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Religious and Spiritual Education: the Way Forward.
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Preface: May 2007.

In the nearly two decades since I wrote this article summarising developments in the 1980s and suggesting a way forward for the 1990s and beyond. How far forward have we come now, by 2007? Most of my concerns then are still concerns now, and more have arrived. First, a proper aim of a school curriculum should be that school leavers are reasonably literate into the reasons why people are religious, and what faith means in the daily lives of for example Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians. In fact they do not. Few teachers have the knowledge to teach religion in any way that is not at best superficial and at worst wrong. Real expertise in the primary school is virtually non-existent – although many do an enthusing job of involving pupils in festivals. The very serious global agenda demands something very different of them, a role teachers will, for no fault of their own, struggle to fulfil.

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Religious Education: Issues for the 1990s.
by Stephen Bigger, Journal of Beliefs and Values (1989).
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By 1980, religious education was exploring the implications of multi-faith approaches. The Schools Council had established a new agenda in the 1970s - in a 1971 working paper for secondary schools, 1972 for primaries. The City of Birmingham had made an uncompromising statement (in *Living Together* 1975) that by the age of 11 pupils should have a basic working knowledge of the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu way of life. Hampshire Education Authority had applied multi-faith objectives to a shire county in its syllabus for religious education (1978), which quickly aroused the interest of a number of similar authorities. Here a gradual approach to multi-faith teaching was advocated, with teachers encouraged to extend their knowledge and understanding a step at a time, including in their syllabus Christianity and at least one other religion at first. The syllabus gave examples from the five religions cited above, and linked this work to "implicit RE" - work rooted on children's own experiences which seeks to extend their personal, social, moral and emotional understanding.

In 1980, working groups of Hampshire teachers expanded the new ideas in practical terms, in *Paths to Understanding.* As the Hampshire syllabus became widely adopted, *Paths to Understanding* achieved a large circulation. *Following the Paths* appeared in 1986, on a similar format. The "Exploring Religions Series" by Olivia Bennett (Bell & Hyman) comes from the same stable.

Education and faith in an open society.
This was the title of a book by A R Rodger in 1982, exploring the rationale of religious education in an open and free society . There is a particular focus on the Scottish education system, but his comments have a wider application. Religious education in school does not focus on a mono-cultural confessional community as teaching in Sunday school or mosque school does. It therefore cannot assume common faith commitments. Schools contain a variety of life stances, with a number of separate faiths in urban schools, and secularist majorities (with Christian

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minorities) in rural schools. Education is about coming
to an informed understanding of how things are. This understanding grows from
exposure to many different points of view, studied impartially and without
preconceived and premature conclusions being drawn. It is clearly improper to begin
study in religious education by declaring that there is only one 'proper' or 'correct'
point of view. Although those who share that officially sanctioned view will be happy
teaching within its prescribed guidelines, it is certain to cause offence to those who
consider the view to be limited, or worse, wrong. This has been the situation in
religious education in past decades, with Christianity the officially sanctioned faith.
Indeed this situation still exists in many primary
schools and some secondary schools, as the Swann Report (1985) noted. The
particular brand of Christianity offered depended largely on the commitments of the
teaching personnel, although some denominations have always been regarded as
unacceptable - Jehovah's Witnesses; the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day
Saints ("the Mormons"); and the Unification Church ("the Moonies").

Christians, historically privileged in religious education, may find it difficult to
comprehend the nature of the offence when teaching ceases to be informative but
becomes evangelistic: considering their reaction if religious education sought to
convert pupils for example to Islam or the Unification Church might give them a
starting point for contemplating this.

Religious education has, in its literature and agreed syllabuses, espoused pluralist
ideals since 1971 but this has not been reflected in the curriculum of many schools.
Either through ignorance of these pluralist aims, or through a feeling that they are
impossible to implement, the Education Reform Act (ERA) preferred to adopt a
divisive model - encouraging parents to withdraw children from the "act of worship",
and encouraging schools with high percentages of non-Christian faiths to opt out of
mainly Christian worship as a recognition of possible offence. It was the view of
many parliamentary speakers, and commentators, that pluralist approaches confuse
pupils. Fortunately ERA's drafters avoided much of the divisive potential of this
position (as explored below).

