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The travail of multi-faith religious education in Britain

L. Philip Barnes
King's College London, London, UK

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EN **Asbtract.** The purpose of this article is to consider the post-confessional history of religious education in Britain, that is, multi-faith religious education, which is the form of religious education that succeeded confessional religious education, and to enquire why (and in what ways) it is in such a 'lamentable' state. The focus is on weaknesses rather than strengths, for it is weaknesses that are increasingly becoming apparent and increasingly discussed. Attention is given both to the commitments and ideas that have shaped the changing character of multi-faith religious education over the last fifty years and to identified weaknesses, as revealed in observational research in classrooms and in pupil surveys.
Keywords: British religious education; confessional education; interpretive approach; phenomenological religious education; religionism

ES La dificultad de la educación religiosa multirreligiosa en Gran Bretaña

ES **Resumen.** El propósito de este artículo es considerar la historia post-confesional de la educación religiosa en Gran Bretaña, es decir, la educación multireligiosa, que es la forma de educación religiosa que sucedió a la educación religiosa confesional, y preguntar por qué (y de qué manera) se encuentra en un estado tan 'lamentable'. La atención se centra en las debilidades más que en las fortalezas, ya que son ellas las que se hacen cada vez más evidentes y se discuten cada vez más. Se presta atención tanto a los compromisos y las ideas que han dado forma al carácter cambiante de la educación religiosa multireligiosa durante los últimos cincuenta años para identificar esas debilidades, como se revela en la investigación observacional en las aulas y en las encuestas a los alumnos.
Palabras clave: Educación religiosa británica; educación confesional; aproximación interpretativa; educación religiosa fenomenológica; religión

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1. Introduction

A common narrative of modern British religious education, at least among professional religious educators (as in Bates 1992; O'Grady 2005), is how a Christian, civic religious instruction (or Christian confessional) model of religious education, which dominated up to the nineteen-sixties, came to be replaced by a multi-faith model in the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies. The story describes how confessionalism gave way to neutrality, commitment to professionalism, and indoctrination to education. Since then, many British religious educators have confidently extolled their form of religious education to religious educators elsewhere: John Keast (2006: 15), a former subject officer for religious education at the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, a national agency concerned with curriculum development (as the name implies), stated that 'RE in much of the UK is in a good position to help other parts of Europe.... RE of the kind needed across Europe is being articulated and provided in the UK'. This opinion was directly challenged by Mark Chater and Clive Erricker. They have described English religious education as 'failing to fulfil its potential' (2013: 2) and expressed the hope that their book, *Does Religious Education have a future?*, (2013) 'could serve as a warning to national jurisdictions of education as to where their interest in English RE might lead them'. For them, 'Some of the most characteristic features of English RE ... should come with a health warning for other national systems' (2013: 3). These critical comments are not because they oppose multi-faith religious education but because they oppose the form of multi-faith religious education practised in most English schools. In the same year as Chater and Clive Erricker were writing, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (2013) finally admitted that there was a 'crisis' in English (non-confessional) religious education and embarked on a series of reviews to identify a new positive way forward for the subject. More recently Mary Myatt (2020), a former adviser and inspector of schools, has stated that 'RE in English schools is in a lamentable state'.

The purpose of this article is to consider the post-confessional history of religious education in Britain, that is, multi-faith religious education, which is the form of religious education that succeeded confessional religious education, and to enquire why (and in what ways) it is in such a lamentable state. The focus is on weaknesses rather than strengths, which are well known, for example, multi-faith religious education's commitment to diversity and inclusion, its aim to develop respect for others and its suitability and relevance to schools that are intended to be inclusive of different religious and ethnic identities and which eschew any form of religious nurture. Attention is given both to the commitments and ideas that have shaped the changing character of multi-faith religious education over the last fifty years and to its weaknesses, as revealed in observational research in classrooms and in pupil surveys. The first historical or genealogical section has a theoretical orientation, whereas the discussion of weaknesses in the classroom has a practical orientation; limited attention however is given to the ways in which theory and practice are linked and co-ordinated, though in some cases connection are obvious.

