

# Does a religious universalism haunt secular religious education?

David Lewin 

Strathclyde Institute of Education, University of Strathclyde, 16 Richmond Street, Glasgow G1 1QX, UK

Corresponding author. E-mail: [david.lewin@strath.ac.uk](mailto:david.lewin@strath.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary theories of non-confessional religious education (RE) imagine the subject as inclusive and non-indoctrinatory. Any latent confessional tendencies towards universalism—encouraging or promoting a singular religious vision—have been exorcised within secular, liberal education systems. But can universalism be so easily avoided? In this article, I argue that some forms of universalism are unjustified, while others are educationally inevitable. The argument acknowledges that failures to distinguish between different forms of universalism lead to confusion about the purposes and justification of RE, and contribute to the poor status of the subject in schools within England and Wales. Knowing when, how, and why universalism operates educationally can help to improve all kinds of education, particularly RE. This article is part of a suite of articles, titled ‘Universal Individuals’, which explore the relations and tensions between forms of universalism (political, civic, philosophical) and individualism.

**KEYWORDS:** religious education, universalism, science of religion, self-consciousness, confessional, interpretive, phenomenological

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary theories of non-confessional religious education (RE) imagine the subject as being inclusive and non-indoctrinatory. Any latent confessional tendencies towards universalism—loosely defined as encouraging or promoting a singular religious perspective as though it should be universally adopted—have been exorcised within secular, liberal education systems. But can universalism be so easily avoided? In this article, I argue that some forms of universalism are unjustified, while others are

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educationally inevitable and so justifiable. The article attempts to indicate which forms of universalism within RE are justifiable and which are not. The argument acknowledges that failures to distinguish between different forms of universalism adds to the confusion about the purposes and justification of RE, and to the poor status of the subject in schools within England and Wales. Knowing when, how, and why universalism operates educationally can help to improve all kinds of education, especially RE. As educators wrestle with the ethics of religious influence, understanding the proper role of educational universalism is vital.

The aspiration to share one's religion goes by many names: evangelizing, persuading, proselytizing, brainwashing, testifying, ministering, witnessing, etc. This article focuses on the kinds of influence that may form a legitimate part of RE in state-maintained (non-faith) schools. Inspired by the theme of this suite of articles on 'Universal Individuals', the article asks whether any form of RE/influence necessitates a kind of 'universalism'. To get started, I propose that universalism is expressed as a general normative aspiration: that the educator/influencer hopes to share widely (universally) their own perspective. Although RE has largely adopted pluralistic, non-confessional forms, can we detect traces of this kind of general, normative universalism in which the educator aspires to influence everyone in a similar direction? Do teachers of religion promote a particular religious perspective? In contemporary European nations, this kind of universalism in RE is likely to be objectionable. National education systems (at least in democratic states) generally do not regard RE as a means of promoting one tradition. Beyond evangelical aspirations, are there other kinds of universal aspirations structuring RE? This question also has implications for the broader issue of whether some form of universalism exists within *any* kind of education.

But what kinds of universalism does RE entail? Do our approaches to RE reflect universalist assumptions about, for instance, the normative character of religion (that religion is fundamentally a positive force in the world), the universal spiritual quality of the child (that all children possess an innate spiritual sensitivity or capacity (Nye 2009)), or the religious destiny of humankind? Are there different types of universalism (religious, philosophical, moral) at play within education, religion, and RE? Should all forms of universalism be denounced as the legacy of European colonialism? This article argues that RE need not (and cannot) avoid certain kinds of *educational* universalism, but that it should protect students from other types of philosophical and religious universalism by encouraging a kind of 'relentless self-consciousness' (Smith 1982: xi). To explain this notion of self-consciousness, I draw on the potential reframing of RE to be found within 'critical Religious Studies'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although the term is not quite as settled as this suggests, I use the term 'critical Religious Studies' to refer to an approach to understanding the phenomena of religion in critical terms: this includes questioning definitions and usage of the category of 'religion' and related terms (e.g. faith, belief), as well as examining positive and negative effects of phenomena generally identified as religious. Wider evidence of the growth of critical approaches to the study of religion(s) can be found in the following research networks and associated publications: <https://criticaltheoryofreligion.org>, <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com>, <https://criticalreligion.org>; <https://religion.ua.edu>.

Although we should be circumspect in making generalizations about so complex and contested a concept as ‘religion’, critical Religious Studies (RS) aims to shift discussions from theological to anthropological frameworks: from conceiving of religion as a unique category that entails examination of what is ultimate, revealed, or true, to conceiving of religion as something fundamentally human.<sup>2</sup> While such a characterization of this shift in understanding religion begs many questions, I would like to emphasize that it need not be interpreted as antireligious.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it might be understood to be offering new approaches that do not presume the *sui generis* status of religion. In other words, while wanting to take the phenomena of ‘religion’ seriously, these approaches do not presume that ‘religious’ phenomena can only be understood in a specially ‘religious’ way (that is, distinct from all other human, social, or natural sciences), or that human beings are, in some fundamental sense, ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ beings requiring a uniquely religious method or mode of enquiry. But how does critical RS (or sciences of religion) decide what belongs to the category ‘religion’? The tension between the generalizing aspect of the category (in this case, ‘religion’) and instances of it cannot be avoided. Insofar as the approaches of the sciences are to identify objects as examples of categories—that is, to organize the world into a comprehensible order (or *episteme*, should we wish to acknowledge a critical note within this process)—the tendency to *generalize* (which is an aspect of universalism) puts in question the singularity of the particular. I do not propose to overcome or dissolve this tension so much as to draw attention to it.

