

What is Religious Education? An Examination and Critique of Current British Practice

ANNA STRHAN

Institute of Education, University of London

The following questions are examples taken from GCSE Religious Studies examinations (OCR and AQA syllabuses)¹:

‘God is not real.’ Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

‘Scientific theories about the origins of the universe prove there is no God’. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

‘God is more likely to be an impersonal force than a personal spirit’. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

‘A Christian life is a good life, but it is too strict for most people’. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

Religious Education is one of the fastest growing subjects in British schools, at both GCSE and A Level. These questions are from the ‘Philosophy and Ethics’ strand of the RE GCSE syllabus, by far the most popular option for both GCSE and A Level courses, and reflect the turn towards the use of critical thinking, philosophy of religion and ethics within the study of religion in British schools. Is there a God? Why is there suffering in the world? What is religious truth based on? These are the sorts of questions that the majority of young people will encounter when studying RE in secondary schools in Britain today. As a teacher of Religious Education, I feel increasingly uncomfortable at the way in which Religious Education specifications and resources thematize religion as the object of a type of critical thinking, whose truth or falsity can be described and known objectively through rational argumentation. In this paper, I will give an account of Religious Education in the British curriculum, with particular reference to the subject at GCSE and A Level. I will consider the rationale for the dominance of current ideologies of Religious Education and outline the conceptual problems underlying these.² I will then briefly consider how it might be possible to articulate the nature of what it is to be religious otherwise, drawing on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BRITAIN TODAY: A SNAPSHOT

Religious education, as taught in schools in Britain today, is a relatively new subject. As Linda Rudge writes:

RE was effectively created by teachers and other educators during the period between 1944 and 1988, and it was legally recognised and given its current name by the 1988 Education Reform Act . . . In thirty years, between 1945 and 1975, the subject changed (at different speeds in individual schools and regions) from semi-confessional religious instruction, usually based on Christian Bible study, through thematic approaches to social and ethical issues usually addressed from a Christian viewpoint, to a multifaith experience in which pupils became engaged in the phenomenological study of religion(s) (Rudge, 2008, p. 11).

RE is a compulsory subject in British schools, part of the basic curriculum (DfE 1994a, para. 20). Although there is no prescribed syllabus for RE, QCA (the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, formerly SCAA) has set out what schools should aim to achieve in Religious Education:

RE aims to help pupils to: acquire and develop knowledge and understanding of Christianity and other principal religions represented in Great Britain; develop an understanding of the influence of beliefs, values and traditions on individuals, communities, society and cultures; develop the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues with reference to principal religions represented in Great Britain; enhance their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; develop positive attitudes towards other people, respecting their right to hold different religious beliefs from their own, and towards living in a society of diverse religions (SCAA, 1994, p. 3).

Religious Education actively promotes the values of truth, justice, respect for all and care of the environment (QCA, 2004, p. 8).

All of these sound very worthy aims. Who would not want to see the values of ‘truth, justice and respect for all’ promoted? However, within schools, the emphasis has shifted profoundly towards the specific target of ‘developing the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues’. This has meant that philosophy of religion and ethics as areas of study have enjoyed a new found prominence within the school curriculum, with many religious education departments (my own included) re-branding themselves as departments of ‘Religion and Philosophy’ or ‘Philosophy, Ethics and Religion,’ and schools increasingly opting for philosophy of religion and ethics papers within the RE GCSE and A level. This has led to the increased popularity of the subject: it is the fastest growing subject in the curriculum at both GCSE and A level³ and students in my experience of teaching RE at a variety of schools clearly enjoy debating issues within philosophy of religion and contemporary moral issues. But the result of this shift is that students emerge from their religious education at school able to give a reasoned justification of whether or not there is a God, whether or not drugs should be legalized,

whether or not women should be allowed abortion on demand, but with very little awareness of the complex, rich and troubling histories and myths at the heart of religious traditions, and indeed, I would argue, a somewhat distorted picture of what 'being religious' means.

