

# Engaged Religious Studies:

## Some Suggestions for the Content, Methods and Aims of Learning and Teaching in the Future Study of Religions

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### Introduction

The theme of the conference is 'Mapping the Field', a metaphor which is applicable to religious traditions themselves, and to learning and teaching in the Study of Religions, as well as to delineating the content of our subject discipline, if such it is. Religious traditions, like

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maps, purport to tell us where we are at present, where we are heading, and the best way to get there. Planning teaching is similar, in that we need to know where the students are now, where we hope to get to, and the best way of getting from A to B. However, although teaching and learning (and no doubt spiritual quests) are usually more successful with a clear idea of the aims of the exercise, as with other journeys, too rigid an adherence to the plan may cause us to miss unexpected attractions and events along the way. Thus the learning journey needs to be a flexible one. Perhaps we should not be too obsessed with predetermined ‘Learning Outcomes’. More importantly, we need to know before we start why we are going on the journey—is it worth setting off?

Michael Grimmitt defines pedagogy as ‘a theory of teaching and learning encompassing aims, curriculum content and methodology’ (2000:8), in other words the why? what? and how? of our educational endeavour. Scholars of religious education for school-aged students have a long history of critical thinking, if not to say agonising, about the why, what and how of learning and teaching in Religious Studies, and perhaps university level Religious Studies has something to learn from this. Over many years of trying to help students become teachers of religious education in school and of being a teacher myself, my focus has moved from the content through the methods to the rationale, especially after sitting through many a technically competent lesson wondering ‘so what? Why do these pupils need to know this?’. With a clear aim, the content and methods often fall into place naturally. However I shall look at these three questions in reverse order of their current importance to me and start with content.

## Content

In spite of our 50th anniversary, Religious Studies is still in many ways relatively a young subject, and although we have successfully distinguished ourselves from Theology to our own satisfaction, the distinction still needs to be constantly made to the uninitiated, and sometimes proves difficult, in that the boundaries easily become blurred. Ninian Smart (1995:8) described the continuing hegemony of Theology, and Anglican theology at that, in British universities, and a

rough analysis of the AUDTRS handbook reveals that ‘religionists’ are still outnumbered by Theologians and Biblical studies scholars in Great Britain by about 1:4. In making the distinction I was involved in some interpretation of the brief listings scholars give of themselves, and several scholars are, of course, happy to be both theologians and religionists. In common with most terms in higher education, as our poor students have to recognise, the definitions of both Religious Studies and Theology are disputed. Some definitions of Theology stress that it is an activity engaged in by believers: ‘the systematic reflection on God and belief in God by Christians for Christians’ is one given by Adrian Thatcher (1997:74-75); whereas Alister McGrath (2001:138) would see it more neutrally as the ‘analysis of religious belief’, with Christian theology being ‘the systematic study of the fundamentals of the Christian faith’. This presumably can be engaged in by Christian and non-Christian alike.

The distinctions in practice in Britain are partly about approach, if the ‘insider’ definition of theology is taken, but are also about content, as Theology tends to stress belief (i.e. doctrine rather than practice) and is often limited to the Christian traditions, whereas the Study of Religions attempts a more holistic approach to belief, behaviour and customs labelled religions and is plural, engaging with several traditions. However, I am concerned that we might have left Christianity to the theologians. Looking at the programme for the next few days, I could spend a whole day on Buddhist Studies or South Asian Studies, and there are substantial sections on Jaina Studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Sikh Studies, New Age Studies—but where is Christian Studies? There are papers within thematic, area, or methodology sections dealing with Christian topics, but no ‘Christian Studies’ section. We are celebrating the establishment in Oxford of Centres for Buddhist Studies, Hindu Studies, Islamic Studies and Jewish Studies—presumably ‘Christian Studies’ is the business of the university Faculty of Theology. Similarly, it is hard to find books to recommend to students which take a ‘Religious Studies’ approach to the Christian traditions. This division into ‘Christianity’ and ‘other religions’ was labelled the ‘fundamental distinction’ by John Hull (1993) when discussing government guidance on religious education, and this distinction seems still to influence the way we divide up our subject field in Britain, and elsewhere in Europe (Tim Jensen noted a similar division in Study of Religions in Denmark [Jensen:2004]). Is the real difference between Theology and Study of Religions one of

content—theologians study Christianity and Study of Religions studies the rest—or one of approach, or of aim?

