

CRITICAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH¹

Abstract

The paper seeks to enhance critical approaches to religious education by addressing the notion of religious truth. The discussion focuses on three standard theories of truth: pragmatic, coherence and correspondence. It is suggested that contemporary religious education draws implicitly and uncritically on pragmatic and coherence theories, to the detriment of the subject. By grounding religious education in a concern for realistic truth the discipline can be liberated from a narrow instrumental understanding of its proper role and function, thereby opening up the possibility of its contributing to the transformation both of individual pupils and of society as a whole.

Introduction

Religious education in England and Wales has reached a fascinating stage in its development. The 1944 Education Act provided for the establishment of a range of locally agreed syllabuses, a provision consolidated in the 1988 Education Reform Act (Rudge, 2000). This led to the emergence of significant variations in classroom practice, as well as the development of a diverse range of contrasting pedagogies and theoretical frameworks (Grimmitt, 2000). The recent drafting of a non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education reflects concerns to move towards a greater unity and integration of the subject (QCA, 2004). Despite this, the debate over the nature of religious education continues unabated. One of the key issues currently under discussion regards the pros and cons of contrasting 'contextual' and 'critical' approaches to the subject (Heimbrock, Scheilke & Schreiner, 2001; Wright, 2000a).

Broadly speaking, advocates of 'contextual' religious education reflect post-modern concerns for the immediate life-worlds of children, and as a result tend to focus on the task of enabling pupils to establish appropriate levels of self-understanding and develop their own preferred life-stances. One of the consequences is that they place less emphasis on the exploration of the world's religious traditions than one would normally expect to find in the religious education classroom. In its more radical form contextual religious education adopts a thoroughgoing relativistic stance, seeking to deconstruct religious traditions *per se* and replace them with fluid notions of individual spirituality (Erricker and Erricker, 2000; Erricker, 2001; cf. Wright, 2001, 2004, pp. 195-207). More mainstream contextual approaches do seek to engage with specific religious traditions; however, such engagement tends to function as little more than as a heuristic tool designed to enabling pupils to understand their own beliefs and values in greater depth, rather than as an end in itself (Jackson, 1997, 2004).

In contrast, advocates of forms of 'critical'

religious education view the study of the world's religions as central to the enterprise of religious education. This is not to say that they have no interest in the spiritual development of pupils; on the contrary, this concern remains central. However, they argue that the cultivation of religious literacy through the explicit study of religion provides the best means of enabling pupils to make informed decisions about their beliefs and values. A crucial dimension of critical religious education is its concern to move beyond a bland descriptive approach to the study of religion towards a critical engagement with the truth claims of both secular and religious world-views.

As its title suggests, this paper seeks to contribute to the further development of critical religious education. I am fully aware that any talk of truth is deeply unfashionable in the current climate of post-modern relativism, as is talk of truth in the context of religious education (Norris, 1993, 1996; Wright, 2004). If I write against the grain, it is because I hold a high view of religious education: its role cannot be limited to that of simply reflecting the current status quo; rather it must accept responsibility for opening up transformational possibilities for pupils and offering the resources of religion to a culture in crisis.

A common misunderstanding is that religious educators frequently seek to bracket-out issue of religious truth in the classroom, on the three-fold assumption that religious belief is a private affair, that religious education in plural societies should be committed to neutrality, and that teachers should strive to avoid any hint of indoctrination. This, however, is not the case in practice: I will argue that contemporary religious education frequently makes two implicit assumptions about religious truth. The first reflects a 'pragmatic' theory of truth: since 'truth' is that which works in practice, religious education acts in a truthful manner whenever it contributes pragmatically to the well-being of society. The second reflects a 'coherence' theory of truth: since 'truth' is that which holds together coherently, religious education acts in a

truthful manner whenever it enables pupils to live their lives in a coherent manner. The problem here is that though the 'pragmatic' and 'coherence' theories of truth dominate contemporary religious education, they effectively bypass the more basic 'correspondence' theory of truth, which addresses questions of the contrasting and often conflicting truth claims put forward by a range of religious and secular traditions. A religious education that seeks to enable society to function more efficiently and to help pupils live coherent lives, but fails to address fundamental questions about the ultimate nature of the universe, the existence of God, and the meaning and purpose of life, will be an impoverished religious education.

