



Does RE still matter?

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Abstract

The role which subject Religious Education (RE) plays in promoting religious literacy matters in my view, acknowledging that I am biased in my judgement, as my professional *raison d'être*, thus livelihood, rests on it continuing. However, others similarly are biased, whether from a specific moral and religious or ideological perspective or their academic positioning. Given whether subject RE exists in schools, or not, is a normative affair. I revisit an established philosophical discussion of possible justifiable aims for compulsory RE in schools considering these reasons in turn, with particular reference to the RE curriculum in England and South Africa. Resisting the urge to identify one over-riding aim for RE, for reasons I explain, I suggest all three of these potentially justifiable reasons can be seen to inter-relate and reflect on whether they might be re-considered more broadly and used to strengthen more recent theoretical work concerned with studying religion in interdisciplinary ways which promote religious and related 'literacies'? On the understanding of RE I seek to develop, the implications for teacher education and continuing professional development would be significant but worthwhile, I conclude, if RE is to be promoted as an entitlement which is taught well and adequately resourced to contribute to the flourishing of many children and young people.

Keywords Religious education · Curriculum · Aims · England · South Africa

1 Introduction

The role which subject Religious Education (henceforth RE) plays on the school curriculum in promoting religious literacy matters to me as much now as it ever has over the past thirty years. Clearly, I am biased as with a vested interest in RE, my professional *raison d'être*, thus livelihood, rests on it continuing. However, whether subject RE exists in schools, or not, is a normative affair and others who comment on RE also do so from a specific moral and religious or ideological position. The opinions I bring 'to the table' are informed by recent and relevant experience: first as a (secondary) teacher, then a textbook author, a teacher educator, briefly a policy maker (REC 2013) and subsequently a researcher.

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I believe RE still matters, although with important caveats. My argument is framed by an established philosophical discussion of reasons for compulsory RE in schools, given these concerns are normative. I consider these in turn, with particular reference to the RE curriculum in England and South Africa, understanding that general principles need applying to specific cases, and that the devil lies in the detail. One justification—based on socialisation or acculturation—remains the most politically compelling argument for RE in community schools, connecting with enthusiasm for the notion of promoting ‘religious literacy’ through the subject. Whether or not this link exists and how it might be promoted in practice remain in some doubt. This leads me to question whether having one specific aim for RE is either necessary or desirable as has been suggested, given how well all three of these potentially justifiable reasons can be seen to inter-relate. Might these philosophical ideas be re-considered and used to strengthen more recent theoretical work concerned with studying religion in inter-disciplinary ways which promote religious and related ‘literacies’?

As things currently stand, I am relatively pessimistic for the future of non-elective RE in those English community schools where no-one is able to champion the subject effectively. The future looks brighter in faith-based contexts, which might include ‘religiously vibrant’ South Africa, once the relationship between religious and political literacy is clearly identified. On the understanding of RE I have sought to develop, the implications for teacher education and continuing professional development would be significant. Yet RE for all does still matter very much, I conclude, as an entitlement which may contribute to the flourishing of many children and young people where it is taught well and adequately resourced.

2 Background and context

Nearly two decades ago, a robust and articulate philosophical debate took place focused on identifying potentially reasonable grounds for including compulsory religious education on the school curriculum in England (White 2004; Wright 2004), stimulated by a discussion of three possible justifications for RE—social, moral and possibility-of-truth—by Hand (2004). The discussion excluded arguments for the subject as an optional academic pursuit, whether at GCSE, A Level or part of an IB programme and I do too, given limitations here of scope and scale. Revisiting the philosophical reflection on this issue is highly relevant, given arguments about the nature and purpose of RE, indeed whether religion has a place at all in state-funded community schools, rest on a priori pre-suppositions of precisely the kind with which philosophy is typically concerned, including the nature of the world, knowledge and contested claims of certain principles and values of the conduct of life (Oancea and Orchard 2012).

Concerns have been expressed in influential places for the subject community about a “lack of consensus about the rationale and purpose” (St Gabriel’s 2011, p. 16) for RE (see also Conroy et al. 2014) already. The RE Review in England in 2013 maintained that religious educators need to be:

much clearer about the reasons which make the plural aims of RE legitimate and how these might be reconciled (where possible) to form a coherent and compelling rationale and purpose for the subject (2013, p. 6).

I support this sentiment on two counts, both the need for a more coherent and compelling rationale, and the acknowledgement that this is a demanding and difficult task. That said, nearly two decades later, the exchange I have highlighted continues to provide a helpful

theoretical starting point for such discussions, although it needs updating, to include more recent scholarship and subsequent curriculum changes (e.g. REC 2013, 2018). I also extend the discussion to reflect on 'Religion Education' in South Africa, maintaining that if philosophical reflection has a helpful role to play in offering alternative conceptions of institutional practice to conceive of new understandings of what is possible (Oancea and Orchard 2012) the framework should be able to be applied more widely to similar settings.

