

Reduction without Reductionism: Re-Imagining Religious Studies and Religious Education

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Abstract

School and university teachers of Religious Studies are caught between presenting the irreducible complexity of their subject matter, and the practicalities of selection and simplification that pedagogy entails. The entanglements of culture, politics and ideology within RS, along with the colonialist and hegemonic histories of the subject, make questions of just representation especially acute. How can educators be inclusive and selective? The central strand of my argument concerns the ‘translation’ between the academic study of religion in universities and religious education in schools. I argue that this translation necessarily involves ‘pedagogical reduction’ – the selections and simplifications that teaching involves – and that we must carefully consider the basis upon which we form our pedagogical reductions. Establishing that basis depends on interdisciplinary dialogue between scholars of religion, scholars of education, and educators more generally. I argue that there is a conspicuous disconnection between critical scholarship in the scientific study of religion(s) and critical scholarship in the ‘educational sciences.’ I justify the need for, and outline the nature of, dialogue between these scholarly communities through consideration of four interrelated pedagogical concepts that I offer as preliminary outlines towards the development of more robust and systematic criteria for developing a religious education that is simultaneously inclusive and selective.

Keywords

Religious Education; Religious Studies; Reduction; Pedagogical Reduction; World Religions Paradigm; Academic Study of Religion

Introduction: You get an 'ology.....you're a scientist!

In a memorable British TV advert from the 1980s, a doting grandmother phones to congratulate her grandson on his exam successes only to be told “I’ve failed!”¹ Grandma’s faith is momentarily tested but then quickly restored when she discovers that the boy has, in fact, passed something: pottery – *‘Anthony, people will always need plates’*; as well as sociology – *‘You get an ‘ology...you’re a scientist!’* Certified with his ‘ology, the high school failure/graduate not only inhabits a social world, he is now accredited as having second-order understanding of it. Understanding science, and the process of becoming a scientist, in terms of establishing a second-order knowledge of some phenomena has preoccupied *religi-ology* (aka Religious Studies) for as long as the scientific study of religions has existed.² What does it mean that second-order reflective imagination about ‘religion’ should be the “central preoccupation of any student of religion” (Smith 1988a, xi)? What are the implications for the study of religion(s) in schools?

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NK5-2fPyCjA>

² Arvin Geertz’s (2004) historical analysis locates an important starting point for the study of religions approach in the second half of the 19th century with the work of Max Müller, whose famous dictum “he who knows one knows none” presents a foundational formulation of this second-order knowledge (see Alberts 2007, 1.1.2).

Making any general statements about RE in schools is problematic; it is a highly diverse curriculum area, influenced by the national and local cultural, historical, political and religious contexts (Hull 2002; Berglund et. al. 2016). The capaciousness of RE – that it can include learning about and learning from religion, as well as understanding aspects of philosophy, ethics, citizenship as well as contributing to the personal and existential growth of children – contributes to the challenges that the subject faces. Conroy et. al. (2013) have argued that RE in England and Wales has been freighted with numerous competing imperatives such as religious literacy, multicultural awareness, philosophical understanding, moral development, understanding heritage, sex and relationship education, and so on. This goes some way to explain the declining state and status of RE over recent years³ leading to existential questioning not so much *within* the RE classroom, but *about* the future of RE (see Castelli and Chater 2017). Recent calls to reframe – not least through renaming the subject of RE to ‘Religion and Worldviews’ (see CORE 2018), reflect widespread demands that the subject be fundamentally rethought (Hannam et. al. 2020). What is striking is that these discussions seldom draw on the latest developments in the academic study of religion.⁴ When it comes to justifications for RE in schools, the argument that RE ought to be justified by its status as a science, or that discuss the ‘second-order’ nature of the study of religion(s), is seldom made.⁵

³ A 2018 Yougov survey found that in England RE is considered one of the least important school subjects (Smith 2018).

⁴ See Cush (2020) for an example of work that attempts to consider the implications of the CoRE report in light of recent debates within the academic study of religion(s).

⁵ For instance, Janet Orchard (2020) has recently reviewed the complex history and context of RE in England drawing on three justifications for RE proposed by Michael Hand: the ‘possibility of truth’ justification; the moral justification; the socialisation justification. The argument does not explicitly discuss the idea that RE is a (human) science with inclusion in the curriculum justified on this basis, though conceivably the ‘possibility of truth’ justification grounds RE in science. Orchard shows that it would be unrealistic to “include every reasonable philosophical possibility of truth account on the curriculum, new materials and innovative curriculum development that reflected for example Eastern, African and indigenous philosophies of ‘possible truth’ would need to be developed and the reasonable contribution of women appropriately recognised” (Orchard 2020, 275).

Recognising that there is a good deal of work to be done if we want to establish or justify a scientific basis for RE, Wanda Alberts (2007; 2008; 2019) and Tim Jensen (2008; 2017; 2019) have made a consistent and compelling case for basing RE on the academic study of religion(s) (hereafter shortened to ASR⁶). Their argument asserts that societies which uphold the value of scientific knowledge, and which seek to transmit scientific understandings and approaches to the world in other school subjects, ought to do the same in RE. This normative perspective seeks to bracket out much of the politics and history of RE by attempting to position the student outside of the phenomena under study. Despite reservations with this ASR-based RE, and concerns about the idea that the politics and history of the subject can be bracketed, I believe that their emphasis on the foundational nature of ASR for RE provides a renewed stimulus for rethinking RE in England and beyond (CORE 2018; Cooling 2020). ASR may not be the only legitimate influence on how RE is framed, but where the academic credentials of RE is questioned, it is important to explore how the subject aligns with academic disciplines.⁷

Rethinking the relations between ASR and RE inevitably raises questions about how we can represent religion(s) educationally, questions that go beyond what is sometimes (somewhat problematically⁸) called didactics of RE. The educational representation of religion(s) in schools is made complex by the ongoing tension between the aspiration to be

⁶ ASR refers to the 'Academic Study of Religion(s)' (Jensen 2016).

