English Religious Education: Developments, Identity, and Diversity

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to review the post-confessional history of English religious education. The intention is to be descriptive rather than polemical. Attention is given to the transition of confessional to multi-faith religious education and to subsequent developments. The strengths and weaknesses of phenomenological approaches are considered, and how the focus upon experience that is central to phenomenology was preserved in later educational attempts to further moral and spiritual development through religious education. Finally, attention is given to the reasons for the emergence of citizenship as an important theme in religious education and to more recent issues.

KEYWORDS

confessionalism, experiential approach, John Hull, indoctrination, multi-faith religious education, phenomenological religious education, spiritual development

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to review the post-confessional history of English religious education. This is a controversial and contested subject, for there is no Archimedean point or God's eye perspective from which to gain a fully objective and disinterested analysis and interpretation. For some commentators the historical narrative of modern English religious education is one of untrammelled success and rational progress, a perception that gives little encouragement to retrospective reflection. For others, the historical narrative is a simple recitation of events, debates and personalities, each event completely explicable in terms of its immediate cause or causes. Both approaches are insufficiently critical, for neither is attentive to the influence of historically extended and deeper intellectual movements or to the beliefs

that have shaped and continue to shape contemporary theory and practice. An attempt is made to identify and to interact critically with the beliefs, commitments and values that have determined the form and content of post-confessional religious education in England.

The Transition from Confessional to Non-Confessional Religious Education

The most important development in relation to the history of religious education in Britain, and the development that distinguishes modern religious education from earlier periods, is the transition from confessional to non-confessional forms of religious education in state-maintained (now referred to as "community") schools – that is, schools that are intended to be inclusive of all pupils, of any religious persuasion or none. Up until the late 1960s, religious education was Christian in terms of both content and of commitment. The purpose of religious education was to nurture Christian faith and values on behalf of what was believed to be a Christian society. This orientation was undermined by a range of developments. Economic, social and intellectual influences contributed to create a new cultural situation where traditional authorities and institutions were challenged, including the role and authority of the churches, particularly the Established Church, the Church of England. There was a radical reassessment of the aims of education in general and of the aims of religious education in particular. In the latter case this reassessment proceeded against the background of diminishing numerical support for institutional religion, widespread questioning of traditional Christian beliefs and values (both of which are properly regarded as aspects of the secularisation of society), and, chiefly as a result of post-war immigration from former colonies, a growing awareness of the multi-faith nature of modern Britain. Influential voices were raised against the prevailing orthodoxy. Research had already indicated that the staple diet of bible study and church history, so central to the religious education curriculum, was meeting with limited success in terms of both capturing pupils' interest in Christianity and advancing their understanding and comprehension of basic Christian beliefs (ICE, 1957; Loukes, 1961).

A new non-confessional direction for religious education was suggested in 1971 by a "working paper", aptly entitled *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in the Secondary School*, that was produced under the direction of Professor Ninian Smart for the Schools Council (a government funded body charged with the aim of exploring and developing new curricular ideas) and inspired by the emergence of religious studies as a separate subject from theology at university level. This publication initiated a revolution in British religious education and marked the beginning of the end of Christian nurture in all state and (fully funded) voluntary schools and heralded the advent of multi-faith religious education. The main ideas of *Working Paper 36* can be summarised in the following points:

1. The confessional or, what the document terms, the "dogmatic" approach to religious education is equated with "intellectual and cultic indoctrination". Confessional religious education is presented as necessarily indoctrinatory. Christian nurture should be abandoned in all schools as nurture is incompatible with "educational principles".

2. Moral education should be distinguished from religious education and the former should be studied in its own right independently of religious education. *Working*

Paper 36 followed the philosophical fashion of the time and maintained that religion cannot provide a foundation for morality; consequently, moral education should be taught independently of religion.

3. The view is expressed that a multi-faith, "non-dogmatic, phenomenological approach", which draws inspiration from the phenomenology of religion should be adopted. It is commended for its "openness" and for its promotion of "empathic understanding" – by virtue of imagination and empathy, human beings are able to transcend their own situations and enter creatively into the subjectivity of others. By developing this form of religious understanding, religious education is believed to promote religious tolerance and to contribute positively to preparing pupils for life in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society.

The descriptive nature of the phenomenological approach and its (purported) neutral stance toward the truth of religion were believed to distance teachers from the charge of indoctrination, while simultaneously securing an educational foundation for the subject.

The Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education

Working Paper 36 provided only an impressionistic account of a phenomenological approach to religion, though its endorsement gave encouragement to scholars of religion and religious educators alike (for example, Eric Sharpe, Michael Grimmitt, Robin Minney, and John Marvell) to explain its distinctive methodology and terminology and to show its relevance in adapting it for classroom use. The fact that the phenomenology of religion had already established its academic credentials at university level, no doubt contributed to its favourable reception by teachers, as did the perception that its approach was the only viable alternative to confessionalism. The vocabulary and procedures of the phenomenology of religion became the currency of religious education and its principles came to be enshrined in numerous textbooks, agreed syllabuses and local education authority handbooks.

The intellectual roots of the phenomenology of religion can be traced to Liberal Protestant attempts in the late nineteenth century to develop a methodology for the study of religion that was descriptive and broad ranging, less driven by Christian polemics against other religions and more conscious of the divisive legacy of religion in the modern world. The professed aim of the phenomenology of religion is to provide an objective account of religious phenomena that is free from bias and distortion. Religious knowledge gives way to religious understanding, for as one learns about religion and enters into the situation of the religious believer, so one comes to understand the universal nature and character of religion. Religious understanding is gained by two hermeneutical steps (or what some call "reductions"). First, attention is given to the religious phenomenon under discussion, with all prior beliefs and assumptions suspended (*epoché*), then in this focussed state, the observer enters into the thought world of religion and intuits (through *eidetic* vision) the meaning of the experience for the believer. Characteristically, in phenomenology, the essential nature of religion is interpreted as experience of the Holy or the Sacred (both words translate the same German term, *das Heilige*): religion is regarded as a unique (*sui generis*)

category of interpretation and knowing. Through empathy and intuition, the essence of the Holy is grasped, and the inner meaning and motivation of religion is grasped. In this way, phenomenologists of religion believed that the "objective" experiential character of religion is laid bare. In broad terms this interpretation (which is sufficiently broad ranging to be regarded as a theory) of religion, was developed and formalised by phenomenologists of religion such as Gerardus van der Leeuw, Friedrich Heiler, Mircea Eliade and others in the early to mid-twentieth century.

The attractiveness of a phenomenological approach to teachers should be obvious. Phenomenological religious education claims to be multi-faith, inclusive, neutral and "objective" – no religion is privileged over another. Formally, the critical evaluation of religious beliefs and practices can be set aside, bracketed out as the phenomenology of religion's methodology demands, yet informally the truth of religion is assumed. Through empathy, insight is gained into the religious world of "the other"; and true to the Liberal Protestant foundations of the phenomenology of religion, the religious world of "the other" is found to be centred on and expressive of the transcendent mystery that lies at the heart of all religion. As Marvell (1982, p. 74) maintained, every religion evokes the "the numinous". On this basis, one of the most controversial issues in relation to religion is overlooked: that of evaluating religious claims to truth and adjudicating between rival doctrinal beliefs. Furthermore, following the demise of Christian confessionalism in education, there was a certain embarrassment with the doctrinal element of religion, and the phenomenological approach provided a welcome justification for diminishing the role of doctrine in religion, and consequently the role of doctrine and beliefs in religious education. Religious education is thus freed from challenge and possible controversy.

This endorsement of religion was important against a background in education and in society where the relevance and significance of religion was often overlooked. Many of the intellectual elite of the time viewed religion as an epiphenomenon that reflected more fundamental economic or psychological realities; in any case commitment to the secularisation thesis predicted that religion was in terminal decline. Against this intellectual background many religious educators in the 1970s and 80s regarded themselves as witnesses to the importance of religion and its positive contribution to society. In a situation where religion was culturally despised, it was natural to underline the similarities between religions and thus present them as collectively opposed to secularism and the cultural disparagement of religion.

Over the next two decades, British religious education became synonymous with a multi-faith, phenomenological approach in which religions were typically studied thematically, with the content of religion organised and classified under generic themes such as founders, sacred buildings, sacred scriptures, and festivals. Pupils were encouraged to set aside their presuppositions, and to enter imaginatively into the religious experience of others. This was the ideal of course, but for many pupils religious education became an uninvolving and superficial journey through a range of different religions and diverse religious phenomena.