One feature of a ‘religious’ reading of religion would be an implied universalism about the fact that something religious (precisely ‘what’, being notoriously hard to articulate) is a universal human quality: that across all cultures and geographies, what characterizes human beings is something called ‘religion’ (Hedges 2021). This reading is interpretive rather than descriptive, one that begins with grounding concepts, namely ‘religion’ (and related concepts such as ‘beliefs’, ‘practices’, ‘rituals’, and so on) with which to interpret objects, events, and actions in the world. These phenomena might be interpreted otherwise. Yet, to illustrate the predominance of certain religious concepts, ask yourself this: were we to encounter intelligent alien life, would we not be quick to interpret the ‘data’ before us through the lenses of our religious concepts? How we see has a significant bearing on what we see.

This article considers the extent to which efforts to avoid the universalism implied in ‘religious’ approaches to religion can inform contemporary theories of RE.<sup>4</sup> By seeking to offer a critical account of ‘religious’ phenomena informed by the ‘science’ of RS, some forms of critical RS risk forgetting themselves: critical approaches are themselves a product of a particular intellectual tradition. The article examines how developments

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘anthropological’ is here used in a philosophical sense (distinct from social anthropology).

<sup>3</sup> Given the diverse nature of the theoretical analysis of religion, interpreting religion as a ‘human phenomenon’ need not be read antireligiously, for instance, through a Marxian, Nietzschean, or Feuerbachian lens (Pals 2006; Hedges 2021).

<sup>4</sup> This article uses the phrase ‘Religious Education’ to refer to the school curriculum subject and the phrase ‘Religious Studies’ to generally refer to the university discipline (distinct from Theology or Divinity). The phrase ‘Religious Studies’ is also sometimes used to refer to the discipline of the scientific or academic study of religion more generally.

within critical RS may be taken up by Education Studies to consider how RE can be reframed. In short, changes from confessional to multifaith and multisecular RE reflect certain changes from theological approaches to anthropological approaches developed within critical RS.<sup>5</sup> I argue that the contemporary challenges faced by RE could be ameliorated by further engagement with theoretical and empirical research on religion as a human phenomenon, but only insofar as the ‘scientific’ foundations of critical RS do not result in the construction of another kind of universalism—one derived less from theological doctrine than from scientific dogma.<sup>6</sup>

First, I will explore the concept of universalism in general, since it is used in many ways. Through discussions of the work of Jonathan Z. Smith and Tomoko Masuzawa, I trace how forms of religious universalism have provoked critical responses to understanding religion. Since this article focuses primarily on RE, I will then examine the concept of universalism in the context of education and religion. I will consider the extent to which a kind of educational universalism is part of education itself. I argue that this educational universalism is inherited by RE. I then examine four approaches to RE to consider whether more problematic forms of universalism haunt the subject.

### ARE WE ALL UNIVERSALISTS?

Is it fundamentally human to universalize our point of view—to imagine that our experience and interpretation is basically like others’ and that we live in a common world? Or, speaking normatively, do we aspire to influence others so that they share our point of view? To address these questions, we need to have a clearer idea of what is meant by these complex notions: *universalizing* and *universalism*. To make a start, I use these terms to refer to the tendency to suppose that others experience, interpret, and imagine the world in ways broadly like mine, or at least that they ought to interpret and imagine the world as I do. I call this *philosophical universalism*. It would seem uncontroversial to claim that one important educational achievement is to overcome this philosophical universalism through the development of historical consciousness; that is, to develop an understanding that one’s experiences, interpretations, and attitudes are, to some extent, a product of historical contingencies and that there is nothing transcendental about their givenness. Recognizing the circumstantial nature of one’s context seems to be a vital educational achievement, one that forms an important aspect of becoming an individual.<sup>7</sup> As we grow up, we typically discover that not everyone likes the same things as we

<sup>5</sup> Multisecular refers to the idea that secularism is not uniform, rather it denotes many different things and is used in manifold ways (Lewin 2016). An important development that might be associated with Critical Religious Studies is recent research demonstrating the complexities contained within the categories of the non-religious, the so-called ‘nones’. Again, it is important to recognize the diversity of ‘non-religious’: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/>

A related consideration is the genealogy of RS and how RS is related to the university discipline of Theology or Divinity. That is beyond my scope.

<sup>6</sup> These challenges are many and complex, though nicely summarized by Cooling et al. (2020).

