the attainment of religious equality for Non-Conformists and the preservation of the rights of conscience." (Derrington, 2006). Of course, the Church of England remained – and still remains - the state church, and there was no separation between Church and state in England, leading to significant overlap between government policy and religion – or Christianity as defined and practised by the Church of England – with significant impact on the statutory requirement for religious education in schools and the proliferation of faith-based schools in many areas of the country. But from the point at which compulsory schooling was established, questions about the influence of the Church over education and equally over government shaped the discourse on how RE should be taught in schools. The idea of schools as some kind of 'learning factories' as described by Callahan (1962) and Robinson and Aronica (2015), has taxed educationalists as they wrestle with the fundamental *point* of statutory schooling including, and beyond, the requirement for religious instruction or education. If state schooling existed at least in part to ensure the transmission of moral messages and the central tenets of the Christian faith, then children could be seen merely as produced vessels, filled with prescribed knowledge dictated from on high, and with little agency, in the same way that a manufactured pot has no agency of its own – a concept explored and questioned today by a number of educationalists (Davis, Conroy and Clague,

2020; Cuban, 2014). The key point for this study remains: enlarged secular state provision of mass schooling did not significantly undermine the role of religion and religious instruction within education.

As educational provision grew and changed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, so too did the books available for children. Texts written with children specifically in mind could support a growing demand for a literate population. To be godly required one to be literate so that it was possible for everyone to undertake Biblical study, and conversely, Biblical study and instruction was instrumental in developing literacy (Prothero, 2010). According to Trousdale (2005), as Children's Literature became more and more of a phenomenon in its own right over time, major changes occurred in both the form and the content of stories written for younger readers. There was, she writes, "a movement away from sentimentality, didacticism and religious values; the inclusion of multi-cultural perspectives and of topics formerly considered taboo in books for children." (pp 62-63). Moving into the 19th Century, Reynolds suggests that:

> [c]hildhood came to be seen as especially close to God and a force for good. In children's literature, this idealised version of childhood became and remained enormously influential throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, though its Christian origins grew less pronounced (Reynolds, 2014, np).

The first 'golden age' of children's literature, generally accepted to be the period between 1865 and the publication of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland,* and the early 1900s before the advent of the first world war, overlaps another period of huge change in education. Books for children during this time reflected the society in which they were published as would be expected. Thus the religious tropes and heavy religious instruction which characterised the earliest texts, started to decline, as children's books increasingly reflected a more adventurous, childhood-focussed approach, with religious faith and practice certainly underpinning the daily lives of key protagonists in the books written but no longer forming the basis of moral teaching therein. Koppes (1978) suggests that one of the most important writers of this time, Frances Hodgson Burnett, was influenced by her own experience of receiving morally instructive and improving religious books as a child, suggesting that whilst her books are not religious in and of themselves, they reflect two key tropes – the fairy tale and the exemplar, which played a large part in Hodgson Burnett's childhood reading.

Schooling, meanwhile, had begun to provide a much broader education than under earlier, much more earnestly religious pre-1870 regimes, reflecting a growing recognition of the role of education in developing economically useful members of industrial-commercial society. Religious instruction still had a key role, but it formed part of a greater whole as far as schools were concerned (Platten, 1975; Barnes et al, 2023).

Significant change in the education system, including the raising of school leaving age, improvements in teacher training, and an increased focus on infant schooling, incorporating ideas from Montessori and Froebel, diversified further into the first half of the 20th century. But it is the period following the 1944 Education Act, through the second 'golden age' of children's literature up until the 1970s that perhaps saw the greatest change in how and what children were to be taught in schools as far as RE was concerned and how this was also reflected in the changing focus of books for children in the school and in the home. A time of revolution both in educational and publishing terms, as far as children are concerned, this period has laid the foundations of learning for children in the 21st Century and it can be seen to have influenced the literary offer provided to those children too.

For education, a growing awareness of increasing diversity within Great Britain, following the implementation of the Butler Act in 1944, led to fundamental changes in tone around the content – and purpose – of RE in schools. For whilst those early state schools, under the hefty influence of the Church in its various denominations, were concerned with the spiritual and moral welfare of their pupils, an increasing recognition of the need to understand, and to some extent incorporate, different faiths into post-war Britain meant that religious education needed to change. The shift in terminology from Religious Instruction to Religious Education was itself a key signifier of this (Deenihan, 2002)

As the 1944 Act was implemented in England and Wales throughout the following decades, a parallel revolution was taking place in children's publishing. Echoing the first golden age from the late 1800s, both technological advances and deepening scientific understanding of child development were major influences on the curriculum provided to children. In 1941, the Penguin publishing group launched the Puffin imprint, specifically for children. This reflected technological changes which enabled paperback books to be produced cheaply and in volume, instantly broadening access to a much wider readership. In much the same way

that advances in printing technology brought books to a younger audience in the mid 19th Century, so the improvements in place in the first half of the 20th Century broadened that audience even further. Technological progress in terms of audience reach can be seen today, with the publishing phenomenon of the Harry Potter books attributed in no small part to the dramatic increase in social media access, driving awareness and access beyond existing audiences for children's books (Purnama and Davis, 2016).

The mid-war period provided children with the opportunity to obtain relatively cheap books. These books tended towards the idealistic (Munger et al, 2016) – but this would change as publishing and education moved into the post-war period:

> …in the 1960s and 1970s a flood of children's books emerged centring on realism. Authors such as Beverley Cleary, Judy Blume and Paul Zindel wrote about growing up, death, obesity, and other issues which marked a shift in the boundaries of what was acceptable, and arguably, even necessary for children to understand. (Munger et al, 2016).

What had happened to encourage such a shift in focus? Ever changing and developing views on childhood, and on the role of institutions in shaping society in the wake of the 1944 Act led to dramatic changes in how children were educated and what they were expected to learn (Tisdall, 2020). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, spending on education and schools more than doubled from the share of national income spent in 1940 (Jones, 2016). Changes to the schooling system, including the abolition of most selective provision from 1964 onwards and an increase in vocational training, also led to a significant increase in children taking public examinations, with the introduction in England of CSEs to be examined alongside O levels, and the development of the 1984 Standard Grade examinations in Scotland. At the same time, teachers, academics, Local Authority officers, teacher training institutions and others began to have an increasing impact on the direction of travel for pedagogical approaches and education policy. Political campaigning on educational policy reached a peak during this time, leading to changes in both what was being taught, and how. The 'progressive' approach to teaching in the 1960s and 1970s, much vilified by many education pundits today, reflected a level of discontent with education which was played out in the press. In 1964, the Labour government promised that "education, at all levels, would be a focus of investment, a site of reform, which would create the culture of a new age," (Jones, 2016, np).

At the same time, publishing for children continued with its own revolution. Kay Webb, Children's editor for the Puffin imprint, part of Penguin Books, took up her role in 1961, and during her tenure introduced a generation of children to the latest in children's books, through intuitive marketing and the introduction of the Puffin Club. A widening range of books for children was promoted through the imprint, and through other publishing houses and editorial groups too – Aiden Chambers began his literary career in the 1960s, followed by an influential period editing and publishing children's books in the 1970s and beyond, introducing children to a diverse and new range of texts which reflected the social concerns of the time.

According to Nikolajeva,

> socially engaged and problem-orientated children's literature from the 1960s and 1970s … came as a reaction to the earlier idyllic children's literature and often discussed social problems without taking literary form into account." (Nikolajeva, 1996, p5)

It is interesting to note Nikolajeva's take on the potential lack of "literary form" during this period, because books written for children were certainly being recognised for their potential as teaching tools. Margaret Meek, in her seminal book *On Being Literate*, first published in 1971, wrote about the power of story, and its role in becoming literate, not only as a textual reader, but in terms of what would become known as multiple literacies, as children created narratives which shaped and explained their worlds. Texts, she agreed, were fundamental to the teaching of reading, but they could do so much more than that. That literary form might be taking a backseat, as posited by Nikolajeva, was not detrimental to the effect of books and story on children's growing understanding of their worlds.

Theories of child development impacted not only in this period upon education, but also upon the content of books available to children:

> Social-constructivist learning theories, particularly those of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, stressed the social formation of meaning and the importance of reading and narrative for human development and higher order thinking skills." (Arizpe et al, 2013, p243)

Books remained an integral and vital part of children's education throughout this period. And as the content of fictional texts for children continued to change, reflecting changing demographics and societal influences, so too did the curriculum for RE in schools.

Jackson and O'Grady (2007) describe how the 1970s saw an increasing willingness on the part of local authorities to place a more liberal interpretation on the 1944 Act when it came to religion. Moves to include religions other than Christianity in the curriculum offered to children reflected not only the spirit of the Act, but also changes to pedagogical understanding throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Important voices such as that of Ninian Smart helped to raise the profile of other faiths and the importance of including them in school curricula, and indeed Smart's Seven Dimensions of Religion (Smart, 1992; Conroy and Davis, 2010) can still be recognised as a basis for much of the structure of agreed syllabi today. A developing awareness of the importance of reflecting diversity in the curriculum as a result of increasing immigration post-war, alongside a recognition that, in order to ensure societal harmony, understanding and tolerance of diverse cultures and beliefs would need to be made specific, was reflected within the curriculum offer for RE, and also in the books available to children.

Whilst the period oversaw a decline in books for children with recognisable religious themes or even protagonists for whom religious belief was a part of their everyday lives, nevertheless, religion still featured. C S Lewis's *Narnian Chronicles* published between 1950 and 1956 took their place as classic children's texts, with their allegorical themes at the forefront of the storylines. Aiden Chambers, whose role in promoting (and creating) a wide range of socially relevant texts throughout the period was clearly influenced by his own prior experience as a member of a monastic order before rejecting the faith in 1967, recognised that it was the language and theatrics of the church which had appealed to him (aidenchambers.co.uk). Such immersion in liturgical language and ritual would influence his writing in the same way that the religious undertones of family life throughout the years preceding the 1960s would continue to shape the language of numerous texts created for children during this period. The second golden age of children's literature, coming as it did at a time of enormous educational and societal change, reflected the lived experiences of writers just as much as it aimed to reflect the lived experiences of its readership.

RE, meanwhile, remained a core part of the curriculum on offer to children, and later legislation cemented its role. The 1988 Education Reform Act saw the establishment of a National Curriculum which excluded RE, but rendered it compulsory and ensured that it could not be dropped at any point up until the age of 16. Further guidance when academisation of state funded schools began, along with the introduction of the Free School system, ensured that, whilst academies and free schools do not have a legal duty to teach the National Curriculum, they are required to provide a "broad and balanced curriculum including English, maths and science, [t]hey must also teach religious education" (DfE, 2012). This left RE in an unusual, and potentially uncomfortable place – not part of a nationally imposed curriculum, but statutory in and of itself, with its content prescribed by members of the local community rather than centrally based government officials. Special, perhaps, but clinging on by its fingertips in order to ensure its credibility with teachers and parents – and pupils – for whom the right to withdraw from it as a subject had been established in 1870, and further strengthened in subsequent Acts of Parliament. The curriculum today, in England, is still decided on an area-by-area basis through the establishment of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACRE) boards, whose members are drawn from religious leaders and practitioners (and Local Authority advisers) who represent the main religious groups and communities of the area (DfE, 2012). In this way, it is hoped, the curriculum for RE should reflect closely the experience and beliefs of local communities which should be recognisable to some pupils, whilst allowing for discussion from different religious perspectives, on how best to ensure pupils are taught about the beliefs and practices of the major world religions as part of their curricular entitlement (DfE 2012). The *Curriculum for Excellence* in Scotland says of Religious and Moral Education that it should enable pupils to "recognise religion as an important expression of human experience", focussing not only on "Christianity in the Scottish context" but also a wide variety of religions and non-religious views. (Curriculum Review Group, 2004). That focus on religion as human experience is reflected in the theme of this thesis. Within children's literature too, a changing focus on the presentation of religion and religious beliefs reflects changing views on religion in society.

Religious themes in children's literature – a changing landscape

Historically, religion has played a big role, as discussed before, in providing content and contexts for children's books. In ensuring children were able to access moral messages, and

to learn Biblical stories and catechism, children's books were, historically, vitally important teaching tools in the Western Christian tradition (Bottigheimer, 19993). Wood describes the positioning of early children's literature as a sweetener for moral and religious learning:

> it could be argued that children's literature as we know it here in the West grew out of the Puritan revolution. The effort to influence children's worldview and psyches, to teach them what is considered essential to their wellbeing in this world, or in the hereafter through appeals to their love of narrative and drama, has always characterised much if not all children's literature (Wood, 1999, p1).

However, not all children's literature from Puritan times would focus solely on direct religious messaging. As described earlier, stories were created not only to provide information for formative minds, but to entertain, amuse and delight their audiences. Trousdale (2005) suggests that indeed it was religious *values* which "permeated books written for children" (p61), writing in a later article that there was evidence of "a critique of the kind of severely punitive theology which underlay *The New England Primer* and John Cotton's catechism." (Trousdale, 2011 p230). The idea of the sinful child reflected in the books available to children was, perhaps, not borne out by the reality of loving families concerned, yes, for the souls of their children who could well die at an early stage, but also keen to provide delight in the activities and books available to them, and exhibiting unconditional love and attachment as generously as the parents and guardians from any other era (Graham, 2000). But the importance of spreading Christian messages, doctrine and morality through books available to children who were, after all, probably the best possible audience for instruction through the written word is clear, particularly when, in England at least, this related almost exclusively to an Anglicised representation of Christianity as it was lived and experienced within the children's own communities.

The ability to read has been held in the highest regard throughout history– being literate could lead to greater opportunities in terms of employment and prospects, lifting people from poverty and opening up opportunities to better oneself (Wamba, 2010). Reading the bible, once it became more widely available in English was one way in which story could be used to improve levels of literacy in the home – and in more formal education settings.

Herman (2001) suggests that increasing rates of literacy in Scotland, which he relates directly to the requirement of the early Reformers that there be a school in each parish where teaching

of scripture was a fundamental goal, led inevitably to an appetite for other stories. “Scotland became Europe’s first modern literate society,” he claims, going on to suggest that “[t]his meant that there was an audience not only for the Bible but for other books as well.” (p23). This growing desire for story beyond that found in the Bible may also reflect the oral storytelling tradition of pre-printing press communities, where folklore, fairy tales and family stories formed major aspects of community entertainment and community cohesion (Tehrani, 2013). But as stories for children (and adults) continued to be created and then distributed through means of the printed word, religious belief and practice was routinely included even if it was not the focus of the tale itself. Trousdale (2011) suggests that “[d]uring the nineteenth century…[i]t was common for fictional characters, in the ordinary course of life, to attend church, pray before meals, read the Bible and fear God.” (p220). If instruction in religious belief and practice was not the purpose of the stories being published, the reality of faith and ritual underpinning the lives of the characters was a cultural and social assumption. Trousdale as she explores the changing representation of religion in children’s literature, suggests that by the middle of the 20th Century, “so nearly absent from children’s books was any mention of religion that the prominent children’s author, Jane Yolen, commented that religion had become ‘the last taboo in children’s literature’”(Trousdale, 2011, p220).

Whilst religion in overt form may have become somewhat unmentionable in children’s books, as the 20th Century drew to a close, religion as a theme began to rear its head once more in books written for a younger audience. Blair (2016), in her introduction to a special edition of *Literature and Theology* focussing on religion in contemporary children’s literature, highlights “a general consensus that the late twentieth and twenty-first century has witnessed a notable revival of interest in religious and theological themes in children’s literature” (p125). This reawakening of interest is borne out by increasing numbers of academic studies exploring religion in children’s literature in the contemporary catalogues. However, where increasing levels of protagonists demonstrating religious beliefs or lived religious experiences within middle-grade and young adult literature themselves is concerned, Trousdale suggests a significant change in *focus* from the accepted, lived religious experience of yesteryear. “When religion was mentioned,” she writes, “it was often in a critical vein. Religion was no longer assumed to have definitive answers…” (Trousdale, 2011, p220). Dystopian fiction, which has emerged as a major genre for young adult fiction in the last 20 years or so (Scholes and Ostenson, 2013) has featured religion in several important novels as an underlying regressive and coercive feature of future or alternative

societies, where it is set up to be challenged and which, unchecked, has the potential to lead, or actually does lead, to the break-down of societies with a lasting negative impact on individual lives (Ness 2008; Farmer, 2002; Pullman, 1995; Almond, 2011). These novels are aimed at older audiences – young adult and crossover groups – and reflect broader social and contemporary questions about the role of religion in our everyday lives in cultures where its influence appears to be on the wane.

Chapter 2

A review of the field – the role of children's literature in education

Religion and children in the 21st Century

It may be helpful here to consider why RE is still considered a necessary part of our education system in the UK at all. The French education system places great importance on the principle of *la laïcité* or secularism, and currently religious instruction, whilst not banned on school premises, is limited to non-statutory, after-school classes, with government officials strongly defending sanctions imposed on violations of secularism in schools (Myers, 2020). In the US, public schools are forbidden from any kind of actual or perceived religious indoctrination, such as reciting a school prayer, or promoting religious doctrine, including daily Bible readings for example. In England, conversely, a daily act of collective worship which reflects the predominantly Christian culture of the country is a legal requirement in Local Authority schools and academies alike (DfE, 1994) and RE is a statutory part of the curriculum from 4-16. Recent developments in the RE world (in England), notably the report *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A national plan for RE,* (Commission on Religious Education (CORE, 2018), have proposed changes to the existing format of RE curricula, with plans for a change of name to Religion and Worldviews which would include non-religious views including Humanism and Atheism. This change of focus from one of belief and practice closely tied to the concept of deities and their worship, to one of personal and institutional worldviews, is designed to be more inclusive and more representative of the population of England and Wales as a whole, with the Commission defining it thus:

> We use the term 'institutional worldview' to describe organised worldviews shared among particular groups and sometimes embedded in institutions. This includes what we describe as religions as well as non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, Secularism or Atheism. We use the term 'personal worldview' for an individual's own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews. (CORE, 2018, p 4).

For teachers of RE in primary and secondary schools, this shift in focus comes at a time of increasing concern about diversity and tolerance. As RE has changed since the 19th Century to reflect societal change, so ongoing developments in how we fit together as a nation and as

a society continue to shape discourse around RE and around the literature presented to children.

Changing understanding of child development and theories around education have been hugely influential on schooling and on publishing as outlined in the historical review of developments in the previous chapter. The link between children's spiritual development and their growing understanding of the world has impacted too upon the texts available to them (Trousdale, 2006). As far back as 1970, Elkind wrote a paper that linked Piagetian theories of child development with children's growing awareness and understanding of spirituality, and their experience of organised religion. Like infants moving through the conservation stage, (object permanence), he describes a child's search for permanence in terms of religious understanding:

> Infancy…bears witness to a new mental ability, the capacity to deal with absent objects, and to a corresponding need, *the search for conservation*, a life-long quest for permanence amidst a world of change. (Elkind, 1970, p37).

Children seeking answers about what happens after we die, for example, are seen as moving through this stage, coming to terms with the realisation that life itself is not permanent, or conserved, and seeking reassurance as to their own relative permanence in the supposed afterlife. He goes on to compare the representation stage with a child's growing ability to represent God beyond a mere concept of 'godness', and the concept of recognising relationships between objects and events with a developing capacity for reason which relates to understanding about the numinous. In making such comparisons, Elkind raises the idea that religious understanding and acceptance is as linear in its development as Piagetian child development theories.

So it could be argued that exposure to, and teaching about, religious belief and practice serves to reflect a natural developmental process which impacts on everyone as they move through childhood and into adolescence and adulthood, whether one chooses to express these stages in religious or non-religious terms. In order to enable children to develop their own views on fundamental and existential questions, lenses can be provided through which they can observe and study and analyse those questions, and religious belief and practice is one of those lenses. But what more can the teaching of religion offer in the classroom? Is it not, as

some suggest, the role and responsibility of parents to provide religious instruction in line with familial beliefs and practices, rather than the school's?

Perhaps an answer to that lies in the difference between the words *instruction* and *education.* The curriculum in schools moved on from the concept of religious *instruction* following the 1944 Act in part because of the linguistic connotations of the word, which suggested not the provision of information and development of understanding of religion *per se* but detailed passive instruction in specific religious beliefs and practices in an attempt to make these a part of a child's everyday experience as member of an identified religious group. The word 'instruction' did not infer the breadth of knowledge and understanding that the curriculum required. Green and Oldendorf (2011) suggest that one must look beyond the instruction model of religious adherence to an appreciation of what role religions and religious practices and beliefs have played in the lived experience of citizens today, whether they recognise the religious basis of the laws and systems which govern them or not (pp. 1-2). To even begin to understand the bases upon which whole cultures and civilisations have grown, developed and continue to advance, they claim, requires an appreciation of the role religions have had to play in this development. In order to acquire an appreciation of others and to tolerate difference, it is important to understand the religious, as well as the cultural, beliefs and expectations which underpin individual and community practice.

This requires direct teaching – but not 'instruction'. As Zeece writes, "[children] do not learn about God and/or religion simply by thinking about these isolation" (Zeece, 1998, p244). It takes modelling, involvement, and the provision of what he describes as "developmentally appropriate materials" to ensure that children are exposed to opportunities to place their growing views about concepts of faith and the numinous into the context of a lived religious experience. It is not the role of schools to churn out godly or religiously motivated young people. Even in faith schools, where denominational instruction such as learning the catechism or participating in seder are part and parcel of the school day, exposure to the diversity of religious beliefs and practice across and within religious communities is an essential part of learning (Sherwood, 2020). In her article for *The Guardian*, Sherwood quotes the Headteacher of the Simon Marks Jewish Primary School describing how children are exposed to other faiths and the importance of diversity "through a Jewish lens". That Judaism, or Roman Catholicism, or Islam, should underpin the ethos and values of a faith-designated school is one thing; RE itself exists to provide a broad picture of diverse religious

beliefs and practices. It aims to provide children with the necessary critical analysis tools to compare, contrast and comprehend different religions and establish how they impact on their own, personal worlds. The importance of providing children with opportunities to explore different cultures and practices is recognised across multiple groups, not just religious ones. In order to develop appreciation and tolerance or acceptance of diversity, it is necessary, in the classroom and beyond, to expose children to resources related to disability, gender, sexuality, colour and culture. Judgement is not a part of the curriculum; the development of critical analysis skills is, and ensuring children are provided with a full picture of the diversity of human experience, background and belief is an essential duty of the adults responsible for their education (DfE, 2013). As well as this, exposure to religious views is not present just to foster understanding. As Prothero writes, in explaining his motivation for developing materials around religious literacy, "my goal is to help citizens participate fully in social political and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts." (Prothero, 2007, p19). In fostering acceptance and understanding through a religious education curriculum, schools enable pupils to share fully in the diverse and multi-cultural societies in which they live.

It is not just in the realm of diversity that RE is so important. A spiritual element of life in its own right, be that framed in conventionally religious terms or not, is identified within the English curriculum as an essential part of self-identity which must be nurtured and recognised, through attention to what was called a curriculum for 'awe and wonder' and which has subsequently manifested itself as spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. In his seminal work on *The Spiritual Lives of Children,* Coles (1992) explored how children explain and incorporate their spiritual awareness into their everyday lives. He notes how accepted adult assumptions about how children may envisage religious tropes, such as angels on clouds, and a God figure with a long beard, are actually a very small part of how they view their religious and spiritual worlds, with numerous examples of children elucidating their understanding of deep spiritual mysteries and their concerns about their own spiritual welfare. He examines how this forms their lives:

> The more closely I listened to [the children]…the more evident it became that in many of them religion and nationalism…gave constant shape to their sense of how one might (or ought not) live a life (pxiii).

This link between religion and nationalism is an especially interesting one when considering diversity. Immediately following the vote in 2016 to leave the European Union, there was a measurable reported increase in racist abuse and attacks on the streets of England (Bulman, 2017), and perhaps much of this can be equated with a growing sense of nationalism (Orazi 2022). If, as Coles suggests, there is a link between a sense of nationalism and religious understanding in terms of creating self-identity, then it becomes even more important that children are exposed to materials and teaching which celebrate and reflect the diverse societies in which they live. This can be coupled with explanations of difference in order to foster understanding, curiosity and decency in the face of growing nationalistic unrest, much of it allied to mistrust not only of race or colour, but religious practice and community. Asma (2018) talks about the mediating power of "the religious imagination" (p11) which links understanding and knowledge with the impact of belief, and it is the development of this religious imagination, beyond the 'Five Fs' of cultural studies (Skelton et al, 2002), which sets RE apart. Walking in another's shoes in terms of their cultural experience is one thing; developing empathy and understanding of something as nebulous as belief and faith is quite another.

In providing a rigorous, detailed and sensitive RE curriculum, it is also essential that the power held by religious institutions and peoples is recognised and critically analysed. It is important that the social and cultural power of religion is explored as part of the offer for children. Ensuring that the language used to discuss and define religions and their rites and rituals is accurate is also important – conflating Islam with Islamism, for example feeds into (sometimes wilful) misunderstanding Muslim communities. At a time when people are exposed to media reports of religiously motivated terror attacks, an understanding of the historical contexts and backgrounds of different faith practices ensures that understanding is placed into a cultural and historical context which does not then shy away from some of the less positive aspects of religious practice in communities throughout history – slavery, violence and gender discrimination for example. It is necessary, in developing religious literacy as a way of promoting acceptance and tolerance, that one does not ignore the negative behaviours of institutional religions and their impact on individuals and communities over time.

However, through a broad-based, accurate and thoughtful RE curriculum, one encourages not only critical awareness in the provision of societal context alongside knowledge about rites,

rituals, dress, worship and festivals, but an insight into the lived experience of those who may well be amongst one's own class fellows. And seeing oneself reflected in the teaching and learning on offer is as important, I would argue, as seeing oneself in the books presented to us. The values espoused through curriculum provision demonstrate very clearly what is deemed of value in school (Gunn et al., 2013). For individuals developing their self-identity alongside their religious identity, as they extend their understanding of how they situate themselves, being openly valued is crucial. A curriculum which helps children develop skills for the workplace is important – STEM subjects will always have their place. But perhaps of equal importance is the development of skills for existing within societies and communities and alongside others, with healthy, respectful curiosity about how we differ from one another in beliefs, cultures and histories, and celebrating difference and sameness on an equal basis. How one ensures that everyone sees themselves celebrated is explored now as I examine how fiction could be an effective mirror, window and sliding glass door for the religious and non-religious child on their journey towards an understanding of their own identity and that of those around them.

The potential role of fiction in the RE classroom

Children's literature has a role in teaching across the curriculum, both to support concepts being taught, and as an artefact of learning in and of itself (Śen, 2021; Bradbery, 2012; Neranjani, 2020). It can provide a conduit into understanding which may be difficult through other teaching means - it provides the reader with the opportunity to explore other worlds and experiences. It is a private zone in which to explore not only the realities of others' lived experience, be that realistic or fantastical, but also to explore personal attitudes and feelings about these new unknowns, to make sense of them within one's own worlds and alongside one's own experiences, and to explore ways of rejecting or absorbing the messages therein into one's own lives. Equally, it provides information beyond that of individual imaginations which can be explored at leisure and in safety. As Detweiler writes, "[narrative fiction]…permit[s] its practitioners, its writers and readers to participate…in an imagined experience of social life in privacy, at their leisure and without exertion" (Detweiler, 1995, p31).

Narrative fiction also provides a place of safety. It allows the exploration of challenging or even reprehensible subjects and viewpoints in a safe place where the reader can begin to form

opinions and views without fear. This sense of safe space also demonstrates the importance of ensuring readers are critically literate, and that texts are mediated where this is appropriate for different ages and different contexts. And this is important because fiction can have significant power. It can portray truths as myths, fictions as absolute truths, opinions as facts, dissent as sinful. When one considers the influence of books as objects of instruction, the ability to discriminate between fact and fiction is key. Readers can recognise that the fictional and fantastical worlds created by authors have their own truths and their own role to play in the exploration of ideas and concepts which form part of real lived experiences beyond the boundaries of the cover. Authorial intent needs to be established when considering the instructive nature of a work of fiction. As Wojcik-Andrews (1993) suggests, there are forces at work when texts are written which may not be in the best interests of children, and indeed even in children's literature, there lies a repository of opinion which may be considered questionable at the very least, and repellent at worst. For whilst those historical texts of Janeway and Bunyon can be read with full knowledge of their instructional motive and moral and religious intent, the objective of the author today is not always so clear, and sometimes deliberately so. Hunt writes, "we can see the book either as a great subjugator of the masses or as a great liberator of the human mind." (Hunt, 1991, p152). And indeed, the power of the book has not gone unnoticed by leaders, regimes and those seeking influence through the ages, with book burnings, for example, as a way of imposing particular viewpoints and silencing others. Selecting texts, therefore, when the selecting adult wants them to have an instructional benefit, is a big responsibility. Ensuring the youngest readers in have the skills to probe the intent of the author and the context in which a text has been written, is necessary for ensuring that child readers can truly explore new worlds in safety.

For, in allowing a safe space for exploration of 'otherness' and other experiences, fiction is, perhaps, unique. That exploration can involve exposure to different cultures and beliefs as well as mythical worlds, historical events and contemporary experiences. Books are valuable tools for helping children to develop a worldview which is broader than that which their immediate community can offer. "Children's literature can be a tool for creating a historical, socio-political imagination in readers," write Botelho and Rudman (2009, p9), "and teachers and other adults can serve as important role models of resistant reading." Fiction allows the reader to question the status quo – again in a safe space – and to challenge their own preconceptions as well as those of the communities around them. It encourages confrontation of fears and demons through exposure to multiple contemporary and diverse cultural stories

where such monsters are encountered and defeated (Seden 2005). Books allow the reader to experience a frisson of fear and to learn how to deal with it before facing the very real terrors they have to tackle in real life; they allow experimentation with ways of feeling, and ways of believing amidst the realisation that some feelings, which may feel overwhelming, do pass. And they encourage readers to frame the questions which go on to form the basis of how one creates one's own identity, encouraging without fear the asking of the difficult questions by providing a scaffold for them – a scaffold which I would argue is much more available in children's and young adult literature than perhaps in adult literature, which often appears to be trying to provide the answers. As Reynolds states, "In the fictions created for them children encounter ideas, images and vocabularies that help them think and ask questions about the world" (Reynolds, 2007, p3). The words themselves on the page, placed into a context of the experiences of others, provide access to a vocabulary which enables the framing of those big questions. Spufford describes the importance of books to him as a child and their role in developing identity:

> the words we take into ourselves help to shape us. They help form the questions we think are worth asking; they shift around the boundaries of the sayable inside us, and the related borders of what's acceptable;…they build and stretch and build again the chambers of our imagination. (Spufford, 2002, loc 274/284)

The attempt to grapple with difficult concepts, big questions, competing identities, through the fictional examination of relationships (adult to child, powerful to weak) helps the reader to develop the mental muscles which enable them to be strong in the real world when faced with real-life challenges. These big questions, for which literature can provide a scaffold, are often related closely to intrinsic and taught beliefs which may be related to a child's experience of religion as a member of a religious community, or of the taught aspects of religion found in schools, or of an active choice for non-religion expressed by family members. Big questions are asked by everyone. Literature helps readers to frame them, and provides possible ways of accessing answers as experienced or articulated by others.

Stories have underpinned human development over millennia, providing spaces for community coherence; the sharing of information in enjoyable and contextual ways; the opportunity to demonstrate reverence for ancestors; the sharing of common, and unknown, histories. When it comes to religious belief, stories have formed the basis of many of the

world religions – an effective tool for sharing commonly held beliefs and giving body to rituals and practices which, without their associated stories, could be devoid of meaning.

Story, when it comes to the lived religious experience, is so important because it is hard to share in the intrinsic religious experience of another when this experience is so utterly personal, even whilst sharing the rites and practices which are associated with such experience. Stories can give an insight into how an intimate familiarity with, and experience of, faith, feels to the protagonist. Where spiritual awareness and moments of awe and wonder are concerned, fiction can be a powerful tool for creating and expressing the experience (Seward, 2012; Mangan, 2018).

Exploring and knowing through fiction

"When readers are able to find themselves in a text, they are therefore validated;" write Tschida et al (2014), "their experiences are not so unique or strange as to never be spoken or experienced by others." Children coming from religious backgrounds may well find their experiences differ significantly to those of their peers, and it can be challenging to recognise or share those familial and cultural aspects of their lives which could lead to othering. Texts which provide recognisable characters with whom readers can identify, by virtue of their shared cultural, religious, social and economic experience. Books such as *It's a no money* day (Milner, 2019) appeal to children on a number of levels, providing recognition and validation. This is equally important for children of faith. Narrative can provide spaces to explore and share experiences whilst validating the mirrored experiences of some readers. Detweiler suggests that:

> narrative fiction substitutes rather than represents. It takes the place of the very activity it dramatises, permitting its practitioners, its writers and readers to participate in an imagined experience of social life in privacy, at their leisure and without exertion. (Detweiler, 1995, p31).

In this act of substitution, fiction allows exploration, without risk of offence, and in the safe knowledge that the reader can share the protagonist's experience without personal risk. Providing literature which contains a lived religious experience (as opposed to specifically dogmatic, didactic religious literature or proselytising fiction) can also provide a mirror for children of faith. As Trousdale writes, "such books provide young people with a sense of

having companions on their journeys" (Trousdale, 2011, p230). Equally, she suggests, books with religious themes or characters, which raise fundamental questions about faith and belief and practice in the name of religion, can provide a safe space for readers who do have a faith to explore those same questions, that, in other spheres, might be construed as blasphemous, or irreligious or "threatening to a sense of God's presence" (p230). For those who are charged to provide children with a good grasp of Religious Education, it is an important part of their teaching role to ensure that those children have the skills to question, to delve into statements of belief, and to be sceptically curious about the beliefs of others, and their own beliefs. Enabling children to use the tools of critical literacy and evaluation to come to a personal, evidenced judgement *without* causing offence, or refusing others the right to hold beliefs one might find offensive or incomprehensible, whilst allowing too for the right to condemn unacceptable actions undertaken in the name of those beliefs, is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks expected of the teacher, the parent – and the author. Giving children the opportunity to explore works of fiction using those very tools could be an effective way into understanding the religious lives of others.

Fiction as teacher

Fiction is used to great effect in classrooms up and down the land to provide information as well as pleasure. In primary classrooms novels and picture books are used as central elements of thematic or individual subject teaching, exploring, for example, World War II through *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (Kerr, 1971), discussing fairy-tale form alongside Anderson's *The House with Chicken Legs* (2018); enhancing a knowledge of the Amazon rainforest with *The Explorer* (Rundell, 2017). In secondary schools, works of fiction can be mined for historical and cultural contexts across subjects: *Follow The Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Pilkington, 1996); *Warhorse* (Morpurgo, 1982)*; I, Coriander* (Gardner, 2005): all texts used to enhance and broaden pupils' understanding of different cultures, peoples, times and events. Teachers are careful to ensure that works of fiction are presented as just that – fiction – whilst recognising the facts which can underpin elements of the storyline, developing through careful teaching the critical literacy skills needed to sort fact from fiction and opinion from reality. Using works of fiction to enhance religious knowledge and understanding works in the same way, but requires, perhaps, on the part of the teacher, an even greater attention to character portrayal and the risk of misrepresentation. As stated earlier, one cannot begin to claim to understand someone's fundamental experience of belief, only to be exposed to

external expressions of it, but one can use fiction as a teaching tool to explore some of the knowledge that is associated with RE. Use of such a tool requires acknowledgement, either privately or openly, of the teacher's own situatedness with regards to their religious experience and their attitudes towards religion and the teaching of it. It requires, too, that the situatedness of historical and 'factual' texts as constructions influenced by ideologies, personal beliefs and social and political contexts, is acknowledged. However, Green and Oldendorf endorse children's literature as "a familiar medium to teachers [which] provides an inviting way to teach about the important dimensions of religious diversity" (Green and Oldendorf, 2011, p18), and in recognising the limitations of fiction as well as factual writing, the teacher can help children to develop those critical literacy skills which are so important when navigating a complex world.

Green and Oldendorf (2011) place the understanding and study of religion at the core of their work on children's literature. "To study religion," they suggest, "…is to examine some of the great mysteries that face human beings, including questions about creation, death, purpose, love and the nature of the universe" (p1). Such questions are often inferred or specifically referenced in contemporary children's literature.

Stories from religious faiths

Probably by far the largest influence on *how* stories from religious faiths are remembered relates to how these are taught in schools. The Non-Statutory Guidance for RE in English Schools lays down the requirement for locally convened SACREs to ensure that the majority of RE curriculum time be devoted to Christianity with a focus thereafter on major world faiths which both reflect global membership and local faith demographics (DCSF, 2010). Thus Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism regularly feature on locally agreed syllabi, whilst attention is also paid to non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, and denominations within faiths as well as locally-specific religious faith groups. There is generally a greater focus on the Abrahamic faiths than others. These are storytelling faiths, (Smart, 1992), where story and parable and allegory are fundamental aspects of teaching and understanding. The way in which key stories that contribute to the sacred canons of different faiths are presented to children (and adults) by teachers and religious leaders contributes immensely to *how* these faiths are understood by young people (Copley, 2007).

Hermeneutics and storyteller bias aside, the language introduced to children through the sharing of religious stories increases their religious vocabulary and potentially their religious literacy. It demonstrates how such stories have provided the linguistic framework for exploring big questions and challenging concepts. Bruner and Bruner explore the ways in which the language of stories contributes to the toolkit available for investigating spiritual themes:

> Myths and legends gave the ancients a common vocabulary for grappling with spiritual realities. Ghost stories caused medieval townsfolk to avoid dark superstitions. Grimm's Fairy Tales gave generations of young children a moral compass for proper behaviour. Scholars like George MacDonald, J.R.R. Tolkein and C.S. Lewis created fantasy novels laced with profound Christian truths about the nature of good and evil. And modern storytellers like Madam [sic] L'Engle, J.K. Rowling and Philip Pullman have created other worlds that intentionally mirror the moral and spiritual conflicts in our own (Bruner and Bruner, 2009, pp14-15).

Myth and fairy tale both have structures which are recognisable and comfortable, offering narratives which provide explanations for a range of concepts and ideas in formats and vocabulary which are familiar and accessible. Werner and Riga (1989) postulate that the purpose of fairy tales is close to that of religious stories in how they enable a sharing of ideas across borders both cultural and class-based. Religious stories, shared via the nursery in colourful picture books, through the nativities and Easter re-enactments that make up such a memorable part of early education, and through RE lessons, contribute equally to enhancing this common vocabulary. The comparison and exploration of authorial intent and the hermeneutics of the stories shared, contribute to the development of platforms upon which to share common experiences of faith and belief as well as to explain and explore differing beliefs. As Aldridge (2018) suggests, "[t]he reader does not occupy the same location as the text, but comes to stand in a new and related way; a shared question comes into view and the horizons of understanding are thus fused" (p248).

Story is a powerful force for vocabulary building and for empathy building (Oatley, 2016; Empathy Lab). Religious stories which demonstrate similarities between faiths can be used to establish links between different faith groups; recognising, for example, the almost universal edict, or Golden Rule, to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' as a comparative feature which underpins interreligious narrative can be a good building block for creating understanding and empathy (Hibbin, 2016). Through exposure to, and discussion of,

the themes, symbols and significance of such religious stories, readers can begin to see the religious and spiritual understandings and knowledge at play in a range of scenarios, from cultural-political contexts to the wording of laws; and from the spiritual significance of poetry to the Christian symbolism at play in the world of Harry Potter (Nikolajeva, 2008).

Religious, sacred, spiritual and secular stories

In order to reflect upon the role books might play in teaching children about the lived religious experience, it may be helpful to define what is meant by *religious, secular, sacred* and *spiritual* stories. Of course, in some cases, the boundaries between each of these genres may well be blurred – *The Wind in the Willows* would be one such example of a secular story with sacred and spiritual dimensions. In general, however, I have taken a *religious* story to be one which comes from the canon of a religious faith's texts, which may purport to describe historical events in narrative form, and which has, as a key function, the explanation, situating, description or recounting of events, beliefs and structures which give foundation and meaning to a faith. Dinkler describes the analysis of texts through the use of "What the text meant" versus "What the text means" (Dinkler, 2015, p223) – a delineation which places focus on the historical, or pseudo-historical, elements of religious stories as well as trying to ascertain deeper meanings from them. He advises caution in this approach, however, suggesting that:

> Strictly distinguishing between "what the text meant" and "what it means" relegates the theology to the present and the historical to the past – a problematic move, not least because history is saturated throughout with theological negotiations (p223).

There is, therefore, a crossover between the recounting feature of religious stories and the intrinsic meaning garnered therefrom. One important element of religious stories for adherents is, as Dinkler puts it, "what is at stake…" (Dinkler, 2015, p225). He suggests that,

> What is at stake for real people in real communities reading the bible as the word of God is nothing less than belief and behaviour, identity and community, salvation or damnation (p228).

Religious stories, then, have specific resonance, not only because they may contain that which presents itself as historical, situating information or truths, but because the stories bind their communities in a common historical actuality (be that accurate or perceived), and

provide an explanation or laying down of accepted practice and belief (Ganzevoort et al, 2013).

Religious stories differ from sacred stories, but can (and indeed often do) include elements of the sacred as well. For the purposes of this study, I have taken *sacred* stories to mean those which claim to hold deeper spiritual truths, rather than accounts of events; stories that give meaning to belief rather than exemplification of it. The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) provides a study unit on Sacred Stories and they define them as:

> Stories that people turn to, to glimpse the transcendent, to conserve a faith tradition, to be authoritatively guided, or to address life's big questions…
> Sacred stories shape and guide lives and are often 'revealed'.
> Sacred stories bind communities (QCAA, 2015, p2).

In revealing a glimpse of the transcendent, sacred stories provide meaning to faith or belief or worldviews. They can relate to formal religions, but they can also relate to inner, non-confessional, spirituality as well. A sacred story may form part of an accepted religious canon, but it can also exist to bring meaning to a religious community which does not include it formally within their own religious tradition, or to those with no formal religious affiliation at all.

Spiritual stories do not necessarily refer to traditional religion at all and have at their heart things that affect the spirit or the soul; the inner life of the individual rather than a collective expression. They may contain or refer to mystical or unorthodox practices, which may have a collective character but which can also be peculiar to the individual (Bilan's 2017 *Asha and the spirit bird;* Millwood Hargrave's 2018 *The Way Past Winter)*

Stories regarded as *secular* have little or no reference to religion, or position religious practice in particular ways, without ascribing special meaning to them. Dystopian fiction which refers to religion can be read as secular in its approach in this sense: Ness's *Chaos Walking* trilogy, for example, provides a commentary on the negative impact of an imposed strict religious order on a community, whilst remaining secular in the telling of a story.

These definitions can be helpful when considering religion and literature. There is a difference too, between those texts which are at heart religious, sacred or spiritual in their core purpose, and those which contain religious themes or elements, or lived religious experiences, for the protagonists, as a part of the storytelling, rather than the point of the story.

Story in performance – the Nativity Play

For many children, both before they start school, and once they are in the infant classroom, exposure to religion in stories comes from retellings of well-known and loved Bible stories shaped to appeal to children. Noah's Ark is a prime example, and indeed, images and art works from this story are ubiquitous in nursery decoration, toys and picture books. A number of picture books aimed at younger audiences feature prayers and Biblical retellings without commentary, and there is a growing number of multicultural picture books which celebrate the religious lives of children (often focussed, perhaps necessarily, on the 'Five Fs' of cultural studies – flags, foods, festivals, fashion and famous people). Books such as Muhammad's 2019 picture book *The Proudest Blue* celebrate the outward symbols of an inner faith with sensitivity and detail; others provide narratives around familiar festivals and rites of passage which may have a religious basis. However, I would suggest that it is with the ubiquitous nativity play that religion and story have their first major influence on school aged children.

The Nativity Play is a key feature of early schooling. There can be few adults who have gone through the British schooling system who do not have cherished memories, as pupils or as parents, of wonky halos on fidgety angels; of gruff shepherds in tea-towels, followed by kings with shiny cardboard crowns and velvet cloaks made from grandma's old curtains; of innkeepers bellowing "NO ROOM AT THE INN!" in a monotone, whilst Mary and Joseph grapple with the twin struggles of floor length robes and a plastic baby Jesus wrapped in a knitted blanket, intent on toppling headfirst into the straw-filled manger. Such cultural artefacts – plastic babies, cardboard crowns, mangers and stables, redolent of mediaeval mystery plays and dramatic depictions of religious stories across faiths – form ingrained memories which help to shape later adulthood. Indeed, so deeply resonant are nativity plays with concepts of identity (I never got to play Mary! What does that say about me as an adult?) and of childhood rites of passage that, when the Covid-19 pandemic prevented the

traditional plays from going ahead due to social distancing regulations in December of 2020, national newspapers were full of the disaster of a ruined Christmas with no nativities to start off the festivities. Nativity plays are the backbone of the autumn term in primary schools up and down the land, a source of not inconsiderable stress to teachers, and delight to proud parents and grandparents, and so in 2020, schools found myriad remarkable ways to continue with their play traditions – through films, outdoor live nativities, live feeds and animated nativities (Wills, 2020; Allfree, 2020). Such is the value placed upon this annual depiction of an archetypal religious story that the prospect of its demise is greeted with horror; stories also abound regarding politically correct nativities, or multicultural approaches which do not conform to stereotypes about a traditional British nativity each year. From my own experience of writing, directing and occasionally performing in a large number of nativities over the years I have spent as a primary school teacher, the visceral appeal of these events has been apparent in the way they are memorialised and held sacred by parents. In 2018, Murphy wrote about the special place held by nativities in the hearts of nostalgic adults, stating that "[n]ativity plays become sites of yet another vestige of a cultural heritage, and the perception that they are under 'threat' another symptom of secularisation" (Murphy, 2018, p122). However, her interviews with parents from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds who had either experienced for themselves being in a nativity or who were parenting young children at that time, demonstrate huge misconceptions and misunderstandings about the story of Jesus' birth itself. Whilst the tinsel and stuffed sheep loomed large in the memories of the interviewees, the details of the nativity story did not. What then does this imply about how one makes narratives of faith stories for small children, and how these may be potentially remembered or misremembered as an accurate reflection of a faith story as the child grows into adulthood? And what does this say about the permanence or legitimacy of the religious literacy taught and promoted in school? In their reflection of historical play-acting, nativities have the power to inspire participants; to create opportunities for visceral responses to religious concepts and stories; but also to misinform, to encourage misremembering, and to lose the essence of the spiritual and religious message within the mêlée of donkeys, tea-towels and forgotten lines which are fundamental to the experience in their own right. The performative nature of these experiences can help to anchor stories from religious traditions in our minds, but at the risk of highlighting the least important aspects. Focussing instead, or as well, on the language of religious story can be helpful in ensuring that key messages are not lost amongst the costumes and the scenery.

