

Learning about religion and Learning from religion:

By Dr Geoff Teece University of Birmingham UK

Part One

Historical context: What led to the development of these terms?: the work of Michael Grimmitt and Garth Read

The terms learning about religion and learning from religion were first introduced by Michael Grimmitt and Garth Read in 1975, two people with whom I have worked closely and who have been the most significant influences on me as both as a teacher of religious education and a teacher trainer. Grimmitt had recently been appointed Director of the Regional RE Centre (Midlands), set up and funded by the Department of Education and housed at Westhill College in Selly Oak Birmingham. Garth Read was an Australian religious educator, who in 1980 succeeded Grimmitt as Director of the RE Centre. The terms were first used in a publication by Grimmitt and Read entitled 'Christians Today', which was a largely photopack based teaching resource, the intention of which was to present Christianity as a 'world religion' to be studied empathetically yet phenomenologically (after Smart 1968). It was a move away from presenting Christianity 'confessionally'. It was part of the growing development in England and Wales of a phenomenological 'multi faith' approach inspired by the work of Professor Ninian Smart at Lancaster University and interpreted for religious educators in schools through the Schools Council Working Paper Number 36 *Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (1971). This is an approach that has often been misrepresented or misunderstood (see for example Barnes 2000, 2001, 2007). The approach as envisaged by Smart and the Schools Council was not intended to either present all religions 'as the same' or for them to be studied uncritically. However, because *religious* education was seen as something more than a 'cold' objective, sociological study of religion, insights from 'modern' Christian theologians such as Paul Tillich were included alongside the notion of

‘implicit’ religion, the idea being that the study of religion in school should be related to human experience in general and pupils’ (collectively and individually) experience in particular.

What is presented in this first section is an account of how Grimmitt’s work attempted to integrate these elements into a coherent curriculum structure, which eventually led to the development of the pedagogical *strategy* of learning about religion and learning from religion.

1.1 What Can I do in RE?-the ‘educational’ integrative approach.

When Grimmitt wrote his first major work *What Can I do in RE?* published in 1973, the RE profession was attempting to come to terms with the ‘need to re-examine the task of the teacher of religious education in the changed circumstances of today’ (Schools Council 1977). These changed circumstances identified as social, theological and educational represented what might be called ‘the flight from confessionalism’ and the requirement to justify RE’s inclusion in the curriculum on *educational* rather than *religious* grounds. In *What Can I do in RE?* Grimmitt provided those educational grounds influenced very much by the philosophers of the London Institute school of philosophy of education such as Richard Peters, Paul Hirst and Robert Dearden. Essentially for a subject to be justified as worthy of inclusion in the curriculum it should incorporate a ‘unique mode of thought and awareness’ which is ‘worthwhile’ for the understanding of the human situation, be able to develop a pupil’s cognitive ability and aid personal development, and be taught in such a way as to enable pupils to think for themselves (Grimmitt 1973, 16). In order to realise these aims Grimmitt constructed a two part conceptual framework consisting of the *Existential approach* and the *Dimensional approach* (Grimmitt 1973, 49-113). These were developments from the Schools Council Working Paper 36 (1971), which talked of implicit and explicit RE, developed from the traditions of phenomenology of religion and the changes in Christian theology that took place in continental Europe in the latter stages of the twentieth century.

There are several key aspects of this approach that are worth highlighting. Firstly the approach recognises that RE involves helping pupils to become informed about religion through developing accurate religious concepts. However, if as Grimmitt insists, a child's thinking is developmental then RE should also be developmental. Such an approach 'demands that a child's own experiences, needs and interests become the starting point for learning' (Grimmitt 1973, 47). This is indicative of the fact that Grimmitt has always placed the child at the centre of the learning process, something which he was to develop and refine in his later work. *What Can I do in RE?* represents the beginning of his attempts to integrate the two traditions mentioned above. Indeed in surveying the 'British Experience' of religious education in 1989, the celebrated American scholar Gabriel Moran regarded Grimmitt as the most prominent voice in the attempt to bring these two traditions into agreement (Moran 1989, 98). As Grimmitt stated when discussing his two approaches, 'Ideally a teacher should ensure that these two approaches are used in combination with each other as they are complementary' (Grimmitt 1973, 51).

1.2 Religious Education and Human Development-the instrumental approach and the emergence of learning about religion and learning from religion.

This integrative dimension to Grimmitt's work took a significant step forward when he began to work with Australian religious educator Garth Read in the Regional RE Centre (Midlands) in 1975. Grimmitt and Read began working on a curriculum model that identified RE's Field of Enquiry initially as Traditional Belief Systems and Shared Human Experience, represented diagrammatically by two circles. Building on the two approaches expounded in *What Can I do in RE?* the model reflected the inter-relationship between the beliefs and concepts of the major world religions and the ultimate questions and issues raised by our shared (human) experience of the world around us. According to Read, this model, 'reflected Mike's [sic] longstanding conviction that education in general and RE in particular was all about human personal development.' (personal

correspondence with Garth Read). The first curriculum outcome of this work resulted in a publication called *Teaching Christianity in RE* (1975). This project also saw the emergence of the two concepts of *learning about* and *learning from religion*, for which Grimmitt is probably most widely known.

Read returned to Queensland to join the Religious Education Curriculum Project team who were responsible for an important development of the diagram. The team,

‘recognised that each student brings a particular (though developing) belief system and set of experiences, knowledge and understandings to the classroom learning situation. These were clearly sources of potential content for examination and reflection during the learning process. Of course, they could only become available to the class as and when any student chose or was able to make them so. The teaching process needed to encourage this to happen in a natural, respectful and non-threatening way.’ (personal correspondence with Garth Read).

Thus the Queensland RE Project extended RE’s Field of Enquiry to include, what is represented in the diagram by a third circle, ‘Individual Patterns of Belief’. It was this model which was to become the basis for the Westhill Project (lead by Read on his return to the Regional RE Centre), as described in *How do I Teach RE?* (1986) and in an extensive series of publications providing a comprehensive 5 – 16 programme of RE.

Grimmitt, meanwhile, re-visited some of these earlier ideas but set about re-working them into a comprehensive theory of the relationship of education in general, and RE in particular to human development. His book, *Religious Education and Human Development* (1987) contains a detailed rationale for the Human Development approach as well as a curriculum framework which sought to bring into a dialectical relationship the *adolescent life world* of the student and the *religious life world* of the various religious traditions. Consequently, the structure of the curriculum should be designed to enable pupils to develop the skills and abilities required to apply insights gained from their study of religion to an understanding of their own situations and experiences (Grimmitt 2000,

20). Importantly the *religious life world* curriculum only includes that content from the Traditional Belief Systems which illuminates and informs the *adolescent life world curriculum* (See Grimmitt 1987, 226: 267-388). So in Grimmitt's design, aspects of religions are chosen to illustrate and inform questions to do with order, meaning and purpose in the universe, of truth, questions about human nature, a just society, individual self-fulfilment, ethical questions, and questions about the nature of community and questions about values. Moreover they are encountered within the context of five experiential, humanising themes that are shown to have a direct bearing on human development – growing, celebrating, learning, acting and believing.

Such pedagogical principles illustrate Grimmitt's conviction that the study of religion should play an *instrumental* role in RE pedagogy. What is important for the learner is not knowledge of religion *per se*, as a reified 'Traditional Belief System', but the way in which a religious believer perceives the world and how these insights can inform how the learner sees the world. Grimmitt also makes a distinction between 'abilities in pure religion' for the purposes of nurturing religious faith and the educational task of enabling pupils to develop 'abilities in applied religion'. Also,

the achievement of such learning outcomes....hinges on devising a curriculum which, while making use of phenomenological method, does not restrict itself to description but engages pupils in evaluative interaction with religious beliefs, values and perspectives (Grimmitt 1991, 77).

