Interreligious Education and the Question of Truth

Brendan Carmody

Introduction

With globalization, societies are becoming increasingly diverse. Peoples of different backgrounds and religious orientation now live side by side, share the same space, so that as Jurgensmeyer (2006, p. 4) puts it, almost everyone is everywhere with important social consequences. Thus, there is need to review the kind of education – religious or other – that is provided. Religiously, for instance, the days when Britain could speak in terms of a Christian education program for public schools are probably over, so that today there is focus on such things as nondenominational, interfaith, and interreligious education (Priestley, 2006; Barnes & Kay, 2002; Hull, 1982). In any such review of religious education in a multifaith context, there will be the challenge not only to be pluralistic but also to sustain the integrity of religious education.

Religion in the Curriculum

It is no surprise then that the adoption of an acceptable model of religious education for use in non-private schools, not only in England and Wales but also elsewhere, remains a challenge (Ouellet, 2006; Chidester, 2006; Kaymakcan, 2006; Grelle, 2006; Estivalezes, 2006; Nipkow, 2006; White, 2004; Hand 2003; Meakin, 1979). Finding an appropriate type of religious education can become so controversial that people even propose that it is better to drop it from, or at least make it optional in, the national syllabus. As White (2004) noted:

> Religion has no place as an independent subject, either as a vehicle of moral education or in order to promote an understanding of religions. (p. 162)

B. Carmody (✉)
The Milltown Institute, Dublin, Ireland
e-mail: carmodybp@yahoo.com

K. Engebretson et al. (eds.), *International Handbook of Inter-religious Education*, International Handbooks of Religion and Education 4, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4020-9260-2_3,
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This is one perspective, but in places like France and the United States where religion is not part of the public education system, it is argued that:

> The spiritual aspect of the self gets almost no attention in today's public schools. Most young people have a host of questions that could be discussed without violating the establishment clause: Is there life after death? Is there a God who cares for me? Am I connected to anything beyond the phenomenal world? Are there spirits with whom I can commune? Will such communication enhance my life? (Noddings, 2005, p. 49)

Yet, these are among the questions that thoughtful human beings everywhere ask and so not addressing them could be a kind of educational malpractice (Noddings, 2005, p. 250; Nord, 1995, pp. 209–235). As Wright (2005) puts it:

> An education that fails to equip children to address world view questions in an appropriate breadth and depth will simply end up imposing one or other prevailing world view by default. The result will be at best a benign educational paternalism and at worst a religious exercise in indoctrination: either way, schools will end up imposing preconceived answers to fundamental questions about ultimate reality and human flourishing. The task of enabling pupils to appropriate their world view wisely and critically is not one that an open society can afford to reduce to a mere optional extra. Each of our pupils has but one short life span, and if they are to flourish as human beings they must be empowered to develop appropriate levels of religious literacy. (p. 27)

Wright further argues that religion should be included in the national curriculum, not primarily because of any moral or social imperative but on account of its intrinsic value.

Religion raises fundamental questions about our place in the ultimate order of things while religious education attempts to enable pupils to engage in a search for responses to such issues. If education fails to do this there is a danger, as we have noted, that the spiritual dimension of the self may get little attention while schools impose preconceived answers about ultimate questions, worldviews, lifestyles, and reality. Thus, for Wright, the development of appropriate levels of religious literacy should not be seen as an optional extra. They are essential to an education system so as to help people to make the kind of decisions that impact on every aspect of their lives (Wright, 2005, pp. 26–27; 2004, pp. 198, 221; Kay, 2005; Noddings, 1997; Meijer, 2006).

The Nature of Religious Education

Nonetheless, even if, as in England and Wales among many other places, it is agreed that Religious Education should form a central part of a national curriculum, its nature becomes highly contestable (Barnes & Kay, 2002; Carmody, 2006). In England and Wales, for instance, where the population is roughly 71.8% Christian, 2.8% Muslim, 1% Hindu, 0.6% Sikh, 0.5% Jewish, 0.3% Buddhist, and 15% non-religious (Jackson & O'Grady, 2007, p. 181), what form of Religious Education is appropriate?