One of the questions that has been exercising scholars of religions for the last decade or so, is whether we have a content at all—is there such a thing as religion? Are the so-called religions mere eighteenth or nineteenth century constructions, ‘isms’ born of Western post-Enlightenment rationalism, or in the case of Eastern traditions, of the desires of imperialist colonisers to categorise and control? Is the very notion of ‘religion’ a misguided category as Tim Fitzgerald (e.g. 1995), for example, has suggested? In many non-European languages there is no word that easily translates into the English ‘religion’, or way of distinguishing between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’; there is just how people live their lives. It was explained to me by a lecturer in religious education from Botswana that this is the case in her own language of Setswana. My question about whether non-religious lifestyles could be included in religious education would just not be translatable. On the other hand, in everyday English, this question does make some sense, as we can see from the current debate about including ‘atheism’ in the English Religious Education curriculum, even if we reject any essentialist notion of the term religion. We all know that ‘religion’ is notoriously difficult to define. Definitions focussing on belief in God only suit theistic religions and leave Buddhism out. Those that focus on the supernatural rule out those worldviews that see no natural-supernatural distinction. If defined as ‘beliefs’, this is seen as a western post-enlightenment view, inappropriately imposed on non-western traditions, which tend to be more about ‘doing’, and even that is an unwarranted generalisation. In reality the traditions we label ‘religions’ are internally diverse, and the dividing lines between them are not clear, particularly in non-western (e.g. Indian) traditions or post-modern or late-modern manifestations of religion such as ‘new age’, nor is ‘religion’ easy to distinguish from other aspects of human life. Thus we recognise that the trend in academic circles is to take a non-essentialist view of the term religion: following Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘religion’ tends to be viewed as an artefact of the academy, a tool for analysis, rather than having any direct relationship to reality ‘out there’ (Smith 1982:xi).

Even if we decide that religion is merely a convenient term, is it a useful one? For some time I have been concerned about the negative baggage that the term ‘religion’ seems to carry in our contemporary culture, to the point where I have started to call it the ‘r’

word. Colleagues working in Education departments seem happy to talk about the need to recognise cultural diversity, but become uncomfortable when 'religion' is mentioned. Each year I start one of our first year courses with a word association task obtaining students' reactions to the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality'—the gut reactions to the term 'religion' are all to do with other people telling you what to do, misuse of power, control, repression, especially the demonic 'organised religion' (which always makes me wonder what 'disorganised religion' might be like). This, remember, is from students who have actively chosen to take at least one module in 'Study of Religions'. 'Spirituality' receives a warmer welcome, being associated with individual freedom, peace and meditation. Discussing the definition of spirituality makes trying to define religion seem easy—suggestions range from those that make it identical to religion to those that include religious and non-religious responses to life. Often it seems to be a way of retaining the 'nice' bits of religion without having to face either the criticisms or demands of adherence to an organised religious tradition. So would 'study of spiritualities' be a better description of our content? Although I can be persuaded to include it in the title of my subject, I would be loath to reduce it to 'spiritualities' because of the rather individualised, self-oriented associations of the term, adrift from the traditions.

If community and traditions are important, would the more fashionable 'culture' be better? In my institution, as in others, more popular than Study of Religions is Cultural Studies, suggesting that students do want to look at human beliefs, customs and artefacts. The word 'culture' seems more acceptable to those who do not like 'religion', such as the Education colleagues mentioned above. In Russia, the subject equivalent to our religious education being introduced into schools is called 'Orthodox Culture'—the first half to satisfy the dominant religious community that its influence on the nation is recognised, and the second to still the objections of the secularists—don't worry, it's not religion, just culture. Apart from the fact that 'Cultural Studies' is a term already taken, and appears to be mainly about the study of popular art, music, film and new media, I have two main concerns about using the term 'culture' to describe the content of our study. First, as pointed out by James Cox, Phillip Goodchild and others (see Bunt 2004) 'culture' as a label suffers from the same artificiality as the term 'religion' and we end up in more debates about the meaning of words. Second, and more importantly to