The Swann Report, *Education for All* (1985) came at the end of a lengthy inquiry into
the education of minorities. Preliminary reports had been published earlier by
Rampton and Scarman. *Education for All* strongly commended the pluralist approach
to religious education, using the Schools Council working paper of 1971 as defining
the ideal model. It noted however that in the schools the inquiry had surveyed, this
was not the model generally in use. In reality, religious education tended to be pro-
Christian and ignored minority faiths. This greatly confused the children,
marginalized other faiths in the eyes of white children, and the implied assumption
that only Christianity was right upset minority communities. The Report
recommended that religious education give pupils an informed understanding of each
faith in a fair and unbiased way.

Religious education is now (1990) in a quandry - whether to campaign for pluralist
approaches in an open society; or whether a school's aim is to instil broadly Christian
values, and an appreciation of broadly Christian worship. The latter view has a great
deal of public and political support among Christians, but as yet has not come to terms
with a fundamental objection - whether this can be achieved without marginalizing or

mocking other faith stances. In urban schools, which have a mix of faith positions, it would seem important to explore each faith in an open and balanced way. Since British society as a whole has a mix of faiths, it is difficult to see why exploring each faith is not similarly important in all schools, if we take seriously the view that education should prepare pupils in a balanced way to take their place in society. ERA itself has taken this point seriously - religious education should, it enacted, reflect the fact that Britain is, generally speaking a Christian country and also that we are a multicultural community. Teachers still do not have, in general, a substantial knowledge base relating to the multicultural nature of the community and it is essential that pluralist multi-faith books are still produced if teachers are to comply with the Act. The majority of a school's acts of worship need to be "broadly Christian" (broad is an important word, in addition to which a multi-faith focus is allowed in almost half of school assemblies) unless the ethnic mix of the school demands the balance to be placed elsewhere - in which case the local SACRE will adjudicate.

Brenda Watson *(Education and Belief,* Basil Blackwell, 1987) spoke of "four-fold openness": openness to fresh evidence; openness to the experience of others; openness to the needs of others as people; and openness to the possibility that we can be deluded (p.44). She argued that in this lies the basis of true commitment (as opposed to "weakly held or conditioned commitments", p.48): education in commitment can "give vision to a utilitarian framework and guard against indoctrination", p.49. She developed the notion of "critical affirmation". "Affirmation of people means acknowledging that they exist as living centres of reality, being willing to relate to them and appreciate all that is worthwhile about them, and confirming them in their status as persons." (p.55). At the same time we aim to have sound judgement and may, in taking a person's view seriously, disagree with them - in the spirit of two-way dialogue.

She identified five intentions: the desire to find insight; the expectation that insights are there to be found; the determination to uncover them; the thoughtfulness to understand these insights fully; and the desire to make other people's insights our own. She applied these methods to beliefs and values, and religious education which, she argues, needs to promote three things: experience; imagination; and the capacity to think (p.129).

Implicit religious education. Edwin Cox, in *Problems and Possibilities for Religious Education* (1983) introduced the notion of "sensitivities" - that religious education should sensitize pupils to key areas of understanding ourselves as individuals, and our relationships. Implicit religious education emerged as an important issue in the 1960s with Harold Loukes works (1961, 1965) which argued that what young people needed was not Bible study, but to reflect on fundamental personal issues. The Schools Council projects (1971, 1977) had picked this up and advocated implicit approaches for both primary and secondary schools, as one strategy among several. The primary project was disseminated   through the teachers book, *Discovering an Approach* and its supporting materials *Seeking Meaning, Conveying Meaning,* and *Celebrating Meaning.* The Hampshire syllabus (1978) made careful use of implicit objectives, and in this has been followed by most syllabuses in the 1980s.