Such comparative reflection is appropriate, given both contexts are culturally and religiously plural, democratic, Anglophone at the level of policy and connected by a shared and problematic colonial past. RE curriculum developers from England informed the construction of a post-apartheid South African curriculum in 2003 (DoE 2003). One key constitutional difference is that South Africa is now a republic, while England remains a constitutional monarchy, with an Established Church, 'led' by a monarch who is 'Defender of the Faith'. Given that complete separation of religion and state is a possible future for religion and education some would wish to see developed in England, the chance to see what might be being wished for through pursuing the comparison here is, at least potentially, instructive.

In England, state-funded schooling as a universal entitlement evolved through the nineteenth century with children's moral development viewed as a crucial component. Advocates of that system, who were typically religious adherents themselves, commonly assumed a broad Christian Religious Education to be an appropriate medium of delivery for moral education too. Denominationally, the views they held were diverse, hence from the beginning schools were to avoid 'instructing' their pupils in specific doctrines and encouraged to study the Bible, cultivating morals based on generally held Christian principles. This general view informed the Cowper-Temple clause, included in the Education Act of 1870 (Gillard 2018).

However, social attitudes in England over the past century and a half have become demonstrably more secular since, even on more positive (contested) sociological accounts which identify widespread ongoing religious belief in the population rather than belonging to organised religions (e.g. Davie 1994, 2000). Religious pluralism in the 'public sphere' (Habermas 1962) operates on two levels: that of 'interfaith', between those people for whom religion and morality remain closely intertwined; and between people of faith and 'none' (Woodhead 2016, 2012) with the place of religion in the public sphere contested in ways that play out differently at each level. The continuing presence of an Established Church further complicates matters, the Church of England being led by a constitutional monarch and also represented formally in public life through the inclusion of Bishops and Archbishops in the second parliamentary chamber.

In state-funded schools in England today, technically speaking all pupils are required to study RE from the age of 3 to 18 as a compulsory element of the school curriculum, but not the national curriculum, yet in practice this is often not the case. Done well, RE in England has been described as "inspiring" and "highly regarded in Northern Ireland and in other European countries" (APPG 2014). However, there are extremely variable standards in practice across the country, as robust scrutiny to capture non-compliance with the legal requirements for RE by the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE 2019) indicates. The statutory determination of the curriculum for the subject is developed through a series of local agreed syllabi [e.g. 'Living Difference' (Hampshire 2016); 'A Religious Education for the Future Understanding religion and worldviews for a life in a changing world' (Norfolk 2019)], ratified by Standing Advisory Committees for Religious Education (SACREs) at the level of local government. Again, done well, these are inspiring and well-informed curricula; but, there are concerns about the quality of locally agreed syllabi

generally across the sector (REC 2018). Non-statutory guidance documents (QCA 2004; REC 2013) developed nationally over the past two decades seek to capture what a high-quality entitlement for RE might comprise. The most recent, *Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE* (REC 2018) does so by proposing a more radical overhaul for the subject and a name change.

In South Africa, the subject's origins are also Christian, although the model developed under apartheid took an exclusivist form. State-funded schools were required to follow the 'Christian National Education' (CNE) curriculum after 1948, with 'Christian', apartheid theology as its guiding philosophy. South African schools were regarded as a benchmark for how society as a whole could be organised (Corrado 2013) and treated like racialized 'congregations', requiring the segregation of learners across racial categories (Chisholm and Sujee 2006). All school-going children, regardless of background, were expected to participate in the schools' 'Christian' ethos with no other religion or worldview acknowledged, let alone included. Religious Instruction (RI) was positioned within CNE, as a curriculum subject purposed for evangelism, nurturing specific values and principles (Orchard and Davids 2020).

In the Republic of South Africa, all pupils are now required to study RE as a compulsory element of the school curriculum governed by the National Policy on Religion and Education (DoE 2003) introduced early in the twenty-first century to replace CNE. South Africa has long been regarded a religiously active society (see Nogueira-Godsey 2016), however, strict separation of religion and the state in education is now required. Teaching and learning about religion and religions should be completely different from the 'instruction and religious nurture provided by the home, family, and religious community' (DoE 2003, p. 3), while recognising 'scope for interaction between the two' and a clear need for a 'relationship between religion and education' (DoE 2003, p. 3) that will best serve the interests of a democratic society (Davids and Orchard forthcoming).

Compulsory RE is included within the 'Life Orientation' curriculum in state funded schools, rather than as a separate subject and the most recent policy guidance on RE included in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DBE 2011), offers limited opportunities to teach about religion explicitly. Some citizens have interpreted the policy negatively, as a move by secularists to remove religion from schools, rather than enforcing a neutral separation (Orchard and Davids 2020). The challenge remains how to restructure the relationship between religion and education, so that shifting away from exclusivist and confessional RE, towards an approach that is inclusive of multiple traditions, does not alienate religious adherents.

