Developments in Religious Studies: Towards a Dialogue with Religious Education

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1. Introduction

This article seeks to summarise some developments in Religious Studies at university level, and to stress the importance of dialogue between those concerned with Religious Studies at university and those concerned with Religious Education in schools, whether as teachers in school or concerned with the education of intending teachers and continuing professional development. The immediate frame of reference is English Religious Education, but there may be implications for other systems.

At present, the main way in which connections are made is in the lives of the students themselves, and the transition from the final year of schooling to university and from graduation to postgraduate teacher training courses or other routes into teaching. The Higher Education Academy (a government-funded body concerned with the quality of teaching and learning) has been much exercised by transition to university in terms of subject content and study skills (e.g. Reid-Bowen and Robinson 2008). Insofar as transition to teaching is concerned, providers may audit students' subject knowledge and offer opportunities for enhancement (e.g. REonline, 2004-2006). There are also some academics whose work crosses the divide between the two, teaching and/or researching in both fields. Another mechanism is via the RE Council of England and Wales, where there is representation from AUDTRS (the Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies), so that reports on the work of the sectors can be shared. However, this collaboration tends to be at the level of policy and practical issues (e.g. if, as is currently the case, school examination entries for religious studies are increasing, why are applications to degree courses failing to reflect this? What are the implications for both Religious Education in schools and Religious Studies in universities of the omission of RE from a list of subjects, labelled the 'English Baccalaureate', considered very important for students at age 16?). There is no forum to share developments within subject content. This paper is attempting to move towards that.

It is important to note that this task is not undertaken from the standpoint that academics at university level should cascade their superior knowledge of the subject to teachers and teacher educators who will then distill simplified versions to their pupils. This would be to take a view of the nature of knowledge that is not shared by the authors, on philosophical, pedagogical, feminist and liberationist grounds (see Cush 1999). Rather pupils in schools, teachers, teacher educators, student teachers, and students and lecturers in degree courses are seen as partners in the continuing attempt

to understand religion and religions. The influences work in many ways – sometimes developments in school Religious Education, such as the popularity of philosophy and ethics examination papers at age 18, has impacted upon curriculum development at universities. A number of new degree course have been developed which combine Religious Studies with Philosophy and Ethics (for example Bath Spa University's degree course *Religions, Philosophies and Ethics.* Sometimes ideas developed in the university have proven useful in Religious Education, for example the multi-faith phenomenological approach developed at Lancaster in the late 60s. On other occasions, developments seem to have worked in parallel, such as the increased emphasis on anthropology, ethnography and fieldwork at both school and university level (Jackson 1997; Hackett 2005; Geaves 2007).

The subject at university level is most commonly known in Britain as 'Theology and Religious Studies'. Although for historical reasons Theology has a certain precedence, in the last 40 years it has been Religious Studies that has had most influence on Religious Education in state-maintained schools in England and Wales. This article is mainly concerned with Religious Studies rather than Theology, though Theology has also influenced religious education – especially in the 'critical realist' (Wright 2000) and 'concept cracking' (Cooling 2000) pedagogies. (For more on different perspectives on the relationship between Religious Studies and Theology, see Bird and Smith 2009).

2. History

Although reference has already been made to the multi-faith, phenomenological approach as an example of developments at university level impacting upon developments at school level, it is important to note that an increasing number of teachers were already experiencing religious diversity in their classrooms from the late 50s and working out their own ways of dealing with this. One of the strengths of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education, founded in 1969 by three university professors (Ninian Smart, Frederick Hilliard and Geoffrey Parrinder), was that from the beginning it sought to involve participants from all levels of education in dialogue together – the original group consisted of three Religious Studies university lecturers, seven lecturers in education and nine school teachers (Hayward, 2008). In the words of Ninian Smart:

