DEVELOPMENTS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ENGLAND AND WALES (PART 2): METHODOLOGY, POLITICS, CITIZENSHIP AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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In this the second of two articles on developments in religious education in England and Wales, we focus chiefly on the subject of methodology, and then conclude by reviewing some of the policies relevant to religious education initiated by the current labour government.

Methodological Approaches to Religious Education

The discrediting of confessional religious education in state maintained schools during the late 1960s and early 1970s (for the reasons set out in Part 1) initiated a continuing debate. It is not a debate, however, on the aims and purpose of religious education, as one might have anticipated, for on these there quickly emerged a broad measure of agreement; namely

one: religious education should acquaint pupils with the knowledge and skills to understand religion;

two: religious education should equip pupils with the skills and procedures to assess religion and to respond individually to it; and finally,

three: religious education should contribute to the well-being of society by fostering social harmony and by helping to overcome religious prejudice and discrimination.[1]

The first aim is broadly intellectual, learning *about* religion, the second personal, learning *from* religion, and the third social, appreciating and developing religion's positive contribution to society. The subsequent debate in religious education has centred not on the aims appropriate to the subject but on how the appropriate aims of the subject are to be realised in the classroom. What is it to *understand* a religion? How is *religious* understanding

[1] Gaynor Pollard, 'A Rationale for Religious Education', in William K. Kay and Leslie J Francis (eds), *Religion in Education: 1* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), 223–51, particularly, 231–39.

best effected in the classroom? What does it mean to evaluate religion and how does this relate to one's self-evaluation? What contribution can religious education make to advancing tolerance in society? Different answers to these questions and varying degrees of emphasis upon the three aims have resulted in a number of distinctive methodological approaches to religious education. In this section we will consider three different approaches, and assess their strengths and weaknesses. Our focus will be on the intellectual and scholarly sources of the respective positions, rather than on classroom textbooks and materials, though some reference will be made to them.

The Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach to religious education first came to prominence in British education during the late 1960s and early 1970s chiefly (but not exclusively)[2] through the work and influence of Ninian Smart. In a number of books and articles Professor Smart argued that religious education should eschew confessional aims and instead model itself upon the emerging university discipline of religious studies.[3] In his view attention to the logic of religion, reinforced by recognition both of the increasingly secular nature of society and of the need for neutrality in public institutions, justified a 'non-dogmatic', phenomenological approach to religious education. The student of religion, Smart contended, should be acquainted with the multi-dimensional nature of religion as exemplified across a range of religions.[4] Semi-official support for Smart's position was signalled by his appointment in 1969 to the Directorship of the Schools Council Secondary Project on Religious Education.[5] The Working Paper produced under his direction, *Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (1971),[6] unsurprisingly concluded that the phenomenological approach was the approach best suited to the promotion of religious (emphatic) understanding

[2] The Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education also did much to promote the study of world religions in schools through its conferences and publications; see Terence Copley, *Teaching Religion: Fifty Years of Religious Education in England and Wales* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 88.

[3] The fullest and most influential expression of Smart's position is *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968). L. Philip Barnes is currently working on an article tentatively entitled 'Secularisation, Pluralism, and the Logic of Religion: Ninian Smart and the Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education'.

[4] Smart identified six different dimensions of religion in *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*: the doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential and the social. These dimensions were elaborated in numerous works throughout the late nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies; see *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (London: Collins Fontana, 1969) and *The Phenomenon of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1973). In later writings Smart identified a further material dimension, see *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[5] See Duncan MacPherson, 'Schools Council' in John M. Sutcliffe (ed.), *A Dictionary of Religious Education* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 308–309.

[6] London: Evans/Methuen Educational, 1971.

in a pluralist, multi-belief society.[7] Its descriptive nature and its neutral stance towards the truth of religion were believed to distance teachers effectively from the charge of indoctrination, while simultaneously securing for the disciple of religious education a fully educational foundation.[8]