3 Three justifications for religious education

3.1 The 'possibility of truth' justification for RE

Having set out these two particular contexts, my next move is to re-consider in turn three possible justifications for RE as a compulsory subject, beginning with the justification which Hand argues (2004) offers its best defence: that of the 'possibility of truth'. Hand maintains that pupils should be given opportunities to explore distinctively religious responses to claims about the world that have far-reaching implications for the way life should be lived, touching on established territory for a subject widely understood by the subject community itself to be concerned with provoking "challenging questions about

meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human” (REC 2013, p. 14). Hand’s emphasis, however, lies far more narrowly on the need to present rigorous arguments in reasonable defence of God’s existence, so as to leave children and young people as well placed as possible to make up their own minds on these matters of ultimate significance. Hand’s concern is that understanding of religion promoted in subject RE may be contaminated by religious belief and doctrine, particularly in faith-based settings.

Hand builds his account of the kind of knowledge that ought to drive the RE curriculum based on the ‘Forms of Knowledge’ thesis developed by Hirst (1974) in which Hirst stipulates that what can be known comprises a small number of logically distinct ‘domains’ or ‘disciplines’, one ‘domain’ being that of religion. If all human meaning and understanding can be examined in terms of these ‘forms’ or ‘realms’, so that there is nothing unique about the epistemological nature of religious truth claims, religious understanding may be taught without also imparting religious belief. There is not space here to do justice to the rigour and precision of Hand’s argument in its entirety. However, Hand’s conclusion is that:

Pupils can be taught exactly what religious propositions mean with reference to other propositions of the same epistemological kinds and without reference to distinctively religious experiences. The aim of teaching for religious understanding without religious belief is therefore perfectly coherent. (Hand 2006, pp. 117–118).

There is some synergy between Hand’s concern to teach exact religious knowledge in more recent work by other religious educators interested in the philosophical dimension of RE. It is judged “necessary” to the subject by Earl (2016); moreover, the attraction of philosophy of religion when it is well taught is significant, as large numbers of students in England who have gone on to study this area through GCSE and A Level programmes testifies. Meanwhile, thorough and rigorous engagement with propositional religious knowledge is currently absent from the RE curriculum in South Africa. Such a focus might well enjoy support, were limitations addressed of curriculum time and the longstanding recognised need for ‘training, commitment, and enthusiasm of professional teachers’ (DoE 2003, p. 14).

One immediate practical concern with both Hand’s ‘possible truths’ argument is its inevitable conservatism. Assuming at this point the forms of knowledge thesis to be a persuasive one, it is sobering how so many expressions of possible religious truth to date have been articulated by so few, overwhelmingly those who are dead, white and male. If all children and young people are to be empowered with education in established authoritative truths, other possible or potentially deserving truths/knowledges need to be sought out and knowledge ‘decolonised’; or at least a wider range of articulations, even if the ‘truths’ are essentially the same. Understanding that it would be neither realistic nor appropriate 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. This will present significant challenges to curriculum developers and teacher educators, although that isn’t a reason not to insist on it.

A second practical concern is the very narrow scope for subject RE, if exploring reasonable arguments for the possible existence of God remains its primary focus and White (2004) understandably questions whether this might warrant the status afforded a curriculum subject on its own. Might there be ways in which possible truths might be included in the curriculum if other justifications proved more persuasive than this debate previously

acknowledged. How would this argument relate, for example, to Kueh's more recent version of a knowledge-led defence of RE as 'intrinsically worthwhile' (Kueh 2017)? Going further, does the curriculum time currently given over to RE need to include more general philosophy for this reason, for example ethics as Tilson (2011) has argued or political philosophy, on the grounds defended by Floyd (2016). These arguments raise serious concerns about education in valuable literacies other than the religious to which children and young people might be entitled, but denied access, if compulsory RE squeezes them out.

White (2004) continues by questioning how far religious possibilities of truth should be privileged on the curriculum in England over other (non-religious) perspectives on the possibility of truth, given the increasingly low levels of religious adherence. His objection is harder to sustain in the South African context, home to a wide variety of religious and major world faiths and a deep and enduring indigenous religious heritage, with 60% of the population declaring allegiance to Christianity (Orchard and Davids 2020). In the English context, it is possible to partially assuage White's concerns with an argument previously advanced by Haydon (1997). If society is becoming increasingly secular, this kind of academic opportunity is a particularly important function of state funded religious education in community schooling. Children will not be exposed to the distinctive truth claims established by religions informally through discussions with their parents and other contacts, creating a role for lessons in school to present well-articulated possibilities of truth from which children and young people can make informed decisions whether or not to pursue religious belief for themselves. This defence is persuasive but nevertheless surely cuts both ways, taking us back to White's original concern. Unless these are included on the curriculum too, children in *religious* homes may similarly receive insufficient exposure to distinctive *non-religious truths*.