⁷ The question of whether the school subject of RE aligns with one or more academic discipline is complicated. The present article does not explore this question in detail but attempts to imagine RE as being aligned with ASR.

⁸ Alberts uses the term didactics to argue that RE didactics is in its infancy (2007). It seems to me that the problem is more complex because the very notion of didactics is widely misunderstood. In contrast to its German equivalent (*Didaktik*), the English concept of didactics is often interpreted to refer to an overly authoritarian (teacher-centred) style of teaching, and contrasted with a *Socratic* method in which the teacher's role is less direct and is more participatory. The word pedagogy has a somewhat more neutrally descriptive sense and so in what follows I have tended to refer to pedagogy (pedagogical reduction) rather than didactics (didactic reduction).

inclusive and wide ranging, while also being selective (pedagogically reductive). My argument here focuses on pedagogy: drawing on recent research in Education Studies to consider how educationalists can be inclusive and impartial in their representations in RE, while recognising the need for what I call *pedagogical reduction* (Lewin 2019; Lewin 2020a), which Jensen has rightly characterized not only as a pedagogical virtue, but as a virtue of science: “[h]ow to generalise, how to reduce, how to teach about, in principle, (almost) everything pertaining to religion as studied by the academic study of religion(s) in school” (Jensen 2019, 43).

Religious Studies goes to school: some challenges.

It is fitting that ASR as taught at universities should be contested, the basic terms of its existence being subject to ongoing critical examination (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Owen 2011; McCutcheon 2018). These analyses invite us to reconsider the framing of the subject matter and methodologies of the ASR. Those who study RS at university are encouraged to consider the complexity of the subject and to take very seriously the disclaimer found in most ASR textbooks: that the formation of the discipline around the world religions paradigm (WRP) is somewhat artificial, reflecting a particular (Western hegemonic) framing of the subject (Owen 2011; Cotter and Robertson 2016).

But what about schools? There is a considerable literature addressing the purposes, content and pedagogies of Religious Education (RE) (e.g., Grimmitt 2000; Jackson 2006; Holt 2015; Bowie 2018). Much of this literature recognizes the complexities of its subject matter and sometimes invites some reimagining of how religions could be taught in schools. And yet, where RE is taught, the gravitational pull of the WRP in forming curricula seems irresistible. It

would be hard to deny that “as elements of discourse, ‘religions,’ and even ‘world religions,’ are social and cultural facts that the Study of Religions needs to deal with” (Alberts 2016, 261).

And we shouldn’t overlook the socio-political contexts of RE:

In contexts where the communication of ‘information’ or ‘facts’ about different religions from a non-religious point of view may be regarded a huge step forward compared to the complete absence of non-confessional education about religions in many school contexts, politicians and educators may not easily be able to follow the argument for a discursive approach to religion and religions, overcoming the world religions paradigm (263).

It is not a question of *overcoming* the WRP, as though we can simply invent a new discourse, than of understanding how we work within, while also being conscious of, its constraints. The WRP is an aperture: a lens that restricts while also inviting us to take a look. Within particular educational contexts, pedagogical judgement can be exercised. In other words, many teachers know how, when, and why to employ or to complicate and subvert the textbook accounts presented through the WRP. But leaving this to the exercise of pedagogical judgement risks at least some students leaving school with a very simplified, even simplistic, account of the nature of religion(s).

Some have argued that the consequences of the challenges faced by RE in England and Wales have been declining levels of religious literacy (Conroy 2016). Others have pointed out that falls in religious literacy are just as likely to result from a widespread lack of RE compliance than what actually takes place within the classroom.⁹ Of course, how we assess

⁹ It is thought that up to one third of schools in England do not fulfil the legal requirement for regular RE classes (see Commission on Religious Education, hereafter CoRE 2018). However, it is also true that RE is routinely taught by teacher’s without higher qualifications in RS/RE: “[i]n 2018, there were around 14,600 state-funded secondary school RE and philosophy teachers. Of these 7,900 did not have a relevant post A-Level qualification” (Long et. al. 2019)

the influence of RE on *religious literacy* is affected by what we mean by it. A recent conceptual and historical analysis of religious literacy within an English RE context does not consider the role of ASR in (de-)constructing the notions that the term relies on (Hannam et. al. 2020). Why don't RE debates in England and Wales consider establishing RE on ASR? Thus, we arrive at the disconnections that this article seeks to address: firstly, the disconnection between research in study of religion(s) and research in RE; secondly, the disconnection between continental and Anglophone educational theory. Although RE can't simply be equated with religious literacy, they are connected. Yet Conroy et. al. (2013) argue that while RE 'works' it does not necessarily make students religiously literate. One might find this odd, even exasperating: after all, what does it mean to say RE works if it does not develop religious literacy? If we are to think *educationally* about religious literacy, then we should seek to affirm the intrinsic value of (religious) literacy. In other words, religious literacy should not be justified in purely social, political or economic terms, for instance for its contributions to community cohesion (Lundie 2017), countering extremism (Gearon 2013) or some other social or political goal: because it belongs to realm of education, it is autonomous.¹⁰

Religious literacy (based on ASR) is only possible through some kind of mediation between the breadth and complexity of the subject matter and methods in 'advanced' studies (the cutting edge of ASR), and relatively selective and simplified views of the subject at less 'advanced' levels.¹¹ While some educationalists reasonably question the implied linearity of this account of educational advancement (Wagenschein 2015), it is a recognisable feature of

¹⁰ Thinking educationally means seeing the value of education as being immanent to education: the value of education should not be derived solely from political, social or economic goods. In this vein, Vlieghe and Zamojski argue that education should be thought of in terms of 'absolute immanence' (2019, Chapter 5).