The roots of the phenomenological approach to the study of religion go back to nineteenth century attempts to describe and classify religious beliefs and practices rather than to interpret or assess them from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy.[9] A neutral stance towards non-Christian religions, beliefs and customs became an essential ingredient in the evolution of the discipline, and in the hands of Gerardus van der Leeuw, one of the twentieth century's leading phenomenologists of religion, became a methodological principle with definite philosophical connotations.[10] According to van der Leeuw, when attending to religious phenomena all prior beliefs, commitments and value-judgements should be bracketed out or suspended. His use of the term *epoche* to describe this process betrayed his indebtedness to the philosopher Husserl, who advocated an act of *epoche* or suspension as a means of gaining direct knowledge of reality. Van der Leeuw also adapted to his own use Husserl's notion of *eidetic* vision (from *to eidos*, 'that which is seen', thus form, shape, essence), the capacity to grasp the 'essence' of experience, so by extension the capacity to grasp the essence of religious phenomena by means of empathy and intuition. This two-fold hermeneutical process, or two-fold 'reduction' (Husserl) became central to the discipline. First, attention is given to the religious phenomenon under discussion with all prior beliefs and assumptions suspended, then in this focused state, the observer enters into the thought world of religion and intuits the meaning of the experience for the believer.[11]

The influence of a phenomenological (or 'multi-faith') religious education increased steadily throughout the 1970s and early 80s. Its principles were enshrined in numerous textbooks, Agreed Syllabuses and Local Education Authority handbooks. In 1985 an official Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups,

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7 *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools*, 21–28. A sympathetic summary of Smart's position and Working Paper 36 are to be found in Dennis Bates, 'Christianity, culture and other religions' (Part 2): F.H. Hilliard, Ninian Smart and the 1988 Education Reform Act', *British Journal of Religious Education* 18 (1996), 85–102.

8 Terence Copley, *Teaching Religion*, 100–105 and 188–90.

9 L. Philip Barnes, 'What is Wrong with the Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education?' *Religious Education* (in press), and L. Philip Barmes, 'Ideology, the Phenomenological Approach, and Hermeneutics: A Reply to Professor Lovat', *Religious Education* (in press).

10 Hans Penner, *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 40–66.

11 Eric J. Sharpe, 'The Phenomenology of Religion', *Learning for Living* 15 (1975), 4–9; Michael Grimmitt's *What Can I do in RE?* (Great Wakering: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1973). These two publications did much to mediate the specialist vocabulary and procedures of the phenomenology of religion to the wider educational community.

chaired by Lord Swann, concluded that the phenomenological approach to religious education provided the

> *best and only means of enabling all pupils, from whatever religious background, to understand the nature of religious belief, the religious dimension of human experience and the plurality of faiths in contemporary Britain.*[12]

The Inquiry also concluded that the phenomenological approach was an ideal vehicle for advancing tolerance and harmony between different religious groups and communities.[13]

With hindsight it is now obvious that Swann's endorsement of phenomenological religious education represented the nadir of its influence in Britain. Even at the time of the Inquiry's publication important criticisms had already been raised and discussed in the professional literature.[14] In the intervening years these criticisms have been deepened and extended.[15] They can be briefly summarised.

One: The phenomenological approach focuses on the observable phenomena of religion and the external actions of religious believers to the neglect of the spiritual and experiential dimension that provides the motivation and stimulus for religious belief and practice.

Two: There is a failure to address the issue of religious truth or to grapple with the reasons for and against religious commitment even though all pupils are confronted by such questions.

Three: A neutral or non-judgemental stance to religion encourages either religious relativism, the belief that religious truth is relative to one's culture, or religious indifference and scepticism.

Four: The juxtaposition of material from different religions on common themes confuses pupils and contributes to superficial learning.[16]

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[12] *Education for All: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* (London: HMSO, 1985), 518.

[13] *Ibid.*, 469; cf. Basil Singh, 'The Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education', *Churchman* 100 (1986), 231–48.

[14] Daniel W. Hardy, 'Teaching Religion: A Theological Critique', *Learning for Living* 15 (1975), 10–16; *idem.*, 'The Implications of Pluralism for Religious Education' *Learning for Living* 16 (1976), pp 55–62; Edward Hulmes, *Neutrality and Commitment in Religious Education* (London: Chapman, 1979).

[15] William K. Kay, 'Phenomenology, Religious Education, and Piaget', *Religion* 27 (1997), 275–83; Nicola Slee, 'Conflict and Reconciliation Between Competing Models of Religious Education: Some Reflections on the British Scene', *British Journal of Religious Education* 11 (1989), 126–35; Andrew Wright, *Religious Education in the Secondary School* (London: David Fulton Publishing, 1993), 39–41; Brenda Watson, *The Effective Teaching of Religious Education* (London: Longman, 1993), 44–6; see also note 9.

