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# UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN A PLURAL WORLD: THE INTERPRETIVE APPROACH.

## A Introduction

The interpretive approach outlined in this chapter was originally developed for use in religious education (RE) in publicly funded community schools in England and Wales, where the subject is primarily concerned with helping pupils to gain a critical and reflective understanding of religions. The approach has subsequently been developed further in the UK, and has also been used in Norway, Germany, Canada and Japan as well as in a Council of Europe project on bringing the dimension of religious diversity to intercultural education across its 46 member states (e.g. Council of Europe, 2004). The approach forms the basis of the theoretical framework for pedagogical studies being conducted as part of a European Union Framework 6 research project on religious education by a consortium of ten European universities (Jackson, 2006).

This chapter is concerned with describing the methodology of the approach, showing how it developed from ethnographic studies of children from religious groups (some of which are outlined by Eleanor Nesbitt in the previous chapter) and developed further through curriculum development and school-based action research. Though the approach draws on the social sciences, it does not reduce religious education to 'sociology', but provides rather a means to personal engagement with religious ways of life. However, it does bring from recent social science practical techniques for interpreting the worldviews of others, and a concern with issues of reflexivity. This last point is important, since arguments against drawing on pupils' own personal views in

religious education (see the chapters by Grelle on the USA and by Estivalezes on France below, for example) tend to assume that this element is derived from religious or theological sources, rather than from social science disciplines such as recent social and cultural anthropology. It should be noted that the interpretive approach does not claim to be a total method for the subject – it does not claim that all the processes of religious education rely on the social sciences – and it can be supplemented fruitfully by other methods and approaches e.g. philosophical, textual, artistic and historical. Those who have developed the approach have made use of such complementary methodologies.

The interpretive approach developed from three related strands of work at the University of Warwick. The first was a series of studies of individuals from various religious groups in Britain, with a concentration on studies of children and processes of transmitting religious culture. The second was a concern with issues of method in relation to practice and theory, which related both to the research studies in the field and to religious education in classrooms. These studies led to a critique of some of the ways in which religions have been portrayed and interpreted conventionally in the history of religions and in religious education. Questions derived from fieldwork, relating to the inner plurality of religions, to the personal yet group-oriented nature of religious expression and to the relationship between the researcher and the object of study, led to a synthesis of experience based on ethnographic studies and theory from a number of disciplines and fields in the social sciences and humanities. Recent debates in social anthropological theory, religious studies and cultural theory, for example, were reviewed in relation to methodological issues in ethnographic fieldwork and in religious education. The third was the development of an approach to religious education (which continues to be developed) in the light of all the above. Its initial development was partly through an experimental curriculum development project (the Warwick RE Project) and partly through on-going work in RE that draws on further field studies of various kinds and relevant theory. Work up to 1997 is reported in *Religious Education: An Interpretive Approach* (Jackson, 1997). Further developments are reported in *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy* (Jackson, 2004a: see Chapters 6 and 7) and in *Intercultural Education and Religious Plurality* (Jackson & McKenna, 2005). Although the work was designed originally as a contribution to ‘secular’ religious education in publicly funded schools in England and Wales, it has been applied within faith-based education (e.g., Coleman, 2005) and it is

applicable internationally both to religious education (or its variants) and to fields such as intercultural education, citizenship education, values education and social studies, which incorporate studies of religious diversity (Council of Europe, 2006; Jackson, 2003 Chapter 1; 2004a: Chapter 8; 2004b).

### **A Developing the approach**

Ethnographic research specifically on children, and the development of curriculum material associated with it, began at the University of Warwick in the 1980s (e.g. Jackson & Nesbitt, 1986) and continued through the 1990s (e.g., Jackson, 1989; Jackson & Nesbitt, 1990; 1993; Nesbitt, 2004). The Warwick RE Project was the curriculum branch of a research project entitled 'Ethnography and Religious Education' funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Project Reference number R000232489). It is important to point out at the outset that the main pedagogical methods and principles associated with the project are not inextricably bound up with ethnography but are associated with theory from various sources in the humanities (e.g., philosophy and cultural history) and social sciences (especially social or cultural anthropology) and with methodology that is influenced by hermeneutics. The hermeneutical method is the key element, and it can be applied in the absence of ethnographic fieldwork.