The most recent non-statutory guidance for RE in England, developed through the deliberations of a Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) has gone some way towards addressing this issue. Nearly twenty years later, a change to the name of the subject to 'Religion and Worldviews Education' (RWE) has been proposed, acknowledging that the needs of children and young people, especially the 'nones', are not met by *religious* education alone (REC 2018; Woodhead 2012, 2016). The expansion of the name of the subject to include 'worldview' has been proposed, being situated within academic discourses that conceptualise the field, and debated energetically (e.g. Cooling 2020; Freathy and John 2019; Hannam and Biesta 2019; Teece 2017; Hand 2018). I support this move, concurring with the observation that the current term in use 'religion' is similarly contested (Freathy and John 2019). In the policy context, where linguistic flexibility is crucial in the unenviable task of brokering deals between interests that are often strongly felt and fundamentally opposed, the word has considerable potential, with the CoRE report itself demonstrating how to capture ways of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world in ways that are more inclusive. Reflecting on the need for further policy development for RE in South Africa as well as England, the term has considerable potential there too, having been widely adopted already in other similarly pluralist and democratically governed jurisdictions.

However, as well as questioning whether RWE can go far enough in embracing ethical and political philosophies alongside more established curriculum fare, such a significant concession with regard to the name of the subject (as this will surely be viewed by conservative religious opinion) faces challenges from another direction and must surely be matched by a more generous and inclusive regard for the 'instruction and religious nurture provided by the home, family, and religious community' (DoE 2003). Hand's 'possibility of truth' justification for RE, positioned within what might be termed a 'neo-logical

positivist' stance, seeks to strip away religious experience to leave epistemologically 'pure' religious truth claims for abstract consideration. However, the difficulty of a so-called 'neutral' stance with regard to religion and education in England is well-established (e.g. Teece 2008; Barnes and Wright 2006); and the South African example of non-compliance with the 'educational' model of the subject illuminates this starkly. The dangers of conflating religious belief and educational practice of the kind with which Hand is concerned were painfully apparent during the apartheid regime; but, since 2003, problems with RE stripped to the bone of reasonable engagement with religious experience alienating religious people have become very apparent.

In this regard, Andrew Wright's well-established 'critical realist' position plays an extremely important role in opening up an educationally defensible approach to the subject in which religious adherents with a particular allegiance to possible truth can feel included. His contribution to the debate with White in response to Hand was to reassert his judgement (2004) that children and young people need RE lessons that enable them to begin to make sense of the fundamental disputes that exist between beliefs and world views in lessons, so as to develop their religious literacy, such that they are enabled to engage meaningfully with conflicting, often contradictory ways of understanding the universe and their place within it.

Before moving on to reflect on the moral justification for RE, I conclude these reflections on possibility of truth with one final complication with moves to make the subject 'academic'. This concerns the way in which academic practices themselves are positioned, so for example the academic rather than religious objection that might be made to the notion of 'stripping away' religious experience to leave pure unadulterated religious propositions. The (academic) view of the world Hand holds to reach this conclusion is informed by different pre-suppositions to those which, for example, inform mine. While I am certainly interested to understand why he thinks as he does, being more agnostic on matters of 'truth' (N.B. while also self identifying as 'religious') and focused instead in promoting understanding in RE, along the lines that Walshe and Teece have developed (see Walshe 2020; Walshe and Teece 2013). Similarly, while I am sympathetic to how 'critical realist' RE plays out in the classroom, I just don't see the world through a critically realist lens. Far from circumventing the neutrality issue, appeals to scholarliness and disciplinarity introduce (quite rightly) a further layer of complexity with regard to RE and neutrality.

3.2 Moral justification for RE

The place of RE traditionally on the curriculum may have originated in arguments for moral education at school (see above) but this is now widely contested. Indeed, Warnock took great exception generally to the perceived need to teach children to be moral while at school at all, dismissing the need to teach the 'difference between right and wrong' as a 'highly ambiguous and somewhat irritating expression' (Warnock 1996, p. 45). The hard line and racist exclusivist ideology pursued under apartheid in South Africa and underpinned by a *specific* religious interpretation of living and being certainly starkly illustrate the problem. However, in less extreme contexts, democratic and religious values need not be incommensurate (see e.g. McLaughlin 2003, 1985); and I have previously argued at length, from a religious *and* liberal perspective, that imparting certain modes of thinking which are above criticism in any curriculum subject is inconsistent with democratic values of political liberty and equality (Orchard 2015).

