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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND PEDAGOGY

Abstract

This paper argues that religious education needs to be more focused on pedagogy, whether it occurs in mainstream or faith education, in order to progress students' spiritual development and provide them with requisite skills that are intrinsic to the subject and transferable.

This argument is exemplified in relation to the conceptual enquiry methodology that has been devised within the agreed syllabus, *Living Difference*, for Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton in the United Kingdom.

The focus of this paper is the philosophical underpinning of the approach and the way in which the idea of managing the learning process, rather than the notion of teaching a subject or a catechism, results in paying attention to different outcomes that rely upon student engagement and ownership.

Introduction and Background

How does religious education establish its curriculum credentials in mainstream education and how does it, within a faith setting, effectively nurture the spiritual development of young people?

These appear to be two quite distinct and separate questions, and have long been regarded as such, but in this article I shall argue that this is a misconception that has resulted in an impoverished pedagogy that has insufficiently addressed spiritual development in both educational settings. These questions are intimately connected if one starts from a pedagogical perspective and, in pursuit of how that connection is developed, the questions themselves come to inform each other¹.

Before embarking on a pedagogically based enquiry we must first reflect on how each of the questions has previously and currently been pursued. Efforts to establish the curriculum credentials of religious education in mainstream schooling have been based on both intrinsic and extrinsic purposes. The intrinsic purpose relates to a body of knowledge. For example, what constitutes scientific knowledge and how it is gained is clear: the force of gravity can be clearly demonstrated as 'knowledge' by pursuing a well established scientific method of enquiry. Similarly, in history, a historical method of enquiry based on evidence and reasoning will lead to historical 'facts' and beyond them to interpretations of events with clear justifications for those interpretations. If we take the body of knowledge approach to establishing the curriculum credentials of a subject then how has this been applied in religious education? First, it has been contested that religion has a body of knowledge. If religions consist of sets of composite beliefs how can the claim be made that belief constitutes knowledge? Of course, lying behind this question is the assumption that what we call 'knowledge' is known by the outcomes of

scientific (natural or social) method and judged by those criteria. However, we can claim that by using the methods of the social sciences focused on the phenomenon of religion a body of knowledge is gained: we can know certain things about the phenomenon of religion and that knowledge is purposeful and useful. In broad terms this is the basis on which, by using phenomenological approaches, religious education has justified its inclusion in the curriculum on intrinsic grounds, at least in England and Wales.

What are the extrinsic grounds upon which the justification for RE has been made? Extrinsic arguments are invariably made on the basis of the broader individual and social gains that the subject pursues and provides: they are statements about attitudes, values and skills. Apologetics for the extrinsic value of RE have focused on the capacity of the subject to enhance empathy in its learners (this has most often been subsumed under the attitudes category but sometimes under the category of skills). However, empathy is primarily an outcome. If empathy is claimed as an outcome then it has to be demonstrated how this outcome is achieved, since the delivery of a body of knowledge will not, in itself, result in such an outcome. Here is the significant pedagogical flaw that religious education has suffered from since the inception of the teaching of what, in England and Wales at least, has come to be called the teaching of 'world religions'. Whilst this approach has won its contested claim to curriculum credentials it has largely done so by advertising its extrinsic value. This extrinsic value is based on an outcome that cannot be empirically validated (have learners and society become more empathetic?) and it has neglected the skills requirement necessary to achieve such an outcome because it has never sufficiently addressed what skills of enquiry are required for the subject to demonstrably develop learners' capacities: their ability to do things. In subjects such as science, history and English the

development of **skills** ate **intrinsic** requirements to **the** study of the subject (if it **is done well**). **Thus**, the relationship between the body of knowledge that constitutes the subject and **the skills** of enquiry (methods) that produce that knowledge are intrinsic justifications **for** the value of the subject but the **skills** of enquiry are also transferable (**extrinsic**) beyond the idea of being **an** historian, for **example**. This sort of rigorous attention to the relationship between knowledge and skills has been absent in religious education and **this** is due to a lack of attention **being** paid to its pedagogy.

