

Religious Instruction, Religious Studies and Religious Education

The different terms of religious instruction, religious studies and religious education have all been used of the broad enterprise of communicating the essence of religious life to the young. They reflect *differences* of emphasis and possibly of purpose, content and methodology. However, in important respects they also overlap. What unites them is the task of transmitting the sense of religious life and faith by some people [usually but not always the older generation] to others [usually but not always the younger generation].

Religious instruction

Religious instruction is the actual term used in the 1944 Education Act. Perhaps it was not used very self-consciously in the knowledge that there were alternative terms they might have considered. Given that religious faith is a form of life, primarily a practice rather than a set of ideas, the use of the term instruction is pertinent since it suggests a showing of *how to do* something. For example, one speaks of driving instruction, the teaching which shows the learner how to drive. Instruction in this sense appears to be skills oriented.

The notion of instruction appears to hide some assumptions. One presumes that the person taking driving lessons may well acquire a car and, having acquired the competence, to drive for oneself. There is, however, nothing necessary or inevitable about that. The person may have taken on board the environmental consequences of car ownership or having started down the path found that the economics of car ownership is such that she prefers to use public transport and although having acquired the driving skill she never uses it. Similarly with religious instruction, one may learn how the religious life is lived and what it entails, but whilst there may be the expectation in the instruction that the person would live like that, there is nothing inevitable about that. Some people rebel; some people have shallow roots and the pressure of the culture around them and the demands of life are such that they give up the practice without much thought; others under pressure reluctantly and regretfully give way; still others suffer, their faith is snuffed out and they feel it as a deep loss. In

life one may go on in very many different ways. The point is that instruction is not a form of indoctrination with its suggestion that a person could not do otherwise.

If the instruction is given in schools it will be planned and systematic. It need not be. Instruction may be given by parents to a child on an *ad hoc* basis, teaching as the occasion arises; a pet dies, and then showing the child the respect for life by the way in which one treats the corpse. A good deal of instruction may also be given *indirectly*; one can do so simply by including the child in the practices and thus communicating dispositions, attitudes, beliefs.

The term, instruction, sometimes seems to ignore or bypass reflection. One might simply say this is how it is done and that is it. As such it is at odds with the ethos of our prevailing liberal education. Instruction, then, has the potential of being unreflective, a simple following of protocols, but there is however no necessity for that approach. One can take advanced driving instruction, which requires the driver to be thoughtful about her driving. The difference between a master craftsman and a journeyman is precisely the experience and the thought that goes into the work and that informs the skills. To induct a person into the religious life inevitably requires the person to be reflective and self-critical about their life and practice simply because it is in the nature of religious life to invite this self-examination e.g. in confession or in theological thought. Thus a religious teacher might instruct a person to love his neighbour and that person may reasonably ask, who is my neighbour?

There are two features about religious *instruction* that seem less attractive to schools in a secular society: firstly, it sounds rather imperious, in other words, too directive. It smacks of 'do this and do it this way!' Today the audience may require an approach that is somewhat more tentative and open, especially to the possibility that the activity itself is fundamentally misguided. It must be noted that neither the attitude of tentativeness and uncertainty nor the possibility of radical doubt is the sole prerogative of secularism. They are not entirely alien to, or incompatible with, the religious life since the religious life itself incorporates such attitudes. However, the tentative attitude and possibility of radical doubt do represent an inherent tension in the educational enterprise. Education sets out to teach a discipline because it is regarded as worthwhile and yet by introducing radical questioning admits the

possibility that the discipline may be destroyed. It is not unlike the dilemma of a democratic society under pressure to give the right to participate in elections to the communist party whilst it has an avowed platform of getting rid of elections and other parties. To refuse them admission is to appear undemocratic, to allow them admission is to contemplate its own destruction. The education of children in religious life is done because the religious life is regarded as intrinsically valuable but the radical questioning of education could in theory destroy it.

The second feature may be related to the first. There is a suggestion in the term 'instruction' that the instructor is him/herself an active practitioner. The driving instructor must be a good driver. There is a good deal of theory in music and listening, both of which invite serious discussion and reflection. But would we really expect to be taught music by someone who never made music or did not play an instrument well? The same may also be said about religious life, can anyone who stands outside the religious life truly *instruct* one in it? Whilst one cannot rule out the possibility that a non-religious person can show the depth and meaning of religious life, one would not normally go to such a person for *instruction* in it. In a secular society one cannot presume that the teachers are practitioners and hence it is difficult to regard the teaching they provide as 'instruction'.

A final question mark over the term 'instruction' comes from those who regard religious life not as a form of doing but as a way of being, or as a form of belief rather than a doing, or as a theory rather than a world that creates possibilities of existing. Instruction presupposes practice and doing; one is instructed in religion when it is a form of life. The question mark over 'instruction' is clearly premised on challenging the view of what the religious life is and entails. Here not everyone agrees. The differences of view may lead some people to challenge the appropriateness of religious instruction in school but this need not undermine the value and appropriateness of religious instruction in other contexts.