Why is it that the RE curriculum has moved in this direction? The answer to this lies with the history of religious education. Let us turn to examine the different aims of RE that have dominated the profession in Britain in recent years, and in particular the phenomenological and critical realist models that have been most prominent in recent years.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The move away from confessional religious education, or as it was often termed, 'religious instruction' began in the mid 1960s, with the rise of Religious Studies in universities, such as the establishment of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster in 1965, under the leadership of Ninian Smart. Smart set up a major research and curriculum development project on religious education in 1969, which was to be very influential on the way religious education has been taught in Britain since. The project pioneered what has become termed the 'phenomenological approach', which it described thus:

the aim of religious education [is] the promotion of understanding. It uses the tools of scholarship in order to enter into an empathetic experience of the faith of individuals and groups. It does not seek to promote any one religious viewpoint but it recognizes that the study of religion must transcend the purely informative (Schools Council, 1971, p. 21 quoted in Jackson, 1997, p. 8).

Whereas with the confessional model, the aim was a subtle indoctrination into Christianity, phenomenological religious education reacted strongly against this, so that six major world faiths were to be studied, and tolerance of difference and empathy replaced nurture into Christianity as the aim of religious education. The phenomenological model of religious education is dialogical in that it places importance on collaboration with religious communities in constructing curricula for study, and in the preparation of texts for analysis. As Robert Jackson, a prominent researcher of the phenomenological school describes:

A key element in a 'conversational' view of religious education is a clear acknowledgement that voices from inside the traditions . . . need to be taken very seriously . . . Members of religious groups and traditions are not simply 'objects of study', but are writers of resource material, pupils, colleagues, parents and others whose voices are relevant to the processes of education (Jackson, 1997, p. 134).

This emphasis on conversation in the phenomenological model is rooted in the ideal of interfaith dialogue. This is not surprising since Smart, the pioneer of this method in religious education, was also a researcher and practitioner of interfaith dialogue in the field of religious studies. His work in this field placed emphasis on tolerance and empathy.

However, there are problems with the phenomenological approach. Clearly tolerance and empathic understanding are desirable aims for religious education in many respects. But one might object to empathy as suggesting a transparency of the other person, the view that we could understand her and her religious lifeworld. Jackson himself questions whether empathy is possible, although he does retain it as a fundamental aim of RE:

The interpretive approach reveals how problematic empathy is, and how easy it is to convince ourselves that we have empathized with another when in reality we have not done so. Its method . . . provides a means to elucidate another's way of life. If the interpretive process is well done (with good technique *and* with sensitivity), then the student should have a clear understanding or interpretation. Whether or not empathy in its full sense can be achieved, an engagement with the process of interpretation is surely a necessary condition for it (p. 46).

While openness to the otherness of different religious traditions and ways of life is possible, and attempting to move towards the Other are valid aims, I would argue that we cannot see empathy as an aim, since it implies a problematic transparency of the other person: that I can make sense of them by bringing their otherness within the sphere of my own understanding.

Tolerance is perhaps more desirable as an aim. Levinas in writing of the question of tolerance in Judaism draws attention to the notion of tolerance as 'bearing the weight of others', an idea which can be traced to the etymology of the term in the Latin term 'tolerare', which implies bearing, or supporting, as well as suffering or enduring (Levinas, 1990, p. 173). The more common understanding of tolerance implies a sense of putting up with a belief or practice that you find disagreeable. This is more problematic, since it implies an attitude of superiority in the one who is tolerant, thus placing the self above the Other. Is this what we should be aiming for in Religious Education? On one level, tolerance clearly is desirable, and it would be a step forward if we could achieve a more tolerant society, yet greater clarification is needed on what tolerance means and how this could be promoted within RE. For example, tolerance perhaps implies a sense of separation and distinctness from the other who is tolerated, and thus its link to empathetic understanding as the two most important aims in the phenomenological model of RE seems problematic, since empathy implies transparency and bringing the other within the sphere of my own understanding. Yet, tolerance is not enough as an aim in itself.

A further aim of RE that can be linked to this phenomenological model is self-understanding. We can see this model in the work of John Hull, for example. He sees the interaction with the other as important as it provides us with contrast, and it is contrast that forms consciousness:

Consciousness depends on contrast. We know that we sleep because we awaken. Before the contrast there is the world of undifferentiated one-ness. At first the baby does not *have* a world; he or she *is* a world. This and that appear. Self and not-self emerge. There is a speech and a speaker, thought and thinker. We shall call this quality of thought its dialectical aspect (Hull, 1996, p. 99).

