



Reflections on the progress of developing religiously literate citizens in England

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Religious literacy is an important topic and one that has been given considerable attention in recent years. It is, however, an imprecise term depending as it does on the hugely contested concept of religion. Here Paul Smalley contributes a provocative article that suggests that RE over recent years has been guilty of producing discontented philosophers rather than religiously literate young people.

Introduction

The context of this article is Andrew Wright's seminal 1993 book *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy*, published in the shadow of the White Paper *Choice and Diversity* (DfE 1992). It will draw parallels between the situation in England then and now, problematising the notion of religious literacy in a changing religious and educational landscape. By looking at other literacies – basic literacy, physical literacy and information literacy – it will come to a workable definition of religious literacy. Drawing on challenges from Carr (2007), Conroy (2013, 2015) and others, it will critically analyse the relationship between religious literacy and RE and consider whether RE has been able to deliver widespread religious literacy in the intervening years. Finally, it will suggest that RE teachers should be sure of their understanding of the complex multi-dimensional and multi-faceted concept we call religion, and become passionate advocates of the lived reality of the religious experience in the life of many diverse believers in order to help pupils understand and appreciate this paradoxical reality so that they are able to develop as religiously literate citizens.

Religious education in the secondary school: prospects for religious literacy

It is now 25 years since I completed my degree in Biblical Studies and Andrew Wright published his book. Reading it as part of my PGCE helped shape my thinking and educational philosophy. It was written in the shadow of *Choice and Diversity* and began by asserting that 'Religious Education today is in a state of flux' (p. 1); some things appear to change very little. It was in this book that Wright highlighted the necessity to address religious literacy. Wright suggests a questioning approach is taken where students enquire after the truth of ultimate questions in a plural society.

Twenty-five years on saw the publication of the *State of the Nation* report, estimating that 800,000 pupils are left 'without the religious literacy they need' (RE Council 2017, p. 5), whilst the RE Commission's *RE for All* interim report suggests that religious literacy is key to employability in modern Britain (CoRE 2017, p. 24).

Literacy or literacies?

But why literacy – and what does it signify? There are of course many 'literacies' and I shall briefly consider three before returning to religious literacy.

Basic literacy is defined by Kirsch (2001) as the ability to read, write or speak a given language based on background knowledge in it. Hirsch (2009) argues that to engage in democratic society there needs to be a common literacy, but this use of language goes hand in hand with the common knowledge to understand the content of the text. Basic literacy is a part of education, but in our schools the curriculum subject of English should develop far more than basic literacy, and conversely basic literacy is taught as a part of all school subjects.

Whitehead describes physical literacy as 'the ability and motivation to capitalise on our motile potential to make a significant contribution to the quality of life. ... An individual who is physically literate moves with poise, economy and confidence in a wide variety of physically challenging situations' (2005, p. 5). A physically literate individual can 'read' the physical environment and use their knowledge and understanding to respond in an appropriate way, deciding, for example, when it is acceptable to run rather than walk and being able to do both.



Information literacy is the ability of a subject to access information in the digital age: 'To be information literate, a person must be able to recognise when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information' (American Library Association 1989) or 'Information literacy is about people interacting, engaging, working with information in many contexts' (Bruce 2011, p. 335).

To be literate one would be able to interact fluently with knowledge and language (basic literacy), with our own bodies and the physical environment (physical literacy) and with many sources of information, including knowing what to trust and what to reject. The element of interaction and engagement is important in all three of these 'literations'.

The contested concept of the religious

So what of religious literacy – what do we, all of us at a societal level, need become literate about?

Jackson (1997) problematises our notion of what religions are, better being viewed as dynamic, fuzzy-edged collections of individuals rather than fixed, bounded, reified wholes. Dinham and Francis (2015) concur, suggesting that religion is shorthand for a whole semantic field of *doxis*, *praxis* and communities, and not dichotomous with 'secular', pointing out the value of including non-religious identity as a part of religious literacy. Thus it is widely agreed that there is no simple definition of religious literacy: 'there are

multiple ways of conceiving of religious literacy, some of which focus intently on the what of religion ... and others which focus more on the dynamic ways in which religious commitments form the self-understanding of individuals and groups, orient them in the world, and direct their actions' (Gallagher 2009, p. 218).

Towards a definition of religious literacy

There have been a number of writers who have tried to define what is meant by religious literacy. Taylor (2009) says that religious literacy ...

... allows people to better understand religion as complex and individual religious traditions as internally diverse and constantly evolving ... [It] also helps us understand how religion has been – and will continue to be – used to justify the full range of human agency from heinous to heroic.

Wintersgill (2017, p. 5) avoids the term but suggests 'Schools should, through their RE programmes, aim systematically to prepare students for the spiritual and intellectual challenges of living in a world with diverse religions and beliefs as well as non-belief.'