Michael Grimmitt (Grimmitt, 2000) **provided** a critical overview of this situation. Whilst it is the case that valuable new approaches **have taken** RE forward in recent **years**; for **example those** of Jackson (1997, 2004) and Wright (1998, 2004ⁱⁱ), their **lack of a pedagogical structure and process that can clearly translate into classroom delivery has meant that teachers are unclear about the intrinsic purpose of the subject, how to teach it and how to assess the progress of learners**. This, in turn, translates into the learners' lack of **understanding** of the purpose and relevance of the subject for themselves and **their** development. Put bluntly, religious education is seen as 'extrinsic' (in the sense of irrelevant) to their own goals and interests unless they are religious or unless a talented or **charismatic** teacher makes it **interesting**, entertaining or **fun**; none of these are educational **justifications** for a subject even though they are important aspects of delivery **to bear** in mind.

The **approach that has made most impact** on classroom delivery of RE **in the UK has been** that propounded by Hammond and Hay (1990) in **New Methods** in RE, which has been further developed by Phillips (2004) in the **Theatre** of learning. These **experiential** approaches have favoured instilling empathy into **learners** through imaginative activities based on **affective techniques that align** students' feelings with those of **religious** believers. **Phillips has taken this forward** by constructing **units** of work that systematically and progressively engage learners **with** the **practices** of a religion as if they were **participants themselves** within a classroom **setting**. **Powerful as these** approaches have been in **making** the subject **relevant** to learners' own existential **questions** and to introducing **learners** to the practices of religion themselves as a way of promoting **spiritual** development, they **are** an **idealised** way of presenting the phenomenon of religion. The underlying **message** given **is that** religion is **good** and it is good for **you**. This ignores the **ideological** aspect of **religion** by virtue of **which religions** **dogmatically establish** their political presence within and influence upon the world. As a result, the key **element** of making judgements about

religion, a persistent theme of John Bowker's writing (Bowker, 1987) has been overlooked. The critical appraisal of a body of knowledge has given way to a benign utilisation of religion as piety applied to the existential **vacuum** that has been created by students' experience in secular education **and** secular society. Whilst this is a positive approach to spiritual development it is not, in itself, sufficient. Pedagogically it utilises valuable techniques, but for a pedagogy to be complete and sufficient it must further address **issues** arising within and intrinsic to the presentation of its subject matter.

Spiritual Development and Religious Education/Nurture

The spiritual development of young people through their encounter **with** the curriculum cannot be understood as something extra to be addressed that is extrinsic to their development within a subject; it is the educational rational upon **which** a subject justifies its presence in the curriculum. An example of an 'intrinsic' understanding of spiritual development that I witnessed recently **was** by observing an Art **lesson**, and this can provide an **appropriate illustration**. The project title given to the students **was** 'self-identity'. **It began** with an enquiry into Holbien's painting The Ambassadors, within which students had to comment upon **Holbien's** use of tone, colour, composition **and** symbolism in order to reflect **upon his** depiction of the subjects as 'Ambassadors'. The students **were** then **given two** contrasting pictures to investigate in a similar **way** to identify **what** the **representations** said about **such** images of **masculinity/** femininity, social position, assurance and vulnerability **through** the use of tone, colour, composition, etc. They then **were** required to produce their own composition of a self-image which would utilise the artistic skills they had learned to represent themselves. **Seamlessly**, the development in artistic competence **was** wedded to an aspect of spiritual development because the project **was conceptually** grounded in applying **the techniques** of art to a **higher** purpose of **art** (social, cultural and moral) grounded in **self-representation** (spiritual purpose). Such a **pedagogically** conceived exercise could have been carried out within either mainstream or faith education. The resources used might change, in relation to the overall aim in terms of spiritual development but the pedagogical process would **conform** to a similar **progressive** Learning structure. It would **be difficult**, however, to cite an example **from** within **mainstream** RE or faith religious education that could compare **with** this example **from** art because the relationship **between** pedagogy, **skills** development and spiritual development in the **former** does **not** pay such rigorous conceptual attention to this process and its outcomes.

