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The Case for Shared Religious Education

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Abstract: This paper conceptualises 'shared religious education' as a way for religious educators to reflect on how their subject might respond to a global need for cooperation and mutual understanding. In the context of migration, climate crisis and violent conflict, European societies are increasingly plural, yet subject to processes of individualization and competition which undermine people's ability to cooperate and share across their respective cultural and ideological differences. We argue that there is an imperative for sharing and collaboration in response to the dangers we see in our increasingly fractured social worlds; and that education can play a key role in responding to this urgent need. Religious education, however, is subject to the sociological reality that it can separate as well as unite people. Through a critical discussion of the 'shared education' model, we make a case for shared religious education, identifying four core aims for those working in the fields of religious and worldviews education. Drawing on literature from religious education, we offer ideas and insights for how those working in the fields of religious and worldviews education may pursue these aims and so respond to the imperative for sharing.

Keywords: religious education; shared education; shared religious education

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1. Introduction

The International Commission on the Futures of Education (UNESCO 2021) is unequivocally clear in its assessment of global priorities in light of climate crises and global disparities. We need nothing less than a fundamental rethink of how political systems work, shifting us away from thinking individually to draw instead on culturally and contextually specific approaches to collective decision-making, inclusive of the global majority, and not dominated by the global minority. The Commission envisions education having a fundamental role to play in that change. Governments, in their view, need to reimagine education as a common good and schools as diverse places which promote more just, equitable and sustainable futures. In these schools, pedagogy should be organised around principles of 'cooperation, collaboration, and solidarity' (UNESCO 2021, p. 4). We are attracted to this imperative but also starkly aware of the gulf between the ideal and reality. In this article, we explore the imperative for sharing that the ICFE and others have made in relation to education and make the case for forms of 'shared religious education' that take this responsibility seriously. We understand shared religious education broadly as being concerned with promoting characteristic commitments to diversity as a lived reality and the educational value of meaningful encounters and exchanges across religious, cultural, and ideological differences. That educational value has the potential to be transformative when it cultivates inter-personal relations, supports the development of academic knowledge of religion and worldviews, and provides skills for practices of sharing and reciprocity.

We argue that these values, insights, and skills are not exclusive to any one particular form of religious education, whether grounded in a single-identity or plural setting; rather, they can be accessed in multiple ways where religious education is constructed as a shared endeavour. Indeed, we will show that at a more abstract level, the notion of 'shared religious education' affords the possibility of acknowledging and living with tensions between diverse legitimate approaches to the subject itself, rather than splintering off into rival or opposing camps. Practiced well by those advocating for it—that is through cooperating, collaborating, and acting in solidarity—damage caused to religious education itself when the forces of diversity push theory and practice into opposing camps might be mitigated. Holding these alternative, legitimate, but conflicting accounts of RE in a collaborative rather than competitive relationship enables religious educators to resist temptations to dissolve difference in overly simplistic solutions, whether in a claim to sameness of 'ideal/pure essential belief', or insistence on the primacy of 'common humanity'. Neither position reflects the messy 'reality' highlighted by Jackson (1997), that people in a religious community often have very different beliefs and may also practice very different variants of rituals and festivals. Furthermore, it seems unlikely, in pragmatic terms, that an overly simplistic religious education can prepare students for an increasingly divided world, where sharing across difference is increasingly necessary. We elicit 'shared religious education' as an approach that presumes difference within and across beliefs, and recognises that there are limits to sharing, for example, experiences of 'enduring strangeness' or relationships of all give and no take. We also theorise and exemplify shared religious education as an approach that attempts to balance ideas and experiences of cooperation and commensurability with competition and incommensurability of beliefs.

Our first step is to name the crisis of cooperation that we believe characterises many aspects of our social and political worlds and which demands a response from education systems that supports greater collaboration and strengthens our capacity for sharing.

2. The Sharing Imperative

2.1. Crisis of Cooperation

The number of people forced to flee globally has risen steadily, from 40 million in 1995 to 108.4 million in 2022 (UNHCR 2023), though only a relatively small proportion of that number end up in Europe. Nevertheless, in Europe, where the authors of this article are based, political discourses at the beginning of the twenty-first century have been marked by a concern about migration (into Europe). A series of violent conflicts in the northern hemisphere, most recently in Syria and Ukraine, have generated significant numbers of displaced people. Nevertheless, the rhetoric this displacement generates is keenly felt in many ways, including in education systems across the continent as the accommodation of people displaced by violent conflict over territory or borders has generated ongoing political tensions and disagreement.

One key element of that rhetoric concerns access to finite resources, including securing access to education. Who deserves what support and which educational opportunities? In relation to education, concern to secure a fair or just degree of access to education as a good may be expressed in anti-migrant terms, disadvantaging 'home' students from other disadvantaged backgrounds, raising questions such as: Why should incomers experience educational opportunities or additional support when these are perceived to be at the expense of the existing 'home' population? From the perspective of migrant groups, there may be practical concerns about the barriers to integration faced within education systems. These might include navigating unfamiliar languages, cultures, beliefs, and values in what are complex social spaces.

In one sense, concern about access to finite resources could be seen as entirely justified given the unsustainability of our current systems of social organisation and consumption. At current rates, the equivalent of 1.7 Earths may be needed to sustain us into the future and several commentators have argued that adaptation to climate change is no longer an option for some societies (Vince 2022). However, this does not appear to be what is driving concerns around just division of scarce resources, especially in those jurisdictions in which neo-liberal conceptions of freedom and entitlement dominate popular political discourses. Plant (2009) explains that neo-liberal thinkers are dismissive of social justice arguments based on the 'common good' on the grounds that it is impossible to agree on a moral basis for an 'ideal' community in a plural society. Rather, they believe individual liberty and competitive market forces are the best way to produce innovation and to resolve inequalities (von Mises 1981).