me, the use of the term ‘culture’ would seem to presume from the outset that religions are human creations. From a believer’s point of view, a clear distinction may be made between the eternal truths of their tradition (whether or not they like the term ‘religion’ for these) and ‘culture’ (the changeable social context in which eternal truths are expressed). It does make some sense, even if it becomes very fuzzy, to talk of ‘religions’ adapting to different ‘cultures’ or making changes in what is merely ‘cultural’. In practice we all know that there is often no agreement as to what counts as ‘religion’, therefore unchangeable and what as ‘culture’ therefore changeable. For example ordaining women as priests, monogamy, not cutting one’s hair, honouring ancestor spirits and local gods, female circumcision all may be viewed as religion or as culture by different people, or the distinction may not make sense to them. Nevertheless, it would not seem sensible to start by alienating the very people we are trying to study by taking an a priori stance that sees their customs and beliefs as merely human creations. As Brian Bocking points out, one of the distinctive features of the generally phenomenological Study of Religions as traditionally practised in Britain has been ‘its programmatic reluctance to propose any theory of religion which makes it impossible for the religious believer to go on believing, or the religious practitioner to go on practising’ (2000:4). I have tried hard to think of another term to encompass the beliefs, values and customs of everyone, whether ‘religious’ or not, in order to explain the content of our study. I have not yet succeeded, and for the time being think we need to continue with the term religion, whilst airing its problematic nature, and trying to explain to anyone who will listen what we mean. As a convenient shorthand, I think we have to hold on to both the communal dimension suggested by James Cox’s ‘sociohistorical manifestations of authoritative traditions’ (Bunt 2004:164) and the more personal and inclusive ‘responses to’ ‘the significant limits of experience’ suggested by Philip Goodchild (Bunt 2004:167)—the latter having room for individual, non-traditional or non-religious responses.

I still rather like Ninian Smart’s delineation of the content of our subject as religions plus ideologies plus questions of value and meaning (Smart 1995). Many school departments have taken to calling themselves ‘religion and philosophy’. My own preference, given the fuzzy nature of the concept of religion, is to cast the net as wide as possible, without rendering it completely meaningless. Thus one of the ways in which the Study of Religions is distinguished from

Theology is by breadth of content. In designing the content of our curricula I would argue for a diverse selection of major religious traditions (with all the caveats about the category 'world religion' pointed out by Ron Geaves [1998] and others), ancient traditions with fewer followers, new religious movements, so-called indigenous traditions, contemporary Paganism, the more nebulous forms of contemporary spirituality such as those sometimes labelled 'new age', implicit and vernacular religion, as well as secular alternatives such as humanism that play a similar role to religions in people's lives: always stressing internal diversity, fuzzy boundaries and the multiplicity of interpretations of each category.

No Department has the time or staffing to cover all the varieties of traditions and spiritualities ancient and contemporary, so we need to have some criteria for selection. I guess that for most of us it tends to be guided by our own research interests, so that students are taught by scholars at the forefront of their discipline. However, it is also important to consider what the students themselves are interested in, if only for recruitment and retention. Edinburgh University were reported in THES 27th August as finding that among students 'there is more interest in contemporary affairs than in biblical studies'. The current good news is that the number of candidates taking A-level in our subject has seen the largest rise (almost 14%) of any subject with 14,418 taking A-level this year. This is partly a result of the earlier success of the 'short-course GCSE' in Religious Education, which led to RS, if both full and short course are amalgamated) being the most sixth popular subject at GCSE, beating French, Art, History and Geography and behind only Science, Maths, English Language, English Literature and Design Technology. (This year's full course entries were 141,037 up from 132,304 last year. I could not find this year's short course entries but last year's were 223,885). The bad news is that as yet this does not seem to be transferring to Theology and Religious Studies at degree level. According to Dick Powell (2004), only Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and Edinburgh have increased their intake this year, and there were 2017 TRS courses left in 'Clearing' this year. At A level, papers increasing in popularity are those dealing with the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, and one of the reasons why the short course GCSEs are popular is because as well as options in Christianity and 'world religions', there are options in philosophy and ethics, and contemporary issues like religion and science, human relationships, wealth and poverty, peace and justice,