Central to this is the pedagogical procedure or strategy of learning about and from religion.

Part Two:

Subsequent developments:

2:1 The SCAA Models

In 1994 The Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (later QCA) published two Model Syllabuses for RE. This resulted from a concern by government that those who are responsible for producing agreed syllabuses should receive as much guidance as possible; especially about what to teach at each key stage. Groups representing the six major religions met to decide what about their faith they would wish pupils to learn. Their deliberations were published as two 'models': *Living Faiths* and *Questions and Teachings*.

With regard to the aims of the subject the model syllabuses summarised the consensus that had arisen in contemporary agreed syllabuses. They stated;

The following aims of religious education reflect a broad consensus about the subject's educational rationale and purpose. Religious education should help pupils to

- acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and the other principal religions represented in Great Britain;
- develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, societies and cultures;
- develop the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues, with reference to the teachings of the principal religions represented in Great Britain;
- enhance their spiritual, moral, cultural and social development by:

- developing awareness of the fundamental questions of life raised by human experiences, and of how religious teachings can relate to them
 - responding to such questions with reference to the teachings and practices of religions, and to their own understanding and experience
 - reflecting on their own beliefs, values and experiences in the light of their study;
- develop a positive attitude towards other people, respecting their right to hold different beliefs from their own, and towards living in a society of diverse religions (SCAA 1994, 4. Bold text in original).

The model syllabuses also recommended two attainment targets that had become axiomatic in RE at the time, and which were loosely built on Grimmitt's learning about and from religion. However, they were changed to Learning about **religions** and Learning from **religion**. They were described thus:

Attainment Target 1: Learning about religions

This includes the ability to:

- identify, name, describe and give accounts in order to build a coherent picture of each religion;
- explain the meaning of religious language, story and symbolism;
- explain similarities and differences between, and within, religions

Attainment Target 2: Learning from religion

This includes the ability to:

- give an informed and considered response to religious and moral issues;

- reflect on what might be learnt from religions in the light of one's own beliefs and experience;
- identify and respond to questions of meaning within religions.

2:2 A National Non Statutory Framework for RE

As the new millennium dawned there was increasing debate as to the benefits or not of a national (albeit non-statutory) approach to the subject. In 2003 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) published a feasibility study that resulted in the publication of a national non-statutory national framework for religious education (QCA 2004). The development of this framework involved close working with and accountability to the faith communities in the UK. In this document the aims of RE were encompassed in a statement-in line with national curriculum documents-of the importance of religious education. The statement reads:

Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. Religious education develops pupils' knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions, and other world-views that offer answers to questions such as these. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development. It enhances pupils' awareness and understanding of religious beliefs, teachings, practices and forms of expression, as well as of the influence of religion on individuals, families, communities and cultures.

Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on,

consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.

Religious education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging. It enables them to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community. Religious education has an important role in preparing pupils for adult life, employment and life long learning. It enables them to develop respect and sensitivity to others, in particular those with faiths and beliefs different from their own. It promotes discernment and enables pupils to combat prejudice (QCA 2004, 7).

In September 2007 QCA published a non statutory national curriculum for RE for secondary schools (key stages 3 and 4) based on the 2004 national framework. Central to the framework was the use of the two attainment targets Learning about religion and learning from religion (reverting to Grimmitt's original titles).

2:3 2010 Non Statutory Guidance

Finally in 2010 QCA published some non statutory guidance which based its understanding of the importance of RE on the 2004 framework and listed three major areas to which RE is intended to make an important contribution; spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; personal development and well-being; and community cohesion.

However there were problems with these developments as discussed below.

Part Three:

Conceptual and practical confusion

3.1 Empirical data:

Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED)

There is evidence, largely from OfSTED reports (for example OfSTED 2005: 2007) that many teachers are not comfortable with this model; the major criticism being that learning *about* religion lacks depth and that consequently learning *from* religion is too 'narrowly conceived only as helping pupils to identify and reflect on aspects of their lives, with lessons used narrowly as a springboard for this reflection' (OfSTED 2005, 2).

Appropriate sections from OfSTED's report *Making Sense of Religion* (2007)

- In many cases, teachers perceive that AT1 (learning about religion) work is essentially descriptive and a lower order of challenge. They assume that short answers are all that is required to check basic knowledge and understanding. More extended answers are always linked to AT2 (learning from religion) alone. As a result, AT1 tasks too often demand that pupils 'report on' or 'write about' rather than asking them to analyse and process the material. (p10).
- Unevenness in the progress that pupils make across the two attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion reflects the continuing emphasis that many schools place on 'learning about' religion. Where provision is particularly weak, pupils learn about only superficial features of the religion, rather than deepening their understanding through investigation. This tends to happen when teachers assume that more analytical and reflective tasks are linked predominantly to

attainment target 2, 'learning from' religion; as a result, they do not include challenging tasks in work related to 'learning about' religion. (p38).

OfSTED (2010) in their second 'long report' on religious education *Transforming religious education* found (amongst other things) that:

- Whilst RE made a positive contribution to pupils' personal development in terms of appreciating the diverse nature of society, its contribution to spiritual development is limited.
- There is uncertainty among many teachers of RE about what they are trying to achieve in the subject.

Research into resources to teach World Religions

Recent research on materials used to teach about world religions in schools found problems with the conceptualisation of learning from religion.. In a section that analyses whether current text books present religion in depth in terms of its 'deeper significance' there are a number of comments to support a rethink about how religion is presented to students (Jackson et al 2010, 99-100). Just to quote one example from this section:

Even where texts are encouraging a 'learning from' approach to religious education the reviewer found that students were not necessarily encouraged to delve much more deeply into the significance of the religion; *"learning from ideas" tend to operate at the level of functionality- e.g. how they might show someone/something respect, the role of having a uniform etc'*. They do not explore Sikh ideas about human values and are interested in parallel practices rather than resonating with values in other traditions and students' lives.

This research gives weight to the argument that effective learning from religion depends on the prior clarification of what exactly pupils should learn about.

3:2 Critical discussion

Any critical discussion should begin with Grimmitt's original statement of these terms that can be found in Grimmitt (1987: 225-6).

When I speak about pupils **learning about religion** I am referring to what the pupils learn about the beliefs, teachings and practices of the great religious traditions of the world. I am also referring to what pupils learn about the nature and demands of ultimate questions, about the nature of a 'faith' response to ultimate questions, about the normative views of the human condition and what it means to be human as expressed in and through Traditional Belief Systems or Stances for Living of a naturalistic kind.....

When I speak about **learning from religion** I am referring to what pupils learn from their studies in religion about themselves-about discerning ultimate questions and 'signals of transcendence' in their own experience and considering how they might respond to them.....The process of learning from religion involves, I suggest, engaging two though different types of evaluation. Impersonal Evaluation involves being able to distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself..... Personal evaluation begins as an attempt to confront and evaluate religious beliefs and values [and] becomes a process of self-evaluation (Grimmitt 1987, 225-6).

Two points need to be made at the outset about Grimmitt and Read's conception of these terms.

Firstly some criticisms of *learning from religion* have, possibly, over emphasised Grimmitt's personal evaluation to the detriment of what he says about impersonal evaluation, see for example Bates (2006) and, although he doesn't mention Grimmitt particularly, Wright (2004). As can be seen from the quotation above, there is nothing in Grimmitt's original conception of *learning from religion* that should inhibit students from examining the truth claims of religious traditions. As can be seen from the quotation, impersonal evaluation involves,

'being able to distinguish and make critical evaluations of truth claims, beliefs and practices of different religious traditions and of religion itself' (Grimmitt 1987: 225). (For a wider discussion of this point see Teece 2008).