By contrast, the economist Kate Raworth (2017, p. 25) states that the notion we are rational, independent consumers is a myth and blinds us to the reality of our interdependence as humans and what she identifies as 'in-built' instincts to 'give, share, and reciprocate'. Complex systems of global mass production ensure that ordinary people make comparatively little themselves, rendering them highly dependent on others for even our most basic needs (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019). Yet this dependence is understood competitively rather than cognisant of our mutual interdependence. For Raworth (2017), the consequences of ignoring the need to share our diminishing resources will be increased inequality leading to increased social instability.

To switch from a competitive mindset to one that is shared can prove challenging and in plural communities, such negotiations are particularly complex. Such issues are explored powerfully in Loach's (2023) film 'The Old Oak', in which the landlord of a failing public house in County Durham befriends a Syrian refugee and attempts to quell tensions between their two communities. In more hopeful scenes, the two groups prepare and share food for a community kitchen, come together for rare social evenings at the pub, share grief, and parade as one at the Durham Miners' Gala. Yet in the background, 'ne-er-do-wells' sabotage these efforts at community building. The film depicts the sobering impact of a further pull made on scarce resources, often in the most socio-economically deprived districts in developed countries where accommodation is cheapest, and diasporas form, further accentuating tensions between different groups around how limited benefits are distributed.

Negotiating what can and cannot be shared inevitably involves the construction or deconstruction of boundaries between groups of people. Stakeholders must consider what boundaries are necessary for groups to maintain group coherence or protect identity and what boundaries should be deconstructed or made permeable to address inequality, increase comprehension, or facilitate cooperation, integration, and cohesion.

2.2. The Uncooperative Self

Despite the increasing need to share, sociologists have for some time now drawn attention to the fragmentation of social structures that support cooperation and sharing such that, to our detriment, our cooperative instincts are being gradually displaced with a tendency to withdraw and isolate. Bauman (2013) coins the term 'mixophobia' to describe the fear some people can experience when faced with the increasing 'polyvocality and cultural variation' in urban spaces. Rather than confront their fear, they resort to separation or self-segregation to ease their anxiety and confusion. The result, according to Sennett (2012), is 'the uncooperative self'. In his analysis, the withdrawal of individuals from social mixing may arise out of a sense of insecurity or fear but is sustained through individualism, a tendency to narcissism, and complacency.

Beck (2010) too sees the reduction of sharing and cooperation as a characteristic of the twenty-first century, but understands this in terms of individualization rather than individualism. His conception of individualization refers to the personal construction of our social worlds through individual choice and preference rather than established networks and traditional social structures. Individualization is not the same as Sennett's narcissistic 'me first' culture, but a realisation that we are burdened as individuals to make our own way in an increasingly complex and globalised world. Thus, we are likely to be selective about who we share with, feel less sense of duty or obligation to others, and be more aware of risks and less likely to trust. In this way, sharing, in many cases, loses its altruistic aspect, and is reduced to an instrumental transaction.

These processes of withdrawal from cooperation and growing individualization are also identifiable in education. We are realising, for example, that education has been complicit in perpetuating the mindset of individualization that sees humans as competitive, rational individuals who are separate from the world around them (Taylor 2020). Indeed, countries which are the most highly educated are the greatest consumers and biggest offenders in deepening our global crisis (Komatsu et al. 2019). Regarding religious education, Dinham and Shaw (2017, p. 11) give examples from England of how religious education has socialised young people into thinking in confused ways about religion and belief. They point to policies that frame the purpose of RE in terms of building social cohesion, countering extremism, and developing personal spirituality, and they caution that societies who adopt similar approaches risk the reproduction of 'individualistic understandings' of religion and belief.

2.3. Individualisation of Beliefs

According to Beck, these social processes of individualisation have particular significance for religious beliefs and practices. Beck argues that the way individuals in western societies position themselves in relation to traditional communities or beliefs has changed in the third millennium. There is, he says, a 'subjective anarchy of belief' (Beck 2010, p. 85), meaning that traditional ways of believing and practicing are giving way to beliefs and values based on individual preference and are open to the influence of a myriad of groups, gurus, or preachers with competing truth claims that may include extreme views or conspiracies. The situation is 'anarchic' as there is no agreed authority against which to measure the competing beliefs. Beck distinguishes his view of subjectivism from that typically associated with the privatization of religion in secularisation theory. Secularisation theorists have pointed to the role of individualism in undermining people's adherence to collective beliefs, practices, and ethical codes, resulting in a reluctance to employ religious language and ideas in public domains. The result is a privatization of beliefs which are held personally and reduced to the status of a leisure pursuit (Bruce 2002). Some sociologists may have seen this privatization of religion as a liberation from domination and a pathway to a liberal secular society based on rational principles, democratic politics, and human rights, but Beck understood the subjective shift differently. He characterised it as the 'individualization of religion' where each person had the power and responsibility to create 'a God of one's own' (Beck 2010). For some, this may be liberating, but for others, this is overwhelming and anxiety-inducing. Thus, he understood the individualization of religion to be fraught with risk; individuals must navigate the treacherous terrain of competing ideological, political, and religious views in order to make sense of their lives. Furthermore, the breakdown of traditional forms of belief and subsequent loss of religious institutions can bring with it isolation and social fragmentation.