The influence of phenomenological religious education in England reached its peak in 1985 when an official British Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups, chaired by Lord Swann, concluded that a non-dogmatic, non-denominational,

phenomenological approach to religious education provided the "best and only means of enabling all pupils, from whatever religious background, to understand the nature of religious belief, the religious dimension of human experience and the plurality of faiths in contemporary Britain" (Swann, 1985, p. 518). Even at the time of Swann's report, criticisms of phenomenological religious education were widely discussed by religious educators. Teachers reported disinterest amongst pupils in a thematically ordered, multi-faith religious curriculum that failed to relate to their "life world" (*Lebenswelt*) and their concerns and interests. Acquaintance with the beliefs and values of minority groups *by itself* will considerably reduce religious prejudice also enjoyed little support from experience. Furthermore, questions were raised about the capability of pupils to enter into the experience of others and to develop a positive attitude to them on the basis of the phenomenological technique of "bracketing out" their own convictions and commitments. A psychological perspective on children's cognitive development suggests that the method of bracketing one's own beliefs and entering into the mind-state and experience of others to gain an appreciation of their beliefs is compromised by the psychological and imaginative limitations of many pupils – limitations that in some case last well into the years of secondary education. There was also the complaint that by setting aside one's own values and commitments and attempting to place oneself in the situation of the experiencing subject tacit support was given to moral and religious relativism; this is because from the perspective of the "insider" everything that is experienced in religion is valid and true. Should religious education not also be developing critical perspectives on religion and religious phenomena?

If classroom experience revealed that phenomenological religious education was less effective in challenging racism and religious intolerance than its first advocates had anticipated, this did not lead religious educators, for the most part, to question either the potential of religious education in this area or phenomenology's underlying Liberal Protestant philosophical and theological commitments. It was conceded that the phenomenological technique for acquiring a positive attitude to religious diversity may be deficient, but ongoing research that identified a link between notions of superiority and prejudice was interpreted by religious educators as confirming their commitment to the experiential truth of the different religions. By challenging religious claims to uniqueness and superiority, religious educators believed themselves to be simultaneously challenging racism and religious intolerance. A straightforward and influential proponent of this position is provided by Professor John Hull, then of Birmingham University and one of the most internationally influential religious educators.

In 1992 Hull introduced the word "religionism", in an editorial in the *British Journal of Religious Education* to refer both to the view that one religion is true to a degree denied to other religions and to the attitude of superiority that expresses itself as intolerance towards adherents of other religions (Hull, 1992, p. 70). Religionism, he affirmed, is rather like racism – there is the racist belief that one's own race is better than others, and there are racist attitudes that show themselves in acts of discrimination against individuals from other races. Belief and attitudes are linked, though strictly speaking, in his view, it is the belief that has priority. With regard to religion, it is the denial of the truth of other religious traditions than one's own that is the cause of religious

bigotry and intolerance. Hull is quite insistent that "[i]t is not enough for religious education to encourage a *tolerant* attitude towards other religions" (Hull, 1992, p. 71, my emphasis). He proposes that, within the educational context, pupils should be taught that all religions are authentic and valid – no one religion should consider itself or be presented in education as *regarding itself* as true in any sense that is denied to other religions. According to Hull (1992), schools should teach that the different religions are not in competition with each other, but rather complement each other. This interpretation should become part of the self-identity and self-understanding of the different religious communities themselves. In a series of influential public lectures, articles and essays, he developed this interpretation of religionism and expounded the positive contribution, he believes, religious education can make to religious and social harmony (Hull, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1999). Other religious educators could be cited that illustrate the same view: a group of prominent religious educators supported Hull's position in a declaration that was widely circulated at the time and was posted on the StudyOverseas.com (www.studyoverseas.com) website on 23 October 2001.

Religious Experience and Spiritual Development

The term "phenomenological religious education" gradually fell into disuse in the late 1980s, to be replaced by "multi-faith religious education". The theological commitments, however, remained the same, as can be briefly illustrated. A number of educators championed what they described as "the experiential approach" to religious education that focussed on the cultivation of the "inner, spiritual experiences of pupils", which they regarded as foundational both for an appreciation of the nature of religion and for later religious commitment, while in part acknowledging that the phenomenological approach had come to amount to little more than a catalogue of religious phenomena without any insight or focus on the experiences that give force and meaning to religious rituals, practices and beliefs (see Hay et al., 1990). In short, the criticism was that phenomenological religious education (originally conceived as a suspension of critical judgement while attending to religious phenomena, followed by an act of intuitive awareness) had confined itself solely to the first procedural step and failed to move beyond external description. The experiential approach aimed to correct this weakness by exposing pupils to the experiential heart of religion and religious life through a range of meditations, guided exercises.