creation, the environment, medical ethics etc. The reason seems to be that in these aspects of the subject you have more opportunity to form and express your own opinions—to quote a local schoolboy ‘I like RE because other subjects tell you what to think—in RE you can say what you think’. Research by Mark Fearn and Leslie Francis (2004) revealed that students prefer a ‘religious studies’ to a ‘faith based’ approach, and analysed the areas they would most like to study at university level. There are differences between ‘churchgoers’ and ‘non-churchgoers’, and between male and female students. Among the findings that interested me are that Philosophy and Psychology emerge as the most popular approaches to studying religions, that Buddhism is the most popular non-Christian tradition especially with boys and non-church goers (with whom it beat Christianity), that new religious movements are of more interest than ‘new age’ (which may be a term less familiar or interesting to them), and that of contemporary issues the order of interest is religion and gender issues top, religion and the media next, religion and politics third and religions and the environment last: a finding that surprised me. Ancient Egyptian religion has quite a high level of interest too.

Looking at younger secondary pupils prior to GCSE, during my current research with secondary school pupils identifying themselves as witches, my control (non-witch) group were also interested in Ancient Egyptian religion, Buddhism and Hinduism, and the whole area of ghosts, dreams, mysterious occurrences and the ‘unexplained’. The latter also came top in research undertaken by an MA student a few years ago. It was interesting to hear from a colleague in Estonia that research into what secondary aged pupils would like in the newly introduced subject of religious education revealed that the options they thought most important of a list provided were ethics, world religions other than Christianity, religion and culture and religion and science in that order, and that when asked to give their own top ten topics these were sexuality and relationships, love, UFOs, world religions other than Christianity, destiny, life after death, alcohol and drugs, soul, spirits and ghosts and reincarnation (Valk 2004). Further research on the religious affiliations and interests of 16 to 19 year olds in England by Lat Blaylock (2004) leads him to describe them as a generation characterised by ‘plasticity of spirituality’, post-modern in the sense of being eclectic, anti-tradition and relativistically inclined, plural, ‘religion-lite’, in their relationship to the ‘faith communities’, rarely

anti-spiritual, more open to ideas like God and life after death than they are often portrayed, and very much in search of meaning. Turning from their own interests to the Religious Education provided for them in schools, the recently launched 'non-statutory national framework' (QCA 2004) for religious education in English schools gives guidance for the local producers of syllabuses. A balanced content is considered to be one which includes Christianity, the five other 'principal religions' in this country, other traditions 'such as the Baha'i faith, Jainism and Zoroastrianism' and 'secular philosophies such as humanism' (QCA 2004:12). The learning objectives are quite challenging, for example pupils aged 11-13 will among other outcomes be able to 'analyse and explain how religious beliefs and ideas are transmitted by people, texts and traditions', 'investigate and explain why people belong to faith communities and explain the reasons for diversity in religion' and 'apply a wide range of religious and philosophical vocabulary consistently and accurately, recognising both the power and limitations of language in expressing religious beliefs and ideas'. The content will cover at least three religions and possibly secular worldviews (QCA 2004:28-29), and deal with themes such as human nature and destiny, authority, religion and science, spirituality, ethics, human rights and social justice, global issues such as war and the environment, and interfaith dialogue. Pupils aged 14-19 will, for example, 'think rigorously and present coherent, widely informed and detailed arguments about beliefs, ethics, values and issues, drawing well-substantiated conclusions' and 'develop their understanding of the principal methods by which religions and spirituality are studied' (QCA 2004:30).

So, in order to capitalise on the interest and previous educational experience of young people we would be wise to include philosophy of religion, ethics, psychology of religion, gender and sexuality and religion and the media at least into our curricula, as well as something dealing with life's mysteries, especially those surrounding death. Universities have much to gain by liaising carefully with schools concerning the aims, methods and content of religious studies. However, I would also argue that we should not be complete slaves to fashion and 'contemporary relevance', or we will be in danger of losing an historical perspective and the languages and literary skills to access religious texts. I would agree with Fearn and Francis that we should not cut less popular options such as Pali or

early Christian history, but we do need to find new ways of marketing them to potential students.

## Method

Even if we have agreed on the content of our curriculum, our search for learning and teaching methods cannot be viewed as the attempt to find a successful way of communicating a fixed package of information. Religions are just not like that. They are living, growing, changing, fuzzy at the edges, and our construction of the content may shift as our attempt to discuss religious traditions with students may affect our own understanding of the tradition as well as the students’.