Steven Prothero, who has carried out large-scale quantitative surveys of religious literacy in the USA (something that has not happened in the UK), defines religious literacy as 'the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life' (2007, p. 13). Gallagher (2009) also notes that Prothero divides religious literacy into a variety of subtypes including ritual literacy, confessional literacy, denominational literacy, narrative, and interreligious literacy, to which we could add biblical literacy (Edwards 2015) and spiritual literacy (McVittie and Smalley 2013; Filipson 2009) and possibly others.

Carr (2007) suggests that religious literacy is intrinsically interwoven with geographic and historical knowledge, political and economic awareness and an understanding of culture, literature and the arts. He suggests that developing these literacies may not be best achieved by a separate independent subject of RE. Echoing these thoughts, Conroy (2013, p. 225) has some very serious challenges to RE and its ability to develop religious literacy: 'The failures to distinguish properly between civics, ethics, religion and education are both a methodological problem and a philosophical conundrum around what might constitute viable "religious literacy"'.



A definition

Therefore, having surveyed some of the literature around the contested concepts of religion, literacy and religious literacy, I offer this definition:

Religious literacy is the ability to interact fluently with the ideas and customs of any religious group commonly found in our local or global society by having a conceptual understanding of religion, such that one can identify and appreciate the reciprocal influence of these groups on public policy, government, society, culture and indeed daily life.

Looking critically at my own definition, I want to point out that it does not suggest that a religiously literate person knows everything about lots of religions; the key terms within it are *ability*, *conceptual understanding* and *appreciate the reciprocal influence*. Religious literacy comes out of an informed and nuanced understanding of the religion that appreciates its contested and complex conceptual nature, thus enabling people to communicate about it.

Religious illiteracy in society

We live in a world where we have come to accept religious illiteracy, which is difficult to quantify but growing as a concern for many academics, politicians, faith leaders and teachers according to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (2016). This echoes Dinham and Francis' (2015) assertion that there is a widespread lack of religious literacy in

society at large. Burrell (2013) has noted that a contemporary audience would not understand the humour of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, and there are frequent examples in published news media (and even more so in the unregulated social media world) that display a serious lack of religious literacy (see, for example, Rushton 2016). Littau (2015) has conducted a large-scale study of American journalism students and concluded that religious literacy is poor. This is worrisome since religion and culture are so intertwined that it is necessary to be religiously literate so to understand the connections and allusions of texts that are part of the driving forces behind policy decisions made at the local or national level.

RE in England

Despite continuing debate about the intended curriculum, RE has left a generation of people who are not only religiously illiterate (Conroy 2015) but who have failed to grasp a conceptual understanding of religion (Strhan 2010; Aldridge 2011); these pupils have amassed the required answers to questions about the specifics of the religions studied, but have failed to become religiously literate. Schools have become increasingly data rich, with teachers accountable for any pupils in their class who fail to perform at (or beyond) the expected level in high-stakes national tests. This has led to diminished status for RE in many primary schools, where RE is often seen as 'transferring knowledge of the nuts and bolts of a religion' (Webster 2010, p. 125) and an unhealthy focus on GCSE outcomes in high schools. The GCSE syllabuses of the last 20 years were in many ways 'not religious education any more' (Conroy et al. 2013, p. 88); even KS3 has had a heavy focus on philosophical and ethical issues, which has not helped pupils become religiously literate (Ofsted 2013). Improvement in a secondary school RE department is framed

in terms of boosting examination results, not in improving religious literacy (Ofsted 2013). RE has become increasingly instrumental in its interdisciplinary nature (Conroy et al. 2013) with beginning RE teachers frequently listing the aims of the subject as being tolerance, respect and questioning.

Teachers of RE, their pupils and the population at large have become skilled at critically questioning and evaluating both individual religious phenomena and whole belief systems, particularly in their response to certain ethical issues, but have little understanding of the centrality of faith, of the truth of religious experience that drives and colours all aspects of the believer's life. Thus, we might have a lesson on the biblical story of the 'Rich Man and Lazarus', probably as part of a unit on wealth and poverty. The lesson might analyse the motives of the characters, and ask pupils to empathise with them, in an attempt to ensure that the pupils have knowledge of the Christian teaching (and a text to use in the exam) about helping the poor. However, the lesson is unlikely to recognise the value of the story to Christians as a theological metaphor for the promise of salvation for all humanity, or pick up on the ritual use of the story in the life of an Anglican Christian who repeats the 'prayer of humble access', positioning herself as the spiritually poor Lazarus. We may have lessons that analyse the concept of *jihad*, using Qur'anic material to demonstrate a good understanding of the concepts of lesser and greater *jihad*, ending with a critical analysis of the events of 9/11 or some other terrorist atrocity to show that the terrorists were not 'good Muslims' and had a flawed understanding of *jihad*, but give no hint as to what the religious worldview that would motivate someone to do such an act would be, or more generally what it means to be a Muslim.

