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2013 REA Annual Meeting, Nov 8-10

'Negotiating and constructing religious identities'

Abstract
What is 'religious identity' and how may schooling impact upon it? In this paper, I present an elementary theory of religious identity construction and negotiation, drawing upon the theoretical framework that emerged from extensive fieldwork as part of a study of adolescent Christians, Jews and Muslims in England undertaken for my DPhil at the University of Oxford. I suggest that a conception of religious identity negotiation and construction based upon sociological and anthropological theories has much potential for educators and educational researchers. This is because to understand the impact of schooling on religious identity construction, a theory must be sensitive to social context, structural factors and power-relations – and how such phenomena may be interpreted and acted upon by individuals. In the course of this argument, I refer to important empirical and theoretical studies in comparable areas of inquiry.

Introduction: conceptions of religious identity in educational research

Reflecting a dichotomy in identity theory more widely, conceptions of religious identity in educational research can be separated into two principal groups: those that assume a psychological conception of identity, and those that assume an anthropological or cultural studies conception of identity. The former, (e.g. Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996; Hunsberger et al., 2001; Rymarz & Graham, 2006; Bertram-Troost et al., 2006, 2007; Armet, 2009), adopt concepts that centre upon religious identity *development* or *formation* as a psychological process, while the latter focus on religious identity *construction* as a socially located process (e.g. Østberg, 2000; Zine, 2001; Peek, 2005).

Studies of religious identity development in the psychological tradition use the adolescent identity development theory of the Freudian psychologist Erikson (1968) as their reference point by employing frameworks or measures derived from Marcia's (1966, 1980) operationalization of Erikson's theory. Marcia focused upon the psychological content of Erikson theory that posited adolescence as a crucial time in the human life-cycle consisting of a psychosocial 'identity crisis' whereby identity diffusion is overcome by adolescents' 'growing occupational and ideological commitment' (Marcia, 1966, p. 551).

Studies of religious identity development in the Marcian mould typically assume that there are four basic identity statuses through which adolescents may progress in order to achieve a coherent self-image and healthy psychological unity: *foreclosure*, that a choice of identity is made but without exploration; *diffusion*, no identity is formed and there has been no exploration; *moratorium*, no identity has been formed, but exploration has taken place; and *identity achievement*, identity has been formed after exploration has taken place. Quantitative studies of religious identity development use measures of identity status based on this model in statistical tests with measures of religiosity in order to understand the relationship between measures of religious socialization, or of religiosity, and identity status.

Studies of this kind can be criticised on account of the assumptions of their conceptual frameworks. Eriksonian-Marcian frameworks (and studies using other positivist models of religiosity) focus upon participants' interior psychological self-concept, rather than the cultural

processes and causal factors within schools that shape religious identity. Schachter (2005) and Vissel-Vogel et al. (2012) argue that these models of development can therefore fail to adequately account for the content and context of religious development. Schachter (2005) also demonstrates, through use of a counter-example case-study, that the assumption of a standardised, universal structure to identity development in the Marcian paradigm may also fail to capture individual courses of religious identity development in adolescence.

Marcia's appropriation of Erikson's theory has drawn substantial criticism because it fails to adequately account for Erikson's own view of the importance of cultural and contextual factors in identity development (Schachter, 2005; Faircloth, 2012; Flum & Kaplan, 2012). A reading of Erikson's classics: *Young Man Luther* (1958); *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968); *Gandhi's Truth* (1969); and, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (1975), confirm this critique. It is because of the relational complexity between context, culture and the individual that Erikson considers the concept of identity as 'unfathomable' as it is 'indispensable' and 'all-pervasive' (1968, p. 9). Recognition of Erikson's original complex and context-specific theory of identity development has led religious identity theorists, while avoiding Marcia's paradigm specifically, to re-appropriate his theories to examine religious identity development in contemporary contexts (Schachter, 2005; Rich & Schachter, 2012; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012). Researchers have also modified the Marcian framework to accommodate additional measures to evaluate contextual factors (Betram-Troost et al., 2007); while others have used observation, semi-structured interviews or unstructured 'life-story' interviews in order to explore the causal and contextual factors and processes in religious identity formation (Streib, 2001; Schachter, 2005; Good & Willoughby, 2007; Visser-Vogel et al., 2012).