It was a great relief to many teachers to discover that the "new" RE objectives covered things they were doing anyway - caring, sharing, friendship etc. But were they? It was

sometimes difficult to see how some of the implicit work related to *religious* education. Some syllabuses continued to append biblical references to make items seem more relevant. What is needed is a tighter rationale underpinning work on general issues to determine what religious education's concerns ought to be - defined not solely in terms of content but in terms of understanding and educational processes. Cox's sensitivities provides one such rationale; Hampshire's notion of *reflection* - reflecting on ourselves, others, the world around us, and on meaning - is another. We could also argue for *ethical* objectives. Linking these together is the philosophy that education should use the *experience* of children, and encourage them to *participate* - in other words, use active learning methods as opposed to passive teaching methods.

Grimmitt (1987), in an important chapter on the concerns of religious education , developed the concept of *humanisation* - education's concern with what it means to be human and with the problematical nature of our understanding of ourselves and the human condition. Norma Thompson (1988:13) described religious education as "a means of helping persons achieve full humanness". Grimmitt argued that *personal education* had this function, and that religious education had an important contribution to add to this enterprise (pp.194-204). He distinguished between learning *about* and learning *from* religion: effective education must be rooted in the pupils' experiences and concerns; RE will fail if it does not meet children where they are, explore their ways of thinking, valuing, relating to others, believing. RE should do more than give information about religions: it should develop its curriculum in ways which best promote understanding of central concepts and issues, beginning with the pupils' own experiences and self-understanding, enriching their understanding through exploring alternative perceptions, and encouraging them to embark on a process of problem-solving in personal education.

It is a logical outcome that children engaged in religious education will learn about themselves in that they are exploring their own perceptions and experiences in order to understand someone else's point of view. It is sometimes called, putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. but this is not a useful image since we can never see things through other people's eyes. We are in danger of making an objective out of something which is impossible. What we can do is to encourage children to reflect on their own experience, and to realise the limitations of their interpretation of experience. That will help them to become more open to other people's interpretations of their experiences, and less willing to judge prematurely. Grimmitt (pp.209-233) challenged the assumption that phenomenology provides an adequate rationale for RE: 'bracketing out' their own views and concerns will mean that the study fails to meet their needs, and fails to appear relevant to them; it discourages them from using their personal experiences to help them understand the material, and inhibits the development of their interpretative skills. Although it is important to discourage premature judgements, phenomenology's rejection of any evaluation except the tradition's self-evaluation "can hardly be said to be extending pupils' capacities for personal decision-making or contributing to their personal knowledge" (p.211). RE should challenge pupils to evaluate their understanding of religion in terms of personal experience, but nevertheless evaluate their understanding of self in terms of the religions they study (p.213). Our purpose is not to *confirm* pupils in their beliefs and opinions, but to encourage them to *appraise* them (p.215). He then explores the sort of skills and abilities that might be involved in this process, and the type of evaluation that could result.

There is sometimes a schizophrenic tendency in religious education for implicit religious education to be experiential and active, and explicit teaching about world faiths to be didactic and passive. Such a split is wholly destructive in a number of ways. Pupils cannot see how implicit and explicit enterprises are related; it becomes difficult to see why implicit themes are "religious"; explicit teaching becomes boring and confusing - a concoction of facts and figures of little apparent relevance to the pupils. What is needed for the 1990s is a determined shift from didactic passive teaching methods in presenting religions to active, experience and skills-based learning methods encouraging pupils to engage with central issues and dialogue, reflect on their own interpretations of life, and express themselves creatively on these matters.

Religious education and believers. RE sees itself as doing more than informing children about religion, although this position is still defensible. Mere descriptive approaches (of how people worship, of their sacred texts etc.) has been rightly criticised as contributing little to religious understanding yet such minimalist approaches are themselves a travesty of what "informing children about religion" ought to be. For children to be well informed, they have to understand in as great a depth as is feasible. They need experience and understanding of religious language, theological issues, the doctrinal implications of sacred texts. In other words, they should have done far more than learn and recall information - they should have interacted with that information and viewed it from a variety of perspectives.