¹¹ Notions such as 'selecting', 'simplifying', and (more or less) 'advanced' are obviously relative and debatable. I have acknowledged those who would question the idea of a linear educational path.

the educational landscape as students move from RE at school to ASR at university.¹² Even if we accept that this linear structure is part of the contemporary practices of teaching ASR and RE, the question remains whether this linearity is part of the logic of the subject itself, and is therefore pedagogically necessary. This question is lived by those who teach RE in schools, many of whom studied ASR at university¹³ and may have embraced, or at least experienced, subject deconstruction: how do these teachers mediate their own complex understandings in representations of classroom RE? What are some of the implications of RE based on ASR? Putting to one side some of the practical challenges and consequences of attempting to make RE into a “mini-science-of-religion(s)” (Jensen 2019, 44),¹⁴ how inclusive is the ASR approach to understanding religion(s)? Does a scientific approach to religion privilege a particular epistemic approach?

The inclusivity of ASR based RE

One consequence of ASR based RE is that it could and should be taught to all students in all schools: because it treats religion impartially, so the argument goes, everyone is on an equal footing when approaching this subject of study. This, alongside the recognition of the social significance of understanding religion, means that no one should be allowed to opt out

¹² Cush and Robinson object to something like a linear progressive account of RE-RS, as though “academics at university level should cascade their superior knowledge of the subject to teachers and teacher educators who will then distil simplified versions to their pupils. This would be to take a view of the nature of knowledge that is not shared by the authors, on philosophical, pedagogical, feminist and liberationist grounds” (2014, 5). As I have argued, there is some notion of simplification going on in pedagogical reduction, so I don’t think it can be entirely discounted, though some of the grounds for how such reductions are formed, are certainly worth critical analysis (see Lewin 2020b).

¹³ One of the challenges for RE is that it is not uncommon for it to be taught by a non-specialist, or someone on the teaching staff who happens to be religious.

¹⁴ See, for instance. Brighouse (2006) for some unintended practical consequences.

(Jensen 2019). As I will argue later, the idea that the construction of the scientific study of religion(s) (ASR) is impartial needs considerable qualification, yet I broadly accept that an effort to be impartial in a qualified sense does support an inclusive form of RE. Alberts has provided perhaps the most balanced account of this view: RE can achieve inclusivity by being *integrative* (this is roughly equivalent to non-confessional: a subject for all students regardless of their religious identity) rather than *separative* (roughly equivalent to confessional: a subject for those of a particular religious tradition) (see Alberts 2007).¹⁵ This inclusivity is made possible by presenting RE as a “second-order analytical-critical discourse on religion...that may, arguably, be seen as crucial to the well-being and well-functioning of an open, secular (not ‘secular-ist’), pluralist and democratic society” (Jensen 2019, 34). One might object that this view of RE is by no means impartial because it is based on a ‘Western epistemic tradition’ (Gellner 1992, 85) which contains certain ‘secular-ist’ assumptions about how understanding religion(s) is framed (Lewin 2016). I will come to this objection in due course, but let me say now that I believe that there is something to recommend this inclusive approach because it explicitly appeals to, even if it can’t always realize, the principle of equality. As I will show later, there is a particular form of *pedagogical equality* wherein students who enter an educational space *de-identify* themselves: on entry to a classroom, their particular class, ethnic, gender and religious identities can be temporarily suspended. Notwithstanding some reservations concerning the very idea of an impartial ASR-based RE, in principle I support the

¹⁵ The confessional/non-confessional binary within RE is as widespread as it is complex and debatable. A familiarity with the some of the varieties of systems of RE around the world might lead us to question this neat division, as Berglund et. al. have shown: “these two models can only represent extremes; most systems of religious education in the real world cannot be placed neatly in either one or the other of these categories, and moreover the situation is constantly changing” (2016, 2).

idea of an integrative RE which is truly a lesson for all just as I would support inclusive mathematics or music.¹⁶

The idea of an RE curriculum for all in which everyone is equal might be theoretically appealing, but what exactly would that look like? What would be the aims? What would be taught? What criteria allow us to determine that a particular artefact, activity, text or idea does, or does not, belong to the subject matter of RE? Who decides? Despite its systematic appeal, arguing that the ASR provides the answers discounts the real socio-political contexts that shape RE (Berglund et. al. 2016) so there is more to be said here, not only politically, but also educationally.

The idea of an impartial scientific basis for any school subject should be examined carefully given the likelihood that all sorts of ideological influences are present across the curriculum (Apple 2018). Critical pedagogues draw attention to the historical and cultural hegemonies of curriculum formation: how we frame the world to the young is always shaped by convictions, prejudices and ideologies. So, if RE is “imbricated in cultural history, ideological battles, political debates, theological wranglings, and pressing social concerns” (Hackett 2007, v), it is not uniquely so. Perhaps the enduring idea of the exceptionalism of religion within culture - religion’s *sui generis* status (McCutcheon 2017) - make such imbrications more densely entangled and confused within RE than in other subjects, and thus issues of ‘just’ representation are more acute.