Paradigms of identity status development in the psychological tradition entail the existence of an 'achieved' identity. Archer (2003) makes a criticism of studies of ethnic identity using the Marcian paradigm that is also pertinent to a critique of its application to religious identity. She observes that when ethnicity is incorporated in an Eriksonian-Marcian or positivist model it becomes an essentialised 'fixed' and 'static' concept, susceptible to stereotypical and neo-colonial biases (Archer 2003, p. 28). Studies of religious identity using an Eriksonian-Marcian framework (or those resting upon other psychological measures based upon essentialised notions of religiosity) also assume religious identity is a psychological commitment to measurable (orthodox or stereotypical) beliefs and practices. This criticism also applies to conceptions of religious identity such as Rymarz and Graham's (2006) notion of 'characteristic practices', a whole body of research in the tradition of Leslie Francis (e.g. Francis 1988, 1992, 2001; Francis & Kay, 1996) and theories of 'faith development' in the tradition of Goldman (1964) and Fowler (1981). Although not necessarily using the terminology of 'religious identity' *per se*, studies in these traditions conceptualise religiosity and faith development as uniform processes that are primarily concerned with individuals' assent to largely static beliefs and practices. They can therefore also be criticised on account of their theological and psychological assumptions, particularly apparent in the case of Goldman (1964) and Fowler (1981), who, following Piaget's theory of cognitive development posit religious understanding necessarily develops more complexity with age (Hyde, 1990).

In contrast to studies that conceive of religious identity in terms of exploration or commitment at the psychological 'core' of the individual, some researchers have conceptualised religious identity by drawing upon the research traditions of cultural anthropology and symbolic interactionism and concepts related to role-performance (Goffman, 1959) and boundary maintenance (Barth, 1969). Studies using sociological and anthropological frameworks to

investigate religious identity (e.g. Jacobson, 1997; Østberg, 2000; Zine, 2001; Peek, 2005) focus on cultural and social processes that impact upon, and constitute, the construction of religious identities, particularly upon Muslim children or adolescents in Western societies and educational institutions. The difference in conceptual frameworks employed between these and psychological studies is reflected in the use of terminology. Identity 'development' and 'formation' (terms that have connotations of a universal identity-teleology) are used less than terms that seek to express a more dynamic, dialogic, and transient conception of identity as a socially located process.

These studies of religious identity suggest an alternative way of conceptualising religious identity from essentialist conceptions. Rather than as a hierarchy of psychological statuses, or individuals' commitment to fixed, beliefs and practices, these studies assume and reveal the flexible nature and mutability of religious identities in their socio-cultural contexts, and how religious identities are shaped by socio-political processes and phenomena, including educational institutions. One significant aspect of studies such as Zine (2001) and Peek (2005) is that they show religious identities can be constructed in response to society's representation of religious adolescents' traditions as part of a process of role-performance. The authors interpret this process as one necessary to maintain ethnic and religious identities either as shifting boundaries between groups (Jacobson, 1997), or in order to preserve religious beliefs and practices (Zine, 2001; Peek, 2005).

Religious identity negotiation and construction
The term 'identity negotiation' originated in social psychology (Swann, 1987). Swann was concerned with the processes that affected changes to personal identity. His terminology and a similar concept of 'negotiation' as a socially located process of identity construction, has been appropriated and further developed by identity theorists interested in issues of political and cultural representation. For example, in his classic text on identity, *The Politics of Recognition* (1994), Charles Taylor drawing on the work of Mead (1934), appeals to the dialogic aspect of identity negotiation. Scholars in the field of cultural studies interested in issues surrounding race and ethnicity in particular, (e.g. Hall ed., 1997) also conceptualise identity as a negotiated process. Fixed notions of identity cannot account for the impact of individuals' changing and conflicting experiences in the unsettled cultural and diverse contexts of postmodern societies. Hall (1996), argues that in the context of globalisation and post-colonialism, essentialist and modernist concepts of identity are not viable in understanding how 'fragmented and fractured' concepts of self are 'multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall 1996, p. 4) that enable identity construction as part of the postmodern 'endlessly performative self' (Hall, 1996, p. 1).