[16] This subject has been much debated by religious educationalists with inconclusive results, chiefly because until recently there was little empirical evidence of the effects of thematic teaching on classroom learning and experience; see Roger Homan and Lorraine King, 'Mishmash

Five: The subject matter does not relate to the interests and experiences of pupils. Basically there is insufficient engagement with the pupils' questions, concerns and values.[17]

Other criticisms could be added, but enough has been said to indicate growing professional disquiet regarding phenomenological religious education's appropriateness and viability. Judged against the generally accepted aims of the subject that we noted at the beginning of this section it enjoys only limited endorsement. A phenomenological approach does facilitate pupils gaining knowledge and understanding of religion, but to what degree and at what depth are matters of concern. More serious still is the accusation that phenomenological religious education neither equips pupils with the skills and procedures to assess religion nor engages pupils' interests and concerns. The phenomenological approach fails to convey the relevance and challenge of religion to personal and social issues. Consequently, a context is created where pupils learn little from religion. Finally, although it is frequently asserted that the phenomenological approach is ideally suited to advancing tolerance and mutual understanding in a multiracial society such as Britain, there is little evidence to substantiate such an assertion. We cannot safely assume that acquiring information about different religions lessens religious and ethnic discrimination.[18]

The Experiential Approach

Although Harold Lukes and Douglas Hubrey, writing in the 1960s, stressed the importance of utilising pupils' experience as a bridge to understanding religion,[19] the roots of current interest in the experiential approach to religious education look back to the pioneering research of Sir Alister Hardy, a distinguished Oxford zoologist, into the nature and forms of spiritual and religious experience. Hardy believed that religious experience evolved through the process of natural selection because of its survival value for the individual. In his 1965 Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen, published as *The Divine Flame: An Essay Towards a Natural History of Religion*,[20] he argued that there is a form of awareness, different from and transcending everyday awareness,

and its Effects upon Learning in the Primary School', *British Journal of Religious Education* 15 (1993) 8–13. However, the results of a broadly based research project into this issue by D. Linnet Smith and William K. Kay give empirical support to the accusation that theme teaching across a range of religion contributes to pupil confusion and misunderstanding, see Smith and Kay, 'Religious Terms and Attitudes in the Classroom, Part 1 and Part 2', *British Journal of Religious Education* (in press).

17 Robert Jackson, *Religious Education: an interpretive approach* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) 10.

18 Patricia Malone, 'Religious Education and Prejudice among Students Taking the Course Studies of Religion', *British Journal of Religious Education* 21 (1998), 7–19.

19 Harold Loukes, *Teenage Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1961); Douglas Hubrey, *The Experiential Approach to Christian Education* (London: National Sunday School Union, 1960).

20 London: Collins, 1966.

which is potentially present in all human beings and which plays a positive function in helping individuals to survive in their natural environment. This transcendent awareness, Hardy contended, is the common experiential source of religion. The difference between religions is to be explained by the diversity and range of human cultures through which the same spiritual awareness comes to expression. Accordingly, spirituality is not the exclusive property of any one religion, or for that matter of religion in general. Those who are alienated from religion and traditional religious language may well express their spiritual awareness in unconventional or even secular terms.

Hardy believed that recognition of the widespread occurrence and the distinctive nature of spiritual experience supported his interpretation of the utility of religion, and he devoted the energies and commitment of his later years, following official retirement, to setting up the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford and to the collection and recording of first-hand evidence of religious experience.[21] This work was carried on after his death, first by Edwin Robinson,[22] at the renamed Alister Hardy Research Centre, and then by David Hay.[23] Under Robinson's direction the Centre's research and publications began to focus more explicitly on the occurrence and significance of childhood religious experiences and their implications for education.[24] This orientation was further developed by David Hay, who headed a research project into religious experience and education at the University of Nottingham. The culmination of this project was the publication in 1990 of *New Methods in RE Teaching: An Experiential Approach.*[25]

The experiential approach's focus on religious experience is frequently presented as a reaction and necessary corrective to phenomenological religious education's over-concentration upon the external, public phenomena of religion. There is some truth in this interpretation, but the contrast between the two approaches should not be drawn too sharply. This is because Hay and his team of collaborators believe the experiential approach actually expresses and recovers the original form of phenomenological religious education as envisaged by Ninian Smart and as commended by Working Paper 36.[26] In the opinion of Hay *et al.*, phenomenological religious education has been misrepresented and misinterpreted by religious educationalists and by popular classroom textbooks.