The aims of the project included increasing knowledge and understanding of the 'transmission' of religious culture to children and young people within families of four religious traditions in Britain using ethnographic methods; developing a theoretical framework for transposing ethnographic sources from the project into religious education material; and developing books for and teachers, drawing on the project's theoretical work in religious education. The first aim was achieved through a series of ethnographic studies of children from different religious backgrounds (See Nesbitt's chapter above and e.g., Nesbitt, 1995 a and b, 2004, Chapters 3 and 5) The theoretical background to the project plus an account of wider possibilities for the approach (aim 2) were published as *Religious education: An interpretive approach* (Jackson, 1997), while the third aim was achieved through the publication of the Warwick RE Project. The theoretical work developed during the ESRC study raised issues of *representation*, *interpretation* and *reflexivity* (Jackson, 1997).

### **A. Representation**

The approach is critical of Western, post-Enlightenment models of representing 'world religions' as schematic and homogeneous belief systems, whose essence can be expressed through a series of propositions or doctrinal statements (Said, 1978, 1993; Smith, 1978). The project does not abandon the use of the language of 'religions', but is critical of approaches which essentialize or stereotype them. The approach is equally critical of simplistic representations of cultures and of the religion/culture relationship. Recent debates in social/cultural anthropology and other social sciences are used to develop more sophisticated models of the representation of cultures, cultural processes and ethnicity (e.g., Barth, 1981; Baumann, 1996; Clifford, 1988; Eriksen, 1993; Geertz, 1973; Said, 1978). Cultures are presented as internally contested and fuzzy edged, while individuals are seen as capable of contributing to the reshaping of culture through making personal syntheses which might utilize various cultural resources, including their own ancestral traditions. Thus 'culture' is seen as both a possession and a process.

A model for representing religious material is developed which encourages an exploration of the relationship between individuals in the context of their religious and cultural groups (Tajfel, 1981) and to the wider religious tradition. The tradition is seen as a tentative but contested 'whole', and it is recognized that different insiders (and outsiders) might have varying understandings of the nature and scope of the Hindu or Christian traditions, for example. The model offers a view of religions which acknowledges their complexity and internal diversity, including their varying interactions with 'culture'. The personal element in religions is emphasized, with religion being presented as part of lived human experience. The approach is not relativistic in relation to truth, aiming for a procedural epistemological openness and acknowledging varying and often competing truth claims (e.g., Jackson 1997, see pp.122-6).

### **A. Interpretation**

In developing a methodology for interpretation, some of the claims of 'classical' phenomenology of religion as interpreted by some writers on religious education were rejected (Sharpe, 1975), especially the view that it is possible to put one's presuppositions into 'parentheses' and that the use of empathy is straightforward. The interpretive methodology does have some elements in common with Jacques

Waardenburg's 'new style' phenomenology (Waardenburg, 1978), but it relates closely to work in recent interpretive anthropology. Rather than asking learners to leave their presuppositions to one side, the method requires a comparison and contrast between the learner's concepts and those of people being studied. The approach requires a backwards and forwards movement between the learner's and the other's concepts and experiences. Sensitivity on the part of the student is regarded as a necessary condition, with empathy only being possible once the terms and symbols of the other's discourse have been grasped.

The application of the model of representation outlined above requires moving back and forth between individuals in the context of their groups and the wider religious tradition. The work of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (e.g., 1973, 1983) influences the method. However, some aspects of Geertz's work are criticized, such as his lack of direct involvement of insiders in editorial roles and his sparing use of quotation from his interviewees – examples of Geertz's lack of attention to issues of power (Clifford, 1988; Crapanzano, 1986).

As Wilna Meijer has pointed out, the approach is not only relevant to studies of contemporary religion; it can also be used 'historically', in revisiting lost or forgotten aspects of tradition and facilitating young people's reappraisal of it. (Meijer, 2004). Her observation is consistent with the project's approach to 'edification' (see below under reflexivity).

The interpretive methodology of the project was also influenced by the project team's experience of ethnographic fieldwork (see Nesbitt, 2004 and Nesbitt's chapter above). Studies of children from different religious backgrounds in Britain stimulated methodological reflection and were used as a primary source for curriculum development.