In his final book, Beck (2016) argued that shifting away from individualization will require nothing less than a 'metamorphosis'. He was optimistic that the climate emer-

gency could be the catalyst for such a dramatic change and could provide space for new opportunities and alternative ways of thinking. He believed we already live in a highly interdependent global system which he terms our 'cosmopolitized reality', though we are generally unaware of what this means. The immensity and global nature of the climate crisis, he contends, is capable of shifting us from our preoccupation with national interests and individualised concerns; it can spur us to transcend boundaries (including national and ideological) to share responsibilities and collaborate on collective actions.

Interestingly, Beck (2016, p. 15) envisages this happening in what he calls 'cosmopolitized spaces of action', which can include places for cultural exchange. Such spaces can give rise to moments of metamorphosis where existing boundaries in our thinking are set aside, and actors take opportunities to develop creative responses that transcend nationalistic, individualised or ideologically confined ways of thinking and acting. While Beck does not specifically apply his concept to education, we would argue that educational spaces have the potential to be cosmopolitized spaces of action. Certainly, in many European countries, classrooms are increasingly cosmopolitanized as a result of the movement of people and the increased accessibility to information about global events, but to become spaces of action, they require pedagogies that are transformative.

Another major sociologist of the late twentieth century, Zygmunt Bauman (2003), also attempted to offer responses to our social fragmentation; however, he was less optimistic than Beck about the possibilities for change. His writing shows how he wrestled with his pessimism about what could be achieved, and he regularly reminded his readers that in modern societies, change lies outside of the reach of individuals—as our problems are increasingly global, our sphere of influence remains local. Yet, he did offer two proposals: first, we must learn to live with ambiguity and fragmentation while, second, we must seek to pursue the search for common humanity. This advice resonates with the analysis and recommendations of education experts who, like Beck and Bauman, are concerned with social fragmentation and subjective anarchy. UNESCO, for example, has over many decades published recommendations from global scholars who emphasise the need to focus on the common good (Common Worlds Research Collective 2020; UNESCO 2015), and to assist learners as global citizens to handle ambiguity and complexity through the development of intercultural competences and dialogical skills in education (UNESCO 2023).

2.4. Competing Truths

A further challenge in these conditions is that of mutual understanding, or rather its absence. Different worldviews, religious beliefs, and practices inevitably contain aspects within them that are hard to understand for those who are not familiar with them. Indeed, their truth claims can be competing, and this creates limits to the possibilities for mutual understanding in religious education contexts. In relation to state-funded education, states have responded very differently to this epistemological challenge: some have accepted the incommensurability of religious truth claims and permitted separation of young people according to religion by school (as in Ireland or the Netherlands). Others have reflected these differences within classes or subject-specific groups (as in Austria and most parts of Germany for religious education) or by abolishing religious education (as in France and recently in Luxembourg). In other places, states have prioritised 'common education', in which young people from plural backgrounds attend the same schools, including classes in religious education where the study of religion and worldviews is designed to be inclusive (as in Wales).

Yet, even in places where the curriculum is designed to be inclusive, schools may have a religious character (Macaulay 2009), or the pupil populations could be largely homogenous in relation to beliefs resulting in limited opportunities for mixing (Ipgrave

et al. 2010). Across these various settings, the attempts to combine pupils often do not do justice to the complexity of their beliefs or backgrounds. Within those settings, when learning about difference, the extent to which learners can come to understand others of different identities and beliefs remains an unresolved issue (Lundie and Conroy 2015).

To play a central role in responding to our crisis of cooperation, educators must therefore first become aware of the many ways education can serve to promote separation and individualization, whether intentionally or not, as the norm. Currently, in western societies, Collet-Sabé and Ball (2022, p. 899) point out how, too often, the 'formation and enactment of practices within the school presumes a preeminent individuality rather than a recognition of community'. When self-formation is constructed narrowly around individual academic achievement in this way, it generates an atmosphere of competition where success is measured at the individual level. From their perspective, self-formation is primarily a matter of how one lives rather than what one knows, and this involves building an awareness of our interdependence on one another and on our planet. By contrast, there are many who believe it to be imperative that education systems help us reimagine our relationship with each other and the world (Common Worlds Research Collective 2020), not least through an increase in sharing.

As three scholars working in the field of religious and worldviews education, we share this concern, but we are also aware of projects and initiatives in many countries where there are efforts to respond to them in various ways. We aim here to highlight those trends which can appear under many headings, including multifaith religious education, interfaith education, interreligious learning, and dialogical religious education. The brief review which follows is not 'systematic' as such (that is another project); rather our purpose is more tentative, drawing on our collective experience of working in the field over many years to make a broad case for the value of these initiatives and also to connect them.

In a scholarly field that can be characterised by arguments for the 'correct' or 'best' way to study religion, we recognise that different approaches are valid and have their own internal logic, yet they face similar challenges in relation to the crisis of cooperation and the individualization of beliefs. Our argument is that the foregrounding of 'shared religious education' can offer a constructive conceptualisation with potential to build bridges across the various forms of religious and worldviews education to help meet these challenges. We begin by outlining and critically assessing how 'shared education' as a concept and practice has been employed in states where political conflicts and tensions have rendered it a political priority already. We then combine the lessons from this evidence with our collective experience of working and researching religious education to make a case for the cultivation of shared religious education.

3. Established Models of Shared Education in Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts, and the Example of Northern Ireland

There are ad hoc examples already of educational initiatives that attempt to hold fragmentation and commonality in tension within a model of 'shared education'. These have emerged in societies marked by conflict or deep social or political divisions. Indeed, the concept as a social-political tool has been employed in a range of international settings, including Northern Ireland (Duffy and Gallagher 2014), Macedonia (Loader et al. 2020), Israel (Jost and Hughes 2021), and the USA (Gallagher 2016).

