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Seeing the kaleidoscope: Investigating whether Year 12 understandings of Christianity's internal diversity can be enhanced through an ethnographic approach

Zoë Grainger

(PGCE Religious Studies, 2021-2022)

email: z.grainger@hotmail.com

Abstract

For the past 50 years, Religious Education in British schools has been non-confessional; rather than nurturing children into the Christian faith, the subject now seeks to help students learn critically about, and from, a wide range of religious phenomenon. Yet, this new model poses an ongoing challenge: how do we ensure that these religious traditions, in all their rich diversity, are authentically represented within the Religious Education classroom? With students now learning about six major world religions, as opposed to just one, many will do so without ever interacting with these faith communities personally. Building on the work of Robert Jackson, this research thus explores the extent to which ethnographic material can be used to practically invite diverse religious perspectives into the classroom, to ensure that generalised understandings of religious communities are debunked and not perpetuated.

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Introduction

Schools in England and Wales are legally bound to ensure that their Religious Education (RE) curricula "reflect the fact that religious traditions in this country are in the main Christian" (Education Reform Act, 1988, s.8). Yet, the question stands, which 'Christianity' should students be taught? As the largest and most widely disseminated religion on earth, Christianity is not homogenous in expression, with scholars even using the term 'Christianities' to describe the disparate phenomenon (Astley, 1992). Smart doubts whether some "essential Christianity" exists at all, simply describing the movement as "kaleidoscope of different lived interpretations of the meaning of faith" (Smart, 1979, p.7).

Whilst this study will focus on the teaching of Christianity, this question of how to authentically represent traditions in their fullness is pertinent to the teaching of any religion. Teachers hold great epistemic power; the way we chose to describe religions, the images we use to depict them and the way we choose to categorise them are all ways of transmitting meaning about them (Hall, 1997). If internal diversity within any tradition is not represented, it may cease to exist in the mind of the student.

It was a conversation with some fellow trainee teachers from the University of Tubingen, Germany, which prompted me to reflect upon the role RE teachers play in this meaning making process. RE in Germany is distinctive from British RE in two main ways. Firstly, it is confessional; the subject is taught by religious 'insiders' and its content is determined by religious authorities (Kenngott, 2016). Secondly, students only receive instruction in one faith and this faith is usually that with which they personally identify. Both countries' systems have their own unique advantages and challenges, but a notable strength of the German approach is that religious traditions can be explored in significant depth. With insider perspectives guaranteed, students can move beyond the rigid examination of

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artefacts and creeds and explore how and why polyvalent manifestations of the faith have arisen. In England, however, an emphasis on secular neutrality has meant that religious educational instruction is largely imparted by outsiders to outsiders (Thanissaro, 2010), hence a growing preference among schools and exam boards to also opt for a more 'neutral' title for the subject, such as 'Religious Studies' or 'Religion and Worldviews'. The risk that therefore arises for many British teachers of RE is that generalised understandings of religious communities are perpetuated, not due to lack of wanting, but a lack of awareness.

The reform of the GCSE and A-Level Religious Studies qualifications in 2016 arguably made it even harder for teachers to represent the divided nature of religious traditions. Whilst one might presume that an increase in the complexity and volume of content would necessarily lead to a more nuanced view of the traditions being studied, in many ways these changes have had the opposite effect. With more subject matter to learn, alternative perspectives not on the specification tend to be ignored, due to both pressures on curriculum time and a wish to not complicate the content even further (Berglund, 2014). There is a two-fold danger here. Firstly, that KS4 and KS5 students will acquire a somewhat detached, stereotypical picture of the religions they are studying and secondly, that students who themselves identify with said traditions, will not be able to recognise themselves in the descriptions provided; a reality that will not only exacerbate the 'othering' of difference but may hinder students' personal development.

This study will examine whether an ethnographic approach to RE could offer a solution to this quandary of representation. Traditionally, the term 'ethnography' has been used to refer to a methodology, based around participant observation, used by anthropologists to learn about 'the other'. This very study is thus an ethnography of sorts, in that it contains a descriptive account, and analysis of, real life interactions and educational processes that occurred within my classroom. Yet, the ethnographic approach as a model for RE is something distinct. It is a way of teaching religion which explicitly seeks to bring 'insider' perspectives into the classroom, which students are then required to reflect upon as part of a hermeneutical process. Most famously, this model of RE was popularised by Jackson (1997), under the title 'the interpretative approach'.

Having applied Jackson's model to my teaching of a Year 12 class studying Christianity as part of their AQA A-Level qualification in Religious Studies, in what follows I will analyse to what extent it was successful in increasing their understanding of the religion's internal diversity. The term

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'understanding' here is used in the broadest possible sense, to encompass not only what this diversity is, but how it emerged and why it exists. I will begin by summarising the rationale behind, and the effectiveness of, previous attempts to implement the ethnographic method within RE classrooms. I will then suggest a potential framework for implementing this approach with A-Level students and detail how I enacted this method within my placement school. Finally, I will analyse how effective this method was in achieving my purposes and offer some tentative recommendations for further practice.

Literature Review

Why is ethnographic material needed in the RE classroom?

Despite growing secularisation, the notion that Britain is a Christian country continues to permeate the public consciousness (Pepinster, 2021). Yet studies have shown that students nationally have a conspicuously weak understanding of the Christian faith. One reason for this is the growing popularity of philosophical and ethical topics at public examination level (Horrell & Davis, 2014). Being able to see how such modules directly intersect with their own lifeworlds, students engage with these topics on a deeper level whilst accompanying theological topics are dealt with more superficially. Citing the findings of the Biblos Project, Horrell & Davis (2014, p.74) note that "of the KS4 students surveyed, 57% were 'not keen' or were 'uncertain' about studying the Bible, and of these, 67% said this was because they found the Bible boring or were not religious". This lack of interest in religious content is further propounded, Horrell & Davis (2014) argue, by a lack of sound resources to support the effective teaching of Christianity in schools. Whilst increasingly exam specifications demand that students justify their answers with links to relevant 'sources of wisdom and authority' (AQA, 2017, p.11) it seems that students are not adequately taught how different Christian communities read and interpret such sources.