> When I started in the university business there was a lot of snobbery,
> as though dons should not involve themselves with popularization,
> still less with secondary and primary teaching, or with other branches
> of higher education. The Shap Working Party set its face resolutely
> against this from the very beginning: all branches of education would
> be drawn together in a communal enterprise…What is the use of talking
> about problems in education unless you do something? And of what
> use is talking about education at all unless you see it as a whole?
> (1993, ix)

Although neither Religious Studies in universities nor Religious Education in schools has stood still for the last 40 years and more, it is important to acknowledge the legacy of such pioneers, and to remember the excitement, enthusiasm and relief of a generation of teachers whose gained entry into many new and different worlds (of Hindus, Buddhists, etc.) and who were liberated from the presumption that their role was to induct children into some version of Christianity.

3. Phenomenology

The new study of religions in universities and schools of the late 60s and early 70s tended to be characterized as 'phenomenological' (e.g. Schools Council 1971; Swann Report 1985), an approach which was dominant in both Religious Studies and Religious Education until into the 90s (see Sutcliffe 2004; Jackson 1997). However, 'phenomenological' has meant very different things to different people, and for many functioned merely as a code or proxy for a non-confessional and multifaith approach. Variously conceived, it has been much criticised during the last 40 years from many different perspectives within both Religious Studies and Religious Education (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000; Jackson 1997). As much has been written on the topic from both Religious Studies and Religious Education perspectives, for present purposes it is only necessary to point out the divergence between some understandings at university level and school level.

At university level, students tended to be introduced to the philosophical roots of the phenomenological study of religion, key thinkers such as van der Leeuw, Kristensen and Eliade and key concepts such as epoche, empathy and eidetic vision (e.g. Sharpe 1975, 220-250). If, in some respects, students did not engage fully with phenomenology as a theory or method, when translated to school level phenomenology frequently, though by no means inevitably, defaulted to a descriptive portrayal of what were seen as facts about religions as conventionally understood with an expectation of evoking a positive appreciation on the part of pupils that excluded criticism. Whether or not directly related to a 'phenomenological' approach, this issue of a lack of analysis continues to be identified as a weakness of some Religious Education (e.g. Ofsted 2007), which might be ameliorated by drawing upon a wider range of theories and methods.

4. Ethnography

At about the time phenomenology was being subjected to severe criticism, ethnography was becoming widely regarded as a way forward in both universities and schools (e.g. Geaves 1996; Jackson 1997) albeit that ethnography in some form has an earlier presence. This includes the empirical studies of the Community Religions Project at Leeds University dating from 1976 (The Centre for Religion and Public Life 2012) and various attempts in Religious Education textbooks to integrate children's religious lives

into the curriculum, if only in imaginative versions, as in the Religious and Moral Education Press series of ' A Family in Britain' that seems to begin with a 1969 publication (Bridger 1969). The reason why ethnography appealed to both constituencies was that, while its own origins were equally vulnerable to criticism 'from below', it was the antithesis of what phenomenology was supposed to be, contemporary rather than historical in focus, people- rather then text-centred. Moreover, it promised to discover the actual in religion in place of often idealized accounts – diverse voices speaking of different experiences. This shift towards ethnography has been marked at all levels of education.

In universities ethnography has become mainstream, and under different titles, features in textbooks on methodology (e.g. Hinnells 2005; Chryssides and Geaves 2007) while students routinely engage in various sorts of fieldwork (examples of this can be found on the Living Religion website www.livingreligion.co.uk). Ethnographically-informed curriculum materials have been published and teachers and children are encouraged to be ethnographers themselves (Nesbitt 2004).

A number of more recent developments in Religious Studies may have something to offer Religious Education. In attempting to summarise such developments in a short space, what follows is necessarily selective and simplified. However, it should provide a starting point for dialogue, with reference to feminist, queer and postcolonial theory.