[21] T. Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977); Hardy draws on this research in *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

[22] Edwin Robinson, *The Original Vision* (Oxford: Religious Experience Research Unit, 1977).

[23] David Hay, *Exploring Inner Space: Scientists and Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) and David Hay, *Religious Experience Today: Exploring the Facts* (London: Mowbray, 1990).

[24] E.g., Edwin Robinson, 'Experience and Authority in Religious Education', *Religious Education* 74 (1976), 451–63.

[25] Harlow: Oliver & Boyd, 1990.

[26] Hay et al., *New Methods in RE*, 6 and 198.

As originally conceived (and as already noted) the phenomenological approach involved two distinguishable hermeneutical steps, that of suspending critical judgement in attending to religious phenomena and then an act of intuitive awareness, laying bear the essence of the believer's experience. This approach, Hay et al. allege, as it came to be practised and taught in schools involved only the first step – a neutral or objective presentation of religious phenomena; with no attempt, as a necessary second step, to go beyond descriptions of religious phenomena to discover the essence of religion in immediate experience. The experiential approach aims to correct this deficiency by providing resources and ideas that enable pupils to enter their 'own and other's personal worlds' and in this way to uncover the experiential roots of religion and spirituality within the self.[27] Through self-awareness exercises, guided meditations, and visualisations pupils are taught to explore their own subjective states, and then to use these as a creative resource to gain an appreciation of the nature of spiritual experience and of the way different cultural and religious metaphors can be used to express deep emotions, feelings, and experiences.[28]

There are strengths in the experiential approach to religious education and in its extension to include the subject of spirituality across the curriculum: the pupil's own experiences are taken seriously; the importance of personal experience in religion and personal learning are stressed; there is an unmasking of secular influences in education and the way in which religion and spirituality have been marginalised; and a word of caution is sounded against content dominated and unduly academic curriculum programmes or syllabuses. But there are also serious weaknesses and deficiencies.

A number of critics have pointed out that the experiential approach is only loosely related to religion.[29] Its focus is more on personal experience and self-awareness than religion. The social and corporate dimensions of religion are largely ignored and the false impression is given that the religious believer constructs religion out of his or her immediate experience. This diminishes the role of sacred writings and religious authorities and the way in which they structure and condition experience. The deliberate cultivation of

[27] Ibid, 6.

[28] The experiential approach has obvious applications beyond the discipline of religious education. Its focus upon personal experience and subjectivity, coupled with the underlying assumption that religious sensibility is a natural element of human experience, clearly opens up possibilities for other curriculum subjects like English, Music or Art to explore. This potential has been recognised by David Hay (one of the authors and the director of the project that produced *New Methods in RE Teaching: An Experiential Approach*) and he has recently, with the publication of *The Spirit of the Child* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), extended his work to incorporate the issue of spirituality across the curriculum, a subject which, as we noted in Part 1, has come to the fore in educational discussion since the 1988 Education Reform Act.

[29] Clive Erricker, 'Affective and Effective Religious Education; A reflection on the work of David Hay and his curriculum colleagues', *Resource* 14 (1991), 3–4.

spiritual or religious experience in the classroom also raises questions. Is every pupil capable of religious experience? Are the kinds of experience gained as a result of guided meditations or self-awareness exercises genuinely *religious* experiences? Are they even analogous to religious experiences? More seriously, is it legitimate to self-consciously pursue (presumed) religious or spiritual experiences in the classroom? Is this a covert form of religious indoctrination?

