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A Religious Education Otherwise? An examination and proposed interruption of current British practice

This paper examines the recent shift towards the dominance of the study of philosophy of religion, ethics and critical thinking within religious education in Britain. It explores the impact of the critical realist model, advocated by Andrew Wright and Philip Barnes, in response to prior models of phenomenological religious education, in order to expose the ways in which both approaches can lead to a distorted understanding of the nature of religion. Although the writing of Emmanuel Levinas has been used in support of the critical realist model by Wright, I will consider how his and Slavoj Žižek's writings on the nature of religion might challenge the dominance of the critical realist approach and provide a conceptual framework through which it might be possible to develop an alternative approach to religious education that attends to the complexity, ambiguity and demanding nature of engaging with religious traditions.

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

'Religious experiences prove that God exists.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

'Suffering makes it impossible to believe in God.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view. (5 marks)

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

These questions are taken from recent Religious Studies GCSE exams,[1] from the 'Philosophy and Ethics' strand of the syllabus, the most popular option for both

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[1] These examples are mostly of what are termed Assessment Objective 3 (AO3) questions, sources AQA Religious Studies, Specification B, Unit 1, June 2003, May 2007, May 2008; OCR Religious Studies A (World Religions) specimen paper 2003. Some examples of Assessment Objective 1 and Assessment Objective 2 questions, from AQA Specification B, Unit 4, June 2008, are:
  • Give two types of evidence on which scientific truth is based. (2 marks)
  • Explain religious attitudes towards cloning. You should refer to the beliefs and teachings from either two religions or two Christian denominations in your answer. (8 marks)

GCSE and A Level courses, and reflect the turn towards the use of critical thinking, philosophy of religion and ethics within the study of religion in British schools. Is there a God? Why is there suffering in the world? What is religious truth based on? These are the sorts of questions that the majority of young people will encounter when studying RE in secondary schools in Britain today. As a teacher of religious education, I feel increasingly uncomfortable at the way in which RE specifications and resources thematise religion as the object of a type of critical thinking, whose truth or falsity can be described and known objectively through rational argumentation. In what follows, I will give a brief account of the place of religious education in the British curriculum, with particular reference to the subject at GCSE and A Level. I will consider the rationale for the dominance of current ideologies of religious education and outline the conceptual problems underlying these. I will then consider how it might be possible to articulate the nature of what it is to be religious otherwise, drawing on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Slavoj Žižek.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN BRITAIN TODAY: A SNAPSHOT

In British schools, religious education is a compulsory subject, part of the basic curriculum. Although RE has no prescribed syllabus, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)[2] has set out what schools should aim to achieve in RE:

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

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

All sound worthy aims. Who would not want to see the values of 'truth, justice and respect for all' promoted? However the emphasis has shifted profoundly towards the specific target of 'developing the ability to make reasoned and informed judgments about religious and moral issues'. This has meant that philosophy of religion and ethics have enjoyed new found prominence within the school curriculum, with many religious education departments re-branding themselves departments of 'Religion and Philosophy' or 'Philosophy, Ethics and Religion,' and schools increasingly opting for philosophy of religion and ethics papers within the RE GCSE and A level. This has led to the increased popularity of the subject: it is among the fastest growing subjects

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- Explain two reasons why some religious people support hospices. (4 marks)
- Explain two reasons why some religious people use caffeine. (4 marks)

[2] This was formerly the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority, SCAA.

at both GCSE and A level.[3] The result of this is that students emerge from their religious education able to give a reasoned justification of whether or not there is a God, whether or not drugs should be legalised, whether or not women should be allowed abortion on demand, but with little awareness of the complex, rich and troubling histories and myths at the heart of religious traditions, and therefore a distorted picture of what 'being religious' means.

Why is it that RE has moved in this direction? The answer lies with the history of the subject. Let us turn to examine the different aims of RE that have dominated the profession in Britain, and in particular the phenomenological and critical realist models that have been most prominent in recent years.[4]

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The move away from confessional religious education began in the mid 1960s, with the rise of Religious Studies in universities, such as the establishment of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster in 1965, led by Ninian Smart. Smart set up a major curriculum development project on RE in 1969, which was to be very influential on the way religious education has been taught in this country since. The project pioneered what has become termed the 'phenomenological approach' to religious education, influenced by the dominance of phenomenology within religious studies.[5] Within the newly emergent discipline of Religious Studies, courses in church history, doctrine and biblical studies within Theology faculties were replaced by sociology and anthropology of religion, with emphasis not just on comparative religion, but on examining non-Christian religions in their own right. The aim of religious education as it was developed according to this approach was described as:

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

Whereas with the confessional model, the aim was subtle indoctrination into Christianity, phenomenological religious education reacted against this: six world

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[3] In 2008, for example, it was the fastest growing subject at GCSE. See http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2598289/GCSEs-Pupils-taking-fewer-exams.html for a discussion of recent trends in GCSE exam entries in relation to this, and also http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/qca-05-2176-re-report.pdf, both accessed 14.08.09

[4] I am aware that these are not the only two approaches to RE that have been used in Britain in recent years, but I am focusing on these two as those that have had the most significant impact upon the way the subject has been taught. Julian Stern provides a comprehensive overview of alternative approaches in *Teaching Religious Education* (2006), and a detailed examination of the history of religious education in Britain is offered by Terence Copley in *Teaching Religion* (2008).