Nevertheless, in practice, Conroy et al (2014) discovered considerable confusion among RE practitioners and other stakeholders in England with regard to positioning and religious belief. The Cowper-Temple clause, while paving the way for non-confessional RE, did so in narrowly Christian terms, being of its time. Its influence, the ongoing requirement for a daily act of Collective Worship in schools in England (which some confuse with the requirement to provide RE) a century and a half later, do nothing to assuage the fears of people with little or no interest in religion that in the twenty first century the situation is changing. Both the governance of RE and practical support for the subject at a local level continues to be influenced heavily by the Church of England, whose position as an established Church within an increasingly non-religiously-observant population is, at best, constitutionally ambiguous.

Unsurprisingly, then, understandings of RE in practice may frequently conflate the educational and the confessional, both in faith-based and community school settings (Conroy et al. 2014). There is concern within the profession that 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion have been misunderstood when divorced from Grimmitt's (2000) original articulation. These are issues that the CoRE report (REC 2018) has worked hard to try to address. For where RE and moral education become confused, this can lead to an unacceptable degree of pupil indoctrination (White 2004; Wright 2004); and given the underinvestment in teacher education for teachers of RE in both England (APPG 2014; REC 2013, 2018) and South Africa (2003) it can perhaps come as no great surprise that this kind of unacceptable practice has been identified.

Distancing myself from the idea that RE and moral education should be conflated, an academically rigorous form of the subject might nonetheless contribute to moral education in distinctive ways, alongside other curriculum subjects. Moreover, there is considerable (academic and philosophical) support within the idealist tradition in which I situate myself from which to construct a different understanding of how 'moral' education in schools is an inevitable aspect of teaching. There is a line of thought, originating with Aristotle (1953) and developed subsequently both by general philosophers (e.g. Dewey 1916; Bradley 1927; MacIntyre 1981; Hegel 1991; Taylor 1992) and philosophers of education (e.g. White 2004; Haydon 1997; McLaughlin 2003; Carr 2007) which maintains that moral education takes place through the experience of ethical living, combined with academic reflection. Moral understanding on this account develops through immersion in habits, particular moral codes enshrined in laws, customs and traditions of the society in which one is located; as well as the capacity to reflect on those beliefs critically, which should inform one's sense of what course of action might be appropriate, given the context in which ethical reflection is situated (see Orchard 2015; Orchard et al. 2020, especially Chapter 11). This leads me to conclude that instead of attempting (ultimately unsuccessfully in my view) to strip the moral dimension away out of RE, the nature and purpose of the subject needs to be clearer and the reflexive nature of the subject explored more thoroughly through improved subject specific teacher education. Improved teacher education with regard to their role as moral educators is needed across the curriculum, without singling out RE for special treatment (Orchard et al. 2020).

In RE, taking the critical reflection aspect of this understanding first, learning *about* religious moral teaching while at school is perhaps relatively uncontroversial, although falling within a socialisation justification for RE according to Hand (see next section) rather than an explicitly moral one, causing me to wonder if these categories, though helpful as conceptual tools, break down in practice under closer scrutiny. Given their powerful influence on established social norms, studying Judaeo Christian ethical perspectives (which are diverse) could help pupils better reflect critically and then interpret in practice the laws

and customs of the society in which they live, work and/or study. Extending that argument further, there could be a good case for studying other religious ethical perspectives in depth to educate children and young people as future citizens of an increasingly inter-connected world order, Islamic ethics and the strict conditions of 'jihad'. Better representation of 'Eastern' and indigenous ways of thinking and behaving ethically alongside 'Western' or Abrahamic religious perspectives could be encouraged, noting that this balance might be a particular issue in England. In theory, indigenous beliefs, including traditional African and Xhosa beliefs, are recognised already on the South African RE curriculum (DoE 2003). Of more concern is the notion of 'learning from' religion, where this is confused (Teece 2010); and even if those terms have been removed from more recent subject documentation and curriculum documentation, on the basis of Conroy and Baumfield's evidence the underlying issue remains: widespread misunderstanding of 'reflexivity' among teachers of RE.

For in practice, children do not derive moral education solely from teachers, who are only one of a number of moral authorities they encounter, alongside parents or carers, family members and people encountered in wider society, whether directly or via the media (Orchard et al. 2020). Such a view, as Haydon points out critically, implies teachers simply 'broadcast' values 'to pupils as passive receivers of moral signals who accept the teachers' values without subjecting them to rational assessment' (Haydon 1997, p. 121). This is not something I recognise either, from my extensive observations of classroom practice. Teachers (and others) who think this may need these matters brought to their professional attention.