Secondly, it is important to note that *learning about* and *learning from religion* were conceived within a human development approach to religious education, fully developed in one direction by Grimmitt (1987) and by Read, through the Westhill Project (1986), which, significantly, stressed that the study of religion should play an *instrumental* role in RE pedagogy.

One reason for a variety of understandings (and misunderstandings?) can be attributed to the fact that since Grimmitt introduced the terms **the model has been uprooted from its original context and according to Grimmitt, 'some of its features [are] transplanted within a curriculum structure which, in other respects, reflects a rationale for RE which is alien to its intentions' (Grimmitt 2000, 37).** This alien environment was the SCAA Model Syllabuses where the terms became learning about *religions* and learning from *religion*. Immediately we can ask, is there a difference between learning about *religion* and learning about *religions*? And if one is learning about *religions*, what does it mean to learn from *religion*? These questions are not answered either in the SCAA models themselves or the QCA Non Statutory Guidance of 2000.

Instead the QCA (2000, 18) guidance provides a list of examples of 'good practice' in learning *from religion*. Whilst one example states that *learning from religion* is about the concepts of religion(s) most examples are about processes and skills, or ways of teaching, which could be applied to any subject in the curriculum. These examples include being 'concerned with the active responses of pupils to what they are learning about'; 'valuing pupils' own ideas and concerns' and 'developing skills, e.g. the skill of living in a plural society'. A similar point has been made with regard to the *Non Statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (QCA 2004) by Kay (2005), even though when the terms appear in the National Framework they revert to learning about *religion* and learning from *religion*. However in the statement 'The Importance of

Religious Education' it is written, 'Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different *religions* [my italics], beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning.' What are we to make of this?

Part Four: Towards conceptual clarity

4:1 Learning about from and in religion

Discussion of the contours, possibilities and limitations of the model has been limited in the academic literature (see for example Grimmitt 2000, 34-38 and Hella and Wright, 2009) in terms of the teaching and learning processes involved or, in other words, *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* as a pedagogical strategy. However I want to suggest is that there is a prior question well expressed by Grimmitt himself(2000, 15) when he wrote;

the evaluative process of learning from religion(s) should be fully integrated into how, within a secular educational context, *pupils are learning about religions in the first place* [my italics].

Moreover, Hella and Wright (2009) have identified the tension that inevitably arises between *learning about religion* and *learning from religion* when applied outside a 'confessional' context. This is because within a 'confessional' context, which one could characterize as *learning in religion* pupils share a common worldview and 'the knowledge and insights gained from learning about their faith tradition will have a direct connection to their own personal beliefs and values' (Hella and Wright 2009, 56). However, in a 'liberal' context pupils are required to engage with a plurality of views, some of which they might not see as immediately valuable or relevant to their personal development.

One could respond here by stating that Grimmitt was fully aware of this as can be seen from the examples he provides in *Religious Education and Human*

Development. (Grimmitt 1987, 267-388). Remembering that religion is understood instrumentally by Grimmitt, the unifying factor in his rationale is the bringing into a synergetic relationship the life world of the pupil and religious life world of the various religious traditions. In Grimmitt's design the religious life world does not include *anything* that one might select from the phenomena of a particular tradition, but only that which illuminates and informs the pupils' life world curriculum (See Grimmitt, 1987: 226; 267-388). So religion illustrates questions to do with order, meaning and purpose in the universe, questions of truth, questions about human nature, questions about a just society, questions about individual self-fulfilment, ethical questions, questions about the nature of community, and questions about values. So it could be said that the unifying factor is human experience rather than religion. **(See appendix 1).**

Nevertheless Hella and Wright's point is an important one because it necessarily poses difficult questions about what we might mean by religion in such a context.

4:2 Learning about and from what? What should be the content of religious education?

4:2:1 Religion in the National Framework

The problems raised about about the lack of clarity in some of the 'official' documentation on learning about and from religion can be illustrated further by examining some debates that arose out of the publication of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE (2004).

Both Felderhof (2004) and Kay (2004) raise questions about the distinctiveness of the subject's focus of study as perceived by the writers of the framework. Kay for example raises a number of challenging questions in relation to the level descriptions in the assessment scheme. For example at level 2, under the heading of meaning and purpose, 'pupils might learn from religion that some questions cause people to wonder and are difficult to answer'. Kay claims that there is

nothing specifically religious about this-it could be science. So if learning outcomes have a place in religious education they make little sense in terms of teaching and learning if not understood in relation to a conception of what is the content of the subject. Felderhof claims that the writers of the Framework are uncertain as to whether religion is a single phenomenon or plural. He points to the impression he gets from reading an early draft that the terms religion and religions are used 'almost randomly and indiscriminately' (2004, p 246). This is true, for example, of the SCAA Model Syllabuses (1994) where the attainment targets for religious education are labelled 'learning about religions' and 'learning from religion'. This gave rise to the view that religion was being defined as a series of six religions (Hull 1995). However, it is quite evident from the final version of the Framework that religion is being understood generically as can clearly be seen in the use of the term religion in the attainment targets 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'. It can be safely assumed that the Framework understands religion as something more than, and more generic than, a series of six or more religions.

4:2:2 A reluctance to define religion

Nevertheless this does not close down the question as to how religion is conceived within the Framework, especially as it makes no specific statement about it. Thus one is forced to speculate that this is because an understanding of religion has been and will continue to be a controversial question for religious educators. Hence it is perhaps understandable that there was reluctance in the writing of a new Framework to get too embroiled in controversial questions about religion familiar to academics. However, the question of distinctiveness raised by both Felderhof and Kay is a significant one and, possibly, a defining one for the future of a subject that is increasingly being seen, in the public domain at least, as a dimension of citizenship (Clarke, 2004).

The reluctance to address this question of what we mean by religion in religious education can be seen in the Framework's 'Importance of Religious Education' statement (QCA 2004, p 7). It begins 'Religious Education provokes challenging

questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human'. As a statement of the process of religious education this is an accurate statement of recent good practice in the subject. But does it define what is distinctive about religious education? Some might answer in the affirmative asking where else in the curriculum is there a place for pupils to engage with these questions and issues? And this is a fair question. But is this *necessarily* the case. Do students have to study *religious* education to study beliefs about God? Cannot and do not sociologists, historians and anthropologists study such matters? Does not literature offer ample opportunities to study what it means to be human? One could ask similar questions about the other claims for religious education contained in this statement. Interestingly, what the 'Importance of Religious Education' statement does not do is offer a statement about what is distinctive about religion as a way of understanding the world. This is not the case, for example, in Geography in the National Curriculum. The corresponding 'Importance of' statement for Geography states that

'Geography provokes and answers questions about the natural and human worlds, using different scales of enquiry to view them from different perspectives. It develops knowledge of places and environments throughout the world, an understanding of maps, and a range of investigative and problem-solving skills both inside and outside the classroom. As such it prepares pupils for adult life and employment. Geography is a focus within the curriculum for understanding and resolving issues about the environment and sustainable development. It is also an important link between the natural and social sciences' (DfEE and QCA, 1999, p 108).