The focus on experience in religious education received further support from the 1988 Education Reform Act, which requires (for this legislation is still in force) schools to promote "the spiritual ... development of pupils and of society" (1988, p. 1). In a multicultural society, it is problematic for governments and legislators (though this does not mean that they preserve moral neutrality about their own chosen "moral" causes) to endorse one religion over others, or even religion over non-religious beliefs and worldviews. It is at this point that the notions of "spirituality" and "spiritual development" become relevant. One important advantage of the language of spirituality over traditional religious language is that the former admits a degree of ambiguity of usage and application that is denied to the latter. Spirituality can be regarded as something

that is shared by adherents of different religions and even shared by non-religious people who are committed to positive liberal values.

The first semi-official statement of what was envisaged by the reference to spiritual development in the act was given in a paper entitled *Moral and Spiritual Education*, which was published in 1993 by the National Curriculum Council. At the outset, it is maintained that "[t]he potential for spiritual development is open to everyone and is not confined to the development of religious beliefs or conversion to a particular faith" (NCC, 1993, p. 2). The spiritual

> has to do with the universal search for individual identity – with our responses to challenging experiences, such as death, suffering, beauty, and encounters with good and evil. It is to do with the search for meaning and purpose in life and for values by which to live (NCC, 1993, p. 2).

Beliefs, a sense of awe, feelings of transcendence, the search for meaning and purpose, self-knowledge, relationships, creativity along with feelings and emotions are then listed as aspects of spiritual education. The framers of the document clearly wanted to distinguish spiritual development from religious development. Spirituality is regarded as something wider and more inclusive than religion, the former focusing on experience, creative awareness and human values, the latter on formal or institutional patterns of religious belief and practice. A number of religious educators had already endorsed the view that spirituality provides the foundation for a broadly progressive, holistic education that focuses upon the child and his or her creative powers (over against a traditional knowledge-based education). Spiritual intuition is believed to lie at the heart of not just religious commitment but of all authentic moral, aesthetic and educational commitments. Moreover, these same writers presumed spirituality to possess an impartial and neutral quality denied to the different religions. Accordingly, it is believed to provide a vantage point from which the different religions can be assessed, while accepted that all religions to some extent expedite spiritual sensibility.

The document also effected a kind of reconciliation between morality and religion in education by placing both within a wider framework of human values which schools were obligated to uphold and to exhibit – I say a kind of reconciliation, and I will return to this point below. Spiritual and moral development are probably linked in the document because it is believed that developing spirituality furthers moral development by seeking to enhance the dispositions of love, sympathy and responsibility that are presumed to provide the mainspring for moral action, while simultaneously refusing to elevate any particular morality or any particular moral stance over others. There is evidence which seems to suggest that at a personal level there is a close relationship between spiritual maturity and perceptions of personal well-being, expressed in terms of mental health, self-fulfilment, perceived contentment and happiness. At a social level, evidence again suggests that the spiritually mature are more likely to make a positive contribution to the community and less likely to engage in anti-social and criminal activities. Thus, by fostering spiritual development religious education can contribute to the moral development of the individual and society.

As said above, this is a reconciliation of sorts between religious education and moral education; yet this reconciliation does not concede much to religion, for a careful reading of the document shows that moral and spiritual values are not believed to need religion for their expression or justification. The view of the document is that both spiritual and moral values are a sub-set of human values and that the latter can be expressed and encouraged in different ways, in religious ways and in non-religious ways.

The identification of spirituality with the "inner life" and with one's feelings, however, opens the door to a subjective and reductionist reading of religion and may in fact undermine the cognitive significance of both spiritual and religious experiences. This refusal to consider deeper religious and philosophical issues is probably prompted by the fear that controversy will be aroused. The tacit assumption is that controversial religious matters are best ignored in the classroom, an assumption, as already noted, that runs back to the emergence of non-confessional religious education. A similar attitude still lies behind contemporary religious educators' refusal to engage pupils in the quest for religious truth or to address the issue of how judgements of truth or untruth in religion are to be assessed and evaluated.