The importance of language

The language of religion and the language of spirituality are similar, but different things. In sharing stories from religious texts, exposure to a vocabulary which reflects the language of the writer (edited and interpreted by the teller) is provided, much of which relates to stories which *tell* us something – how Noah saved the animals; how Rama rescued his kidnapped wife; the story of the Prophet and the ants and the crying camel. All of these can be read and discussed for intrinsic meaning. They can also be interpreted as explanations of cultural, legal and societal developments, as attempts at answering 'big questions', and as the ineffable, sacred word of God, within their own historical context and in terms of their relevance today.

Religious laws, practices, expectations and doctrine are also explored and expanded through the medium of religious story. Within these sacred scriptures are different genres of storytelling, much as there are in secular fiction/classifications. Religious stories may be introspective or contemplative, examining and making sense of individual and collective religious experience. They may be celebratory, jingoistic, even. They are both historical in terms of *when* they were written and their historical context, and also as records (of varying reliability and accuracy) of historical events recorded as they unfolded, and embellished by individual and collective memory and commemoration (Ammerman, 2013). They are stories written for mourning and as declarations of love. They use carefully selected language to inspire a sense of awe and to evoke awareness of a power beyond that of human comprehension. As tales and records, the stories which underpin the major world religions provide form and structure upon which to build the individual and collective expressions of adherence found in the rites and rituals which define religious communities.

Studying a religious text as a literary text within the classroom can involve exploration of the language used, and can also provide a focus on the sociological and historical context of the writing and, importantly, the resonance and application of the text for contemporary believers. Applying analysis tools which might more often be used with pupils to explore non-religious works of fiction can provide interesting insights into the text. However, without reference to beliefs about religious texts being divinely inspired or the actual words of God, the stories themselves may sometimes fall somewhat flat compared to fictional accounts. Particularly in children's bibles, for example, stories can be fairly short and more declarative than descriptive. Readers are left to their own imaginations to situate some of the stories in

place or atmosphere. Religious stories can be exciting and adventurous and gripping, yes, but they tend not to go into lots of extraneous description. For the reader used to rich literary texts, stories from religious canon can appear quite sparse in comparison – because they stand to serve a different purpose to a fictional text and were composed and compiled in an often distant and remote past.

When looking at *fictionalised* accounts of religious stories or stories with religious subjects, one is faced with other challenges. Does description and fictionalisation distract from the central message of a religious text? Is the purpose of a religious story to instruct or to delight or to do both? The Horatian Platitude allows for both instruction *and* delight, and for instruction *or* delight – suggesting that there is a role for both together and separately. A text which is thoroughly enjoyed and from which very little is "learnt" is as valid, then, as one by which the reader is transformed. Perhaps the risk of misremembering of religious story which can be a feature of the nativity experience is in part remedied by the joy which the experience of exposure to a religious story can provide.

Hunt asks challenging questions of stories with religious subjects: "[do] religious subjects …have a positive influence on young readers," he asks, "and in this way have a positive influence on the process of civilisation?" (Hunt, 2004, pp 316-317). He goes on to ask whether the entertainment value of "stories dealing with the fundamental questions" outweighs their ability to develop ethical stances. These are challenging questions to ask when using texts with religious subjects or religious stories in the classroom. If the story of Noah and the Ark is used for its entertainment value more than its intrinsic message of punishment, salvation and compact between God and mankind, then there is the risk of belittling an important religious message and tenet of faith for those who believe. And yet different retellings of such stories (McCaughrean's *Not the end of the world,* 2017; Caldwell's *All the people were mean and bad,* 2021), allow us to explore alternative views, the perspectives of others and the contexts within which the original stories were presented. But in much the same way that nativities, particularly those with the 'second lobster' approach, can detract from the story of Christ's birth itself, religious stories and stories with religious subjects need careful handling in the classroom to ensure that their messages are explored appropriately and proportionately. New tellings of old stories can bring fresh perspectives when undertaken with care and thoughtfulness.

Developing religious and spiritual literacies and vocabularies

Providing a moment of pause, an intake of breath, has much to do, in fiction, with the craft of writing, of being able to select and order words in such a way that they resonate and thrum with meaning. Where, for example, stories as recounted in children's Bibles can be short on detail and rely on an understanding of the religious or spiritual significance behind them, works of fiction (be they secular, or fictionalised accounts of religious stories) can have greater freedom to use the craft of writing to inspire awe and wonder, or to describe something beyond the everyday. Moore's *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal;* Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ;* Alderman's *The Liar's Gospel,* all confidently use known stories and tropes from the New Testament and commentaries thereon as the basis for their storylines, adapting and enhancing and, indeed, twisting the known narratives to form new stories which make the reader question those stories perhaps taken as truths. Indeed, Alderman claims that in the writing of *The Liar's Gospel,* "I went into the novel religious and by the end I wasn't. I wrote myself out of it." (Armistead, 2016). Fiction, then, both in the writing and the reading, has the power to transform our understanding and acceptance of those religious stories and 'truths' to which the reader may have been exposed as a child, or to which they have pledged their belief.

The modern take on spirituality has its own vocabulary and grammar, some of which reflects the roots of many of the practices associated with exploring the spiritual aspects of our everyday lives. The importance of acknowledging and expressing one's spiritual experience beyond or aside from the religious experience has grown in the 21st Century with the proliferation of practices such as mindfulness, yoga and meditation. Undertakings such as pilgrimage have been separated from their religious origins and imbued with the goal of self-discovery and of spiritual awakening through exposure to nature, to physical experience and contemplation, controversial though this may often be in terms of appropriation and the inherent religious significance which has traditionally underpinned such enterprises (Margry, 2008). The language of the spiritual finds a home in both the religious and the secular life. And this is as true for children as it is for adults already travelling the road of self-discovery and spiritual awakening.

The exploration of spiritual language, which codifies and expresses inner feelings and a sense of the numinous, or the universe or of personal significance, is important for children who

"cannot be acknowledged without attention to the spiritual" (Adams, 2009a, p116). According to Freeman, "the language of spirituality is a persistent and often unrecognised presence in every aspect of most everything in which we engage ourselves" (Freeman, 2013, n.p). Indeed, the National Curriculum for England places the spiritual, moral, cultural and social education at the heart of the syllabus, and the spiritual development of children in schools in England has been formally commented upon within Ofsted reports. A broad recognition of what it means to be spiritually aware, and how best to nurture a child's spiritual consciousness is an essential element of their broad and balanced education. Ofsted, in inspecting the spiritual, moral and cultural education of children, defines the spiritual constituents of children's education as their:

- ability to be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) and perspective on life
- knowledge of, and respect for, different people's faiths, feelings and values
- sense of enjoyment and fascination in learning about themselves, others and the world around them
- use of imagination and creativity in their learning
- willingness to reflect on their experiences (Ofsted, 2021).

Spirituality, and spiritual development, then, are considered fundamental to the educational experience. Schools are tasked with providing children with opportunities to explore their own worldviews, to reflect on their own beliefs, to respect those of others, and to be imaginative and responsive to their world in creative ways. An awareness of the importance of the affective domain when teaching links closely to the need to provide spiritual experiences for children as a fundamental part of their learning entitlement, and not just their religious education. It supports the provision of the skills needed to be both aware of, and able to articulate, feelings; to be able to respond emotionally to external and internal stimuli; to be able to articulate the value of beliefs, of things, of opinions; to be confident in the sharing of own viewpoints and beliefs.

In exploring the difference between spirituality as an inner sense of something "greater than ourselves and the physical world as we know it," compared with religion as "an organised spiritual belief system for understanding our existence" (Green and Oldendorf, 2011, p2), stories can once again be a rewarding vehicle for developing a spiritual vocabulary. This lexis can then be used to weave personal understanding of spirituality and the awe-inspiring reality of life, whilst recognising how religions have codified the experience of the world and the

numinous in systematic and comparative forms through different words and images. There is, of course, an individual dimension to spiritual awareness which differs from the communal interpretative and ritual features of organised religion. When one absorbs oneself in a book, it is often an extremely individual and private experience. In private reading and communal reading alike, stories of many different kinds and traditions lend themselves to deep probing and the exploration of religious and spiritual concepts. For Adams, "the spiritual probes at a deeper level. It raises issues of who an individual really is, and their place and purpose in the world – fundamental questions which adults also ask" (Adams, 2009a, p115).

Exposure to stories which allow for such contemplation, which inspire feelings of awe and wonder, and which celebrate spiritual awakening, helps children to develop a vocabulary to formulate questions (and tentative answers) which underpin every human's search for meaning in life – and which thus adds to their cultural capital in allowing them facility to share such concepts and understand others (Adams, 2009b).

Why would stories be so good at this, as opposed, say, to descriptions of incredible natural phenomena or feats of great strength or resilience? Trousdale suggests that,

> Stories invite children to enter a world not their own, vicariously to identify with the story's character and their situations, thus stimulating the emotions, the imagination, cognitive powers and moral reasoning. Such books may resonate with children's own spiritual experiences or encourage them to think beyond their experiences (Trousdale, 2004, p185).

It is the very act of engaging one's imagination, and pushing at feelings of empathy and understanding, that affective domain, which enables fiction to tap into spiritual feelings, awe and wonder, in efficient and meaningful ways. And imagination and belief are closely linked here. How could anyone conceive of God or Gods without imagination? How could one even begin to try to understand the beliefs of someone else, or their religious experience, or their sense of the numinous, without access to the power of the imagination? As Asma states, "[t]he religious imagination is a way of understanding the world and ourselves, that draws upon our visual and narrative capacities" (Asma, 2018, p9). It does not necessarily follow, however, that fiction which can help to develop that inner spirituality and empathy for others' beliefs should be explicitly religious in its nature. As Zeece writes:

> One of the best ways to address children's inquiries about God and religion is to provide developmentally appropriate literature experiences that extend children's knowledge base, cultivate their critical thinking skills, and develop their tolerance for religion-based differences (Zeece 1998, p243).

The Scottish education system allows for a broad definition of religious observance which is also known as Time for Reflection. The importance of taking time to think, to ponder, to meditate is closely associated with school ethos and community, being defined as:

> Community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community (Scottish Government, 2017)

The Scottish requirement for religious observance, then, includes the contemplation of actions as well as the opportunity to take time to think. Providing access to knowledge and facts – about historical and religious figures, for example, or the central tenets of faith, or actions taken from a standpoint of morality throughout history – can be undertaken through the use of stories from different faiths, and historical accounts of important actions. But whilst religion-specific texts *can* provide that 'knowledge base', I would suggest that critical thinking skills may be as well served by contemporary, secular texts which can be read for their spiritual content beyond formalised adherence or reference to organised religion. Secular story can move us into the place of myth and provide moments of awe and wonder – the "catch of breath" (Hein, 2014), providing that hiatus or interpellation or epiphany, which allows us a brief spell of meditation or immersion in something bigger than our everyday experience. Grahame's description of Mole's encounter with Pan is a good example of this; and whilst the encounter is with a mythological, spiritual character, the setting and happenstance described create a pause and intake of breath in a story otherwise simple if indeed adventurous and exciting (Grahame, 1967). *The Wind in the Willows* is an Arcadian novel, with great storytelling at its core and recognisable character tropes throughout, but the Pan-encounter must rate as one of the most deeply spiritual descriptions of the numinous written for children – and it occurs in a broadly, and self-consciously, secular text. Religious texts too have multiple functions – one of which is to provide information, detail and explanation (such as creation stories), and another of which is to provide that intake of breath at the beauty or wonder of the world, and the people in it, and the ways in which these impact upon our lives. They provide the background and meaning for religious laws, for dictated rituals. They explain and expand upon the meaning and significance of religious observance,

and the importance of salvation, acknowledgement of a greater power, and commitment to a faith. And such stories expose readers to a vocabulary which can be internalised and used to explore and describe one's own experiences, be they religious, spiritual or secular. Secular fictional texts sometimes move, perhaps, towards the acknowledgement of greater power in many ways, actively attempting to make the reader *feel* something through the judicious use of language to create atmosphere and a sense of place and a feeling of identification. It is the language used, and the liminal spaces created between the words, which can be designed to inspire spiritual feelings when looking at secular fiction.

When considering what makes a story, or a book, spiritual, I am drawn to Sheldrake's 2007 definition as that which reflects "the deepest values and meanings by which people live." (Sheldrake, 2007). Ammerman (2013) describes "the common sense wisdom that "religion" is organized [sic], traditional, and communal, while "spiritual" is improvised and individual" (p4). The concept of the spiritual also incorporates that awe and wonder discussed earlier, and the search for meaning and purpose through communion with the natural world and through self-reflection and meditation. The following passage from Almond's *Island* (2017) gives a flavour of how a secular book can evoke the spiritual through the language choices the author makes:

> *The village is very still. Somewhere someone is playing the Northumbrian pipes, some sweet lament that merges with the turning of the sea. I would like the words I write to be like that music. I would like my words to be like the cries of those late oystercatchers.*
> Around the words I scratch drawings of beasts and birds. Birds fly and fish swim between the lines. I draw a pattern of stars. I draw jagged monsters at the fringes.
> *I listen to the night. I look out at the stars and sickle moon. The firmament is blazing. The Longstone lighthouse turns and turns. Darkness then light. Darkness then light. The sea rises, falls, rises, falls. Mind moves and shifts through memories, facts, imaginings and gathering dreams. The time of the night, the condition of the mind, where what is real and what is dream seem to merge into each other, confuse each other. Dark Star is inside the boatshed, inside my mind, deep inside my heart.*
> I sip the wine (pp. 66-67).

Almond's use of vocabulary to paint a picture of the girl's night-time experience on the island of Lindisfarne resonates with her search for identity, for context, for belonging which pervades the novella from the beginning. His descriptions of the night reflect movement and cycles, reality and mystery. The girl's desire to make something lasting with as much importance as the cries of the birds and the sound of music through the words she writes hints

at a deeper desire for legacy and connection with the land, the sea, the sky and the people who mean most to her. The spiritual aspect of this passage relates to her physical environment, and the emotions and awe that can raise within us. For a secular passage, it contains so much that can be mined for spiritual, and perhaps religious, meaning.

This passage by Almond is a beautiful piece of writing, of craftmanship, sprung, I would suggest, from the author's experience of awe and wonder in a landscape of ethereal beauty. A sense of the spiritual, as well as a sense of the religious, can be instrumental in inspiring great works of art, be they written, painted, built or performed (Green and Oldendorf, 2011). Counting works of literature as artefacts which can be spiritually inspired provides us with the opportunity to explore the spiritual domain within the reader, and to help develop the metalanguage which enables us to describe how the words on the page evoke that sense of the spiritual. The capacity of fiction to provoke spiritual feelings should not be underestimated when selecting fictional texts for children. As Detweiler writes, "[s]tory is redemptive by nature hoping against hope that one will be yet saved by and through the telling" (Detweiler, 1995, p.ix).

Children's literature - a vehicle for exploring difficult religious ideas in the classroom

Stories can provide examples of how fictional characters might frame and attempt to answer the big questions which everyone asks. RE places those big questions into a formalised sphere, with historical and cultural roots, where understanding requires not only the ability to remember and comprehend facts, but a deeper insight into the forces which motivate individuals and communities, create the foundation for civilisations, government and social structures, and which can be incomprehensible in their requirement for belief and trust in an unseen, unknowable deity or force beyond us. So, is it important for children to be exposed to how people live, behave and believe *religiously* – and if so, what role might fiction have in bringing this to life for those looking through the windows?

Membership of a religious community, or recognition of shared beliefs within fiction helps to establish for the reader a sense of world within the text. "Most religions," says Asma, "bind a social group together and provide a sense of identity" (Asma, 2018, p8). When world building in a work of fiction, religion can be a useful part of the toolkit with which to create

the rituals, activities, festivals and reasons for gathering in communities necessary for readers to recognise such social groupings. Even when readers have no religious affiliation themselves, they are able to recognise the social and ritual elements which constitute communities. As Detweiler puts it, "all persons adopt some narrative and indulge in certain repetitive actions that assure them of the world's intelligibility and assuage the threat of chaos." (Detweiler, 1995, p37). Indeed, for many dystopian Young Adult (YA) and Middle Grade (MG) books, it is the chaos created by either a lack of systematic ritual and repetitive action on the part of communities, leading to a sense of detachment from those around, or the over-application of a set of rules based on a belief system, which provides the basis for many of the storylines explored, and religion often plays a large part in these (Pullman, 1995; Ness 2008; Almond 2011; Farmer 2002.). In a 2012 blog post, Hill suggests that "[r]eligious issues can create an instant emotional tie that you produce with few other story elements." (Hill, 2012, n.p.) Exposure to the beliefs of others and how they practise this is a powerful way of enabling readers, including those who have no religious affiliation themselves, to develop empathy and understanding of beliefs different to their own (Conroy, 2009; Santner, 2007).

When looking at realist fiction as opposed to fantasy or dystopian novels, there is a place for religious representation as an explainer and as an explorer of key issues which may be controversial or uncomfortable. Kahn's 2018 novel, *I Am Thunder,* as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, tackles the pertinent issue of radicalisation in the wake of real-world media coverage of the Bethnal Green Jihadi Brides. Where social and mainstream media in attempting to cover stories where religious extremism is a major feature will, by their very nature, likely provoke negative reactions, fiction allows us to explore, again in a safe and equal place, the motivation behind religious extremism, and the forces and situations which may lead to this (Khan, 2018; Mehmood, 2018; Meminger, 2009). Media reports are a blunt instrument, portraying single-story approaches, often written for specific audiences whose political and social viewpoints are well known and financially important in terms of report approach. Fiction can be more nuanced, and in children's literature in particular, peculiarly well-situated to offer multiple viewpoints from which the reader is at liberty to make judgements or develop understanding independently. Khan's novel allows the reader to explore what it *feels* like to be radicalised at an age when establishing an identity, coming to terms with sexuality, looks, and popularity, and questioning the beliefs and practices which have been part of one's life, are fundamental to the process of growing up. In presenting a character to the reader who is multi-dimensional, space is created to investigate the reasons

for actions, the external influences at play in the decisions made, and the cultural, sociological and religious forces which come to bear on those decisions too. One of the "challenges of the journey to the past or to another culture," states Orsi, "is to recognize what people in these other times and places share with us, the ways our stories overlap, and the way in which a shared humanity creates the possibility for deeper understanding" (Orsi, 2010, pxlvi). A media report about the religious background to a decision taken by a minor can only present an external viewpoint. A work of fiction allows us to see the internal decisions made in the round, and make our own judgements based on our funds of critical and religious literacy.

The challenges of using children's literature in the RE classroom

The access to a wider repository of information and insight is not without its problems, however. Whilst it would appear that there is very definitely a place for religion within the fiction written for children and young adults, for all the reasons expressed within this chapter, it is also important to give regard to how religion in literature can skew the level platform sought and portray incorrect or damaging images of faith and practice. Wood suggests that "[r]eligion in children's literature functions as a mechanism of social ordering, of setting up hermeneutic categories with which to view the world" (Wood, 1999, p1). Without thought about *how* those interpretative categories are explored, named, vocalised and placed into different contexts, there is a risk that religion poorly portrayed or inaccurately recounted, can lead to misunderstanding or judgements about the beliefs of others which do not reflect real lived experiences. Religions portrayed in dystopias, too, can present as overtly patriarchal (Pullman, Ness, Atwood for example), and Trousdale asks whether "the children's books today that deal with religion reflect the old patriarchal norms, or do they offer liberating possibilities for girls, and for boys?" (Trousdale, 2005, p64). Where such portrayals do not allow for a discussion of context or history or accurate representation, they risk becoming the accepted image or stereotype of religion which is all too familiar in an increasingly secular world. Careful analysis of religion in fiction requires a good level of both religious and critical literacy as defined in the introduction to this study, in order for it to be a force for good, for understanding and empathy, and not a tool which can be used for denigration, misrepresentation and suppression of religious belief under the banner of nationalism or culturalism. As Carey writes in *The Irish Times*,

> [t]he fact that children's literature can reflect so many different ideologies is a reminder how important it can be for children to ask questions about the books they read; to thoughtfully examine how an author depicts the world and, if necessary, challenge the ideas that the reader doesn't agree with. To question authority, in fact. (Carey, 2020, np).

Using fiction to help pupils develop an understanding of others' religious beliefs and practices, be they from known religions or ones in fantasy worlds, comes with a health warning. It is essential to develop textual analysis skills, in the forms of both religious and critical literacy, at a level which empowers and informs the reader and renders them able to place the fiction they are reading into a real-life context – a teaching task not to be underestimated.

There are pitfalls, therefore, in using fiction to teach about religious behaviours. In her TED talk in 2009, Adichie talks about the dangers of presenting a "single story" with regards to culture and religion. She speaks about how her own childhood was populated with stories where white middle-class children were ubiquitous, and that became the single story for her of how to be a child even when it failed to mirror her very contrasting experiences. She warns against the dangers of familiar tropes in stories which present a single aspect of a character in terms of their race, or their culture or their beliefs (Adichie, 2009). Religion, and religious belief, is multi-faceted, expressed in myriad different ways and it is important when using works of fiction to enhance understanding of religious facts that stereotypes and misleading tropes are avoided or challenged. Following their work with trainee teachers and their experience of exploring single stories in religious education, Tschida et al. state that,

> [w]e carry single stories about cultural narratives. These relate to the way the world works or how things are 'supposed' to be. These kinds of stories tell students who they are and who they should be; these stories make some ways of being in the world more acceptable and others less so (Tschida et al., 2014, p33).

That cultural narratives should be challenged when they are one dimensional or "single story" is important when one recognises the myriad ways of being religious or spiritual. Providing children with a toolkit of critical literacy skills can enable them to challenge narratives respectfully and in a spirit of curiosity and enquiry, with an understanding of the context of the narrative and the role of the author's own situatedness. Respectful scepticism, as a lens through which to interrogate personal, cultural and religious narratives, can allow the reader, or inquirer, to remain one step removed from the single story to which they may be being

exposed, and in so doing, to allow for a wider casting of the net of enquiry and exploration into the validity of the 'truths' being presented to them. An understanding of how an author uses language and presents the linguistic attributes of protagonists can help readers to guard against presumptions based on the appearance of the characters. Dialectic choices in writing have the potential to present single stories in their own right (Ivanov, 1999) and need to be viewed, by the reader, accordingly..

In using fiction to explore the 'what' of religion, care must be taken too. Citing Begler (1988), Livingston and Kurkjian warn that "too often we turn the classroom study of cultures to a fixation on the "Five F's". We focus on food, fashion, fiestas, folklore and famous people." (Livingston and Kurkjian, 2005, p696). When looking at both culture and faith, the dangers of reducing faith to the wearing of a hijab or attendance at Mass or the carrying of the kirpan needs to be taken into account. Livingston and Kurkjian suggest that,

> [i]n selecting culturally rich literature, teachers need to keep several criteria in mind: authenticity of the text in the depiction of diverse cultures; author and illustrator background; quality of the literature and illustrations; avoidance of bias and stereotypes; and above all, accurate messages that are relevant to a readers' own life and that have the power to positively shape his or her cultural consciousness (p696).

This is a tall order when it comes to selecting texts with religious themes and practices, and requires of teachers a great deal of knowledge and understanding of their own. However, the opportunities offered by fiction to place religious faith in context and help to embed an understanding of practice remain enormous. Zeece claims that "[l]iterature that informs children about their own religion and introduces them to other religions encourages youngsters to understand and respect religion-based differences" (Zeece, 1998, p245). Peyton and Jalongo hold in high esteem the power of children's literature to "provide a first glimpse of the beauty and diversity of a variety of faiths and at the same time, set in motion a lifelong commitment to acceptance, tolerance and respect" (Peyton and Jalongo, 2008, p303). These are powerful claims for stories and show not only how formidable fiction can be in the classroom in presenting both facts and feelings, but also how carefully they need to be handled to ensure regard is paid to authorial intent and the potential for misrepresentation.

Using fiction within the classroom to address religious 'facts' can help to contextualise those aspects of religion which may be alien to students. Once the facts, the details of the practices,

are understood, fiction can then be explored for deeper meanings. Ensuring children are well versed in religious knowledge can enable them to recognise the religious aspects of stories which do not, at first glance, necessarily present religious characters or themes. An understanding of authorial sedimentation as well as intent helps to ensure that elements of story presented as factual can also be challenged, and contextualised. Knowing of David Almond's Catholic background, for example, can help the reader to find new meanings in his works (Blair, 2016). Understanding Lewis's allegorical approach to *The Chronicles of Narnia* allows the reader to delve deeper into the themes of good and evil, virtue and vice, repentance and forgiveness which it espouses (Carey, 2020; Nikolajeva, 2003; Bell, 2005; Graham, 2004). Recognising the Harry Potter books in terms of sacrifice, redemption, chosen-ness, the saviour-character and humanity's fascination with evil provides a new reading of familiar stories which brings the books to life all over again. And whilst the world of Hogwarts is, unfortunately, not one in which the reader can live, the religious imagery and underlying Christ-story does form, for Christians, the bedrock of the world in which they *do* exist. Using fiction to teach facts has potential to motivate learners in the religious education classroom. Using story as one way of providing mirrors and windows for young people searching for their own truths and identities is a potentially exciting classroom tool.

Through this review of the field I have sought to explore the development of children's literature and that of Religious Education and compulsory schooling, and the importance of these in terms of developing well-rounded, curious and respectful citizens in a diverse society. The role of stories – religious, sacred, spiritual and secular - in providing opportunities for the exploration of religious practice and belief has been shown to be a potentially useful and meaningful tool in the classroom, providing opportunities for increased understanding of others through the presentation of information and the transformation of individuals as they gain insights into the personal experience of religion for other people. But there are clear pitfalls for teachers and those responsible for ensuring children gain a good understanding of, and respect for, the religious beliefs of others, when using fiction. Whilst these dangers are clearly outlined in the literature, there is little available to educators to demonstrate practically how fiction might actually be used in the teaching of RE to positive effect. It is this question of *how* one might use children's literature effectively in the RE classroom that this study now attempts to answer, through an exploration of selection and analysis tools, and the development of a toolkit for teachers to help bring the teaching of the

lived religious experience to life in the classroom through the medium of contemporary children's literature.

Chapter 3
Exploring texts

> *I am certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me.*
>
> *Descartes, 1642*

The review of the field in the previous chapters highlights the importance of ensuring that children have access to high quality religious education, and argues that there is a role for children's literature as part of the teaching toolkit for exploring and examining religious experience. However, there was little in the literature which gave guidance as to *how* to use fiction within the RE classroom. Having identified this gap I set out to explore ways in which teachers could be supported to use children's literature in the classroom. The following research questions, as outlined earlier in this thesis, were considered:

1. Is it important that children develop an understanding of lived religion, and if so, why?
2. How can fiction written for children support the development of understanding of others' religious faith, and which genres, if any, are particularly well placed to explore lived religion as a theme?
3. How can teachers, especially non-specialists, be supported in the teaching of lived religion and the lived religious experience through the medium of children's literature?

In this chapter, I focus predominantly on that second question, looking at *how* fiction can be used as a teaching aid and which types of books lend themselves most comfortably to use within the RE classroom. However, to start with, I consider the ways in which representation of religion in children's literature has changed over time, and reflect upon the importance of fiction as a teaching aid specifically for RE, along with the potential risks associated with silencing of voices through lack of representation, or avoidance of texts with religious protagonists within the classroom.

Religious representation in children's literature

Characters in the children's books which permeated my own childhood in the late 1970s and 1980s still took, as their norm, church, prayer and belief in God even though religious instruction was not a driving factor in their storylines. Eleanor-Brent Dyer's *Chalet School* series, the publication of which spanned the period from 1922 to 1969, is an example of explicit referencing of religious adherence in a traditional girls' school story setting. The *Chalet School* series, which included some 57 books, was considered essential reading for me and my peers growing up a few decades later, even if the events described in the books were far removed from our own school experiences. And whilst these stories did not appear to have any overt intention of proselytising or instructing the reader in religious beliefs, the lived religious experience was certainly present throughout them.

Trousdale identifies a change in the way religion was treated as the 20th Century drew to a close, describing "the beginning of a re-emergence of religion in books for children, but with a distinct difference" (Trousdale, 2011, p220). Far from the instructional texts of those early, sometimes devotional, often moral works of children's literature, she writes, when religion was included in children's books during the last quarter of the 20th Century "it was often in a critical vein" (p220). Wood (1999) further suggests that "even covert advocacy of religion (particularly Christianity) in secular children's literature or religious themes in children's books has become suspect and subject to censorship" (p1). A growing market for dystopian young adult and middle grade (8-12) literature was beginning to see the traditional religious expectations of the previous centuries as an appropriate vehicle for exploring power, corruption, discrimination and blind acceptance of dictated truths (Gottleib, 2001).

The market for these YA dystopias has proven fruitful; books and series such as Ness's *Chaos Walking* 2008-2010 trilogy; Farmer's 2002 *The House of the Scorpion;* and Almond's *The True Tale of the Monster Billy Dean Telt by Hisself* (2011), have all presented worlds to young readers which are at once familiar and alien and which use religion as a vehicle to explore corruption and structural violence. Pullman, in his epic trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) is explicit in both how he uses his extensive knowledge of religious practices, and how he then situates religion and the power of religious bodies to control others through

claims of divine mandate. A significant scholarship around the allegorical, reportedly quasi-Christian nature of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Bridger, 2001; McCarron, 2009; Armstrong, 2011; Feldt, 2016), demonstrates that religious imagery and themes do still feature in popular children's literature. The first screen version of Pullman's work, *The Golden Compass,* reflected concerns around the publication of the text itself, as it drew ire from fundamentalist Christian groups who were concerned about the books' depiction of Christianity (Friedman, 2009). Potter books have been banned, burnt and denounced as some kind of witchcraft by individuals and religious groups from different faiths, and in a number of different countries (Buck, 2019). Such demonstrations seem to have served not to put off readers, but to help increase their sales.

Changing approaches within fiction have occurred alongside changing protagonists, and there have been some moves towards the creation of children's books which feature characters from different cultures and backgrounds, in order to better reflect readerships (CLPE,2021). As the call for increased diversity in texts for children increases, it is probable that there will be an increase too in religious representation as part of that push for diverse voices. The field of research and discussion around the overall importance of story in terms of providing instruction and alternative worldviews to children suggests story is a valid way of providing information and opportunities for reflection in areas of the curriculum. It is my argument that this should hold true for RE as well as, say, History. It is to the consideration of story as a valid vehicle for RE teaching that I now turn.

Fiction as a vehicle

Narrative, fictional or based in truth, is one of the ways people have attempted to make sense of their worlds and circumstances throughout history. Religions in particular are storytelling constructs, concerned with multiple responsibilities to their adherents to explain and describe the numinous in words which accurately reflect a personal relationship or experience with something – or someone – beyond description and knowing. Burton (2020) explores the importance of collective rites and rituals which convey a sense of identity where "religion" itself is less concerned with God and more with ideas of self-fulfilment and that nebulous 'sense of the spiritual'. Such communities have used story as a way of establishing the community itself, creating, through oral and then written means, the narratives and histories which define cultural expectations, laws, rituals and orthodoxy. A discussion of how such

stories have come to be taken as absolute truths within some circles is beyond the scope of this thesis: that fictions, grounded perhaps in truths, can become the bedrock of civilisations, or beliefs systems, of laws and of cultural exemplification, demonstrates, I believe, the power of story as a way of exploring and explaining fundamental aspects of life (Puchner, 2018; Storr, 2020).

Rizzuto (1979) explores the idea of God as a central, and to some extent unquestioned, aspect of young children's lives. Coles describes this same principle thus: "In the lives of children God joins company with kings, superheroes, witches, monsters, friends, brothers and sisters, parents, teachers, police, firefighters and on and on" (Coles, 1992, p5). In our acceptance as children of the magical, the fantastical and the impossible, God is as real as any fairy or dragon. The superhero powers of a personal god can go unquestioned by the young child in the same way that those qualities are conferred upon the adults in their lives who wield power, and act in ways incomprehensible (and thus potentially magical). This makes a personal God comprehensible on the same level as a known adult. Powerful, yes, but tangible, relatable and grounded in the lived experience of the child.

As they grow older and begin to question those aspects of life with 'blurry edges', a belief in an invisible God can form part of the child's schema of what is, and is not, 'real' or possible. It is, therefore, one of the roles of organised religion to provide the justification, or evidence, or fundamental acceptance which allows the child to explore concepts of God in a framework of trust. And of course, one of the most potent ways that organised religions carry out this essential work is through story (Muzakki, 2017). By combining experience of the numinous with the everyday experience of the human, organised religions bring the unknowable to a place where the listener can begin to know. Parables of farming life in the New Testament; love stories in the Bhagavad Gita; tales of kings and battles, temples and slaves in the Torah – all these stories place the unknowable numinous into a framework of the every-day. They shrink the notion of the divine to a scale which is within our human comprehension, whilst enabling the ineffable enormity of the concept of an all-powerful deity to be highlighted against the routineness of our human experience. I would argue that narrative, story, is an effective way to make large concepts manageable – and the reliance of organised religions on their oral and written storytelling is testament to the supremacy of story as a key vehicle of religious understanding (Johnston, 2018; Assman, 2018). Stories are influential. They hold authority (Hunt, 1991) which one does well to recognise, especially when dealing with

children and the wide-eyed openness with which they view their worlds when young. As a result, it is important to be aware of the ways in which fiction can be used to influence readers in terms of preferred behaviours – and the risks of excluding voices in fiction as well.

Silencing, and the fictionally invisible child

There has been a significant focus in children's literature in recent times on *representation* within books. Historically, many children's books featured recognisably average families– a father who went out to work, a mother who stayed home, two children, a dog. Ladybird books were key in promoting this image of white, middleclass family life to their readers; and tales of derring-do and high adventure as espoused by the Blyton books, and Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, reflected a particular family trope which permeated the literature available to children for many years (Hunt, 2009; Maunder, 2021). Exposure to such books was wide, and the aspirations of many young minds may well have been shaped by the characters in these popular and easily available texts, even if they could not see themselves within them, as is described so lyrically by Adichie (2009). But it would be a book for younger readers which would change the landscape of children's literature in terms of representation and begin the long and slow journey towards wider representation for children within the books offered to them and the truths about the world they would be taught.

In 1983, Gay Men's Press published an English version of the Danish picture book *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* by Bösche (1981). Probably the first book for children depicting the everyday experience of a child living with two men in a homosexual relationship, it caused uproar when a copy was found in the children's section of an ILEA Library in 1986. The ensuing media frenzy, focussed as it was on what some deemed to be depravity, and the potential damage done to innocent young minds, led ultimately to the introduction of the infamous Clause 28 legislation in 1988 which forbade Local Authorities (and therefore schools) from "promot[ing] the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (UK Government, 1988).

Coming at a time of increased suspicion of homosexuality amongst the general public in the wake of the AIDS crisis, the Act drove homosexuality underground in schools, preventing teachers from discussing gay relationships, and providing a field for homophobic behaviours and bullying in school. According to the testimonies of young, gay pupils over the

subsequent fifteen years until the Clause was repealed, it created confusion, self-hatred and dangerous behaviours due to the lack of appropriate, wise and safety driven sex education messages. That it should be a picture book for children which would foment such dramatic changes in both public policy and attitudes towards people demonstrates the power that children's literature has. Some 15 years after Clause 28 was enacted, it was finally repealed after much campaigning and following shifts in public perceptions of homosexuality and different family groupings which no longer commonly reflected the 1950s ideal of mum, dad, two children and an estate car. Society and opinion had moved on – and representations in children's books moved with it.

However, whilst books for children have begun to embrace the importance of depicting different family relationships over recent years, other marginalised groups have yet to see much of a change in representation in the literature. In 2017, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE, 2020) began a longitudinal study of minority ethnic representation in children's literature, finding, at the beginning of the research, that despite children from ethnic minorities making up 33.5% of classroom populations, only 4% of books published for children in 2017 featured children from minority ethnic backgrounds, rising to 20% in 2021 (CLPE, 2021). Established in 2017, the children's commercial publishing company, Knights Of, was set up to ensure the promotion of diverse voices within the children's publishing community both as producers of texts and as protagonists within texts. In 2020, they published Scottish author, Elle McNicoll's debut novel, *A Kind of Spark* which has as its central protagonist an autistic girl voicing her experiences in contemporary Scotland as she researches the witchcraft trials of the past. In ensuring that diverse voices, from ethnically diverse, neurodivergent, alternatively gendered and other marginalised groups, are promoted, Knights Of has been instrumental in getting such voices into the mainstream – amongst them McNicoll, (Blackwell's Book of the Year, 2020); Sharna Jackson (Waterstones Children's Book Prize for Younger Readers); and National Book Award finalist, Jason Reynolds. Such high profile authorship leading to increased readership is to be applauded and there can be no doubt that companies such as Knights Of have impacted greatly on the data collated by CLPE. But there is clearly work to be done when only 20% of books reflect the lived experience of 33.5% of readers, and where animal and inanimate protagonists in children's books in 2019 featured in 38% of all books published within the category.

Interestingly CLPE's report identifies a range of parameters by which they have judged the content of the books reviewed in terms of the validity of the heritage of the protagonists – significantly in the remit of this thesis: is their background an 'issue' within the story or is it incidental? CLPE states:

> A good proportion of the titles reviewed focussed on themes of activism, celebrating different cultures, conveying experiences of different diasporas and unpicking the ideology of racism… However, it is paramount that these are balanced with titles in which ethnicity is incidental to ensure that the presence of characters of colour in the classroom bookshelves do not exclusively centre on narratives of struggle, strife or subjugation (CLPE, 2021, p9).

If children do not define all their experiences according to their heritage – and why indeed should they? – then background should be just that: background, incidental to the events of the story, but part of the rich tapestry of life which makes up the lived experience of the protagonist. And whilst race or heritage may impact upon that experience, particularly if the story *is* an issue or social justice based one, is it not important to ensure that the everyday, comparable aspects of life are portrayed too? By dwelling on ethnicity to the exclusion of all else, we run the risk of only allowing children to see themselves as the sum of their ethnic background, and not as individuals with sharable experiences within their own right.

> I argue…that for those children who historically had been ignored…in children's books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as *realistically human* was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up" (Bishop, 2012, p9) (my italics).

Realistic humanity may be one of the most important features of children's (or any) literature which hopes to reflect experience, and open doors and windows to the experience of others.

When considering the role of representation within children's literature, the deficit model must be examined as well – the impact of silencing those voices, or not recognising them, acknowledging them or valuing them. Silent voices can mean invisible characters, and as Bishop declares, seeing oneself in books is vital to ensuring self-value and external validation of one's own identity. That publishers and reviewers, authors and readers are recognising the vital importance of the representation of ethnic diversity in children's literature is to be applauded, along with the growing call for representation of neurodivergent characters as highlighted by the response to the highly successful *Kind of Spark* (McNicoll, 2020). A

growing canon of refugee literature is to be welcomed; humanity in all its shapes, sizes, colours, cultures, abilities and histories to be celebrated and promoted. And yet religion and the religious experience of protagonists appears to be much less visible in children's literature of the late 20th, and early 21st centuries, despite the fact that it is inescapably tied up with cultural heritage, history, family, modern culture and the every-day experience of many children who are readers (Nielsen BookScan 2020). As Tariq Mehmood stated in the *Beyond Belief* episode that started me on this journey of exploration,

> [Religion] affects everything in our lives, how we conceive the world, how we think about it, how we talk about it. It…gives meaning to that which is often senseless and painful (Beyond Belief, 2016).

To ignore the role and reality of religion in the lives of our readerships could be seen to be silencing, or making invisible, many of those same readers who we wish to engage. Citing Banks (2006), Gunn et al suggest that:

> The majority of research about cultural diversity issues neglects to separate different elements of culture, such as religion. Culture comprises a person's identification with their nationality, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, socioeconomic class, and race (Gunn et al., 2013, p17).

It is important here, I believe, to consider the difference between silencing and rendering invisible in children's books. To silence someone implies a 'physical' act; a conscious decision; an act of power and violence. Synonyms for silencing include gagging, stifling, quashing, smothering, muzzling – tangible acts associated with power and forceful action on the part of another. When one silences a voice – in literature or in life – one exerts power over that voice, making a choice on behalf of oneself, *and on behalf of others* as to which voices one is willing to hear, be exposed to, or value. When a voice is silenced, as a conscious act on the part of the author, or of the distributor, or of the teacher, or of the parent, there can be a number of reasons for making such a decision. Sometimes this will be a concern that the reader may not understand what is being presented to them – as Geraldine McCaughrean stated in the *Beyond Belief* episode "Now if I refer to anything biblical or to religion, the editor will say: Is the reader going to understand this? Take it out if not" (*Beyond Belief*, 2016). With dwindling adherence to mainstream religions in Britain (Curtice et al, 2019), faith can be seen not only as irrelevant but as alien to young readers who may not have been exposed to the reality of faith, other than through their introduction to religions

through classroom-based RE lessons. It also renders the religious experience of those readers who *do* identify with a faith group or background as being without value to a general audience. This is, surely, the equivalent of suggesting that readers from a predominantly white background cannot be expected to understand the cultural heritage of a child refugee from the southern hemisphere and so should not be exposed to their realities – a viewpoint which is clearly untenable and which does not have general traction in the classroom or on the bookshelves, unrepresentative though the numbers of minority ethnic protagonists may be compared to the prevailing population. Referring back to Gunn et al., (2013), cultural experience is not limited to nationality or heritage – it includes religious backgrounds, historical and current, and, I would argue, cultural decisions to choose *non-religion* as a stated or accepted way of life. Silencing the vocal experience of this element of cultural experience surely denies the fullness and richness and reality of one's cultural heritage just as much as censoring voices based on the colour or nationality of the speaker. It is a choice to actively preclude the voices of the child of faith in literature, and as such, can be construed as a form of structural violence as described by Galtung (1997). Equating the 'soft and cuddly' world of children's books with structural violence is uncomfortable, but when the lived experience of children within the books, who act as reflections of those who read the books, is actively silenced, it is the job of the grown-ups to check whether this damages those who are powerless in decisions surrounding the texts they are offered, and to try to right the 'violence' done unto them if they are hurting. The term violence may seem to be a strong word to apply to the world of children's books, but it is important to recognise that the act of *not doing* can be as harmful as the act of doing when it comes to validating a person's identity. Galtung's triangle of conflict, or violence, can be applied to how one views acts of silencing and ignoring and in acknowledging the potential impact of these as derogatory acts, one is in a better position to challenge and put right conscious and unconscious bias and associated action (or inaction).

Galtung himself speaks of how culture and cultural differences can be used to legitimise acts of violence, be they direct or structural (Galtung, 1997), and of course, there are inextricable links between a person's religious identity and cultural heritage, which spill over into the choices made about religious affiliation as they grow older and more independent. But we are concerned here with children, young people who have little agency in the decision to participate in certain religious practices or to belong to specific religious. Galtung's model demonstrates visually the idea that much of the violence perpetrated towards others is

invisible in itself, and I would add that, in its invisibility, it can also be unconscious, although this is certainly not always the case. Thus one can express outrage at acts of direct violence towards those of a religious background, whilst symbolically perpetrating cultural and structural violence by default or by omission or ignorance. Exploring individual biases, subconscious and voiced, as the mediating adults where access to fiction for children is concerned, is vital for ensuring that the potential for discrimination towards others is tackled face on, and the issues surrounding lack of exposure to others' beliefs and practices in an increasingly divided and perhaps intolerant society. As can be seen from Fig. 1, it is relatively straightforward to identify aspects of direct violence in a work of fiction, and to be fair to publishers and authors, there is little material which would fit this concept as writing aimed at promoting a violent stance towards religion, although there are many contemporary examples where direct violence towards religious groups, individuals and artefacts *is* discussed – be that as a central part of the story, as in *You're Not Proper* (Mehmood, 2015), or as part of an overall storyline, as in Weissman's *The Length of a String* (2018) and Almond's *Island* (Almond, 2017).