I am not treating here a discussion of the best methods of researching religions, but of teaching religions to our students. There are questions of general approach, and of practical teaching techniques. Fearn and Francis claim that school students prefer a ‘religious studies approach’. By this I understand a broadly phenomenological approach, which at school level has nothing to do with Husserl and essences or Eliade and the sacred, but simply trying to take an impartial and objective as possible look at the traditions or issues studied, and trying to understand before judging. Importantly it is open to believers, non-believers and agnostics. Although we may need to go ‘beyond phenomenology’, it is not a bad place to start. Objectivity, epoche and empathy may all be impossible and in some cases undesirable, but the general attempt to understand with sensitivity before evaluating, and to be conscious of our own presuppositions and agendas, and where these come from, cannot but aid our explorations of religions and our own personal development. As Brian Bocking argued (2000:2), ‘the Lancaster-style phenomenology of religion ... still has a lot going for it’, at least as a place to start. Over the last thirty years, this approach has been supplemented by feminist insights, first hand ethnography of a dialogical nature, and a more sophisticated understanding of terminology, but has not been fundamentally overthrown. One valuable component of the ‘methodological agnosticism’ associated with the phenomenological approach is the commitment to avoid premature evaluation, an attitude described as ‘epistemological humility’ (Cush 1999: 386; Bocking 2000 6; Chidester cited in

Jackson 2004:181). James Cox contends similarly that even taking account of the many criticisms of a basically phenomenological religious studies 'there is still a methodological middle ground between theology and culture' (2004:263). One argument for having a subject called Religious Studies/Study of Religions is that it means that we can look at traditions in a rounded and holistic way, drawing on the insights of insiders and outsiders, and of a range of disciplines including ethnography, sociology, psychology, philosophy, literary theory, languages, history, art, archaeology, music...I would agree with Smart that the study of religions is polymethodic (1973:8).

A heated debate in religious education circles has been whether religious traditions are best studied systematically or thematically, paralleling the 'particularist' and 'comparativist' approaches in higher education. There are strengths and dangers in both, as well as hidden agendas. The strengths of looking at one tradition at a time include maintaining the integrity of the tradition in all its dimensions, being able to grasp the historical development and contexts, whereas the weaknesses include essentialism and reification, accepting the construction of a tradition by a dominant group, and ignoring the lived reality where people may draw upon a variety of so-called religious traditions. The hidden agendas may be those of theological exclusivists who are convinced that their own traditions cannot be compared with others, or a postmodern concern to stress the incommensurability of different cultures. The strengths of a comparativist approach include that similarities often cut across the traditions (with for example liberals in two religions having more in common with each other than with non-liberals in their own traditions), and that the 'religions' are to some extent at least constructs anyway. Weaknesses include giving students a one dimensional view of a tradition, imposing categories upon traditions that come from outside and may distort, be eurocentric or orientalist or in other ways unacceptable to the tradition, and that aspects of a tradition may be studied with no grounding in historical or other wider contexts. The hidden agendas with comparativism may include a universalist or inclusivist desire to teach that all traditions are really different paths to the same goal. My answer to this problem at all levels of education has always been to do a bit of both, being aware of the pitfalls.

When we turn to the practicalities of teaching and learning, a battery of strategies is required as different students respond to

different methods and variety is welcomed by all. Sophie Gilliat Ray (2003) describes an interesting variety of techniques employed by colleagues in Wales: teaching through visual material such as art and film, using popular music, and practical drama. Technology has enhanced our repertoire in many ways, both using the internet as resource (with the corresponding requirement to enable students to interrogate and interpret what they find—the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ being much required), and as a means of learning and teaching. Distance learning in particular has been revolutionised by communications technology, and many university departments have developed very successful courses this way. Susan Stuart and Margaret Brown (2004) describe an innovative use of handsets to encourage students to answer questions in the teaching of logic—other tutors have reported students who are far happier to engage in an on-line discussion than a classroom one. My ongoing discussion board for students at Bath on the meaning of spirituality is proving popular and interesting. On a visit to the USA in spring 2004 I was impressed by the use of technology at a community college in Chattanooga—not only did they have completely on-line and hybrid courses in world religions, complete with interviews specially created by the college film crew, but they were making excellent use of webcams to have interactive lectures with students at a distance, but being able to see them face to face. This enabled learning to be distant in space only or time as well, and had proved popular with the non-traditional students they were trying to reach. The college provided the first two years of a degree course, after which students progressed to university for the second two years of their programme. The combination of FE provision of HE and extensive use of technology gave me a distinct feeling that I was looking at the future of mass higher education.