Admittedly, attempts to overcome educational separation are not new. In relation to overcoming religious separation of pupils we could point to the 19th century when enlightenment ideals inspired the authorities in the city of Bremen and the county of Nassau (Germany) to establish shared forms of RE. In Nassau, "the denominational separation of schools was abolished in 1817 and in 1838 a joint religious education programme for Lutheran,

Reformed and Catholic children was introduced alongside denominational religious education" (Lott and Schröder-Klein 2006, p. 69). Around the same time (1811) in Ireland, the Kildare Place Society was formed, and this managed to sustain non-denominational schooling for a short period in Dublin and around Ireland where Protestant and Catholic children were educated together (Akenson 1970). This was achieved by having a minimalist religious education; scripture would be read without comment. The vision in both cases was of children from different religious backgrounds being educated together, although in both countries, separation of children by religion subsequently became a feature of their systems, one at school level and the other at class level for religious education. This historical challenge regarding separate or joint religious education remains a contemporary issue in various forms.

In Northern Ireland, the challenge facing policy makers in a divided education system is whether to maintain the status quo of separate schools or mandate a system of common schools. The danger with the first is that existing social cleavages are perpetuated through subsequent generations; the risk of the second is that strong bonds between schools and communities are broken and/or schools become sites of conflict, mirroring wider social disagreements. One solution has been the development of a shared education model. This model of exchange between whole schools has emerged within the context of Northern Ireland, where, despite the end of armed conflict, strong divisions remain and are reflected in an education system that remains largely separated by religious identity in various school types (Gallagher et al. 2022; Hughes and Loader 2015). In this context, shared education means different school types working together, including through opportunities for their pupils to come together for classes and/or extra-curricular activities.

The approach taken recognises the reality of fragmentation or division in education systems, either because of conflict or social cleavages, yet it aims to build a sense of commonality and to promote reconciliation without overlooking the differences. In divided societies where pupils are separated according to language, religion, or ethnicity, it may seem that peaceful co-existence between the 'sides' would be a satisfactory outcome; however, a 'shared education' approach adopts a more ambitious view. It is based on a vision of a shared society that recognises interdependence and mutuality, and promotes joint action and collaboration. Thus, it is grounded in a relational view of the self where identities are seen as malleable, and group relations can be understood as having the potential to evolve, for example through co-construction of alternative narratives (Kuttner 2017). In giving recognition and agency to educators from different sides of a divide, it opts for a perspective of interculturalism rather than pluralism. In other words, it attempts to steer a path between approaches to education that tend towards assimilation and those that tend towards strict separation. In a way, shared education could be considered a practical example of Bauman's (2003) vision of living with fragmentation while building common humanity.

The shared education model has also placed the experience of bringing learners together at the centre of its focus. Following contact theory (Allport 1954), this is grounded in the potential for contact between pupils to promote positive social relationships. Indeed, the value of shared education has been shown to be increased friendship potential, reduction in fear of the out-group, and stronger social cohesion (Duffy and Gallagher 2016; Gallagher 2016; Hughes 2014; Hughes and Loader 2015). Despite some limits of the theory and its practice (cf. Section 4.3 below), it can also highlight that where separation occurs in education systems, such as religiously separate schools, creating porous boundaries and bridging between communities offers positive alternatives in contexts where arguments fall into either/or categories of separate or common schooling (Ben Jaafar et al. 2009).

In Northern Ireland, this vision of shared education was put into legislation in 2016. The purpose of shared education is defined by the Shared Education Act (Northern Ireland) (2016) as: (i) delivering educational benefits to children and young persons; (ii) promoting the efficient and effective use of resources; (iii) promoting equality of opportunity; (iv) promoting good relations; and (v) promoting respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion. Since then, the Department of Education (DE) in Northern Ireland and the region's Education Authority (EA) have implemented a shared education policy (Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) (2015)) whereby schools are asked to establish partnerships with others in their area.

The DE sets a minimum number of hours for shared activities, but the school has flexibility around the nature and length of the interactions. This recognises the importance of self-governance in collaborative work, an approach that is supported in Ostrom's (2015) research on 'commoning'. She found communities can manage sharing sustainably when they are given the power and resources to do so at a local level. The model of change within shared education gives agency to schools to tailor partnerships in ways that are relevant to their local contexts; in turn, teachers are empowered to create space for innovation. Shared education allows teachers and pupils to retain a religious or cultural identity associated with a particular school, but also belong to a shared (inter-school) community (Gallagher and Duffy 2016). Thus, distinct social and cultural ways of life can be maintained, such as religiously influenced education or linguistically differentiated classes, yet common goals and mutuality can also be fostered.

A key lesson from shared education projects is that, to be effective, sharing in education must engage with ideational concerns (Hughes and Loader 2023). In other words, constructing a process for envisioning shared education is key (Nelson 2013). Not only that, but determining a vision is best when there is local ownership and co-construction of aims (including the voices of young people) (for similar lessons from the field of peace education see Bajaj (2015)). Thus, in relation to shared education, working on a vision of sharing is a task for participants at multiple levels. Notably, Ostrom (2015) also found that developing a shared vision is core to successful cooperation and sharing. In this way, shared education is not seen as an 'add-on,' but as integral to the core function of the school.