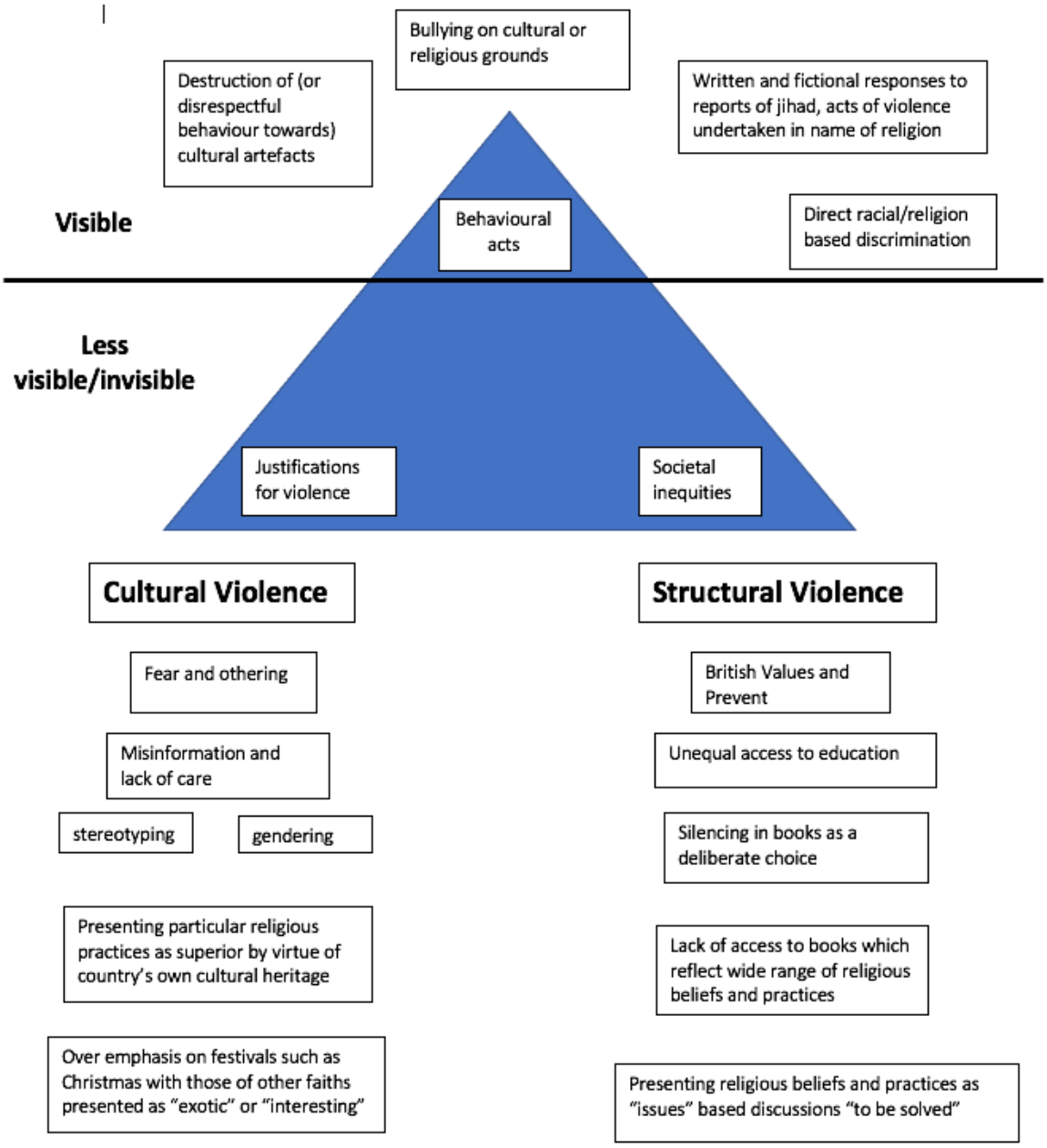


Fig.1

The less visible forms of violence as outlined by Galtung, may be harder to identify within texts and require knowledge, understanding and religious literacy both on the part of the mediating adults, and the child readers for whom they are written. Recognising and calling out stereotypes of religious individuals and groups is one aspect of this, as is the recognition that the cultural Christianity-based festivals which predominate in the United Kingdom should not be seen as superior by virtue of their perceived greater religious legitimacy than those of other faiths, and none. Opportunities to discuss issues within current affairs such as the outrage at the prospect of 'cancelling Christmas' (Murray, 2020) during the pandemic as

opposed to the silence around the actual limitations placed on people who wished to celebrate Eid due to the same catastrophe, can be related to books which promote one set of faith practices over another, as can the very real danger of presenting the Five F's (Skelton et al., 2002) as somehow fully representative of faith and culture, and of an individual's experience of their religious culture and beliefs. When considering structural violence in terms of what is on offer to children, then, one can consider how equal the offer is; whether there are texts in which children can see themselves reflected, or whether there is a conscious choice *not* to include representative texts, and what the reasons for such choices may be. And in presenting religious themes as issues to be solved, one runs the risk of dismissing or even disparaging the lived experience of adherents.

Of course, one may feel it important to censor texts offered to children based on their age, maturity and the validity, authenticity, accuracy and content of the texts on offer. Teachers and parents hold great responsibility when curating the texts available to those in their care – to provide diverse voices and experiences, for sure, but also to ensure that texts offered are appropriate and will not cause distress or harm in their own right. Texts which present as accurate or truthful but which do not provide a correct or validated experience can cause untold damage themselves. Texts which are designed to promote ideas, actions, beliefs or viewpoints which may be harmful to others need especially careful handling. It is, therefore, the difficult job of the parent or teacher to be available to mediate and interpret texts provided, where this is necessary, to ensure that children are equipped with the critical literacy skills they need to identify when a text is telling 'truths'; when it is portraying an entirely fictional or mythical landscape; or when it is subverting or carefully selecting truths in order to present a biased or single story view of an issue or an experience. Selecting appropriate texts which ensure that children's voices are heard, whilst ensuring that those fictional voices do not mislead the readers, is a challenging task. I look, therefore, in the next section at a range of fictional texts written for children with religious themes, in order to establish common themes, and identify possible approaches to support teachers in the selection and use of texts, which form the basis of the toolkit introduced in the last section of this thesis.

What do the books say? A review of fifty texts written for children

In order to identify possible approaches to texts for teachers, it was important that I read books written for children. A total of 50 books from middle grade and young adult age ranges were consulted in order to establish *how* religion is portrayed in books for children, taking into account the changes in representation as described above. The publication dates of these texts spanned from 1950 to 2021, with 42 of the 50 books (84%) published since 2000.

Of the books consulted, using the classification of genres outlined by Green and Oldendorf (2011), 10 novels were broadly historical (20%); 17 were contemporary (34%); 17 were fantasy novels (34%) 2 were based on myth and traditional tales (4%); 2 were vampire novels (4%); and 2 were picture books or graphic novels (4%).

In order to select the fifty texts in the first place, I devised a general list of characteristics which enabled me to filter appropriate texts:

- An overarching, clear, religious theme
- Key 'religious character[s]' (priestly or overtly adherent, angels, saints)
- Participation in religious or quasi-religious festivals and rites as an integral part of the story
- Existence and presence of organised religion essential to storyline
- Religiously allegorical storyline
- Focus on religious or quasi-religious artefacts as essential to storyline
- Historically religious context
- Reference to gods, goddesses and historically deified or worshipped mythological beings central to storyline
- 'Lived religious experience' enhancing but not driving storyline
- Recognisable religious iconography or buildings
- Mention of key 'famous' religious personalities as essential to storyline

It was not necessary for the texts considered to feature all of these characteristics, but the list formed a helpful way of filtering texts for initial analysis.

This list was necessarily subjective and reflected my personal understanding of religious representations, borne from prior reading. In reading these texts, I was aware of this subjectivity and my own religious literacy levels. As discussed previously, suppositions as to the ability of the reader to recognise religious themes or tropes within the texts need to be carefully considered, which in itself, perhaps, is a justification for the development of a teacher toolkit as makes up the final aspect of this study. For the most part, religious concepts or ideas were fairly easily spotted, with the historical novels often including settings such as religious orders or pilgrimages (*A little lower than the angels; The book of boy; The order of darkness)* or containing references to religious activities recognisable from history (*Where the world ends; The lie tree).* Contemporary novels often included reference to religious groups or traditions (*Rani and Sukh; Rose, interrupted; Does my head look big in this?)* whilst fantasy novels tended to contain images or references which included rituals, worship or religious allegory (*Shadow and bone; A wrinkle in time; Harry Potter)* or placed the fantasy action in a clearly religious setting (*The candle and the flame; The knife of never letting go).*

From the reading of the texts, a more nuanced list of characteristics was identified which featured in the books with varying frequency:

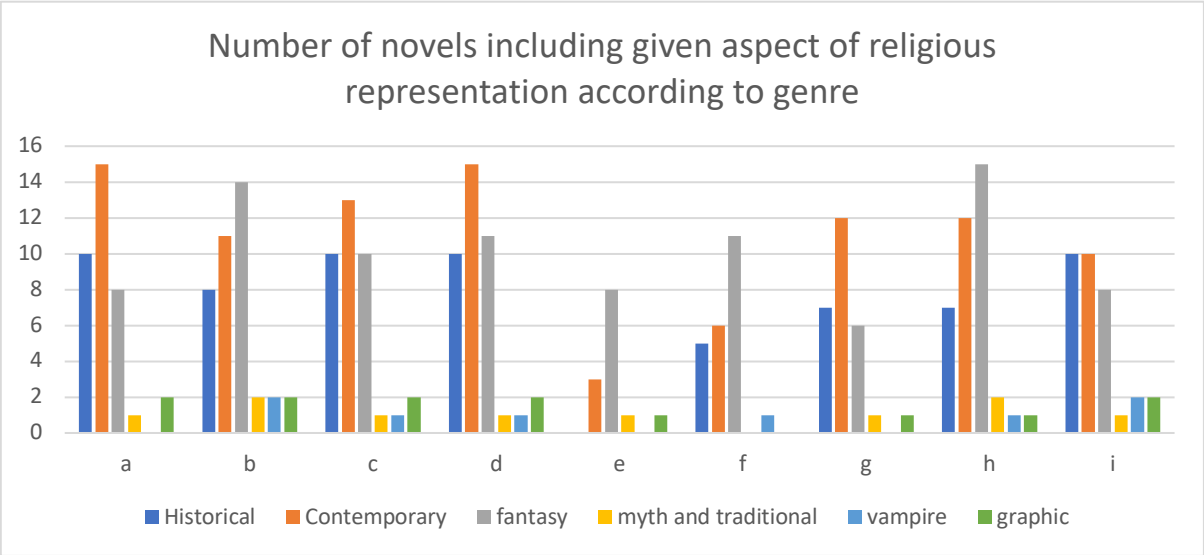
a) Detail of known/fictional religious practice
b) Artefacts holding sacred significance
c) Characters acting in accordance with religious or quasi-religious beliefs
d) Descriptions of religious performativity (ritual, dress etc)
e) Potential to be performed/ film or stage version available
f) Potential to be used with religious reading techniques to ascertain deeper meanings
g) Clear authorial intent to inform readership, change viewpoints or open debate on religion
h) Transformation of key characters occurs as a result of exposure to religious practice or belief
i) Transformation of situation occurs as a result of faith/religious practice/ adherence/ denial.

This list reflected less the storyline content of the books consulted, than the facility of each text to provide insights into a lived religious experience. The first three characteristics reflected the role of the texts in offering information about known or fictional religions. This included descriptions of religious artefacts, buildings, practices and creeds (*e.g. The length of a string; Grace; A little lower than the angels; The proudest blue*) and aspects of information about how religious faith impacted on the choices made by protagonists (*e.g. Rani and Sukh; The lie tree; Does my head look big in this).* The next three characteristics described the performance of religion, again recognisable or fantasy, including descriptions of rituals and dress *(e.g. Where the world ends; You're not proper; The Muslims; The order of darkness).* Performance was also considered in terms of film adaptations or the potential for the story to be performed in some way, which reflected approaches often taken in the primary classroom when exploring new stories (Van de Water, 2021; Murphy, 2018). A number of the books read had film and stage adaptations which indicated their suitability for performance. Alongside this drama aspect of performativity, I included the potential for the text to be used with a range of religious reading techniques. These are explored further later in this thesis, but the rationale for including this as a characteristic stemmed from a website, *Harry Potter and the sacred text* (www.harrypottersacredtext.com/resources) which explores in detail the use of religious reading techniques as a way of gaining deeper insights into contemporary and secular texts.

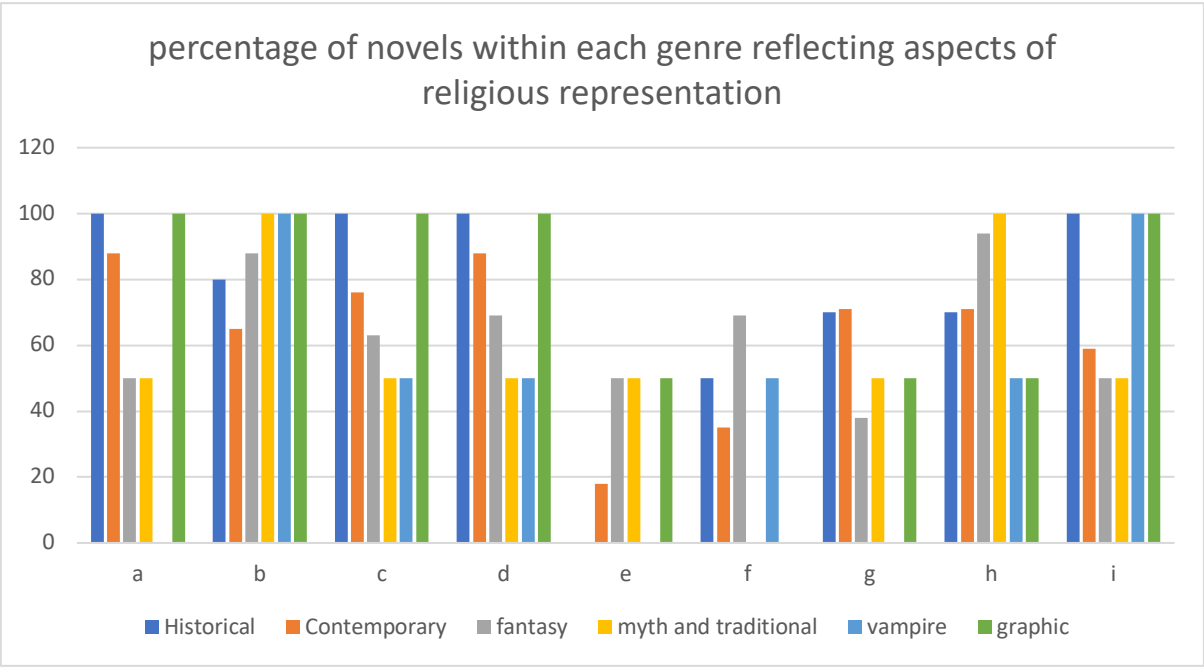
The final three characteristics which became apparent from the reading of the texts related to the ways in which characters within the books were changed by their religious experiences or exposure to religious themes, and to books which clearly aimed at the transformation of the reader, through the provision of alternative arguments around contemporary issues, or the clear desire to change viewpoints.

Appendix 1 provides a table of the 50 books analysed. Taking the three broad themes identified through the reading, of providing information about religious practice and belief, providing examples of religious ritual and performance or being suited to performance within the classroom, and including elements of transformation for the protagonists or the reader as a result of clear authorial intent, the table groups the nine characteristics above under the terms Informative, Performative and Transformative. In identifying these core themes, the three terms form the basis of the selection toolkit which is exemplified in the final section of this thesis.

The genres of the books read were analysed according to the number of novels demonstrating each of the nine characteristics outlined.



The data suggest that whilst religious representation as identified in the list above features in all of the genres listed, there are certain genres where this is more prevalent than others. Historical, contemporary and fantasy novels contained the majority of representations, but this numerical data is skewed by virtue of the small number of myth, vampire and graphic books consulted. As a result, I looked at how many books within each genre featured religious representation as outlined.



These data provided a more useful overview of how religions are represented within the fifty texts consulted. Across all of the novels, 78% contained reference to artefacts which contained sacred significance, and 80% referred to performative elements including dress and ritual. 26% had a film or stage version, or were felt to easily lend themselves to performance within the classroom.

Transformation of protagonists was another key element which featured in 76% of the books consulted, whilst recognisable religious practices and characters portraying behaviours directly linked to religious belief featured in 72% and 74% of the texts respectively. By transformation, I mean changes in behaviour, attitudes or understanding of protagonists as a result of exposure to ideas or experiences with a religious aspect.

In identifying three broad themes – informing, performing and transforming – within the texts considered, I considered their relative importance within the classroom, in order to establish whether there is a place for the intentional inclusion of texts which reflect these themes when teaching RE. These themes have directly informed the creation of the DIPT approach to selecting and using texts, which is explore in the final section of this thesis.

Informing

Using fiction to explore the religious basis of behaviours and attitudes

> Our task along with the myth-makers, poets and philosophers is to deepen children morally, enlarge them as human beings and bring them closer to the lofty, imageless transcendence of God which no story can fully express for it surpasses them all. (Priestley, 1983, p389).

For the teacher, and indeed the parent, Priestley's is a tall order! "Deepen[ing] children morally" requires the wiser or more experienced partner in a teaching relationship to have a clearly defined moral code themselves, and to be comfortable within that code in order to express it as one to live by (Flanigan, 2013). For the child, exploring the dos and don'ts of a world daily revealing itself in new ways, being presented with strict rules and moral positions without context or explanation could be a most bewildering experience and one against which it would be reasonable and perhaps prudent to rail. Yet religious writings, particularly from the Abrahamic religious traditions, are full of strict laws about behaviours, beliefs and

practices which have shaped and honed the moral codes of individuals and the statutes of their countries for thousands of years (Douglas, 1999).

Trousdale writes:

> What part has story played in the ongoing life and power of the Bible? Has it not…rested on the inner persuasiveness of its stories? So we choose not to kill simply because the law says 'Do not kill'? or because when we hear stories about killing we understand this is what it means to kill, this is what the consequences of killing are? (Trousdale, 2004, p180).

Stories, it is implied, can help provide both a reason for the codes by which people are expected to live our lives, and a way of exploring the reasons for those codes. They help to place moral laws and expectations into context, and provide scenarios which can be safely explored and countered and subsumed or dismissed in terms of the lessons they may be trying to teach us. Early writers creating texts specifically for children were well aware of this – morality and the consequences of wrongdoing even on what appears to be a minor scale, are the basis of many of the texts mentioned earlier in this thesis. Book titles such as '*Proverbs Exemplified and Illustrated by Pictures from Real Life: teaching morality and a knowledge of the world' (1790)* and '*The Instructor and Guide for Little Masters or the School of Virtue and Good Manners containing Directions for Children and Youth to behave and carry themselves on all occasions'* (Tuer, 1898), are explicit about their role as morality tales, instructing their readers into right ways of living and providing exemplification of the consequences of poor or ill thought through behaviours and beliefs (Reynolds, 2014; Nikolajeva, 2009). But religious stories are not always mere morality tales, designed to provide us with moral codes by which to live our lives. They are rich, contextual, historically-fashioned narratives with narrative forms recognised in other places – myths, legends, quest stories, fairy tale. Indeed, Green and Oldendorf make a distinction between the narrative forms adopted by religions to tell their story and the proverbs which "provided followers with an understanding of religious principles and metaphors for daily life" (Green and Oldendorf, 2011, p15).

The historical situating of story as the best way to explain and contextualise religious concepts is common amongst the main world religions, with the narrative form widely deployed in Hindu scriptures, in Buddhism, and in the Abrahamic religions. Storytelling form has been used throughout the ages as an efficient and effective mode of teaching and

explication in times when literacy and access to the written word have been limited. In modern times, according to Green and Oldendorf, "religious narratives offer a framework for faith, provide examples of ethical living, build awareness of human responsibilities, and connect followers with the sacred" (2011, p15). Followers of a particular faith may be asked to make distinctions between true story, and story which leads one to truth; to look beyond the concept of myth in order to see that which cannot be described. In many respects, conflating story and religious belief can be problematic especially for the non-believer – one can, from childhood experiences of story, instinctively assume 'story' equates to 'made up'. If one finds the Biblical account of Jesus turning water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11) to be unbelievable, then how much faith should one place in the validity and actuality of the story of Jesus's crucifixion? When story is presented as absolute truth – and there is no way of ascertaining its absolute veracity – it is that very core of religion, *faith*, which enables us to incorporate the unbelievable into a certainty of the numinous and transcendent. In creating from story the central tenets of faith and practice, religions provide a framework upon which to hang lives lived and beliefs held. It is in the incorporation of story as "propositional statements" (Priestley, 1983, p382) that theology undertakes one of its most important tasks. We are a species defined by narrative: the narrative carried by individuals in explanation of their own lives' journeys, and the narratives which shape and define individuals from external sources.

Understanding the historical and sociological context of the religious stories (and secular ones for that matter) to which one is exposed is important when seeking to recognise the things that have shaped beliefs and practices. Equally, the way those texts are interpreted and thence subsume into individual lives is important. How is one taught *how* to apply hermeneutical approaches to texts? What are the influences and sedimentation at play in those who expose readers, and learners, both to their own interpretations, and methods of interpretation themselves? Should readers view all texts as educative, including those from religious traditions? There are risks for the teacher, and the parent, and the librarian, in promoting texts which are written purely for educative purposes. As Trousdale writes:

> We find in both secular and religious realms an expectation that children are to derive a particular, preordained 'correct' meaning from a given text…In the religious realm it is revealed in the use of stories as a vehicle for preaching explicit moral lessons or inculcating particular religious virtues (Trousdale, 2004, p389).

It is this possibility for preaching and indoctrination which makes the way in which one uses stories so potent – and so dangerous. Story, fiction, myth can be forces for good and for ill. In determining how best to use a text as a teaching tool, be that from a parental or teacher point of view, it is essential that the potential capacity of a piece of fiction to promote specific viewpoints is recognised and accounted for. Story has power precisely because it is not overtly didactic. Story provides us with the opportunity to explore vicariously the potential beliefs and practices which form and determine the characters therein; it gives us the opportunity to 'try on' those principles and check them for fit against our knowledge of ourselves (Arthur et al, 2014). Stories are powerful because they do not dictate. Priestley's warning against attempting to teach moral values through what he describes as "the direct language of propositional statements" (1983, p385) suggests that such an approach may well be counterproductive, perhaps as it leaves little 'wriggle room' for the pupil to question, explore and come to their own understanding of why a moral viewpoint may or may not be valid. "By contrast," he goes on to state, "knowledge communicated through story holds cognitive and affective learning together in one integrated whole" (p385). Ways of understanding the world are placed into the context of a lived experience of holding certain moral viewpoints when viewed through the lens of fiction, in forms which enable readers to explore in safety both what it might mean to subscribe to a certain moral code, and equally what it might mean to reject such conventions, to live according to alternative, secular, morals. The popularity of dark psychological thrillers points, I would suggest, towards a desire to explore safely what it might mean not to be bound by a set of moral principles without having to subscribe to the protagonists' approaches at any point. Where children are concerned, story provides a hugely valuable opportunity to investigate not only how adherents of particular religious faiths, or communities with varying political views, live their lives, but how the prevailing morality or teachings within the stories drives behaviours – and whether they wish to subscribe to something similar.

In encouraging readers to explore codes, behaviours and the principles behind behavioural choices, be they cultural or religious, fiction can be both extremely useful, and influential. In allowing readers to look vicariously upon and then enter into another's lived experience, stories enable safe exploration not just of concepts but of realities. The growth in promotion of minority ethnic writers and books with diverse characters, whilst still not nearly sufficient or proportional, is an example of how readers have demanded representation (mirrors). It also

recognises that books can be a safe and appropriate place for others to explore those represented. By portraying religious realities, through books such as Mian's *Planet Omar* (also known as *The Muslims)* and Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This*, barriers can be broken down, and spaces created for genuine curiosity and exploration, and for personal contemplation of the realities in place for others.

Using fiction as a way of exploring challenging ideas

In early 2021, a scandal in a West Yorkshire secondary school highlighted the sensitivities around teaching aspects of religious practice and belief which can cause distress and difficulties for both adherents of a given faith and others. In attempting to teach a class about tolerance and radicalism, a teacher from the school appears to have shared a cartoon image which was known to be offensive to Muslims, and the subsequent protests and fury from the local community led to calls for his expulsion from the teaching profession, and his professed fear for his own safety (Drury, 2021; Belger, 2021). Much of the ensuing coverage of the story focussed on the debate between the co-existing protected characteristics of right to freedom of speech, and perceived rights to not be offended religiously, which provoked much anger and demands for the teacher's reinstatement following his suspension. Aside from the debate about the validity and appropriateness of using a real-life story and issue to explore sensitive concepts, one could ask whether fiction might be a better way to explore realities? Writing about an equally sensitive subject, Kahn, in his 2018 YA novel, *I Am Thunder*, explores the reality of radicalisation in a Muslim setting, as discussed in the introduction to this study. The novel allows the reader to explore difficult and sensitive concepts through the eyes and behaviours of fictional characters, rendering them one step removed from a discussion which could have the potential to cause offence or distress were it to be handled in a factual way. Fiction allows the reader to blur the boundaries between what is real and what is not, to tentatively prod at challenging topics and make judgements about fictional characters and fictional behaviours without judging, in the moment, real people. By providing realistic representations of the lived religious experience, social-realist and naturalist fiction, such as Mehmood's novel, is well placed to offer safe places to explore the more challenging aspects of religious adherence and personal belief which can prove difficult to tackle in the classroom through other mediums.

The role of religious allegory

When presenting religious worlds in children's fiction, there is a place for allegory too. Fiction as religious allegory can similarly provide safe spaces for the exploration of challenging and complex ideas and concepts. One of the joys of allegory is that it can be read on a number of different levels. It is not necessary to recognise the allegorical quality of Aslan, sacrificed for the salvation of the world and rising on the third day, in order to enjoy the Narnia story as a tale in its own right. Consider the Harry Potter phenomenon with its chosen hero fighting the forces of evil, rising from the dead, defeating the dark lord after spending time in some kind of between world, surrounded and supported by ardent followers and virtual disciples – none of these allegorical features is essential to an absolute enjoyment of, and identification with, the boy wizard who lived. The *Twilight* series can be enjoyed without knowledge of the Church of Latter Day Saints and the Mountain Meadow Massacre of 1857 (Maurer, 2013). Religious allegory offers an opportunity to either explore and enjoy tales as they are, or to reflect upon known or recognised features of faith or religious stories. Or both. Writing about C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe,* Bell states that:

> [a]llegory, properly speaking, manifestly and continuously represents a separate philosophy or sequence of events for the primary (though not exclusive) purpose of highlighting or inculcating a doctrine or system of belief…The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe does not prescribe doctrine and faith…the four children are differentiated, delineated by particular traits and motivations. Lewis's various protagonists…live vitally and independently – not to illustrate something higher or deeper (Bell, 2005).

In recognising the allegorical within children's literature, the reader is encouraged to consider the meaning of what is written, to experience perhaps a deeper understanding of accepted religious truths or tropes or behaviours, but to read the story also for what it is as a work of fiction, with all that that entails. Quoting Lewis, Hein writes of allegory:

> Allegory gives you one thing in terms of another. All depends on respecting the rights of the vehicle…We ought not be thinking 'This green valley where the boy is singing represents humility': we ought to be discovering, as we read, that humility is like that green valley (Hein, 2014, p14).

Experienced readers can choose to read for allegorical recognition, or can choose not to, and their level of religious literacy will dictate the level to which they can recognise the religious

allegorical aspects of a text. For some children, of course, the concept of allegory may be too advanced, and they will read (or listen) literally – and stories have to work on such a level as well as allegorically if they are to have resonance with younger readers (Hooper, 1974; Machosky, 2020).

Fantasy written for children and young people has been particularly imaginative in its portrayal of the lived religious experience using allegory as its vehicle to present invented belief systems and practices. Authors such as Dianna Wynne Jones, Ursula Le Guin and Susan Cooper do not present overt religious communities or practices, but their world building necessarily involves the portrayal of worldviews in both personal and organised representations. These texts hold imaginative appeal to readers because they exist as coherent stories of lived experiences. Their portrayal of fantasy worlds maps allegorically onto the lived religious experience of the real world even whilst it avoids known religious terminologies or tropes. Indeed, Wynne Jones and Le Guin actively avoid recognisably religious concepts within their texts, but the world building therein allows the reader to make connections between religious experience in the real world and lived experience within the fantasy sphere. Fantasy novels, through an allegorical approach, invite investigation and the probing of these experiences.

Fiction also offers the opportunity to make analogies with personal experience, or with known experience of others. As Michael Rosen suggests, the ability to make analogies between one's own life and what one reads in a story "is the first step towards abstract thought e.g., thinking of anger or hope or envy or fear across the two: story and self" (Rosen 2020, op cit). This ability to provide space for the reader to make links between fiction and personal reality is powerful. For the teacher or parent mediating texts or choosing them for the purposes of providing guidance or opportunities for reflection, such power can be the key to opening up both an understanding of one's own position in relation to a given concept or experience, and an exploration of the unknown in the light of the reader's own lived experience. As Priestley writes:

> [story] enables us to experience life vicariously and holistically. The knowledge I learn through story is essentially self-knowledge acquired within the total context of doing and being. The extent to which the story reflects back that knowledge of myself to me depends, of course, on the depths at which the original storyteller lives. (Priestley, 1983 p385)

Here I return again to those windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors of Bishop, in recognising – and utilising – the fact that readers bring to their reading something of who they are and what they have experienced themselves, seeing themselves reflected back from the pages; looking in, as observers, onto the lived religious experience of those individuals and communities whose experience differs from their own; and walking confidently through the sliding doors to share in that experience through the power of the fictional text. One can use the output of the skilled writer to explore cultural and religious differences in safe spaces, as one of the most effective teaching tools available (Green and Oldendorf, 2011). But as well as using it to look at others, fiction can be used vicariously to do, or be, something or someone else. Many will recognise the child under the duvet, torch in hand, reading a book at night which sends a frisson of fear down their spine, causes them to catch their breath in terror, to shut their eyes against an image which scares them. And yet they read on. The safe space which is the space of fiction, allows the reader to experience fear, horror, distress, to recognise the physical feelings these emotions arouse within them, to work on strategies to deal with those feelings, and then *to let it go.* Fiction gives the reader the permission to recognise that these feelings will pass, before they are overwhelmed by them in a real life situation (Warner, 2011). I would not advocate, for obvious reasons, reading a terrifying story to small children which leaves them in tears, but introducing them to mildly scary stories which enable them to feel that slight clench in the stomach which signals anticipation of the unknown, helps them to know what that feels like.

It is the continuing investigation of the story, the search for meaning on behalf of the protagonists, which makes fiction powerful as a teaching tool. Where this is true of texts which invoke sensations of fear, or wonder, or excitement, and those which enable the reader actually to live vicariously through those protagonists living the lives to which the reader may well aspire (Blyton, Rowling, Brent-Dyer), it is also true of texts with lived religious encounters and practices.

Using fiction to develop understanding and empathy

In Mian's *The Muslims,* (later published as *Planet Omar)* the eponymous narrator's very first words as he opens the story are "Dad. Has a beard, because he's copying the greatest man who ever lived" (Mian, 2017). Mian makes no bones about positioning her characters as Muslims who are eager to share their faith and practices with the reader, in an explanatory fashion within the framework of an adventure. In so doing, the author is at pains to ensure that the reader is fully incorporated into Omar's world, recognising the challenges he faces as a Muslim in an apparently predominantly white, Western school and community. The reader can experience through the skill of the author the feelings Omar goes through in finding his place and explaining his faith in the face of misunderstanding. It is particularly where controversial or challenging concepts are at play that fiction can blur the edges between that with which one sits comfortably and that which troubles or puzzles the reader. Reading Khan's *I Am Thunder* allows the reader, through the power of the fictional mode, to relate to the struggles of Muzna as she negotiates the fine line between religious belief and adherence, and radicalism. The reader can appreciate her tumble into the latter even whilst condemning the reality of it, and can understand, through the power of the medium, how she arrives at the choices she makes, and subsequently rejects. Exploring how it must feel to be a 15-year-old girl groomed and radicalised by others is difficult when it is related to real life cases such as that of Shamima Begum, and this difficulty in understanding is reflected in the decisions made about her and her behaviour. In fiction, the reader is afforded a secure – and often private – space to attempt to live her life and come to an understanding of why she might have behaved as she did which may not be an easy option outside of the pages of a novel.

Interestingly, *I Am Thunder* was number one best seller in the young adults' books on bullying on Amazon at the beginning of 2021 – at a time when the ongoing story of the actual girl whose story inspired the novel has *not* been viewed through a similar lens. Fiction has the power to engender empathy when the real world may not. And this leads us to question the motivation of the writer, and the gatekeepers who mediate which texts are available from which to choose freely. Adults, in general, write, or co-create, the texts which children then read. Their voices are written through the voice changer of the adult, sometimes recalling their own inner child, and when considering the lived religious experience of children and young adults, whose practices, if not whose beliefs, are dictated by the adults who have

authority over them, this can be problematic. “Who, ultimately, writes the narrative that gives our lives meaning?” asks Wood, in her essay on C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman. “Can children become narrators of their own lives – or are they fated simply to occupy narratives already written for them?” (Wood, 2009, p45). Of course, the debate about own voices where children is concerned is a very topical one, and beyond the scope of this study, but it is, I believe, worth acknowledging that, for children of faith, their everyday practices and thus experiences are dictated to them through the choice (cultural or not) of their families and communities, even where they are in full agreement with these. Novels with religious themes, written by adults who bring their entire life experience of religion (or non-religion) and their own prejudices from within or without a faith group, aimed at children, will always have to work extra hard to accurately portray what it means to be a child in that situation.

Performing

Fiction as a way of experiencing

Vicarious living via the novel often occurs privately, through silent, independent reading. However, shared and read-aloud texts with group involvement lend themselves to opportunities for performance. This can be through play, acting out in the normal run of things what it means to be a doctor, a vet, a teacher, a priest, or through prescribed performative activity – re-enacting a marriage or a baptism in the home corner; sharing elements of a seder meal. There are challenges too to this performative aspect. Re-enacting events and rituals cannot begin to replicate their fundamental meaning in any profound way, and this risks diminishing the lived religious experience to a series of theatrical actions and rites of passage – the commonly accepted or recognised anthropological tropes to which religious and cultural experiences can be reduced. Novels which allow the reader to explore ritual behaviours can also demonstrate the profundity of meaning behind these; what it *feels* like to baptise your baby, to perform rakat, to undertake kaddish in the context of human feelings and emotions. Re-enacting these rituals touches only the surface of their meaning and importance, because the faith behind them dictates their meaning absolutely.

Yet there is a place for the performative in exploring the lived religious experience which novels are well placed to serve. Sharing texts together can bring new dimensions particularly where the text is a read aloud one, where the nuances, stresses, pronunciation and timbre of

the reader's voice brings new levels of understanding. In sharing experiences through the performative aspect of texts, children are enabled to use their new understanding and knowledge to explore concepts in groups, in play, in discussion. Pahl and Rowsell state that "children's talk is where things get done, problems solved, and they co-construct their material and social worlds" (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p45). The novel can provide a framework, and a meta language for that children's talk whilst encouraging and enabling imaginative responses to situations and practices which may be beyond the child's own lived experience. Performing, through reading aloud, through shared reading experiences, through imaginative play inspired by story, can bring to life those aspects of the religious experience which are harder to describe or understand including a sense of awe and wonder in the face of something or someone greater.

Providing performance spaces when considering the lived religious experience, allows power to be shifted to children from the teacher or other adult. The enabling of a voice for those with a religious background or who are part of a religious community can be hugely important in terms of tackling the problem of silencing as discussed both earlier and later in this study. Talking more generally, and not with religion specifically in mind, Pahl and Rowsell suggest that:

> this construction of space and identities provides a platform from which students can access literate identities, as here there is a reason to write, to articulate from a position from which students feel powerful (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p64).

In providing spaces of power through the novel, the author helps to ensure that religious voices are not left unheard or deliberately silenced, and this assists children to create their own identities as described by Pahl and Rowsell which then move beyond the religious and on to the religiously literate. Moving power into the hands of those living the religious experience when exploring religious identities is important in ensuring that they are provided with an accurate and respectful explanation and exemplification of how it feels to be of faith. Promoting books with religious themes alongside books which tackle other aspects of lived experience ensures that the topic is kept in the conversations and the minds of pupils as they navigate a diverse world where understanding and tolerance of difference are key. As Adams states, "children are…quick to understand which topics are deemed unimportant in their social circles" (Adams, 2009, p117), and it is one of the roles of the teacher or mediating

adult to ensure that all voices are represented and given appropriate importance as children seek to form and explore their own identities.

Transforming

Fiction as a call to action

Fiction can be a call to action for readers and for those responsible for the creation and provision of texts. In today's fast-paced, social-media driven world, people often find themselves bombarded with information, images, opinions and political behaviours which are both transparently associated with religion, or more subtly associated. These can include issues around the religious case for supporting individual political parties and viewpoints; appropriation of religious symbols for positive and negative visual purposes in the media; the influence of religious groups on the take up of vaccines, or access to medical interventions; the conflation of religion with war and the annexation of religious belief and belonging for insurgent purposes far removed from the central tenets of that faith (Matevski, 2021). Increasingly, participatory acts of demonstration or disruption feature in the media, and more and more people at this point in our history, appear willing and determined to show their colours, religious, political and other, in acts of peaceful and non-peaceful demonstration.

It is no surprise, perhaps, to see children and young people at the forefront of such demonstrations and rallying cries for change on subjects such as Black Lives Matter and climate change (BBC *Newsround*, 2021; Daly, 2020; Baskin-Sommers et al, 2021). Indeed, these seismic shifts in societal viewpoints have given rise to the previously unheard voices of *children writing for children* in the books of Malala Yousafzai, Dara McAnulty, Greta Thunberg, to name but a few. Giving agency to children's own voices as writers for their peers is new and uncharted territory in the commercial world, and full of exciting and provocative potential for adults and children alike. As far as religious characters and themes in fiction are concerned, those voices are yet to be heard (although perhaps they will come). Thus we are dependent on texts written *for* children *by* adults, with the concomitant prejudices, concerns, ideologies and discomfort that religion can arouse in adults, particularly in the West. Given the lack of voice that children have in terms of their religious beliefs and experiences, their silencing in books is perhaps not surprising. Including those voices, after all, could be a radical act at a religiously-inflamed point in history. But perhaps it is one of

the roles of children's books to be radical, to jolt the reader into uncomfortable areas and to provide transformational potential. Portraying a lived religious experience, giving voice to the voiceless and substance to the invisible is a responsibility that, as adults creating and mediating the texts offered to children, seems daily more and more important.
Reynolds (2007) takes issue, in the introduction of her work, with Jaqueline Rose's presumption that writing for children by adults portrays an impossible childhood, reflecting the adults' need for an idealised childhood of the past, which may not be the lived experience of the child readers themselves. According to Reynolds, Rose's views are based on a carefully curated canon of literature, and she suggests that many other, often postmodern, works of fiction for children exist which provide opportunities to question the natural order of things through radical and disruptive approaches which may include tropes uncomfortable for adults when thinking about children's stories– e.g. swearing, sexuality, dissent and dystopias. However, where religion, and especially Christianity, is concerned, I wonder if Rose's argument holds more firmly. As adults, do we want the innocence of the Reception Class Nativity to be the pervasive image of religion presented to children, without the messiness of belief and ideology which can be presented as potentially dangerous, out-dated, unscientific and insurgent? Is there a reluctance, particularly where Christianity is concerned, to present a lived experience of religion in children's fictions, which could then enable and encourage a deep questioning of belief and practice? Is this a conscious and calculated measure to either discourage children from forming views on religious beliefs as a way of ensuring the sanctity and unquestionability of religion *per se*, or is it a way of silencing the religious voice, and thus diminishing the importance of religion for individuals and as a key factor and motivator in cultural history and contemporary understanding? If children's fiction can be disruptive and radical, as Reynolds argues and, as I would suggest, the evidence of contemporary children's fiction demonstrates, then the absence, or deliberate silencing, of religious voices is problematic.

Fiction as a transformational force

In supporting children in their text choices and in mediating their understanding of what is being read, the role of the adult is central. Adults create the environments in which children learn; they mediate the spaces and the resources which are used to teach them; they model the behaviours deemed desirable; they write the texts that children read. In recognising the power of the adult, therefore, and acknowledging the ways in which adult power can be a force for

ill as well as good, especially in the field of religion, fiction can provide a voice for the voiceless as well as an equal space in which to explore identities. Fiction in the right hands, used carefully and thoughtfully, is a powerful tool for the teacher and the parent. And this makes it all the more important that there are quality texts from which to choose, which accurately reflect the religious questions and experiences of the children in our care and which are written in ways which appeal and resonate with the children in their intended audience. Children's literature as a transformational force requires access to the full range of experiences encountered by children in order for it to bring about change in an equal and democratic manner. When selecting texts for children, the potentially transformational nature of the works has to be considered and planned for. If it is desirable that children both recognise themselves and their experiences in books, and have opened to them doors to different experiences which they can then weigh up and judge in terms of how their own lives can be altered and changed by that exposure, then they need access to books which provide access to the full gamut of human experience - be that racial, cultural, political, gendered, [dis]ability focussed, class-focussed, or religious. Disallowing or discouraging one of these because it causes discomfort or because, as individuals, there is disagreement with, or failure to see the relevance of it in one's own life, effectively silences and devalues the experience of the readers towards whom there may be both a duty of care and a responsibility to act with equality and democracy, tolerance and understanding. The decision to render invisible, or silent, the voices and experiences of fictional characters for whom faith forms an indelible and fundamental part of their self-identity, is an act of discrimination that needs to be challenged. I would argue that this is particularly apposite at this point in time, when questions about morality, death, blame for natural disasters, justifications for governmental decisions, and the importance and sanctity of life itself press in upon us from every corner more than perhaps they ever have done.

In Summary: Answering the research questions.

In the introduction to this thesis, I identified a number of research questions:

1. Is it important that children develop an understanding of lived religion, and if so, why?

2. How can fiction written for children support the development of understanding of others' religious faith, and which genres, if any, are particularly well placed to explore lived religion as a theme?
3. How can teachers, especially non-RE specialists, be supported in the teaching of lived religion and the lived religious experience through the medium of children's literature?

Within this chapter, I have explored the risks inherent in silencing voices of religious children in literature. The review of the field has identified the potentially powerful impact of children's literature to inform and enable transformation of views and practices, which can have both individual and societal benefits. I have identified, through the reading of fifty texts, the ways in which the lived religious experience is depicted in contemporary fiction for children and have sought to justify the potential role of children's contemporary fiction in religious education, in providing information, opportunities for exploration and performance, and offering spaces for transformation for readers as well as the characters they meet in the books they read.

From the reading of the fifty texts selected in the initial stages of this study, it appears that fantasy and historical genres tend to most comfortably feature religious representation. In the following chapter, I investigate why fantasy may be an effective vehicle for exploring the lived religious experience, and provide a close reading of an historical novel which has served, alongside a similar close reading of twelve novels, as a basis for an analysis tool with which to approach selected texts. The delighting, informing, performing and transforming (DIPT) tool which has been developed as a result of the close reading is considered in the final section of this thesis.

Chapter 4
Genres and Analysis

> *What is missing so far from the historical treatment of religion for children is the sense of fascination and power which accompanies discipleship in a living faith. For this we need to turn to fantasy, to a fictional archipelago controlled by the power of a benevolent magic.*
>
> *Robson, 1982, p134.*

Following the review of texts as described in the previous chapter, it was apparent that historical novels, and fantasy novels featured religious experiences and accounts of personal religious lives most frequently, and perhaps more comfortably, than other genres although a growing number of socio-realist novels feature religion and personal belief as a part of their storylines. In this chapter, I provide an example of the close reading undertaken of one of the books within the historical genre, to demonstrate how the texts read have influenced the design of a selection tool for teachers. This is followed by an exploration of the fantasy genre and the reasons why depictions of religious experience feature as part of world building, and why this may be helpful within the classroom when talking about the lived religious experience.

What do the stories tell us?

Selecting lenses and recognising how they alter our view of a text is an important part of being critically literate. Once one has acknowledged one's own situatedness and that of the author, then one can begin to analyse the text and make valid comparisons with one's own experiences and those of others. As outlined in the previous chapter, the choice of text is one which needs to be undertaken with care.

When I set out to read the works of fiction which have shaped and driven the direction of travel for this research, it was important to have a series of questions against which to consider and analyse them with a view to creating a framework for the selection of texts from a broader canon. In reviewing the texts read for this study, I used a structure to analyse texts which was based on Wooldridge's 2001 *Framework for Multicultural Literary Analysis* (Appendix 2). The questions within this framework were used to shape the development of the DIPT selection and analysis tools outlined in the final section of this thesis. The

identification, through the initial study of the fifty selected texts, of three broad themes – *informing, performing* and *transforming* – gave me a lens for identifying common features in the close reading of texts. I considered, too, in analysing the texts, the importance of delight – for the reader and the teacher, bearing in mind Hunt's view that books written for children are there to delight and to instruct (Hunt, 1991).

From the initial set of fifty texts, I selected 12 which represented the five key genres identified from that initial wide reading: historical, realist, fantasy, vampire and traditional/mythology, and two additional texts – a picture book and a graphic novel. A close reading of each novel was undertaken, using the questions from the framework as a guide. It is not possible (or perhaps desirable) to include the detailed analyses of all 12 books within the body of this thesis; instead I have included a table of notes related to each text at Appendix 2. What follows is an example of that analysis using *one* of the chosen texts, Geraldine McCaughrean's *Where The World Ends.*

McCaughrean's novel was published in 2017, going on to win the Carnegie Medal in 2018. For the purpose of this thesis, it was selected as a representative of the historical genre, suitable for a YA readership, but also appropriate for the older end of the MG group. Based on true events, the book provides an insight not only into a historical story set on St Kilda in Scotland, but also a commentary on what it means to be a child on the cusp of adulthood, part of a tight-knit community, but placed in a situation which requires the formation of new social systems and structures within the strictures of a lived religious upbringing. The novel, whilst historical, covers contemporary themes of love, loss, gender, power and identity. It seems like the perfect novel to demonstrate the power of fiction in presenting a lived religious experience.