Research conducted by Bowie and Coles (2018) corroborates this point. Studying levels of biblical illiteracy at KS4, the authors interviewed a focus group of RE teachers preparing their students for the new Religious Studies GCSE, triangulating this data with an analysis of exam papers and a set of examiners reports. Principally, they observed among students "an extensive use of fragments of texts", the misguided "practise of proof texting" (using a short scriptural passage to prove a particular point without considering the text's context) and a general "failure to explore deeply how Christians

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engage with texts in different ways" (Bowie & Coles, 2018, p.277). Such findings are concerning, not only because they signal bad academic practice but because they demonstrate that students are developing binary understandings of how Christians handle scripture and are thus failing to grasp the basic fact that the Christian tradition is a profoundly divided one. Horrell & Davis (2014, p.74) note that the voices of "evangelicals and fundamentalist Christians" especially, are "poorly represented or even omitted" within RE lessons. The effects of this exclusion notably extend far beyond the issue of students' subject knowledge. If young people never engage with the origins and attraction of such conservative beliefs, which likely contrast starkly with their own, societal polarisation simply grows. Ethnographic content, I will contend, could help to bring these voices to the fore.

There has been significantly less research on student understandings of Christianity at KS5, the stage that forms the focus of this particular study. Yet, the evidence that does exist unfortunately points to much the same picture. In AQA's latest examiners' report it was recorded that

> "There was often some vagueness about different varieties of Christianity. The terms 'Catholic', 'liberal' and 'protestant' were used imprecisely and often quite inaccurately to characterise ideas, beliefs or practices in a polarised way."
>
> (AQA, 2019a, p.3)

Increased curriculum time to explore contrasting manifestations of the faith does not then, guarantee that students will come to understand Christianity's internal diversity in any greater depth. Active pedagogical interventions are needed to ensure this conversation takes place.

How has ethnography been actualised in the classroom before?

Jackson's (1997) interpretative approach to RE was born out of a desire to address these very issues, striving to teach students about the "dynamic, internally contested and fuzzy edged" nature of religious traditions (Jackson, 2004a, p.4). As a pedagogical model, the interpretive approach has three stages: 'representation' (how to depict traditions to students), 'interpretation' (how students understand the religious content they have been presented with) and 'reflexivity' (how students personally respond to the knowledge they have acquired). Such a model can be actualised in a myriad of different ways, and thus I shall now turn to two examples of how it has been practically applied: first by Jackson (2004a) himself, and secondly by his doctoral student, O'Grady (2018).

To make his pedagogy accessible to everyday practitioners, Jackson (2004a) developed a curriculum scheme, and accompanying resources, to facilitate its implementation. In an attempt to accurately

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represent the internal diversity within traditions, Jackson and his team designed a new series of RE textbooks based upon their own ethnographic research of children in religious communities across Britain (Jackson, 2004a). The textbooks produced were thus organised, not around common religious themes (holy books, places of worship, festivals, etc.) but around portrayals of real-life children who adhered to the respective traditions being studied. Striving to avoid reductionism, each religion was granted its own book at each key stage. For example, the KS3 book Christians, contains the stories of four different British teenagers from contrasting denominational backgrounds: Church of England, Greek Orthodox, Quaker and 'New' Church. Each child's feature introduces their general hobbies and interests and then explores how they personally live out their faith, with direct extracts from interviews with the children accounting for a substantial amount of the book's content. Such material has obvious benefits for students. The diversity of the Christian faith is explicitly presented and students are confronted with the lived experiences of children their own age, facilitating the cultivation of empathy. In each book, a series of tasks then guides students through the stages of 'interpretation' and 'reflexivity', by encouraging them to make links between individual and community-wide understandings and 'build bridges' between their own experiences and those of the children depicted.

Jackson's project went a long way in helping practitioners find a workable solution to the problem of faithful representation in RE. Yet, his method does have limitations. As Jackson (2004a) himself admits, whilst his textbooks do strike up a conversation between living insiders and students in the classroom, the medium of print prevents this dialogue continuing any further. Genuine clarification can never be sought, questions students may have can never be answered. There is "a feeling of distance from both parties" (Jackson, 2004a, p.12). Moreover, Jackson's research solely concentrated on Key Stage 1, 2, and 3. Thus neither Jackson, nor any of his successors for that matter, have tested this model's effectiveness with older students.

This latter observation is in line with the fact that student interaction with religious communities seems to drastically diminish as they progress through education. I myself went on numerous trips to places of worship when I was at primary school, went on a handful during my KS3 years, and then had no interaction with local religious communities through my GCSE and A-Level study. That my personal experience is indicative of a wider picture was in part verified by a quick scan of the archives of the British Journal of Religious Education. After searching for articles which contained the word 'trip' or 'visit', I came across four research papers which examined the value of students visiting

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places of worship. Of these four papers, three were studies of primary aged children (Beckerlegge, 1988; Kindermann & Riegel, 2018; Lundie et al., 2022) and one focused primarily on KS3 students (Muller, 1994). Whilst not conclusive, the fact that there has been little published research into the value of insider interactions at KS4 and KS5 level does indicate that these interactions seldom occur. This study thus seeks to address this imbalance.

Following Jackson's work, subsequent researchers have tried to implement the interpretative approach in new contexts. Most pertinent to this study is the work of O'Grady (2018), a student of Jackson, who implemented the approach, first with a Year 8 class over a 10-week period, and then with a Year 7 class over a period of 18 months. The raison d'être behind O'Grady's work was distinct from mine. He was investigating whether the model could increase student engagement and enjoyment of the subject, whilst I am examining whether it can enhance student knowledge, in both a substantive and personal sense. His observations nonetheless proved useful for my purposes and helped inform the design of my lesson sequence.