A second core lesson from shared education research is that the value of working across boundaries is more effective when it is regular, sustained, and visible. In previous attempts to build reconciliation through education in Northern Ireland, outcomes were found to be inadequate when contact was occasional and tokenistic (O'Connor et al. 2002). Thus, shared education has built on the evolving evidence in contact theory research (Paolini et al. 2021) such as the work by Brown and Hewstone (2005) which shows the potential for increased positive contact through intimacy-building activities and encouraging a shared group membership, as well as the contributions of Dixon et al. (2005), which point to the need for power-relations to be taken account of in contact settings. Together, these insights are being employed to create shared experiences that are authentic and recognise the real-world context of young people (Hughes et al. 2018).

This is not always easy to achieve, and researchers have found that where shared education raises controversial issues at classroom level, teachers may choose to avoid them (Donnelly and Burns 2022). Teachers need support when working in shared spaces and facilitating shared educational experiences. In the Northern Ireland context, increased professional development, government support, and policy development have helped to increase the positive outcomes of shared education in relation to building good relations, and promoting equality and respect for identity and diversity (see, for example, progress noted in inspection reports (Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) 2020; Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) 2022)).

To summarise the argument of our article so far, we have shown that there is a global crisis effecting our planet, which is affecting the ability of communities to flourish, or in some cases to exist, in a sustainable way. From a Western perspective, there is also evidence of social fragmentation and individualization which are both the symptom and cause of our crisis. We must learn, therefore, to move away from individualistic ways of being and rediscover our abilities to work together and share for our common good. Education has the potential to be a key contributor to this, although at times it has worked against sharing both in its promotion of competition and individualism, and in the way it has separated people (by religion, among other categories). To respond effectively, we must find ways to overcome the barriers to sharing, even in contexts of conflict or division where separation has become accepted as the only way to co-exist. One example of how this can be done in education is through a 'shared education' approach. 'Shared' in this context is distinct from 'common' or 'integrated'. The latter two terms can imply sameness or uniformity. A shared education model recognises difference and acknowledges that forms of separation may be necessary or even desirable, but it also notes that separation has the potential to fuel division and may feed into negative outcomes such as stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. However, these can and should be mitigated by creating regular and sustained opportunities for sharing in terms of resources, facilities (including pupils moving between schools), and curricula. Building on this, we now consider what this could mean for religious education.

4. Shared Religious Education

Bringing together these examples of 'shared education' in divided societies, and the sociological analysis which preceded them, we believe religious education has an essential contribution to make, under the right conditions, to help address the crisis of cooperation that has previously been sketched. Our purpose is not to offer a monolithic model of shared RE, but to offer an outline of how religious education, in its various forms, might positively encompass shared approaches. We do this by proposing four core aims for shared religious education that can support and sustain an educational response to our sharing challenge.

1. To build a vision of sharing;
2. To create opportunities for boundary crossing;
3. To cultivate meaningful encounters (including in digital forms), and;
4. To promote pedagogies that are transformative.

We elucidate these aims below, making connections with existing scholarship in which we detect examples of a shared approach (some of which are included in this present special issue). We recognise these examples do not represent an exhaustive list, but they illustrate the international interest in developing forms of religious education that could be encouraged and developed to address our crisis of cooperation and mutual understanding.

4.1. Envisioning Shared Religious Education

During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there has been a proliferation of methods, approaches, and models proposed for religious education (Gearon 2013; Grimmitt 2000; concerning Europe: Williame 2007), and each, in their own way, are forms of envisioning. Academic debate around these approaches has played a valuable role in 'testing' their value and allowing adaptations, improvements, and alternatives to emerge. We do not doubt the value of this work; however, it takes time for theory to permeate into practice, not least because of the challenges of policy development and implementation.

A point to be learned from shared education research is the power and potential for envisioning at a more local level. Like findings in the field of peace education (Bajaj 2015), actions at local levels can be highly successful in developing encounters and experiences

that enrich sharing and mutuality. There are many examples of this in the religious education literature too—for example using the practice of shared storying (Hess 2020) as a tool for understanding context and envisioning a future; the cultivation of a community of enquiry through participation in shared spaces (Orchard et al. 2021); or developing curricula that engage with plurality (e.g., Bauer 2022). What these have in common is that they employ context-informed creativity to envision a shared form of religious education.

We note that another important aspect of the shared education model is that it recognises difference, and the fact that people may make educational choices based upon religious identity while also seeking to mitigate the possible negative effects from separation and dividing learners. From a sociological perspective, identities depend on being distinguishable and distinguished, and it is important to accept that there may be aspects that cannot be shared and that there are always varying degrees of mutual understanding in classrooms (Meyer 2021). In advocating for Shared RE, we do not suggest that everyone ends up sharing everything as a positive outcome; it cannot be the task of education to dissolve identities and distinctiveness. Rather, we see cooperation and sharing being encouraged where there is, first, recognition of diverse worldviews in a learning community and, second, the involvement of diverse voices in the co-construction or shaping of the learning purpose and the learning processes.

Obviously, the opportunity for this will vary from context to context, but we propose that, in general, sharing in religious education is enhanced by raising awareness of difference among our learning community and creating space for participation and reflection on how we can learn together. Admittedly, this could place educators and curricula in a space of uncertainty and rootlessness, but this is the very challenge that Beck (2012), Bauman (2003), and others have shown us must be faced. In many places, the challenges associated with envisioning religious education is not new. This is evident in ongoing debates over curricula and human rights (Jawoniyi 2012; Kaymakcan and Hendek 2022) as well as what counts as knowledge in the subject (Chater and Castelli 2017).