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this article, the notion of ‘becoming an individual’ might be associated with aspects of self-formation, individuation, and subjectification (Biesta 2010).

do; and yet, is there a tendency to stubbornly cling to the impression that there is something *true* (universal) about *our* (particular) tastes and proclivities, and that others really ought to see the world similarly? It requires a certain discipline to keep in mind that our preferences—for instance, for the music of the Beatles, or for Frida Kahlo’s paintings—are not universally shared, and that taste need not be valorized.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, we may learn to delight in the diversity of taste and experience. If coming to understand the relativity of our circumstances and tastes is a general feature of education, this suggests that philosophical universalism is often overcome by a kind of moral formation.<sup>9</sup>

I turn next to a kind of general religious universalism. This is broader than the universalism of confessional RE referred to in the introduction (although it does inform RE, as I will go on to show). By ‘general religious universalism’ I primarily have in mind the idea that some kind of religious feeling and sensibility is understood to be a universal feature of the human condition, and that such a feeling is to be valorized and promoted.<sup>10</sup> It is related to philosophical universalism since one’s religious feeling is interpreted as something to be shared by everyone else; something fundamentally human which, moreover, enhances our humanity. This kind of religious universalism lingers in the so-called ‘experiential’ approach to RE, which references a universal religious experience as the basis for RE. This general approach continues to influence debates about the place of religion in education and the purposes of RE (see [Alberts 2007](#): 130–41). The extent to which religious universalism haunts secular RE is complicated to assess, but given the continued emphasis in England and Wales that we ought to learn both *about* religion and *from* religion, it seems there is a case to answer: the idea of learning *from* religion is suggestive of an experiential core that belongs to the category of ‘religion’, one to which all children have access.<sup>11</sup> This experiential core forms the basis both of religious universalism as well as a certain kind of exceptionalism for RE in relation to other curricular subjects.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [Vlieghe and Zamojski \(2019a, 2019b\)](#) argue that the fundamental educational gesture is based upon the fact that teachers share their love of something.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of alienation might be invoked here: we are alienated from ourselves (our circumstances, tastes, and proclivities), and this alienation arises through an ‘educational journey’ or *Bildungsreise* (see [Kenkies 2020a](#)). In the context of religious studies, Paul [Ricoeur \(1967\)](#) considers of the formation of the (critical religious) subject in his account of the transition from what he calls a precritical first naïveté of childhood, through a critical phase to a postcritical ‘second naïveté’.

<sup>10</sup> Since this article focuses on RE, I do not engage with the larger theological universalist debates that run parallel to my argument (see [Hick 1980](#)). A number of Christian (and other) theologians could be referred to here: for example, Karl Rahner, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Kung.

<sup>11</sup> Learning ‘about’ and learning ‘from’ religion are the two ‘attainment targets’ of RE in England and Wales ([Engebretson 2009a](#)).

<sup>12</sup> In England and Wales, the exceptional nature of RE is also evident in the fact that RE is the only compulsory subject without a national curriculum, its curricula being formed by local authority groups known as SACREs (Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education). It is also the only curriculum subject from which schools are legally obliged to excuse students from attendance at the request of their parents.

A full account of the forms that universal religious sensibilities have taken across human history, which could richly contextualize this universalism within RE, is well beyond my scope.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that a universal religiosity is one explanation for a related religious universalism: the attempt to encompass all religions and philosophies into a single system or to present the many particular perspectives on or views of the world as fundamentally reconcilable (i.e. perennialism). These particular forms of religious universalism are diverse in kind, from Neoplatonism to Transcendentalism; from Theosophists to Traditionalists. One significant manifestation within the ‘Western’ tradition is found by following the thread of Protestant theology stitched by Jacobi’s and Schleiermacher’s religious psychology, which holds that a transcendent supersensible being is fundamental to human perception, feeling and reason—a thread that was woven into the psychology of religion of Rudolf Otto and many others.<sup>14</sup> Otto’s formulation of the universal experience of the *numinous* affirms the idea that the phenomenon of religious experience is universal, irreducible, and *sui generis*; this experience ‘presents itself as wholly other (*ganz Andere*) a condition absolutely *sui generis* and incomparable whereby the human being finds himself utterly abashed’ (Eckardt and Eckardt 1980: 169).

This kind of universalist religiosity has been subject to a good deal of critical scrutiny within critical RS keen to emphasize the problematic and hegemonic universalism that it presupposes. To unpack something of this critique it is worth noting a couple of key moments in it: first, Jonathan Z. Smith’s provocative claims that there is no data for ‘religion’, and that identifying something as ‘religious’ is an act of interpretation with its origins in nineteenth-century Christian philosophical theology; and second, Tomoko Masuzawa’s argument that interpreting certain ‘religious’ phenomena in terms of ‘world religions’ (WRs) is a hegemonic configuration formed by a particular European universalism.

### Some preliminary critiques of religious universalism

Debates in critical RS owe a good deal to the work of Smith, who developed the insight that interpreting some phenomena as ‘religious’ is never simply descriptive of something that exists ‘out there’, but is formative of—and as—a way of seeing; it demands attention to how we see as much as to what we see:

[w]hile there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed,

<sup>13</sup> The great variety of universalisms within the Christian religion are discussed by [McClymond \(2018\)](#). Other religions no doubt entail similarly varied notions of universalism, as well as universalist attempts to reconcile those diverse religious notions into a single universal religion (e.g. Theosophy).

<sup>14</sup> This includes Ernst Cassirer, Max Scheler, Michael Polanyi, and Susanne K. Langer in the philosophy of language; Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach, Gerhardus Van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Friedrich Heiler in the history of religions; William James and Carl Jung in psychology of religion; and Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan in theology.

this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study. (Smith 1982: xi, emphasis in original)

The counter-intuitive phrase ‘there is no data for religion’ is well known among scholars of critical RS. It points to the interpretive nature of RS: that identifying some phenomena as data for religion (as something ‘religious’) is a discursive and scholarly act. The data do not exist ‘out there’, but are produced. Of course, much the same could be said of academic study in general. But let me emphasize the striking claim that the real ‘content’ of RS, the foremost object of study, is not ‘out there’ but ‘in here’: self-consciousness. How we interpret the world and ourselves becomes the ‘content’ of RS. This is not to reduce the phenomena of religion to the subject so much as to recognize that our perspective shapes what is perceived, and that therefore observation of something is also observation of oneself.