When translated into religious education this example is **salient**. How do **we** do something similar in a subject that is so 'intrinsically' oriented to spiritual development? Here **we** must orient our pedagogy toward the same goals rather than think of the subject as justified **by** the uniqueness of its content or catechism, whether we are involved in mainstream or faith education.

Taking pedagogy seriously in religious education and spiritual development

Religions (and non-religious worldviews) are conceptualisations of the world. Religions conceive the world in differing ways based upon their conceptual constructs. As a result, **any** study of religion in religious education has to base its rationale upon the examination of conceptual differences and their implications for **the** way believers act in the world. **This was** our pedagogical basis for constructing an **Agreed Syllabus** in Hampshire, UK, when it was **required** to be revised in 2004: *Living Difference, the Agreed Syllabus for Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton* (Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton SACREs, 2004) in **the** United Kingdom is **based** upon conceptual **enquiry**. The body of knowledge in **this** document is the conceptual formulations of different religions that compose their **worldview** and the **contextualised** ways in which these **conceptualisations** are expressed, **dependant** on the interpretations given to how those concepts are applied by different groups of believers. The key skill that learners have to master is that of interpretation. Thus, the Attainment Target of the document is 'Interpreting religion in relation to **human** experience' (SACREs, 2004, p. 16). The purpose of religious education then becomes 'to support students in developing **their** own coherent **patterns** and principles, and to support **their** spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' (SACREs, p.7), whereby the **Attainment** Target becomes **an** achievable aim. The Attainment Target is a **means** to achieving the purpose, which is grounded in the spiritual development of learners. It **is** in **this way** that the pedagogy itself becomes **conceptually** grounded. To put this succinctly: the conceptual basis gives it academic rigour and the process of enquiry ensures educational purpose.

The syllabus encapsulates this approach within **two** diagrams. The first is entitled the **hierarchy** of conceptual development (SACREs, p. 20; figure 1). Here concepts are divided into types A, B and C. Within each type differentiation is created between those that are simpler **and** those that are more complex. Type C concepts are those that are particular to specific religions. Though the diagram might suggest that type C concepts are the most

difficult for students to engage with this is not necessarily the case. The point is that the internal connections between type C concepts within a specific religion and their differing interpretations by believers within different groups makes the most demanding challenge on learners, **plus** these concepts **are** culturally 'distance-far'" from learners to an extent that types **A** and **B** are not.

For learners in primary school (ages 4/5 - 11) the conceptual challenge is to primarily and initially engage with less complex type A, then progress to type B and then less complex type C concepts. To take an example that identifies progression: 5 year old pupils should engage with the concept of belonging in order to then, when aged 6 or 7, engage with concept of **community** and then, when aged 9 or 10, engage **with** the concept of ritual (type B concept), and then engage with **the** concept of **Umma** in Islam, as a less complex type C concept. This provides a systematic **way** of progressing learning on the basis of conceptual enquiry".

Type B concepts and how they are addressed is crucial to the development of **skills** in RE and to spiritual development whether in a mainstream or faith setting. **Ritual**, symbolism, myth and metaphor may seem to belong in concepts that are common to religious and non-religious experience (type A), but they require an explicit type of reflection that is not ordinarily gained in students' experience. The point of type B concepts is to require students to engage in figurative expression, rather than literal thinking. As such, they pave the way **for** understanding such type C concepts as Church and Resurrection, in Christianity, that are **theological** rather than literal in nature. Within this transition we can identify the major **skills** development that pertains to the subject. Engaging **with** figurative expression and doing figurative **thinking** become an intrinsic necessity. How is this **skills** development achieved? **As** an example we may quote the following that emerged from a lesson in a special school with MLD (moderate learning difficulties) students verging on **SLD** (severe learning difficulties students) **engaging with** the concept of symbolism.