Hull contrasts non-dialectical models of RE, which he sees as leading to reification and fetishism, with dialectical models of RE, which lead to dialectical thinking, which is:

healthy because the mind is situated in a world. Not only does that keep thinking material, relative, and incarnate, but it retains the possibility that the relationship between mind and world will itself become an object of perception, thus making it possible to think about thinking (Ibid.).

I would tend to agree with Hull, that greater self-understanding is generally desirable within education, however, what self-understanding means, whether it is actually possible, and how it is achieved are rather more complex questions.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine fully the theorisation of the self within educational theory and practice, however, I would wish to raise the question of whether one should aim at understanding the self, or whether greater self-awareness is brought about often when one is not self-consciously seeking it: through attending to otherness we realise the gift of our own subjectivity as unique. In relation to RE specifically, it is my contention that it is not through seeking to examine my own beliefs in contrast with others that I will understand myself better, but through being fully attentive to the nature of a religious symbol, narrative or image, my own subjectivity is brought out in the way that I have been changed in the process of listening and responding, a response that is conditioned by the way that I have been situated through the social discourses that have formed me uniquely so that I stand in a particular relation to what I have heard. Thus, in a certain sense, RE might lead to self-understanding, but to prescribe this as an aim of the subject is rather more complicated and difficult than in Hull's model of the subject.

In recent years, the emphasis has shifted away from these models within the phenomenological school to the 'critical realist' model, which has led to the rise of philosophy of religion and ethics within the subject. To this let us now turn.

THE CRITICAL REALIST MODEL

The pioneer of the critical realist approach to RE is Andrew Wright, whose work since the early 1990s, beginning with 'Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy' (1993), has had a great influence in shifting the emphasis of the subject away from phenomenological approaches towards the evaluation of the truth claims of the different faiths traditions. Wright criticises the phenomenological approach, which he describes as 'liberal religious education' as leading to a relativization of the question of religious truth:

Liberal religious education has also perpetuated the *myth of the equality of religions*. . . The demand for neutrality meant that the truth claims of individual religions were seen as private issues that were not to be dealt with in the classroom, ignoring the reality that at the heart of each of the religions being dealt with lies a claim to the possession of the unique and ultimate truth about reality. Thus, in the classroom the demand for openness and neutrality became in reality a claim that each, in its own way, offers an equally valid path to truth. Yet this is precisely what the world's faiths, in their own self-understanding as opposed to the liberal interpretation, do not claim (Wright, 1993, p. 40).

Wright therefore advocates instead what he terms a 'critical realist' model of RE, in which students are enabled to critique different truth claims to evaluate autonomously and rationally the best way to live one's life, to question, as he writes, 'are the things that I am ultimately concerned about in harmony with the way reality ultimately is? Or am I living a life grounded in a false illusion?' (p. 45). He goes on to propose an agenda for RE, which has largely been taken up in British secondary schools:

[t]o enable our pupils to reach a depth of understanding of the moral and social dilemmas before humanity we must allow them to see what these dilemmas and questions look like in the light of the question of ultimate truth (Ibid.).

The aim, therefore, of this model of religious education that is so popular today is for each student to be able to evaluate for herself what Wright calls questions of 'ultimate truth', on a range of religious and ethical issues. He describes the importance of religious education according to the critical realist model thus:

Religious education: because we are given but one short life and the way we live it matters; because the ultimate questions matter; because religious and areligious truth matters; because the reality of ambiguity matters; because it matters if we are contented pigs or discontented philosophers; because it matters whether or not we are religiously literate; because the integrity of religious education raises issues that lie at the heart of what it means to be human, at the heart of society, at the heart of our environment, and at the heart of that which is ultimately true about reality (p. 106).

Wright describes religious education as 'essentially a pilgrimage towards the truth and meaning of our humanity and our universe' (p. 67). And so, because of this desire to enable students to be able to evaluate for themselves what constitutes ultimate truth, RE teachers spend much of their time teaching GCSE students to evaluate the various arguments that have been put forward by philosophers for and against the existence of God, the ethical debates surrounding such issues as abortion, voluntary euthanasia, genetic engineering, and organ transplants and students can present rational arguments to the sort of questions listed at the beginning of the paper, carefully supported by examples and evidence.