Some writers maintain that the phenomenological and the experiential approaches complement each other: the weaknesses of one are overcome by the strengths of the other and vice versa; the two together providing a balanced picture of religion.[30] There may be some truth in this, but in our view any simple marriage of the two approaches would do little to diminish the force of many of the criticisms we have already discussed. In fact, at the very point where the experiential approach is most frequently regarded as providing a corrective to phenomenological religious education, that is, where it exalts the importance of religious experience, it is arguably most vulnerable to criticism. A careful reading of the chief text of experiential religious education, *New Methods in RE Teaching: An Experiential Approach*, reveals a number of disquieting assumptions: one, that religious/spiritual experience has priority over its conceptual interpretation; and two, that the same spiritual experience can be expressed in a variety of different theological and cultural languages. Such assumptions lie behind experiential religious education's endeavour to effect religious experiences by self-awareness and meditation exercises. However, in the light of recent work in the philosophy of language and mind, largely prompted by Wittgenstein's later philosophical writings and his celebrated 'Private-language argument',[31] these assumptions are at least controversial and at most incoherent.[32] Space forbids a discussion of these admittedly complex matters. In this context we may simply record that the weight of philosophical opinion seems to support the view that beliefs condition experience and that our conceptual beliefs provide the framework within which all experience occurs. If this is the case then the experiential approach, as it has come to be interpreted and implemented, is deeply flawed.[33] An appreciation of religious beliefs and doctrines provides the necessary preliminary context for an understanding of the

[30] Mark Chater, 'Different Approaches to Religious Education', in William K. Kay and Leslie J. Francis (eds), *op cit.*, 284.

[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), paragraphs 244–71.

[32] The Private-Language Argument has given rise to a large body of interpretative secondary material and to a lively debate on its meaning and implications; see O.R. Jones (ed.), *The Private Language Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1971), and John V. Canfield (ed.), *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein, Volume 9: The Private Language Argument* (New York: Garland, 1986).

[33] Adrian Thatcher, 'A Critique of Inwardness in Religious Education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 14 (1991), 22–27.

individual's religious experience, rather than *vice versa*.[34] Furthermore, where beliefs differ, so experiences differ; there is no common religious/spiritual experience underlying the different religions.[35]

The Conceptual Approach

The Conceptual Approach to religious education is associated with Margaret and Trevor Cooling, and their work at the Stapleford Centre, Nottingham.[36] Its point of departure is recognition of weaknesses in both the phenomenological and the experiential approaches to religious education: the former is regarded as failing to capture the interest and imagination of pupils and the latter is regarded as divorcing religious experience from its theological and doctrinal context. According to Trevor Cooling, who has provided the intellectual underpinning of the approach (whereas Margaret has focused more on the production of materials for school),[37] understanding religion necessarily involves understanding the theological concepts that (propositionally) distinguish one religion from another and from non-religious philosophies. An appreciation of the role of theological concepts in religion is regarded as providing the key to the interpretation of religion. Cooling contends that a proper understanding of religion is gained only when one comes to appreciate the way in which the practice of religion is determined by religious concepts in the form of religious beliefs.[38]

An equally important insight according to Cooling is that religious concepts originally had relevance and continue to have relevance only when they relate to human experience. Religious concepts provide a commentary on human experience.[39] For example, the religious doctrine of salvation presupposes the human sense of alienation, purposelessness and guilt. To understand salvation one needs to have some appreciation of what it is to feel alienated and separated from God. Successful teaching must find a way of translating religious concepts into forms that make sense to pupils. The notion of alienation from one's parents or of guilt on account of something one had done could serve as 'a bridge between the world

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[34] Wittgenstein's insights have been applied by Fergus Kerr to religion and theology in *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); also L. Philip Barnes, 'Rudolf Otto and the Limits of 'Religious Description', *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), 219–30; and Barnes *Religious Education*, (note 9).

[35] L. Philip Barnes, 'Relativism, Ineffability and the Appeal to Experience: A Reply to the Myth Makers', *Modern Theology* 7 (1990), 101–14.

[36] The Stapleford Centre (UK) is an independent Christian education centre, focusing on providing training for teachers, resources for schools and research into education; see http://www.stapleford-centre.org/ for more details.

[37] E.g., Margaret Cooling, *Christianity Topic Books, 1, 2, and 3* (Norwich: Religious and Moral Education Press, 1991, 1992, 1992).

[38] Trevor Cooling, *Concept Cracking: Exploring Christian Beliefs in School* (Nottingham: Association of Christian Teachers, 1994).