¹⁶ While this argument from principle may be persuasive, there are a number of practical issues with it. The influence of religious groups on the development and management of RE in England is considerable. The theoretically appealing idea that the representation of religion(s) in RE should not be influenced by the interests of religious groups is likely to meet considerable difficulties at the level of policy and practice. If these groups feel that RE is implicitly secularising, or even indoctrinating children against religion (see Copley 2005), then there is a risk that religious groups will disengage from state sanctioned RE in schools and will establish private forms of (wholly unregulated) religious instruction. My thanks to Janet Orchard for highlighting this considerable tension.

Related to the problem of neutrality is the problem of integrity: which theories of religion are most 'scientific'? Which methods of analysis and interpretation are most robust? Where does the scientific consensus lie? Those who argue for the scientific basis for RE sometimes speak from a broad 'continental' conception of science (*Wissenschaft*). *Wissenschaft* includes a range of concepts and methods from human, social, natural and theoretical disciplines. For some this means that general appeals to scientific methods or foundations are themselves little more than rhetoric (Feyerabend 1993), rendering the foundationalist quest for RE futile.

Given the contested nature of the 'sciences' it is fitting that scholars of RS are not in the business of simply presenting scientific theories or methods to their students, but of encouraging debate and research on the complex and contested nature of religion(s) (Cotter and Robinson 2016). The historical formations of the categories 'religion', 'religions', and 'religious studies' (Smith 1998) should in some way inform the RE curriculum as it should for ASR. This means that children should be encouraged to consider how the categories that we employ in thinking about religion(s) influence what we see. This raises a certain methodological complexity which risks obscuring an educational principle that I take to be widely overlooked: pedagogical reduction.

Pedagogical Reduction

While ASR is concerned to avoid reductionism, we can't get far in understanding a phenomena without some kind of reduction. Scientific experimentation and understanding entail abstraction and reduction, what Feyerabend once characterised as the *Conquest of*

Abundance (1999). In the context of education, forms of reduction are driven by an educational intention, and so can be defined as the activities of selection, simplification, generalisation and exemplification for educational purposes (Lewin 2019). This definition is elaborated below, but by way of entry into the concept let me present a distinction made by Tröhler (2008): research knowledge and pedagogical knowledge.

According to Tröhler, research knowledge is generated by questioning existing knowledge using verifiable scientific methods, resulting in new, but provisional knowledge. Tröhler contrasts this with pedagogical knowledge whose chief characteristic is that it is “combined, arranged and structured for the purpose of effective teaching” (Tröhler 2008, 79). The presentation of pedagogical knowledge, often in textbook form, follows certain principles: knowledge is stable, not provisional or contested; exceptions and contradictions are avoided; elements are presented in discrete parts or units; the presentation itself is often attractive or entertaining in some way. In summary, this involves “[s]election, condensation, composition, didactical structuring and streamlining for classroom instruction” (Tröhler 2008, 79). This simple sounding statement disguises the complexities involved in pedagogical representation and reduction.

Let me first acknowledge that this distinction between research and pedagogical knowledge is somewhat fluid: as soon as one attempts to communicate research findings in journal articles and other ‘academic’ fora, one is (we hope!) thinking about how to present ideas and arguments clearly, and so questions of pedagogical representation accompany all attempts to influence others through the communication of scientific research. Education is not confined to the class or seminar room, rather it extends to all efforts to intentionally influence someone’s relation to some knowledge, capacity, skill or disposition. On the other hand, pedagogical knowledge is not disconnected from research knowledge as though it is

only concerned with the practicalities of effective communication: even pedagogical knowledge is about something. Nevertheless, the distinction is useful and visible in all sorts of contexts. Tröhler discusses the Heidelberg Catechism as “a prime example of an educational work or ‘textbook’ that treats knowledge pedagogically” (Tröhler 2008, 81).

Let me also acknowledge that Tröhler’s account of pedagogical knowledge is uncomfortably juxtaposed with the presentation of religion(s) within ASR: this kind of reductive presentation of religion in the WRP is precisely the problem. If we must employ the term ‘religion(s)’ at all then we ought to keep in mind that it describes no essence; it is dynamic; its borders porous. Used as a stipulative or performative, deployed strategically or academically, the term does more than just describe; it inscribes. Now we arrive at the central tension of this essay: school and university teachers of RE and ASR are caught between presenting the irreducible complexity of their subject, and the practices of selection and simplification that pedagogy entails. Simplification is denounced *tout court* without examining its proper scope. This is illustrated, for instance in the idea that reduction is often taken to be reductionist. Elsewhere I have made a case for distinguishing reductionism from pedagogical reduction (Lewin 2020b): reductionism considers the representation to be necessary and sufficient for understanding, while a pedagogical reduction is (arguably) necessary, but is never thought to be sufficient. But as soon as we think about criteria for selecting and simplifying, we are caught up in a seeming endless demand to broaden and deepen the curriculum. As well as global-local questions (Berglund et. al. 2016), we must take account of research exposing the colonialist, racist and hegemonic histories of the RE (Joy 2001; Nye 2019), all of which make questions of just representation pressing and inescapable. The primary question is: *how can educators be inclusive and selective?* A complete answer to this question is beyond the scope of this article. However, a number of recent innovations

within educational theory and philosophy can contribute to progress here: towards establishing criteria for representing religion(s) and the study of religion(s) within educational contexts informed by recent research within both ASR and the ‘science’ of Education Studies.