5. Feminist Theory

Feminism as a term suggests a unitary phenomenon but this is misleading such that it is a moot point whether reference should be made to 'feminism' in the singular or 'feminisms' in the plural to indicate the different forms of feminism that exist, not excluding debate about whether it is appropriate to use the term at all. One reason for questioning the use of feminism as a term is the problematising of the category of 'woman' itself, entailing as Sheila Greeve Davaney explains the move away from 'a unitary and essentialist female nature and what was taken to be the common oppressive character of all women's experience and the shared nature of women's liberated and critical consciousness' towards 'a focus upon women as historical subjects, emergent from distinctive histories and situated within plural and diverse … locales' (*excerpted in* Peskowitz *et al.* 2001, 392). Insofar as feminism has directed its attention towards religion, it has given rise to a variety of responses ranging from the rejection of religion as inherently patriarchal and incapable of revision (e.g. Hampson 1996), through advocacy of reform grounded in an alternative reading of religions as egalitarian and empowering (e.g. Radford Ruether 1983), to the creation of new religions centred on the Goddess and woman-centred spirituality (e.g. Christ 1997).

If, to adapt a phrase, 'the religious is political', then the study of religions is political too since the divide between the academic and the activist approaches dissolves in feminist praxis. As an engaged discipline, feminist scholarship is concerned not only to critique

past practice in respect of its subject matter and methods of study and, accordingly, research new topics in new ways, but to champion an integrated transformative vision. Thus feminism has gone beyond identifying the uncritical acceptance of men's religiosity as normative and a pervasive male bias that has equated the masculine with the human, and even beyond the introduction of innovative areas of enquiry that focus on women as subjects in their own right and the revision of existing methodologies to take appropriate account of issues of gender. Notably, it has involved a re-examination of the norms and values of academia in which the objectivity of the scholar is challenged as neither possible nor desireable. Characteristically, feminism stresses that the scholar's own beliefs shapes the scholarship s/he undertakes since the scholar does not so much survey the scene from above but works within the web of her/his own experiences and relationships. This requires that the scholar become reflexive, that is, conscious of how s/he affects what s/he is doing, hence Kim Knott's guiding principles features '*[a]n awareness of one's own feelings and thoughts throughout, and a consideration of their role in the research as a whole*' (1995, 210). Further, from a feminist perspective, were objectivity to be possible, it would still be unethical because religions sometimes advocate or defend teachings that are damaging and to pretend otherwise would amount to an abstention from judgement that fails to acknowledge suffering. As Rita Gross observes, '[n]ot all the points of view that one can describe and understand deserve to survive' (1993, 315).

Religious Education might take from this that there are different views and interpretations of religions that conflict with the dominant discourse, and that feminists have identified abuses within religions that cannot be condoned on the grounds of inter-religious or inter-cultural sensitivity. In practice, this means emphasising diversity: at its most basic, it requires checking that examples and resources include women and girls as well as boys and men; it also entails an openness towards subdominant discourses in religions that destabilise stereotypical portrayals; moreover, pupils need to be given confidence in their own experience as a source of authority equal to that of priest, teacher or textbook. Although there is much to be said for trying to understand before evaluating, it is important that pupils are not given a sanitised version of a religion but are enabled to engage with intra-religious debates such as the ordination of women in contemporary Buddhism.

6. Queer Theory

Queer theory contests the widely-accepted view that sex is natural whereas gender is the cultural construction of natural differences between two sexes, insisting instead that the notion of the naturalness of sex is a result of gender as ideology and a social construction. Consequently, gender is understood by Judith Butler to be 'the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture', an ideology that is complicit in heteronormativity since '[t]he institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the

masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire' (1999, 11, 30). Although a comparatively recent development, queer theory has already had an effect upon religions as feminism has done before it, influencing a distinct version of theology that challenges conventional theological assumptions as moulded by heterosexuality (Althaus-Reid 2003, 2) and informing innovative types of religious expression such as the paganism of the Radical Faeries (Thompson 2011).