Rather, many children seem able to make moral choices for themselves from an early age, although they remain relatively inexperienced decision-makers, facing difficult decisions in their schooling, with potentially life-changing consequences and while vulnerable to the undue influence of predatory or domineering adults. Julian Stern (2007, pp. 29–34, 40) suggests schools should be thought of as "semi-protected" environments that encourage young people, while supporting them to make decisions. Strengthened teacher formation programmes are needed in this area that foster the acquisition of professional knowledge, both subject-specific and more widely pedagogical appropriate to the developmental stage in which they specialise.

Conroy has argued bluntly that RE in England has tried to do too much and included within its brief a range of whole-school priorities such that any sense of a substantive core or essence of the subject has been eroded. This problem has been further compounded by insufficient curriculum time, money and/or staffing or expertise (APPG 2014; REC 2013, 2018) to deliver on such promises. However, the study of religion continues to play a distinctive role in moral education, alongside subjects across the curriculum who should share this responsibility. Combining both subject content and moral reasoning (Haydon 1997) and within an appropriate educational environment, through religious moral education children and young people might be enabled to engage critically with contested claims of certain principles and values of the conduct of life. Compulsory RE should neither be regarded the sole vehicle for moral education on the curriculum; nor should moral education be the sole or main aim of RE, perhaps better conceived as a 'carrier subject' of the kind Huddleston and Kerr (2006) have identified for citizenship education.

3.3 The socialisation justification for RE

A third and final possible aim for compulsory RE, the socialisation justification, is as follows: children and young people should be able to understand and respect the plurality of religious belief in 'society'. Religion Education policy in South Africa asserts that in the most "profound matters of life orientation" "diversity is a fact of our national life" (DoE 2003, p. 6) a tone also consistent with the more inclusive notion of religion and worldviews education promoted by the CoRE report for England. Were a "simple accessible way of explaining RE to the public, media and government" (St Gabriel's 2011, p. 16) needed, this would be the single most persuasive argument to include compulsory RE on the school curriculum. The notion that people will get on with each other better if they are informed about the different tenets of the world's 'religions' is widely appreciated by general public opinion, particularly when issues seemingly caused by religious diversity make headlines (Orchard 2015).

While less bothered by the social justification than the moral, Hand and White point out that the promotion of good community relations may be dependent on important factors other than religious diversity, including ethnicity and/or race, culture and family, ability, social class and material wealth, and I agree with them (Orchard 2015). Then, if religious difference is *not* the only way in which modern democratic societies are plural, it is reasonable to question why the study of religion should enjoy a privileged curriculum claim on the basis of this argument (White 2004) over the social sciences. Christopher (2019) is more sceptical still, drawing on Critical Race theory, i.e. a sociological antiracist analysis of education, to argue that the community cohesion agenda for RE is destined to fail, even on its own terms. Conventional RE focuses almost exclusively on the interpersonal, the potential of education to be transformative for individuals, while ignoring the structural, economic and political dimensions of exclusion and inequality, she continues, proposing that RE drop entirely what she considers to be a poorly-conceived aim, resting on thin assumptions.

In terms of curriculum content, in England the focus on worldviews in the CoRE report goes some way towards extending the subject beyond a narrow and specific concern with religious faith. There is also increasing awareness amongst religious educators (see for example Wright 2018; Kueh 2017) of the need for RE to take a multi-disciplinary approach. As time has passed, religious educators have addressed such concerns for themselves, opening up to a much wider and more inclusive account of subject content and academic perspective. At the same time, a curriculum subject focussed on understanding and respecting plurality in society cannot be solely about religion or world views; were this the only aim of RE, well taught Social Science lessons with good coverage of religion as set out in a National Entitlement for RE, as the CoRE report proposes, could address this more than adequately and appropriately.

However, at this point, recent philosophical reflection that has taken place in the past decade around the term 'religious literacy' and its application to RE in England should be introduced as a potential counterclaim for the need to focus very specifically on religion in this regard. Although 'religious literacy' had already been introduced into the subject's theoretical literature when Hand first formulated his framework for reflection on the subject by Wright (1993), it did not attract the prominence then which it has since gone on to receive in policy documentation in England (see Biesta et al. 2019, pp. 14–21). The argument that improved religious literacy is needed for the good of society has been picked up in England particularly by Dinham, who stresses the need to talk about religion in the

public sphere as a central aspect of human life. He identifies ‘an urgent need to re-skill public professionals and citizens for the daily encounter with the full range of religious plurality’ (2015, p. 110).

However, the term has become increasingly contested in England as its potential as an aim in its own right for the subject has been explored (see Biesta et al. 2019 for an extensive review and discussion of the literature). Where religious literacy promotes academic knowledge of religion stripped from religious experience problems follow, apparent in both the English and the South African context. Miller, for example, reflecting on practice in England captures the problem observing how many teachers appeared schooled in phenomenological models of ‘bracketing out’, suspending judgement and aiming for objectivity in seeking to show ‘respect for all’ in their treatment of religious and moral questions (Miller cited in APPG 2014).