Education Studies and RE

Although experienced teachers are well aware that the skilled representation of religion(s) requires subject ‘content knowledge’ (an unfortunate phrase for it tends to reinforce the unhelpful notion that education entails transmitting ‘content’) along with pedagogical understanding, it is acknowledged that the theory of pedagogical representation and reduction of religion is not well developed (Alberts 2007; Lewis and Andreassen 2016; Jensen 2017; Lewin 2020b); as Alberts puts it “the field of didactics [pedagogy¹⁷] has been neglected in the study of religions in many countries for a long time” (Alberts 2007, 2). Not only that, and recognising the broader context of Alberts’ point, it has been persuasively argued that there is no straightforward equivalent in ‘English-speaking’ educational theory for the concept of systematic pedagogy of RE (special, or subject didactics) or of systematic pedagogy for subjects more generally (general didactics) (Westbury, Hopmann, and Riquarts 2014). So, it is hardly surprising that pedagogies of ASR do not have a firm foundation within the educational sciences. Despite widespread discussion of pedagogies of school-based RE, much the same could be said of RE in schools, and this might explain the deteriorating status of RE in England and Wales.

¹⁷ See note 5.

But do we really need a ‘systematic pedagogy’ for RS or RE? Don’t we learn most from the experiences of teaching than from theoretical reflections? I concede that for those of us that teach in universities or schools, our relation to educational theory is often ambivalent. Early career lecturers are encouraged, sometimes coerced, to engage in pedagogical reflections as they embark on academic careers at university with mixed results. Similarly, it is not uncommon for students on teacher education programmes to express some impatience with theoretical analysis of education, asserting that school placements provide the most relevant educational experience. The primary dignity of practice indicates that the value of educational theory cannot be assumed, a point not lost on the founding figures of systematic pedagogy, Johann Herbart and Friedrich Schleiermacher. But theoretical reflection on educational practice is valuable where we are otherwise prone to repeat the habits we acquire through our meandering experiences. This is not the place to develop a comprehensive account of the value of educational theory vis-à-vis practice. My related purpose here is to show that some recent work in educational theory is highly relevant to both the theory and practice of teaching RE and ASR. I will discuss four interrelated pedagogical concepts: grammatization, the suspension of identity, pedagogical reduction, and exemplarity.

1. Grammatization

The concept of grammatization describes the processes by which the flux and complexity of space, time, the world and its contents becomes organized, named and defined so as to become educational subject matter; material to be studied. The process of transforming the chaos of life into the order of a system of signs is an ambivalent one; to use a

Derridean/Stieglerian term, it is *pharmacological*: it both gives *and* takes, reveals *and* conceals, creates *and* destroys (Stiegler 2010). Music, for instance, can be listened to and enjoyed; it can also be studied where the notes and intervals are interpreted and understood: “we make something that cannot be studied as such (e.g. the performed music) into a pedagogical object (e.g. the music score, the sounds of individual instruments)” (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019, 138). This scholastic operation entails the formation of a relation – a kind of *distanciation*¹⁸ – between the student and the thing. The operation takes the object out of its context of everyday use, and places it as something worth particular attention. Different metaphors describe this scholastic operation of transforming the thing into an object for study and education, a popular metaphor being to place something on the table around which students are gathered:

[i]t is being unhanded and placed on the table. That is to say, something (a text, an action) is being offered up and simultaneously becomes separated from its function and significance in its social order; something that appears in and of itself, as an object of study or practice, regardless of its appropriate use (in the home or in society, outside the school) (Masschelein and Simons 2013, 40).

Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) vividly illustrate the encoding of the continuous (e.g. music) into the discrete (e.g. notes and intervals) in their discussion of the music pedagogy of the American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein. In the case of the ‘subject matter’ of

¹⁸ In the context of maths education, Mason (2010) defines *distanciation* as follows: “The essence, as the word suggests, is a pulling back from immersion in action in the moment, what Schön (1983) referred to as *reflection-in-action* as distinct from retrospective *reflection-on-action*.” My emphasis here is less on reflection than on pulling back from an immersion in everyday usage of a thing, towards a relation where the everyday usage is disrupted so that the thing is before us, available for study.

ASR or RE, the encoding, or grammatization, of beliefs, practices, performances and texts to make them sufficiently alien that they become subject matter, is itself worthy of attention. Müller's oft-quoted dictum comes to mind: "He who knows one [religion], knows none" (Müller 1876, 14) and brings us again to the idea of a second-order analytical-critical discourse on religion. This is neither the *object* that is before the gaze of the Cartesian cogito, nor the Heideggerian object (i.e. hammer) that is only revealed when *ready-to-hand* (Heidegger 1996). A pedagogical relation is made possible through an interruption or suspension of the everyday function and context of the thing so that it can be studied. Putting something "on the table" is not without risk since what is shown is not simply there, but is a product of educational speculation, and so any grammatization must be undertaken (at least by the teacher: the one who puts the thing on the table) as self-consciously as possible.

2. *Suspension of Identity*

The suspension of the object from its everyday context is mirrored by another suspension: that of the identity of the student. Masschelein and Simons (2013) argue that gathering students around the thing (the subject matter) establishes (or realizes) educational equality because the encounter with the subject suspends identity and realizes equality:

[t]he equality of each student is not a scientific position or a proven fact but a practical starting point that holds that 'everyone is capable' and thus that there are no grounds or reasons to deprive someone of the experience of ability, that is, the experience of 'being able to'. This experience not only means that someone can detach from his or her normal position (children become students/school children), but also that

something can be detached from its normal use (material becomes subject matter...)
(Masschelein and Simons 2013, 61).