The Emergence of Citizenship as an Important Theme in Religious Education

The linking of religious education with spiritual and moral development in the late 1980s and early 1990s is not unrelated to the growing importance of the social aims of education, which were beginning to coalesce around the modern political discourse on the ideas of citizenship and rights. The ratification of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights into British law in the 1998 Human Rights Act consolidated the connection between citizenship and human rights and pushed both to the forefront of the educational agenda. A growing perception of the reality of moral and religious pluralism in society convinced some educators that schools did not have the authority to adjudicate on matters of personal lifestyle and morality; instead schools should concentrate on social behaviour. In other words, the view that public education should be concerned with social responsibility and not with the private lives and behaviour of individuals became increasingly influential. One can appreciate how a focus on citizenship and rights served this new interest in social morality: public education should be concerned with the creation of good citizens. A "good" citizen obeys the laws of the land and respects the rights of others. (I have argued elsewhere that there are inherent limitations to what a rights-orientated form of religious education can contribute to the realisation of liberal educational aims.)

A number of religious educators, including Mark Chater (2000), were quick to state that religious education provides an ideal vehicle for furthering the citizenship agenda. In fact, support for the role of religious education in advancing citizenship education illustrates the increasing trend for religious educators in Britain to seek extrinsic or instrumental reasons for the inclusion of religious education in the curriculum. Religious education ought to be studied for the contribution it makes to civil society or as some have argued more recently for the contribution that it makes to challenging religious extremism. Ed Pawson, the then chairperson of the National

Association of Teachers of Religious Education, for example, stated at a conference in January 2015 that "developing young people's religious literacy could help to make them less vulnerable to religious radicalisation"[1].

Recent Developments

The topics of religious education in schools and state funded religious schools continue to be the subject of heated debate. The last two decades have seen a gradual expansion in the number of religions to be covered, and more recently many locally agreed syllabuses have begun to include non-religious worldviews in their provision. In 2013, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales recommended that altogether over twelve religious and non-religious worldviews should be studied by all pupils. Others view this development with dismay and oppose this expansion of content as educationally unsupportable, as it will lead to truncated teaching and superficial learning. It could be contended that this continual expansion of what has to be studied provides evidence to critics of current provision that religious education's efforts to challenge religious bigotry and to gain the interest of pupils are simply failing, for why otherwise is the curriculum subject to constant change. Allied to this expansion, is an increasing focus on the diversity within religions. Influential in this regard has been Robert Jackson's interpretive approach which explicitly challenges the idea that religions are "coherent wholes", and instead focuses on personal appropriations of religious traditions (for discussion and criticism, see Barnes, 2014, pp. 180–217).

Other debates have focussed on the need for a nationally legislated curriculum and for the parental right of withdrawal of children from religious education to be removed. Both measures have been interpreted by liberal groups as imposing further restrictions by the state on personal freedom. Schools with a religious character, which are commonly referred to as "faith schools", also continue to attract discussion and legislation. In some cases, arguments against faith schools are proxy for arguments against Muslim schools, which are regarded as inimical to "liberal" values. In saying this, there is a long tradition in English education of secular and secular humanist opposition to faith schools of any kind; such opposition has more recently espoused the language and concepts of equality and inclusion to make the case against faith schools. All this is against the background of considerable disinterest by pupils and the identification by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)[2] of major areas of concern, including low standards of attainment and weak teaching.

Conclusion

A brief overview of post-confessional developments of religious education in England has been provided. The context requires that much has had to be overlooked, for example, the developing legislation that governs the practice of religious education,

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[1] As reported by the BBS: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-30989933.

[2] The Office for Standards in Education is a non-ministerial department of the UK government concerned with inspecting and regulating services providing education.

and the work of particularly significant religious educators apart from Ninian Smart and John Hull. Developments have been presented and considered in historical order with some attention given to the beliefs, commitments and forces that have determined or directed debates and how one development connects to another. It has been noted how the phenomenological religious education's emphasis upon religious experience was continued through the experiential approach and then through recent interest in spiritual development, which is then linked to moral development.

At the outset, I acknowledged that there is no God's eye perspective on religious education in England. In keeping with this, it is admitted that my interpretation on the developments presented differs from more positive or conventional accounts. Yet, while all interpretations are personal and partial, it is not admitted that all interpretations and representations of the modern history of religious education in England are equally true and reliable.

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