Attempts to find an acceptable type of religious education reach back perhaps to the late 1960s. The context is moreover colored by a legal framework from 1870

when state-funded schools could opt for Bible teaching without denominational instruction. Modifications followed when the agreed syllabuses composed by largely Protestant denominations with no space for non-Christian faiths emerged from the 1944 Act. However, by the time of the 1988 Act, it was seen that representatives of faiths other than Christianity should be included. This also reflected a developing concern that an appropriate religious education should be progressively more educational in nature (Jackson & O'Grady, 2007, pp. 183–186; Jackson, 2003; Gearon, 2001).

The struggle to wrench Religious Education from its confessional to a more educational base in England and Wales entailed methodological experimentation giving much emphasis initially to phenomenology in the 1970s. While undoubtedly this broadened the basis for Religious Education, phenomenology reached perhaps the nadir of its influence in the mid-1980s as it began to be overshadowed by an emphasis on religious experience probably not greatly different to phenomenology except that it directed more attention to pupils' own religious experience (Wright, 2004, pp. 181–194).

Even then the methodology was not seen to be entirely satisfactory because of a perceived over-concern with pupil-centeredness. A conceptual approach followed bringing to attention the need for including theological concepts in the teaching of religion (Barnes & Kay, 2002, pp. 39–51). More recently, the interpretive approach moves a step forward methodologically when it highlights tendencies toward reunification of culture and religion (Jackson, 1997). In this approach, doctrinal and historical dimensions of religion can be downplayed, as comparing, contrasting, or evaluating religions becomes less desirable (Jackson, 2004; 1997, pp. 49–71; Jenkins, 2007; Nesbitt, 2006; Erricker, 2006).

In the journey to make Religious Education more educational for the increasingly pluralistic context of England and Wales, it is therefore not surprising that how one teaches religion has become highly problematic. At one end of the spectrum 'learning about religion' seems best, while at the other 'learning from religion' can also be seen as crucial (Attfield, 1996). This raises the question of what constitutes education and in this case what makes the study of religion educational? (Hindman, 2002; Cohen, 2006, pp. 201–237; Noddings, 2006, pp. 238–242; 2003, p. 158; Kay, 2005; Heilman, 2003, pp. 247–274; Hunt, 2006, pp. 635–650). As these matters are complex and debatable, efforts by governments and others to achieve social harmony through religious education can downplay differences between forms of religion, thereby undermining the integrity of the subject (Erricker, 2007).

The Question of Truth

In attempting to be inclusive, there then has been a tendency to unduly seek social harmony with the result that the impression created can be that all religions provide valid roads to the religious centre of life and that in some ways they are all equally

valid (Jurgensmeyer, 2000; Wright, 2004, pp. 109–123). Claims to religious superiority are misrepresented while hard and intelligent questions about existing religions are often evaded resulting in acceptance of nonsense confusing indifference with respect (Noddings, 2005, p. 49). There is, therefore, a need for an approach that moves both beyond the romantic-postmodern celebration of subjectivity and the Enlightenment ideal of pure objective knowledge (Wright, 2004, p. 60; Teece, 2005, pp. 29–40; Donoghue, 1998, pp. 34–53). While it may be attractive to downplay objectivity in the interest of some form of social cohesion, religions:

> do differ and contrast. The religions provide conflicting accounts of what it is to be human, the way to achieve human fulfillment, the nature of the divine, and so on. God is either triune or not. Salvation is through Christ or though Krishna, and so on. (Barnes & Kay, 2002, p. 56)

Thus:

> To present the different religions in the classroom as not in competition with each other would be to falsify the self-understanding of most adherents of the main religions. (Barnes & Wright, 2006, p. 72)

If religious education is to truly address people's religious viewpoints, it appears that it must be ready to recognize, not bypass, differences that are part of the reality of the other (Wright, 1998, p. 86; Kay, 2006; Hull, 2006; Engebretson, 2006; McGrath, 2007, p. 46). Adequate recognition of the other as other entails:

> being receptive to what another has to say, and open to possibly hearing the other's voice more completely and fairly. Caring about another person. . .requires representing the other as a separate, autonomous person. (Thayer-Bacon, 1997, p. 249)

In that sense, perhaps, there is some truth in the assertion that much religious education in its attempt to accommodate does not sufficiently include treatment of the self (Conroy & Davis, 2007, p. 5; Wright, 2004, 1996; Hunt, 2006). This is not to say that the authors who affirm this are unaware of the 'learning from religion' dimension of much religious education. What rather concerns them appears to be what might be termed a return to the subject with a loss of objective theory (Cassidy, 2006; De Souza, 2006).