[5] There is unfortunately not space within this paper to contextualise the way in which phenomenology emerged as a dominant approach to studying religion. James Cox provides a detailed examination of the influence of Husserlian phenomenology in particular as a philosophical approach upon the study of religion, leading to the phenomenology of religion as a distinctive methodology, in *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion* (2006).

faiths were to be studied, and tolerance of difference and empathic understanding replaced nurture into Christianity as the aim of religious education. Terence Copley emphasises how the phenomenological approach to religious education aimed to allow students to participate in the experience of subjective commitment to others' religious traditions through the power of the imagination, based on the possibility of self-transcendence. 'In primary school this might mean being a Jew or Muslim for a day or an hour by witnessing a sacred festival or acting out an imagined ritual occasion. This capacity for self-transcending awareness was seen as the basis for all objective scholarship' (Copley, 2008, p. 102).

As it was developed, the phenomenological approach aimed at dialogical understanding of the meaning of religious practices, and placed importance on collaboration with religious communities in constructing curricula for study and in the preparation of texts for analysis. As Robert Jackson, a prominent researcher influenced by the phenomenological school[6] describes:

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

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

While in many respects, the phenomenological model offered rich possibilities for the subject in contrast with the confessional model that had dominated prior to the emergence of this approach,[7] there are nevertheless problems with this approach. While empathy and tolerance are desirable aims in many respects, one might object to empathy as suggesting a transparency of the other person, the view that we could understand her and her religious lifeworld, by 'trying on' their religious practices. Jackson himself questions whether empathy is possible, although he does retain it as a fundamental aim of RE: 'The interpretive approach reveals how problematic empathy is, and how easy it is to convince ourselves that we have empathized with another when in reality we have not done so' (Jackson, 1997, p. 46). While openness to the otherness of different religious traditions and ways of life *is* desirable, empathy cannot be straightforwardly be taken as an end in itself, since it seems to imply a

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[6] The approach to religious education with which Robert Jackson has most usually been associated is 'interpretive pedagogy', which has much in common with the phenomenological approach, but places great emphasis on interpretation. Julian Stern summarises the approach thus: 'In religious terms, the focus is on internal diversity as well as religious plurality, and on a serious engagement with the layering of religion, culture and philosophy. In terms of learners, the key skill is interpretation' (Stern, 2006, p. 77).

[7] For more detail on the historical context of the debates surrounding the phenomenological approach, see Copley, 2008, pp. 100-152.

problematic transparency of the other person: that I can bring their otherness within the sphere of my own understanding.

Tolerance is more desirable. Levinas draws attention to the notion of tolerance as 'bearing the weight of others', an idea which can be traced to the etymology of 'tolerance' in the Latin 'tolerare', which implies bearing, or supporting, as well as suffering or enduring (Levinas, 1990, p. 173). The more common understanding of tolerance implies a sense of putting up with a belief or practice that you find disagreeable. This is potentially more problematic, since it implies an attitude of superiority in the one who is tolerant, placing the self above the other. Is this what we should be aiming for in religious education? On one level, it would be a step forward if we could achieve greater tolerance, yet clarification is needed on what tolerance means and how this could be promoted within RE, for example in how tolerance might be related to concepts of hospitality. Yet, religious tolerance is surely an inadequate aim in itself.

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

THE CRITICAL REALIST MODEL

The pioneer of the critical realist approach is Andrew Wright, whose *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious Literacy* (1993) has had great influence in shifting the emphasis of the subject away from phenomenological approaches towards the evaluation of the truth claims of the different religious traditions. In this book, Wright criticised the phenomenological approach, described as 'liberal religious education', as leading to relativisation of religious truth through the implication that all religions offer an equally valid path to truth:

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

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

> To enable our pupils to reach a depth of understanding of the moral and social dilemmas before humanity we must allow them to see what these

dilemmas and questions look like in the light of the question of ultimate truth. (ibid.)

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

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

Philip Barnes, in *Taking Religious Difference Seriously*, has, like Wright, insisted on the importance of religious education grappling with the truth claims that he sees lying at the heart of the different religious traditions. For him, religions are essentially concerned with 'ultimate truths', which he sees as mostly mutually exclusive:

> the religions endorse different and well-nigh contradictory systems of belief. For example, Christians believe that the divine is personal and Trinitarian in form; Jews and Muslims deny this, although they agree that God is personal, in contrast with Advaita Vedanta Hindus, who believe that the divine is an impersonal principle . . . It is not just that the religions differ, it is that they differ in fundamental ways. Each version of religion, moreover, believes its beliefs and doctrines faithfully represent and picture the true nature of reality. Simply, the different religions each claim to be true, while affirming different doctrinal systems of belief. (Barnes, 2009, p. 40)

Although Barnes does not here use the term 'critical realism', we can see the same emphasis on RE evaluating questions of 'ultimate truth', which he sees as the most important aspect of each religious tradition. Barnes, like Wright, is keen that RE avoids imposing any 'relativist religious identity that follows from liberal theological assumptions' (p. 42). The agenda he proposes for the subject is that rather than looking for similarities between religious traditions, religious educators must take religious difference seriously, and to do this means 'to acknowledge the importance of beliefs and doctrines' (ibid.). He argues that religions themselves see belief as central, and that any responsible education must acknowledge this. The task therefore for religious educators is to enable students to evaluate, differentiate and choose, using rational argumentation, between the truth claims made by the different religions. He suggests that liberal religious education has attended to the question of truth by the tacit assumption that there is truth in all religious traditions, but he is critical of such an approach, arguing that 'such a conviction actually fails both to

engage critically with the issue of truth in religion and to equip pupils with knowledge and skills to enable them to choose wisely from the rich variety of religious options that are culturally available' (p.50). He concludes that what is needed for students to be able to choose wisely, is an element of philosophy within RE, 'for it is this discipline that traditionally provides the skills and the framework for assessing and evaluating competing truth claims' (ibid.).