Upon entering 'school', not only is general capability realized, but a related suspension of identity takes place, sometimes called de-identification: "[t]hat the sphere of education is one of de-identification is well illustrated... by looking at the Latin genealogy of the word "pupil". *Pupillus* means orphan... When someone enters the school, s/he leaves behind her/his family, social, economic, religious, etc. identity" (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019, 48). This idea of a temporary suspension before subject matter applies to all subjects in general, though it could be argued that there are particular resonances with RE because of the significance of (non)religion for identity:

[RE] also 'brackets out' the religious or non- or anti-religious backgrounds of RE teachers as well as of the pupils. When entering the RE-classroom... pupils enter not as Muslims, Christians, atheists, or the like. They enter as pupils, and the teachers enter as RE-teachers trained at ASR departments. One of the main aims of an ASR based RE is exactly this: to de-familiarize pupils with familiar (be it their religious notions or commonplace notions) notions, and to teach them how religion(s) may be approached in other ways. In ways other than theological, religious or life world ways, in ways developed by the secular academic study of religions (Jensen 2016, 78).

Among educators this approach may seem controversial because it appears to move away from a child-centred focus on the particular needs and dispositions of the learner. Presented as a temporary suspension of identity, does this risk denying some essential feature of the

child's personhood, or stalling the processes of subjectification (becoming a subject)? Moreover, it appears to be predicated upon the perhaps naïve supposition that such bracketing is possible, or that what is suspended is not (surreptitiously) supplanted by some other ideology: e.g. that de-identification leaves a child vulnerable to influence by an illegitimate religious or political influence. Thus, what is presented as impartial is regarded (rightly or wrongly) with suspicion.

Perhaps the most serious objection to the notion of suspension of identity is not that it is impossible to achieve, or that it attempts to install another identity, but that the very idea is expressed by those for whom identity can, for a period, be safely unhitched because they already inhabit such privilege that nothing is particularly at stake in this gesture. The white male European academic can speak of suspension of identity precisely because they occupy a place in which such experiments are safe. Where the migrant child's religious, cultural and ethnic identity may already feel threatened, the expectation that this be suspended as an educational gesture might seem profoundly insensitive. Despite these objections, I want to hold to the possibility of an equality before the thing, an equality that does not trample on identity, but invites the subject matter forward to take centre stage.

3. Pedagogical reduction

Earlier I introduced pedagogical reduction, a concept which can scarcely be separated from grammatization and suspension. Ever since Johan Comenius's hugely influential general picture/textbook for children *Orbis Pictus*, published in 1658, the idea of presenting an account of the whole world, through a selective combination of text and image, has been

fundamental to the development of modern education. As the complexity of culture has increased, and the very idea of encompassing the world's knowledge into a single encyclopaedic representation was surrendered, societies responded by extending the time needed in education and compressing the curriculum in order to cover more with less. Pedagogical reduction becomes all the more essential given the sheer scope of things that might be learned. I understand pedagogical reduction as a generative constraint: a way of constraining attention on something in order that it can come into view. It is worth noting the twofold aspect of the term: it refers both to the processes and activities of focusing the attention of students on particular things (i.e. selection; simplification; generalisation), as well as the objects that result from those processes (i.e. textbook; museum exhibit; balance bike) (Lewin 2019; Lewin 2020a). Recall Tröhler's claim that the Heidelberg Catechism is a prime example of the presentation of knowledge. With this in mind, it is instructive to consider the way that the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary website presents this Catechism:

The Catechism summarizes the major teachings of Holy Scripture in one hundred and twenty-nine memorable questions and answers. Simple yet profound, as well as concise yet sufficient, the Catechism has been appreciated by young and old alike as one of the most clear, helpful and comforting guides into all the spiritual treasures of the holy gospel (An Ageless Summary of an Everlasting Comfort 2019).

Note the surprising claim that the Catechism is 'sufficient': this appears to be more reductionism than reduction. Is it really enough for salvation? In fact, the website goes on to explain that it is no replacement or substitute for Scripture. The Catechism has been represented in many visual-pedagogical forms, from posters to cross-stitch. For many

Christian educators it distils the essence of the gospel, elides theological controversies, and meets the student where he or she is.

Forms of reduction apply across the curriculum, going beyond school to educational influences across the life course; an interesting example is the child's balance bike which enacts pedagogical reduction through eliminating certain complexities like braking and gears (see Lewin 2019). The 'textbook' form of the pedagogical reduction is the textbook, because it is designed to select, simplify and engage (Friesen 2017). The pedagogical reductions of textbooks tend to present simplified concepts: as stable, not provisional or contested; exceptions and contradictions are avoided; elements are presented in discrete parts or units; the presentation itself is often attractive or entertaining in some way. I have also noted how contemporary scholars of religion are at pains to point out the problems with precisely these kinds of reductions of religion(s). Since I argue that we always use pedagogical reductions (they are unavoidable at some level), a robust theory can help us do it better by defining criteria by which such reductions are developed and deployed. It is vital that such theory take account of a wide range of critical voices: feminist, post-colonial, anti-racist, queer and other voices must be engaged in developing criteria towards inclusive pedagogical representations and reductions. But how do we square this circle: how can we represent everyone fully and inclusively, while being selective?