Within religious education it is recognized that even for Smart whose method was highly phenomenological, 'objective' meant more than looking at temples, churches, and so on, and that teaching of religion should move from inside other traditions (Conroy & Davis, 2007, p. 5). The conscious shift away from what was called 'learning about religion' to 'learning from religion' which uses various methods to more adequately include the personal aspects of Religious Education is acknowledged (Conroy & Davis, 2007; Kay, 2005; Wright, 2000, p. 173; Hobson & Edwards, 1999, p. 19; Florence, 2006; Moran, 2006; Miller, 1979; Jackson, 1997; Geertz, 1999).

Nonetheless, the process, which focused on reaching within, struggled to move beyond a certain immanence and thus failed to adequately recognize and listen to the other, where the key to unlock the door to either one's own heart or to the presence of God may indeed lie (Cassidy, 2006, p. 883; Noddings, 2007, pp. 231–234).

In attempting to reach the other, there is need for objectivity. Otherwise, 'we' can quickly become the plural of 'I' (Noddings, 1996, p. 257). This means that one does not respond to the voice of the other in a neocolonial way, where the other simply reflects the countenance of one's preestablished expectations (Wright, 2004, p. 159).

There is need to move from immanence to some form of objectivity. In speaking of objectivity, there is, for instance, the kind of objectivity connected to functional literacy which enables somebody to read Hamlet as one might read a newspaper but be unable to enter into the deeper meaning of the text (Mecado, 1993, p. 203; Kay, 2005, p. 46; Wright, 1996, pp. 166–180; 2004, p. 225; Grelle, 2006, pp. 464–468; Donoghue, 1998, pp. 73–79; Phillips-Bell, 1983; Carmody, 2004, pp. 83–84). Put somewhat differently, there is need for individuals to focus critically on their relationship with their own selves in relation to others and so rescue his/her real personal self from the jaws of collectivism which devours all selfhood (Buber, 1955, p. 110).

The question, however, remains: how can the self be rescued from being seriously dwarfed? In this context, Conroy and Davis (2007) argue:

> There is a need for the student qua observer to place herself, through the execution of the phenomenological epochè, in the frame of perception as part of that which is apprehended. The common sense self, with its inbuilt prejudices, needs itself to be part of that which is to be apprehended and grasped. If I wish to examine a particular religious practice or belief, it is not that I stand outside, examining the liturgical practice of communion and how the believer sees and relates to the practice; rather, I place my own perceiving into the frame for apprehension. (p. 6)

How, we ask, do I apprehend my own perceiving with some sense of objectivity? In subjecting one's perceiving to investigation, the religious educator is being called to introspection, where:

> The subject is within but does not remain totally within. His knowing involves an intentional self-transcendence. But while his knowing does so, he has to know his knowing to know that it does so. (Lonergan, 1974, p. 76)

To know one's own knowing, however, entails not simply looking inside oneself, but:

> 1) experiencing one's experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding; 2) understanding the unity and relations of one's experienced experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding; 3) affirming the reality of one's experienced and understood experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding; and 4) deciding to operate in accord with the norms immanent in the spontaneous relatedness of one's experienced, understood, affirmed experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. (Lonergan, 1972, pp. 14–15)

In some ways, everybody knows and observes this patterned process of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding in so far as he/she is attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible in any sphere of life. Yet, to heighten one's consciousness by objectifying it in the way that is being proposed in striving to know one's own knowing is a difficult and intensely personal endeavor. It means distinguishing between consciousness and knowledge:

> We are all conscious of our sensing and feeling, our inquiring and our understanding, our deliberating and our deciding. None of these activities occur when one is in a coma or a deep

> sleep. In that basic sense they are conscious. Still they are not properly known. They are just infrastructure, a component within knowing that in large part remains merely potential. It is only when we heighten consciousness by adverting not to the objects but to the activities, when we begin to sort out the activities, to assign them distinctive names, to distinguish and to relate, only then we move from the mere infrastructure that is consciousness to the compound that is man's knowledge of his cognitional process. (Crowe, 1985, p. 117)

While acknowledging the subjective infrastructural component in the movement toward knowing one's cognitional process more objectivity, this approach does not necessarily claim that there is no absolute truth, as some argue (Hobson & Edwards, 1999, p. 79). Rather, one is identifying a pattern which is normative and not open to revision because the activity of revising cannot bypass that same pattern. Any revision rejecting the pattern is rejecting itself (Lonergan, 1972, p. 19; Kelly, 2006; Carmody, 1988). In this way:

> Not only are the "I" and its cognitional operations to be affirmed, but also the pattern in which they occur is acknowledged as invariant, not of course in the sense that further methodical developments are impossible, nor in the sense that fuller and more adequate knowledge of the pattern is unattainable, but in the sense that any attempt to revise the patterns as now known would involve the very operations that the pattern prescribes. (Lonergan, 1974, p. 273)

Method thereby shifts from being something one uses. Rather, it is oneself as he/she becomes aware of his/her experiencing, understanding, and judging, thus gaining self-discovery and control over such operations (Gregson, 1985, p. 11). The process provides the locus of truth so that the basic discipline is not metaphysics but intentionality analysis (Gregson, 1985, p. 37; Noddings, 2007, p. 117).

Although, as noted, the process itself of self-affirmation of the knower does not admit revision, its objectification remains contingent and partial. This is not, however, the contingency of proclaiming the truth that there is no truth (Wright, 1998, p. 64). The self-affirmation of the knower recognizes that truth emerges not primarily from understanding but from judgments whose veracity and objectivity are based on the degree of the subject's authenticity and fidelity to the canons: be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible (Lonergan, 1972, p. 37; 1974, pp. 69–86; Hardy, 1985, pp. 101–115; Wright, 2006, p. 342).

This method of introspection entails a distancing of oneself from what is nearest to one and requires one to objectify what most fully belongs to one's subjectivity (Sutherland, 1985, p. 140; Lonergan, 1972, pp. 153–173; Noddings, 2007, pp. 107–132). Among other things, it includes:

> An interruption of reliance on external sources of authority. The 'tyranny' of the 'they' – or the potential for it – must be undermined. In addition to the kind of critical reflection on one's previous assumptive or tacit system of values, there must be a relocation of authority within the self. (Fowler, 1981, p. 179; Mezirow, 1998; Clifford, 2006)

As such, the emergence of the self as knower is not shorn of choice and commitment in a way that personal search becomes private while the self strives toward some feigned neutrality (Conroy & Davis, 2007, p. 7; Rossiter, 2006). Rather, as in what is termed critical realism:

> The epistemological role played by informed judgement allows our knowing to embrace the realm of meaning and values as well as that of scientific fact. By placing a hermeneutic of faith alongside a hermeneutic of suspicion the critical realist proceeds directly from the fact that we indwell in a world with which we are already intimately related. Because we are bound up with the world, and because our own knowledge is always a greater or lesser extent provisional, our understanding always proceeds from the givenness of what we already know. Consequently the reified and abstract knowledge of modernity is replaced with a personal knowledge that engages the whole self: mind and body, action and reflection, reason and experience. It follows that our pursuit of knowledge entails a struggle for more authentic forms of life, more appropriate ways of being in the world, and more truthful ways of relating to ourselves, to others in community, to the natural order of things and to the presence or absence of that which is sacred, transcendent or divine. (Wright, 2004, p. 167)