There has been a reluctance to address critical questions about multi-faith religious education in Britain, for a variety of reasons. It is felt by some that criticism of contemporary theory and practice could undermine the protected legal status of the subject. Religious education in Britain is a compulsory subject in schools and the religious education community, through its organisations and associations, frequently make representations to government about its contribution to the moral and social aims of education, particularly to positive relations between different ethnic and religious communities. Criticism at this point could undermine the case for its continuing compulsory status. Others feel that criticism of non-confessional, multi-faith religious could conceivably encourage calls for the return of a more characteristically Christian form of religious education in (non-faith) 'community' schools and academies, or (which is more likely) confirm support for the continuing existence of faith education, which is pursued in some Christian schools—Christian academies, Roman Catholic schools and some Church of England schools (it depends on their legislative status). Religious education in faith schools is typically adjudged by independent inspectors to be superior to that of non-faith schools. Finally, the 'lamentable' state of religious education is largely the result of commitments and practices that were endorsed by influential groups and organisations representing religious education, such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (abolished in 2012), a semi-official independent government agency, and the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. It is difficult for them to acknowledge responsibility for the current situation, which, in part, is a consequence of their endorsement of earlier initiatives and 'reforms'.

It may be that an awareness of where one national system of religious education falls short could encourage educators from elsewhere to look more reflexively and critically at their own national systems of religious education. We can learn from each other: secularisation, the process of individualisation, the decline of institutional forms of religion, the rise of non-religion and the growth of moral and religious diversity are common influences across most European nations; they provide the context within which religious education is practised. In addition, in Britain (as in other countries) there is also the historical influence of the Christian churches over education, though this influence has been refracted and refined, and in part annulled in places. It is not disputed that all national systems of education, including religious education, have their own distinctive character, but this does not undermine the value of gaining a wider perspective and being attentive to research and developments elsewhere.

2. Multi-faith religious education in Britain: theoretical perspectives

The post-confessional history of English religious education is a controversial and contested subject: there is no Archimedean point or God's eye perspective from which to gain a fully objective and disinterested analysis

and interpretation. Interpretations differ and not all commentators will agree with the judgements expressed here (an extended interpretation and justification is provided elsewhere; see 2014 and 2020).

2.1. The Transition from Confessional to Non-Confessional Religious Education

The most important development in relation to the history of religious education in Britain, and the development that distinguishes *modern* religious education from earlier periods, is the transition from confessional to non-confessional religious education in state-maintained schools – that is, schools that are intended to be inclusive of all pupils, of any religious persuasion or none. Up until the late 1960s, religious education was Christian in terms of content and of expected commitment. The purpose of religious education was to nurture Christian faith and values on behalf of what was believed to be a Christian society, with the aim of producing good citizens. This orientation was undermined by a range of developments. Economic, social and intellectual influences contributed to create a new cultural situation where traditional authorities and institutions were challenged. There was a radical reassessment of the aims of education and of the aims of religious education. In the latter case this reassessment proceeded against the background of diminishing numerical support for institutional religion, widespread questioning of traditional Christian beliefs and values (both of which are properly regarded as aspects of the secularisation of British society), post-war immigration from former colonies and an increasing awareness of the multi-faith nature of modern Britain. Influential voices were raised against the prevailing orthodoxy. Research had already indicated that the staple diet of bible study and the study of church history, so central to the religious education curriculum, was meeting with limited success in terms of both capturing pupils' interest in Christianity and advancing their understanding and comprehension of basic Christian beliefs (ICE, 1957; Loukes, 1961).