Criteria for selection are determined partly by educational intentions: what do we want the students to learn? The assumption that students need to acquire a breadth of knowledge in all the 'world religions' through an encounter with each is increasingly questioned. Rather we might prefer to dive for pearls (Korsgaard 2020). In other words, we can move away from conceiving inclusion in terms of breadth of scope, and move in the direction of particular pearls: keys to the overall purpose of RE. For instance, if we are not

beholden to the assumption that the primary purpose of RE is to ensure children have a knowledge of a wide variety of religious traditions – a ‘content’ view of RE – then we might consider the selections and simplifications in more creative ways. Studying religions might then be as much about the existential inquiry of the self (as in becoming a subject, or *subjectification* to use the language of Biesta (2020)) as it is about learning *content*. RE may be fundamentally reflective, concerned with the development of something like *historical consciousness* (the awareness that my own historical circumstances are the product of considerable contingency, and that, therefore, the categories I use to understand others are themselves contingent). Learning about religions then becomes a mode of self-inquiry intended to alienate the self from its own self-assured historical (and religious) conditions. In this context we could refer to the notion of encountering the self through alienation of the self (von Humboldt’s notion of *bildung*) (see Kenklies 2020). I am tempted to agree with Jonathan Z. Smith where he states that self-consciousness constitutes the foremost object of study for the student of religion (Smith 1988a, xi), as long as the *other* is not thereby negated by being absorbed as a facet of the self.

4. Exemplification

If we are to *dive for pearls* which waters should we explore?¹⁹ How do we discover good examples? Examples are themselves reductive insofar as they stand, as exemplar, for a number of instances. In selecting examples, we may be too attached to the waters and shorelines with which we are familiar, those familiar waters. Korsgaard (2020) uses the

¹⁹ The once popular and lucrative practice of diving for wild pearls was disrupted by the development of pearl farming in the 1930’s. This shift suggests an interesting metaphor for the search for examples in RE: our examples discovered or farmed?

metaphor of diving for pearls in his discussion of Martin Wagenschein's (2015) influential analysis of exemplarity in education. This discussion is also remarkably relevant to scholars of religion for whom methodological considerations of the concept of exemplarity is extensive (e.g. Sutcliffe 2016; Kidd 2017; Ritchey 2019).

The selection of examples is a skill that ought not to be left to amateurs (Smith 1988b). Part of the importance of examples is their ability to distil, by standing for many as well as offering 'entry points' into an otherwise overwhelmingly abundant domain. Wagenschein suggests that the initial entry point (*Einstieg*) into a subject ought not to be just a simple element onto which more knowledge can be piled, but is more like an aperture, a perspective which focuses attention but also allows a glimpse of the whole. Korsgaard (2017, 165) offers the following summary: "we do not need to begin at the bottom of the 'knowledge pyramid' and work our way to the top. Rather, we should begin at what may be a complex problem or object that can challenge the student's spontaneity, regardless of their prior knowledge about the subject. It is about gripping and maintaining the student's attention, rather than beginning a process of knowledge accumulation."

Beyond the pedagogical insight that the straight path is not always the best, the educator's choice of example(s) is naturally driven by considerations of what it is that they want the student to learn. The quality of the example is related to its generalisability, but then what general principles are in view? I have already suggested historical consciousness might be one principle on which pedagogical reductions are used: how examples reveal/reflect back our contingent historical, social and religious circumstances. I have to think carefully about my own framing of a subject through the examples I choose. It is my responsibility to take steps to reflect on, encounter, and perhaps counter, my own assumptions and prejudices, even while recognising that there is no complete escape from prejudice.

The aspiration for an all-encompassing RE curriculum, one that is fully inclusive of the complex and multifaceted traditions and cultures that form our political, cultural and social communities, is hard to resist. But teachers will become exhausted by the relentless responsibility to add more to the knowledge pile. Knowing how and why to make selections and to exemplify is more important than ever. Thus, in re-thinking RE a vital first step is the development of inclusive criteria.

RE in Context: the CoRE Report

I now turn to some brief and selective reflections on the educational implications of the influential report by the Commission on Religious Education (CORE 2018) on the subject in England and Wales.

Among the recommendations of the report are the following: changing the subject name from Religious Education to ‘Religion and Worldviews’; setting out a ‘National Entitlement’ of what all children should learn in RE; increasing national oversight of the curriculum while maintaining local and regional context and influence. Among the wider RE community, the report has been taken up enthusiastically by a many academics and practitioners (Cooling 2020; Benoit et. al. 2020), though this has not yet resulted in significant changes to RE policy in England and Wales. Academics of RS in England, such as Wendy Dossett, Suzanne Owen and others, have reacted to the report with cautious optimism.²⁰ The optimism partly reflects the fact that the report emphasizes the complex and dynamic nature

²⁰ Miller et al. (2018). See also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P75lbSO6i64&t=20s>.

of religion and worldviews. It recognizes the challenges of representing diverse religious and non-religious worldviews while cautioning against simply expanding the logic of the world religions paradigm to include non-religious worldviews (such as humanism and atheism): not only are we encouraged to move beyond thinking of religion in terms of 6 major world religions, but the report emphasises the need for children to problematize the categories of religion.

The National Entitlement identifies the kind of content that RE must draw from:

Programmes of study must reflect the complex, diverse and plural nature of worldviews. They may draw from a range of religious, philosophical, spiritual and other approaches to life including different traditions within Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism, non-religious worldviews and concepts including Humanism, secularism, atheism and agnosticism, and other relevant worldviews within and beyond the traditions listed above, including worldviews of local significance where appropriate (CoRE 2018, 13).