(Kathryn) Wright maintains that to address concerns of this kind, religious literacy should combine understanding of religious beliefs and practices with the ability to apply this understanding in everyday life through interaction with others (Wright 2018). Similarly, Roux insists that to be ‘religiously literate’ requires an individual to have sufficient self knowledge that they might engage with those who are ‘other’ in ways that are meaningful (Roux 2006). Whilst not attributing this quality directly to religious literacy, Kathryn Wright argues for the open ‘embrace’ of otherness, and ‘being hospitable’ in RE teaching, with the host giving of themselves in the encounter more than simply providing hospitality (Wright 2018, p. 229). This insight reinforces the difficulty of separating out the socialisation and moral strands of justification for the subject and how the moral as well as the social dimensions of RE bring together both social and moral and ‘academic’ aspects.

Biesta et al (2019) conclude their deliberations by refusing to prefer one existing account or definition of religious literacy, while agreeing that a convincing case can be made in favour of the idea that education should assist in helping children and young people to become knowledgeable about a wide range of different religious beliefs and practices, on the simple assumption that such beliefs and practices continue to shape contemporary societies. Their “nagging suspicion” is that:

Religious literacy does not resolve the controversies about pinning down the aims and content of religious education, but rather simply reframes them in alternate terminology. If this is the case, is the terminology of religious literacy actually needed, since it could be argued that it only serves to add a further complex layer (Biesta et al. 2019, p. 28).

4 Some implications for policy and practice

The main purpose of my analysis has been to review the potential of three justifications for compulsory RE by Hand, and the responses of White and Wright from 2004, in order to explore their potential for this ongoing and troublesome (as well as intellectually engaging) issue of the subject’s aims. I have revived philosophical reflection on the aims of RE from several decades ago in the belief that it can help both to illuminate and challenge ‘the grasp of the concrete’ (Peters 1966, p. 15) inherent in policy formulation and educational practice, while also ‘bringing into focus what is important’ (Laugier 2011, p. 997). From the experience of wrestling with these challenging concepts in some depth and over time, I see considerable value in returning to the questions and challenges posed in the light of ideas that have been developed in the subject since and in relation to RE in South Africa as

well as England, although perhaps at this stage I am left with more questions than definitive answers. In the somewhat limited space that I have left I want to offer some reflections on how I see these ideas being taken forward in future deliberations.

I am partially attracted to the notion of 'possibility of truth' being studied in RE, on a more generous account of truths to be studied. I agree that moral education and religious education should not be conflated but argue that Hand's dismissal of the moral justification entirely is unwarranted. I also agree that the socialisation justification cannot apply to religious plurality alone but suggest that recent changes to the RE curriculum in the direction of a broader subject focus and inter-disciplinarity are positive if insufficient reforms for the subject in community schools where its prospects are currently quite bleak where there are not outstanding champions of the subject performing amazing curricular feats.

In tentatively suggesting that all three justifications for compulsory RE identified by Hand might be developed into a persuasive argument, I am aware of the nervousness in the RE subject community in England around complicating the aims of the subject when there is already a degree of confusion and misunderstanding. However, religious educators in England should be careful what they wish for, as the example of the (relatively) clear and uncomplicated aims for RE South Africa illustrates. There, clear and streamlined policy aims have not been shared by notable stakeholders, including more conservative religious adherents. Thus the notion of inclusive RE for South Africa has been undermined, as certain members of the 'rainbow nation' opt out of this provision entirely (Davids and Orchard, forthcoming). Were one 'simple and accessible' aim to be adopted, in England, as in South Africa, for political reasons this would become reduced to the socialisation argument. RE has a necessary role to play in order to better understand their ideological and cultural differences, become more secure in the formation of one's own religious identity; however, on its own this argument is insufficient to justify a discrete curriculum subject. I support the conclusion reached in Biesta et al.'s review of religious literacy as a possible focus for RE that the notion has considerable potential but needs developing. I wonder if the arguments around the three justifications considered here might offer food for thought in those deliberations.

The discussion has also generated reasonable concerns with promoting RE as a discrete inter or multi-disciplinary subject. Real life in general and religious experience in particular does not fall easily within neat disciplinary parcels and this is a promising way forward for the subject but existing theoretisations do not go far enough. As Aldridge concludes (e.g. Aldridge 2018), the subject's lack of a clear disciplinary community with which to identify is problematic in these academic defences of RE on the school curriculum. And the very nature of inter or multi-disciplinary study is that it evades easy categorisation by subject.