The learning and teaching strategy I am most committed to myself is the direct experience of living religions. This can now be partially achieved at a distance through technology, such as interactive or recorded interviews with religious practitioners, but there is much to be said for actually visiting religious communities on their own ground. Learning happens through all the senses—iconography and atmosphere can communicate directly as well as what the community representatives say. At Bath Spa, there is a long-standing tradition of over 30 years of sending students on placements where they live alongside a religious community and join in as far as their own perspectives will allow. Students almost inevitably report that such

experiences bring their studies to life, and that they gain more insights into the tradition than through the more conventional methods of attending lectures and reading books. Such encounters not only enhance learning about the host tradition, but the experience of being in an environment where the presumptions underlying everyday life are different, often leads students to reflect upon their own worldviews and spiritual resources.

I have been to four conferences this summer, and among many benefits is the experience of spending long hours passively listening to colleagues. Even when fascinating, the effort to keep listening is often difficult. One of the four was intended more for practising teachers of religious education in European schools, and as a result some sessions involved activities rather than listening to papers. Interpreting pictures, working out why a certain ethical action had been taken from written clues, discussing specific issues in small groups, certainly made for more memorable learning. Returning to those Estonian school students, their favourite teaching and learning methods included, from the top, fieldtrips, free conversation, visiting experts, group work, storytelling, games and interviews conducted by students, and their least favourite was teachers' oral presentations and students taking notes (Valk 2004). Field visits, philosophical discussions, the use of the creative arts, and experiential methods are all common in British RE, but perhaps less so in Higher Education.

In taking students on the journey of learning about religions, it is important to know where they are starting from, and our experience is that they are starting from very different places, especially as widening participation brings us an increasingly diverse student body. I usually start new first year modules with something like word association to see what existing perceptions students have, and a quick show of hands to see who has studied this topic before at A level or GCSE. Increasingly I find that students know both less and more than one would have presumed, and we are trying to develop the ability to teach at more than one level at the same time: for example in first year lectures combining basic information with some points for further reflection for those who are in a position to go beyond the basics, and reading lists differentiated by previous experience. Another impressive learning strategy I came across in my recent travels was in a Canadian state-funded Catholic school which was one of a few schools pioneering individualised self-directed learning. There is no timetable, and students negotiate their own programme, which is a

mixture of individual use of study materials, working in small groups and attending lectures and seminars by tutors if and when required. Teachers in the school become teacher advisers who write learning materials, organise more conventional lessons and workshops where required and assist students with their planning and with tracking their progress. Tests and assessments can be taken when ready rather than a whole student group at once. This has proved a particularly useful arrangement for pupils of all abilities, including the so-called gifted and talented as well as those with special needs. It requires a lot of commitment to producing both paper and on-line learning materials, and utilises an electronic system for tracking pupils' progress. Students gain excellent time-management and learning skills which equip them well for further study, employment and adult life in general. It does not suit all students, but I would certainly like to have attended such as school myself. Perhaps university Religious Studies can develop a similar mixture of distance learning materials for individuals and groups, on-line resources and individualised guidance.

Just as diversity of content and of learning strategies is advisable, so is diversity in forms of assessment. Traditional university students were those who performed well in formal examinations, and my external examining experience reveals a relative bias in favour of formal examinations in the older universities, and towards various forms of course work such as essays, projects, dissertations, assessed seminar presentations by individuals and groups, and visual productions in the newer institutions. Only last week a mature student candidate asked if it was possible to create a piece of artwork rather than a written piece of work as an assignment. I had to admit that this was not one of our current forms of assessment, but I shall give it further thought—perhaps there are topics where a piece of artwork with an accompanying written piece might be possible. I know that there are some institutions where such forms of assessment are used. There are arguments for and against each form of assessment, and different students prefer or perform better in different modes of assessment. Age and gender appear to have some relevance here.