### **A. Reflexivity**

A number of issues concerning reflexivity – understood here as the relationship between the experience of students and the experience of those whose way of life they are attempting to interpret – were raised by the project's ethnographic methodology and applied to religious education. Three aspects of reflexivity were identified as applicable

to religious education. First, learners are encouraged to review their understanding of their *own* way of life (edification). Secondly, they are helped to make a constructive critique of the material studied at a distance; and thirdly, they are involved in reviewing their methods of study. Clearly, the more the teacher is aware of the religious and cultural backgrounds of students, the more sensitive and focused the teaching can be. This approach also requires methods that allow students to gain insight from their peers and to be able to examine different ideas of truth held within the classroom. The 'content' of RE is not simply material provided by the teacher, but includes the knowledge and experience of the participants and an interactive relationship between the two. Teachers working with children from diverse backgrounds need the skill to involve children directly in designing and evaluating methods of study.

### ***B Edification***

One of the key aims of religious education, as understood in the English and Welsh curriculum, is to help pupils to reflect on their studies of ways of life that are different from their own in some ways. It is illuminating that anthropologists have written about how their studies of others have prompted some form of re-assessment of their understanding of their *own* ways of life (e.g. Leach, 1982 see p. 127). The term 'edification', adopted from the American philosopher Richard Rorty, was used to describe this form of learning (Rorty, 1980). This concept has some features in common with Michael Grimmitt's idea of 'learning from' religion but is not identical to it (see Grimmitt, 1987, p. 225; Jackson, 1997, see pp.131-2).

This reflexive activity is not easy in practice to separate from the process of interpretation. Interpretation might start from the other's language and experience, then move to that of the student, and then move back and forth between the two. Thus the activity of grasping another's way of life is inseparable in practice from that of pondering on the issues and questions raised by it. Such reflexive activity is personal to the student and teachers cannot guarantee that it will happen. They can, however, ensure that such activity is not stifled and can provide structured opportunities for reflection. It is also the case that making this type of connection often helps to motivate students to participate more fully in RE. As Harold Loukes found in the 1960s (Loukes, 1961), and as Kevin O'Grady has demonstrated in his action research with secondary pupils in the north of England (O'Grady, 2005), a religious education disconnected

from pupils' own questions and concerns is very likely to fail to engage and to motivate them. Whatever differences there might appear to be between the student's way of life and the way of life being studied, there may also be common features or points of contact or overlap. What might appear to be entirely 'other' might link with one's own experience in such a way that new perspectives are created or unquestioned presuppositions are challenged. Edification need not only result from studying religions or cultures other than one's own. As Wilna Meijer has noted (see her chapter above), the study of *one's own* ancestral tradition, in religious or cultural terms, can also give new insights in re-examining one's sense of identity. The anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff demonstrates this very well in her study of elderly people in a Jewish community in the USA, showing how her academic studies re-awakened her own interest in questions of Jewish identity (Myerhoff, 1978). In the case of religious education, young people might see religions, including the one of their own history, from a new perspective. Ethnographic source material, plus data from locally conducted studies, could provide a basis for this, as could historical material (whether from local or wider sources).

Being edified by studying religious material does not imply *adopting* the beliefs of followers of that religion. It does imply recognition of the similarities and differences between all humans and of the inherent relationship between the identity of each person and the manifestation of differences. Moreover, it builds upon a genuinely positive attitude towards diversity, seeing the meeting between people with different beliefs and cultural practices as enriching for all, and seeing individual identity as being developed through meeting 'the other'. 'Recognition' in this sense can lead to a more positive approach to multi-cultural societies, both at the individual level and from the perspective of the state, leading to an active accommodation of differences, while upholding and strengthening shared values and a common human identity.

### ***B Constructive Criticism***

Reflexivity involves being able to engage critically with material studied. The management of such critical work is a sensitive pedagogical issue, especially in pluralistic classrooms. Criticism can also be applied fruitfully to method. Just as researchers should spend time reflecting on the effectiveness and the ethics of the

methods they have used, so a critique of the RE methods should be part of its content. This methodological self-awareness can reveal issues of representation and can also stimulate creative ideas for improvement, in the presentation of findings to others, for example. Methodological reflection can also help students to become more aware of bias in the techniques used in other forms of presentation. Once they have engaged in some methodological self-criticism they might better undertake a critique of the representation of Islam in popular newspapers, for example.