Geraldine McCaughrean's *Where the World Ends* – a synopsis

The novel is based on a true story from 1727 of a group of children and their adult supervisors who were sent out from their home island of Hirta in the archipelago of St Kilda to Warrior Stac, there to collect fulmar, gannets and storm petrels which would keep the inhabitants of the island fed and in trade for the coming year. McCaughrean's story focusses on Quilliam, a boy of around thirteen years of age, intelligent and quick witted. When the expected boat taking them back to their home island fails to turn up, the group of three men

and nine boys are forced to draw upon their own resources as they attempt to create some kind of society on the uninhabited rock face, and as they face their own demons and impending starvation for the nine months they are stranded. On their eventual return to Hirta, they find that smallpox has devastated the small community, leaving only a handful of inhabitants (in actuality, only one person survived on Hirta) to pick up the pieces of a community.

Analysis

The themes of *delight, information, performance* and *transformation* have been used as a lens through which to view this novel, but in a synthetic, not schematic, manner. The themes, identified as common features of a wide range of novels, arose initially from the wide reading of texts as described earlier, and have been used within the narrative which follows, based upon the close reading of the text, to scaffold the interpretation of the work.

Delight permeates this story. There are believable characters with whom the reader can closely identify, and a premise which, whilst in its detail is perhaps alien to contemporary children, reflects the traditional conceit of children's literature – where children must solve a problem or deal with an issue without the support of adults (the three men who accompany the boys on their trip are, in various ways, completely useless and indeed damaging to them). There is light humour throughout the book which serves to bring into sharp relief the horrors which present themselves as the boys realise they have been abandoned, with a self-styled preacher determined to save their mortal souls but not at the expense of his own comfort and safety.

McCaughrean's novel is set in the 1700s and carefully reflects the times in which the narrative unravels. In her *Afterword*, she writes:

> What you have been reading is a true story…and there again, it's not. Fiction is elastic: it stretches to encircle true facts and then crimps them into shape to create Story (p319).

She is at pains in her exposition of the tale to stress the fictional nature of her writing and the truths against which it is written – and thus the worldview she writes of reflects both the historical realities of the time, and the fictional world she writes alongside it. The novel opens

with the chief protagonist about to leave his family for the first time for his two week stint on the Stac, and the reader is left in no doubt within the first 100 words as to his family's faith which underpins their lives, his relationship with his parents - which is one of love and care but also recognition of his impending manhood - and the business-like approach both Quilliam and his parents have to his trip. There is a pragmatic, practical approach to faith which both sets the story in motion and establishes the foundations for a tale which will pin together society, life, death and growing up, with a belief in God at its core.

Right from the beginning of the novel, religious and superstition-based imagery is present, in the seeking of good omens as the group leave for the Stac (p11) and the comparisons of physical land features to Biblical concepts and stories:

> Warrior Stac is so big and so dark that all the fowl of the air since Creation haven't been able to stain it. It looms there, as black and fearful as one horn of the Devil himself (pp12-13).

This comparison with known religious imagery is important, as it provides not only a visual description of an environment likely to be unfamiliar to readers, but helps to ground the experience of the group within their own religious experience, where Church and God lie at the heart of every aspect of their lives. Their dependence upon both their faith, and the God around which it is centred, allows McCaughrean to explore the depths of human feeling when that faith is shaken. For it is by the hand of God that the people of Hirta are fed, clothed and sheltered, (p13) and His role in providing for them gives them permission to then use whatever means necessary to benefit from the richness of the land and sea. In the ensuing descriptions of the way in which the group collect and kill and use the abundance of birds on the Stac, the reader is left in no doubt as to their inalienable right to harvest them thus, however much the descriptions may be uncomfortable. However, this view of human dominion over the animals, Biblical as it is in its source, is brought into sharp contrast throughout the novel as Quill begins to see value in the lives of individual birds such as the garefowl, and their comparisons to human beings in shape and form and right to life as well. We are expected, as readers, both to accept the apparently base behaviours of the group with regard to their collection of the birds on the Stac, against the historical and geographical context of the story, and to question the motivation of the group when a lowering of the value of human life or dignity is brought to our attention. Such conflicts raise big questions for the reader around motivation, human dominance, stewardship, value and decency. For who are

we to judge the values of others in a situation beyond our comprehension? McCaughrean never shies away from ensuring the reader is faced not only with the fragility of the environment in which the group operate on an everyday basis as well as during their time on the Stac, but the fragility of each member of the group as they leave the comfort of their homes and then deal with the privations which face them as the story unfolds (p15).

That fragility of life is a constant feature of the novel, as the fate of the group becomes more and more insecure, and in a mirroring of the equally precarious lives of the birds they are sent to trap and kill. Quilliam, right from the start, sets himself apart both in terms of his pragmatism and practical approach to the task in hand and the ensuing challenges the group faces, as well as in terms of his leadership. As the killer of the "King Gannet", (p25), whose demise ensures that the trapping of other birds is rendered possible, he takes for himself the mantel of King Gannet. The killing foreshadows Quill's take-down of the self-made 'king', Col Cane, who, as one of the adults within the group, holds a position of authority which, as the tale unfolds, he abuses in the name of God and organised religion.

The arrival of the garefowl early on in the group's occupation of the Stac provides McCaughrean with a vehicle for comparing the superstitions of the people with the religious practices later explored. The garefowl is seen as a sea witch, as a friend, a mother and a demon. The bird creates fear for some, and comfort for Quill, in the same way that the rituals and rites which are first mooted and then enforced by Col Cane provide a safe sense of structure and an existential threat to the lives – and afterlives – of the group.

Cane's view of himself as responsible for the religious and moral welfare of the boys is made clear early on in the story. The Sexton of the church on Hirta, he is generally reviled by the boys and adult parishioners alike, but on the Stac, in the absence of a minister, he begins early on to position himself as the guardian of the Faith - through his language and the way in which he compares events and behaviours with his reading of The Lord's will. "The Lord smiteth the proud and bringeth down the mighty. Think on that, laddie,'" (p26), he admonishes Quill following his promotion to King Gannet. Quill himself appears humble in the face of his triumph, but his leadership qualities are clearly seen by Cane as a threat. Through the use of language associated with the Church and specifically the King James version of the Bible, McCaughrean manages both to present Cane's declamations as apparently meaningful and God-given and to prefigure the essential ridiculousness of the

man, described early on as “a reliable killjoy” (p12) and later, once he has established himself as the ‘temporary minister’ of the Stac (p37) described thus:

> He called himself “the Minister’s Right Hand”, though in fact he was only the sexton, employed to dig graves, tend the manse vegetable plot, mend the roof and clean the barn which served as a kirk…Col Cane had made it his job to ring the bell, too, before services, summoning the villagers to worship. He thought it made him an important “officer of the kirk”. (pp37-38)

From an early stage, Cane uses God and faith both as a comfort and as a threat, in part, at least, to establish his own superiority and authority over the rest of the group. Indeed, although Cane’s behaviour is presented as absolutely appalling throughout the novel, his insistence on establishing and maintaining a prayer and faith-led approach to their lives does, even as it hurtles into fanaticism, provide the group with a structure and format which also offers comfort and familiarity in a harsh environment where all that they had believed in has proven to be false.

It can be of no coincidence that the Sexton is named after Cain in the Bible, whose murder of his brother, Abel, in Genesis, situates him according to some commentators as the father or ancestor of evil (Hughes, 1979; Bowman, 2007). Yet the Biblical Cain is also untouchable due to the mark on his forehead given by God as a sign of the vengeance which will be wrought should anyone kill him to avenge Abel’s death. Col Cane is presented as similarly untouchable. Despite his increasingly unacceptable behaviours, and the risks he takes in getting off the Stac, he remains alive, and in pretty good health. He does not fall victim to the increasing anger of the boys as their world falls apart around them when they find themselves abandoned, but instead, despite his evident absurdity, retains his sense of authority through a combination of fear and invocation of God’s will as a result of his own provenance. Cane is a fascinating character. McCaughrean presents him as utterly unlikeable from the start, with few redeeming characteristics. Yet it is Cane who recognises, and acts upon, the importance of ritual and routine for the boys, both as a way of creating a ‘sticky’ community, and as a way of providing safe and familiar structures as events take a turn for the worse. His instigation of routines around prayer, his insistence on moral behaviours, his understanding of the importance of artefacts in such a harsh environment, such as his creation and decoration of an altar, provide us with an image of a man who is utterly fallible, but who has some understanding of the moral responsibilities which go hand in hand with authority. Does

he take advantage of this understanding to his own betterment? Absolutely, and his actions are often un-Godlike and unbefitting of a truly God-fearing man: his exhortations to the increasingly frightened and bewildered boys to shun one of their own; his decision to take for himself a new, young wife when it is discovered that one of the 'boys' is, in fact, a girl, despite the fact that he has a wife back on Hirta; his hoarding of precious resources for himself in the name of God, which could lead to the starvation of the boys.

That said, McCaughrean is extremely clever in her portrayal of this imperfect, and unpleasant, man. As the reader, one can view his behaviours and proclamations in the same way that the boys (and parishioners) view him as a man – as ridiculous, pompous and worthy of derision. She writes:

> Quill's father whispered that Col Cane thought God was on the other end of the bell rope, and he pulled it to get the Almighty's attention. Quill's mother said she was thankful for ears, so that she could put her fingers in them. Quill suggested that if Mr Cane ever laughed, his own ears would fall off in surprise (p38).

Yet for all the scorn justifiably heaped upon his head, Cane does bring the community of boys together as they face an uncertain future. McCaughrean's portrayal allows for a religious reading of his character, which requires a certain level of religious understanding (of the Abrahamic faiths) in order to make comparisons with a Biblical Cain, for example, but which also leads the reader to ask some of those big, existential questions that are looked for in the RE classroom. If a figure of power, who claims his authority from God, proves to be utterly fallible and indeed dangerous to those in his care, then what does that tell us about God Himself? When the group find themselves abandoned, both by the islanders and then even by Cane himself, where is God then? Indeed, Cane himself is said at the end to have lost his faith, despite his fervent and fanatical adherence to his God throughout his time on the Stac. "[H]e was no longer on speaking terms with God (who had left his prayers unanswered)" (p303), writes McCaughrean, raising the question, is there some kind of contract with God which requires prayer and devotion on the part of the supplicant in return for a guaranteed answering of prayer in the hour of need?

Cane's use of Biblical language, which he mostly uses to admonish his 'flock', positions him as a man of devotion and religious wisdom. Gleitzman uses language similarly in *Grace* where the titular hero uses language instantly recognised as religious to describe everyday

events and happening. The juxtaposition in *Grace* of childlike speech and content with ancient Biblical wording throws Grace's situation into sharp relief for the reader, and McCaughrean's use of Biblical declamation positioned within a landscape of sheer cliff faces and multitudinous birds provides the reader with a similar jolt of dissonance. The reader is left questioning Cane's intent and also the intent of the words he quotes. Is God really looking after them? Are they purely at the mercy of a formidable God or do they hold their futures within their own hands? McCaughrean allows the reader to pose these questions without providing definitive answers – because there are none. And questions such as these reflect the big questions we begin to ask ourselves as children and as adults. Contrasting the small-minded Cane and his sense of religious superiority with the actions that he does undertake - which, in their deployment are damaging and cruel, but in intent provide structure and familiarity (rituals, artefacts, stories and so forth) - helps us to consider the role that the lived religious experience might play for individuals, and allows us to consider, and evaluate, human fallibility against a supposedly all-knowing, all-seeing God.

Some of these big questions are presented very clearly to the reader as the novel moves on. As the group becomes increasingly aware of their predicament, they naturally begin to question the reason why no-one has come to take them off the Stac at the end of their expected time there. Mr Farriss provides pragmatic reasons. Cane places their fate into the hands of God. The boys consider piracy or sea witches or the green blue men of the sea as reasons for their dilemma (p45). The whole group speaks only with respect of the Owner, the distant wealthy person from the mainland who owns the archipelago of islands. Indeed it is for the benefit of the Owner, ultimately, that the group finds itself on the Stac, collecting the birds which will provide the necessary income and currency for the residents of Hirta to pay for the right to live there. McCaughrean capitalises the Owner, perhaps in deference to his almost god-like status – she writes:

> Like God, he was held in awe by everyone on Hirta. The very fact that he could *own* a whole archipelago of islands and stacs made him seem like the Creator Himself (p47).

This comparison with God is important, for it is in the hands of the Owner, through his Steward, that the group's fate ultimately lies, and it is telling that their rescue comes about purely as a result of the Steward attempting to collect his annual rents from the residents of Hirta. Finding their population decimated by smallpox, he is driven to rescue the group at the

pleading of the few remaining survivors of the disease. God, perhaps, rescues them after all, then, because the mysterious figure of the Owner is representative of God in and of himself.

In their discussion of the Owner early on in the plot at their realisation that no-one is coming to rescue them, the group cease to talk about the reasons why they are not being rescued. Those reasons are too troublesome to dwell upon, and, as McCaughrean writes, "a thing not talked about barely exists, does it?" (p47). This concept is a central part of the novel – as a group there is an, often unspoken, agreement not to mention certain aspects of their rapidly deteriorating situation. The revelation that John is, in fact, a girl, is one of these, and her experience of childhood in which her true sex has been kept from her father reflects the same principle. Quill, on finding out her secret, chooses not to tell, partly in order to protect her, but also because accepting or talking about her otherness would render her no longer one of 'them', and for the boys on the Stac, togetherness is essential to their very survival.
In terms of faith and religion, the boys hark back regularly to their experiences on Hirta of ritual, prayer and belief in a God who will save them, and these beliefs are fundamental both to their ability to remain optimistic and therefore alive, and to Cane's desire to create and lead a viable social community in the image of that with which he was most comfortable back home. So, whilst believing that "a thing not talked about barely exists", the opposite runs true for belief in God. Angels, demons, the afterlife and Heaven are spoken of freely and regularly. It suits the little community to have, then, a holy, martyr figure in little Euan, with his visions and apparent holiness presented in stark contrast to the increasing untaming of the other boys (p50).

Euan's vision of the Rapture, where the small group have missed the action by being hidden on the rock (perhaps God is not so infallible after all), adds further elements to the novel. It allows the boys to have hope that God will, eventually, see them and reunite them with their loved ones. It gives them something to talk about, constantly, in direct contrast again to denying realities through silence. It enables Cane to embed further his own brand of religious fervour and adherence for the good of the boys' souls. And, in the description given of what this might mean, it exposes the reader to the physicality of their situation in expressly religious terms:

> God had decided to end the world. The Last Days had come. A golden trumpet had sounded and sent God's angels down to earth to fetch all the good people home to

> Heaven and pack off all the bad people to Hell…But they had never thought to look on the stacs, because the stacs were only lumps of rock sticking out of the sea… (p50).

The performance element of the novel is clearly visible here, and the reader is led to images of a golden rapture, of souls ascending to Heaven, of music and ceremony, all of which are familiar to the boys from their evangelical religious culture. McCaughrean talks about the dramatically dissimilar setting in which this concept is revealed to them, demonstrating not only the importance of practical objects to the boys, but their artefactual religious significance too. The contrast with the actuality of their situation is stark:

> Around them on every crevice of the rock walls, headless petrels burned, the wicks encircled by haloes of flame, as though a band of skinny little angels was peering down at them. They made it easy to believe the unbelievable (p50).

From a religio-artefactual point of view, this is key. Artefacts, be they produced with religious intent or representative of known material objects, are imbued with sacredness as a result of human behaviours and conviction. Artefacts can provide a sense of 'religiosity', of being in the presence of something greater or holy, and they provide the setting for the *performance* of religion as well as helping believers to experience a sense of the sacred through the feelings they inspire. Euan's enactment of mysticism and visions, his strong beliefs which seep into every element of his being and his behaviours, are a form of performance - albeit not pretend in any way - which the boys are able to accept without question. Their view of Cane's performative religion is starkly different. It is related to the man and not the God he professes to believe in, and it is only through fear that Cane is able to force the boys to undertake confessions, to stop them working in order to focus on prayer, and to take for himself the most important and valuable belongings they have in the name of his own superior religiosity. It is significant that the boys immediately reject ideas of wars, disasters or monsters creating the situation in which they find themselves when faced with the probability of divine intervention as a result of a small boy's vision. Believing the unbelievable is rendered easier by virtue of the artefacts with which they are surrounded, and this enables them to reject the increasingly uncomfortable and likely truth of their situation – that they have been forgotten.

Performance is fundamental also to the beginning of this novel, in the way that the boys perform adult roles in providing for their community through their bird-catching. It is present, too, in the performance of traditional or ritualistic behaviours associated with birding on the Stac such as the timing of movements between the bothies and, of course, the crowning of King Gannet. The performance of ritual, with associated artefacts imbued with meaning through their usage or the symbols they are taken to represent, provides structure and meaning to the boys' everyday existence. There is no question that they will reject the religious aspects of any such performance since this is simply the reality within which they have lived their whole lives. That Cane should take on the role of minister is no surprise to them, and, indeed, in their grudging acceptance of him in this role, the rest of the small community gives permission for him to find comfort and security in those aspects of his old life which gave it meaning. Religious rituals such as timed prayer, confession, the lighting of candles, readings from the Bible, form the bedrock of the community they build. McCaughrean has spoken of her intention to write a novel with undertones of *Lord of the Flies*, one in which "the boys (being from a highly religious and gentle community) decided to create an ideal society which put the adults to shame" (Sanderson, 2018). Much of the performance culture which is described throughout the novel, certainly in terms of that which could be considered to be religious, is dictated by the few adults within the group – and Col Cane in particular. The performances created by the boys – the crowning of King Gannet, the bestowal of Keeper titles (Keeper of Stories, Keeper of the Flame) – are perhaps more visceral and pagan in their origins, but serve a similar purpose, which is to bind the small community and provide comfort through familiarity and repetition. Cane's insistence on hearing the boys' confessions is frowned upon by the other adult members of the group: "'By the soul, are we Catholics now?...What, is he the Pope?'"(p92) bellows Domhnall Don on hearing of the requirement. Adult readers can infer a prurient aspect to Cane's behaviour which is borne out later in the novel once he discovers the truth of John's identity and vows to take her for his (additional) wife. However, this performance of confession serves a purpose both for Cane and for the community as a whole in that it serves to bind the group through fear. Cane's power and influence are seen to grow and become more and more embedded through his use of religion to position himself: "on the Stac, Cane had formed an unbeatable alliance – with God and with Fear and with Weariness". (p83). Through the performative nature of the things Cane puts into place - and with which the others fall into line - the establishment of a cohesive society is ensured, even if this is to the detriment of some of its members. And as much as the boys rail against the privations created not only by

their abandonment but by Cane's increasingly rabid pronouncements, it is recognised, as their future becomes almost completely untenable, that this approach has, in fact, been better than any alternative.

Cane abandons the boys entirely, taking with him their source of fire and their only hope of getting themselves off the Stac, and any attempts to see positives in this – that he will potentially be easier to see from Hirta making their rescue more likely - are devalued by the clearly depressed Farriss:

> "It's a signal, at least… They'll look over from Hirta and see that we are living still." "If there is anyone left to see it," muttered Farriss. And the boys hissed at him through their teeth, writhing with resentment. At least Cane had offered them Heaven, angels, Judgement Day. At least Don was offering them family and hope. Farriss's only explanation lay in tragedy, in having been utterly forgotten, and in a god who had turned his back and walked away (p177).

A god who seems to have deserted them is one the boys cannot begin to accept or account for. But their attitude to religion is transformed through their experience, both lived and remembered: the realisation that hope is essential, that there is merit in visualising angels and heaven, and that individuals can themselves be transformed through their own outliving of their religious experience. Cane himself is altered through his experience from religious adherent, to fanatic, to, at the end of the novel, someone "no longer on speaking terms with God" (p303). Although religion and belief has shaped him just as much as anyone, it is clear throughout the story that Cane does not have all the answers, and his fallibility contributes to his transformation from pious, charismatic Presbyterian, to a grumbling return to Sexton.

The boys themselves are also transformed, and as their experience on the Stac continues, McCaughrean describes the way their belief and their religion itself moulds and alters:

> They lived in the Present: the Past was past mattering, the Future a shapeless improbability… They were turning into angels; still patiently devout in their strange, half-pagan religion, they went on waiting for the white ship or angel chariot, Amazon Queen or the drying up of the sea to release them from the Stac (p282).

Their lives are transformed through their experience on the Stac; and ultimately through the reality of the disaster that has befallen Hirta in their absence – a land transformed through the decimation of its population in a foreshadowing of the later total evacuation of St Kilda. For

all the survivors of the Stac experience, as well as those few left behind following the smallpox devastation of Hirta, lives will never be the same again. However, the boys' experience of how performative ritual, be that religious or secular, can bind a community together is again hinted at as the novel ends, with Quill's encounter with Murdina, the woman around whom he has built so many dreams and wishes throughout the privations of his nine months stranded at sea. The reader is left informed about an historical event, certainly, but also about how religion can enhance, and detract from, social relationships. Readers are exposed to the performative nature of religion and the performative aspects of communities as they adhere together. And they are left altered through new knowledge, and through a deep understanding of the transformation of the lives of each of the individuals who return from the ordeal.

Magic and the decline of religion: fantasy as a vehicle for writing religion.

In my first headship, I ran a staff and governor training day about values and our core purpose. We started the day by leaving the school building with our cups of coffee, on the hunt for something which each individual viewed as a magic wand. This magic wand would, I suggested, be the artefact we could return to throughout the day, reminding us that, as teachers, we had a certain kind of magic which was of value to our pupils.

I then asked the participants, individually, to represent, in drawing, writing or mind-mapping, their perfect school were money no object. We collated the results after about twenty minutes of work. The composite school, created entirely independently by 20 grown adults, was fascinating. They described buildings which could inspire, by their beauty or magnificence, a desire for exploration and learning which lay at the heart of what we were about as teachers. They requested merit systems which encouraged collegiality and mutual support – and competition. They waxed lyrical about the magic they held as teachers, and as learners, and how this could be harnessed to bring about the school ethos we had identified right at the start of my tenure there – a school where children would run in at the beginning of the day, and dawdle out at the end. They spoke about lessons and subjects and learning which had context, and direct, and immediate, application to real life problems. They described, in effect, Hogwarts.

When I left the school, one of the teachers presented me with a turned, wooden wand, inscribed with the words "*You can do magic*". As teachers, we really believed that "magic" was the key to making our pupils' time at primary school the most joyful, full, and useful experience possible. I do not think our sense of ourselves as teachers in charge of something magical was unique to that school. In fact, in the schools in which I had previously, and have subsequently, worked, *magic* is a word which has come up frequently in discussions about engagement, enjoyment, resilience and application. Observations of creative, dynamic lessons, which aimed to inspire and astonish the minds in front of the teacher suggested to me that creating magic, harnessing it and recognising it in the children in our care is, perhaps, at the core of how primary teachers perceive themselves professionally. A requirement to provide exposure to awe and wonder may no longer be specified in the National Curriculum for England, but for teachers up and down the land, creating those eye-widening magical moments has never ceased to be of importance.

Was it the influence of Rowling's Potter series itself which dictated the image of the perfect school experience to the teachers and governors at that inset day? The runaway success of her books, and their enduring longevity, has surely influenced both how readers view desirable schooling and inspired visions of what magical learning could be like. Rowling, as all successful fantasy writers, creates not so much a story, as a secondary world (Hutcheon, 2008; Thomas, 2015) into which the reader can become absorbed, and against the background of which fantastical storylines can play out in perfectly comprehensible and believable ways.

Fantasy as a genre has been harnessed over many years by authors keen to include religious themes, or structures, artefacts or transcendent powers. Perhaps the best known of these would be Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, with the tale told in terms of natural, every-day and deeper magics. According to Clute (1997),

> A fantasy is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it…when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms (p311).

The fantasy format enables us to suspend disbelief, and to find ourselves at home with talking beasts, wizards and witches, magic spells, fairies and faeries, wands, and books which might

attack us at any given moment (Koelb, 2020). The fact that these things are impossible in the world we inhabit corporally does not preclude us from engaging with, and believing in, them in the moment of reading. Indeed, even whilst the stories may include mortal peril, horror or challenging questions of morality, the reader may well find themself craving admission to these impossible worlds as both an escape from, and possibly an explanation of, the lived experience they call their own. These created, fantastical, and often magical, worlds hold a power over readers which is reflected in their enduring popularity across both children's and adult publishing.

In exploring why fantasy appears to handle the problems of religious themes successfully, it is necessary to look at the roots of the fantasy genre itself. Matthews, amongst other commentators, suggests that "modern fantasy is clearly related to magical stories of myth, legend, fairy tale and folklore" (Matthews, 2002, p1). Myths and mythology form the basis of significant numbers of stories in both the religious and secular spheres. For Hein, myths have a special place in the lexicon of story, describing them as "stories which confront us with something transcendent and eternal" (Hein, 2014, p3). Certainly, the popularity of myths in both children's and adults' literature has not abated over time. The Neilsen figures for books which are based on mythology or traditional tales, with religious elements, show that their popularity more than doubled between 2010 and 2014, although this had dropped back by 2019. However, books such as Maz Evans's *Who Let The Gods Out* trilogy, Riorden's *Percy Jackson* series, and Chaddha's 2021 book for the Disney imprint, *City of the Plague Gods,* continue to be extremely popular - all of which reference, or are based upon, traditional and well-known mythology.

Chaddha's book references the Gilgamesh myth, and this is one of the great epics which finds reproduction, albeit in varying forms, in sacred literature as well – the story of Noah and the Ark reflects closely the earlier Gilgamesh legend for example. But mythology is wider than those well-known traditional tales which form such a great part of our unconscious (and conscious) story backgrounds. Detweiler describes myths, in terms of their religious relevance, as "narrative histories of an interpretive community's shaping of a belief system" (Detweiler, 1995, p42). In attempting to make sense of the world, communities and individuals throughout time have used storytelling, mythology, and folklore to explore big questions about creation, the meaning of life, good and evil, and the afterlife. Stories, presented as sacred truths, form the backbone of religious belief, providing an explanatory

framework for these big questions. Belief systems and organised religions can rely on these narrative frameworks to provide interest, entertainment and easily understood answers (Johnston, 2018; Campbell & Moyers, 1991). Whether regarded as the direct word of God or the gods, or as inspired by them, sacred stories and myths are fundamental to how groups and individuals understand the actions and rituals and beliefs of religious communities – and the RE curriculum requirements reflect their importance as being at the centre of belief and practice. "In the beginning was the Word," writes John, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1 NIV). Word as sacred, Word as God incarnate – John could hardly have stressed more the fundamental role of Words for believers in a Judeo, and Christian, God. Matthews points to the Old Testament Book of Genesis as a prime example of how order was created for religious communities, where words provide the scaffold for that order, where "the subjects are the first acts of creation, the bringing of the world into being through the uttering of words" (Matthews, 2002, p11). In placing story front and centre in terms of its importance, religious communities have been able to blur the boundaries between *what is*, in fact, and *what is*, in belief.

The mythic form which underpins so much of what is understood by the fantasy genre – with elements of quest, of supernatural or magic impossibilities, with Powers or Beings who transcend human existence – is so familiar to us from our exposure to myths from sacred writings and traditional tales, that I would suggest that it is extremely well placed as a genre to allow and enable children to explore what it *might mean* to have a religious faith. According to Hein, "myth is necessary because reality is so much larger than rationality" (Hein, 2014, px). For children, and adults, trying to grapple with concepts of a numinous beyond rational understanding, harnessing the mythological allows such concepts to be explored and constituted in a size and format which is comprehensible. In using the fantasy genre to provide a background to an exploration of faith, and the lived experience, opportunities are provided for the *suspension of belief* itself – and this is important. Teachers routinely attempt to be entirely rational in the classroom when teaching about religions and their beliefs and practices, deliberately avoiding any accusation of proselytising or coercion. They ask children to be respectful of others' beliefs, to be curious and to try to empathise with what it might be like to hold those beliefs – and what the outward demonstration of those beliefs might be – but do not ask them to share in the beliefs themselves. Realist novels which tackle the religious beliefs of others leave themselves open to readers questioning the validity of those beliefs – "I don't think God exists anyway, so this is just stupid". Fantasy,

however, provides us with a moment where one does not have to pledge allegiance to a particular conviction but to share in it as one immerses oneself in the lives of the protagonists without needing to question whether what they believe in is true, only whether the way in which they enact their faith is justifiable. Readers do not, in general, read the Narnian Chronicles and throw them aside because they are 'unbelievable', any more than they discard the Harry Potter books, or Tolkien, or the animals in *The Wind In The Willows*. They are able, because they are familiar with the structure and premise of fantasy texts, owing to their exposure to myths, legends and fairy tales from an early age, to take them and their convictions at face value, in ways perhaps harder to do with realist fiction. Fantasy allows the reader to suspend disbelief long enough to become absorbed into the story. This makes fantasy, I would argue, a particularly compelling and efficient vehicle for exploring what it means to have faith, and the conviction of one's religious beliefs - exploration which can then be applied to the material worlds of religion and faith.

According to Freeman,

> Children's fantasy literature has an honesty, an openness, and a directness unlike any other genre; an author can discuss topics in children's fantasy literature, through the use of analogy, that may be frowned upon in adult literature…The genre, by its very nature, allows for spirituality, because it makes allowances for all other impossibilities (Freeman, 2013, np).

In allowing for other impossibilities, fantasy writing enables the reader to explore what it feels like to hold a belief in a power beyond themselves, to adhere to a religious or quasi-religious group and to act accordingly, without having to ask themselves whether they too can share that belief. Fictional religions play a really important part in helping us to understand the lived experience or visceral sense of believing in something beyond oneself. In so doing, fantasy writing in particular asks the reader to draw not only on their own experiences and to use these to understand the impossible or the inexplicable, but also to give full reign to their imagination. For Hein, such imagination is all. "To experience the power of myth," he claims, "readers must respect story for its own sake and enter its precincts exclusively through the portals of imagination" (Hein, 2014, p13). It is, surely, this ability to use one's imagination which enables people to believe in a God or gods or supernatural power. However, it is vital not to conflate belief and imagination. Religious belief here relates to sincerely held convictions related to theistic – or agnostic – concepts, regardless of

whether these are recognised or validated by others. Imagination is also one of the most powerful tools in the teacher's toolkit, since pupils are asked regularly to step into the shoes of another, to imagine, through stimuli such as visual resources or first-hand accounts, what it might be to live in a distant country; to come alongside major characters from history; and to attempt to understand the motivations for their actions. Imagination is key to so much that is meaningful in teaching and learning, and fantasy writing takes this human need to explore the impossible and turns it into something that *could* be possible – just maybe not in our world, or our lifetime, or our experience (Rorty, 2009; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Religious faith also requires us to be able to believe in the possibilities of the humanly impossible in just the same way.

Magic can be found as a theme in many children's books throughout history. From collections of fairy tales and stories of fairy folk by Andrew Lang, the Grimm brothers, and Hans Christian Anderson, building on the works of Perrault, to publishing phenomenon, J K Rowling, authors have harnessed the power of magic to drive storytelling, to present moral stances and to explain the inexplicable. In the podcast, *The Witchcraft Trials of JK Rowling,* the author explains her use of magic, stating that "magic gives a person agency they wouldn't otherwise have… that's particularly appealing to a child because children inevitably are quite powerless" (Phelps-Roper, 2023).

Magic and magical folks are rooted in ancient folklore, in fairy tales and, yes, in religious beliefs and practice. The Scottish minister and scholar, Robert Kirk, collected folklore and fairy stories between 1691 and 1692 - later published by Walter Scott in 1815, with a second edition published by Andrew Lang in 1893 - entitled *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies.* For Kirk, there was no dichotomy between his religious faith and a belief in fairies and elves. Indeed, these supernatural, magical beings, were examples of God's work on earth, and Kirk saw no tension between a belief in the fairy world and belief in God. Ordinary people appear to have been much closer to the idea of the supernatural in their everyday lives, and open to all manner of magical and uncanny activities and influences. As McGuire (2008) suggests, "magic and miracle were once completely interwoven with religion; they were integrally part of how people understood religious power" (McGuire, 2008, p38). Belief in unseen magical folks and in magic *per se* was on a par with belief in an equally unseen, supernatural and all-powerful God. The Protestant Reformation heralded discussion about links between so-called magic, and spiritual, religious belief and practice

(Thomas, 1971; Hunter, 2020). That there were many parallels identified between religious practice and magical practice was the cause for some concern amongst the Reformers. Thomas describes how magicians and priests often demonstrated similarities in their procedures, be they magical (spell-linked) or religious:

> both thought their spells more effective when pronounced in one place and at one time rather than another; both turned to the East to say them; and both thought that mere words could possess a magical virtue (Thomas, 1971, loc 1121).

The visible links between magical behaviours and religious ones required, for modernising reformers, the stamping out of the magical in favour of the religious. The deployment of magical elements and rituals, beliefs and practices, were necessarily brought under the control of the Church (Thomas, 1971). For the Reformers, any religious ritual or practice which could be equated with something magical was to be treated with suspicion – for only through the sacrifice of Jesus could man be saved. Thus some of the more puritanical believers eschewed even the Lord's Prayer, citing its potential as incantation and thus the potential for imbuing it with magical properties. According to Hunter (2020), there was a significant gap which grew between Catholics and Protestants at this time, with the latter stating that miracles (which could be seen as a kind of divine 'magic'), whilst significant in terms of their Biblical provenance, were no longer the way in which God "chose to exercise his power" (p.6). Thomas writes,

> The Protestants were helping to make a distinction in kind between magic and religion, the one a coercive ritual, the other an intercessionary one. Magic was no longer to be seen as a false religion…it was a different sort of activity altogether (1971, loc 1573).

The intent behind "priest-craft and witch-craft…distinguished not by differences in effectiveness but by presumed benevolent or malevolent intent" (McGuire, 2008, p36), would be one of the driving factors behind the witch trials, and the movement underground of any belief or practice which could be reasonably described as magical.

Of course, the traditional fairy tales, the folk-lore of magical beings, of witches and wizards, benevolent or not, did not disappear altogether in places like the British Isles. The Wellwoods in AS Byatt's novel, *The Children's Book,* creating actual fairy stories for their children and for profitable publication, exist in the book in a world at the cusp of great industrial and

political change and they fill the liminal spaces with experiences of enchantment, magic and supernatural mystery, for both adults and children. In times of upheaval and disorientation, magic and the supernatural come into their own to provide a security and familiarity which resonates with something ancient within each individual. Religious belief, chosen and adhered to, did not always dispense entirely with an awareness of the magical in the past, even where this was explained away rationally as make-believe. The resurgence of fantasy and magic in both children's and adult's literature, as well as popular TV and film, suggests that our deep need for exposure to the magical has not gone away either. Rowling's Potter series harnesses fantasy and magic to extraordinary ends, and her hero and his exploits continue to delight and engage readers old and new over 20 years after their stories were first published. Within those novels, the significance of spell-casting, incantation, artefacts with magical properties, powers available to the few, not to all, can be related to structures of religious power and belief, and whilst an overt religiosity is conspicuously absent from the books, there are clear parallels with Christianity – the sacrifice of the one for the good of the many, resurrection, betrayal, and redemption. Rowling herself has spoken of the Christian parallels within the books (*Christian Today*, 2007).Yet the books have been the source of huge debate amongst parents, schools and Christian communities as to whether children should be allowed to read them at all. Some communities believe that exposure to these books would encourage children to dabble in witchcraft, or to engage with the occult (Bridger, 2001). That children's books about magic can inspire such visceral reactions - Rowling's books have been removed from libraries and schools, and even burned (Flood, 2019; Alexander, 2017) - in an age when magic wands and spells are generally seen as entirely fictional, is testament to the power such books have. If magic is make-believe, surely, then exposure to fantasy novels with magic at their core can do no more harm than books with clothed animals who speak.

But of course, the Church in the Reformation did not suggest magic was not real. On the contrary – it painted magic, and belief in magical beings, as being *at odds* with the central teachings of Christianity. The idea that magic is all make-believe is a relatively modern one: Kirk's text demonstrates that even for the most religious, magic and the fairy realm were considered perfectly real. Much of the explosive impact of the Reformation can be traced not only to Luther's ninety-five Theses, but, symbiotically, to the development of the printing press, and the fact that many of Luther's writings were produced in low German, the language of the people, as opposed to Latin. In increasing access to his declamations against

certain practices of the Catholic Church amongst the common people, the message of the Reformers was spread far and wide. Burton (2019) suggests that the Harry Potter phenomenon happened – and continues to happen – at a similarly important period in time in terms of the spread of information, claiming that between the publication of the first and fourth Potter books, Americans' access to the Internet rose by 500%. In spreading the 'message' of the books far and wide, by being published at such a turning point in information access, the Potter books were well placed to spread widely and rapidly and they seem to have filled a gap – a magical gap – which had perhaps not been sufficiently filled before.

Of course, fantasy fiction was popular with readers of all ages before the Potter books came on the scene. *The Hobbit, The Chronicles of Narnia, The Magic Faraway Tree* – numerous books written for children from the so-called 'Golden Age' of Children's Literature have harnessed the power of magic and the fantasy form to delight and engage their readers. Fantasy novels are popular with young, and young adult readers (*Statista*). It is interesting, when considering the range of fantasy writing with religious themes or aspects available to children and young adults currently, to see that many of these popular novels form parts of longer series or trilogies. Ness's *Chaos Walking* is made up of three sequential novels. *The Chronicles of Narnia* run to seven books; Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy has been joined by the companion trilogy *The Book of Dust* along with a number of additional companion short novellas. Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* trilogy has at its centre her take on a pseudo Russian-Orthodox church, with the central character, Alina, viewed as a saint by those around her. Bardugo has spoken about the importance of religion in her Grishaverse novels:

> As for religion, this may just be my perception, but I feel like it's weirdly taboo in a lot of YA that isn't dealing with it as an "issue". It gets ignored or just hinted at – ah, the ancient gods of yore – or it gets scapegoated. It's an easy "big bad," right? Authority. Conformity. But for me, religion was always a big part of the Grisha world – same as geography or magic or government, and I didn't want to present just one view of it. Faith can be scary. It can also be beautiful and sustaining (Johnson, 2015).

From the reading of novels for the purposes of this study, it is clear that there is somewhat of a problem in contemporary children's literature in that it has mostly avoided religion in its output. There is a risk, too, for authors, that a focus on religion in a realist novel can border on cultural exoticism, especially as Christian – based depictions are relatively few and far

between. Cultural exoticism brings with it the risk of objectifying and othering, exploiting or marginalising, the religious experience of others, a problem which is more easily tackled through the medium of fantasy. This study, whilst focussed on reviewing the use of existing fiction within the classroom, is also a call to arms for writers of contemporary children's literature to be braver in representing the religious experience of protagonists in novels as it manifests in the lives of children today, as confidently as fantasy writers appear to do.

In placing religion firmly within their novels, many fantasy writers rely on their skills as world builders, creating a fantasy world which requires context and explanation to the reader, and which, therefore, benefits from the longer form of the trilogy or the series to explore and expand upon beliefs and practices which make the imaginary society and world function. Given that religion as a concept is so utterly huge, in its beliefs, its practices and its scope, as it attempts to provide answers to the biggest questions we are equipped to ask as humans, it makes sense that a fictional religion would require multiple novels in order to make it feel authentic. A quick Google search for 'religion and worldbuilding' brings up a huge number of websites dedicated to, or contributing to, the exploration of *how* to write a new religion in a fantasy world both in novels and, interestingly, gaming. Nikolajeva describes fantasy as "an eclectic genre…blending seemingly incompatible elements with one and the same narrative, for instance pagan and Christian images, magic wands and laser guns" (Nikolajeva, 2003, p139). I would suggest further that, particularly in long form, fantasy novels which do not pay any heed to describing or including faith or religion or some kind of belief system may have a harder job to present an authentic world to their readers. For in creating impossible worlds, perhaps one has to consider the creator themselves – where does this world come from? How do the inhabitants relate to a creator or lack thereof? What do they believe *in* and how do they express and celebrate their beliefs? What is their moral code, and how has it been decided? All these are questions which can be asked of a fantasy text and of actual communities and societies too. The back story – creation, evolution, whatever that may be - is essential to both understanding known worlds and the unknown. Green and Oldendorf (2011) write that "faith groups are bound together by their myths, legends, and shared histories, with storytelling at the very heart of human and religious experience" (p15). The fantasy novel provides us with the opportunity to explore those myths, legends and shared histories for new worlds, and religion or faith is often at the centre of this task.

In worldbuilding, the fantasy novelist has the opportunity to place enormous concepts and ideas into a manageable context. Writing about Grahame's beautiful expression of the Numinous in *The Wind In The Willows,* Poss suggests that, "with his creation of the friend and Helper, Grahame has neatly seized control of the gods, scaling another epic problem down to comfortable size" (Poss,1975, p84). Where God, or gods, or creation, or the meaning of life, are concepts too big for us to handle, fantasy allows us to explore them at a manageable scale; gives us the opportunity to walk around them through 360 degrees and to understand them in terms and contexts which can be controlled.

This worldbuilding potential of fantasy writing also allows the author to present one collective view of the beliefs and understandings which help to form the societies about which they are writing. For the reader, therefore, the world presented is understood similarly by other readers, creating a community of understanding about the fantasy world which can be shared. This relates to sacred and religious reading of texts in a community setting – when we read together, we share the experience of the text in ways which are different to individual reading, and this is important in a number of religions, where shared reading and exposure to religious and sacred texts lies at the heart of their practice – Islam and Judaism, for example, where the act of listening to a sacred text, and of performing it, is in itself an act of interpretation, of hermeneutics. Detweiler (1995) describes such an act of religious reading as "one in which a reader understands herself as part of a community engaged in simultaneously recognizing, criticizing and reshaping the myths and rituals it lives by" (p38). That concept of sensemaking by community relates well to the communities which are often created around fantasy novels, especially where these are part of longer series, and where detailed descriptions of worlds are provided. Fandom online and in person allows those who have been exposed to the story which has come out of the author's head to feel that, even if they cannot be a part of the storyline itself, they can be part of the world in which it exists (Tosenberger, 2008; Goodman, 2015). For those who wish to enable children to understand others' lived religious experience and 'impossible world', fantasy novels provide, through their world building, a portal into another's experience, and a passport into a new world, even when they are not a part of the story itself.

For educators, then, there is potential in using fantasy novels as a way of exploring a lived religious experience, related to an imaginary religion. Such books provide routes into thinking about belief and practice, without requiring the reader, or learner, to have a view on

the validity of those beliefs. In exploring how individuals may choose to express their faith, through accepted rituals, through their day-to-day interactions or equally through behaviours which are at odds with our own concepts of what is good or right, the reader can begin to make parallels between imaginary faith and practice, and the personal meaning of the religious practices they learn about in the RE classroom. Readers of a fantasy world are guests, although they may choose to become absorbed into the story as observers or even participants in the fandom world, and this allows the reader to be curious about the behaviours and motivations they see, without the risk of causing offence. Asking questions of a fictional character about their faith and coming up with the answers to those questions as a result of textual analysis and inference, is much less fraught with the potential to offend than doing the same to a pupil or visitor from another faith. And that means that the reader can ask difficult questions, without the risk of hurting anyone. Trying to get to the root of why Lord Asriel feels it is his right to challenge the Authority in *His Dark Materials*, or why the Wazir is in partnership with the Shayeteen in *The Candle and the Flame,* can enable us to begin to understand how people of all faiths in our own world make sense of their beliefs and actions in relation to their understanding of their god or gods. Alina's attempts to understand the concept of her own alleged sainthood in *Shadow and Bone*, and Harry Potter's struggles with his destiny, his role as notional redeemer and his realisation about the motivations of the adults around him in terms of fundamentally held beliefs, can be related to real life people, situations, and news stories and can help the reader and learner to develop empathy even where they do not share a belief or a conviction based in faith. There is something 'safe' about the fantasy genre which allows it to explore some very challenging and controversial issues, including internal religious differences and disputes (Pullman, 1995).

It is important, however, to approach the use of fantasy for examining religion and lived experience with care and thought. The author, in creating a whole new 'impossible' world is, in effect, the Creator, the God of their own imaginary universe, shared with the reader. This is a position of power and has the potential to be used carelessly or for questionable purposes. Freeman (2013) raises this as a concern, suggesting that,

> Spiritual themes and archetypes in this genre function as a means of maintaining the "natural hierarchy" … between author and audience, between adult and child…[this] results in the author creating a fictional child that is ineffectual and helpless (np).