Wright has, in his more recent work, developed a more nuanced form of critical realism, 'read in partnership with alteristic forms of post-modernity' (Wright, 2004, p.63). In *Religion, Education and Post-Modernity* he sets out an agenda for a critical realist pedagogy, emphasising that critical realism should approach the question of reality in a way that admits of some degree of subjective truth and keen to avoid the perception that critical realism could claim any kind of view from nowhere. He outlines the following as the basic truth claims affirmed by critical realism:

> That there is a reality existing independently of our ability to perceive or understand it; that our comprehension of the world must take account of our own subjective engagement with reality; and that the complexity of reality requires an appropriate level of critical thinking and self-criticism if we are to penetrate beneath surface appearances (p. 55).

Wright acknowledges a sense of the contingency in the critical realist approach to the knowledge we could gain of such reality, and argues that this approach suggests 'a way of progressing towards deeper and more truthful knowledge of ourselves, and of our place in the ultimate order-of-things' (p. 64). This phrasing, and the way that the language of 'ultimate truth' and 'ultimate reality' continues to reverberate through *Religion, Education and Post-Modernity* suggests that this modified version of critical realism, still holds to the belief that there *is* an ultimate order of things, and this informs his understanding of religion.

It is interesting to see how Wright has worked Levinas and Derrida into his more recent work on critical RE. Central to his interpretation of Levinas is his understanding of alterity as a form of mystery, which might lead to a re/enchantment with the world and of theology. He sees the centrality of goodness in Levinas's writing as the recognition of the difference and space between I and Other. Wright describes this sense of goodness in Levinas's writing as 'dependent on my learning to gaze into the face of the Other and recognising the space between us as a sacred space. True morality lies not in the overcoming of difference, but rather in the celebratory vision of difference' (p. 50). What Wright seems to find most significant in Levinas is this idea of difference, 'Levinas's vision of humanity flourishing through its celebratory encounters with alterity, difference and otherness' (ibid.). He goes on to describe alterity as foundational - the 'bed-rock' for both Levinas and Derrida's thinking about 'the order-of-things' (p. 123). Wright links this to a virtue of receptivity and this appears to be an integral aspect of his overall vision for RE:

> A transformative religious education will demand that the context of learning is identified and articulated by all involved in the learning process; it will insist on receptivity towards a range of alternative accounts of ultimate reality; it will self-consciously strive to develop

appropriate levels of wisdom and literacy; and it will view the pursuit of ultimate truth as its core task. (p. 227)

This more nuanced version of critical reason provides a corrective to the excessive dominance of instrumental critical reasoning in Wright's earlier model. However, it is open to debate whether the main insight that we should draw from Levinas in relation to RE is this idea of a 'celebration of difference and alterity'. Whilst this balances earlier versions of critical realism that sought to bring all within the sphere of *my* understanding, the problem with emphasising this celebration of difference, and seeing goodness as the recognition of difference, is that it appears to neutralise the troubling nature of the confrontation with the Other, that Levinas emphasises, which is far from a celebration of difference. A reading of Levinas following Wright's interpretation is easily open to the critique of Levinas that is a central theme of Alain Badiou's *Ethics*:

> Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. Even the apparently reflexive experience of myself is by no means the intuition of a unity but a labyrinth of differentiations … There are as many differences between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself. (Badiou, 2001, pp. 25-26)

It seems, as Badiou writes, to be a given that in any classroom, or in any curriculum, that students will encounter difference, because that is just what there is. What is missing in Wright's reading of Levinas is the traumatic nature of the approach of the other, which stands at a significant distance from the 'celebratory encounters with difference' that Wright advocates, and the curvature of intersubjective space, which is what Levinas calls 'the very presence of God' (Levinas, 1969, p. 291), that signifies the other as my teacher, always higher than me, and to whom I am always already responsible. Indeed, Wright's assimilation of Levinas's thought to his critical realism appears to be a way of insulating our thought from the exposure to the other.

This outline of ideology shifts within religious education has been necessarily brief, focusing on the two most dominant trajectories of thinking within the subject. What can we therefore say about the impact that critical realism has had on the way that the subject is taught and assessed?

THE INFLUENCE OF CRITICAL REALISM

Although Wright's more recent work has been open to Levinasian perspectives on alterity, the clarity and persuasive force of his earlier work, emphasising the instrumentality of reason allowing us to grasp, or at least to move towards, 'ultimate truth', has had a significant influence on RE curricula at secondary level. Because of this desire inherent within critical realism to enable students to evaluate what constitutes ultimate truth, RE teachers spend much of their time teaching GCSE students to evaluate the various arguments that have been put forward by philosophers for and against the existence of God, the ethical debates surrounding such issues as abortion, voluntary euthanasia and genetic engineering, and students are assessed on

their ability to present rational arguments to the sort of questions listed at the beginning of the paper, carefully supported by examples and evidence.