### **A. The Warwick RE project**

The first educational outputs using the interpretive approach were books for pupils and teachers, known collectively as the Warwick RE Project, developed from ethnographic field data and theory. Project team members had various roles, with some members taking on more than one. These included supervising and conducting ethnographic research and curriculum development; contributing theoretical and methodological ideas; arranging meetings to provide an on-going review of progress; and contributing to the project's writing programme. The main role of the ethnographers was to conduct field studies and disseminate findings. Ethnographers liaised with the curriculum developers providing them with field notes, audio-taped interviews and slides and introducing them to selected families in order to extend their involvement with the Project. Ethnographers also provided background briefing material for use by curriculum developers in writing books for pupils or teachers' resource books. The curriculum developers were introduced to the project's methods and theory and to ethical issues such as confidentiality. The co-ordinator of curriculum development liaised with all participants, organising limited trials of material in schools (Everington, 1996a, b), and contributing to the Project's writing programme (Everington, 1993a, b; Jackson, Barratt & Everington, 1994).

The project team aimed to find ways to connect the experience of children in communities with the practice of RE in schools. Our ideas and materials *could* have been developed for in-service training of teachers or for use in initial training. However, we eventually settled for a curriculum project. The key goal was to

*experiment* with applying some of the theoretical ideas and some of the ethnographic data from our studies in books for children and young people, rather than giving comprehensive coverage to religions, which was not feasible given the project's budget and time scale. The following is a brief summary of the content and pedagogical approach of the texts written for pupils.

### ***B. Pupils aged 5-7 years***

For 5-7 year olds, each children's book focuses on a single child from one religious group. The stories of two Christian girls, a Jewish boy, a Muslim girl and a Buddhist boy are based on studies conducted by members of the project team, each illustrating how children learn through participation in religious activities within the family (Barratt, 1994a, b, c, d, e). There are two versions of each pupil text, one printed in the *Teacher's Resource Book* to be read by the teacher and used as a basis for discussion (Jackson *et al*, 1994), and a simpler text to be read by pupils reproduced in the children's books. The process of interpretation is also introduced in the *Teacher's Resource Book* which helps children to relate concepts, feelings and attitudes encountered in the stories to their own language and experience. Terms, actions and objects identified from the pages of the story books are grouped under general headings as 'key ideas'. These general concepts suggest areas where bridges can be made from pupils' experience of life to the experience of the children introduced in the story.

'Edification' is introduced through raising questions in relation to the pupils' own experience. These explorations and discussions aim to broaden children's horizons and stimulate thought and reflection. The bridging discussions include ideas for encouraging children to make their own contributions spontaneously. Children are encouraged to explore their own ideas, emotions and attitudes, and to recognize similarities and differences between their own experience and that of children in the stories.

### ***B Pupils aged 7-11 years***

With 7-11 year old children, the focus is on several young people associated with various Christian membership groups, and the emphasis moves to learning and reflection in groups associated with the family's religious practice. The book for 7-9 year olds introduces children from Salvation Army and United Reformed Church

backgrounds (Barratt & Price, 1996a). The discussions cover topics from ethnographic source material and include 'joining', 'learning', 'believing and worshipping', 'prayer and praise', 'the Bible', 'living as a Christian', 'sharing' and 'caring for others' (Barratt & Price, 1996b). In the book for 9-11 year olds, three children from families with different ethnic histories are introduced, from Roman Catholic, Baptist and Pentecostal backgrounds (Everington, 1996c). Readers encounter each young person taking part in activities within the family and in different parts of their church communities. The material is arranged under the headings 'learning', 'preparing', 'responsibilities' and 'traditions'. Extracts from interviews are combined with an author-narrated text, illustrated with original photographs. Links are made to other parts of the Christian tradition and the *Teacher's Resource Book* provides advice on method and offers information and activities for pupils, moving between the language and experience of the children portrayed in the text and those in the classroom (Everington, 1996d).