In the wake of Smith’s influence, scholars have widely acknowledged that the interpretations of certain phenomena as ‘religion’ that form the basis of RS, and of RE, have been inventions of a particular type of scholarly activity (see, e.g. Fitzgerald 1994; Owen 2011; Hedges 2021). While this has resulted in significant re-evaluation of the study and construction of ‘religion(s)’ within RS, the effects on RE have been less marked.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it is unfair to judge with hindsight what might have been evident to scholars working in RE during the closing decades of the 20th century: that the production of RE curriculum content, particularly the foundational concept of ‘religion’ itself, reflects and privileges a ‘European’ perspective, a point I will elaborate in the following paragraphs. While many did consider this argument, multifaith RE proceeded largely on the basis of the established category of religion and associated notions (e.g. belief, faith). Thus, although a great deal of interesting and important work within RE has taken place over the last fifty years, it could be argued that it remains broadly universalist in its general categories, in the sense that it tends to allow the categories of analysis to become naturalized without giving sufficient consideration to the manner in which they privilege a particular scholarly tradition. So let me say a little more about how our concepts ‘religion’ and ‘world religions’ universalize a particular European scholarly tradition.

In her influential study, *The Invention of World Religions: Or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Masuzawa argued that there is:

a rather monumental assumption that is as pervasive as it is unexamined, namely, that religion is a universal, or at least ubiquitous, phenomenon to be found anywhere in the world at any time in history, albeit in a wide variety of forms and with different degrees of prevalence and importance. (Masuzawa 2005: 1)

Masuzawa’s study has shown some of the ways in which the new discourse of pluralism and religious diversity that took hold in the 20th century ‘neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony—formerly couched in the language

<sup>15</sup> This point possibly underestimates the considerable range of research within RE over the last fifty years that does take very seriously the complexities around the framing of religion through the WRs paradigm. See, for instance, Grimmitt 2000; Jackson 1997.

of the universality of Christianity—but, in a way, gave it a new lease ...’ (2005: xiv). She makes visible the diverse forms of universalism and the contours of its influence in WRs discourses: scholars anticipated forms of deity, practices, and texts to reflect the general categories of Western scholarship; for example, Hindus were presumed to ‘believe’ or have ‘faith’ in different ‘gods’, terms which do not readily fit this complex set of Hinduisms. These and other examples show how the categories of analysis and interpretation influenced how WRs were viewed and framed. Masuzawa’s powerful observation has shaped university studies of religion, though it seems to have had less of an impact on RE. A brief glance at recent work in RE makes it plain that curriculum ‘content’ continues to be deeply indebted to WRs, as established through what critics often call the ‘world religions paradigm’: a way of framing and taming the other in terms that are recognizable and reducible to curriculum content (Owen 2011; Cotter and Robertson 2016). The adoption of this WRs paradigm is hardly surprising. We cannot simply discard this hegemonic framing of religion(s), because ‘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). Although we may not want to jettison the discourse of WR, we can become more self-conscious in its use; as Smith points out, that self-consciousness ought to be the primary content of RE.

What are we to take from Smith and Masuzawa, and those who have furthered their arguments? They are a reminder of the basic hermeneutical structure of understanding: that how we see shapes what we see. In the case of ‘religion(s)’ this is particularly evident: the framing of certain religious categories to represent WRs shapes what is seen. We seem to be entangled in a certain religious universalism: RE often seems to presuppose that religion is not only a meaningful category, but that it is something deeply human that we all share, which seems to bind us all. Later, I will explore four prominent approaches to RE to trace how religious universalism still lingers in RE. But first, I discuss education in general, since elements of universalism belong to that concept and are inherited by the concept of RE. In brief, I argue that a kind of educational universalism is not problematic; in fact, it is inevitable.

### IS EDUCATION UNIVERSALIST?

From an educational perspective, a kind of universalism can be interpreted as having a structural role. This educational universalism is suggested by the fact that the concept of education (the one advanced in this article) implies an aspiration to something that is characterized as ‘good’ (at least in the mind of the educator), thus implying a universal. This implication is not self-evident, though an appeal to the idea of the good in, for example, Platonic philosophy (an instance of a well-known form of universalism), could offer an account of a structural relation between the good and the universal. One might object to the idea that what is good must be good for all. In what follows I address this objection, but what is initially important for my argument is to acknowledge that my definition of education,



as outlined below, entails an aspiration to the good of the student which I argue implies universalism. Thus, *educational universalism* can be distinguished from the forms of religious and philosophical universalism discussed thus far. To elaborate this, I offer a definition of education.

Education is defined here as what occurs when someone intends to improve someone's relation to something (Kenklies 2020b).<sup>16</sup> This intention to improve the relation of someone (a student) to something (content) could involve diverse forms of educational content; for instance, knowledge and understanding, skill or know-how, virtue or character trait, disposition or desire; belief or faith; self-consciousness. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but illustrative of the breadth of the notion of the 'content' of educational improvement. Any intention to improve the student's relation to something has a more or less clearly defined goal in mind. Since an educator has something in view, namely a future state (an improved understanding, skill, virtue, desire, belief, or self-understanding) then we can say that the educator is promoting that future state. Accordingly, this conception of education is intrinsically bound to promote something because it entails an intention to guide, support, or in some other way influence someone to become 'better'.