Finally on 'method', whatever resources electronic or otherwise are available to tutor and student, I remain convince that at heart learning and teaching is a relationship—sometimes necessarily asymmetrical, where the onus is on the teacher to find a way of bringing student and material together, but sometimes, if the notion of

teacher as possessor of a fixed commodity called knowledge is shed, a journey of equals where both learn together. And, although variety in a programme is generally a good thing, there is a lot to be said for playing to the strengths of the individual lecturer rather than trying to force everyone into a predetermined model of good practice. Students respond well to enthusiasm and expertise, whatever the mode of delivery.

## Aims

Now to the crucial question of why we are engaging in this enterprise anyway. I was disappointed that I was unable to attend the PRS-LTSN sponsored conference at Lancaster last December ‘Religious Studies, what’s the point?’, but found reading the conference report in Discourse 2004 3.2 very illuminating. Gary Bunt writes (2004:161) that ‘a central premise was that studying religion in comparative contexts is a worth while exercise, which can widen horizons and deepen understanding of the world around us’. However, this central premise is not necessarily shared by those outside our field or those with power to grant resources. Throughout my teaching career, I have found opposition from two main quarters—religious people and non-religious people. The former, when of the more exclusivist variety, cannot see the point of studying the history of falsehoods that lead one away from the truth, and the latter cannot see why one is wasting one’s time on obviously false, dangerous and dated worldviews. You may all have suffered like me from people in managerial positions who hold one or other of these views. The type of students who might in the past have studied religions because of an interest in what makes people tick, are now more likely to choose psychology. There is truth in the claim that the history of the subject shows that interest in comparative religion tends to be associated with liberal protestant rather than secularist outlooks. It is interesting that the few countries that have pioneered non-confessional multi-faith religious education in schools have been of liberal protestant heritage, often with a state church.

So what are our aims and motivations for teaching religions? The most common answers fall into one of two categories, the first being what I call the ‘understanding our neighbours’ rationale—

religion, whether you like it or not, whether you can define it or not, or even if you critique the category, is still a powerful force in the world. We need knowledge, understanding, and dialogue in a world of plurality of religions, cultures, beliefs, values and customs. The other is to do with the student's own personal and intellectual development. Studying religions involves the students having to engage in critical reflection on their own, as well as others', beliefs and values—their sources—their validity. This aspect is central in school RE, but tends to be a bit of a side effect in university level Religious Studies, in contrast with Theology. The combination of the two aspects of understanding and critical reflection has been termed 'religiacy', a word first coined by Brian Gates in 1975. A 'religiate' person is one equipped to deal with religion at the level required by their context in the same way as the literate and numerate can cope with words and numbers (Gates 1975:72). Andrew Wright (1993:64) talks of 'religious literacy' as 'the ability to think and communicate intelligently about the ultimate questions that religion asks' and I noted in Discourse 2004 that John Shepherd continues the St Martin's tradition by defining 'religiacy' as 'a combination of informed understanding of religions and the exercise of critical skills in their evaluation' (Bunt 2004:164).

One of my main aims in teaching the study of religious at university level is to generate more RE teachers for schools. Religious Studies is not vocational exactly but in practice this is one of the major career destinations for TRS graduates in this country. The shortage of RE teachers is desperate—we produce between us less than 1000 graduates per year in England (Single Honours Theology and/or Religious Studies) and about 600 of these would need to enter teaching to fill the posts required, a larger proportion than any other subject. This important for us as it affects our recruitment. Since giving up teacher training, I have developed a Religion and Education module as part of our undergraduate as well as Masters degree dealing with interactions between Religion and Education on an international scale, and asking the big questions before they get bogged down in the practicalities of government directives and how to control Year 10 on a Friday afternoon, when undertaking a PGCE. These are proving popular, vocationally oriented modules which to date have encouraged more students than they have dissuaded. Opportunity for students to go into schools and see what RE departments are like is also an option in a compulsory professional and academic development module.

Returning to the less pragmatic aims, at an international conference of RE teachers and teacher educators in 2001, there was surprising agreement between teachers of RE in schools and universities from very different educational settings—whether the contexts were confessional or not, all put forward some version of the ‘understanding others’ and ‘developing critical and reflexive thinking’ reasons above, plus a third which could be summed up as addressing crucial issues for the future of humanity.