We believe that some ways which show promise in helping pupils to navigate uncertainty and respond to the imperative to share are premised on the use of inclusive language in religious education settings that builds commonality without extinguishing individual identities. This could involve acknowledging the existing beliefs that learners bring to the classroom and identifying activities or projects as 'shared explorations' or 'collaborations'. This is consistent with Hannam and May's (2022) argument that a religious education curriculum cannot be developed in abstraction but ought to be grounded in an awareness of the lives and location of those who experience it. Employing explicit processes of research or consultation when curriculum planning offers another way forward. The work of Dinham and Shaw (2017), for example, drew on the views of pupils and employers about their experiences of religious education and their vision for how the subject could evolve. Similarly, conducting 'small experiments' could help teachers to engage in ongoing reflection of their practice. In her Nobel-winning research into 'commoning', Elinor Ostrom (2015) highlights the value of small experiments in shared work to test out various interventions and grow those which show promise (diversify-select-amplify). Applied to religious education, this offers another way in which educators can practice 'envisioning' in an ongoing way and provide spaces for pupils to think and speak generally about what they are doing educationally and specifically about how it can cultivate sharing and cooperation.

4.2. Boundary Crossing

A second fundamental aim for shared religious education is to create opportunities for boundary-crossing, involving pupils and teachers. To address our crisis of cooperation, the UNESCO (2021, p. 40) report on Reimagining our Futures notes that 'Education has

a role to play in encouraging and assuring robust democratic citizenship, deliberative spaces, participatory processes, collaborative practices, relationships of care, and shared futures'. In these practices and processes, crossing boundaries can be both literal, involving movement in spatial or geographical terms (Duffy and Gallagher 2016; Robinson et al. 2020), or metaphorical, in which case boundaries may be crossed through the introduction of new ideas or alternative perspectives. Evidence from shared education projects show that, for learners, it is sustained contact with others that is the most significant mediating factor of social attitudes (Hughes 2014), yet other research has shown that engagement with others through virtual contact can also be significant (Wegerif et al. 2017). In contexts where encounters may be difficult to organise or where internet facilities are not good, the use of images and real-life stories of people from out-groups can also enhance confidence in and readiness for contact in future settings; Turner and Cameron (2016) have shown that engagement with case studies and examples can have positive effects on pupils' attitudes to out-groups.

In religious education, there can also be multiple opportunities for different types of boundary crossings, including geographical, virtual, and conceptual encounters. Wolffe et al. (2024) provide a fascinating example of how multiple types of sharing can be done within one project. Their Religious Toleration and Peace Project (RETOPEA) involved young people from multiple European countries coming together in physical and virtual meetings to explore historical examples of co-existence in different European communities that were characterized by diverse beliefs and values. A core focus for the encounters was co-creating short films (which they describe as 'docu-tubes'), which were subsequently shared with other students online. Thinking about in-person inter-faith encounters, Boehme (2019, p. 3) provides a list of five possible ways they may be structured or facilitated in an educational setting:

1. interreligious everyday encounters between people of different religious denominations,
2. initiatives of participant-oriented interreligious encounters between participants (groups) of different denominations (e.g., Day of Religions in some cities),
3. temporary interreligious encounters with theologically qualified experts of other denominations (e.g., by invitation),
4. interreligious encounters through learning processes stimulated by theologically qualified experts of other denominations (e.g., through team teaching or delegation or alternating teaching) and
5. didactically guided participant-oriented encounters between participants of different ideological and/or religious denominations (e.g., in large group lessons, parallel lessons, or in learning projects).

Clearly, this list could be adapted for cases of virtual religious education contact or extended to be more inclusive of non-religious worldviews, but it illustrates some of the possibilities open to religious educators.

In the majority of settings, however, the types of boundary crossings that are likely to be most manageable for teachers are those that stay within the classroom using resources such as textbooks, videos, or visitors to introduce pupils to the lives of 'insiders' (Jackson 1997). This 'lived religion' approach has been adopted in the production of textbooks and classroom materials by using young people as guides to their different religions (e.g., 'My Life My Religion' (BBC 2025)). In 'Lea asks Kazim about God', Meyer (2006) extends this idea by using two insiders from different traditions: two children visit a mosque and a church together, learn about the call to prayer and the church bells, and discuss the meaning of prayer. This pedagogical device foregrounds plural perspectives when young people are learning about religion and worldviews. Other ways to create

an encounter in single-identity settings is reflection on personal experiences, through techniques such as the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounter (Byram et al. 2009) or Story Circles (Deardoff 2019).

Our point is that there are many inherent possibilities for boundary crossing within religious education which can be exploited to increase awareness of others, legitimize alternative perspectives, and open possibilities for the development of pro-social attitudes. In its most basic sense, shared religious education is an 'engagement in plurality' (Shaw 2023).

4.3. Meaningful Encounters

Our third aim for shared religious education is that it should develop pedagogically constructive strategies for meaningful encounters. We know from contact theory that not every encounter across a boundary is positive; there is a growing awareness of negative as well as positive forms of contact (Paolini et al. 2021); also, such encounters may vary by frequency, strength and value. Based on research into Muslim and Jewish schools, Marie Parker-Jenkins (cited by Ipgrave 2016) used a six-point scale to show how encounters with out-groups ranged from 'non-existent' to 'superficial and tokenistic' to 'sustained and meaningful'. What such a list misses, however, are the complex issues that underlie choices about whether and what encounters are possible. Helpfully, there is a growing awareness of the specific challenges that can be associated with inter-religious and inter-belief encounters which, in turn, are pointing to possibilities for how these might be mitigated or addressed.