From this perspective, the self and the other are discovered through an objectivity not of logical, scientific, and academic concern but of the subject in so far as he/she is authentic (Lonergan, 1972, p. 37, 265). Such objectivity is not that of the other merely as seen, but as affirmed in true judgment emerging from the critical self-reflection which we have noted. It is rather the objectivity or self-transcendence, based on conversion which is:

> A fully conscious decision about one's horizon, one's outlook, one's worldview. It deliberately selects the framework, in which doctrines have their meaning. (Lonergan, 1972, p. 268)

Conversion in its different dimensions forms the basis for research, interpretation, history, dialectic, and selection of doctrines (Lonergan, 1972, pp. 267–70). It thus also provides the framework for dialogue that can truly hear the other, however different, even painful this may at times be (Laubscher & Powell, 2003, pp. 203–224).

Implications for Interreligious Education

For the religious educator, then, agreement about material content of the curriculum and appropriate methodological procedures remain important but they need to emerge from a self that affirms herself/himself as knower, and in so doing remains faithful to the canons: be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible (Lonergan, 1972, p. 37; 1974, pp. 69–86; Wright, 2004, p. 222; 2006, p. 338). In his/her educational endeavor, he/she will need to be radically respectful of the learner for:

> The teacher must not forget the limits of education; even when he enjoys confidence he cannot always expect agreement. Confidence implies a break-through from reserve, the bursting of the bonds which imprison the unquiet heart. But it does not imply unconditional agreement. A conflict with a pupil is the supreme test for the educator. He must use his own insight wholeheartedly; he must not blunt the piercing impact of his knowledge, but he must at the same time have in readiness the healing ointment for the heart pierced by it. Not for a moment may he conduct a dialectical manoeuvre instead of the real battle for truth. (Buber, 1955, p. 107)

Evidently, the so-called battle for truth assumes different dimensions linked to the age and context of the pupil.

Initially, there is concern for what might be called basic religious literacy which focuses on allowing the pupil to articulate his/her own religious or secular viewpoint in as much of its ambiguity as possible (Jackson, 2004, p. 85, 124; 2006; Grimmitt, 2000, pp. 207–227; Schweitzer, 2006; Streib, 2006). This will have a highly relational nature, while the degree to which existential issues are included will vary (Jackson, 2004, p. 85; Boschki, 2006; Noddings, 1996, p. 261). Yet, in religious education as perhaps against religious studies, is there need to facilitate the formation of a basis out of which the pupil begins to move toward a critical dimension as she/he is presented with comparing and contrasting his/her own and others' beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices? (Jackson, 2004, p. 125; Cush, 1999).

It seems evident that pupils need to move from a recognition of the nature and source of their pre-understanding of religious issues to engage in dialogue with the narratives and language of relevant primary traditions as owned and home colored by faith communities and secular traditions (Barnes, 2007b; Wright 1996, p. 174; Grimmitt, 2000, pp. 207–223; Noddings, 2002, p. 174). The degree and extent to which this is done may be somewhat different in faith schools where balance between nurture and challenge will vary (Jackson, 2003, pp. 89–102; Wright, 2003, pp. 142–152; Noddings, 2003, p. 250; Beer, 2006; Arthur, 2006; Parker-Jenkins, Hartas, & Irving, 2005). Whatever the setting, the overall objective entails encouraging students to gradually appreciate the moral significance of grounding their religious beliefs on rational foundations, rather than merely on authority, custom, prejudice, or superstition (Hobson & Edwards, 1999, p. 98; Wright, 1998, p. 97; Cooling, 1994).

While the ability to empathize is pivotal, critical thinking, not only of a personal but social nature, needs to be close behind. For as Wright (2004) notes:

> The child uses the ongoing learning process as a means of reflecting on, reassessing, and confirming or revising his or her own prior beliefs and commitments. (p. 177)

Sensitivity to the learner's worldview is important, but when strangeness and difference are evident, it should not lead to burying one's head in the sands with forms of chosen amnesia (Buckley-Zistel, 2006; Gearon 2006, pp. 71–82; Jackson, 2004, p. 125; Freire, 1993, p. 73; Renehan, 2006, p. 1078; Kay, 2006, pp. 559–576; Weisse, 2003; Jenkins, 2007, p. 36).