Nevertheless, most religious educationalists see a child's personal development as a legitimate RE objective. Grimmitt (1987: 177) noted that the appropriate question was' What does the *study* of religion contribute to pupils' development', and not What does *religion* contribute...' which can only be effectively answered by promoting religious faith. The contribution of the study of religion will vary from child to child, making it hard to advocate one approach or RE curriculum over others. In particular, a child who is an active member of a faith community will have different requirements as compared to a pupil who is religiously illiterate (or not "religiate") . Telling pupils, however subtly, that they are wrong and offering them an alternative (perhaps secularist) life stance is not helpful to them: this is the major issue which has prompted Muslims to demand for Muslim schools. Believers need to develop maturity in their own faith, and to make their faith first-hand rather than second-hand. They need to see their own faith as 'problematic' - that is, a series of issues for them to reflect on rather than a pre-packaged philosophy for them to accept unthinkingly. They need deeper exposure to key sources in their own tradition and the skills to analyse these critically within their own traditions. There is currently some political support for separate schooling for faith groups: this may be an understandable reaction to secularism (and therefore invite teachers to think again about what they are presenting as "true"); but it would be a shame if schools, by their very organisation, inhibit the proper development of a foundation for dialogue.

Further, *believing* children need to learn about other peoples views, and that these are legitimate even when they differ from their own views. Hardy (1979, 1985) highlighted theological reflection and dialogue as essential RE objectives; Grimmitt (1987: 169- 79) thought this optimistic for school RE, where pupils' allegiances were often "tribalistic" (176), which could really only begin to prepare the ground for this.

Of course, until RE begins to prepare the ground thoroughly and consistently throughout the 5-18 curriculum, we will not know what understanding children might be capable of. School-based research today is largely based on pupils who are effectively untutored in religious education.

Religious education and the environment. Interesting work of great potential came out of a link between religious education and the World Wildlife Fund. First to appear was *World's of Difference* by Martin Palmer and Esther Bissett, with teachers and pupils books for the 8-13 age range. It linked together creation stories or teaching from a variety of faiths and examined their attitudes and relationship to their environment, all the time inviting pupils reflect on their attitudes to their world. A series of schools television broadcasts accompanied this - *Why....Because....* - which are still useful and deserve to remain in use. Palmer's book, *Genesis or Nemesis?* (1988) is ideosyncratic but interesting, linking religious education not only to environmental issues, but also to religious ideals and potential environmental disaster. The whole is an excitingly creative way of reassessing the role of religious education: it would be good if other writers pursued similar avenues in so active and relevant a way.

Primary religious education.
There have been no major advances here since 1977 - when the Schools Council recommended a blend of implicit and explicit objectives. The decade has been one of consolidation and implementation with, if anything, a greater emphasis on explicit objectives and materials as compared with the previous decade. Ralph Gower produced simple guidelines for infant and junior teachers (1984 a and b). Material for multi-faith primary RE boomed, with Olivia Bennett's series *Exploring Religion* very influential, Wayland's large list of primary topic books with a number of RE titles, the useful *I am a ...* series published by Franklin Watts and many others. Today, implicit themes which do not capitalise on relevant explicit material would be regarded as superficial: equally, explicit topics need to draw from
and expand children's experience and contribute to the development of their understanding of life and society. With the 1988 Education Act stipulating that religious education should reflect both the Christian heritage and the multicultural nature of British society, there is an increased need in the very near future for exploring how the study of religions can be made relevant, interesting and meaningfulfor this age-range, and how confusion and tokenism can be minimized (so Bigger, 1987).