Pragmatic Truth

In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, first published in 1692, John Locke signalled a shift from a classical to a modern understanding of the purpose of education (Locke, 2000). The classical notion that education has to do with bringing pupils into a proper relationship with the ultimate order-of-things gives way to a more mundane concern to prepare them to take their proper place in society. According to Locke, 'of all the men (sic) we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education', and the goal of education is to establish 'a sound mind in a sound body', this being 'a short, but full description of a happy state in this world' (p. 83).² Such an education is no longer concerned with the pursuit of ultimate truth, but rather with the routine truthfulness that comes from living the good life: the authenticity of education is rooted in its practical effectiveness, in its ability to fulfil its adopted goals.

Locke's understanding of education reflects an approach to truth most clearly articulated by the American school of pragmatic philosophy, a tradition associated with Charles Pierce and John Dewey, and which probably reaches its high point in the philosophy of William James (Cormier, 2001; James, 1978).

The tradition enjoys a post-modern manifestation in the work of Richard Rorty, according to whom the world contains no deep hidden meanings: our attempts to unpack the ultimate structures of reality or discover the real meaning of life are misplaced (Rorty, 1980, 1982, 1989). Instead, we find ourselves thrown into a world devoid of all meaning apart from that which we create for ourselves. The ontological bedrock of reality – the point where, as Wittgenstein puts it, our spade is turned and we can seek no further explanation – consists of nothing more profound than the values that we choose to adopt as individuals and communities (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 85). Truth is

essentially a pragmatic affair that we measure instrumentally: do we live up to the targets we set ourselves?

In western democracies, the overriding values we have adopted are the twin liberal values of freedom and tolerance. Hence, we judge the truthfulness or authenticity of our actions against these standards: do our economic, political, and educational systems maximise personal freedom and engender actions that are more tolerant? It was Locke who first clearly articulated these values, and Rorty has been quick to portray his own position as the culmination of the liberal tradition. According to Rorty, it is only by abandoning the search for ultimate truth that we can free ourselves to be the people we wish to be, and thereby become more like his ideal liberal, the person who thinks that cruelty is the worst thing in the world (Rorty, 1989, p. x).

This pragmatic approach to truth has had a profound impact on education in England and Wales. The 1944 Education Act retained something of the classical understanding of education: through religious education and a daily act of collective worship, schools were to nurture children into a confession of the Christian faith. Though the 1988 Education Reform Act retained a commitment to the place of religion in education, its understanding of the purpose of education took a distinctively pragmatic turn. Now the primary task of schools is to contribute to well being of society by promoting the 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils' and prepare them for the 'opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life' (UK Government, 1988, p. 1). This responsibility has been interpreted on a number of different levels. Thus, a low view of education reduces schooling to the task of preparing pupils for future employment by instilling basic intellectual, social and technical skills, thereby equipping them to contribute to the future economic well being of society. On the other hand, a high view of education seeks to cultivate character and virtue in order to mould the next generation of future citizens. Either way, the pragmatic enhancement of society takes precedence over any higher-order educational goals.

We have already seen how the 1944 Education Act was concerned to nurture pupils in the Christian faith. However, many educators saw such a Christian based schooling in ethical rather than religious terms, preferring to link the teaching of Christianity with the task of moral formation rather than that of faith development. Thus, teaching the Ten Commandments, the parables of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount was concerned with instilling moral values rather than grappling with theological

issues. As a result, society increasingly looked to religious education to provide children with a healthy sense of morality, rather than with an understanding of religion itself. This shift from theology to morality took a secular turn with the advent of forms of phenomenological religious education concerned to introduce pupils not just to Christianity but also to the other major world religions. Rather than teach children how to engage intelligently with questions of ultimate truth, religious education sought instead to bind together a religiously and culturally divided society by instilling in children tolerant and empathetic attitudes towards the world's religions.

On the surface, there is nothing particularly objectionable about this process: the development of a harmonious society and cultivation of liberal virtues is surely to be welcomed. The problem, however, is that the equation of truth and truthfulness with the successful achievement of this liberal agenda effectively does violence to the great religious traditions of the world in an act of cultural imperialism. For these traditions ultimate reality, and hence the ultimate good of human beings and society, lie in a greater reality that transcends the world of space and time. A pragmatically driven religious education may indeed refer to such transcendent beliefs in passing, but it does not see its primary task to be that of unpacking them and opening up any transformational possibilities they might potentially contain. On the contrary, the message – implied or otherwise – is clear: religion is of value insofar as it contributes to the fulfilment of liberal aspirations, and a positive danger if it seeks to place these aspirations under a question mark. Ultimate truth, for such pragmatic religious education, is not God's truth, but our truth; pragmatic religious education, that is to say, inducts children into a broadly secular world-view.