O'Grady involved his students in the planning of his lessons in order to see which lesson activities they found most stimulating. He concludes that it was dialogue, both with insiders and with their peers, which "proved to be lively sources of personal and ethical interest for them" (O'Grady, 2013, p.138). Unlike Jackson (2004a) who solely used textbooks to stimulate this dialogue, O'Grady (2013) employed a wider range of stimuli to facilitate discussions including video. Yet, O'Grady also observed that in order for this dialogue to be fruitful, such conversations need to help students refine their own opinions and beliefs as "they are not motivated by neutral, descriptive or personally distant religious studies" (ibid., p.138). The extent to which this statement is true of all students is debateable. I have observed that as some students get closer to sitting exams, they can become less interested in discussing their own worldviews and more invested in simply acquiring the relevant information they need. Nevertheless, I would contend, alongside O'Grady that, regardless of student preference, it is vitally important that RE continues to develop students' 'personal knowledge' (Ofsted, 2021) as they move up through the school. I hope to achieve this through the 'reflexive' stage of Jackson's pedagogy.

What are the limitations of an ethnographic approach?

Previous studies then, into the effectiveness of the interpretative approach in the RE classroom have been enlightening but limited in scope. Yet, before I go onto document my attempt to extend

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Jackson's model in practice, it is worth summarising the arguments of the principle critics of this approach to demonstrate how my study has been informed by ongoing debates within the field. Jackson's work has been criticised by thinkers on both sides of the epistemological field; firstly, by Erricker & Erricker (2000) who attack the approach from a post-modern perspective and secondly by Wright (2008), who argues from the position of a critical realist. Both of these criticisms will now be explored in turn.

Erricker & Erricker (2000) offer up two objections to Jackson's interpretive model of RE. Firstly, they argue that the model cannot adequately advance the spiritual development of learners. Indeed, as deconstructionists, they are wary about the religious views of the 'other' being presented to students all together, regardless of how dismantled these views may be. Notably, this is not because they worry that traditions will not be accurately represented. Rather, it is because they believe that if religious perspectives are placed at the heart of the lesson, students without a religious faith are "excluded from the developmental process" (Erricker & Erricker, 2000, p.24). They argue that non-religious students cannot freely reflect upon their own beliefs and experiences if such reflections are always tethered to a limiting religious framework and thus contend that the starting point for all RE lessons needs to be material produced by the children themselves. I do not have the space here to contend why Erricker & Erricker are wrong to assert that religion should cease to be the main focal point of RE. Rather, it is enough to say that, at present, public exams primarily assess students' substantive knowledge about religion and until this changes such knowledge must remain the bedrock of RE curriculums.

Erricker & Erricker (2000) have, however, offered up a more practical critique of the interpretative approach which is pertinent to my study. They question, "Who decides which membership groups will be represented in a faith tradition?" (Erricker & Erricker, 2000, p.25); an important point given that there are numerous economic, political, social, and emotional factors at play when deciding how traditions should be presented. Such an observation, however, is no reason to discard Jackson's model, rather it serves to remind practitioners the importance of being self-aware. Teachers must critically examine the sources of their lesson materials if they are to ensure representations of communities are – as far as they can be – balanced and truthful. Further, if teachers can be transparent with students about how they navigated these challenges, students will be granted the opportunity to consider 'ways of knowing' in RE (Ofsted, 2021), which in turn may encourage them to question the sources of their own views in a scholarly way.

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Contrastingly, Wright's critique of Jackson stems from a concern that a 'bottom-up' approach to RE will distort students' understandings of religious traditions (Iversen, 2013). He takes, for example, Jackson's research into Christian children who believe in reincarnation and asserts that to bring this ethnographic content into the classroom is unhelpful as firstly, "instances of Christian belief in reincarnation are so rare as to be almost entirely insignificant" and secondly because "the belief, in Christian terms, is quite simply wrong" (Wright, 2008, p.7). As a critical realist, Wright believes religious traditions are "substantial social facts" (ibid., p.6) which make mutually exclusive claims to truth. He thus rejects Jackson's "nominal reduction of discrete religious traditions to the atomistic level of the individual spiritual lives of adherents" (ibid., p.3) and instead argues that students should be presented with mainstream manifestations of each religion, to allow them to critically evaluate the orthodox claims being made. For Wright, self-representations of religious traditions do not guarantee authenticity (Everington, 1996).

Yet Wright here is wrong to portray Jackson as an advocate for the wholesale deconstruction of the category of religion. Jackson does think there is merit in giving students a generalised overview of a tradition's character, he simply believes that this picture needs to be subsequently complicated with real life examples to add nuance to students' understandings. What Wright's argument does rightly emphasise though, is the importance of putting heterodox insider perspectives into context to ensure students are both aware of the contested nature of such claims, and can understand the theological and historical reasons behind such departures. Indeed, Jackson himself admits that the interpretive approach would benefit from a historical dimension (Jackson, 2004b).

Research Design

In light of the fact that there has been little formal investigation into the use of ethnographic models of RE at KS5, I decided to research the effectiveness of Jackson's interpretative approach with a Year 12 class. The above discussions also drove me to devise the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ 1: What prior knowledge did the class have of Christianity's internal diversity?

RQ 2: What insights did students gain through engaging with the ethnographic material?

Around these questions, I then devised a research plan. That I was to undertake my research from within an interpretivist paradigm, as opposed to a positivistic one, was clear for the following reasons. Firstly, at the heart of both of these questions is a desire to examine the feelings, attitudes and

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knowledge of the students under study. Such data is primarily qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, in form and thus was going to require interpretation. Secondly, my data collection process and my subsequent findings were to be characterised by subjectivity, as this study is grounded in a specific context. Recommendations born out of this study were thus to be suggestive, not definitive (Taber, 2013).