I do not wish to suggest that students should not learn to employ critical reasoning within religious education. I would agree with Wright that some examination of religious truth claims enables students to stand in critical engagement with the religious and non-religious traditions into which they have been raised. But there must be greater attention given to the situatedness of the critical reasoner, to the fact that they stand within a certain epistemic community with its own assumptions. Although his later more developed theorisation of critical realism does pay more attention to this (Wright, 2004, p. 54), exam specifications, influenced by his earlier work, pay insufficient attention to this emphasis.

Furthermore, I would argue that the critical realist model indoctrinates students into a distorted understanding of what it is to be religious. The centrality of philosophy of religion within RE leads students to view being religious as believing that certain statements of knowledge are true. Thus, exam specifications, determining to a large extent the content of the curriculum, tend to present religion in too simplistic terms as assent to certain religious propositions. So, for example, students might read in a GCSE textbook:

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

As a discussion of religious truth, this is an understanding that members of many religious traditions would disagree with.

A further problem that might seem tangentially related to the dominance of the critical realist model, is the way contemporary issues with only marginal relevance to religion have become established on RE curricula. This is related to the desire to see some aspects of PSHE and citizenship covered within RE. However, the examination of such issues borrows critical realist methodologies and is linked to the emphasis within critical realism that students should evaluate religious responses to ethical issues. Given the decline in the percentage of the British population involved with organised religion, this might be linked to a desire on the part of examiners to make the issues covered in RE seem relevant to students. The result is that we have such topics in GCSE syllabuses as 'drug abuse' and 'religion and sport.' The following are some GCSE questions from the 'drug abuse' topic:

> Explain two reasons why some religious people use caffeine. (4 marks)

> How might the teachings of the religion you have studied affect the attitudes of believers towards drug taking in sport? (10 marks)[8]

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[8] Both questions from AQA Religious Studies, Specification B, Unit 3, June 2008.

Admittedly, it is of fundamental importance that students learn about the effects and debates surrounding drug abuse, but given that no religious tradition that I am aware of prioritises the issue of performance-enhancing drugs in sport in its moral teachings, should it be a topic that we should devote time and attention to within *religious* education? Surely trying to make the subject appealing through focusing on contemporary issues in this way undermines the integrity of the subject.

Although this overview of current approaches dominating RE at GCSE and A Level has been brief, we can see that conceptually and ideologically, the subject is not fulfilling its potential. OFSTED, in a recent report on the state of RE in British schools, has pointed out problems with the dominance of philosophy of religion and ethics within current RE teaching:

> RE cannot ignore the social reality of religion. Most of the issues in the RE curriculum for secondary pupils have been about ethical or philosophical matters, such as arguments about the existence of God, or debates, from a religious perspective, about medical ethics or the environment. It has been unusual to find questions about religion's role in society, changing patterns of religion in the local community, or the rise and decline of religious practice. It now needs to embrace the study of religion and society. (OFSTED, 2007, p. 40)

Given that Barnes seems to be arguing that more philosophy needs to be on the RE curriculum, not less, I am left wondering whether he has read the whole OFSTED report, since he cites other sections from the same report in his work, and if so, on what does he base his assertion that there needs to be more philosophy in the RE curriculum? As a teacher of RE, over the last eight years I have witnessed a decisive shift towards the philosophy of religion in RE, reflected in the exam syllabuses at GCSE and A Level. This OFSTED report indicates that I am not alone in my unease at the growing dominance of philosophical approaches towards religion.

There is still work to be done, therefore, in clarifying the aims of RE. At the heart of both the phenomenological and critical realist models is a desire to avoid religious indoctrination. The phenomenological model was a movement against indoctrination within the confessional form of RE, in which students were instructed in the Christian faith, rooted in study of the Bible. The critical realist model likewise aims against indoctrination, by enabling students to develop rational autonomy through critique and evaluation. It also aims against the form of indoctrination that Wright sees in operation in the phenomenological approach: a liberal religious indoctrination that approaches all religions as reducible to a shared set of social structures, beliefs and practices, such as rites of passage and founding myths. Clearly, this desire to protect students against religious indoctrination is important, however, it is my contention that the dominant critical realist model nevertheless might lead to a more subtle indoctrination into students seeing the nature of religion as a matter open to straightforward evaluation and justification.

So what can and should be done?

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OTHERWISE?

In a recent sixth form lesson, I asked students who were considering applying for theology at university to write down and then discuss their understanding of what the subject involved. One of my students, who identifies himself as a Christian, described Theology as, 'the study of the transcendent and inarticulable Good, through examining how people from different religious traditions and faith communities have responded to and attempted to articulate this transcendent.' Given that many students of theology do not believe there to be any 'transcendent and inarticulable Good', it is possible to take issue with his definition, nevertheless, his understanding of theological study highlights the currently impoverished state of RE in contrast.