The all-knowing author as God or creator needs to be explored in its own right to ensure that readers and learners are equipped to evaluate, critically, the situatedness and motivations of the writer in how they present religious behaviours and beliefs. Knowing Pullman's views on organised religion helps us to understand how he positions religion within his works, and helps us to explore why he considers it important to have religion at the heart of his writing. Equally, understanding Rowling's approach to Christianity enables us to recognise some of the allegorical aspects of the novels; exploring Nafiza Azad's religious background brings colour and depth to her depiction of Noor and the storyline which unfolds against its fictional city walls. But at the end of the day, it is important to make the distinction between a fictional religion, created by an author for the purposes of entertainment, and the deep-held beliefs of adherents to religion in the world we inhabit, which is not fictional, either in terms of fundamental belief, or physical actuality. Fantasy as a genre is popular, and of interest, therefore to publishers and book sellers – as Blair writes, "the greater presence of theological debate in the fantasy genre may represent current publishing standards and norms" (Blair, 2016, p127). Fantasy does not take the place of the lived religious experience amongst the communities around us. As the genre continues to accelerate in popularity for young and older audience alike, it is perhaps important to consider Bridger's gentle warning: "has fantasy literature like *Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter become, as Marx once said of religion, 'the opium of the people'?" (Bridger, 2001, p115). Fantasy is there to be used, but to be used carefully and with adequate preparation. Choosing, or acknowledging, the lenses through which one views works of fiction and the tools that need to be developed in order to understand and incorporate them is an essential factor in using fiction in the RE classroom.

The analysis of all the texts consulted, and the stories themselves, identified some key areas in which there were commonalities, including the importance of artefacts within the books. The close reading of McCaughrean's novel demonstrates the fundamental importance of artefacts to that lived religious experience. Within the final part of this study, I now consider the practical application of an approach for teachers in the classroom, based on the themes of delight, information, performance and transformation, to support the selection of texts and provide a scaffold for analysis, looking in more depth at an approach combining artefactual critical literacy and religious literacy for a more in-depth examination of texts that can be used in the teaching of RE and the lived religious experience.

Chapter 5

Approaching the texts: the importance of multiple literacies

The review of the literature exploring the importance of religious literacy, the role of RE in school, and the potential of fiction to be used as a teaching tool across the curriculum, have all led me to consider how time-restrained teachers and non-RE specialists can actually select and use the texts that exist, bearing in mind the challenges faced by teachers identified in earlier chapters.

In this section, I explore further the validity of using fiction in the RE curriculum, and develop the approach identified within the study which focusses on *delight, information, performance*, and *transformation* (referred to throughout the remainder of this study as DIPT), arising from the close reading of texts, into a practical tool for teachers. The importance of deep analysis of texts is approached through the development of an analysis framework which places the lived religious experience at its core. The toolkit ends with a mapping exercise, matching a range of fictional texts against the requirements of the National Curriculum for England, and the Scottish requirements for Religious and Moral Education. The development of this toolkit for teachers, which is exemplified in Chapter 6, to enable them to select, analyse and use fiction as part of the teaching sequence provides a practical response to the analysis of data and review of texts, and forms, I hope, a sound basis for teachers upon which to develop a meaningful, reflective and contextual aspect to their RE curriculum.

My professional experience as a headteacher has shown me that time-poor teachers tend not to use complex models within the classroom. The simplicity of the DIPT approach allows it to be altered to fit teacher exposition and cohort specificity. It is a dynamic model, which I would expect, through trials and use, to be altered and expanded as a result of professional dialogue and experience, creating new iterations from a practitioner approach. It is important at this point to recognise that many teachers will be already using similar approaches, possibly without even recognising this – the toolkit provided in the next chapter provides a framework and vocabulary for embedding the use of fiction within the RE classroom, which builds on good practice already in place.

In devising an approach to the selection and analysis of contemporary fiction texts, it is important to establish what ways of reading might be important and what types of literacies it may be desirable for readers to develop either before accessing a text, or as a result of a reading. In the first part of this section, therefore, I examine some possible lenses through which to read a work of fiction, which can be taught and used in the classroom and beyond.

Selecting the texts: approaching the multiple literacies we bring to reading.

When one selects and then reads texts, they are accessed or understood in different ways. Readers bring to the text their own experience and values – their "sedimentation" (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) – and this necessarily influences individual understanding of the text and how it impacts on each one as the reader (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Does this mean that, in order to truly understand and empathise with a challenging text, the reader needs to have had experiences which mirror those of the protagonists? Of course not. But it is important to recognise and acknowledge the prior knowledge and sedimentation of the reader in order to gain an insight into *how* they are reading and understanding a text, and how this may differ from other readers (Schmidt, 2020). A child from a Muslim background, reading *The Proudest Blue*, or *Planet Omar* in the primary classroom, will have a very different understanding and approach to the text from a child who does not have an understanding or experience of that faith. In exploring the differences between readers in terms both of their funds of knowledge and how they approach a text, it is possible to enhance and enliven readings for all. Of course, in raising this need to pay regard to the backgrounds of readers, it is vital to acknowledge the limitations of what can be done in an over-crowded, time-poor classroom. Realistic approaches to selecting and using texts are essential if one wishes to develop both knowledge and competence in the area. Requiring teachers to spend disproportionate amounts of time investigating the backgrounds in detail of their texts, the histories of protagonists and writers and then applying these as comparators to a class full of pupils in full cognisance of each individual history present there, is unrealistic. But bearing these things in mind and using the tools at hand is part of great teaching; developing such tools and providing support and guidance for their use can help to make this a reality.

When selecting texts, then, in order to provide examples of religious faith, it is necessary to establish at least at a basic level, which literacies, and what experiences, our readers will bring to the reading, and which literacies will need enhancement, teasing out, direct teaching and acknowledgement in order to gain the most from the reading experience (Rowsell et al, 2018). In establishing what the reader brings to the text, the area of religion can be an ethical minefield and this has to be taken into consideration when preparing any teaching which provides children with access to the lived experiences of others, be they real or fictitious. A myriad of literacies exist beyond decoding and comprehending written text at its most basic level. For the purposes of this study, I have looked at the main components and application of artefactual literacy practices as well as ways in which to use fiction in the development of religious literacy and critical literacy skills. I have combined these, along with the requirement on English schools to provide opportunities for pupils to increase their cultural capital as a "golden thread, woven through everything you do to teach children well" (Spielman, quoted in Stauntson, 2020), as a starting point for the development of a selection and analysis tool for the use of fiction texts in the classroom intended to enhance understanding of the lived religious experience of others.

Religious literacy: approaching the 'final frontier of prejudice'

When considering religious literacy with regards to the classroom, it is helpful to look at it alongside readily accepted and understood notions of what it means to be literate in the broadest sense. Suzanne Newcombe, who, in 2019, led a course for The Open University in *Why Religions Matter* cites Adam Dinham in one of her lectures, stating that he "stresses that religious literacy is associated with traditional ideas of literacy, i.e. reading and writing. It implies an understanding of grammar, rules, stories and the language underpinning religion" (*Why Religion Matters*, 2019). In schools in England, there are no qualms about teaching pupils the rudiments of grammar, and linguistic rules, and levels of literacy in England at the end of Key Stage 2 are judged according to metrics which include grammatical and linguistic measures (Standards and Testing Agency, 2019). When considering how it can be ensured that pupils are *religiously* literate, attention needs to be paid to the *language* of religions and how pupils can be helped to become accurately and responsibly articulate about the lived religious experience (Astley, 2017). Making discursive mistakes about something which is fundamental to an individual's life meaning, worldview and sense of place and belonging can lead to dramatic and unforeseen consequences. In a world of fake news and attempts to sow

discord, hatred and misinformation, the classroom language used matters (Young and Brunks, 2009; Miskec, 2011; Garcia Landa, 1993). If one gets it wrong – deliberately or unwittingly - it can lead to mistrust, to alienation, othering and insult. The wilful misuse of language is a known tactic of those who would spread dissent and suspicion and is prevalent in our social media times (Colmina et al, 2021). One of the roles of the teacher is to ensure that pupils are taught carefully about terminology, the importance of accuracy and the ways in which the grammar of religion can be manipulated to create confusion and misunderstanding as well as enlightenment and transformation. This applies even more fully to the classroom development of critical religious literacy and the capacity to question and evaluate religious beliefs and practices.

The RE classroom is where much of this specialist grammar and language is commonly taught. The non-statutory national framework for RE in England provides a scaffold for the content and breadth required of a syllabus, and suggests a range of approaches which lead, it is intended, to the development of secure religious literacy skills. This work has been expanded upon by NATRE (National Association of Teachers of Religious Education) and they have been instrumental in guiding SACREs across England in the creation of meaningful syllabi for the teaching of RE which contributes to, and drives the importance of, religious literacy in schools. Conroy and Davis (2008) suggest that "religious literacy denotes an acquaintance with, and an understanding of, the nature of religious experience, religious concepts and practices, along with some basic grasp of the complexities, contradictions and challenges of at least one religious tradition" (p187). It is this idea of understanding the religious *experience* which is so hard to ensure through a purely lexicographic or 'grammatical' approach, because the term 'experience' can be so nebulous. Individual SACRE approaches to the curriculum ensure that pupils are exposed to those grammatical, semantic, language-based, knowledge-rich elements of religions against a local context, but it is much harder to pin down the *experience* of another in ways which are genuinely authentic and meaningful.

RE in English schools includes teaching *about* religion – and this could, and should, include the lexicography and vocabulary of a faith. Yet, as Prothero notes,

> Just as it is not possible to speak language in general…it is not possible to inculcate religion in general. That is because religion in general does not exist; all that we have are specific religious expressions (Prothero, 2007, p123).

In exposing them to these specific religious expressions – the language and practical exposition of the central tenets of a faith for example – pupils are provided with a certain type of religious literacy. However, as Conroy and Davis (2008) have stated, religious literacy is concerned not only with the words, but the experience of religion. The lived religious experience forms as much a part of religious literacy as the languages and grammars of faith.

"The term 'Lived Religion'," states McGuire, "is useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practice" (McGuire, 2008, p12). Taking into account the myriad individual experiences of faith, from the domestic to the public stage, the need to explore and attempt to understand these experiences is challenging, particularly in the classroom, and particularly when looking at faiths and practices which are not shared by the majority of learners – or the teacher. However, looking at religions as situated in personal, lived experience, can bring them to life even for those who do not share a belief or set of practices. Exploring what religious faith, ritual, artefacts and beliefs mean on an individual, day-to-day basis normalises a practice which is, on the evidence of data collection agencies such as British Religion in Numbers (BRIN), increasingly rare. Sunday church attendance in England fell by 2% in 2019 (Church of England, 2020), and the likelihood of the average classroom containing members who have a regular experience of church attendance, is relatively low in non-religious schools in England. Yet churches play an enormous role in the social fabric of everyday lives, even where this is not generally recognised. The same Church of England report states that over 60% of churches are involved directly in running or supporting nearly 8000 foodbanks – services which *do* affect directly the lives of growing numbers of children within the classroom (Trussell Trust; Church Poverty). Churches are seen to be involved in the provision of night shelters, of community cafes, parent and toddler groups, and wrap around childcare provision. The day-to-day lived experience of many families will be influenced or organised or supported by religious institutions with which those same families are likely to have little in common in terms of religious belief or practice.

The religiously literate will be able to recognise from where the social, altruistic facets of a religious community's activities are coming – and to respect that for its own merits. Where

religious affiliation, certainly in terms of Christianity (or more accurately, perhaps, the Church of England) appears to be on the wane year-on-year, the disregard of religious institutions without recognition and consideration of the social impact were they not in place, is potentially devastating for many, non-religious and religious alike. Ensuring pupils have a deep understanding of this, without the expectation that they then adhere without question to a particular religious faith, should go some way to preserving these positively regarded actions of religious communities (and they are many) for generations to come, in the face of declining adherence to a religious worldview per se. There is, after all, a pragmatic view of religious literacy, connected to social responsibility and social justice and how one can experience religion in the social fabric of our lives such as in social care structures (Dinham, 2015; Crisp and Dinham, 2019). Altruism is not, of course, the preserve of the Church of England, or of religious communities in general. However, whilst individuals may carry out good works for various personal reasons, many religions have service to others, charity and community support as central elements of their teachings. But an *understanding* of what drives people to act out of compassion, and the commensurate hope that such compassion will be replicated, goes a long way towards fostering good relationships between those of faith, and those of none.

The Director of the Woolf Institute, Ed Kessler, describes religion as "the final frontier of prejudice" (Wyatt, 2020). The antidote to prejudice is knowledge and understanding – in this case, religious literacy. In an article for the website, *The Marginalian,* Maria Popova explores Walter Lippmann's views on how one overcomes such prejudice. "Without preconceptions – without having already half-templated and half-mapped the world we are trying to perceive and navigate," she says, "we would have to evaluate afresh every smallest object our attention falls upon" (Popova, 2019). Prejudging situations, people and beliefs is an essential element of mapping our worlds, of creating schema or interconnected webs of knowledge which enable us to navigate life without remaking it every time one encounters something new. But such stereotypes and prejudices need to be recognised for what they are and where they come from and be adaptable in the light of new evidence or discovery (Aldridge, 2018). Popova describes Lippmann's concern that,

> the most tainting of our interpersonal relations…is that in which we take a single trait of the other and extrapolate from it an entire type, filling in the rest of the picture with the stereotype we already hold of that 'person' (Popova, 2019).

It is surely incumbent on educators to ensure that religious stereotypes, as all stereotypes, do not negatively impact on relationships, worldviews and societal constructs. It is necessary to furnish children with the tools they require to navigate the inevitable stereotypes they themselves will create, influenced by those around them, and those prejudices they will encounter. In so doing, teachers can ensure that their pupils are flexible and knowledgeable enough to form opinions and views which are grounded not only in evidence and critical thought, but in tolerance, understanding, and compassion. Enabling them to expand and embed their religious literacy is an essential part of that toolbox of growing up (Dinham and Shaw, 2017).

The 'nuts and bolts' of religious understanding and knowledge which can be found in information texts and in RE lessons, are essential to creating the foundations upon which to build a deeper understanding of others and what it means to be a child or adult of faith. It enables us to safely create webs of understanding which explore emotional and non-tangible aspects of 'other'. By increasing their religious literacy through exposure to the lived religious experience, which Orsi describes as "*embodied* practice and imagination" (Orsi, 2010, p xxxix), children are provided with the scaffolding upon which to start creating and building their own worldviews. These personal worldviews which reflect upon, incorporate, or reject those espoused by organised religions, are constructed from the myriad experiences, conversations, exposures, and opinions to which they have had access through the wealth of platforms which contribute to, and shape, their lives. In order to construct their edifice safely, they need to have the tools with which to build it, and religious literacy is one of those tools, ensuring that their worldview is balanced, evidence based, tolerant but appropriately critical, and compassionate.

Ivanova talks of "sacred literacy", which is a term of which I am particularly fond, as it incorporates not only the religious, and the organisation and constructs which that encompasses, but the sacred within and beyond all of us:

> Sacred literacy can … be conceptualised as the embodied knowing that life holds within it, components – events, relationships, memories, moments – which are special, ones given significant value. Sacred literacy is the use of various sacred practices (texts) to sacredly read the world through one's experience (Ivanova, 2014, p276).

In reading the world sacredly, and helping children to develop sufficiently robust religious literacy skills to enable them to see the sacred, or special, or spiritual in all around them, perhaps some of the downfalls of the stereotyping and prejudicial approach to life as described by Lippmann can be avoided. Religious literacy has a part to play in enabling us to position ourselves within those worlds, and alongside others.

When it comes to considering how fiction can be used to help children to make sense of their worlds and those of others, we need to look at ways of providing opportunities to 'feel' what it might be like to hold religious beliefs. "Religion, like art," says Asma, "has direct access to our emotional lives in ways that science does not." (2018, p3). Iftikhar Awan (chair of trustees for Muslim Aid) suggests that the apparent reluctance of people in the UK to incorporate or tolerate others' religious beliefs comes from "a traditional British reluctance to "wear our faith on our sleeves"' (Wyatt, 2020). If this is so, then it is important to find alternative, creative ways to ensure that children are exposed to the lived experience of others which brings a given faith to life. Fiction, and the potential for judgement-free, character-driven exploration of religious belief and practice, could potentially overcome this 'British reluctance' to share what it means to be a child, or an adult, of faith. After all, a fictional character is not going to feel embarrassment at the prospect of children gazing in on their life. And if books can provide doors as well as windows, then fiction for children which offers examples of a rich lived religious experience can be a tool not only for understanding, but for empathy and exploration too as part of the worldview construction they undertake.

There are, of course, a number of issues with religious literacy, both as a concept and in terms of its practical application. Biesta et al (2019) have explored some of the concerns around religious literacy in terms of definitions; of who decides what it is (and is not) to be religiously literate, and in ensuring that religious literacy does not become diminished to the building blocks of knowledge without reference to the diversity between, and within, different religious communities and faiths. In a 2019 paper about how religious literacy could be used in Pakistani education, Muhammad Ashraf explores not only what religious literacy means to teachers in public schools in the region, but their attitudes towards it. His research throws up a number of interesting conundrums. He interviewed 25 teachers about the role of religious education in schools in Pakistan, and the potential benefit of including religious literacy on the syllabus. Of the responses given, 44% stated that "religious literacy is not in line with the teachings of Islam," and 32% would accept it as a concept were it to be renamed

as Islamic literacy (Ashraf, 2019). There is clearly an issue with the role of religious literacy in terms of perceived risks – of conversion, of blasphemy, of misinterpretation and offence. It is incumbent upon the adult exploring with children the *literacy* of religions to be sensitive to these concerns. The RE curriculum requires the teaching of essential knowledge *about* different religions, along with an exploration of what can be learnt *from* them, and what it means to be a believer. One way of harnessing the lived religious experience within fiction texts, which can avoid the risk of blasphemy, is through the study of religious artefacts, their place in story, and the rituals associated with them which bring them to life.

Artefactual literacy: approaching the story of the objects

In 2010, Pahl and Rowsell published *Artefactual Literacy: Every Object Tells a Story*, in which they explore the storytelling potential and power of everyday objects and the ways of reading and telling those stories. Through an analysis of a range of ethnographical studies with schools, community groups, and individuals, they explore the power of objects to cross boundaries and open minds to new ideas, cultures, and histories. They describe the concept thus:

> Artefactual critical literacy is an approach that combines a focus on objects, and the stories attached to them, with an understanding of how different stories have different purchase in particular locations (2010, p129).

The objects cross boundaries through recognition, through usage, and through the stories which they tell about themselves and those whose lives they have touched. They enable us to explore issues and concepts, and stories, which may be too raw or uncomfortable or complex or alien when associated only with the human protagonists of the tale. As Pahl and Rowsell state, “Artifacts mediate experience in gentler ways” (p114). They describe the semiotic properties of objects which are imbued with meaning making, holding a literacy all of their own (p39). By being able to recognise how objects hold and tell stories, they argue, communities can be extended, and understanding between different groups fostered through the mediating power of artefacts. Above all, artefacts provide opportunities for connectivity and boundary crossings, inviting exploration and discussion in non-judgemental ways. The objects can be seen as items to be read – “scriptive things” as Bernstein (2009) describes them - and players in the actor-networks which surround and connect social lives and experiences (Fenwick and Edwards, 2019).

Where religious understanding is concerned, artefacts are an important part of the RE classroom, and indeed, for many years, local authorities in England held boxes of religion-specific objects which were loaned out to schools to enhance understanding of the RE curriculum. There is something special about handling artefacts, especially where these are imbued with meaning, and it is this meaning-making potential which makes them such a powerful force within the classroom. Investigating their role, their manufacture, their significance, and how to handle them brings meaning to the religious practices being studied. It provides opportunities to explore how artefacts in and of themselves are fundamental to story and to practice. According to the Lancashire County Council digital archive of resources for teachers, "An artefact needs to be filled with meaning, with facts, stories, discussion, looking at the symbolism, the craftmanship, how it is used and the feelings of those using it" (CLEO, 2020). To explore all of these elements requires us to consider the stories of the artefact itself and those associated with it, and in exploring these stories, connections can be made which transcend both cultural and religious boundaries. "As objects they are dumb, as artefacts, aiding faith, they speak" (CLEO, 2020). Discovering the language, words, experiences, and stories spoken by the artefact can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the beliefs and practices of other people in tangible form. They are "understood as being 'in practice'" (Pahl and Rowsell 2010) – as though they have lives (and thence stories) all of their own, which then enable them to be placed into storytelling itself. Helping children to develop the literacy skills which help them to 'read' the artefacts and their stories adds to their understanding and willingness to engage with objects, practices, and stories which are beyond their own experience. "Artefactual literacy," say Pahl and Rowsell, "allows meaning makers to bring in objects to educational contexts and makes more explicit the role of material objects in literacy and their thing-like status." (Pahl and Rowsell, 2011, p133). Of course, those meaning makers can be the children themselves. In bringing in artefacts of importance or relevance to their own lives, they 'materialise' their literacy and can use these artefacts to share experiences and practices which are meaningful to them, but possibly new or challenging to others – as Pahl and Rowsell say, "an artefactual critical literacies framework shifts more agency to meaning makers and foregrounds the process of identity construction in relation to textual practices" (2011, p134). The artefact crosses the boundaries between cultures and practices and provides the vehicle for the telling of stories which may be lost in mere words.

Artefacts form a central part of much of children's literature. The alethiometer in *His Dark Materials*; the Elder Wand in Harry Potter; the hijab in *Does My Head Look Big In This?*; the wardrobe in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* – fiction for children is rich in artefacts which tell stories in their own right when the reader has the artefactual literacy skills to be able to read them. Without these objects, the stories do not work. The artefacts themselves have their own explicit or implicit stories – indeed, the Elder Wand has a tale written about it in a separate book which explains its significance. Authors often use artefacts as vehicles which broach boundaries in their stories. Frances Hardinge, in her 2015 novel, *The Lie Tree*, sets the fantasy against the cold, Victorian backdrop of a staunchly religious family, exploring how the constraints of a such a religious upbringing and background lead to the downfall of key members of the family. The eponymous Lie Tree is the vehicle by which this downfall is brought about. It symbolises numerous things: the contrast – and similarities - between good and evil as identified by the church of its time; the hypocrisy of power; the mental struggles of a girl questioning the basis upon which her life has been built to date; the power of the supernatural to affect and drive behaviours; the problem with explaining belief to those who do not understand without tangible proof. It exists materially, and it is in its material form that it causes physical problems for the protagonist and her family. Trying to explore a potential dichotomy between religion and science in Darwinian times could be a dry affair with only people and their beliefs, reasoning, and arguments to drive the narrative. Building the exploration of such issues around an artefact provides a material and tangible aspect to the discussion. This helps the reader to understand the arguments being made, against a setting wildly different to a contemporary one. It enables the reader to experience the supernatural against the backdrop of an omnipotent God, and the beliefs and practices which surround that God – and to question those practices as they relate to an unseen and intangible numinous through the lens of artefactual literacy. It is a powerful juxtaposition and brings the situation into sharp relief.

Similarly, in Patrice Lawrence's *Rose, Interrupted* (2019), the Marauders' Map blanket, owned by the protagonist's younger brother, Rudder, takes on both a material and a symbolic role. This provides not only richness to the storyline of a family building their lives away from a fiercely evangelical religious group, but comes to symbolise the desperate need for magic in the lives of the family members, the conflict between contemporary and religious cultures, and the physical impact of belonging to – and being torn from – an exclusive religious minority group. The blanket, which reflects the boy's obsession with Harry Potter,

even when this has been condemned by his strictly fundamentalist grandparents, comes to represent both comfort and fear, physically and emotionally, and helps to express the irreconcilable differences between what Rudder wants from his old life and for his future. The artefact adds to, and drives, elements of the story and provides a hook upon which the reader can hang their understanding and recognition.

Artefacts which hold their own stories are an important feature of much children's literature. The alethiometer in *His Dark Materials* has a back story all its own, which is explored in Pullman's *La Belle Sauvage* and which not only enhances the story but explains and grounds it in an historical, social, and religious context. A truth teller is at once an item to be coveted and sought, and one to be feared by organisations which claim to have jurisdiction over what 'truth' actually is. Placing such an important and potentially incendiary item in the hands of a child plays into one of the commonly held tropes of children's literature, which subverts power relationships, where adults are dominant and the source of all authority, to a situation where children, wittingly or not, hold the source of power themselves; where their innocence and youthful bravado reveals truths hidden from the adults who have become inured to new ideas, concepts, and opinions. Indeed, in the case of the alethiometer, Lyra's gradual diminution in her ability to read the truths it provides mirrors her increasing maturity and transition into womanhood, and her mounting rigidity of thought which becomes more apparent in *The Secret Commonwealth (Book of Dust).* I would argue that it is the alethiometer which is central to *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust* stories more than the characters themselves, in that it represents so much of the world in which they live and the changes apparent therein, and links together so many different and disparate people – from Gyptians to academics, religious leaders to family members. Its power could be seen to be far in excess of Lyra's, despite her centrality to the prophecy which will change the worlds. In many ways, Lyra, and the other characters inextricably linked with the alethiometer, are the conduit through which it carries on its own role, and without it, they would be both diminished and impotent. Artefacts in stories can hold power in and of themselves whilst being often indivisible from their human counterparts who are made greater by their existence.

Such artefacts, holding their own stories and their own truths are symbolic in many works of fiction. In Patrick Ness's *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (2008), the eponymous knife comes

to stand for a range of things – for choices, for truth, for safety. As Todd, the chief protagonist, states:

> "a knife ain't just a thing, is it? It's a choice, it's something you *do.* A knife says yes or no, cut or not, die or don't. A knife takes a decision out of our hand and puts it in the world and it never goes back again" (pp. 83-84).

Artefacts in books, then, can be powerful characters or agents in their own right. As religious actors, they can provide ways into challenging texts through both prior acquaintance and curiosity about something unfamiliar. Within fiction, one can explore how objects are rendered sacred by virtue of their provenance and the stories associated with them (the Elder Wand for example), or how they are made sacred through their use (the Alethiometer). Through such exploration, children can be enabled to understand the significance, both personal and collective, of the artefacts which are associated with belief, religious affiliation and community in accessible and meaningful ways.

Ritual literacy: approaching the physicality of religion

The way that artefacts are put to use as sacred objects can involve element of ritual in terms of the behaviours that are apparent through their handling, utilisation, and curation. In order to make sense of them, one learns, through exposure and 'osmosis', and with direct instruction, to read artefacts as texts – hence the importance of recognising the literacy that surrounds them. A critical artefactual literacy approach to a specific artefact in its own right allows us to interrogate it for its own meaning, as well as its symbolic and representative value. When looking at different religions, artefacts can also provide tangible hooks into ritual practices, whilst holding their own stories. One can explore the manufacture and craftmanship that has gone into the creation of the object; its role with individuals and with groups (CLEO 2020). One can investigate its symbolic significance for individuals or groups and the impact it has on how people feel. Equally, one can question the ways in which the artefact is used and the rituals which surround that usage. An interrogative approach to an artefact outside a story might give us information about cultural practices, beliefs, and behaviours – within fiction, one can discover the story of the artefact itself. An essential contributor to their artefactual world will be books themselves - artefacts in their own rights as well as vessels containing symbolic and cross-cultural objects for discussion and exploration.

Botelho and Rudman (2009) describe literature as a cultural artefact in and of itself, and works of literature have often been described as works of art in their own right. Of course, there will be significant disagreement about which books merit being considered as works of art – but in terms of describing a text as an artefact, this could refer to sacred books or scriptures. In considering scriptural writings as artefacts one can interrogate not only the content, but the form, material and otherwise, in terms of craftmanship, materials, power, meaning to individuals, rights and responsibilities for handling or reading. Interpretative approaches to the contents can be seen as separate from the written word itself. It is possible to do similarly with secular texts – what is the value of *the book* to the reader/the school/the community? Are there books which are treated differently in terms of how they are handled or stored because of their intrinsic (and extrinsic) value? Why are first editions, and signed copies, and old books valued? And, importantly, is there any kind of ritual associated with the care of these texts? Rituals, and what they mean to individuals and groups, can have artefactual resonance as well as solid objects. Indeed, Orsi talks about the place of ritual alongside artefacts when exploring individual religious belief and practice – religion as lived – which feeds directly into levels of religious literacy. These things are inextricably linked.

Ivanova discusses how individuals use artefacts as tools for remembrance which links into their sacredness for individuals and communities:

> The practice of remembering…contains these artifacts which act as texts, helping us to make meaning. These artifacts are sacred because of their profound association with deeply impactful events, relationships, struggles, joys (Ivanova, 2014, p277).

Artefactual critical literacy skills enable participants to read the stories told by those objects behaving as texts, to tell their tales and their truths. The intrinsic value of those same artefacts to an individual or a group is measured in their ability to instigate deep and reflective emotions related to the rituals which surround their use and their importance within the home or community or other setting, begging the question "how would I feel if this artefact was lost, or stolen – or didn't exist?"

When considering the notion of sacredness, it necessarily brings up connections with holiness, consecration, and religion. It is a term used in common parlance too, to describe those objects or events or behaviours which can be considered to be inviolable, whether associated with religious practice and belief or not. In terms of religious behaviours, sacred

objects and sacred places are fundamental to practice and ritual. Christian church rituals utilise sacred objects symbolically – chalices to hold consecrated wine; crosses to remember and symbolise the sacrifice upon which the faith is built; cathedrals designed and built to the glory of God by craftsmen and women for whom the act of creation was as much an act of devotion as attendance at a service. Deep meaning is ascribed to the artefacts and associated rituals which are fundamental to religious belief and practice, and the absence of either the artefact or the ritual diminishes the experience of that faith and is a cause for sorrow. The unprecedented changes wrought by the global pandemic in 2020 have shown just how important religious (and secular) rituals and their associated artefacts are to both worshippers and the general public (Legare, 2021).

The crossover between what *is* sacred and what is *held* sacred is very apparent when considering Christmas here in the United Kingdom. Many rituals associated with the festive season have at their heart the performance of the religious story which is central to the festival – from attendance at church carol services, to school nativities; from the giving of presents which some believe reflect the giving of gifts from the kings to the infant Jesus, to the Christmas meal itself, about which Jay Rayner wrote in *The Observer* in 2019, saying "The meal we serve on Christmas Day is unique. It is our last shared feast, a secular ritual hooked to the vestigial stump of the religious" (Rayner, 2019). Rituals are created with artefacts which have meaning to individuals and communities, and the development of religious literacy in understanding the artefactual can help us to begin to understand the importance of secular and religious objects and behaviours for others.

Artefacts do not need to be specifically 'religious' to hold sacred or profound meaning in terms of faith. Orsi and McGuire both write about the importance of unremarkable objects when included in sacred or religious rituals (Orsi, 2010, p74; McGuire, 2008, p10). Such artefacts, both faith-based and secular, hold layers of meanings for individuals which can be linked to, and taken from, and subsumed by, religious communities. They hold meaning in and of themselves which may not be immediately apparent. The sacralisation of everyday objects is conferred by the user who sees inherent value within an object, which raises it beyond its material value and actuality, into an item which holds resonance in terms of its intrinsic meaning. The bestowal of significant or sacred meaning onto an object can link it closely with a person's sense of their own identity and understanding of their own personal history.

Such items lend themselves to personal rituals; those objects on public show, be they items of clothing which define a religious identity, or which are used in the shared practices of a religious community, or which are considered sacred in their own right, lean towards outward and public displays of religious adherence. Items which are considered sacred because of their religious usage, or stories associated with them, often provide visual 'clues' about religious affiliation – and they are often linked with known and shared ritual practices. For children, who are party to these rituals by virtue of their memberships of religious communities through their families, these artefacts and rituals can form a fundamental part of their own identity – which makes it all the more important that they are reflected in the books they read as well as in the communities within which they live and function. By recognising and valuing the artefacts which help to define the personal faith of children in and beyond the classroom, and the rituals which surround them, value and credence are given to their experience and create an equality amongst disparate groups where faith is concerned. As Pahl and Rowsell (2010) state, "material objects, artifacts, create an intervention in a space that can change the kind of talk that happens" (p40).

It is that desire to change the conversation which led to Ibtihaj Muhammad writing, in 2020, her first picture book, *The Proudest Blue*. Exploring what it feels like to wear a hijab to school for the first time through the eyes of a younger sister, the book does not shy away from presenting some of the negative conversations such an act can bring about amongst those who do not (or choose not to) understand the significance and importance of the hijab for some Muslim women. It contrasts these with the inner strength and sense of belonging and community which the girls feel in choosing to wear the headscarf amongst a predominantly non-Muslim peer group. The rituals, personal and collective, around the selection and wearing of hijab are as fundamental to the personal religious experience of the characters in the book as the hijab itself. Explaining her reasons for creating the book in the first place, Muhammad writes:

> I wanted to tell this story so that children who look like me could see themselves in a picture book – a story of family, love and faith. So they could see two sisters taking pride in hijab, and see that the parts of ourselves that might make us appear "different" are worth celebrating (Muhammad, 2020 np).

Artefacts, be they dress, sacred objects, texts, or rituals, which define someone's religious identity can be story carriers and can act as very visual (or imaginatively 'visual') prompts and hooks for children who may find it difficult to see themselves, as they self-identify, within the books they read.

There is much documented, both formally and anecdotally, about bullying and discrimination against children and young people who wear particular forms of dress related to their religion – the hijab and burqa are obvious artefacts here, but reports are plentiful ranging from Sikh children and young adults having patka and turbans removed in incidences of violent bullying (Dunne, 2020), to alleged discriminatory practices in the workplace for employees wearing a cross – where these very visible symbols of religious affiliation are regarded as objects of derision in themselves. Where rituals are concerned, lack of understanding and knowledge, along with superstitious or politically motivated attitudes can also lead to discriminatory and unpleasant behaviours towards adherents of religious groups, for both children and adults alike. In her novel, *The Muslims (Planet Omar),* Mian (2017) uses her main character to both explain some of the rituals in which his family participates and to dispel misconceptions and irrational beliefs about the religious behaviours causing concern for other characters within the book:

> For a few mornings, as we'd leave for school, my mum would ask me if I had done my duas. Those are prayers. I did do them, every day. Especially the ones for protection, because Daniel was highly likely to punch my head in any day… If you ever see a Muslim's lips moving, DON'T WORRY! They are not talking to themselves, or secretly putting a spell on you. They are just doing one of their duas (Mian, 2017, Ch 6 np.).

Mian demonstrates here the potential of a children's book to oust superstitions and myths around ritual behaviours, which may appear even more alien to non-practitioners than forms of dress or sacred objects. Rituals are often steeped in a mythological view of the world; in historical accounts of behaviours which might today be viewed as outdated, or superstitious; summoning magic forces or the supernatural to aid individuals and communities using rituals which can appear exotic and outlandish to our Western worldview. Indeed, one is rarely called upon to examine the day-to-day rituals carried out for numerous reasons – superstition, habit, family tradition, and so on. Many of these ritual behaviours take place in private and are completely unique to an individual or small group. Ritual behaviours related to religious practice can be much more visible in both their resonance and their expression, and without

sufficient religious literacy to attempt to understand them, can appear challenging. Yet for children who are being brought up in religious homes and communities, those ritual practices are every day, normal, and of importance – and certainly not something of which to be suspicious. There is a deep meaning to ritual behaviours, which have marked out religious practice for many centuries.

> Physically sensing the smell of burning beeswax candle, the sound of a church bell, the touch of a fingered cross could create a desired religious experience. Performing religiously meaningful postures, gestures, and ritual acts could also produce…a religious sense of awe and worshipfulness." (McGuire, 2008, p102)

Ritual practices, engendering a sense of awe and wonder, of oneness with the numinous, are central to belief and practice for children and adults of faith alike. There is a risk, in teaching non-practitioners *about* these ritual behaviours that the meaning of them to the individual can be missed – because it is really hard to share what it *feels* like to have a spiritual experience. This, of course, is where works of fiction have the potential to add huge value to the teaching of religions. Through the expression of emotion and feelings as a result of a religious act, fictional characters can express personal experience and illuminate what that means for them. Fictional characters are safe – as discussed earlier in this study, they can be examined, explored, judged even, without consequence. The child of faith in the seat behind cannot be similarly interrogated, not without running the risk of misunderstanding and offence even where this is completely unintentional. Readers' relationships with fictional characters, and their response to them, are private unless they choose to share them. Those relationships allow the reader to feel curiosity or discomfort or empathy without risk. It is perhaps easier to accept ritual behaviours in works of fiction without judgement because one is used to suspending preconceptions when reading certain genres of fiction – accepting magical powers, or the existence of supernatural beings, or the power of the faerie realm. The key is making the leap from a potentially universal acceptance of religious practices and rituals within a work of fiction and applying that same acceptance and curiosity to the real world as experienced by children of faith. That is where the importance of critical literacy comes into play.

Critical literacy: approaching truths and misunderstandings

In an article following the 2020 American election and the subsequent publication of former President, Barak Obama's, autobiography, a BBC news article suggested that "the polarized world of the internet – where everything is a matter of opinion rather than fact, and *we choose our tribe* [my italics] – has created a fertile breeding ground for conspiracies and misinformation" (BBC, 2020). In the same article, the reporter quoted Obama as describing current approaches to the world as "truth decay". It has never been, I would suggest, more important to ensure that young people are well versed in critical literacy skills and the importance of critically reading texts – be they works of fiction, fact, text books, news articles, internet copy, or artefacts and rituals acting as texts – before making judgements and basing actions on what they have read.

In 1990, Freebody and Luke presented their *Four Resources* model of literacy, which outlines the approaches taken to texts as readers starting with the role of code breaker – one who can break down the code of written language, or, in multiple literacy approaches, the code of artefact, picture, digital presence, and so on. Readers then become Meaning Makers, through the application of comprehension skills which enable them to make meaning of the text before them. Critical literacy skills enable the reader to become a Text Analyser. In recognising that no text is neutral, and that authorial position and intent is an essential part of a text in its own right, readers are encouraged to explore not only the key objective of the author in presenting the text – their authorial position – but also the influences which have led them to present the text as they have, be they cultural, sociological, political, or religious, and which shape their authorial intent. This enables the reader to place a text into context and view it dispassionately alongside any visceral responses they may have to it. That then leads to readers evaluating texts according to their own positioning, sedimentation (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) and backgrounds. This enables them to become Text Users, who understand how texts can be manipulated– their functionality and performance both within the classroom and beyond – and also to recognise both the ways in which a text can transform them, and how they can use text to transform others. These four approaches taken together can help to create readers who are informed, critical and knowledgeable, who can recognise the impact of text upon their own thinking and view this in an objective and measured way.

Recognising how texts can affect and transform readers is essential to ensuring that they do not fall prey to opinion over fact, or to the influence of authorial intent which can be based in bias, misinformation, or power. The words we both use and are exposed to hold authority, particularly where they are written down. Hunt suggests that "to many readers a book has such authority that the simple fact of something being included in one gives it the stamp of respectability" (Hunt, 1991, p139). Spoken language, too, has the power to influence and transform: one only has to think of political rhetoric to see how the greatest orators manipulate language to persuade listeners of realities which may not be grounded in any form of fact or actuality. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, in the wake of the apartheid years, stated that "Language…does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves people against other people" (TRC, 1998: 7, 124, 294, quoted in Janks, 2010, p45). Or as Rosenblatt writes, "words do not function in isolation, but always in particular verbal, personal and social contexts" (Rosenblatt, 1988, p3). The development of critical literacy skills ensures that readers are furnished with the tools to establish intent on the part of the author, and to recognise their own sedimentation as a reader.

The act of critically evaluating a text can be an empowering one. In recognising one's own standpoint, sedimentation and those aspects of the environment which influence thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours, one develops greater self-awareness. Critical literacy can help to explore and delve into the power of prior experience upon our responses to situations, and to texts. Children bring with them to school funds of knowledge which are taken from their home situations, their exposure (or not) to stories, nursery rhymes and songs, their interactions with relatives and friends, their contact with television and screen-based story and song, their religious groupings and communities. The idea of funds of knowledge, as described by Vygotsky (Moll et al., 1992) places value on these prior experiences and events which help us to make sense of our worlds and to define them and ourselves within them. Children bring into school not just the home-based, or screen-based experiences easily identified, "but also their cultural traditions including religious practices." (Green and Oldendorf, 2011, p5). The religious experiences of these same children add to these funds of knowledge in both overt and intrinsic ways, in the beliefs which are espoused and passed on through families and religious communities, the experience of rituals and practices which may not be shared by other class or group members, and the day-to-day lived experience of belonging to a religious community and what that means to an individual. When approaching

a text, the reader brings all of these prior experiences to bear and they necessarily colour our reading. This sedimentation of experience makes the text new for each reader - their experience of it is nuanced and reflective of their personal funds of knowledge. Young children do not tend to question the validity of the stories and experiences to which they are exposed; they believe them without question (Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy, the existence of monsters and so on). They do not question the reasons behind the author writing as they do; they accept these as given truths (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004). The development of a critical approach to texts enables the reader to explore this further. "When reading from a critical stance," suggest McLaughlin and DeVoogd, "readers use their background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text" (pp 52-53).

In a world where even the youngest children are bombarded daily by information sometimes of dubious provenance, knowing how to interrogate that information is increasingly important. So much of what is understood of the world is based in the language people hear and use to describe it. Comber talks about how "[c]ritical literacies involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice" (Comber, 2001, p1). She goes on to suggest that it is teachers who help children to develop new "repertoires of language practices" (p1) which in turn empower them. This metalanguage is important, because it provides a scaffold upon which to build questions, investigations, and to draw conclusions, from a position of knowledge, and linguistic power. Janks proposes certain questions which help develop pupil understanding of both what they are interrogating, and how to interrogate in a meaningful way. "Why did the writer or speaker make these choices? How do these choices work to position the readers or listeners? Whose interest do they serve? Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged?" (Janks, 2013, p46). Helping children to develop the metalanguage to probe deeper into intentions and the sedimentation which causes writers or speakers to act as they do, and recognising what readers bring to a text, are steps on the road to developing this enquiry approach. Knowing one's 'stuff' is important. Being open to changing opinions demonstrates a maturity in terms of critical literacy and understanding which serves us well.

It is perhaps here that religious communities can face one of their greatest challenges. In promoting accepted truths, unquestioned as a point of faith, some communities and groups may appear intransigent. For children being taught to question the literature in front of them,

being faced with apparently unquestionable truths in the form of religious faith can be challenging and uncomfortable, particularly for children with religious home lives. Fiction allows the reader to explore these givens, providing scenarios which may resonate with individual readers, but which do not, by virtue of their fictionality, exactly reflect a reader's experience. One can question the motivation of characters within the texts, exploring what it is from their explicit or inferred backgrounds which may make them behave the way they do, and investigating the environmental issues which impact upon decisions, and points of view; and one can question the motivation of the author in creating the text in the first place. Where there is access to authors who are comfortable sharing their religious beliefs in public, one can explore whether their faith has impacted upon their stories. The Roman Catholic upbringings of the authors Frank Cottrell-Boyce and David Almond infuse the stories they tell through the natural inclusion of religious practices as part of the lived experience of characters. Ibtihaj Muhammad confidently uses her own lived experience to describe how it feels to wear hijab in school as part of a storyline which gently tests social conventions which seem to allow discrimination on the grounds of how someone chooses to dress or what they believe.

Muhammad is explicit, in her author's notes, about her motivation for writing *The Proudest Blue* as a way of providing children with characters they can recognise through the mirror of children's fiction, and as a response to her own experiences as a young person wearing hijab in school. In Khan's 2018 *I am Thunder,* he is unambiguous about the motivation which drove him to write the book in the wake of the Isis Brides scandal in Bethnal Green. Such information helps us to position the book within a context and provides direct material upon which both to base assumptions about the motivation of the author, and from which to evolve questions to ask of the text. For texts where there are no author notes one can use information available through research to examine possible motivations, where this information exists. Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) provides storylines which focus on the corruption of an organised church: his views on organised religion and his own childhood experiences in which religion played a part as the grandson of a clergyman are readily available in a number of articles written about him in newspapers and journals (Barton, 2010; *The New Statesman,* 2011). The works of authors such as C.S. Lewis are chronicled, examined, interpreted and reviewed in countless companion books and essays which can be accessed by anyone.

Where background information on possible authorial intent is not available, however, the critically literate reader has to take care in the assumptions they make from the text alone. Works of fiction are, by definition, made up. Whilst all writing reflects to an extent the author's worldview (Garrahy, 2011), imaginative writing allows us to explore views and opinions and behaviours which are not our own. It is the motivation, rather than the reflection, which the critically literate reader is aware of. In order to develop this level of awareness, teachers need to devote time to the exploration and dissemination of textual discussions, (Comber, 2001) and this is a challenge when other curriculum pressures are strong. But I would argue that developing the ability to reflect critically on texts (and beyond) is an absolutely essential part of a child's education, enabling them not only to explore fictional texts for motivation, intent, and bias, but to read the world around them, and to make judgements about that which is presented to them based on evidence and investigation, and not through ignorance or fear. As McLaughlin and DeVoogd write, "Students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective." (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004, p56). At this turning point in history, as 'fake news' becomes more and more a part of everyday experience, enabling children to develop the ability to view texts, in all their forms, in a critical and evidence based way is perhaps one of the greatest educational gifts they can be given.

Cultural capital: approaching a changing world

The three literary lenses outlined above through which texts can be viewed – religiously, artefactually and critically - provide frameworks upon which to hang questions and order answers, and to help form opinions and worldviews which are grounded in an understanding of intent, of provenance and evidence, and of personal sedimentation. Within the context of the English education system in particular, we are also charged to help to increase cultural capital, promote British Values and instil a culture of tolerance towards difference within the classroom. These obligations form a part of the inspection framework (Ofsted, 2021), and the Prevent Strategy places a legal requirement upon teachers and other authorities to "prevent people from being drawn into terrorism" (Home Office, 2021), which is closely related in schools to the requirement to promote government-defined 'Fundamental British Values'.