When we attempt to teach children to understand something, we promote the value of understanding. Sometimes this means that we also promote the truth of a claim being understood; at other times, this means that we promote the value of understanding without promoting the truth of the claim.<sup>17</sup> If we teach some uncontroversial historical dates as 'facts', then we promote the truth of the claims. If we teach some historical controversies or religious claims, we do not necessarily promote the 'truth' of those controversies or claims; rather, we may promote the value of studying them and the improved future state to be attained through an understanding of them. In short, promoting an understanding of religion can be distinguished from promoting religious beliefs or doctrines, or attempting to nurture someone into a particular religious faith. But in both cases, something is promoted.

In physics class, we might promote the value of a knowledge of physical forces. We might also judge it appropriate to promote certain 'facts' as true because we take them to be uncontroversial (e.g. that water slows down light). At a theoretical level, we can imagine a distinction between uncontroversial facts and controversial claims. Thus, we might approach curriculum organization by separating our educational content into categories of (uncontroversial) facts and (controversial) claims, and then arguing that facts should be taught directly because they are uncontroversial, while claims should be taught non-directively as matters that are not

<sup>16</sup> To fully defend this particular definition would demand an unnecessary detour. The basic concern here is that education is defined as an intentional act so as to distinguish it from unintended influences. Intention is important because it requires a particular ethical justification and therefore brings us into the domain of the justification of (religious) influence.

<sup>17</sup> It is a risk that by referring here to claims—a very common way of discussing education in Anglophone educational theory—we entirely lose sight of the breadth of educational content and therefore of Smith's insight that the content of education is self-consciousness, not claims *about* religion, whether controversial or not. The reader is asked to keep this in mind, though a full discussion of this would entail too great a detour.

settled.<sup>18</sup> Here, directive teaching implies that we intend the student to assent to something (i.e. the truth of the facts). RS and RE appear to be constituted by some facts (e.g. about people's beliefs and practices) and some claims (e.g. about the truth of doctrines or the effect of practices).

There are at least two complications here. First, it could be argued that all education has a directive quality, or that education could be defined in terms of being a directive process. Second, it might be objected that the (uncontroversial)-fact/ (controversial)-claim distinction does not hold up to critical scrutiny. Exploring these two complications in more detail will deepen our understanding of the universalism implied in the concept of education.

1. All education is directive. According to the definition presented here, education has an idea of what improvement looks like and attempts to influence the student towards the desired improvement. The goal of educational improvement cannot be reduced to the acquisition of uncontroversial facts partly because education is about so much more than knowledge in the propositional sense (e.g. moral education; historical consciousness). That is not to say that educators do not or should not promote certain facts. They can and should. But educators also promote attitudes, skills, dispositions, and beliefs. Many of these kinds of educational influence will not be entirely uncontroversial (e.g. the skills involved in warfare, the belief in the healing power of crystals). But where an educator believes that promoting something would be in the interests of the student, they have their justification for their educational intention. According to this interpretation, calling education 'directive' is nothing more than calling it 'goal oriented'; and since education is intentional, it will always be directive in that sense.<sup>19</sup>
2. The problem with the distinction between uncontroversial facts and controversial claims is that it very much depends upon perspective: it seems hard to find the universal perspective from which to make this distinction. That does not mean, of course, that there are no facts, or that the distinction does not exist. It clearly exists in many people's minds and influences debates about the appropriate scope and limits of moral and RE. But the way the distinction is used can tell us as much about those using it as about the things it intends to define. It should be used self-consciously, if at all.

If the foregoing arguments are at all persuasive, we may then ask: to what extent does this notion of education as directive—as necessarily promoting something—imply an

<sup>18</sup> Michael Hand makes this argument as follows: 'To teach a problem or question *directively* is to teach it with the intention of guiding pupils towards an approved solution or correct answer; to teach it *non-directively* is to withhold such guidance and to present different possible solutions or answers as impartially as possible' (2014: 79). I use the terms differently because I wish to emphasize that all education has an intention to direct towards something.

<sup>19</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the methods used to guide the student are direct, whatever that might mean. The educator might well use indirect means of influence, but that particular discussion takes us beyond our scope (see Aldridge 2014).

educational universalism? Why do I suggest, just on the basis that to educate is to promote something, that what is promoted for one student implies anything universally good for all? This link needs to be made explicit. To do this, I turn to an example: karate.

If I try to teach a child karate, do I do so because I believe that being able to practise karate is universally good? At first sight this seems implausible. I might be justified in thinking that a particular individual would benefit from such an education, but that does not mean I think everyone would. Being able to practise karate should not be called a universal aspiration. Similarly, learning to play the piano or even becoming more patient do not appear to be universalizable aspirations: whether such changes are interpreted as improvements depends on context. Some children may not be disposed to learn the piano, and the figurative ‘patience of Job’ may be excessive.