What is presented here is a case for the distinctiveness of Geography as an academic discipline that views the world from a particular perspective and then what follows is the focus of that discipline within the curriculum. Religious Education does not benefit from similar treatment; it appears to avoid the

former and launch straight into the latter. So pupils do not study religion as such but religious education. Felderhof (2004, p. 246) also makes this point –‘as if [it] was an object of study in its own right’. This, of course, avoids a certain degree of controversy. By avoiding making a statement as to what is distinctive about a religious perspective on the world, religious educators avoid the complex and controversial debates about explanations of religion as understood in religious studies (See for example, Clarke and Byrne, 1993). There may be good reasons for this but the downside is that a case is not made for the subject's distinctiveness, particularly in relation to the other humanities subjects.

4:2:3 Not a new question

In many ways none of this is new and it is possible to argue that this has been the great-unresolved question for religious educators since, what we might call, the flight from confessionalism in the 1960s. This was a flight from theological foundations for religious education within a Christian context and the adoption of a phenomenological approach to religion based on the naturalistic disciplines of sociology, history, philosophy, psychology and anthropology. Simultaneously, this new study widened the perception as to what was to be understood as subject matter, religion previously being understood as synonymous with Christianity. It became widely accepted that the rationale for RE must have its basis in a secular education system with a critical and open concept of education being the first order activity and that the best way to represent religion in this context is through a phenomenological approach.

However in the most recent significant contributions to the subject there has been a concern that religious education needs to look beyond phenomenology for the perspectives from which its subject matter is viewed. Interestingly this concern does not depend on any particular philosophical or pedagogical position. For example the concern is evident in the writings of Andrew Wright (1993)- because the phenomenological approach in religious education has tended to pre-package religion and deny pupils the opportunity to engage with

questions of truth, of Michael Grimmitt (2000) – because the popularity of phenomenology has tended to result in uncritical and limited pedagogies that merely describe and label religious phenomena, and of Robert Jackson (1997) – because phenomenology can produce inaccurate representations of religion and culture.

The American religious educator Gabriel Moran has addressed similar concerns. It is unfortunate that his contribution is largely ignored in the UK. In *Religious Education as a Second Language* (1989) Moran devoted a chapter to the British experience. Whilst complimentary about the pioneering work done in the UK, especially by Grimmitt, he identified two significant problems with the way that religious education was being conceptualised. Firstly there was a problem with language. The term religious education when used to describe an academic subject makes 'little logical sense and obstructs a wider discussion of RE still needed in the UK' (p. 99). He notes that RE instead of comprising worship and religious instruction as in the 1944 Education Act had in 1988 become a name of a curriculum subject. He contrasts this usage with the notion of religious education being an involvement in a lifelong process, which in school can involve the literature teacher, the history teacher etc. Instead our language has meant that every other teacher, apart from the RE teacher, is outside religious education. Whilst there is some force in this argument, the reality of the situation is that in the UK there exists a discreet subject called religious education and it is important that those who value it are able to argue a case for its distinctiveness in an over crowded school timetable.

Nevertheless there is the possibility of claiming too much for one curriculum subject and also being unclear as to what it is this curriculum subject is actually about. This point has been re-emphasised in Kay's article cited above. Moran puts these problems down to what he sees as the bifurcation of thought in the west deriving from the enlightenment; a point that echoes one made strongly by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1981). Such bifurcation has led to unhelpful opposites such as objectivity and subjectivity, religion and science. So should religious

education be objective or confessional? Should it take its place on the outside or the inside of religion? Are you a believer or a non - believer? Thus, according to Moran we lack an agreed upon language that can guide us safely from this 'universe of unbridgeable gaps'. (p. 103).

Secondly he notes that, 'religious education has to do with the religious life of the human race and bringing people within the influence of that life. The word 'education' indicates some restraints on how that influence is exercised (p. 218).' And consequently, 'intellectual criticism can be introduced gently, but it should start about five minutes after the child's school career begins' (p. 221). In describing this process Moran points out two unacceptable polarities, the first one is the inappropriateness of proselytising and indoctrinating and the second one is merely presenting explanations of religion, by which he means religion as described by the naturalistic disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology etc. He does not view such disciplines negatively but states that people who work in such fields do not regard themselves as religious educators.

Even though Moran's thesis applies to a context where religious values are seen as central to the curriculum, his argument can bring into sharp relief some of the issues that I am trying to address here.

Part Five

A religious framework for understanding religion in religious education?

5:1 Developing pupils understanding in RE

One way of approaching the question of the subject's distinctiveness is to ask what we might expect pupils/students to understand in RE

In the academic literature, over the years, the question of what it is to understand in religious education has often been discussed in a way that polarises views between what we might call an insider and outsider perspective, or an objective and subjective understanding.

According to Cox (1983), if 'religious' is used as an adjective, it refers to understanding in the field of religion. If an adverb, it implies a special kind of understanding. One of the central difficulties surrounding the term is that it is unclear as to whether it assumes that understanding in RE is distinctive to RE; that is to say, whether there is a form of understanding that is *religious* or relates to religion that is somehow different to another form of understanding such as scientific, historical or sociological (Melchert 1981). As I have discussed above, unlike similar documentation for other curriculum subjects however, the core curriculum document for RE in England (QCA 2004) does not present a case for the distinctiveness of the particular subject as a discipline that views the world from a particular perspective

Much of the debate surrounding the term *religious understanding* has centered around the extent to which the content of RE, namely religion, might itself be considered a unique form of knowledge and whether, therefore, there is sufficient justification for the inclusion of RE in the school curriculum. If religion is a unique form of knowledge, then real understanding can only be the reserve of those on the inside, those who possess a religious faith. If understanding is not available to those outside of that faith, then RE, in the sense of contemporary multi faith RE, is 'impossible' as it is not possible to understand the phenomenon of religion from the point of view of the adherent while at the same time remaining free to reject those beliefs (Marple 1978). However, if religion is not a unique form of knowledge, in other words, if the skills required to know and understand religion are the same as those essential for any item of knowledge, then to promote students' *religious understanding* in RE must mean something other than to foster a personal faith position.

5:1:1 Religious understanding as believing

For some, *religious understanding* presupposes religious belief, as to understand a religious concept is to accommodate it into one's conception of reality (e.g. Hirst 1973; Marple 1978; Gardner 1980). Such an interpretation implies that

full understanding is possible only when one believes the claims being made. What it means to understand is complex as illustrated by the language we often use to describe it. When it is said that a person doesn't really understand, the point of the word 'really' is critical. It tells us that although the person may demonstrate one or more of the criteria often associated with understanding: a) connectedness; b) sense-making; c) application; and d) justification (see for instance Smith and Siegel 2004), there is something missing. Whilst he/she may be able to relate that which is to be understood to an impersonal body of knowledge and to that extent demonstrate understanding, this understanding is inferior to the real variety where the relating is to personal experience (Barrow and Woods 1988, 64). As the Schools Council Working Paper put it: 'It has long been assumed, by believers and non-believers alike, that emotional involvement leading to commitment is inseparable from a truly informed and sympathetic study of religion' (Schools Council 1971, 28).

If we apply this to *religious understanding*, then it follows that an 'insider' or participant understanding is not a desirable aim in a classroom that may contain students from various faiths or none at all (Marples 1978).

5:1:2 Religious understanding as theological understanding

For others however, *religious understanding* does not presuppose religious faith, as religion is not a logically unique form of knowledge (see for example Hand 2006). Instead, *religious understanding* is to do with understanding the 'grammar' of religion. It is entirely possible from this perspective, to understand the claim that is being made (e.g. God is omnipotent), without believing it to be true (Attfield 1978).

On the other hand, some would argue that there are particular forms of theological understanding that require religious faith. For example, Hession and Kieran (2007, 19) state that, 'Catholic theology is about people and their

experience and understanding of a loving God. It is deeply personal'. If what Hession and Kieran say is true then we are left with our original dilemma as outlined in the previous section.