Meyer (2021, pp. 258–66) argues that building meaningful encounters must consider the ambiguity of aspects which are familiar and our enduring strangeness to one another, especially in matters of religion. He argues not just for tolerating this ambiguity but, like Bauman (2003), also for learning to "manage" to live with it together. While some authors simply uphold the goal that people should know each other at the end of an encounter, and so only the familiar aspect is mentioned, Meyer thinks this is unrealistic because part of the reality is concealed. It makes more pedagogical sense and is more sustainable for future encounters to deal constructively with the interplay of the familiar and persistently unfamiliar, and to include the persistently unfamiliar in the pedagogical process when getting to know each other. This can be done on different levels, for example on a micro level through small methodological markers such as words of blessing at the mention of Mohammed as a reminiscence to Muslims ('markers of unfamiliarity', Meyer 2021, pp. 261–62), and on a larger scale through discussions and reflections on the enduring strangeness. Explicitly managing commonalities and differences was similarly regarded as a key learning point from a shared dialogical project researched by (Husebø et al. 2019). A specific insight from the research findings was that allowing space for learners to clarify their own positionality built trust and strengthened relationships, allowing dialogues to move beyond superficial exchanges. Such evidence helps us to understand the importance of authenticity in making encounters across difference meaningful.

As noted above, it may not be easy or possible to arrange direct in-person encounters, but shared religious education can also be thought of as encounters through resources and encounters through digital media. Where the encounter is with ideas and resources, the authenticity of the sources and the interpretive skills of the teacher are crucial (Jackson 2004). If students are provided with misleading information, poorly constructed resources, or representations of religion that are disconnected from their own experiences, then they are likely to disengage from religious education (Marshall 2024). When teaching about Islam, for example, Savenije et al. (2022, p. 9) argue that learners may disagree about which sources are authoritative. To overcome this, the authors point to the need for teachers to make their choices visible and engage in 'deliberate epistemic switching' to model how secular and sacred sources can have different purposes and methods of interpretation.

In this way, they believe, teachers and learners can overcome materials being a source of division or distancing and can help to develop 'sharedness' and 'proximity' between learners and teachers.

Yet, we must return to the acknowledgement that building meaningful encounters into religious education is not always straightforward, and success is difficult to guarantee. Evidence from research into inter-religious dialogue shows the importance of creating conditions of respect and equality in encounters (Campdepadrós-Cullell et al. 2021); we know too that encounters are strengthened where there is interdependence, trust, and mutuality (Marujo 2020). There has been growing awareness in work on contact theory that achieving trust requires that attention is paid to the power relations between those involved in encounters. Hughes and Loader (2023) remind us that joint work cannot ignore the status of the participants and their group identities outside of the encounter as well. For shared religious education to avoid artificial exchanges and work towards meaningful encounters, critical awareness is needed of intersectionality, multiple identities (Bekerman and Zembylas 2017), and power relations (Hughes et al. 2018). The last aspects need specific sensitivity.

Some ways of addressing issues of power imbalances and creating more equal and meaningful encounters in shared education projects in Northern Ireland has been through ensuring inclusive representation of diverse students in symbolic or formal events and in school clubs or societies. Shared events in the school calendar, shared choirs and sports teams, and shared celebrations have been used in various partnerships to build community and interdependence. Interestingly, Sennett (2012) too focuses upon the importance of ritual as a way for partners to work together, even across unequal relationships. Rituals, of course, are at the heart of religions, but if we hope to build shared spaces and cultivate cooperation, religious educators must also find ways to use ritual as a means for meaningful encounters across boundaries and not just within their own communities.

4.4. Transformative Pedagogy

Fourthly, shared religious education should aim to promote pedagogy that is transformative. In envisioning new forms of education, the authors of *Reimagining our Futures* note:

> 'Pedagogy needs to be transformed around the principles of cooperation and solidarity, replacing longstanding modes of exclusion and individualistic competition. Pedagogy must foster empathy and compassion and must build the capacities of individuals to work together to transform themselves and the world. Learning is shaped through relationships between teachers, students, and knowledge that go beyond the limitations of classroom norms and codes of conduct. Learning extends students' relationships with the ethics and care needed to assume responsibility for our shared and common world. Pedagogy is the work of creating transformational encounters that are based in what exists and what can be built'. (The International Commission on the Futures of Education (UNESCO 2021, p. 147))

This plea for change contains a vision for education that is transformative for individuals and for their social worlds, realised through pedagogies that are relational and collaborative, which develop an ethic of compassion and mutuality that can, in turn, motivate a response. There are parallels here with Beck's (2016) 'cosmopolitized spaces for action' in which actors reach beyond their own individualised or group boundaries to generate shared ways of thinking or understanding, or creative responses for collaboration. We believe that religious education has much to offer in this regard, if it works to mitigate its potential towards separateness in some contexts or its promotion of individualism in others.

Not all religious education naturally leads to positive social outcomes, and it is important to be aware of its potential pitfalls as well as potential advantages. In some circumstances, its tendency for separateness can work against social cohesion (Fontana 2015) and sustain divisions (Franken 2017). Even in circumstances where it aims to build inclusion or mutual understanding, it can be founded on impoverished knowledge that is detached from 'real' or lived religion that can create misunderstandings or stereotypical representations (Agbaria 2012; Strandbrink 2014). Also, there is the risk that a religious education that is focused on self-interpretation (Dinham and Shaw 2017) draws learners into existential anxiety. When faced with questions of meaning, whether through philosophical and theological debate or through personal experiences such as the climate crisis or conflict, students may well feel overwhelmed if they are made to feel that it is up to them to make sense of it all without sufficient support or the help of existing frameworks. As we have noted previously, this is what Beck (2010) describes as the burden of having to create a 'god of one's own'.