While rooted in certain (arguably hegemonic) constructions of ‘different traditions’, this statement recognizes the broad domain of the subject without specifying exactly what should be taught. Through the concepts of personal and institutional worldview, the report also emphasizes a significance not only to learning about other cultures, but that learning about other traditions is part of self-inquiry and formation:

It is one of the core tasks of education to enable each pupil to understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview. This is a whole-school responsibility and

the explicit, academic study of worldviews is an essential part of it. Through understanding how worldviews are formed and expressed at both individual and communal levels, the ways in which they have changed over time, and their influence on the actions of individuals, groups and institutions, young people come to a more refined understanding of their own worldview – whatever this happens to be – as well as those of others (CORE 2018, 5).

Here the focus on developing the child's worldview can be interpreted in terms of self-formation through *historical consciousness*: that through seeing how other social formations (cultures, religions, communities etc) operate, one gets a sense of one's own historical conditions and contingencies. Once insight into these conditions arise, one is in a better position to reflect on the historical conditions and contingencies of one's own worldview as well as one's upbringing: the ways one's worldview come into *view*. Setting such historical consciousness as a key aim of RE moves it somewhat from a focus on content (beliefs, texts, rituals, etc. of particular traditions) which will always struggle to be comprehensive and inclusive enough, to a process of learning about difference not only to understand some 'other', but to reflect on oneself. The CORE recommendations contribute to reframing RE in this direction. Here pedagogical reduction cautions against the aspiration to completeness, but to invite students to see how their understandings of self and other are framed by certain categories, histories and contingencies. This is still too abstract to define the 'National Entitlement' but I hope my brief reflections offer some indications of how one can approach developing RE based on criteria that are inclusive but also appropriately selective: without the impossible demand to be comprehensive.

Conclusion

A central strand of my argument has been that the ‘translation’ of ASR to RE necessarily involves pedagogical reduction, so we must consider carefully the basis of our reductions. Establishing that basis depends on an interdisciplinary encounter between scholars of religion, scholars of education, and educators more generally. Noting a conspicuous disconnection between critical scholarship in ASR, the ‘educational sciences,’ and RE, I have attempted to justify the need for, and outline the nature of, encounters between these scholarly communities through consideration of four interrelated pedagogical concepts that I take to be preliminary to the development of a set of more robust and systematic criteria for being inclusive and selective in representing religion(s) in ASR and RE. Given the colonialist and racist histories and contexts of the subject, the recent focus on the limitations of the WRP, and the current crises of RE in places like England, greater dialogue between the ‘sciences of education’ and the ‘sciences of religious studies’ might be worthwhile. This essay calls for these interactions not only as a theoretical exercise, but as a dialogue with practical consequences for how we represent the world to the young.²¹

This preliminary discussion has only touched on a number of potential problems and criticisms. Jensen (2019, 34) acknowledges a potential criticism of developing ASR based RE: that establishing ‘science’ as a foundation may be hegemonic because it appears to belong to the dominant Western epistemic tradition. Jensen doesn’t seem to offer much of a response

²¹ How we represent the world to the young, and how the young take up the world are two quite different matters. I argue (with Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019) that standing for our representations (while acknowledging their limitations) is not an attempt to conserve or reproduce the status quo, but to offer up the world to be taken forward by the next generation in unprecedented ways.

to this significant criticism. My own preliminary reflections on this criticism are as follows: we can interpret awareness of, and reflection upon, this predicament as itself part of a properly developed ‘scientific’ enterprise (in the tradition of *Wissenschaft*: where the human sciences and the hermeneutics of the human condition are recognized). This means that the ongoing methodological debates within ASR are interpreted as part of the science of RS, as can be seen within a number of contemporary discussions (Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 2018; Führding 2017; Črnič 2019).²² ‘Science’ may not be entirely impartial, but nor is it as methodologically univocal as some concepts of ‘scientific method’ might suggest. Those with an interest in discussions about the future of RE should consider the relevance of an ASR-based RE to their context. Concerns about the hegemony of the Western epistemic tradition may not be particular to RE, but research suggests that RE is particularly embroiled in colonialist and racist histories (Nye 2019), and so these concerns must be central to how the subject is re-imagined.

Being an interdisciplinary ‘scientist’ of religion and education myself²³, reflection on the limitations of my interpretations and understandings are ongoing: my reading is bound to be (unintentionally!²⁴) partial, selective and no doubt at times simplistic. My particular framing of RE and ASR reflects my own (somewhat idiosyncratic and often implicit) intellectual encounters and methods. Although I have been trained as a teacher of secondary RE in England, and have a rather brief teaching career in that context, I don’t have the recent and relevant classroom experience of RE that a full account of the foregoing argument

²² This account may be optimistic. The capacity of a field to be self-reflective in this way is limited and the academic study of religion is arguably not the most progressive of sciences.

²³ It is interesting to ask whether either Education Studies or Religious Studies amount to disciplines or whether they are better understood as fields in which certain disciplines (e.g. Sociology, History, Psychology) operate. This consideration is beyond the scope of this essay.

²⁴ I would not insult the intelligence of the reader by suggesting that my own shortcomings are pedagogical strategies!

deserves. But, whether in curricula or in life, selections are inevitable. Moreover, I must acknowledge that there are other (empirical) approaches that one could take to the issues of pedagogical representation of religion, where it becomes appropriate to ask different questions, e.g.: What are the effects of certain pedagogical representations and reduction?; How do teachers navigate the tensions between inclusion and selection? and so on. That said I take the theoretical work of rethinking RE seriously and hope this argument offers some indications for the development of criteria for how we reimagine ASR and RE.

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