Within the critical realist model, students are expected to be able to evaluate contemporary ethical issues. Given the decline in the percentage of the population who are involved with organized religion, this might be linked to a desire on the part of religious educators and examining bodies to make the issues covered in religious education seem relevant to students' lives. Therefore, we have such topics in the GCSE syllabus as 'drug abuse' and 'the media.' The following are some example GCSE questions from the 'drug abuse' topic:

Give an outline of what the law says about 'soft' and 'hard' drugs. (5 marks)

How might the teachings of the religion you have studied affect the attitudes of believers towards drug taking in sport? (10 marks)

'Cigarettes come with a health warning. Alcohol and caffeine need one too'. How far do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. Refer to religious teachings in your answer. (5 marks)

Admittedly, it is of fundamental importance that students learn about the effects and debates surrounding drug abuse, and the media, but given that no religious tradition that I am aware of prioritizes the issue of performance-enhancing drugs in sport in its moral teachings, should it be a topic that we should devote time and attention to within Religious Education? It is my contention that trying to make the subject appealing through focusing on contemporary issues in this way has the effect of undermining the integrity of the subject, which should surely be more concerned with the meaning and complexity of religious traditions as they are practiced today.

At the heart of both the phenomenological and critical realist models is a desire to avoid the religious indoctrination of students. The phenomenological model was a movement against the confessional form of RE as religious instruction, in which students were taught about the Christian faith, rooted in study of the Bible, with the aim of instructing children in the Christian faith. The critical realist model also aims against this type of indoctrination, by enabling students to critique religious truth claims, but it also aims against the form of indoctrination that Wright sees in operation in the phenomenological approach: a liberal religious indoctrination that approaches all religions as reducible to a shared set of social structures, beliefs and practices, such as rites of passage and founding myths. Clearly, this desire to protect students against religious indoctrination is an important aim, however, it is my contention that the dominant critical realist model nevertheless might lead to a different and more subtle type of indoctrination into students seeing religious and ethical truths as matters open to straightforward evaluation and justification.

The markscheme for all A level essays in Religious Studies breaks assessment down into Assessment Objective 1—Knowledge and Understanding, and Assessment Objective 2—Critical and Contextual Skills as follows and this shows something of where the problem might lie⁴:

AO1	Students should be able to select and demonstrate clearly relevant knowledge and understanding through the use of evidence, examples and correct language and terminology, appropriate to the course of study.
AO2	Students should be able to critically evaluate and justify a point of view through the use of evidence and reasoned argument.

I do not wish to suggest that students should not learn to employ critical reasoning as part of their religious education, and indeed I would agree with Wright that some examination of the truth claims of the religions is useful to enable students to stand in critical engagement to the religious and non-religious traditions into which they have been raised. Yet the desire to enable students to realise what Wright sees as the 'ultimate truth', that can be grasped through rational argument, does not pay enough attention to the situatedness of the critical reasoner, to the fact that they stand within a certain epistemic community with its own assumptions. They must also learn to use other tools in their learning. As Grace Jantzen writes in her critique of the dominance of an

objective notion of critical reasoning in the philosophy of religion:⁵

Critical reason need not be replaced by a sardine can opener, but it could very beneficially be supplemented by (or indeed become a subsection of) a wider understanding of reason that includes sensitivity and attentiveness, well-trained intuition and discernment, creative imagination, and lateral as well as linear thinking (Jantzen, 1998, p. 69).

Furthermore, I would argue that the critical realist model might indoctrinate students into a distorted understanding of what it is to be religious. The centrality of the philosophy of religion within current religious education leads students to view being religious as believing that certain statements of knowledge are true. When GCSE students ask me in class whether or not I am religious, I find this in many ways a difficult question to give a straightforward answer to. Whilst I would identify myself as a Christian, I do not recognise myself or my own relation to the doctrines and practices of Christianity that are presented for examination and critique in the questions and materials written by examining boards for RE. My answer to students tends to be fairly hesitant and long-winded, starting: ‘Yes, although a very liberal Christian; I don’t believe in the God of Classical Theism that we’ve been studying . . .’. The examination specifications, that determine the content of the curriculum, tend to present religion in too simplistic terms as assent to certain religious propositions. So for example, students might read in a GCSE textbook:

If you belong to a religion, you are likely to say that your religion is true. It must be true for you, otherwise you would not believe in it. As you believe your religion to be true, you would probably go on to say that it possesses the truth . . . There are, however, many religions and most people believe that only one view can be right. This means that religions often make conflicting claims to the truth. Buddhism says there is no God. Other religions believe that God exists (Beck & Warden, 2002, p. 6).