[39] Trevor Cooling, *Concept Cracking*, 9.

of Christian belief and the world of children's experience'.[40] In this way Cooling believes pupils can both gain an understanding of religion and come to see its relevance to human experience. Progression in learning is achieved by analysing concepts into their constituent parts (Cooling refers to as 'concept-cracking'), and then systematically exploring the different parts of the main concept at different stages of the pupils' education. The pupil builds up an increasingly conceptual grid of religious doctrine, through which a proper understanding of religion will be realised.[41]

There are obvious strengths in the conceptual approach to religious education. Its emphasis upon concepts is certainly in keeping with recent trends within child psychology and the psychology of learning that underline the essentially linguistic and conceptual nature of human understanding.[42] Its concern with language also means that it is ideally placed to take advantage of recent government initiatives to advance literacy in schools.[43] Furthermore, the conceptual approach's stress upon religious doctrines is a necessary corrective to their neglect in much contemporary religious education. Part of the confused legacy of the rejection of confessional religious education has been that religious doctrines have been marginalised and pushed to the periphery of the study of religion in schools. For some educators, the mere mention of religious doctrines unfairly conjures up the picture of an arrogant and dogmatic presentation of religious truth; doctrinal religion is regarded as synonymous with indoctrination.[44] Cooling's work challenges this perception and goes some considerable way to rehabilitating the study of doctrines and beliefs within religious education. According to Cooling, conceptual religious education develops an understanding of religion by underlining the constitutive role of beliefs in religion. It neither attempts nor facilitates attempts to convert pupils to religion, be it Christianity or any other religion.[45] Although Cooling illustrates his methodology by reference to Christianity, he insists that it can fruitfully be applied to illuminate the nature and significance of any religion.[46] In his view a conceptual approach provides a middle way

[40] Trevor Cooling, *Concept Cracking*, 8.

[41] A conceptual approach to Christianity is employed by Chris Wright in his second level, pupil text-book, *Key Christian Beliefs* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1995).

[42] A. Demetriou, M. Shayer, and A. Efklides (eds.), *Neo-Piagetian Theories of Cognitive Development: Implications and Applications for Education* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[43] Department for Education and Employment, *The National Literacy Strategy* (Sudbury: DfEE Publications, 1998).

[44] This is the view of Antony Flew, 'Indoctrination and Doctrines', in I.A. Snook (ed.), *Concepts of Indoctrination* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), and Tasos Kazepides, 'Programmatic Definitions in Education: The Case of Indoctrination', *Canadian Journal of Education* 14 (1989), 387–96.

[45] Trevor Cooling, *Concept Cracking*, 25–26. The charge is effectively rebutted by Elmer John Thiessen in *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination and Christian Nurture* (Montreal/Leominster: McGill-Queen's University Press/Gracewing, 1993).

[46] *Concept Cracking*, 6.

between overtly descriptive approaches to religious education, which neither adequately relate to pupils' experience nor which penetrate to the meaning of religion, and confessionalist approaches that subvert understanding in the attempt to convince and convert.

Despite the undoubted strengths of the conceptual approach to religious education it has also weaknesses and limitations. Although it seems reasonable to conclude that a consideration of the beliefs of the different religions should provide much of the subject matter of religious education, there may be dangers in an over-concentration on religious beliefs in the precise manner that the conceptual approach advocates. One limitation is that if the term 'religious belief' is interpreted according to normal usage, then it would seem to follow that any study of non-belief would be excluded from the discipline of religious education.[47] This is probably unsatisfactory given the prominence of secularist assumptions within society and public institutions. A study of religious unbelief should be included within the religious education curriculum because it is both a cultural substitute for religion (indeed it may even be argued that unbelief is a form of religion, in that it exhibits many of the same characteristics as religion, for instance it provides a total interpretation of life, atheistic beliefs are often held with the same intensity and certainty as religious beliefs, and so on)[48] and it frequently provides the horizon of meaning against which religion is interpreted and assessed.