2.2. Working Paper 36: Religious Education in the Secondary School

A new non-confessional direction for religious education was suggested in 1971 by the publication of *Working Paper 36*: *Religious Education in the Secondary Schoo*l, produced under the direction of Professor Ninian Smart for the Schools Council (a government funded body charged with the aim of exploring and developing new curricular ideas). This publication initiated a revolution in British religious education and marked the beginning of the end of Christian nurture in all state, fully funded schools and heralded the advent of multi-faith religious education. The main ideas of *Working Paper 36* can be summarised in the following points:

- The confessional or, what the document terms, the 'dogmatic' approach to religious education, is equated with 'intellectual and cultic indoctrination'. Confessional religious education is presented as necessarily indoctrinatory. Christian nurture should be abandoned in all schools as nurture is incompatible with 'educational principles'.
- Moral education should be distinguished from religious education and the former should be studied independently of religious education. *Working Paper 36* followed the academic fashion of the time and maintained that religion cannot provide a foundation for morality (a position less philosophically convincing now than then); consequently, moral education should be taught independently of religion.
- The view is expressed that a multi-faith, 'non-dogmatic, phenomenological approach', which draws inspiration from the phenomenology of religion, should be adopted. It is commended for its 'openness' and for its promotion of 'empathic understanding' - by virtue of imagination and empathy, individuals enabled to transcend their own situations and 'enter into' the subjectivity of others. By developing this form of religious understanding, religious education is believed to promote religious tolerance and to contribute positively to preparing pupils for life in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society.

2.3. The Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education

The phenomenology of religion had already established its academic credentials at university level and this contributed to its favourable reception by teachers, as did the perception that its approach was the only viable alternative to confessionalism. The vocabulary and procedures of the phenomenology of religion became the currency of religious education and its principles came to be enshrined in numerous textbooks, agreed syllabuses and local education authority handbooks.

The intellectual roots of the phenomenology of religion can be traced to Liberal Protestant attempts in the late nineteenth century to develop a methodology for the study of religion that was descriptive and broad ranging. The professed aim is to provide an objective account of religious phenomena, one free from bias and distortion. Religious phenomena—rituals, practices, when appreciated at depth give way to religious understanding, for as one learns about religion and empathises with the religious subject, so one comes to understand the universal nature and character of religion. Religious understanding is gained by two hermeneutical steps (or what some refer to as 'reductions'). First, attention is given to the religious phenomenon under discussion, with all prior beliefs and assumptions suspended (*epoché*), then in this focused state, the observer 'enters' the thought world of religion and intuits (through *eidetic* vision) the meaning of the experience for the believer. The essential nature of religion is interpreted as experience of the Holy or the Sacred (both words are used to translate the same German term, *das Heilige*): religion is regarded as a unique (*sui generis*) category of interpretation and knowing. Through empathy and intuition, the essence of the Holy is apprehended, and the inner meaning and motivation of religion is grasped (the influence of Rudolf Otto and van der Leeuw should be obvious). In this way, phenomenologists of religion believed that the 'objective' experiential character of religion is laid bare (see Barnes 2014: 79-93).

The attractiveness of a phenomenological approach to teachers should be obvious. Phenomenological religious education claims to be multi-faith, inclusive, neutral and objective – no religion is privileged over another. Formally, the critical evaluation of religious beliefs and practices can be set aside, bracketed out as the phenomenology of religion's methodology demands, yet informally the truth of religion is assumed. Through empathy, insight is gained into the religious world of 'the other'; and true to the Liberal Protestant foundations of the phenomenology of religion, the religious world of 'the other' is found to be centred on and expressive of the transcendent mystery that lies at the heart of all religion. As John Marvell (1982: 74), an influential religious educator of the period, maintained, every religion evokes the 'the *numinous*'. On this basis, one of the most controversial issues in relation to religion is overlooked: that of evaluating religious claims to truth and adjudicating between rival doctrinal beliefs and practices. Religious education is thus freed from challenge and possible controversy.

Over the next two decades British religious education became synonymous with a multi-faith, phenomenological approach in which religions were typically studied thematically, with the content of religion organised and classified under generic themes such as founders, sacred buildings, sacred scriptures, and festivals. Pupils were encouraged to set aside their presuppositions, and to enter imaginatively into the religious experience of others. This was the ideal of course, but for many pupils, religious education became an uninvolving and superficial journey through a range of different religions and diverse religious phenomena. Teachers soon began to report disinterest amongst pupils who complained that thematically structured multi-faith religious curriculum failed to relate to their 'life world' (*Lebenswelt*) and their concerns and interests. The presumption that acquaintance with the beliefs and values of minority groups by itself will considerably reduce religious prejudice also enjoyed little support from experience.