There has been, then, some 'queering' of religions which has been matched by some 'queering' of their study even if such 'queering' of the subject occurred later than in other academic fields. One complication here is the need to distinguish 'gay' from 'queer' despite the origins of queer theory in what, for want of a better term, is the 'gay' community and the putative sexuality of its practitioners. The distinction to be drawn is that the former is an identity category that the latter aims not to reproduce or represent but, significantly, to transgress and transcend. It adopts this stance through emphasising that these categories have no real basis given that sexuality is simply a reification from the flux of desire. Notwithstanding, queer theory has directed attention to how religions define and evaluate sex, gender and sexuality. William Deal and Timothy Beal, for example, suggest that Butler's influence is evident in the way 'scholars are interested in how religious discourses, as part of larger social-symbolic orders, construct and constrict gender identities as well as how they open up possibilities for subversion of identity' (2004, 70). Consequently, queer theory has also exposed discrimination against those deemed homosexual that has been sanctioned by reference to religious tenets in a context where religions have often vested much of their authority in the authenticity of 'traditional' morality. In this connection, Christine Gudorf goes as far as to offer advice to religions that includes urging a 'focus on the dignity, value, and obligations of human persons to each other irrespective of those persons' sexual identities' (2001, 885).

Taking this on board, Religious Education could explore the ways in which religions have naturalised gender and, by extension, sexuality as inherent to human nature, for instance by analysing Genesis 2-3. The issue of homophobia could be raised, perhaps by contrasting responses to same-sex marriage proposals which have divided many churches and other religious groups in their understandings of faithful living. This would facilitate an examination of competing versions of core values and their practical outworkings in sexual morality and social action. Certainly, the very existence of gay members of faith communities must be acknowledged, notwithstanding official pronouncements to the contrary.

7. Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory turns upon a recognition of the hegemony of the West over the South and the East, and a rejection of such hegemony as oppressive and exploitative. Its commitment to change incorporates not just politics and economics but also culture in

which respect Morny Joy comments upon the postcolonial challenge to 'the imposition of cultural absolutes/ideals on a country or peoples who have been subjected to the influence of European colonialism' that, in common with Orientalism from which arguably it derives, denies 'a pattern of identification according to a dominant principle that is in the service of a Eurocentric ideal' (2000, 112). In response, postcolonial theology has embarked upon the task of liberating Christianity from the clutches of colonialism (e.g. Keller, Nausner and Rivera 2004) while postcolonial concepts cast light on religious movements of resistance to the West such as women's assumption of the veil in revolutionary Iran (Najmabadi 1991).

The relevance of the postcolonial perspective is that its scrutiny of the colonial legacy encompasses investigation into the heritage of the study of religions including its understanding of religions. Viewed through this lens, the study of religions historically is seen as inextricably intertwined with colonialism, with many of its ideas and much of its information revealing the impress of the colonial attitudes and assumptions that characterised the period of its origins. What then becomes imperative is a reappraisal and reorientation of the study of religions to free it from its colonial roots. This entails an effort to attend to indigenous voices and engage with indigenous concepts however profound the disjunctive effects of colonialism that exacerbate the difficulties of rediscovering and revitalising indigenous norms and values. Such a stress on indigeneity poses particularly pressing questions for religion because it has been defined and demarcated on a Western model. Thus Slavica Jakelic and Jessica Starling indicate that there has been an acknowledgement of 'the need to describe religion in indigenous terms in order to recover the subjectivity of the formerly objectified colonial "other" ' (2006, 204). The need to undertake this task is determined, at least in part, by the insight that 'religions' in the non-Western world are themselves the products of colonialism and complicit in the exercise of Western power. This thesis of the invention of non-Western religions in the colonial cause is illustrated by 'Hinduism' which as a homogeneous and unified entity is regarded as a feature of British imperialism and instrumental in the prosecution of British policy on the subcontinent (e.g. Sugirtharajah, 2003).