Philosophically, my research design was guided by the model of action research, an approach grounded in the principle that research should lead to "the improvement and advancement of practice" (Kumar, 2014, p.160). An action research strategy thus involves identifying a problem, implementing an intervention to address said problem, collecting data produced by that intervention and then evaluating that data in order to assess whether further action needs to take place (O'Grady, 2013). The problem I identified was that students demonstrated weak knowledge of Christianity's internal diversity. Literature had identified Jackson's interpretative approach as a potential solution to this problem and so I grounded my intervention in this pedagogy, designing a scheme of work for the Year 12 topic of 'Sources of Wisdom and Authority' which drew upon Jackson's stages of 'representation', 'interpretation' and 'reflexivity'. Unlike Jackson's trial of his own approach, where the 'representation' stage was solely tackled through the medium of textbooks, I experimented with using a variety of materials to bring insider perspectives into the classroom, utilising videos, ethnographic texts, articles and church materials in my lessons, as well as virtually bringing members of different Christian traditions into the classroom to answer student's questions. The stages of 'interpretation' and 'reflexivity' were then actualised through a series of carefully devised questions which students answered first verbally, using the Think/ Pair/ Share format (Jamison, 2008), and then in writing on their handouts. These discussion questions always followed the introduction of insider voices. Adopting this action research strategy was advantageous as it meant that, as I was implementing my iteration of the interpretative approach with KS5 students, I was able to continually reflect upon its effectiveness and adapt my upcoming lessons accordingly. Due to time constraints, I was only able to complete one cycle of action research as opposed to several.

Given the nature of this type of study, there was a high possibility that bias could distort my findings and thus to guard against this, I triangulated my data from a range of sources. My first source of data was an optional questionnaire, which I sent round to my Year 12 class before we began the unit. This questionnaire had two objectives and was therefore divided into two sections. Firstly, I sought to ascertain student's attitudes towards the study of Christianity by asking students which component

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of the AQA course they preferred, which they found the easiest and which they found the hardest. In answer to each of these questions, students were required to select either ‘Philosophy of Religion’, ‘Ethics’ or ‘Study of Christianity’ and then give a brief reason for their answer. To analyse these responses, I added up the number of students who had selected each option for each question and then displayed this data in a pie chart to aid comparison. Secondly, I sought to gauge how confident students already were at describing Christianity’s internal diversity. Therefore, I presented students with fourteen different Christian denominations and asked students to rate whether their knowledge of each group was ‘Excellent’, ‘Good’, ‘Average’, ‘Poor’ or if they had ‘No knowledge’. To analyse this data, I used the Likert procedure to give every student a numerical score. To calculate this, each position on this knowledge scale was given a different ‘weight’ of 5, 4, 3, 2 or 1. So, having ‘excellent’ knowledge of a tradition scored pupils 5 points whilst having ‘no knowledge’ gave students 0. The final score of each student was thus calculated by adding up how may points they received for each of the fourteen traditions (Oppenheim, 1992). With the maximum score students could receive being 70 (5x14), a high score indicated strong knowledge of Christianity’s internal diversity, whilst a low score the opposite.

With the exception of the explanations provided by students for three of their answers, the data produced from this activity was numerical and thus quantitative in form. This allowed me to contrast it with my only other source of quantitative data: the class’ mark book. Such triangulation helped me to glean the extent to which student’s perceptions of the subject were consistent with their examination performance.

As I began to enact my intervention in the classroom, my own reflections and observations on my teaching became a second source of data. Through monitoring class discussions and having conversations with students, I was able to assess how well the pedagogical aims of my lesson were translating in the classroom context. I made brief, unstructured notes during lesson time, and then wrote up a more formal evaluation of each lesson after it was over. Yet whilst there is great professional value in self-evaluation, I was also conscious that the process of examining one’s own practice entails a unique set of difficulties. Firstly, when in the flow of teaching, I found that it was not always easy or appropriate to step away from my role as teacher and don my researcher hat to reflect upon how the lesson is unfolding. I had to prioritise the needs of the students and thus in-lesson evaluative exercises were frequently thwarted. Secondly, it is near impossible to achieve objectivity during this process. Not only are teachers limited by the fact that their eyes and ears can

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only monitor one area of the classroom at a time, but due to the personal nature of the enquiry, they are also likely to either be overly self-critical of their actions or seek to justify their actions unfoundedly (Taber, 2013).

In light of this, my mentor's observations were another key data source. These observations were also unstructured, but were specifically focused upon monitoring the changes I had made to the scheme and how well I was acting on my training targets, which differed from week to week. After each lesson, I received a written record of these observations and then had a discussion with my mentor during which these written comments were expanded on verbally. The more impartial nature of this data source helped to mitigate bias when I later came to analyse how successful my lessons had been at furthering student understandings.

Students' classwork served as a fourth source of data. At the beginning of each lesson, students were provided with a structured handout, on which they made their personal notes and completed all of the lesson activities. At the end of each lesson, I collected all of these handouts in, recorded the responses students had given to certain questions pertinent to my study, and then noted any identifiable trends in student understandings. Reviewing the handouts of every student, whilst time consuming, was advantageous as it allowed me to see how effective my lessons were across the whole spectrum of ability within the class and gave me access to some of the ideas students had had about the content which were not shared during periods of class discussion. I also analysed the essays that students produced in exam conditions at the end of our unit of work; providing me with a fifth data source. Students answered a question taken from an AQA past paper and then these answers were marked in accordance with the board's mark scheme.

Lastly, as I am investigating the extent to which student understandings of internal religious diversity can be improved by interactions with insiders, I felt it important to ascertain, not just what students thought of such an approach, but what religious communities themselves had to say about it. Thus, after I had carried out the 'formal' interviews with the representatives from both the Catholic and evangelical traditions which were shown to the class, I asked each speaker, "How important do you think it is that people studying religion engage in dialogue with members of the communities they are studying?" These answers were recorded and subsequently transcribed, with the full permission of both interviewees.

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The table below summarises which of these respective data sources were drawn upon to answer each of my research questions:

Research Question	Data Collection Tools
RQ 1: What prior knowledge did the class have of Christianity's internal diversity?	Student Questionnaires; Mark-book; Lesson observations; Students' classwork
RQ 2: What insights did students gain through engaging with the ethnographic material?	Lesson observations; Students' classwork; Students' assessments; Guest speaker interviews

Table 1: Research Tools

Ethical Considerations

My research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018) and was also directed by the ethics checklist provided by the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. My research plan was devised in consultation with my Head of Department to ensure that it would not detrimentally affect the class' progress. Then, to ensure that all participants were able to authentically consent to their work being scrutinised for research purposes, students were informed of both the nature and the purpose of my research before I began to teach my sequence of lessons, and of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Students were also aware that involvement in tasks extraneous to their A-Level study, such as the completion of the questionnaire, were voluntarily. References to my placement school and particular students have also been anonymised.