Furthermore, questions were raised about the capability of pupils to enter into the experience of others and to develop a positive attitude to them on the basis of the phenomenological technique of 'bracketing out' their own convictions and commitments. A psychological perspective on children's cognitive development suggests that the method of bracketing one's own beliefs and entering into the mind-state and experience of others to gain an appreciation of their beliefs is compromised by the psychological and imaginative limitations of many pupils - limitations that in some cases last well into the years of secondary education (see Kay 1997). There was also the complaint that by setting aside one's own values and commitments and attempting to place oneself in the situation of the experiencing religious subject tacit support was given to moral and religious relativism. This is because from the perspective of the 'insider' everything that is experienced in religion is valid and true. Should religious education not also be developing critical perspectives on religion and religious phenomena?

If classroom experience revealed that phenomenological religious education was less effective in challenging racism and religious intolerance than its first advocates had anticipated, this did not lead religious educators, for the most part, to question either the potential of religious education in this area or phenomenology's underlying Liberal Protestant philosophical and theological commitments. It was conceded that the phenomenological technique for acquiring a positive attitude to religious diversity may be deficient, but ongoing research that identified a link between notions of superiority and prejudice was interpreted by religious educators as confirming their commitment to the experiential truth of the different religions. By challenging religious claims to uniqueness and superiority, religious educators believed themselves to be simultaneously challenging racism and religious intolerance— a somewhat naive assumption one may add. A straightforward and important proponent of this position was Professor John Hull, then of Birmingham University and one of the most internationally influential religious educators. He used the word 'religionism' in a series of writings to refer to the view that one religion is true to a degree denied to other religions; this he believed encouraged intolerance towards adherents of other religions (Hull 1992: 70). Hull's view is open to serious criticisms (see Barnes 2014: 126-158). The different religions have historically regarded themselves as advancing rival and alternative claims to truth (Christian, 1972 and 1987). Hull's strategy would require religious adherents to relinquish exclusive claims to truth, yet this misrepresents what most believe about their religion: the nature of a religion, e.g. Christianity or Islam, is misrepresented in the cause of religious harmony. Hull contends that religions should not be presented to pupils in such a way to suggest that they provide competing accounts of life and existence. Would this alleviate all religious intolerance and bigotry? Is a religion's claim to exclusive truth the only source of serious disagreement and conflict between religions? This does not seem a credible position in the light of religious history and a knowledge of the nature of the origins of religious conflicts. Religions have as much to do with political power and influence, historically with colonialism and the subjugation of indigenous groups, as with narrowly 'spiritual' matters.

Hull believes that if religious adherents could be convinced that there is no competition between religions then religious intolerance would be considerably lessened. There is a sense in which this is true, though it alerts us to an important conceptual point. If all religious adherents acknowledge the truth of each other's traditions, then religious intolerance that finds its origin in claims to exclusive truth would not exist. Equally, by parity of argument, if everyone belonged to the same ethic group, there would be no ethnic intolerance or ethnic violence: if in a particular polity every citizen sincerely adhered to a Marxist ideology, then presumably (if somewhat ideally) there would be no political intolerance based upon political conviction. Hull's strategy of rejecting religious claims to exclusive truth or to superior truth, however, compromises religious diversity (in fact diversity in all its forms). It is difference that ultimately can give rise to disagreement and (unjustified) intolerance and bigotry. Hull's educational strategy 'erases' difference, whereas a defensible educational strategy in a pluralist democracy should aim to enable pupils to tolerate those who hold different (religious) views and to be respectful of them as persons. There is also a problem with Hull's assumption that belief in

the exclusive truth of one's own religion is necessarily accompanied by religious intolerance, for if there is not a necessary relationship, there would not be any need for adherents to revise their exclusive claims to truth. The relationship between claims to truth and negative attitudes to others is much more complex than Hull suggests.