5:1:3 Scholarly understanding of religion

Some have distinguished between *religious understanding* and understanding of religion (see for example Cox 1983). Holley (1978) proposed that a scholarly understanding of religion, as opposed to a religious (spiritual) understanding, was better suited to the RE classroom, as it was essentially an intellectual understanding of religious phenomena and of *religious understanding* itself, rather than a distinctive form of understanding in its own right. *Religious understanding*, on the other hand, involves an emotive response and is available only to those with religious commitment (Cox 1983).

5:1:4 Religious understanding as a spectrum

According to Astley (1994), the key positions in this debate as outlined above have created an unhelpful polarisation and tended to treat *religious understanding* as an all or nothing affair. The problem with the idea that it is only possible to understand religion from the perspective of the insider is that it raises questions about whether religious education is a viable educational activity. If those on the outside cannot understand, and if we are true insiders only to our own experience (Kvernbekk 2001 cited in Bridges 2009, 112), what is the point of religious education? It cannot hope to achieve even its most fundamental aims.

In the same way, the difficulty with suggesting that an outsider can only hope to develop a cognitive, intellectual understanding of the phenomenon being studied, is that such an understanding cannot really hope to grasp why, for some people, God or the Transcendent, is the Ultimate Ground of their being; the axis

upon which their whole world turns. A cold, rational, objective understanding could not begin to comprehend the reasonableness of such a position. However, the Schools Council Working Paper 36 is illuminating here when it suggests that, 'objective' understanding need not be-indeed is best not- seen as cold and rational. In referring to a phenomenological approach to the study of religion the paper suggests that understanding other people's beliefs depends on 'the characteristic human capacity for self-transcendence'. It goes on to say: 'A human being can be himself [sic] and at the same time share the life and thought of another person. A person does not react only to another person as an object' (Schools Council 1971, 22).

A more helpful approach might be that proposed by Grimmit (1987) who suggested that the distinction between an intellectual outsider's understanding of religion and an insider's *religious understanding* was really a distinction between two ends of a continuum of *religious understanding*. In this way, being conscious of religion and having religious consciousness are simply different points on that continuum (Astley 1994). There is no clear cut off between them and one may contain elements of the other. The difference is one of degree. Indeed, even an insider's understanding might find itself on different points of that continuum depending upon the object of that understanding. It is entirely feasible that someone brought up in a faith tradition might adhere to some aspects of that tradition more than others, and in relation to some, might find his or herself more closely aligned to the point of the view of the outsider than to that of a fellow insider.

Thus *religious understanding* may be better conceived as a spectrum of understanding where the observer's understanding need not be inferior to that of the participant's as 'the taste is from the same cooking pot as the full meal' (Astley 1994, 93). Moreover, the observer's understanding may even be preferable at times, as the insider may be blinkered and trapped in his/her own set of self referencing assumptions (Bridges 2009). Conceived of in this way, the

development of students' *religious understanding* becomes an acceptable aim for the state maintained English school RE classroom which may contain students from a variety of faith backgrounds and none. Both the insider and the outsider perspective are valued and both may be seen as evidence of a student's *religious understanding*.

For Grimmitt, the issue at stake is how education should relate to religion and what contribution the study of religion should make to students' understanding of themselves and the world around them (Grimmitt 1987, 43). As both education and religion are value-laden enterprises our understanding of how students should understand religion depends on recognising that in a secular educational context *education*, as opposed to religion, is the *first order activity*. This does not exclude the possibility of students being able to form some understanding of a religious tradition as understood by its adherents but any such understanding, 'will inevitably be influenced by the fact that the study is taking place within the context of a secular educational enterprise' (Grimmitt 1987, 46). Because of this educational context, RE shares a concern with other subjects, such as the arts, literature and human sciences, in exploring human values. However, what is distinctive about RE's role in this is that RE helps students explore such values, 'within the context of a religious view of life' (Grimmitt 1987, 132).

Of course Grimmitt's approach is based on his view that the central purpose of RE lies in its contribution to human development. So religion isn't studied for its *intrinsic* worth but rather for its *instrumental* worth. Indeed Grimmitt offers a humanistic rather than theological rationale for RE. However, whilst, in his view, theology cannot provide a *sufficient* understanding of RE it does make a *necessary* contribution 'in providing for the elucidation of *Substantive Religious Categories* which permit the differentiation of 'religious beliefs' and 'religious values' within human beliefs and values' (Grimmitt 1987, 260 emphasis in

original). The possible contribution that theology may provide for RE is clearly expressed by Grimmitt (1987, 261) in the following quotation:

All religions provide a view of the human and a vision of the goal to which human beings should aspire. In this sense their disagreement is likely to be less with the concept [of humanisation] than with the implications of how human beings should respond to it. The development of such theological underpinnings, although unnecessary for religious education's educational legitimation, would, perhaps, enable religious adherents, including teachers, who are disconcerted by the humanistic character of the rationale I have put forward, to be confident that the basis it provides for studying their religion does not assail its integrity.

However, herein lies the essential dilemma for religious education. How does a subject called *religious* education, in seeking to avoid the pitfalls of the perspective of any one religious tradition, develop a distinctive character that is true to the nature of its subject matter? Or in other words, is it possible to argue for, and develop an approach to religiosity that is somehow religious in character yet not confessionally bound to any one tradition? That it can reflect the *religiousness* of its subject matter but be 'neutral' in approach? Is it possible for multi faith religious education to reflect a distinctive religious character in its subject matter and avoid becoming a version of citizenship, sociology or history of religions?

I tend to agree with Moran that the term religious education has often prevented religious educators from articulating what is distinctive about the subject and what is distinctive about understanding in the subject. However, this has not always been the case. At the time of the publication of the SCAA models Barbara Wintersgill (1995) stated that 'What RE offers uniquely is the study of religion.' This would seem to be a step in the right direction as well as seemingly stating

the obvious. But of course this is exactly the problem. What do religious educators mean when they make this sort of statement?

Part Six

Towards a distinctively religious understanding of religions

In this section I seek to raise and offer some tentative thoughts towards answering two questions. Firstly, is it possible to articulate an understanding of religion in religious education that is reflective of the distinctiveness of religion as a particular way of understanding human life that is, on one hand, more than mere descriptions of explanations of religion and yet, on the other, that is more appropriate, in a largely secular system of education, than a narrow proselytising? And secondly, can we talk about an understanding of religion that is common to all the religions studied but doesn't distort any one of them?

To the latter question some would immediately answer 'no!' Any attempt to look for commonality in spirituality or religiousness is bound to fail because religions are essentially different. What it means to be a Christian is fundamentally different than what it means to be a Buddhist. Furthermore any attempt to define religion is doomed. For example one cannot, as many dictionaries do, define religion in terms of the worship of God. That would exclude Buddhists straight away and, anyway, it depends on what we mean by God!