The lesson focused on the 'communicate' and 'apply' elements of the **conceptual** cycle of **learning** (see below) in which students respond in relation to their own experience. The students had been carefully helped to recognise **signs** (such as the sign for a tent indicating a camp site) and to start to draw their own pictures that reflected which groups they belonged to or activities they participated in, responding with their feelings, memories and thoughts. The problem lay in getting them to recognise the difference between literal

association (talking about a picture that literally represented an activity) and symbolic association (recognising how an object, for example, can provoke thoughts and feelings not literally associated with the object but with its subjective reference to a person and an event). I was pondering how to get over this obstacle to learning that the students were experiencing. Right at the end of the lesson I put my hand up and Clare allowed me to join in. I had seen a pot of flowers on the window sill. I picked up the flowers and asked the group what I should do with them. George (who when introduced to me earlier and asked to tell me something he liked, had told me he liked silence) responded by telling me that I should give them to his teacher. So, I gave them to Clare and said 'These are for you Clare'. Clare thanked me. I then asked the group 'When Clare looks at the flowers when I am not there what will she think of?' George, bless him, pointed at me and shouted 'You!' So, one step forward, but on that basis Clare and I were able to plan the subsequent lessons in the cycle around how we would take the students' learning forward based on this small step. By using this technique I had taken George, at least, beyond the experientially enculturated notion of literal association that lies behind the connection between the tent sign and a camping site toward the subjectively hidden relationship between an object (flowers) and their symbolic value expressed in the narrative to be told about them. The same process would hold true for objects of a religious kind. For example, an empty cross is symbolic of resurrection but the explanation for resurrection does not lie in the absence of the figure on the cross per se. If that were the case and the explanation consisted of noting that Jesus had gone to heaven then the cross is simply a sign. If the explanation consists of the narrative of Christ's sacrifice to ensure salvation and thus the restoration of humankind's relationship with God, then it is symbolic.

The methodology for conceptual enquiry

The methodology for conceptual enquiry (Hampshire County Council, 2004, p.18; Figure 2) was developed through the research of the Children and Worldviews Project (see Erricker, Emcker, Ota, Sullivan, 1997; Erricker & Erricker, 2000a; Erricker & Erricker, 2000b). It started to be formulated more specifically in relation to an explicit religious education programme through a faith education project with a Shia Ithnasheeri Muslim community in 2000 (Erricker, 2001) where I acted as a consultant working with medrassa teachers helping them to construct a pedagogy for medrassa education based on conceptual development for young Muslims in Britain.

The methodology consists of cycles of learning based upon five elements: enquire, contextualise, evaluate, communicate and apply. These elements have a technical meaning in association with each other and the process of enquiry can be begun either at enquire or communicate. The elements follow in the order given. Importantly, following this structure is not, of itself, sufficient; it is meant to result in a pedagogical process that progressively develops learners' skills, deepens enquiry and, thus, results in spiritual development as well as raising standards within mainstream education.

Communicate and Apply relate to students' responses to the concept in focus from their own experience. Enquire provides the bridge to enquiring into the concept within a religious context. Contextualise is an examination of the interpretations believers place upon the concept and the expressions (in terms of practice and events) that result. Evaluate considers what issues and implications the concept raises as a result of these different interpretations. With type C concepts, the communicate and apply elements lead the students toward an appreciation of the concept, at the beginning of the cycle, and if returned to at the end of the cycle, consolidate and progress students reflections on and responses to the concept in a wider context. Each element of the cycle should raise expectations of students' contributions to learning as a result of learning in the previous element; thus a learning curve is achieved that progresses learning.

As an example we can take the following observation of classroom delivery. The teacher is teaching the Hindu concept of Brahman (God who is formless and within all living things) to 11-12 year old students in their first year of secondary education in England.

She starts with communicate: the students are in groups around different tables with a bowl of water in the centre of each table. Each student tastes the water in the bowl and comments on its taste. She then puts salt in the bowls and asks them to taste again and comment on the difference. The point she wishes to draw out is that though the taste is different the awareness of that is not discernable to the eye (the salt has dissolved in the water). She then asks them 'How do you know it is different?' and 'Can you make it taste as it did previously?'