Truth as Coherence

Alongside pragmatism, the so-called 'coherence' theory of truth has also had a deep impact on contemporary religious education. This second approach, which is rooted in the tradition of philosophical idealism that runs from Plato through to Hegel, identifies truth not with the practical outcome of our actions but with the internal coherence of our ideas. Plato perceived the world to be in a state of constant flux and change, and considered its ephemeral nature incapable of bearing ultimate truth; consequently, he sought to locate truth in the eternal realm of unwavering ideas. According to idealist philosophers, ultimate truth – the ontological bedrock where all explanation must cease – resides in the inner coherence and illuminatory power of our thoughts and mental processes. If, under the influence of Hegel, idealism dominated the intellectual currents

of the 19th Century, it suffered a significant decline in 20th Century. The criticisms of F. H. Bradley's philosophy offered by Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore were widely held to have dealt idealism a mortal wound. Put simply, Russell and Moore contended that just because a statement or world-view is coherent does not make it true (Moser, 2003).

Despite such criticism, the notion of truth as coherence continues to flourish, albeit in a revised form. Under the influence of the Romantic Movement, in which the category of reason gave way to that of emotive experience, the idealistic concern for the coherence of rational ideas was transformed into a romantic concern for the coherence, authenticity and authority of inner feeling and emotion (Wright 1998, pp. 57-68, 2000b, pp. 16-25, 2004, pp. 18-20). That which is ultimately true – and hence constitutes the ontological bedrock at which the need for further explanation ceases – is the experiential reality of my inner feelings and emotions. That which is ultimately real is that which is most meaningful for me as I reflect on my inner experience. Such romanticism took a further turn with the emergence of post-modern interest in the category of 'desire': in a post-modern world in which all truth is relative, it is not the coherence of my ideas, nor even of feelings, but rather my desires that become most important to me. Such desire opens up the possibility of living an authentic – and hence 'truthful' – life. If there is no objective truth 'out there', then I can at least be truthful to myself by refusing to suppress my deepest desires.

This romanticised version of the coherence theory of truth entered the educational sphere through the writings of Rousseau. He advocated a 'negative' education designed to allow pupils to discover their authentic inner-selves by growing naturally as nature intended, protected from the corrosive influence of society (Rousseau, 1986). All that is true and authentic is already present in children's minds as innate potential, and a 'positive' education designed to transmit forms of knowledge or induct them into the moral norms of prevailing society can only serve to hinder the realisation of such potential. Rousseau's pedagogy has close links with the Socratic notion of the teacher as midwife, bringing to birth the inner potential innate in the child by enabling him or her to recollect a state of original innocence from which they have fallen. In the *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard labels this disparagingly as a doctrine of recollection, "by which all learning and inquiry is interpreted as a kind of remembering" (Kierkegaard, 1967, p. 11; cf. Willows, 2001). For Rousseau authentic education must be child-centred, since truth resides in the subjectivity of the

child's inner experiences. Rousseau's pedagogical vision was a key driver of forms of progressive education that flourished in the 1960s, and remains part of educational counter-culture that seeks to challenge the hegemony of the subject-centred and skills-based National Curriculum established by the 1988 Education Reform Act. This child-centred counter-culture has been a significant factor in the growth of interest in spiritual education, viewed as a potential means of challenging the narrowly instrumental focus of current educational theory and practice (Wright, 1998, 2000b).

Religious education has a longstanding interest in the spiritual development of pupils, and an ongoing concern to engaging with the inner-lives of children, in order to enable them not merely to 'learn about' religion, but more importantly to 'learn from' religion. According to the implicit religious educators of the 1960s, as well as David Hay in the 1980s, religious education should start from the inner feelings and spiritual experiences of children (Goldman, 1964, 1965; Hay, 1985; Loukes, 1961). However, such a starting point is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means of enabling students to build bridges to an understanding of the realistic truths claims of the various world religions: the child's spiritual experience, that is to say, does not itself constitute truth, but rather a potential path to a greater truth. The 1990s saw a fundamental revision of this process. Under the impact of post-modernity, some religious educators sought to engage with the inner life of the child as an end in itself, rather than as a means to some greater end. Thus Clive Erricker argued that the authenticity and integrity of the child's inner-experience is sacrosanct, and that the primary task of religious education was simply to make children aware of their inner feelings (Erricker, 2001). Here truth, understood as the coherence, authenticity and illuminatory power of our inner feelings and emotions, clearly plays a significant role in contemporary religious education.