Indeed the attempt to *define* religion in such a manner is a false trail and I would want to follow Hick (1989), for example, in seeking an inductive approach to the plurality of religious traditions. For our purposes here it is instructive to note a number of characteristics of Hick's work. In making use of Wittgenstein's family resemblance concept in an attempt to *describe* rather than define religion, he concludes that whilst religions have no common essence, as they are essentially human constructions over time, it is possible to say that religions do have a defining characteristic. Beginning with Tillich's concept of 'ultimate concern'

(Tillich, 1957) Hick moves on towards what Cantwell Smith describes as 'transcendentology' (Cantwell Smith, 1981). Thus the transcendent dimension helps define religion as a distinctive, and significantly for Hick, rational way of interpreting the universe. In the literature on religious education this concern with the defining characteristic of the reality of the transcendent is evident in the work of Andrew Wright (See for example, Wright, 1993). But whilst it is important that religious believers are able to argue for the validity of a life interpreted in terms of the transcendent (to counteract non-realists), naturalistic and 'religious' interpretations should not be seen as mutually exclusive because 'human factors manifestly enter into the formation of religious concepts and into ways in which the transcendent is believed to be encountered...Thus to defend the conviction of the reality of the transcendent is not to affirm the moral worth of religious phenomena as such. On the contrary, the recognition of the human element in religion emphasises the need for rational and ethical criticism and discrimination' (Hick, 1989, pp. 8-9)

So I believe that there are interesting possibilities for a religious education that seeks to define its content in a broadly 'religious' way that recognises religion's plurality of forms but also recognises the importance of a discerning and critical stance towards religious phenomena.

6:1 Religion as human transformation

What is distinctive about religion is its soteriological character. As Ward (1987, p.153) has noted, 'Religion is primarily concerned with the transformation of the self, by appropriate response to that which is most truly real.' Recognising the inevitable problems of terminology in using the term 'soteriology' in a plural religious context, Hick opts for describing religion's primary function in terms of human transformation or liberation. Hick arrives at this description because of his Irenaean intuition (Cheetham, 2003, p.105) in that religion is understood as enabling humans to transcend their natural immaturity that is self, or ego-centred in order that they may become liberated, more truly human, or holy. So, to use two examples, for the Christian this means overcoming fallenness or sin

through a path of redemption found within the person of Jesus Christ and the development of the 'fruits of the spirit' leading to eternal life. For the Sikh it is the overcoming of *haumai* (pride, self-centredness) by following a path of *nam simran* and *sewa* and developing *gurmukh* leading to the state of *mukhti* (See Hick, 1989, pp. 21-69).

6:2 Implications for religious education

Thus in terms of an inclusive religious education we might ask the question, what is good about religion? This is a different question than, what is good about religions?

If one uses the plural here then it is not much different to asking what is good about cultures. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that there has to be a notion of what religion is and does, and the role it plays in human life. So religion is essentially about human response to that which is greater than we. For many religious traditions that 'greater' is the Transcendent or God, yet even within non-theistic traditions, the 'greater' is the wellbeing of the world. The good thing that religion can offer to pupils is the notion of change and self-improvement – or the decentring of the self: the appreciation that I am not the centre of the universe, but that the way I am in the world can be of significance, and can change the world for the better or the worse. If one is going to learn *from* religion – without being persuaded to become a follower or adherent – there must be something of value for the learner – of educational, as well as intellectual value.

However, if we are to be able to articulate what there is value to be learned *from* religion, it is essential to be clear about what it is that pupils should learn *about* religion. In saying this, moreover, we accept that what might be selected will be contested. For, who has the right to be the final arbiter on what should be learned about and from religion? In offering some suggestions I am seeking to take seriously the content of the discipline in which I work. I want to treat religion not just as a cultural phenomenon which influences or dictates the way people live their lives, but to enable pupils to appreciate some of the power and passion of religion as a force for change. In the QCA (2000) explanation of what

learning from religion should entail, I noted that some of the attempts at description include allusions to teacher style, teacher handling of pupil talk, even pedagogy. What this sleight of hand really disguises is that there is no serious suggestion that pupils should learn from *religion* as such but only from the process of religious education. Whilst this latter is a laudable aim which I would endorse, Kay has already identified that this description is so general that it could apply to many subject disciplines. What I am attempting to articulate is the distinctiveness of the discipline. In the QCA publication referred to it is also stated that learning from religion is 'about the concepts in religion(s)', but this vague reference benefits from no further elucidation. The recently published National Framework for RE continues this understanding that pupils should learn from the process of RE.

I think it is important to revisit Grimmitt's (1987) assertion that what learning from religion could, and should, entail is learning from religion about oneself and, I might add, the world. As he argues, "The value of studying religions is not merely to be found in the understanding of religious meaning that it promotes, but in what understanding religious meaning contributes to the pupil's understanding of self." (p.165) This is what is of educational value for the learner. Yet it is the religious content of what one studies here that is crucial for the distinctiveness of the subject. As Grimmitt has said more recently and to which I referred earlier, 'the evaluative process of *learning from religion(s)* should be fully integrated into how, within a secular educational context, pupils are *learning about religions* in the first place' (Grimmitt, 2000, p.15).

6:3 Theory into practice

In terms of the selection of religious material which has the richest potential for pupils to 'learn from religion, I want to suggest, that this is not to be found in the static features of religious life or buildings. In Christianity, for example, this is not to be found in something like the features of a church, but rather in an exploration of aspects of Christian spirituality and teachings such as forgiveness. In the Sikh tradition, it would less likely to be found in a recounting of the names

of the 'Five Ks' of Sikhism and more in an exploration of *sewa*. This latter can be explored at many different levels – it can be considered most basically as service for the benefit of others, counting one's own needs and desires as less important than those of others, or at a deeper level, it can be considered as the continuous striving to remove *haumai* or the ego in order to be closer to God. Of course, it would be possible to argue here that pupils may find it easier to 'learn from' the more basic and outward manifestation of *sewa* (as in reflecting upon the significance of serving others for their lives), than from the deeper motivating significance of eliminating *haumai*. However, reflection upon, or the relating of, the content material to one's life and understanding of the world must always have a genuinely open agenda, with the highly likely outcome of rejection.

So what we need to continue to identify are these facets of religious life, belief and practice that are integral to the religious traditions' self-understanding (so as not to give a distorted impression of the religion), but which also have potential for pupils to consider their significance or otherwise for their lives and the world in general.

In the example, below I consider what it may be possible to learn 'from religion' as a direct result of visiting a place of worship. In such places much of significance to adherents of the tradition may be in evidence – although this is always more likely when the place is being used, rather than when it is an empty monument. The following experiment took place as a result of reading *Visiting Places of Worship* by Gateshill and Thompson (2000). In this book suggestions are provided about how pupils may learn about and from religion during and following their visit: Suggestions for the way that pupils may learn from religion included asking them to think about a special place of their own; somewhere they go alone to think; a special building they have visited; a room or area at school that is special. A final offering is that pupils could design a peaceful area at school with questions for the pupils about how, when and why it might be used.
(P.9)

These suggestions provoked me to ask: What do these questions have to do with learning from religion? It is true that they provide opportunities for thinking through what connections there may be between the religious tradition and one's life and so, in this respect, satisfy the objectives of relatedness and relevance – but do visits to the places of worship of different traditions prompt each of these questions? Does a visit to a gurdwara prompt thinking about being completely alone? Is there a link between 'a corner of a room where you keep your things' and the prayer hall of a mosque? Does a visiting a mandir for *aarti* stimulate thoughts of peace?

As a result of scepticism about the appropriateness of these examples I considered what could be gained as a result of visiting a place of worship for Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims or Sikhs. It will be noted that in considering what each religious tradition here surveyed may offer, some concepts will be particular to that tradition, and others may be found more broadly: some are particularly religious concepts whereas others are generically religious. For example, commitment (in most cases, to God) can be seen as a trans-religious concept, whereas the *Ummah* is obviously particular to an understanding of Islam. The examples below are not intended as a polished, final word on this but I hope that they do illustrate the essential point that I am attempting to make.