The debate about Fundamental British Values has been ongoing since their formulation in 2014, and concerns have been justifiably raised about the apparent roots of the terms included

in Islamophobia and counter-terrorism (Germaine Buckley, 2020), rather than in a desire to promote harmonious, diverse and multi-cultural societies within the UK. Landers sounds significant notes of caution about the "steady erosion of references from the previous iterations of the Teachers' Standards to preparing new teachers to teach in our ethnically and culturally diverse classrooms" (Landers, 2016, p274). As far as the terminology used to articulate the values is concerned, Landers is equally concerned:

> Whilst there may be popular and political consensus with this list of values, the claim that they are wholly British is troublesome and in an attempt to forge cohesion, the unintended effect but some (Hoque, 2015) would argue intentional effect, has been to create notions of insider-outsider citizen…those we tolerate up to a point, namely the Muslim 'Other'. (p275)

Ofsted have long judged schools in England against frameworks which appear firmly aligned to political agendas – from the obligation on schools to have regard to community cohesion strategies in the early part of the 21st Century, to the requirement on headteachers and teachers to actively promote Fundamental British Values. Both of these programmes have had at their heart a sense of political and social unease around diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism and have moved significant aspects of the conversation around schools in England from education to "political secularisation" (Lander, 2016, p274).

In the conflicting views on the role of schools within the political debate over the desirability of multiculturalism and diversity (Richardson, 2015), works of fiction written for children have an increasingly important function in presenting multicultural, socially and religiously diverse worlds to children in ways which enable them to question safely and be informed accurately.

So against the requirements on schools to promote politically-fuelled beliefs about what it means to be British, what does the ability to view texts, and the world in general, through different literacy lenses, do, in terms of preparing children both for their classroom education and for a world beyond school?

The ways individuals view the world, and are encouraged to express this, are influenced from an early age by those around them, by their early experiences, expectations and exposure to the beliefs and practices of those closest to them. How we understand the world is influenced

by all these factors, and helps to define who we are – Biesta et al (2019) describe Aldridge's claim "that understanding constitutes the *being* of the child, as opposed to the more limited epistemological conceptions that emphasise what the child *knows*" (p16). Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) includes all those things which shape us; the "ingrained, unconscious, embodied ways of being" (Janks, 2010, p55) which are absorbed from families, communities, exposure to books, tv, song, art, theatre – and which help to determine how individuals view the world and choose to behave or live within it. "Habitus is especially developed through processes of socialisation," writes Navarro, "and determines a wide range of dispositions that shape individuals in a given society" (Navarro, 2006, p16). That socialisation process takes place in homes and communities, in playgroups and shopping malls, in schools, colleges, and workplaces. The influence of those different fields is immense and cross-generational as well (Pahl and Rowsell, 2011) and forms the basic patterns with which lives are woven and fashioned. Navarro describes these fields as "structured spaces that are organised around specific types of capital or combinations of capital," (Navarro, 2006, p18) and the influence and power of these fields needs to be acknowledged when considering the sedimentation and personal history of individuals in exploring how they respond to texts.

Cultural capital, the term coined by Bourdieu (1977) when looking at the skills, dispositions and tastes of the individual and how they are reflected in their response to social and cultural situations and experiences, is a concept which has created significant interest in the English school curriculum as a result of Ofsted including it within their inspection framework. In the inspection handbook, they write:

> [I]nspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life. Our understanding of 'knowledge and cultural capital' is derived from the following wording in the national curriculum: 'It is the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.' (Ofsted 2021, para 203)

Much is argued about what the "best that has been thought and said" should include, and concerns raised that this could lead to a deficit model where white, male, British, middle-class experience and cultural know-how is seen to be the gold standard within an increasingly diverse population. Indeed, much of the curriculum in England, particularly in English Literature and in History, could be seen to reflect a political desire to promote a view of the

world and culture through a specifically white, British lens, with reading lists accused of being ‘pale, male and stale’, and not reflecting the diverse voices, historical and contemporary, who make up both the creators and consumers of literature. By placing a political value on the content of the curriculum, through the imposition of statutory frameworks and associated inspection regimes, which is tied to a concept of cultural capital, great power is potentially wielded over schools, teachers - and children. In defining what cultural capital is considered to be most valuable, we run the risk of devaluing cultural experiences with which we are unfamiliar, or which reflect a specific social, class-based or cultural group.

This applies equally to religious experience – Christianity, in a (notionally) Christian country might be expected to be the predominant feature of an RE curriculum, but in placing capital value on one specific religion over another, there is a risk not only of devaluing non-Christian faiths, but also of denigrating them – and through the accidental or wilful misunderstanding of the role of individual faiths and religious beliefs in people’s actions, this can lead to the demonisation of entire faith groups. It is the job of adults, particularly teachers, to make sure that children are exposed to a wide variety of culturally valuable experiences and viewpoints from a wide range of sources, in order to ensure that they can build a view of society which is grounded in evidence, tolerance, and a desire to learn about the experiences and beliefs of others.

It is important, too, to recognise the loaded nature of the term ‘cultural capital’ as it is being used in English education. For Bourdieu, the term was pejorative, concerned with how elites increased their own power through cultural means. That the term has been harnessed by Ofsted for different purposes – in terms of ensuring social mobility – is problematic, as it risks the application of a Hirschian-style checklist approach to what one needs to be considered a cultured member of society, and does not allow for a debate as to whether what it means to be cultured should be dictated by others. Prothero’s list of what makes a person religious literate (2010) is similarly problematic. It is clearly important, as seen from the review of the field earlier in this study, that an understanding of concepts of faith and how they impact on behaviours is to be encouraged, and ensuring children develop their religious literacy is part of this. If attention is not paid to religion and how it has shaped – and continues to shape – societies, communities, and individual behaviours, then the risk is run of quasi-religious practices impacting in their most toxic forms, politically, racially motivated,

nationalist, and exclusive. The religious beliefs of people and communities which have shaped and driven the development of societies, practices, laws, politics, and these areas of life which impact upon everyone, are worthy, then, not only of recognition but of interrogation and comparison with other societal and world views. “Religion influences political relationships,” writes Williams, “because religion is central in the creation of symbolic worlds; in particular, religion shapes the phenomenology of culture members” (Williams, 1996, p370). Whilst religion provides some of the clearest symbolic ways of seeing the world, through festivals, rituals, works of art, music, and other artefacts, its influence over the political and structural aspects of societies is fundamental, even where adherence to the central tenets, or practices, of a faith is low. One only has to read some of the mainstream media to see examples of our nation’s ‘Christian heritage’ manipulated and distorted in order to demonize other nations, cultures, or beliefs. Whilst attendance at church services was dropping significantly before the pandemic in 2020 (BRIN, 2020), the Christian trope is still used regularly as a symboliser, or signifier, of what the political classes, and the people, stand for. It is important to ensure young people understand how religion, alongside philosophy, history, sociology, and works of literature has shaped and inspired, and sometimes manipulated, how cultures have developed (Green and Oldendorf, 2011; de Maeyer et al, 2005).

However, religion is not just about history – belief and practice are living, breathing aspects of everyday life for significant numbers of people. Whilst religion may have brought to life some of the great cultural resources of our countries: awe-inspiring places of worship, sacred music, works of art and great literature, it is in the everyday, personal, private experience of faith that one can see how profoundly individuals are affected by a relationship with a higher power, and how this impacts upon the day-to-day practices and morality of individuals. As Green and Oldendorf write, “[i]n modern times religious narratives offer a framework for faith, provide examples of ethical living, build awareness of human responsibilities, and connect followers with the sacred” (Green and Oldendorf, 2011, p15). By not only exposing young people to those aspects of heritage and society that are deemed most valuable, but also offering opportunities to explore what the *meaning* of these aspects is to individuals in their everyday lives, the power which comes with knowledge and cultural capital is grounded in understanding, and is evenly distributed. A gap year experience at a Thai temple surrounded by chanting monks may add to a person’s cultural capital, but without an understanding of *what this means*, that capital is built on shaky foundations and risks becoming a novelty, and

less valuable as a result. This is important, because cultural capital does bring power and influence, disproportionately disadvantaging those on lower incomes, and enabling those in receipt of such capital to unduly influence the everyday lives of others (Sullivan, 2001). Helping young people to become fully versed in a critical appreciation of the motivations of groups and individuals as they wield power ensures they are well placed to make conscious and measured choices as to whether to accept, or challenge, ideologies which are presented as the norm.

Botelho and Rudman (2009) suggest that "cultural meaning is established though representation, drawing on literary and non-literary texts (embedded with discourse) that play a central role in fixing the meaning in literature" (p2). In establishing cultural meaning, opportunities are provided for pupils to develop their cultural understanding in meaningful ways which will impact their lives in the future by enabling them to seek answers to the questions they ask. Selecting texts which can help develop this understanding is an important and nuanced act. Selecting texts which are accurate, meaningful, appropriate, positive, and which, above all, interest and delight the reader, is potentially fraught with problems.

In creating a toolkit to support the use of children's literature in the RE classroom, I am aware that this could be appropriated to fulfil the requirement to increase pupils' cultural capital. It is essential, therefore, that any such toolkit is viewed and used in the light of understanding the intrinsically personal nature of religious faith. Indeed, I would argue that the toolkit as an approach to helping children make sense of others' religious experience should not be seen as a passive collusion with the orthodoxies promoted in the English education system in particular. In providing children with the opportunity to explore the beliefs of others through fiction, the teacher may well be helping to develop tolerance and understanding as espoused in the British Values requirement, but the fundamental importance of understanding and respecting others' religious beliefs should not be reduced to a blanket approach towards a top-down vision of what society should look like. Indeed, perhaps the tools provided in the next chapter to help expose children to the lived religious experience should be used as a method of *critiquing* the ways that religion gets annexed to the cultural capital and British Values agendas in ways which dilute its fundamental importance to human beings individually and as part of organised societies with belief systems in common.

Wooldridge states that “the curriculum decisions we make in selecting particular resources and in framing them in particular ways reflect our own perceptions and biases” (Wooldridge, 2001, p292). Educators have to be aware of their individual biases and limitations before asking those in their charge to explore their own in relation to a work of fiction, and to recognise that the choices made in terms of artefacts and texts impact on the experience of pupils. In then asking young people to analyse the text in order to expose them to a deeper understanding, it is necessary to provide structures and frameworks which help them develop their questions and plan their research. The literacies discussed in this chapter – religious literacy, artefactual literacy and critical literacy – all have their place in the planning undertaken to ensure pupils are equipped with the tools they need for meaningful understanding and analysis. I would propose that there is room for a combined approach – a religio-artefactual critical literacy approach which combines features of all these literacies with the specific intent of exploring, interrogating and examining the lived religious experience within works of fiction created for children and young adults. In the following chapter, I examine this approach further, and present a possible toolkit for selecting fiction to enhance the teaching of the lived religious experience in terms of delight for the reader, and the performative, informative and transformative potential of the text, and for analysing texts through a religio-artefactual critical literacy approach.

Chapter 6

Choosing And Using Fiction in the RE classroom – a Toolkit.

How texts are selected, analysed and used in the classroom requires thought and planning. Where works of fiction are used to enhance the teaching of history, or geography, or, indeed RE, for example, teacher knowledge and expertise are of paramount importance (Huth, Brown and Usher, 2021; Burns, 2019; Hirsch, 2006). A recognition both of the power of these texts to influence, enhance, mislead, misrepresent, or add accurate insight from authorial lived experience, is vital when deciding how best to use them in the classroom (Bruner and Bruner, 2009; Miskec 2011). Having considered these aspects, and the potential pitfalls of appropriation and proselytising, as well as the positive opportunities that works of fiction can provide when used carefully and thoughtfully, the toolkit which follows describes a potential framework for the selection of texts, and a proposed structure for their analysis, which can be used to enhance understanding of the lived religious experience.

Choosing appropriate texts from the myriad on offer in contemporary fiction is tricky. In selecting texts for the purpose of providing useful learning opportunities around lived religious experiences, the first and foremost consideration must surely be the enjoyment and accessibility of the text for the reader, as a piece of fiction in its own right. Texts which are perceived as dull, irrelevant, too hard, or too easy, may easily lead to disengagement with the source material itself and potentially therefore with the desired learning outcome. Particularly where the text is to be read aloud or discussed in detail, it is essential that all parties are engaged by it. This is one reason why reviewing and investigating available genres is important. The other, equally valid, reason for establishing the genre of the texts to be used is in recognising how different genres represent and explore – and comment upon – religious, ritual and symbolic behaviours and artefacts in general. This thesis has established, for example, the way in which fantasy writing is often well positioned to include lived religious experience without question as a central element of, or explanation for, a protagonist's behaviour, or plotline. Realist writing can deliberately or unintentionally encourage questioning of a lived religious experience within a social context familiar to the reader, in which negative as well as positive portrayals and interpretations are available. Contemporary dystopias often use religion as a context for explaining some of the negative aspects of the situations presented to the reader, raising questions about power, influence,

validity and gender. In recognising and carefully selecting the genre used for a religious reading of a fictional text, the situatedness of the author and the authorial intent are questioned from the outset, which helps to validate the content provided therein through the application of critical literary analysis.

Once texts have been classified according to genre, and assumptions of the authorial intent made, an overview of the text or section selected is necessary to identify different elements presented to the reader. One can examine the historical and social context of the story, and establish how relevant this is to the plot itself and to a religious reading of the text. The way in which the historical and social context is presented to the reader can be investigated through plot examination, use of language, setting, character descriptions – and through discussions of the assumptions the *reader* brings to the text themselves. Identifying and naming assumptions and recognising one's own sedimentation when approaching a text enables the reader to respond further to the behaviours of the protagonists, and to remain cognisant of authorial intent as they read.

In reviewing the text itself, one can ask what artefacts and rituals, be they overtly religious, every day, or fundamental to the storyline, are apparent, and how important they are. The identification of specific rituals and artefacts and establishment of their intrinsic importance to the story can be used to make comparisons with known ritual or artefactual behaviours and stories from known religious texts as further analysis is undertaken using scaffolds such as the Religio-Artefactual Critical Literacy framework (RACL) which is described later in this chapter.

Having interrogated the text for overall meaning, be that mediated through the narrator's voice or authorial experience, one can dig deeper into how the text itself may be altered through performance and a hermeneutic assessment of how the *reader* remakes the text – and what may lie behind this. What does the reader, or performer, bring to the text in terms of their own situatedness? How is the meaning of the text altered in *performance* through the interpretation of the performer? Are there multiple ways of interpreting the text according to one's own sedimentation, cultural background or prior knowledge? When considering the transformative aspects of a text, one can consider how the text *as a whole* transforms the reader. Can it be established, from the style, content, grammar, knowledge of author background etc. what the author might want, to effect *transformation* in (and for) the reader?

Is it a desire to increase knowledge and understanding of a different worldview? Is it an opportunity to raise big questions or encourage uncomfortable ones? And how do we know? What is it about the text that helps the reader understand the intent of the author? Reflecting on some of these questions can lead to more informed judgements about what is being presented.

The toolkit that follows provides a two-strand approach to using fiction in the RE classroom to enhance understanding of others' religious experience. The first part of the approach describes the DIPT model in practice. The themes of *Delight, Information, Performance* and *Transformation*, derive directly from the reading of novels where common themes were identified (Appendix 1). The previous chapter provides the background and justification to the model, and to the analysis tool discussed later in this chapter. The toolkit below provides examples of how the model might be put into use.

The second part of the toolkit involves the aforementioned analysis tool which incorporates artefactual critical literacy approaches with the development of religious literacy. Textual analysis features strongly in English and Scottish curriculum requirements, and this analysis tool provides another lens through which to interrogate texts for their religious, sacred or spiritual meaning. The chapter ends by pulling these two strands together, and providing an overview of a selection of texts written for children which are mapped to national curriculum requirements.

Using the texts: what could it look like in the classroom?

This toolkit is designed to enhance the teaching of RE through the use of fiction, both with easily recognisable religious aspects, and with aspects which need to be looked for more carefully. It is not designed to replace any element of the RE syllabus or teaching sequence, but provides ideas for bringing some of the more challenging aspects of the lived and internal experiences of believers and adherents to life through a medium readily accepted and enjoyed by children. The toolkit provides a broad range of tools which can be used either by themselves or as part of the whole, and which can be applied across the age ranges, using picture books, short stories, novels and series of books as start points for the exploration of the lived religious experience.

Intent, impact and implementation

Teachers are, of course, best placed to know what will appeal most to their classes, what levels of religious and critical literacy are apparent within their cohorts, and which needs direct teaching and enhancement. Some of the books suggested contain challenging and occasionally upsetting imagery and concepts, and, as with all books used in the classroom as teaching tools, it is vital that the teacher reads the sections to be used in advance in order to make a judgement as to their suitability for a given class. It is perhaps important, too, to consider whether using excerpts as opposed to whole texts can skew the reading and interpretation of the content as a whole. This caveat holds true too for ensuring that the voice in which the text is written is authentic and positions are not appropriated in ways which could be perceived as offensive; that there is no attempt at proselytization and that where aspects of faith are clearly fictional (fantasy faiths for example, or made up rituals and practices) these are clearly identifiable in order to prevent misunderstanding or misrepresentation. It is also worth noting that suggested books are only a small part of the range on offer, and where the religious experience is involved, pupils may well be best placed to recognise their faith expressions within the fiction they are reading and to recommend those texts accordingly. Creating a classroom environment where the sharing of texts, recommendations, and discussion of core concepts is a natural part of everyday school experience can help hugely in encouraging children to come forward and to share the books which they feel best reflect them and their experiences. Such an environment should not be exclusive to specific curriculum areas: reading for pleasure and confidence in sharing and using texts should be an integral part of a child's whole learning experience across the curriculum. (DfE, 2021; CLPE, 2021).

Using fiction to enhance learning in any curriculum area requires planning and sequencing. Will the use of a text replace parts of an existing lesson sequence? Will texts be used partially, or shared as a class book in their entirety, perhaps outside of the subjects they are intended to enhance? And will the skills needed to select, utilise and analyse the texts themselves be taught discreetly or as part of the planned lesson sequence within which the content of the books features? These are big questions for timetabling, resourcing and ensuring teacher knowledge, and need to be considered as part of the process of bringing the lived religious experience alive in the classroom in the most efficient, economical and

meaningful way possible. The tools provided in this kit are just one way of bringing that experience into the classroom and beyond – but one I hope will be enjoyable, meaningful and completely accessible to children of all ages.

At the end of the day, a desirable outcome from introducing fiction into the RE classroom is greater understanding of, and respect for, the lived religious experience of others. In developing these through fiction, the ongoing development of critical literacy skills can also be a focus, enabling readers to make judgements about the veracity of texts or the experiences of protagonists from the tools available, and for increases in religious literacy, through the exposure of the reader to information about rituals, beliefs, dress, practices, festivals, and sacred writings. It is intended that pupils will emerge from a lesson sequence that has used fiction to explore the lived religious experience, better able to evaluate and position their own worldviews, in the context of organised belief systems, historical religious influence, and contemporary understanding and views of the world in which they live, and to be able to articulate their worldview with passion and conviction.

Above all, the point of investigating varied approaches to teaching the lived religious experience must be to encourage curiosity: curiosity about how others live their lives, curiosity about different worldviews, and curiosity about our own positioning and where that has come from (and could move towards.) Curiosity requires an open mind, and a flexibility of approach, and when learning about something as potentially divisive and open to misunderstanding as religion, this is essential in order that one does not fall into the trap of assumption. Fiction allows the reader to explore, in safe spaces, concepts which are new or alien, to question motivation without causing offence, to play around with ideas and beliefs without risk of accusations of heresy. Tolerance of underrepresented groups is high on the agenda, and rightfully so, in schools and communities right now, and it is right that all religious groupings and communities should feature. The following resources aim to provide a framework for exploring these themes through a range of approaches which use fiction as their basis.

The DIPT (Delight, Informative, Performative, Transformative) approach starts by asking: does the text **delight**? As the basis of using fiction to enhance learning, the enjoyment of the text is paramount, and it needs to be enjoyable not just for the pupils but for the teacher too! Is the text **informative**? Does it contain information that is actually *useful* in terms of

teaching? This could include accurate descriptions of faith practices for example, or it could involve totally made-up, fictional accounts of religious observance, which can be used to explore similarities and differences between faith practices, or the importance of accuracy, or what we *think* of when we imagine religious practice in its generic form. Are there **performative** elements to the text? Does it include accounts of religious performance – or could it be used in performance in and of itself? Does it lend itself to performative reading as a piece of text (lectio divina for example)? And finally, is it **transformative**? As a piece of text, could it transform the readers' understanding or view of religious practice? Are there examples of transformative action within the text? Who changes and why?

Selecting and using texts – the DIPT approach

Religious faith and practice can be considered in a number of ways. From the reading of texts earlier in this study and my own experience of teaching religious education, I would suggest that some of the ways of seeing distil to these:

- Organised religions can be INFORMATIVE. They provide information about the meaning of life. They stipulate accepted ways of living through laws and rituals. They offer explanations, often through story and allegory, about the development of cultural systems, and their historical context. They provide descriptions and information about their god(s) and the hierarchies under which adherents live (Prothero, 2007; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2010).

- Organised religions can be PERFORMATIVE. They encapsulate prescribed ways of 'doing' through agreed rituals, rites of passage, prayer, readings, and worship. They encourage interpretation through different forms of performance. They display outward forms of adherence, through dress, symbols, artefacts, and community behaviours, which are performances in their own rights (de Jong, 2007).

- Organised religions can be TRANSFORMATIVE. They offer opportunities to transform one's own life, to access favour, or eternal life, or enlightenment. They provide guidance on how to transform one's own behaviour in line with the central tenets of the faith. They transform the everyday into something special and dripping

with meaning and help to frame philosophical questions about how, and why, we live our lives. They rely on unwavering trust – faith – in a being, or beings, beyond our comprehension, and that faith has the power in and of itself to transform an individual's experience of their own life (Wilt et al, 2019; Barros and Schultz, 2023).

From the analysis of the texts selected for this study, which is exemplified in the previous chapters, I would argue that books and works of fiction can be viewed under the same headings:

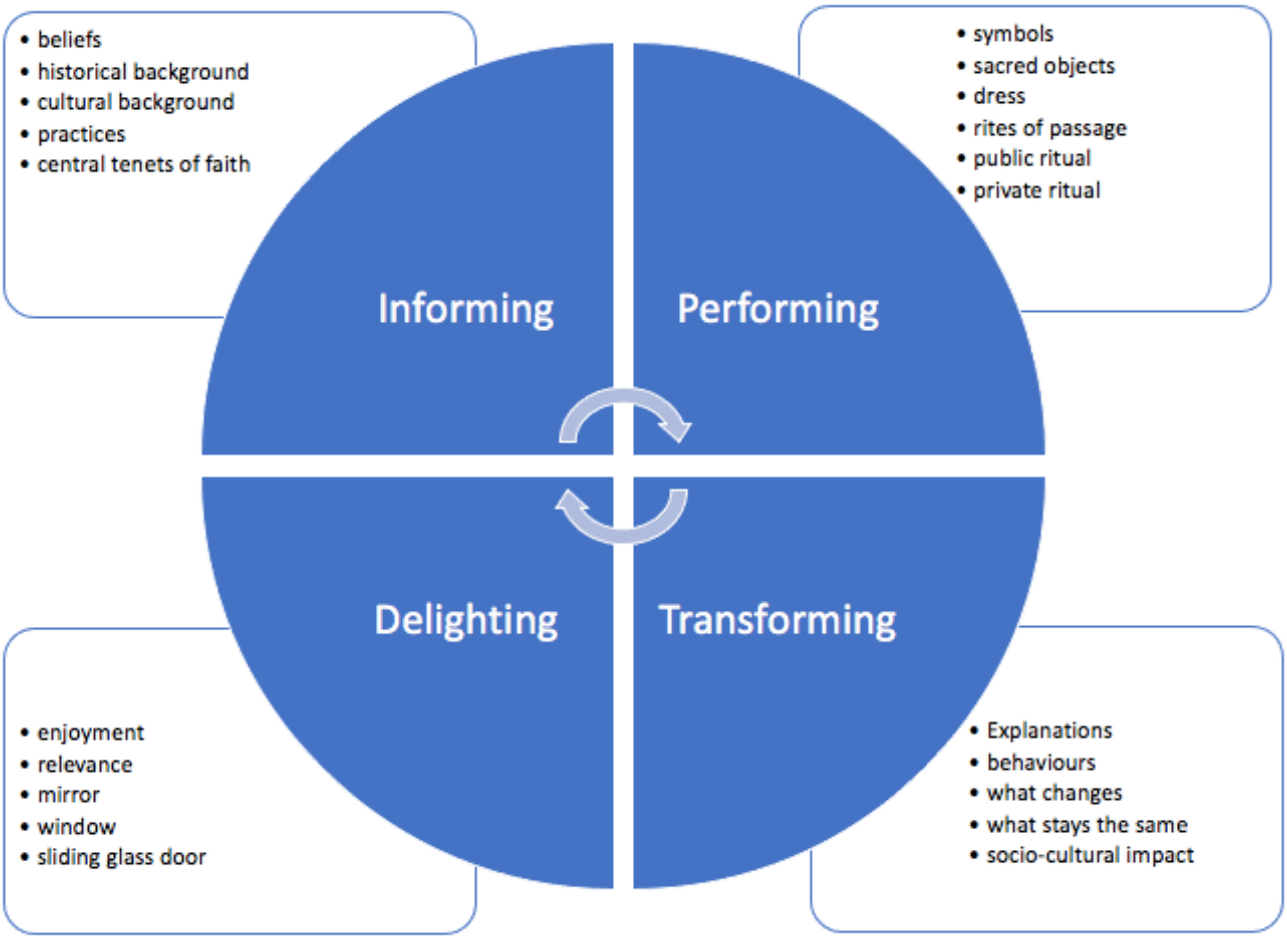
- Stories can be INFORMATIVE. They give the reader information about others' lives and experiences. They provide access to unknown worlds and unknown peoples. They use descriptions of settings, historical events, celebrations, rituals, beliefs, cultures, relationships, which, even when completely fictional or based in fantasy, deliver an information-heavy experience to the reader, whose job it is then to make connections between their own lived experience and understanding of their world and that of the world on the page before them (Green and Oldendorf, 2011).

- Stories can be PERFORMATIVE - in the silent reading where the reader gives voice to the characters between the pages; in reading aloud with interpretations given through intonation and approach; when dramatised, both formally in plays, films and on tv, and informally through re-enactment, classroom drama and individual and group play. Stories are dramatic, performative entities in their own right and, in the dramatization of another's words, we remake the text for ourselves.

- Stories can be TRANSFORMATIVE – both for the characters for whom storylines bring about transformation on small or large scales, and for the reader whose understanding and cultural capital is increased and enhanced through the reading of a text. Stories have the capacity to make readers question strongly held views, to examine their own motivations around a variety of subjects and to provide scaffolds against which to build new viewpoints and practices (Reynolds, 2007).

Using these similarities and including delight as an important feature when both accessing a text and participating in religious practice, the Delighting, Informing, Performing and

Transforming (DIPT) approach to selecting and using texts can provide a helpful approach to teaching lived religious experience in the RE classroom.



This diagram provides a useful aide memoire when considering the different aspects of each of the four areas of the DIPT approach. Pupils can be asked to devise questions based on each area, or can be directed to questions of the text overall which provide an overview of how religion is depicted within the storyline. The following table provides some starter questions to ask of a text in terms of how it delights, informs, performs and transforms. Encouraging pupils to think up questions themselves under the DIPT headings can be a useful way to of developing higher order questioning skills – an essential part of being literate itself..

Area	Questions to Ask	Examples	Possible texts
Delighting	Is the text engaging for children? Is the text enjoyable for the teacher? Will the text resonate with pupils?	Effective read-aloud; Opportunities for leaving listeners with a cliff-hanger; Humour; Relatable characters; Cohort-related interests	*Planet Omar* *City of the Plague God* *Grace*

Area	Questions to Ask	Examples	Possible texts
Informing	Does the text include information about specific, known religions? Does the text include information about the lived experience for an adherent of a religious faith? Where information is given about known religions, is it accurate? Where information is given about fictional religions, does it include aspects we can use to make comparisons e.g. information about festivals, dress or sacred writings?	Key figures, key beliefs, key practices; Descriptions of how it *feels* to belong to specified faith group; Examples of how individual belief impacts on day to day practice – prayer rites, morality, life choices; Depictions of dress, festivals, worship, artefacts, sacred writings – and their use.	*Does My Head Look Big in This?* *Shadow and Bone* *Slog's Dad*

Area	Questions to Ask	Examples	Possible texts
Performing	What performative aspects are highlighted in the text (rites, rituals, individual and collective)? What role does the performance of worship or prayer take in the text? Are there opportunities to *use* the text itself performatively (drama, re-enactment, reading aloud for impact, shared reading, language choice etc.)?	Collective and individual rituals form part of the background or central storyline; Modes of worship, descriptions are included;	*The Candle and the Flame* *The Book of Boy* *Millions*

Area	Questions to Ask	Examples	Possible texts
Transforming	Who is transformed in the text and why? What or who influences transformation? How might the text change the reader? (questioning own worldview, exposure to new ideas, understanding of others' experience etc.)	Personal faith or group belonging impact on life choices of protagonist(s) in defined ways; Key figures who hold influence and power for good or ill; Authorial intent – changing reader perceptions?	*The Island* *The Order of Darkness* *I Am Thunder*

Each of these aspects is now considered in turn, using Azad's YA fantasy novel, *The Candle and the Flame,* to explore the delighting, informing, performing and transforming potential of a text.

Finding value in what is being read is central to my proposed approach to selecting, exploring and analysing fiction used in the RE classroom. Stories which attract and hold the reader's attention, which provide them with worlds to explore, experiences they can relate to, and which offer information and confirmation, are an invaluable resource and privilege. Those which lend themselves to multiple interpretations through experience and through the interpretive power of performance, and which show transformations in positive lights have, in turn, the power to transform the readers. Hunt (2009) talks about the importance of delight

in books and in reading. Readers read also for information, for declamation, for transformation, and for enchantment. One of the risks of the over-analysis of texts is that it can remove some of this delight from reading – one only has to listen to student recollections of studying set texts in school to see how easy it is to devalue a glorious story in the attempt to analyse its every feature and intention. When selecting a text as a route into exploring the lived *religious* experience, the enjoyment factor – for reader, teacher, parent alike – has to be paramount. In order for the text to resonate and transform thoughts, raise big questions and inspire debate, it needs to be relatable. I can think of numerous works of fiction which have contained experiences I could relate to, but which have not resonated with me because of the style of writing or the plotline. Selecting the texts carefully, as outlined above, is essential to ensuring they are valued as worthy in their own right and not just as teaching tools – again, there are many books available which feel as though their prime mission is to 'educate' at the possible expense of an engaging story. It takes careful mediation to ensure that the selected texts are held as precious – sacred, even – by their readers.

Thus, in order to ensure that this positive and precious relationship between reader and book is not impaired by over analysis, the approach I am proposing for the selection and initial exploration of texts begins – and ends - with Delight.

Delighting

Investigating a text in terms of the delight it brings plays strongly on how much it resonates with the audience. Indeed, so important is the role of enjoyment that there is a specific strand devoted to the concept within the *Scottish Curriculum for Excellence*, and a focus on reading for pleasure has underpinned the 2019 Ofsted Inspection Framework for schools in England. Skilled authors, writing about subjects or experiences which may be unknown to their readership, weave storylines which enable the reader to embrace different experiences - of religious practice, of cultural context, of historical fact – without recourse to a didactic approach to each element. Presenting a lived experience of 'the other' as part of a gripping storyline ensures that it does not become a distraction. As part of a teaching sequence, that same lived experience can be explored as a 'real' one within a safe environment for enquiry and debate – a fictional character cannot take offence at a poorly phrased question about their religious practice. And safe spaces for discussion, especially where topics may be sensitive, are well provided for by fiction (Rosen 2020). In making analogies, connections can be made

between the experiences of others and individual experience, finding commonalities which can lead to greater levels of respect and acceptance – a desirable goal in the classroom and beyond. As Orsi writes,

> [one of the] challenges of the journey to the past or to another culture is to recognize what people in these other times and places share with us, the ways our stories overlap, and the way in which a shared humanity creates the possibility for deeper understanding (Orsi, 2010, p xlvi).

In making links between subjective experiences and those of others, books can bridge the gaps in understanding that perhaps instructional texts and teaching *about* religious beliefs cannot. They create shared worlds and introduce concepts of faith and practice which may be unfamiliar, challenging, or, on occasion, uncomfortable; Khan's *I Am Thunder* does exactly this by presenting characters with religious views which are sometimes distasteful but with whom the reader has built a bond of experience through immersion in the teenage world in which they function. The ability to hook the reader into the story – to delight them – is extremely beneficial in the classroom, ensuring readers and consumers of text buy into the story before mining its content for religious meaning.

The opening chapter of Azad's novel, *The Candle and the Flame*, launches its readers into a world with elements some may recognise, but which is grounded in a fictional land within a fantasy setting. This places readers on an even playing field to a certain extent. After all, no reader has visited the fictional town of Noor although some will be familiar with the Silk Road and its history and cultural importance. The passage, describing the early morning prayer ritual undertaken by Fatimah on the rooftop of her dwelling is described in beautiful, but technical language:

> Turning her back to the city, she, too, prays the four rakats of Fajr, bowing down with her hands on her knees for the ruqu before touching her forehead to the ground in a sajdah. (p4)

In the space of one sentence, the author introduces four very specifically religious terms, with little or no explanation, although it can be surmised from the text what some of them may mean. For readers from the Muslim faith, the words will be familiar, the actions and context known – for practising children of faith, they will potentially see themselves reflected in the mirror held up for them by Azad's words. For readers unfamiliar with the Muslim faith, this

one sentence provides Bishop's window onto a new world. But there is partnership potential here for both those readers who are familiar with the religious world described and those who are not, because the fantasy setting of the novel and the plotline - which involves jinn, shayeteen and ghuls, characters which feature in Hinduism and Arabic folklore too - is a form which is familiar to many readers. Whilst from the start the reader is left in no doubt as to the importance of Fatima's faith and associated rituals in her personal life, the storyline ensures that even for those for whom this is not a shared experience, there are sufficient hooks to enable them to enter the text with confidence. Throughout the text, constant references to religious behaviours establish the fundamental position that religion holds within both the lives of the protagonists and the storyline itself, with its allusions to known ancient Arabic folklore, Islamic and Hindu stories and references to the religious melting pot that is the city of Noor. The beauty of the language, the promise held by the prologue and first chapter and the first glimpses of an arresting storyline provide the delight the reader is seeking despite the very early introduction of specifically religious, complex (for some readers) language furnished without explanation (a glossary at the back of the book offers definitions if needed.) These opening words provide a mirror, yes, for children from the Muslim faith (and later the Hindu faith which is represented throughout the story), but also the windows and doors through which to peer and then travel for those who do not see themselves in terms of their religious identity reflected here, but are incorporated and welcomed with a storyline which includes references to the lived experiences of many young people.

Of course, delighting in a story is a subjective event. By considering the existing preferences of the pupils being engaged, in terms of genre in particular, the selection of books to aid the teaching of the lived religious experience can be made easier – it can be challenging to harness enthusiasm and attention when the genre selected does not sit well with the class, making it even harder then to explore controversial or difficult issues. Equally important is the delight a chosen text inspires in the adult, and the importance of pre-reading and, where applicable, experimenting with a text for its read-aloud potential, is paramount.

Informing

It is potentially a risky strategy for an author to position their fictional work as informative or instructional, despite the understanding of children's books providing "instruction and delight" (Hunt, 2009). A didactic approach to storytelling can easily become off-putting to

the reader when they want to become immersed in story itself – and as an approach, it risks alienating audiences if the tone is considered strident, or proselytising. And yet, by virtue of their ability to create worlds which have detail, vibrancy and context, authors provide information about all sorts of things within their storylines. When considering texts for their religious themes or aspects of lived religious (ritual, spiritual etc) experience, the information provided, measured against what is known to be factual, can be analysed and interrogated for meaning and context. *The Candle and the Flame* provides a rich source of information about the lived religious experience of the protagonists, through descriptions and portrayals of their everyday and ritual lives, conversations about their beliefs, and the central storyline itself - which draws on aspects of Arabic folklore and Muslim and Hindu story and exegeses for its themes. But it also provides cultural and historical information, some of which is grounded in fact, some of which is fantasy and all of which provides the context for the world-building of the author. Exploring and questioning the cultural information provided can lead to discussions about similar cultural experiences or understandings, or provide opportunities to make comparisons to known contexts. Critical literacy skills come into play when searching for evidence to back up assumptions about the cultural or historical information provided – what does the text *say* in plain terms? What have I assumed to be the case? Where do those assumptions come from – what connections can I make with my prior knowledge, experience, or understanding of other cultures? A close reading of a text can provide rich data with which to make judgements and test hypotheses – skills which are transferable across the curriculum and beyond the classroom door.

"The afternoon court gathers under the shade of several peepal trees located in a corner of the vast grounds of Southern Aftab Mahal. The Rajmata complained that she felt suffocated inside the mahal, so Maharani Aruna requested that arrangements be made to take tea outside. The courtiers sit on cushions scattered upon thick rugs placed on the grass under the trees. Birds are singing, and a gentle breeze makes merry with the leaves on the trees and the bright dupattas on the women. Chai, flavoured with the Rajmata's favourite cardamom, is poured into china cups, another of the Rajmata's indulgences, while platters of delicacies are passed around by the maids. The conversations are pleasant, and during the lengthier pauses, someone sings beautifully." (Azad, op cit p120)

Possible questions:

- What words are new to you? What do you think they might mean? How have you come to that definition?
- Where is this action taking place? Who is involved?
- What does the author want you to think about the main characters in this passage? How do you know?
- What does the word colonial mean to you?
- How might it refer to elements of this passage?
- What does that tell you about the people involved?
- How might the story be decolonised?

Information can include, as in the passage at the beginning of this chapter, details about faith practices as well as rituals and artefacts (which feature later). Comparisons can be made to known and recognised rituals and objects, and explored for relevance to the storyline or to an understanding of the lives of the protagonists. When looking at novels, one can investigate which practices are reflected, and in making connections with known religious practices, beliefs, and sacred objects, establish commonalities which can go a long way towards developing understanding and acceptance of others' beliefs and practices. By exploring, non-judgementally, depictions of people of faith within novels, open dialogue can be encouraged which may be more challenging when children are uncomfortable about sharing their own religious backgrounds for fear of misunderstanding or ridicule.

Using a work of fiction for the purposes of gleaning accurate information about a religion or religious practice is of course, potentially fraught with problems. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is essential, in this case on the part of the adult, to apply critical reading skills when selecting texts in order to ensure that they are accurate and respectful and that the positionality of the author has been taken into account. Blindly accepting a fictionalised account of a religious belief or ritual has the potential to lead to misinformation and even offence. The use of fantasy as a genre suited to the exploration of faith and practice can provide a safe space, as there is no risk of causing offence or getting things wrong when discussing features of a made-up religion. Instead, analysis of aspects of that faith can then be applied to, and compared with, similar aspects of known religious experience from prior teaching or the lived experience of pupils. But where known religion is a basis of a fictional

text, for example, in *Planet Omar,* it is essential to situate the reading within a fictional world and to make judgements on the veracity of the religious experience described therein against known facts and the experience and views of adherents themselves.

Performing

When looking at the performative aspects of a text, there are a number of approaches that can be taken. The texts themselves can be interrogated for elements of performance. The depiction of the prayer ritual at the beginning of *The Candle and the Flame* provides rich text for analysis and interpretation. The outward presentation of the 'performance' itself can be explored along with what each element might mean in terms of understanding at this point of Fatima's faith. The reader can investigate how the depiction of ritual performative aspects of a person's faith might change when in a public place, or in private. Are the different aspects, movements, forms of dress, forms of address, the same when alone as when one performs within a congregation or alongside family members? Do the performed movements/words/ actions hold religious significance in and of themselves? Is attire a form of performance – and if so, what does the described clothing tell us about the cultural backgrounds of the lives of protagonists? Can gender specific elements to clothing choices – or locations for ritual – or permissions to perform specific acts and rituals in the name of a faith be recognised within the text? Or does the collective performance of a ritual, recitation, or wearing of specified garb, place adherents on a level and equal playing field before their God or gods?

Fictional texts, when performed, are open to interpretation. How many readers, seeing a screen version of a well-loved book have cried out in horror that the depiction isn't remotely representative of their own interpretation of it? Readers remake the text each time it is read (Jewitt, 2008). Viewers, or listeners, are subject to another's interpretation and vision of that text. In making comparisons between written text and film or television adaptations, judgements can be made about the relative importance given to themes and aspects of text by the performers and those producing the performed material. A good example of this would be a study of the film adaptation of Pullman's *Northern Lights*, *The Golden Compass*, comparing the strong opposition towards the organised church found in the writing in the former, with the complete lack of reference to organised religion in the adaptation. What does this tell us about the people adapting the text? What did they think their audience would make of the adaptation had religion been kept as central to the story? Does the plot work as

well/better without the religious themes running through? Does the removal of reference to religion dramatically alter the meaning of the story as it was revealed to you, the reader?

However, it can be enlightening to perform the text itself in different ways. In a number of religious traditions, notably in Judaism and in Islam, where the direct translation of the word Qur'an is Recitation, the reading aloud of sacred scriptures is a fundamental part of worship, meditation, prayer, and understanding. Reciting sacred text allows for an interpretation by the performer of the text being read. It allows for multiple interpretations, through the modulation of voice, through emphasis, tone, musicality. In the Jewish tradition, recitation allows for an understanding that there may be multiple valid interpretations to a sacred text, because god-speak cannot be equated with single-truth, human-speak. In performing sacred text or prayer, the performer brings a personal interpretation into the open.

Reading story aloud is a strong feature not only of the classroom (particularly in the primary sector) but also at home where reading aloud to a young child is a recognised factor in developing literacy skills as well as engendering a lifelong love of story. When using texts in the classroom in order to interrogate them for meaning, intent, and religious themes etc, the adult reading aloud takes the mechanics away from the child, allowing them to immerse themselves in the fluidity and melody of text, the overall meanings and atmosphere a text offers, without being side-tracked by linguistics, or parts of speech, form or function. Reading a passage aloud allows the text to flow whilst providing, through the voice of the reader, a possible interpretation thereof. In encouraging children themselves to perform portions of text, their interpretations are allowed to come to the fore (where they are confident to read aloud), and by encouraging dramatic representations of portions of text, additional layers of meaning can be added, or taken away.

Another important aspect of performance through recitation and reading aloud is its role in memorisation. Reciting poetry, prayers, and portions of plays, is a way of encouraging the reader to remember not only the meaning or overall flavour of a text but the accurate rendition of it. Reciting a portion of text, with a focus on melody, on slowing down during the reading, on emphasis of different words and phrases, can enable participants to discover new things about the text itself in terms of its form and its potential layers of meaning, which can be missed when quickly reading silently, or studying a portion of text as a visual without attention to the aural elements. Choral, or group, reading, too, can provide new

understandings of a text as words, punctuation, vocal modulation, rhythm, and collective musicality enhance the enjoyment and resonance of the text. There are obvious comparisons to be made with sacred readings, and religious recitation, which can provide rich areas for discussion. In attempting to provide examples of a lived experience of faith – from the point of ritual, awe and wonder, internal 'gut feeling' and so on – the recitation of text can be used to replicate some of those feelings and thence open up debate about what special words or passages in sacred scriptures might mean to believers.

The sacred or religious reading aloud of texts, be they religious in their own right, or secular, forms an important part of performance. Reading a text in different ways can help the reader and, where appropriate, the listener, to gain new insights into the meaning of the words, and can imbue those words with importance and validity in their own right. The passage below from Azad's novel is a short one referring to death. Read as part of a silent reading of the novel, it is a paragraph which has importance, but which is easily sped past in the attempt to get to the next piece of action in a fast-paced plotline. Read aloud, the passage becomes lyrical, meaningful, and open to interpretation and question.

> People, Firdaus told Fatima Ghazala, are afraid of death for two very different reasons. The first one is obvious: They do not know what, if anything, lies beyond the veil. That is a matter of faith. The second reason is also obvious: People are being afraid of being forgotten. They live their lives carving themselves spaces in time and history only to be forgotten anyway. Even those who gain fame and notoriety fall victim to time; what people remember are not the individuals directly but as they were experienced by the people who knew them. A person's truth, a person's essence, fades with a person's death. That is simply the way of life (p213).

A slow read aloud, or performance, of this short paragraph emphasises the meanings and raises questions. The reader can explore from just over 100 words what the prevailing cultural view of death might be in the context of the book; compare that to their own views on death and legacy; explore how the Muslim faith, which underpins much of the lived religious experience in the book, approaches themes of life and death, and compare this to other faiths' views of death and the essence of being human. In treating this short passage as a performative act, the reader is exposed to a deeper layer of meaning within it – and different performances will elicit different emphases. The lectio divina method of reading, when applied to a secular text, may prompt emotional responses, or stir deep recognitions. Reading aloud is a powerful and collective act which requires buy-in from the reader and the listener, and which can stimulate conversation.