A religious education that objected to attempts to encourage children to explore their inner-feelings would be severely limited. However, certain problems arise if this exploration does not equip children to respond critically to what they find, but rather merely offers the criteria that 'what you find is what is true for you'. First, an education that assumes that the child's desires and feelings are always appropriate ones can amount to little more than a form of indoctrination into post-modern relativism. Second, such an education will fail to take seriously the spiritual self-understanding and truth claims of the great religious traditions of the world. Christianity, for example, views the assumption of the automatic truth of our innate

feelings as heretical, ignoring as it does the doctrine of original sin: true spirituality for the Christian lies not in self-affirmation, but in a joyful acceptance of the grace of God leading to self-abandonment to divine providence. Once again, we find a clear understanding of truth operating within religious education, but in a form and manner that is particularly narrow and which effectively bypasses the truth claims and potential insights of the world's religions.

Truth as Correspondence

I have argued that, despite the received wisdom that contemporary religious education seeks to be neutral by bracketing out questions of religious truth, a commitment to truth permeates the subject at a deep level. This manifests itself, both in a commitment to the truthfulness of the pragmatic goal of establishing a stable and harmonious society, and in a concern for the truthfulness embodied in the coherence and authenticity of the spiritual lives of students. These twin truths are, generally speaking, not open for discussion, but rather form the implicit bedrock of classroom practice: to this extent at least, contemporary religious education constitutes a benign form of liberal confessionalism.

I now wish to raise a more familiar understanding of truth, one that has so far played little part in our discussion. According to the correspondence theory of truth, a statement is true if it corresponds to an actual state of affairs in the real world (Alston, 1996). The theory assumes the realistic understanding that reality somehow exists 'out there', in an objective manner independent of our ability to perceive it. It follows that a truthful life is one lived in harmony with the ultimate order-of-things. Thus the statement 'God exists' is true if, and only if, it corresponds to an actual state of affairs; further, if the statement is indeed true, then a life lived apart from a proper relationship with God cannot be said to be either authentic or truthful.

Two general comments are in order at this stage. First, when viewed through the lens of the correspondence truth, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that contemporary religious education's concern for social pragmatism and experiential coherence implies some form of naturalistic ontology. That is to say, having bracketed out questions of realistic truth, contemporary religious education tends to act on the hidden assumption that reality consists of nothing more substantial than the brute fact of the material world, within which human beings attempt to give their lives meaning and purpose, both individually and collectively. Second, the great religious traditions of the world, almost without exception, embrace

realistic understandings of truth, and therefore it is to realism that we should look if we wish to equip religious education with a richer understanding of truth. Religious education, according to the correspondence theory, ought to place concerns for the authenticity of spiritual life and the pragmatic needs of society, in the broader context of the pursuit of the ultimate realistic truth of the actual order-of-things. However, the task of embracing a correspondence theory of truth and addressing realistic questions of ultimate truth in religious education throws up a number of problems.

First, the modern tendency to reduce external reality to the sum of the facts that together constitute the physical world, and consequently to dismiss knowledge of transcendent reality as an unverifiable act of faith which must be treated as a private matter not open to public debate. This tendency frequently rests on the drawing of a sharp distinction between certain knowledge and ephemeral belief; this, however, is a distinction that no longer holds water. It is increasingly clear that our understanding of the world is contingent and limited, and that adherence to *both* secular and religious world-views requires an act of faith. As Newman puts it, we inevitably assent to an understanding of a reality that transcends our complete understanding (Newman, 1979). This is not, however, to suggest that such assent is entirely arbitrary: we move forward through informed judgements, driven not by a narrowly conceived rationality but rather by a broadly based reflective wisdom. This suggests the possibility of developing a religious education rooted in a critical realism that sees as its primary task of enabling pupils to develop appropriate levels of religious literacy through which they will be empowered to engage in the quest for ultimate truth for themselves (Wright, 2004). In seeking to move beyond the extremes of, on the one hand a confessional induction into a preconceived world-view, and on the other a neutral survey of a variety of belief systems which in practice bracket out the issue of ultimate truth, critical religious education opens up the possibility of grappling with religious truth in an open and informed manner. In the light of such a possibility, the option of merely encouraging pupils to articulate their inner spiritual experiences and inducting them into the value system of secular liberalism does not go nearly far enough.