She then moves on to apply in which she persistently uses the question 'how do you know?' She asks them to think about how we can know something is present without being able to see it. They respond with answers such as 'the wind because we can see things moving and feel its effects on us' through to speculations on 'the soul,

because we do not know if we have one but we feel we must have otherwise **who** are we, **what** makes us all different and unique?

Enquire introduces the concept explicitly, since until now we have been working within a context based on the learners' own experience. This is done **by** examining the Upanishadic story explaining the concept of Brahman as, analogously, the salt taste within the waters of the sea. It **consolidates** the learning so far and complements it by building on the previous activities but introduces a more complex learning demand. The **story** works through the analogy presented (i.e., it is figurative in expression). The key question at this **stage** is: if Brahman is the salt what is the water? Here students have to **determine** what living things is Brahman within (even though he can't be seen or, in one student's phrase, extrapolated). **The** tendency is to think of things 'out there in the world' trees, animals and so on. But the key to developing the learning at this point is to respond to students' answers by **introducing** the question that raises implications. If Brahman (God) is in trees or animals does that change the way **we** treat them and regard them? **However, key** to development at this point is to ask the question 'If Brahman is in everything is Brahman in you? The answer is obvious but the supplementary questions are the basis of progression. For example: 'Then where in you is he?' Answer: 'My brain or my heart' (further figurative **issues** are therefore germane at this point). Then the response **from** the teacher becomes 'So who is **doing** the **thinking/feeling**, you or God? Finally, therefore, **we** can **ask** the question: 'Do you think you could possibly be **God** without knowing it?' At this point the students **became** so engaged with the question that they wanted to debate it in their groups. **Thus**, teaching gives **way** to the management of the **learning** process and interventions of the teacher are in response to group discussion to progress their thinking further. **Contextualising** (what teachers traditionally would regard as the point of introducing the most **significant** content into the lesson) is the way of introducing further material to progress a Hindu perspective on this concept; **not** just to inform but to raise issues and further implications (or to further unsettle and inform learners' **worldviews**). In this lesson a Hindu commentary on the concept of Brahman **was** introduced for students to study and respond to through textual analysis.

Evaluate is based on an evaluative question. In this case 'Is this way of thinking about God helpful to our understanding of the idea (concept) of God?' Students can debate, write about and reflect upon this concept with **an** informed appreciation of the Hindu understanding but also include their perspective by **reflecting** upon issues raised and

implications that emerge. For example, if Brahman is within all life forms then how do we treat **other forms** of life? Does this mean that all life forms are to be valued equally, if so, does that have implications for medical ethics? Does **this** idea **actually** impose restrictions on human progress? Do **we** have restrictions on what **we** can do to gain economic wealth because of the way **we** must **treat** other creatures by being vegetarian?

As we **start** to pursue this line of questioning we are drawn back (or proceed round **once** more) into communicate **and** apply. Students are starting to respond to the implications and issues raised **by** the **concept from** their own experience **and** involve thinking beyond, but influenced **and** informed by, the **understandings** expressed within the specific religious context presented (here, of course, students within a faith education programme are likely to respond differently to those within mainstream education; but the principle remains the same: student ownership and justification of their own views). The overall result envisaged, in terms of students' development throughout their educational experience, is expressed diagrammatically in figure 3.

Faith and Ideology

Some concepts are more ideological than others or more open to ideological interpretations. Within **Islam**, Jihad is such a concept. **When** enquiring into such concepts the purpose should not be to persuade students that ideological interpretations are wrong and that spirituality resides in a **non-confrontational** interpretation that embraces diversity rather than difference. There are different **spiritualities** and these must be examined and **responded to**. Jihad (both greater **and** lesser) can be **understood through** its expression in **salaat** and **dua** (**formal** and individual prayer) as striving toward Allah **and** through the attack on the twin towers in **New York** as striving against the corruption of Allah's creation. The latter, ideologically motivated expression of jihad is obviously overtly political and, **by** some Muslims, may be understood as unacceptable; but not by all. The importance of the enquiry based approach is to present the phenomena rather than pre-judging what phenomena should **be** presented as an appropriate representation of Islam. Ideological and political engagement is itself, both historically and in the present, a continuing feature of religion that should not be shied away from if **we** are to maintain the academic integrity of the subject of study and **ask** students to recognise that 'spirituality' is **both** an important and dangerous phenomenon, in much the same **way** as natural phenomena are, such as **fire** or **water**.