If the study of religions has a colonial past, then it follows inevitably that teachers of Religious Education have had their images of religions reflected in the distorting mirror of the colonial frame of mind. Teachers might offer the opportunity for older students to encounter colonisers' comments on the religions of colonised peoples as a basis for discussion of ways in which those religions are subordinated to Christianity as inferior or otherwise marginalised as exotic. In addition, teachers should recognise that the division of the subject into discrete religions, often designated by the '-ism' suffix, demands critical attention. A counterbalance could be to choose examples, such as Sathya Sai Baba or the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, that do not neatly fit into inherited categories.

8. 'Religion' and 'Religions'

One of the major issues that emerges from many of these, often contested and controversial, developments in Religious Studies is the adoption of a critical stance towards 'religion' and the 'religions'. It underlies many of the criticisms of phenomenology's stance on reductionism as, in Douglas Allen's summary, 'methodologically confused and unjustified' (2005, 201). It is underwritten by ethnography which, from her own experience in the field, Eleanor Nesbitt observes, 'contests essentialized representations of religions' (2011, 247). Further, it is evident in feminism where Rosalind Shaw identifies that '[t]he *sui generis* concept … stands in a contradictory relationship to the premises of feminist scholarship' when arguing that the irreducibility of religion is itself reductive, albeit in another sense, specifically inadequacy (1995, 70). Queer theory also questions the existence of an essence to 'religion', so that Mary Tolbert advocates an extension of the deconstructive strategy from sexual identities to religious ones predicated upon 'the radical historicity of both of these social constructs'(*excerpted in* Rycenga *et al.* 2004, 271-2). Postcolonial theory questions 'religion' too, in this case it is considered ideologically suspect as an agent of western power leading Daniel Dubisson to comment that, at the advent of 'religion', 'imperialism and colonialism were equally justified and even, with the impetus of missionary activity, received an unanticipated moral guarantee' (2003,115).

As this short survey shows, the criticism of 'religion' is a point of convergence between otherwise disparate disciplines and, through generating considerable debate (e.g. Schilbrack, 2010), has changed the climate of the study of religions by demanding analysis of its foundational category and awareness of the complexity of the factors that condition its meaning and implications in certain contexts. At its most basic, it involves thinking about 'religion' as the interpretive paradigm through which we think about what we study.

8. Religion and Belief in Contemporary Britain

As well as investigating the implications of recent theoretical developments represented in Religious Studies for Religious Education, it is important to refocus upon the world in which the pupil is living, both in Britain and beyond. Recent studies have highlighted some significant aspects of religion in British society. Paul Weller (2008:1) argues for a 'three-dimensional' view of religion and belief in the UK – those dimensions being 'Christian', 'secular' and 'religiously plural', and each of them complex and changing. Linda Woodhead argues that versions of the secularisation thesis that expected a gradual withering away of religion cannot be upheld. The reality is a religious market economy with room for new evangelical Christian churches and new age, people who do not go to church but are 'Christian in my own way' and people who are 'spiritual but not religious', radical atheists and soft pluralists. The future is hard to predict, but one positive aspect of the 'diverse, complex, multi-layered and contradictory' situation is that it 'allows new interpretations to emerge, quiet voices to be heard, everyday lives and struggles to count' (2012, 26-7). The characterisation of the current situation as

'post-secular' is rejected, as this suggests that religion went away and came back again rather than always being present in changing ways, and also plays down the strength of increasing secularisation, however defined. A situation where the Christian, the secular and the plural (each in diverse forms) are sharing the same space has led to increasing hybridity. Eleanor Nesbitt points out that the number of people whose personal spirituality draws upon several religious traditions is growing – these she calls 'spiritually plural' and 'existentially interfaith' (2011, 232). In addition, the number of children brought up in mixed faith families is increasing (Arweck and Nesbitt 2011).