In the presentation of curriculum content with sensitivity to pupils, is the teacher expected to be neutral? Is such possible? Wright argues:

> It is now generally accepted that such a privileged perspective (neutral vantage point from which religion can be explored without prejudice) is unobtainable. The way to constrain the imposition of ideological bias is not to pretend that it does not exist, but rather to draw it to the surface and openly acknowledge it. (Wright, 2000, p. 178; Nord, 1995, pp. 236–36, 304–319)

Neutrality, as sometimes advocated by secularist approaches (Mabud, 1992), seems more idealistic than real, and from the viewpoint of religious education which

attempts to authentically reach the depths of the person as here proposed, the most appropriate approach is:

> not to disguise (disputed questions of faith, value and commitment) under a veil of neutrality but to make them as visible as possible so that pupils may make judgements based on knowledge rather than ignorance. (Wright, 2004, p. 186)

This does not, however, mean that the teacher takes his/her own perspective as standard but strives to take alternative viewpoints with utmost seriousness avoiding any imperialistic imposition of an alien view (Wright, 2004, p. 219; Skeie, 2006; Williams, 2006). Such an approach endorses the concept of religious literacy the aim of which is that students:

> be able to think, act and communicate intelligently about the ultimate questions that religion asks and to be able to do so whether the students are believers, agnostics, or atheists. (Hobson & Edwards, 1999, pp. 59–60)

Religiously literate students should be enabled to critically perceive their situations – religious and other – and so better discover their potential as human beings. They should moreover possess the critical means to examine their own particular lived experiences so as to illuminate the processes by which they were produced, legitimated, or disconfirmed (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 234; Bassey, 1999, pp. 105–123; Diez, 2006, pp. 259–275). Religious Education should thus include the desire to present religions fairly and sensitively and to follow the evidence where it leads, in deciding for oneself whether or not one religion is superior to another (Wright 2004, pp. 220–231).

Religious Education of this kind may affect personal beliefs and values of students and may lead to what Jackson (1999, pp. 213–214) has termed edification. In this:

> there are no guarantees that students, exposed to alternative world views and beliefs, will choose the path of their parents, but one thing is certain, if they are not given viable alternatives, the students will have no choice at all. (Vold, 1974, p. 109)

This Religious Education is not purely cognitive or scientific, but strives to:

> actively engage the student in thinking through the question of meaning of life, with the religious studies instructor engaged as facilitator of the process of 'forming' the student, she or he takes the place of the religious educator and theologian. (Wiebe, 2005, p. 119)

Enhancing intelligent and rational choice in the matter of religious beliefs and values constitutes part of the aim of the religious education we have outlined and it would concur with the view which states that:

> It is better, whether one espouses atheism, agnosticism or religious belief, to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible in assimilating and developing one's ultimate belief systems and commitments. (Wright, 2000, p. 180)

Religious literacy should emerge through facilitating the promotion of intelligent and rational choice in the light of ultimate concerns as well as in the context of recognizing the other as other and not as an extension of oneself. The approach to religious education presented here should form the basis of dialogue that addresses

the other with utmost care. In turn, this should help create community, not a society of homogenized consensus or safe-distance tolerance (Baratte, 2006, p. 245; Wright, 2006; Noddings, 2003, p. 224). Rather, it would engender a true good of order, where patterns of relationships are no longer preponderantly contractual, legalistic, and formal, but are truly personal and just, ensuring that the jaws of greed and collectivism are less evident. As part of this it should confront religious intolerance and prejudice by explicit challenges to religious and secular sources of intolerance, violence, and injustice (Buckley-Zistel, 2006; Gearon, 2006; Barnes, 2007a, pp. 29–30; Hytten, 2006).

Conclusion

This chapter has proposed that there is need in the present environment of rapid globalization for an interreligious education that deeply respects the faith, religious or secular, of the other person whoever she/he might be. It argues that this requires an epistemology that adequately differentiates subject from object particularly when the object is another subject. From an interreligious education so constituted, do we not have the basis of true community?

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