It is also important for students to recognise that concepts are not just cognitive constructs but

affective ones, they stir the emotions and, therefore, become the basis for action in the world. Mirroring this, the modes of **learning** employed when following the cycle need to be fit for purpose in reflecting both cognitive and affective engagement.

Conclusion

Religions translate the apparent contingency of individual experience into a transcendently grounded metaphysical pattern of salvation through a **congruence of the conceptual** ordering of **things** that then proceeds beyond the cognitive, through the affective, toward their salvific goal. Students within a faith religious education environment need to engage **with the** conceptual constructs of their religion and the relationship between those constructions in order to enquire more deeply into the **worldview** they inhabit and develop spiritually, as a result. This is quite different from learning a catechism and yet it is **catechetically based**.

Students engaging with religious education outside a **faith setting**, by following a programme based on conceptual enquiry, are learning **how** religions construct human experience and, at the same time, are challenged to provide their own constructs and justify them as a democratic activity with other students, **this** is the process underpinning their own spiritual development. We started **with two apparently disparate questions and this** is the way in which they are linked based upon spiritual development related to the pedagogical **integrity** upon which **religious** education **must** be **judged**. Spiritual development becomes **intrinsic**, rather than extrinsic, to the purpose of the subject in both settings **and** spiritual development is directly linked to the ownership of learning of students and student empowerment.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For example, McLaughlin's comment that 'Jesus is perceived as another Superman or Batman or Spiderman or Dr Spock or moral policeman...The essential core of Christianity, the incarnation, appears practically to have evaporated in the lives of Catholic Youth (McLaughlin 2005, p.223); Cupit's observation that 'the role and status of spiritual development within a secular system of educative care needs explanation' (Cupit 2004, p.293); and Hyde's notion of 'beyond logic' (Hyde 2005, p.32) in relation to a student's comment within his idea of a hermeneutical process underpinning learning, are all directly related to the need to link pedagogy to spiritual development in both a faith and mainstream setting and evidence the effectiveness of personal development based on sound principles and effective practice

ⁱⁱ Perceptively, in her review of Wright's 2004 book, Marian de Souza states 'The real difficulty for religious education teachers may lie in the transition from theory to practice but strategies to assist the transition are not included here' (de Souza 2005). The purpose of the generic pedagogy based on conceptual enquiry in this article is actually to fill that gap regardless of whether the approach is, like Wright's, critical realist and theological, or, like Jackson's, socio-anthropological, interpretive, realist and dialogic

ⁱⁱⁱ Distance-far and distance-near were terms coined by Clifford Geertz in a social-anthropology context and utilised by Robert Jackson in his interpretive approach to religious education (see Jackson, R. 1997)

^{iv} For further explanation of this process go to www.RE-NET.ac.uk which displays pages of Living Difference, the Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton Agreed Syllabus for RE, has a video explaining its delivery and the thinking informing it and a review by Geoff Teece of Birmingham University published in the British Journal of Religious Education, Spring 2006. Further explanation of the Living Difference approach can also be found in Erricker C and Costambeys R, *Bike Riding for Beginners* (Shap 2005), Erricker C, *If you don't know the difference you are living with how can you learn to live with it* (International Journal of Children's Spirituality, December 2006) and in *Living Difference - the primary and secondary handbooks* (Hampshire County Council 2006).

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Acting Editor's Note: The Hampshire County Council's curriculum document, *Living Difference*, has been reviewed by some Australian Religious Educators. See under Book Reviews in this issue – Marian de Souza

Advance Notice

The Eighth International Conference on Children's Spirituality will be held at Australian Catholic University, Ballarat Campus.

Dates: 20 – 24 January, 2008.

Theme: *The role of spirituality in Education and Health: Finding connectedness to promote health and well-being amongst children and adolescents.*

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