As a discussion of the nature and meaning of religious truth, this is woefully inadequate and, furthermore, a picture of religious truth that many members of religious traditions would disagree with.

Religious Education as a subject of schools may be enjoying great popularity amongst students, but conceptually and ideologically, it is, I would argue, not fulfilling its potential. Indeed OFSTED,⁶ in its most recent report on the state of RE in British schools, has pointed out problems with the dominance of philosophy of religion and ethics within current RE teaching:

RE cannot ignore the social reality of religion. Most of the issues in the RE curriculum for secondary pupils have been about ethical or philosophical matters, such as arguments about the existence of God, or debates, from a religious perspective, about medical ethics or the environment. It has been unusual to find questions about religion’s role in society, changing patterns of religion in the local community, or the rise and decline of religious practice. It now needs to embrace the study of religion and society (OFSTED, 2007).

So what can and should be done?

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

In a recent sixth form lesson⁷, I asked students who were thinking of applying for Theology at university to write down and then discuss their understanding of what the subject involved. One of my students, himself a Christian, described Theology as, ‘the study of the transcendent and inarticulate Good, through examining how people from different religious traditions and faith communities have responded to and attempted to articulate this transcendent.’ In one sense, I would disagree with his definition of the subject, given that many students of theology at university are non-religious, and many do not believe there to be any ‘transcendent and inarticulate Good’, but I do think his definition of what the study of theology involves highlights the currently impoverished state of RE in contrast.

The problem perhaps lies with the disputed concept of ‘religion’ itself. While the phenomenological model is problematic in that it pays insufficient attention to the otherness and opacity of the object of study, and tends to domesticate and thematize all religions as broadly similar, the critical realist model distorts religion into a matter of true v. false knowledge (the question of what really is the ‘ultimate truth’, to use Andrew Wright’s terminology). Both imply a transparency of religion, either in terms of religious belief or in terms of its lifeworlds, that belies the true complexity of the nature of religious belief and practice, which as my student suggested, for those within religious traditions is founded on what is beyond articulation and, arguably, rational justification.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a theory of the nature of religion that could be used as a basis for clarifying the aims of religious education, and the very attempt to give a definition of religion is itself contested, with interpreters of religion offering variously lexical, empirical and stipulative theories of religion. Thomas Tweed argues that it is the duty of scholars of religion to attempt a working definition of their subject of study, but he highlights the lack of agreement amongst sociologists of religion as to the nature of religion:

‘It was once a tactic of students of religion’, Jonathan Z. Smith argued . . . , ‘to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba’s *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task’. But the task is not hopeless, just demanding (Tweed, 2006, p. 41).

I do not propose to attempt such a demanding task in the remainder of this paper, but wish rather to provide a very brief sketch of the way that Levinas and Žižek describe religion, as their understandings of the nature of religion provide a stark contrast and challenge to the implicit theorisations of religion at the heart of the currently dominant models of RE we have considered.

In his essay on Franz Rosenzweig in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas describes religion as follows:

Religion, before being a confession, is the very pulsation of life in which God enters into a relationship with Man, and Man with the World. Religion, like the web of life, is anterior to the philosopher’s totality.

Life or religion is simultaneously posterior and anterior to philosophy and reason, reason itself appearing as a moment in life. I insist on this fact: unity is not here the formal unity of God, Man

and the World, which would be produced beneath the gaze that adds something even as it reduces, through the synthetic thought of a philosopher who remains outside the elements (Levinas, 1990, p. 189).

In a sense then, for Levinas, religion is concerned with ultimate truth, but this is a very different notion of ultimate truth than the idea of a truth we might glimpse through rational argument at the heart of the critical realist model of RE. For Levinas, religion concerns the transcendent in ‘relationship with Man, and Man with the World.’ This notion of a transcendent, as Levinas insists, does not fall within the philosopher’s totality, and therefore the attempt to study religion through critical evaluation in order to determine its truth or falsity, would appear nonsensical. We have seen how examination specifications in RE are much preoccupied with attempts to prove or disprove God’s existence. Yet this is to miss the very nature of religion, as emphasised by Levinas. Adriaan Peperzak puts this point well:

We must understand that God is neither a phenomenon nor a being, and that neither God nor human subjectivity, freedom nor speaking can be understood as themes or topics of thematization. They precede any possible logic, as not only Levinas, but the entire tradition of Western onto-theology knew. A God that could be proven would certainly not be Godly enough to be ‘*Il*’. He would fit our categories—and thus, perhaps, give us satisfaction—but this would disqualify him from being God (Peperzak, 1997, p. 107).