And yet these cases are complex. Teaching karate is never just teaching some movements, fitness, and forms (*kata*). At least traditionally, the teaching involves self-development (*budō*) in a more general sense, even self-consciousness (becoming aware of oneself and how one sees the world). In other words, insofar as it entails the development of the person (admittedly a broad notion), learning karate could be interpreted as having a universal dimension and might indeed be something that all people could benefit from. The aspiration to improve someone’s relation to karate, to piano, or to patience at least could be understood as an aspiration to support someone to become more fully themselves. By reference to traditions of *Bildung* (Autio 2014; Friesen and Kenkies 2022)—of holistic educational formation—I would defend this idea that the concept of education means to develop oneself as fully as possible, though I acknowledge that further discussion of this conception of education is beyond my scope.<sup>20</sup>

### HOW UNIVERSALIST IS RE?

We have noted the general risk that RE may assert a kind of religious universalism, seeking to generalize a particular confessional perspective. Yet I have argued that there is something universalizing within any kind of education. To bring out more clearly the contours of universalism operative in RE, and those forms that might be appropriate to RE, I briefly turn to four specific approaches:

1. Confessional RE: teaching that intends for students to assent to certain doctrines.
2. Phenomenological RE: teaching that intends to improve students’ understanding of religious phenomena in descriptive terms.
3. Interpretive RE: teaching that intends to improve students’ ability to interpret religious language and practices well.

<sup>20</sup> We could interpret the apparent hollowness of this kind of educational aspiration (e.g. realizing one’s potential) as the result of the fact that it is stretched to the level of a universal aspiration. It is hard to claim anything very specific, or meaningful, as universal. Moreover, it would be hard to find truly universal elements that belong to the structure of the pedagogical relation itself. One candidate might be that the student has a relation to something that is interpreted as improvable. This structural feature of education also entails that the educator can imagine an improved state: that they have a vision of what improvement looks like which may, therefore, also qualify as a universal element of education.

4. Science of religions RE: teaching that intends to improve students' understanding of religious phenomena through scientific approaches: for example, sociological, psychological, historical, philosophical.

I discuss what these four approaches intend to promote or direct students towards. The philosophical question of how these intentions can be justified cannot be fully explored here (though interested readers can turn to [Alberts 2007](#) for a concise and systematic evaluation of these approaches).

#### **Universalism in the confessional approach**

At first glance, one might imagine that confessional RE could be described as having a universalist intention. Often those engaged in teaching confessional RE intend to influence their students towards certain beliefs and practices, an approach that might be taken as implicitly or explicitly universalist (e.g. universal Catholic doctrine). There is clearly directive teaching going on, and not just directive towards an understanding of something or an acceptance of broad ideas, but apparently directing students towards believing or assenting to particular doctrines. But does the promotion of certain doctrines necessarily mean that those promoting take them to be universally true?

Catholic schools, for example, may wish to nurture their students into faith and belief, but the fact that these are a type of faith school as opposed to a comprehensive school suggests a limit to the implied universalism. In contexts where faith schools are offered as one among different options (as is generally the case in England and Wales), one could argue that the existence of faith schools gives people a degree of choice over whether they wish to be nurtured into a particular faith or not. Of course, educators within confessional faith schools might believe that their religious nurture concerns the whole child and that the influence would benefit every child because the gospel is for everyone. It would seem disingenuous to suggest that there is no universalism at work here, or that the Church would not wish for wider, perhaps universal, influence through schools. But the practical arrangements of confessionalism in faith schools suggests a recognition at some level that children should also be protected from an unjustified universalist aspiration. The danger of a general or comprehensive system of education is that there is no such protection (i.e. from the universalist commitment to educational principles that it holds dear).

Ninian Smart is said to have played the key role in bringing about the demise of confessional RE in England and Wales through his shift 'from a confessional model of RE, which aims to nurture Christian faith, to a non-confessional "open" model which aims to impart knowledge and understanding of religion' ([Barnes 2002](#): 62). This non-confessional 'open' model came to be identified as the phenomenological approach to RE.

#### **Universalism in the phenomenological approach**

On its face, the phenomenological approach to RE might suggest a greater attention to the particular lived experiences of religious people (the phenomena of religious life) and therefore may seem less likely to aspire to, or impose, universalism. Through description of experience, the phenomenological approach studiously

avoids promoting religious doctrines or evaluating different religions and world-views (even if the categories it employs cannot be entirely neutral). This approach could be summed up as a kind of methodological agnosticism that seeks to allow the phenomena to speak for themselves. The phenomenological approach to RE encourages students to understand the nature of diverse religious traditions and experiences, partly as a way of exploring their own religious and existential questions, without directing students to assent to (or reject) the beliefs or practices they study. Thus, the student is encouraged to perform something like an *epoché*—bracketing the question of truth and falsehood—in order to encounter the religious phenomena on their own terms. The phenomenological approach is thought not only to ‘foster learning at an intellectual level’ but also to ‘sensitise ... to the feelings which underlie religious beliefs and practices’ (Grimmitt 1973: 96).