Nonetheless, religious educators from many different contexts are finding opportunities to support students through transformative pedagogies. We see claims for transformative approaches appearing in several overlapping domains of religious education, including those focused on building relational values, developing inter-religious competences, and those who see knowledge as praxis in religious education. In the next section, we briefly sketch where we see potential in existing insights and practices.

Turning first to relational values, we note scholars who have developed activities and projects that cultivate 'mutual hospitality' or 'hospitableness' (Boehme 2024; K. Wright 2017). In these religious education contexts, learners are introduced to the benefits of sharing and relational values while also being engaged in practices of 'give and take' in many forms, from individuals working on shared projects to practicing skills of listening and respectful participation in online dialogues.

In some studies, researchers attempt to isolate specific competences that accompany relational approaches, in which they see potential to create transformative religious education. In an Australian context, McCowan (2017) notes how an interfaith project, Building Bridges through Interfaith Dialogue, used with young people, helped them to develop knowledge of their own and different faiths leading to greater openness and willingness to counter discrimination. Other researchers show how inter-religious pedagogies have the potential to build cooperation, increase confidence in encounters with out-groups, and resolve conflicts (Bauer 2022). There exist further valuable contributions in the wider discipline of intercultural education to support religious educators in exploring skills which might facilitate transformative learning (e.g., perspective-taking, listening, self-awareness, conflict resolution) (Deardoff 2020; Leeds-Hurwitz 2013). However, we are also aware of important critiques of intercultural education, including those that remind us of the importance of reflexivity for educators in an area that can never be neutral. Despite its focus on the value of difference and importance of good relations, for example, intercultural education can still privilege 'self-centrism' (Dervin et al. 2020, p. 9) or reinforce existing cultural hegemonies (Collier 2015). Educators involved in shared religious education should be aware of such matters, though not deterred. Indeed, to adopt transformative pedagogies capable of addressing the pressing challenges previously discussed, it is vital to be persistently reflexive around purpose and positionality. We illustrate this point next in relation to the issue of 'knowledge' in religious education.

There is significant debate around what counts as 'knowledge' within religious education (Franck and Thalén 2023; Lewin et al. 2023), and this is also the case in interreligious education (Schweitzer et al. 2023). Helpfully, however, it is an area of religious education that is now receiving particular attention from scholars and researchers in different contexts

(Berglund et al. 2023), and of particular interest to us are those who see knowledge as holding the potential for transformation in how we relate to and interact with others. For Hannam and May (2022, p. 253), for example, knowledge in religious education can be transformatory when it is understood to serve a broader purpose, such as to help young people to 'speak, think and act in the world' in respect to social justice. Others concur using similar language, including Koukounaras-Liagkis (2020) and Liljefors Persson (2023), who speak of transformative religious education as involving thinking, reflection, and action.

Thus, knowledge becomes powerful when, instead of being confined narrowly to facts, the view of knowledge taken can help learners to come to new understandings that not only change their thinking but also their way of being in the world in relation to others. We see this as a form of praxis in line with critical perspectives on education, such as critical peace education theory, which promote pedagogies that build empathy, solidarity, agency, and democratic participation (Bajaj 2015), as well as challenge the reification of the self in education (e.g., Bekerman 2007). In other words, we resist any attempt to constrain shared religious education by one single theoretical position[1].

Much like those who wish to see more theoretical plurality in fields of educational praxis (Archer et al. 2023), we envision those involved in shared religious education to be reflexive and open to the possibility of understanding their work through different theoretical or epistemic lenses. As well as being critical, these might, for example, be affective (Zembylas 2022), realist (A. Wright 2008), or interpretive (Jackson 2009)[2]. Thus, a fourth aim of shared religious education should be transformative pedagogies which cultivate cooperation and solidarity, empathy and compassion through building relational values, inter-cultural competences and a praxis-based knowledge.

5. Conclusions—Orienting Towards Shared Religious Education

This article has sought to provide a response to the contemporary challenge of sharing. We have shown the critical need for systems of education to create conditions for cooperation and collaboration, especially in contexts where students are separated by beliefs or worldviews, and we have highlighted the importance of employing pedagogies that aim to counteract the tendency towards competition and individualism in Western cultures. Shared education was characterised as a pluralist and inter-cultural way of thinking about education that has had significant success in addressing structural divisions in some societies. It can be distinguished from assimilationist and integrationist approaches; it does not attempt to minimise difference, nor reify separation. In a shared education model, differences are acknowledged and so too is a belief in porous boundaries and the value of bridging. In that regard, it does not accept peaceful co-existence as an end point but, using a relational lens, sees identities to be malleable and inter-group relations as constantly evolving.

Drawing on this model of shared education, we have argued that there are rich possibilities for religious education to cultivate sharing attitudes and practises. We have highlighted a range of existing examples of projects and initiatives in religious education that work toward addressing our need for cooperation and mutual understanding. We recognise the very different contexts out of which they emerge and do not suggest we can provide a single answer to the sharing challenge. Nevertheless, we hope to have brought greater visibility to the considerable body of valuable work being undertaken by religious educators, in which we see potential to energise those working practically in the field to create contextually relevant responses to the sharing imperative.

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Notes

[1] Writing this article has been a difficult but committed act of consensus building, sometimes involving intellectual humility in our willingness to defer to each other when deal-breakers are not at stake and to compromise.

[2] Other examples of theoretical frames can be seen in Grümme and Pirner (2025).

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