### ***B Pupils aged 11-14 years***

For 11-14 year olds, the emphasis is on engaging with the comments and reflections of young people linked to various groups within the religions. Each book features four British teenagers, two girls and two boys. *Muslims* focuses on young Muslims with a Pakistani family ancestry (Mercier, 1996), *Christians* introduces young people with Church of England, Greek Orthodox, Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) and 'New' Church backgrounds (Robson, 1995), while *Hindus* introduces young people whose lives relate to various aspects of Hindu tradition and whose family ethnic background is Gujarati Indian (Wayne, Everington, Kadodwala & Nesbitt, 1996). As well as providing general information about the young people and their interests, each text concentrates on aspects of their religious life, and includes extracts from interviews with them and photographs taken during fieldwork. The books cover topics related to religious practice in contemporary Britain, all suggested by the material collected during fieldwork.

Pupils are provided with activities related to each unit of work. '*Making it clear*' tasks check that students are familiar with the basic facts and ideas featured in the unit. '*Working it out*' activities help students to relate material from one of the three 'levels' – individual, membership group or tradition – to material drawn from another 'level' so that each sheds light upon the other. '*Building bridges*' activities ask students to draw

from their own experience or ideas in order to interpret material presented. Students are asked to focus on personal knowledge and experience for comparison and contrast with material from the religious tradition. The familiar is used to make sense of, or to gain insights into, the unfamiliar.

*'Thinking it through'* activities encourage students to use material from a religious tradition as a stimulus to reflect upon matters of personal concern. As the teachers' notes state, the aim is 'to encourage students to examine or re-examine aspects of their own understanding in the light of questions, issues or experiences which are encountered in particular religious traditions, but which also have universal significance' (Wayne *et al.*, 1996, p. 4)

The books had a wide distribution and usage, and are now sold out. All who were involved in the Warwick RE Project probably had some mixed feelings about the books and about the labour intensive experience of producing them. However, a great deal was learned through the exercise, and the materials have been widely used.

#### **A. Developments of the interpretive approach**

The Warwick RE Project illustrates a particular application of the interpretive approach. Whereas its pedagogical method started from a consideration of individual young people portrayed in the curriculum texts in the context of their families and communities, the interpretive approach can start at any point on the hermeneutic circle.

#### ***B. Starting with key concepts***

For example, instead of starting with portrayals of particular individuals, the approach can begin with an overview of a tradition dealing provisionally with some of its key concepts, followed by a consideration of specific examples of individual or group life. This approach was used in writing a book for teacher education students and teachers entitled *Approaches to Hinduism* (Jackson & Killingley, 1988). The book starts with an overview of the Hindu tradition, but the limitations of such summaries are pointed out to readers. A treatment of some specific elements from the tradition follows, using a series of case studies of individual Hindus based on ethnographic or biographical studies. The intention was that the introduction should make the case studies intelligible, while the case studies provided non-generalisable details of religious

life. The latter point up the limitations of the overview and extend an understanding of the Hindu tradition. There is scope for further developments along these lines giving closer attention to issues of interpretation and reflexivity.

### ***B Starting with students' questions and concerns***

The approach can also start from the questions and concerns of students, move to individuals or groups within a tradition or to general ideas from a tradition, and then back again to the student. Two examples will be given here.

#### *C. Case study one: Buddhism in the lower secondary school*

The first is a project conducted by Amy Whittall with lower secondary students from a school in Birmingham who had previously done very little on Buddhism (Whittall, 2005). All activities covered at least one of the elements of representation, interpretation and reflexivity. As students had little prior knowledge, they were encouraged to raise questions about Buddhism, and were given time to discuss these in groups and to explain why they were of interest. The groups focused on two questions they would like to address. They were then asked to record their tentative answers to the two questions drawing on any previous knowledge. The answers formed their hypothesis.

Students were then given time in lessons to decide how they would investigate the answers to their two questions. They were able to choose the methods used, the resources needed, the tasks for individual group members and the homework set. As part of the process, students were required to be involved in a dialogue with Buddhist sources. Some groups wrote to Buddhist communities and then analysed the replies in comparison with 'textbook answers'. Other groups spoke to Buddhist children in other year groups in the school. All groups were encouraged in each lesson to discuss their work with students who were investigating different aspects of Buddhism. This helped them to build up a bigger picture of the tradition into which their questions fitted as a part (i.e. *representation* and *interpretation*).