Despite first impressions, there are some distinctly universalist tendencies within this phenomenological approach. In the UK at least, this approach was explicitly understood in terms of a universal education, as demonstrated by the title of Lord Swann’s 1985 report endorsing the phenomenological approach: *Education for All*. While the desire to account for and encompass diverse religious cultures and traditions is interpreted as an evolution from the more separative and exclusivist approach of confessional RE, the broad scope of this descriptive approach encourages the phenomenologist to imagine that diverse religious cultures and experiences can be encountered and described accurately through categories of interpretation that are given. We have already noted something of the problematics inherent in the approach that categorizes the individual phenomena of religious traditions into a tidy taxonomy known as the ‘world religions paradigm’. In addition, Smart’s (1996) six (or later seven) dimensions of religion (mythological, ritual, doctrinal, social, ethical, and experiential) while seeming inclusive and broad, establish new borders for policing the ‘religious’, rather than drawing attention to method: the relentless self-consciousness that might be derived from a more radical questioning of the logic of the borders as such (Engebretson 2009b). My query here is not to say we should do without definition and categorization; but that we must keep an eye on and remain vigilant about it. Finally, the emphasis of phenomenology on ‘experience’, or at least the supposed methodological agnosticism of the *epoché*, masks a notion of religious experience as a unique category of human existence, one that stands *sui generis*. The unjustified assumption of a universal religious feeling appears to lie behind the idea of a sensitivity to feelings, to which Grimmitt refers.

### Universalism in the interpretive approach

As its name suggests, the interpretive approach to RE emphasizes the interpretive nature of understanding religious language and practices. Jackson reacts against the relatively ahistorical descriptive approach of phenomenology in RE, and its formulation as a comprehensive account of the WRs. The desire to encompass all via the universal phenomenological methodology is problematic for several reasons (Jackson 1997: 30–49). For Jackson, phenomenology leads not to non-dogmatic

description, but to generalizations and oversimplifications precisely because it affirms a general understanding that encompasses all. By contrast, Jackson hoped to introduce much closer readings of the particular through his interpretive approach. His attention to the particular provides richer understandings and accounts of religious concepts and practices. Through reflective activities, this approach interprets aspects of lived experience that contribute to self-understanding through what he calls ‘edification’: the task of ‘grasping another’s way of life is inseparable in practice from that of pondering on the issues and questions raised by it’ (p. 130). Thus, Jackson (2021) claims that this approach provides a set of tools that can be used by religious and non-religious people alike for understanding religious and cultural ideas and practices, as well as for reflecting on issues for oneself. That these tools are derived from the human sciences of anthropology and ethnography highlights the thickness of description required for understanding the complexity of religious life. Jackson illustrates the approach by giving an account of what understanding ‘Hinduism’ might entail. Using a thick description of a young woman of Hindu Gujarati ancestry growing up in Coventry, Jackson offers a perspective that is, ‘not “typical” (what is a typical Hindu or Christian or Jew? )’ but that gives a flavour of Hindu life, and that ‘avoids imposing a general schema which raises the expectations that all “members” of a religious tradition share the same concepts, beliefs and ways of doing things’ (Jackson 2021: 69).

Jackson’s tools are meant to be inclusive: to be used by anyone from any religion or none, and without any intention to promote any specific point of view, but rather to promote a rich understanding of aspects of religious life. With this close attention to the particular, what happens to the general categories and concepts that give understanding its ground and context? To understand something, even interpretively, is to locate it in relation to other things; to identify it, and thereby to differentiate it. Jackson’s efforts to avoid essentialism, and a universalism that imposes categories derived from the WRs paradigm, is commendable and remains an important step in the development of RE. And yet Jackson hints at a fundamental problem: that his approach to understanding ‘Hinduism’ undermines the very category of ‘Hinduism’ itself. The fact of the matter is that categories and concepts are simplifying and reductive in the way that Jackson wishes to avoid. Insofar as the interpretive approach concerns itself with the representation of religions and cultures, it relies on, and perhaps reinforces, certain categories that subsequent scholars in critical RS have also wanted to question.

What I think is missing from these debates (not only the interpretive approach) is an understanding and recognition of the fact that all education is productively reductive: pedagogical interpretation always entails forms of *pedagogical reduction*. Pedagogical reduction is defined as the selection and simplification of the world for pedagogical purposes and is, I argue, a structural feature of the educational representation of anything (Lewin 2019, 2020). Jackson’s account of interpretive RE seems to want to ‘have its cake and eat it’: denouncing the phenomenological approach as relying on generalizations, but failing to acknowledge the pedagogical role that generalization—or reduction—must make. Understanding and interpreting are

intrinsically reductive. The construction of curricula is a productive process, but also one that entails reduction. The question now becomes: on what basis do we form pedagogical reductions for RE? And can we do this without employing problematic universalisms? These are pedagogical questions, questions of subject-specific didactics. One candidate for establishing a robust logic for RE is the Science of Religions approach.

### Universalism in the Science of Religions approach

I cannot do justice to the complex histories of scientific universalism here; to the ways in which a particular (some say European) scientific approach has been interpreted as universal (Somsen 2008). Conceptions of scientific universalism are often associated with productions of knowledge that are formed as stored in ‘the encyclopaedia and the museum, the world map and the database’ (Schaffer 2017: 12), conceptions that rely on the persistent idolatry of scientific objectivity. It is this tendency to idolize ‘scientific knowledge’, that causes a difficulty for the current turn towards a scientific basis for RE. My argument seeks to show that if we are to refer to the science of religion as a basis for RE, we need to be circumspect and *relentlessly self-conscious* in how we do so. Let me first offer a brief perspective on the argument for establishing RE on science of religions.