Outline of the Sequence of Lessons

I had ten lessons to teach the A-Level topic of 'Sources of Wisdom and Authority' to my Year 12 class, with the final lesson in this sequence reserved for their assessment. As part of this unit, students had to learn about three distinct sources of authority within Christianity: The Bible, the Church and Jesus and different Christian beliefs about them. For each source of authority, I wanted to present students with contrasting insider perspectives to help expand their understanding of Christianity's internal divisions. Yet, to do this I did not need to include ethnographic content in every single lesson. Therefore, only five of my lessons were explicitly structured around the principles of Jackson's interpretive approach, a decision also informed by Ofsted's guidance that the use of "any of

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[pedagogical] model alone would be insufficient" (Ofsted, 2021, "Appendix C", para. 7). I shall thus focus on those lessons which did incorporate ethnography.

Lesson One: What is the Bible?

We began the unit by examining the Bible as a source of authority. Literature widely cites low levels of Biblical literacy among students (Bowie & Coles, 2018; Horrell & Davis, 2014), and whilst I had not taught A-Level before, I had found these findings reflected in my teaching of Christianity at GCSE level. These observations, combined with the contextual fact that a number of students in the class had not even taken the GCSE course, informed me that a substantial proportion of the lesson needed to be dedicated to introducing students to what the Bible is, what it contains, and how it came to be, as this foundational knowledge is needed to understand why the interpretation of this text is so contested. Students therefore first received an overview of the text, completing activities such as spotting the differences between the content pages of the Tenakh, and the Catholic and Protestant Old Testaments, and sorting some Biblical passages into their respective genres. It was only after these tasks that I introduced ethnographic content into the lesson, with the aim of showing students why questions of composition and genre have a bearing on how Christians interpret the Bible today. I played the class two short videos; one which showed an American evangelical pastor defending his view that Genesis should be read as historical narrative and another of a confessing Anglican Professor at the University of Cambridge, explaining why he believes Genesis is a poetic account. These videos thus fulfilled the 'representation' stage of Jackson's model. Students were then required to 'interpret' and 'reflect' upon these two conflicting perspectives by discussing and answering the questions 'Which of these approaches do you find most convincing?' and 'Has this changed your understanding of how certain Christians read the Bible? Why/ Why not?'.

Lesson Two: How do evangelicals read the Bible?

Beginning with a review of last lesson's learning (Sherrington, 2019), as all succeeding lessons within this scheme do, this lesson introduced students to how evangelicals perceive and read scripture. Before this however, I asked students to record their initial impressions of evangelicals to gauge what preconceptions students had. Learners then read an extract from Ammerman's Bible Believers, an ethnography of an American fundamentalist Baptist church, which described how this particular subset of the evangelical community approach Biblical text. This material was selected for three

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reasons. Firstly, with traditional theology degrees being gradually replaced by interdisciplinary religious studies courses across the UK, introducing students to anthropological enquiry is necessary if they are to make an informed choice about the type of course they wish to pursue. Secondly, an ethnography that focused in on the lives of fundamentalist Christians was selected to address the absence of these views from traditional curricula (Horrell & Davis, 2014). Thirdly, devoid of anthropological jargon and specialist terms, I believe this text was accessible for Year 12 students. After getting students to answer a series of comprehension style questions, to draw out the meaning of this 'representation', students were then asked to critically evaluate this particular religious perspective by asking them to state the advantages and disadvantages of this method of interpretation.

Lesson Four: Non-conservative readings of the Bible

In this lesson, students learnt about liberal protestant and neo-orthodox approaches to scripture and I experimented with placing the insider 'representation' at the beginning, as opposed to the end, of the lesson. Students read an article by Steve Chalke, a popular British liberal pastor, where he explained his view on the Bible's authority. Again, students were required to answer some questions about the passage's content to check for comprehension and were then asked to evaluate how convincing this approach was. This lesson also drew on another aspect of Jackson's idea of 'interpretation', which states that students should move "backwards and forwards between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider religious tradition" (Jackson, 2004a, p.5). Students were presented with two conflicting facts: that Chalke identifies as an evangelical and that Chalke's organisation was expelled from 'The Evangelical Alliance' in 2014 and asked to explain why this might be. Such an activity served as an antidote to Wright's concern that representing of heterodox religious perspectives will lead students to misunderstand what different religions believe, as students were made aware of the fact that Chalke's opinion is considered heretical and encouraged to consider whether this is justified. Students then learnt about how the liberal protestant approach to the Bible contrasts with that of neo-orthodoxy. As a plenary, students were asked which of these camps Chalke's views fitted into, if any.

Lesson Seven: Ask a Christian

This lesson was my boldest attempt to bring insider perspectives into the classroom. By this point in the scheme, we had studied contrasting Christian beliefs about the nature and authority of the Bible and the Church, with particular reference to evangelical and Catholic viewpoints. This lesson

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involved showing the students two interviews, one with a Catholic chaplain and one with an evangelical church worker, which I had conducted and pre-recorded. These particular speakers were selected as their professions meant that they were not only both experienced in communicating the tenets of their faith to 'outsiders' but that they were also able to give responses with sufficient theological articulacy (Thanissaro, 2010). They were both aware that the purpose of these interviews was to educate and not to proselytise (Jackson, 2014). The questions asked in these interviews were all devised by the students themselves, given such a strategy has proven to have positive educational benefits (Jackson, 2014). As we had moved through the unit, students had been encouraged to note down any questions they had. They were also given ten minutes at the end of the preceding lesson to come up with additional questions on their tables. Before these interviews were shown, students were asked to record what understandings they had already formed about these two traditions. Then, after watching each interview, students completed a reflection exercise constructed around the three stages of Jackson's pedagogy. To consolidate the 'representation' stage, students answered the question "What did you learn from this conversation?" To aid them in 'interpreting' the material, that is to compare their "conceptual schemes" with "those of the insider" (Jackson, 2004a p.5), learners were asked 'Given what you already knew about Catholicism/ Evangelicalism, did any parts of this conversation surprise you? Then finally, to help them think 'reflexively', students answered the questions 'Did this conversation make the Catholic/ Evangelical perspective seem more or less convincing?' and 'Did this conversation prompt you to reflect upon your own beliefs about the Bible and the Church?'.