Learning about and from Sikhism and a visit to a gurdwara:

hospitality/sharing/respect/gifts/learning and sharing music
/humility/holiness/generosity/beauty/unity/commitment/honesty/devotion/i
mportance of identifying that which is important/ God's words are to be found in
many places/listening to the praise of God is a good thing/reciting God's praise
continually is a good thing
Specific concepts from Sikhism, for example; sewa, akhand path, langar,
wahiguru, diwan, Guru Granth Sahib.

Learning about and from Islam and a visit to a mosque:

Unity/commitment/devotion/humility/brotherhood/respect for
Allah/submission/obedience/importance of cleanliness inside and
out/importance of prayer together/gratitude/authority/modesty/beauty in

pattern, colour and shape/taking care to make something beautiful for Allah/importance of not making images/importance of memorisation of important words/ holiness/ honesty/authority/importance of ritual
Specific concepts from Islam, for example; dhikr, ibadah, Qur'an, ummah, tawhid, wudu.

Learning about and from Buddhism and a visit to a vihara:

Commitment/respect/devotion/all life changes and decays/obedience/value of silence/meditation/difficulty of silence/struggle with oneself and one's mind/honesty/ gratitude/ importance of ritual
Specific concepts from Buddhism, for example; anapanasati, annica, Brahma Viharas, dukkha, samadhi, samatha, upaya, upekkha.

Learning about and from Hinduism and a visit to a mandir:

God can be understood in many different ways/God is bigger than the human mind can comprehend/the senses can be used in worship /gratitude/vibrancy and joy in worship /devotion/ holiness /generosity/importance of ritual
Specific concepts from Hinduism, for example; atman, avatara, bhakti, Brahman, dharma, trimurti.

Learning about and from Judaism and a visit to a synagogue:

Respect/ holiness /importance of the words of God/authority/obedience/importance of ritual/community/importance of prayer together/remembering the acts of God/remembering those who have died/ importance of symbol to communicate that too holy for words/everlasting presence of God/commitment/ gratitude
Specific concepts from Judaism, for example; kedusha, ner tamid, bet tefillah.

Learning about and from Christianity and a visit to a church:

Holiness /importance of symbol for communicating ideas/importance of sacrifice/ remembering the acts of God
/authority/commitment/duty/confession/importance of ritual/forgiveness/repentance/beauty/expressing ideas about God in a creative form/ devotion/gratitude/ importance of prayer together
Specific concepts from Christianity, for example; communion of saints, reconciliation, forgiveness, prayer, thanksgiving.

Part Seven: Conclusion: A religious understanding of RE within the idea of a 'neutral' religious education

In offering these examples I am suggesting an approach to understanding religion in religious education that avoids the pitfalls of reductionism that has often been a consequence of the phenomenological method. However, this is not

to say, of course, that in seeking to go beyond the phenomenological method we abandon the phenomena!

In attempting to provide what I am calling 'a religious framework for understanding religion in religious education' I am open to the criticism that any approach to religious education based on some kind of generic understanding of religion will not do (Thompson 2004). Thompson's view is that religions are different and any attempt to provide a religious education that is true to religious life must have its grounding based on one tradition alone. I think this is an unnecessary conclusion to a very genuine concern that much of modern religious education fails to represent religious life. In the examples given above I am not suggesting that religions are the same, nor am I suggesting that they are versions of the same thing. I am attempting to provide a second order interpretative framework that seeks to understand the phenomena of religion in a way that does justice to the soteriological or transforming quality of religious life (for more on this see Teece 2010). In so doing I am not suggesting that Christian salvation and Buddhist nirvana are the same, for example. What I *am* saying is that Christian salvation and Buddhist nirvana are both examples of the transformative nature of religion and that it is a concentration on this transformative quality that should be the main focus of religious education. In the examples given above I am not insisting that a Christian church and Buddhist vihara are two versions of some kind of generic concept called a place of worship offering the same kinds of insights to pupils as suggested in the example from Gateshill and Thompson (above). Each place of worship has its own particular gifts (Grimmitt, Grove, Hull & Spencer, 1991) to offer and those gifts are firmly embedded in the self - understanding of the tradition not in the experience of the learner. **The aim is to enrich the experience of the learner not to reduce religion to the experience of the learner.**

In aiming to enrich the experience of the learner I am not suggesting enrichment equals proselytising nor should it be devoid of a critical dimension. My approach does not seek to provide a sanitised or idealised version of religion. Pupils will and should be confronted with religion's essential ambiguity. But they are

unlikely to be able to develop any kind of balanced understanding if they are never confronted with the transformative quality of the religiousness offered by the religious traditions. Arguably religious education has not done this often enough. These ideas are merely an attempt to redress the balance.

7:1 Learning from religion as skilful means: Religious education as upayic.

Finally given the importance that religious education should reflect human responses to the transcendent and that students should *learn from religion*, it can be suggested that what is important for students is not knowledge of religion *per se*, as a reified 'traditional belief system,' but the way in which a Christian or Buddhist perceives the world. Smith (1981: 47-48) states that: 'To understand the faith of Buddhists, one must not look at something called 'Buddhism'. Rather, one must look at the world, so far as possible through Buddhist eyes.'

Hence the phenomena and teachings of religions are not just to be studied in, and for, their own sake but as means by which students may expand and deepen their understanding of the human condition in a religiously ambiguous world.

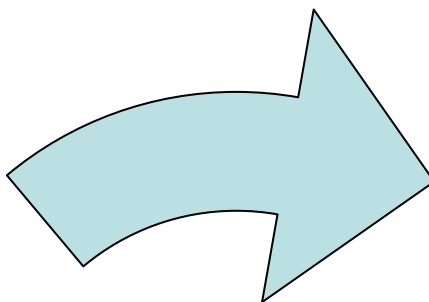
Thus the function that the religions play in the process of teaching and learning can be described as *upayic*. *Upaya*, or 'skilful means', was a concept used by the Buddha in two ways. Firstly religious teachers, such as Jesus or the Buddha, used metaphor, parable, etc to communicate spiritual truths to their followers. According to Hick (1993: 119-136) this is *upaya* in its narrower sense. It is possible to conceive of the religious educator using *upaya* in this sense but with the concern that his or her approach may be bordering on the confessional. However, the use of the term *upaya* in a second, wider Mahayana, sense can best be described by the Buddha's famous parable of the raft, which can be found in the Majjhima Nikaya (Homer 1954). Briefly, a man comes to a river that has no bridge or means of crossing so he constructs a raft from reeds and branches. He

then uses the raft to paddle to the other side. Because the raft has been useful he is tempted to take it with him on his journey. The Buddha counters against this suggesting the man leave the raft behind. The raft was a 'skilful means' by which the man could continue on his journey. In the Buddha's teaching the raft stands for the *dharma*.

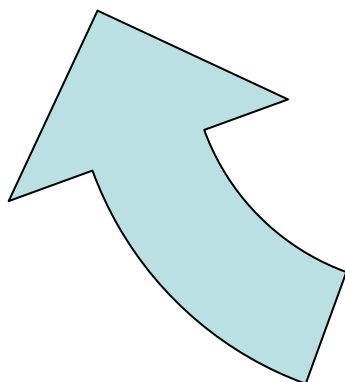
It is in this second sense that religious education might be understood as *upayic*. I'm not suggesting that teachers present religions to students as *skilful means*. That would be to prioritise Buddhist understanding over any other. Rather the religions, understood as vehicles of human transformation, can operate within the teaching and learning process as *skilful means* by which the students develop a wider and deeper understanding of what it means to be human. There is no intention that students carry any particular religion with them on their journey, although they may of course already have a religion. If this is the case then learning about and from other religious traditions may enrich the tradition to which they already belong. For students of no religious adherence insights from the various religions may enrich their own particular stance on life, or even assist them in developing one, religious or not. This is a two way process by which students might use what they learn about and from religion as a critical filter when considering the world in which they are growing up. It is two way because their experience of growing up in a western democracy will require them to explore religious teachings and practices critically on the basis of their own developing beliefs and values. The diagram on the page opposite explains how this may work in terms of a learning process.