A key assumption of this critique is that 'identity' makes no sense outside of a system of representation in social space (Taylor, 1994; Hall, 1996; Gee, 2000). To have an identity is to be recognised as such, and to represent oneself as such, as part of an on-going dialogic process within a culturally determined system of representation. The multifaceted nature of postmodern societies means that identity is therefore constantly constructed across conflicting systems of representation and recognition. Because identity-processes are concerned with how individuals construct their sense of self in dialogue with systems of representation in a plural society, harm can be caused through mis-representation.

A body of literature concerning ethnic, national and racial identity construction among adolescent minorities in educational contexts (often in diaspora) draws upon this concept of identity negotiation (e.g. Jackson, 1999; Stritikus & Mguyen, 2007; Stewart, 2008; Chen, 2010;

Awokoya, 2012). These studies provide, or apply, a conceptual framework that can account for the impact of conflicting systems of representation and their power structures upon minority groups' identity construction in schools.

Gee (2000) gives further theoretical insight into how such identity processes may be conceptualised in school settings, and how they can be recognised as relating to different systems of authority. 'Identity' can be defined as 'what kind of person' someone is recognised as, or presents themselves as, in a given circumstance (Gee, 2000, p. 99). In the sense of identity as 'kind-of-person', Gee suggests there is fourfold typology of identities that are underwritten by different sources of socially constructed power: 'Nature-identity (from a state in nature); 'Institution-identity' (a position within institutions); 'Discourse-identity' (individual character traits as recognised in the dialogue or discourse of individuals, such as being 'charismatic'); and, 'Affinity-identity' (shared in the practice of affinity groups) (Gee, 2000, p. 100). According to Gee, being African American can be an Institutional identity (I-identity) because social and educational institutions may ascribe certain positions to African American students, for example, by direct discrimination or institutional racism. It can also be understood as a Nature identity (N-identity) when considered in a racial or biological sense. African American identity can be recognised and represented in the way people talk and act in dialogue as a Discourse (D-identity), or by performing practices or holding beliefs that show an affinity with other African Americans (A-identity). All of these kinds of identity rely upon social and historical systems of representation and recognition (Discourses), but an individual has some agency in terms of which kind of identity they may seek to be recognised as, perform or emphasise.

Gee's typology may be used as a theoretical illustration of how religious identities could be contextually constructed in different ways, drawing upon, and reacting to, different sources of social authority. But it is important to note that while Gee's typology is useful in expressing the nature of shifting identities according to systems of representation, his concept of an A-identity – such as a 'Star Trek fan' (2000, p. 101) – can be considered weak in comparison to affinity with a religious tradition or community. Gee's concept of A-Identity does not fully encapsulate the binding nature of religious affiliation upon individuals, in particular as a commitment to transcendental beliefs which exert a powerful impact upon the way individuals interpret reality. Jackson's (1999) concept of identity negotiation may be relevant here as it incorporates the notion of worldview and self-definition as an integrated facet of identity negotiation. In his study of the experiences of African Americans, Jackson (1999) develops the concept of cultural identity negotiation to account for 'a communication phenomenon among two or more individuals that is driven by message exchange over a period of time.' Given that religious identities are likely to draw from, and entail, comprehensive systems of meaning and understanding, Jackson's definition of cultural identity negotiation captures a nuance that may be applicable to the experience of religious adolescents as it considers identity as a corollary and condition of worldview as well as a form of representation and performance.

The use of the term 'religious identity' to refer to the identification of an individual with a religious tradition was first introduced by Hans Mol (1976, 1979) and later expounded by Seul (1999). These scholars argue that because religions rest on metaphysical and ethical beliefs drawn from a shared religious tradition, they form a key influence on an individual's perspectives of themselves and the world. Seul (1999) argues that religion provides the strongest kind of identity for individuals and groups. Religious norms and values are communicated through texts and practices and because of their appeal to the transcendent they have a greater influence on people than other kinds of influences.