This is, emphatically, *not* to say that reason is not important in the study of religion—according to Levinas, reason appears *within* religion—yet reason can never be separated from what is prior to reason.

In ‘God and Philosophy,’ Levinas suggests that God is what bursts open the ‘omnipotence of the *logos*, of the *logos* of system and simultaneity’ and instead manifests ‘transcendence as signification, and signification as the signification of an order given to subjectivity before any statement: a pure one-for-the-other’ (Levinas, 1986/1998, p. 78). Levinas makes it clear that God cannot be thematized and indeed is revealed as what could never be brought to presence in language in illeity. The term illeity, as Michael B. Smith points out, is linked to the Latin demonstrative *ille, illa, illud* and as with this pronoun, designates something present, but at a distance. Smith suggests that this term is then used by Levinas in contrast with the notion of reciprocity in a dialogical relationship:

The dialogical relationship brings with it elements that make it an inadequate structure for transcendence because of the reciprocity and eventual play of gratitude and psychological interplay to which both parties of the dialogue are open. The otherness of the other person is preserved and his or her stature as ‘greater than myself’ safeguarded only if the face of the other is “*in the trace*” of illeity (Smith, 2005, p. 89).

Illeity, as used by Levinas, is the refusal of reciprocity and totalitization and means that slipping into a relation of equality is impossible, which means that neither I, nor my neighbour, nor the third party, can be reduced to essence or identity. Levinas uses theological terms to signify the

grace and transcendence bound up in the concept of illeity:

This saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness. This way for the order to come from I know not where, this coming that is not a recalling, is not the return of a present modified or aged into a past, me unbeknownst to myself, 'slipping into me like a thief', we have called *illeity* . . . The word God is an overwhelming semantic event that subdues the subversion worked by illeity (Levinas, 1981/2004, pp. 150–151).

Illeity is what allows the word God to be said, without allowing it to be thematized:

Illeity overflows both cognition and the enigma through which the Infinite leaves a trace in cognition. Its distance from a theme, its reclusion, its holiness, is not its way to effect its being, . . . but its glory, quite different from being and knowing. It makes the word God be pronounced . . . It is non-thematizable (p. 162).

Religion ultimately, for Levinas, is to respond to the need of my neighbour who approaches me yet remains ultimately unknowable in illeity, bearing the trace of God in the appeal they present to me to respond to their address. This is in some senses not so far from my sixth form student's implicit understanding of religion in his description of theology as the study of 'the transcendent and inarticulate Good'. This notion of religion is ethical at its core and as such cannot be reduced to knowledge:

Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision (Levinas, 1990, p. 17).

The ethical order does not prepare us for the Divinity; it is the very accession to the Divinity. All the rest is a dream (p. 102).

Žižek's theorization of religious belief also emphasises that it cannot be reduced to knowledge. In a recent book on Lacan, he suggests that it is characteristic of both religious fundamentalists and religious sceptics to reduce religious truths to knowledge:

For both liberal cynics and religious fundamentalists, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept them as such, while sceptical cynics mock them (Žižek, 2006, p. 117).

But this view, for Žižek misses the groundless nature of belief, and in particular religious belief. Belief is about commitment and ethical to its core, an ethics that cannot be reduced to or justified in terms of knowledge:

A fundamentalist does not believe, he knows it directly. Both liberal-sceptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge. Think of Anne

Frank . . . in a true act of *credo quia absurdum*, asserted her belief that there is a divine spark of goodness in every human being, no matter how depraved he or she is. This statement does not concern facts, it is posited as a pure ethical axiom . . . At its most fundamental, authentic belief does not concern facts, but gives expression to an unconditional ethical commitment (Ibid.).

Current models of RE, assessing students ability to present a reasoned and justified evaluation of religion are then missing the point, and indeed encouraging a polarization between ‘liberal-sceptical cynics’, in the model of Richard Dawkins, perhaps, and more conservative or fundamentalist forms of religion, who do see religion as something that can be known.