2.4. More recent developments

The 1990s saw the emergence of an interpretive approach to religious education, which was announced in Robert Jackson's programmatic essay, 'Religious Education's representations of "Religions" and "Cultures,"' (1995), with a fuller version provided two years later in *Religious Education: An interpretive approach* (1997). The major influence on his thought was the 'interpretive anthropology,' of Clifford Geertz, though other influences can be identified, that of post-colonial studies of religion and post-structuralist philosophy. He distinguished (1995: 277) his approach from '[t]he "world religions" movement in British RE'. His work should be seen as an iteration of multi-faith religious education, albeit with post-modern accents. According to him, the 'religions' were represented in terms governed by a powerful western intellectual tradition which, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had defined them and which regarded them as inferior to Christianity. The idea of a 'world religion' is an extension of the eighteenth-century concept of 'religion' and, arguably, still presents 'other religions' as structured in a similar way to Christianity. They have scriptures, a class of special interpreters, rituals, founders, and appeal to large numbers of people; and like Christianity they are assumed to have a universal message and a doctrine of salvation potentially available to people in different cultural contexts (thus distinguishing them from primal religions, for example); arguably religions like Christianity and Islam do claim to possess a universal message. Jackson (1995: 278) suggests that many educational books and school resources operate with this idea of a religion (e.g. Brown 1987; Cole 1985). His aim was to move the focus of religious education away from what he regarded as essentialised and discrete 'religions' to personal appropriations of religions mediated through community membership groups and interactions with wider organised tradition: individuals 'construct' their distinctive religious identities in dialogue with these relationships. Different insiders and outsiders construct their own personal versions of a religious tradition (Jackson 1997: 64).

The interpretive approach of Jackson has strengths: its appreciation of the hermeneutical challenge of interpreting the beliefs, values and practices of others, particularly when these beliefs have originated in a different cultural or historical context to that of pupils; its focus upon religion as it is lived and experienced by individuals in different cultural contexts. Too many textbooks in religious education present the religions as a set of beliefs and practices that seem remote from and unrelated to the modern, often secular, world of pupils. Yet there are also weaknesses; two only of which may be considered here.

There is a striking similarity between Jackson's interpretation of cultures and his interpretation of religion. According to him both are internally diverse, contested, organic and flexible; both lack coherence in terms of beliefs and values; and no one internal form of religion or culture can legitimately claim authenticity over any other form. For him, a religious way of life is an example of a different cultural way of life; and the tools required to study culture, such as Geertz's interpretive ethnographic approach, are equally suited to studying religion. Religion is a manifestation of culture. But is religion best interpreted as solely a manifestation of culture and are the categories for interpreting culture equally appropriate to interpreting religion and capturing its different dimensions and diversity? If religion and religions can be distinguished conceptually and empirically from culture, then there is the possibility of identifying and conceptualising different relationship that exist between them. The weakness in Jackson's understanding of religion is that he does not fully attend to or take sufficiently seriously the diversity of relationships that may exist between religion (or religions) and culture.

Jackson criticises 'essentialised' views of religion in education. At no point does he expand upon this criticism and illustrate what an 'essentialised' view of any particular religion, religious tradition or religious community looks like. Is the following an 'essentialised' view of Islam: 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet'? Can one be a Muslim and deny that Muhammad is the final prophet of God, implicit in which is the view that Muhammad received revelations from God that are now contained in the Qur'an? Christians confess that 'Jesus is Lord': is this belief essential to Christianity? The early Christians regarded this confession and the beliefs and commitments that follow from it as distinctive of their identity and community. What Jackson needs to do, if he rejects the idea of 'essentialised' versions of religions is to describe what an 'essentalised' version of some particular religion looks like and then contrast this with a 'non-essentialised' version of the kind he thinks should be conveyed through religious education. The critical question then becomes are his 'non-essentalised' versions representative of how adherents view their religious commitments or are they carefully crafted versions that reflect Jackson's own interpretation of the different religions.