The reflexivity element was achieved when students wrote their final reports. They were asked to consider if they had learned anything about *their own* ideas from their studies and, in particular, whether they could see any connections between their

own ideas and those of Buddhism. One student, for example, considered how the idea of *nirvana* in Buddhism and that of paradise in Islam appeared similar in some ways, but not others. Finally, students were encouraged to review their hypothesis. They were asked to analyse how accurate they had been in their initial ideas and to try to explain this. Had they, for example, drawn on knowledge about other faiths and applied this to Buddhism? Had they made correct or incorrect assumptions? The process enabled students to analyse how they had used their knowledge of religious diversity and applied this to one specific tradition.

Throughout this work, students were involved in a process of moving inside and outside of the religious tradition, making conceptual links and drawing on previous knowledge (*representation* and *interpretation*). Every individual was challenged at a level appropriate to them so that the work met the varying academic needs of the students. Students gained an emergent picture of the Buddhist tradition as well as engaging in a process of comparison between ideas from Buddhism and their own ideas. Classroom work utilized the skills of analysis, reflection, and investigation and students showed increased motivation through their individualized learning and hermeneutical activities.

### *C. Case Study Two: Aspects of Islam*

This example shows a development of the interpretive approach through the use of action research in a secondary school in Sheffield in the north of England (O'Grady, 2005). A group of 12-13 year old students worked together with Kevin O'Grady, a teacher/researcher, to plan and assess a topic on Islam. Meanwhile, the teacher/researcher also gathered data on factors in their motivation to learn. The school had almost no Muslim students despite its location in a large, culturally diverse city and the students had little prior knowledge of Islam. Before the teaching started students added their own questions to the pre-set school scheme of work and also wrote down their preferences for styles of learning.

The first few lessons were planned taking these ideas into account, and at two further points in the topic the consultation was repeated. Students additionally reflected on what they had learned from the lessons. The teacher/researcher kept his own log of observations throughout. Towards the end of the project the students were interviewed

in small groups about the process as a whole. There was evidence that involving students as collaborative researchers and planners of work had increased their motivation.

The key concepts of the interpretive approach were used as follows. With regard to *representation*, students became aware that stereotypes of Islam, as found commonly in the media, for example, did not match the diversity of the religious lives of real people. In relation to *interpretation*, students learned how to compare and contrast Islamic concepts with ideas from their own experience, and explored some of these similarities and differences through drama. With regard to *reflexivity*, bringing students' own questions and ideas into a dialogue with the Islamic material prompted students to reflect on their own values and cultural assumptions, generating some genuine intercultural understanding. There was no face-to-face dialogue, since no Muslim students were present in the class, but there was still a 'dialogue with difference' that built self-awareness and cultural understanding, as the following example shows.

In a lesson about family life, the students formed drama groups and most prepared sketches about what they believed to be important in family life. One group researched Islamic beliefs about family life from a variety of texts and noted five key factors on a poster for display. Each sketch was performed and then discussed, and the students indicated points of contact with the poster about Islam. There was a discussion about extended families. Students shared their own experience of traditional working class patterns of extended families in the local area, and how they valued especially the care for the elderly that this provided. In comparing this with their earlier assertions about Muslims 'sticking together in large groups in one area', the students reappraised their view. Muslims became less exotic through the experience of cultural comparison. Several interview responses illustrated the students' experience of increased self-understanding through the interpretation of Islam:

The link is because, when we learn about different religions, you find out who *you* are...whether you're Christian, or some people don't want to be different things...you find out who you are inside.

We learn about Muslim life, then about whether it relates to us, in our life.

In Islam, they have set rules, like you should always help your elders, and it's made people think that we should always help our parents, too.

Another key element of reflexivity in this example is the importance given to the students' own voices at the centre of enquiry. Other examples of developments and adaptations of the interpretive approach are given in Jackson, 2004a Chapter 6. An example of a dialogical approach, developed from the interpretive approach by Julia Ipgrave, is given in Jackson, 2004a Chapter 7.