GCSE
This decade has seen the introduction of the GCSE examination. The "new' syllabuses unhappily proved to be remarkably like the ones which preceded it which meant that change generally has not been radical. Methods of assessment have of course changed, introducing a knot of new questions:
- *what is meant by 'skills' in religious education?* I have argued in detail elsewhere (Bigger, 1989) that *interpretative* skills are central - interpreting the data in careful and disciplined ways, and taking care not to confuse interpretation with fact. A student does not need to become a skilful practitioner of religion but a skilful *understander* of religion and its various manifestations.
- *can pupils even begin to empathise with the worshippers of various faiths?* As discussed previously, empathy may be too optimistic a term for the operation that

G.C.S.E. students actually do, which is to realise that their understanding is limited, and that worshippers of life stances other than their own interpret life differently. 'Empathy' means in reality that we should extend our horizons, although at this very early stage pupils can never even begin to perceive in any depth how other people view their world.

- how do you 'evaluate' religion? Can an expression of a personal opinion in religion ever be anything other than premature? Are opinions informed by sufficient data to allow pupils to make fair, balanced and impartial judgements? Can a GCSE course do any more than scratch the surface? Is there sufficient in-service training to enable teachers to understand the religions they are teaching in depth? Does the demand for evaluation invite students to form premature opinions which could inhibit their later development? Are pupils made aware that their judgements must always be provisional? People are beginning to wrestle with these issues. It is hoped and expected that the attainment targets recently drafted by Westhill College RE Centre with the support of many education authorities will revolutionize the way secondary schools plan their RE provision.

Education Reform Act 1988.
The Education Reform Act's provisions on religious education caused a great deal of discussion and lobbying. Some points were lost. religious education did not become a subject of the National Curriculum, because parents could not then withdraw their children from it if they so wished; and 'broadly Christian' was written into the regulations relating to the act of worship. Nevertheless, some points had a happier resolution. Religious education should reflect both that Britain is a broadly Christian country, and that it is a multicultural community. Although 'most' acts of worship should reflect broadly Christian traditions, they do not all have to be - indeed, almost half could be of multi-faith focus. What precisely is meant by 'worship' in an open, school setting (as opposed to in a committed faith community) requires urgent resolution: clearly, worship in school, particularly in multi-cultural schools, will not be the same as in particular churches. "Broadly Christian' also needs urgent discussion. In this case the Act helps by stressing that worship and religious education should not be distinctive of a particular religious denomination - a carry-over from the 1944 Act. Thus, some religious education and worship which a school happily plans as broadly Christian could contravene the law in that it is too distinctive of one particular Christian group.

Christianity.
Throughout the 1980s RE literature has been concerned with how world religions, including Christianity, should be presented properly and fairly. Many new textbooks on religions other than Christianity were published, for two reasons - there was a hole in the market, with a dearth of books in the 1970s, followed by a great interest stimulated - but not created - by the Swann Report. There were new books on Christianity - the Westhill Project, and *Religious Denominations Series* for example - but many other titles were reprinted from the 1960s and 1970s. Many teachers feel that, at a time when interesting and eye-catching material was appearing for religious education, Christianity was being poorly served, with boring formats and *texts* which failed to interest or hold the attention of young people. This is still the situation - and it may be that, stimulated by the renewed focus on Christian worship highlighted by the 1988 Education Act, new series for different age-ranges will appear in the 1990s.

One issue needs to be carefully thought through - one which is relevant to all religions studied: how do we balance the need for children to be reflective and thoughtful, with the need to present the faith in a way that does justice to it and that should not offend most reasonable members. It is too easy to present an oversimplified view that could offend thoughtful worshippers for its very naivity. With Christianity, relevant doctrinal issues are whether the virgin birth, resurrection and ascension are presented as unchallengable "facts" or as Christian beliefs; and how literally the Bible is presented as the word of God. There is wide variation also on moral, social and ethical issues. Christians have a full range of views, making all statements beginning with "Christians believe..." out of order: someone, somewhere will always be saying "Count me out!". Any presentation of belief and doctrine also needs to take account of children's age and development, and needs to aim at developing understanding by examining questions which arise. Openness, generally espoused throughout the curriculum, is actually elusive in religious education: how is Jesus presented to infants? dogmatically, as God or son of God? how are they helped to understand what Christians might mean by it? or are they simply told that it is "true", it is how things are. Is it part of a wider planned curriculum which explores what "God" signifies?