Lesson Nine: Who Was Jesus?

In this lesson, students examined the unorthodox Christian view that Jesus' authority was only human and not divine. To help students acquire information on the key groups who have historically held this heretical belief, a peer-teaching activity was set up. Yet, as well as knowing who holds these beliefs, the specification states that students must understand "the implications" of these ideas (AQA, 2019b, p.19). Ethnographic content in the form of a service booklet from a local Unitarian Church was used to address this point. RE curriculums tend to separate the study of 'belief' and 'practice' yet the two are intrinsically interlinked. Worship is not only a reflection of what Christians believe, but serves to actively shape these beliefs, and therefore must to be explored if one is to grasp the complexity of Christianity (Doble, 1993). Students were asked three different questions, again inspired by the stages of pedagogy, to help them critically assess this document. Firstly, students were

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asked “What sort of material does this order of service contain? What does it not contain?”, encouraging them to draw out how Unitarians worship and why that might be. Secondly, students were encouraged to ‘zoom out’ and compare such practice to that of the wider Christian tradition through the question “How does this differ from your experience of church or what you might expect from a church service?”. Lastly, to prompt students to personally reflect on this new representation, they discussed “Do you think you would enjoy attending a service like this?”.

Findings

What prior knowledge did the class have of Christianity’s internal diversity? (RQ 1)

Data pertaining to this research question was predominantly collected prior to my teaching episode to help inform and structure my practice. Firstly, 15 of the 21 students in the class completed the voluntary questionnaire at the start of the course, which divided into two sections, sought to measure both students’ attitudes towards the ‘Christianity’ component of their A-Level and their knowledge of the different Christian denominations. Responses to the former half of the questionnaire mostly corroborate the findings of wider literature which state that students tend to both disengage (Horrell & Davis, 2014) and struggle to excel (Bowie & Coles, 2018) when studying Christianity. As shown in Figure 1, ‘Christianity’ is by a significant margin the least preferred component of the AQA A-Level, with only one student selecting it as their preferred section.

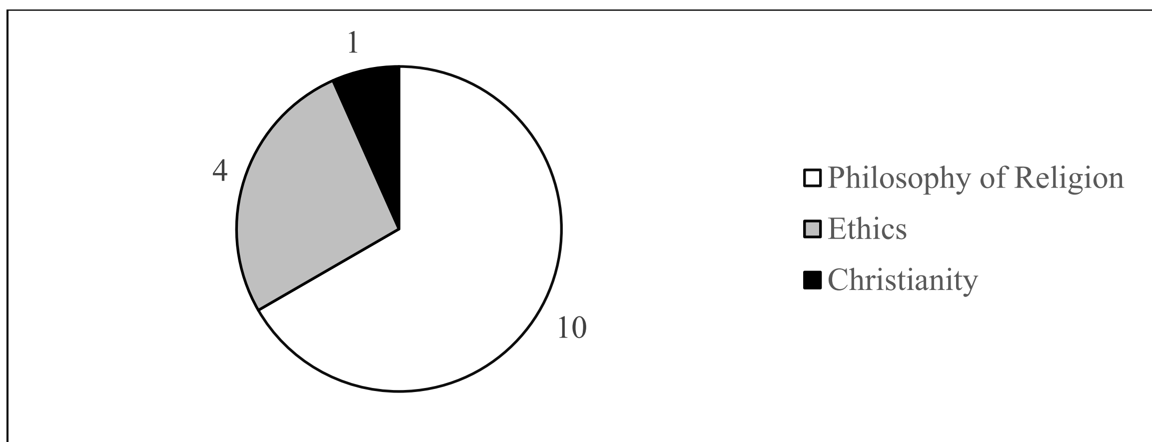

Figure 1: Response to Pre-Teaching Questionnaire Q1:
“Which component of A-Level Religious Studies do you prefer?”

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Similarly, responses to the latter half of the questionnaire support the findings of Jackson that students tend to have a weak grasp of the internal divisions within religious traditions. Students were asked to rate their knowledge of Christianity's internal diversity by placing themselves on a five-point knowledge continuum scale (5 = excellent knowledge, 0 = no knowledge) for each of the fourteen different Christian denominations listed. As outlined in 'Research Design', I then used the Likert procedure to give each student an individual score to quantify how strong their knowledge of Christianity's divisions was at this initial stage. The full breath of students' scores can be viewed in 'Appendix 1' but, to summarise, the vast majority of scored poorly with the average score being 23 points out of a maximum of 70. Student attitudes alone then provided grounds for pedagogical intervention.

Self-evaluations should, however, be read cautiously on account of the fact that students may over or underplay the knowledge they possess. Hence, I compared this data source with that of the class mark-book to see whether student perceptions aligned with their general performance. In their last 'Christianity' assessment students performed well, with the majority of students sitting around the 'A' grade boundary (see Appendix 2 for full data set), although it is notable that students did not access the very highest marks in this paper, as they did in their Philosophy of Religion and Ethics assessments. To access this top level, the AQA mark scheme states that student answers must contain "very good use of detailed and relevant evidence" (AQA, 2020, p.5) and a "perceptive discussion of different views" (p.6). Thus, there is likely a causal link between students struggling with knowledge of Christianity's diversity and their assessment grades.