### **A. Teacher training**

There is no space here to deal in detail with issues of teacher training, but some general points can be made. Teachers using this approach could be from any religious background or none. However, in terms of attitude, a necessary condition would be sensitivity and a positive attitude towards difference and the ability not to impose particular views upon others. Clifford Geertz would expect a similar sensitivity and openness from a cultural anthropologist studying another cultural scene (Geertz, 1983). I have called this quality 'epistemological openness', allowing pupils to enter debates and enabling them to position *themselves* (Jackson, 2004a). This is not a relativist position and leaves questions of religious truth open to debate (Jackson 1997, see pp.122-126).

Teachers would also need to treat pupils as co-learners, and to give them some agency in selecting particular topics or designing and refining methods of study (see, for example, the discussion of O'Grady's work in Jackson 2004a, Chapter 6 and of Ipgrave's work in Jackson 2004a, Chapter 7).

Teachers would need some education in the study of religions that introduced them to the debates about the representation of religions in Western literature since the European Enlightenment. This would not need to be extensive, so long as it was ongoing. Teachers would need to experiment with ways of representing religions that emphasized the personal elements in religion and challenged the idea of religions as homogeneous systems of belief. They would also need a similar flexibility in

approaching debates about ‘cultures’, ‘ethnic groups’ and ‘communities’. Access to some small scale, local ethnographic studies would be an advantage (see, for example some of the studies reported above by Nesbitt, and in Nesbitt (2004) and by Østberg in her chapter below) or to autobiographical accounts and personal stories from members of religious groups. The important point is to learn principles rather than seek mastery of large amounts of data in a short space of time. The approach lends itself to learning *with* students in a spirit of joint research. Some knowledge of the cultural and religious backgrounds of their classes would also enhance teachers’ sensitivity.

Teachers would also need practice in comparing and contrasting their own concepts and past experiences with related but (often) different concepts and experiences found in concrete examples of religious practice. They would then need to practise this ‘bridging’ skill with pupils. To enhance the bridging process, teachers would need to work with pupils in identifying the issues that concern them. Teachers need to use their professional judgement in relation to particular classes and the social circumstances of the school in deciding whether to start with explorations of students’ own concerns and values (see, for example, the discussion of Eriksson’s work in Jackson 2004a, Chapter 6) or with overt material from religious sources (as with the Warwick RE Project materials or with an overview of key concepts).

### **A Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined an interpretive approach to religious education, illustrating it specifically through the example of the Warwick RE Project, but also indicating wider applications of the approach. The approach sees religions as dynamic and changing, and as a series of relationships rather than rigid and homogeneous systems of belief. Understanding is increased through studying the cases of individuals, in the context of their religious and cultural groups, in relation to various constructions of the wider religious tradition. The approach also requires the student to use familiar or analogous concepts and experiences in a process of comparison and contrast between one's own worldview and that of others being studied. The source material for such studies can be of various kinds, but ethnographic studies that point up the complexity of religious and cultural interactions and challenge stereotypes are one particularly useful source.

The interpretive approach includes the possibility that students might have their own views deepened through the study of other positions, whether outside or related to their own traditions. It also offers opportunities for students to apply their critical faculties skilfully and sensitively to material studied and to engage in methodological self-criticism and creative approaches to presentation, using the arts for example. The approach also recognizes that students' own experience can and should be part of the subject matter of religious education, and that there is the possibility of developing new ideas through the interaction of pupils from different backgrounds. Pedagogically, the more aware teachers are of beliefs and values embedded in the religious and cultural experience of students, the more they can take account of pupils' concerns and can provide teaching and learning situations which are designed to foster communication between students from different backgrounds.

The interpretive approach is inclusive of participants from different religious and non-religious backgrounds, providing the opportunity for different religious and cultural positions to be understood in a methodologically sound, self-critical and non-relativistic way. It also acknowledges the potentially transformative character of such studies, while equally recognizing the limited and partial effect of schooling in the overall experience of the young. There is scope for developing the interpretive approach in different ways, starting at any point on the hermeneutic circle. In countries where there has been deep ethnic or religious division it might especially be appropriate to begin with students reflecting on their own traditions, presuppositions and attitudes towards others. There are also possibilities for developing the approach in relation to the interface between religion and other curriculum fields such as values education, citizenship education and intercultural education.

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