One recent reaction to criticism of multi-faith religious education, pursued by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, is to reconceptualising religions as worldviews and to require the subject to include a range of secular worldviews, under the proposed name of 'religion and worldviews' (CoRE 2018). It also recommends a central group of nine religious educators that will oversee the Council's 'reforms', all of whom must express support for the new worldview curriculum. These suggestions have proved controversial (see Barnes 2023). Many are concerned that requiring a study of secular, non-religious worldviews alongside religions obviously reduces the time available for the study of religions – in some respects it would mark the demise of *multi-faith* religious education. Other criticisms focus on reconceptualising religions as worldviews by questioning the suitability of this philosophical, more abstract orientation for younger pupils. There is also

concern about removing the significant influence of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs), which determine the content of locally agreed syllabuses, and a small central group assuming control over the subject (the worldviews approach is discussed in detail elsewhere; see Barnes 2021).

A more detailed account of developments in post-confessional religious education could be provided, only a few themes have been considered to give an indication of the commitments, ideas and debates that have been influential. The focus has been mainly theoretical, rather than the practical outworking of theories in the classroom; it is to this our attention now turns.

3. Multi-faith religious education in Britain: pedagogical and classroom perspectives

Weaknesses in the practice of religious education in the classroom may be illustrated from a variety of sources. One of the largest surveys conducted into pupil attitudes and values in Britain in 2004 revealed that only 29% found religious education interesting; only 16% believed that religious education helped them to think about their identity; only 9% believed that religious education helped them to live a better life; and 53% described religious education as boring. Penny Jennings, who conducted the research, concluded that 'the majority of the students do not feel that religious education is relevant to their own spiritual or moral development' (see 2014: 22-23). More recent research presents broadly similar conclusions. A YouGov survey in 2018, showed that of 4000 students survey across the 6-15 age range only 12% admitted to enjoying religious education a lot. In contrast, 47% enjoyed science a lot and 31% enjoyed history a lot. Only Citizenship polled lower than religious education, with 6% enjoying it a lot. Clearly in Britain religious education is not a popular subject among pupils (Cooling et al. 2020).

In the early 1990s Stephen Orchard (1991 and 1993), the then General Secretary of the Christian Education Movement, conducted two reviews of HMI Reports on religious education, from 1985-1988 and from 1989-1991 respectively. His conclusions were largely negative: 'poor teaching and unbalanced content'; 'Pupils are given unimaginative and repetitive lessons, with no attempt at development of the subject or to differentiate content and method according to the ability of the pupils.' There are no further reviews of inspection reports of this nature available from the 1990s from which to draw conclusions. Between 2007 and 2013 the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) produced three informative and authoritative reports (2007, 2010 and 2013) that evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of religious education in primary and secondary schools. On occasions improvements were noted but serious weaknesses were acknowledged in all three reports. The 2013 report helpfully identified 'eight major areas of concern' (2013: 40): low standards, weak teaching, problems in developing a curriculum for religious education, confusion about the purpose of religious education, weak leadership and management, weaknesses in examination provision at Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16), gaps in training, and finally the impact of recent changes in education policy. The teaching of Christianity was a particular cause of concern in all three reports. More generally, 'Many pupils leave school with scant subject knowledge and understanding.

A more recent and wide-ranging source of information about the 'workings' of religious education in the classroom are the findings of the 'Does Religious Education Work?' project (Conroy, et al. 2013), based on research conducted at the same time as the crisis within the subject was beginning to demand wider attention. A fuller summary of the findings has been presented elsewhere (BArnes 2020: 18-20); consequently, the following are recorded to illustrate the seriousness of identified weaknesses in classroom religious education.