The problem is bound up with the disputed concept of 'religion' itself. While the phenomenological model is problematic, paying insufficient attention to the otherness and opacity of the object of study, the critical realist model distorts religion into a matter of true v. false knowledge (the question of what really is the 'ultimate truth', to use Wright's terminology). Both approaches tend to imply a transparency of religion, either in terms of religious belief or in terms of its lifeworlds, belying the complexity of religiosity, which as my student suggested, for those within religious traditions is founded on what is beyond articulation and, arguably, rational justification.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a definition of religion that could be used as a basis for clarifying the aims of religious education: the very attempt to give a definition of religion is itself contested, with interpreters of religion offering variously lexical, empirical and stipulative theories of religion.[9] What I wish to do in the remainder of this paper is to provide a brief sketch of the way that Levinas and Žižek describe religion in order to consider how this might open up an alternative approach to religious education that breaches the interpretative closure of the phenomenological and critical realist approaches. Before doing so, it is worth noting that the claims that Wright, in his earlier work, and Barnes make about religions being primarily about truth claims is not an understanding of religion that would find ready acceptance amongst many theorists of religion. Consider, for example, William James's classic examination in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James acknowledges that any definition of religion will be oversimplified, because of the very diversity of religion, but seems to point towards ritual as at one level the most basic element of religion: 'Worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization, are the essentials of religion in the institutional sense' (James, 2002, p. 28). On another level, James sees the basis of religion as relating to what he describes as 'the inner dispositions of man': 'his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness' (ibid.). Friedrich Schleiermacher would likewise have disagreed with the idea of religion primarily pertaining to truth claims, doctrines and beliefs, describing religion as 'the sensibility and taste for the infinite' (1996, p.23). Whilst both Schleiermacher and James's 'definitions' are problematic – it is, for example, difficult to consider 'feeling' as in some way separable from the frameworks of

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[9] Thomas Tweed highlights the lack of agreement amongst sociologists of religion as to the nature of religion: '"It was once a tactic of students of religion," Jonathan Z. Smith argued…, "to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba's *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task."' (Tweed, 2006, p. 41)

language and interpretation within which we make sense of feeling – they nevertheless highlight that the claim that religion is a matter of 'ultimate truth' that could be established through rational evaluation is already contested. Wright himself acknowledges this and does admittedly want in his later work to stress that 'ultimate truth' / 'ultimate reality' might always lie beyond rational argument. But his theological critique of Schleiermacher does seem to posit a theory of truth at odds with what Levinas will wish to claim, for example arguing that 'the major problem for romantic forms of theology was how to distinguish between subjective experience of the inner self and objective experience of the divine' (2004, p. 77).

Let us now examine Levinas's understanding of religion, upon which Wright has himself drawn. I will outline how Levinas's understanding of religion is in some ways (uncharacteristically) similar to Žižek's writing on the nature of belief, and show how their understandings provide a stark challenge to the implicit theorisations of religion at the heart of the currently dominant models of RE we have considered. In relation to these models, it should be noted that, in a sense, one could describe Levinas as working within a phenomenological tradition: he was taught by both Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg, and in *Otherwise than Being*, he describes his own work as 'in the spirit of Husserlian philosophy'. He explains this approach as follows:

> Our presentation of notions proceeds neither by their logical decomposition, nor by their dialectical description. It remains faithful to intentional analysis, insofar as it signifies the locating of notions in the horizon of their appearing, a horizon unrecognized, forgotten or displaced in the exhibition of an object, in its notion, in the look absorbed by the notion alone. (Levinas, 1981, p. 183)

Yet it is open to question whether Levinas's own work can really be seen as remaining within phenomenology. If the intentionality thesis, which sees every mental phenomenon as directed towards its object, is axiomatic within phenomenology, then, as Simon Critchley suggests, 'Levinas's big idea about the relation to the other person is not phenomenological, because the other is not given as a matter for thought or reflection … Levinas maintains a methodological but not a substantive commitment to Husserlian phenomenology.' (Critchley, 2002, p. 8)[10] It should be noted therefore that there are significant differences between Levinas's phenomenological or post-phenomenological project and the way in which phenomenology has been used within the study of religion, as becomes apparent in the way in which Levinas articulates his understanding of religion. To this, let us now turn.

In an essay on Franz Rosenzweig, Levinas describes religion as follows:

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[10] It should be noted that Levinas's challenging accounts of religion and ethics have much to recommend them to RE teachers beyond the concerns that I am articulating in this paper. Terry Eagleton's *Trouble With Strangers* (2009) provides a very clear introduction to the central ideas of Levinas's philosophical project within a larger examination of the history of ethical theory that should be of interest to all RE teachers who teach A Level courses on ethics, and also provides an excellent introduction to Jacques Lacan, upon whom Žižek draws heavily.

> Religion, before being a confession, is the very pulsation of life in which God enters into a relationship with Man, and Man with the World. Religion, like the web of life, is anterior to the philosopher's totality.
>
> Life or religion is simultaneously posterior and anterior to philosophy and reason, reason itself appearing as a moment in life. I insist on this fact: unity is not here the formal unity of God, Man and the World, which would be produced beneath the gaze that adds something even as it reduces, through the synthetic thought of a philosopher who remains outside the elements. (Levinas, 1990, p. 189)

In a sense, for Levinas, religion is concerned with truth, but this is a very different notion of truth than the idea of an 'ultimate truth' glimpsed through rational argument as in the critical realist model. For Levinas, religion concerns the transcendent in 'relationship with Man, and Man with the World.' The transcendent, as Levinas insists, does *not* fall within the philosopher's totality, and therefore the attempt to study religion through critical evaluation of its truth or falsity, appears nonsensical. We have seen how examination specifications in RE are preoccupied with attempts to prove or disprove God's existence. This is to miss the very nature of religion, as emphasised by Levinas. Adriaan Peperzak puts this point well:

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

For Levinas, God is what bursts open the 'omnipotence of the *logos*, of the *logos* of system and simultaneity' and instead manifests 'transcendence as signification, and signification as the signification of an order given to subjectivity before any statement: a pure one-for-the-other.' (Levinas, 1986, p. 78)

Levinas makes it clear that God cannot be thematised and indeed is revealed as what could never be brought to presence in language in illeity. The term illeity is linked to the Latin demonstrative *ille, illa, illud* and as with this pronoun, designates something brought to my attention, yet at a distance. Michael Smith suggests that this term is used by Levinas in contrast with the notion of reciprocity in a dialogical relationship:

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

This dense concept of illeity is used by Levinas to invoke the refusal of reciprocity and totalisation and means that slipping into a relation of equality is impossible,

which means that neither I, nor my neighbour, nor the third party, can be reduced to essence or identity. Levinas uses theological terms to signify the transcendence bound up in the concept of illeity:

> This saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness. This way for the order to come from I know not where, this coming that is not a recalling, is not the return of a present modified or aged into a past, this non-phenomenality of the order which, beyond representation affects me unbeknownst to myself, 'slipping into me like a thief,' we have called *illeity*....
>
> The word God is an overwhelming semantic event that subdues the subversion worked by illeity. (Levinas, 1981, pp. 150-51)

Illeity is what allows the word God to be said, without allowing it to be thematised: 'Illeity overflows both cognition and the enigma through which the Infinite leaves a trace in cognition… It makes the word God be pronounced' (p. 162).

Levinas uses this idea to describe both religion, in a prophetic mode of voice, and the condition of subjectivity.[11] This is in some senses not so far from my sixth form student's implicit understanding of religion in his description of theology as the study of 'the transcendent and inarticulable Good'. This view of religion is ethical at its core and as such cannot be reduced to knowledge. 'Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision', Levinas argues: 'The ethical order does not prepare us for the Divinity; it is the very accession to the Divinity. All the rest is a dream.' (Levinas, 1990, pp. 17, 102)

The magnitude of the ethical demand from which divinity emerges is rather more than any 'celebratory encounter with alterity' as in Wright's interpretation of Levinas. Towards the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes how subjectivity depends upon the 'curvature of intersubjective space', in which the Other, higher than me, addresses me and looks for my response. This Levinas describes as 'perhaps the very presence of God' (Levinas, 1969, p. 291). Strikingly, and at odds with Wright's interpretation, the possibility of violence and hostility are always there within the approach in which the divinity is to be found, emphasising the difficulty implicit in all our relations with alterity:

> The true essence of man is presented in his face, in which he is infinitely other than a violence like unto mine, opposed to mine and hostile, already at grips with mine in a historical world where we participate in the same system. He arrests and paralyzes my violence by his call (pp. 290-91).

Thus we can see that for Levinas, religion stands beyond ontology and cannot be grasped by comprehension. He is critical of those versions of theology that treat transcendence or God as something that could be *understood* conceptually, as is the implicit theorisation of God within critical realist frameworks:

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[11] Further discussions of the relation between religion, education and the theme of subjectivity in Levinas's thinking are offered in Standish 2007 and Strhan 2007.

> Theology imprudently treats the idea of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology. It presupposes the logical privilege of totality, as a concept adequate to being … But transcendence precisely refuses totality, does not lend itself to a view that would encompass it from outside. Every 'comprehension' of transcendence leaves the transcendent outside … The transcendent is what cannot be encompassed. This is an essential precision of the notion of transcendence, utilizing no theological notion. (Levinas, 1969, p, 293)

Current models of RE, emphasising the importance of conceptual transparency and the ability to logically evaluate and critique the rival truth claims of religions are already misconstruing the nature of religion, if we follow Levinas.

Given his stinging (and arguably unfair) critique of Levinas elsewhere[12] and his very different philosophical positioning, it is perhaps surprising that the way in which Žižek theorises belief could also be taken to suggest an understanding of religion that cannot be reduced to knowledge. Žižek's writing on religion and Christianity in particular is highly provocative, and provides rich resources to stimulate RE teachers to consider the sites of their study in new ways.[13] In a recent book on Lacan, he suggests that it is characteristic of both religious fundamentalists and religious sceptics to reduce religious truths to knowledge: 'For both liberal cynics and religious fundamentalists, religious statements are quasi-empirical statements of direct knowledge: fundamentalists accept them as such, while sceptical cynics mock them.' (Žižek, 2006, p. 117) This view, for Žižek, misses the groundless nature of belief, which is about commitment and ethical to its core, an ethics that cannot always be justified in terms of knowledge:

> A fundamentalist does not believe, he knows it directly. Both liberal-sceptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of the term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge. Think of Anne Frank… in a true act of *credo quia absurdum*, asserted her belief that there is a divine spark of goodness in every human being, no matter how depraved he or she is. This statement does not concern facts, it is posited as a pure ethical axiom… At its most fundamental, authentic belief does not concern facts, but gives expression to an unconditional ethical commitment (ibid.).

Current models of RE, assessing students ability to present a reasoned and justified evaluation of religion are then missing the point, and indeed *encouraging* a polarisation between 'liberal-sceptical cynics', with celebrity atheists such as Richard

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[12] Žižek's most extended critique of Levinas is in 'Neighbors and Other Monsters' (2005), in which he suggests that Levinas's articulation of the neighbour in *Otherwise than Being* is fundamentally unjust. His more recent *Violence* (2009) has also suggested that the figure of the Other in Levinas's thinking can become grounds for violent exclusion. Although I argue that Žižek's attach on Levinas is unfair and based more on his disagreement with Judith Butler than on his reading of Levinas, what is at stake in his attack is interesting. For more on this debate, see Strhan 2009.