Lectio has application for secular texts in a wide range of situations, but the practice stems from the reading of sacred texts. Developed in the 11th Century by the prior, Guigo, lectio divina is a method of reading religious texts which encourages exploration of deeper meanings and resonances through the performative act of reading aloud and actively meditating upon the reading. The process aims to allow the reader to gain a deeper insight into the sacred text being read, and to bring them closer to God. In his 2019 paper about the role of lectio divina in the philosophy classroom as a secular activity, Wright (2019) cites James Martin's article in *America - The Jesuit Magazine*, where he describes how the four steps involved in lectio divina can be explained in terms of practitioner questions: " 'What does the text say?' (*lectio*), 'What does the text say to me?' (*meditatio*), 'What do I want to say about the text?' (*oratio*) and 'What difference will the text make in my life?' (*contemplatio*)," (Wright, 2019, np). That this can be applied to the reading of secular texts seems clear; however, as Wright goes on the discuss later in his paper, there is a potential issue with concerns about appropriation of an essentially religious, prayerful approach to reading a text within a secular, in his case, philosophical, classroom setting. In the attempt to ensure that children are not exposed to an expectation of religious *behaviours* within the secular classroom, it could be a challenge to ensure that exercises of faith with their basis in religious practice are used appropriately when contemplating secular texts and outcomes. Wright deals with this concern by comparing the practice of lectio divina in the classroom with the performance of yoga or meditation for the non-believer:

> It would be wrong if I required my students to pray the Rosary or engage in *Lectio Divina* in an effort to bring them closer to Christ, but engaging in a secularised *Lectio Divina*…requires no more commitment to Christianity than practicing yoga to realize the benefits of strength and flexibility requires a commitment to Hinduism (Wright, 2019 np).

There can be hesitation around using practices which find their bases in Christian beliefs and ritual which is less apparent where other religions are concerned and have influence, such as yoga and meditation, alternative medicines and pagan ritual. There appear to be benefits to using lectio divina in the classroom to explore deeper meanings within the text, but there is merit in discussing and exploring its foundations before entering into the practice itself, in an attempt to unpick the religious and secular appeal of deep, thoughtful contemplation of the written word. Teachers are expected to encourage pupils to 'dive deep' into works of literature, to move beyond the words on the page into an investigation and analysis of meaning, intent, context, and authorial sedimentation. The process of reading aloud slows the

reader and the listener down and allows for a focus on individual words and phrases, and the musicality of the text itself. Taking the text above from *The Candle and the Flame*, a slow reading according to the four questions outlined by Wright encourages us to examine firstly what Firdaus is saying about death – the actualities of his words, the realities of what he believes is left behind when we die. When exploring what the text says to the individual, personal beliefs, and experiences of death, and what it means to leave a legacy, to colour Firdaus's words. Am I afraid of death or am I afraid of being forgotten? Does the memory of me live on through the acts I have done which leave behind impacts on others' lives, or does it live through the reflection of my acts and my 'being' as it is interpreted and remembered by others? In spending time thinking about, or meditating upon, how individual beliefs and experiences impact both on the understanding of the text and the reading of it, the reader is able to probe deeper into the possible effect and influence such beliefs as they are written may have upon the protagonists, and how this may influence their behaviour. In terms of understanding the religious motivation of characters being read, this is extremely useful. In moving from *meditatio* to *oratorio*, voice is given to the meaning brought to the text, what it makes the reader think of, whether they believe it to be valid or representative of the experience of another and whether it reflects anything recognised within oneself or one's own experiences. Vocalising the impact of a short piece of text can help to firm up the understanding of it and the influences brought to bear on personal interpretations of it. And finally, in moving to the *contemplatio* part of the process, one is encouraged to think deeply about how the different elements of the reading of the base text come together, in the actuality of the words, the message it portrays on a personal level, the *way* in which the reader can vocalise that meaning, and ultimately a recognition of how that may alter, enhance, colour, or challenge personal beliefs and understanding about, in this instance, death and how human beings live on beyond their mortal lives. The performative nature of the process, in reading aloud, listening, applying specific questioning processes within given time frames to the text, and vocalising its impact and transformative elements to an audience, helps the reader to investigate the religious experience of another within the context of their own lives, beliefs, non-beliefs, and opinions. This approach can render it a more *real* reading experience than perhaps may be gained from a private, silent reading, where words and phrases and passages can become lost amongst the plotlines, twists, and turns of a good piece of fiction.

Sacred reading has the potential to help the reader gain deeper insights into a text. Below, I examine in more detail how to use lectio, alongside PaRDeS, Havruta and Florilegium approaches as ways of examining both the performative nature of texts themselves and gaining new insights into them. The Harry Potter fandom site www.harrypottersacredtext.com provides good examples of how to use these approaches amongst others to undertake sacred readings of contemporary texts, and is a useful resource when thinking about using children's literature in the RE classroom.

Sacred Reading: Lectio Divina

Defined as "divine reading", lectio divina comprises a four-step approach to texts which, according to the Anglican communion, is a "contemplative way of reading the Bible" (anglicancommunion.org). In order to utilise lectio for the purposes of looking at secular texts it is, of course, important to make a distinction between reading a text for devotional purposes, and reading a text for deeper meanings which the lectio process can allow (Hoyser, 2019). According to the Anglican Communion website materials, (op cit),

> *lectio* is not Bible study or even an alternative to bible study but something radically different…It is a practice we come to with the desire to be changed at all sorts of levels. It operates very much on the emotional rather than the purely cerebral level.

In using a lectio approach in the classroom it is important to step back from any concept of devotional reading and to use the approach as an interpretive, explanatory one. Lectio can be used on an individual or a group level, and it is the latter usage which is perhaps the most useful in the classroom. There are four steps to the approach:

1. *Reading - what does the text actually say?*

To begin with, the text is read aloud, either individually, or as part of a group. Listeners and performers take note of the essence of the text in terms of narrative – identifying the bones of the text itself. Standard comprehension questioning tasks which aim to glean information from the text with evidenced examples can easily be used along with recounts of what is actually being said within the text. There is no requirement for exploring inference or intent – the focus is on what the text says in its simplest form.

2. *Meditation - what does the text say to me?*

In this step, the text can be re-read aloud, or read silently by individuals. There is merit in a slow read-aloud, savouring the words and the musicality of the section. This is where discussion about intent and deeper meanings comes into play. In thinking about what the text *means* this is the opportunity to explore allegory, and to make links with other known texts – myths, fairy tales and sacred texts known to the readers and listeners. How has the author used known sources to influence or impact upon the story or piece of text? Is it a re-telling or an allegorical version of something well known – as in *The Chronicles of Narnia*? The meditation step provides opportunities for in depth conversations between participants, in which each person's view or understanding can be incorporated into new ways of understanding.

3. *Articulation – what would I say about the text?*

Articulation offers the opportunity for participants to share links they can make between the text and their own lives. Identifying ways in which characters resonate with participants' own lived experiences, discussing similarities between beliefs expressed in the text and those held by people known to the participants, can help bring the text to life, and help to identify aspects of the text which can be identified as religious, sacred, or spiritual in some way. As a technique, the articulation step provides for thoughtful exchange of individual experience and can be a really useful way of exploring personal beliefs and practices in a supportive atmosphere.

4. *Contemplation – how does the text change me?*

The final reading of the text invites the participants to explore ways in which it changes *them*. This may be through exposure to new ideas or practices with which they were previously unfamiliar, or challenging preconceptions and prejudices which is particularly poignant when thinking about religious affiliations and practices.

The lectio process allows for slow, thoughtful approaches to text, and can be a powerful route into deeper textual meaning. It clearly does not work for large pieces of text in the classroom – short, meaningful sections, such as the description of Mole's encounter with Pan in *The Wind In The Willows* lend themselves to this approach and can enable even the most reluctant participant to experience new meanings from familiar texts.

Sacred reading: Havruta

The practice of havruta stems from the study of the Torah in Jewish tradition. It involves the analysis of texts in pairs, rather than as a solo activity, and is considered best practice for the hermeneutical exploration of religious texts. According to Jewish scholars, havruta holds particular power in that by involving two people in discussion, debate, argument, and ultimately consensus on the *meaning* of a piece of text, it avoids the dangers of an individual believing themselves to hold ultimate truths, and provides a third way combining the scholarly knowledge and understanding of the two participants to create a third understanding. In the classroom, this can be a particularly useful method of exploring a text, in part, I believe, because it encourages argument! Coming from the position that each person's opinion is equally valid, the havruta approach requires not the acceptance of another's stance, but the creation of a consensus which places equal validity on both points of view. In encouraging, or even demanding, consensus, havruta allows participants to explore challenging aspects of texts, for example when introduced to Muzna in *I Am Thunder* as she attempts to justify her position on jihad and extremism from the point of view of faith. The Havruta approach expects of its participants passionate dialogue, but also respect for another's views, rather than the attempt to belittle or dismiss those views, and from this perspective, in providing learning experiences which teach tolerance, acceptance, and respect for beliefs and practices, it can be a valuable approach to take to the reading of a text.

Sacred reading: PaRDeS

The PaRDeS approach to texts has certain similarities with the lectio approach in terms of how it aims to discover deeper meanings to texts. The term comes from the words *P'shat, Remex, D'rash* and *Sud* and has been likened as a process to peeling an onion into layers to find hidden depths at its core (Yashanet.com).

The first stage of the PaRDeS approach, *P'shat*, or 'simple', reflects the first step of lectio, in establishing simple meaning. Stemming from the exegesis model of Biblical interpretation which tends to focus on grammar and literary context, the first step requires the reader to establish plain meaning from what is read, taking into account historical, social ,and cultural contexts to the writing. The reader can identify figurative language, and also elements of

allegory or symbolism, but it is the simple meaning of what is written which is sought during this stage.

The reader then moves onto the *Remez* stage. *Remez* means 'hint' and that is exactly what the reader is asked to look for – what the text is hinting at. Implied meaning can be garnered from knowledge of the text in its complete context, understanding of authorial intent, recognition of contextual factors which influence the text, or deeper meanings not for the reader but for the protagonists in a piece of fiction. In establishing layers of meaning, the reader is encouraged to move beyond simple interpretation and to understand what is meant by the text itself, and in the classroom, the taught skills of textual inference come to the fore. This stage leads straight, therefore into the *D'rash* stage.

D'rash means 'concept' and this third reading of the text asks the reader to try to work out what the author – or the narrator – wants the reader to *learn* from this piece of writing. What is the concept being, effectively, *taught* by the passage? Mole's encounter with the Numinous in *The Wind In The Willows* can be read for the bucolic description of a meeting with a god in the woods; it can be searched for deeper meanings which take into account the era in which Grahame was writing, his academic background, and the literature which was popular at the time of writing. During the *D'rash* stage, the reader explores what the author wants them to gain from the text itself, what teaching he is aiming for – which in this case could be interpreted as a desire to demonstrate how the numinous can be found in the simplest of things (nature) and how all are important to him, regardless of stature, age or importance (the safety of baby otter curled at the feet of Pan).

The final stage, *Sud*, links to the last, and means 'hidden'. In the fourth reading, readers look for "hidden, secret or mystic meaning[s] of a text" (chabad.org). Of course, there may be none! Or they may be tenuous. However, seeking hidden meanings can be a useful way of interrogating the power of the text and the author, intent, and belonging as well – is it the case that only the few can 'understand' the hidden meanings of a text? Is there a deliberate attempt at a form of apartheid on the part of the author or the narrator between those who 'know' and those who do not? And how does this relate to the readers' understanding and experience of organised religion? The PaRDeS approach can provide powerful and challenging opportunities to explore belonging and specialness and how this can make insiders – and outsiders – feel.

Sacred reading: Florilegium

The final approach to text, *florilegium*, gets its name and its focus from a medieval practice of collecting small excerpts from text, a bit like gathering flowers from a hedgerow. In collecting and then combining these small 'sparklets', new meanings can be derived from a text. Florilegium can be undertaken individually or as a group. The participants read the selected passage or passages and jot down short phrases or sentences that jump out at them, or 'sparkle' (hence sparklets). Again, individually or as a group, these are collated and written down next to each other. They can refer to a chosen theme or idea and can come from a variety of texts or just one. Once the sparklets are written down together, participants look for connections, similarities and differences, and identify ways in which they find resonance with prior learning, lived experiences, or other readings. The idea is to approach the task with a free mind, not searching too hard for information but letting the mind wander and make connections almost by accident. Common themes can then be identified from the connections made, and questions asked of the original excerpts – does the collection lead the reader to new understandings? What meanings are identified which are new or surprising? And how can the reader use this new understanding to further understand the entire text being used?

All four of these approaches to reading the text find their origins in the performance of sacred reading from a variety of religious cultures, but whilst there is an element of sacredness in the approaches themselves, they are easily applied in a secular setting. However, it is important to ensure that the application of these methods do not allow for a suggestion that the secular works of fiction considered are being treated themselves as sacred.

One of the main advantages of the approaches is the way in which they slow the reading down, allowing the reader and listeners to savour the timbre and rhythm of words as well as the meanings and plain narratives which conjure up their own imagery. In combining a religious reading approach to a secular text, readers can actively engage in the process of discovering the layers of meaning which are apparent in many texts.

Performance through drama

As well as reading aloud, the performative element of the DIPT approach to using fiction to explore the lived religious experience, also includes dramatic interpretation. Performance in the classroom as a teaching tool has been explored in numerous papers and books which look at ways of incorporating a drama approach as part of the curriculum (Gill, 2017; Van de Water, 2021; Heathcote and Bolton, 1995). For many children, their first school-based encounter with the realities of the lived experience of the Christian story will be performing in a school nativity, as highlighted earlier in this study. For many, it may be the only remembered aspect of a religious education they have – as Murphy writes "nativity plays, with their distinctive imagery and comedic value, might evoke particularly strong episodic memories" (Murphy, 2018, p131). Murphy explores the importance of the corporeal aspects of involvement in a nativity – the colours, lights, "exaggerated imagery" (p131) - in locking a knowledge or understanding of the Nativity story into the memory, and giving it meaning. When considering the importance as explored already of artefacts and rituals in meaning-creation and in developing an understanding of the religious experience of others, the role of drama needs to be taken into account as well.

Performance of religious stories, from a variety of religious traditions, has been a feature of religious practice, devotion and proselytising throughout history. From passion plays to re-enactments of Biblical passages in pre-Reformation England, from treatise on the use of performative elements in the Nātyaśāstra to the Islamic Taziyeh passion plays of Persia and the Khayal shadow plays of Egypt, dramatic representation of religious stories has been an important element in both sharing narrative with the laity and exposing non-believers to accepted religious truths in appealing and accessible ways. In Medieval Christianity in Britain, the public use of dramatic interpretations of Bible stories and religious narratives was an accepted, and enjoyed, part of everyday life for all classes and helped to spread the stories to those unable to read, or understand services and church retellings in Latin. McCaughrean's book, *A Little Lower Than the Angels* (2003), tells the story of one such itinerant group taking religious plays around the country and the effect this has not only on those watching, but those participating, raising interesting questions about self-awareness, godliness, living up to others' expectations and views of oneself, and the beginnings and pitfalls of a god-complex.

So for the audience, dramatic representations can provide insights into religious stories and the characters involved. For those performing, drama offers the opportunity to explore the motivations of characters, what drives them, their back stories and situatedness, as well as the plotline of the stories they perform. Dramatic interpretations of secular stories which have religious themes or characters with a lived religious experience, may help the 'actor' to delve deeper into what it might feel like to have faith or a belief in something or someone greater than oneself. However, dramatic performance needs to be handled carefully when portraying religious rites and rituals such as prayer, for example. For some, a non-practitioner 'play acting' a religious rite which holds profound meaning, would be disrespectful at the very least. Where dramatic performances of religious behaviours are concerned, the advice and views of adherents should be sought and heeded. But where drama is deemed to be appropriate, it can have profound effects upon the participants in terms of enabling them to engage on a different level with the concept of belief as they attempt to enter the mindset of the characters within the story they are re-enacting (Winston, 2001).

Religious performance

When considering performance, it is important not only to look at the examples above, of practices such as lectio divina and of dramatic representations, but to consider religious practices as performances within their own right. Indeed, the development of an analysis tool to include religion specifically when considering the artefactual within texts, has come from the importance of the rituals which are associated with religious artefacts, and the performances which accompany their usage. When allowing children (and adults) a brief insight into what it *feels* like to be part of a religious community or faith group, it is important to consider not only what the associated beliefs themselves may be, but how they are portrayed, represented and performed within buildings, with artefacts, and through ritual and dress. Creating performance options when using secular texts with religious themes or characters can provide opportunities to explore these elements in new ways. The Religio-Artefactual Critical Literacy approach to analysing texts, which I explore later in this chapter, can be combined with a drama-based approach to *accessing* the text in order to enhance understanding and provide resonance with own experiences.

Transforming

When considering transformation as part of the criteria for selecting and reading texts, the reader can look at how the characters within the text are transformed as well as the potentially transformational nature of the text upon the reader. The changes which individuals undergo as a result of exposure to religious practices and beliefs yield insights into their characters which can be compared to the life experiences of the readers. Transformation can be expressed in terms of spiritual development or understanding, in terms of increased – or diminished – religious affiliation or practice, for example in *Does My Head Look Big In This*, and in terms of changes in behaviours which result from religious or quasi-religious experience.

The transformation of Fatima Ghazala from an ordinary girl partaking in cultural religious behaviours, to a woman holding deep and complex religiously-based powers, and seeing herself as a conduit for expressions of faith, provides the reader with opportunities to discuss how people in the real world may feel about how religion changes or shapes them. By exploring Fatima Ghazala's changing approach to spiritual practice and the ways in which this subtly (and not so subtly) changes her relationships with her loved ones, a deeper appreciation of what it means to hold faith can be explored.

Transformation can also be applied to the reader, considering how the reading of the text, and the ideas expressed therein, are recognised as central to changes in personal understanding or perception. This can be linked to the idea of performance too. Rasa Theory within the Nātyaśāstra treatise on the arts states that not only should performance evoke pleasure in entertainment, but that its "primary goal is to transport the individual in the audience into another parallel reality, full of wonder, where he experiences the essence of his own consciousness and reflects on spiritual and moral questions" (Wikipedia, Natya Shastra). This transformational approach to, in this case, drama and the performing arts, can be realised through exposure to fiction as well. Fiction which makes the reader question their viewpoints, or prior practices, or which encourages and enables them to explore the unknown, or which transports them to new worlds which refresh and revive spirits, can have a transformational effect on how one views, and approaches, the world in which one actually lives. As Pahl and Rowsell (2010) state, "Sometimes witnessing a story can become a moment of transformation for a student, creating a shift in the student's way of seeing the world" (p50). It is in transforming children's view of the world, of others, of themselves, that fiction can really

come into its own, providing a platform for exploration and self-realisation which is unavailable elsewhere - because the limits of the imagination combined with the portrayal of the lived experience of others, are almost infinite. Fiction gives us permission to question preconceived notions and opinions in a safe environment. But it is essential to be mindful of the power a work of fiction can hold to alter perceptions and possibly behaviours. As Francis Spufford writes, in his autobiographical work, *The Child That Books Built*:

> There were times when a particular book, like a seed crystal dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it, like a supersaturated solution, and suddenly we changed. Suddenly a thousand crystals of perception of our own formed, the original insight of the story ordering whole arrays of discoveries inside us, into winking accuracy (Spufford, 2002, loc 127).

As I have suggested earlier, care needs to be taken to select texts which give a balanced view, and which are not proselytising in their approach. Applying a critical approach to the selection of texts in order to establish intent and motivation, accuracy, and the possibility of appropriation, is essential when dealing with topics such as race, culture, sexuality, and religious faith which are so fundamental to self-identity. Not all writers will be accurate in their portrayal; not all books will be broad or open-minded in their approach. That is not to say they should not be used – a didactic or proselytising book may well be of use when exploring religion - but it is essential that children are made aware of the possible intent of the writers and promoters of given texts, and allowed to form opinions and viewpoints which may differ from that of the author or the publisher. Knowing, for example, Phillip Pullman's widely shared views of organised religion and the church helps the reader to place some of the messages which can come across from his writing into a context; knowing the depth and breadth of his understanding and experience of that church allows the reader to take comfort in the validity of his approach, and to disagree with it, or find communion with it. It is the role of the educator, or parent, to be aware of the ways in which works of fiction may be used to sow different ideas or encourage questions, and whilst this is an aspect of fiction which is hugely valuable, exciting, and valid, it is a characteristic which needs sensitive handling in the classroom and beyond. Writing about the radical and transformational nature of children's literature, Reynolds suggests that fiction for children has been instrumental as a tool for those trying to change the world order:

> It is not accidental that at decisive moments in social history children have been at the centre of ideological activity or that writing for children has been put into the service

> of those who are trying to disseminate new world views, values, and social models (Reynolds, 2007, p2).

As such, it is vital that those who hold power in terms of what literature is placed in front of children, or hidden from them, are fully aware of the motivations behind the creation of the texts and the different ways in which the text can be used to influence and shape young minds. Equally important is a recognition of the ability of those texts to open up a world of questions and to provide a toolkit of vocabulary and concepts which children can use to explore and make up their own minds about both big existential questions and about societal norms and values which may be ripe for challenge.

Analysing the texts

The use of fiction in the classroom requires thought and planning, and the DIPT approach provides a framework for both selecting and introducing works of fiction in RE. Interrogating the texts for meaning can be done on a relatively high level, but there are times when it is helpful to push deeper into what the words on the page say, and what they can be taken to mean. Textual analysis allows for a focussed exploration of a text. In the introduction to this toolkit, I mentioned the importance of critical literacy, artefactual literacy and religious literacy with particular reference to using fiction in the RE classroom. In this section, I propose an approach to textual analysis which combines all three literacies into a religio-artefactual critical literacy framework.

Religio-artefactual critical literacy: an approach for the analysis of texts.

There are, of course, a number of appropriate analytical tools that can be utilised when exploring a text for lived religious experience and which focus on different priorities. Many of the lenses through which texts can be viewed and investigated take as their starting point positions of power; and for works of fiction which present a lived religious experience within the storyline, this can be useful. Religions and the religious experience can be viewed as institutions and centres of power, with gender, wealth, colonialism and post-colonialism, nationalism, and sexuality, exemplar areas against which religious power is vividly drawn. As such, therefore, these theoretical frameworks can provide banks of questions with which to look at the text, and which aid the reader in placing their own context alongside that of the text and making comparisons with their ‘knowns’. Stories themselves expose us to

relationships of power too – between author and reader, between the reader and one who has not read, and between the pages of the books themselves as characters demonstrate their responses to power struggles.

For the purposes of this study, however, I have focussed less on theoretical frameworks which are based in power relationships and more on a hermeneutical, interpretive approach, from the standpoint that, as reader response theories explain, the reader makes anew the text upon reading and creates a new text which has validity and value of its own alongside, and sometimes separate to, the original (Rosenblatt, 1988). A hermeneutical approach to exploring texts allows for a recognition of the context against which the text was written, the situatedness of the reader, and the validity of individual interpretation of a text according to reader belief, experience, and context – all of which are worthy of analysis in themselves. García Landa talks about the "many degrees of unknowing" (1993, p6) as a justification for attempting formally to interpret or analyse a text. He writes:

> we interpret literary texts because they are valuable for us, because they open up new areas of experience and reality which we *could not reach otherwise.* We have not enough with the text as it stands, and we want more: more details of why this has happened, a yet more profound immersion in that world, a clearer view of what we already know is valuable (Garcia Landa, 1993, p6) (my italics).

One way in which one can ascertain value and recognise links with one's own experience, is through the power of the story of the objects – the artefacts within, and associated with, the stories being presented.

Religions are firmly associated with both artefacts and with rituals. Sacred artefacts provide visual, aural, oral, and tactile connections with the numinous, or with a sense of the spiritual aspects of one's experience. They may be sacred in and of themselves, or in their use, and those who are entitled or enabled to use them may be perceived as holding positions of power, as explored earlier in this chapter.

An understanding of the role of religious ritual in the lives of young people is an area which is important to consider in terms of literacy. Le Blanc has written about how ritual reading – choral reading, prayer recitation and so on, helps to bring young people into the religious community they are accessing, as a form of reciprocal gift-giving and receiving (LeBlanc, 2017). "[O]vert pedagogies of choral reading, call and response, recitation, chanting, and

song can help bridge the gap between home and school literacies," he writes (p78). He explores how ritual movements such as kneeling, and hand movements aid the memorisation of associated words, certainly, but also bring participants into the community through shared experience. Through memorised recitation and associated physical rituals, he suggests that "the focus is not on understanding insofar as it is about analytically parsing the text; rather the focus is on allowing the words themselves to work on you," (p78). The example of the use of physical movements as an aid to memorisation in the practice of learning to read can be seen in popular phonics-based approaches in England which use actions to support the memorisation of different sounds for the youngest pupils.

Religious behaviours are often associated with ritual behaviours, but it can be challenging for the non-believer or practitioner to understand the significance or symbolism inherent in rituals associated with religious practice. The concept of rituals themselves may well be familiar to pupils – particularly when it comes to magic ritual. Well-known fairy tales, alongside classic and contemporary fantasy writings, employ the idea of ritual as a way of imbuing action with consequence within a magical context, and as a way of providing a collective shared experience for practitioners which moves beyond the adherence to a code of conduct for example, or merely stating one's membership of a group. Magical rituals (collecting nettles by the light of the new moon in Anderson's 1838 *The Wild Swans;* tapping a specific pattern of bricks to reveal Diagon Alley in *Harry Potter*; the collective recitation of spells such as "Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble" in *Macbeth*) have a defined purpose which is understood by all those taking part in the ritual activity. But this is different when it comes to religious ritual. Goody writes:

> a magical rite has a definite practical purpose which is known to all who practise it and can be easily elicited from any native informant, while a rite is religious if it is simply expressive and has no particular purpose, being not a means to an end but an end in itself (Goody, 2010, p21).

It is relatively straightforward to examine the rituals associated with magic in works of fiction, as it is in the acts themselves, the words or the timings, that the 'magic' can occur – and without which the magic will not work. When looking at prayer rituals, or rituals around communion, or personal rituals associated with faith as described by Orsi (2010), although such personal rituals may also have a notionally 'magical' element too, it is harder, perhaps, to identify their purpose or meaning in the context of what the adherent or believer is aiming to achieve. It is, in the case of religious ritual, the ritual itself which is important rather than

any perceived or wished-for outcome. Religious ritual is used to prepare the believer for communion with God – the wuku washing ritual which brings the worshipper to Allah in a state of physical purity; kneeling for prayers to demonstrate supplication; the attachment of the mezuzah to the door post to sanctify the home and to remind inhabitants of God's covenant, and the touching thereof as a sign of respect. It is also a way of anchoring teaching and codes of belief and practice, of providing a dual coding for memory within predominantly oral/aural traditions. As Le Blanc's findings demonstrate, ritual draws practitioners into a religious community through shared experience and 'gift-giving' (Le Blanc 2017). In exploring the significance of myth, Goody states that it "usually has a strongly religious and even explanatory role; it is not recited raw around a campfire but to adults in a special ritual context" (Goody, 2010, p8). By combining teaching with ritual, the core beliefs and practices of a religious group can be easily shared, transmitted and, importantly, *remembered,* without the influence of the storyteller's interpretation or embellishment (LeBlanc, 2017; Copley, 2007.).

Exposing children to the ritual behaviours of people of faith can help to both demystify their practices and to set those rituals within a context of faith and worship. The rituals associated with artefacts are also important. Personal artefacts can be imbued with deeply personal and individual meanings – photograph albums, a cherished teddy bear, a lock of hair. Stories related to these personal artefacts, be they fictional or factual, are valuable for providing commonalities and links between the reader/listener, and the author/teller. Religious artefacts, on the other hand, such as the communion cup, the singing bowl, a prayer mat, or a string of rosary beads can be explored both for their practical elements and in terms of the rituals which apply to them which aim to bring the user closer to God through a prescribed set of behaviours. This level of religious literacy can be hard to teach in isolation. Works of fiction, however, which exemplify ritual behaviours can be hugely helpful in introducing and exploring ritual behaviours and what they mean to the practitioner. Skills in critical literacy enable the learner to place their understanding of ritual behaviours, artefacts, and beliefs into a context – where establishing authorial intent, or examining the motivation of a religious leader or key religious character can provide a nuanced understanding of practice.

Artefacts and the rituals and practices which accompany organised and personal religious beliefs and institutions have stories of their own in their utilisation and in their very existence. Sacred objects can be associated with sacred stories or can be hallowed in their

own right; they can wield power or become powerful in the hands of certain people. Artefacts can bring a community together in a shared belief, or in how they are used as part of ritual behaviours – and they can divide communities too. As outward symbols of belief or secret affirmations of belonging, artefacts and rituals associated with religion sit at the centre of how religious communities express themselves collectively and individually, and when looking at works of fiction, it is those outward expressions which enables the reader to identify and relate fictional characters and communities to known ones from their own experience or learning. For writers of fantasy fiction, as they build worlds which need to be painted in words for their readers, religious symbols, dress, rituals, and collective practices can give shape to the lived experience of characters and the world they inhabit and give the reader a 'recognition hook' which enables them to enter unknown new worlds. I believe, therefore, that there is a place for the close analysis of texts in terms of their religio-artefactual content and impact.

The ways in which readers analyse, or teach children to analyse, texts relate to many factors – prevailing political and social norms, historical contexts, teacher bias, a need for rebalancing in terms of diversity, public examination requirements, and so on. Different analysis tools afford new insights into texts and help the reader to view them through different eyes. And it is because of this latter point that being specific about the religious lens when looking at a piece of fiction is so important. As discussed earlier in this study, religious beliefs and practices (or a voiced and active rebuttal of religion) are often foisted upon, or expected of, children from an early age, by virtue of parents and the communities in which they grow up. Unlike aspects of individual lives which can lead to discrimination such as race, neurodivergence, disability, and such like, religion tends to have an element of choice about it. Parents or peers or communities may dictate what one *does* in the name of a particular religion, or none, but no-one can decide for another what they must *believe* in. Religion is fundamentally personal, and yet it is an aspect of contemporary life which others can feel comfortable about belittling or denying. When considering how fiction depicts people of faith, the reader may be drawn to books which focus in on the outward depiction of that faith, the clothing, the festivals, the rituals and the artefacts which are unique to specific institutions. An understanding of what those visible aspects actually *mean* to the adherent or believer is much harder both to portray and to understand. A comparison might be with the depiction of magic in children's books. Where magical things occur in a fantasy novel, it is possible to set aside rational views and accept fantastical events, creatures, and abilities, as

truths within those tales. Were the reader to be presented with an entirely realist novel, posed as 'true' in fictional terms which then had a character who fundamentally both believed in magic and demonstrated magical abilities, it would be hard for them to classify that writing in terms of what is understood by different genres. Readers know people cannot fly, for example, so if a character in a book which appears totally realistic and chimes with the reader's own lived experience suddenly sprouts wings and whizzes around the living room, they are left to ask whether they are being presented with a fantasy, an otherworld, or whether they are being asked to re-evaluate what they perceive and understand to be truth. David Almond tackles this beautifully in both *Skellig* and *The Tale of Angelino Brown*, and in the hands of a skilled storyteller such as Almond, the reader can be drawn into the impossible, and use the dichotomy to then interrogate the text for meanings below the surface of the storyline. When it comes to what people believe in terms of religion and gods and the afterlife, the same sort of issue arises. Is the description of someone's religious experience a fantasy? Are they deluded or dishonest? Or is the reader being asked to suspend their own disbelief, just as they are when reading fantasy, and to immerse themselves in a world where what is believed and practised does not necessarily reflect their own beliefs and practices?

Where fantasy is concerned, a created world which has very little that reflects one's own understanding of the world can be hard to grasp. Hence most fantasy novels contain at their heart instantly recognisable features which provide the reader with a hook upon which to hang their understanding and which provide also a safety net for exploring complete unknowns. Such worlds (and dystopias also reflect this) may have instantly recognisable people, or houses, or methods of eating, language, or modes of dress. They may reflect the reader's understanding of relationships, or of labour; of procreation or of government, even whilst these aspects may differ from their own experience. When looking at texts with religious aspects, a scaffold is required as we attempt to understand, to respect and appreciate beliefs which are, invariably, unprovable and highly personal. The afterlife, creation, meaning, the reason for suffering, redemption – the aspects of religious belief around which rituals and practices are built, are slippery concepts which require fundamental belief in the absence of tangible proof beyond personal conviction. Artefacts and ritual behaviours, with sacred or religious meaning, can be helpful hooks upon which to hang an understanding of why people believe in a power beyond themselves, and they are easily relatable to the personal artefacts and personal secular rituals which make up a part of individual's everyday experience and existence. A religio-artefactual critical literacy analysis approach provides a

way into the beliefs and experiences of others in terms of their religious convictions which allows the reader to explore, to disagree or disbelieve but also to respect those convictions by providing familiar concepts with which to compare religious practice to their own lived, and often secular, experience. The worldviews we hold, both religious and non-religious, are fundamental not only to how we view others and our place in that world, but to who we are as people. It is as inappropriate and as offensive to deny the religious experience of an individual because it is not one we share or understand, as it is to deny the lived experience of someone of colour or of different gender or disability. How we experience our world is unique to each one of us – a religious affiliation may give a framework and vocabulary to express and understand that experience, but the core beliefs which underpin that can be blurry and challenging for someone who does not share them. Books are superb at providing glimpses of others' lived experiences and at allowing the reader to explore and question those experiences safely without risk of causing offense, and where beliefs are fuzzy-edged or complicated, fiction can help in seeing the world from a different viewpoint, through different eyes.

There is benefit from making comparisons with knowns, such as important artefacts or personal rituals. However, it can be easy to miss the central role that fundamental beliefs and worldviews play when considering the importance of artefacts and rituals, rather than just the influence of circumstances or societal expectations. It is easy for me to recognise, for example, how peer pressure, grooming and social media could lead to the actions of the Bethnal Green Jihadi Brides back in 2015; it is much harder for me to understand the fundamental *beliefs* which led them to take the actions they did. *I Am Thunder*, through the power of fiction, provides the opportunity to explore what those beliefs might mean from a religious viewpoint that may not be shared by the reader. The book offers an insight into the importance and power of religious ritual, dress, and practice in creating self-identity for the characters involved, and allows and exploration of how power can be wielded through the imposition of expectations, in the name of religion, for good and evil ends. In analysing how beliefs are presented in fiction, particularly in terms of artefacts, actions, and rituals, it is possible to make comparisons with individual worldviews and begin to appreciate how religious beliefs and observance can lead to actions that may appear inexplicable.

In considering an analysis tool along these lines, I have been influenced by Pahl and Rowsell's work, and the critical analysis framework proposed by Wooldridge (2001), which I

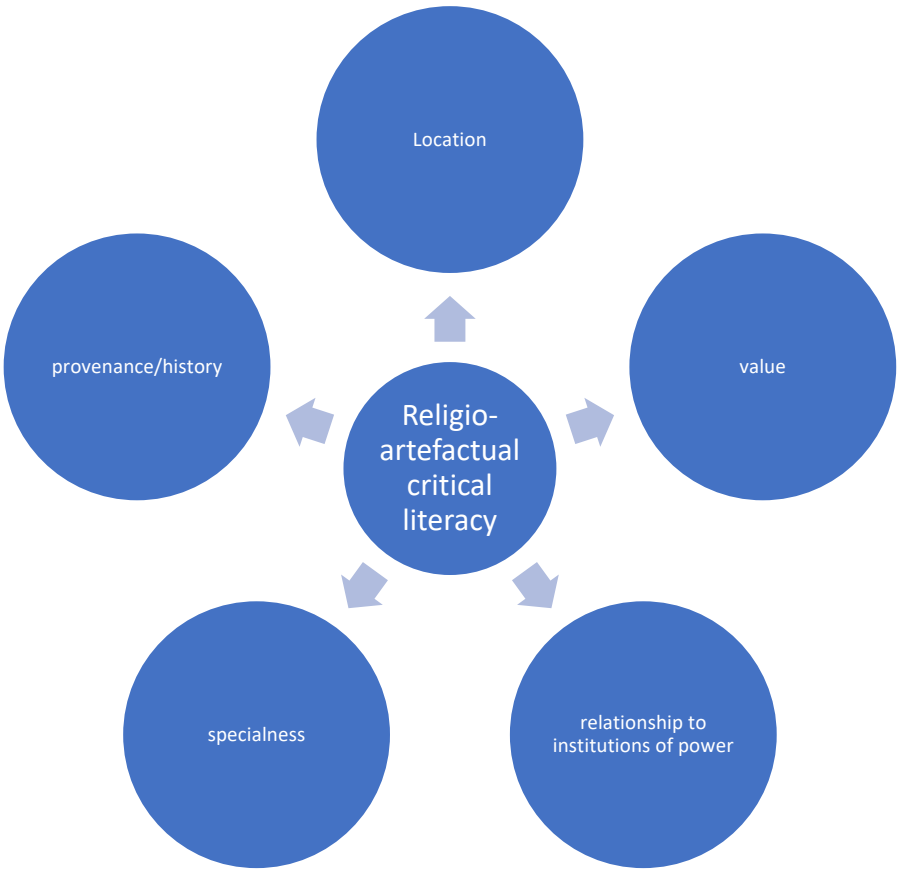
adapted in my MEd to use for texts with religious themes (Appendix 2). This latter framework looks at who is heard and who is silenced in a work of fiction, and how religious adherence impacts on and influences this. It also questions authorial intent and authorial worldview, asking what behaviours are "presented as normal by the text" (Lawrence, 2017), in an attempt to apply a critical literacy approach to that which is presented as 'truth' even where this truth is clearly fictional. In developing a framework or tool which combines aspects of religion with current understanding and an appreciation of the role of artefacts in promoting understanding, respect and appreciation for others' experience, the religio-artefactual critical literacy approach encourages the reader to question both authorial and protagonist motivation in terms of fundamental beliefs and their institutional backgrounds, and to provide opportunities to identify the artefactual and ritual 'hooks' upon which to place our own understanding of the world in order to better understand how others experience it for themselves.

The religio-artefactual critical literacy framework consists of a series of questions which can be employed in the interrogation of artefacts and ritual behaviours in fiction. These questions enable comparisons to be made between known objects or behaviours, and those associated with religions (both actual and fictional) which may be unfamiliar. An example of this might be a comparison of the alethiometer in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* to a religious artefact, exploring the value of the artefact itself, its rarity, the required competencies of the user, the power that usage or ownership assigns, how the owner or user gets themselves into a position to employ its power through ritual behaviours or specific settings, and so on. In using something known to the reader (the alethiometer), as a comparator, a religious artefact or behaviour can be contextualised and therefore more easily understood.

Religio-artefactual critical literacy, therefore, combines religious literacy and critical literacy with an artefactual approach which is not limited to physical artefacts, but relates to rituals, actions and shared (and individual) practices undertaken in the name of belief or faith. By looking at texts through this lens, it is possible to identify not only obviously religious aspects of a text, but also to investigate ways in which artefacts and practices can be imbued with sacred meaning, be that religious, spiritual, or personal. In so doing, it is possible to make comparisons between, for instance, the elder wand in *The Deathly Hallows* and religious artefacts found in a Christian place of worship. In identifying the importance and meaning of rituals involving artefacts, and of rituals and artefacts themselves in popular

literature as ways of expressing beliefs, belonging, commitment, and identity, pupils can be helped to make similar connections to recognisable religious artefacts and rituals in the religions they study and are exposed to throughout the curriculum. Examining a text for its religio-artefactual content requires the reader to ask probing questions and to make comparisons with their own lived experience, be that religious or not.

The map of themes which can be explored when looking at religion in children's literature is complex. Analysing a book or a portion of text from a religio-artefactual perspective allows the reader to narrow down the options and focus in on aspects of familiarity which can be used to make comparisons. Artefacts and rituals in story can be compared and contrasted with artefacts and rituals from persona home lives and those from religious traditions, enabling readers to make connections between the specialness or sacredness of particular actions and objects and to make judgements about power, location and value from their own, and from others', perspectives. Each element can be looked at separately or as a whole, and the questions applied to artefacts, rituals, rites of passage and beliefs found both in sacred or religious writings and secular works of fiction.



The careful exploration of the intrinsic and personal importance of rituals and artefacts is a useful route into understanding what it means on an individual level to adhere to a religious faith. Familiar (and new) stories for children can be investigated in terms of the importance of the artefacts and rituals within them to the storyline and to individual characters. Could Pullman have written *His Dark Materials* without the alethiometer? How would its absence impact not only on the storyline, but on the characters and their motivation, and how they are viewed by others? Who believes in its intrinsic power, and who is unconvinced? How does a human relationship with, or use of, the artefact impact upon its use? How does both the possession of, and unique ability to use, the alethiometer impact on Lyra's sense of herself and her place in the world? Would she be 'lesser' without it? And how might the reader relate her relationship with the alethiometer to their own understanding of a religious artefact such as a set of rosary beads or an icon, a sacred relic, or an item of religious clothing? Such artefactual questioning can enable readers to come alongside those who hold beliefs which differ to our own and to understand the importance of artefacts and rituals which, of themselves, may be incomprehensible to them.

Artefactual Critical Literacy

Meaning and semiotics in everyday objects and behaviours:

- What artefacts or objects are central to the story? (comprehension)
- How would the story change if these artefacts or objects were not there? (comparisons, predictions)
- What everyday rituals can you identify within the story? (nb. not necessarily religious ones- more personal rituals which may end up having a religious or spiritual element.)

Transforming understanding

The careful exploration of the intrinsic and personal importance of rituals and artefacts is a useful route into understanding what it means on an individual level to adhere to a religious faith. Familiar (and new) stories for children can be investigated in terms of the importance of the artefacts and rituals within them to the storyline and to individual characters. Artefactual questioning can enable us to come alongside those who hold beliefs which differ to our own and to understand the importance of artefacts and rituals which, of themselves, may be incomprehensible to us. Combined with the DIPT framework for selecting and using texts, the toolkit can offer a useful scaffold for both teachers and learners.

The principles behind the RACL approach have been explored in some detail within this chapter, and it is for teachers to decide best how they might wish to apply the approach, and that of DIPT, to the works of fiction they use in their classrooms. However, a list of possible questions can prove useful as start points. Creating interrogative lists alongside pupils can, as mentioned earlier, be a helpful exercise in developing an understanding of hierarchical questioning, and the use of Blooms and Solo taxonomies can provide a useful guide to the types of questions that can be asked, and where they sit in terms of cognitive ability, experience and maturity.

The following list of questions to support a RACL approach is by no means exhaustive, but it provides examples of how one might use the approach to interrogate different texts and make comparisons between one's own lives and one's understanding of religious belief and practice. Questions can be manipulated too to refer very specifically to aspects of individual texts which the teacher wishes pupil to concentrate upon, or they can remain more generic, as an early way into analysing a new text.

Location	
Where is it located?	• Buildings • Hidden location to be sought • Maps • Country-specific
Does its location matter?	• Chosen location • Housed in building or place of significance or holiness
Can it be situated elsewhere?	• Use of artefact in different places • Rituals held outside place of worship or sacred space • Availability of ritual or artefact outside special place
Does its power increase/diminish according to its location?	• Fantasy items such as amulets with power related to place used • Sanctification of spaces
Value	
Does the artefact or ritual have value in and of itself?	• Monetary value • Intrinsic value • Value by virtue of age • Value by virtue of provenance
Does its value depend on its location?	• Sacred buildings • Special places • Personal/secret places • How the artefact is used differently according to location
Is it valued outside its community?	• Universal appeal • Niche appeal • Individual value • Community/group value • Personal items of significance
Who values it?	• Members of defined community • Individuals • Families • People/institutions of power • Widely accepted value
Power	
How is it related to people of power?	• Who can use it? • Who can touch it? • Who can perform [with] it? • Who can wear it?
How is it powerful?	• Intrinsic power (magical?) • Power related to who or how it is used • What happens if it falls into the 'wrong hands'? • What happens if it is performed by the "wrong person"?
Provenance	
What stories/histories are attached to it?	• Stories the artefact/ritual tells • Stories told about the artefact/ritual • Stories attached to the artefact's/ritual's history
How do we know if its provenance is true? (in real life or fictitiously!)	• Is its provenance widely agreed upon or is it controversial (held as truth by specific group or individual)? • Can its history be verified?
How does its history make it important?	• Does it rely on its provenance for its power?
Specialness	
How do we know the artefact/ritual is special?	• Monetary value • Rarity • Unique powers • Importance of what it symbolises
To whom is it special?	• How specialness affects individual and group behaviours • Portrayal of specialness in terms of treatment of the artefact/ritual by people

The use of physical artefacts is familiar to many teachers as a hook into learning. From an RE perspective, providing access to devotional objects can help to engage learners in the exploration of particular elements of a given faith; and using questions such as those outlined above, also enables them to explore the intrinsic *value* of an artefact in terms of lived

religious experience and personal devotion. Investigating ritual practice, both with physical artefacts and in its own right, also allows for a deeper investigation into how a religious affiliation can make one feel. Bringing these two elements together with an associated work of fiction provides a multi-sensory approach to learning about religion and belief which can enhance understanding, and contribute to delight.

There is merit, too, to using the RACL questions with regards to the physical texts being explored. Books and scriptures are artefacts in their own right, and can be interrogated as such for value, provenance, intent and authority. Exploring the physicality of a book can help to stimulate feelings of awe and wonder which can be compared to religious approaches to sacred objects. And moving this into the realms of rituals which might surround the exploration of an important object enables the learner to look at ways in which we might create importance around objects, making them sacred in their use and significance to an individual as well as a faith community.

Bringing it all together

An understanding of how to select a text to enhance the teaching of the lived religious experience (DIPT); how to use a text within the classroom (Lectio, Havruta, Florilegium, PaRDeS); and how to analyse that text (RACL) has the potential to bring new levels of comprehension to the RE classroom. It can allow an understanding of the importance of what an individual believes, how those beliefs are articulated, how artefacts and rituals help to frame and ground belief, and how individual beliefs impact upon others. Where pupils are given the tools themselves to select, use and analyse texts, they can begin to make connections which the teacher may not have seen, and to make links with, and comparisons to, their own lives. In seeking ways of making the teaching of religious education relevant and meaningful in the classroom, the use of fiction can be a really valuable tool within the teaching toolkit. And in exposing children to works of fiction which they may not have come across before, or to which they would not usually be drawn, teachers can contribute to their pupils' funds of cultural capital, whilst encouraging the development of an open attitude towards different kinds of fiction, and of the critical literacy skills required not only to interrogate literature, but to begin to question the world itself, and the choices we, and others, make.