 Bible.
The Bible has been a fundamental plank in RE syllabus throughout this century. Until the 1970s, even primary school syllabuses were mainly concerned with familiarising children with biblical passages. This did not disappear in the 1980s, although multi-faith considerations became more dominant. Secondary schools have continued to include biblical studies in their syllabus - especially in Wales, as the HMI evaluation revealed - and biblical syllabuses are still very popular at G.C.S.E. There has perhaps been some decline in Old Testament studies - with often unexpressed assumptions that it is not relevant for modern youngsters. Taught as a mere chronicle of events, it could vie with Paul's missionary journeys as the most tedious and irrelevant part of the curriculum. Yet there is a wide-ranging richness here which it would be sad to lose entirely - Job on suffering, Ecclesiastes on life and death, the Song of Songs and Ruth on love, and the prophets on social justice to mention just a few obvious areas of development.

We need, for the next decade, to think through how to educate pupils about how to read the Bible - or to use modern jargon, develop in them interpretative skills. Starting the enterprise of biblical studies in an open non-dogmatic frame of mind is essential, with pupils encouraged to start their thinking with what they know to be true, and not asked to believe *as true* opinions which cannot be demonstrated. For example, we know it to be true that the books were written, and can therefore seek to discover their essential messages. We do not know when, or by whom, or for what purpose they were written - these are areas for an open mind, and an interpretation both of what we can deduce from the text, and of other people's opinions. To give an example - that the creation story was written is certain, and its purpose may perhaps be deduced; that it represents scientific reality is opinion and not fact - an area for open discussion rather than dogmatic assertions. A skills-based approach to the Bible is an essential future development which could promote interest among young people, so long as they are left free to explore and not told what to believe. A start has been made in this in *Creating the Old Testament: the Emergence of the Hebrew Bible* (Bigger 1989) for students and teachers.

Of course, an entire syllabus on the Bible could be planned which had no RE content or objectives. Perhaps the most crucial question for the 1990s is *what constitutes religious education.* Implicit RE foundered when most of it was not really RE at all. Some studies of world religions are little more than sociology. Bible study need not be an effective medium for reflecting on religious concerns. Thus there is an urgent agenda discussing what RE should aim to do, and what type of material best satisfies the objectives derives from this. In particular, thought should be given to how religious education relates to the social, intellectual, emotional and creative development of young people, and how best children's understanding can be developed. RE has often focused on giving children background information - about the world of the Bible; about how Hindus live in India (which Hindus?); and about what mosques and synagogues actually look like. What it needs to do is to help children to understand the various messages of the Bible to the needs of everyday people, how Hindus view life, existence and experience - and why Jews and Muslims worship as they do.

RE is at present in search of its heart. It is in many cases in danger of being lost on its peripheries.

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Postscript, 2007.

Religious and Spiritual Education: the Way Forward.

These issues continued beyond 1990 in a context of an over-full curriculum in both primary and secondary schools. Writing now nearly 20 years later, I see different issues. Violent terrorist actions in the name of Islam has radically politicised some Muslims who are swayed by extremist agendas, to the extent of being prepared to become suicide bombers. This has had various backlashes – a form of discrimination on religious lines that has been called Islamophobia; and encouragement for extremist Islamic attitudes throughout the world, including the UK. On the former, an article I submitted supportive of Muslim women, that had passed the referees, was rejected by an editor as "this is not the time to give succour to the Muslim community at a time when their young men are trying to kill us". On the latter, those same Muslim women have lost the right to decide how to dress because they are afraid to go out in public if they look western, even if their dress is fully in line with the spirit of the Muslim dress code. At the same time, Muslims often live next to white families in parallel communities, the two never meeting or talking. Various politicians, such as Jack Straw and Ann Cryer (MP for Keithley) have emphasised the need for open dialogue and communication, and also for traditional religions to liberalise and reform themselves from the inside, particularly on their attitudes to women and marriage.