Recognition of the role of assumptions in conditioning how we perceive and assess religion naturally raises the issue of how religion is to be interpreted within an educational context.[49] Although Cooling is aware of this hermeneutical issue, and to his credit he gives more attention to it than most advocates of other approaches, there is nevertheless a sense in which his interpretation of religion is one-sided. Cooling correctly recognises that there are two poles of the hermeneutical situation: religious beliefs that are the product of a different and typically ancient culture and human subjects with characteristically modern presuppositions, beliefs and concerns. The one-sidedness is that in Cooling's hands priority is given to the religious concepts over contemporary experience. According to his methodology, religious concepts are unpacked into their constituent parts and then related to the world of human experience. The movement is from (ancient) religious beliefs to contemporary experience. But the hermeneutical process is more complex than this. Modern individuals and pupils in schools come to religion with

[47] As early as 1970 Ninian Smart advocated that the study of religion should include the subject of 'non-religion', 'The Structure of the Comparative Study of 'Religion', in John R. Hinnells (ed.), *Comparative Religion in Education* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Oriel Press, 1970), 31.

[48] Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 9–34.

[49] Andrew Wright's programmatic essay (in two parts) is required reading, 'Hermeneutics and Religious Understanding', Parts 1 and 2, *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 18 (1997), 203–16, and *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 19 (1998), 59–70.

their own particular questions and concerns, and these initially may be quite different from the central theological concerns of the great religions. For example, the aim of Christianity is to put away sin and initiate communion with God. Consequently, the doctrine of salvation is at the heart of Christian faith and the relative importance of other Christian beliefs is determined by their proximity to this theme. The need for salvation, however, may not be obvious to young people or central to their interests. They may be more concerned with immediate issues like employment prospects, family relationships and sexuality. The challenge for religious educators is to show the relevance of religion to these concerns, and then by dialogue and extension to develop connections with more central religious beliefs and values. The religious education curriculum should not be wholly determined by the doctrinal agendas of the different religions. A balance needs to be struck between the theological concerns of religion and the existential concerns of pupils. However, there is no reason why the conceptual approach cannot both preserve the doctrinal integrity of the different religions and respect the integrity of pupils – this means that the questions and concerns they bring to the study of religion are taken seriously.[50]

Let us conclude our remarks on the conceptual approach to religious education by focusing on the extent to which it advances fulfilment of the aims of religious education that we identified at the beginning of this section. Certainly conceptual religious education is successful in furthering pupils' knowledge and understanding of religion. It also provides a context in which pupils may learn from religion. The attempt to relate religious beliefs to the experience of pupils is an essential feature of the methodology, even though we have suggested that the likelihood of pupils interacting and learning from religious perspectives would be further helped if a more sophisticated hermeneutic that assigned greater importance to the interests and concerns of pupils was adopted. Finally, the question of whether conceptual religious education advances tolerance and furthers the social aims of religious education is a matter of dispute, as it is with all the approaches we have considered. Clearly those advocates of both phenomenological and experiential religious education who believe that tolerance is best furthered by drawing attention to the similarities between religions, be they in terms of material or experiential content, will be unhappy with the differences that emerge from a focus on the distinctive doctrines of the different religions. But then there is no reason for believing that religious tolerance and respect for others' religious beliefs and values are best served by diminishing differences and exaggerating similarities. Such a stance ultimately betrays 'the other' by refusing to accept its right to be different and distinctive.

[50] Andrew Wright, 'Mishmash, Religionism and Theological Literacy: an Appreciation and Critique of Trevor Cooling's Hermeneutical Programme', *British Journal of Religious Education* 19 (1997), 143–56.

Politics, Citizenship and School Performance

Almost immediately after the 1997 general election the new Labour government began to focus on education. It removed money from the assisted places scheme (which had enabled pupils to attend fee paying schools at taxpayers' expense) to nursery school places and the repair of neglected buildings in the state sector. Had the Conservatives remained in power it is possible that the state system would have been fragmented or eroded.[51] With the new government's commitments, the whole system was given a fresh lease of life.

Traditionally the Labour Party had favoured the funding of primary education while the Conservative party had favoured higher education. To some extent this difference continued. The Labour government massively expanded provision so that by 2002 (the date when the next general election is due) 66% of three year-olds ought to be receiving nursery education.[52] Yet the government also continued the expansion of higher education that had already begun so that, by 2002, a further half-million places ought to be available. At primary level the emphasis was on raising standards through highly concentrated literacy and numeracy hours. The main effect of this almost military drive was to lift the worst performing schools. Throughout the system, primary, secondary and tertiary, a connection was presumed between educational performance and national prosperity through innovative and competitive industry or commerce.