Making sense of the non-sense of religion

Faith, or belief, is not always a rational pursuit. Throughout the twentieth century philosophers were able to develop a range of critical approaches that collectively enabled them to declare belief in God as 'sick', 'silly', 'meaningless' and 'self-contradictory' (Stenson 1969, p. 16). Psychologists from Freud (1927) to Fuller (2018, p. 25) have suggested that 'religious thought, feeling and behavior is nonsense'. And yet still for religious believers this nonsense makes sense and motivates them to act and believe in particular ways. We, as teachers of RE, give pupils very little sense, little experience, directly or indirectly, of what William James described more than a hundred years ago in his *The Reality of the Unseen* as an unquestionable religious reality, more real than actual reality that exists in the mind of the believer (James 2014). This deficiency in RE teaching, flowing from a lack of teachers' understanding of the fundamental concepts of religion, has been noted before, particularly in the work of Teece (2010), and is the subject of a recent study in Sweden by Liljestrand (2015).

This criticism is not, however, new: Hammond et al. (1990), in another seminal work from my PGCE, *New Methods in RE Teaching: An Experiential Approach*, set out the failure of an approach prevalent in the 1980s that concentrated on knowledge of external phenomena, at the expense of developing understanding of empathy, intention and religious experience. Hammond et al. claimed that the 'World Religions Approach' had led to a de-skilling of pupils, who were unable to appreciate the affective dimension, or understand the believers' experience. They promulgated RE teachers as de-indoctrinators whose role was to show that the implicit secular

model of humanity radically effects the way we experience the world. RE teachers would therefore help pupils increase their awareness and appreciation of the variety of religious responses of human beings to reality and show that these alternative ways of being human are personal possibilities (Hammond et al. 1990, p. 18). Their book, forgotten in many quarters, was a rallying call to shamelessly promote the reality of the spiritual dimension of life as a means to exposing pupils to that reality so that they would be able to have greater understanding of the different religious responses of people, to make sense of the non-sense of religion or, as we might say now, to develop religious literacy. In the intervening years, much RE, following Wright (1993), has sought to evaluate religious ideas and teaching in a philosophical, rational way. But often religion is not rational, and being religiously literate involves understanding that the spiritual dimension of life radically influences believers, sometimes in a non-rational way.

A provocative suggestion

I have suggested thus far that our society has become increasingly religiously illiterate, with many who cannot interact fluently with the ideas and customs of religious groups, nor recognise their reciprocal influence on society, because (in part at least) RE has failed to give them experience of the reality of what it means to be religious, and de-indoctrinate pupils from the prevailing assumed secularisation of society. Our overly rationalist approach to the teaching of RE, particularly with older children, has reinforced the taboo on talking about spirituality or anything remotely religious unless in a wholly sterile disconnected way (Hay and Nye 2006).

In the subject of Physical Education (PE) there have been moves in recent years to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and develops physical literacy in all pupils (Whitehead and Capel 2013), rather than simply nurturing the most able athletes to excel even further at their chosen sport. One aim of PE, and this is just as contested a statement as proposing an aim of RE, is to develop confident pupils who go on to live healthy, active lives (DfE 2013). We would, perhaps, think it odd if a PE teacher didn't like sport: some would prefer football, or hockey, or dance or all sport; many will regale pupils with tales of them playing one sport or another. We may expect the PE teacher to be disappointed at the pupils who at the end of their time at school declare that all sport is rubbish and they will never do any physical activity again. Simply because many pupils do not like physical activity, preferring FIFA on the PlayStation to football on the field, the PE curriculum does not (as far as I am aware) change to be relevant to the PlayStation pupil. Part of the job description of a PE teacher can be to be a role model for students, inspiring them to be actively interested in PE, sport and healthy active lifestyles.

In the world of RE we have increasingly shied away from this sort of advocacy approach, preferring a rational non-committal stance (Gardner 1980), for fear of being labelled as 'confessionalist' (Kimanen 2016). Yet research has shown that it is the atheist or agnostic RE teachers who are much more ready to influence the beliefs of their pupils (Hampshire 2012). This perceived neutrality has actually resulted in a sceptical neglect (Carr 2007) of the contribution to human understanding of religion.



Conclusion

My definition of religious literacy includes knowledge of religious belief and practice as well as appreciation of the impact of faith and belief on society, but places a conceptual understanding of religion at its heart. I have suggested that in recent decades the approach to RE in a number of schools, possibly in a desire for the subject to appear 'relevant' to predominantly non-religious pupils, means students have been encouraged to become discontented philosophers through a critical realist pedagogy. This has been shown not to have delivered the religious literacy that Wright had hoped for. Over the last 25 years, RE has, consciously or subconsciously, privileged a rational discontentment with religion over transmission of the passionate reality of the believer's lived faith, leaving many pupils to question why they should be religiously literate in a secular rationalist world where no one really believes anything anyway. This approach has missed opportunities to help pupils understand the paradoxical reality of what religion might mean to a believer. I have suggested that one way of helping pupils develop their understanding of the complex multi-dimensional and multi-faceted concept that we call religion is for them to develop knowledge and understanding of belief and practice through encountering the lived reality of religious belief, and RE teachers should not be afraid of being passionate advocates of this spiritual reality.

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