Religious education has emphasised the need for open and affirming description of faiths, producing teaching about religions that worshippers would not find offensive. And indeed it is important that bias is reduced, and one religion does not empire-build by privileging their own teachings. However, any discussion of any faith has the potential to offend someone, and if we try to avoid offence, we would have nothing to teach. If for example I encourage pupils to question a literal view of the Bible creation narrative, or the virgin birth or resurrection, literalist Christian will be very concerned; but we have opted for broad education rather than instruction, and to take a doctrinaire approach to teaching Christianity would not only be biased but would cause equivalent offence on the other side. The same issue of literalism can be applied today to the teaching of Islam. Which Muslim point of view should we favour? Are there Muslim points of view we should discourage? Where does empathy sit when considering this issue?

In 1988, I gave a paper to the NATFHE Religious Studies Section Conference called "Dumbing Down Religious Education?". The central point I was making is that "learning from religion" should be interpreted as having a criticality that linked with thinking skills and philosophy.

> "If 'learning from religion' allows the possibility of rejection and critique, then the words are ambiguous; if not it is confessional rather than educational. ('Confessional' can extend to *teaching as true* religious as opposed to secular approaches to life). By dumbing down, I am saying that there is a danger that school structures and processes (including OFSTED and the power vested in the agreed syllabus) inhibit freedom of thought and debate, that RE is informing pupils about religions and advocating religious perspectives, but not developing skill and experience in proper debate. 'Learning from religious education' might be more accurate." (pp.2f)

I included a plea to develop the hermeneutical skills of interpretation amongst children from a young age, that is giving them the confidence to pose questions about life and truth from all of the religious material they are introduced to.

> "Whilst information about religions is helpful, it is not always accurately depicted or developed in depth. The quality of textbooks has improved but tend to describe an authorised version of the faith rather than noting difference and debate. A religious story, or ritual, or teaching is capable of a complex hermeneutic, not only in the context of the faith itself but relating also to everyday life. Opportunities for developing interpretation skills are thus missed. It is an old adage that how something is taught is more important than what is taught. A teacher can convey a sense of a religion's meaningfulness and coherence within its assumptions, and an enthusiasm which grabs pupils' interest. A teacher to whom I gave an in-service course on Hinduism ten years ago asked me a few weeks ago how long I had been a Hindu, confusing enthusiasm and empathy for personal commitment. Such an approach which assumes that a faith is relevant, meaningful and of value is compatible with it also being critical. If the RE teacher does not ask real questions about life, relationships and society, will see religions as dogmatic systems beyond criticism rather than growing, maturing life-stances."

Religious education needs the joint ambitions of seeking empathy and being critical. What criticality means needs exploring. To an extent it need to embrace the authentic self-critique that is found in thoughtful discussions within the faith itself. That means that teachers need to understand not only the key theological debates within Christianity but in other faiths also. Further, they need to do so in the primary sector, since this is the time that incorrect answers are likely to given to half understood questions. It is the positivist assertions about God in the early primary years that leads to wholesale rejection of God in the later primary years, unless family background provides a counter view.

The key debate that is relevant to different faiths is that between literalism and symbolism. Children from a young age are taught about signs and symbols, and this needs to be applied to religion. A Hindu divine image of Saraswati is a symbolic sermon about wisdom, just as the image of Ganesh symbolically explores how to cultivate the inner strength to solve our own problems. The literalist who says that there really was a child-god whose severed head was replaced with an elephants is missing the point: the image is a visual parable about our own lives containing the power to transform ourselves. Although Judaism and Christian Protestantism has disapproved of visual images, word pictures of God as the good shepherd, or just king, convey existential commentary. So before the question is raised about whether God exists, there is a prior discussion to be had about what language about God means. I explore this in terms of the Judaeo-Christian traditions in the book *Creating the Old Testament* (Bigger, 1989) in the chapter on symbolism and symbolic language and in my distance-learning pack on religious education (Bigger, 2004). Children need to know what it is they are accepting or rejecting.