At 50, it is probably the time to ask whether what we are doing is the best use of our time. My colleague Dave Hicks at Bath, an international figure in Global Futures Education has analysed various projects and initiatives by educationalists and organisations such as Oxfam working for change. The four main themes that recur as the most crucial for educating today’s young people for the future they will face are:

- wealth and poverty
  - human rights including inequalities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious freedom
  - peace and conflict, including religious conflict
  - the natural environment
- (Hick 2004:22)

These, and similar topics, do feature in the syllabuses for religious education in schools. Interestingly, according to Francis and Fearn, the last mentioned—religion and the environment—is not such as priority for A-level candidates looking to choose universities—perhaps they’ve had an overdose of environmentalism in schools?

I would suggest that not only for marketing purposes, but also for the future of the planet and its people, we need to address such issues theoretically either in thematic modules or within our considerations of individual religions, looking at the various ways in which the power and resources of religious traditions can both help and hinder positive ways forward. As Rosalind Hackett argues, ‘Religion constitutes a powerful ideological, symbolic and organisational resource, not only for constructing personal and communal identities, but also for underwriting social and countercultural movements’ (2003:8). However, can we also do something practical? As Brian Bocking asked, ‘Is the scholar simply

trying to understand religions ... or is one trying to understand in order to bring about some change?’ (2000:4).

Part of our distinguishing ourselves from Theology has been an altogether correct desire to be as impartial as possible. However, as feminist and other liberationist thinkers have pointed out, complete objectivity is a myth and it is immoral to collude with injustice. Ninian Smart himself, way back in 1968, argued that although religious studies should ‘emphasise the descriptive historical side’ it should also ‘enter into dialogue with the parahistorical claims of religious and anti-religious outlooks’; it must ‘transcend the informative ... in the direction of understanding the meaning of, and into questions about the truth and worth of, religion’ (1968:105-6).

I have spent some time this year in a number of countries in an exploration of the interactions between religion and education especially in countries where religious education does not feature on the state school timetable. One thing I have been impressed by is the commitment to doing something practical found in confessional institutions. Religious faith provides tremendous motivation for ethical action. One example is Craig Kielburger from the Mary Ward School in Toronto, the school with self-directed learning, who, at the age of 12, after seeing a documentary on child labour in India, started an organisation called Free the Children, run by children for children and now internationally successful. I’m not talking about the ‘sponsored no-uniform day’ type of charity but students being enabled to take an in depth look at the reasons behind world problems as well as actually taking action. Among the 16 educational institutions I visited in Mexico, USA and Canada, the most impressive was not a school, college or university, but the Cuernavaca Centre for Intercultural Dialogue and Development. A Catholic run but ecumenically open endeavour influenced by liberation theology and the radical educational theories of the likes of Paulo Friere and Ivan Illich, this centre brought sixth-form and university students into contact with the poorest Mexicans in shanty towns and indigenous villages—not as gaping tourists or even as charity projects, but simply to meet and begin to understand their lives and the structures and factors that caused them to be as they were. The meetings were embedded in a programme of briefings and debriefings guiding the students to a deeper understanding and a commitment to do something. One of the strengths of Theology rather than Religious Studies in British universities is the element of practical theology

which enables students to engage with communities. Can there be an equivalent in non-confessional study of religions, or can only religious commitment provide the motivation to do something practical? Maybe some institutions are already doing something like this. On the model of 'Engaged Buddhism' I have labelled this 'engaged religious studies'. Religious Studies that makes a difference to the poor, oppressed, sufferers in conflict situations and the planet. This is somewhat similar to Rosalind Hackett's call for 'a committed scholarship which has something to offer the world and its problems—a more relevant future for a critical, comparative religious studies' (2003:21).

Returning to the map analogy, maps are never a simple representation of reality but distorted by the perspectives and interest of the mapmakers. The Mercator Projection emphasised Europe at the centre and the USA and then USSR as large—the Peter's projection gives centrality and emphasis to Africa and the poorer, southern countries. An Australian friend has a version of the Peter's projection, upside down from our perspective, which puts Australasia firmly at the centre top. Perhaps we need to work on a Peter's projection of Religious Studies which puts the previously marginalised at the centre and top of our map.

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