Mapping the books to the curriculum

The list of books below provides just a few examples of texts which can be used within the classroom mapped to the NATRE syllabus which informs many Locally Agreed Syllabi in England.

	Knowledge and Understanding	**Using Fiction to Enhance**	
A	Know about and understand a range of religions and worldviews, so that they can:		
i.	describe, explain and analyse beliefs and practices, recognising the diversity which exists within and between communities and amongst individuals	*Millions* *Where the World Ends* *The Candle and the Flame* *His Dark Materials* *Shadow and Bone* *A Wrinkle in Time* *Who Let The Gods Out?* *Does My Head Look Big In This?*	*Not the End of the World* *Ferryman* *The Proudest Blue* *I Am Thunder* *Planet Omar* *You're Not Proper* *The Length of a String* *Grace*
ii	identify, investigate and respond to questions posed, and responses offered by some of the sources of wisdom found in religions and worldviews	*The Tale of Angelino Brown* *City of the Plague God* *Godless*	*Not the End of the World* *Shine, Coconut Moon*
iii.	appreciate and appraise the nature, significance and impact of different ways of life and ways of expressing meaning	*Planet Omar* *Millions* *His Dark Materials* *The Tiger at Midnight* *Chaos Walking* *Narnian Chronicles* *The Proudest Blue* *The War of Jenkin's Ear.* *Skellig*	*You're Not Proper* *Where the World Ends* *The Candle and the Flame* *The Length of a String* *His Dark Materials* *I Am Thunder* *Shine, Coconut Moon* *Island* *Twilight*

B	Express ideas and insights about the nature, significance and impact of religions and worldviews, so that they can:		
i.	explain reasonably their ideas about how beliefs, practices and forms of expression influence individuals and communities	*His Dark Materials* *The Candle and the Flame* *The Tiger at Midnight* *Chaos Walking* *Shadow and Bone* *A Wrinkle in Time* *Who Let The Gods Out?* *Ferryman*	*The War of Jenkins' Ear* *The Castle Behind Thorns* *Rose,Interrupted* *Amina's Voice* *Planet Omar* *You're Not Proper* *The Length of a String* *I Am Thunder*
ii.	express with increasing discernment their personal reflections and critical responses to questions and teachings about identity, diversity, meaning and value, including ethical issues	*Grace* *Order of Darkness* *Millions* *Amina's Voice*	*Planet Omar* *The Book of Boy* *Rumaysa*
iii.	appreciate and appraise varied dimensions of religion or a worldview	*His Dark Materials* *I Am Thunder* *You're Not Proper* *Rose, Interrupted*	*Narnian Chronicles* *The Proudest Blue* *Shine, Coconut Moon*

C	Gain and deploy the skills needed to engage seriously with religions and worldviews, so that they can:		
i.	find out about and investigate key concepts and questions of belonging, meaning, purpose and truth, responding creatively	*His Dark Materials* *Narnian Chronicles* *Shadow and Bone* *A Wrinkle in Time* *Who Let The Gods Out?*	*The Proudest Blue* *I Am Thunder* *Planet Omar* *You're Not Proper* *The Length of a String*
ii.	enquire into what enables different individuals and communities to live together respectfully for the wellbeing of all	*His Dark Materials* *The Tiger at Midnight* *Chaos Walking*	*The Candle and the Flame* *The Length of a String* *Where the World Ends*
iii.	articulate beliefs, values and commitments clearly in order to explain why they may be important in their own and other people's lives	*Rani and Sukh* *The Proudest Blue* *The Candle and the Flame* *The Length of a String* *Does my head look big in this?*	*You're Not Proper* *His Dark Materials* *The Tiger at Midnight* *Chaos Walking* *Grace*

The Scottish Government's *Curriculum for Excellence: Religious and Moral Education* provides a series of desired experiences and outcomes from which to plan the syllabus across the 3-18 age range. These experiences and outcomes can be mapped similarly against a range of contemporary texts to enhance understanding and engagement.

Experiences and Outcomes	Suggested Texts	
Recognise religion as an important expression of human experience	*Order of Darkness.* *The Candle and the Flame* *The House of the Scorpion* *Godless*	*I Am Thunder* *His Dark Materials* *You're Not Proper*
Learn about and from the beliefs, values, practices and traditions of Christianity and the world religions selected for study, other traditions and viewpoints independent of religious belief	*The Candle and the Flame* *Does My Head Look Big In This?* *Planet Omar*	*Mayhem Mission* *Rumaysa* *Millions*
Explore and develop knowledge and understanding of religions, recognising the place of Christianity in the Scottish context	*Where the World Ends*	
Investigate and understand the responses which religious and non-religious views can offer to questions about the nature and meaning of life	*The Candle and the Flame* *The House of the Scorpion* *Twilight* *Godless*	*The Narnia Chronicles* *Who Let The Gods Out* *Island* *The Book of Boy* *Not the End of the World*
Recognise and understand religious diversity and the importance of religion in society	*The Candle and the Flame* *Rani and Sukh* *Order of Darkness*	*Planet Omar* *I Am Thunder* *You're Not Proper*
Develop respect for others and an understanding of beliefs and practices which are different from my own	*The Candle and the Flame* *City of the Plague God* *Grace*	*Shadow and Bone* *Island* *Rumaysa*
Explore and establish values such as wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity, and engage in the development of and reflection upon my own moral values	*Where the World Ends* *I Am Thunder* *Rose, Interrupted* *Rani and Sukh* *Shine, Coconut Moon*	*The Length of a String* *The Tale of Angelino Brown* *The House of the Scorpion* *Island* *The Narnia Chronicles*
Develop my beliefs, attitudes, values and practices through reflection, discovery and critical evaluation	*Planet Omar* *Island* *Godless*	
Develop the skills of reflection, discernment, critical thinking and deciding how to act when making moral decisions	*Where the World Ends* *Grace*	
Make a positive difference to the world by putting my beliefs and values into action	*Does My Head Look Big In This?* *The Length of a String* *Amina's Story* *Grace*	
Establish a firm foundation for lifelong learning, further learning and adult life		

(Experience and outcomes are taken from LTS, 2009, p1)

Chapter 7
Conclusions

When, in 2017, I began looking at how religion was portrayed in children's literature for my Master's thesis, I was already convinced by the potential of children's literature as a resource for helping readers explore new worlds, and its role in challenging preconceptions, and in entertaining and delighting. I had been a voracious reader all my life – my own children had followed in my footsteps and were now far exceeding my reading habits. I knew that reading fiction had changed me; had moulded how I experienced the world and had provided me with moments of stark revelation. The impact of Byatt's 2009 *The Children's Book*, for example, turned on its head how I viewed my role as a mother and changed my approach to the experiences I wanted to create and provide for my own children, and those I taught. Exploring how religious belief, which had played such a formative part in my early years, had changed in its portrayal in children's literature over time was fascinating, but realising that I could 'read' religious themes within books which would not necessarily have been recognised as religious in themselves was revelatory. A burgeoning platform for teacher dialogue on social media which promoted and celebrated the incredible power of children's literature alongside growing voices demanding diverse representation and experience in the books available to younger readers suggested to me that there was – is – an appetite for not just providing 'good' fiction in the classroom, but for *using* it as a teaching tool. Alongside this growing recognition of the importance of children's literature was an equally strong voice from teachers and researchers in the field of Religious Education. They were busy proclaiming the vital importance of the subject in what seemed to be an increasingly intolerant, divisive, and 'post-truth' reality for the diverse communities in which we live and function. It seemed like a seminal moment for both critical and religious literacy. Fiction, I thought, could be a meaningful vehicle for teaching children what it means to have religious faith – and to encourage thoughtful conversations about the role of religions in our society.

I aimed therefore, in this thesis, to do two things: to explore *whether* contemporary literature for children could contribute to developing their understanding of the lived religious experience; and thence to investigate *how* it could be used to achieve this end. My key objective was to create a simple guide for teachers (especially non-specialists) which would help them to select, interrogate and use works of contemporary fiction to enhance their teaching of the lived religious experience. In a time of increasing teacher workloads, and

challenges navigating (for adults and children alike) a world of shifting sands around truth and tolerance, such a guide seemed an essential distillation of all I had read and considered. Immersing myself in a discourse community (Thomson and Kamler, 2013), which reflected not only the importance of children's literature as a teaching tool (there were few dissenting voices) but also analysis methods, enabled me to explore the possibilities for furthering this recognition into a subject-specific area, investigating 'what next' when it comes to teaching the lived religious experience in the classroom. Moving the conversation on from how literature can be seen as important in developing understanding in the RE classroom, to practical methods for doing so fills, I believe, a gap in knowledge which relates especially to non-specialist teachers of the subject – of whom there are many (Wintersgill, 2013). With some 42% of RE lessons in secondary schools in England being taught by non-specialists the importance of relevant tools which play to strengths from other areas of teaching are, I believe, essential. This study has enabled me to explore this and produce guidance which has the potential to make a positive impact on children's learning in the RE classroom.

In order to create such guidance, it was also important to explore both the scholarly views of the significance of children's literature and religious education, and what contemporary fiction provides in terms of an exploration of the lived religious experience. At the beginning of the study, a review of the available literature and my own gut feeling suggested that religion was now rarely, and poorly, featured. Recent publications suggest that this may be beginning to change. Those recent publications (Azad, Mian, Rai, Lawrence, amongst many others) have featured a lived religious experience as a fundamental aspect of their storylines and this provides an exciting and solid foundation upon which to build the teacher guidance materials which come from the research – whether, of course, such novels will gain sufficient readership to feature on that top 500 best sellers list remains to be seen. But religion, long held to be a taboo subject for children's writing, really does feature in the recently published children's books being promoted in our classrooms. A growing awareness of, and determination to tackle, the dearth of minority voices in the books offered to children has led to a steady increase in opportunities for writers from minority backgrounds. Protagonists in books increasingly reflect the diverse readership in schools and homes across the country. This is being reflected too in the presentation of religious practice as an everyday, lived reality in books created from a position of knowledge and understanding. In talking up, necessarily, the importance of minority voices and protagonists in children's literature, the industry, and readership at large may not have highlighted voices of faith, but writers

themselves appear to be gradually reflecting this important and fundamental aspect of so many children's lives.

The development of a toolkit came from the analysis of literature, and an exploration of some of the skills and competencies considered to be of high value in the classroom. Critical literacy and religious literacy both featured highly in the consideration of approaches to contemporary texts. It felt important to reflect within the toolkit those day-to-day realities experienced by children. At a time when mainstream media and social media have appeared to present multiple opinions and altered facts as absolute truths, education has had a growing role to play in ensuring consumers of the future are able to sort the fact from the fiction. Critical literacy skills have never, I believe, been more important. Presenting opinions alongside facts as some kind of 'truth menu' from which one may pick and choose at will, places a huge level of expectation on children and young people, the very citizens who will be responsible for societal developments and behaviours in the near future. This research has led me to believe that fiction is, perhaps, ideally placed in being deliberately *not* a truth, to shine a spotlight on what actually *is.* In a seemingly 'post-truth' era, it strikes me as absolutely essential that children are furnished with the critical literacy skills to interrogate that which is presented to them as fact, and the motivations of those who may speak with a fictionalised voice which carries sedimented truths about the author, the publisher, the bookseller, and the gatekeepers of children's literature.

In order to help develop these skills, I established a protocol for *selecting* and *using* texts: the DIPT approach, the core themes of which arose directly from the reading of novels, where they featured as common themes in books which included religious representations. This approach to text selection encourages teachers to evaluate texts in terms of their use and appropriateness in the classroom. The DIPT criteria focusses too on how texts may be used, with examples of performative reading drawn from sacred reading approaches.

Looking more deeply at the texts selected, an analysis tool, the religio-artefactual critical literacy (RACL) approach to *analysis*, enables children to interrogate texts for their religious themes and meanings, and to make comparisons from familiar stories and the artefacts and rituals therein, with those found in sacred texts and texts which present religious practice in multiple ways. Artefacts and rituals proved to be helpful vehicles for the exploration of texts, and comparative analyses. Combining Pahl and Rowsell's 2011 approach with a focus on

ritual behaviours too (including those outlined by Orsi, 2010, and McGuire, 2008), produced a means of bringing the everyday religious experience to life. It enabled me to explore texts not just for those overt religious themes, behaviours or analogies with which I was familiar but for the small sparks of meaning, the personal meanings behind a declaration of faith.

In developing the toolkit, I was heavily influenced by hermeneutical, or interpretative, approaches to texts. Exploring how and why a text is interpreted as it is, a central tenet of the hermeneutical approach to sacred texts, applied then to contemporary texts, provided a religious grounding to the critical literacy skills I wanted to see developed. The techniques of florilegium, lectio divina and such like, providing a performative aspect to the physical reading of a text, proved fundamental to the approach I devised. The toolkit I have developed offers a new, and unique, way of exploring fiction for children which has potential, I would suggest, across the wider curriculum – an area ripe for enquiry as curriculum design features more and more prominently in the English and Scottish education systems.

In an era when Western societies appear to be more diverse in actuality, and increasingly insular in approach, I believe that the research undertaken in this study into the importance, and development, of religio-critical literacy competences through the use of fiction is important. The study was situated in a moment in time when as a country, we were coming to terms with different views of truth, of difference, with increasing social media influence over opinions about religious belief and practice in the wake of terrorist attacks and an associated decline in religious tolerance. I believe that this combination of societal conditions in itself highlighted the vital importance of developing religious literacy in the classroom, with an approach to the use of fiction as a valuable and efficient method of delivery. Fiction proved itself to be a valuable place for exploring what it means to be religious, even if the explorer had no religious faith or experience themself.

And then a pandemic hit.

“Coronavirus is leading to a religious revival” trumpeted the headline in the *New Statesman* in April 2020, claiming that “as Covid-19 reminds us of life’s fragility, an increasing number of people are turning to faith and spirituality.” (Shehadi and Partington, 2020). As the pandemic rampaged throughout the world, claims of a return both to simple values and to spiritual reflection and potential religious adherence could be found in publications and news

outlets with relative ease. In fact, data collected both from the census which took place in 2021 in England, and YouGov, when analysed carefully, did *not* suggest a mass turning to God as a result of the pandemic. Numbers of people claiming religious adherence or even belief in God, or identifying as a member of an organised religious group continued their downward trend (Field, 2020), and a "negligible net religious effect in the UK" was noted as a result of the pandemic. But *The Times* reported from those same figures an increase from previous polls, albeit slight, in the numbers of young people (16-24) self-reporting belief in God (Burgess, 2020). Was there something about the pandemic which has led to a reappraisal of religious contemplation, especially amongst the young who, for the first time, have been faced with life-changing circumstances, affecting the whole world, over which they have little, or no, control?

For some, the pandemic has been seen as a religious event – a punishment from God; the heralding of the apocalypse (Shehadi and Partington, 2020); an attempt to make sense of untold and inexplicable suffering. But the pandemic has not just affected people's views of God or search for something beyond themselves. It has had immense impact upon religious communities, for many of whom the collective nature of religious adherence is of primary importance. The ways in which one 'reads' sacred artefacts and buildings, rituals and rites of passage, changed in order to accommodate the requirements of social distancing, repeated lockdowns, and rules regarding cleaning and sterilisation of objects and the cessation of communal singing. The buildings that may have been held sacred were replaced by online services and spaces, where home became the sacred space. Some have spoken of the freedom lockdowns provided in terms of remotely visiting other places for communal religious gatherings. A number of churches reported an increase in the take up of the Alpha Course, designed to provide spaces for non-believers to find out more about Christianity (https://evangelicalfocus.com). Taking part in religious activities at home, or in private is a far cry from the communal aspect of many religions – and one which appears to have held some appeal. From the point of view of the religio-artefactual critical literacy approach, the pandemic, effectively, turned religion on its head, imbuing the everyday with sacred meanings which placed the personal, lived religious experience even more at the forefront of how people experience faith and belief in the 21st Century. It required us to look at things differently. When a chalice can no longer be used for communion, what value does it have? Does a single-use, plastic tumbler become more valuable, or more powerful by virtue of its new usage than the artefacts held dear in the past? And what does that say about how we, as

humans and people of faith, ascribe importance and religious relevance to inanimate objects? If I can practise my faith in private, what does that say about the importance of the collective, or of public demonstrations and symbols of what I believe? Living the much more insular lives to which we became more accustomed over the course of the pandemic lead necessarily, I believe, to questions about how comfortable we should, and do, feel with outward professions of faith, and allowed for a more contemplative and private response to the religious, the perceived absence of which may have contributed to diminishing reporting of religious adherence. In considering the wide implications of the pandemic, the impact it has had on religious observance in both the public and private spheres may become more apparent. However, the ways in which religion forms part of personal sedimentation, individual understanding of society and how it is structured, one's responses to others and one's own self-identity, remains important even if the pandemic has altered the ways in which this is expressed, shared and ultimately incorporated into ways of being.

The pandemic shaped the course of this study itself too, of course. I began the research convinced that there was a role for fiction to play in the exploration of the lived religious experience of others. I end it more and more confident of the power of fiction to allow opportunities to explore what religion or faith or worldviews can mean for individuals in safe spaces, in private, in conversations over fictional characters, and in contemplation through the application of sacred reading techniques to secular reading. The constraints and challenges of the pandemic led to a necessary hiatus in my research in order to focus on the needs of my family, but the six months spent technically away from this thesis provided me with a breathing space and an opportunity to place things into perspective in terms of the research, which has been hugely beneficial to me and my thought processes. A growing awareness, personally and from professionals with whom I have worked, of the impact of the pandemic on the everyday lives of children has sharpened the focus of the study. In our very own Noah situation, children from an early age are asking very big questions about suffering, predetermination, and the afterlife, which may not have been heard with such clarity from so many children before. Faced with images and experiences of fear, trauma, and death, which are close and very present every day, children as well as adults have had to make new accommodations related to their understanding of their own worlds. And when mum and dad are as worried about the impact of a virus as you are; when a well-loved teacher or teaching assistant is no longer present because they have been impacted by illness; when family members die unexpectedly; and when the everyday rituals of school attendance or religious

community gathering suddenly are no more, what can children turn to in order to make sense of their new reality? I would argue that the one, constant, unchanging, word-for-word-the-same-every-time-you-visit place that they can go, is straight into a book.

The pandemic changed both how I could undertake the planned research – there was no opportunity for testing the toolkit - and also how I viewed the research as a researcher. I think everyone changes the terms of their self-identity when they are faced with their possible end, and in a study which looked at how we identify ourselves as part of, or alongside, religious groups or affirmations of faith, the reality of suffering at close range has coloured my readings and my writing. More than ever, it seems important that we ensure children have both the access to books which provide them with spaces to ask big questions, and the tools with which to interrogate them, using their religious literacy, yes, but also the critical literacy skills which have become, daily, more and more vital in a world of mixed messages, uncertainty and, frankly, downright untruths. At times, the situation in which the world found itself through the pandemic felt dystopian, and has been described as such by a number of commentators (McCartney, 2020; Casagrande and Coradini de Freitas, 2021) whilst others have poured scorn on such notions (Flood, 2020; Shames and Atchison, 2020). In providing children with books which explore dystopias – and utopias – teachers can ensure that they put their experience, both personal, and as part of a collective recognition of the challenges faced, into perspective.

It has been interesting to witness a flurry of publications from Muslim authors in particular, perhaps in response to widely shared public perceptions of Islam which are incorrect or which pertain to extremists and not 'real' people. In attempting to change the perception of how their community is viewed, Muslim authors have positioned themselves at the forefront of meaningful, funny, thought-provoking, literature for children. Such books surely cannot help but be a huge influence upon how the coming generations not only view people who have different beliefs to their own, but how they treat them, as human beings, as individuals, and as believers who have the right to believe and practice as they so wish. It is almost certain that the coming years will see a spate of children's and young adult books with underlying pandemic themes. I wonder how many of these now will pay tribute to that religious, worldviews-based undercurrent which has come to the fore during the actual lived experience. How we write ourselves out of the pandemic, with the fiction created and shared with young people will, I suggest, help to shape the landscape for future generations in terms

of true tolerance, acceptance, and respect for others. That books hold a peculiar and undeniable power in helping to form political, social, cultural, and religious views and in providing spaces for exploration of 'the other', has been a central theme of this study, and I believe that that power has been proven throughout the research. How that potential is now harnessed to effect change is a question which will, I believe, come to the forefront of musings on educating children going forward. The tools with which they are provided, and the materials available to them, will be instrumental in forging the future. The way a book makes us *feel* as we encounter new characters, uncharted worlds, situations which resonate or surprise, has not changed. The world context in which those books are experienced, however, has changed, and continues to change rapidly. Stories and books can provide stability and the comfort of permanence when the world around feels like shifting sand. That is what organised religions claim to offer too. Immutability in the face of upheaval; invariability in the face of the unknown; agelessness at a time of constant newness. Combining the power of both fiction and the religious, spiritual, lived experience as a way of exploring, explaining, and enjoying that changing world strikes me as something not only formidable in its potential to effect change and provide succour and comfort, but extremely enjoyable. I believe that the research undertaken for this thesis, and the toolkit, which is my practical response to the research findings, can provide a springboard for future research into how best the texts written for children can be harnessed in order to bring the curriculum to life in ways which resonate with individual, lived, experiences. The DIPT approach has potential not only for how texts are selected to *support* the teaching of a specific subject area, but also, on a much wider scale, as a framework upon which to build approaches across the curriculum. This is a potentially very exciting area for development as teachers look at curricula in their broadest sense within schools, and attempt to make tangible meaning for pupils in all subject areas, which reflects and incorporates their own sedimented lived experiences.

The future is, of course, full of unknowns, but perhaps encouraging children (and adults) to examine their attitudes towards religion, and towards the respectful interrogation of worldviews, coupled with a desire to confront cultural behaviours which appear self-serving, dishonest, and disingenuous, will lead to fairer, more accepting, and fundamentally curious societies in the future: curious about the lived experience of others, curious about truth, curious about potentials. Fiction for children has the capacity to be at the forefront of a growing wave of curiosity. Perhaps, in years to come, we will not be muttering "Shhh – don't mention the Christians" at all. Perhaps we will be revelling in the beauty and potential of

those traditions, cultures, artefacts, rituals, and stories which provide both colour and meaning to the lives of believers, whether those fundamental beliefs are shared or not. Instead of hushing it up because we are embarrassed by outpourings of faith, perhaps we will celebrate and shout it from the rooftops and reflect it in our songs, our dance, our drama – and our stories. And perhaps the research undertaken for this study will make a tiny contribution to bringing about that utopian vision. I hope it does.

> *All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.*
>
> *Grahame, 1908*

Appendix 1

Book	Informing			Performing			Transforming		
	Detail of known / fictional religious practice	Artefacts hold sacred significance	Characters act in accordance with religious or quasi-religious belief	Describes religious performativity (ritual, dress etc)	Can be performed Film/stage version available	Can be used with religious reading techniques to ascertain deeper meanings	Clear authorial intent to inform readership, change viewpoints or open debate re religion	Transformation of key characters occurs	Transformation of situation occurs as result of faith/ religious practice/ adherence or denial
A little lower than the angels	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Not the end of the world	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
Project X		X		X				X	
Rani and Sukh	X		X		X		X	X	
The length of a string	X	X	X	X			X		
The candle and the flame	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
The tiger at midnight		X		X					X
Shadow and bone	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
Grace	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rose, interrupted	X	X	X	X				X	X
The tale of Angelino Brown		X		X				X	
Island		X				X		X	
The true tale of Billy Dean	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
There is no dog	X	X	X	X				X	X
Who let the gods out?		X			X			X	
Vampire Mountain		X		X					X
Twilight		X	X			X		X	X
The lie tree	X	X	X	X		X	X		X

Book	Informing			Performing			Transforming		
	Detail of known / fictional religious practice	Artefacts hold sacred significance	Characters act in accordance with religious or quasi-religious belief	Describes religious performativity (ritual, dress etc)	Can be performed Film/stage version available	Can be used with religious reading techniques to ascertain deeper meanings	Clear authorial intent to inform readership, change viewpoints or open debate re religion (intent may come from interviews etc)	Transformation of key characters occurs	Transformation of situation occurs as result of faith/ religious practice/ adherence or denial
The book of boy	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
The order of darkness	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
His Dark Materials	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Skellig		X				X		X	X
The house of the scorpion	X		X	X			X	X	X
Lamb: the gospel according to Biff	X		X	X			X	X	X
The wizard of Earthsea		X				X		X	
The knife of never letting go	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Fat boy swim	X	X	X	X			X	X	
Amina's voice	X		X	X			X		
Does my head look big in this	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
The Muslims	X	X	X	X			X		X
The miraculous journey of Freddie Yates	X			X				X	
The book of dust (2 vols)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
The wind in the willows		X	X		X	X		X	
The lion, the witch and the wardrobe		X			X	X	X	X	X

Book	Informing			Performing			Transforming		
	Detail of known / fictional religious practice	Artefacts hold sacred significance	Characters act in accordance with religious or quasi-religious belief	Describes religious performativity (ritual, dress etc)	Can be performed Film/stage version available	Can be used with religious reading techniques to ascertain deeper meanings	Clear authorial intent to inform readership, change viewpoints or open debate re religion (intent may come from interviews etc)	Transformation of key characters occurs	Transformation of situation occurs as result of faith/ religious practice/ adherence or denial
Children of blood and bone		X		X		X		X	
The castle behind thorns	X	X	X	X					X
The proudest blue	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Rumaysa	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
American Jesus	X	X	X	X				X	X
You're not proper	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
I am thunder	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Millions	X		X	X	X		X		X
City of the plague god	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
A wrinkle in time	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Shine, coconut moon	X			X			X		
The war of Jenkin's ear	X	X	X	X					X
Godless	X		X	X		X	X		X
Ferryman			X			X		X	
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows		X			X	X		X	X
Where the world ends	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X

Appendix 2

Adapted framework for the multicultural critical analysis of texts with religious themes (Lawrence, 2017; Wooldridge 2001)

- How does the novel portray a worldview? What (or whose) view of the world or kinds of behaviours are presented as normal by the text?
- Why is the text written that way? How does the author's worldview impact on the writing?
- What ideological positions can be identified?
- Who is silenced/heard?
- What assumptions are made about the reader (gender, class, ethnicity, level of religious literacy)?

How does the novel portray a worldview? What (or whose) view of the world or kinds of behaviours are presented as normal by the text?	**Why is the text written that way? How does the author's worldview impact on the writing?**	**What ideological positions can be identified?**	**Who is silenced/heard?**	**What assumptions are made about the reader (gender, class, ethnicity, level of religious literacy)?**
City of the plague god Myth and traditional YA/MG				
Position of refugees/immigrant communities. Good works of religious groups esp. from masjid. People blame others for things they don't understand. Power of the supernatural. Myths and legendary gods. Sik's acceptance of the ancient gods walking in his contemporary world is initially presented as fantastical, but it becomes his norm, and it is easy for the reader to suspend disbelief at this view of the world. As the situation for ordinary people becomes more and more untenable, it is clear that they can accept a "new normal" – however, once things return to the old "normal" this acceptance fades into its own mythology.	http://www.thecompulsivereader.com/2011/02/guest-post-from-sarwat-chadda.html	Careful to demonstrate difference between Mesopotamian gods who rampage throughout the novel, and Muslim God, so that "faith is not compromised" Importance of exploring concepts of good and evil with their own historical contexts and also the context of the novel – ancient gods appearing in contemporary world (v similar to WLTGO) Questioning whether we should judge people (and gods) on singular acts or across all that they have achieved, and whether singular actions which are reprehensible cancel out the good things done.	Little on Islamophobia, although this is touched upon in terms of stereotyping when Sik's cousin is typecast in his acting roles as a terrorist. Strong female and male roles across contemporary and ancient worlds. Older generations within contemporary world are predominantly presented as naïve or ignorant of what is ging on – youth have insights into situations which are not recognised or validated by older generations.	Story references, strongly, the Gilgamesh legend, and, in order to situate the novel within its religious context, the impact of Gilgamesh on the early narrative of both Judeo-Christian and Middle Easter religions is important. However, it is not necessary for a full enjoyment of what is, after all, an adventure story.

Who let the gods out? Myth and traditional MG				
Clear sense of right and wrong and the importance of taking a moral stance even when the actions which stem from this stance can be seen as unlawful or even immoral in their own right. Dementia (?) seen as something to be worried about; strong focus on child as carer and the invisible pressures this places upon young shoulders. School as enemy, child as bigger than education experience. Teachers as bad guys or ineffective. Gods are fallible, and presented as vain, self-obsessed and occasionally incompetent, whilst not questioning their own right to be superior to human beings.	https://storgy.com/2017/07/16/interview-maz-evans/ https://sjohart.wordpress.com/2017/01/14/interview-with-maz-evans-author-of-who-let-the-gods-out/	Anti-capitalist stance. Importance of doing things "wrong" if moral code dictates - question authority and go with gut. Gods are fallible and vain. Human life is dictated by whims of the supernatural and this needs to be accepted.	Strong voice of young carer. Adult voices diminished because they are either ill (mother), incompetent (headteacher) or evil (neighbour). Older gods are portrayed in less favourable light to younger ones who are contemporaneous with mortal protagonist.	No specific religious literacy assumed; back story of gods alluded to and in some cases explicit. However, premise of story could imply requirement of readers to have a small amount of classical knowledge in order to fully understand motivation; so there is cultural capital at play here. Appears predominantly white (middleclass but poverty stricken due to illness of mother and absent father?) Lots hinges on financial issues for which the main protagonist takes responsibility in the absence of a capable parent figure, and in the face of unhelpful adults.
Rumaysa Fantasy MG				
Goodies and baddies. Parents are powerful but eminently fallible. Fairy tale scenarios are a given.	https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/books/meet-the-muslim-author-rewriting-fairy-tales-i-wanted-to-write-something-that-felt-truer-to-my-experiences-1.1206071	Girls are strong and do not need saving! Illustrator was asked to make a character plus size – novel attempts to be as inclusive as possible. We hold responsibility for our own destinies – magic (or other people) are not responsible for it.	Very strong female voices. -male voices are fewer and more questionable in their take on their world. Some make characters are portrayed in ways which demonstrate a shallowness of character – they do not (correctly in the context of the novel) have the opportunity to redeem themselves. Older generations portrayed as either wicked (Cordelia) or ineffective (King and Queen).	Mention of hijab with descriptions. Some mention of duas, but religion is part of the background – the adventure stories related to fairy tales are foregrounded.
The candle and the flame Fantasy YA				
Equality of viewpoints; separation between mortal and Ifrit worlds. Rule by maharaja in tandem with Ifrit, Djinn of order and reason.	https://spinemagazine.co/articles/nafiza-azad	Not just Western culture where names are unimportant. Naming as political identity claim. Women equal. Supernatural (djinn, Shayeteen) to be respected/feared/ strive to understand. Maharajah's court still shows intrinsic superiority of male in way women are seen as possessions	Set in fictitious middle eastern setting, with associated cultural and ethnic mix. Christianity is alluded to but there is an understandable, and appropriate, absence of white voices. Equality of genders, however, with exploration of gender-related roles (maharajah's household) and limitations put on women within such structures.	Language from the start is closely related to technical terms for religious practice, predominantly from Isla, but also Hinduism. Religion is fundamental to the lives of the people in the book, and it is expected that the reader accepts this from the outset. A good level of religious literacy ensures that readers are not caught up in the meaning of the language but can immerse themselves in the beauty and symbolism of it.

Grace Contemporary MG				
Novel presents the closed, fundamentalist lifestyle as normal, written, as it is, in the voice of one of the members of that community. However, by focussing on the point at which young people begin to question the absolute authority and knowledge of adults, the book turns the presentation – and Grace's own view – of what is normal completely on its head.	www.morrisgleitzman.com	Faith is fundamental to some people's lives and therefore to be respected even if not shared. However, the abuse of power in the name of religion is not to be tolerated.	Within the cult, women and children are effectively silenced as are all those who are not amongst the chosen few who are a part of the group. Dissenters are removed and family members told to act as though they have died – the ultimate in cancellation. Grace is heard – because she is a child who has been brought up to question. In being someone who is heard, she is a threat to the order of the group.	Religious imagery, Biblical language, recognisable rituals and rites from Christian tradition all present. An understanding of the King James Bible way of wording scriptures is helpful when reading in the voice of Grace and her friends. Allusion to washing of feet and wiping with hair directly from New Testament – level of religious literacy required to comprehend how this act is used to deliberately humble/humiliate someone from the group within the book, rather than in its original symbolic meaning of willing service and chosen humility before Christ. Readers are asked (implicitly)to accept Grace's faith as her inalienable right to believe whatever she wishes, but invited to condemn the actions of members of the cult under the guise of that faith.
Island Contemporary YA				
Coming of age novella which focusses not only on the changing understanding and questioning of the protagonist with regards to her father but on her changing worldview with regards to how she views outsiders and how she will cope with views which don't resonate with her own. Links between the natural world and the inner "spiritual" world. Coming together of cultures (? religious, but not detailed, and nationality-based) and recognition of how these are the same. Others' views on difference (anti-immigrant stance, cruelty to animals etc) is broadly condemned.	https://thewordfactory.tv/in-interview-david-almond/ https://booksforkeeps.co.uk/article/an-interview-with-costa-shortlisted-author-david-almond/	Generational gaps – solidity of view vs fluidity of youth. All humans as equal but within a world where individuals and groups do not believe this to be the case. Reflects contemporary views on "other", especially with regards to immigration and terrorism. The annual "pilgrimage" to Lindisfarne occurs in memory of the dead mother, in seeking remembrance of her, but leads to the creation of new memories. Lives are ultimately interlinked (knowledge of bullies on Island; surprise historical links between the two main protagonists).	Allows for dissenting voices, although written from perspective of one. Traditionally silenced characters (Syrian refugee, suspicions of terrorist links based on skin colour) are given voice alongside those holding judgemental views.	No actual 'religion' within this book – the "spiritual" is to be found within the setting (which is, of itself, a scared place); the communion between people and the wilderness. Assumption of recognition of phobic viewpoints. Written from pov of girl on the cusp of adulthood – could appeal more to female readers? However, storyline is universal.

Vampire mountain Vampire MG				
Importance of rites of passage, initiation. Good and evil. Journey as trial and pilgrimage.	https://www.vampires.com/author/moonlight/	Existence of ancient vampire gods, distant from vampires themselves – not related to human religions. Rebirth for those who do good; evil should remain earth bound. Links between vampires and wolves – importance of relationships between different groups/species/lifestyles. Importance of trial – proving oneself worthy.	Very few female voices at all in book. With exception of Shan, who is himself now half vampire, few non-vampire voices heard – only associated groups.	Vampire tropes – assumption of some pre-knowledge. Allegorical links to creation stories not easily visible – would require good understanding of these tor recognise similarities
Twilight Vampire YA				
Looks are important! Difference is challenged but appealing. Closed communities are to be feared. Abstinence is to be lauded. Male power, female submission.	Meyer hails from Church of Latter Day Saints, and reference to famous Mormon historical events is evident (in symbolic form) within the text. Tenets of that faith seep into the writing – no sex before marriage; redemption; temptation; eternal life and eternal bonds between husband and wife, parent and child. Meyer has talked openly about her Mormon faith, and how it influences her own life, and this is reflected in the book.	Good vs evil (problematic in that evil is often conflated with dark or black – questions about prejudice here?). Freedom of choice, and free will – Bella is a lightly drawn character, but it is her choice to become inextricably linked with Cullen despite his protestations and concerns about her welfare. Links through marriage are unbreakable (Mormon perspective) – link to vampire through becoming one oneself are also unbreakable. High Catholicism, symbolically portrayed by the Volturi, is roundly condemned in line with LTS doctrine.	Controversy over female voice – focussed on female protagonist, but she appears sometimes not in control of her own destiny, mesmerised as she is by Cullen. Meyer refutes this claiming that feminist views are reflected through the book, in that Bella make her own choice to become a vampire.	Few assumptions made, although appeal is gendered towards female audience. Parallels with LDS community not apparent unless well-known by reader, but story works without these.
Book of boy Historical MG				
Religion underpins everything. Angels are to be feared and prized. Difference is not tolerated. Gender is important – to some. Rich and poor divide. Existence of evil, both supernatural and prosaic. Acts of wrongdoing committed for good purposes are forgivable (if not easily by oneself)	https://www.hbook.com/story/five-questions-catherine-gilbert-murdock	Not taking everything on face value. Sinful acts undertaken for good are forgivable. Religion and faith does not always equate to decency and tolerance. Angels as mystical and to be feared (in same way, genderless/transgender character would instil fear too.) “pacts with the devil” may be made for the benefit of another, even when this disadvantages the one entering into agreement.	Good spread of voices heard. Gender roles relate to time in which novel is set. Voice of young person coming to terms with their own self-identity is paramount.	Some understanding of medieval church helps with overall understanding of story. Knowledge of middle-age’s view of Satan etc needed to make connection with Secundus. Behaviour of members of church and high society in name of religion requires understanding of both historicity and element of religious literacy, but story works without deep prior knowledge

Where the world ends Historical YA				
Rites of passage linked to pragmatic need to get food and income. Religion underpins daily life, and it is a given that something religiously ritualistic will develop on the stac. Hierarchy of adults: children, age: youth, strength: weakness. Bullying happens and is hated but accepted.	https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/2020/01/29/the-inspiration-for-where-the-world-ends-by-geraldine-mccaughrean/ https://www.alcs.co.uk/news/the-alcs-interview-geraldine-mccaughrean	Importance of societal structures – but those instilling them can be fallible. Religion as fundamental to life, but can be looked at in terms of outward demonstrations, their validity in different circumstances, and big questions about God .Religious fanaticism needs questioning. Children can represent true faith. Hope is essential and linked to the supernatural and the numinous.	Hirta residents are silenced by virtue of their on-appearance, followed by their demise. The loss of their loved ones on the stac is not examined or referred to.	Knowledge of lived Christianity in 1700s not essential but some understanding helps to place the behaviours of the people left on the stac into context historically.
The proudest blue Picture Book MG				
Integration, tolerance, pride in one's faith and oneself. Ignorance leads to misunderstanding – importance of standing firm in one's own beliefs.	https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/2020/may/i-didnt-see-myself-in-childrens-books-olympian-ibtihaj-muhammad-on-writing-for-kids/	Hijab and outward expression of faith is something to be proud of. Hijab is everything – indicative not only of belief but of self. Ignorance is root cause of bullying.	Main voice is that of younger sister. Boys presented mostly in negative terms, but this could relate to age of narrator and how young girls often demonize young boys. Non-Muslims presented (in action) in negative, discriminatory way, but any comment on them being representative of all non-Muslims is not apparent at all. No obvious male Muslim characters.	Useful to understand some background to hijab. Format of book allows readers to understand the fundamental importance of hijab in terms of identity. Hijab relates to female experience of Islam – no male Muslim characters – aimed predominantly at female audience? (experience of sharing book suggests it is not taken in this way in class).
American Jesus Graphic Novel YA				
Presentation of gospel themes through comic book approach via popular author. Places story of Jesus in modern context, but this is a new messiah. Book focusses on boy's realisation following a near death experience, that he is the embodiment of Christ returned, and has supernatural powers. Equivalence with superheroes is clear.	https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/celebrities/interviews/mark-millar-god-and-comics.aspx	Christ figure as ordinary. Belief and trust no different today than in biblical Jesus' time. Returned Christ is not perfect – relatable (some hubris).		

Appendix 3

LO: Class discussion. What have we learned about Islam from reading The Proudest Blue?

The book is about sisters supporting each other and looking out for each other. It is about love and faith.

It is about an older sister getting to wear her hijab for the very first time. It shows the importance and specialness of this day for her.

That the author: Ibtihaj Muhammad is an American Olympic medalist in the sport of fencing. She is a proud Muslim woman who wants to share her success with others and be proud of her religion and her faith as well as her sporting success.

We learned that some Muslim women and girls wear a headscarf which is part of their religious beliefs. It is called a hijab. They are made of light fabric and can come in lots of colours - mostly plain.

The book compares the hijab to the sea and the sky. Not simply because they are all blue, but because the sea and sky are always there and essential to our existence (water and air) – just like the hijab is to Asiya – it is THAT important to her life.

Girls can only choose to wear the hijab when they get to a certain age. This is around the time they go to secondary school (puberty) and represents the fact that they are beginning to become an adult and make important choices of their own.

The book is also about people who are not Muslims, not knowing about the wearing of the hijab and not understanding its specialness.

Some people in the book wonder and ask questions and are then informed and respect the differences.

Other people in the book don't bother to ask questions but simply compare Asiya's hijab to a table cloth or point and laugh.

Some people in the book accept Asiya wearing her hijab as a normal piece of clothing which is just part of who she is.

The wearing of a hijab is partly a symbol of following Islam and being a Muslim, but it is also part of a ancient culture and partly a fashion item which the girls enjoy. It's a statement of who and what they are.

The book is about the symbol of the wearing of hijab being about strength – belief in the Islamic faith and self-esteem.

The book is about the little sister being so delighted about her big sister's special day (she calls her a princess). Her pride in being part of such a special occasion (drawing the picture and asking her sister how she feels).It's about her also noticing that other people won't necessarily feel the same way and having to cope with different feelings - embarrassment? (when she whispers) and protection (when she keeps checking up on her sister to make sure she's alright.)

When Asiya wears hijab she feels proud and knows that it is a sign of strength. It is also 'friendly' (it is not about women being dominated).

We know that the girls' mum is very wise as she has given her daughters good advice. She gives them freedom of choice and gently tells them to believe in themselves and not worry about being different but proud to be unique. We like the phrase:

'Don't carry around the hurtful words that others say. Drop them. They are not yours to keep. They only belong to those who said them.'

We have also learned that wearing hijab is also about modesty and respect for Allah. Allah is the Muslims' one and only true god.

BBC class clips religious studies

Friday 11th February 2022

L.O: To create a soundscape as inspiration for writing a vivid descriptive setting.

First, we discussed how sound is made in films, for television and radio. We identified that often, when films are shot, the sound is muffled or compromised by unwanted or inappropriate noises – for example an aeroplane sound in a period drama. We deduced, therefore, that visual images and the sounds they make are often 'dubbed' in post-production. We looked at two short 3 minute video clips showing the jobs involved in sound production and editing. We found out that people who manufacture sounds are called 'foley artists'.

(Definition) Foley (named after sound-effects **artist** Jack **Foley**) is the reproduction of everyday sound effects that are added to film, video, and other media in post-production to enhance audio quality. These reproduced sounds can be anything from the swishing of clothing and footsteps to squeaky doors and

We created a simple storyline of a little Muslim child making their way to the Mosque to pray. Our ideas for our soundscape plotted their journey from the busy street into the prayer hall, with the people and sounds they would encounter.

We found items around the classroom which could be used to create the effects. We became foley artists. By having each sound to represent a part of the storyline helped us to understand the plot and sequence of events.

3. Libby pressed her shoes into some pebbles to create a crunchy, gravel sound.

1. Talullah began with the squeaky classroom door which was our rusty swings in the park.

2. Oliver played a lovely Adhan from the internet.

4. Leo used an umbrella to re-create the sound of pigeons flapping their wings as they took-to flight. It was very authentic

7. George and Elsie created the flowing water sounds as our character completed their wudu before prayers.

5. Ellie used a large drum to create the sound of the child running up the steps to the mosque.

6. Arthur created the Velcro shoes coming off and being stored away in the cubby hole.

Thank you Leonor, for taking all the fabulous photos!

8. Max created the ticking clock noise with two pairs of scissors. It sounded really good.

Soundscape for Islam writing opportunity

Park Playing on the swings	Muezzin Call to prayer adhan	Run Across gravel path Russing to be on time for salah	Birds Take flight in the town square	Mosque Up the stone steps to the big front doors	Prepare Remove shoes People chatting and saying hello	Wash Water flowing to wash ears, Hands/ arms feet	Through the door Into the prayer room Silence and hush	Kneel on prayer mat "Phew, I made it"	Muezzin Begins to pray Begin prayer "Allahah akbar"

Squeaky hinge	Youtube clip From minerette	Pebbles Tray shoes	umbrella	Upturned boxes Books Cutting boards shoes	Crowd murmur Velcro ripping	Water Dribble Bowl Jug hand	Door open and shut From talking sound to silence	Single voice "phew I made it"	Youtube clip Inside mosque Begin prayer "Allahah akbar"

9. We all chatted quietly to create the hum of people talking, then Phoebe created the sign for silence with the slam of the doors.

10. Annabelle was the imam, welcoming us,

"As-salaam alaikum, Asif,"

"Allahah akbar"

11. Eve created a great heartbeat by pulling strong fabric backwards and forwards quickly.

12. Jasper provided the final sounds– Asif, panting and puffing and calming as he kneeled to pray. He gave fantastic panting followed by, "Phew, I made it!"

13. Rory played a beautiful piece of singing led by an imam from the new Cambridge mosque.

Our soundscape was complete.

We all followed a visual storyline on the washing line.

Once the sounds were set, we played our storyline through a few times, adjusting and improving as we went. This is where we added the ticking of the clock and the beating of the heartbeat.

We then thought showered loads of descriptive words which came to mind when we thought about the scene and sounds. We were ready to box up and start writing!

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