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The importance of religious beliefs, practices and group identification to the conceptualisation of religious identity is recognised in studies in the psychological tradition of religious identity research which use measures of practices, beliefs etc. to analyse the development of religious identity. The criticism of these concepts of religious identity given above is not intended to dispute the impact of distinctive characteristics of religious traditions (beliefs, practices, ways-of-being and ways-of-seeing the world) on people's lives, worldviews, self-concepts and self-representation. Instead, the above critique is intended to demonstrate that some concepts of religious identity are more sensitive and sophisticated in accounting for the complexity of religious identity construction as an on-going social process in a plural or postmodern context. Identity is a useful concept in the study of religion because it 'effectually unites a multiplicity of concerns' (Bailey, 2001, p. 82). Principally, it provides a way of conceptualising adherence and affiliation to historical traditions that emphasise relationship to the transcendent, while remaining sensitive to varying contexts and their action upon individuals.

The role of religions as powerful discourses in adolescents' lives can be thought as similar to 'culture' in Stritikus and Nguyen's (2007) study of Vietnamese youth. Religions, like culture, can be 'carried by individuals' *and* 'reconstructed' in 'moment-to-moment interactions' (Nasir & Hand 2006, p. 458 in Stritikus & Nguyen, p. 862). Although religious identity is co-constructed by individuals and their social context, this is done by individuals drawing from, endorsing, or opposing, established religious traditions, their systems of representation and forms of recognition. For example, the studies of Islam in the lives of adolescents reviewed above do not suggest that the tenets and practices of Islam do not impact upon individuals' worldviews and identities, but that adolescents' identities as Muslims are constructed across contexts that view Islam and Muslims in different or opposing ways. In these different contexts not only does being Muslim mean different things to different people, but individuals may draw upon different resources from their religious tradition to perform or represent themselves in different ways. The use of symbols to create identity boundaries can be an important part of this process (Jacobson, 1997; Ajrouch, 2004). A pertinent visible example of this would be the decision of Muslim women to wear or not wear hijab in diaspora contexts – a topic of academic interest in recent years (e.g. Read & Bartkowski, 2000; Haw, 2011).

Conclusion: a summary of a theory of religious identity negotiation
The discussion above has introduced the origins and assumptions of conceptions of identity, religious identity, identity construction and identity negotiation. I argue that the conceptual framework of religious identity construction and negotiation gives explanatory potential for studies in education, particularly how educational institutions may impact on the religious identity construction and negotiation of their students.

In summation, the theory developed in the course of my own study can be presented as follows. Educational institutions may represent or recognise religious adolescents' religious traditions in particular ways and ascribe (Peek, 2005) religious adolescents a particular religious identity through a system of representation and recognition underwritten by institutional authority (I-identity) (Gee, 2000). Similarly, religious adolescents may represent themselves or seek to be recognised as having particular affinities, beliefs, practices or character traits (Gee, 2000).

The process of identity negotiation takes place when adolescents seek and act to represent and define themselves to others, perhaps in order to change other people's perceptions as part of an exchange of identity presentation and recognition according to established systems of representation (Hall, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Gee, 2000; Chen, 2010). Systems of representation

are the ways people recognise and represent identities by conventions of depiction and portrayal. Aspects of systems of representation may act as cues or messages that prompt religious identity negotiation (which in itself can become a form of representation and message exchange). Adolescents may use symbolic boundaries between them and others to show affinity or identification with, religious traditions or their adherents (Jacobson, 1997; Ajrouch, 2004). Over time, the process of understanding oneself to be, or seeking to be recognised, or representing oneself in a particular way, as part of identity negotiation, contributes to religious identity construction – the identification with, rejection of, or partial or full integration, or presentation of elements of a religious tradition (or ties with members of that religious tradition) with an individual's worldview, lifestyle, beliefs, practices, actions.

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