I. Minimal evidence of the use of primary religious texts.
II. Quite a number of teachers observed in classroom situations felt uneasy talking about the transcendent aspects or 'other-worldly' aspects of religions: 'Steeped as many appear to be in the discourse of secular relativism' (Conroy, et al. 2013: 37-39; quoting from 39).
III. Teachers' interpretations of the theological and doctrinal claims of a particular religion or tradition sometimes have little connection to official explanations or to the interpretations and explanations upheld by those communities themselves. 'Equally, some treatments of religion offered formulaic, superficial and anodyne accounts of a tradition'.
IV. There was a strong tendency for teachers to stress the ethical aspects of religions over their religious aspects (2013: 40).
V. Frequently there are superficial accounts of religious concepts and ideas, practices and claims, that offer limited insights insight into the theological, philosophical or ethical claims of particular religious traditions.
VI. Despite claims by teachers, to the contrary there was little evidence of a critical element in religious education (2013: 48-49).
VII. There was a desire in many cases to avoid (in the name of 'respect') comparisons between religions.
VIII. Pupils seem to be invited to construct their own version of religion that embraces their spirituality while little attention is paid 'to the linguistic and conceptual demands of the geneaologically (*sic*) rich traditions of religious systems, and the otherness that they embody' (2013: 226).
IX. The impression is often given that there is nothing to 'learn in the subject since everyone is entitled to his or her opinion'.
X. Responses by pupils to the question, 'Do you believe your school has helped you get along better with members of other religious groups?' showed that pupils in denominational (confessional) schools were 'significantly more likely' to respond positively than students in 'diverse schools'.
XI. Many of the current attempts to justify religious education at national levels serve to facilitate 'civil religion' imprinted with non-religious values.

These weaknesses focus on three main issues: representations of religion; critical issues about religion; and the social aims of religious education. All are issues that are relevant to religious education, wherever practised. The first issue is how faithful representations of religions in multi-faith religious education are to the religions, as they are affirmed and practised by 'adherents' in different contexts (see i – v above). The research shows that in many cases the beliefs of religions are assigned limited importance and when practices are described they are divorced from the beliefs that they are intended to express. There seems to be an embarrassment with the transcendent character of religion and the beliefs that give expression to it. What are the reasons? Beliefs about the supernatural presumably clash with the secular character of the age; as Charles Taylor (2007) has reminded us, we live in 'a secular age'. Teachers may also want to present a positive picture of religions to non-religious pupils and to tailor their presentations to what they adjudge to be the more accessible aspects of religion, such as the descriptive and historical aspects. The doctrinal aspects may be regarded as uninteresting and boring, and even irrelevant to the experiences and concerns of pupils. There is also the possibility that some teachers lack knowledge and understanding of the ever-expanding range of religions that they are encouraged by the Religious Education Council and other groups to teach pupils. Numerous reports have drawn attention to the low quality of teacher knowledge, with many non-specialists required because of a shortage of specialist teachers. In some universities in Britain one can be admitted to a one-year post-graduate course to teach religious education without any qualifications in religious studies or theology (Barnes and Thompson 2023).

Criticism can also be directed at the interpretation of religion that was foundational to the phenomenological approach and carried over into more recent forms of multi-faith religious education. True to its origins in Liberal theology (of which the phenomenology of religion is one version), phenomenological religious education often drew a sharp distinction between religious experience and religious doctrine, with the former regarded as the essence of religion and the latter as the inadequate translation of authentic experience into 'second-order' doctrines. What is important in religion lies beyond the domain of discursive reason. Accordingly, religious language is chiefly evocative rather than descriptive; it seeks to evoke ('ineffable') experience of the sacred rather than describe. This interpretation clearly diminishes the role and importance of religious doctrines and beliefs in religion and fails to appreciate the conditioning influence of religious beliefs over religious experience.

The second issue concerns the almost complete absence of a critical element in religious education (see vi-ix) What is meant by this? Pupils were rarely asked to consider the truth asserting nature of religious beliefs or to enquire how religious beliefs and practices could be justified, both from the perspective of the religious adherent or of the non-adherent. Teachers were reluctant to compare religions or to compare aspects of different religions. It may be that some teachers feel that attending to critical issues about religion invites controversy and controversy is to be avoided in the classroom or that they are not confident in conducting demanding and potentially emotive discussions, which their teacher training course ill-prepared them to conduct. The failure to address critical issues may reflect the continuing influence of certain forms of Liberal theology on religious education in which all religions are interpreted as capable of mediating an encounter with the divine, as in phenomenological religious education, and that a critical stance could undermine the empathy and insight needed to appreciate this. Presuming that all religions mediate some form of religious truth may foster either religious relativism (all are equally true) or, by way of reaction, all are equally false. It is also possible that some teachers equate criticism of religion, in the sense of criticism of other people's religion, as disrespectful; even though a plausible philosophical case has been made by Kant and others that respect relates to persons or individuals; it does not relate to beliefs and practices. Beliefs can be true or false, coherent or incoherent, interesting to some and uninteresting to others, and so on. The terms in which we evaluate religious beliefs and practices, in Wittgensteinian terms, belong to a different 'language game' to the terms in which we evaluate and relate to persons. A false understanding of the nature of respect again undermines the place and role of criticism in religious education. A place for criticism in the study of religions, however, does not entail that teachers in schools should seek to determine the attitude of pupils to religion, either positively or negatively. In a world where religious diversity is encountered in different forms, often on a daily basis, it is educationally responsible to provide pupils with the knowledge, understanding, and skills to make their own reflective (and probably differentiated) responses.