In 1998 the new Standards and Framework Act was passed by the English parliament and, among other things, this gave attention to the status and position of church schools.[53] From 1998 onwards a new category of 'foundation' schools was created and many of the schools that eventually ended up in this position were those which had been grant-maintained under the previous Conservative administration.[54] But religious schools could also opt into foundation status and their religious ethos would be determined and protected by their trust deeds. In addition ordinary county schools became

[51] A view expressed about the right wing of the Conservative party in the days when Sir Keith Joseph was in charge of education by S.J. Ball (1990), *Politics and Policy making in Education: explorations in policy sociology* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[52] A cynical view of this emphasis was that the Labour vote was attractive to lone parents who, if they were looking for work, would welcome the child-minding aspect of nursery education.

[53] The whole of Part 2 of the Act was devoted to 'a new framework for maintained schools'. Part 3 dealt with school admissions, Part 4 with miscellaneous provisions like home-school agreements and school meals. Part 5 dealt with nursery education, Part 6 with partnership arrangements in Wales. Part 1 dealt with standards and new Education Action Zones, areas of poor schooling that could be run by business or agencies other than local authorities and with a mandate to do all that was necessary to raise basic standards, including by-passing parts of the national curriculum.

[54] Grant maintained schools with a church foundation could choose to become voluntary aided, voluntary controlled or foundation.

'community' schools and the position of parents on the governing bodies of these schools was strengthened. 'Voluntary aided' schools, however, which included nearly all the Roman Catholic schools within the system as well as a good proportion of Anglican schools and some Jewish and Muslim schools, were able to retain their legal basis, nomenclature and religious distinctiveness. They were able to offer denominational religious instruction and denominational worship in school time, although all religious provisions were subject to the conscience clause allowing parents to withdraw their children should they wish.

From the point of view of religious groups the most exciting development of the 1998 Act was the possibility that new religious schools might be formed.[55] The Anglican Church began to consider the possibility of opening new secondary schools and awaited the result of a report by Sir Ron Dearing on the advisability of this. In any case, in some areas it was possible for community schools to close and reopen as voluntary aided schools. In other words the administrative tide was not necessarily running against religious provision, despite the wariness of senior civil servants of an expansion in religious schooling. But, from the point of view of the Treasury, the contribution made by the church to education was welcome. And, given the general philosophy of devolution within the highest ranks of Labour government as well as the generally good performance of religious schools in measures of pupil attainment, it made sense to permit local expressions of preference and concern to be embodied in a strengthened religious sector.

Agreed syllabuses, which were drawn up and monitored by Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs), remained unchanged through all these legislative alterations so that there is a continuous line of development from 1944 through to 1998.[56] Religious education will continue after the year 2000, even when the National Curriculum has received its 'new look'.[57] However, within the primary school the inclusion of non-statutory frameworks for Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and citizenship are bound to put pressure on the curriculum and may, deliberately or not, reduce time that is normally allocated to religious education. A similar effect may occur with the introduction of citizenship as a foundation subject at key stages 3 and 4. The Labour government remains keen on the notion of citizenship because of the statistics showing the lack of interest in voting among many British young people. Citizenship is thought to be an antidote. Moreover, if citizenship fits in with social, moral, spiritual and social education (SMSC) then it may well encroach upon some aspects of religious education. Indeed, in some schools SMSC is offered instead of religious education which is notionally confined to school

[55] During the 1990s about 1 new Anglican school per year was formed.

[56] SACRES are the lineal descendants of the old Agreed Syllabus Conferences brought about by the 1944 Act.

[57] QCA), *The Revised National Curriculum for 2000. What has changed?* (Sudbury: QCA Publications, 1999).

assemblies. Despite the willingness of inspectors to draw attention to the poor provision of religious education, local education authorities appear to do little about this deficit. Whether the willingness of the Labour government to give local education authorities a role in raising standards (and therefore to protect the importance of local education authorities) will be beneficial to religious education remains to be seen. According to some commentators the only thing that will benefit religious education will be a tough regime of assessment. But who can assess spiritual progress and is inspection able to quantify moral development? For these reasons it is unlikely that assessment will occur and religious education in community schools will have to continue to fight its corner on the basis of the importance of religion within an apparently secular society.