This numerical data then, indicated the level of understanding students initially had about Christianity's internal diversity. What such data was not able to do, however, was inform me of the types of understandings students had formed about the Christian tradition (Kumar, 2014). This information was largely ascertained through listening to student contributions to class discussions and reviewing their written work. In Lesson Two, for example, students were asked "What words or ideas come to mind when you hear the word 'evangelical'? What about 'fundamentalist'?". My mentor observed that, at this point in the lesson, "most of the students" had nothing to say, presumably because such terms were largely unfamiliar to them. Looking to those students who did engage with this task, the most common answers given were words such as 'literalist' and 'creationist'; no student demonstrated an awareness of the fact that the terms 'evangelicalism' and 'fundamentalism' describe separate phenomena (Ammerman, 1987).

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What insights did students gain through engaging with the ethnographic material? (RQ 2)

Having reviewed my lesson observations, student's written work and the transcripts of the interviews conducted with our external speakers, I have identified three main areas of 'insight' that the ethnographic content promoted with varying levels of success. Firstly, such material served to clarify and consolidate subject knowledge. Secondly, this material aided the deconstruction of stereotypes. Thirdly, this material helped increase critical engagement with the subject matter. These observations will now be explored in turn and evidenced by a range of data sources.

This study largely bears witness to Jackson's (2004a) findings that the use of insider voices in RE lessons can help students learn about a religion's internal diversity. In this study, ethnographic content particularly served to illuminate nuance and consolidate learned concepts. This was most apparent in the interview lesson, where our guests addressed a range of misconceptions that the class had collectively accumulated. For example, students had learnt that the Catholic church subscribes to a dual-source theory of tradition whilst Protestants a single-source theory. Yet, constantly re-going over this fact had led to the misconception that: "Evangelicals don't think the church has any authority and it is mainly scripture because scripture is inspired by God and inerrant" (Student D, pre-interview reflections). One of the questions that the class subsequently wanted to ask our evangelical speaker was "Why do you go to church?". Her response, in which she detailed the huge role her church and the church community played in her life, served to correct this misinterpretation. Indeed, in their post-interview reflections many students made a comment in a similar vein to Student J who said she was surprised that: "that they do see the importance of the Church and believe that they should listen to it". Students also commented on the fact that this speaker supported every answer she gave with a scriptural reference, a tangible example of how much emphasis evangelicals place on 'God's word'.

Similarly, in response to the students' question "How do you reconcile your belief that the church is authoritative with the fact that there have been historic instances of Church corruption?", our Catholic speaker was able to provide the class with a much more nuanced description of the notion of papal infallibility. The textbook simply states that "the whole body of the Catholic faith is inerrant" (Frye, 2017, p.233). Many students thus formed the view that Catholics are incapable of accepting the fallibility of their church leaders. Our speaker, however, corrected this assumption explaining that "members of the Church…right the way up to the Pope…we're human, we're fallible, we do get things wrong" clarifying that the Pope has "a very limited and special kind of infallibility…it's not a

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kind of ‘anything the Pope says goes’”. Unaware of this caveat, many students made similar comments to that of Student R in their post-interview reflections, who noted that she was surprised at how the speaker “admitted members of the Church make mistakes despite having the Holy Spirit”. This notion was something I myself had not fully appreciated, highlighting the value of insider perspectives for both student and teacher (Heimbrock, 2001). Furthermore, when I asked students directly whether they thought hearing from insiders was valuable for their learning, they all responded in the affirmative. Social desirability bias no doubt played a role in these responses, yet the fact that every student was able to record something they had learnt from these interviews and that my mentor also commented on the success of the activity makes these answers more reliable.

However, I also found that the extent to which ethnographic material can help build students’ substantive knowledge is dependent on how it is presented in lessons. One of the reasons I believe the interviews worked so well was because, occurring later in the scheme, students had already acquired sufficient understanding of the foundational ideas of the unit, enabling them to engage meaningfully in this dialogue. Contrastingly, in Lesson Four when I presented students with an ethnographic source before teaching them about the belief system of its author, my intervention was much less successful. My mentor observed that many students struggled to engage with this passage, despite it being “comprehensible enough” largely because I had overestimated the class’ “vocabulary and background knowledge assumptions”. Consequently, whilst I would not go as far as Wright (2008, p.11) and assert that students must receive an overview of the “prototypical properties” of a religion before exploring its diversity – as I am not convinced there is a ‘prototypical’ Christian way of reading the Bible – providing students with a bit of background knowledge of the sub-group being studied does make individual case studies more intelligible.

The ability of ethnographic material to deconstruct stereotypical understandings was also observed. As mentioned above, during Lesson Two it had become apparent that some students believed all evangelicals to be fundamentalists. The students pre-interview reflections informed me that many also held this view about Catholics, with Student A writing “[Catholics] just take everything literally”. That both speakers asserted that they believed in evolution surprised the majority of students. In their post-interview reflections, fourteen students noted this as something they had learned about Catholicism and eleven students noted this as something they learned about evangelicalism. Moreover, when I asked the guest speakers themselves what they thought the benefit of this activity

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had been, both of them commented upon how such conversations help to dismantle false assumptions (see Appendix 3).

Many students drew upon these new understandings when asked to 'Examine two different Christian views concerning the nature of the Bible' for their end of unit essays. Not only did students demonstrate clear knowledge of Christianity's internal diversity, but they were also able to use practical examples from the ethnographic material to support the claims they were making. For example, when explaining how fundamentalists view the Bible, Student D explained the concept of "proof texting" whilst Student J how some fundamentalist churches "believe that the scientific knowledge we have today e.g. the Big Bang/ evolution that contradict the Bible are the works of Satan trying to put against the word of God"; both of these ideas derive from Ammerman's ethnography from Lesson Two. Moreover, Student I utilised our evangelical speaker's description of Bible studies to explain the practical ramifications of the Protestant doctrine of Sola Scriptura; "evangelicals Bible studies look different to Catholics too…they will often sit around in groups (with or without a priest) and converse among different people to help in solving questions or interpreting scriptures from the Bible". Students also described how Catholics interpret scripture with great nuance: "they acknowledge that a lot of the Bible is literature and is not literal" (Student M). Interestingly however, many students seemed to re-espouse their initial understandings when it came to evangelicalism with eight students writing in their essays that evangelicals interpret the Bible literally.