The third issue relates to the moral and social aims of religion (x and xi). Religious education has always aspired to do more than simply provide knowledge and understanding of religions and the religious life, though it seems plausible to conclude that to understanding and appreciate the religious life involves some level of engagement with religion is rquired, even if it is not possible to specify here what level of engagement is necessary or appropriate in different types of school. At its simplest, religious education aims to complement an understanding of religions with securing certain behavioural and attitudinal goals, both personal and social, on behalf of society. It is this that is often meant when religious educators refer to 'learning from religion', in contradistinction to 'learning about religion'. Others refer to the moral and social functions of religious education, and others think of the study of religions as contributing, in part, to values education or possibly to political education ('civics'). It would be interesting and pertinent to look more closely at these designations and to what they denote and whether they reveal a common understanding or whether different designations indicate contrasting interpretations of the moral and social aims of religious education. Space unfortunately forbids discussion of this, except to note that there is a tendency in some countries (and with the support of some religious educators) to increasingly 'domesticate' or 'instrumentalise' the role of religion in education: religious education is important because it serves aims extrinsic to religions (see Barnes 2022: 289-290). In my view religious educators need to be cognizant of the risk of conforming religious education

to the ideological aims of the nation state, that is, they need to beware of religion being used to further a political or moral agenda that misrepresents religious commitments and ideals or tries to shape these in ways that ultimately subvert or secularise them. Religious educators in Britain often seem oblivious to this danger and happily announce religion education's suitability to contribute to the shifting moral and political agenda of the state.

Point x also needs much fuller discussion than is possible here. For some it sounds counter-intuitive to report that in a questionnaire to pupils (which was part of the wide-ranging research project on which we are drawing) that was used to complement classroom observations, responses to the question, "Do you believe your school has helped you get along better with members of other religious groups?" showed that pupils in denominational (confessional) schools were 'significantly more likely' to respond positively than pupils in non-confessional, common schools. This finding feeds into a growing body of research that indicates that multi-faith religious education of the forms typically pursued in non-confessional schools make very little contribution to reducing religious bigotry and with developing respect for those with whom pupils differs religiously (see Barnes 2014: 19-22). The idea that multi-faith religious education *ipso facto* challenges and overcomes negative attitudes to 'the religious other' is not based on evidential findings—it is an educational myth! This obviously raises the question what forms of religious education do foster religious toleration and respect for others; this is a topic to wide-ranging and controversial to pursue here.

The purpose of this article was to look closely at post-confessional, multi-faith religious education in Britain, with a focus on weaknesses in both theory and classroom practice, rather than strengths. The strengths are well known, the weaknesses less so, hence our focus. Clearly our review shows that there are serious, historically extended weaknesses in British multi-faith religious education. This conclusion should not be interpreted as questioning the credibility and relevance of multi-faith religious education *per se*. What should be concluded on the basis of our review is that attention needs to be given by religious educators in Britain (and perhaps elsewhere) to developing more educationally defensible and credible versions that faithfully represent the nature of religions and relate to the interests and 'life-world' of pupils, while providing them with the knowledge, understanding and skills to live moral and socially positive lives in the context of religious diversity. Fifty years after the adoption of multi-faith religious education in British education, the challenge remains to develop a version that contributes to the realisation of the liberal aims of education in a pluralist, democratic society.

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