Second, standard correspondence theories of truth tend to focus on propositional statements, thus threatening to reduce religious truth claims to 'mere' creedal affirmations that fail to reflect the holistic nature of religious belief. This, however, reflects a limited understanding of the nature and function of language. There is space here to highlight only two issues. First, the increasing

recognition of the intimate relationship between speech and action: thus Searle's notion of 'speech acts' recognises that we use language not merely as a means of describing the world, but also as a means of living out of beliefs and values (Searle, 1969). Second, the recognition that language functions not merely to identify atomistic objects and events, but more fundamentally to weave narratives through which we make sense of the world and which constitute a central aspect of the world-views through which we seek to live out authentic lives. This suggests that a critical religious education concerned to engage with questions of ultimate truth need not be an arid affair, but rather retains the possibility of an existentially engaged process of learning to make sense of the meaning and purpose of life and of our proper place in the ultimate order-of-things.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the option of a critical engagement with questions of ultimate truth is an option which is both intellectually valid and existentially relevant. Further, it opens up the possibility of a religious education capable of transcending the narrow instrumentalism of contemporary approaches to the discipline as these embrace, albeit by default, narrowly conceived pragmatic and coherence models of truth.

As a coda, I would like to suggest the possibility that, when read in the light of a correspondence theory of truth, the pragmatic and coherence models we considered earlier might take on a new lease of life. There is no reason why critical religious education should ignore the pragmatic concern for the well being of society and the flourishing of the common good. However, by introducing into the classroom crucial questions about the grounds upon which the success of any given society might be judged, as these are raised by the truth claims of a variety of religious and secular traditions, this particular agenda may be taken up to a higher level. As a result, religious education need not be limited to the instrumental task of supporting the status quo, but may take on the more fundamental task of making available resources capable of aiding the transformation of society.

There is obvious reason why the coherence model of truth might not undergo a similar renovation. Within a critical framework the coherence of pupils' inner experiences and desires would no longer be judged uncritically according to the simplistic criteria that – to put the matter a little crudely – enable them to feel good about themselves. On the contrary, a religious education committed to the pursuit of ultimate truth will demand that such pupils reflect critically on the criteria for authentic feelings, desires and self-

understanding by attending to a range of possible answers, both religious and secular.

Conclusions

I have argued that in addressing questions of truth and truthful behaviour it is not enough for religious education to limit itself to two narrowly conceived tasks: the upholding of the norms of liberal society and the cultivation of children's developing spiritual sensibility. By introducing the question of realistic truth, of the ultimate nature of the order-of-things, critical education offers the possibility of giving these twin tasks a critical edge, thereby shifting the practice of religious education from an instrumental to a transformational level. It is increasingly clear that both the needs of children and of society as a whole can no longer properly be served simply by striving to consolidate liberalism. The values of freedom and tolerance are important, but they do not go nearly far enough. A critical religious education that enables children and society to become wise, informed and literate about questions of ultimate truth, will, I contend, produce a better society. The task of religious education is not simply to buttress the status quo, but to engage in the pursuit of realistic truth regarding the ultimate nature of reality, thereby potentially transforming both individuals and society by making available a raft of alternative accounts of our place in the ultimate order-of-things.

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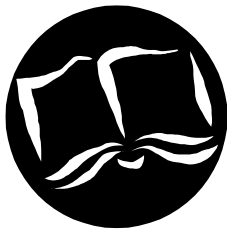
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Endnotes

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² I have taken the liberty of altering quotations from Locke's original text to reflect modern conventions of capitalisation .

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NEW PUBLICATION

RELIGION, EDUCATION AND POST-MODERNITY

by

Andrew Wright

This book, the first to explore religious education and post-modernity in depth, sets out to provide a much needed examination of the problems and possibilities post-modernity raises for religious education.

At once a general introduction to this topic and a distinctive contribution to the debate in its own right, *Religion, Education and Post-modernity* explores and illuminates the problems and possibilities opened up for religious education by post-modern thought and culture. The book describes the emergence of post-modernity, considers the impact of post-modernity on religion, addresses its impact on the philosophy of religion and considers the nature of religious education in the post-modern world.

Andrew Wright argues that, although post-modernity has much to offer the religious educator, there are also many pitfalls and dangers to be avoided. Steering clear of the extreme of post-modern hyper-realism, he constructs a religious pedagogy sensitive to post-modern concerns for alterity, difference and the voice of the Other, whilst insisting on the importance of reason in cultivating religious literacy.

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