Research by Paul Weller (2011) with staff and students in universities made for surprising reading for those who assumed the secularism of the academy. Among university staff, the self –identification as 'spiritual' came in third after 'Christian' or 'no religion', and among students fourth after 'Christian', 'no religion' and 'Muslim'. With students, Pagans slightly outnumbered Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs and other religious groups. These findings reveal another important feature of the British religious landscape that has also merited scholarly attention, viz. the 'spiritual revolution' (Heelas 2002). This describes the claimed move away from traditional 'organised religion' towards a more personalized 'spirituality', with a stress on individual experience that is growing within 'traditional' religions as well as the more characteristic 'spiritualities' of Paganism, New Age, Goddess spirituality, etc. Thus Higher Education increasingly includes courses on these forms of spirituality alongside New Religious Movements, for instance, Rastafari, Soka Gakkai and the Raelians. In order to take seriously secular world-views as part of the subject and not simply as the antithesis of religiosity, university programmes may include courses such as Stephen Bullivant's module on 'Atheism and Non-Religion' at St Mary's, Twickenham. As for Christianity, increasingly both Religious Studies and Theology are recognising intra-Christian diversity.

Teachers need to be prepared for classrooms where the diversity of religion and belief cannot be mapped easily onto ethnicity and where many children will be influenced by multiple spiritual trends. Religious Education should perhaps make space for smaller traditions, in the light of Eileen Barker's (2012) contention that many newer or minority religious groups face discrimination and marginalisation in Religious Education as elsewhere. Units of work which analyse atheism and humanism as belief-systems in their own right could be developed to supplement the more common practice of including non-religious perspectives in philosophy and ethics. Similarly, the teaching of Christianity should reflect the very real differences of belief and practice on the ground.

9. Religion and Belief in a Globalising World

Today's pupils are not, of course, confined to a British context either virtually or actually but as a generation experience globalisation as a fact of life. Globalisation denotes the process by which the globe is understood as an ever more interconnected whole. As William Scheuerman points out, in addition to 'interconnectedness', globalisation is

defined by the following: 'deterritorialization' where geographical location is irrelevant; 'velocity' where the movement of ideas, individuals, finance and commodities is rapid; 'long-term process' where today's experience represents an intensification of pre-existing tendencies; and 'multi-pronged' where the numerous aspects of globalisation are revealed in specific political, economic and social spheres (2010).

Although this process is not generally approached in religious terms, Religious Studies has discussed how globalisation affects religions. Peter Beyer, for example, links globalisation with relativisation to which he argues religions can respond in both a fundamentalist and a liberal manner (1994, 9-10). Many contemporary religious communities function as transnational networks as Elisabeth Arweck and James Beckford have noted (2012, 367). In addition, Religious Studies has broadened its already wide comparativist curriculum by extending the range of its philosophical content consistent with the World Philosophy movement. The latter has built on Simon Critchley's satirical observation that '[p]hilosophy speaks Greek, and only Greek' to counter the belief that philosophy is a solely Western enterprise (Deutsch, 1999). In some respects it is parallel to the earlier World Religion movement and also championed by Ninian Smart (1999, 1). Given that much non-Western thought does not reflect the Enlightenment dichotomy between philosophy and religion (King 1999, 32), this has introduced new material for the philosophy of religion to consider. Chad Meister's *The Philosophy of Religion Reader* (2008) exemplifies this greater inclusivity, featuring readings from various Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist thinkers.

Religious Education could use globalisation as a means of illuminating the emergence of fundamentalist, and hence standardised, and liberal, and hence universalised, forms of religion in the modern world. It could also consider how transnationalism might affect belief and practice, not least for children in the classroom. Pupils might also benefit from an opening up of philosophy and ethics, that have been dominated by Christian and secular categories and content, to other Abrahamic and crucially Dharmic perspectives.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, a dialogue needs to be re-established between Religious Studies in universities and Religious Education in schools and teacher education in the spirit of the pioneers of non-confessional multi-faith Religious Education. This is all the more pressing given current English education policies which seek to give schools more autonomy and reduce the input of universities into teacher education. In identifying a number of recent developments in Religious Studies and suggesting their possible implications for Religious Education, this article re-opens a dialogue in which Religious Studies has the opportunity to learn as well as teach.

Notes on Contributors

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