Some religions assert a particular status to a prophet or manifestation of God. Again this needs comprehending. The literalistic claim that Jesus was and is Son of God causes offence and division between Christians, Jews and Muslims. The physical

sonship of God leading to the doctrine of Holy Trinity caused a deal of creative thinking, such as Matthew's Gospel's denial of human paternity. Curiously however the genealogies given in Matthew and Luke are of Joseph's line. The word 'virgin' in the quotation "a virgin shall conceive" is a translation of the Hebrew word 'almah, 'young woman' in a context where there is no suggestion of supernatural conception. Our discussion first is what being a son of God means. We learn that King David was God's son (e.g. 2 Sam 7) in an entirely symbolic sense. And John's Gospel tells us that we all, if we believe, have the right to be called sons (or children) of God. Hinduism focuses on avatars (manifestations) of Vishnu such as Rama and Krishna in devotional worship, with their stories told in the devotional classics the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Again, this status can be taken literally or symbolically. For Muslims, Muhammad has a special station, as the last messenger but not as a form of God. His life is viewed as an exemplar of the ideal pious life, God's will in action. Bahais deepen this concept in their teaching of progressive revelation through Manifestations of God, of which Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are examples. Their latest (but not final) Manifestation was Bahaullah, whose writings provide the bedrock of Bahai teaching, although their body of Scripture is broader. Their answer to the question, What does the station of Manifestation mean? is that it is a mystery that no one can explain, and that it certainly is not simplistic. For children also, what is meant by people manifesting God's qualities, in full or in part, should not be presented over-simplistically. God is usually presented in ethical religions as just, fair, loving, empowering and transforming, and some people exhibit these qualities more than others, in history and today. Some we hold up as role models to inspire us. And indeed, such role models need not be explicitly religious.

This leads us to another issue to untangle – whether religion is spiritual, whether spiritual persons have to be religious, and whether spiritual education has anything much to do with religious education. This is particularly important at a time when spiritual education is promoted and expected across primary and secondary schools. The nature of spirituality, and its problematic relationship with religion, is hard to untangle. The massive Handbook on Spiritual Development from Sage is vitiated by confusions between these two categories, so evidence for religiosity is improperly used as evidence for spirituality. I proposed in the introduction to *Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education* (Bigger and Brown, 1999) that our definition of spirituality should encompass both people of religious backgrounds and none, therefore that it has to make sense in a secular context. Once we sort out spirituality as human experience, only then can we see whether it also applies in religious contexts. I further explore in *Secular Spirituality?* (Bigger, 2007) how spirituality can make sense of natural human experiences and insights, and can help also in moral development and social engagement. Ordinary non-religious children who have been encouraged to think spiritually are more likely to respond positively to religious stories and insights than those who remain in a materialist and consumerist mindset. Therefore, spiritual education could be one of the most radical developments that we have so far seen in education. I am currently engaged in a programme of spiritual meditation with disengaged and behaviourally difficult children, with very positive effects (see Bigger, 2006).

The Next Decade.

So, setting the agenda both for religious education and whole school spiritual education, to me the agenda has changed since 1990. The need to accurately represent religious teachings remains paramount, with the understanding that each religious has many voices, and the powerless are no less important than the powerful. The work of Bob Jackson and colleagues in Warwick have been invaluable for this, showing how listening to children talking about their religious beliefs and practices is important. We also need to engage pupils in reflecting on their lives and relationships in positive ways. Then we need these processes to come together so that the personal search for meaning gives them insights about the religions they are studying. These insights need to be critical: that is asking critical questions about power, equity and equality, environmental custodianship, relationships, moral and social action, and political engagement. I see the agenda therefore as developing a critical spiritual education – in which religious education has a part to play, but that will not be a comfortable one. Religious points of view need to be critiqued on issues of human rights, human empowerment and free choice, positive social engagement and ethical discipline. This will place a number of extreme religious perspectives under sharp scrutiny, a could be the start of a grass-roots pressure to change. A traditionalist backlash is inevitable, and education should prepare young people for this and develop their coping skills.

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