

A Brief Response to Nobuhiko Itani and Tatsuya Ishizaki's Papers

ANNA STRHAN

Institute of Education, University of London

Nobuhiko Itani and Tatsuya Ishizaki have both raised important theoretical, methodological and practical questions in response to my paper, and I am grateful for the opportunity to think through some of the implications of these. I agree with Itani that within education, it is difficult to plan for any kind of experience of alterity, because of the way that the structure of schooling and emphasis on assessable outcomes encourages an attitude of mastery in the student that might frustrate the possibility of any kind of meeting with the Other. Itani is therefore right to question how it would be possible to plan engagements with those of different religious traditions 'without spoiling the opacity and illeity of the Other'. Related to this, he questions whether the experience in my school of inviting those from different religious traditions to meet our own students leads to an instrumentalised version of the meeting with the Other, that therefore inhibits any such meeting *a priori*. In a sense, I think Itani's point is very salient: it is not possible to plan for a meeting with otherness, and when students meet those of different religious backgrounds, it is not possible to prevent the students contextualising each other and thus covering over difference. I do however think that such experiences enable students to see how religiosity is not just a matter of belief, but is constitutive of the values and identity of many within British society. Enabling students to talk about how their religious identities impact upon their experience of being teenagers in London therefore challenges the hegemony of religious education within the critical realist model of religion being primarily a matter of cognitive belief. I also think that the presence of the students for each other, their corporeal vulnerability in front of each other did make a difference to the encounter: I doubt that my students saw the students they were meeting as just transparent objects of study.

Itani raises the important question of 'what it means in religious education to be aware of the opacity and the otherness of religions'. Clearly, it is impossible to give a precise definition of what the otherness of religions might mean, since this would be already to bring them within the sphere of one's own understanding. In his excellent study of Levinas, Michael Morgan suggests that one might see Levinas's writing as offering us a different perspective on the way that we relate to things, so that instead of understanding everything within the realm of the same, alterity is revealed, which is worth quoting at length:

According to this view, all that is included in the notion of the same are the typical, regularly accepted, and even mythologized perspectives that we take on things and people in the world. The things called 'the other' are not new entities as much as they are or represent unnoticed or repressed perspectives, dimensions, or aspects of the world as we already experience and think

about it. The divine, on this reading, represents a perspective on nature—say, that it is dependent or ordered, that we might regularly ignore, but that, with greater attention and direction, we might better notice and appreciate. Just as intellectualist approaches to knowledge neglect or distort our emotional lives, for example, recognition of the role of institutions and practices would open up a social perspective that tended to be ignored or reduced to a kind of individual construction. On this account, the other calls upon us to see things as we had not seen before, so to speak, although even to speak of “seeing” might at best be a metaphor (Morgan, 2007, pp. 89–90).

It is in this sense that we might see the alterity of religious traditions, texts, rituals and myths. Rather than following the intellectualist critique of critical realism, religious education should avoid the attitude of mastery that such approaches lead to and instead encourage a sense of the infinitude of the subjects of study: that the meaning of a religious text, or a philosophical text for that matter, can never be exhausted.

In response to Ishizaki’s question about whether religious education should have similar teaching methods to other subject disciplines, I suggest that an attitude of attentiveness to the subjects of study, leading students to recognise that there is a depth to religious traditions that can never be plumbed, just as in a great work of literature, would perhaps be reflective of this alternate perspective that Levinas leads us towards. This might be distinguished from a Gadamerian ‘fusion of horizons’, in the sense that in a Levinasian mode, the challenge is to see that what we relate to in our study of religions is never something we can fully meet, even as we move towards it in our understanding. There are, therefore, clear similarities between the kind of religious education that I am advocating and the way that literature and arts subjects cultivate aesthetic sensibilities. There are also clear overlaps with the study of history. This relates to the question that Itani raises about how we might need to reconsider the methodology of curriculum construction, which at present is dominated by the concepts of planning, thematization and evaluation. Whilst I would not necessarily suggest that formal education could operate without these concepts, the challenge of Levinas is to open up a space for a kind of absorption with texts, traditions and rituals, for example in religious education, that resists easy assessment and planning.

The possibility of persuading my colleagues and other professionals within religious education of the importance of opening up such a space might depend on such practices being seen as already taken place within religious education when practised well, and enriching what already takes place within the currently impoverished framework. It is, I suggest, of great importance to show that the sort of religious education that Levinasian thinking might lead us towards is possible, even if always utopian and at present rare. My sense that there is something wrong with the current model of religious education arises from experience, rather than rational argument: witnessing the spaces that religion occupies within public and private spaces and then considering the ways in which it is theorised within religious education has convinced me that students are not presently enabled by the current exam specifications to understand the complex and different ways in which understanding religion is an important aspect of understanding society or to understand the way in which different religious traditions play an important role in the formation of many individuals’ lives. It is interesting that Ishizaki’s experience of moral

education within Japanese education testifies to a similar feeling of unease, and that he feels that an understanding of ethics after Levinas likewise interrupts the narrow frameworks of rational assessment operative within both systems of education. I therefore agree with him, that the challenge of Levinas is to consider the possibility of a new mode of speaking and listening in our educational daily life, which might maintain a 'tense relation to public education, without being subsumed within such frameworks', but rather serving to expose the limitations of the way that current frameworks can serve to frustrate their very purpose by stifling thought through their excessive focus on assessment, critique, evaluation and performance.

REFERENCE

Morgan, M. (2007) *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).