Among recent discussions of RE, Tim Jensen offers the most principled argument for developing school RE on the basis of the scientific understanding of religion, which he roughly equates with the academic study of religion (ASR):

If science and scientifically grounded knowledge is held by the state to be of positive value (and it is at least to a certain degree), then scientific approaches to and knowledge of religion and religion-related matters must be of value too. Religion is a human and social phenomenon, a phenomenon influencing, now as before, for good or bad, other areas of life, society and culture (also Culture with a capital ‘C’). Scientifically grounded knowledge of humankind must include studies and knowledge of what is referred to as religion. The state, thus, needs must establish and support an academic, scientific study of religion. (Jensen 2016: 65)

Jensen makes repeated appeals to the ASR, which he presents as the scientific knowledge of religion as developed within university departments of RS. As a human, cultural, social, and historical phenomenon, understanding religion requires the human sciences to develop this kind of second-order view of religion (Lewin 2021).

The context of state-sponsored education is important since Jensen assumes that an ASR-based RE is something for all citizens within a national context: universal within the confines of the nation-state. What justifies Jensen’s universalism? On the basis that ‘scientifically based knowledge of humankind, history (evolution too), nature, culture, social formation, identity formation, etc. is considered essential and valuable knowledge’, Jensen reasons that, ‘scientifically based knowledge of religion(s) must be considered equally essential and valuable’ (2019: 33). Jensen seems to suggest that science offers the best possible understanding of the phenomena of religion because it employs scientific methodologies. Is Jensen’s conception of science problematically universalist?

Idealized and ahistorical conceptions of science underpin the view of science as a universal method: ‘the idea that science is independent of the place where it is practiced (because of the universality of its knowledge or method), and that scientific practitioners are automatically united in a single global pursuit—a model of peaceful cooperation’ (Somsen 2008: 362). I cannot conduct a thorough investigation of whether Jensen is deploying this kind of idealized and ahistorical conception. He certainly affirms the public value of science, and its variety through the range of natural, human, and social sciences. Moreover, one could interpret his occasionally defensive stance as a response to the oft-made observation that the term *science* in English does not translate the breadth of the continental concept (glossed here by reference to the German term) of *Wissenschaft*.<sup>21</sup> All this suggests that Jensen’s view is not simplistic scientism. Yet the unequivocal tone with which he affirms the ASR as the only proper basis for RE requires something more: a relentless self-consciousness concerning what we mean when we use the term ‘science’ or *Wissenschaft*, and the extent to which it reflects our own parochial point of view. Even as method, science is characterized by variety, complexity, and inconsistency. The Science of Religions or ASR approach is not fixed or settled, making its application to school RE problematic.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION: DOES A RELIGIOUS UNIVERSALISM HAUNT RE?

I have argued that some forms of universalism are hard to justify (philosophical, religious), while others are inevitable (educational). Beyond the structural universalism of all education, there are forms of problematic religious (and potentially scientific) universalism that haunt RE. The presumed universalism of confessional RE can be mitigated to the extent that it is circumscribed by context. A more interesting problem that my argument raises concerns the structural universalism of ‘directive teaching’, which suggests that all education promotes something.

Phenomenological RE seems bound up with a broadly anthropological view of religion, relying on categories derived from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century conception of WRs forged in a culturally Christian intellectual landscape. This is perhaps clearest in the comparative structures offered by the seemingly neutral framing of the WRs paradigm. Of course, such framing is not neutral or purely descriptive. The risks of partiality and prejudice can be mitigated by reflection and self-awareness: becoming aware of the way our context shapes our perceptions and understandings. Becoming aware of context is the task of philosophical hermeneutics, broadly

<sup>21</sup> Although publishing mostly in English, Jensen is Danish and belongs to the broadly continental European tradition when it comes to interpreting science as *Wissenschaft* (*videnskab* in Danish). Jensen (2020) suggests that the problem of how ‘science’ is interpreted plays a role in how the ‘science of religions’ approach is conceptualized and why the phrase is rarely used in an English-speaking context.

<sup>22</sup> This leaves to one side the practical and what might be called ‘political’ problems of any attempt to establish RE on the ASR. In England and Wales, the RE curriculum is overseen by regional SACREs which are formed, in part, by regional stakeholders, including various leading figures within religious communities. This makes it difficult to make the case for a relatively pure, academic basis for RE (Lewin 2021).



construed. Interpretive RE takes seriously the hermeneutical conditions of communication and education. But does it really offer a clear way of determining how one goes about the necessary generalizations involved in curriculum production? Does it offer a substantial basis for RE?

We seem unable to avoid interpreting the particular as universal (e.g. concepts) or imposing universals on particulars. Within RE this *symbiotic condition of thought*, as we might call it, can be more or less sensitive to the pedagogical and political context in which we work: we should become more self-conscious when using terms like ‘world religions’. Thus, the image of the article’s title, of a universalism ‘haunting’ RE, is meant to be suggestive: it alludes to the assumptions and conceptions that seem to float among us, our reasonings, judgements, and approaches. The image suggests that forms of universalism, in various guises (philosophical, religious, educational, scientific) persist without our being fully aware of their presence, and without the means to exorcise them. Similarly, perhaps, phantoms of particularity seem to appear, only to vanish into the universal concepts that we need in order to see them. So, should all forms of universalism be exorcised from RE? Should we desist from identifying the particular as an instance of a general thing? Rather than plan elaborate and potentially damaging exorcisms, we might consider seeking to understand these spirits: Why are they here? What do they want? How might they help? This raises the repeated refrain of this article: the call for historical consciousness that I have framed as the ‘content’ of RE—namely, relentless self-consciousness.

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