Hence these are 'interesting' times for religious educators and other supporters of the subject. I commend in England the hard work of the REC and many others to collaborate in the best interests of the subject and to broker agreement. The recommendation to change the name is timely and the general direction indicated by the CoRE report thoughtful and promising both in this jurisdiction as well as with potential lessons for curriculum reform in South Africa. There, two decades is a long time in policy terms and further revision to the National Policy for Religion and Education is urgently needed, given advances in the field since then and in the light of those unintended practical consequences of the policy which have been briefly highlighted.

If insights from either jurisdiction were to inform policy thinking in the other context, this should go beyond 'policy borrowing', or the (false) assumption that policy can simply be transplanted from one national context to another (Phillips and Ochs 2004, p. 774) to

what might better be described as ‘cross-national attraction’ (Phillips 1989, 1993; Ochs and Phillips 2002). Through shared reflection, educators in both places might share mutual understanding of the respective possibilities and challenges to identify common concerns, albeit these maybe more acute in post-apartheid South Africa. From a South African perspective, curriculum development projects which draw on strong and diverse traditions of theorising about RE in the subject community and curriculum resources and examples of practice which at their best are “inspiring” and “highly regarded” offer promising possibilities for future development at all levels, practice, policy and research. From an English perspective, meanwhile, one potential attraction of the South African example is the positive connections drawn between the religious and political under an umbrella of Life Orientation, albeit with shortcomings (see Orchard and Davids 2020; Davids and Orchard forthcoming).

Stronger connections drawn between school RE curriculum developers and international scholarship in the study of religion, worldviews and philosophy would benefit the subject in both contexts, with openness to South African scholarship one example of how the RE Curriculum in England might be decolonised (Orchard and Davids 2020). Such reflection on potentially promising practice in education found in ‘other’ places (Phillips and Ochs 2004) might seem highly impractical in the fevered world of educational policy and reform and practice in England. However, I have found it hugely insightful; seeing the good in certain familiar aspects of RE that I had previously taken for granted.

In each place there is a clear need to improve levels of teacher professionalism through better teacher education in RE. I have argued previously, the established discussion of pedagogy often pursued in the RE literature in England (Grimmitt 2000) is unhelpful (Orchard 2015), really about ‘methods’ rather than ‘pedagogies’, or a broader concern with how children and young people learn, advocating the potential of engagement with educational theorists like Bruner. In promoting more robust accounts of pedagogical and subject knowledge in RE, again arguments for a more academic approach must go further still to acknowledge the positioned nature of academic practice. I am interested by Kueh’s robust arguments for powerful knowledge in RE, on a ‘social realist’ account influenced strongly by the work of Michael Young and others (see Kueh 2017) but personally drawn to a case for more academic RE aligned with Oakeshott’s (1959) notion of engaging with conversations of mankind (sic), given my idealist pre-suppositions. RE teachers need to be supported to engage more robustly with educational theory as well as the findings of research (Orchard et al. 2020); teacher educators in RE need to be research active themselves, if this kind of robust educational reflection is to feature more prominently in subject specific professional development practice.

5 Conclusion

At the heart of this discussion lies the question of how far an explicit emphasis on the study of religion be retained in the focus of a subject promoting better mutual understanding; and what a compulsory study of religion in a pluralist education system might necessarily entail? I have shown how, two decades on, these categories of possible justification for RE identified by Hand remain useful tools to frame theoretical reflection on the aims for RE, even though the policy context to which they were originally applied has in some ways shifted.

I have supported the case for including lessons in which knowledgeable and articulate teachers transmit an explicit and structured canon of religious arguments concerned with ‘possible truths’ both accurately and reliably. My own religious upbringing provoked “challenging questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human” but did not expose me systematically or with rigour to the kind of religious literacy I developed through formalised academic study when I arrived at university and I understand that these two things are distinct, although more inter-related than Hand allows for.

My experience of that degree (in Theology and Religious Studies) was reflexive and personally engaging as well as academically rigorous; on academic terms, I find this bifurcation problematic. Thus, to exclude the possibility of reflexivity in academic practice might be personally engaging as well as knowledge rich is to disaggregate the school curriculum from those disciplines and fields of study as they are understood and practiced by many of their exponents in higher education. Furthermore, those disciplines are informed by a priori pre-suppositions concerning the nature of the world, knowledge and contested claims of certain principles and values of the conduct of life, a matter which needs to be made more explicit by exponents of academic, multi-disciplinary RE, like Kueh, given common cause might be pursued more wholeheartedly if allegiance to social realism were not a pre-requisite.

Finally, while I understand the pragmatic reasons given, particularly by those engaged in policy making, to opt for one ‘clear’ aim of RE, it seems to me the case for the subject is best made through appeals to more than one argument as to why subject RE continues to matter, building on the powerful and widely persuasive idea that RE promotes religious and cultural literacy. Such an endeavour might genuinely inform better mutual understanding in and of the world, through study that is both academically robust as well as personally developmental.

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