Diagram 1: Learning from religion as skilful means (Stolberg and Teece 2011, 67).

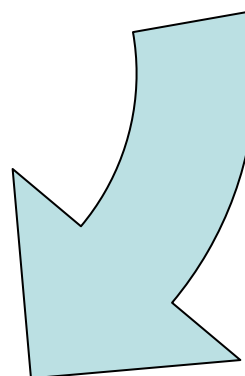
make impersonal observations of how specific religious principles determine responses to particular human issues. So students can develop critical filters to illuminate and inform their personal perspective. To...



enable students to reflect on their emotional response to religious and human issues. Use this to form the basis of their view of the world around them. So that they can critically ...



use their personal experiences to engage with specific religious and human issues, rather than examine the topic in the abstract or through someone else's perspective. So that they can then



References:

Astley, J. (1994) The place of understanding in Christian education and education about Christianity. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 16(2): 90-101.

Attfield, D. (1978) Is religious education possible? A reply to Roger Marples. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 12, 93-97.

Barrow, R. & Woods, R. (1988) *An Introduction to philosophy of education* (3rd edition). London: Routledge.

Barnes, P. (2007) "Religious education and the misrepresentation of religion." In Felderhof, M., Thompson, P., and Torevell, D. (eds.) *Inspiring faith in schools*. Aldershot: Ashgate. pp. 75-88

Barnes, P. (2001) What is wrong with the phenomenological approach to religious education? *Religious Education*, 96, (4): 445-461

Barnes, P. (2000) Ninian Smart and the phenomenological approach to religious education. *Religion*, 30: 315-32

Bates, D. (2006) "John Hull a critical appreciation." In Bates, D. Schweitzer, F. Durka, G. (eds.) *Education, religion and society: essays in honour of John.M.Hull*. Oxford: Routledge. pp. 6-31

Bridges, D. (2009) Education and the possibility of outsider understanding. *Ethics and Education*, 4(2): 105-123.

Cheetham, D. (2003) *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection* (Abingdon: Ashfield).

Cox, E. (1983) Understanding religion and religious understanding. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 6(1): 3-17.

Clarke, C. (2004) Good RE makes for good citizenship, *Church Times*, 29th October p 11.

Clarke, P & Byrne, P. (1993) *Religion Defined and Explained* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).

Department for children, schools and families, (2010) *Religious education in English schools: non-statutory guidance 2010*. Nottingham: DCSF Publications

DfEE & QCA. (1999) *The National Curriculum: Handbook for primary teachers in England*.

Felderhof, M. (2004) The New National Framework for RE in England and Wales: a critique, *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 25 (2), 241-248.

Gardner, P. (1980) Religious Education: In defence of non-commitment. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 14(2): 157-168.

Gateshill, P. & Thompson, J. (2000) *Visiting Places of Worship* (London: Hodder & Stoughton).

Grimmitt, M. (1987) *Religious Education and Human Development: The Relationship between studying religions and personal, social and moral education*, Great Wakering Essex, McCrimmon

Grimmitt, M. (2000) *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE* (Great Wakering Essex: Mc Crimmons).

Grimmitt, M., Grove, J., Hull, J., Spencer, L. (1991) *A Gift to the child: religious education in the primary school* (London: Simon & Schuster).

Grimmitt, M. and Read G. (1975) *Teaching Christianity in RE*. Great Wakering: Mayhew.

- Hand, M. (2006) *Is religious education possible? A philosophical investigation*. London: Continuum.
- Hella, E. & Wright, A. (2009) Learning 'about' and 'from' religion: phenomenography, the variation theory of learning and religious education in Finland and the UK. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 31 (1): 53-64
- Hession, A., and Kieron, P. (2007) *Exploring Theology: Making sense of the Catholic tradition*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Hick, J. (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan).
- Hirst, P. (1973) Forms of Knowledge: A reply to Elizabeth Hindess. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 7(2): 260-271.
- Holley, R. (1978) *Religious education and religious understanding: An introduction to the philosophy of RE*. London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hull, J. (1995) Religion as a series of religions: a comment on the SCAA Model Syllabuses, *From Syllabus to Schemes : planning and teaching RE* (Shap Working Party
- Jackson, R. et al. (2010) *Materials used to teach about world religions in schools in England*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Jackson, R. (1997) *Religious education: an interpretive approach* (London: Hodder and Stoughton).
- Kay, W. (2005) A non-statutory framework for religious education: issues and opportunities, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 27 (1), 41-52
- Marples, R. (1978) Is religious education possible? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 12, 81-91.
- Moran, G. (1989) *Religious education as a second language* (Birmingham Alabama: Religious Education Press).

Melchert, C. (1981) 'Understanding' as a purpose of religious education. *Religious Education*, 76 (2), 178-186.

Newton, D.P. & Newton, L.D. (1999). Knowing what counts as understanding in different disciplines: Some 10 year old children's conceptions. *Education Studies*, 25 (1), 33-55.

Ofsted. (2010). *Transforming religious education: Religious education in schools 2006-09*. London: Office for Standards in Education.

OfSTED, (2007) *Making sense of religion: a report on religious education in schools and the impact of locally agreed syllabuses*. Document reference number 070045. [online]. <http://www.OfSTED.gov.uk/OfSTED-home/Publications-and-Research/Browse-all-by/Education/Curriculum/Religious-education/Secondary/Making-sense-of-religion>. [Accessed June 2007]

OfSTED, (2005) *OfSTED subject reports 2003/05: religious education in primary schools*. Document reference number: HMI 2346. (out of print).

QCA. (2000) *Religious education: Non-statutory guidance on RE* (London: QCA).

(2003) *A non-statutory framework for religious education: report of a feasibility study*. London: QCA.

-(2004) *Religious education: The non-statutory national framework* (London: QCA & DfES).

Read, G., Rudge, J., Teece, G., & Howarth, R. (1992) *How do I teach RE? the Westhill Project RE 5-16. 2nd ed.* Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.

SCAA. (1994) *Model Syllabuses for RE* (London: Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority).

Schools Council Occasional Bulletin (1977) *A groundplan for the study of religion*. London: Schools Council.

Schools Council Working Paper No 36 (1971) Religious education in secondary schools. London: Evans/Methuen.

Smart, N. (1968) *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber).

Smith, M. and Siegle, H. (2004) Knowing, believing and understanding: What goals for science education? *Science and Education*, 13, 553-582.

Smith, W. C. (1981) *Towards a world theology* (London: Macmillan).

Stolberg, T. and Teece, G. (2011). *Teaching Religion and Science; Effective pedagogy and practical approaches for RE teachers*. London: Routledge.

Teece, G.(2010) Is it learning about and from religions, religion or religious education? and is it any wonder some teachers don't get it? *The British journal of Religious Education*, 32 (2): 89-103

Teece, G. (2008) Learning from religions as skilful means: a contribution to the debate about the nature of religious education. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 30 (3): 187-198

Tillich, P. (1957) *Dynamics of faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers).

Thompson, P. (2004) *Fitting out the framework* (Crosby: Thompson).

Ward, K. (1987) *Images of eternity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd).

Wintersgill, B. (1995) The case of the missing models: exploding the myths, *Resource* 18 (1), 6-11.

Wright, A. (2004) *Religion, education and post-modernity*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Wright, A. (1993) *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (London: David Fulton).