Religious Studies

Religious Studies has greater affinity with our secular world. It has its roots in tertiary education with its 'scientific' approach. When we use the word 'scientific' we do not

mean in the sense of being experimental but of being 'objective', detailed and systematic. It describes, classifies and it also *explains* by looking for significant causal connections. Its claim to objectivity makes no presumptions about any personal involvement of the investigator with the phenomena under investigation other than that of being an observer. In so far as there is *teaching* in religious studies there are no expectations from the student either, other than that of being an observer and making judgements as an observer or spectator.

It is supposed that from the position of being an observer one can be more dispassionate, disinterested and impartial. 'Disinterested' here does not mean uninterested but in not allowing one's intellectual investigations and study to be influenced in any way by the stake one may have in the outcome. For example, Socrates tried to eliminate from his considerations the fact that he was going to die the very night he philosophised on the question of the immortality of the soul with his friends. He clearly had a stake in the conclusion but he rigorously sought to eliminate that particular interest from his enquiry. Disinterestedness is manifested in what one concludes should be true for all, regardless of one's own personal position. There is no half-way house in which one can rest and say it is true *for me* or that is how *I* 'feel'.

All of this seems admirable and eminently transferable to schools yet there seems to be a fly in ointment, or perhaps more than one fly. **Firstly**, with respect to religious life the aspirations of intellectual investigations in school to objectivity seem to be just that, aspirations. The realities of religious life across the world are so complex there can be no final conclusions; the interim conclusions as a consequence appear all too personal, prejudiced by interests and old loyalties, and all too readily reduced to mere hunches or 'feelings'. The inconclusiveness of the investigations may lead to a loss of faith in the capacity of reasoning and argument to come to a fixed conclusion in which case all appeals to 'feelings' become expressions of intellectual despair. **Secondly**, the descriptions and detached conclusions of observers often appear alien to people who are deeply engaged in religious life. For example, to people in the midst of a loss of life, the description of 'extreme unction' [last rites], as a 'rite of passage' in the parlance of religious studies, is a description without its soul. **Thirdly**, there is a religious suspicion that the aspiration to be an observer from some

‘Archimedean point’¹ is itself mistaken. Kierkegaard [1813 – 1855] poked fun at this aspiration to be the impartial observer by depicting scholars as so many judges examining the credentials of Jesus whilst keeping him waiting in the foyer of life. Before the burning bush Moses took off his shoes, he did not do a scientific experiment, he did not check credentials! **Fourthly**, the methodology of religious studies is agnostic and exclusive, i.e. it perceives religious phenomena as the product of natural and human forces, explicable by means of social and psychological considerations. By definition it cannot consider human beings to be in the presence of God or existing before the Divine or as having to relate to the Eternal. In not doing so, it ‘knows’ the phenomena very differently from the person of faith.

To base the educational transmission of religious life on the contribution of *religious studies* **alone** is precisely to miss out the understanding of the religious believer. It will almost certainly be religiously inadequate. However, it is also inadequate educationally speaking in that it cannot incorporate the communication of person to person so vital to real learning. It de-personalises education.

Religious Education

Religious education can mean different things in different societies. The differences in education arise because education is first and foremost an act of communication. The communication in our schools will vary from those of others in other places and times because the character of the communicator and the nature of the recipients will differ. In Birmingham, the teachers as communicators are no longer adherents of a single religious tradition and they have been deeply influenced by the modern and post-modern condition of culture in western society. The recipients of the communication, the pupils, are also from very varied backgrounds and they too are constantly bombarded by thought forms from our prevailing culture that is intrinsically hostile to religious understanding, e.g. in viewing religious belief as an hypothesis and as an experimental issue. The content of the educationally communication will also differ, because globalisation ensures the influence of a multiplicity of religious traditions.

¹ Mathematically, from some point in outer space Archimedes claimed he could move the entire world with a lever. The trouble is that the realities of life ensure that his feet remained firmly planted on the ground.

The precise nature of that influence will invariably depend on the nature of the local community, as well as on the media that make the wider world accessible, radio, newspapers, television, and the internet.

In this state of affairs religious education must rely in its methodology on *interpretation* to ensure that the logic and meaning of religious life is made evident in its *own* terms. This must be held in creative tension by honest conversation between teacher and pupils as to what it might mean for their lives and their culture in the here and now. In what ways does our context affect our judgements of what is true, right and beautiful? Neither the teacher nor the pupil can be unaffected by the enquiry. They are engaged by it. To deal with the divine is to encounter an imperative of what one must do or how one should live. Ideally in this educational enterprise the school will co-operate closely with parents and the local religious communities so that the conversation is extended and fundamentally honest and open.

In summary

Religious instruction: [a] the teacher is committed to religious life, [b] the pupils commitment is engaged, [c] the subject matter is a shared form of life, [d] the methodology is implicitly directing.

Religious Studies: [a] the teacher is an observer, [b] the pupil is an observer and implicitly remains distant from religious life, [c] the subject matter is (by virtue of the condition of being an observer) the activity of others, [d] the methodology is implicitly humanistic and agnostic.

Religious education: [a] the teacher is an interpreter, [b] the pupil is a conversation partner with the teacher on the meaning of religious life, [c] the subject matter is religious life as informed by prevailing traditions, [d] the methodology is one of engagement spiritually, morally and culturally.

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