[13] Žižek has explored religion in numerous works, such as *The Monstrosity of Christ* (2009), *The Fragile Absolute* (2009), *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003), *On Belief* (2001).

Dawkins as their figureheads, and those forms of religion which do see religion primarily in terms of knowledge.

This is, as I have emphasised, not to say that critical reason is not an important aspect of RE. As Grace Jantzen writes in her critique of the dominance of an objective notion of critical reasoning in the philosophy of religion:[14]

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

The problem lies not only, however, with the dominance of critical reason, but with the language of 'ultimate truth' and 'ultimate reality' that resounds throughout the critical realist frameworks. Why is 'truth' not enough? In John's Gospel, the most exclusivist interpretation of Jesus in the Bible, Jesus is only seen to claim to be 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14.6) – even John does not see the need to use this language of ultimacy – so why do critical realists feel the need to use such language? Perhaps a better language of truth might be Alain Badiou's, in which the subjective truth of religion as a universal singularity implies the ethical commitment to a truth that ruptures former knowledges and forces new knowledges to be produced.[15] Truth here, as in the Levinasian notion of the transcendent, exceeds any knowledge of the current situation and refuses to be contained by conceptual thinking or rational argument: it is experienced as radically subjective. This is, admittedly, rather a different notion of truth than that of critical realism: what is true, for Levinas, is not just a matter of personal taste or whim, but of being called to account by the other and all the others.

Before moving on to consider how these alternative articulations of religion might enrich our understanding of the possibilities for religious education, I would wish to emphasise that I see neither Levinas nor Žižek as providing a definitive theoretical approaches to religion, and I am conscious that my account draws exclusively from a Judaeo-Christian framework. There is therefore a need for further examination of the ways in which the understanding of 'religion' implied within the ideologies of religious education has emerged from distinctively Christian hegemonic understandings of religion and spirituality, and the work of scholars such as Talal Asad and Russell McCutcheon, who have explored the way in which 'religion' as a site of study has been framed, might provide useful starting points for such analyses.[16]

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[14] An approach exemplified in current prominent philosophers of religion, such as Richard Swinburne and Brian Davies.

[15] Although Badiou is resistant to seeing events as taking place within the realm of religion, it is possible to extend his approach to argue that those within religious traditions do constitute certain occurrences as 'events' and might perceive themselves as working out the conditions of fidelity to those events in their lives. Badiou's own work on St Paul further supports this idea that it is possible to understand religion in this way.

[16] Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (1993) and McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (1997) provide illuminating analyses of how academic understandings of religion have emerged within particular historical contexts.

My aim has been rather more modest, in setting out to explore how reading Levinas's account of religion reveals the limitations of the implicit theorisation of religion within both the critical realist and the phenomenological approaches to the subject, and provides a richer account of how it might be possible to think of 'religion' otherwise.

Having considered this alternative understanding of religion opened up by reading Levinas, is it then possible to say what religious education is, or rather, what it should be today? Perhaps surprisingly, the recent OFSTED report on RE offers some clues as to a possible way forward:

> RE cannot ignore its role in fostering community cohesion and in educating for diversity. This goal has never been far from good RE teaching but the current changes in society give this renewed urgency. Pupils have opinions, attitudes, feelings, prejudices and stereotypes. Developing respect for the commitments of others while retaining the right to question, criticise and evaluate different viewpoints is not just an academic exercise: it involves creating opportunities for children and young people to meet those with different viewpoints. They need to grasp how powerful religion is in people's lives. RE should engage pupils' feelings and emotions, as well as their intellect. (OFSTED, 2007, p. 41)

Wright criticised the phenomenological model of RE as a benign form of social engineering (Wright, 1993, p. 41), and it is true that the phenomenological model did oversimplify the diversity and ambiguity of many religious traditions. The critical realist approach aimed to enable students to evaluate and critique the religious truth claims of the major world religions. However, this has led to too much emphasis on critique and evaluation as the most important approach to studying religions, with the result that religion is understood as a matter of true vs. false belief. An understanding of religion as founded on an ethical sensibility that is irreducible to knowledge, following Levinas, might provide a conceptual framework to support these recommendations of the OFSTED report. There is an urgent need, therefore, for further work to be done to tidy up the conceptual confusion about what the study of religion should involve in British schools and why it is so important, given the rise of religious fundamentalisms and violent reactions to them in Britain and elsewhere. As the OFSTED report suggests, students need opportunities to meet those with different viewpoints, to engage with them in a dialogue of openness in order to work together for a more just community.