Given these significant alternative theorisations of the nature of religion, challenging the way that RE is taught in Britain, is it possible to say what religious education is, or rather, what it should be today? Perhaps surprisingly, the recent OFSTED report on RE in Britain offers some clues as to a possible way forward:

RE cannot ignore its role in fostering community cohesion and in educating for diversity. This goal has never been far from good RE teaching but the current changes in society give this renewed urgency. Pupils have opinions, attitudes, feelings, prejudices and stereotypes. Developing respect for the commitments of others while retaining the right to question, criticise and evaluate different viewpoints is not just an academic exercise: it involves creating opportunities for children and young people to meet those with different viewpoints. They need to grasp how powerful religion is in people’s lives. RE should engage pupils’ feelings and emotions, as well as their intellect (OFSTED, 2007).

Andrew Wright criticized the phenomenological model of RE as a benign form of social engineering (Wright, 1993, p.41), and it is true that the phenomenological model did oversimplify the diversity and ambiguity of many religious traditions. The critical realist approach was keen to enable students to evaluate and critique the religious truth claims of the major world religions. However, this is arguably at the expense of fostering community cohesion. An understanding of religion as founded on an ethical sensibility that is irreducible to knowledge, as both Levinas and Žižek suggest, provides a conceptual framework to support these recommendations of the OFSTED report, or at the very least, provide an alternative that might balance the dominance of the instrumental approach to rationality in the critical realist model.

There is an urgent need for work to be done to tidy up the conceptual confusion about what the study of religion should involve in British schools and why it is so important, given the rise of religious fundamentalisms in Britain and elsewhere. As OFSTED suggests, students need to meet those with different viewpoints, to engage with them in a dialogue of openness in order to work together for community cohesion. The school where I teach has students from predominantly secular liberal and Christian backgrounds, with a sizeable minority of Jewish, Muslim and Hindu students. Last term in my school, we invited a number of girls from a Muslim school in East London to spend the day with students at our school studying Religious Studies, in order for them to be able to compare their experiences of studying religion, and to discuss the different ways in which religion impacts on their experiences of being teenagers in London. This

was the first time that this had happened in our school, and such experiences are comparatively rare. But it provided a valuable opportunity to meet and engage with those from a very different background, and for our students, from largely secular households, it provided an invaluable insight into what it might be like to live as a teenager whose religious identity is very important to them. I do not wish to suggest that students should not study philosophy of religion and ethics. Indeed, I would wish to see philosophy established as a discrete subject of study alongside religious education on the curriculum. However, the true complexity of the social reality of religion is something that must be prioritized within religious education, in a way that is not supported by the current framework. Indeed, as the OFSTED report tells of the need to encourage respect for others, we might extend this to speak of the need to teach ‘a religion for adults’ (Levinas, 1990) in the sense that Levinas describes, a religion of humanity that ‘does not mystify the notion of the divine; it realizes that the language of God arises for us when we are aware of our responsibility to others and of the demands of justice’ (Morgan, 2007, p. 345). It is true that not all members of religious traditions would agree with this: as Žižek comments, it is a trait of fundamentalism to see religious truth as knowledge that can be argued for and justified, the message spread to others. But it is vital that religious education also presents a picture of religion otherwise, a religion for adults.

NOTES

1. GCSE exams are taken by students in Britain aged 16 and A Level exams are taken when students are 18 years old.
2. Religious Education does not exist as a formal subject discipline within Japanese schools, except within some private schools, however Ethics/Morality is taught. Moreover there is a concern for the development of morality and spirituality within Japanese education, under the movement termed the ‘Education of the Heart’ which seems to lie within a rather different register from either Religious Education, or spiritual and moral education within British schooling. Furthermore, the place of religion itself is different in Japan compared to Britain, with there being some disagreement about what might constitute ‘religion’. I would be interested to find out the extent to which religious teachings are taught within Moral Education classes? How does this compare with what happens in Religious Studies in British schools?
3. See <http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-05-2176-re-report.pdf>
4. Source QCA/06/2863
5. An approach exemplified in current prominent philosophers of religion, such as Richard Swinburne and Brian Davies.
6. OFSTED is the official government body for inspecting schools in Britain.
7. Sixth form students are aged 16-18. This particular student is 16 years old.

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