Lastly, I observed using ethnographic content within lessons provided more opportunities to engage students in critical analysis. With 'reflexivity' being a key stage of Jackson's pedagogy, the class spent time discussing the credibility of each insider viewpoint they were presented with. It can be difficult to engage students in theological debate, especially when most lack any personal religious affiliation; it is all too easy to simply discard religious truth claims. Yet, if students can listen to an insider explain the beliefs which underpin their views, critical opinions can be formed "based on understanding, not on ignorance, bias or misinterpretation" (Watson, 2012, p.18). For example, in Lesson One, some students found the views of the fundamentalist pastor more convincing than that of the Cambridge Professor. Student H, for example, wrote that "I think that the idea that God made the world how Genesis describes is central to the Christian faith and it's important to preserve these ideas, otherwise we lose faith and value in the rest of the Bible." Notably, this does not mean that Student H is now a creationist herself; she notes that she personally believes that "not everything

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should be literal". Yet her answer does signal that the explanation given by the evangelical pastor has enabled her see how and why people could come to such conclusions. Alternatively, when students disagreed with particular Christian perspectives on certain issues, they seemed able to do so with more weight; critiquing specific ideas as opposed to general beliefs.

Conclusions

This study serves to support Jackson's findings that ethnographic content adds nuance to RE and thus asserts that insider voices should be used to aid student's understanding of religious diversity at every stage of their RE journey. Further, writing in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, my hope is that this study has provided practitioners with some new ideas as to how such voices can be listened to effectively, in light of increased restrictions on school visitors.

Yet, whilst adopting an ethnographic approach can help to refine students' knowledge of intra-religious difference, it simultaneously has the power to reproduce essentialised understandings. Presenting my class with Ammerman's ethnographic account of a fundamentalist Baptist church, for example, seems to have unintentionally reinforced the idea that all evangelicals are fundamentalists, despite my efforts to counter this narrative by introducing students to an evangelical speaker with a contrasting outlook. I cannot be certain as to why this happened, yet I can hypothesise that Ammerman's account held greater epistemic power because it reinforced the simplistic narrative most commonly peddled by the media; a crucial source of information about religions in an increasingly secular nation (Davie, 2015). Teachers then, need to better understand the preconceptions students have about religious traditions so that they can appropriately select and contextualise sources for study. For teachers of teenagers today, this will involve not only an awareness of how religions are represented in traditional media outlets, which is largely well documented (Horrell, O'Donnell & Tollerton, 2018), but also an understanding of how students' understandings of religion are shaped through their interactions on social media platforms; which remains largely unexplored. Further research into this is area is vital to ensure that uninformed prejudices can be challenged within the RE classroom.

Lastly, I would stress the importance of using the interpretive approach alongside complementary pedagogical models. One of the notable weaknesses of the class' assessed essays was that many students struggled to ground the diverse range of views they were describing in Biblical evidence.

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The critical study of ethnographic content must then be accompanied by a hermeneutical examination of sacred texts to ensure that varied religious views are appropriately contextualised (Pett & Cooling, 2018). The interweaving of these approaches will greatly enhance student's ability to understand why Christianity is no longer one thing, but as one student wrote in the introduction to her essay "an umbrella term for different beliefs and interpretations".

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Appendix 1

Students' questionnaire scores, indicating their knowledge of different Christian denominations

Student	Total Score
Student A	27
Student B	24
Student C	21
Student D	11
Student E	4
Student F	9
Student G	50
Student H	20
Student I	27
Student J	17
Student K	23
Student L	15
Student M	35
Student N	24
Student O	33

Appendix 2

Table showing the spread of grades for each A-Level component among Year 12 students

Grade	Philosophy of Religion	Ethics	Christian Teachings
A*+	1		
A*			
A*-	3	1	
A+		2	
A	6	2	7
A-	5	5	8
B+			
B		1	
B-	5	2	3
C+		3	
C		1	1
C-		3	
D+			
D		1	
D-			1

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Appendix 3

External speakers' responses to the question, "*How important do you think it is that people studying religion engage in dialogue with members of the communities they are studying?*"

Catholic Speaker: I think its hugely important. Um, I mean from my perspective as a member of a religious faith I think it's really important because obviously you know it is the thing that gives meaning to my life, its hugely important to me and I want to make sure that when people think about it they are thinking about the reality of it rather than some kind of distortion of it or some picture of it that's, you know, almost certainly very well intention – I don't think there is a big campaign out there to…to… diss the church, I really don't but people don't always understand, we haven't always been the best at explaining it either, so I think its really good when people actually do. Also, it means that people see it as being, it's not just a list of beliefs, or even a list of like moral thou shalt nots, it is actually a whole way of life. So, for example, if I could actually invite your Year 12s to come to Fisher House, they would see us, yes talking, and sometimes arguing about what we believe – because that's also part of learning more about our faith, this kind of wrestling with these sometimes-difficult questions – but they would also see us having fun together, they would see us socialising together and all of that is definitely part of it. You know, it's a way of life, it's not just a set of propositions in other words. I'm also really aware of this as a university chaplain as I have colleagues who are, for example, the Jewish Chaplain or the Muslim Chaplain and a whole host of Anglican chaplains and I want to not just think to myself 'Oh yeah I know what Islam teaches', without ever talking to a Muslim. You know that would be quite wrong. Or 'I know what Judaism teaches' without ever talking to a Jew. So, I think it's absolutely vital and I hugely encourage what you are doing.

Evangelical Speaker: I just think they are great. I do think it's a really great and important thing to do. I think it is so easy to have misconceptions, um, and I think that works in all directions and it's easy to misunderstand one another and then mistreat one another. Christians have definitely been guilty of that plenty of times as well. So yeah, it's really important to be able to understand one another and the kind of nuance of what people believe. And, I think that helps then in the sense that even if we disagree on some things we are still able to relate to each other well. I think one of the things we have potentially lost slightly recently is the ability to disagree well, to say, I don't completely agree with everything you believe but I still want to be kind and respect you rather than be hateful. So, I think, yeah, it's really important to engage seriously with one another and to be good at listening to one another.

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