It may be that the discussion has been proceeding at what some may find too abstract a level. Let me take a more personal turn at this point in order to reflect on ways in which some of these matters are shown in relief in my own experience. The school where I have taught for the last five years has students from predominantly secular liberal and Christian backgrounds, with a sizeable minority of Jewish, Muslim and Hindu students. Last term a colleague invited a number of girls from a Muslim school in East London to spend the day with students at our school, for them to compare their experiences of studying religion and discuss the different ways in which religion impacts on their experiences of being teenagers in London. This was the first time that this had happened in our school, and such experiences are

comparatively rare.[17] But it provided a valuable opportunity to meet and engage with those from a very different background, and for our students, from largely secular households, it provided an invaluable insight into what it might be like to live as a teenager whose religious identity is very important to them. Yet clearly within school communities themselves, difference is also *already* there, as are the opportunities for attending to this. In my school, one of the design technology teachers, a prominent figure within his local synagogue, was invited to a Year 7 RE class to explain how and why he prayed. Significantly, when asked why he prayed, he replied, 'I do not pray because I believe in God. I do this because my father did it, and his father, and his father before him. Doing this is holy for me because it carries on that tradition.' His own description here of his place within his religious tradition seems at odds with what Wright and Barnes identify as the essence of religion as related to truth claims. For this teacher, his religiosity appears to me to be bound up in an ethical demand he has experienced to carry on the tradition of his father, and his religious identity seems dependent upon the performance of rituals such as this. Prayer is usually presented in RE textbooks as primarily a conversation between the religious believer and God, but in the experience of this teacher, it is the performance of the ritual, which has come to him from outside, from those that he loved, that comes to define his beliefs about the ritual.

In addition to having more opportunities to meet with those practising different religious traditions, what is also required is a different attitude towards texts, artefacts, and other objects of study. I did not take RE for GCSE or A level – the phenomenological model in operation at the time was unattractive to me – but pursued literary subjects. In my experience of these subjects at school, we were never encouraged to engage with each text as closed and complete enough for a thoroughgoing critique, but rather read each in such a way that new meanings would emerge as we turned back to them again and again, so that I would never have claimed to have fully understood or exhausted the meaning of *King Lear*, for example. This is in striking contrast with the demands of the RE A level, in which students have so many philosophers of religion and ethics that they need to cover, that they are able to spend barely a week on each philosopher (little more than two hours of teaching), in which time they are expected to understand their theory and be able to critique it. Thus teachers have little time to give students primary texts to engage with, and if they do, there is barely time to read them, and most students rely on potted versions of philosophers of religion from textbooks. Thus, I always feel slightly shocked when I encounter a Year 13 student who can declare 'Descartes's crap', not having read anything by Descartes, but feels that since all that he needs to know of Descartes to get an A at A Level is to be able to critique the ontological argument for the existence of God, he is justified in making such a claim. It is not the student's fault that he feels satisfied and qualified with such a superficial knowledge; it is rather the fault of those who have devised such assessment criteria that privilege the ability to set up a philosopher's argument only to be able to knock it down again.

What would lead to a better religious literacy and engagement with the stories at the heart of each religious tradition might therefore be a more literary approach, where

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[17] Julian Stern also outlines a helpful approach to facilitating face-to-face dialogue between those of different faith commitments (2006, p. 33). Clearly if such approaches are used, attention must be paid to avoid exoticising difference.

the aim is a deep insight into the different levels at which stories can be read and interpreted, rather than an approach focused on mastery and critical points-scoring. In a recent article in *The Guardian*, Andrew Motion expressed his regret that students are unable to enter into our literary heritage because of their lack of understanding of the Bible and other religious texts. Although not describing himself as religious, he nevertheless sees these stories as enormously important to our cultural heritage. When asked why he is so passionate about the importance of children studying the Bible, he replied:

> Simply because it is full of terrific stories. These stories are primitive. They speak to us about human nature and the recurring patterns of human behaviour … Many of my students stumble into vaguely mythological stories in their writing. When I ask them anything about the Bible, they frankly don't know.... I do think there is a real problem with the education system that has allowed these great stories to disappear, to fade out of the diet everyone gets at school. It's an essential piece of cultural luggage.[18]

Perhaps what I am advocating, therefore, is a move in the subject more towards the approach of theology and religious studies as they have more usually been taught within liberal universities, involving a multidisciplinary approach: philosophical, yes, but also involving literary, historical, sociological and psychological approaches towards the study of religion, but with more emphasis given to attentiveness to the subjects of study, rather than just setting every belief or truth up as an object of critique.

I do not wish to suggest that students should not study philosophy of religion and ethics. Indeed, I would wish to see philosophy established as a discrete subject of study alongside religious education on the curriculum. But, the complexity of the *social* reality of religion is something that must be prioritised within RE, in a way that is not supported by the current framework. Indeed, as the OFSTED report tells of the need to encourage respect for others, we might extend this to speak of the need to teach 'a religion for adults' (Levinas, 1990, pp. 11-24) in the sense that Levinas describes, a religion of humanity that 'does not mystify the notion of the divine; it realizes that the language of God arises for us when we are aware of our responsibility to others and of the demands of justice' (Morgan, 2007, p. 345). Indeed, it could be argued that teaching RE in the way that I am suggesting might itself be seen as the practice of this type of religiosity. I do not, unlike Wright, think it possible to insist on a virtue of receptivity, in either teachers or students. But if assessment criteria and the content of the curriculum were to be changed, it might be possible to move away from the dominance of seeing religion as primarily concerned with philosophical questions about the existence of God and move towards an attitude of greater attentiveness towards the very diverse ways in which religion is found in the lives of individuals and communities. It is true that there are many members of different religious traditions who would not agree with my alternative theorisation of religion: it is a trait of fundamentalism, both atheist and religious, to see religious truth as knowledge that can be argued for and justified. But it is vital that religious education *also* presents a picture of religion otherwise, a religion for adults.

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[18] From http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/feb/17/bible-religion-andrew-motion, accessed 17.02.09

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